



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Lodging houses as facilitators of global and local entanglements in harbour districts: evidence from the port of Antwerp c. 1860–1910

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Abstract

The late nineteenth-century harbour districts, or so-called ‘sailortowns’, are generally depicted as deterritorialized ‘enclaves’ of heightened globalized transience. However, these neighbourhoods were just as much shaped by semi-durable local labouring communities. This article studies lodging houses as facilitators of global and local entanglements in harbour districts from a socio-cultural perspective, with Antwerp in the late nineteenth century as a case-study. Analysing the spatiality, materiality, sociability and people of the lodging phenomenon, it reveals that next to the highly transient seafarers, sailortown accommodated a diverse yet largely local population of small entrepreneurs and their families right between transience and permanence.

Introduction

In the novel *In 't Schipperskwartier* (1861), the Antwerp writer Domien Sleenckx sketches the life story of Jan Savoir, an orphan who was raised by a guardian in Antwerp’s harbour district, or so-called sailortown.¹ After one of his earliest voyages as a cabin boy, Savoir found out that his guardian had passed away and therefore he needed to find a new place to stay. Fortunately, he knew that the Peeters family kept a lodging house a few houses down from his guardian’s home, and because the family knew Jan, they offered him a cheap room whenever he was in Antwerp. Since then, Savoir always returned to the Peeters’ lodging house in between voyages, and as time passed, their relationship moved beyond a mere economic transaction. The Peeters family took on a parental role: they ate breakfast together, celebrated Savoir’s returns ashore, discussed reputations of employers in the harbour and even encouraged him to go on dates. When Savoir eventually passed the captain’s exam and married, the Peeterses officially acted as parents at the wedding.²

¹For a discussion on realism in contemporary fiction, see R. Warhol, ‘Realism in the nineteenth-century novel’, in M. Fludernik and M. Monika (eds.), *Narrative Factuality (A Handbook)* (Berlin, 2019), 511–20.

²D. Sleenckx, *In 't Schipperskwartier: Tafereelen uit het Vlaamsche volksleven* (Ghent, 1861).

The life story of Jan Savoïr, although fictional, offers a fascinating perspective on both global *and* local entanglements facilitated by lodging houses in nineteenth-century sailortown.³ It depicts the harbour district not as an isolated enclave but rather as a strongly networked hub between global mobility flows *and* local urban life, which contrasts with general assumptions of these neighbourhoods as hubs of globalized transience. The nineteenth century, in the words of Jürgen Osterhammel, was the ‘golden age of port cities’.⁴ Harbour districts were perceived as the culmination of an ever-globalizing world which incited contemporary writers, social commentators and journalists to describe late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sailortowns as turntable neighbourhoods where people from all over the world swiftly passed through.⁵ Recently, there has been an increased interest in mobility flows through port cities and their harbour districts, but migration has mainly been placed within the same international and transient framework.⁶ As such, studies on harbour districts have often echoed source perspectives by emphasizing the international and transient character of these neighbourhoods, limiting our understanding of their local embeddedness.⁷ Critical urban geography, however, informs us that neighbourhoods, even if spatially separated, were and are rarely completely socially disconnected from urban fabrics.⁸

On the crossroads of maritime and urban history, two fields that rarely interact in the context of harbour districts, this article explores both global *and* local entanglements in sailortown. The goal is not to deny the international and transient nature of harbour districts. We rather aim to contest it as an isolated enclave of global interconnectedness. This approach complies with recent calls in sailortown historiography to acknowledge maritime districts as *urban* communities.⁹ The same applies

³In this study, ‘lodging sector’ is used as an umbrella term to refer to those establishments where furnished rooms were habitually rented on a temporary basis to individuals outside the immediate familial household. While the majority of these also offered food, thus technically being a ‘boarding house’, the sources do not allow to differentiate systematically between the two. For a discussion on concepts, see C. Lévy-Vroeland, ‘Les avatars de la ville passagère’, *Les Annales de la Recherche Urbaine*, 94 (2003), 96–106; W. Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, 2007), 8.

⁴J. Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 2014), 275.

⁵S. Hugill, *Sailortown* (London, 1967).

⁶For a recent overview, see C. Reimann and M. Öhman, ‘Introduction’, in C. Reimann and M. Öhman (eds.), *Migrants and the Making of the Urban-Maritime World: Agency and Mobility in Port Cities, c. 1570–1940* (New York, 2020).

⁷See, for instance, J. Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns of Eastern Canada* (Toronto, 1982); R. Cameron, ‘“The most colourful extravaganza in the world”: images of Tiger Bay, 1845–1970’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 31 (1997), 59–90; G. J. Milne, *People, Place and Power on the Nineteenth-Century Waterfront: Sailortown* (Cham, 2016); M. Prokopovych and T. Feys, ‘Transience, overseas migration and the modern European city’, *Journal of Migration History*, 2 (2016), 214–15.

⁸L. Vaughan and A. Penn, ‘Jewish immigrant settlement patterns in Manchester and Leeds 1881’, *Urban Studies*, 43 (2006), 653–71; M. Kwan, ‘Beyond space (as we knew it): toward temporally integrated geographies of segregation, health, and accessibility’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 103 (2013), 1078–86.

⁹V. Burton, ‘Boundaries and identities in the nineteenth-century English port: sailortown narratives and urban space’, in S. Gunn and R. J. Morris (eds.), *Identities in Space: Contested Terrains in the Western City since 1850* (Aldershot, 2001), 137–50; L. Moon, ‘“Sailorhoods”: sailortown and sailors in the port of Portsmouth circa 1850–1900’, University of Portsmouth Ph.D. thesis, 2015; B. Beaven, ‘From Jolly Sailor to Proletarian Jack: the remaking of sailortown and the merchant seafarer in Victorian London’, in B. Beaven,

to maritime histories that have stressed the importance of coastal environments' local embeddedness and the need to focus on social, cultural and environmental contexts.¹⁰ As shown by the opening example, lodging houses pose an ideal lens for this endeavour. Lodging houses, next to providing room and board, also served as crucial contact zones for social interaction and cultural exchange, enabling us to better understand the inner social gears of sailortown communities. Such an approach is also imperative because both maritime and urban historians have paid relatively little attention to lodging houses as urban institutions, obstructing a deeper and layered understanding of encounters in harbour districts. Some important ground on sailortown lodging has been covered, most notably in exploring seamen's institutions – voluntary and often religiously inspired organizations – that aimed to educate seafarers in reaction to the dubious reputation of the private lodging industry.¹¹ Yet, as this article will reveal, these institutions formed only a small segment of the whole lodging sector. Ironically thus, we are well informed about the most visible and best-documented form of lodging in sailortown, but also its least consumed. Despite some laudable exceptions, much less is known about the private lodging market in harbour districts.¹² Moreover, studies have generally focused on economic rationales of survival and the social wrongs associated with life in sailortown, neglecting social ties, networks of co-operation and even friendships.¹³ Connecting urban with maritime history therefore provides us with an informed socio-cultural lens that encompasses both global and local entanglements, which is crucial to a better understanding of the sailortown experience.

