Case Study - ICH in Urban Context:

Funfair Culture in Urban Contexts
The Antwerp Sinksenfoor Case

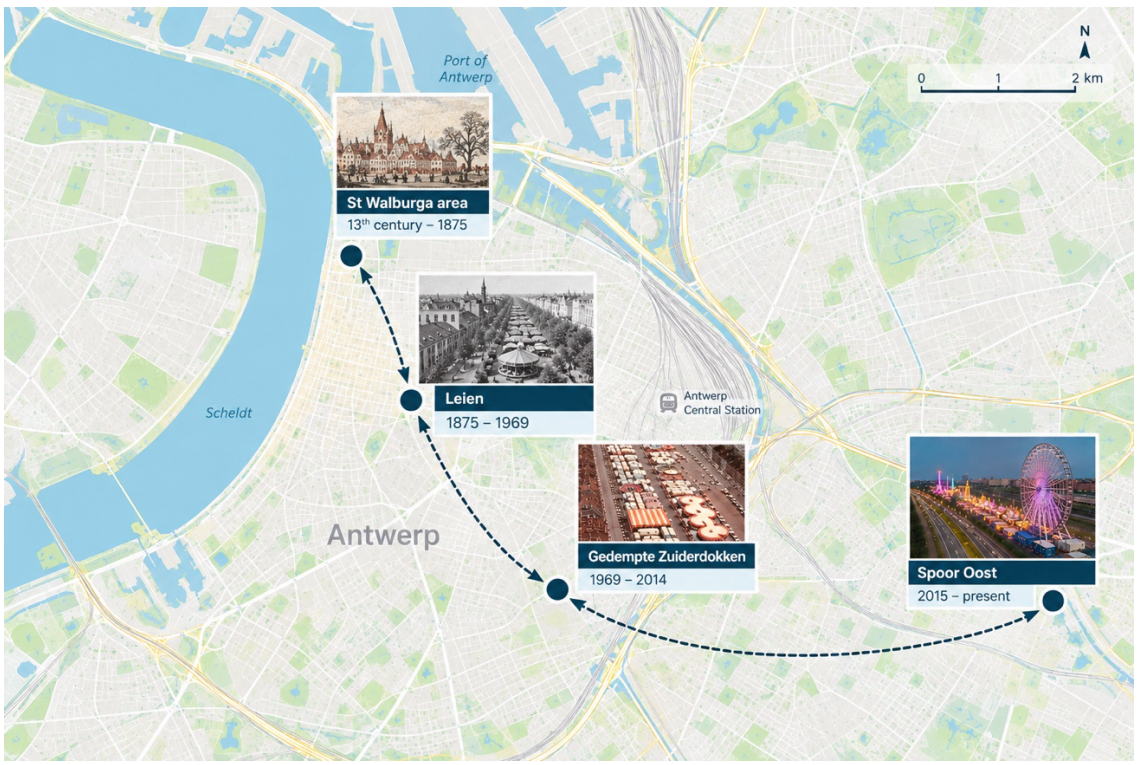
The purpose of this Case Study exercise is to analyze and articulate the basic structures of urban planning and their relationship to the practice and safeguarding of Funfair Culture. It is also important to identify some of the main threats to its viability in urban contexts and the type of benefits that arise from its practice.

Below, we first introduce Funfair Culture in the urban context of Antwerp along the following set of questions:

1. **Description of the urban context where Funfair Culture is practiced** including, for example, demographic or socioeconomic factors, urbanization trends, etc.

2. **Description of Funfair Culture**
   - *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/neighborhood, 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*

3. **Location map and ICH element images for visual representation purposes**

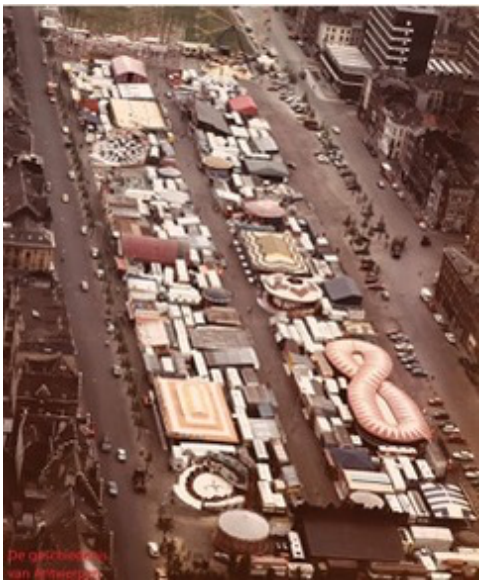


Map:
SInksenfoor change of locations over time (13th Century until today) in the city of Antwerp

