



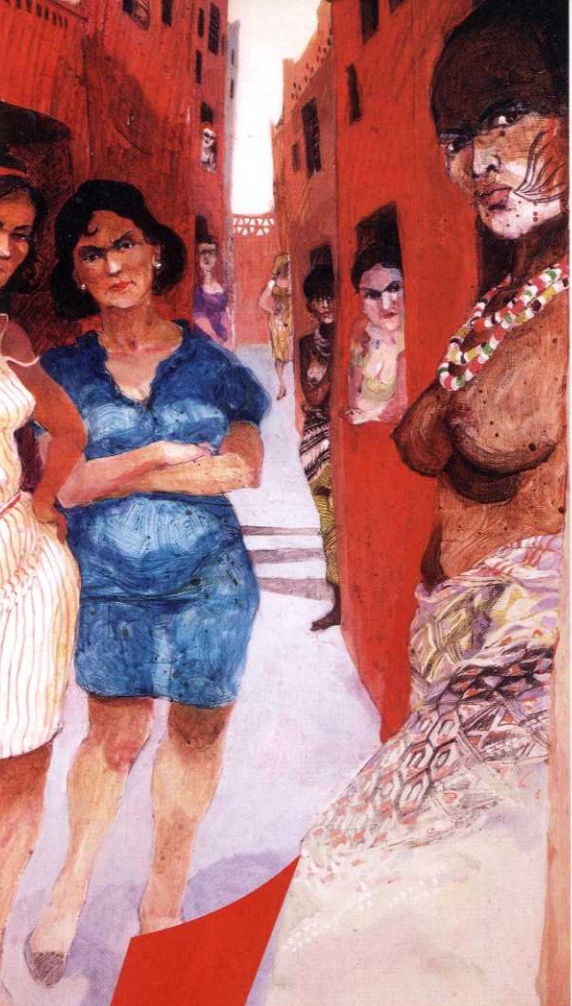
*When the Lights Go*

**NAKED TRUTH**  
Amsterdam's red  
light district is  
undergoing a change  
like never before

OUT

PROSTITUTION IS THE  
OLDEST PROFESSION  
IN THE WORLD, BUT  
THE RED LIGHTS ARE  
DIMMING IN ITS MOST  
INFAMOUS HOTSPOT.  
**HELEN RUSSELL**  
INVESTIGATES THE  
CHANGES TAKING  
PLACE IN AMSTERDAM





THE COLOUR RED HAS BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH THE OLDEST profession on Earth since Biblical times, when prostitutes identified their houses with scarlet rope. The term “red-light district” apparently comes from the red lanterns carried by railway workers, left outside brothels so they could be quickly located if they were needed to move a train. But it has also been said that red paper lanterns were hung outside brothels in ancient China. There are red-light districts all over the world: Soho has been at the heart of London’s sex industry for hundreds of years; in Singapore, sex workers operate from licensed dens; while Shenzhen, Bangkok and Nairobi have long been notorious for their red-light districts. ¶ But it is Amsterdam that’s most famous for its relaxed approach to prostitution. The Netherlands has around 25,000 prostitutes, with 140 brothels in Amsterdam’s red-light district and 500 prostitute display windows. The sex industry brings in around US\$130 million a year and its workers are unionized and pay tax.

Amsterdam’s red-light district, or “De Wallen,” as the locals call it, is a web of streets and alleys around the city’s medieval dam walls. It has been a centre of prostitution since before the city’s golden age in the 17th century, but it wasn’t until 2000 that brothel prostitution was made fully legal in the Netherlands. Those in favour of the legalisation of the sex trade have long cited Amsterdam as a model, but critics claim that the windows mask the violent reality of organised crime. “Money laundering, extortion and human trafficking are things you do not see, but they are hurting people and the city,” says Amsterdam’s deputy mayor of economic affairs Lodewijk

Asscher, who decided to make some changes.

In 2007, brothel owner Charles Geerts, known as “Fat Charlie,” retired and sold 18 of his properties to the city’s housing corporation. The council wasn’t sure what to do with them until Mariette Hoitink, founder of fashion agency HTNK, which supports young designers, suggested lending them to Dutch designers. “Amsterdam is always going to have a reputation for its coffee shops and prostitutes,” says Hoitink, “but in the 1960s and ’70s, we had a cutting edge garment industry as well, and I wanted to bring that back.”

Now, between the windows lit up in red, there’s another kind of mannequin, wear-

**RED BLOODED**  
**ABOVE FROM LEFT**  
Prostitution is one of the oldest professions; a brothel interior  
**OPPOSITE FROM TOP** Amsterdam’s red light district; a prostitute talks with a potential client

ing haute couture and illuminated by white halogen lamps. This is part of Redlight Fashion Amsterdam (RLFA), the initiative that’s given 16 designers the opportunity to work and live rent-free in the 17th-century buildings of De Wallen for one year. 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.”

