Nostalgia for Urban Vices: Cultural Reminiscences of a Demolished Port City Pleasure Neighborhood

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Abstract
Contradictions and conflicts lie at the heart of port cities, with contemporary waterfront redevelopments offering the latest controversial associations to traditional maritime history. Tracing back classic urban renewal and modernization processes in maritime areas, this article develops a case study on a notorious pleasure neighborhood (the Zandstraatbuurt) in Rotterdam, eradicated when the Dutch port city entered a new stage of urban and industrial development in the decades around 1900. The case study is embedded within a conceptual framework on nostalgia and its connections to bygone sailor culture. Significant cultural imaginations of the historical pleasure district are discussed, and notable journalistic accounts help to assess how nostalgic sentiments attempted to shape the legacy of the neighborhood around the time of its dissolution. Finally, general newspaper coverage of the district after its turn-of-the-century life span is analyzed, thereby demonstrating the potential for further research on urban nostalgia in historical contexts.

Keywords
nostalgia, pleasurescape, port city, urban renewal, newspaper coverage, modernity, Rotterdam

Introduction
Discussions and characterizations of port cities often revolve around certain contradictions and conflicts. This is primarily due to port cities’ location along, or between, the two different geographical spheres of land and water. While this position has led to certain dynamics developing between the industrial and urban components of larger port city entities throughout history, this inherent spatial dichotomy has also been articulated through diverging cultural representations. Port cities are portrayed as “exotic places of cosmopolitanism and vibrant cultural exchange, connected to the ‘blue’ of sea, sky, and dreams,” Alice Mah writes, but also as “‘black’ places of crime, poverty, and social exclusion, classic [urban] settings for gritty noir literature and film” [emphasis in original]. On the basis of these opposing meanings, of “reality and imagination, death and life, night and day,” commonly associated with the colors black and blue, Mah advocates exploring the contradictions and ambivalences inherent in the urban identity of port cities. One recent example that follows this research path is Maciej Kowalewski’s study of...
postcard depictions of port cities, which tries to foreground the underlying tensions in visual representations and, through a categorization of the postcards’ different iconographic contents, highlights how romantic and mythical images of port cities’ pasts have not yet been cast aside, but rather continue to inform the artificial character of transformed maritime areas.4

As the contemporary post-industrial era of port cities is best typified by the phenomenon of waterfront redevelopment projects, various scholars have rightfully pointed out that these initiatives often generate a contentious relationship with the traditional maritime history of their host cities. Dirk Schubert, for instance, observes that, all too often, traces of a maritime past are utilized for the decorative practices of “image formation, and marketing,” whereby “developers capitalize on nostalgic images and fake versions of the past.”5 In a similar vein, Graeme Milne concludes his study on sailortown legacies by stating that “Waterfront regeneration schemes [. . .] build nostalgia for a maritime past into projects that are nonetheless carefully disconnected from the old sailortown districts themselves, which were a short but crucial distance inland.”6 These remarks illustrate how processes of historical appropriation and embellishment of former dockside areas clearly require ongoing critical investigation. The extensive body of literature on the subject continues to grow,7 with the exploration of new case studies across the world fluctuating between the positive and negative outcomes of this type of urban renewal.

Milne nevertheless points out a prevalent bias in scholarly texts on waterfront redevelopment, namely that

[They are] often limited chronologically, and, [. . .] there is a tendency to assume that [new waterfronts] sprang from a blank canvas sometime in the 1980s. [. . .] [I]f questions of the maritime character of maritime cities are to be addressed properly in an era of regeneration, we need to understand the historical ambivalence of the port city towards its own waterfront districts [. . .].8

In other words, while currently there seems to be a selective historical awareness at play in many port city redevelopment processes, research on the topic should not fall prey to the same bias, as it may hinder new, effective contributions to the persistent inquiry into the distinct character and legacies of port cities.9 The history of port cities worldwide can quite naturally be equated with that of industrial developments and modernization processes,10 and maritime cultural heritage may therefore already have been affected by acts of urban renewal in earlier periods.11 Uncovering and contextualizing such earlier cases deepens the historiography of port cities, and the ambivalences embedded within it, while also forging new and fruitful connections with contemporary waterfront-related literature. This article positions itself in this line, developing a case study around the Dutch port city of Rotterdam, and more specifically the Zandstraatbuurt neighborhood that was eradicated when the city forcibly entered a new stage of urban and industrial development at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

To arrive at meaningful insights going beyond the confines of the Zandstraatbuurt’s particularity and resonating with broader, contemporary (port) city-related contexts, the historical case study in this article is embedded in a conceptual framework on nostalgia. As the citations above on waterfront redevelopment indicate, nostalgia is a major theme that continues to haunt and influence port cities and urban renewal in the post-industrial era. I operationalize this conceptual framework by discussing and interpreting a wide variety of cultural sources throughout the article, consistently with the overarching aim of analyzing the Zandstraatbuurt as a so-called “pleasurescape.”12 In doing so, I investigate the area’s notorious entertainment culture less from the standpoint of its specific historical sites, as the sources and information available for this are often quite anecdotal and difficult to trace back, but rather through experiential remembrances grounded in its urban spatiality.13 The structure of the article is as follows: First, I provide a short contextualization of the Zandstraatbuurt and describe its place within the history of Rotterdam. Subsequently, I offer a conceptual discussion of nostalgia in relation to bygone sailor culture and
outline the term’s general research potential within urban history. This provides the basis on which to analyze the varied historical traces and representations of the Zandstraatbuurt. In the first instance, a range of cultural images of the neighborhood are interpreted in relation to the theme of nostalgia and its inherent contradictions within urban contexts. This is complemented and further nuanced in the next section, by exploring the most significant writings produced on the pleasure district and discussing their author, the notable Rotterdam-based journalist M. J. Brusse. As Brusse came to be regarded as the Zandstraatbuurt’s preeminent chronicler, his original newspaper publications further help to assess how nostalgic sentiments attempted to shape the neighborhood’s legacy around the time of its dissolution. After this, as a final counterpart, a brief content analysis is made of the Zandstraatbuurt’s general newspaper coverage after its turn-of-the-century life span. This exploration ultimately serves as proof of concept for further research on urban nostalgia in historical contexts. The conclusion of the article puts forward reflections on this issue and suggests additional research opportunities afforded by the interpretation of the Zandstraatbuurt case through the prism of modern port city history.