Funfair at the Leien (1875-1969)



Funfair at the Zuiderdokken (1969-2014)



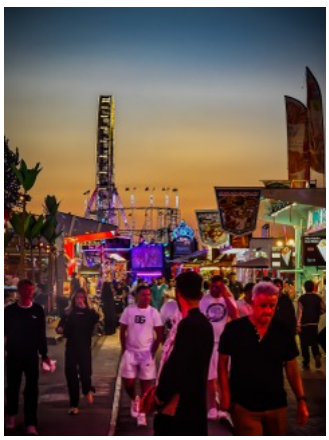


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Contested relocation of Sinksenfoor in 2014

Funfair at Spoor Oost (2015-...)





Images: Sinksenfoor Leien - Stadsarchief Antwerpen - Zuiderdokken Gerry De Wilde - Protest Gazet Van Antwerpen - Spoor Oost left: Sigrid Spinnox; right: Jo AntwerpInsight

1. Funfair Culture

The element and its communities

Funfair culture encompasses the traditions, knowledge and skills of **travelling funfair communities**, as well as their particular way of life. In 2024, Belgium and France jointly inscribed the element on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Funfair families are at the core of the practice. Being a funfair operator is not simply a profession: practitioners describe it as a way of life, strongly **organised around family, travelling and recurring relationships with places and people**. Funfair culture also involves visitors, local inhabitants, municipalities, suppliers and other actors. Fairs are recurring meeting places and are often closely connected with local festive traditions.

In Belgium, the main funfair season runs approximately **from February to November**. Families travel according to established itineraries, returning to many of the same towns and cities year after year. A fair may remain in one place from a few days to several weeks before being dismantled and moved to the next destination.

Practices, knowledge and transmission

Funfair culture entails a wide range of practices. These include operating and maintaining traditional and contemporary rides, games of skill and chance, food stalls and characteristic fairground foods. Less visible knowledge concerns travelling and logistics, setting up and dismantling attractions, repairing equipment, complying with technical and safety requirements, and interacting with visitors and local authorities.

The material environment of the fair includes attractions and stalls, tools and technical equipment, transport vehicles and mobile homes. Together, these temporarily transform the fairground into a place for working, living and social interaction.

Knowledge is transmitted largely within families and through participation in practice. Children grow up within the travelling community, observing parents and grandparents and gradually acquiring practical, commercial and social knowledge. Attractions and equipment may be maintained, restored and operated within the same families over several generations. Strong networks of solidarity between funfair families also support transmission.

At the same time, funfair culture continuously adapts. Attractions and technologies change, as do safety and environmental requirements, visitor expectations, mobility patterns and regulations.

A travelling practice that depends on places

Funfair culture has **no single fixed location**. Its annual itineraries connect a network of towns, cities and fairgrounds. Yet although the practice is mobile, **place is essential to its continuity**. Fairs depend on suitable and accessible spaces with sufficient room for attractions, living and working facilities, heavy vehicles and technical infrastructure, as well as circulation, safety and visitor access.

Funfair operators are therefore in an unusual position: they may be **temporary users of a place but return to it over generations**. Changing the location or dates of one fair can affect other parts of the travelling cycle.

Urban transformation can directly influence the viability of the practice. When squares and streets are redesigned, for example, trees, street furniture, terraces, mobility infrastructure or other new uses can make established pitches unusable. Funfair representatives therefore increasingly engage with municipalities about public-space planning and stress the importance of being involved early enough in these processes.

Safeguarding funfair culture in cities consequently extends beyond transmitting knowledge and maintaining attractions. It also concerns the **spatial, social, regulatory and economic conditions that allow the practice to continue**.

2. The Sinksenfoor in Antwerp: living heritage and changing urban space

The **Sinksenfoor** is Antwerp's major annual funfair and has a history reaching back several centuries. Its location has repeatedly changed as the city itself developed. While it was associated from the13th Century onwards with the area around St Walburga's Church, it later moved to the Leien and, in 1969, to the **Gedempte Zuiderdokken**, a large open space close to the city centre.

