Memory and Urbanism in the Constitution of Global Citizenship: Heritage, Preservation, and Tourism in Amsterdam and Rotterdam

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Memory and Urbanism in the Constitution of Global Citizenship: Heritage, Preservation, and Tourism in Amsterdam and Rotterdam

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I. Introduction

One of the most exciting areas in the cultural study of globalization concerns heritage preservation and heritage tourism. This subfield has grown out of the studies of collective memory by sociologists, historians, and art historians attentive to the relationship between capital, spectacle, and place. Whereas traditional studies of collective memory by figures like Maurice Halbwachs emphasized group social interaction, contemporary scholars have underscored the produced nature of what Pierre Nora terms “sites of memory.”¹ Christine Boyer, for example, distinguishes between what she terms “vernacular topoi,” or sites tied to memory due to repeated use, and “rhetorical topoi,” sites intended to instruct, often at the behest of the state, a local elite, and, increasingly, global financial concerns.² These latter sites tend to demarcate not only official narratives of local history but also cater to visitors seeking to encounter pasts both nostalgic and contested. As such, they lay at the intersection of heritage, preservation, and tourism.

The obsession with heritage emerged across the Western world in concert with what Walter Benjamin has termed a memory crisis brought on by the dislocation of modern urban dwellers from the locations of production and the cyclical continuity of traditional life.³ One of the first cities to take advantage of this nostalgic impulse was New Orleans, where a declining industrial and shipping economy has been propped up by nostalgia tourism for almost a century.⁴ Other cities followed New Orleans’ lead, receiving the support of local officials to preserve particularly significant sites that were then recognized by regional or national governments as contributing to national development. In the aftermath of the Second World War, UNESCO began to codify similar sites with importance to international history through its world heritage program. Though these originally emphasized isolated buildings, natural wonders, or technological marvels, beginning with the colonial center of Quito, Ecuador in 1978, the possibility of applying world heritage status to an entire urban district accelerated the program’s ties to urban rehabilitation and the fostering of international tourism. Today, heritage tourism represents not only a celebration of an autochthonous past but also decided entrepreneurial opportunities often intertwined with sociopolitical conflicts. The contemporary struggles regarding the precarious status of Istanbul’s UNESCO world heritage site epitomize the resources at stake in heritage status.

This essay reflects upon the state of heritage in the contemporary Netherlands with a particular focus on the intersection between heritage, tourism, and the articulation of urban “mythscapes.”⁵ It begins by providing an overview of the history of heritage movements in the Netherlands and the relationship between broader questions of authenticity and sociopolitical tension. It then provides two case studies that illustrate the
complexities of heritage tourism. These include the case of Amsterdam’s Red Light District and the celebration of modern architecture in Amsterdam and Rotterdam.

II. Heritage and the Dutch City

Cities have been a mainstay of Dutch economic and political life since the nation’s heyday during the Golden Age of the seventeenth century. During this period, ships from the Low Countries traversed the globe, dominating European trade with Asia and also establishing colonies in the Caribbean, South America, and across the Indian Ocean. The wealth accumulated by these burghers spurred urban development, immigration, and a cultural renaissance heralded by famed painters such as Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Steen. This transformation was most evident in the great port cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, which developed into shimmering examples of Early Modern architecture and seventeenth-century urban planning.

The architectural landscape of these urban centers maintained stylistic coherence over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but began to alter with increasing industrialization in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, particularly in Rotterdam, which quadrupled in population as it transformed into Europe’s busiest port city. Besides the explosion of industrial construction that accompanied this transition, the Netherlands proved a modernist architectural entrepôt. Rotterdam took the lead by introducing the skyscraper to Europe with Molenbroek’s Witte Huis (1897–98), an eleven-story structure based on Chicago models yet incorporating a Chateau-style roof. The turn of the century was distinguished by the work of H. P. Berlage, whose rationalist Amsterdam Stock Exchange (1904) proved highly influential in the development of Dutch functionalism. The most innovative functionalists congregated in the De Stijl movement, whose primary architectural proponent, J. J. P. Oud, centered his work in Rotterdam and its environs during the 1910s and 1920s. Perhaps the apogee of De Stijl, however, was Gerrit Rietveld’s Schröder House in Utrecht (1924), now a World Heritage Site. Rotterdam also saw the rise of the Nieuwe Bouwen or New Architecture Movement that was dominated by Johannes Brinkman and Leendert van der Vlugt, whose most famous structures are the Van Neele factory (1927–29) and the Sonneveld House (1929–1933), each of which demonstrate the influence of Russian constructivism and the Bauhaus in their use of glass, steel, and poured concrete to emphasize light, air, open space, and hygiene. Throughout this era, an alternative modernism developed in the expressionist Amsterdam school led by Michel de Klerk, which rejected the rational in favor of “fantasies in brick,” and would also influence Berlage’s later works.