**Contextualizing Rotterdam’s Zandstraatbuurt**

At present, Rotterdam actively develops and presents its maritime cultural history in a “Maritime District” around a waterfront area directly south of the contemporary center\(^\text{14}\) and on former port peninsulas located on the southern riverbank opposite the city center\(^\text{15}\). Both of these locations hosted unruly entertainment areas during a significant part of the twentieth century,\(^\text{16}\) but were nevertheless preceded in time by another neighborhood that was equally steeped in disreputable pleasure practices, the Zandstraatbuurt, named after the district’s principal street. Typical of sailor-towns as described by Milne,\(^\text{17}\) the Zandstraatbuurt was a poor working-class neighborhood located near the center of the port city. While sources speak of a few thousand inhabitants, it is safe to say that the district was overpopulated, with most buildings providing a rudimentary home for multiple families in heavily compartmentalized and unsanitary spaces.\(^\text{18}\) Around the turn of the twentieth century, the Zandstraatbuurt catered to the needs of both traveling seafarers and Rotterdam’s exponentially growing population. Its number of bars, “dance houses,” and other places of amusement easily reached more than hundred.\(^\text{19}\) Neither was there any shortage of women working in prostitution and houses functioning as brothels. Official municipal registration data did not accurately reflect the true proportion of this social sphere within the neighborhood, however. Its hidden shares should thus be sought behind many of the more regular professional designations listed about the Zandstraatbuurt in archival population registers and address books.\(^\text{20}\)

By and large, the Zandstraatbuurt’s reputation and appeal coincided with the period from 1880 to 1914, during which considerable infrastructural investments significantly expanded Rotterdam’s port and launched the city as a whole into a new phase.\(^\text{21}\) The Zandstraatbuurt occupies a pivotal position in Rotterdam’s history, since the city’s leap into a new era of industrialization and modernization is directly related to the neighborhood’s demolition in the early 1910s, when it had to make way for a new city hall and a stately central boulevard.\(^\text{22}\) These circumstances poignantly resemble key developments in other port city histories, “in which catch-up modernization processes [met with] [. . .] ‘backward’ milieus” [emphasis in original]\(^\text{23}\). Notwithstanding the traditional “hotbed of marginality” image of sailor-towns and related districts,\(^\text{24}\) the Zandstraatbuurt did spawn a significant cultural legacy, which has also influenced that of subsequent pleasure districts in Rotterdam. As this well-known port city’s maritime heritage projects continue to dabble in the cultural-historical elements so evocatively introduced and disseminated by the Zandstraatbuurt more than a century ago, this neighborhood holds the key to a better understanding of how Rotterdam opened its doors to modernity, and its accompanying nostalgia, in the first instance.\(^\text{25}\)
Nostalgia and the Urban

Milne repeatedly states that sailortowns should not be sources of nostalgia, especially considering the impoverished and exploitative circumstances in which most of the residents and transient workers of these areas had to struggle for a living. In this respect, investigating Rotterdam’s former sailor quarter on the basis of the term “pleasurescape” may appear biased in itself, as the concept gives the impression of predominantly referring to consumption and hedonism, and potentially also nostalgia for these aspects. Walter Benjamin’s “Hashish in Marseille,” one of the best-known reflections on the cultural spirit of port cities, can, for instance, certainly be read in this way, as the names of various bars and related locations in the essay add up to a hazy roadmap for the philosopher’s personal pub crawl. A passage in another of Benjamin’s writings relates even more specifically to sailor culture, and posits how “the nicknames of pubs and dance halls, beautiful women and national dishes” are what seafarers above all gather from their numerous port visits. Notwithstanding its poetic nature, this statement suggests that the people who traditionally populated the maritime sphere were far from insensitive to feelings of longing for those key elements that nourished their stays on the mainland.

Evidence of similar nostalgic markers can also be traced in the memories of past inhabitants of waterfront areas, as results from an oral history project on Liverpool’s abandoned docksides show: in the study by Balderstone, Milne, and Mulhearn, interviewees were eager to point out dock road cafés and pubs as memorable places that injected vital moments of conviviality and distraction into their daily routines as local laborers. The study appropriates Pierre Nora’s influential concept of “lieux de mémoire,” and narrows its scope “to explore the interconnection of public memory with place-consciousness at a more local level.” In doing so, the article also provides reflections on and nuances of nostalgia, albeit in a way that largely glosses over the sharper paradoxes and ambivalences that the concept potentially entails in relation to urban environments. However, in a rather different research context, namely, that of a literary case study, Tamar Katz powerfully summarizes these tensions as follows:

Much critical commentary reflexively casts nostalgia only as the imaginary reconstruction of homogeneous communities and hierarchical class and gender relationships [. . .]. Nostalgia thus seems tied to the desire for a time before the conflicts of modern industrial capitalism [. . .]. Urban nostalgia reveals the limits of this account of nostalgia’s content and politics by showing how we also desire less traditional communities and forms of social convergence imagined through conflict rather than consensus.

