

# Bruges' Splintered Forest

Jessica Alleva

## **BRUGES, BELGIUM-**

There is an environmental war zone in Bruges. The edge of the Lappersfort forest is lined with wire fencing, crippled from the weather so that it leans from side to side. Heaps of red brick are dropped haphazardly in no particular order. Bobcats stand in silence and piles of tree branches, losing their lively green colour, are rotting.



An activist protesting the bulldozing of Lappersfort in Bruges.

Barging through the disorder is a road of fresh cement, lined with a few trees spared for aesthetic quality. The construction of this road with the scattered shrapnel of trees is a warning to the rest of Lappersfort: its future is uncertain.

Lappersfort is a forest that totals 18ha and is located a few kilometres from the center of Bruges. It contains “sun-estranged” trees: trees that have grown on land zoned ‘industrial’ by the government. Thus, the forest could be legally cut by the private owner, Fabricom GTI.

But Flanders is suffering: it has the fewest trees in Western Europe, along with the Netherlands and Ireland. One in four trees in Belgium is sun-estranged and therefore unprotected. In reality, while it is legal to cut these trees, Flanders cannot afford to lose what little green it has left.

That is why people are fighting back in many different ways.

## **Wearing a green belt for Lappersfort**

Luc Vanneste is the secretary of the Green Belt Front (GBF) in Belgium, a network of organizations that form a protective circle around Lappersfort. GBF works closely with politicians and Fabricom GTI to negotiate environmental solutions.

A true green thumb, Vanneste always arrives on his bike. He is a religion teacher and devotes his free time to the GBF. "If you ask about the destruction of the rain forest, most will tell you they are against it. Yet these same people can turn a blind eye to the destruction in our own land."

It was this irony that inspired Vanneste to take action. "I did not want to stand still any longer. I wanted to get my hands dirty," he says.

To date, 14 ha of Lappersfort has been purchased by the government and is now public property; even walking paths have been created. For Vanneste and others, this is a success.

There are currently 65 empty industrial buildings in Bruges. So, GBF wants the government to give Fabricom GTI one of the empty spaces in return for the remaining 3.5ha of Lappersfort. According to Vanneste, Fabricom GTI says the GBF is dreaming if they think the government will comply. Fabricom GTI refused to comment.

Nevertheless, the GBF is determined to save the last piece of Lappersfort. "It's an open ending, anything can happen tomorrow. But we will keep on trying to do as much as we can," says Vanneste.

### **Setting an example**

Navanadi.com is another initiative to save Lappersfort. On this website visitors easily send a protest e-mail to the mayor of Bruges and to Fabricom GTI.

Thanks to Joachim Meire, yoga instructor and creator of the website, over 600 e-mails have been sent. "I want to shake the politicians awake and make people aware. It definitely helps," says Meire.

Meire lives by example. The yoga studio he will build this September will be made as environmentally friendly as possible, for example by using bamboo flooring instead of oak. "I believe in living as consciously as possible," he explains. "And that means doing as much as I can for the environment."

His motivation for saving Lappersfort is clear. Concerned, he says, "I have two small daughters, and if Belgium continues to cut trees at the same rate, what will they have left?"

Things have changed since Meire was a child. Every day the equivalent of one football field is cut in Flanders. Although 3.5ha is small compared to the number of trees cut per day, saving Lappersfort would set an example for the rest of Flanders. That is why Meire calls the Lappersfort forest, "the mother of the sun-estranged trees."

The Flemish government does have a compensation policy for companies that cut trees. For every hectare cut, a new hectare must be planted in Flanders. Otherwise, the company must pay a compensatory “replanting fee.”

However, Meire points out that the ecosystem of a long standing forest is much more developed than a newly planted one; the carbon dioxide absorption is also much greater. In order to replace a mature forest, twice as many trees must be planted. Consider the seven different biotopes that belong to Lappersfort, too. These cannot be replaced.

