

Antwerp

By Agostino Delannoy

Everything starts at the central train station. But it probably began with the harbour. The harbour always was its main advantage in comparison to other cities. Merchandises go through the harbour. All types of it: valuables ones, cheap ones, raw ones, some with added value, and even edible ones. What goes through the port is what makes the living of part of the city. But people still go through there as well, although there was a time when it was much busier with passengers. Like when it was the main entryway to the country. Or the main exit too. This is where people had to go when they wanted to go to the Mediterranean or England or Scandinavia during the Middle Ages. This is where they also had to go during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries when they wanted to immigrate to America. They would first take the train and then make their way to the harbour. The train would stop at the main train station.

Today, this is where it all starts. It is called Antwerpen Centraal. They say it is the most beautiful station in the world. Well, not the inhabitants themselves, but people from far away⁵. The people that live there do not even see it anymore – it just became part of the décor. Everyone walks in the station as if nothing was special about it. The only people looking up are the few tourists and small children that are not yet used to it. They are the only ones that pay attention to its beauty: the other people just pass through it. The other people do not pay attention to the four separate levels of trains. They do not pay attention to its architecture. They also do not pay attention to the gilding and the bas-

⁵ Jaime Cunningham, “Stations: A Destination That Matches the Journey”, *Newsweek*, New York, January 10, 2009; Dennis Green, “All Aboard! 12 Beautiful Railway Stations from Around the World”, *Mashable*, New York, August 25, 2014.

reliefs, to the central clock or the glass ceilings. But the tourists do. For them, this is where it all starts.

When they get out of the station, they emerge on a busy street, usually full of cars, buses and streetcars. The zoo is behind the train tracks. This is where the kids always want to go. On the left side of the station is the diamond district. This is the city where approximately eighty percent of the world's diamonds go through. They do not stay in the city – they just come and go. If one walks a bit past the diamond district, they will find an Orthodox Jewish neighbourhood. Like in Venice and Amsterdam, Jews were somewhat tolerated in the sixteenth century and onwards, but many perished during World War II when they were forced out of the city by the occupying forces. However, some came back and the community is still present and very active. For someone not used to Orthodox Jews who walks through the parks in that area, like the Stadspark, it might look like time has stopped. But time never stops in Antwerp. Things must keep moving. Things must keep coming into the city and things must keep being shipped out of the city. And so do people. They always move. Well, except during the night when things finally calm down, but the rest of the day, people always move. They do not have a choice, if they want their city to stay rich, and consequently to stay beautiful. The city must pay for the restoration of all these buildings, like the train station.

Antwerpen Centraal. And if the tourists decided to go to the right when they exit the train station, what would they find there? Chinatown. Yes, the place that people refer to as “Chinatown” with a small smile on their face. Well it is more of a street than a “town”. Or actually, a section of a street. Chinatown is very small; it is just a few Chinese restaurants and stores that happen to be on the same block. As if they had been forced to

move there. That street is dirty. There are always papers and other things on the sidewalks. It also is a smelly street. Perhaps the city does not clean it as often as other busier streets. Perhaps it is because not many people go there so they do not see the point of cleaning it often. Perhaps it is because it is getting closer to the harbour. Or perhaps it is because the people in Chinatown are always moving stuff from a store to another, from store to restaurant, that the street is dirty. Things fall from carts sometimes, it is something that happens. Things are always moving in Chinatown. Like in Antwerp. It is part of the same city after all.

But what else is there on the right? If we go to the northwest of Chinatown, we find the Begijnhof. This is where, during the Middle Ages and until recently, the beguines would live. They would move to the Begijnhof for a few years, sometimes for the rest of their lives. But they could always move out. In and out – not like in convents.

On the way back from the Begijnhof, we can see the opera house. De Koninglijk Vlaamse Opera – or the Royal Flemish Opera. Another place where people gather, go in, go out. From there, if we go down De Keyserlei⁶, we are back to the train station.

It is always there that it begins. The place from which trains depart and to which they all arrive. Vertrekken en aankomen.⁷ If after walking out of the station we walk straight, on De Keyserlei, we will get to Meirstraat.⁸ The *premetro*⁹ runs under it. De Meir is the shopping district of the city. There are always people on this street, people walking up or down the street, with bags in their hands, smiles on their faces, eating a

⁶ De Keyserlei is a street in central Antwerp.

⁷ Translation: Departures and arrivals.

⁸ Meirstraat is the main street of the shopping district of Antwerp.

⁹ The *premetro* is an underground tramway.

sandwich, a waffle, or enjoying tea or coffee in a café, on a patio when the weather allows it. People look worry free on this street.

Up Meirstraat is a shopping centre, on the left to be exact. They say it is the prettiest one in Europe. Gilding everywhere, high ceilings, bas-reliefs, glassed domes, and all this with classical music in the background. During pride week, they even add rainbow flags. Once again, the inhabitants do not see its beauty. Only the tourists take pictures and look up. Only the tourists look at the ceilings and not at the clothes for sale.

Still on the left, and after the shopping centre, is Rubenshuis. Rubens lived here for a few years. The building was his house and studio. Now people can visit it. The house is on a quiet square that has several overpriced cafés with nice patios, a few steps away from all the craziness of Meirstaat. If one continues past Rubenshuis, they will find several small art galleries and designer shops. But this is not it. It is important to go all the way down Meirstraat, to keep moving. This is where the historical centre is.

To get to the historical centre, one must walk in front of a modern tower. Then only he or she can access the old town. The tourists will find themselves on a big square. Cars and buses are not allowed on it, but oddly streetcars go around it. Things must keep moving in Antwerp. Nothing can ever stop. When the streets become too narrow even for streetcars, then the flow of people takes over. A never-ending flow of people going into the historical centre. This is where we find the most tourists. They walk in the square in front of the Onze-Lieve-Vrouwkathedraal, take pictures of the cathedral and of the statues next to it, only to realize that one of them is a person painted in an oxidized

copper colour. Even the statues move in Antwerp. And at the end of the day the statues go home to their families. Things come and go in Antwerp.

A little further is another square, where the *stadhuis*¹⁰ is located. The façade is full of flags. It is an imposing building. There is a big fountain in the middle of the square. There is no one painted in oxidized copper colour on this one though, the water would take the paint away. No one would give money to a normal person standing in a fountain.

Things move in Antwerp. Going down the street from the *stadhuis*, we get to a bigger street. That one is very busy. On the other side is the Schelde.¹¹ There we can see the boats coming and going. Bringing merchandise in the city, taking merchandise away from the city. Things never stay put in Antwerp.

Antwerpen Centraal. Where it all starts. Trains leaving and arriving on four different levels. People moving on four different levels, getting in and out of the train station. It is surrounded by buses and cars and taxis and streetcars and the *premetro*. Everything is moving around Antwerpen Centraal. People, like merchandise, always move. Time never stops. We can stare at the central clock in the station to be a witness to it. But if we take even a second to pause, at any hour, in any place, we can see how beautiful the city is. If we have a few minutes, we can allow ourselves to drift in the city to enjoy it for what it really is. And if we have several hours or days, then, like the tourists, we can make time stop and let ourselves be amazed by all the small things we take for granted. Antwerp never ceases to impress, provided the onlooker gives the city a chance of entering their world.

¹⁰ Translation: City Hall.

¹¹ The Schelde is the river that runs through Antwerp.