

## An Amsterdam Experience

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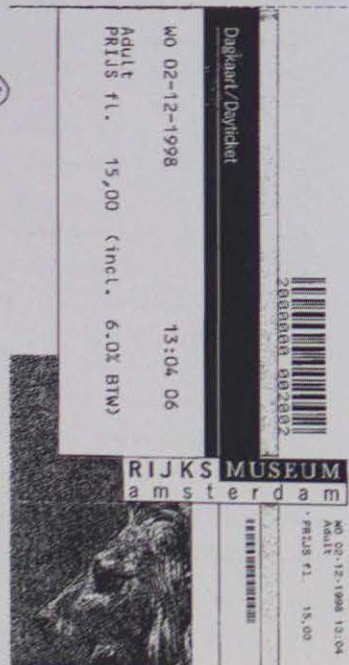
money & the great weather, it didn't bother me to only walk around all day & observe the architecture, the canals, the people, the bikes... We didn't even look for a museum - The city was our museum.

This time we have a slightly bigger budget so we can afford museums - Thank god 'cause I don't know what I would do outdoors all day. It's way too cold.

Since the Van Gogh Museum is closed for renovations, we went to the RIJKSMUSEUM that holds his collection temporarily, amongst other things.

Very interesting from his early days in Holland with

his desire to be a portrait painter (he painted self portraits on back of other paintings in order to practice) to his Paris days, Provence & the cubism, the Japanese growing influence, his craziness (cutting his own ear off after threatening his friend Gauguin) his hospitalization & subsequent suicide. His career lasted only 10 years but what full-filled years they were! If it wasn't for his brother Theo who financed him, and others like Monet he probably would of never done any painting. Kind of shows that crazy winds is synonymous with artistic mind. What does it say



WHAT IS THE best way to gain an appreciation of a city, or any space for that matter? One way to begin is by looking for obvious features, which might be shape, size, or colour. Most architectural reviews focus on these physical qualities but they seem to leave out personal experience. This seems odd; consider, for example, how state of mind can greatly influence an experience.

This is a personal description of my two visits to the Dutch capital of Amsterdam. On a three month trip to Europe that I took with my girlfriend Nathalie two years ago, Amsterdam happened to be our point of arrival and our point of departure. It was our bridge to adventure. We set off on this trip with many goals and not much money. We wanted to discover other people and other cultures. We also wanted to discover ourselves in a context other than that of North American university life. In terms of my architectural education, I was looking to add a component of personal experience to my knowledge of European cities gathered from lectures, pictures and books.

### Arrival

Nathalie taught me one of my first lessons: that the feel of the city can be absorbed. As an architecture student I had been trained to record the images of a place through plans and sketches. And so off I went to draw one afternoon. Three hours later, I met Nathalie along a canal. When I saw her, she had been sitting for a while, her book closed, lying next to her on the bench. "What are you doing?" I asked. She replied that she was taking in the city. Although it appeared that she wasn't doing much of anything at all, she was creating memories. It occurred to me then that there are many ways of learning about a city. Just as the tourist will miss out on the local ambience if he only visits tourist spots, so will the architecture student miss out on the full architectural picture if he only draws those famous buildings he's heard about in class.

Like any tourist, I also quickly learned a basic lesson in urban planning. Although the tourist has the advantage of fresh perspective, he also has the disadvantage of limited time. Which made this travelling architecture student appreciate the proximity of certain types of buildings and services in the center of the city, namely, the train station and the student hostel.

Once settled in the hostel, we had to decide how to begin our attempt at understanding the city. Mu-

seums, guided tours, restaurants? No, we wanted to learn about Amsterdam's urban environment by scouting it out on our own. This was convenient because with our tight budget we couldn't afford any tourist attractions anyways. And so, our program for the next couple of days *seemed* simple: walk and eat sandwiches. However, the challenges for a student traveler are almost overwhelming: see the most for the least, relate new discoveries to studies and school-work, and develop conclusions while keeping up momentum. With a simple map in hand and no other real information we spent three full days walking aimlessly, *à la derive*, along canals and through the lanes, avoiding the small cars and many bicycles. It occurred to me that in a city one knows it is hard to take a random route anywhere. We become programmed to certain routes as we travel between familiar landmarks during our daily routines. However, in a new city, there are no points of reference and there isn't much of a routine. When faced with an intersection, a decision to go one way is as good as any other. The unfamiliar city yields the kinds of discoveries, in alleys or around corners, that aren't usually made at home.