The earliest efforts to preserve Dutch architectural heritage responded to this transformation of its urban landscape. Victor de Stuers dominated the early efforts due to the notoriety of his 1873 pamphlet “Holland at its Narrowest,” which advocated conserving landmarks in disrepair. He received a post in the Dutch Ministry of the Interior that facilitated conservation efforts and his patronage of the Rijksmuseum as a monument to national heritage. As Wim Denslagen has noted, however, the year 1900 proved a benchmark for the development of broad support for the “protecting of historical cities against the feared assaults of modernity.” Denslagen reminds us that this phenomenon was by no means limited to Holland but was common across the Western world, and likely tied to an increasing anxiety inspired not simply by change but
also by the increasing homogenization of space represented by modern urbanity. The earliest preservationists thus must be considered as proponents of the singular and iconoclastic.

The popular image of the conservationist as a hidebound advocate of tradition developed in the postwar era. In the Netherlands, as elsewhere in Europe, historic preservation and the rebuilding of city centers formed an essential component of shoring up national unity following a period of stress, violence, and destruction. The architect and preservationist Fred Schoorl has argued that the coordinated national heritage policy had consequences that “were sometimes as devastating as [those] of the war itself.” He cites the homogenization of urban space as a central element in this process, whereby cities like Amsterdam could be reconfigured to highlight the Golden Age of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries at the expense of heterogeneity, “in search of history, of common roots.” These efforts dominated reconstruction efforts in city centers minimally affected by the war but were implausible in cities like Rotterdam, whose entire center was destroyed by Nazi bombing in 1941, which resulted in an expanded commitment to modernism, as I shall discuss below. However, urban environs, suburbs, and rural areas were largely ignored under these prescriptions, leading to a bifurcated landscape in which architectural contemporaneity lay outside the city and traditional structures held sway in the core. This homogenous and traditional tectonic map belied socio-cultural norms in a country increasingly marked by an international reputation for tolerance and permissiveness. This would give rise to laments in the 1980s and 1990s regarding the “museumification” of city centers. Kees van der Ploeg, for instance, spoke of the sentimentalizing of the city into a “sugary-sweet backdrop” that “bears hardly any real relation to normal urban activities.”

This concern about the authenticity of diversity versus the artificiality of homogenized space dominated heritage debates in the 1990s, leading to a more dynamic approach to conservation sparked partially by the Belvedere Policy Memorandum of 1999. Coordinated by Schoorl, the memorandum built upon the first fledgling attempts to nominate Dutch candidates for World Heritage status. These highlighted three themes worthy of preservation: the Golden Age, modernism, and the country’s struggle with water and the innovative use of dykes and canals. The memorandum advocated expanding the reach of these efforts by advocating “preservation by development,” while “explicitly linking heritage externally with the fields of rural and city planning, nature and landscape, infrastructure, architecture, water management and other disciplines and interest in search for mutual gains.” The resulting initiative, supported by a 100-million-euro budget, prioritized integrating development over concerns with authenticity and conservation per se. As would be expected, these efforts have resulted in an increased attention to tourism tied to heritage, the certification of ten new Dutch World Heritage Sites, and initiatives designed to expand the financial possibilities afforded by heritage sites.

