



Antwerp

"Antwerp is hip, its diamonds are cool, its nightlife is hot, its innovative fashion is ultra bold, and its beer is served ice-cold. Whatever your tastes Antwerp won't leave you disappointed."

So says the website *coolcities.com*, which singles out Antwerp as one of the five hippest cities in Europe. And certainly even for me Antwerp is perhaps my favourite of all the 21 towns and cities I have visited. It is certainly the one I would like to live in most - and here lies I think its secret for success.

Antwerp became by the 17th Century one of the most prosperous and civilized ports in Europe. Later the Belgian exploitation of its African colonies brought with it the untold wealth of the diamond trade. Today Antwerp is still the European capital of that trade. The docks have always been important, even though Antwerp, like Baltimore in the USA is several hours up river from the sea. Its industries have been heavy, dirty and varied. Antwerp strikes me as being very like Liverpool. But while Liverpool struggled with trade union disputes and cranky councillors in the 70's and 80's Antwerp kept doggedly focused on trying to improve their lot. The political ambience of Belgium in the last 25 years meant that local politics gave way to far more dramatic national issues. In particular the weakness of successive governments almost



caused Belgium to split into two. Antwerp is based in the Dutch speaking Flemish sector of Belgium and is, in essence, its capital.

Decline was not always gentle in Antwerp. As with all ports and manufacturing cities it has a very large immigrant population, in particular a large Turkish sector. Its population suffered from poor educational achievement, drug abuse, prostitution and quite recently a couple of appalling gun crimes which have shocked the nation.

However due to the economic downturn in the latter part of the 20th century the city centre remained largely intact. And Antwerp possesses some of most pleasant town centre residential neighbourhoods. Architecture ranges from the magnificence of 17th and 18th Century palaces, to highly decorative art nouveau neighbourhoods and stylish individual houses and small blocks of flats built during the 30's, 50's and 60's. There has been very little whole-scale redevelopment.

Cover Vitrine the annual fashion extravaganza @citylifeantwerp.

Below One of Antwerp's eclectic housing streets © Cohen

Into this void walked a young fashion designer Linda Loppa who started working at Antwerp's Fashion Academy in the 60's. The Academy has a long history, but it was in the 60's that its



resurrection began. Loppa influenced a generation of fashion designers, culminating in the early eighties where she encouraged a group of six highly talented designers to storm the barricades of London Fashion Week. The *Antwerp Six*, as they became known, showed innovative, exquisite and highly crafted designs with panache and style. They were an instant success. But these young designers chose to remain in Antwerp. They set up shops and two of them Dries van Noden and Ann Demeulemeester still run their operations from Antwerp while remaining two of the worlds most sought after fashion names.

In an interview by Ninett Murk for the web magazine 4c [1] Linda Loppa is in no doubt as to the reason people stay in Antwerp;

"Antwerp is an interesting city, spacious, agreeable and nice to live in. This helps, certainly if you come to study here from a foreign country. Antwerp is a good centre to start young; in some other countries, bureaucracy sometimes makes it difficult for young people to get started."

It was the ambience, the fact that the sometimes outrageous fashion community were left very much alone, the availability of cheap premises and a willing, often immigrant workforce, that fuelled Antwerp's fashion success. But Linda Loppa, an accomplished designer in her own right, was also an accomplished publicist. As she publicised her course and her protégés she inadvertently publicised the city. The coup de théâtre in London's Fashion Week, was followed by a series of end of year shows in Antwerp which attracted the worlds press. Today fashion is a considerable part of Antwerp's tourist trade. But of course this form of tourism also attracts people to live,



who are drawn to the availability of spacious accommodation, the proximity to the coast and the easy lifestyle.

And of course there is the shopping. Today Antwerp's quirky tangle of shopping streets boasts a myriad of specialist fashion and accessory shops, which even capitals of fashion like London or New York would covet. Most of these shops are off pitch. Even the most crucial of fashionistas cannot afford the cost of the primary pitch. This wealth of specialist shopping has invigorated secondary streets and secondary areas. For example Ann Demeulemeester's cool white garage of a shop is located a kilometre south of the shopping centre opposite the art museum, in an elegant and spacious 19th Century square.

