Capacity-Building Workshop in Europe

Safeguarding Living Heritage in Urban Contexts

12-13 October | Antwerp, Belgium

FIELD VISIT TO

Reuskens of Borgerhout

13 October 2026
Location: BorGerHub - Turnhoutsebaan 92, 2140 Antwerpen
Time: 9:00 am.
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The purpose of the visit is to learn about this element, 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 element with its location

The Reuskens of Borgerhout: Living Heritage in an Urban Context

The **Reuskens of Borgerhout** are a long-standing giant tradition rooted in the history of the district. The **Reuzenstoet** (Giants precession) takes place in the streets of Borgerhout and brings together the four traditional Reuskens, other giants, music, pageantry and a wide range of local participants. The practice connects historical figures and stories with contemporary community life, public space and the neighbourhood's changing social fabric.






Illustrations: Borgerhout Giant's Parade 2022 – Reuzenstoet Borgerhout by Dries Luyten

1.1. A long-standing tradition

The **Borgerhout Reuzenstoet** originated from the **Repelkermis**, a popular annual festival which has been documented since 1536. In 1712, the inhabitants of Borgerhout decided to add two fantasy figures to the festivities: **Reus and Reuzin**. The following year, in 1713, two more figures, **Kinnebaba and Dolfijn**, joined them, completing the group of four traditional 'Reuskens' that are still celebrated today. Due to their relatively short stature and broad physique, they became known as the 'Reuskens' (little giants). The procession has continued for more than three centuries and remains closely connected to the streets, squares, and community life of Borgerhout.

However, the tradition has also changed over time. Borgerhout itself has undergone major demographic and cultural changes, particularly from the second half of the 20th century onwards. The district became increasingly diverse, with successive waves of migration contributing to the neighbourhood's social and cultural fabric. These developments impacted local community life, contributing to a period in which the Reuzenstoet lost visibility and participation. The **300th anniversary** of the tradition in 2012 was an important moment in its revival.

1.2. A tradition evolving with the neighbourhood

The revitalisation of the Reuskens giants was closely connected to efforts to reconnect the tradition with Borgerhout's diverse neighbourhood. The Reuskens were paraded in various events to raise their profile, and local associations, schools and sports clubs were encouraged to create their own giants and join the procession.

This approach significantly increased the number of people and groups involved. According to the City of Antwerp, more than 100 new giants were created in the twelve years following the 300th anniversary, each with their own story. The procession therefore brings together the historic Reuskens and the newer giants, which reflect the various organisations, neighbourhoods and communities of contemporary Borgerhout.

Some of these newer giants explicitly reflect the neighbourhood's demographic and cultural diversity. **Reuzin Fatima**, for instance, was created in 2012 by Chams and the Federation of Moroccan Associations (FMV) as part of the 'Reuzenjaar' festival. Her creators describe her as a representation of women with a migration background in the streets of Borgerhout, and as a way of recognising their role in the community. Other giants similarly incorporate different cultural backgrounds, organisations, and local stories into the procession. Consequently, the collection of giants associated with the Reuzenstoet has become **an evolving portrait of the neighbourhood alongside the four historic Reuskens**.

Consequently, the Reuzenstoet is a useful example of a tradition that has evolved alongside its social environment. Its continuity depends on people and organisations in the neighbourhood being able to participate, contribute new stories and forms, and connect the tradition with community life today.

1.3. People, communities and belonging

The Reuskens are closely associated with Borgerhout's identity, and the tradition is maintained by multiple organisations. The procession involves local associations, schools, sports clubs, neighbourhood groups, volunteers, creators and residents, as well as the organisations responsible for coordinating the procession and caring for the giants.

An important example of this participatory approach is the **'Maak Je Eigen Reus'** ('Make Your Own Giant') project. By inviting local organisations and groups to create their own giants, the tradition enables different communities to contribute to the district's cultural life. Each new giant can carry its own story, creating a connection between a group, a place, and the wider procession.

