

# THE CANALS OF AMSTERDAM

HOUSE BY HOUSE



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## The creation of the canal ring

The history of the famous ring of canals, from the Singel to the Prinsengracht, began in the sixteenth century. Medieval Amsterdam was bursting at the seams, as newcomers from all corners of the world travelled to the thriving port city. Among them were many people from the Southern Netherlands, travelling north after the fall of Antwerp in 1585. The city was enlarged at a rapid pace, once in 1585 and again in 1592. The old stone city walls along the inner side of the Singel were demolished and a strip of new land was created, turning the Singel into a residential canal instead of a defensive moat. New earthen walls were built, with bastions and gates and an outer cladding of bricks. On the inner side of this wall, a new and narrow canal was dug which later became the Herengracht. On the eastern side of the city, a new district was built outside the city walls: the Lastage (now the Nieuwmarkt area), primarily intended for shipyards and other industry.

These first and second expansions (known as the Eerste Uitleg and Tweede Uitleg in Dutch) soon proved inadequate. The city grew explosively, going from 30,000 inhabitants in 1585 to 100,000 in 1620; in other words, the population more than tripled. The city government decided to address the housing problem in rigorous fashion by significantly expanding the city with a ring of new canals on the west side of the city. To begin with, the port was relocated to the north-west side of the city. The defensive walls were then moved up, after which it was time to divide the area into new districts. This was easier said than done, however, because the new land was not vacant: dwellings had already been built outside the city walls, because newcomers had to live somewhere, after all. These structures were concentrated around the old drainage

ditches. To save costs, and fearing riots, the city government decided not to expropriate a part of the land but instead, to integrate the existing dwellings into the new districts. The Prinsengracht, dug in 1614 and named after the Prince of Orange, marked a dividing line: on the west side of this canal, the existing buildings were left intact. The placement and course of the old ditches and paths is still visible in the pattern of the streets in the Jordaan district today. The land on the city side of the Prinsengracht was expropriated, and the newcomers were forced to relocate. Regular, rectangular building blocks were planned on this land, creating a terrible fit with the irregular canals and streets of the Jordaan. The old moat was widened and christened the Herengracht, after the Heren Regeerders (lit. Lord Regents) of the city of Amsterdam. In 1615, an additional canal was dug; this was the Keizersgracht, named after Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I. Building the entire ring of canals from the IJ River to the Amstel in one go, would have placed such a financial burden on the city that the city government decided to implement the plan in stages. The first part of the canal ring stretched from Haarlemmerstraat to the Leidsegracht.

Why build all those canals, though? It may seem counterintuitive, but the truth is that digging canals was an absolute necessity. Amsterdam's soil consists primarily of boggy peat, making it difficult to build on. The earth that the digging of the canals produced, served to reinforce the land on which buildings were constructed. Shipping in earth from outside the city was kept to a minimum so as not to increase the costs of the project even further. The canals also drained excess water, and were of course used for the transportation of goods. In fact, Amsterdam's weak soil offered so little solidity that houses had to be supported by wooden poles, which were imported



from Germany and Scandinavia in huge numbers. Even today, new buildings have to be built on piles to prevent them from sinking into the squidgy ground.

The Herengracht and Keizersgracht were exclusively intended as luxury residential canals: all industry was kept well away from them. Shops and small companies were permitted in the side streets (now the Negen Straatjes, literally "Nine Little Streets"), while markets and ferry services were clustered around the quays of the Singel. The Prinsengracht served a dual function, allowing people to either live there, or set up a business and/or warehouse. The long, narrow lots along the canals were sold by auction, so that everyone with sufficient money could obtain a piece of land. The buyer of a lot was given first right to purchase an adjoining lot in order to build a double house, though some chose to build three smaller houses on two lots instead.

Although there were no restrictions on the width or height of houses or the shape of gables, buildings were not permitted to take up the entirety of the lots on the Herengracht and Keizersgracht: room had to be left for gardens behind the houses. House owners could choose to construct a gazebo at the back of the garden, but these were subject to a maximum height of ten feet, or two metres and eighty centimetres. Trees were planted along the quays, lining the canals with a profusion of greenery. The new canals were a great success, and within the shortest of times, all the lots had been sold and houses built on them.

