

Vision of a city

Mechelen stares down a 450-year history as the seat of Catholicism and figures out where to go next

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This year marks the 450th anniversary of the archbishopric in Mechelen, an occasion the city is recognising by throwing a three-month cultural festival. Dubbed City Visions, the festival, which runs until 21 June, looks back at Mechelen's colourful history. But it also focuses on the future by shedding light on the numerous renovation projects in this marvellous little city that is often underrated by both tourists and locals alike.

Mechelen is located in Antwerp province, almost exactly between Brussels and Antwerp. With its many shops, pubs and restaurants, it has a contemporary – even cosmopolitan – air. But once you take a walk through the narrow streets along the river Dijle, past numerous churches and preserved Gothic architecture, you can't help but be overwhelmed by its spectacular past.

During a brief period in the early 16th century, Mechelen became the capital of the Low Countries. This short but ambitious period was very important to the city's heritage as it produced many of the now-treasured Renaissance buildings, along with works of art and the overall poetic atmosphere.

Its history has also made Mechelen, with a population of about 80,000, the proud owner of 389 listed buildings and no

fewer than four mentions on the list of UNESCO world heritage sites: the St Rumbold's Cathedral, the Belfry, the Small and Large Begijnhofs and, finally, the Ommegang parade held every 25 years to celebrate the arrival of Emperor Maximilian of Austria. (The next one is in 2013.)

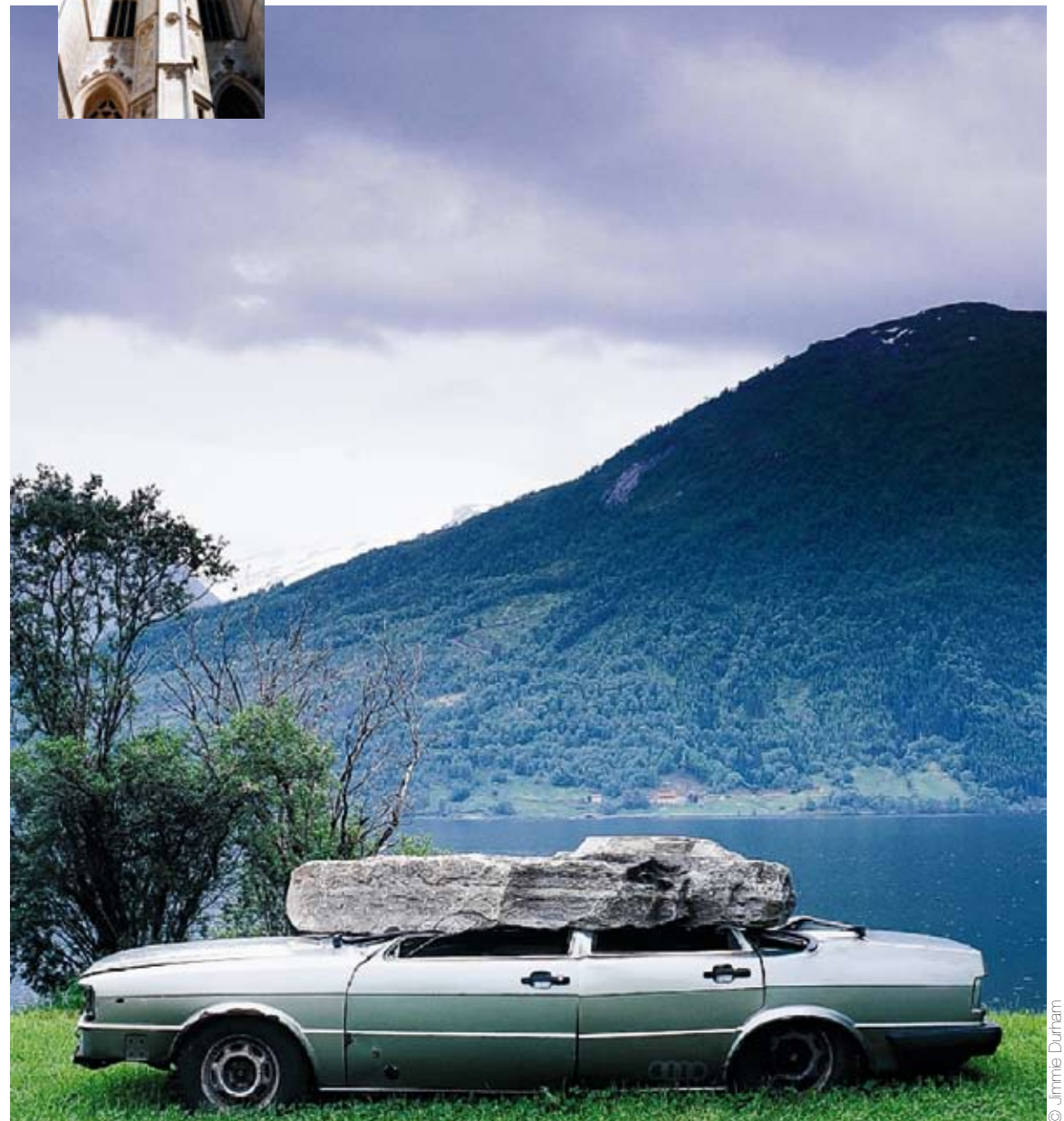
During the past decade, many young families have moved into Mechelen, attracted by the cultural vibrancy mixed with a provincial, small-town feel, turing it (economically speaking) into one of the fastest-growing cities in Flanders today. To make Mechelen even more alluring, the city has launched various renovation projects – some completed and some still in the works. A few of these have earned the city prizes for groundbreaking architecture, green spaces – and even cleanliness.