**G**EERTS HANDED THE KEYS to the housing corporation on January 4th, 2008, and Hoitink got to work with the designers on removing the brothels’ fittings. Together they threw out 121 mirrors and found numerous condoms, dildos, underwear, wigs and shoes, but the built-in salmon-pink tiled beds (“better for wiping clean”) were boarded over to create workbenches. “You could smell cigarettes and sex,” says designer Conny Groenewegen of her first day at her new address of Stooftsteeg 1. “The walls were painted 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.” Shoemaker Roswitha van Rijn wasn’t sure about her new home at Oude Kennissteeg 5: “The first

night after seeing it, I had awful dreams. I didn’t think I could go through with it.”

The neighbours weren’t too keen on the new arrivals, 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, DJ and designer at street number 82, admits it was a learning curve, but says that, “after a while, they realised that we weren’t the decision makers, we’re just trying to make a living, same as them.”

Now, the prostitutes are getting used to them. “When I first arrived, I was offered sex about five times a day,” says Oudshoorn. “Now they recognise me and there’s a sense of community. I only get offered sex two or three times a day now.” Hoitink is friends with the owner of Casa Rosso (infamous for its live sex shows), while Van Rijn has a daily discourse with

*“To buy **THE DRESS** instead of the woman is a very **STRONG AND POSITIVE** message,” says Asscher*





**WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY**  
FROM TOP RLFA has temporarily replaced prostitutes with fashion in the district's windows; Mariette Hoitink of fashion agency HTNK

the girls opposite her: "I go inside to chat; they've even bought my jewellery and boots." Merel Wicker of LEW womenswear label feels equally at home: "Everybody is friendly. It's like a little village. But a strange village, of course, because most of the residents only wear underwear."

Asscher hopes that RLFA will help give De Wallen back to Amsterdammers and attract a more diverse group of tourists. "There will probably still be prostitution in the area," he says, "but it will be much better controlled and the women will be better protected." The project officially ended in January this year, but while four of the RLFA buildings are waiting for redevelopment, the leases on the other buildings have been extended to July 2009. "We have got until then to develop a plan for the long-term future of RLFA," says Karlijn Bozon, who works with Hoitink at HTNK, but the council has announced plans to regenerate the area to create wider social traffic, with restaurants, clubs and other creative companies opening.

The authorities have said they want to close half of all the brothels and offer retraining to the prostitutes who will lose their jobs, a motion that's attracted a lukewarm response from sex workers. "This is fine if they actually want to move on to something else, but some might not

want to," says Metje Blaak from Red Thread, an advocacy-support group for prostitutes in the Netherlands. Mariska Major of Amsterdam's Prostitute Information Centre agrees, "The authorities have made people think everybody involved in the red-light district is a criminal and all the girls are victims, which is not true." Many fear that this is a step towards making prostitution illegal, putting women in greater danger. "Women behind windows will have to work the streets now, and women in forced prostitution will disappear underground," says Blaak.

The council has yet to release statistics on crime rates since RLFA started, but organisers insist that the area is safer. "I've received quotes from the local police stating that the feeling of safety in the neighbourhood has definitely increased," says Bozon. "The designers are happy with the outcome and we have a scheme in the pipeline to create a fashion label conceived by the prostitutes themselves."

Asscher and Hoitink are convinced their plan can help make the red-light district safer for sex workers and the community at large. "Fashion people are creative and tolerant and don't tend to judge, so there's a great opportunity," says Hoitink, "I think it could work in other cities."

In other countries around the world, prosti-

**"FASHION PEOPLE** are creative and **TOLERANT** and don't tend to judge, so there's a **GREAT OPPORTUNITY**"



tution is technically still illegal, where business owners sell sex under the guises of massage parlors and tea houses, giving the women involved little or no protection, which in turn gives rise to trafficking. Perhaps official acknowledgement from an initiative such as RLFA could help the women involved, while also giving the arts a healthy social relevance?

**"T**HE AUTHORITIES ARE right to try to solve problems," says the Prostitution Information Centre's Major, and many sex workers agree that reducing other criminal activity in the area has to be a good thing. Blaak, meanwhile, would like to see a greater police presence on the streets, "but we also need more rights for these women and less corruption by police and other villains."

Acceptance seems to be the key to harmonious symbiosis between proponents of the world's oldest profession and those who would do away with it altogether. In other countries, after all, prostitution is almost culturally rooted, with fathers considering their sons sleeping with sex workers as a rite of passage, and corrupt policeman stand by because their "protection" has been paid for.

But even with the most noble of ideas, the rub is that money, rather than grandiose morals or philanthropic schemes will ultimately decide the fate of the world's red-light districts. Commerce is king, even in carnal matters, and as long as there is profit to be made from gangs, brothels and the women who work in them, little will change. The relentless draining of the wallets of mesmerised tourists will continue for some time yet. But if the world's most famous red-light district can do it, then there's hope yet. ■



**CHANGE OF SCENERY**  
CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Metje Blaak from Red Thread; the sex trade still lives on in Amsterdam; one of RLFA's designers, Bas Koster; for the meantime, Dutch fashion can be seen in the windows