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EUROPE'S COOLEST CITIES

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Mapping Amsterdam's Creative Class

By Gerald Traufetter

Amsterdam is home to a growing number of creative and knowledge workers, members of the so-called "creative class." And the city is doing much to foster its most important economic asset: the creative power of multiculturalism.



Netherlands Board of Tourism

Amsterdam's NEMO science museum is only one manifestation of the Dutch people's strong design sensibility.

Each morning begins with the same question for Doreen Westphal: "Do I still enjoy the life I'm living right now?" She calls it her "system check." If the answer is no, she doesn't hesitate before moving on to a new project, a new studio, a new city.

Many years ago, she moved to Berlin from a small town in the former East Germany, not far from the city of Dessau, trained as a tailor, moved to Nottingham and studied stage design, and then she landed in Amsterdam, where she switched to being an object designer right away. "I'm a nomad," she says. "If I live in a place that's not buzzing, I'm out of

there."

Westphal, now 36, has been living in Amsterdam for seven years -- an eternity to her and a span of time that leads to only one conclusion: This city is buzzing. She sits in her new studio, a 30-square-meter (232-square-foot) office in the former editorial headquarters of the daily *De Volkskrant*. Bags lie piled up inside Chiquita boxes, sewn together from old bicycle tires and air mattresses -- one of her creations.

FROM THE MAGAZINE



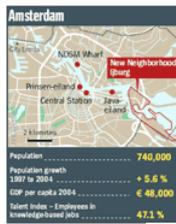
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The raw materials come from bicycle shops in Amsterdam; the sewing is done in Warsaw; and the rubber accessories are sold in trendy stores in the United States, Europe and Japan. "The shop in the Guggenheim Museum also has them for sale," she proudly states. That's no less than a genuine coup for a creative worker and serves as a warning to all would-be

copy-cats: I got there with my idea first! "That's better than a patent," she says.

So here's the story: She sewed one of the bags for a girlfriend as a birthday present. Her friend walked past a boutique with it. "The owner ran after her to ask where she could order one of them," Westphal recounts. Business success chased after her, not the other way round. She now wants to follow up on her bicycle tire debut by making garden furniture out of granulate mats.

The Volkskrant Building is probably what ties Westphal to Amsterdam more than anything else. The €277 (\$378) she pays for rent (including heat) makes her part of a self-administered collective, along with about 100 other like-minded people. The colorful bunch is just beginning to reclaim the seven-story building from the 1960s. A painter is stacking his paintings in the hallway, and a woodworker is lugging his electric saw into his room. People in the hip hop label's studio are "blowing" -- and cloud of smoke from a hashish cigarette wafts up the stairwell.



Graphic: Amsterdam's Creative Capital

A municipal agency in Amsterdam, the Bureau Broedplaatsen, keeps an eye out for vacant buildings like the Volkskrant House and subsidizes their upkeep. The city has already spent €50 million (\$68 million) to help its creative class grow. And it is money that has been well spent. Of Amsterdam's 740,000 residents, 47.1 percent of those who are currently employed work in knowledge-intensive sectors. The growth rates within individual sectors are impressive. Eight thousand people work in the art business, and the creative services sector has created 9,000 new jobs -- a third more than a decade before. Twelve-thousand people work full-

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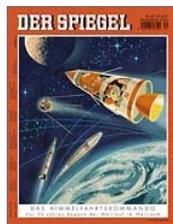


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reservoir.

Sako Musterd is the man who collects these figures. A professor of social geography at Amsterdam University, Musterd is the mirror opposite of his object of study, the creative workers. He sits in an office with pale orange walls, dressed in beige pants, and the machine he is leaning over is one of those ugly PCs that not even an intern would be expected to put up with in an interior design studio.

Multiculturalism, Tolerance, Creativity

Musterd clicks his way through an extraordinary computer program. With a few hand motions, he conjures up a map revealing how many artists, foreigners, fringe groups or same-sex couples live in a particular neighborhood as well as how many restaurants, cafes or cultural establishments are located there. "We can determine that with an accuracy of up to 50 by 50 meters (164 by 164 feet) for Amsterdam," says the fastidious scholar.

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The secret to Amsterdam's success becomes visible on the computer screen. Violet squares representing people in creative jobs appear around the port. Many of them live on Prinsen-eiland (Prince Island), a small island west of the train station, and on Java-eiland, a former quay where sailing ships once arrived carrying spices, coffee and precious metals.

Today the conformity of the creative class holds sway over the place: strong cubist facades, large glass windows and an Arne Jacobsen chair in the living room. Java-eiland is an almost 2-kilometer-long (1.2 mile) exhibition space for Dutch architects. "The creative city of the future needs sites like this one," says Musterd. Amsterdam is catering to the strong demand shown by people looking to buy such real estate by dumping 7 million cubic meters (247 million cubic feet) of sand in the Ijmeer on the southern tip of Lake Markenmeer. There, a new neighborhood with even more designer studios and trendy apartments is taking shape, to be called the Ijburg.

