

Liège's Saint-Léonard



Waffles, boulets sauce lapin, a very nice train station and – for good or for worse – Belgium's first Primark branch. These are the things that first spring to mind when talk of Liège comes up. But things are on the up-and-up for the country's third largest city, with its industrial past the perfect backdrop for cultural experiments and artist developments of all kind. Take our word for it, La Cité Ardente is burning once again, with the neighbourhood of Saint-Léonard taking the lead.

Writer HANNA MOENS
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From top to bottom:
Twodesigners'
Jonathan Honvoh and
Rodrigue Strouwen,
artist Denis Verkeyn
and Le Hangar



As any local will tell you, Liège has been trying to reinvent itself for a few years now, with projects initiated years ago finally showing signs of paying off. The city council initiated quite a lot of prestigious, upscale innovations and implantations, making the city fit for life in the second decade of the 21st century. The Guillemins Railway Station was undoubtedly one of the way makers for this urban resurgence. A surprisingly modern and daring design by a world-renowned architect sounds risky for a medium-sized city, but the end result has proven to be worth every overbudgeted penny, as tourists and day-trippers finally find their way to the city. Another recent addition to the city's architectural landscape is the new wing of the Theatre de Liège. Architects Pierre Hebbelinck and Pierre De Wit transformed the prestigious building of the Société Libre d'Émulation, one of the city's emblems, into a contemporary, geometric, glass-walled piece of art.

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In the slipstream of these bigger real estate interventions however, a wealth of smaller, more neighbourly initiatives are popping up. Organizations such as KIKK, Reciprocity, Les Ardentes and Le Micro Festival draw on the city's younger, somewhat more dynamic, classes, in positioning Liège as a leading cultural hub in Wallonia, and the entire region for that matter. The majority of these projects are set in the city centre, but this does not mean there's nothing going on in other parts of town. On the contrary, the Saint-Léonard neighbourhood has been making quite a few inroads of its own. There is plenty of room for people to take things in their own hands, experimenting with other types of innovation and creativity. There's something stirring in Saint Léonard, and the city's artistic, entrepreneurial and creative communities are taking note.

UNDERNEATH THE SURFACE
"Change isn't always visible, but it's definitely happening," says Jonathan Honvoh. Jonathan and his partner in crime Rodrigue Strouwen operate as Twodesigners, a design studio. Both started out as industrial designers, but took on graphic design and interior projects along the way. Now, they're creating

full-scale creative projects straight from their studio in Saint Léonard. "The energy here is very good, there's always something going on. However, if you're not part of the creative scene yourself, you probably won't notice when walking down our streets. The change isn't obvious, but things are stirring on a deeper level, beneath the surface." One could say that the change is in its first stage, a first step of gentrification maybe. Young starters are joining forces and launching new businesses, but the hip restaurants, concept stores and bespoke bars haven't taken over the high street just yet. "I do miss the presence of nice places to eat, drink and shop at the moment, but I'm sure they will turn up soon enough," say Jonathan. Places like Le Hangar, Le Maniema or Epicerie du Nord already point in that direction.

MONEY MONEY MONEY

One of the main incentives for people to flock to a new place is, as always, cold hard cash. Rent in this area is markedly lower than it is in the other parts of town, allowing people to live in a more spacious environment for the same amount of money. Denis Verkeyn, a multidisciplinary plastic artist, moved to Saint-Léonard in 2009 and hasn't looked back since: "I live and work in an old factory that was made into a loft. I have everything I need in just one space: a small music studio, an atelier for painting, and enough space to run Patate édition, my micropublishing project. You really get value for your money here."

ART HUB

The neighbourhood provides the perfect backdrop for a new generation of creative enterprises, thanks to its rich past in mining and steel. Saint-Léonard has always been an industrial, working class area. A past that's still very visible when walking around now, surrounded by old factories and small labourer's houses. Nadja Vilenne's gallery is the perfect blend between the old and the new Saint Léonard, between past and present, heritage and innovation. Commandeering high ceilings, perfectly worn-down brick walls, striking glass facades. Her strong exhibitions of modern art are housed in an old bicycle factory, which has been restored with close attention to detail. "Saint-Léonard is the perfect location for the things I'm doing," she adds, boldly mentioning that this area will be the next best thing for contemporary art in this little country. "It's close to the city centre, but very close to the motorway at the same time, making it easy for collectors to pop by. Belgium is having a moment in the art scene, and I'm sure its central location in Europe is also part of the success story." Young people get chanced here, as lots of initiatives encourage them to express themselves, and provide plenty of room to exhibit to an audience of curators, collectors and critics.



