

## Introduction

This is my third book on urban exploration photography after *Mind Travels* in 2017 (Editions Ici, d'ailleurs...) and *Abandoned Churches* (Jonglez Publishing). Why publish books when social networks make it widely possible to share this type of work? Because I love books. I love the smell of fresh ink on paper. I love feeling their weight in my hands. It's also a way to make it tangible, especially at a time when everything tends to be virtual. I hope to reach a different audience than the one that pats itself on the back on social media. I want to reach an audience that's not well-versed in exploration photography, that doesn't care about the race for likes, and that simply loves uncommon places – the ones I've been able to see with my own eyes through my camera lens.

When it was time to widen my field of exploration, naturally I turned to Belgium. Next to France, it shares a border with the Grand Est and Hauts de France regions, barely an hour's drive from my home. Belgium is a country that's renowned for its medieval cities, Renaissance architecture, and the vestiges of its rich industrial past, as well as its artistic avant-garde. It has many different regions: Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north, French-speaking Wallonia in the south, and a German-speaking community in the east. And in the middle of this hotchpotch is Brussels, the bilingual capital of Europe. Wallonia is still trying to make up for the loss of its textile and metallurgical industries. That's where my adventure began.

While selecting the photos for this book, I had some tough choices to make. Choosing is forsaking – forsaking important sites, but sites that were probably too damaged or too often frequented to fulfil my vision. I wanted to create a predominantly industrial book, and this is more or less the case. I began exploring industrial wastelands in my native region, Lorraine. I very quickly found myself on the other side of the border, looking for the same emotions, the same smells, the same colours. The volume of urban conglomerations in Belgium means it's a kind of promised land for explorers.



## Blast Furnace B - Liège Province

**Lit in 1962, this blast furnace remained one of the largest in Europe for a long time. Producing up to 5,000 tonnes per day, its skyline stands 265 feet tall. It had the sad privilege of being the last Liège basin giant until it officially shut down in 2011.**

From its smoking ruins, on the banks of the Meuse, you can still feel the hot blasts of this steel dragon that was brought down by the economic crisis. On an early autumn morning in 2014, a group of eager photographers decided to venture to this hunting ground that was surrounded by barbed wire and was still under surveillance. I was part of the outing. A colleague just in front of me dropped one of his business cards as he twisted himself up between vegetation and barbed wire. We could have been more discreet. We were quickly overtaken by the feeling of moving through dangerous territory, and had fewer and fewer fallback plans ready to employ in the event of danger. We were torn between the exhilarating feeling of exploration and the awareness of being caught in a giant industrial mousetrap.

At the corner of the first building, to our astonishment, we discovered two large stainless steel lunchboxes as well as huge dog paw prints on the ground. As the tension escalated, I kept thinking of this sentence: "What's important is not running faster than the dog, but your friends", all while looking for refuge or somewhere to climb in case of an emergency. I had a funny feeling of wonder mixed with the fear of ending up in the jaws of an over-enthusiastic Cerberus. We kept going as surreptitiously as possible in groups, each one of us peering in a different direction, looking like meerkats in training in a hostile environment. Fresh tyre tracks confirmed that guards were still making their rounds. As soon as we could, we slipped into the depths of the sleeping monster, shielding our silhouettes from menacing gazes. We moved through the conveyors so that we could discreetly go from one building to another – sizing up the guards' onerous task of forcing us to come out of twists and turns of the rusted maze we had invaded. The light, filtered through dirty translucent sheets of PVC, was strange.

As we continued exploring, the group spread out so we could all enjoy the immense steel cake. After a while, you always end up alone in one of the many buildings, feeling like an ant in the land of giants. There were miles of infernal pipes, and we half expected to see De Niro emerge from them like a mad plumber, hanging from a zip line. Endless metal stairs let me reach a high point with a breathtaking view of the distinctive industrial landscape. As Brel sang, "...with a sky so low that a canal hung itself".



