Capacity-Building Workshop in Europe

Safeguarding Living Heritage in Urban Contexts

12-13 October | Antwerp, Belgium

FIELD VISIT TO

Chinatown & the 2060 Quarter

13 October 2026
Location: Permeke Library (entrance) - De Coninckplein 26, 2060 Antwerpen
Time: 9:00 am.

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The purpose of the visit is to learn about living heritage, the urban dynamics associated with it, and some of the challenges and opportunities posed by its incorporation into urban planning. This visit also aims to help participants envision measures that could be implemented to help its safeguarding, from an urban planning perspective.

1) Description of the living heritage and its location

Living Heritage in Chinatown and 2060 quarter in Antwerp

This field visit explores living heritage in Antwerp's 2060 quarter in Antwerp, with a special, but not exclusive, focus on Chinatown.

Some basic facts about the area:

1.1. Demography

The 2060 neighbourhood, referred to by its postal code, which includes Chinatown, is one of the most densely populated and diverse neighbourhoods of Antwerp. The neighbourhood counts 45,262 inhabitants, of whom 76.1% is of foreign origin (having a foreign nationality or a parent with a foreign nationality). 60% of households consist of single people or single-parent families, and people very frequently move in 2060. The borough also has significant levels of poverty, with 51.7% of the inhabitants living in poverty.

Today, Chinatown is a hub for Chinese and other Asian associations, restaurants and shops. However, the number of people of Chinese origin living in this area is smaller than one might expect: only 974 of its inhabitants are of Chinese origin. The Chinese community is the sixth-largest foreign community in the area, behind those from Morocco, Afghanistan, Turkey, the Netherlands and Spain.

1.2. History

In the 19th century, the area underwent a transformation from a partly rural and commercial district into a densely populated working-class neighbourhood for dockworkers and other industrial workers and their families. Thanks to its affordable housing and central location, it became an important arrival point for newcomers, and it has retained this function until today. Labour migrants from Turkey and Morocco began settling there in the 1960s, and many economic migrants and political refugees followed afterwards.

In 1976, the Chinese supermarket Sun Wah opened in the area. This marked the beginning of what would later become Chinatown. The existence of Antwerp's Chinatown today is partly linked to the city's history as a port. Around 1900, Chinese seamen from Guangdong started working for Belgian shipping companies, such as Compagnie Maritime Belge. The first Chinese hotels and restaurants were located in Antwerp's 'shipping quarter' and catered for these seamen. After 1945, the number of Chinese seamen declined, but some remained and opened restaurants for Belgian customers.

Through chain migration, the number of restaurants gradually increased. Initially, these restaurants were scattered across the country, and their owners only travelled to Antwerp to buy supplies. This began to change with the opening of the Sun Wah supermarket. Subsequently, the Van Wesenbekestraat became a hub for other Chinese shops and restaurants, as well as associations. Today, other Asian businesses, such as Thai and Vietnamese shops and restaurants, have become part of the hub.

The current appearance of Chinatown, which resembles American Chinatowns, owes much to a unique interaction between urban planners, policymakers and Chinese entrepreneurs in the area. The installation of Chinese lions in 2001 and of the pagoda gate in 2010 formed part of the city's urban development strategy to stimulate commercial activity, tourism, and the overall resilience of the neighbourhood.

Another major urban planning project was the opening of the Permeke Library, Antwerp's new public library, in a former car repair shop, in 2005. It is the main public cultural institution in 2060.

Notwithstanding commercial activity and cultural dynamism, as well as recent public investment, poverty and drug addiction remain challenges. If 2060 appears in the news, it is often in connection with these issues rather than its living heritage traditions, for instance.

1.3. Living Heritage Traditions

Chinatown became a hub not only for shops and restaurants, but also for Chinese associations and culture. The oldest Chinese association based in Chinatown is the Vereniging van Chinezen in België (Chinese Association of Belgium), which was established in 1968. Other associations include the Choi Lee Fat Kungfu Lion and Dragon Dance association, the Buddhist temple (Fu Guang Shan Belgium Temple), the Chinese medicine shop, among many others. With the support from the city, traditions like Chinese New Year and the Moon Festival became public events in the 1990s.

Alongside these well-known Chinese living traditions, the 2060 quarter is home to living traditions associated with other ethnic communities and, of course, with many non-ethnic communities. For instance, north of Chinatown, there are Afghan restaurants, and east of Chinatown, Moroccan fishmongers are a prominent feature of the Handelsstraat. A new Erfgoedlab Antwerpen (Heritage Lab Antwerp) project will invite young people from the neighbourhood to gather stories and heritage of the people living in 2060: Verborgen verhalen van Antwerpen 2060 (Hidden Stories of Antwerp 2060).

For more info:

- https://stadincijfers.antwerpen.be/mosaic/hoofd-dashboard/demografie
- https://maanfeest-antwerpen-envens.vercel.app
- https://www.chineesnieuwjaar.be/
- https://www.facebook.com/Choileefatbelgium/
- https://cemper.be/nieuws/doorgeven-van-leeuwendans-in-vlaanderen
- https://erfgoedlabantwerpen.be/verborgen-verhalen

2) Suggested topics to discuss during the visit

During the visit, through dialogue with stakeholders, it is important to explore the urban dynamics that positively or negatively affect living heritage, as to identify its relationship with urban planning structures and possible safeguarding measures.

Below are some questions that may help guide the discussion:

- What are the location, scale, associated elements and temporal aspects of the living heritage?
- Who are the communities involved with the element and what is the kind of involvement?
- Does the element have an inventory? Was it done by/with the community?
- How is the element transmitted? How has it evolved?
- What are the threats* that may affect the element in relation to urban factors and especially urban planning and management interventions, policies, decision making, etc.
- Are there urban development pressures?
- Have any urban planning measures been taken that affect it (positively or negatively)?
- Are there places/built heritage related to the element?
- Which other living heritage traditions interact with the living heritage you describe here?

*The **threats** to intangible cultural heritage in urban contexts, when urban planning does not consider it, include rapid urbanization altering ways of living, destruction or changes to spaces associated with cultural practices, unemployment or low incomes, lack of public spaces, globalization (homogenization), migration (outward and inward), climate change and associated natural disasters, consumerism, armed conflicts, industrialization, and infrastructure strain.

<u>Questions for the field visit and exercise:</u>

- Location of the element (e.g., whether it occurs in the city as a whole, or in a particular part, etc.)
- Place and scale at which the element is practiced (e.g. monument, building, block/plaza/street, district/neighbourhood, region, other)
- Description of the temporal aspects of the element (e.g., whether it is practiced daily or once a year for a given period of time, etc.)
- Description of associated elements and, if any, instruments, objects and related cultural spaces.
- Description of how the element is transmitted in the urban context.
- Description of which communities, groups and individuals are related to the element
- Sketch of other living traditions which might interact with the tradition(s) you describe here

Notes: