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Chaussée de Mons – Bergensesteenweg -walk:
Impressions, ideas and observations

Sunday 10.5.2009
Between 10-14.30 o’clock

Corner of Bergensesteenweg
The poetics of the street – general notes

I like the richness of the street scenery in Brussels. I find the local approach to the built environment both carefree and creative. The ways of taking control of space that startle me include reckless driving, totally self-regarding walking in groups, the most inventive DIY constructions and decorations, the filling up of space with posters and paintings, and the like. Brussels is a combination of the distractively creative and the destructively creative.

Many of even the older periods are still surprisingly present in Brussels, if you care to notice them, and the attendant demographic fluxes mark the population of the city. One of my pleasures is to observe the quaint charm of hand painted signs of artisans and small entrepreneurs. The phenomena of folk typography would be an interesting research topic as such.

Brussels is rarely static, and the watchful eye must stare, yet proceed to record thousands of images. If you do not carry a camera, you are always likely to miss a shot forever. Not that all – or any – of my shots are so great. During the Bergenseesteenweg walk, I took around 200 pictures. As I am conduction a couple of research projects on urban history, I was happy to get shots for these projects as well. I only really liked a couple of the pictures I took on Sunday. But in this case I think the journey was the most interesting and important thing.
Prologue

I took the metro from Madou to Clemenceau and walked along the Bergensesteenweg quite a bit to get to Cafe Roma at 10 o'clock. The stretch from the metro to the Porte de Anderlecht is rather familiar to me although I have never payed any attention to the name of the street. I have the Japanese way to locate places with landmarks, not with street names. Up until now, for me Bergensesteenweg has just been "the street near the Anderlecht market" with e.g. many Lebanese entrepreneurs. I had not figured out earlier that the street is very long.

In fact I had visited Bergensesteenweg the day before and already taken some pictures. During that day we were nearly driven over by a car, when we were using the zebra to cross the road. The guy in the car started yell at us that we were not quick enough. When the car went by, I noticed that the man in the car was actually giving driving lessons for the person who tried to kill us. Luckily, our fieldwork day was during one of the best days in a year (seen from the traffic point of view): Autoloze zondag – Dimanche sans voitures. Hurrah!
From Metro to Cafe Roma

I decided to take my pocket camera along, as it is easy to carry and use. It is very new and I can not use all it's fineries yet, thought. I could not help myself and taking some shots already on my way to the meeting. Brussels is a Mecca for people who love old signs. This Cavalier club (1) is especially pleasing: the picture is great, and the arabic typography finalises the touch. This sign is most probably unique.

I'm a bit obsessed with Call Shops. This (2) with it's bright colours and nice hand painted typography looks especially charming. Sorry for the odd angle of the shopfront. I tried to avoid the car that was parked in front of the shop; it seems that every time you see something nice, there is a car in the street that spoils your opportunity to take a decent picture. Oh well, I have to come back one day.

MY EQUIPMENT

I FORGOT THE LUNCH PACKAGE...
Detail from the Call Shop (3). It’s definitely handpainted! Please note the plastic buttermilk cup (ayram) to the left. Due to it’s immigrant nature, this part of the street is full of call shops (4). Mobile phones are widely used, too, no matter where you are and what you do. Driving and talking seems to be the national sport in Brussels, no matter your country of origin.

From Cafe Roma to Bizet (or so I thought)

Café Roma (4) was charming place. We got our instructions there. I think more or less understood the mission: walk, inhale the atmosphere and document your impressions, take no pictures before Bizet and meet the others near a big Coca cola sign near Ikea. That should not be too hard. Off we go!

Not as many signs of recession (5) here as in where I live in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode, the poorest commune in Brussels if things have not changed since I last checked this fact. - - I had to take the picture to memorise this detail.
At this point I noticed that I could not wait until Bizet to take pictures.

7. Old shops are converted to flats all the time (note the curtains! Note the mail boxes!)

8. See my point about cars at note 2: This picture might have turned out ok, if the car would not have been parked in front of the window. - - My attempts to cut the car from the pictures were useless.