In the following sections, I discuss two case studies that have led to both contested and successful examples of preservation by development and then offer some concluding thoughts. I first discuss the tensions surrounding the city of Amsterdam’s redevelopment of De Wallen, its famous Red Light District, which has become embroiled in broader conflicts regarding the limits of tolerance in the aftermath of September 11 and the concomitant rise of Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party (PPV). Secondly, I consider the
relatively successful case of heritage sites celebrating Dutch modernist architecture, in which both literal museumification and an entrepreneurial approach have been shown to be effective not only to preserve but also to accelerate economic development. My concluding remarks argue that the Dutch engagement with heritage preservation and heritage tourism demonstrates the tangled nature of contemporary political and social conflicts in the country and the way space and site serve as staging grounds for these concerns.

III. Amsterdam’s Red Light District: Contentious (Intolerant?) Preservation

Amsterdam’s Red Light District is world famous for its windows populated by sex workers, strip clubs, “coffee shops” selling legal marijuana, and analogue institutions celebrating vice, of which the Sex Museum and the Cannabis Museum are the best known. It is also located primarily in De Wallen, the oldest section of the city and home to several medieval monuments. These include many churches of which the most important is the Oude Kerk (Old Church, 14th century), along with the earliest of Amsterdam’s canals and the largest Chinatown in the Netherlands. Consequently, De Wallen is an obvious target for preservation and heritage tourism in accordance with the current mandate described above. To date, there has not been a direct appeal for naming De Wallen a World Heritage Site, although a case could certainly be made for its historical and cultural importance as the original center of Amsterdam and even its role as a site of both vice and tolerance. Instead, the district became the target for a regulatory initiative by the City Council in 2007 known as “Project 1012” in honor of the district’s zip code. The project explicitly links the “sanitizing” of De Wallen with economic activities in accordance with the ideals of “preservation by development.”

The origins of Project 1012 can be traced to 1996, when a little known municipal alderman from the Labor Party (PvdA), named Lodewijk Asscher, suggested transforming the district by limiting the number of windows designated for prostitutes.15 Given the fact that the Netherlands tolerated prostitution and would afford it full legal status in 2000, Asscher’s proposal initially received little backing. However, during the past decade his assertions that prostitution relies upon human sex trafficking and that coffee shops rely upon illegal marijuana and hashish have received increasing approval by the public. Due to concerns about his claims, the city ordered further research into human trafficking in 2004, resulting in a report that argued that many sex workers hailing from Latin America, Africa, or Eastern Europe had indeed been forced into sexual slavery. PvdA Mayor Job Cohen’s administration followed up by passing an initiative to fight criminality, spur development, and integrate De Wallen into a broader attempt to provide a “quality boost” to the city center. In a 2007 strategy paper titled “Heart of Amsterdam,” the administration highlighted nine projects designed to accelerate this process. Most critical to the concerns of this paper was the decision to rehabilitate the Oudekersplein by replacing prostitutes’ windows, several of which flank the church, with “traditional activities such as arts and crafts” so as to make the square “a pleasant place in which to pass the time.”16

In order to facilitate this venture, the city determined to purchase properties housing both windows and coffee shops, which would be replaced by alternate activities. It succeeded rather rapidly, reaching an agreement as early as September 2007 to purchase
eighteen properties with over fifty windows from “Fat Charlie” Geerts. Other tactics included leveraging legal action, as in the case of the threatened closure of the live sex theater Casa Rosso and the Banana Bar strip club. Though these closures did not take effect, Mayor Cohen announced in 2008 that the city hoped to close half of the 400 windows in De Wallen and lower the number of coffee shops. Many of these windows have been converted into high-end boutiques, galleries, and artisanal workshops loosely bundled under the monickers of Redlight Fashion, Redlight Art, and Redlight Design. These shops have spotlighted chic design as well as pieces inspired by their surroundings, and have been featured in arts, fashion, and design publications worldwide, increasing the visibility of the city’s efforts.

