Reading the Edge

Tracing Water, People, and Fragmented Memory at Antwerp's Margueriedok

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Abstract

This thesis examines the Margueriedok - Antwerp's last tidal dock still connected to the Scheldt - as a material site of fragmented memory, suspended infrastructure, and evolving urban-water relations. Using a method of partial reading that combines field observation, archival analysis, and critical theory, the project interprets three site fragments: a blue stone quay wall, a truncated railway line, and the Dutch Pilotage Building. Each chapter explores how these remnants embody past regimes of circulation, control, and resistance, revealing tensions between heritage and redevelopment, memory and erasure. Rather than reconstructing a linear history, the thesis foregrounds ambiguity, material latency, and spatial entanglement as crucial tools for rethinking post-industrial waterfronts. In doing so, it challenges dominant narratives of urban transformation that prioritise clarity, accessibility, and security over complexity, contradiction, and historical depth. The Margueriedok is presented not as a ruin, but as an active assemblage - one that resists easy erasure and invites alternative readings of how cities remember, forget, and relate to water.

Keywords: Margueriedok, Antwerp waterfront, Tidal dock, Fragmented memory, Urban-water relations, Post-industrial landscapes, Field observation, Spatial entanglement, Waterfront assemblages, Non-linear history, Urban memory practices



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Annotated Bibliography

Prologue

Field Note 03
19.10.2024, 11:33
Marguerie Schuilhaven, 2000 Antwerpen, Belgium
Site Visit 01 - Prologue

I walk towards the Margueriedok from the east, across the back of the harbour, where the cranes have stopped moving. The ground changes from asphalt to gravel. There is no marked entrance, just an opening of the floodgate of the concrete wall. I pass through.

The dock is quiet. Flat. The water sits still in its basin. It seemingly doesn't flow, it moves slowly towards the river. Wave after wave. It seems to be held back. Not by force, but by neglect. The edges are too steep to approach directly. I keep my distance.

A single tugboat is moored across the dock. Its cable stretches into the water and disappears. Beyond it, the industrial sheds are sealed shut. Their windows are either broken or removed. Nothing signals what, if anything, is happening here. The warehouses are getting stripped layer by layer. Some of them, it's only the steel skeleton left. Behind my back, there is an array of different buildings, lined up at a safe distance.

I walk along the stone edge. Blue hardscaping lines the entire perimeter. Its surface is polished in places, cracked in others. It is clear that this material once held things in place—ships, machines, people. Now it holds a kind of stillness.

Rails emerge from the gravel and disappear again. They cross paths with weeds, with broken pipes, with empty metal frames that once held something in place. It's hard to tell where the infrastructure ends and the erosion begins.

The water is inaccessible. There is a wide slope wilder over by plants, debris, and trash, narrow wet steps, and no easy access. The relationship between the dock and the body is indirect. I feel I shouldn't be here—not because it's forbidden, but because it's been forgotten.

I stop walking and begin to observe. I take out my notebook. The page remains blank for a while. Then I start to draw the line of the quay. I note the cracks in the stone, the offset between two rails, the way a sapling has grown between loose cobble stones and gravel.

I'm not looking for history in the traditional sense. There is no sign explaining the place, no plaque to clarify what this used to be. But something remains in the way things are arranged—in what stands out, in what is left, in what has shifted.
I start with what is still there.

"What borders have been drawn between land and water, and for whom?

What infrastructures remain to tell us how cities once moved?

Which buildings resist forgetting by refusing to disappear?"

Why the Margueriedok matters:
Suspended infrastructure, water separation, and material memory as a method.

On the northern edge of Antwerp's historic centre lies the Margueriedok, the city's last tidal dock still connected to the river. Once animated by maritime flows, it now lies silent, cluttered by traces of former activity. Stone, rusted steel, and cast-iron balustrades remain—not as ruins, but as unresolved infrastructures. The site is materially dense, yet narratively quiet.

This thesis reads the Margueriedok as an assemblage of time-bearing fragments. By combining field observation with historical photograph analysis and theoretical reflection, it seeks to understand how matter records shifts in urban life and riverine relationships. The dock is not interpreted as a passive relic but as an active material site where memory and governance, disuse and potential, collide.

In the face of accelerating climate risk, the stakes of such reading grow sharper. Urban and ecological crises in Antwerp today—from flood vulnerability to freshwater scarcity and spatial inequality—are intimately tied to the city's historical disconnection from its water. Yet, master plans such as Bureau Bas Smets' proposal for the Scheldt Quays (2023) continue to advance a vision of the waterfront that emphasizes safety and accessibility at the cost of ambiguity and memory. The proposal includes raised flood barriers, sculpted parklands, and concrete edges, but fails to engage with the latent histories embedded in spaces like the Margueriedok.

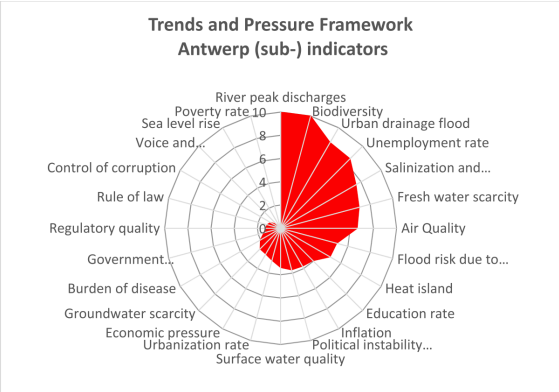


Fig.2. Spider chart diagram of individual indicators of the Trends and Pressures Framework scored from 0 (no concern) to 10 (great concern).

As Donna Haraway reminds us, "It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories."[1] The Margueriedok is not just an obsolete port dock; it is a space where different stories of water and urban life

[1] Donna Haraway, Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

converge. In reading its fragments, we ask: What worlds have been made and unmade here? What relations to water might yet be possible?

Methodology

This thesis employs a three-part method grounded in architectural history, material observation, and critical theory. It is structured around the practice of reading assemblages: contingent wholes made of diverse parts that interact without being reducible to a single function or meaning.[2]

Each chapter begins with a fragment: a stretch of blue stone quay, a rail embedded in gravel, a building on the verge of demolition. Field notes and sketches frame a present encounter. Historical photographs, sourced from FelixArchief and KMSKA collections, are then introduced not as proof but as provocations. Their compositions are analyzed for what they reveal, omit, or stage.

This practice is informed by Karen Barad's theory of intra-action, where entities do not precede their relations but emerge through them.[3] Stones, images, rails, and walls are not passive witnesses but active participants in shaping histories. As Haraway argues, staying with the trouble means attending to the entangled, partial, and situated conditions of knowledge.[4] The Margueriedok's fragments are read not to complete a narrative, but to stay within their incompletion.

The methodology also incorporates Michel Foucault's understanding of space as historically constituted and politically charged.[5] The material configurations observed at the dock are viewed not just as neutral remains, but as spatial expressions of shifting regimes of power and knowledge.

A Partial Reading
This thesis does not reconstruct a linear history of the Margueriedok. It does not resolve ambiguity into clarity. Rather, it presents three assemblage histories, each focusing on a fragment that speaks to different aspects of Antwerp's evolving relation to water. The goal is not synthesis, but juxtaposition. The fragments are partial and unresolved, but in their juxtaposition, a deeper pattern emerges.

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[2] Manuel DeLanda, A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity (London: Continuum, 2006).

[3] Karen Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[4] Haraway, D. J. Staying with the trouble. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

[5] Michel Foucault, Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, (*Diacritics*, 1986).

Chapter 1: The Quay Wall

Field Note 05
23.11.2024, 13:42
51°13'40.0"N 4°24'00.3"E
2000 Antwerpen, Belgium
Site Visit 02 – Chapter 1: The Quay Wall

The tide rises and falls here twice a day. It brings debris, sometimes plastic or branches, and it takes other things away. The quay wall caught my attention before I even realized I had arrived. Its shadow stretched longer than expected, the stones darker than the grey air. They were cold, not just to the touch, but in their presence—cut too precisely to feel accidental.

I counted the cast iron mooring rings: three still intact, one barely hanging on. Moss was thick in the gaps, but someone had tried to patch one part with poured concrete. The repair looked smooth, indifferent. In some areas, the limestone had worn down, and some spots even look polished by time and tide. Some ropes are still attached and floating in the water.

As I traced the edge of the wall, I noticed a tide line marked halfway up —brown, uneven, the only indication that the water still moved. The city sounded muffled from here. I tried to lean out to see the dock below, but the balustrade held me back, not out of safety, but out of protocol. There's a power in stone to both welcome and refuse. I felt it here. The wall was doing exactly what it had been built to do—only now, it had no one to do it for.

