

Traces from the Past: Ghost Buildings in Brussels

Riitta Oittinen, Brussels

I moved from Helsinki to Brussels at the turn of the millennium. To make sense of the new environment, I started to photograph the visual scenery and statements of the city. I took my first photo of a ghost building in 2010 – a crumbling tile wall with distinct painted rectangles that outlined the walls of a flat in Molenbeek, Brussels. This spurred me to notice palimpsests around the city.

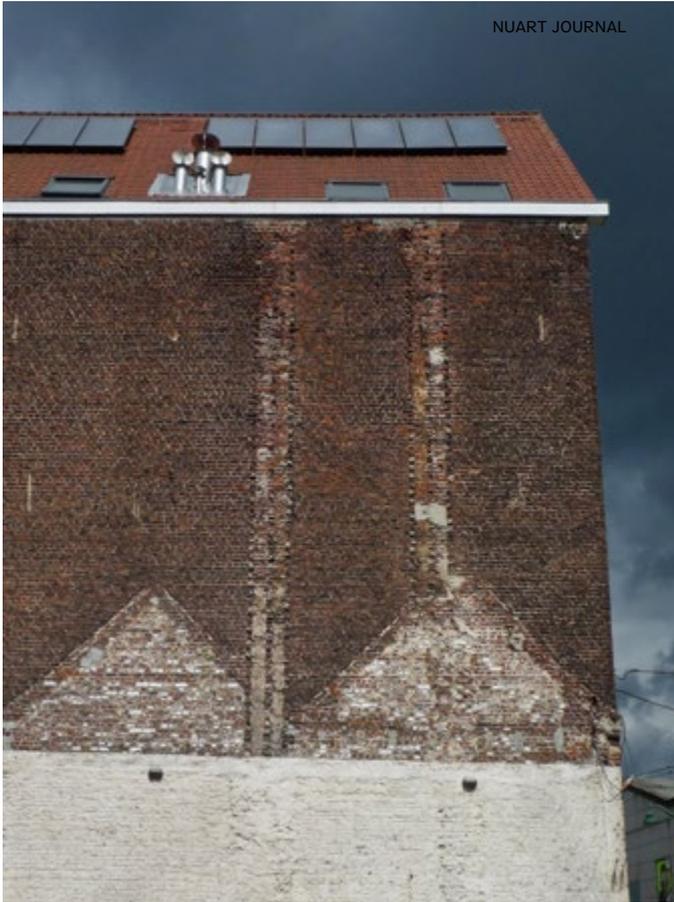