In the context of the Zandstraatbuurt, which remains Rotterdam’s first widely rejected but equally most unforgettable pleasure district, it is precisely this heightened understanding of city-oriented nostalgia that can effectively underpin this article’s case study.

Katz analyzes selected cases of contemporary urban literature with the aim of understanding how its authors write about, and thereby also contribute to, the role of cities as prime conservators of the past. While it goes beyond the scope and theme of this article to comprehensively outline Katz’s approach, it is nevertheless essential to highlight its theoretical crux, namely, that the ever-changing nature of (modern) cities is inextricably tied up with a past that continues to echo along its streets and buildings. Stated more directly, “As a result of its constant change, the city becomes paradoxically the home of the past.” Modernity in the city is therefore accompanied by loss and longing, and incites mirror images steeped in nostalgia. In portraying urban modernity as a kind of double-sided coin, Katz takes inspiration from cultural theorist Svetlana Boym’s key publication *The Future of Nostalgia*, among others. In this text, Boym dismantles the dismissive stances that nostalgia has traditionally been subject to, and generalizes the theme as “a historical emotion [. . .] coeval with modernity itself.” Boym not only forges extensive connections with post-communist cities and diasporic memories in particular, but also splits
nostalgia into multiple strands: based on different etymological emphases in the word “nostalgia” itself, Boym distinguishes restorative from reflective nostalgia, with the former implying a return to or rebuilding of the lost past and the latter instead offering meandering reflections and commentaries on it.

Despite the fact that Rotterdam’s Zandstraatbuurt was physically destroyed, its story and legacy fit less with Boym’s first type of nostalgia, but rather tend more toward reflective nostalgia and the less serious, almost whimsical nature ascribed to it. One emblematic illustration of this is the obituary that inhabitants allegedly circulated throughout the neighborhood on the eve of its demolition, and which also features as closing statement in Brusse’s first series of Zandstraatbuurt press stories (Figure 1). Fully aware that the pleasure district would not be resurrected, local residents masqueraded as a funeral committee to announce the neighborhood’s passing, an act very much in line with the workings of reflective nostalgia, as Boym explains: “Nostalgics of [this] type are aware [ . . . ] [that their] home is in ruins [ . . . ]. This defamiliarization and sense of distance drives them to tell their story [ . . . ].” Furthermore, the solemnity of the mourning card is playfully subverted by the signing’s tongue-in-cheek associations with local female nicknames and the prostitution-related characterizations of the Zandstraatbuurt.

Since Boym’s influential study, other scholars have continued to dissect nostalgia, to account for its multiple tendencies and variations. In recent years, these endeavors have especially paved the way for scholarship that enquires into the diverging political implications of nostalgia, and that frames the topic firmly within the context of contemporary globalization. Transposed to urban settings, it then becomes almost inevitable to employ this literature in relation to cases of recent urban redevelopment and deindustrialization. This also fits with the links between port city history and post-industrial regeneration as outlined in the introduction of this article, but the analytical potential for a historical case study like that of the Zandstraatbuurt arguably remains limited. In further investigating this part of Rotterdam’s history, it is therefore more useful to closely build connections with the most pivotal points around which the literature on nostalgia necessarily keeps revolving. On one hand, this is the “experience of loss [as related] to living in modernity,” with “loss” potentially defined on multiple levels, ranging from

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Figure 1. Obituary of the Zandstraatbuurt (1912), with author’s translation below.
Source: Rotterdam City Archives, signature number: XXIV C 741, https://hdl.handle.net/21.12133/2C9E9EF9AF7429F8392DE25D1A0B3E.
the historical to the personal. On the other hand, it is the continuous engagement of the past, present, and future with one another. Both these issues are also strongly evoked in Katz’s understanding of urban nostalgia, as cited above. Indebted to the claim that “the rhetoric of loss and [ . . . ] the forms of remembering that shape the way we think about and in cities” should guide studies of urban representations, the following sections discuss the history of Rotterdam’s Zandstraatbuurt by interpreting the varied traces that make up its cultural legacy.

Cultural Imaginations of an Inner-City Slum

The story of the Zandstraatbuurt initially reads like a classic case of slum clearance. As an overpopulated and unsanitary district enclosed in the old city center, it obstructed the unfolding process of modernization that Rotterdam was caught up in during the port’s rapid industrial development toward the end of the nineteenth century. Around this time, public awareness of the dire living conditions in the Zandstraatbuurt and other labyrinthine, run-down neighborhoods was significantly raised by the publication Arm Rotterdam: Hoe het woont! Hoe het leeft! (“Poor Rotterdam: How It Is Housed and How It Lives!” (author’s translation)), written by journalist L. Schotting and municipal councilor H. Spiekman in 1903 and issued through the local publishing company of the Brusse family. Today, this text presents itself as a curious amalgamation of social historiography, socialist pamphlet, and ethnographic journalism. Initiated by the municipal health committee with the aim of compiling a comprehensive view of Rotterdam’s most impoverished residences, Arm Rotterdam contains data on house types, resident numbers, and rental prices. It also directly addresses the reader in an empathetic style and includes drawings by local artist Herman Schotel that help narrate the circumstances and atmosphere found in these particular urban microcosms of the port city (Figure 2). These characteristics of the book formed a blueprint for Brusse’s main publication on the Zandstraatbuurt some ten years later, as will be discussed in the following section.