It was not until 1660-1662 that the canals were extended from the Leidsegracht to the Amstel River, and even further to the IJ. This expansion is known as the Vierde Uitleg, or Fourth Expansion. This

time, the city government took a different tack: all land was expropriated and existing structures were demolished so that the streets could be laid out according to plan. Once again, it was possible to buy adjoining lots, and more than a few rich people purchased one or more lots on both the Herengracht and the Keizersgracht in order to build a town house on the prestigious Herengracht, a coach house on the Keizersgracht, and an enormous garden in-between. The stretch of the Herengracht between Leidsestraat and Vijzelstraat is known as the Gouden Bocht, or Golden Bend, due to the many grand town houses concentrated there. By the end of 1662, the city had quadrupled in size in just one century. After that, the city remained nearly unchanged until halfway through the nineteenth century, when the city walls were demolished to create space for the city to expand once again.

## Houses

In the seventeenth century, it was primarily merchants who built their handsome homes on the canals. The separation of home and work had not yet been established, and the upper floors of many homes were intended for the storage of goods. This can still be seen in the large windows in the middle of the facade; these used to be doors with a hoisting beam directly above them in order to hoist goods up and into the house, or out and down. These beams are still used to hoist furniture that doesn't fit up the stairs. People who could afford to, stored their goods in separate warehouses so that the entire house could be used as a home. On the Prinsengracht and Brouwersgracht, especially, many buildings were constructed that served exclusively as warehouses. Both of these canals connected directly to the IJ River via the lock on the Korte Prinsengracht, and this waterway connection made them ideal locations to store goods.



The owners of lots were free to build as they pleased, but there was a uniformity to the buildings nevertheless. Architects as we know them now did not exist in the seventeenth century, so houses were built by joiners, builders and bricklayers, meaning that many buildings were constructed according to a standard design, with identical facades. Less than five percent of the canal houses were specially designed for the client; these buildings are very distinctive, and their constructors often went on to become famous 'architects', such as Hendrick de Keyser, Adriaan Dortsman and Philips Vingboons.

Various types of gables emerged as time progressed. The so-called tuitgevel (lit. spout gable, based on its funnel-like shape) was the simplest, unadorned form, and was primarily used for warehouses. Many such "spout" gables can still be found along the Brouwersgracht, often with a trapezoid shape in double warehouses. In the early seventeenth century, most houses had a brick stepped gable, decorated with blocks or bands of natural stone; the more stone, the more expensive the gable. Over time, fashions evolved and so-called neck gables and bell-shaped gables (halsgevel and klokgevel, respectively) began to appear. The neck gable, an invention of Philips Vingboons, has a high central piece with sandstone ornaments, the so-called crolls (in Dutch: klauwstukken, literally: "claw-pieces"), on the sides; this type was much imitated. In the bell-shaped gable, the crolls are integrated into the main body, and the top is, as the name suggests, shaped like a bell. The straight corniced gable emerged in 1670. Those who had money to spare had facades constructed entirely out of natural stone.

Many of the gables no longer look as they did when they were built. Not one house has survived in its original state; over the centuries, every building has undergone a good deal of conversion

and renovation. Windows have been changed, floors have been added, and gables have been adjusted to fit the fashion of the time – or even replaced entirely.

Corner buildings were often used as shops and had a high, wooden shopfront that allowed a good amount of daylight inside, as well as a street-level entrance. In homes, the cellar or basement was used for storage, and the kitchen was located at the rear of the building. The main entrance was on the first floor, well above the damp basement, and was accessible via a flight of steps built out of natural stone along the house's facade, with a platform in front of the door. A window above the entrance door allowed more light into the entrance hall; as the eighteenth century progressed, lanterns were installed in these windows to illuminate both the hall inside and the stairs outside. In large houses, the domestic staff had rooms in the basement, with a special entrance located below the main entrance.