Musterd starts clicking his way through his statistics program again. Another one of Amsterdam's strong points is its ethnic diversity. Almost half of the city's residents weren't born in the Netherlands (only Dubai and Miami boast an even higher percentages). The one-time colonial power's former subjects from Surinam and Indonesia mix with the guest workers of the waning industrial age that include Moroccans, Turks and Egyptians.



The Canal Parade is Amsterdam's annual gay pride celebration.

Amsterdam was considered a model for the integrating power of an open, liberal society. Signs of this were the liberalization of marijuana consumption, the annual gay parade along the canals and the liberal immigration policy. But this model has been at risk since the November 2004 morning when the son of immigrants from the Maghreb region of North Africa slit the throat of film director Theo van Gogh. The murder triggered a deep crisis.

But urban geographer Musterd says he hasn't seen any massive shift in the city's demographic trends since the slaying. "There is no neighborhood in which an originally foreign ethnic group makes up more than one-third of the residents," he says, his eyes fixed on the screen. "The power of integration is greater than one would think," he claims, "and, with it, the creative power of multiculturalism."

During the 1960s, a very lively squatter community emerged in Amsterdam. At first they squatted abandoned buildings along the canals in the city center. Then they took over the mighty warehouses and industrial buildings along the IJ, the large river north of the main train station. But then the economic boom directed the attention of real estate investors and city planners to the bizarre community, which was celebrating house parties and watching alternative theater performances in halls that had been left unlocked. A wave of evictions swept through the creative hotbeds. "They were planning to turn Amsterdam into a museum city with pretty houses," says Eva de Klerk, who appears barely able to control her rage almost a decade later.

From Squats To MediaWharf

De Klerk, now 41, was a squatter. Today she manages 80,000 square meters (861,113 square feet) of commercial real estate -- and she is no longer living on welfare. She is the founder of the Kinetisch Noord Foundation, which now occupies the former NSDM dockyard. The huge area north of the city is the largest cultural breeding ground in the Netherlands -- if not in Europe.

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De Klerk is something like an official of the creative class. An enormous cultural project is now on display on the premises of the dockyard, which closed in 1984, and she is the one who keeps it going. Right now she is leading a cultural worker from The Hague, who wants to learn to be a creative manager, through the imposing dockyard buildings.



Netherlands Board of Tourism

NSDM wharf is one of a handful of massive developments in the city's former port area that have attracted the creative class.

De Klerk has been to Berlin, Hamburg, Zagreb and London's Tate Gallery to recount the story of how her project developed. Squatters like herself are different from their ilk abroad in that they display a less rigid stance towards the capitalist system. City planners were practical enough to take the squatters' initiative seriously. While the squatters were evicted from the buildings they had occupied along the southern banks of the IJ, no action was taken when they seized the NSDM premises.

De Klerk pulls open a mighty steel gate so as to show the representative for cultural affairs from The Hague the main hall -- the heart of the NSDM dockyard. The steel, glass and brick monster encloses a two-story studio building. It looks as if a whale had swallowed a mackerel. The rooms have been built from colorful containers, steel girders and plaster boards. Inside, a crowd of industrial designers, drama groups, sculptors and illustrators is at work. Roughly 100 studios serve as work spaces for about 200 artists here, and the number keeps rising. But, there is still plenty of room inside the whale's belly.

Unusual things occasionally happen here. Once a year, fire-spouting robots, which look like they were designed for the film "Alien," move in circles. The King Shiloh reggae sound system can regularly be heard blaring from the bunker below, and the flash is constantly going off in the photo studio next door. "A dark-skinned man asked me for the way there recently," says de Klerk. She later discovered that the man was none other than the rap star 50 Cent, who wanted to have pictures taken for his next album cover.

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Stories like these are music to the ears of Amsterdam's municipal authorities. In their view, the subculture is gradually being absorbed by the mainstream. MTV recently moved onto the premises of the former dockyard. It is now part of the so-called MediaWharf, a location for four major project development firms whose headquarters lie in the comfortably middle-class city of Haarlem. ID-TV was the next media company to sign a lease contract, and the TV

company Endemol -- which produced the successful reality TV show "Big Brother" -- is said to be interested in the property next door to the NSDM hall.

But de Klerk has no illusions about her new neighbors. She is already imagining the next class struggle within Amsterdam's creative caste. She is very attached to her project, and the rental agreements with the city are valid for another 20 years. "But moving away wouldn't bother me, either," she says, walking to her orange bicycle parked in front of the gate to the premises.

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