The wall repeats itself in blocks, regular, uniform—except where it doesn't. At one corner, a different kind of stone appears. Lighter. Rougher. Possibly a later repair. I note this down.

It's in these exceptions that the wall becomes most legible.

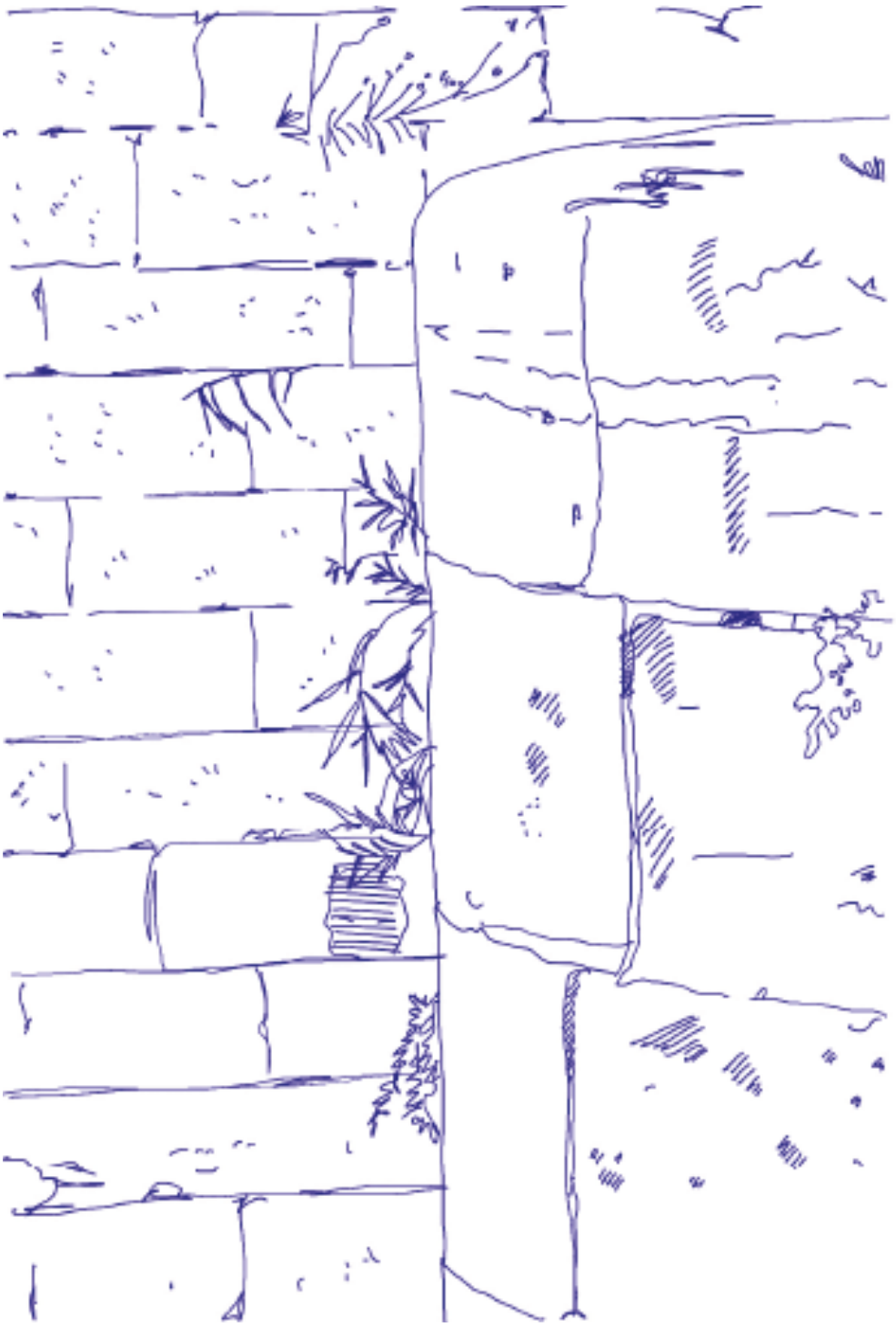


Figure 03. Drawing by author

How does the transformation of Antwerp's shoreline from porous edge to hardened border materialize a changing relation between water and governance?

The Margueriedok quay wall rises with quiet conviction from the water's edge. At first glance, it seems immovable: a monolithic boundary between land and river, softened by moss, weeds, and time. But it is anything but a ruin. Worn steel mooring rings, worn steps, and rusted ladders descending into the still waters show signs of constant use and wear. The wall may have aged, but it is still doing something: holding back, dividing, and enduring.

Built of blue limestone, locally known as blauwe hardsteen, the quay wall is made of fossil-rich Devonian limestone dating back more than 350 million years. Its deep grey-blue surface bears the imprint of the fossils of tiny sea creatures, crinoids, which are sometimes visible and give the stone an almost organic texture. This material was not chosen by chance.[6] In 19th-century Belgium, blue limestone was both a symbol of national pride and a practical choice because of its durability. It was used in docks, monuments, and cathedrals, including the construction of the Margueriedok.[7]

Late 19th-century photographs show the quay wall shortly after its completion in 1883, when it was pristine and fully functional. These historic images capture the ambition and precision of the moment.

Figure 04: Archival image of the Margueriedok, circa 1890s, showing a clean stone quay wall and docked ships. Source: FelixArchief.
Figure 05: Postcard: View of a sawmill, 'Pierre Bleue du Hainaut' (Blue Limestone of Hainaut), 1986.
Figure 06: 19th-century engineering plan showing gravity wall section.

Today, the Margueriedok quay wall is a shadow of its former self. The original stone joints have been patched up with smooth concrete, and the once sharply defined steps have eroded into uneven slopes. It no longer invites interaction. The wall has become a boundary - high, distant, and inaccessible.

Figure 07. Present-day photograph of the quay wall at Margueriedok, showing concrete patches, vegetation, and steel attachments. Photo by author, 2024.

The quay wall was built between 1877 and 1883 as part of the expansion of the port of Antwerp. The design was heavily influenced by British and Dutch dock construction techniques, reflecting a period of significant industrial change.[8] But it is also a symbol of transition - what was once a threshold between land and water has now become a barrier.

The Margueriedok quay wall is built on layers of history, each representing a different phase of interaction with the river. Before industrial expansion, the riverfront was less controlled and much more

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[6] Carrières du Hainaut. “The Composition of the Material.” *Carrières du Hainaut*. Accessed April 12, 2025. https://www.carrieresduhainaut.com/en/quarry/belgian-bluestone.

[7] Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed, Immobiliën Inventar: Historische gebouwen en beschermd erfgoed in Antwerpen(Brussels, 2025);
De Munck-Manderyck et al., Bauen im Laufe der Jahrhunderte in Flandern, (1979).

[8] Havenkaart Antwerpen, 17th-century archival map, FelixArchief.

fluid. Early depictions from pre-industrial times help us to understand the nature of the river before human intervention formalised it.

Figures showing pre-industrial waterfront morphology.

Figure 08. Mattheus Ignatius van Bree, *Studie voor het schilderij 'Intrede van de 1ste consul Napoleon te Antwerpen in 1803'*, ca. 1803. MAS, Museum aan de Stroom.
Figure 09. de rede, rechttrekking, reason, straightening
Figure 10. Bevroren Schelde, 1894, bron Roger Binnemans en George Van Cauwenbergh
Figure 11. Spanish fortification, © Stad Antwerpen - dienst Archeologie
Figure 12. Spanish fortification, Gedrukte kleurenreproductie, 1973, Fotogravure De Schutter, Felixarchief, 12 5946

These figures illustrate the evolution of the riverfront over the centuries. From the 16th-century Spanish fortifications that straightened and formalised the waterfront, to the early 19th-century plans for further urbanisation, the river has long been a space of control, not just exchange. Recent excavations have uncovered traces of these earlier walls beneath the Margueriedok quay, linking the current structure to a long history of infrastructural development along the Scheldt.[9]

In this way, the quay wall is not only a technical object, but a political one. As Foucault reminds us, “space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power.”[10] The height and hardness of the wall physically manifest a logic of separation: the river as risk, as traffic, as resource, but not as presence. With the wall’s construction, the river ceased to be a shared surface. It became infrastructure.

