Amsterdam

Post-World War II History and Culture

Wendy Jones

13th June – 17th June
Introduction
My travel scholarship granted by the University of Leicester allowed me to fund a rewarding journey to explore the capital of the Netherlands. My main aim of this trip was to divulge deeper into the immense history and impact that World War II had on The Netherlands. I have a special interest in the architecturally preserved monuments and museums that have been dedicated to telling the story that occurred between 1940 to 1945. During this trip I was also able to explore the influences of modernism architecture on the post-war rebuilding of the country. This opportunity has provided me with invaluable historical and cultural experiences that have helped me to develop greater independence and insight into what the world has to offer.

13th June
My trip to Amsterdam started out with me meeting up with my 3 friends and flying for an hour on the morning of the 13th June. Once we landed, we purchased a week combined ticket which would allow us unlimited travel on the tram, bus and train. This was a great idea because it allowed us to be completely independent and plan our day accordingly – it also meant we saved a lot of money by avoiding the use of taxi’s. The location of our hotel was just a tram ride away from the centre of Amsterdam so we decided to take the afternoon to rest and recuperate so that we could go out and explore in the evening. During this time, we started pre-planning the attractions and routes we would use so that everyone would be able to see the sites they wanted during our holiday. In the early evening (after a quick nap!) we headed out to the centre of Amsterdam to where the restaurant and bar strip were. We ended up in Zero20 where we had a chance to catch up and even meet some local Dutch people who recommended some great places to eat. On our way back to our hotel, we walked through ‘De Wallen’ which is internationally known as the Red-Light district. For everyone in our group it was both a strange and surreal experience. During the beginning of World War 2 when Germany first occupied The Netherlands, the Red-light district continued to operate however the industry soon took a big hit. Once the German government implemented a curfew it was increasingly hard for the workers to make any money during the evening and night time. In addition to the curfew, the rapid decline in international trade coming into the Amsterdam meant that the number of customers also decreased which forced the industry to move from front windows into the underground. Our night
ended in Dam square where we visited the National monument. Dam Square is famously known for the shooting that occurred on 7th May 1945 by the Germans during World War II which resulted in 22 deaths, and for the 1980 Queen Beatrix coronation riots which is known as the biggest post war disturbances in the Netherlands. In 1956, Queen Juliana unveiled the historic liberty pole that was commissioned to remember those who gave their lives during the second world war. Architecturally stunning, the liberty pole is inscribed with verses from a poem by Anthonie Donker. Jacobus Oud, John Radecker and his 2 sons were the architects behind the concept which includes a sculpture of 4 men chained to represent the Dutch resistance and the suffering that people endured. Jacobus Oud is well known for being the Rotterdam Municipal housing Architect and his influences are seen extensively around the world especially in America where his style acts as the basis for the modernist movement.

14th June
We started the day exploring the Homomonument which is dedicated to the LGBT community who were persecuted by the Nazi’s for their sexuality. We were lucky enough to eavesdrop on a guide giving a tourist tour where we learnt that in 1970, several LGBT activists attempted to create a wreath in Dam square which was quickly destroyed by the Dutch police. However, after nearly a decade of fundraising €200,000, the Dutch gay and lesbian rights committee won the right to have permanent memorial built. The triangle designed by Karin Daan has significant World War II homage as each point of the triangle points to the National War Memorial, Anne Frank house and the COC Netherlands Dutch gay rights group. We visited the Beurs van Berlage building where the Amsterdam commodities exchange now resides. The building is comprised of 3 great halls and has stunning halls that connect them. The presence of iron beams, gable roofs and flat brick arches is characteristic of the architectural work designed by the world renown ‘Father of Modernism’ Hendrik Petrus Berlage. His strong influence on European architecture is recognisable in many other buildings such as the Rijksmuseum and even St Pancreas station in London. We had a lovely lunch by the Van Gogh Museum before we explored the renown Banksy museum. It was great to able view works by modern artistic genius known as Banksy!

