The Lemaire sanatorium, which was built between 1933 and 1937 by Horta’s follower Maxime Brunfaut, lies just outside the Flemish village of Tombeek. Miners with pulmonary diseases were treated there until well into the 1980s, when the institute was closed as part of an extensive reorganization of the health care system. Having read an article by the architect’s grandson in BEople, a Belgian magazine, I went there on a Sunday morning to have a look.1 The sanatorium is standing on top of a hill, not far from the first bus stop outside the village, at the end of a long driveway. At first sight, it looks like a deserted holiday resort: exquisitely situated in the Flemish landscape, sun-drenched, with spacious balconies on each floor. It is very easy to enter the building: it used to have large windows on all sides, almost all of which are smashed. A long corridor, strewn with fragments of glass, gives access to the former patient rooms, joined together by a gallery on the outside. Washbasins, lying all over the floor, have left large breaches in the walls; sunlight is working its way into the heart of the building. Old x-rays, still with patient ID’s, have been glued on the windows by previous visitors: an unimpeded view over the surrounding fields through the filter of blackened lungs. Not a single wall has remained without graffiti: ‘Le chien est dans le frigo’ – the dog is lying in the fridge. Most of the infrastructure is centrally located: offices, the lift shaft with what used to be an elevator, lost between two floors, as well as a spacious but gutted dining room. The paint is peeling off, and the floor is covered with a thick layer of ashes. With its charred chest, the sanatorium not only recalls the life of its former inhabitants, it also seems to embody it.

A similar scenario repeats itself on each of the floors. At the head of the last stairs, suddenly countless eyes are watching me. Here too an artist has left his signature. How many souls are wandering around here? A chaise longue is standing on the terrace, as if someone went for a few-minutes’ walk and could come back at any time to enjoy the wonderful view. A light breeze is coming up. Time for a large gulp of oxygen, and let’s go to the roof. Light and air in profusion, sloping hills all around and, rooted in the roof covering, a few timid trees, rocked by the wind. The building heaves a sigh of pleasure: the place where people formerly learned how to breathe again has appropriated this skill itself.

For many years, official agencies have left the Lemaire sanatorium to its own devices. Although it was listed in 1992, nothing was done to
What extent, architecture depends on a durable, physical form. What architecture as an envelope or symbol, but in the direct experience of, we testify to regular visitors, who are not primarily interested in shutting down, the building has started a new life: the numerous graffiti and torium had to be closed down. On the other hand, since the institute was health care and the decline of the mining industry, a number of sanatorium is no longer inhabited, because its function has become obsolete. With the regression of tuberculosis, the modernization of sanatorium is no longer inhabited, because its function has become untenable. On the one hand, ruins are elements from our built environment that progressively withdraw from social life. The Lemaire sanatorium was indestructible.\(^5\) This can partly explain why the Lemaire sanatorium, despite its broken windows and flaking paint, looks so lively: not distracted any longer by the furniture and decoration, the users and the dynamic of social life, we focus all our attention on the fundamental choices underlying the design. The open, spacious, clear and bright construction, serving the patients' mental and physical well-being, has not lost anything of its strength. The organization 'Red het Modernisme' (Save Modernism) describes its actual state as follows: ‘Only its structure is steady as a rock, and speaks out for the quality of the architectural design’.\(^6\)

Yet in this perspective the potential vitality of derelict buildings finds itself reduced to what can still be observed and experienced from the initial design. In reality, it also owes much to the meanings projected onto the building retrospectively. Shaun O’Boyle has emphasized this on his website about modern ruins: ‘When first visiting ruins I realized that these abandoned buildings had an interest and a meaning that went beyond the original design intent, that in fact they had become something quite different’. Still according to Boyle, the changed meaning of modern ruins is mainly due to the transformation from an utilitarian object into a form without function. In addition, abandoned buildings derive their new meaning from what visitors associate with them: ‘The architecture is heavily loaded with what the viewer imagines the history of this place might have been’. Since its closure, the Lemaire sanatorium has formed a source of inspiration for a number of graffiti artists and even film producers.\(^7\)

Not only the traces left by visitors and the focus on the initial design confer a lively appearance on the building; also, long repressed natural phenomena become visible again. Material alterations, notably due to weather conditions, are no longer stopped or disguised by maintenance or repair. The transitoriness of architecture, now unbiasedly experienced, gives evidence of its vitality. As the building is falling into disrepair, its mortality becomes apparent: one can observe that it unmistakably consists of living material. The previously described unstable equilibrium between ephemerality and durability parallels a balance between natural phenomena and human intervention: ‘Ruins are a trace of the human intervention in nature and evidence of nature’s intervention in the human.’\(^8\) Dilapidated buildings embody the endless cycle of nature and culture. When people construct a building, society appropriates a piece of nature by determining the purpose and meaning of the plot of land and the materials. Years later, when official bodies distance themselves from the building because it is no longer needed or wanted, the artefact can be absorbed by nature again: ‘As things fall apart, out of their remains emerge new forms of growth. These are signs both of human
A building which is considered practically, culturally and historically valueless is generally soon removed and only seldom abandoned to its fate. In this context, longing for places where trees are free to grow through the walls, ‘urban explorers’ seek for abandoned, ‘uncontrolled’ architecture.

