

‘Venice of the North’?

Ten Years of World Heritage in the Amsterdam Canal District: An Exploration of Effects

Jaap Evert ABRAHAMSE, Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands, The Netherlands

Erik SCHMITZ, Amsterdam City Archives, The Netherlands

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Fig. 1. Amsterdam Canal District World Heritage Site and buffer zone

‘The worst of it is, that by watching for half an hour this masquerade in the sun, we ourselves lose the sense of solid reality, and instead of the walls of the [Ducal] palace making the actors seem real, it is the actors who make the palace seem fake’.¹

In March 2020, Amsterdam went into lockdown because of the Covid pandemic. For the first time in years, the city could be experienced without tourists. In the empty city the overwhelming effects of tourism became painfully clear. Parts of the inner city that had been taken over by mass tourism became accessible to residents for the first time in years.

¹ ‘Il peggio si è che a fissare per mezz’ora quella mascherata al sole, noi stessi perdiamo il senso della solida realtà, e non le mura del palazzo [ducale] ci fanno sembrare vere le comparses, ma le comparses ci fanno sembrare finto il palazzo’: Ugo Ojetti, *Cose viste*, vol. I, 1921-1927 (quoted in: Pemble 1995, 2).

In the Dutch Golden Age, Amsterdam was compared to Venice, because it had taken over its role as the dominant trade hub in Europe (Abrahamse, 2019; Abrahamse and Rutte, 2021) and because of its position of dominance within the Dutch Republic. Nowadays there is another reason to make the comparison: in Amsterdam, like in Venice, the consequences of tourism are beginning to take on worrying proportions. In this paper, we will integrate a series of large datasets, which have been made available by the municipal government, the national government, and other institutions. By connecting and interpreting these data, which reflect factors such as real estate value, visitor numbers, hotel development, vacation rentals, and mobility patterns, we will analyze recent developments in and around the city centre.

Amsterdam has been a popular tourist destination since the seventeenth century, resulting in mentions in a great many publications aiming at travellers (see the thematic website *Visiting the Golden Age* at www.rkd.nl). After the first historical topography of the city was published in Latin in 1611, many would follow (Verbaan, 2011). The city has been extensively covered in travel guides since the rise of modern tourism in the nineteenth century (Vroom, 2008). The famous ring of canals has been a place of interest to international visitors since its construction in the early seventeenth century. Tourism experienced a boost in 2010, when a part of Amsterdam's inner city was awarded the status of world heritage – a decision that was welcomed by both the hospitality industry and heritage action groups. The city was confronted with a surge in tourism, while the main discussions relating to the World Heritage status concerned its *visual integrity*. One of these was a conflict, now decided by the highest court, about high-rise buildings in the planned *Sluisbuurt* district, outside the buffer zone (Abrahamse and Kosian, 2019). A second issue was the advertising on scaffolding banners, which was banned in 2012 due to the designation of World Heritage. An unforeseen issue that might be related to the World Heritage status is the ongoing deterioration of bridges and quay walls, which seems to have accelerated in recent years. 135 of the 200 kilometres of quay wall and 750 of the 850 bridges were found to be unsafe (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2020). In several places, quay walls have collapsed. In the coming years, a large-scale renovation operation costing billions of euros needs to be carried out, with a major potential visual impact on the inner city, including the core area of the Canal District.

In this paper, we will look into the effects of the World Heritage status and the developments that have taken place in the past decade. We will take a brief look at some data (more to follow).

Hotel development

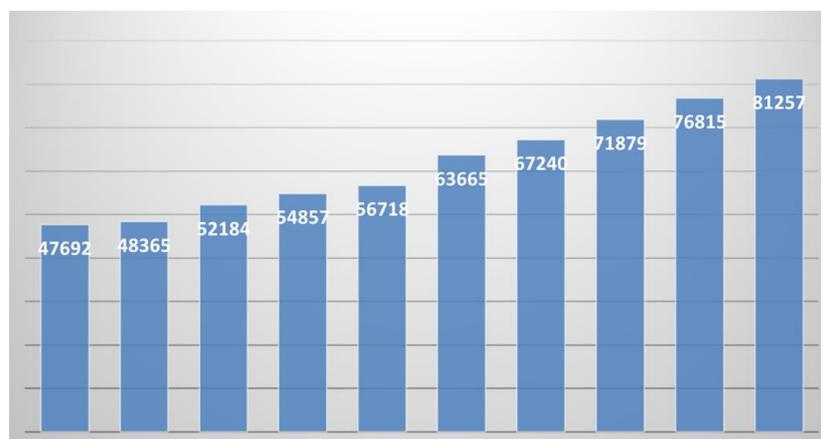


Fig. 2. Number of hotel beds in Amsterdam 2010-2019 (Source: Kerncijfers Amsterdam 2020)

The number of hotel beds in Amsterdam has been rising rapidly since 2010. Thousands of new beds were added every year. This is without a doubt the result of Amsterdam's increased appeal to international tourists, partly due to the World Heritage listing.