Notwithstanding the social outcry that Arm Rotterdam sought to arouse, the Zandstraatbuurt’s fate was ultimately sealed by a municipal decision in 1909 to adopt grand new infrastructure...
The plans did not provide any replacement housing for the Zandstraatbuurt’s original inhabitants, and because the demolition of the neighborhood only started in 1912, the district was kept in a state of limbo for several years. As various sources already pointed out before, the clearing of the Zandstraatbuurt can also be placed in the context of wider social civilization offensives at the time: the municipal verdict on the pleasure district closely coincided with the abolishment of the local fairground and stricter city policies regarding prostitution. These were hardly surprising initiatives for the historical period under consideration, and similarly to other cities in the Netherlands and beyond at the time, the influence of religion in Rotterdam played a role in these processes.

The Zandstraatbuurt was home to various religious shelter organizations, whose local solidarity and conversion activities were among the first that Brusse would capture on paper. Local “city evangelism association” Jeruël, for instance, depicted its arduous mission in the neighborhood by contrasting a desperate, pious young woman with a supposedly amoral party crowd on the cover of a booklet about its work (Figure 3). This illustration also highlights a key issue regarding the Zandstraatbuurt, namely, its internal variety. Socially disapproved vices thrived there alongside religious convictions, a mix that could also be found in other sailortown communities. The fact that these apparent oppositions are hardly accounted for in the dominant, overarching narrative of the Zandstraatbuurt’s demolition within the port city touches on “a dilemma central to urban nostalgia [namely] the attempt to imagine urban community as simultaneously coherent and argumentatively, profusely multiple.”

Similar tensions can be discerned in other portrayals of the neighborhood, in which the impending eradication of the area mainly instills a nostalgic view of the district. Most surviving photographs of the Zandstraatbuurt exemplify this. Local photographer Henri Berssenbrugge most prominently captured the neighborhood on camera, mainly focusing on day-to-day work activities in the area’s larger streets and back alleys. Many of his pictures were taken in the

Figure 3. Front cover of booklet on the work of religious association Jeruël in the Zandstraatbuurt (W. Jonker Jr., 1904).
Source: Rotterdam City Archives, signature number: XXVII F 721, https://hdl.handle.net/21.12133/410FCED642124B6
AB360CBF561A15830.
years between the municipal verdict on the neighborhood and its actual demolition, meaning that both the photographer and the residents who feature in them were aware of the future lying ahead. Precisely because of that, a sense of loss emphatically permeates these images (Figure 4). It can be said that Berssenbrugge’s idyllic snapshots of the Zandstraatbuurt are purposefully draped in a desire for absence, acknowledging a part of urban life that would soon fade away.

Rotterdam city historian Paul van de Laar calls Berssenbrugge a type of “flâneur,” as famously theorized by Walter Benjamin. I prefer to specify this characterization further by using the closely related term “passer of time,” coined by Sylviane Agacinski to refer to Benjamin himself in her philosophical treatise on the temporal experiences of modernity. This designation fits the urban photographer particularly well, since the act of freezing the city through his camera makes him “available for passage, for opening a passage from one time to another in letting himself be attracted by [. . .] traces of the past in the city [. . .].” As Berssenbrugge captures the Zandstraatbuurt in preference to more exciting city scenes taking place elsewhere in Rotterdam, he becomes “the witness of a world in the process of passing [. . .]; he is witnessing the very event of the city’s aging” [emphasis in original]. Considering that photography is recognized as the creative means par excellence both to accompany modernity and to grasp the mortality of things, pinning down the Zandstraatbuurt through this medium only further emphasizes the transience of the pleasure neighborhood.

Some last remarks can be formulated on the Zandstraatbuurt’s visual representations, before turning to written ones in the following sections, by looking at the interplay between Berssenbrugge’s photographs and the works of befriended artists. Publications on the photographer stress both the influence of painting in his compositions and the use of his images by local painters themselves. Paintings and drawings by Adriaan de la Rivière or Kees van Dongen also regularly depict typical Zandstraatbuurt scenes, but even in their fleeting impressions, the dawning of modernity subtly pierces through: street lights are frequently present in these artworks, for example, illuminating bars and passers-by at night. Also a prominent feature in Berssenbrugge’s pictures, modern street lighting carries with it both a romantic, dreamy allure and a clear indication of urban modernization. Both photographs and drawings of the Zandstraatbuurt are thus intrinsically enmeshed in the conflicts between past, present, and future unfolding in the

Figure 4. Photograph of the Halvemaanstraat, located in the Zandstraatbuurt (Henri Berssenbrugge, 1910). Source: Rotterdam City Archives, signature number: IX-1131, https://hdl.handle.net/21.12133/98E8CA0869B34F0FA729993A7A6C9187.
developing port city. The nostalgic sentiments emanating from the images ultimately do not so much disentangle these clashes, but restate and emphasize the deviant character of the neighborhood in light of the surrounding urban environment.

