

GISHistorical Antwerp: a micro-level data tool for the study of past urban societies, test-case: Antwerp

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Space never lies. Urban societies, historians agree, are distinct through their size, density and the spatial relationships that shape social interactions, which in turn are at the heart of urbanity. Yet, hitherto few studies have managed to integrate spatial data into a comprehensive database system that allows to map the complex web of social relations. Moreover, most GIS-based studies tackle cities at an aggregate level, while most social decisions and data are created at a micro-level. The major goal of the Gistorical Antwerp project is to build a micro-level data tool for historical Antwerp, but transferable to other cases as well, constructing series of vector maps, linked to a variety of historical geo-data. By creating an historical GIS for urban history, we argue, amazing synergies can be reached through the integration of various sets of data into one spatial database: future archaeological research will no longer be excavating the remains of an anonymous stone house, but, at the first onset of the enquiry, it will know that in the nineteenth century this site was the workplace of, for example, a tanner. And a historical study on, for example, parish-charities can be completed with various formerly inaccessible datasets on housing, occupational activities, membership of guilds, activities on the real estate market, marriage alliances etc., using spatial location to integrate the most diverse datasets.

The development of GISHistorical Antwerp necessarily starts in the (long) nineteenth century, when the first modern cadaster was implemented. Based on this cadaster a spatial base layer of over 9,000 plots was already digitalized. These plots will be linked to two large and very pivotal datasets for the history of nineteenth century Antwerp, the commercial almanachs (directories of industrial and commercial activities) and the building/environmental permits. During the nineteenth century, the urban landscape and society were complete reshuffled by both active town planning and the far-reaching impact of industrialization; mass migration; transport (r)evolutions; social polarization; the breaking-up of old solidarities (e.g. the urban guild system), and their replacement by new ones; and specifically for Antwerp, the rise of the city as major European harbor. The integrating of both data-sets in GISHistorical

Antwerp, not only allows to analyze changing topographies of commerce and industry, but also to measure how these topographies incorporated and steered the above mentioned transformation processes. Once constructed, GISTorical Antwerp immediately allows to address major research questions on the social, environmental and economic history of the nineteenth century town, for the first time at the level of the individual household. Thanks to this unique combination of a critical mass of already existing databases and a clear focus on households as major agents of social behavior, we believe, this cutting-edge tool will result in a truly innovative “integrated social history” of the city.