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TAKING THE INITIATIVE



A short walk from Amsterdam Centraal station, where the new direct Eurostar service from London comes gliding in, is coworking space Spring House. From the back, you can see the train tracks and hear the rumbling of carriages, while from the front there are views of the River IJ, Amsterdam's waterfront.

The area was once less than salubrious, and associated with drugs and prostitution. But Spring House – a former distillery and tin can factory – was given a new lease of life when it was saved from dereliction by a group focused on creating social change within the city. Open since 2015, Spring House now has more than 200

By 2025, the Amsterdam Economic Board has hopes for the city to be among Europe's top three regions for innovation. What is it doing to achieve this?



members, plus a buzzing ground-floor restaurant called Choux that is proving popular with its neighbours.

Spring House was founded by Vandejong Creative Agency, independent curator Joanna van der Zanden and Kennisland, an incubator for societal innovation. With its vibrant red frontage and interior adorned with mid-century leather sofas, art books and pot plants, the aim was to provide a setting for “sharing ideas and putting them into action”. At the very least, it's a pleasant, light-filled place to settle down with a laptop.

Over a cup of herbal tea, Thijs van Exel, social innovation advisor for Kennisland, says: “We got some funding from a very benign government that saw the need for rejuvenation of this area. There is a lot of room for entrepreneurs to do new and innovative things. You can get things done really quickly. And [travel booking website] Booking.com is opening a new office at the end of the street. It has plenty of money, so it must have chosen this site for a reason – there is something interesting going on.”

FUTURE-PROOFING AMSTERDAM

By 2025 the Amsterdam metropolitan area intends to become one of the top-three most innovative regions in Europe. To achieve its goal of becoming smart, healthy and green, it has set itself five ambitious urban challenges: it wants to develop a “circular economy” whereby resources are recycled, reused and repurposed; public transport will become emission-free; it will be a leader in digital connectivity; it will future-proof its jobs market by →

ABOVE LEFT:
The exterior of Spring House
ABOVE RIGHT:
Its interiors are peppered with comfortable leather seating and pot plants

empowering citizens to develop the skills they need to stay relevant; and inhabitants will be able to expect an additional two, bright-eyed years of life.

The organisation tasked with bringing this vision to life is the Amsterdam Economic Board (amsterdameconomicboard.com), which was set up in 2010 to bring together businesses, government and knowledge institutes. I speak to Nina Tellegen, director of the board, about the “bottom-up” approach the city has to problem-solving. “We want to be ahead of things – that might have to do with our history; we were always threatened by the water and it meant we had a tendency to collaborate. We are a very non-hierarchical society. It’s in our culture to do things together. All the major issues confronting us – climate change, overpopulation – we need innovation to deal with them.”

SMART THINKING

There are dozens of initiatives that are already underway. Schiphol airport aims to become zero-waste by 2030 by using technical fixes such as airside fleets of electric buses, carpets made from recycled KLM uniforms, separating out the plastics used in aircraft catering, and buying electricity from local wind farms. Meanwhile, the Amsterdam branch of French advertising company JCDcaux decided to take back lease cars from employees and instead give them free electric bikes, public transport passes and a pay rise. Elsewhere, the city’s rooftops are being turned into gardens, and coding is being taught in schools.

Cornelia Dinca is the delegations lead for Amsterdam Smart City (amsterdamsmartcity.com), an EU-funded pilot that has now been incorporated into the Amsterdam Economic Board. She says: “We talk about social and technological

A blockchain currency is being used by De Ceuvel residents to buy and trade renewable electricity



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The café at De Ceuvel; Hotel Asile Flottant; the hotel’s interior; rooftop gardens are being planted throughout the city

innovations but we don’t believe that once you have sensors everywhere you become a ‘smart’ city. We are interested in how the city remains attractive and competitive. A smart city is about engaging community members and organisations in an open, transparent platform.”

One of the projects Dinca highlights is a “living lab and clean tech playground” called De Ceuvel (deceuvel.nl/en) in Amsterdam Noord, on the other side of the River IJ. The De Ceuvel community occupies a former shipyard and now has its own sustainable café, boardwalk, office spaces for rent and floating bed and breakfast accommodation, Hotel Asile Flottant (asileflottant.com). Dinca says: “They have houseboats on land for creative companies and artists, and each one generates electricity from solar panels and composts kitchen waste. They even have their own digital currency.” What she refers to is the Jouliette, a blockchain-based currency that is being used by residents to buy and trade renewable electricity within a localised “smart grid”.