To explore the layered entanglements in harbour districts, we focus on Antwerp in Belgium. The Scheldt city serves as an ideal case-study as it was one of the leading ports in Europe and had a booming lodging industry during the period under consideration.¹⁴ Due to the growth of shipping and increasing migration, to name

K. Bell and R. James (eds.), *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront, c. 1700–2000* (London, 2016), 159–78; V. Bickford-Smith, 'The use of "local colour" and history in promoting the identity of port cities: the case of Durban, c. 1890s–1950s', in Beaven, Bell and James (eds.), *Port Towns*, 201–20.

¹⁰D. Worthington, 'Introducing the new coastal history: cultural and environmental perspectives from Scotland and beyond', in D. Worthington (ed.), *The New Coastal History: Cultural and Environmental Perspectives from Scotland and Beyond* (Cham, 2017), 3–30; M. Reeve, *Bombardment, Public Safety and Resilience in English Coastal Communities during the First World War* (Cham, 2021), 5–7; J. Byrne, *Beyond Trawlertown: Memory, Life and Legacy in the Wake of the Cod Wars* (Liverpool, 2022), 7–22.

¹¹For sailors' homes, see, for instance, A. Kennerley, 'British merchant seafarers and their homes, 1895–1970', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 24 (2012), 115–46; C. Engberts, 'The rise of associational activity: early twentieth century German sailors' homes and schools in Antwerp and Rotterdam', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 32 (2014), 293–314.

¹²M. Seltzer, 'Haven an a heartless sea: the sailors' tavern in history and anthropology', *Social History of Alcohol and Drugs*, 19 (2004), 63–93; M. van Rossum, "'Goed scheepsvolk noodig?": logementhouders en arbeidsmigranten in Rotterdam, 1915–1925', *Holland*, 40 (2008), 18–38; D. Morris and K. Cozens, 'Mariners ashore in the eighteenth century: the role of boarding-house keepers and victuallers', *The Mariner's Mirror. The International Quarterly Journal of The Society for Nautical Research*, 103 (2017), 431–49.

¹³I. Land, 'The humours of sailortown: Atlantic history meets subculture theory', in G. Clark, J. Owens and G.T. Smith (eds.), *City Limits: Perspectives in the Historical European City* (London, 2010), 326; R. Lee, 'The seafarers' urban world: a critical review', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 25 (2013), 27.

¹⁴K. Loockx, "'Antwerpsche bloedzuigers": over de rekrutering van zeevaarders en de Antwerpse maritieme arbeidsmarkt in de tweede helft van de negentiende en vroege twintigste eeuw', *HistoriANT*, 10 (2022), 159–63.

but a couple of factors, Antwerp's *Schipperskwartier* (Sailors' Quarter) became a bustling neighbourhood during the second half of the nineteenth century. Parallel to the increasing maritime activities, the need for temporary shelter rose, resulting in an expanding private lodging sector. To reconstruct the lodging industry and the entanglements it encapsulated, we have explored a diverse array of sources such as police reports, newspapers, contemporary literature, marriage certificates and population registers, using qualitative, quantitative, spatial and digital methods.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section, we contextualize Antwerp's sailortown and spatially analyse its lodging sector from the perspective of the entire city and the harbour district. Secondly, we venture behind the facades of the houses by performing a prosopography of the lodging housekeepers. The sailortown hosts generally mirrored the city's maritime migration fields, although a significant share was operated by locals. Thirdly, we attempt to reconstruct the services offered in lodging houses from an employment and sociability perspective of the (prospective) lodger. The analysis shows that well into the twentieth century, lodging houses were crucial intermediary hubs for maritime recruitment, while they simultaneously offered a sociable and homely atmosphere for guests ashore. The fourth section, finally, zooms in on the clientele of a single sailortown lodging house. Next to transient seafarers, the lodging house accommodated a diverse, yet largely local population of small entrepreneurs and their families, often in relatively durable housing constellations. In conjunction, the sections reveal how lodging houses facilitated encounters between global mobility flows and local urban life.

Shelter at the shore: the spatiality of lodging in sailortown and beyond

The port of Antwerp expanded immensely in the nineteenth century as it was able to capitalize on the transition from sail to steam from the 1870s onward, becoming one of the major ports in Europe.¹⁵ The Belgian government's thorough investment in the construction of railways proved a crucial factor as it connected Antwerp with the rapidly industrializing German Rhineland, which, among other things, increased the demand for both maritime and harbour-related labour.¹⁶ Moreover, Antwerp's ideal location in the Atlantic trade network allowed the port to establish shipping lines that served as extensions of the dense railway network overseas, particularly when shipping companies like the American-Belgian Red Star Line (1873–1934) transformed the port into an international hub for passenger transport between Europe and the United States.¹⁷ Antwerp attracted different people across the social ladder, which in turn impacted the city's demography. Natural growth and migration explain why Antwerp's population increased from approximately 120,000 inhabitants in 1860 to more than 315,000 in 1910. As such, Antwerp was the largest Belgian city in

¹⁵R. Lee, 'Configuring the city: in-migration, labour supply and port development in nineteenth-century Europe', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 17 (2005), 93.

¹⁶K. Veraghtert, 'From inland port to international port, 1790–1914', in F. Suykens, G. Asaert and A. De Vos (eds.), *Antwerp: A Port for All Seasons* (Antwerp, 1986), 371–2; G. De Block and J. Polasky, 'Light railways and the rural–urban continuum: technology, space and society in late nineteenth-century Belgium', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 37 (2011), 313.

¹⁷T. Feys, 'Trans-Atlantic migration at full speed ahead: a flourishing and well-oiled multinational enterprise', in B. Beelaert (ed.), *Red Star Line Antwerp, 1873–1934* (Leuven, 2013), 32–3.

demographic terms at the turn of the twentieth century. No other Belgian city, not even the capital city Brussels, could follow Antwerp's pace.¹⁸

The transformation of Antwerp into a world port attracted a variety of people, a part of whom embodied the global and transient nature that characterized sailortown and relied on the local lodging sector for room and board, information and entertainment. Although not all transients were attracted by the vibrant activity in and around the harbour, maritime growth and economic expansion were important factors to explain why Antwerp's sailortown developed into a crowded quarter.¹⁹ The maritime labour market mostly required male unskilled labour on the docks and clerical and merchant positions to facilitate trade, while the shipping industry, as a result of an insufficient supply of Belgian labour, relied heavily on foreign labour.²⁰ Additionally, there was also a need for female employment in the domestic, harbour-related, entertainment and hospitality industries in and around sailortown.²¹ The question now arises where these mobile groups were accommodated.