From a materialist perspective, the wall is part of what Manuel DeLanda would call an assemblage: an arrangement of heterogeneous parts—stone, water, people, sediment, policy—that retains internal tension without dissolving into unity.[11] Its blue stone belongs to another geological epoch, but here it binds together political decisions, economic flows, and urban aspirations. It is a connective agent and a divider, a presence and a memory.

Karen Barad’s theory of intra-action urges us to treat such matter not as inert, but as active participants in world-making. “Matter is not a thing,” she writes, “but a doing, a congealing of agency.”[12] The quay wall, in this light, is an ongoing material negotiation between water and land, city and river, past and present. Its erosion and repairs, its additions and absences, speak to the incomplete nature of its work.

At the Margueriedok, the blue stone quay is not merely what remains—it is how the past persists. It continues to shape where one can walk,

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[9] Port of Antwerp Renovation Project Report, De Vlaamse Waterweg nv, (2021).

[10] Michel Foucault, Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, *Diacritics* (1986).

[11] Manuel DeLanda, A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity (Continuum, 2006).

[12] Karen Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning (Duke University Press, 2007), p. 170.

where one can see the water, and how one imagines its former uses. It is both stage and actor, threshold and barrier. To read this wall is to read a sedimented politics of water—at once engineered, forgotten, and still in effect.

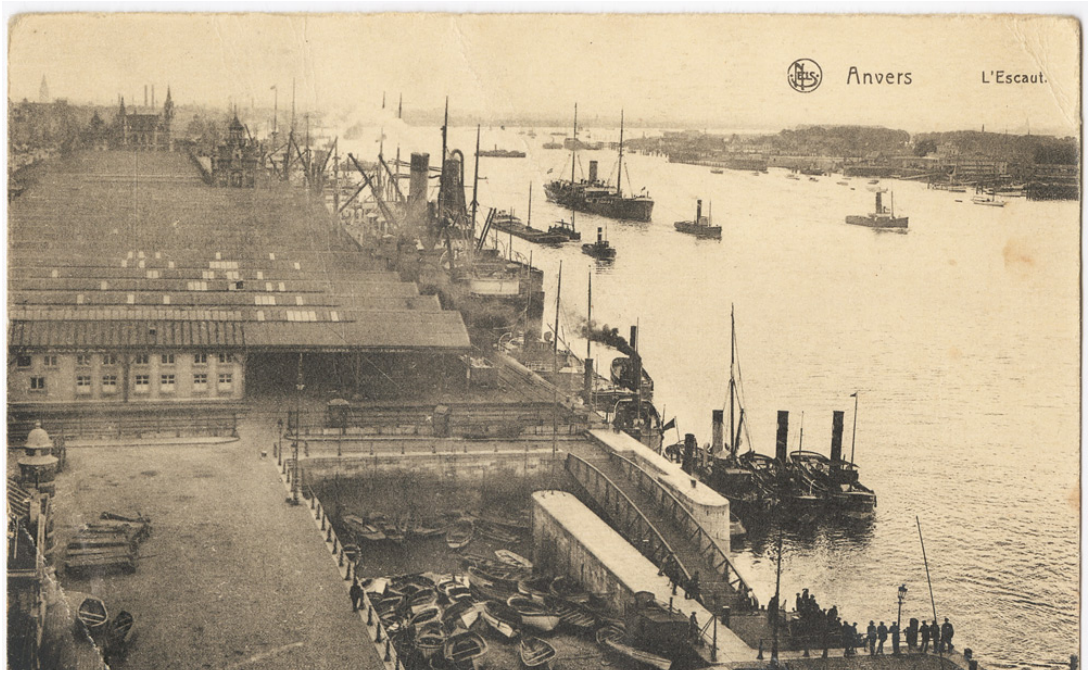


Figure 04. Anvers, L'Escaut.

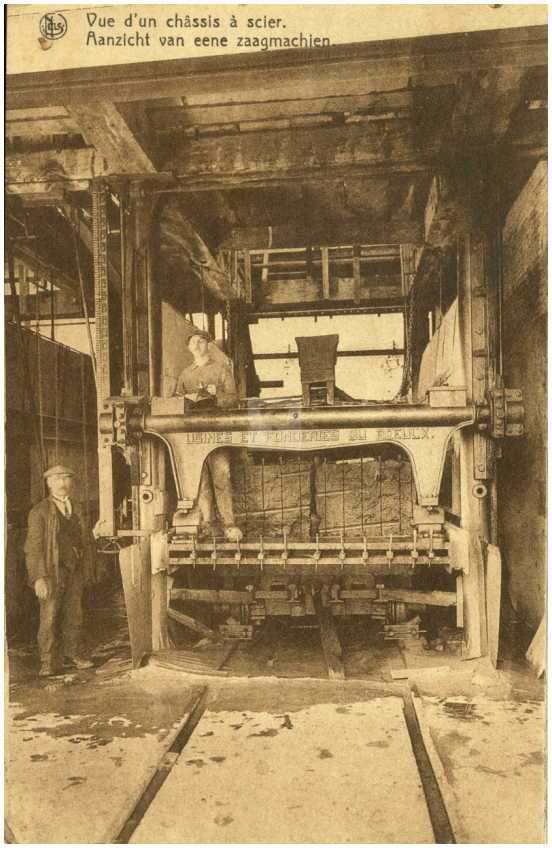


Figure 05. Postcard: View of a sawmill, 'Pierre Bleue du Hainaut' (Blue Limestone of Hainaut) 1986.

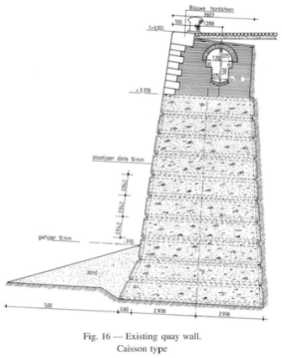

Fig. 16 — Existing quay wall.
Caisson type

Figure 06. 19th-century engineering plan showing gravity wall section



Figure 07. Present-day photograph of the quay wall at Margueriedok, showing concrete patches, vegetation, and steel attachments. Photo by Hanna Hoffmann, 2024.



Figure 08. Mattheus Ignatius van Bree, *Studie voor het schilderij 'Intrede van de 1ste consul Napoleon te Antwerpen in 1803'*, ca. 1803. MAS, Museum aan de Stroom.



Figure 09. de rede, rechttrekking, reason, straightening



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Figure 11. Spanish fortification relicts, © Stad Antwerpen - dienst Archeologie



Figure 12. Spanish fortification, Gedrukte kleurenreproductie, 1973, Fotogravure De Schutter, Felixarchief, 12 5946

Chapter 2: The Interrupted Rail

Field Note 11
22.03.2025, 16:44
51°13'39.0"N 4°24'00.8"E
Marguerie Schuilhaven, 2000 Antwerpen, Belgium
Site Visit 04 – Chapter 2: The Interrupted Rail

Rails appear and disappear along the shore, some are still visible and used to exhibit historic cargo cranes by the river. But here, at the Margueriedok, they behave differently.

Walking around the dock wall, I stumbled across something: a visible, half-buried piece of steel. At first, I thought it was a pole. But its directionality caught my attention. I followed its angle. I realized it must have once been part of a larger network, part of the same system that moved cargo in and out of the port distribution. Infrastructure as choreography.

I stepped onto the gravel and immediately felt the shift: uneven, loose, deliberately neglected. The rails appeared suddenly—one straight, the other crooked. I followed the crooked one. It curved toward the water, but didn't arrive. It ended abruptly in gravel and dust.

I knelt beside the break. A dried weed had grown through the bolt holes. There were signs that someone had recently stepped here: footprints shallowly imprinted in the dust. For a moment, I imagined a rhythm, as if the tracks could still hum underfoot.

Further along, the track reemerged for two meters then disappeared again beneath stacked stones. It was like trying to read a sentence with every other word erased. I didn't know what had moved along these rails. I only knew it had stopped.

They remind me of the rails for the floodgates in the background—low steel doors that can seal off street access and connect to the low flood protection concrete wall. Every time I have walked through that barrier, I had to step across a similar metal seam.

These rails are not about transport anymore. They're about interruption.