Housing prices

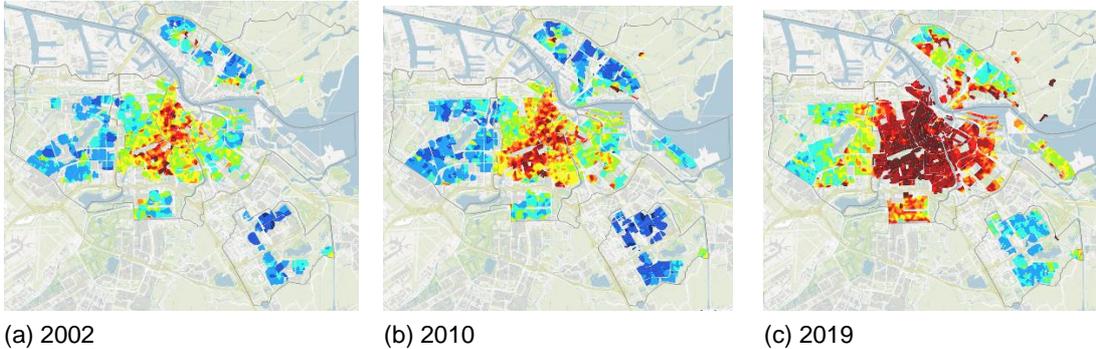


Fig. 3. House value in Amsterdam: selling price per square meter (source: <https://maps.amsterdam.nl/woningwaarde/>)

Housing prices in the centre rose sharply after 2010, with a radiating effect on surrounding districts. Although other factors have influenced this development, such as the increased economic importance of the Randstad area, and the limited volume of new housing that was built in recent years, the UNESCO-status has emphasized the unique qualities of the centre, which translates into selling value.

Some of the consequences of the World Heritage status were foreseeable, as they reinforced trends that had already begun: the growth of tourism and the subsequent development of ever more hotel capacity, the overcrowding and nuisance in the streets, an increasing monoculture in the retail sector and the catering industry. Others were entirely unexpected, such as the rise of the platform economy, which has led to large-scale renting out of homes to tourists – contributing to the increase in real estate prices and the housing crisis that the city is currently grappling with.

'Tourism, if not managed well, poses threats to World Heritage properties', according to the UNESCO World Heritage policy guidelines (UNESCO, s.d.). The question is: are tourism and its consequences manageable at all in the case of Amsterdam, as it is a sector with a huge and ever-growing impact on the regional economy, from which not only the sector itself but also homeowners also draw substantial financial benefit. The economic interests are so large that political support for controlling tourism seems to be lacking. In the past years, there have been initiatives to spread tourism across the region, but to date they have been nothing more than pipe dreams: in the long run, visitors of the region all want to see the one site that they come for: Amsterdam's canals.

An underlying question was never posed, but should have been a consideration: what exactly has the inscription on the World Heritage List yielded for Amsterdam's heritage? Amsterdam had already been a protected cityscape since the year 2000, and on that basis had already drawn up protective zoning plans, a building valuation map, policy documents on the appearance of buildings and the use of the canals, and several other policy documents that were (partly) aimed at protecting buildings and public spaces. The management plan drawn up in connection with the application was in fact no more than a confirmation of the status quo, as far as heritage protection was concerned.

Therefore, we could ask ourselves whether we should not have the State Party carry out an assessment of the effects of this status every time a site is nominated for the World Heritage List.

It would therefore be advisable to develop a tool for monitoring the effects of tourism based on the observations presented here and the crucial factors within them. This requires, to begin with, targeted visitor research by the city government. Why do people come to Amsterdam and what do they want to see? What is the World Heritage's share in that, and what role does the World Heritage status play in the choice of destination? With these data, choices in the marketing of Amsterdam can be more targeted. In this respect, the city can learn a lot from the practice of planning (green) recreational areas, where visitor numbers and visitor pressure (i.e. the number of visitors per square metre) are always taken into account, in order to steer flows through the spatial layout, the course of paths and the signposting, taking into account the available amount of public space and facilities such as hotels, restaurants, shops, etc. In this way, it is possible to respond to the maximum capacity of various areas in the city and to seek a better balance between living, working and tourism.

A truly attractive city is more than just an empty backdrop that only exists because of the attention of visitors. If tourism becomes more important than the city itself, the city will seem fake, like Ugo Ogetti described Venice in 1922.

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