A Reporter among the People

Having problematized quintessential portraits of the Zandstraatbuurt in the more general context of urban nostalgia, Brusse’s influential writings on the neighborhood can now be discussed. Undoubtedly, Brusse’s local tribute *Het roosse leven en sterven van de Zandstraat* [“The Life and Death of the Zandstraat Red-Light District” (author’s translation)] can be regarded as the key publication on the pleasure district, bringing together most of the cultural imagery discussed above. Occupying a special place in Dutch literary history due to its particular subject matter and format,68 the book was released by Brusse’s family publishing company in 1912, the year the Zandstraatbuurt’s demolition started, and, in a seemingly more buyer-oriented move, reprinted in 1917 with one of Van Dongen’s typical Zandstraatbuurt drawings replacing the original neutral front cover. The fourteen short chapters that make up the book were originally written by Brusse as consecutive column publications in the newspaper *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (NRC) in 1910-1911. It was also through his work as journalist for NRC that Brusse met the painter Van Dongen at the turn of the century, and the two men subsequently began to explore, observe, and experience the Zandstraatbuurt together.69 In an exhibition catalog on Van Dongen, it is nevertheless remarked how, after relocating to Paris and starting to divide his time between France and the Netherlands in the first years of the twentieth century, Van Dongen criticized Brusse to *Arm Rotterdam*-illustrator Schotel, scornfully calling the writer an “aristocratic socialist” whose embellished social vignettes of the Zandstraatbuurt served his publisher rather than the slum dwellers themselves.70

As Van Dongen’s comment should be seen in the context of his growing affinity with French anarchist circles at the time,71 the extent to which it truly did justice to Brusse’s character and intentions in writing about the Zandstraatbuurt can be questioned. Somewhat similarly to Van Dongen himself, who ultimately went on to pursue a successful career in the Parisian high society, Brusse’s work as journalist in the port city of Rotterdam was steeped in contradictions. Above all, he wanted to express the pure and authentic character of people who lived on the margins of society, but he did so through publications in Rotterdam’s leading liberal newspaper, whose readers primarily consisted of wealthy port entrepreneurs, traders, and merchants.72 On the contrary, however, the importance that the NRC newspaper traditionally attached to editorial independence largely left Brusse free to write his stories as he wished,73 and the respect and trust that he ultimately acquired among Rotterdam’s higher circles, as asserted in his recent biography, could not have been achieved from outside the confines of his liberal press environment.74 Yet trying to instill in his readers a more understanding and compassionate attitude toward that part of the port city’s territory and populace that appeared most contrary to local ideals of progress remained quite a balancing act. This is also apparent in the first pages of Brusse’s Zandstraatbuurt tribute, where he addresses the Rotterdam elite in a last condoning attempt to reconsider whether there might not be a future for “de pittigste, eigenste wijk van de stad” [“the most spirited and peculiar neighborhood of the city” (author’s translation)] after all (Figure 5).75

In reporting on “die nachtbuurt [die] een oude liefde van me is geweest” [“that night district that used to be an old love of mine” (author’s translation)],76 Brusse seems fundamentally torn by the dilemma of defending the Zandstraatbuurt as against acknowledging its anomalous nature to Rotterdam’s social establishment. Even before the demolition of the area had begun, Brusse struggled with his inability to fully side with the local pleasure district. Aware of the direction of progress that the port city was taking, the conflicts expressed in his writings match those that urban nostalgia generates, as formulated by Katz.77 During his reporting career, Brusse nevertheless tried to find ways of becoming part of the marginalized communities that
he documented. He pioneered forms of undercover journalism in the Netherlands, to, for instance, find out how seafarers were exploited when staying on the mainland. The title of his NRC column “Onder de menschen” [“Among the People”] alludes to these practices, and the social empathy displayed in his writings also earned him the designation of local Emile Zola figure in Rotterdam’s history.

Nevertheless, his typical reporting tactics arguably stimulated positive biases, and Brusse was ultimately open enough to go against his own initial impressions of the Zandstraatbuurt at various points in his book: for example, he recounts that exploring the neighborhood with a police detective almost instantly altered the views that he had previously held on the area, “toen ik er vroeger maar zoowat rond had gezworven met gretige schildersoogen en licht gevoelig voor de stemmingen van ‘t geval” [“when I used to just roam around there with the eager eyes of a painter and slightly sensitive to the local moods of the place” (author’s translation)]. In a similar vein, and in remarkable resonance with the visual impressions of the Zandstraatbuurt discussed in the previous section, Brusse also mentions how the introduction of modern gas lighting quite literally gave the district a new look, one which enticed him far less (Figure 6).

As a result, the duality between the district’s outward appeal and internal morals increasingly sharpened, with Brusse attempting to chase his original nostalgic sentiments as the end of the “angstwekkende krotten-doolhof” [“frightening slum maze” (author’s translation)] neared.