Whether or not you make it over to De Ceuvel, travellers coming to the city will still get a sense of innovation taking place. I was driven around in one of taxi company Bios-groep’s Tesla Model Xs, a state-of-the-art electric SUV with Batmobile-like doors. And for those with flexible travel policies, there are hotels such as →





FIVE SMART CITY INITIATIVES

TURNING RAINWATER INTO BEER Hemelswater (pictured below) is Amsterdam's first rainwater brewery, taking advantage of the city's high rainfall by collecting it with specially installed tanks across the city. The aim is to install 200 units that will catch 200,000 litres of water for use before it reaches the sewers.

3D PRINTING FOR EVERYONE Described as an "innovation playground", the 3D Makers Zone (3dmakerszone.com) allows companies and entrepreneurs to 3D print designs without having to invest in the hardware themselves. People can print prototypes, learn how to use the equipment, and share ideas with others to speed up the development process.

SOLAR PANELS ON ROOFS The Solar Coalition (zoncoalitie.nl) is encouraging the owners of buildings with large expanses of rooftop to install solar panels on them. They can then sell the power or use it themselves. This spring, Nissan Motor Parts Centre, for example, completed the largest solar roof in the Netherlands.

PUTTING FOOD WASTE ON THE MENU InStock (instock.nl) has set itself the task of rescuing perfectly good food that has been discarded from supermarkets and turning it into tasty dishes in its restaurants. So far there are three outlets. The Amsterdam branch serves dishes such as chipotle nachos, fish burritos made from crooked cuts, and spicy falafel salads.

PLANTING TOWER BLOCK BALCONIES Supported by donations, Urban Street Forest (urbanstreetforest.com) assists tower block residents to plant trees on their balconies. And for every tree planted in the city, another one is planted in the developing world to help combat desertification.

Visit amsterdamsmartcity.com for more information





GETTING THERE BY EUROSTAR

Eurostar launched its direct route from London to Amsterdam on April 4, although the return journey still has to go via Brussels. The journey time, with a stop in Rotterdam, is three hours 41 minutes (four hours 40 minutes on the return). There are two departures a day from London St Pancras International (at 0831 and 1731) with prices from £35 one-way.

When will the Amsterdam-London route be direct? A spokesperson for Eurostar says: "We will run a direct service in both directions as soon as the UK and Dutch governments finalise an agreement allowing immigration and passport controls to be carried out by the border authorities on departure in the Netherlands, as is the case with other key Eurostar destinations. The governments have given their commitment to this by the end of next year." eurostar.com



the Movement (themovementhotel.com), which is run by refugees inside a former prison; the Volkshotel (volkshotel.nl/en), known for its expansive communal workspace; and the Crane Hotel Faralda (faralda.com), which has three suites at the top of an industrial crane. IHG also opened the QO (qo-amsterdam.com) in the spring, which has a rooftop greenhouse and small fish farm that supplies its restaurants.

To get a sense of how innovation is changing the way we travel, I stopped by the Zoku (livezoku.com), up the road from Marriott's new Apollo hotel. Now two years old, the Zoku can be called a "hybrid hotel-office" with modular apartments and co-working space on the top floor with panoramic views. Beautiful, fresh food (mainly vegetarian) is served buffet-style throughout the day, there are meeting rooms with whiteboard walls for delegates to write directly on to, and a couple of ping pong tables. The concept is already catching on among corporates, with companies



ABOVE LEFT: The greenhouse at hotel-office Zoku
ABOVE RIGHT: Rooms at Movement hotel are in former prison cells

such as Nike, Netflix, Uber and Tesla reportedly putting their employees up in the apartment-hotel.

Zoku co-founder Hans Meyer (who was also one of the founding partners of Dutch hotel chain Citizen M), says: "With Airbnb and coworking coming up, we wanted to create a hybrid of those two models. If people live and work in a city that they don't know very well and don't know other people, after a few days they start to feel disconnected. The majority of hotel lobbies are empty in the day, but not here, as people are working."

Spend a little time in inspiring Amsterdam, and you may just find you have your next creative breakthrough. 