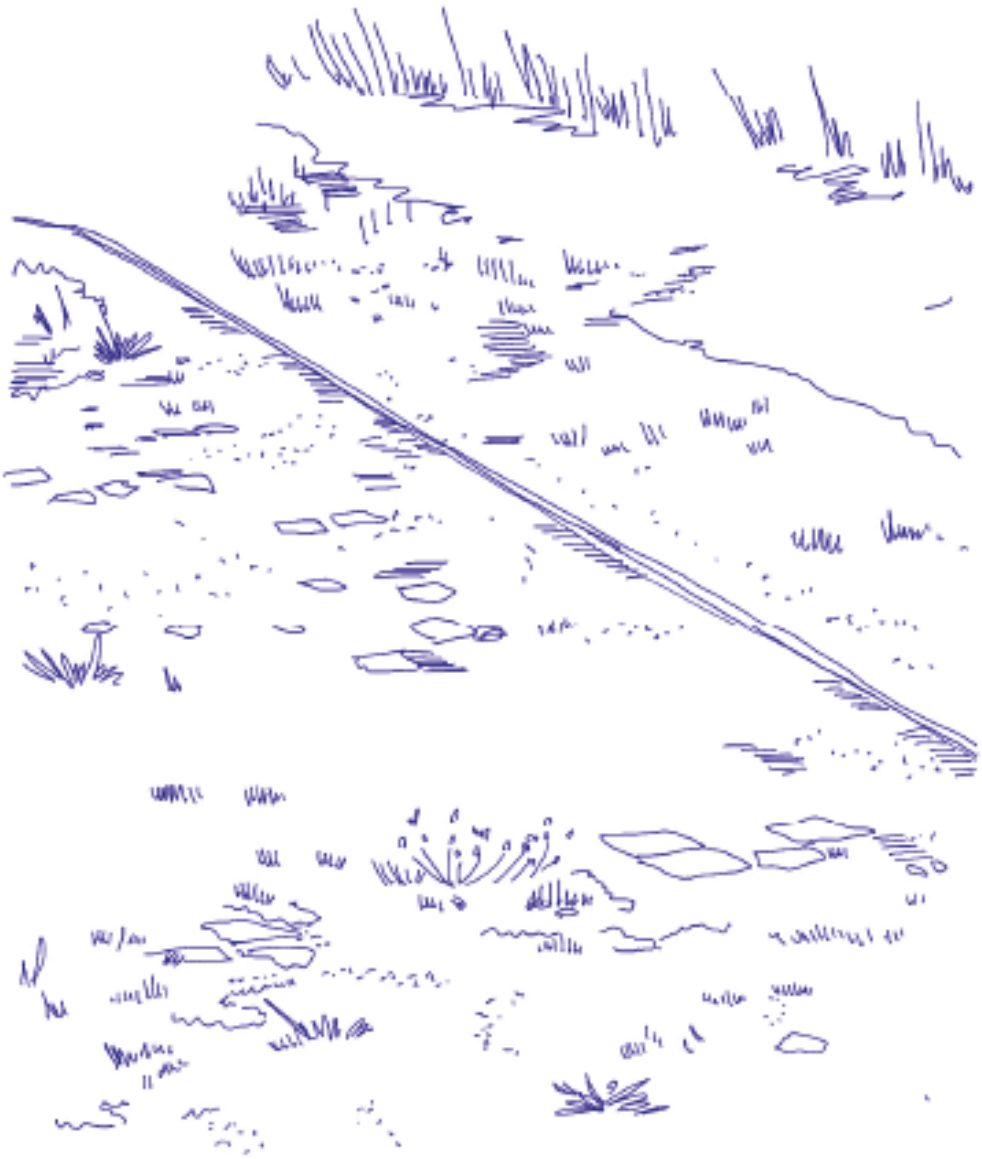


Figure 13. Drawing by author

What does the buried rail reveal about the breakdown of circulation, and how does this infrastructural residue shape how movement — both past and present — is remembered and interrupted?

Coming upon the Margueriedok, one of the most peculiar gestures in the gravel is the steel rail that cuts through the ground before ending in dust and gravel. It disappears into a void, no destination, no continuation. The rails lie cracked and rusted, sometimes doubling back on themselves. They resist logic.

Once part of a complex logistical network linking ships and warehouses, these rails now lie as disjointed lines - traces of movement that have come to a standstill. They are infrastructural remnants, artefacts of a time when the edge of the city was a place of intense circulation. Where they intersect with vegetation or collide with broken masonry, the sense of disruption becomes tactile. As I trace them with my feet, I am forced to step over them, to change direction, to rethink my path. They interrupt my body as they once directed goods. This infrastructural remnant does not guide; it unsettles.

The rail is a fragment of a larger system, part of a logistical assemblage that once enabled circulation and extraction. In DeLanda's terms, it is a component whose identity was defined by its relationship to others - machines, workers, and port schedules.[13] Removed from its network, the rail loses clarity. But it gains something else: a trace of expectation. A line without arrival.

The rail system that once crisscrossed the port of Antwerp was crucial to its rise as one of Europe's major industrial hubs. In the 19th century, Antwerp was not only a port but also a city at the crossroads of global trade, with the railway system serving as a vital artery for the transport of goods such as rubber, coffee, and textiles. This system was an integral part of Belgium's colonial network, facilitating the flow of resources from the Congo Free State to Europe. As such, the rails were not only physical links within the port, but also emblematic of the wider systems of extraction and control.

Today, the fragmentation of the railway reflects Antwerp's post-industrial transition. As industry has declined, so has the infrastructure that supported it. The rails are now part of a reimagined cityscape, no longer tied to the busy flow of goods, but marking the space where that flow has stopped. This disruption - symbolised by the overgrown and broken rail system - is not just about the decay of infrastructure, but about the city's attempt to reconcile itself with its industrial and colonial past.

Figure 14. The postcard shows the View of Loodswezen, Warehouses, and the wide ending point of the rails. This image captures the dynamic circulation of goods at its peak—an image of Antwerp's economic might. The efficiency of the rail system in the past is striking in comparison to the broken form of the rails we encounter today.

In archival images, workers move along these tracks, and wagons shuttle barrels from dock to depot. The lines were arteries of flow. Their logic was economic, industrial, and colonial. Goods arrived here

[13] Manuel DeLanda, A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity (Continuum, 2006).

from overseas—rubber, coffee, textiles—and were redistributed through Antwerp's hinterlands.[14] The rail, then, was not neutral; it was the infrastructure of empire, part of a system of extraction and control. Now, its truncation marks more than disuse—it is a broken promise of movement. A historical condition that was never resolved, merely covered. As Foucault might argue, the spatial organization of circulation reflects political intentions.[15] And here, the failure of continuity points to a failure of integration—a silent break in the imagined efficiency of the port city.

Figure 13. Present-day drawing of a rail segment buried in gravel with vegetation breaking through in 2024. This image beautifully captures the transformation of the railway into a passive relic. It also highlights how the city's shift away from industrial power has been accompanied by a physical disappearance of the systems that once enabled movement.

Figure 15. The Photo shows that the Train Locks are getting delivered by ship and lifted with Cranes on the tracks right on the dock.
Figure 10. A postcard featuring the SMS Prinzregent Luitpold, 1916. This ship was the fifth and final vessel of the Kaiser class of dreadnought battleships in the Imperial German Navy. In the foreground, the Margurie Dock is visible, loaded with materials and train wagons, while the opposite bank of the Schelde River showcases the beauty of nature.
Figure 17. Antwerpen - Noorderterras. Stadsarchief Antwerpen
The postcard shows a higher walkway leading from Steen to Maguire dock. Above the warehouses, people with kids in strollers and on benches on the side are visible. The walkway is wide.

Figure 13. Present-day drawing of a rail segment buried in gravel with vegetation breaking through in 2024.

The railway is overgrown. The city has moved on without removing it. This is not just an oversight, but a gesture. Like other traces of erased infrastructure - such as the buried Spanish Wall or covered drainage canals - the rail marks a historical forgetting by layering rather than reconfiguring. Its material remains persist not through preservation but through omission.

This is not nostalgia, but latency - a moment held open. What can these rusting lines still teach us? That infrastructure, like expectations, can decay. That disruption has a material form.
From the perspective of memory studies, these rails become more than technical debris. They embody what Andreas Huyssen calls the "present past" - remnants that haunt the everyday. They are not memorials, but fragments that disturb the present.[16] They slow down the body, demand a sidestep, whisper of systems no longer in place.

Their scale is important. Unlike the monumental quay wall, the rail operates at foot level. It addresses the pedestrian, not the ship. It creates a boundary not by height, but by refusal - a refusal to direct. Its smallness is deceptive. Its message is clear: this was once a place of movement. It is no longer.
Together with the quay wall, the rail draws a second line - this time not along the water, but across the land. A line of friction, interruption,

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[14] Koen De Scheemaeker, "Functional Shifts in the Port of Antwerp," in *International Journal of Maritime History*, Vol. 17 (2005).

