

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Filip Dujardin

For our first issue of 2008, we are taking a sneak peek at how Flanders might look in 2020. As well as examining the government's plans for the coming 12 years, we ask architects, futurologists and artists what direction they think we might be heading.

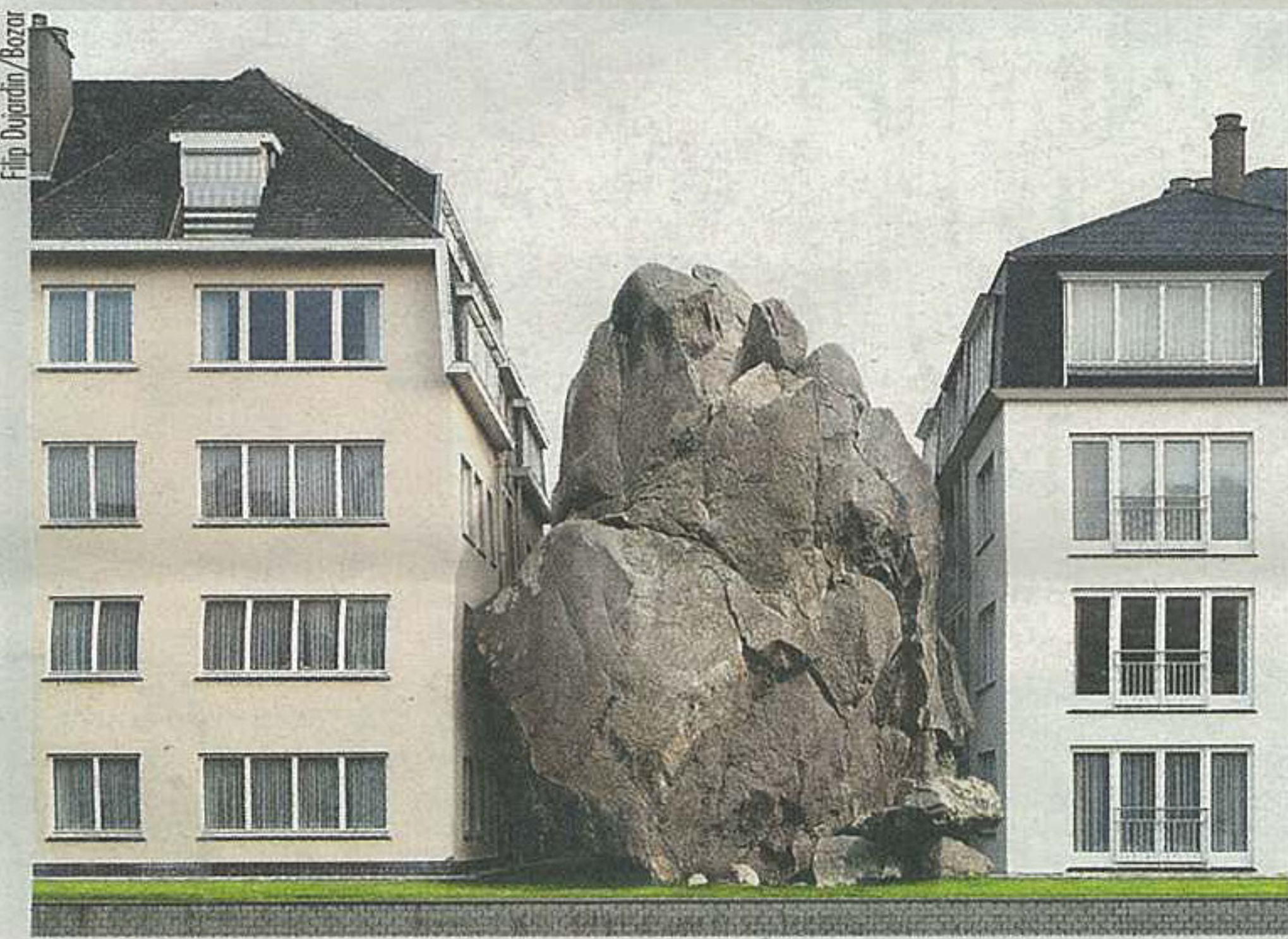
Exactly 50 years ago, Expo 58 in Brussels was an attempt to imagine the future. The temporary pavilions at the Heysel exhibition ground gave people new ideas about transport, food and architecture. Some of the ideas were realised in the 1960s and 1970s, while others were quietly forgotten.

The Ghent photographer Filip Dujardin has tried to imagine the future of cities in an exhibition that recently opened at Bozar. Using photomontage techniques, he has created a series of remarkable images of imaginary buildings. Some of them might one

day be built, like the apartment tower made from random housing blocks. Others, like the giant rock squeezed between two dull apartment buildings, look more like a surrealist dream.

The Bozar exhibition also includes a series of photographs of random structures in the Flemish countryside taken by Dujardin for the Belgian architectural journal *B+*. They illustrate the various constructions put up by local farmers or city dwellers using bits of salvaged junk. Dujardin calls this "intuitive architecture." These strangely appealing photographs are a reminder of the way that things evolve accidentally, according to individual whim, out of sight of government planners and critics.

online
www.bozar.be



Cover illustration

The cover illustration for our Future Issue was done by Flemish graphic designer Eva Cardon, who signs herself Ephameron. One of Flanders most exciting young illustrators, she has designed magazine covers, websites, t-shirts and book illustrations. Her work has been exhibited in group and solo shows in Rome, Paris and the United States. She has further shows coming up this spring in Antwerp, Berlin and Paris.

online
www.ephameron.com

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FACE OF FLANDERS

Probo



It might look like a simple cuddly toy, but this little piece of green artificial intelligence is no toy. Several years in the making and a huge investment by the Brussels region, the project of the Robotics and Multibody Research Group at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (Brussels Free University) is a fully-functioning robot with the ability to read your emotions and respond in kind. Called Probo, the 60-centimetre tall "huggable robot" will debut at the end of this year in the children's ward of the Brussels VUB university hospital.

Brussels' Anty Foundation, which works to improve the experiences of kids in hospitals, came to the university a few years ago with a proposal to create a robot that could comfort children by understanding their emotional and physical traumas and even explain medical procedures to them. Probo is equipped with cameras in his eyes and with audio programmes, so it can actually assess a child's emotions. "Vision analysis is used to recognise facial expressions and then translate those into emotions," explains Jelle Saldien, an engineer working on the project. "Audio analysis can identify the intensity and pitch of a child's speech. If you combine the two, you have some idea of the emotional state – if a child is calm or angry."

Probo will also be able to respond to children appropriately with its own facial expressions and speech that correspond to happiness, sadness or confusion. "There are no real words, so it's not really a language," says Saldien. "But it can communicate emotions with sounds – like the Teletubbies do." Through the use of artificial intelligence, programmers can actually train the robot to improve its recognition and response skills.

Speaking of Teletubbies, the Brussels' robot will also be fitted with a screen in its stomach to show children videos explaining medical procedures they will undergo and "which crazy, scary machines they will see," says Saldien. "The robot can prepare the children so we can reduce their fear before medical examinations." Kids will also be able to play computer games on Probo, and older kids can surf the internet. Eventually, you could have a Probo sit in a classroom and focus on the teacher and the blackboard and relay the images to the child in the hospital, so he or she could continue with school.

But can an expensive robot really perform services that medical staff can't? "You have to give children information in a special way," explains Saldien. "When they are really young, they are living in a fantasy world. You have to sustain that world, even when they are in the hospital. Otherwise, it can be really traumatic for them."

Hence Probo's look and feel. To children, he is a big stuffed toy. The name is derived from the Latin *proboscidea*, a zoological order that includes a number of extinct species and now includes only elephants. Of course, "robo" refers to its own modern species, making Probo a mix of an ancient past and a technological future. Kids get a kick out of such a fantastical creature.

Currently, robotics are being employed in other parts of the world to perform tests, particularly with autistic children. Probo is only one of two in the world, though, that is "huggable" – Japan has a baby seal version they are using with children and the elderly.

The ultimate goal is to have Probos scattered throughout hospitals in Belgium. But only one is expected to be serviceable this year. "Then we need to build more prototypes and do a lot of testing and see what is working, what isn't, what could be improved," says Saldien. "The vision and audio software will be upgraded gradually, so the robot becomes more and more autonomous. But for now, the main aspect is really just safe interaction."

Lisa Bradshaw

online
http://anty.vub.ac.be/info/Probo

TALKING DUTCH

notes on language



Slurptaks

Words come and words go. Some wish that certain words had never come in the first place. Such fuddy-duddies will have been having seizures these days if they have come across *Woord van het jaar 2007*. All languages have to add to and refresh the vocabulary if they are to survive. Some new words are nine-day wonders; others do a job, appeal to the imagination and stay. *Het Woord van het jaar 2007* attracted over 10,000 visitors who voted online for their favourite new word of last year. Here are two that have gained a toehold in the Dutch language.

Bokitoproof was voted the word of the year. It means that something can stand up to anything you throw at it. So I suppose you could describe some gas-guzzling 4x4 with sufficiently strong off bodywork that every other car simply bounces as *bokitoproof*. *Bokito* is the name of silverback gorilla who ran amok in a Dutch zoo last summer seriously injuring a woman. "*Bokito*" is used now to mean een *reischopper*, though I wouldn't call any hooligan that to his face. Of the 10 words you could vote for, my favourite is *slurptaks*. I love those Dutch words that you instantly recognise from English but have a twist in their meaning. In English, one should not slurp one's soup, and also in Dutch, *slurp uw melk niet!* But Dutch goes further: *Zijn 4x4 (vier maal vier) slurpt benzine*. You can almost hear the thirsty engine... slurping!

The definition of *slurptaks* is: *een heffing op auto's die veel brandstof verbruiken*. It's short and to the point, a word that should continue to be used as long as it's necessary to levy a tax on those cars that use too much fuel. And there we have another visual Dutch word, *brandstof*, "fire stuff".

Our languages are also changing as a result of the use of short message services, or sms. The young are blamed for ruining the language with their phone contractions, but they should be thanked for unshackling the language so that we can all take advantage of sms. English influences a lot of smsing in Dutch: *omg* is "oh my God", or it could be *oh mijn God*. Certainly, *fc0l* can only be "for crying out loud". Now if you want to ask a Dutch-speaking young lady what she has done today, simply sms *whigv*, and she will understand that you mean *wat heb je gedaan vandaag?*

If you later arrange to meet in town, you can sms her when you see her across the square: *xiudaar!* (*ik zie je daar!*) if you don't fancy shouting and waving. And if you are feeling affectionate, you can send her a kiss and a cuddle, which in Dutch is *een zoen en een knuffel*; in sms-taal, *een znuffel!* If you need further help with smsing in Dutch, you should get hold of *het Smszkwrdnbk* (sorry but that's the title), which alphabetically lists all the most commonly used expressions.

Alistair MacLean

Smszkwrdnbk is published by Van Halewyck, price €9,95.