These changes have resulted in severe pressure upon sex work in the Red Light District and have received much criticism as well. Figures such as Mariska Majoor, a former prostitute and founder of the Prostitution Information Center, have argued that the project would not reduce crime but unfairly stigmatize sex workers. Similarly, Jan Broers of the Royal Taste Hotel has formed an opposition committee called Platform 1012, which argues that the purchase of real estate is a façade for desired gentrification, while also staging protest marches. Academic studies have also suggested that the evidence cited for a post-2000 rise in criminality was manipulated by the city to justify its broader desire to redevelop the region. Others have suggested that there is an important element of racial tension in the conflict. Marie-Louise Janssen, an anthropologist at the University of Amsterdam, has underscored the significance of the immigrant background of most sex workers in the city, who hail largely from the West Indies, Africa, and Eastern Europe, and thus represent a visible “other.” A similar argument appears in a report directed by Laurens Buijs, Ph.D. candidate in political science at the University of Amsterdam, titled “Macht op de Wallen” (Power in De Wallen), which holds that the city’s strategy echoes a developing neo-liberal and xenophobic mood in Holland since the September 11 attacks and the sensationalized murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 that has fed a revival of the far right across the country. For Buijs and Jansen, the struggle over the Red Light District thus represents a broader tug-of-war about the very nature of the Dutch people, in which tolerance wrestles with censorship.

These tensions helped inspire coordinated exhibits by the Amsterdam Historical Museum in the summer of 2010 that demonstrated the multiple sides to the problem of the red light district. The initial inspiration sprang from the museum’s presentation of Ed and Nancy Kienholz’s installation, “The Hoerengracht,” a three-dimensional piece inspired by Amsterdam’s Red Light District that was developed in Berlin between 1983 and 1988 but had never before visited the Netherlands. The curator of the exhibition, Annemarie de Wildt, took advantage of the piece’s visit to feature work by contemporary artists involved in the various Redlight initiatives, making for a riveting juxtaposition of a fabricated brothel from the 1980s, with contemporary video art featuring De Wallen’s most famous windows. Particularly powerful is a video by Marieken Verheyen from the viewpoint of a sex worker, which features projections of potential customers asking, “How much? How much?” The exhibit also features a powerful documentary titled, “What is Amsterdam Doing with Its Red Light District?,” in which Nancy Kienholz converses with critical players in this controversy, including Mariska Majoor; Jan Broers; Pierre van Rossum, Project Manager for Project 1012; Annemarie de Wildt; and the PvdA Alderman for arts and culture, Carolien Gehrels, who coordinated the Redlight
initiative. Each of these figures articulates his or her particular position in stark tones that together highlight the dissonance of this particular clash over Dutch heritage. More poignant are the laments of an elderly resident of De Wallen who notes how quiet the neighborhood has become since the closing of the windows, or the worries of Joop de Groet, a former policeman who patrolled the district, that the PvdA hopes to create “a Disney park” in one of the more permissive and tolerant sites in the world.

The fate of Amsterdam’s Red Light District has not been decided, but it appears likely that “preservation by development” will ineluctably transform its contours. Regardless of one’s opinion on this contentious issue, the case reveals the political stakes of heritage preservation and heritage tourism in a city and society celebrated for its tolerance. Heritage includes controversy, and the tricky challenges posed by celebrating heritage are only exacerbated at a moment of societal tension dominated by renewed arguments as to the essential qualities of Dutch nationality. It is ironic, however, that both opponents of Project 1012 and its proponents firmly frame their arguments within the norms of enlightened tolerance even as they take polarizing political stances that must be viewed as a byproduct of the broader political struggles enveloping the Netherlands in the past decade. This attempt to claim the moral center of tolerance by those on all sides ultimately underscores the dissonance highlighted in Kienholz’s documentary.