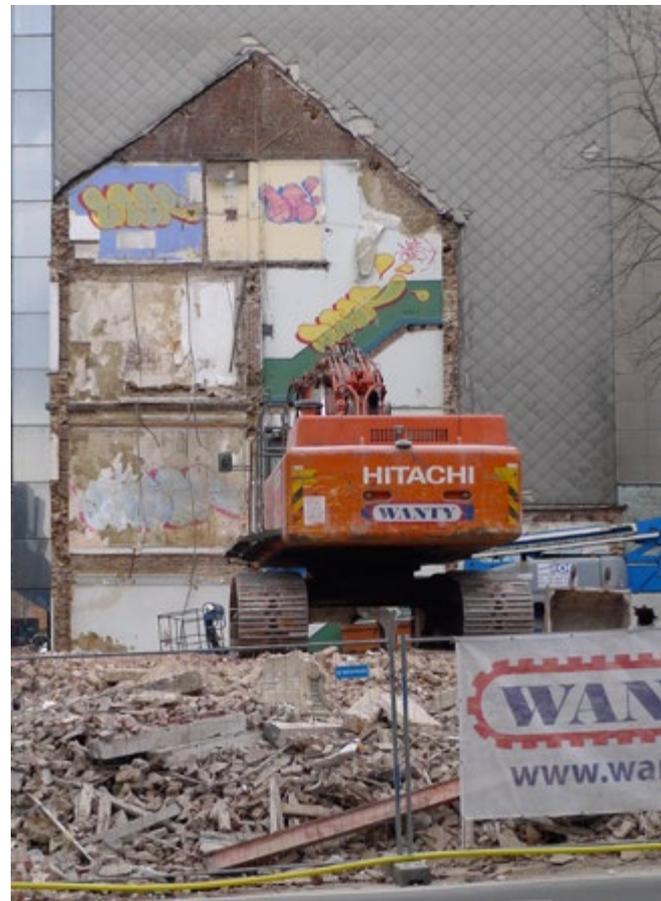
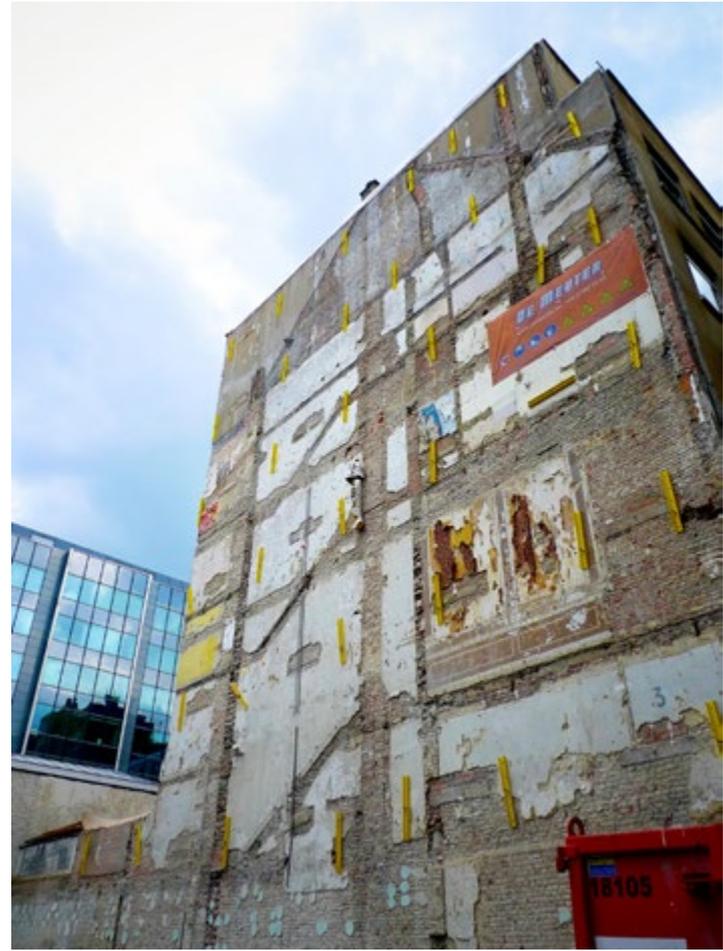
Ghost buildings are buildings that do not exist anymore, and have only a 'negative' or non-existent presence. They are memorials of things lost. This phenomenon has been called, among other things, an architectural fossil, phantom, or palimpsest. Each term refers to the ghostly remains of buildings, or parts of other buildings that are still apparent on adjacent structures (Ephemeral New York, 2017; Madrid no Frills, 2017; Spencer, 2017).