For more than four decades, the Zuiderdokken became an established home for the Sinksenfoor. Funfair families returned there every year as part of their travelling itinerary, while generations of Antwerp residents came to associate the site with the annual fair.

Today, the Sinksenfoor takes place at **Spoor Oost**, a former railway freight yard on the eastern edge of Antwerp's inner city, between densely inhabited neighbourhoods and major road and railway infrastructure. The site is a large, multifunctional open space, used at different times for events, parking, recreation and other public uses. The fair therefore takes place not on an isolated event site, but within an intensively used urban environment where different demands for mobility, public and green space, recreation and residential quality meet.

For several weeks each year, the Sinksenfoor temporarily transforms a large part of this site into a fairground, accommodating around 150 attractions and stalls, circulation routes and the infrastructure required for their operation.

A contested relocation

By the early 2010s, the location at the Zuiderdokken had become increasingly contested. A group of six nearby residents pursued legal proceedings concerning, among other issues, noise nuisance and the use of the site. In 2013, legal proceedings resulted in the prospect that the Sinksenfoor could no longer remain at the Zuiderdokken. A transitional arrangement allowed the fair to stay there in 2013 and 2014 while another location was sought.

For the **funfair community**, relocation involved much more than moving an event. The Zuiderdokken had been their Antwerp location since 1969. Operators knew the site, had established relationships with visitors and depended economically on the Antwerp fair as an important period within their annual itinerary. Funfair representatives strongly resisted the move, and protests culminated in road blockades around Antwerp in March 2014.

The dispute also involved other legitimate interests and perspectives. Residents argued for residential quality, reduced noise nuisance and a different future for the Zuiderdokken. The conflict became highly polarised, with some of the residents involved in the legal proceedings themselves facing threats and

intimidation. The city, meanwhile, had to respond to the legal situation while trying to secure the future of a major recurring cultural and commercial event.

From Zuiderdokken to Spoor Oost

The city eventually identified **Spoor Oost** as the new location. The first Sinksenfoor was held there in 2015.

Relocation required more than finding a sufficiently large empty site. Spoor Oost needed suitable access for heavy vehicles, utilities, safety arrangements and a workable layout. Funfair operators also needed confidence that a less central and unfamiliar location could attract sufficient visitors and remain economically viable.

Following negotiations between the city and representatives of the funfair associations, conditions were agreed for the move. For the first edition at Spoor Oost, the city adapted infrastructure and operating conditions and offered a substantial reduction in pitch fees. City decisions explicitly referred to providing **continuity** for the funfair operators.

Spoor Oost remains a multifunctional urban space. Outside the fair period it is used for other activities, while neighbourhood organisations have advocated more green and publicly accessible space. The annual presence of the Sinksenfoor therefore continues to intersect with other expectations concerning the site. Noise, traffic, parking, accessibility, public space and neighbourhood quality require ongoing coordination between the city, funfair operators and surrounding communities.

Perspectives within the funfair community have also evolved. Ten years after the relocation, operators who had initially feared the move described advantages of Spoor Oost, including more space for large contemporary attractions, visibility and strong visitor numbers.

The Antwerp case shows that **a mobile heritage practice can depend on relatively stable relationships with particular places**. Relocation may create new possibilities, but it can also affect livelihoods, itineraries, social relationships, visibility and the conditions for transmission.

Key sources

- https://www.immaterieelerfgoed.be/nl/immaterieel-erfgoed/kermiscultuur/
- UNESCO, *Funfair culture*, Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, No. 02108 (2024).
- UNESCO, Decision 19.COM 7.b.23 (2024).
- Histories, *Kermis: Forains - in gesprek met Steve Severeyns en Franck Delforge*.
- Histories, *Toekomst geven aan je erfgoedpraktijk: Steve Severeyns over de kermiscultuur*.
- https://sinksenfoor.be/de-geschiedenis-van-de-sinksenfoor/
- City of Antwerp, decisions concerning the relocation of the Sinksenfoor and Spoor Oost.
- VRT NWS, retrospective reporting on *10 years of the Sinksenfoor at Spoor Oost* (2025), including perspectives of funfair operators and neighbourhood residents.