Although Belgian sources on the private lodging sector remain difficult to trace, particularly because such evidence is fragmented across time and scattered across a multitude of archives, an 1883 police report proves an exceptional source to map Antwerp's lodging sector. The report was created in response to massive fires in large hostels for transmigrants in Bremen, which stimulated Antwerp authorities to instruct the local police to create a detailed overview of the conditions in every lodging house in the city, including information on the housekeeper, available rooms, beds and prices, as well as observations on cleanliness and morality.²² As such, the 1883 police report enables us to reconstruct Antwerp's lodging sector in detail, both spatially and socially (Database Lodging Antwerp). Since the report entailed the city of Antwerp in its entirety, it allows us to make comparisons between sailortown and the rest of the city in order to analyse its peculiarity.

Despite its relatively small geographical size, the 1883 report indicates that Antwerp's sailortown harboured a significant amount of the city's lodging facilities (Figure 1). From the 388 identified establishments, no less than 84 (22 per cent) were

¹⁸H. Greefs and A. Winter, 'Cities in motion. mobility, migration selectivity and demographic change in Belgian cities, 1846–1910', in B. Blondé et al. (eds.), *Inequality and the City in the Low Countries (1200–2020)* (Brepols, 2020), 83.

¹⁹R. Loyen, *Haven in de branding: De economische ontwikkeling van de Antwerpse haven vanaf 1900* (Leuven, 2008), 323–30; I. Van Damme, H. Greefs, I. Jongepier and T. Soens, *Historical Atlas of Antwerp: Between Aspiration and Achievement* (Bussum, 2022), 46–56.

²⁰K. Loockx, 'From sail to steam: two generations of seafarers and the maritime labour market in Antwerp, 1850–1900', University of Antwerp and Vrije Universiteit Brussel Ph.D. thesis, 2020, 56–63.

²¹T. Verbruggen, 'The arrival of foreign female domestic servants in Antwerp and the role of compatriots and relatives as intermediaries, 1860–1880', *Gender & History*, 31 (2019), 591–5; K. Loockx, 'Jackie of all trades: the emergence of stewardesses in the Belgian fleet, 1870–1914', *Yearbook of Women's History*, 41 (2022), 52–4; H. Greefs and A. Winter, 'Foreign female sex workers in an Atlantic port city: elite prostitution in late nineteenth-century Antwerp', in Reimann and Öhman (eds.), *Migrants and the Making*, 202–7.

²²City Archives Antwerp – Felixarchief (CAA), 731#1059, letter from Edward Pycke d'Ydeghe to Léopold De Wael, Antwerp, 16 Feb. 1883. For the inspection reports on which the Database Lodging Antwerp is based, see CAA, 641#518. The reports were drawn up by the neighbourhood police officers, who we can assume knew their territory closely. Some underground lodging houses will, however, always remain under the police and our radar. It is also noticeable that the police implicitly excluded elite tourist hotels in the historical city centre and near the railway station.

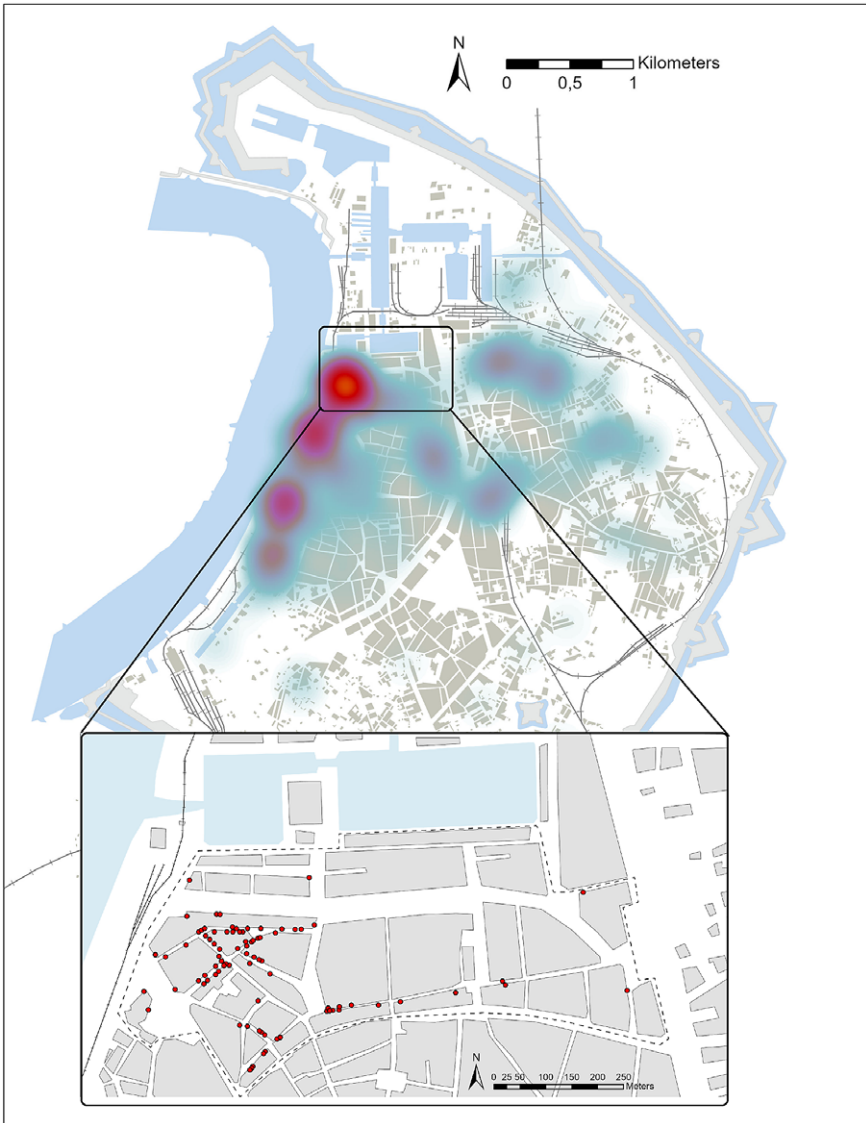


Figure 1. The lodging sector in Antwerp in 1883. N = 376 (12 lodgings could not be plotted due to uncertain addresses).