## Maidens School - Liège Province

**Built by two Brussels architects, the building opened in 1876. It then became home to “the school for young girls”, a middle school for girls that had been founded in 1865. After being taken over by the State in 1925, it then became a high school. In 1946 it was named Lycée Royal. Before closing its doors in 1998, the building was also home to a nurse training college. A large company bought it in 2001 and it was listed as a heritage site, but it remained abandoned until 2019.**

I visited this former school twice – in 2014 and then in 2016. Its architecture and luminosity make it a remarkable building. Each time I went I could easily picture the excitement that must have reigned over breaktime, but I could also picture the strict discipline that must have been administered once the bell rang. From my first visit I realised that the entire building had water leaks, and that the beautiful glass roof was no longer waterproof or secure like the original must have been. On rainy days, the ground would be completely flooded, which gave photographers a beautiful mirror-like reflection from that perspective. The vegetation was overgrown in all four corners of the courtyard. Furniture that had been thrown from the first floor was in pieces on the ground.

During my second visit, two years later, I could feel that it had gradually deteriorated. All of the classroom windows were broken, and plaster moulding from the balconies was strewn about the ground. Graffiti tags had appeared, but the light’s magic had remained intact.

A programme of works was performed in 2019 to avoid the risk of collapse. The roofs and the glass ceiling were boarded up. The doors and the window frames were completely dismantled so they could be restored to their original form. Finally, in September 2022, the Société Publique de Gestion de l’Eau (The Public Water Management Company) installed its new offices in the old nurse training college that had been completely renovated. However, it had been neglected, and water had been leaking in for almost 20 years.



