

# Where demolition

Belgian town in process of being knocked down for 15 years becomes a living street art gallery

By **Melissa Hekkers**

**I**n 1998, the Flemish regional government in Belgium first outlined plans to expand the port of Antwerp which also meant the future demolition of the 400-year-old village known as Doel.

Throughout the years, residents have gradually seeped out, only to leave behind the notions of the bustling town Doel once used to be.

As more of the town became abandoned, street artists from across Europe came to debut their works around Doel, establishing a trend which quickly took off but could also soon belong to the past since the street artists who have made use of most of the town's facades, walls, abandoned petrol stations and small businesses, are now also under threat.

Wedged as it is between a nuclear power plant and an existing set of docks, trying to get to the town is somewhat daunting.

There are no remains of the province Doel was initially tucked away in. Aside from the protruding antennas, the countless cargos waiting to be delivered or taken away, the massive ships and the double-lane, industrial roads leading you to Doel, there is nothing to catch the eye.

It is only once you trespass a gate at the entrance of the town, with a sign politely asking visitors to respect remaining residents, if any, that you begin to



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feel what the town once used to be.

In fact, the transformation plan of the area aims at digging a ship-sized dock across the village and turn surrounding farmland into a nature reserve, an environmental requirement for the port's expansion.

According to a news conference and press release from August 20, 2008, "The Flemish Executive started last week with the demolition of the village of Doel on a massive scale. The historic village is situated in the vicinity of the Port of Antwerp. However, there are still 200 inhabitants in the village who are resisting the demolition of their homes. That is the reason why the Flemish Executive resorted to sending a 100-strong squad of riot police to the vil-

lage in order to force through the start of the demolition works. The sheer brutality and heavy-handed approach of the Flemish Executive has left the remaining villagers humiliated and the wider region in a state of shock. The streets are strewn with rubble, big ugly gaps appeared in between the houses. The village now looks like a war-torn zone. But still, the villagers show resilience and announced to go on with their resistance in a bid to save their village."

Although no villagers were there at the time I roamed around the streets, I spotted solely two houses which bore lively pot plants outside their windows as well as indications of liveliness within house windows. For the rest, homes were decorated with massive pieces of street art, windows either sealed with

Photos: **Melissa Hekkers**



# n meets art



wooden planks or covered with more, artistic banners.

Nadia Maria Rene Halim, niece of Doel resident recalls coming to Doel as a child, where her aunt owned a home. "Now, she's moved to another area, but I remember, we sometimes used to go and eat at the old mill, next to Escaut River."

The mill, a historical monument since 1946, dates from the mid-seventeenth century and is one of the oldest brick mills in Flanders. Out of use since 1927, the mill is only one of the historical elements which Doel will eventually see disappear. Doel has varying architectural attractions, such as a house which is said to have belonged to the family of baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens and its parish church, dedicated

to Our Lady of the Assumption, built in neoclassical style between 1851 and 1854 and according to plans by Lodewijk Roelandt, municipal architect of Ghent.

Yet what seems to be more appealing nowadays is to walk through the very much living street gallery of the town. Everywhere you turn there is something to see, something to read, something to try and understand perhaps, or merely appreciate it for what it is. Because, very much like the decaying history of the village, which is to be recollected by its residents and visitors, the existent and perhaps still developing art work is also something to be captured in the mind and more importantly on paper. Just to enrich that part of life called history, and respect it for what it was, what it is, and what it will become.