Source: Database Lodging Antwerp.

in a territory that coincided with the boundaries of sailortown.²³ Furthermore, reflected in the red dots, a clear concentration existed in the core of the neighbourhood, a nexus of specific streets that were littered with various inns and lodging

²³Even though 12 lodgings could not be accurately located, these are without question located outside the boundaries of sailortown, and will be considered as such throughout the following analyses.

houses: *Korte Schipperskapelstraat*, *Blauwbroekstraat* and *Schippersstraat*, *Oudemansstraat* and *Vingerlingstraat*, and the *Verversrui*. The *Blauwbroekstraat*, for example, counted 37 houses (53 if we include the cul-de-sacs), 10 of which were identified as lodging houses.²⁴ However, the map also highlights that strong concentrations of lodging facilities were not limited to sailortown. Lodging houses were a distinctly urban phenomenon, with particular concentrations near areas of arrival and departure or so-called transition spaces, such as harbours, quays and train stations.

If we zoom in on sailortown, lodgings were paradoxically both larger and smaller compared to the rest of the city. Larger, in the sense that there were more beds available on average (5.7 in sailortown compared to 5.3 in the rest of the city), but smaller as there were fewer rooms and arguably less space (2.2 rooms in sailortown versus 2.3 in the rest of the city).²⁵ Many of these were also twin beds. The upcoming middle-class ideals of private space were clearly not applicable for the general newcomer in Antwerp. This crowded character also emphasizes how the architecture of a lodging house facilitated encounters between strangers, allowing for opportunities to establish both social and professional networks, exchange information or just casually converse. Architecture, at least in theory, stimulated encounters rather than isolation.

For seafarers and other port-related professions, proximity mattered. Due to the temporary nature of the labour market, it was important to stay close to employment opportunities. The lodging sector cleverly capitalized on this. Near the harbour, room and board costed around 70 Belgian francs (BFR) per month, while elsewhere in the city, this averaged 50 BFR. Even though these numbers obfuscate the very diverse range of lodging practices and services this included, an average price difference of 40 per cent indicates that sailortown was not a cheap area to reside in – an able-bodied seaman in the Belgian fleet, for instance, earned about 100 BFR per month.²⁶ Daily and weekly lodging rents were commonplace in sailortown, suggesting that the lodging sector often aimed their services at transients. Yet even within the harbour district there were striking price differences. In central commercial streets, such as the *Schipperstraat*, room and board almost universally costed 3 BFR per day (90 BFR per month), while in adjoining streets further inland, such as the *Falconrui*, this was about 10 to 12 BFR per week (40–45 BFR per month). The uniformity of prices in the main street furthermore suggests that lodgings here did not (have to) vie with each other for clients, but perhaps were able to settle cartel-like fixed prices. A newspaper article from 1879 mentions the existence of such an association of all lodging housekeepers in sailortown (excluding the Italian, Greek, Spanish, Turkish and black counterparts).²⁷ In any case, the variety in prices with other streets suggests that seafarers had options without losing touch with the labour market.

The omnipresence, diversity and relatively high-priced lodging house sector reveal a thriving economy in Antwerp's sailortown. This success was also an incentive for private organizations and authorities to offer alternatives and take control, not in the

²⁴Database Lodging Antwerp.

²⁵These numbers exclude the 22 emigrant hotels located throughout the city which housed transatlantic migrants in dorm rooms the days before their departure. Due to their sheer size, they heavily distorted the averages.

²⁶For seamen's wages in the Belgian fleet, see Loockx, 'From sail to steam', 155–80.

²⁷*Het Handelsblad*, 5 Sep. 1879.

least because of the neighbourhood's associations with alcoholism, prostitution, abuse and exploitation. These vices were considered detrimental for the well-being and discipline of the maritime labour force and the progress of shipping in general.²⁸ As such, German, Norwegian, Swedish and British private organizations established seamen's homes that were targeted at the many compatriots who dwelled in Antwerp, offering a safe harbour with affordable prices, the organization of meetings and a strict ban on all the vices that were associated with the lodging house sector, such as alcohol, promiscuity and gambling.²⁹ For example, the German seamen's home on the *Rijnplaats* had 17 rooms in 1890, while the new building on the *Brouwersvliet* could accommodate 100 seafarers in 1909.³⁰ In 1891, the International Seamen's Home (ISH), officially the *Koninklijk Belgisch Zeemanshuis*, opened its doors with some hundred beds available at the turn of the twentieth century. In contrast to previous initiatives, the ISH was not aimed at a specific nationality. Although the number of annual guests steadily increased from about 1,000 seafarers in 1892 to more than 2,700 in 1910, this remained only a fraction of the seafarer population.³¹ On the contrary, the private lodging sector even continued to expand. A concise police report in 1914 counted 795 lodging houses, with 165 (20 per cent) in sailortown.³² The private lodging sector in sailortown thus remained a major player in accommodation. This would only diminish when the connection between port and city was gradually broken in the twentieth century.³³

Behind the facades: the profiles of lodging housekeepers

According to the 1883 police report, lodging housekeepers were mostly male, both in sailortown (84 per cent) and the rest of the city (82 per cent). This is likely an overrepresentation. London's Victorian trade directories, for example, counted 566 lodging houses with a female owner, about 40 per cent of the whole sector in 1871. Through a comparison with insurance records, Alison Kay concludes that even this was likely an underestimation, as many of these enterprises were signed in the name of their male partner.³⁴ A study on early twentieth-century lodging in Blackpool, on the other hand, also revealed an almost exclusively female-run sector.³⁵ Regardless of the gendered ownership of the establishment, women, either as landladies, or in relation to the landlord as a partner or maidservant, would have been doing the bulk of the domestic work involved with the keeping of a lodging house.³⁶ Moreover, this

²⁸D. Williams, 'The quality, skill and supply of maritime labour: causes of concern in Britain, 1850–1914', in L.R. Fischer, H. Hamre and P. Holm (eds.), *The North Sea: Twelve Essays on Social History of Maritime Labour* (Stavanger, 1992), 43.

²⁹Loockx, "Antwerpsche bloedzuigers", 168–9.

³⁰C. Engberts, 'Een eigen huis in de haven: het Duitse Zeemanshuis in Antwerpen', *Brood en Rozen*, 1 (2014), 33–41.

³¹H. Sielens, *75 jaar officieel Zeemanshuis te Antwerpen, 1891–1966: Schets voor een geschiedenis van de instelling* (Antwerp, 1966), 13 and 20.

³²The police inspection reports of 1914 were compiled in response to the practice of illicit lodging. See CAA, 731#165.

³³Loockx, "Antwerpsche bloedzuigers", 175.

³⁴A.C. Kay, 'A little enterprise of her own: lodging-house keeping and the accommodation business in nineteenth-century London', *London Journal*, 28 (2003), 43.

³⁵J.K. Walton, *The Blackpool Landlady: A Social History* (Manchester, 1978), 85.

³⁶Gamber, *The Boardinghouse*. See chapter 2 in particular.

was a profession favoured by widows as it allowed women to generate income while simultaneously maintaining a (matriarchal) role in the domestic sphere.³⁷ Indeed, also in the case of Antwerp's sailortown, 9 out of 13 women (69 per cent) were identified as widows in the 1883 report, whereas this was less pronounced for the rest of the city (35 per cent).

Lodging housekeepers were overwhelmingly middle-aged, with an average of 42 years of age in 1883. Individual foreigners' files the State Security reveal that many of the housekeepers in sailortown had worked on the waterfront or were seamen.³⁸ For instance, Peter Anderson from Stege, a town on the island of Møn in the south-east of Denmark, came to Antwerp in March 1890. He declared himself to be a seafarer, but a year later, Anderson worked as a tally clerk in the port of Antwerp, while together with his wife he was also running a lodging house in the *Korte Schipperskapelstraat* in sailortown.³⁹ This and other examples strengthen the idea that lodging housekeepers would have been experienced urbanites, well equipped to guide their clientele through local labour markets, administrative practices and the urban social space of leisure and commerce. Yet we need to be careful not to overestimate the proportion of active or former seafarers in the sailortown lodging sector. Research in early twentieth-century Rotterdam demonstrates that only 35 per cent of the lodging housekeepers had a maritime background.⁴⁰ Also, in Antwerp lodging housekeepers had diverse backgrounds. Take for example Catharina Bach from Rohrbach, Germany. Somewhere in the early 1880s, her husband had died. Being in her late forties and already having resided in Antwerp for several years, Bach opened a lodging house on the *Brouwersvliet* nearby the harbour. Neither her deceased husband, nor Bach appeared to be active in the maritime labour market before.⁴¹ Her career change needs to be understood as opportunistic, a response to the economic necessity of providing for the livelihood of herself and her son after the death of her husband.

Given their origins, we can assume that Anderson's and Bach's lodging houses were targeted at Scandinavians and Germans respectively, although this does not imply that other guests were not welcome. Lodging houses in sailortown had names that referred to the origins of residents, luring them with national flags, illuminated signs, fellow-country waitresses and music reminiscent of home.⁴² Literature indeed often highlights how lodging was a service *for* and *by* immigrants, providing a network away from home.⁴³ In general, the composition of the origin of the entire

³⁷Kay, 'A little enterprise of her own', 42; D. Vickers, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail* (New Haven, 2007), 154–6.

³⁸CAA, Vreemdelingendossiers (VD), nos. 96805, 97749, 97752.

³⁹*Ibid.*, no. 69085.

⁴⁰Van Rossum, "Goed scheepsvolk nodig?", 28 and 39. Comparisons between our findings and Rotterdam are further complicated by the nature of the sources. Van Rossum uses applications for the opening of a lodging house in sample years, meaning *flow* data of new lodging housekeepers, while the Antwerp police reports provide *stock* data, a snapshot of the entire sector in 1883.

⁴¹CAA, VD, no. 57504

⁴²G. Van Looy, *Pierewitje: Herinneringen van een jongen uit het Schipperskwartier* (Antwerp, 1945), 100; Huggill, *Sailortown*, 145.

⁴³C. Lesger, L. Lucassen and M. Schrover, 'Is there life outside the migrant network? German immigrants in XIXth century Netherlands and the need for a more balanced migration typology', *Annales de Démographie Historique*, 2 (2002), 33–8.

lodging house sector in Antwerp mirrored the city's migration field, with Antwerp's surroundings and neighbouring countries as main recruitment areas (see Figure 2).⁴⁴

Sailortown clearly attracted more foreign lodging housekeepers compared to the rest of the city, especially from Scandinavia, Germany and Britain. Scandinavian and British lodging housekeepers even exclusively ran establishments in sailortown, but the number of Dutch and French lodging houses remained rather limited. Their geographical origins also ran parallel with the overall flow of shipping and the composition of seamen in Antwerp. Most of the incoming tonnage of shipping in the port of Antwerp in the late nineteenth century came from British and, to a lesser extent, German vessels and the Antwerp fleet relied heavily on labour from Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Britain.⁴⁵ Yet crucially, the report indicates that lodging was primarily a Belgian affair, both in the entire city and in sailortown. In both contexts, Belgians outnumbered foreigners (79 per cent and 59 per cent respectively). Urban historiography often emphasizes the global character of sailortowns, stressing their vastly foreign constitution, but the findings indicate how much harbour districts were simultaneously rooted in their local urban environments.

Region of birth	Sailortown		Rest of the city		Total	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Belgium	47	58.8	244	85.6	291	79.7
<i>Antwerp</i>	12	15	54	18.9	66	18.1
The Netherlands	4	5.0	24	8.4	28	7.7
France	2	2.5	1	0.4	3	0.8
Germany	8	10.0	13	4.6	21	5.8
Britain	5	6.3	0	0.0	5	1.4
Scandinavia	11	13.8	0	0.0	11	3.0
Other countries	3	3.8	3	1.1	6	1.6
Total	80	100	285	100	365	100
Unknown	2	/	20	/	22	/

Figure 2. Regions of origin of lodging housekeepers in Antwerp (1883).
Source: Database Lodging Antwerp.

The multi-layered functions of lodging houses

In Sleeckx' novel at the onset of this article, we saw how lodging houses took on multiple auxiliary roles. Next to providing room and board, these places could also offer information on the labour market and create a home away from home. In this section, we will further scrutinize these functions and their applicability in general. In doing so, we will explore these interactions through a variety of sources that are less studied in this context. First, we will focus on the position of lodging housekeepers in Antwerp's maritime labour market through a detailed undercover study by a

⁴⁴H. Greefs and A. Winter, 'Alone and far from home: gender and migration trajectories of single foreign newcomers to Antwerp, 1850–1880', *Journal of Urban History*, 42 (2016), 74–5.

⁴⁵K. Lookcx, 'Migration trajectories of seafarers during the transition from sail to steam: change and continuity in Antwerp, 1850–1900', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 32 (2020), 620–2.

contemporary journalist. Then, we turn to marriage records, police reports and popular contemporary literature to reveal socio-cultural ties between lodging house-keepers and their clientele.

As mentioned, the maritime labour market in Antwerp, as was the case in many other ports around the world, was largely controlled by informal recruiters, also known as crimps.⁴⁶ These middlemen controlled the labour and wages of seafarers and therefore worked closely together with lodging housekeepers (some of whom combined both professions), runners (who lured seafarers at the harbour) and other associates, such as tailors and cobblers (who also often aimed their services at transients in sailortown).⁴⁷ As testimonies on abuse and exploitation by crimps in sailortown increased in the late nineteenth century, the Dutch journalist Marie Joseph Brusse decided to go undercover as a steward in Antwerp to uncover how the seafarer spent his time ashore and how employment was acquired.⁴⁸

Brusse, or Jaap Harms as his alter ego was called, detailed how he had not left the Antwerp train station before he was besieged by coachmen shouting: 'For three francs I'll show you the way'; 'Come on, boys, enough of these, get a coach'; 'I will show you a good lodging'; 'Surely you have just disembarked, come with me, I'll help you find a ship.'⁴⁹ Jaap ignored these coachmen and instead followed his informer Toon – a seaman who was aware of his real identity – to a sailortown inn. Here again, they were approached by a man who offered them a 'reliable' boarding house and work aboard a Red Star Line vessel, Belgium's main ocean liner service to the United States. On the insistence of Toon, Jaap again declined, replying they were going to lodge in the International Seamen's Home (ISH).⁵⁰ Once there, Jaap and Toon easily secured lodging in a room for two. Finding a ship to board proved more challenging. The ISH had some permanent runners, but these offered fewer positions than there were seafarers in the ISH. Their professional network – partnerships with captains and shipping companies – was limited compared to the informal crimps.⁵¹ Therefore, one of the clerks suggested they should walk around the docks themselves to find employment. Later, in a sailortown inn, they were quickly approached by a man who promised to help them contact a shipping master in return for some gin. Brusse then described an excruciating journey to various inns in search of employment, although the answer was always that the shipping master was currently elsewhere.⁵²

Brusse described a crimping system wherein various actors – coachmen, runners, shipping masters, innkeepers and lodging housekeepers – worked in conjunction to exploit the seafarer ashore of as much of his money as possible. In essence, Brusse's account promoted the ISH, which, at least from his point of view, was the only place

⁴⁶The origin of the term 'crimping' remains unclear. For discussions of the crimping system, see, for instance, J. Fingard, "'Those crimps of hell and goblins damned': the image and reality of Quebec's sailortown bosses", in R. Ommer and G. Panting (eds.), *Working Men Who Got Wet* (St John's, Newfoundland, 1980), 323–33; C. Dixon, "The rise and fall of the crimp, 1840–1914", in S. Fisher (ed.), *British Shipping and Seamen, 1630–1960: Some Studies* (Exeter, 1984), 49–67; Milne, *People, Place and Power*, 103–37; Loockx, 'From sail to steam', 190–237.

⁴⁷Loockx, "'Antwerpsche bloedzuigers'", 163–6.

⁴⁸*Het Handelsblad*, 8, 9, 12, 16, 17 and 20 Sep. 1899; M. Brusse, *Van af- tot aanmonsteren: het leven van den zeeman aan den wal* (Rotterdam, 1911).

⁴⁹Brusse, *Van af- tot aanmonsteren*, 16.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 18–19.

⁵¹Loockx, "'Antwerpsche bloedzuigers'", 175.

⁵²Brusse, *Van af- tot aanmonsteren*, 30–1.

that offered a safe haven. He confirmed contemporary middle-class views that considered sailortown as an area with a unique culture where danger could be around every corner. To some extent, these perceptions were grounded. As noted by Stan Hugill, ‘one had to be careful where one boarded in Antwerp, for crimps would dope and shanghai [the practice to intoxicate or drug seafarers and then abduct them unto a ship and force them to work under harsh working conditions] a man without the bat of an eyelid’.⁵³

We can assume that observations like Brusse’s and Hugill’s reflected a reality, but we should be vigilant about generalizations. While exploitative practices were indeed prevalent, these took shape next to equally and mutually beneficial interactions. After all, lodging housekeepers and their associates had much to gain from good relationships with their clientele. This would, after all, guarantee returning customers. As noted by the Antwerp poet Victor Brunclair, the landlady of a lodging house ‘knows that even if they [seafarers] do not call at this port again until ten years from now, their first steps will always go to her home’.⁵⁴ In the fictional novel *Tille*, the Antwerp writer Lode Baekelmans also described how Niels, a Norwegian lodging housekeeper, ‘was constantly on the move, going from the English consulate to the maritime commissioner for payment and hiring, visiting shops and exchange offices with his lodgers’.⁵⁵ Seafarers who often disembarked in ports could familiarize with its urban specificities and from experience learn which inns, lodging houses and crimps to approach and, above all, which ones to avoid. The importance of word-of-mouth advertising in this respect cannot be underestimated. The longevity of the crimping process, well into the twentieth century, means that it was an effective way of structuring port labour markets.⁵⁶

Nostalgic writings are thus indicative of more meaningful relationships between landlords and their guests and emphasize how lodgers, despite their temporary presence, could become part of the household. The parental relationship described in the opening example of Jan Savoir appears to be, at least to some extent, grounded, although reciprocal relationships remain difficult to substantiate empirically. Ongoing research on marriages of seafarers in Antwerp provides a glimpse into their social networks. A database, which consists of about 1,900 seamen’s marriages in Antwerp between 1850 and 1899, reveals that many witnesses ran lodging establishments, particularly when foreign seafarers married. If we include professions that traditionally worked closely together with keepers of lodging houses, inns and taverns, such as coachmen, tailors and cobblers, no less than a quarter of all witnesses at marriages of foreign seafarers had one of these professions throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵⁷ Some seafarers built relationships with their hosts that were based on a degree of confidence, which could even result in friendships. In 1899, Laura Olivia, the daughter of the Danish lodging housekeeper Lars Olsen Rasmussen, married Friedrich Krohn, a German fireman who had been sailing from Antwerp for

⁵³Hugill, *Sailortown*, 143.

⁵⁴V. Brunclair, ‘Het eilandje’, in L. Franck (ed.), *Weerspiegeld Antwerpen: Hoe ’t vroeger was. Onze schrijvers over hun stad* (Antwerp, 1929), 29–30.

⁵⁵L. Baekelmans, *Tille* (Antwerp, 1912), 74.

⁵⁶Loockx, “Antwerpsche bloedzuigers”, 167.

⁵⁷Database Seamen’s Marriages in Antwerp, 1850–1900 (Kristof Loockx, University of Antwerp, and Marc Loockx).

more than six months. Most likely, Krohn met his future wife while staying at Rasmussen's lodging house.⁵⁸

Shared culture and/or origin could foster meaningful relations, but this inherent trust could just as easily be exploited. In 1901, the German seafarer Hermann Knoblik reported to the Antwerp police that his lodging housekeeper and fellow countryman Carl Weissenborn was a swindler (*bedrieger*). Not only had Weissenborn and his wife made him pay the same bill on multiple occasions, they had resorted to violence when he refused to pay. Furthermore, Knoblik testified that a few days ago two German seafarers started lodging with Weissenborn. Knoblik wanted to provide them a position aboard the next Red Star Line voyage, but the housekeeper resisted: 'let those men stay here because they have a lot of money; I first want to see what will happen with it'.⁵⁹ Lodging housekeepers had to strike a careful balance between, on the one hand, providing a good service to guarantee positive word-of-mouth advertisements and returning customers and, on the other hand, keeping their lodgers under their roof as long as possible to guarantee income. This could result in more durable patterns of co-habitation, as shown in the next section.

Visiting a sailortown lodging house: 10 *Blauwbroekstraat*

The previous sections explored the organization of lodging houses and their functions, highlighting their intricate ties with urban space. Yet the question of who made use of lodging houses in sailortown largely remains open. It has been suggested that many of these places were aimed at transient seamen, but the lack of empirical evidence requires more in-depth research. As such, it is useful to zoom in by exploring a single lodging house in Antwerp's sailortown. This focus does not only allow us to paint a more detailed picture of lodging housekeepers and their clientele, it also provides more insight into the lodging sector's role as a facilitator of global and local entanglements.

We investigate 10 *Blauwbroekstraat*, a property in the heart of Antwerp's sailortown, for two reasons. First, the establishment remained a lodging house throughout most of the period. This longevity was rather rare, but it allows us to analyse its inhabitants in the long term. On the other hand, a comparison with other lodging houses reveals that this was an 'average' sailortown lodging house. The property got its function from 1860 onward, when Cornelius Peeters, who was born in the surroundings of Antwerp, moved to this address together with his wife and two daughters. The house, as advertised in an auction in 1914, consisted of two separate buildings: a row house and a backhouse. The row house had three floors, each with two rooms, and an attic. The ground floor consisted of a kitchen, taproom and toilet, while the backhouse had two floors with one bedroom each and an attic.⁶⁰ The 1883 inspection report of the Antwerp police indicated that there were two rooms available for guests, namely one on the ground floor and one in the attic, most likely in the backhouse. Each room had four twin beds, allowing 16 guests to spend the night. Room and board would have cost around 75 BFR per month.⁶¹

⁵⁸CAA, Registers met Huwelijksakten, 1899, no. 2287.

⁵⁹CAA, VD, no. 97409.

⁶⁰The house was advertised in a notarial sale in 1914. The house had been rebuilt in 1885 but, considering the building record, it is unlikely any structural changes had been made. CAA, 1885#115.

⁶¹Database Lodging Antwerp.

To identify residents at *10 Blauwbroekstraat*, we mined the Belgian population registers between 1846 and 1900 (Blauwbroek 10 Database). This dynamic source registered all inhabitants, who, at least in theory, resided in Belgium for more than two weeks and subsequently documented every change of residence.⁶² Transient seafarers thus elude our gaze, but a perspective on relatively durable forms of habitation is exactly what is needed to further complicate the notion of sailortown as a neighbourhood of exclusive transience. To visualize the data, we explore the analytical potential of the *Vistime*-function in R (Figure 3). Each line represents the stay of an individual at *10 Blauwbroekstraat*, its length being an indicator of the duration of stay, while the colours reflect residents' occupations.⁶³ The vertical red line marks the opening of the lodging house by the Peeters family. The analysis is based on three categories of residents. The first category consists of everyone who either arrived and left along with someone else or carried the same surname as another inhabitant, which we marked as 'Group'. Members of the Peeters family constitute the second category. A final category encompasses everyone who did not fit into the other two categories, indicated as 'Single'.



Figure 3. Residents of *10 Blauwbroekstraat* based on population registers between 1846 and 1900. N = 310 (38 had no entry and/or exit date and therefore could not be plotted).

Source: Blauwbroek 10 Database.

⁶²The Antwerp population registers are fully digitized and freely accessible at: <https://felixarchief.antwerpen.be/archievenoverzicht/83819>. For an overview of Belgian population registers, see M.P. Gutmann and E. van de Walle, 'New sources for social and demographic history: the Belgian population registers', *Social Science History*, 2 (1978), 121–43. For anyone staying less than 14 days, specific lodging registers existed that monitored transients. However, despite the source's centralization at the municipal level, lodging registers yield little information on the harbour district. The exact reason for this hiatus remains unclear, but this means that it is difficult to paint a comprehensive picture of all residents at a certain address in sailortown, particularly because sailors and other transients remain strongly under-represented.

⁶³Population registers only record a single occupation per person and only update this in case of relocation, making it a flawed source for tracking social mobility and income-pooling strategies. Residents below the age of 15 rarely include an occupation and have thus been interpreted as children.

Between 1846 and 1900, *10 Blauwbroekstraat* accommodated no less than 332 different residents, marking a total of 348 different stays. Eleven inhabitants returned once and two did so twice. This translates to an average of one new inhabitant every two months. Transient seafarers were not recorded in the source, but we can clearly see how arrival was not a constant phenomenon. After the Peeters family opened the lodging house in 1860, there was a significant rise in single arrivals. It is impossible to accord everyone after 1860 a lodger status as this was not recorded in the source, but most of these singles likely were. On the other hand, many groups – families or otherwise related – persisted in living there, often staying for multiple years, in an unclear relationship with the Peeterses.

Furthermore, the population residing at *10 Blauwbroekstraat* was quite diverse. Unspecified labourers (18.7 per cent) and non-maritime occupations (14.7 per cent), such as millers, smiths, shoemakers and barbers, took up residence at the lodging house of the Peeters family. For their part, seamen and port-related occupations, such as shipbuilders and rowers, were almost equally divided and accounted for 17.8 per cent in total. Seafarers appeared more often in a family connection and not as singles, challenging the perception of lodging houses as catering exclusively to single, transient sailors. However, percentages might differ to some extent because population registers did not always record occupations, while, albeit less pronounced, several residents simply had no occupation (a total of 9.8 per cent).

The presence of families at *10 Blauwbroekstraat* accounted for a significant proportion of children; 22.7 per cent of the inhabitants was less than 15 years old upon arrival. Children, like elsewhere in the city, were omnipresent in sailortown, yet they are rarely considered in sailortown historiography. Other strongly represented groups were ‘housewives’ (9.2 per cent). Their description as housewife in the sources, however, did not do justice to the variety of activities these women performed. According to the population registers, landlady Maria Peeters was initially considered a housewife, even though we can assume that she, together with her children and/or maids, served guests and would have done the domestic work in the lodging house. Only rarely were women registered in another occupational role and when this was the case, it was mostly as a servant.

