

CANALS OF CREATIVITY

THERE'S MORE TO HOLLAND THAN CLOGS, BICYCLES AND TULIPS. THE DUTCH WERE AMONGST THE WORLD'S EARLY EXPLORERS AND HAVE NEVER REALLY STOPPED. BUT NOW THEY ARE DIVING INTO DESIGN, AND AMSTERDAM IS CONCOCTING A CREATIVE STORM

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

The canals of Amsterdam don't change.

It's been decades since I visited the city as a child, but as I pause on one of the many bridges, gazing down a tree-lined canal, fringed with squat, floating house-boats, I feel a strong sense of *deja vu*. I'm taking a stroll down memory lane on a week-long trip to the historic city. But, right now, I'm finding it hard to tear my eyes away from the perfect reflections of the slim 17th century canal houses, leaning together like rows of crooked teeth, which ripple on the water's surface.

On a smaller canal, a tangle of padlocks creeps up the bridge's guide-lines, emulating the love-locks on the Pont des Arts near the Louvre in Paris. Couples write their names on the padlocks and lock them onto the bridge, throwing the key into the canal as a symbol of undying love. The plethora of bridges in Amsterdam gives romance free reign, somehow fitting in the city that produced Rembrandt. As I blink, a lightly-chilled breeze whispers along the canal and I can almost feel time pause.

Built during the Golden Age of the 17th century, Amsterdam's Canal Ring, now on the UNESCO World Heritage List, comprises a twisted network of intersecting waterways lined with historic merchant's houses. Many have become museums and galleries, and several, like Hotel Pulitzer and Canal House Amsterdam, have converted conjoined narrow buildings into five-star accommodation within Amsterdam's historic heart.

I duck into Hotel Pulitzer to explore how the hotel has merged design from the 17th and 21st centuries. Following a glassed-in corridor that wends through a lush hidden garden past the hotel's art gallery and into Restaurant Keizersgracht 238 with its prime canal-side views, the integration of old and new is both seamless and classy. Dining on exquisitely-buttery scallops and lobster in a light foam served on caramelised chicory, followed by sumptuously-grilled-to-perfection steak, I'm looking forward to exploring how Amsterdam is balancing this historical heart with an emerging contemporary cool. ➔



PREVIOUS PAGE: The EYE Film Institute Netherlands is a relatively recent addition to the city.

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Houseboats lining a canal; padlocks on one of the canal bridges; the cafe at Hotel Droog; Tejo Remy's Rag Chair; 17th century canal houses; the violin chandelier at the Conservatorium Hotel.

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Suzanne guides me through a veritable maze of rooms, designated as one to five stars – this is the first hotel in the world to contain all levels of accommodation within its four walls. "It's fun and if you don't like a room, about 80 of them are different, so you can always change," laughs Suzanne. The one-star rooms are naturally the smallest, with shared bathrooms and space-saving features, while the five-star rooms are generously spacious, each with an unusual design feature. An attic room has an open bath along one wall, and a swing

dangling from a beam; one room has a bed tucked away in a cupboard; another features a bathroom cube that can be reconfigured to change the layout of the room. And Dutch designers peek from every corner; a milk bottle chandelier by Rody Graumans illuminates one room and an eye-popping lime green bathroom by Joep van Lieshout graces another, while products from Droog are available in the hotel's shop, tucked into a corner of the restaurant.

Lloyd Hotel is an adventure, a recurring theme in this city, where accommodation ranges from a luxurious room in the former conservatory of music, now the imposing Conservatorium Hotel, to a houseboat, or a refurbished remnant of the Municipal Water Company like the Windketel. This single, three-storey apartment-hotel is inside an octagonal building designed in the 1900s, and together with the other water company buildings it was heralded as one of the most impressive works of architecture of the new century. The five buildings have now been declared monuments, the Windketel being the smallest, entailing clever design. The largest is now Café Restaurant Amsterdam, a bright and airy warehouse-style eatery designed around the old winches and engine of the former pumping station.