Opposite page from top to bottom:
Gallerist Nadja Vilenne and art space Espace 251 Nord

This page from top to bottom:
Le Garage's staff, a workshop at Dynamo Coop and Dynamo Coop's Marc Moura

CREATIVE CONCENTRATION

Jean-Francois Jaspers agrees, confirming the potential of the neighbourhood. Together with a bunch of partners, he has just recently launched Dynamo Coop. Instead of buying property for themselves and then renting it out, they take a slightly different turn. People are encouraged to join theirs, becoming owners of the building themselves. The rental price is discernably lower, making those otherwise over-budget buildings easily accessible for artistic creation. It's definitely not a coincidence Dynamo Coop is active in this district, since the majority of Liège's 'creative club' work and live here at the moment. "This really is home for us. We live here, we go out here, our kids go to school here. We wouldn't think about starting out somewhere else." Denis too notices this concentration of artists: "Plenty of people know each other and work together on different projects, even becoming friends. This creates a very fertile, fun environment to work and live in."

A MULTIFACETED SOCIETY

Saint-Léonard is a very multicultural zone, and always has been. Indeed, the neighbourhood's community is very mixed: trendy bobo's, recently-arrived foreigners and poorer, older people. At the moment, there's probably more than 70 different nationalities to be found on these limited square metres of land. Nadia describes this place as a "village in the city, a vast laboratory" that works as an almost symbolic place. It's a small intersection of society in general, with its highs and lows. This mix of people, of lifestyles is what attracted Denis to the city when he started his studies at the Académie Royale des Beaux Arts here in 1999: "Liège was something different for me, it opened my eyes. The atmosphere here was a bit more off, a bit grittier even than in other cities. The energy was more southern, more latin here. Parties could go on all night long, dancing with whoever and wherever."

Where people of different background, belief, age and upbringing come together, there's always something going on. Saint-Léonard too inevitably has its problems, but there's plenty of inspiration and ideas as well. There's a lot of goodwill to be found among the majority of the inhabitants. People are genuinely interested in what's happening to their quartier. "This area is a meeting point between fellow creatives, but also between different strands of society," says Jonathan. "This makes it a very interesting area to move in. Things could always be better, but in general Saint-Léonard is doing well. People meet each other, and really try their best to live with each other instead of next to each other".

EASY LIVING

Like in so many other cities, traffic is also a main issue on the mind of many inhabitants. "There is always more and more passage of cars," says Denis, "and there aren't really any facilities for pedestrians or cyclists." More parking space, easier passage and alternative means of transport would help a lot and make this zone even more friendly. But the assets in the vicinity make up for that downside in a way. It's still really close to the centre. Located in the valley, it's easy to get around on foot or by bike. There's lots of greenery too as it is located right next to Les Coteaux de la Citadelle, a lush park on the hills of the city. Twodesigners's studio is located on the third floor of their building: "We're up quite high, which gives us a great view. There's always a spot of green in sight."

A pleasant environment, plenty of supporting initiatives, a healthy mix of people, reasonable prices... Saint-Léonard has it all to make it as one of the city's most liveable, creative spaces. Liège has always been a restless, burgeoning city and won't stop burning soon. It's only a matter of time until those organic supermarkets, vegan pizza places and boutique breweries take over. So, take it from us, enjoy the raw and gritty Saint-Léonard while you still can.



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- ☛ LE MANIEMA
⇒ Rue Saint-Léonard 210
 - ☛ TWODESIGNERS
⇒ Rue de la Brasserie 6
☞ twodesigners.be
 - ☛ LE HANGAR
⇒ Quai Saint-Léonard 43B
☞ lehangar.be
 - ☛ EPICERIE DU NORD
⇒ Rue Saint-Léonard 8B
☞ epiceriedunord.be
 - ☛ NADJA VILENNE
⇒ Rue Commandant Marchand 5
☞ nadjavilenne.com
 - ☛ DYNAMO COOP
⇒ Quai des Tanneurs 2
☞ dynamocoop.be
 - ☛ DENIS VERKEYN
⇒ Rue Defrêcheux 22
☞ verkeyndenis.blogspot.be



From top to bottom:
L'Épicerie du Nord
and Marie Failon's
furniture repair shop.