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TURN OUT THE RED LIGHTS

CHANGE COMES TO AMSTERDAM'S
BEST-KNOWN TOURIST ATTRACTION

BY SHARON ZUKIN

The Prostitution Information Center is situated in a small storefront on a narrow street in the oldest part of Amsterdam, a few steps from the city's oldest church. Mariska Majoor, a former prostitute who founded the center in 1994, takes my name and collects 14.95 euros for a guided tour around the red-light district, the only place in the world—except for Bangkok—where women in fancy underwear stand in red-lit windows, selling sex.

Next door a shop sells juice and Coca-Cola, toilet paper and paper towels, condoms and lubricating jelly. In the windows beyond the shop, three women stand waiting for customers. One raps on the window to tell me to move because I am blocking her view of potential clients. More important, I am blocking their view of her.

The windows of the red-light district are not only Amsterdam's best-known tourist attraction, luring a good portion of the nearly 5 million visitors who come here every year, they are also a lightning rod for the city's politicians, who want to clean up the district and turn it into a shopping and entertainment center. But Project 1012, the redevelopment plan named for the area's postal code, is not the same as bringing Disney into Times Square. Amsterdam's politics and history make a complicated brew.

Like Times Square and other urban centers where prostitutes once shared the streets with drug dealers, con artists and drunks, Amsterdam's red-light district is valuable real estate in a great location. But unlike in other places, redevelopment here is an enigma wrapped in a paradox.

The paradox comes from the legalization of prostitution in the Netherlands 11 years ago. The city government can't get rid of the district now because sex workers have every right to do their jobs, and they say they don't need pimps. Unlike streetwalkers, who are illegal, some window prostitutes

claim that displaying their bodies in public view protects them from danger.

The women size up prospective clients and choose men who don't look drunk, drugged or prone to violence. Sometimes a prostitute smiles and flirts or knocks on the window to attract the attention of a man passing by. On my tour, I saw one woman, whose ample charms were barely confined by her black bra, laugh and mimic a young man playing air guitar on the sidewalk outside her window. At another window, after catching someone's eye, a young blonde woman



opened her door to chat. “You can come in,” I heard her say with a Polish accent.

The tiny rooms behind the windows feature a panic button that a prostitute can press to ring an alarm. Even when the red velvet curtains are closed, Amsterdam’s sex workers feel the police are working with them, not against them.

The legal situation makes for a thriving economy. Not only do prostitutes work as independent contractors, the room rental agents who manage the leases for their eight-hour shifts and the building owners earn a ton of money.

On Saturday nights, when young male tourists roam the streets, they throng the bars, sex shops and coffeehouses that legally sell small amounts of marijuana and hashish. Although the government says many of them are tied to organized crime, these establishments own a lot of real estate in the district.

Legalizing window prostitutes gives the government a way to control the sex business. Human traffickers who force women, especially foreigners, to do sex work are supposedly stymied by legal registration. The room rental agents must check the women’s passports to see that they are citizens of countries in the European Union. Legalization also allows the government to tax prostitutes’ income.

But legalizing prostitution doesn’t change the in-your-face display of bodies for sale. Though Amsterdam residents say the windows have been a part of the city’s culture for 50 years, the frontal view of near-naked bodies can be hard for Americans, especially women, to take. Nor does legalization eliminate marijuana fumes or the trashy neon lights of coffeehouses, sex shops and bars. The red-light district—where everything is allowed—looks less like a dream and more like a dump.

Shortly after prostitution was made legal, the Dutch came up with a law to make the red-light district smaller and reduce the number of windows. The government can deny a business license to anyone suspected of criminal activity. Applied to the red-light district, it has forced brothel owners like “Fat” Charlie Geerts to sell their buildings to the social housing corporations that already own two thirds of the city’s rental apartments.

Between 2007 and 2010, these forced sales reduced the number of prostitution windows from almost 500 to about 400. Now the city government aims to cut the number to fewer than 300 and concentrate them in fewer blocks. This will free historic buildings—many classified

as national monuments—for renovation and new use.

Politicians want to stamp out crime and defuse charges of human trafficking. In this case they have been joined by luxury hotels and stores that will benefit if the city sweeps the open sex trade away from their properties. For the housing corporations, benefits will come from renovating historic buildings, many with canal views, into expensive apartments.

Most Amsterdammers cannot afford to buy an apartment in the center, and they resent what they see as government-sponsored gentrification. Some local residents, moreover, say they want the area to retain its randy charm—especially since an expanded police presence and closed-circuit television cameras have greatly reduced crime. For now, Project 1012 is stalled because the city

government cannot afford to buy more buildings. But it still encourages upscale restaurants to take the place of tawdry coffeehouses. The enigma of redevelopment is that the government is spreading gentrification.

I don’t like to see gentrification come to any low-rent neighborhood, but this isn’t a low-rent area. Prostitutes pay 85 to 180 euros per eight-hour shift to rent a ground-floor room with a single bed and a window. A building owner

earns \$36,000 a month in rent for the continuous use of his windows—and most building owners in the red-light district have multiple business interests. Which is better: window prostitution or family-style gentrification?

Fantasy and anonymous sex play an important social role in cities—but where is their place? Since the 1960s many ports have lost their economic value, requiring a shift from traditional pleasures offered to sailors on shore to different kinds of entertainment. Amsterdam should not be Disneyfied, but it’s hard to see why the city should continue to devote such a prominent place to prostitution.

At the end of the PIC tour, my guide offers to take a photo of me sitting on a red plush chair in the storefront window. I remove my jacket and fantasize that I have a price tag on my breasts and thighs. It’s not a pleasant feeling.

Then it is nearly dark and the crowd slowly shifts from a mix of casual shoppers to groups of men. By nine o’clock the only women on the streets here will be standing behind plate glass.

*Sharon Zukin is author of *Naked City* and a professor of sociology at Brooklyn College.*



A change is gonna come: A prostitute in Amsterdam solicits clients.