**Nostalgia in the Newspapers**

Sources on the journalist conclude that Brusse ultimately accepted the Zandstraatbuurt’s demolition, especially bearing in mind the area’s inherent crime and exploitation, although he would...
continue firmly to favor its “gulle echtheid” [“generous authenticity” (author’s translation)] over the “saaié schijnbravigheid” [“dull hypocrisy” (author’s translation)] of the urban society surrounding it.85 Brusse was convinced that Rotterdam’s bourgeoisie could still learn from the Zandstraatbuurt, knowing that something unique and valuable was buried along with it.86 It is no surprise, then, that years later, he again looked back on the neighborhood in his long-running column: in 1933, he published a new series of articles in NRC that reflect on the Zandstraatbuurt through the memories of a police officer.87 Due to Brusse’s use of this witness, the emphasis of these later writings is mainly on a vivid portrayal of past criminality. A detailed map of the Zandstraatbuurt is also included, originally made by the policeman to orient himself when tracking down criminals in the district’s alleys (Figure 7). This nevertheless begs the question of whether Brusse’s first Zandstraatbuurt publications, along with the related visual representations mentioned before, exerted any influence on reminiscences of the area through the decades between its demise and Brusse’s second, and altogether less nostalgically inclined, retelling in his newspaper column. In other words, did the touches of reflective nostalgia characterizing the Zandstraatbuurt’s previously discussed cultural traces, namely, “the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and [. . .] the contradictions of modernity,”88 live on, or did they rather quickly die out after the dismantling of the pleasure district began?

To complement the qualitative accounts of visual and literary sources above, in this section, I briefly broaden the perspective on the Zandstraatbuurt’s history and legacy by analyzing general newspaper coverage of the area. To this end, digitized historical newspaper material from the Royal Library of the Netherlands’s Delpher platform is utilized.89 For the period 1912-1932, marking the time between the official start of the Zandstraatbuurt’s demolition and Brusse’s second series of NRC writings on it, the most significant newspapers published in Rotterdam are available digitally, as listed by the Rotterdam City Archives.90 Searching this archival material

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**Figure 6.** Excerpts from *Het rosse leven en sterven van de Zandstraat* (M. J. Brusse, 1917, 2nd ed.), 5-6, with author’s translation below.

Source: Rotterdam City Archives, signature number: VI C 82, https://hdl.handle.net/21.12133/BCA3F1920E5E4910AEE12A729EF50550.
for the “Zandstraat,” as well as derived and combined words, yields a total of 1,159 newspaper articles. Figure 8 shows the historical spread of these results.

The graph indicates that the liberal NRC was indeed not the principal publication to report back on the Zandstraatbuurt through the years, in part also because of its country-wide orientation. Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad, historically the port city’s newspaper that was most oppositely positioned to NRC, mentioned the Zandstraatbuurt most throughout the 1910s-1920s, apparently in line with its positioning as a popular press outlet for a broad local audience. On the other hand, the equally persistent coverage of the neighborhood in De Maasbode most likely served more polemical purposes, given this newspaper’s exclusive orientation toward conservative Catholic readers. Notwithstanding these differences in readership, mentions of the Zandstraatbuurt generally dwindled over time. Peaks in press coverage appear to follow in the wake of the demolition, and the opening of the new city hall after 1920, before dropping to a level lower than that of the First World War period by the 1930s. This potentially gave Brusse all the more reason to bring the pleasure district back to the local public’s attention at that time.

Additional research techniques, such as text mining and sentiment analysis, can offer possibilities to further delve into the evolution of historical press coverage, and the changes in public perception that potentially came with it. This arguably also links to recent endeavors in the field of “history of emotions” that have, among others, started to focus on past emotional responses to shifting urban environments. This scholarship is particularly concerned with sensory traces, embodiment and materiality, and often gathers a considerable amount of personal accounts from an inclusive range of historical city-dwellers. In part due to the lack of a similar scope in empirical, first-person evidence, this article’s explorations of urban nostalgia are ultimately further removed from the research efforts just outlined than one initially might expect. Brusse’s changing nostalgic inclinations toward the Zandstraatbuurt cannot simply be extrapolated to the general public at the time, but an additional exploration of newspaper material can nevertheless help formulate a broader historical claim regarding the initial period of the district’s afterlife. Within the limits of this article, I therefore add a final supplement to the graph on the Zandstraatbuurt’s press coverage by spatially visualizing the references in Rotterdam newspapers to the other streets and

Figure 7. Map of the Zandstraatbuurt around 1910, as published by M. J. Brusse in Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant in 1933. Source: Rotterdam City Archives, signature number: K 187, https://hdl.handle.net/21.12133/1E82D9683F3843C0BEDF6429CE4FC5E.
alleys making up the district, as indicated on Brusse’s police map. This approach also sidesteps the rather thorny discursive issue of distinguishing whether certain news articles that mention the “Zandstraat” were only casting a judgment on this particular street or rather the entire neighborhood around it.

By repeating the digitized newspaper search, this time to cover all local street names appearing in close proximity to the previously retrieved “Zandstraat” mentions,95 I thus circumvent the issue of trying to separate references to the main street from those of the neighborhood as a whole. In addition, the number of search results becomes considerably smaller, to eighty-five news articles in total. This collection enables a relatively straightforward qualitative content analysis to uncover the kinds of descriptions and messages written and published about the streets. The limited amount of search results makes it possible to read through all the articles retrieved. On doing so, it quickly becomes apparent that the majority of the content revolves around succinct and factual reports of undesirable events such as murder, theft, and street fights, or unfavorable conditions afflicting the area, such as unhygienic housing and the occasional plague of rats. The articles diverging from this negative pattern mostly report neutrally on the streets in relation to the planned infrastructure changes, or mention a few scattered, more cheerful events, such as a local children’s party or neighbors meeting.

Based on these observations about the news articles, the relative shares of negative press coverage can be calculated for the Zandstraatbuurt’s different streets. Figure 9 shows these results on the original police map. This overview underlines how the neighborhood continued to be largely stigmatized in newspapers during the decades after its demolition began: press coverage relating to nearly all the individual streets was predominantly negative. The empty lower left corner on the map corresponds to the new city hall’s construction site and demonstrates that the streets and alleys that disappeared first were also those most quickly forgotten in the press. The majority of the district’s inner alleys still occasionally featured in the news, and also in a more consistently negative way than the larger outer streets.96 This ultimately shows that, at its core, the negative image of the Zandstraatbuurt remained ingrained at the local level, even after its fate was sealed.