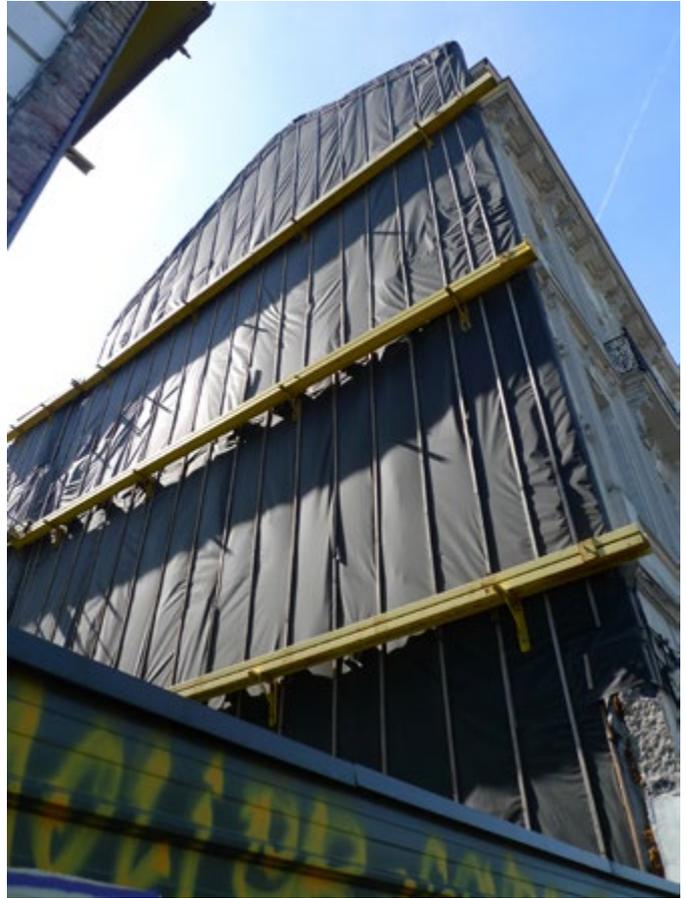
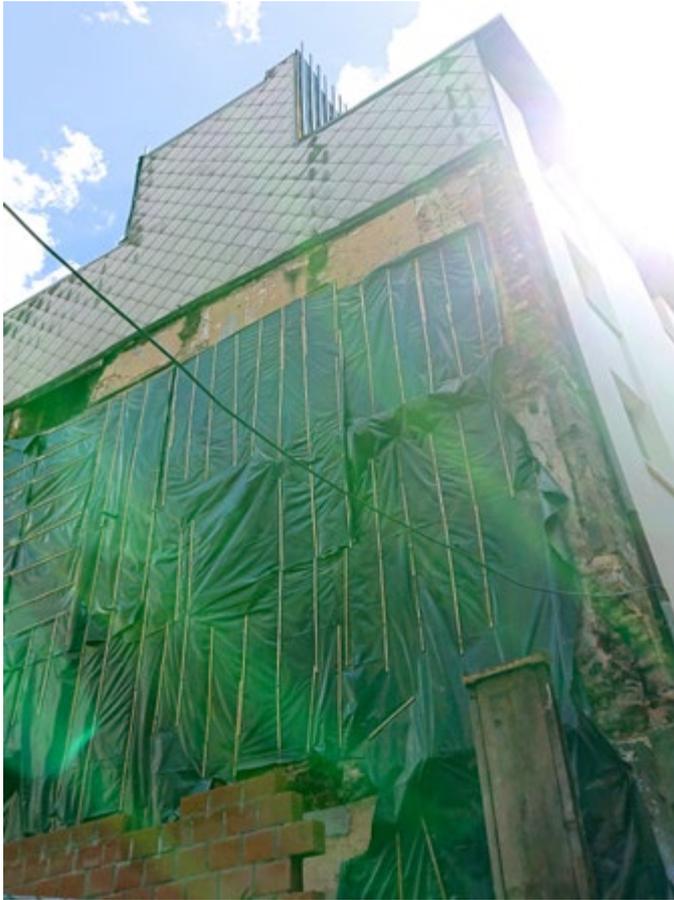
Architectural palimpsests, abandoned places and ghost buildings have also been the focus of photographers such as Thom and Beth Atkinson, Marcus Buck, José Antonio Millán, Thomas Monses, and Xenmate who have each produced thematic series on this theme (Dornob Staff, no date given; Kohlsted, 2017; Tonkin, 2015), while the artist Flavia Mielnik has drawn furniture and household objects on ghost buildings (Helm, 2012). Some have noticed that demolition exposes 'accidental paintings' by revealing colourful abstract formations of past houses. In online discussions, people associate these paint traces with the works of Joan Miró, Gordon Matta-Clark, Clay Ketter, Clyfford Still, and Richard Diebenkorn.

Ghost buildings can stand for greed, neglect, change, destruction, and the general passing of time. They are like a missing tooth that has left a hole in your smile. They contain a touch of history and nostalgia, and also a hint or promise of the future – the void might later house a new building, car park, or leisure area. There is cruelty in ghost buildings, too, as they reveal private choices not meant to be seen by others. From these remnants one can try to guess who the previous occupants were and what their lives were like.









There are four overlapping types of ghost building. The first type consists of clear marks of past housing and room divisions: paint, ceramic tiles, wallpaper, kitchen cupboards, fire places, or toilet facilities. Removed stairs leave a mark where the painted wall surface stopped. The second type is exemplified by the silhouette of a demolished house that is visible in the walls of a building left standing. You may trace doors or windows that have been covered with bricks. In the third case, structures left by a demolished house are scaffolded, supported, insulated, or protected in ways that leave the outlines of the demolished building traceable. The fourth variation results from a visual intervention. A wall left by the removed house has been covered by a mural or an artistic installation. More commonly, these markings are unofficial, and take the form of graffiti or posters. Plants such as vines and climbers can have a similar effect.

There is a visual sameness in ghost buildings around the globe (Meier, 2013). They are eyesores and open wounds in the cityscape. At the same time, they exude a strange melancholic beauty and ask questions about city planning, regulation, and land use. Encountering them stimulates your imagination to grasp past lives, actions, and histories.

Riitta Oittinen is a social historian (MA) who lectured at the University of Helsinki for over ten years. She lives in Brussels where she divides her time between research, science journalism, and projects that combine research and art. Oittinen's work often combines research with photography. She has been involved in the planning of exhibitions in museums, galleries and pop up spaces, and her research, documentary photos and artworks have been published in journals, books, and online. They have also featured in group exhibitions in Belgium, Canada, China, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain and the USA.

All photographs were taken by the author in Brussels (2010–2019).

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