Up until the French period, from 1795 until 1813, houses had no numbers; instead, they had to be recognised based on a plaque on the facade, or a sign. The images on these plaques often referred to the owner's profession. In 1796, a new and highly complex district-based numbering system was introduced. In the following decades, the numbering system was repeatedly changed; it was not until 1875 that the idea emerged to number houses by street or canal, with even numbers on one side and odd numbers on the other. After a long period of quiet, construction activities along the canals started to pick up again in the second half of the nineteenth century. The new economic activity gave rise to new uses for the canal buildings: traditionally, most merchants had their office at home, but businesses were growing so rapidly that it was no longer

possible to fit all the employees into the upper floor of a single home. Some people bought one or more adjoining buildings to enable expansion, but the construction of new buildings was an attractive alternative. Many new banks and insurance offices arose, designed by such notable architects as Salm, Van Gendt, Van Arkel and Berlage. These offices in turn attracted cafés, restaurants, hotels and department stores. To provide the city with an efficient connection to the railway network, three islands were constructed in the IJ River at the northern edge of the centre, on which Amsterdam Central Station was built.

Constructing new buildings along the canals was easier said than done, however, as the uninterrupted facades constrained the architect's freedom, forcing them to take the surrounding environment into account. Protests were common, especially when people felt that the size or height of a building deviated from the houses around it, as is the case with the telephone building at Herengracht 295, or the head office of the Nederlandse Handel Maatschappij (Netherlands Trading Society; NHM) on Vijzelstraat. Architectural style was less frequently criticised, as the styles that were in fashion towards the end of the nineteenth century fitted very well with the existing buildings. Around 1880, Renaissance Revival architecture was very much in vogue, and Gothic Revival styles were eagerly applied in new churches, such as the Krijtberg on the Singel. The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of the first distinctive buildings with corner turrets and bay windows, at the corners of Leidsestraat and Utrechtsestraat, which further evolved into true shopping streets. The international Art Nouveau style never gained a foothold in Amsterdam, with some few individual exceptions, and the Amsterdam School of the twenties found almost no application

along the canals, despite its prevalence in the city's new districts. The requirement that buildings should fit into the existing facade row remained in effect after the war, although occasionally an architect would devise a modern solution, such as Ingwersen, who designed a concrete and glass building (Keizersgracht 300) for the Wella soap factory in 1960, inspired by French architect Le Corbusier.

## Occupants

Who were the original occupants? Those who could afford a house along the canal were for the most part wealthy citizens. They were merchants, shipowners, factory owners and bankers, and often also held an administrative position such as magistrate, mayor or director of the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie; VOC) or Dutch West India Company (West-Indische Compagnie; WIC). The trade in wood, grain and iron ore (and the related weapons trade) with Scandinavia and the Baltic region created the basis for the wealth of the Dutch Golden Age. In addition to the trade with Northern Europe, the sugar plantations in Suriname and the related slave trade were especially profitable. Many canal-side citizens held an office as a director of the Society of Suriname (Sociëteit van Suriname), such as Paulus Godin, who commissioned the construction of Herengracht 502 (currently the official residence of the Mayor of Amsterdam).

In the seventeenth century, Amsterdam was well-endowed in terms of super-rich citizens: of the 300 or so Dutchmen who possessed 200,000 guilders, nearly half resided in Amsterdam. Each of these men's capital equalled a thousand times the annual salary of an artisan (200 guilders); by modern standards, they were multi-millionaires. The grand town houses of the Golden Bend were the most

prestigious places to live. People of different faiths lived peacefully side by side and did business with each other, although marriages outside one's own circle were rare if not non-existent. In order to protect the family capital and distribute jobs to each other, marriages were arranged. This also served to guarantee many administrators' positions of power. Marriages between cousins were commonplace, with inbreeding and childlessness as a result. The capital of many childless couples went to nephews and nieces, as a result of which the rich families of the eighteenth century became even richer than their parents. Many of the people who lived along the canals were easily able to live lives of leisure, and were far from productive. During this time, much money was invested in redesigning the interiors of houses, with stucco work and wallpapering, much of which has been preserved to this day.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the industry market collapsed but trade and shipping fared well, and bankers and insurers thrived. In addition to the super-rich, there was a significant middle class of luxury goods makers and retailers. A large proportion of the population lived in poverty, however, and their problems became increasingly visible in the city. Marriages were postponed, children were abandoned (see also the enormous overpopulation of the Aalmoezeniersweeshuis, or Almoner's Orphanage, at Prinsengracht 432). Many public buildings, bridges and quays were in bad shape because maintenance was expensive and placed a great burden on the city's budget. People left the city to try their luck elsewhere; for the first time in Amsterdam's history, its population shrank from 240,000 in 1730 to 220,000 in 1795. Vacant houses were left to decay.