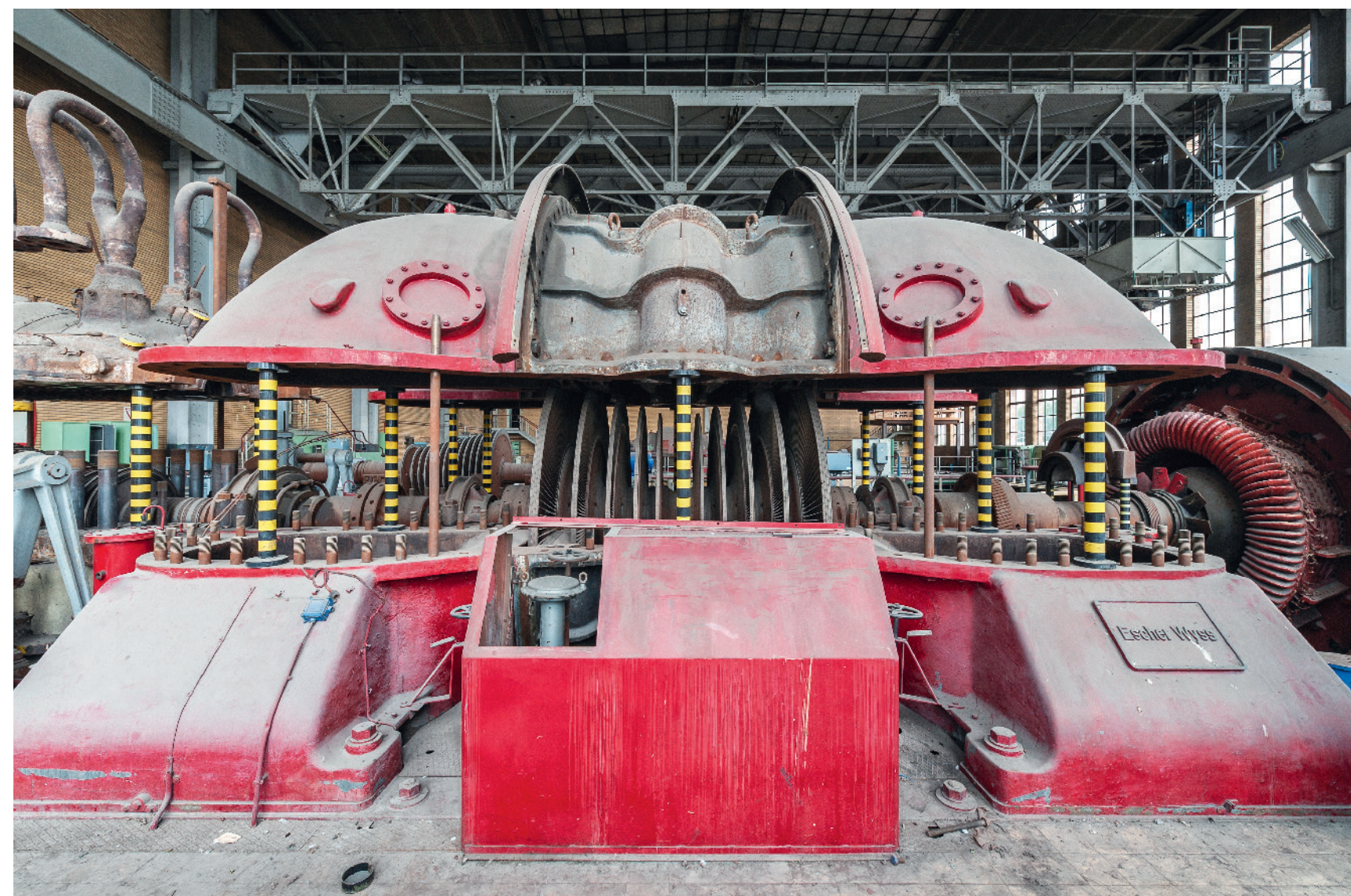
## IM Powerplant - Hainaut Province

Built in 1921 on the banks of the Sambre, this coal-fired power station was one of the largest in Belgium. Standing at 345 feet tall, its immense chimney still makes it look like a nuclear power plant. It ran for nearly 90 years, supplying the entire region with electricity. After a report revealed that its CO2 emission rate was too high, it closed its doors for good in 2006.

This plant is a legendary place in forgotten industrial Belgium. They've been talking about its demolition for a long time, but it's still standing. I was fortunate to be able to go there three times between 2013 and 2017. During each of my visits, I noticed that a piece of this industrial cake had gone missing – almost as if an invisible predator had been feeding off the building and pushing back the front line between past and future. The red turbine was half-open, its depths exposed as though it were ready for one last servicing, or in this case, an autopsy.

Cooling towers are legendary in urban exploration. They all look more or less alike from afar, just part of the landscape. This one was notable for two things:

**The giant green hole** where you could cross into unknown worlds if you weren't careful,  
**The reality:** if you ventured into the belly of the beast, you could reach the core of its foundation. It was one of the most amazing views I've ever seen, standing in the stagnant water, balancing on two old truck tyres.



## The Commodities Exchange - Antwerp Province

In 1531, the Handelsbeurs of Antwerp was built, a Neo-Gothic architectural gem that was the first stock exchange in history. Other buildings all over Europe were modelled on it. It closed its doors in 1997 after stock market activities had been transferred to Brussels. The old commodities exchange had been a legendary place in forgotten Belgium before finally being restored in 2019, after 20 years of slumber. It is now a shopping centre that's open to the public and located in the city centre.

As a photographer and an urban explorer, I had dreamed about this place for a long time. It was one of the top sites that had strongly influenced and motivated me to persevere with this activity. However, the opportunity to finally visit it came late. More and more rumours about restoration seemed serious and led me to try my luck in the middle of summer 2015, before it was too late. But how was I going to get into this building right in the city centre?

An epic experience for a site that was well worth it – the sewers! Imagine lifting an iron manhole cover right in the centre of a big city early in the morning, going down into the sewers, walking uncertainly in the darkness, crossing the foundations of several buildings, and then coming back up to the surface thinking you might have ended up in someone's basement. Finally, by following the cable of a never-ending extension cord, I managed to reach a spot that looked a lot like a construction site. But once more I wasn't sure. There wasn't the slightest sign of Neo-Gothic architecture. I was going in circles. I scanned my position on my phone's satellite map, but the signal was weak underground and the map rarely refreshed. I noticed a door that was partially covered by construction material. I managed to sidle up to it and half-heartedly pushed it open. Behind it was a magnificent scene — everything was bathed in the first rays of sunlight. It was 6:00am. I was as happy as could be.

