

Monumental

Flanders' biggest, best and most beautiful buildings bare all

Have you ever wondered what lies behind the tall gates of that castle, just outside of town? Or what happened in that old abbey, years and years ago?

Flanders is filled with mediaeval buildings and huge, old estates that are hidden away from public view. But once a year, these uncovered gems are allowed to show you the glory of their refined or industrious – or unsettling – pasts. Open Monument Day – 13 September – is the Flemish solution to losing its legacy and becoming forgotten.

Every year has a theme, and this year it's *zorgmonumenten*, or care monuments – buildings and sites associated with medical and social care throughout the ages in Flanders.

This year is the 21st anniversary of this surprisingly exhilarating event that both the Flemish and foreigners embrace as if it was some kind of merry travelling circus rather than a celebration of old buildings. Embracing the idea of poking around in spaces usually off limits, they come out in droves, and lines for the more popular sites snake around the corner.

Some are well known, like the Benedictine abbey in Sint-Truiden, and others are just waiting to be discovered like the LJJ Somers Foundation in Antwerp with its beautiful courtyards and neoclassical architecture.

This year's topic tends towards the universal experience, as we all need to visit a hospital or be looked after once in awhile. The care sector has always been a flourishing part of society filled with hope and sorrow, leaving its mark on our cities and towns. In the distant past you would visit a chapel to be taken care of, and over time these tiny sanctuaries have evolved into big hospitals visited by hundreds each day. This evolution, not only in terms of care but also in architecture, will be highlighted during Open Monument Day.

Besides hospitals and chapels, you'll also find countless gardens filled with medicinal herbs, schools designed to

Monument prize

One week after Flanders Open Monument day comes the announcement of this year's Flemish Monument Prize, chosen from a shortlist of one nominee from each province. This year's field includes the restored sacristy of the Basilica of Grimbergen (Flemish Brabant); a 1,000-year-old oak tree in Lummen and the surrounding site, including 500 historic pollard oaks (Limburg). The other nominees are De Hoge Wal, a man-made hill on which a castle once stood in Evergem (East Flanders); archaeological prospection from the air in Zedelgem (West Flanders) and an Art Deco swimming pool in Antwerp (see *Flanders Today*, 12 August).

create the perfect housewife, peaceful cemeteries, comforting churches and even majestic castles that are happy to show you how they have made a difference to the general well-being of the public. You can either roam around on your own or join one of the many guided tours, depending on your monument of choice.

There are literally hundreds of participating monuments spread across all five provinces. One of the highlights, however, is the old Military Hospital in Antwerp, which is undergoing a complete renovation in order to become a residential area after years of neglect. This enormous turn-of-the-last-century estate, tucked away in a residential neighbourhood, immediately arouses curiosity with its ominous iron gate. Now, we finally get to take a peek at what is hidden behind it.

Inside includes a chapel, an old infirmary and the former officer's quarters. After being restored to its original glory, this domain will be equipped

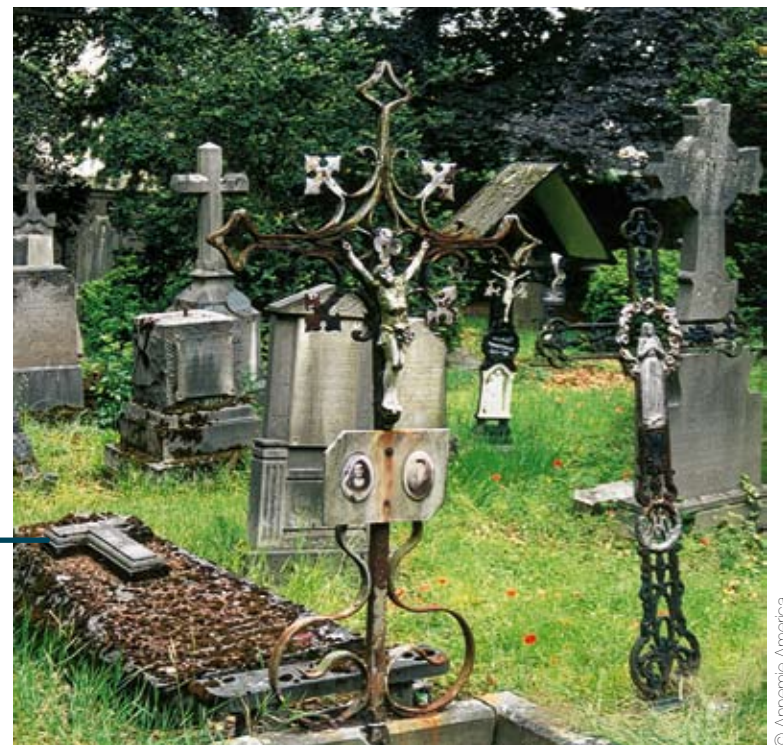
with numerous new facilities, houses and naturally, lush greenery.

If you are in Limburg, on the other hand, be sure to stop by the old cemetery in Hasselt. The only official burial ground in the area from 1796 to 1930, the cemetery is just outside the Kempische Poort and exudes the wealth of the 19th-century *bourgeoisie* with its sumptuous – often bombastic – tombstones and chapels. Each grave is more elaborate and intricately decorated than the next, all embraced by giant weeping willows and cypresses: a peaceful yet melancholy atmosphere in a rich oasis just outside of the city.

The Streekhuis in Eeklo (East Flanders) is also definitely worth a visit. When Hermann Enke built his grand home in 1894, he had no idea what kind of impact it would have. It became a gorgeous castle-like structure that mixes various styles but was predominantly inspired by Art Nouveau. In 1952, this splendid piece of architecture became the property of the small town. Now restored, it houses the local health board, among others organisations.

An exhibit especially designed for the occasion will tell the tale of the Enke family, their number of impressive houses and their heavy influence on 19th and 20th century Eeklo. ♦

Social housing, Limburg style: The former hospital for men in Sint-Truiden is now residential (above); the old Hasselt cemetery (right); the official residence of the Governor of the National Bank in Brussels (below)



Brussels' own

Or, rather two days. Brussels spreads its Open Monument Day over the weekend of 19 and 20 September, due to the abundance of its patrimony. Their theme will be something completely different: *Van Andere Oorden*, or *From Other Places*, which will focus on all the exotic and

imported influences that have left their mark on the capital's gardens, architecture and decorative elements. Ranging from Japanese details to Art Deco and from English cottage style to Moorish influences and back, it's all here.