The end of the century was characterised by major social unrest and

economic adversity. Rebellious citizens and young regents, the patriots, directly opposed the conservative Orangists, leading to a minor civil war in 1787. In 1795, this was followed by the Batavian Revolution and the French occupation, which would last until 1813. In 1795 the Dutch East India Company went bankrupt, dragging down with it quite a few family fortunes.

The economy slowly recovered over the course of the nineteenth century. It flourished immensely in the second half of that century, and Amsterdam's population doubled in just fifty years (from 245,000 in 1850 to 520,000 in 1900). The social balance had changed: the old elite had a new role to play as a result of the noble status bestowed on them by King William I. Many left the capital city to fulfil administrative functions elsewhere in the country. Furthermore, a new elite had emerged, consisting of people who had grown rich off industry, as well as the trade from and investments in the colonies. The city also attracted important newcomers from abroad: German merchants and entrepreneurs who saw opportunities for investments, and internationally-operating Jewish bankers. The new elite eagerly purchased the canal homes of the old elite, because these houses were still highly prestigious and, on top of that, located at a conveniently short distance from the city's financial heart. The old and the new elite did not integrate much; anti-German sentiments and antisemitism flared, and the German and Jewish elite had great difficulty being accepted into social circles at all.

The depopulation of the city centre that had begun in the nineteenth century continued into the twentieth century. Running water, electricity and domestic appliances had made live-in domestic staff obsolete. Many residents relocated to newly-built districts or houses

outside the city. The vacated buildings became offices, and the Golden Bend became the territory of banks.

After the Second World War, the city government had grand plans to make the city and the offices in the centre more accessible for cars through large construction projects and the filling in of canals. The people of Amsterdam had no intention of letting that happen, however, and their protests were successful: the most drastic of the plans were abandoned. Furthermore, as car traffic increased it became apparent that the structure of the canal ring was extremely inconvenient. The canals became crowded with cars and a host of bollards and fences to repel those cars; the city centre was gradually clogging up. The poor accessibility, lack of parking places and lack of possibilities for expansion ultimately drove the offices to the city's edge, where new build was possible.

It was at this point that the citizens returned. Starting in the 1970s, many buildings were converted into apartment complexes. Unique buildings had already been saved from demolition and remodelled since 1918, however, with the establishment of Vereniging Hendrick de Keyser (the Hendrick de Keyser Society). On the municipality's side, chief inspector Van Houten of the Municipal Housing and Building Control Department worked to preserve the historic gables of dilapidated buildings and give them a place elsewhere during the 1930s; some 300 parts of buildings were saved in this manner. After the Second World War, Stadsherstel (City Restoration) was established to preserve the historic city; this organisation now owns and maintains more than 500 buildings.

## **Water**

Until the end of the nineteenth century, Amsterdam was a truly water-based city, and was consequently known as "the Venice of the North". The canals were crucially important in the transportation of goods. There was a well-organised system of beurtschepen (public transport ships) and ferries in all directions for the transportation of people and goods. The prestigious residential canals had stone quay walls and large stone arched bridges. The streets were paved with yellow cobbles marking the pedestrian area and strips of grey cobbles along the water for traffic. At the Prinsengracht and Brouwersgracht, the quays were protected with a wooden facing, and the bridges and drawbridges were also made of wood. Trees had been planted along all the quays – initially lime trees, but these were soon replaced by elms as they were stronger, suited to a variety of soil types, and able to survive in both wet and dry conditions. These trees were partly aesthetic but also served a practical purpose: their roots reinforced the quays, and they provided shade.

Local residents viewed the canals as more than just waterways. It was not long before the canals were widely used to dump household waste, manure, sewage, offal and dead animals. The flow through the canals was too weak to keep the water clean, with predictable results: the waters stank horribly, especially during the summer months. This was part of the reason why wealthy people sought refuge outside the city; at the beginning of summer, they loaded their household effects onto barges and retired to their country homes along the river Amstel and the river Gein, or other places where the air was fresh. The city government tried all manner of measures to combat the pollution, including high fines for public urination, systematic garbage collection, and a prohibition on