

double Dutch

At Amsterdam's new concept hotels, fashion and design converge to flout the conventional hospitality experience

Text **Natalie Dixon** Photographs **Lisa Dickinson-Blundell**, **Masha Osipova** (portrait)



Guests relax at Snel restaurant at Amsterdam's Lloyd Hotel & Cultural Embassy in the Netherlands. OPPOSITE The Manray's Eyes room by Dutch design studio INA MATT's Arjan Benning is just one of the many inspired accommodation options at Hotel The Exchange in the capital.

LEISURE TRAVEL

Suzanne Oxenaar weaves her way through the pedestrian traffic of Amsterdam, making a U-turn to face me. She shamelessly sidles up to strangers, gently manoeuvring them sideways into the entrance of Hotel The Exchange. People shuffle past unconcerned, eyeballing her, but from where I'm standing the concept behind her new project becomes clear. Suzanne is creative director of Amsterdam's newest 'fashion hotel' and one of the city's strongest creative voices. Her inspiring, flamboyant and often subversive perspective is producing entirely original travel experiences.

The Exchange is positioned on an overcrowded pedestrian artery, called Damrak, on the border of the city's infamous red-light district. It's an unimpressive address – although the area has been spruced up recently, through an urban renewal effort, to reflect a more diverse and fashionable look. Damrak, once Amsterdam's busiest canal, is sometimes referred to as the 'Red Carpet' into the city. If you've ever visited the capital, you'll remember exiting from the stately Centraal station, seeing the beginnings of quaint canals and then running the gamut of 'High in Amsterdam' T-shirt vendors on Damrak as you head into the city centre, Dam Square. Suzanne, sometimes more artist than creative director, nestled her glamorous new fashion hotel in between a French-fry stand and a shawarma takeaway. Like most of her hotel projects, it echoes the city's philosophy. There are some rules, but few norms; every experience is up for inspection and then disruption.

Through Suzanne's eyes, the hotel structure was a body in need of 'dressing'. Her animated performance on the pavement illustrated how Damrak was reinvented as the hotel's unofficial urban 'catwalk'.

Working with her long-time business partner Otto Nan, Suzanne interviewed bright young students from the Amsterdam Fashion Institute as her new design team for The Exchange. Afterwards, the crew followed her into a makeshift studio in a disused building adjacent to the hotel. The brief: to 'dress' the hotel's bare rooms as models. This style concept was now in the hands of twenty-something design talents under the tutelage of Dutch studio INA MATT. The process yielded rooms modelled on abstract fashion themes such as T-shirt creases, skirt pleats and Marie Antoinette panniers. Less literal themes saw rooms modelled on nostalgia, wallflowers and misunderstood creatures. The fashion metaphor ran undaunted throughout the hotel – fixed structures turned into fashion accessories. The reception

desk became a giant handbag, the light fixtures a necklace and the lobby coated a fleshy pink.

Amsterdam is a city constantly moving: like its canals, there's a fluidity that characterises the lived experience. Pop-up shops and restaurants merrily come and go. Just a stone's throw from Hotel The Exchange a young English ad-guy-turned-organic-cook started a pop-up brunch on the Brouwersgracht in the autumn. By winter, he'd disappeared. Further downstream a temporary gallery shop

near Dam Square showcased a selection of lunar-inspired accessories: passports to the moon, 'moon' Coke and moon boots – a concept store not completely out of place in the capital.

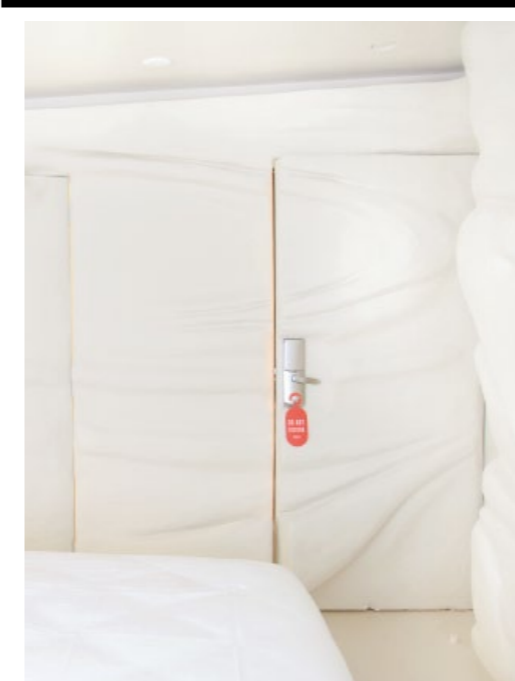
As a city, Amsterdam has plenty of experience in bucking convention. Which is why projects such as The Exchange and sister hotel the Lloyd flourish. The seven-year-old Lloyd Hotel & Cultural Embassy was initially a lowly immigrant hotel, then a youth detention centre. It was a depressing place with narrow corridors and low ceilings. Now it's often described as a design hotel, a reinvention at the hands of Suzanne and Otto, and the eminent Dutch architectural firm, MVRDV.