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Amsterdam's foray into the modern world can be seen in its design style, finding an outlet in architecture, interior design, and the arts. A host of uber-cool concept hotels, restaurants and retail outlets are popping up across the city, some peeking out from behind historic facades, others in the converted shipyards of Amsterdam-Noord, accessed by ferry from behind Amsterdam Central train station. The ferry chugs past the Amstel Botel, a large boat-hotel moored in front of the former NDSM-shipyard and into NDSM Pier. The whole area has become a breeding ground for cultural entrepreneurs, housing workshops, artists' studios, hip cafes, restaurants, exhibition and performance spaces.

The Eastern Docklands area has also regenerated, transforming from a derelict harbour area into a desirable residential enclave attracting well-to-do urbanites. One of this area's most characteristic buildings is the Lloyd Hotel & Cultural Embassy, a project combining a hotel with a centre for cultural events.

The hotel was originally constructed in 1921 as temporary housing for emigrants on their way to Latin America, but spent stints as a prison, juvenile detention centre and artists' studios before its current reincarnation. This is a building steeped in history, but it's far more than that. The brainchild of Otto Nan and

Suzanne Oxenaar, the hotel neatly merges art, history, design and community involvement.

"Otto's background is art historian, mine is art curator, specialised in modern art in public spaces," explains Suzanne. "The city wanted to have a new heart for this neighbourhood and Otto said 'What do you think about starting a hotel?' So we started talking about it. In this building an important part of Amsterdam's cultural history happened and I see that as a value to our guests, but moreover it's important as an exchange with what people are bringing." This heralded the start of the cultural embassy, a non-profit venture funded by the hotel. The embassy has almost unlimited scope, promoting cultural exchange through diverse projects ranging from art exhibitions – 17 rooms have been set aside for this purpose during my visit and a tractor appears in the middle of the restaurant one night as an installation – to pop-up fairs and philosophical talks.

The hotel is a design project unto itself. "When people say it is a design hotel, I say no, it is a hotel with a lot of design. That's a little bit different. There's not a layer of design built over it, it's built in," says Suzanne. It took eight years to pull the disparate threads together and over 50 designers and artists worked on the interior. Despite this hard graft, it's a work in progress, never to be completed.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The interior of Store Without a Home; invisible bookshelves on the wall of Hotel The Windketel; the award-winning Mendo bookstore; the reception area of art'otel; one of Lloyd Hotel's five-star rooms; the Cultural Embassy at Lloyd Hotel.



the museum district I'm pleasantly surprised. The sleek futuristic lines of the building are starkly beautiful, despite its resemblance to an enormous bathtub, and it's not incongruous next to the elliptical grey-concrete exhibition wing of the Van Gogh Museum.

Inside I seek out the design galleries. While they draw on work collected from around the world, the result gives an overview on how Dutch design has developed, with emphasis on the relationships between craft, design and technology. But now that I understand where Dutch design has been, I want to see where it is going. Conceptual Dutch design company Droog is a good place to start.

Co-founded and directed by curator and author Renny Ramakers, Droog works with independent designers – the current collection consists of around 200 products by more than 100 designers, large parts of it housed in Hotel Droog. Deliberately ironic, the 17th-century space incorporates the Droog Store, a gallery, a dining room, beauty

products, fashion, and just one hotel room (titled the One and Only Bedroom). On my way to the café, I glance out a window and find the fantasy garden, oversized fungi-sculptures providing an ideal hiding spot for fairies.

In the store, packed with bright colours and irresistibly tactile objects, I pick up an invisible bookshelf before I get caught in the glare of Droog's signature chandelier. Called *85 Lamps*, bare bulbs and cords are brought together into a bouquet of light, proving that even with lighting, less can be more. The same theory works for Tejo Remy's Rag Chair, layered from the contents of 15 bags of rags. Remy's chest of drawers, a loosely-bundled collection of found drawers, has become a Droog classic, examples housed in both MoMA and the Museum of Art and Design in New York.

