

Ironic superlative

Ostend, Ostending, Ostended

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You sense it immediately: there is something fishy about the building that has just been completed at the marina in Ostend. The first thing that strikes you is the consciously staged confrontation between old and new. A modern residential block towers out behind a row of centuries-old houses. Historic values and present-day land prices seem to merge in an exquisite compromise. But once you blink your eyes things start becoming clearer. It's the picturesque houses that are new; the Flemish Neo-Renaissance strikes again! So was the high-rise block, with its seventies formal idiom, due for a face lift?

On blinking again, the real truth begins to dawn on you: the renaissance-style houses are merely the stuck-on facades of the ziggurat's basement. Could this be the outcome of some public consultation procedure? The brainchild of a historic buildings committee gone mad? Or the superior irony of an architect? Finally, you realize that such an improbable project can only be a pointer to political intrigue.

As appropriate to an affair of this kind, it involves a mix of rumour and calamity. Bribery on the part of a property developer. Ten historic houses demolished by mistake. Pseudo-history by way of compensation. A modified application for building permission approved retrospectively. Tumult in the town council. Insinuations in the press. An investigation by the Supervisory High Committee. This town has a reputation to uphold. It is said that Ostend has been more cruelly mutilated than any other Belgian city by post-war speculative construction. This time the result is not a tragedy but a farce. It's definitely an improvement: at least we can laugh.

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