[15] Michel Foucault, Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, *Diacritics* (1986).

[16] Andreas Huyssen, Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory (Stanford University Press, 2003).

displacement. Its material presence is minimal, yet ideologically dense. And in its very incompleteness, it offers a way of thinking about water-city relations not in terms of connection, but in terms of disruption.

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Together with the quay wall, the rail draws a second line - this time not along the water, but across the land. A line of friction, interruption, displacement. Its material presence is minimal, yet ideologically dense. And in its very incompleteness, it offers a way of thinking about water-city relations not in terms of connection, but in terms of disruption.

Figure 18. Steen en Van Dyck Kaai: This postcard shows a busy street with cars, trams, and horse-drawn carriages carrying goods in front of the railway tracks and the Steen. The warehouses extend to the ruins, and smoke from ships can be seen in the background. The juxtaposition of movement with the now broken infrastructure offers a poignant reflection on the transition from industrial speed to post-industrial stagnation.

Figure 19. Steenplein: A postcard of the pedestrian walkway along the river, past the railway tracks, shows a quiet, peaceful atmosphere. This shift from industrial activity to leisure space marks a clear contrast with the past and highlights the transformation of the area from a place of exchange to one of quiet reflection. The absence of railway activity here deepens the sense of the rails' loss of purpose.

Figure 20. The photograph shows the shoreline next to the warehouses with two rows of rails and bollards. The bustling energy of the past is in stark contrast to the overgrown tracks and the slow-moving river in the foreground. The image symbolises the contrast between the rapid movement of the industrial era and the stagnation of the present.

Figure 21. The photograph shows warehouses next to three rows of railway tracks. A high steel fence separates the trains from the pedestrian walkway and the road where small cars pass. This image encapsulates the boundary between the industrial past and the current urban space, illustrating the separation between the former active space of industrial transport and the modern, quiet pedestrian access.

[17] Huyssen, Andreas. 2000. "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia." *Public Culture* 12 (1): 21-38.



Figure 14.
The Postcard shows the View on Loodswesen, Warehouses, and the wide ending point of the rails.



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Figure 17. Antwerpen - Noorderterras. Stadsarchief Antwerpen
The postcard shows a higher walkway leading from Steen to Maguire dock. Above the warehouses, people with kids in strollers and benches on the side are visible. The walkway is wide.

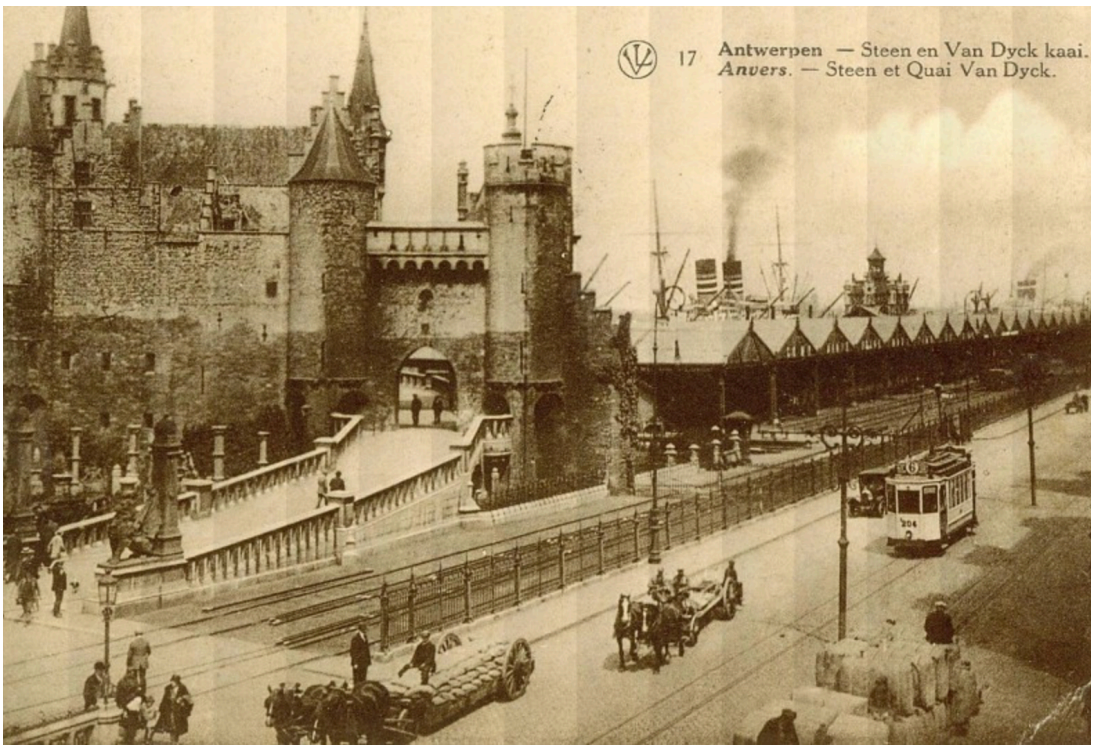


Figure 18. Steen en Van Dyck kaai, Ernest Van Dijckkaai
The postcard depicts a busy road with cars, trams, and horse carriages carrying goods in front of the rail tracks and the Steen. The warehouses extend all the way up to the ruins, with smoke from ships visible in the background.



Figure 19. Steenplein
The postcard depicts the pedestrian walkway next to the river, located past the railway tracks. It is situated further south of the Maguire dock, where the Steen is located. Statues and trees are visible, and a high fence leads to a bluestone balustrade. The atmosphere is peaceful and quiet.



Figure 20.
The photograph shows the shoreline next to the warehouses, featuring two rows of rails and bollards. In the Schelde, there are sometimes three ships next to each other.



Figure 21. Steen, Ernest Van Dijckkaai.
The photograph shows warehouses alongside three rows of train tracks. A tall steel fence separates the trains from the pedestrian walkway and the street, where small cars pass by. Adjacent to this is a row of houses with shops on the ground floor.

Chapter 3:
The Dutch Pilotage Building – An Architecture of Arrival and Erasure

Field Note 06
23.11.2024, 15:05
51°13'38"N 4°24'00"E
Tavernierkaai 7, 2000 Antwerpen, Belgium
Site Visit 02 – Chapter 3: The Dutch Pilotage Building

Sitting in the autumn sun, I watched people passing—walking dogs, jogging—each one turning back just before the dock. None of them crossed into it. It was like a forgotten page no one wanted to reread. Cut away by the flood, the concrete wall.

Next to the dock, a row of buildings stood in a strange sequence—historic, generic, vacant. The Belgian Loodswezen loomed over the corner like a stone monarch: grand, broken, uninhabited. Its glass was cracked, its silence loud.

A cat jumped through a slightly opened ground-floor window. Surprised, I knocked on another window out of curiosity. Two men appeared behind the glass. They wouldn't tell me much. "Everything is online," one said. "Sigma Plan. Look there." I asked if I could look inside. They shook their heads. "Nothing we can do." I kept on walking down the street parallel to the shore.

I passed a one-floor depot with chiseled stone detailing—probably once a storage house of importance—and then a modern grey box that looked like it didn't belong here (now an office space, though unclear for what). Finally, I reached the last building. It stood under a tall tree. Brick, high-pitched roof, vines up the entry, a line of buoys strung along the facade like forgotten invitations. A poster flapped in Dutch. I paused, clearly confused. A woman said hello, sitting there enjoying the last rays of the sun. Then someone else joined. We talked for an hour—not just about the building, but about memory, politics, and who gets to stay.

The house, I learned, is now a residency. A place for artists. A building that once welcomed foreign pilots was later granted monument status for its cultural value and now faces demolition. They don't understand. I can relate. What and why?

What remains isn't just architecture—it's the uncertainty of belonging.



Figure 22. Drawing by the author

What can the uncertain fate of the Dutch Pilotage Building teach us about the politics of erasure, and how might ambiguous fragments offer resistance within dominant redevelopment narratives?

I approach the Dutch Pilotage Building from the edge of the quay, where its brick volume sits slightly recessed, facing the now-quiet water of the Margueriedok. The facade is restrained: smaller windows, faded stone lintels, and a red tiled roof that folds sharply into the street. But what draws me in is its condition—not quite preserved, not yet demolished. A paper sign inside the dusty window reads simply: *Red het gebouw*—save the building.

