

# Amsterdam to Berlin: An artistic mass exodus



The international appeal of Berlin is best shown in the city's largest graffiti work. The project was completed in 2009 with the help of artists from Colombia, Venezuela and Germany. Photo: ANP

## Coverage

By Laura Owings

**Berlin's reputation as 'poor but sexy' is pulling Amsterdam's artists away from the city in what many are calling the end of the capital's creative reign.**

Amsterdam has long been associated with multiculturalism, tolerance and creativity. Until now, that is. As NRC Next reported on 6 January, the image of the country's capital as a creative hub is being replaced by its bigger and cheaper neighbour - Berlin.

"Amsterdam cannot possibly compete with Berlin," Steve Korver, writer and one-time editor of the Amsterdam Weekly newspaper told NRC Next. "The German city is much bigger and cheaper. Berlin is an exciting city in a natural way."

Indeed, Amsterdam's size and notorious housing shortage has escalated to what many call the gentrification of the city. High housing and living expenses are driving out the younger, pioneering artist types. And, as the government seems bent on criminalising the practice of squatting, there is an undeniable change in the vibrant creative culture that once defined the city.

## From A to B

"In Berlin, the standard of living is really high and it has a lot of creative energy," says Edial Dekker (25), a Dutch native who has been living in Berlin for the past five months.

Dekker and his business partners chose to base their digital agency, Your Neighbours in Berlin because of its creative bustle, but also because of the low cost of living. According to figures

are natural elements of Berlin's creative climate that you do not find in modern Amsterdam.

"In Amsterdam, I get the feeling you're always too late," says Dekker. "You have to live in the centre or de Pijp, but it's already expensive there. In Berlin, the creative hub is always shifting, and it's still cheap."

## End of an era

Amsterdam was not always the crow-

**"Amsterdam's focus is creative industry - businesses, companies - it has nothing to do with artists."**

published in the Economist magazine's 2009 Worldwide Cost of Living Survey, Berlin is the lowest ranking European city in the top 50 at 49th place (Amsterdam ranks as 29th).

"Berlin is still poor, you have little money here. That's a big difference from Amsterdam for example," says Dekker. "It's very independent and creates a lot of energy."

Indeed, students, designers and creative types have been flocking to Berlin where cheap rents and a notorious nightlife foster a willingness to work for less. As a city that lacks a proper centre, a sense of independence and evolution

ded, expensive city it is today. In fact, the artistic elite in the capital look decidedly more put-together today than they did two decades ago when it was the creative crux of the country.

At that time, the face of creativity was found in the squatting movement. In a low-cost, dynamic atmosphere relative to what is being witnessed in today's Berlin, the squatters embodied the unique counter-culture that grew into the city's worldwide fame as an open, liberal society.

"Squat buildings became really successful, avant-garde art in Amsterdam," says Eva de Klerk, chairwoman of the

Guild of Industrial Buildings and former squatter.

By the late 90s, the government had become increasingly involved in the squatting movement, evicting these artists and advancing the gentrification of the city. According to De Klerk, this is also when the city launched initiatives aimed at providing artists with working space.

"The whole policy in Amsterdam of creating artist's space, its origins lie in the squatting movement," she says. "The initiatives were for young people who can't afford Amsterdam."

Despite the fact the government has established 50 locations with 2,500 workstations for artists and cultural entrepreneurs since 2000, De Klerk questions this top-down approach to creativity.

"Now the focus is more on the creative industry - business, architecture, companies - a higher segment than the starters," she says. "It has nothing to do with the artists."

Because the government is working alongside project developers and housing corporations on these initiatives, there are an increasing number of requirements and criteria needed before an artist gets the green light. Such restrictions may actually be alienating the creative community instead of energising them.

"Artists are quite independent and some don't want to get involved with this bureaucracy. They will go to Rotterdam, or Berlin," De Klerk says. "Although you will always find activity under the radar, it is the end of the creative times in Amsterdam in a way."

## Grass is greener

Unemployment in the Berlin is 14.2 percent according to national figures from 2008, more than twice that of Amsterdam at 6.6 percent. Even the city's Mayor Klaus Wowereit says, "Berlin is a sexy but poor city."

Edial too acknowledges the financial restrictions in the German capital. "People who are from Berlin always say the people here are temporary. They come for two or three years then they move to where the money is," he says.

Even De Klerk is sceptical of an artistic exodus out of Amsterdam. "People are always going to Berlin, I don't really believe there is a trend there," she assures.

As project initiator and developer of the largest hotbed for artistic talent in the Netherlands at the NDSM shipyards in Amsterdam Noord, De Klerk has a regular finger on the city's creative pulse.

For her, a vibrant creative climate needs only the power from the people. "You cannot force an exciting creative climate, it goes naturally," she says.

"If there's a real creative group in Amsterdam and they really want to make it, then they can make it for themselves."

## OV card causes fare hike

**THE HAGUE** | Deputy Transport Minister Tineke Huizinga (ChristenUnie) has ordered an investigation into hidden price rises connected to the OV-chip pass. The electronic travel card is said to be making rail or bus fees more expensive than under the paper system. An economic stability programme opposes unwarranted price rises, and research from the SP party shows prices have gone up by 5 percent on average, with buses in Arnhem ranking the highest at 22 percent. With the OV-chip pass, travellers pay for the number of kilometres travelled, rather than for the previous zone method.

## Eleven Dutch dead in Haiti

**HAITI** | The Foreign Ministry says that seven of the 11 Dutch citizens reported missing in Haiti are dead. The remains of the travellers were buried in a temporary grave on 18 January. A remembrance ceremony was held outside the hotel where the bodies were discovered, with honorary consul and the Dutch marines present. DNA testing is still needed to confirm the deaths. In another hotel, two more Dutch travellers were presumed to have perished. There are still no reports on the possible whereabouts of the final two missing. Haiti experienced an earthquake of 7.1 magnitude on 12 January, killing over 150,000 people.



## Journalist's charges dropped

**THE HAGUE** | The Hague's Public Prosecutor (OM) will no longer prosecute De Telegraaf journalist, Jolande van der Graaf, the office announced on 26 January. Van der Graaf was suspected of receiving and publishing state secrets first in an article on Iraq and later on threats against the Dalai Lama. The journalist, along with a former employee of the secret service AIVD and an employee of the department are also involved in the investigation. The OM said Van der Graaf used material from AIVD investigation techniques, including eavesdropping to obtain sensitive material. The two co-defendants will face trial later this year.

## US: Dutch stay in Uruzgan

**THE HAGUE** | US Vice President Joe Biden has expressed the need for continued Dutch support in the ISAF mission to the Afghan province of Uruzgan. On 20 January, the VP spoke with Deputy Prime Minister Wouter Bos (PvdA). According to the White House website, Biden thanked Bos for the Dutch contribution to the security and development efforts in Afghanistan. He also said he wanted to resume discussions about a joint strategy in Afghanistan. The Dutch government would like another NATO country to take over efforts in Uruzgan when the mission ends in August. A decision is expected in March.

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