9. This is not from Bergensesteenweg, but at this point I thought it would be the street to the right. I took the hypothetical Bergensesteenweg (no street sign at the corner, why not?) and walked a bit insufficient.
we were supposed to meet near a Coca Cola -sign. Surely, this can not be the end of the journey? I start to have a feeling that I have taken the wrong street from the crossroad.

1. This is definitely a wrong street. I need to back up.

12. I had to walk some 200 meters back before I found the sign “Teenweg van Berge”. Neat. Now, a new try.
How come did I not notice that there is a third road on the very left at the crossroad. That turns out to be Bergensesteenweg. Just my luck. I’m a bit pissed off with my orientation skills, but I will definitely not look at the map. They are usually wrong, anyway. Bergensesteenweg and Bizet here we come!

I would need a rest now.
15-17. Night Shop: Great shop sign. Too bad it was not open. The sun was shining so brightly that I could not see anything from the camera’s plasma screen. This picture could have been taken in total blankness. Very near the Night shop was a Polish shop, so I bought some juice. It took ages and ages from the seller to slice sausages for the man who was doing his shopping before me. - - - I know we are not supposed to take pictures yet, but this Uniroyal sign is awesome. I feel like I’m on route 66 in the USA! Hopefully there is something to see after Bizet, too?
18. This is from a side-street. Monsieur Henri used to have a swell photographic studio. Seeing it makes me sad and strangely happy at the same time. The historian in me is happy to see the shop quite unaltered and without awful plastic stickers and modern advertisements, but obsolescence may have been the reason of its decline.

19. Next to Henri’s, a lovely modern door handle. These can be seen everywhere in Brussels. This new gem for my door handle collection cheers me up after feeling bad for Henry. Actually, there is no real evidence to feel bad, something fun might happen behind the curtains at this moment.

On the other side of Henri the favourite bird of all carnivores: the chicken. I’m happy it’s closed. I hate the greasy smell of a burning animal.
Some sort of BIZET-sign at the Crossroads!

20. This is what I then thought was my first official observation from Bergensesteenweg. It turned out I was wrong. Anyway, I kind of like this non-place feeling and I sure have seen the puddles somewhere else, too. They have probably been used in a laundry advertisement.
21. Still no grand idea how to visualise my impressions of the street. Well, now I’m going to kick some ass and do something about this.

It’s hot.

BURNING

22. Another non-place. This always open place seems to be closed forever.

Actually it’s not really a non-place, but wait and see...
23. At Planet Meubles I start to get this where on earth am I -feeling. The person who drew the map totally infused Finland to Russia, our old colonizer. On the other hand, our other former colonizer Sweden looks huge – could it be interpreted as a marker of an unconscious fear of Ikea – the multinational other that will finally wipe away most of the Plantet Meubles from this planet?

From Bizet to Ikea

24. Oh well. I can not use the non-place pictures and the map for the official work. It turned out that this is THE BIZET, with the metro Bizet and everything. The blue and yellow (notice my colour theme!) sign proves it. Great typography in the shopfront again.
Jupiter, this is BISET and I know this place. I have been to this flea market many times with my Bulgarian friends who own a car.

25. What a déjà vu-feeling. Time to make a quick search. - - I can not believe my luck, next to a cardboard of Calypso-bananas is this wonderful box of plastic toys. I just have to rescue the doll with a yellow torso; 50 cents for her is a bargain if I can make some use of her later in connection with Ikea. Her eyes are blue, so the colours match. Perfect.

26. Here it is. My official Bergenseesteenweg-treasure, and my first – and almost only – picture with some people in. I do not feel very comfortable shooting strangers.
26. At Bizet I sit down on the bus stop bench. Gee, who’s there, it’s the cool looking lady from our workshop. She’s probably up to something really artistic and intelligent. The Flemish people will think I’m mad if I take pictures of the plastic doll. Should I go back to square one and think something else?
- No time for that, thought. It’s better to carry on and count on an inspiration.