Built in 1925 by architect C. Jelsma, chief of the architectural service of the Dutch Loodswezen, the structure is an unusual example of the Amsterdam School in Belgium.[18] Its stepped brick detailing, diamond-shaped windows, and saddle roof carry a formal language that is expressive, yet modest. Designed as both a residence and an administration hub, the building originally accommodated offices, waiting rooms, and sleeping quarters for Dutch pilots responsible for navigating the last stretch of the Scheldt into Antwerp's port.[19]
But this was not the first iteration. In 1891, a smaller, neoclassical brick building stood on this site—functional, single-storey, facing the basin.[20] It mediated a daily rhythm: pilots, many coming from Vlissingen, would descend from its vestibule into small boats to meet incoming ships, guiding them upstream into the expanding 19th-century harbor. In turn, Antwerp maintained its pilot post across the water in the Netherlands, a transnational choreography of maritime governance.[21]

Figure 24:
The photograph shows a small tram station beside the tracks, bordered by a tree-lined avenue leading to the Margueriedok. In the background, the Dutch pilotage can be seen behind the train carriages, blocking access to the deck.

Today, that logic has broken down. The original building is long gone, and the 1925 structure, though still standing, is no longer in use. Since the early 2000s, it had been reinhabited by artists, designers, and residents who transformed the space into a vibrant, if informal, cultural meeting point. Hand-painted posters from a protest in 2024 frame the building not as obsolete, but as alive: *"25 jaar wonen en werken hier vele creatieve zielen... een vrije ontmoetingsplek waarvan er in de stad helaas niet veel meer zijn."* ("25 years of living and working here by many creative souls... a free meeting space of which there are sadly few left in the city.")[22]

Figure 23: The protest poster created by Dutch pilots, photographed by Hanna Hoffmann, 2024.

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[18] Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed, "Nederlands Loodswezen," *Inventaris Onroerend Erfgoed*, last modified March 29, 2019, https://id.erfgoed.net/erfgoedobjecten/212119.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Hooft, Elise; Braeken, Jo, "Herinventarisatie bouwkundig erfgoed op de Scheldekaaien," *Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed*, 2010.

[21] Nederlandse Loodsencorporatie, "Scheldemonden," accessed April 2025.

[22] Protest Poster, "R.I.P. de villa," photograph by Hanna Hoffmann, 2024.

The building is currently scheduled for demolition. Despite being listed as architectural heritage since 2010 and reaffirmed in 2019, it lacks monument protection status.[23] The reason given is spatial clarity: the ramp required for public accessibility cuts directly through its footprint. The redevelopment plan for the Loodswezensite, led by Bureau Bas Smets, highlights “the site’s strong heritage character and relationship with water” while removing the very structure that anchored that relationship for a century.[24]

Figure 24: This photo shows the former pilotage building, much smaller than its current counterparts. Constructed of brick, it has a square ground floor with windows on all sides. The building interrupts the fence bordering the railway line. In the background, a large ship can be seen on the River Scheldt, alongside a small settlement on the opposite bank.
Figure 25 - Figure 30: Alterations of the Dutch Pilotage

The building is currently scheduled for demolition. Despite being listed as architectural heritage since 2010 and reaffirmed in 2019, it lacks monument protection status.[25] The reason given is spatial clarity: the ramp required for public accessibility cuts directly through its footprint. The redevelopment plan for the Loodswezensite, led by Bureau Bas Smets, highlights “the site’s strong heritage character and relationship with water” while removing the very structure that anchored that relationship for a century.[26]

But this building is not just a structure—it is an archive. Its brickwork holds traces of multiple transitions: the shift from national representation to transnational cooperation, from administrative order to informal dwelling, from maritime navigation to cultural production. Its ambiguous present reflects a broader uncertainty around what is worth preserving—and what is quietly allowed to vanish.
In archival images from the 1930s, the building is animated: pilot boats moored in the dock, men in uniform, a footbridge suspended over the water. It appears both infrastructural and civic.[27]

Figure 24. Les Troubles D’Anvers. Aout-Sept. 1907, Gardes Civiques Escortant les Ouvriers Anglais.

In more recent photographs, the water is still. The windows are covered with fabric. A DJ plays a set from the entry porch during a “dismantling ritual” organized by the artist residents. Their protest is not nostalgic—it is performative, aware of its ephemerality. The posters read like eulogies and refusals at once.

The building thus stages its departure. Yet its endurance as a fragment complicates this narrative of smooth erasure. In terms of Manuel DeLanda’s assemblage theory, the Dutch Pilotage Building once operated as a territorializing agent, structuring spatial relations,

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[23] Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed, “Nederlands Loodswezen.”

[24] Bureau Bas Smets, “Definitief ontwerp voor gebiedsontwikkeling Loodswezensite,” *Stad Antwerpen*, 2023.

[25] Agentschap Onroerend Erfgoed, “Nederlands Loodswezen.”

[26] Bureau Bas Smets, “Definitief ontwerp voor gebiedsontwikkeling Loodswezensite,” *Stad Antwerpen*, 2023.

[27] FelixArchief, archival image series of Margueriedok, c. 1930.

controlling flows, and legitimizing jurisdiction.[28] Now, unmoored from those systems, it becomes a site of deterritorialization. It has lost its function, but not its meaning. It has become a platform for latent agency—a fragment that resists narrative closure.

For Donna Haraway, "staying with the trouble" means remaining with the complexities of a world that cannot be fully resolved.[29] This building, with its contradictory roles—heritage site and obstacle, residence and ruin—embodies that trouble. Its threatened demolition marks not just the loss of a structure, but of an unresolved space where different histories continue to touch. Its ambiguity becomes its resistance.

This is particularly evident in contrast to its neighbor, the Belgian Loodswezen. Monumental, neo-Flemish, and now undergoing renovation, the Loodswezen dominates the site both visually and discursively. The Dutch building, by contrast, was national in a minor key: pragmatic, expressive, and ultimately more ephemeral. Their juxtaposition mirrors a broader tension between scales of preservation and erasure, between what is commemorated and what is discarded.

The new plans for the site do not show the building. In its place: a landscape of grasses, stairs, and a wide concrete path. The architectural drawings include annotations about historical context, but the building itself is absent. This is erasure through simplification.

Figure 33- 36. Proposed redevelopment of the Loodswezen site, 2023. Source: Stadt Antwerpen, Protest poster, Bureau Bas Smets

And yet, the building endures in memory, in protest, and in stone. Its removal would follow a familiar pattern—one seen in the disappearance of the Spanish quay wall, the cast-iron balustrade, and the wooden port structures that once lined this dock. Each erasure leaves a smoother surface. Each smooth surface forgets.
If we treat built heritage not only as objects to conserve, but as actors in the negotiation between past and future, then buildings like this one deserve more than footnotes. They deserve attention, not as monuments, but as fragments—ambiguous, expressive, unresolved.
The Dutch Pilotage Building reminds us that resistance does not always arrive in large gestures. Sometimes it appears in the refusal to simplify, in the coexistence of layers. Perhaps this building is not one to restore. But it is certainly one to read.

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[28] Manuel DeLanda, A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity (London: Continuum, 2006).

[29] Donna Haraway, Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).



Figure 23.
The protest poster created by Dutch pilots, photographed by Hanna Hoffmann.

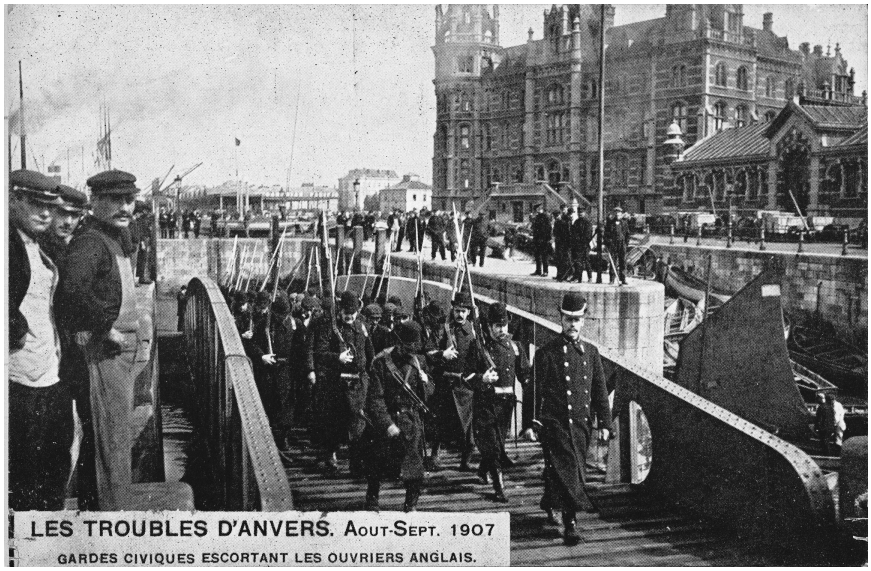


Figure 24. Les Troubles D'Anvers. Aout-Sept. 1907, Gardes Civiques Escortant les Ouvriers Anglais.