Antwerp, like Southwold in Suffolk, seems to have developed because of the ingenuity of one person. And like Southwold this person has drawn a cohort of like minded colonisers, attracted to the city's qualities that ordinary people could not see. In both cases the lack of late 20th Century development and the backwater nature of the towns contributed to their attraction.

Antwerp's administration layers are rather typical for a European City. There is a City Council, Stad Antwerp [2] with a socialist Mayor, a regional council, above that Provincie Antwerpen [3], is responsible for economic development and above that the youthful Flanders government, Vlaamse Parlement [4], which since only 1995 has governed this autonomous region. The region is ultimately responsible for most issues apart from foreign policy.

City fathers were quite slow to recognise the importance of fashion to the economy. It was only in 1998 that Linda Loppa

was instrumental in founding The Flanders Fashion Institute [5] and only in 2004 was the Flanders DC created by the Flemish government. [6] This is a non-profit association dedicated to economic development of the knowledge and design sector. While it is mostly financed by the Flemish government, Flanders DC remains an independent organisation supervised by the Administration for Economic Inspection from the Ministry of the Flemish Community. Flanders DC has a management board that helps shape the organisation's overall strategy. This organisation describes creativity as follows:

"Creativity comes in many colours. It means different things to different people: from simple gardening projects to self-help gurus or even scandalously expensive design items. This is one of the issues we confront on a daily basis at Flanders DC. Our type of creativity - entrepreneurial creativity - encourages people to think beyond that first obvious solution and go further: provide something of true value; significantly improve an existing product or idea (incremental improvements) or create something completely new (breakthrough innovation)."

The organisation has a series of informing, training, mentoring, supporting and brainstorming events, all presented in a stylish pink and black website. This is aimed at the young. Antwerp is lucky in having an extremely young population. As a centre of learning it absorbs new immigrants each year and as an attractive city - it keeps them.

Flanders DC has succeeded in addressing the scientific and manufacturing community of Antwerp as well as its designer community. Not surprisingly the things which have attracted designers to the city have also attracted the entrepreneurial, and the scientifically innovative. Even today Antwerp's

economic development plans do not pay particular attention to the catalyst of hip. Instead they are concentrating on the need for more industrial premises and on the expansion of the port. Trade with China is today making ports like Antwerp far busier than heretofore. Also interestingly most of the Antwerp's fashion is now produced in the far east, though it is designed in ateliers all around the city.

However the current strategic plan, the s-RSA [7] was constructed with the support of hip young urban practices, mainly imported from the Netherlands. And though most of their ideas were dismissed as far too bizarre (I tend to agree)



The economic development map of Antwerp. The shopping centre is marked by the red lozenge, the fashion district is a yellow square and two large industrial development schemes are enclosed in a blue dotted rectangle.

some of their stylish images have been included in the strategy documents.

Now Flanders and Antwerp market themselves as a knowledge economy. Young creative professionals have flocked to Antwerp and those who study often remain. It is an inclusive and open community. They say that any nationality can become a Belgian designer. For it is not so much where you were born but where you practice and the influences that effect you.

If you want to understand the requirements of the knowledge economy then Antwerp is the city to study. But do not focus entirely on its hip city centre. Note that Antwerp is also busy developing its port and its industrial hinterland. And note also that it sees innovation as relevant to manufacturing as it is to creative industries.

When Ann Demeulemeester sends her models down the catwalk dressed in pea jackets and jaunty naval style caps she evokes the historic image of Antwerp as a port city. But today even though the outlook for the container port looks rosy and the prospect of high tech manufacturing is high, it is the importation and exchange of *ideas* which is making Antwerp really hum.

Over Antwerp's stylishly decorated container port.

[1] 4c www.4c-mag.com Note this crucially stylish magazine is actually the house magazine of a chemical company located outside Antwerp.

[2] Stad Antwerp www.antwerpen.com

[3] Provincie Antwerpen www.provant.be

[4] Flemish Parliament www.vlanderen.be

[5] Flanders Fashion Institute www.ffi.be

[6] Flanders DC www.flandersdc.be

[7] s-RSA Antwerpen Ontwerpen www.ruimtelijkstructuurplanantwerpen.be

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