IV. Dutch Modernism: Complacent (Tolerant?) Preservation

Along with relations between the nation and its waters and Golden Age structures, another of the critical areas targeted for heritage preservation and development by the Belvedere Memorandum are examples of Dutch modernism. As previously mentioned, the country proved an early pioneer in modernist design, exemplified by De Stijl, and would continue to serve as a wellspring of creativity and dynamism in the postwar era. Rotterdam, in particular, has developed into one of the more significant locations of high modernist and postmodern architecture. The city has a legacy as perhaps the most vibrant center of modern Dutch architecture, but it was largely destroyed during the Rotterdam blitz of 1941. The city’s early postwar reconstruction focused upon the necessity of rebuilding its port capacity, and few architectural monuments exist from this time, with the noted exception of Marcel Breuer’s Bijenkorf Department Store (1955–57). During the 1970s, however, the city government, facing limits on continued spatial expansion, opted to patronize high profile architectural experimentation, in the process creating an environment animated by some of the most innovative and avant-garde postmodern architecture in the world. Since 1975, Rem Koolhaas’s notorious Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) has not only based its headquarters in the city but has also constructed several important structures locally, including the Kunsthall (1988–92) and a slew of commercial buildings. Between 1978 and 1984, Piet Blom built his famous Cube Houses along the Blaakse Bos pedestrian bridge, with each unit being fully contained within a diagonal cube. The past thirty years have also seen a plethora of experimental and monumental works often reflecting the city’s industrial heritage. A fine example is a series of three blazing red structures evoking dockside cranes in the Schouwburgplein Theatre Square that were designed by A. H. Geuze and erected between 1990 and 1997. Similarly, Bolles and Wilson’s Luxor Theater (1996–2001)
features a similarly dramatic color palate with a rounded shape that evokes a nautical theme in keeping with its location.

One of the key ingredients in this explosion of architectural innovation has been an attempt to celebrate the city’s modernist heritage alongside its new construction. One particularly successful attempt can be seen in the design and location of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI), designed by Jo Coenen and built between 1988 and 1993 in the Museumpark in Rotterdam. The NAI campus includes three structures, each of which is designated for one of the Institute’s core functions as archive, library, and exhibition space, and then adding a fourth node for public functions. Each structure has its own tectonic and color scheme: a closed red brick rectangular for exhibitions, a longitudinal curved building of poured concrete and red and silver corrugated metal for the archive, a tall glass unit for the study hall, and a flat concrete box perpendicular to the archive for public areas. Each harmoniously intersects and connects via glass airlocks that enable passage from one to the other.

The building has a distinct relationship to its surroundings that serves the function of tying its poetic arrangement to the history of the city. It is surrounded by a reflecting pool on the western edge, providing an elemental link to Rotterdam’s watery past and creating the illusion that the structure is floating. On the east, it is steps away from Brinkman and van der Vlugt’s Sonneveld House, one of the few structures remaining from the pre-war era. The linkage between an architectural archival institute, the built heritage of modernism, and the post-modern building is clear simply by virtue of the proximity of the two buildings. However, on visiting the Sonneveld House (tickets for which are available at the NAI), one realizes that the earlier structure—with its extraordinary clarity of line and unique color-coded template designating spaces for the family, for the public, and for the servants—is clearly refracted in Coenen’s modular design for the NAI modernist heritage and thus reveals itself as new and old, authentic and inauthentic combined.

A similar type of playfulness can be seen in more traditional examples of what the Belvedere Memorandum terms “preservation by development.” These include the use of historic sites for new activities, several examples of which can be found in both Rotterdam and Amsterdam. In the former harbor area of Rotterdam, for example, vacant warehouses are being developed for residential use, audiovisual agencies, the Shipping and Transport College, and hotels. The former headquarters of the Holland-Amerika Lijn, a principal migrant transport company that carried tens of thousands of immigrants from Europe to Ellis Island, is one prominent case in point. The company closed during the 1970s and its headquarters, built at the start of the 20th century, sat empty until the early 1990s when the city collaborated with private entrepreneurs to create the Hotel New York, a luxury hotel with a thriving restaurant which sits on the left bank of the Maas, across from the city center and can be reached by water taxi as well as by public transportation. The hotel furnishings trade upon its heritage, featuring numerous steamer trunks, pamphlets in the shape of passports that present its history in English and Dutch, a barbershop with a New York style barber’s pole, and kitschy souvenirs including Hotel New York lunchboxes and Delft-style pottery. The kitschy aesthetic extends itself virtually on the landscape of the hotel’s website, where the sound of seagulls and the low boom of a foghorn greet Internet visitors.
A similar example can be seen in Amsterdam’s Lloyd Hotel, which, like the Hotel New York, is located outside of the city center in the Eastern Docklands overlooking the River Ij. The building was originally commissioned by the Royal Holland Lloyd (KHL), which used it to house passengers traveling to South America, mostly poor Eastern European Jews. It is an eclectic structure designed by Evert Breman, demonstrating influences of Art Deco and the Amsterdam School. The KHL’s bankruptcy in 1936 led to its purchase by the City of Amsterdam, which used it as a refuge for Jews escaping persecution from Nazi Germany. During the Occupation, it became an adult prison and would remain as such until the 1960s when it converted to a juvenile detention center. In 1989 it was used temporarily as studio space but was redesigned during the late 1990s as a hotel and cultural embassy. The method of this renovation was itself cutting edge as multiple architects were tasked to design particular rooms, which ranged from one-star bedrooms with shared bathrooms to five-star luxury suites. The building also serves as a cultural embassy, hosts conventions and receptions, and serves as a meeting place for cultural organizations. It is also the cornerstone of the development of the Eastern Docklands, which had been long abandoned but are now the site of new residential structures as well as grocery stores and other commercial properties.