CONTEMPORARY RUINS

There is a fundamental difference between historic and contemporary ruins. Historic ruins are usually treated as cultural heritage. The unstable equilibrium between ephemeralism and durability is no longer present, because official agencies bring the process of decay to a standstill. Historic ruins thus embody a bygone state of dereliction. With regard to contemporary ruins, on the contrary, no one can as yet say who will get the upper hand: will the building be definitely reincorporated into nature or will people later pick it up again? This also applies to the Lemaire sanatorium which, despite its status as a monument, is facing an insecure future. Robert Harbison describes the difference between historic and contemporary ruins in his book The Built, the Unbuilt and the Unbuildable: ‘Ancient ruins vividly depict the passage of time, but it is now almost frozen. [...] Industrial ruins are most special in this: though large and powerful they feel extremely vulnerable. [...] Old ruins only look doomed anymore, these plants and factories are.’12 With both natural decay and a potential demolition as a threat to its existence, a building exerts a special attraction, if only because any visit could be the last one. Harbison describes decay as a kind of ugliness that we experience as beauty because of its transitoriness: ‘This ugliness does not become beautiful until one realizes that all these signs tell us it will be swept away.’13

The vitality of contemporary ruins

At the same time, the building is ‘released’ for all those interested to explore it, interpret it, and put new meaning on it. In other words, there is both a natural and a socio-cultural ‘re-conquest’ going on.

Situations in which nature gains or tries to gain the upper hand again are relatively rare in the highly regulated and mediatised Western world, especially in urban areas. This has to do with the Western perception of buildings as durable or even permanent objects – a tendency which is reflected in the preservation of monuments from local to global level, as well as a far-reaching regulation of the built environment. A building which is considered practically, culturally and (art-)historically valueless is generally soon removed and only seldom abandoned to its fate. In this context, longing for places where trees are free to grow through the walls, ‘urban explorers’ seek for abandoned, ‘uncontrolled’ architecture: ‘Deserted buildings are rare in The Netherlands. Especially in the area where I live where every square meter is immediately reused and civilized.’17

Later, the building will either fall back into nature, or people will breathe new (cultural) life into it. In a book entitled Second Hand Cultures, Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe have described how clothes which have been cast off can be revalued after some time.15 Their observations can just as well be applied to buildings. First, people can try to find back and re-emphasize the building’s historic meaning: Gregson and Crewe call this ‘recovery’. This form of revaluation can either be based on thorough research and a well-founded historic reconstruction (‘meaning creation through historical reconstruction’), or on an imaginary conceptualization of the period in question (‘imagined history making’). The Lemaire sanatorium could, for example, be restored to its original state, to be used as a clinic or a museum. Such an approach will often result in the building being no longer animated, but frozen in a real or fictive historic condition. Harbison even goes as far as to call a building which was ‘renovated to death’, the real, lifeless ruin: ‘Rehabilitated, it had become a ruin, of a dispiriting sort, losing its history and its defining edge.’16 Second, people can try to erase all traces of history. This might happen if, as proposed by a property developer, the sanatorium is transformed into an office building. As ‘divestment’ erases all or most traces of human presence, it also often results in the loss of the building’s lively aura. Finally, the building can be used as a basis for something entirely new: repaired, re-interpreted, perhaps completed by a contemporary extension, it will get a new spirit, as expressed by the term ‘re-enchantment’.

URBAN EXPLORERS

I use the term ‘urban explorers’ as a generic name for a large variety of people calling themselves not only ‘urban explorers’, but also ‘urban adventurers’, ‘geocachers’ or ‘infiltrators’.17 They regularly visit buildings which are not meant for that purpose: often abandoned, sometimes also unfinished buildings or inaccessible pieces of buildings, such as tunnels or drains. Many urban explorers present photos from their explorations on the Internet. This medium is also indispensable to exchange information about newly discovered locations. Geocachers’ expeditions distinguish themselves by their character as a hunt: geocachers either reveal cache coordinates on the Internet, or use a GPS (global positioning system) to find caches hidden by other participants. Geocaching thus has two purposes: to visit a special location and to find the cache, which usually consists of a can of Coca-Cola for the first finder, a logbook, and a small mascot or key ring which the finders may exchange for something else.