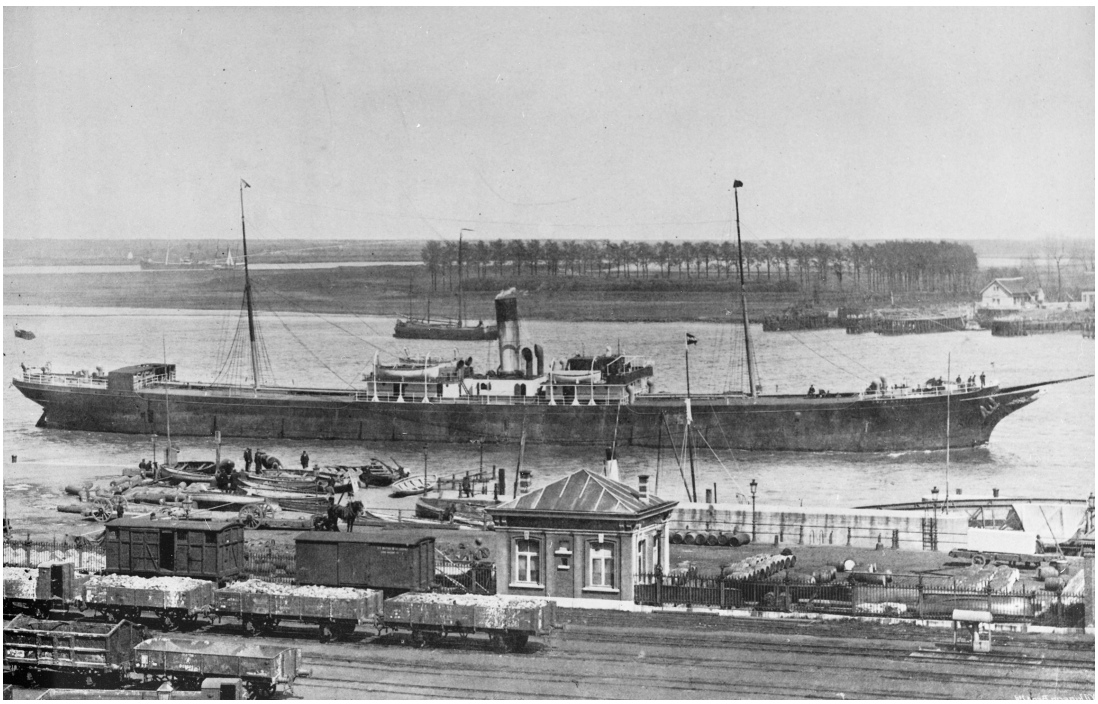
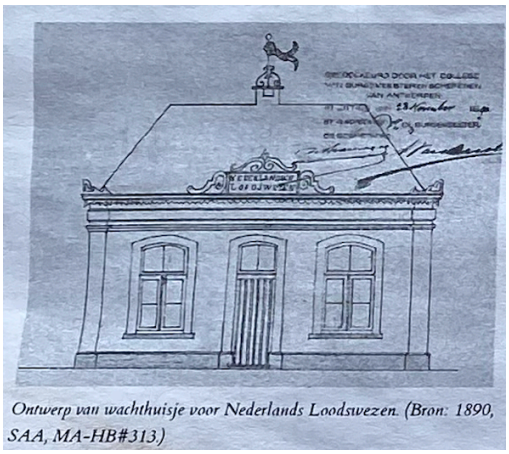


Figure 24.
This photo depicts the former pilotage building, which is much smaller than its current counterparts. Constructed of brick, it features a square ground floor with windows on all sides. The building interrupts the fence that borders the railway tracks. In the background, a large ship can be seen on the Scheldt River, alongside a small settlement on the opposite bank.



Ontwerp van wachthuisje voor Nederlands Loodswezen. (Bron: 1890, SAA, MA-HB#313.)

Figure 25. Design of guardhouse for Dutch pilotage (Source: 1890,SAA, MA-HB#313.)



Figure 26. Customs building in original condition. (Brou: Pieron- Loodts, 1895, SAA, Photo-GF#124.)



Figure 27. Waiting house for Dutch pilots on travernierkaai. (Source: ca.1891, Vereniging Nederlandse Loodsen Societeit, VNLS 1.l-66c.)



Figure 28. The customs building after its extension. (Source: ca.1899, MAS, AS.70.24.27)



Figure 29. Photo from the 1920s shows the old and new building for the Dutch pilotage system side by side (Borne: ca.1925-1930, MAS, AS.85.64.37).



Figure 30. The new Dutch pilotage system. (Source. 1984, vereniging Nederlandse Loodsen Societet, VNLS 10-17c.)

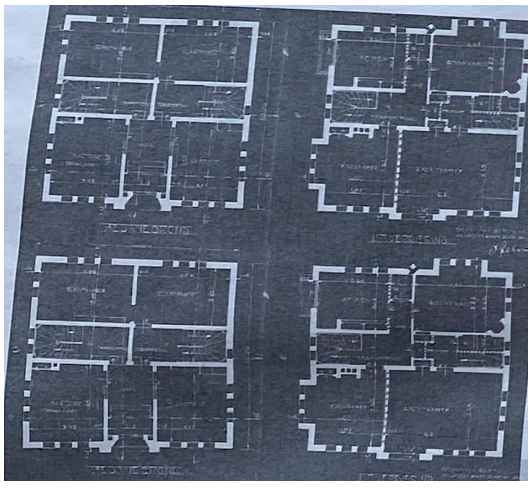


Figure 31. Fragment from construction file new Dutch Pilotage shows ground plan (1925, SAA 125#21397.)



Figure 32. The former Dutch pilotage is today used as an Artist residency. Photograph By Hanna Hoffmann.

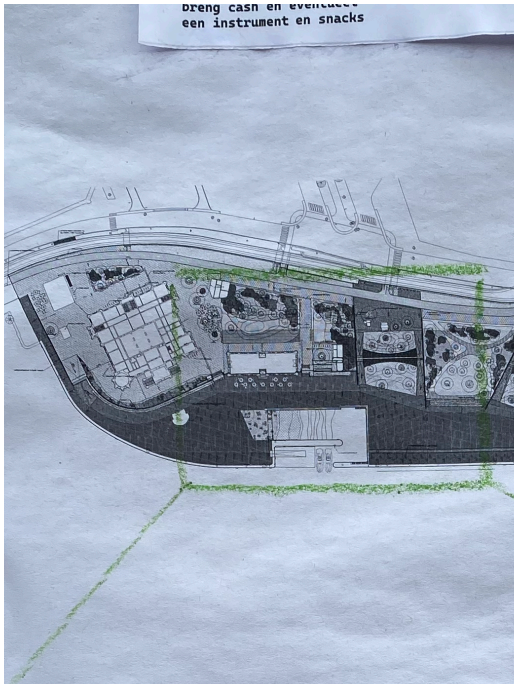


Figure 33.
Plans from protest poster. Photograph By Hanna Hoffmann.

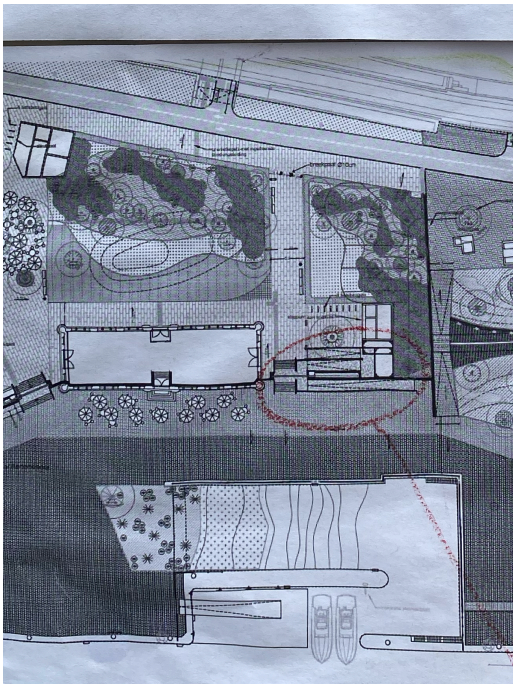


Figure 34.
Plans from protest poster. Photograph By Hanna Hoffmann.