V. Conclusion

In a recent speech, Amsterdam Historical Museum curator Annemarie De Wildt highlights the role a historical museum plays in deploying entertainment and the fetishizing of historical objects in order to communicate the complexity of the past. She further argues of the importance of deploying multiple sites of entry, a “heteroglossia” of voices, when presenting a historical subject. This strategy can decidedly be seen both in the Hoerengracht exhibit she organized at the AHM as well as in the playful juxtapositions of modernist architecture visible in Rotterdam and, to perhaps a lesser degree, in renovated sites like the Hotel New York and the Lloyd Hotel and Cultural Embassy. This is not the case, however, with the renovation of De Wallen, where selective deafness appears to mark the multiple voices clamoring against each other and thus denying dialogical possibilities. The reasons for this tension stem not only from the frameworks deployed by both the city and its detractors, but also, I would argue, from the spatial conditions of these two examples. De Wallen is situated in a densely populated urban district where competing claims for space jockey for influence, whereas the modernist structures are primarily located in underdeveloped, former industrial areas or in the blank slate regions of postwar Rotterdam and Amsterdam’s Eastern Docklands. Commemoration seems to be a more highly fraught endeavor when it necessitates judging which historical memories to celebrate and which to deny. Yet in this way the process of heritage development sheds light on the ways that cultures build narratives about themselves on contested terrain, as well as the power that those narratives have to shape the landscapes and national and transnational imaginaries we inhabit.

Notes


15. My history of Project 1012 is based upon Amee Barber, “From the Red Light District to the Red Carpet: The Gentrification of Amsterdam’s Red Light District and its Impact on the Democratic Citizenship Rights of Sex Workers,” online at ualberta.academia.edu/ameebarber/Papers; Laurens Buijs et al., “Macht op de Wallen” (29 January 2009), online at bachelors.socsci.uva.nl/pol/MachtopdeWallen.pdf; and “Heart of Amsterdam,” online at centrum.amsterdam.nl/aspx/download.aspx?file=/contents/pages/211421/hvneng.pdf; as well as interviews with Gert Hekma (1 June 2010), Marie-Louise Janssen (2 June 2010), and personal communication from Laurens Buijs (1 September 2010), all of the University of Amsterdam.


19. The Hoerengracht, Amsterdam Historical Museum (20 March–29 August, 2010), curator Annemarie De Wildt, online at hoerengracht.ahm.nl.

20. This section is based upon site visits in Rotterdam and Amsterdam between 29 May and 3 June 2010, and tourist pamphlets publicly available at kiosks throughout the two cities. Of particular importance were “Architecture in Rotterdam,” “Rotterdam: Art City,” “Hotel New York: Rotterdam,” and “Lloyd Hotel and Cultural Embassy.” Also valuable were the websites of the following structures: Hotel New York at hotelnewyork.nl/2007/?lang=en; the Netherlands Architectural Institute at en.nai.nl; Welcome to Rotterdam at rotterdam.info; and the Lloyd Hotel and Cultural Embassy at lloydhotel.com.