Amsterdam's Nine Streets, a grid of side streets connecting the main canals between Leidsestraat and Raadhuisstraat, are a popular centre of design and fashion. Here an eclectic bundle of specialty stores gather, from

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Hay, featuring funky stationery and home items, to a random collection of items at the Otherist, contemporary furniture and accessories at Frozen Fountain, art and interior design-wares at CNCPT13 and award-winning bookstore Mendo, described as a candy store for book aficionados.

But Dutch design doesn't end here. Haarlemmerdijk and Haarlemmerstraat also house funky finds, from small designer labels at Restored, where a bamboo bike by BlackStar hangs on the back wall, to candy-pink Store Without a Home, cluttered with a miscellaneous assortment of household items from cool to kitsch. Big labels and chain stores don't get a look-in.

I can't define contemporary Dutch design until I've explored Amsterdam's latest hotel offering, art'otel, smack-bang in the city centre. Here artist Joep van Lieshout, ranked one of the top five most-recognised Dutch artists by *Elsevier Magazine*, again makes an appearance. Atelier Van Lieshout, owned by Joep, aims to balance art, architecture and design, with 120 pieces incorporated into art'otel following a theme; the Course of Life. Many are simply beautiful, such as a sculpture on the third floor of a woman holding a child, while others are deliberately provocative.

The deep red heads functioning as reception desks signal that the art'otel aims to be different, as does the 20-by-40-foot interactive silicon curtain separating the library from the restaurant, 26 hidden sensors monitoring and reacting to the movements of

guests nearby. Downstairs, the 5&33 gallery hosts a rotating series of exhibitions, while 5&33 restaurant upstairs has quickly become the place to be seen.

Even the restaurant sets itself apart. Expert mixologists design creative beverages at the bar, while chef Daniele Pampagnin presents a shared dining concept, a range of small plates served in the middle of the table. "It's been well received so far," says the chef, "But a restaurant is like a field. You plant it full of seeds. In three months the plants come up, but it's not until six months that you see if the fruit is good, so let's see."

Sitting at the chef's table near the kitchen with my friend Pam, who lives in Amsterdam and is keen to try the food here, we watch the chefs expertly prepare multiple dishes, their hands flying from plate to plate like conjurers. Chef Daniele advises us that a table of two can stretch to six dishes, so our goal is set. We power through a forest mushroom and chicory salad, a selection of cured meats, a phenomenal goat cheese ravioli, oxtail tortellini, deep-fried soft shell crab and a plate of incredibly creamy Burrata cheese, each morsel impossibly delicious, before we concede defeat.

As we depart through the library, I take a moment to climb inside Atelier Van Lieshout's fibreglass open skull sculpture. Sitting inside someone else's mind is much like delving into Dutch design – inspiring and thought-provoking. Amsterdam is clearly at the centre of an edgy design renaissance, with a focus on simple, functional and fun design. ☺

EXPERIENCE AMSTERDAM

CHECK OUT: HOTEL THE EXCHANGE

Find the narrow doorway in central Amsterdam and slip into Hotel The Exchange for something completely different. The rooms were designed by students from the Amsterdam Fashion Institute and accessorised like models, requiring one-kilometre of individually-designed fabric to be produced.

WWW.HOTELTHEEXCHANGE.COM

SLEEP AT: HOTEL THE WINDKETEL

The recently-refurbished Hotel the Windketel is housed inside a detached, octagonal tower, three storeys high. The cosily-comfortable historic building is entirely decked out with Dutch-designed décor. It's self catering, but Café-Restaurant Amsterdam is close-by.

WWW.WINDKETEL.NL

EAT AT: NOORDELICHT

Noordelicht, in the former North Amsterdam shipyards is housed inside what looks like the offspring of an airplane hanger and a multi-coloured glass greenhouse. Presenting simple, fresh produce, it is the epitome of cool, catering to the 250 artists and designers working in the area.

WWW.NOORDERLICHTCAFE.NL

SUNDOWNERS AT: EYE FILM INSTITUTE

Catch a ferry over the river IJ to the EYE Film Institute at sunset. Even if you don't catch a flick, the EYE bar-restaurant is the perfect spot to watch the sun sink over the city. Tables fill up early, but there's plenty of seating on the arena stairs for those not dining.

WWW.EYEFILM.NL

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