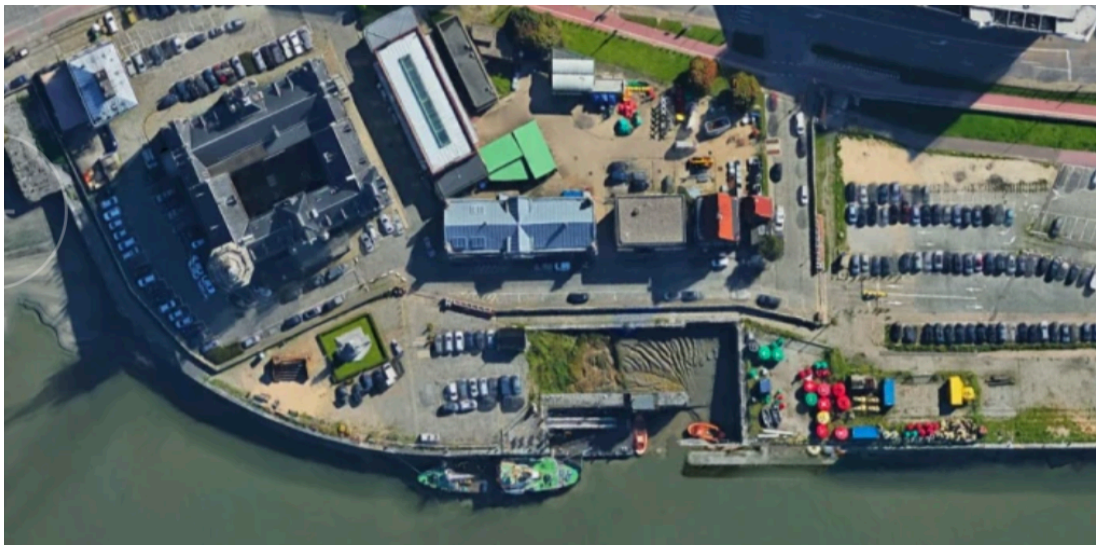


Figure 35. Afbeeldingen © Bureau Bas Smets



Figure 36. Afbeeldingen © Bureau Bas Smets

Conclusion: Between Stone and Flow – Learning from the Margueriedok

The Margueriedok is no longer a site of arrival, nor one of circulation. It does not declare its history, nor offer itself up for easy reuse. It sits in waiting—not abandoned, but suspended. This stillness is not absence; it is a material condition saturated with latency, edged by ambiguity, and shaped by political and infrastructural decisions. In this thesis, I have proposed that to understand the shifting relationship between the inhabitants of Antwerp and the Scheldt River, we must learn to read these forms of material suspension. Not as obsolete remnants, but as active agents in ongoing urban and ecological entanglements.

Across the three assemblage histories—the blue stone quay wall, the interrupted rail, and the Dutch Pilotage Building—I have followed how material fragments encode and disturb the city's changing relation to water. These are not static elements. Each fragment holds sedimented layers of function, memory, and disruption. Their endurance makes visible the contested dynamics of planning, erasure, and resistance.
The quay wall tells the story of formalization: of how a porous edge became a hardened border. From tidal sands and timber docks to the gravity-bound geometry of *blauwe hardsteen*, the shore was reconfigured into a linear system of control. This transformation—engineered, architectural, and ideological—remains legible in the stone. Yet even in its eroded joints and moss-filled seams, the wall resists forgetting. It materializes both order and its afterlives.
The rail, by contrast, makes visible a different form of rupture. Once an artery of flow, it now lies fragmented, disconnected from both its infrastructural network and the body it once directed. The rail does not lead anywhere. But it remembers movement. It marks the absence of function, the silence of systems undone. As a material interruption, it teaches us that disconnection is not nothing—it is a condition in itself.

Finally, the Dutch Pilotage Building offers a spatial testimony to both arrival and disappearance. It once mediated movement across the watery border—housing, processing, and guiding. Its architecture, modest but expressive, held a cross-national maritime rhythm. Today, it is contested terrain: not yet demolished, no longer protected, subject to bureaucratic omission. Its layered history—function, reuse, protest—unfolds through its continued presence. And its potential removal signals not just the loss of a building, but the loss of a practice of ambiguity: a space where the unfinished and unresolved still had room to exist.

What unites these three fragments is not their shared function, material, or age, but their condition of temporal entanglement. They carry durations that do not align with official timelines. They interrupt the clean sequencing of past, present, and future that underpins many redevelopment narratives. Their stories unfold at different scales–

geological, infrastructural, and political—and reveal a city in continuous, uneven negotiation with its river.

The readings offered here are necessarily partial. They do not produce a complete history, but a situated one, constructed through field observation, archival comparison, and theoretical attunement. In their partiality lies their strength. As Haraway reminds us, "staying with the trouble" means refusing premature resolution. It means holding space for complexity, for contradictions that do not resolve, but still matter. To read the Margueriedok this way is to approach it not as a void to be filled, but as a layered assemblage of decisions, absences, and deferred meanings. It is a site that does not belong entirely to the past, nor any clearly defined future. It holds uses that have stopped functioning, but not stopped speaking.

This thesis also engages with a broader critique of redevelopment practices, such as those proposed by Bureau Bas Smets for the Loodswezensite and wider Scheldt Quays. These projects speak in the language of resilience, accessibility, and green design. But they often do so by smoothing over ambiguity. Raised flood barriers, park-like landscapes, and streamlined edges replace awkward materials and contested memories. The logic of safety, while important, risks erasing the very fragments through which water and people once met, negotiated, and transformed each other.

The Margueriedok, then, is not just a space of disuse. It is a spatial question: How do we deal with what persists but no longer performs? What kinds of relationships—between material, memory, and place—are still possible when function falls away?

If there is an answer, it does not lie in monumentality, nor complete erasure. It lies in a slower, more careful mode of attention. In reading Stone and Steel, not as obsolete, but as storytellers. In learning that infrastructures may decay, but they also endure—in cracks, in pauses, in the bodies they still shape. And in recognizing that the future of Antwerp's relation to the river will not be designed solely by master plans, but also by those fragments that refuse to leave.

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This text explores how architectural fragments encode colonial and epistemological power. Its theoretical framing supports the reading of the Margueriedok's historical layers not as neutral, but as ideologically loaded.

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This book introduces assemblage theory, which grounds the thesis's methodology. It enables the analysis of each site fragment (stone wall, rail, building) as components of larger assemblages shaped by dynamic relations over time.

Haraway, Donna. *„Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*." Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.
Haraway's notion of "staying with the trouble" guides the thesis's commitment to ambiguity and partiality. Her work supports the speculative,

open-ended reading of the dock's fragments as spaces for imagining new water-inhabitant relations.

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Used to contrast dominant narratives of growth-driven urbanism with the thesis's critique of redevelopment plans. While optimistic, Glaeser's approach is challenged by the need for historical sensitivity and memory in post-industrial waterfronts.

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Offers a long-term view of port evolution, emphasizing how economic functions and national imaginaries intertwine. Supports the argument that infrastructures like docks and pilotage buildings reflect national pride and imperial legacy.

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This essay helps conceptualize the patched and repaired surfaces of the quay wall and rail tracks as active historical documents.

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FelixArchief Antwerp (City Archive of Antwerp). Various materials (19th–20th c.). Includes photographs of the Margueriedok (1890s–1960s), engineering drawings, and shoreline maps. Used in each chapter to visually trace spatial and material transformations.

Havenkaart Antwerpen, 2023

Up-to-date spatial data on port infrastructure and zoning. Used to contextualize current urban design developments and remaining historical structures.

KMSKA Royal Museum of Fine Arts – Visual Archives
Visual documentation supporting the analysis of architectural and social practices at the Margueriedok, particularly concerning visual framing and selective memory in historic imagery.

Oral History Interview: "Ginds zie ik de lichtjes van de Schelde"
Reflective accounts from locals on the social meaning of the waterfront. Used to support the analysis of the Pilotage Building's symbolic relevance.

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Details of engineering techniques and material decisions from the quay wall restoration efforts. Supports the interpretation of the gravity wall and blue stone use.
Provides a public-facing narrative of redevelopment strategies, used to contrast marketing language with site-specific ambiguities explored in the thesis.

Sigma Plan Project Files. Vlaamse Waterweg, 2024.
Outlines policy motivations behind the waterfront transformation. Cited in the critique of path-dependent planning logic.
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