

AFAR

Is This the Most Progressive Museum in Europe?

The art is only part of the reason this is one of Europe's edgiest museums.

BY ASHLEA HALPERN 2.7.2017

The driving theme behind [Belgium's new Millennium Iconoclast Museum of Arts](#), or MIMA for short, is “culture 2.0.” In practice, this means art extracted from and inspired by such subcultures as skateboarding, surfing, tattooing, comic books, hip-hop, punk rock, and street fashion. Although the art itself still pushes some buttons, that isn't what makes MIMA one of the most cutting-edge museums in Europe—it's where it's located.

Housed in the former Belle-Vue Kriek brewery on the banks of an industrial-era canal, MIMA sits on the fringe of Brussels's Molenbeek district. If the name sounds familiar, it's because the heavily Muslim and immigrant commune came under intense scrutiny after Salah Abdeslam, one of the terrorists behind the deadly November 13 attacks in Paris, was apprehended in its streets following a monthlong manhunt. Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the suspected chief planner of the Paris atrocity, also resided in Molenbeek. Newspapers have called the area a “hotbed for extremism,” a “terrorist breeding ground,” and a “jihadi haven.” Even security experts call the ghettoized neighborhood a “no-go zone.” It was an unusual place to open a multimillion-dollar art museum, to say the least.

MIMA cofounder and art director Raphaël Cruyt says he and his business partners had numerous reasons for choosing Molenbeek. They loved the “magnificent” architecture of the building; they appreciated its central location in Brussels, just a 10-minute walk from La Grand Place; and they were determined to use art to help forge a connection with some of the ethnic enclave's notoriously disaffected youth. (Molenbeek is the second-poorest municipality in Belgium; unemployment rates are sky-high, particularly among people under the age of 25.)

Cruyt was not to be discouraged. Along with three partners, he spent three years raising funds and renovating the century-old malt house. MIMA's inaugural exhibition, "City Lights," would focus on Brooklyn street artists and include major installations by FAILE, Swoon, and Maya Hayuk, among others. Everything was ready to go for a March 23, 2016, opening. But on March 22, suicide bombers stormed the Brussels airport and a Belgian subway station, killing 32 people and sending the city into another tailspin. The opening was canceled. All eyes were on Molenbeek. MIMA would have to wait.

The "City Lights" opening was rescheduled for April 15. The founders feared that no one would show up, but they needn't have worried. Some 4,000 visitors turned out that first week—and more than 40,000 by the time the exhibition closed last December. Many of the earliest supporters came from the Molenbeek neighborhood, rallying around MIMA the way MIMA had rallied around them.

Although international media have depicted Molenbeek in an ugly light, Cruyt says the reality on the ground is very different. "There are, of course, problems related to poverty," he says. "But if you look more closely, you see the wealth of a multicultural society—one of the most cosmopolitan in the world. . . . [And] it was the people of the neighborhood who were the first to come on inauguration day."

The museum's second exhibition, "A Friendly Takeover," opened Friday, February 3, and runs through May 28. The retrospective finds Dutch graffiti legend Boris Tellegen, aka [DELTA](#), staging immense works across three floors. Sculpture, manga figurines, and Tellegen's old graffiti sketchbooks all have a place. Some of the pieces are interactive, including a huge, scalable robot.

"A Friendly Takeover" and "City Lights" before it both dug deep into the now-mainstreamed subculture of street art. But at the end of the day, the thing they have most in common is accessibility. Even if you've never set foot in a museum, the pieces are "audience-oriented," says Cruyt, and this was very intentional. One of the museum's major goals was to get locals who were maybe skeptical about contemporary art—or museums at large—in the door and interacting. Cruyt says, "The visitor does not feel stupid when faced with [these] works of art."