Figure 8. Number of articles mentioning the “Zandstraat” and derivatives in main Rotterdam newspapers during 1912-1932.
Conclusion

One of the latest artifacts to represent the Zandstraatbuurt’s history is a scale model built for a recent museum exhibition in Rotterdam, showcasing the massive discrepancy in size between the new city hall building, which serves the same function to this day, and the decrepit settlements of some 2,000 people that it came to replace (Figure 10). Shedding light on the doomed district a century after its demise, the object quite literally encapsulates the dichotomous character of urban nostalgia as formulated by Katz: through its overlapping structure, the scale model captures the location of Rotterdam’s city hall as “a space imagined as intrinsically preserving a lost past.”97 The skeletal outer structure of the government building becomes a coffin for the expunged neighborhood and the condemned amusements buried within it. Consequently, it underscores the tension between that what once was and what still is, much in the same vein as the idea of the “urban palimpsest,” as famously put forward by literary theorist Andreas Huyssen, covering the past through layers of the present.98 As a whole, the museum model presents how the pluralistic entity that was the historical pleasure district ultimately succumbed to Rotterdam’s overwhelming drift into modernity.

The analysis of historical newspaper coverage in the previous section provides insights into the local discursive context around this particular demise and the legacy of the Zandstraatbuurt. At the same time, it opens up many additional pathways for research on views of Rotterdam’s former pleasure district: over a wider time period, for instance, or from the perspective of other, non-maritime cities in the Netherlands, or even in comparison with internationally infamous sailor quarters that existed at the same time. As I briefly noted above, more advanced digital and text-oriented research methods can be promising for further uncovering the emotive stances that have historically been articulated in the context of disappearing, atypical urban neighborhoods. The new research possibilities that can be generated in this regard potentially also present opportunities for addressing broad experiential themes such as nostalgia in more hands-on and empirical ways. The final section of this article merely hints at this. In tracing newspaper-sourced data and relating it to the urban layout of the Zandstraatbuurt, I ultimately emphasize the entanglement of this pleasurescape’s spatiality with historical views of its unruly pleasure practices, emanating both from general cultural images of the neighborhood and from Brusse’s particular personal writings.99
In correspondence with general press tendencies, Brusse’s attempts to romanticize the Zandstraatbuurt in the end gave way to more somber reflections. Nevertheless, this local reporter did provide fittingly ambiguous characterizations of the port city district while it was being closed in by the municipality’s dominant ideals of modernity. Brusse’s writings on the neighborhood at the beginning of the twentieth century can arguably be seen as the individual work of a “reflective nostalgic,” since they provide a very local-oriented “meditation on history and [the] passage of time.”100 Like the visual works of related Rotterdam artists that I have discussed, they are illustrative of the conflicting nature of urban nostalgia, as put forward in the theoretical framework of this article, but also show that this kind of nostalgia is not necessarily consistently sustained over time. Regardless of declining attention to the Zandstraatbuurt in the 1910s-1920s, Brusse’s classic booklet still anchored the special status of the district for years to come. The title and cover of the book have been imitated by other local booklets on the later pleasurescape of the Schiedamsedijk, for instance.101 In addition, Het rosse leven en sterven van de Zandstraat was itself reissued in the early 1970s, right when urban renewal initiatives once again came to dominate Rotterdam’s political agenda.

As the legacy of one pleasure district can be copied for or help shape that of another, the same can perhaps be said for urban renewal projects that have characterized the modern history of various cities. This also links back to the introductory remarks of this article on maritime redevelopment plans in port cities. The critical understanding of these contemporary initiatives’ “strategies of nostalgia,” so to speak, may well be further strengthened by analyzing and demonstrating how nostalgic elements embedded in waterfront revitalization projects potentially lack the kind of ambivalences and contradictions that can be found in the wide-ranging representations surrounding the Zandstraatbuurt case, for instance. At the same time, another urgent avenue for future inquiry arising from this case study is a continuing historicization of gentrification. While this issue has already been placed on scholars’ agenda through research into other urban contexts,102 it certainly also presents itself as a much-needed opportunity to enrich the historiography of port cities. To highlight but one aspect, framing cases similar to the Zandstraatbuurt more extensively through the lens of gentrification potentially allows to shed more light on the displacement of urban areas’ original inhabitants, who often remain largely missing from the cultural traces left of such neighborhoods.
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Notes

3. Ibid.
8. Milne, People, Place and Power, 227.
12. This is also in line with the special section in which this article appears, and the HERA-funded collaborative research project from which it stems. See https://heranet.info/projects/public-spaces-culture-and-integration-in-europe/pleasurescapes-port-cities-transnational-forces-of-integration/. See also Paul van de Laar and Vincent Baptist, “Pleasurescapes,” Bloomsbury History: Theory & Method (2022).
15. These peninsulas are Kop van Zuid and Katendrecht. Hein, “Port Cities,” 822.
16. These areas were Schiedamsedijk and Katendrecht. For an illustration of the present state of these locations and their echoes of past sailor culture, see Baptist, “Of Hedonism and Heterotopia.”