The Reuskens therefore offer a useful perspective on questions of belonging and participation in **a diverse urban neighbourhood**. While the tradition has a long-standing identity, the people who participate in it and the stories represented in the procession continue to evolve.

1.4. The Reuskens in the urban environment

The urban environment plays a key role in the Reuzenstoet. As the giants move through the streets and public spaces of Borgerhout, the procession transforms these everyday areas into vibrant spaces for celebration and collective participation.

The tradition is also connected to the places where the giants are stored and prepared, and where they can be encountered. Today, the Reuskens sleep in **BorGerHub**, where they occupy a prominent and meaningful position at the heart of the neighbourhood. BorGerHub is a former courthouse that has been converted into a centre for social entrepreneurship, work, meetings and creativity. Having the Reuskens in this building brings the tradition into an active, everyday urban environment rather than keeping it separate from neighbourhood life.

The **Turnhoutsebaan** is also an important part of this urban context. This busy commercial and social artery of Borgerhout is traversed by the Reuzenstoet as part of its annual route. **De Roma**, located on the Turnhoutsebaan, provides another important point of connection. During the procession, the Reuskens traditionally pass through De Roma and perform there, linking the heritage practice to one of the district’s major cultural venues. De Roma therefore functions as a physical landmark along the route, as well as a place where the procession and Borgerhout's everyday cultural life intersect.

The procession also creates temporary spatial transformations. Streets and squares become spaces for movement, gathering, performance and encounter. The fact that the procession

interacts with locations such as the Turnhoutsebaan, De Roma, BorGerHub and neighbourhood squares demonstrates how widespread the practice is across the urban landscape. However, organising such a large-scale event requires coordination with various stakeholders, including those responsible for mobility, safety, public space management, and local businesses and residents. The routes followed by the giants, as well as the places where they are stored, prepared and presented, are all therefore part of the urban context of the practice.

1.5. Living heritage in a changing urban context

The history of the Reuskens neighbourhood raises questions about how living heritage can remain meaningful when an urban area undergoes change. The tradition has experienced periods of decline linked to wider demographic and cultural shifts, followed by a deliberate **revitalisation centred on participation and local involvement**.

The evolution of the giants themselves provides an interesting insight into this process. While the four traditional Reuskens remain at the heart of the procession, newer giants have emerged from organisations and communities that are part of contemporary Borgerhout. Figures such as Fatima demonstrate how the tradition can incorporate stories and identities that reflect the neighbourhood's evolving demographics while preserving its historical framework.

During this visit, the Reuskens provide an opportunity to examine the **relationship between a long-standing heritage practice and a diverse, evolving urban neighbourhood**. Particular attention can be given to the spaces used by the tradition, the procession's route, the role of local organisations and residents, and how urban planning and public space management can support or constrain the practice.





Illustrations: Borgerhout Giant's Parade 2022 – Reuzenstoet Borgerhout by Dries Luyten

For more information:

- Immaterieel Erfgoed Vlaanderen – Reuzenstoet en Reuskens van Borgerhout
- Stad Antwerpen – Borgerhoutse Reuskens
- Stad Antwerpen – Erfgoedverhalen over de Reuzenstoet van Borgerhout
- De Reuskens van Borgerhout – Official Website
- De Reuskens van Borgerhout – Historiek
- Immaterieel Erfgoed Vlaanderen – Reuskens van Borgerhout: Context van het erfgoed en de acties
- BorGerHub – Official Website
- Empact – Reuzin Fatima
- De Roma – Reuzenstoet

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 the element, as to identify its relationship with urban planning structures and possible safeguarding measures.

Below are some questions that may help guide the discussion:

- 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?
- 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?

*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.

People	Places	Time & movement	Urban change	Opportunities / challenges
Who is involved?	Which places matter?	When does it happen?	What is changing?	What supports the practice?
How are people connected?	What happens there?	How does it move?	Who makes decisions?	What creates difficulties?
How is knowledge transmitted?	What spaces are needed?	What are the rhythms?	How does the community respond?	What could be improved?

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