

Fashion whores

Dressed up or dressed down, now there's something for everyone in Amsterdam's most notorious quarter, as Helen Russell discovers

Featuring: Backstreet Boys. Brothels. Permissive Society. Wipe-Clean Beds.

Rich, emerald silk perfectly catches the afternoon sun in a sumptuous little window display of couture gowns. Two doors down there is a toga-inspired off-the-shoulder number and a gathered empire-line shift with elaborate ruching, tucks and pleats in pale fawn. It's like some sort of fashion heaven where everyone is dressed by Patricia Field - but this isn't New Bond Street or Fifth Avenue.

Between the boutiques, there's another kind of mannequin, wearing nothing but lip gloss and a pink thong. Opposite, a woman in her underwear draws a curtain across her window as a customer hurries in to the sounds of rivals' nails tapping on glass and deals being done in hushed voices.

This is Amsterdam's red light district and the frocks are part of Red Light Fashion, the initiative that's giving 16 designers the opportunity to work and live rent-free for a year in the 17th-century buildings of Oudezijds Achterburgwal. Deputy mayor Lodewijk Asscher is behind the campaign and hopes that Amsterdam can use its tradition of creativity and tolerance to improve the area. "To buy the dress instead of the woman is a very strong and positive message," he says.

Local brothel owner, Charles 'Mr Big' Geerts, retired earlier this year and sold 18 properties to the city's housing corporation. Asscher and his colleagues weren't sure what to do with them until Mariette Hoitink, founder of local fashion agency HTNK, suggested lending them to the Dutch designers. "Amsterdam is always going to have a reputation for coffee shops and prostitutes," says Hoitink, "but in the '60s and '70s, we also had a cutting-edge garment industry as well, and I wanted to bring that back." Asscher approved and Hoitink was asked to select the lucky designers.

Geerts handed the door keys to the housing corporation on January 4 and three days later the



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designers were in. Hoitink helped them clear the brothel-chic fittings ("we threw out 121 mirrors") but the uniform salmon-pink tiled beds - better for wiping clean - were built-in (an interior-design challenge solved by boarding them over to create workbenches). "You could smell cigarettes and sex," says couture queen Conny Groenewegen of her first day at Stoofsteeg 1. "The walls were red and everything was nicotine stained." Womenswear designer Edwin Oudshoorn (at number 64) enlisted the help of his mother for the clean-up, but soon regretted it: "We didn't talk about what we saw, we just threw it away." Meanwhile, shoemaker Roswitha van Rijn found condoms, dildos, underwear, wigs, shoes, rat droppings and posters of Samantha Fox and the Backstreet Boys in her new home at Oude Kennissteeg 5. "The first night after seeing it, I had awful dreams," she recalls. "I wasn't sure I could go through with it."

The locals weren't enamored with their new neighbours either. There were demonstrations in the street, with sex workers chanting, "Keep your hands off our district". Many complained that the bright window displays detracted from the red lights of their own rooms. Bas Kusters, the DJ, designer, artist and all-round Renaissance man (at number 82), admits that it was a learning curve: "After a while, they realised that we weren't the actual decision makers - we're just trying to make a living, same as them." For both sides, it has been a revelation. "I have respect for them," says Kusters. "It's a hard job. You need balls, so to speak."

The prostitutes are getting used to the designers. "When I first arrived, I was offered sex about five times a day," says the distractingly handsome Oudshoorn. "Now they recognise me and there's a real sense of community. I only get offered sex two or three times a day now." Hoitink is friends with the owner of Casa Rosso (notorious for its live ➤➤



(left) Bas Kusters by
Marc deurloo.
(this page)
Jan Taminiau shop and
studio in the red light
district.
(next page)
...And Beyond studio
entrance.
The Roswitha van Rijn
window display.



sex shows) and van Rijn has a daily discourse with the girls opposite her. “I go inside to chat; they’ve even bought my jewellery and boots.” “Everybody is so friendly,” adds Merel Wicker of LEW. “It’s like a little village. But a strange village, of course, because most of the residents only wear underwear.”

Red Light Fashion has resurrected an ancient symbiosis. “In this street you have a wood store, a tailor and prostitutes,” says Oudshoorn. “They’re probably the oldest professions you can imagine, so it seems fitting that we’re all here together again.”

The location has had an inevitable impact on the designers’ work. “The sleaziness, and the low level of the men that walk around and the way that women are just looked at as sex objects definitely affects my way of thinking about the world,” says van Rijn, who feels sure that her Spring/Summer ‘09 collection will be heavily influenced by her new environment. Jan Taminiau, known for romantic creations, says that his eyes have been opened by his new home at number 60: “People of different walks of life all come here and the men change into children in a candy store. It’s fascinating.” Mada van Gaans (at number 19) says that it has added a “dose of realism,” to her work, and Groenewegen has been inspired to take part in design workshops with prostitutes in Eindhoven.

Being in the red light district itself also keeps the designers’ feet on the ground. “It helps stop us getting too fashionista and arrogant,” says van Rijn. Wicker says that being so close to the other designers is good for creativity. “We stay sharp, knowing that everyone else is working hard and we share our knowledge. And sugar.”

“The clients really like it,” says van Rijn. “It’s a neighbourhood where you don’t come as an local ‘Amsterdammer’, so it’s an experience for them.” Kim Leemans, of urban designers LEW (Oudezjids Voorburgwal 27-29), agrees: “They love it.

“I have respect for them [the prostitutes]. It must be hard. You need balls, so to speak.”

— Bas Kosters, artist



Normally people don’t come here, so it’s nice for them to have a legitimate reason.”

Asscher hopes that Red Light Fashion will also help give Oudezjids Achterburgwal back to the Amsterdammers and attract a diverse group of tourists. “Probably there will still be prostitution in the area,” he says, “but it will be better controlled and the women working better protected.”

The Code Gallery (121) sells the Red Light Fashion designs in a showroom retaining the original character of the workspace (wipe-clean beds, red lighting). This is partly to promote a greater understanding, and also because no one knows what will happen when the year’s lease expires.

“If the government is smart they will keep this high-end versus sleazy profile,” says van Rijn. “It’s a perfect mixture. Holland has always been very proud of its tolerance and combining these two disciplines of business is proof of that.” It’s also made the red-light district so much more female-friendly and less threatening.

Could the project work elsewhere? Prostitution is still illegal in Bangkok where business owners sell sex under the guises of massage parlors and tea houses, giving the women involved little or almost-no protection. In Shenzhen, China, prostitution and trafficking is widespread, despite the country’s growing economic fortunes and the burgeoning cultural arts scene. Official acknowledgement from an initiative such as Red Light Fashion would help the women and give the arts a social relevance.

“It could definitely work in other cities,” says Hointink. “Fashion people are very creative and tolerant and don’t tend to judge, so there’s a great opportunity.” Making it happen may depend on the efforts of someone with the same drive as that of Hointink and with considerable global clout. As Groenewegen says: “It’s got to be worth a try.” ●

W—Helen Russvoll