Moreover, according to the GBF, the government is lagging behind some 13 000ha of trees that must still be planted—a debt that Flanders cannot afford. And, Meire adds, “Flanders simply doesn’t have the room and there aren’t any zones designated for replanting.”

### **The trees are alive**

At the first glance of Lappersfort, it seems like any other forest: trees, leaves, branches... But upon a second glance, Lappersfort reveals its deeper layers. The trees are in fact decorated with banners screaming protests such as “Save the forest,” and “Trees or industry?”

Then there are the tree huts. They span across the canopy, dotting the landscape above. Blankets hang to dry from some

of the windows and ropes connect one to another, in order to travel quickly from hut to hut.

The walkway leading to the forest community is lined with wire in order to prevent the police from swift entry. There is a tent where a man is starting a camp fire and two stray dogs gallop by. The other occupiers are huddled under a tent having a drink. The atmosphere is relaxed but the messages hanging from the branches remind them of why they are here.

Didier Caestecker is the owner of Aarde and Zon (Earth and Sun) and installs alternative energy systems. He is part of the first group of Lappersfort occupiers who built the first tree huts on



Tree huts and banners at Lappersfort.

August 7<sup>th</sup> 2001. They stayed until the 14<sup>th</sup> of October, 2002, when the police arrived with shields and horses.

Caestecker slouches over the table lazily. He speaks with a gentle voice but his stories speak of strength. "We stayed there 14 months before the police came in and removed us by brute force," he explains. "In pairs we chained ourselves to the trees... the police beat us with their batons. You could hear screams from outside the forest."

In reaction to the government's decision to clear Lappersfort and the force used, over 5 000 people gathered to protest in Bruges. The government warned the occupiers with a fine of 50 000 Euros if they return to the forest. As a result, the Lappersfort lay still for almost six years, but the quiet was not permanent. In September 2008, a second group of occupiers moved in.



The Police march toward Lappersfort on September 3, 2008.

Caestecker questions the motives of some of the new occupiers. "There are some anarchists in the forest who simply came because they heard there was a group living there against the government," Caestecker laments. "What they need to do is work with the politicians, not against them."

Caestecker suggests the government is trying to create negative media attention around Lappersfort. On February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2009 police arrested an occupier for taking expired food from a garbage container behind a Delhaize in Assebroek. 'Ollie' had no identification and was imprisoned for 3 weeks. In Caestecker's opinion, this was absurd.

The public shows mixed reactions to the Lappersfort occupiers. Neighbours bring warm blankets and allow the group to use their internet and telephone. Others, such as local produce sellers and bakers, donate food and drink to the group. In contrast, "Some people do not even want to talk to you just because you have dreadlocks," says Caestecker. He admits that Bruges is rather conservative, and many people do not question government decisions.

But dreadlocks or not, the occupiers are making a difference. Occupation of the forest discourages construction because there are a lot of costs involved in clearing the forest, not to mention negative media attention if force is used again.

### **Help from across the border**

One of the Lappersfort supporters is Green Front! (GF!). GF! does not call itself an organization but a 'radical cry' and a 'banner for nonviolent direct action.'

GF! is based in the Netherlands, but takes a strong interest in the Belgian forest. Vanneste says that GF! considers Lappersfort part of a global movement against capitalism and the destruction of the environment. And there are no boundaries when it comes to that.

According to the Milieu en Natuur Compendium, Zeeland is the province with the fewest trees in the Netherlands. Vanneste hopes that if Lappersfort is successfully saved, it will set a positive example for Zeeland to take similar action to protect the few trees it has left.

### **An uncertain future**

For now, the bulldozers have been kept at bay. But amongst the members of GF!, the occupiers and supporters of Lappersfort, there is discomfort. Until the remaining 3.5ha is protected by the government, there will be no rest.

Above all, there are still many unanswered questions. Caestecker: "What is the purpose of building new industrial buildings while there are already so many empty plots in Bruges? And with the economic crisis, this question gains even more importance. What politician can answer this question?"

At this time, the Lappersfort supporters are still demanding answers as the future of Lappersfort dangles by a thin branch.