15th June
The majority of this day was dedicated to exploring the Rijksmuseum. The Rijksmuseum is one of the national institutions and it proudly celebrated its 200th anniversary in 2018. With over 200 paintings, there was so much for us to explore that we ended up spending close to 5 hours there alone! During World War 2, Hitler wanted to create a ‘Führermuseum’ in Austria which would house the greatest
artworks of Europe. However, in order for him to do so he set orders for the Third Reich to seize all art and destroy all works that he deemed inadequate. In order to prevent valuable artefacts from being seized by the German occupiers, secret bunkers were used to store a multitude of private collections including the Rembrandt’s Night watch. Interestingly enough, in order to maintain secrecy, there was no record kept of what artworks were stored in which bunkers and whom the rightful owners were. This was mainly to allow protection for the Jewish collectors but caused a huge problem when it came to the time to return the paintings to the rightful owners. This is where ‘The Monuments Men’ come in. A small group of men and women were involved and managed to save millions of pieces of European art work from falling into the hands of Hitler and the Third Reich. One of my more notable memories of the museum was touring around the paintings from the Dutch Golden Age. The Golden Age was dominated with Dutch artistic leaders in still life, portrait and landscape paintings with the likes of Frans Hals and Rembrandt leading in their respective fields. After viewing a couple of exhibitions as a group, we split up to allow us to gain further in-depth insights into our personal interests. I spent a majority of the time exploring the Dutch involvement in World War 1 and 2. During World War 1, The Netherlands remained as a neutral country which allowed them to establish themselves as a colonial trading power. The trade of handmade objects, life science and technology strengthened their position as one of the leading countries in the world after the industrial revolution. This hard work was unfortunately undone by the danger of fascism, the international financial crash and most importantly the 5-year German invasion during May 1940. The museum housed some incredible original artworks from the 1940’s including original copies of the Deutsche Zeitung in den Niederlanden which were propaganda newspapers that the Nazi’s published in order to reach a Dutch audience. On display in the Rijksmuseum was a concentration camp coat belonging to Isabel Wachenheimer who was a holocaust survivor. In October 1944, Isabel alongside 500 other Jewish women were sent from the Auschwitz death camp to the Labour camp in Austria. Right below her jacket is her family photo album that her mother had diligently maintained after the Wachenheimers had to flee from Germany to the Netherlands. A second exhibition I visited documented the rebuild and recovery of the Netherlands thanks to the economic aid received from the United States. One of the more notable sculptures was the model of the Kernhuis. The Kernhuis was created by Gerrit Rietveld who aimed to create social housing that was practical and included essential functional elements. This was due to the high deficit of affordable mass housing post war. Shortly after the Second World War, a new era of artists evolved who used freedom from the German occupation as inspiration to spur their creativity in a free society. After spending the large part of the day at the museum, we went on to visit the lamsterdam sign located
near the A’DAM lookout swing. We had to take a ferry to cross the canal and once we were there, we got a great skyline view of the whole city. We concluded the night with a fun night out.

16th June

After the previous long day, we decided to have a late lunch near the Anne Frank museum. It was highly unfortunate that we didn’t manage to get pre-booked tickets and judging by the queue leading around the block it seemed unlikely that we would get tickets at the door. The Anne Frank Diaries is one of the most well-known diaries published in the world. It depicts the story of a Jewish girl and the hardships her family endured during World War 2. Like many other Jewish families whom had to flee from Germany, The Netherlands was the first point of call for safety. There is an abundance of architecturally preserved monuments in Amsterdam but just seeing the museum that now stands at Prinsengracht 263 further emphasis’ the importance that Amsterdam places on liberation and freedom. A great recommendation from the hotel was to go on a small traditional boat cruise. Over the past decade the expansion of tourism has meant that a lot of the canals have been over populated with big fast tourism boats that can accommodate up to 100 passengers. We opted to go for a more intimate family led company that could accommodate 30 passengers and the experience was amazing! Rick and Eva who were our live tour guides, had a wealth of knowledge that they shared with us. It was great to ask question and hear their personal anecdotes/stories, secrets of Amsterdam and historical facts about World War 2.

17th June

On our last day, we opted for an early breakfast so that we could travel and visit the Albert Cuypmarkt which is the largest street market in Amsterdam with over 260 stands. The liveliness and abundance of culture spoke loudly to represent all the different ethnicities of Amsterdam’s residents. The market
originated in the 19th century and had to be regulated by the government in 1905. As we walked up the street market it was clear to see the diversity and wide range of produce, products and food that were available - The freshly made stroopwafels which are a Dutch delicacy were delicious and we were sure to take plenty for our family back home. We were lucky enough to get talking to some of the stall holders who had been working there for decades. I expected to find out that the market completely closed down at the start of World War 2, however I later found out that the market continued running during the war until it could no longer do so. Prior to the war, about a third of market sellers were Jewish so when the Germans did invade, the market did reduce in size which had financial and practical repercussions. After purchasing souvenirs and Dutch snacks to take home, we headed back to the airport to return home.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, my week adventure to Amsterdam allowed me to complete all my objectives for that trip. It has shown me the influence key post-war architects had on the development of modern architecture and the steps a city can take to rebuild itself after such tragedy. It was highly interesting to evaluate the results of how the Dutch government maintained a clever balance of modern tourism in combination with the preservation of valuable history. The trip has been a rewarding end to the year and a great refresher before I start my Year in Industry. I would definitely recommend Amsterdam as a place to visit – even if it’s for a quick city break!

**Itinerary**

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