The first things the architecture student notices when travelling in a foreign city are those outstanding features that aren't found in their home town. Canals fall into this category. There are dozens of canals in Amsterdam, especially around the old part of the city. The cobblestones, small scale and quiet dignity transport the visitor back in time to the beginning of the century. I easily imagined Van Gogh walking these streets along the canal. Unlike Venice, the canals in Amsterdam are not treated as monuments, but as aquatic parks, which have become an integral part of the city. The canals also help with orientation. For the most part, they follow a semicircular pattern around Damrak (main street) and the Centraal Station. The main waterways are parallel to each other and perpendicular to the Amstel River. The main street straddles the widest canal with opposite directions of traffic on either side. The added width of main streets affords panoramic views of the unique façades of the city. The range of broad to narrow routes results in changes of scale from block to block, and encourages an inspection of building details on small streets, and then a more general view of the building façades on the wider roads. Turning corners off the canals onto lanes or boulevards, not knowing what to expect, the city reveals to the traveller a sampling of grand views and a handful of details.

[16.00]

There were about 16 people in our dorm. One of them was surely to be a snorer. In deed. In fact some people thought that it was normal to talk normally in the room around 100. After someone shut them up, the night went pretty smooth. We woke up at 845, right on time for breakfast, which was ending at 930.

We stepped out, wow was it cold! I don't know if it's like that because we were in the Cyclades two days ago, 'cause we only have limited clothing or that it's just really cold.

First stop: HEINEKEN Brewery Museum - The 100 tour.

For 2 guildens we got a guided tour of the old brewery, a history lesson & biological about beer & more precisely Heineken. Also included in the prize (which goes to charity) is all you can drink beer.



After about 6 I called it quits. Good thing they were ~~helping~~ helping us out or I probably would of had more - I mean, it's free.

We arrived about 20 min before the tour started around 1015. So we went to the corner cafe for a cup of coffee. Some people ~~also~~ who turns out were in the same group as us, were already sipping on a Heineken. What do these people do? Drink morning noon & night? I guess that's why this company can afford to offer a free museum.

These 3 days in Amsterdam are definitely different than the first three. The first time, because of the lack of

The means of locomotion in this city are just as diverse as the choice of routes - by water or over land. People do use boats, but the preference for public transportation is evident in the extensive network of buses, metro, and trams routes. For getting around independently, cars are very popular, but small vehicles, motorized bikes and scooters are prevalent for reasons of spatial economy in this dense city. Nothing, however, beats the bike here: they are a way of life. The basic, inexpensive models discourage theft, since most are identical. Bikes remain parked without a lock: "If someone takes mine, I'll just take another." The small scale and flat topography of Amsterdam encourage the use of the bicycle. Where some lanes don't even allow for two car widths and streets curve into hairpin turns, the bike is a quick and efficient way of getting from one place to another, not to mention affordable and accessible to everyone. I can remember many young businessmen, briefcase tied to the back wheel, riding, on the narrow streets, rushing to a meeting or leaving a presentation. They rode backs straight, eyes on the office, careful not to get the pantlegs of snappy suits caught in the spokes.