The premise rested on turning the building into a cultural embassy, not just a hotel, meaning that creatives needed to feel at home there.

For most of the year, the Lloyd is overrun with international artists, jewellery designers, ceramicists and industrial designers who reside in or visit Amsterdam. Occasionally they take over rooms and create unforgettable pop-up exhibition spaces. Documentary makers use it to show their films to guests. Cello players crank up the volume in the evening. Shoe designers hijack the bar area. There are often design talks and international collaborations,

orchestrated by Suzanne and her team. It's meant to breed ideas by inference and inspiration. It's undoubtedly one of the hippest places in the city for a coffee, a meal, and people-watching.

As with The Exchange, guests can choose their star rating – the 117 rooms range from one star to five. The Lloyd's guest book proffers hundreds of comments from a global creative community, praising the hotel's innovation, often zooming in on tongue-in-cheek features, such as the bed designed to sleep eight people, or the communal bathrooms. □ **Lloyd Hotel & Cultural Embassy;** lloydhotel.com; **Hotel The Exchange,** exchangeamsterdam.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Suzanne Oxenaar, creative director behind the concepts of Hotel The Exchange and sister establishment, the Lloyd; quirky tea-making facilities at the Lloyd; quirky tea-making facilities at the Lloyd; Snel restaurant lives up to its name as a cool 'fast' dining spot; even the designer handbags and purses at Options! department store at The Exchange are statement pieces; creative lift interiors at The Exchange; the Lloyd offers a comfortable reading space for guests; The Pleats room by Paul Hanraets at The Exchange was inspired by the effects of a creased white T-shirt; The Eighties room by Roos Soetekouw is designed in bold, graphic fabrics, so that guests sleep in the middle of what appears to be an oversized jumper and a tight miniskirt. OPPOSITE Guests can take time out in one of the many common areas at the Lloyd Hotel.



An image from the work 'Warriors' by Cuban-American photographer Anthony Goicolea hangs above a designer chair at the Lloyd. OPPOSITE A lone light bulb suspended from the ceiling of the Live Hand Drawing room by Iris Kloppenburg at The Exchange. The walls are adorned with artistic arrangements of electrical cord.



EAT AT

Hotel The Exchange's snack and coffee bar, **Stock**, provides delicious soups, artisanal bread, local coffee and bespoke Stock marmalades. **Damrak 50H, 1012 LL, Amsterdam, stockamsterdam.com**

Gartine restaurant, with its random opening times, offers home-grown produce, slow-food formulae and cakes delicious enough to warrant a second helping. Make sure you have a reservation. **Taksteeg 7, 1012 PB Amsterdam, gartine.nl**

Proef is an eatery originally conceptualised by food designer Marije Vogelzang. It boasts eccentric interior touches, a taster menu and delicious, unfussy, organic dishes. **Goschalklaan 12, 1014 DC Amsterdam, proefamsterdam.nl**

SHOP AT

Options! is the designer department store of Hotel The Exchange. It's stocked with sublime interior decor items from Japan, South America, South Africa and beyond. **Damrak 49, 1012 LL Amsterdam, optionsamsterdam.com**

The Otherist sells curiosities and design trinkets. Many up-and-coming local designers stock their goods here. **Leliegracht 6, winkel 1015 DE Amsterdam, otherist.com**

Restored, near Centraal station, is a platform for talented young designers and makes their innovative, handmade items available in small quantities to the public. **Haarlemmerdijk 39, 1013 Amsterdam, restored.nl**

On a Monday morning the **Noordermarkt** market, next to the Noorderkerk, spills out onto the pavement with Amsterdam's finest bric-a-brac: antlers, vintage Burberry trenches, fur throws, postcards and books. On Saturdays it turns into an organic market. Catch the oyster shucker, crêpe maker and cheese *boers* early.

ART THAT WON'T BORE

W139 is a space for a motley crew of German hipsters, as well as fun events. It's not only one of the coolest galleries for emerging art and performance but also a party venue. **w139.nl**

Visit **Huis Marseille** photographic museum for its well-curated work. Catch South African photographer Guy Tillim's exhibition *Second Nature* here from 2 March to 3 June 2012. **huismarseille.nl**

FOAM Editions is the new talent store of the photo gallery Foam and sells prints from emerging international photographers at affordable prices. **foam.org/foam-editions**