The biggest and most ambitious project to date is the renovation of the area surrounding the station, a building of which the *Mechlinians* (as they call themselves in the local dialect) are particularly proud, considering that the Brussels-Mechelen connection was the first railway line on the European continent.

But the station has actually been an eyesore for a while now. According to residents, not only are there a lot of traffic issues, but the buildings are old (some abandoned), creating an unsafe



Climb the 536 steps of St Rumbold's for an unforgettable view



© Jimmie Durham

atmosphere and not the ideal first impression for tourists. By 2020, however, this area will be completely modernised and easily accessible for commuters and pedestrians. By emphasising its prime location near the Dijle river and adding a lot more greenery, the city council hopes to create a more appealing entry point to Mechelen.

Bring on the festival

City Visions is a sweeping celebration of Mechelen's past, present and future. Despite half a century of change, the city (and

many of its inhabitants) remains true to its Catholic roots. With City Visions, Mechelen wants to offer its views on the last 500 years of spirituality, creativity and legend and discuss how to creatively and realistically incorporate these traditions into a fast-evolving future.

In order to contemplate Mechelen's place in the world (and confirm its place in our hearts), the city will host numerous exhibitions, parades, city walks, theatre, film, music and a wealth of other festivities during the next three months.

The vibrant "Bar-o-droom" will be at the heart of the festivities. Located in the Interior & Design Department of the Catholic University Mechelen (KHM), it will serve as a meeting point for visitors and locals. Not only is it a chic bar, but it's also a stage for music, dance and the city's most visionary film programme to date.

To commemorate Mechelen's link with Catholicism, the major exhibition *Backlit Heaven* focuses on four-and-a-half centuries of faith in the Mechelen-Brussels archbishopric. Almost 300 works of art have been selected to portray the ongoing tension between popular devotion and religious authority, while at the same time trying to paint a clear picture of faith today. If you are looking for even more enlightenment, you can also follow the Backlit Walk that explores eight of Mechelen's beautiful churches, which contain several masterpieces by Rubens

and Van Dyck.

The internationally renowned MuHKA (Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp) has relocated to Mechelen for the duration of City Visions to host its *All That is Solid Melts into Air*. In five locations across the city, international artists try to answer an important question: does art serve a purpose in today's society? Through various transformations (material as well as spiritual), this exhibition introduces God to art and allows multiple visions of reality and of the future.

Contourlight is an atmospheric (and free!) evening trail that combines all the charms of Mechelen's historic centre with contemporary art lighting. Following the theme of past-present-future, international artists have conjured up a whole range of visions using every light source from neon to LED. Mixed with common streetlights, these installations lead you along the city's most prized locations.

But the absolute highlight of the festival is Mechelen's own St Rumbold's Tower. While climbing the 536 steps to the top, you are confronted with its unique history and the secrets behind the carillons. Ninety-seven metres above ground, you reach the sky walk that was installed for City Visions – offering a breathtaking view of Mechelen that extends to the Port of Antwerp and the Atomium in Brussels. ◆

➔ www.cityvisions.be



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The devil on your shoulder: How does Mechelen incorporate its religious past with a contemporary cultural edge? That's the question at the heart of City Visions, which includes the exhibitions *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* (top) and *Backlit Heaven* (above left)