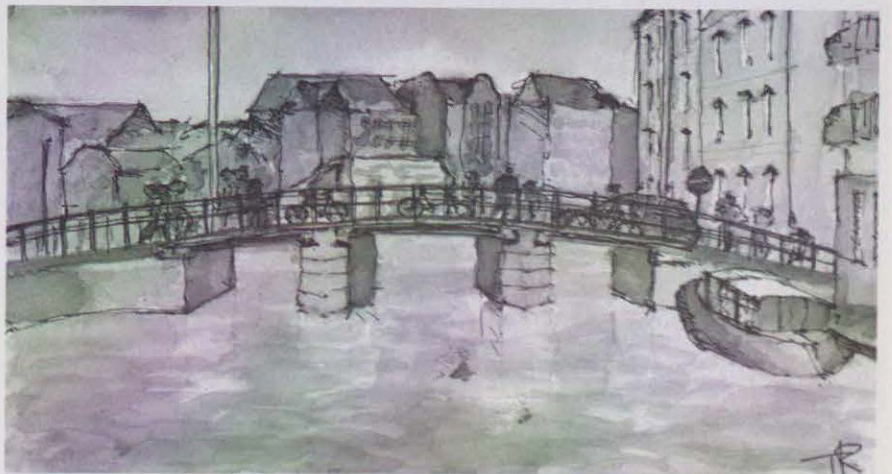
Of course, most visitors to Amsterdam, student or not, find themselves at some point in the Red Light District. But are most visitors as surprised as I was? I realized that foreign cities and infamous sites can't be understood from hearsay, least of all from postcards. During the day, the Red Light District hardly befits its name or reputation. The quiet residential streets are amongst the oldest in the city, making for a rustic ambiance, not a seedy one. The area appears to have changed only subtly with time: the original cobblestones and old storefronts seduce the pedestrian and provide a sensual satisfaction, as much so, no doubt, as the waving women in the windows and doors. At night, however, there is a drastic change. The area more than merits its reputation. As if from nowhere, sex shops, peep shows and live sex theaters suddenly appear, glowing with fluorescent signs and bustling with business. Workers of the oldest trade in the world are everywhere, sitting behind the glass doors of "love boudoirs" wearing scant lingerie and waiting for customers. The potential of an area to totally change character according to the clock was astonishing. I thought of New York's business district, which is full of activity from 9am to 5pm, but becomes deserted at night. How do these changes happen, or how were certain qualities so well-masked during the day? Were the neon lights camouflaged during daylight hours? Was

I too much the "architecture student," diligently examining the surrounding buildings, missing what was going on inside them?

A far cry away from the Red Light District, the Outer ring between Singel and Princengracht was quiet and residential. With few tourists or vehicles bustling about, it was my favorite place to walk. At first glance this area appeared calm, even uneventful. However, a closer look revealed exciting places and people. Audacious modern art galleries, lively colors and wonderful plants, can be found in the buildings. This area is not adapted to tourist interests and yet it was this very indifference towards the tourist industry that appealed to us most. We had the opportunity to see local lifestyles and livelihoods.

Of course, big, often curtainless, windows on the typical rowhouse façades make it very feasible to see local lifestyles. The main component of Amsterdam's urban fabric is the row house. Municipal legislation and the environmental conditions have dictated the city's architectural vocabulary, a situation similar to the prevalence of exterior staircases in Montreal. In Amsterdam, these picturesque row houses are favored due to the lack of available space, the high population density and a law stipulating that one buys property according to sidewalk width and nothing else. One notices that in many cases, the mitoyen walls of these row houses are not vertical. This is a direct consequence of the purchasing procedure of property. A landowner is free to build on top of his property as he wishes. Thus residents build wider and wider as the house goes up if floor area is available. They are not required to build the top floor at the same width as the bottom: first come first served is the rule of the game.

On average, a row house is no more than twenty feet wide and about three to four floors high rising to the city's sculptural roofline. A typical row house elevation is composed of a door on the ground floor and one window on every other floor with a mandatory hook above the highest window. The hook is an absolute necessity for moving anything in and out of houses. Partly for this reason, most windows are much bigger than their North American counterparts, which also allow much more light to get in these deep and narrow homes. The unique details of the row house contribute to the city's architectural identity. All over Amsterdam designers base their work on the architectural vocabulary of the row house, but manage to elaborate on it and let loose without ever compro-



missing the character of the city. A professor in Montreal once referred to Amsterdam as a great city without any great buildings. What it lacks in architectural landmarks, it makes up for with a cohesive and memorable collection of vernacular buildings.

#### Departure

After two and a half months of travelling around Europe, we were ready to go home, but not before spending our last days in Amsterdam. We were back to our point of departure. The second time in this city was totally different. Somehow, we seemed to have more money set aside for the last three days than we had spent in the first three, which was a good thing since the weather didn't really cooperate: half the time it rained, and it was so cold that walking all day was no longer an option. We spent most of our time indoors, in cafés, in coffee shops, restaurants, galleries or museums. The only time we were outside was while we travelled from one point to another. Ironically, this was exactly the way we had thought that we *wouldn't* see the city. However, in those three days we saw another Amsterdam, the one we couldn't afford the first time, and we also afforded ourselves the time for a crucial component of any trip: reflection.



*Tudor Radulescu, M.Arch 2000, overwhelmed and overdesigned, is tanning in Cuba. Contact tudor2@email.com.*