25. In line with the special journal issue in which this article appears, “modernity” is understood here as “an open process of transformative dynamism, triggered and driven by all the extensive changes in science, technology, culture and society in the course of the advance of industrialism in the decades around 1900,” as formulated in Ulrich Herbert, “Europe in High Modernity: Reflections on a Theory of the 20th Century,” *Journal of Modern European History* 5, no. 1 (2007): 11.


32. Schubert et al., “Memory and Place on the Liverpool Waterfront,” 480.

33. Ibid., 492-94. Note that Mah also touches on nostalgia in case studies on Liverpool and New Orleans, mostly in relation to maritime laborers’ accounts of past work experiences at the docksides. See Mah, *Port Cities and Global Legacies*, 128 and 160-62.

34. In comparison, the discussion and problematization of nostalgia in David Adams and Peter Larkham, “Walking with the Ghosts of the Past: Unearthing the Value of Residents’ Urban Nostalgias,” *Urban Studies* 53, no. 10 (2016): 2004-22, a study that is also built on interview-based data, is more in line with the exploration of the topic provided in this article section.


36. Ibid., 820-21.

37. Ibid., 811.

38. Ibid., 821.
39. Ibid., 810-11.
41. Ibid., xviii.
42. Ibid., 49-50.
45. In this regard, see, for example, Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley, “The Modalities of Nostalgia,” *Current Sociology* 54, no. 6 (2006): 919-41.
51. See Van de Laar, *Stad van formaat*, 266-67, for a more detailed account of the local political background from which this text originally arose.
52. Ibid., 292-94; Van de Laar, *Coolsingel*, 80-87.
55. Note that the Zandstraatbuurt was, for instance, also home to a significant Jewish population. An elaborate account of the Zandstraatbuurt’s underexposed Jewish profile has recently been provided in Hans Schippers, Rob Snijders, Chris Buitendijk, and Albert Ringer, *De Zandstraatbuurt en zijn Joodse inwoners* (“The Zandstraat Neighborhood and Its Jewish Inhabitants”) (Rotterdam: Uitgeverij Douane, 2016).
58. The photographs taken in Rotterdam by artist George Breitner should also be mentioned here. They slightly predate Berssenbrugge’s and explore the dark slum alleys around areas like the Zandstraatbuurt and Schiedamsedijk even more prominently. See Aad Gordijn, Paul van de Laar, and Hans Rooseboom, eds., *Breitner in Rotterdam: Fotograaf van een verdwenen stad* (“Breitner in Rotterdam: Photographer of a Lost City”) (Bussum: Uitgeverij THOTH, 2001).

63. Ibid., 50.

64. Ibid., 58.


69. Anita Hopmans, *De grote ogen van Kees van Dongen* [“The Big Eyes of Kees van Dongen”] (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2010), 16.

70. Ibid., 19.

71. Ibid.


75. Ibid., 3.


80. Ibid., 14.

81. Note how this excerpt from Brusse’s text, together with the previous quote, is also congruent with the “atmospheric envelopment” of infrastructures that Lisa Kosok points to in the editorial introduction to this special section, adopting Derek P. McCormack’s term from *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018): Lisa Kosok, “Pleasurescapes on the Edge: Performing Modernity on Urban Waterfronts (1880s-1960s),” *Journal of Urban History* (forthcoming). In addition, see Nicolas Kenny, “City Glow: Streetlights, Emotions, and Nocturnal Life, 1880s-1910s,” *Journal of Urban History* 43, no. 1 (2017): 91-114, for a research example approaching the topic of historical street lighting from combined infrastructural and emotional perspectives.


83. Ibid., 14.


87. These newspaper extracts are collected in the Rotterdam City Archives (signature number: K 187, https://hdl.handle.net/21.12133/1E82D9683F3843C0BEDE6429C5E4FC5E).


89. See https://www.delpher.nl/.
90. See https://stadsarchief.rotterdam.nl/zoek-en-ontdek/info-kranten/. For the historical period analyzed here, the most important newspapers in Rotterdam are available in Delpher, with a few exceptions. Other minor news publications that existed, but that are not available online for this period, were mostly smaller journals aimed at Rotterdam’s peripheral areas and industry journals related to maritime labor and shipbuilding. In addition, some of the larger newspapers listed by the Rotterdam City Archives, but for which Rotterdam was not the actual place of publication, were omitted from the search.

91. Delpher automatically takes historical spelling variations into account in its queries. Note that the Zandstraatbuurt also had another common designation among locals, namely, the “Polder.” However, this name was often directly mentioned together with the “Zandstraatbuurt,” as is evident, for instance, in Brusse’s writings. Since “polder” is also simply a common word in Dutch language and culture, I did not include it as an extra search term for the newspaper material, in order not to overburden the search results.


93. Ibid., 3.


95. The textual proximity taken into account in Delpher is a maximum distance of ten words.

96. Apart from the streets that were not mentioned in the press and thus remain empty on the map, it should be noted that this spatial overview does not incorporate differences in the numbers of newspaper mentions between the various streets. I refrained from visualizing such differences in more detail, as several other factors would then also still have to be taken into account to derive correct insights from this information, such as differences in types of newspapers, their scope of publication and readership, and the length and placement of selected news articles, for instance. In general, differences in individual streets’ news mentions fluctuated from zero to seventeen. More local distinctions and nuances between the different streets, before the Zandstraatbuurt was demolished, can be found in Romer, De ondergang van de Zandstraatbuurt.


100. Boym, The Future of Nostalgia, 49.


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