

DEMOGRAPHIA



ANTWERP: CUTTING EDGE METROPOLIS

FAST FACTS		Similar To
Metropolitan (Labor Market) Population	1,200,000	Austin, Calgary
Urbanized Area* Population	915,000	
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	230	Brussels, Manchester, Calgary, Tulsa
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	600	
Population per Square Mile	4,000	Portland, Saskatoon, Melbourne
Population per Square Kilometer	1,500	
*Continuously built up area		

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Antwerp is one of those places that defines Europe. There is the very dense urban core, with districts of more than 25,000 per square mile density. The old city has an attractive pedestrian area and an impressive cathedral. Walking around the attractive, historical core, it might be surprising to find out that you are in one of the least densely populated urbanized areas in the world outside the United States. Surrounding it all is the broad expanse of suburbs made invisible by tree lined freeways and people looking to see only what they expected. Despite its high core density, Antwerp would not be among the most dense urban areas in the United States or Canada.

But Antwerp's low density is somewhat misleading. Perhaps one-fourth of the urbanization is consumed by the world's fourth largest international seaport. But despite its high international ranking, Antwerp is only the second largest international seaport within 50 miles. The world's largest, Rotterdam, lies not far north of the nearby Netherlands border. But outside Rotterdam, only Singapore and Hong Kong handle more international tonnage. North America's largest seaport, Houston, ranks sixth in the world and handles 15 percent less volume than Antwerp. The seaport is located on the upwind west side of the city.

Like perhaps only St. Louis and Pittsburgh in the United States, the city of Antwerp has the distinction of having lost more than 50 percent of its population. Since 1920, the city has fallen from 334,000 residents to 158,000, a loss of 53 percent. This is greater than Pittsburgh, but less than the 60 percent loss that has been sustained by St. Louis. The loss in Antwerp is masked, however, by a 1982 amalgamation that brought a number of suburban jurisdictions into the city. Even the post 1982 city has lost approximately 10 percent of its population since amalgamation. Antwerp suffered grievously from World War II bombing, but the loss of population was well on its way before that. Since 1950, more than 100,000 people have left the city (pre-1980 boundaries), while the suburbs have added 450,000.

The seaport location precludes the higher value housing that is often found on the up-wind western side of so many mid-latitude urban areas. Here, the nicest residential areas are to the east.

And they are nice. The suburb of Schilde has many beautiful homes on large lots. The western and northern suburbs also contain many other single-family dwellings built on fairly large lots. The houses tend to be a bit smaller than what was being built at the same time in US suburban areas. The difference is probably a matter of income, with US households able to afford larger homes than Belgian households.

Here and in other European urban areas it is important to recognize the role played by suburbs. Many US urban planners have the misimpression that Europeans, unlike their American cousins, prefer to live in high density settings. And, indeed, in Europe, the cores of the largest urban areas have much greater opportunities for quality high-density living, with the poor often conveniently housed in substandard housing and public housing estates in the inner suburbs. But it is, in fact, in the middle ring and outer suburbs where “things are happening.” Population has fallen substantially in the high density urban cores, though in most places it seems to have stabilized at this point.

Generally, the growth is occurring in the outer rings, where people are building and buying new houses that would fit quite nicely in any of the world’s suburbs. With the apparent simple choice of quality high-density living and a suburban life style that depends upon the car and its sometimes \$5.00 per gallon petrol, most people with the means opt for suburbanization, of the unplanned variety that best suits their needs and wants. This is surely evident in Antwerp, where most suburbanization is of the dreaded (at least by urban planners) unplanned variety.

Antwerp is well served by freeways. Intercity freeways enter the area from the north, south and east. Brussels is less than 30 miles away, while the world’s largest port, Rotterdam is only 50 miles away. But as close as Antwerp is to Brussels, their considerable sprawl does not yet meet. There is also a freeway ring road located within the core city. An interesting feature of many Belgian freeways is that they are lighted virtually all the way. In the freeway medians are tall light towers which put out considerable light. This is in contrast to freeways in much of the rest of the world, where lighting is reserved for the largest interchanges, and sometimes not even that.

One entry to the urban area is particularly interesting. When a freeway, it is called the A-12, and when an arterial, the N-12. Between the northern ring of Brussels and the Antwerp ring road, it is first the A-12, then the N-12, then the A-12 again, then the N-12 again and then the A-12 for the last time. The last N-12 section is the most interesting. There are four roadways of two lanes each, with the center roadways carrying express traffic. Eventually the center rises to a 6-lane viaduct and the local roadways continue underneath and to the side of the viaduct as it approaches the Antwerp ring.

But where it is the N-12 in the southern Antwerp suburbs will be found a commercial corridor of an intensity that would be notable in Houston. Fast food restaurants, big box stores, automobile dealers and other retail facilities make this a picture that looks American or Canadian, but for the language difference. Of course, as in most of northern Europe, once one enters such a commercial facility, even the language difference goes away, because so many people speak English and speak it well. But the commercial corridors are not limited to the freeways. For example, parts of the arterial Ring-11 through the eastern part of Antwerp is a commercial corridor with a large shopping center.

European suburbs often give the impression of being very old, perhaps hundreds of years old. This can be observed in Antwerp. These suburbs are indeed old, and did not begin as suburbs. They were pre-existing villages that were consumed by the spread of suburbanization, just as some smaller towns in the United States and Canada were incorporated into the spread of urbanization. It is more obvious in Europe, where villages tended to be closer together than in North America. But in Antwerp can be found an urban area exhibiting all of the urban trends that some would deny --- an attractive core growing less and less important to a metropolitan region growing on its edges.









PICTURES

Commercial Strip: N-12
Shopping Center: City of Antwerp
Suburban House
Suburban House
Ranch House Antwerp Style
Commercial Development: A-12
Between Antwerp and Brussels
Core

By Wendell Cox

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