Several urban explorers emphasize that their deeply rooted interest for abandoned and off-limits locations is preceded by a long history. The
authors of the website ‘Infiltration’ go back to 1861, when the poet Walt Whitman described his visit to the Atlantic Avenue Tunnel in Brooklyn. Contemporary artists and photographers have also shown interest in contemporary ruins. In 1976, Paul Virilio tried, in his ‘Bunker Archéologie’, to get a grip on the mysterious attraction emanating from the bunkers along the Atlantic coast. In the same period, Gordon Matta-Clark drew attention to the beauty of buildings that were about to be torn down. In his project ‘Splitting’, from 1974, he cut a dwelling house in two pieces. In ‘Office Baroque’ (1977), he removed pieces from the walls and floors of an office building, as if an enormous iron wrecking ball would have quietly gone through a house, without damaging the rest of the building. Each of these projects was extensively filmed and photographed, and the fragments removed from the buildings were exhibited in galleries. Matta-Clark wanted to make people aware of some of the premises underlying Western architecture, which have become so self-evident that many people take them for granted: ‘The idea that important buildings should be not only durable but also permanent is so integral with the Western idea of architecture as to escape notice, except by those critical of Western civilization as a whole.’

This further explains why, at the end of the 1980s, indignant critics mercilessly rejected Tyree Guyton’s sensational ‘Heidelberg Project’ as something scandalous. With his stylized accumulation of old toys, car tyres, shoes and rusty ironmongery, Guyton wanted to denounce the neglect of a row of houses in Detroit. To make the decay of architecture visible, however, also means to challenge some of the foundations of (Western) architecture. Therefore, Matta-Clark’s projects were also seen by many – himself included – as anti-architecture or ‘anarchitecture.’ He underlined the unstable equilibrium through which the beauty of transitoriness comes to the fore: ‘Like an alchemist, Matta-Clark had melted through it. ’

Ruined buildings and sites are natural storytellers; they have been the containers that we fill with the stuff of living and work. […] They tell stories about the recent past of our culture, and comment on our transition to the present.” Former inhabitants and users have left the place, so visitors depend on the objects left behind to reconstruct the life in the building. O’Boyle writes that he has a preference for modern ruins because he understands their history and meaning much better than that of historic ruins: there are many more artefacts, and they stand much closer in time to the contemporary visitor. Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas have devoted a book to archaeologists’ interest in the recent past and the present. In their Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past, they write: ‘With the archaeology of us, any gap [between the archaeologist and what is studied] is constantly being contested and collapsed because we are implicated in what we do to an extent much more immediate than with any other kind of archaeology.’ Urban exploration and archaeological exploration have many points in common. Not only do urban explorers try to let abandoned objects speak, they also display a similar respect towards these objects, as expressed in their motto: ‘Leave nothing but footprints, take nothing but photographs.’ On their websites, almost all of them explicitly distance themselves from thieves and vandals.

Originally, archaeologists concentrated on the distant past. Since they started in the 1960s to pay attention to the recent past and present, their usual (temporal) distance to the object of their investigation has been replaced. Analyzing their contemporary Self has alienated them from the latter: ‘[…] turning our methods back onto ourselves creates a strange, reversed situation – a case of moving the familiar unfamiliar.’ The same holds true for urban explorers: on the one hand, they recognize enough aspects in modern ruins to be able to identify themselves with them, but on the other hand, through their archaeological approach, they remain at a distance. To explore the familiar as something unfamiliar constitutes perhaps the greatest attraction of contemporary ruins. At these exceptional, uncontrolled places, urban explorers do experience without bias the unstable equilibrium between ephemeraity and durability, and the concerted action of natural and human intervention. To approach abandoned buildings as an archaeological field also creates a specific distance: a previously familiar environment is given the character of a strange land, to be investigated by explorers and adventurers. In particular, locations which embody the ‘Other’ in one’s own society and were not accessible before, such as asylums, tend to be very popular.
The exploration of contemporary ruins has a much more direct social relevance than that of historic ones. According to Buchli and Lucas, it has the potential to get a grip on the absent and invisible aspects in the recent past and present of our own society: “[…] the archaeological act, in addressing the absent present, addresses the silent and painful lacunae in our understanding of recent experience.” This form of – according to both authors, highly creative – archaeological disclosure emphasizes once more what grants contemporary ruins their vitality – not only their liveliness, but also their indispensability.

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5. ibid. p.12.
7. See: http://oboeephoto.com/ruins/index.htm
10. Roth (see note 3) p. 2.
11. ibid. p. 2.
12. See: www.euronet.nl/users/kaaz/vg00.html
16. Harbison (see note 13) p. 110.
18. See: www.infiltration.org/history-timeline.html