The gender dynamics skewed drastically when the Peeters family established a lodging house in the *Blauwbroekstraat*. Before 1860, we see a relatively static population, with every age until 40 years equally represented among both genders (57 per cent male and 43 per cent female). After the Peeters family moved in, the number of middle-aged men (between 20 and 40 years old) increased significantly and overall proportions skewed to 70 per cent male and 30 per cent female. This demography inclines to other findings on lodger populations.⁶⁴ However, young single men were not the only group that increased in size during the period under consideration. A total of eight residents above the age of 60 years old, who were absent before 1860, also resided in the house. As such, it seems that lodging houses could also function as a sort of pension for the elderly, like Joanna Carpentier who definitively moved in alone at 70 years of age in November 1893.⁶⁵ On the other side of the spectrum, many infants added to the size of already present families in the house.

⁶⁴C. Regnard, ‘Stopgap territories: inns, hotels and boarding houses in Marseille at the beginning of the 1870s’, *Quaderni Storici*, 1 (2016), 13.

⁶⁵CAA, MA-BZA-B#468.

Finally, as mentioned, the perception of sailortown as an exclusively international neighbourhood conflicts with our observation that more than half of the lodging housekeepers were Belgians. Does this imply that lodgers had similar geographical backgrounds, as suggested by the literature?⁶⁶ Figure 4 shows the birthplaces of the residents at 10 *Blauwbroekstraat* before and after 1860. By far, most inhabitants were Belgians. Before 1860, over half of the inhabitants were born in Antwerp (58 per cent), with the port city of Ostend as second (16 per cent) and the remainder spread evenly across a diverse collection of inland Belgian and some foreign – mostly Dutch – towns. After the opening of the lodging house, the migration field of the house densified towards the immediate eastern hinterland of Antwerp. Admittedly, the largest segment was still born in Antwerp (34 per cent), although this figure is certainly amplified by high birth rates. Most of the population, however, was born in nearby polder villages, similar to where the housekeeper family hailed from. Only seven people (3 per cent) came from beyond the Belgian border. Six of these were born in the Dutch border region, in similar polder villages. The last one, William James Holland, was a labourer from Liverpool who married Melania, the youngest daughter of the Peeters family. Perhaps William met Melania as a seafarer during one of his earlier undocumented short stays at the lodging house? Transient seamen are undoubtedly under-represented, but our analysis demonstrates that lodging houses

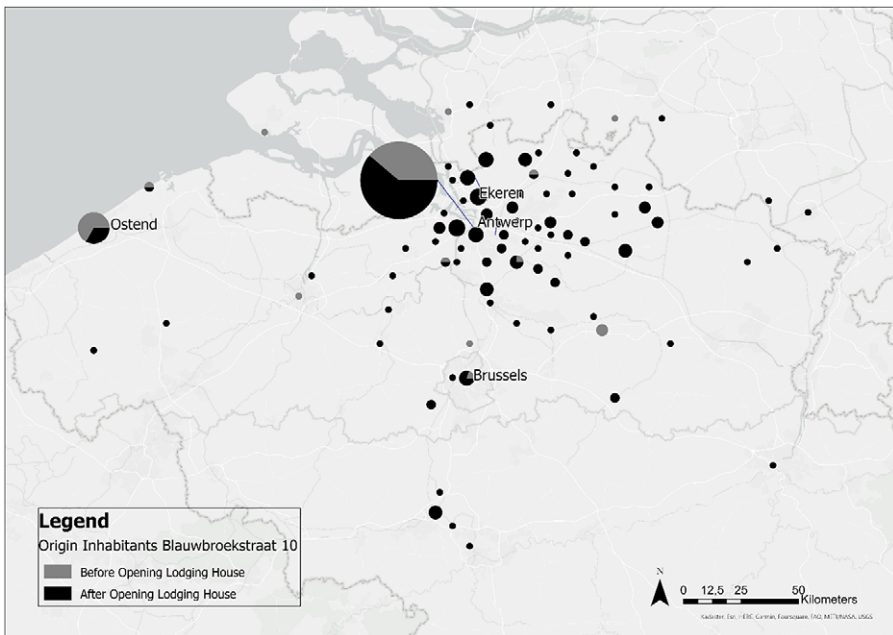


Figure 4. Birthplaces of inhabitants before and after the opening of the lodging house at 10 *Blauwbroekstraat* in 1860. N = 304 (30 could not be plotted due to an unclear place of birth or entry date; the remaining 4 are beyond the geographical scope of the map).
Source: Blauwbroek 10 Database.

⁶⁶For an overview, see J. Meek, 'Boarding and lodging practices in early twentieth-century Scotland', *Continuity and Change*, 31 (2016), 83.

in sailortown were not only places where foreign seafarers came and went. As homes, they also housed a local population of labourers and small entrepreneurs, often for longer periods. The lodging sector in sailortown was characterized by diversity and adaptability, a testament to the unprecedented demographic and urban transformations of port cities in their age.

Conclusion

This article has shown that the lodging sector was a facilitator of global *and* local entanglements in harbour districts. Sailortowns were not isolated enclaves, but rather strongly networked within the local urban fabric. Lodging was a thriving industry, which formed a significant segment of urban accommodation in general. Compared to the rest of the city, however, the lodging industry in Antwerp's harbour district also had some peculiarities: it was generally more expensive and offered more beds per property, albeit in fewer rooms. Lodging housekeepers from abroad were more present, notwithstanding about half of the establishments were ran by Belgians. Lodging in the harbour district, however, entailed more than simply finding room and board. Well into the twentieth century, lodging housekeepers played a crucial role in the chain of maritime employment practices, while also providing a sociable home away from home. Abuse and exploitation were a reality, but this should be placed alongside forms of mutually beneficial relations and even friendships. Among other things, this might explain why it was difficult for sailors' homes to compete with the private lodging sector throughout the period. Furthermore, accommodation in sailortown was not exclusively targeted at foreign seamen or transients. Indeed, lodging houses were characterized by a wide diversity of occupants, consisting of men, women and children, as well as both temporary and permanent residents from different cultural and occupational backgrounds. It highlights that the demarcation between transients, such as seafarers, and the populace – to which seafarers could also belong – was less apparent in sailortown than is often assumed. As such, maritime districts were just as much global as they were embedded in the local urban fabric. In sum, this study underscores the necessity of further bridging the gap between maritime and urban histories. We need to acknowledge that sailortowns, both as places of social challenges and belonging – were one of the many different districts in port cities. Both intra- and inter-urban comparative approaches are needed to paint a more comprehensive picture of this widespread phenomenon.

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