27. Next to the brick wall is a travel agency. A house as colourful as this would probably not be allowed in Helsinki. Another fine example of the world map. I wonder if it was the same person who made the logo for Planet Meubles.

Maybe she has a magic camera?

Another NIGHT SHOP. Don’t the consumers sleep at all?
28. This butcher is Roger. The texts in the signboard are also in Polish, so I guess there are people from that area around.

29. I have been on this spot before. My Bulgarian friend Peter even stopped his car, so that I could take a picture of this giant pizza on the wall. It does not make me feel like eating one. It is advertising the use of wooden ovens, which is a good sign. I take a couple of pictures of the pizza sign. - - At home I notice that the building is far too dark. If I start to manipulate it, it will soon look too photoshopped, and I dislike that look. At least it would not look good with the other, non-photoshopped pictures.
30. Time to celebrate. I have walked from number 13 to number 1193. I like the minimal decorative display and elegant pastel colours of the balloons. This is one of my favourite shots. Just before or after the balloons I stopped in a Polish tea room (number 1028). It was 13 o’clock. I did not have a clue how long I would have to walk to Ikea and the mysterious Cola-sign

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31. Inside the cafeteria I write some notes in the small notebook given to us by the organizers. Suddenly a hysterically laughing guy comes in. He holds a motorbikers helmet. Somebody had glued a black, fake-hair-hairbrush and a black beard to it. The ladies in the cafe are not as impressed as the guy. Suddenly another guy comes in. He is wearing a motorbike outfit and is the owner – and probably also the proud DIY-man – of the helmet. This would make a great picture, but the moment is gone. I document the incident in my note book and call it the picture I would have wanted to take.
33. Off we go. The multilingual environment is sometimes very funny. “Jano” means “thirst” in Finnish. I was already thirsty after the cafe. I’m getting a bit tired, and the charm of the Bergenseesteenweg starts to fade.

It’s quite hot...

JANO = THIRST
Anonymous SHOP.
Nice tiles.

34. See my point: you can not seem to get rid of the cars, ever. Now there is an irritating reflection.

35. Nice tiles again!

OHAY, I'M ALMOST THERE..

36. For a moment I play with the idea that I might collect yellow and blue targets to fit the colours of the doll and Ikea. I reject the idea as phony. And anyway, the walk is almost at the end. If I want to stick to the colour code idea, it's better to use the doll as a starting point and Ikea as a finishing point and not to rub the idea in too much.
This is the true non-place.

**Goal**

Whee, it's your plastic girl from the flea market! She looks like she has escaped from a Swedish version of Star Trek, but maybe she feels home here on earth, at least near Ikea. She is a really good model. The only problem is that she is a bit unstable and the tiniest gust of wind makes her tumble.

The real goal was of course the journey... wait...
From Ikea to the giant Egg and the nice shop

37. There is still time to walk a bit further before our meeting, so I'll do that. Eggo kitchen house seems to be going strong despite of Ikea. The logo is a failure. I even prefer the giant pizza-sign to the Eggo-logo. Now I have another idea in my pocket: Giant pizza meets giant egg. Hmm...

![Eggo Kitchen House](image1)

It is bigger than the pizza.

about 150-200 cm??

38. In front of Eggo I saw this. I might use it some day. It kind of looks like an unintended warning of swine flu.

39. Opposite Eggo is a small shop, from where I take my last official Bergenseesteenweg photo. The owner of the shop is really friendly. We chat in English. He asks me what the Finnish people think about the Belgians.

I assume that people who visit Eggo and Ikea try to use his parking place all the time.
Prologue

I still took some photos from the outskirts behind Ikea, but that would be another story. It was great to see some grass and green after the urban walk. The canal behind the Ikea is supercool. A city without a sea always feels a bit incomplete to me. I miss the Baltic sea so much!

Sitting at our final point on Brasserie Luciano’s terrace was a small compensation for the long walk and you could almost fool yourself into breathing the real sea air.

That’s it, folks. What a great day out!

The Stone Road — workshop (animatrice Els Dietworst)
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