

Amsterdam

Population: 743,000
Area code: +31 (0)20

Fear not, the city of sin is rather personless! The debauchery is ring-fenced to the red light district and to the dull antics of visiting stoners stuck in the city's coffee shops. Beyond these clichés, Amsterdam is a beacon of grown-up civilization and the playground of innovative art venues, edgy club nights, political activism and urban experimentation. The town hall is trying hard to rebrand the city as a creative hub under the 1 Amsterdam banner but you will need to look beyond Central Amsterdam. Everyone else has done the same, fleeing the centre in all four directions to find the last square feet of affordable space, more often than not in dockyard containers.

Amsterdam is pure concentrate of creativity: this spring sees the return of Art Amsterdam, with a growing number of international galleries and buyers, and many solo shows; the

Stedelijk Museum will exhibit a personal selection by Wolfgang Tillmans, before leaving the Post CS building in October (Club 11 leaves too); September is Design Month.

Amsterdam Fashion designers are taking over the Red Light District: Jordaan and the 9 street area are staid and upscale. De Baarsjes, an extremely diverse area, sees the opening of many studios and venues, and reminds us that Amsterdam is one of Europe's true multicultural cities. The sleek Eastern Docklands are interesting architecturally but not as effortlessly relaxed. The alternative scene that squats the industrial shipyards of NDSM is at the vanguard of Amsterdam's subculture and looks suspiciously at the recent arrival of MTV. Wherever you go, pack your swimwear: despite the frequent rain, Amsterdam has some of the best manmade beaches in Europe.

Seduction of fashion

Amsterdam's cultural identity is one of complex introspection:

legalised vice casts a shadow over any significant cultural contribution as if Rembrandt's grittily honest self-portraits symbolised an everlasting quest for identity between lowbrow and highbrow. This introspection lives on in the stream of urban art and fashion arising from the city's subculture: the lowbrow movement are an outlet for revealing darker depths. And in September Streetlab, a poppish utopia of street culture, fashion, design and clubbing, takes place at the margin of the very highbrow Design Month. The festival brings together more than 150 movers and shakers of the fashion and design world, in the brand new Blijmer ArenA station (the area has an up-and-coming Caribbean food and music market, Kwakoe, every summer weekend).

It must be a challenge to rebel as a young fashion designer when vice is such an integral part of the city landscape so it makes complete sense

for the emerging fashion scene to instrumentalise cheesy neon signs, sex shows and coffee shops as part of this year's Fashion Week. January saw the launch of the year long Redlight Amsterdam project: fashion consultancy HTNK made the controversial purchase of a number of brothels at the hub of the Red Light District, transforming neon-lit working-girl booths into showrooms for Amsterdam's talented young designers. This is an interesting move because previous collections have been almost too prudish but now Amsterdam designers are going head to head with the sex of the city. It could easily look like sensationalist propaganda and graceless PR but on closer inspection this exemplifies artists reconnecting to their city. "Blinded by the Lights", the previous collection by label ... and beyond, professed to catch the instant when utopia disappears and reality bites when the lights go on. Maybe 2008 is a landmark moment in Amsterdam's subculture. *Kate Bloomfield*

Art, Design & Fashion

In your diary: Queen's Day, 29-30 April... Art Amsterdam 2008, 7-12 May... Holland Festival, 31 May - 22 June... Amsterdam Fashion Week, 19-28 July... Amsterdam Design Month through September... Streetlab, 10-14 September (t.b.c.)... PICNIC, 24-26 September...

The current art scene is focused on random studios, art collectives, international projects and top-end exhibitions, as well as experimental collaborations between artists and clubs - a fixture of Amsterdam nights. For invitations you should become a member of the Andy Warhol Club and be on the Mediamatic mailing list.

The interplay between art and politics is a recurring Amsterdam theme. The rise of foundations and corporate philanthropy and the ongoing strength of collectives have triggered a vibrant debate on public art and a wave of innovation toward the link between public spaces and private collections. The debate features prominently at Art Amsterdam this year.

Street artists are compared to the Dutch Masters and galleries have jumped on the bandwagon a long time ago. Amsterdam continues to reign supreme as the European capital of the lowbrow movement. The Koch x Bos studio is its de facto embassy.

Amsterdam is more about design than high fashion and Dutch design is enjoying a spectacular revival: the Man and Living and Man and Identity departments at the Eindhoven Design Academy are beyond influential. Product design focuses on inventive use of materials and technological advancement. The emphasis is not always on functionality and humour can be a strong component. Ever since Viktor & Rolf challenged the sobriety and uptightness of the motherland, many designers have followed in their footsteps. Dutch Touch brings home-grown talent to Milan and Paris, with sporadic success, but the city has yet to replicate the success of the Antwerp Six. We spotted Fashion Institute Arnhem in Paris this February.

Portrait

Brigitte Hendrix, one half of ...and beyond

Brigitte, you go head to head with prostitutes in the RedLight project. Is your work part of a seduction?

That's its antithesis.

Do you see the use of this space as rebellious?

It's resourcefulness. We're aiming at being part of a temporary positive step towards more diverse dynamics in the red light area.

You are involved in both Streetlab and RedLight. Where do you see the fashion scene heading?

We see it becoming increasingly diverse. Over the past few years we've shown our work in the context of museums, independent fashion presentations and events such as Streetlab. We believe that this bigger spectrum of possibilities to reach an audience

is where fashion is heading.

Where do you suggest 'turning left' in Amsterdam?

Turn left just off Dam Square, into RedLight Fashion!



RedLight Fashion is taking place in the Red Light District throughout 2008.

The Dutch Model

No matter how we look at it, a World Heritage status makes central Amsterdam a museum city. Give or take the odd token statement of starchitecture, central Amsterdam cannot deviate too much from its chocolate-box architecture.

Housing innovation is a Dutch endeavour and Amsterdam's inner-city neighbourhoods redefine social housing before the rest of Europe. The Big City policy enforces socially mixed areas, implying the scattering of low-income households: with great controversy, the westelijke tuinsteden (Western Garden Cities) - quality housing schemes built during the 1950s and 1960s - are partly demolished to accommodate a Parkstad (park city) suitable for leftfield middle-class urbanites. On a different note, WoZoCo, a retirement home, and Silodam, which addresses the chronic housing shortage, provide an essential foray into the resilience of the Dutch social-democratic psyche. Both were designed by MVRDV.

The Eastern docklands have brought Amsterdam a silver lining: the derelict area is an experimental interconnection of residential dwellings, bridges, squares and offices. Java island is crossed by 4 canals (a wink at the historic centre). Next is KNSM. In Borneo-Sporenburg is Scheepstimmermanstraat: each resident chose an architect and the experiment turned out surprisingly well. Most intriguing are number 62 and 68, by Christian Rapp. In contrast, the former shipyards of Amsterdam North (NDSM) are still in transition: artist studios and the container village assembled for student housing are at the vanguard of the city's subcultural movement. The brand new Kraanspoor, a spectacular building on former crane tracks, signals the revival of North Amsterdam. Despite a rising profile, this alternative area doesn't see too many tourists.

Whoever said that Tupperware boxes are nicer than Dutch buildings?

