Introduction

Only a decade since the Dutch parliament ratified the legalization of prostitution, the sex-oriented Red Light District, prominent symbol of Amsterdam’s ‘progressive’ liberality and permissiveness, has come under heavy fire. The Amsterdam city council has formulated a comprehensive strategy to alter the character of the historic city centre: launched in 2007, Plan 1012 aims to restructure and clean up this inner-city neighbourhood which includes the Wallen, the city’s largest red-light district. A strong reduction of window prostitution is one of the spearheads of the restructuring plan. Why have local authorities turned against the red-light district, Amsterdam’s great tourist draw, heralded not so long ago as exemplifying a great advancement in the free choice of labour and the long-awaited social acceptance of ‘the world’s oldest profession’? As Amsterdam is, and traditionally has been, deeply integrated in the global economy, acting as a prime hub for international flows of people, finance, information, and ideas, this question is here considered within the context of the ever-deepening processes of economic and cultural globalization that profoundly affect Amsterdam’s political, economic, and cultural life (Nijman 1999; Taylor 2000; Krätke 2006).

Two significant shifts are taking place against the backdrop of Plan 1012. In local political discourse, window prostitution is increasingly portrayed as a problem, signifying a shift in the way in which the character and (in)appropriate place of prostitution in Amsterdam is imagined by local policymakers and international commentators (Skinner 2008). An increased emphasis on human trafficking, sexual slavery, crime, and violence fuels calls for the drastic curtailment of window prostitution in the district, despite the fact that formal legalization was designed to combat such excesses and that window prostitution can be more successfully regulated than alternative, less visible forms of sex work. Second, the imaginary of Amsterdam itself and its central historic district are shifting. It has been a general trend for some time now that city councils are pressured to promote and brand their cities in a globalizing marketplace. Branding strategies and economic considerations are likely to play a key role in any plan to restructure the centre of a globally well-connected capital (Savitch and Kantor 2002). Amsterdam is certainly no exception: a recent white paper states that one aim of Plan 1012 among others is ‘to realize a varied and high quality image for the city
approach area’ (*Heart of Amsterdam* 2009, 4). This raises questions about the way in which the shifting reality of prostitution practices ‘on the ground’ relates to – and is shaped by – the increasing role of ‘city image’ considerations.

It must be clear that the stakes are high for many parties involved. Major changes to the red-light district are bound to affect Amsterdam’s economy and the character of its city centre. Furthermore, how the municipality handles the district affects not only the city’s reputation and its place in the global imaginary, but also the working conditions of prostitutes on the local level. Will Plan 1012 effectively tackle the negative excesses of prostitution and make the city centre a more attractive place for residents and visitors, as its proponents claim? Or will its unintended consequences leave both prostitutes and the city worse off? Much of this depends on how the views, of locals and others, on prostitution and its place in Amsterdam interact with its actual manifestations. In what follows, our historically grounded analysis will focus on how the red-light district has been shaped by a long history of global flows into Amsterdam as well as by external or ‘outside’ views on prostitution in the city, partly through their effects on local (self-)perceptions. Through comparing and contrasting past and present interventions in the district, and through analyzing the causes and effects of these interventions with special attention for the role of image considerations, we aim to show what may be in store for Amsterdam, the red-light district and its sex workers post Plan 1012.

**A Genealogy of Amsterdam Prostitution as Global, Real and Imagined**

The social and spatial realities of Amsterdam prostitution are, and have been historically, intimately related to Amsterdam’s position as an important node in international economic networks as well as to its openness, with flows of people moving continually in and out of the city. Through their globality, Amsterdam, its historic centre, and prostitution itself in the city exist simultaneously as real social-economic and spatial phenomena and as cultural signifiers that hold meaning for different groups, from local inhabitants to foreign visitors.

It has often been argued that with the intensification of globalization and the proliferation of various global media, symbolic images and markers increasingly influence material and social realities (e.g. Appadurai 1990). Unmediated experience is becoming ever less relevant to social interactions, blurring dichotomies between lived experience and symbolic representations. The post-industrial, globalizing economy produces and depends on images and brands which distinguish different products and consumer identities. Products, lifestyles, and identities are consequently experienced and lived through their (often contested) definitions as unique (Lash and Urry 1994). The same goes for cities. With people increasingly footloose, and able to see and interact with remote places online, cities are no longer the unquestioned social domain of their inhabitants and the occasional visitor. Places are increasingly defined and experienced relationally; thus the experience of being and living there is thoroughly affected by notions held about the place, even by remote observers. These notions are often based largely on some
striking characteristics, social or cultural extremities or oddities, overdefining the distinctness of the place, and putting ‘outside’ pressure on local lived realities.

Cities like Amsterdam, as well-known tourist destinations that are highly integrated into global economic and media networks, are simultaneously ‘real-and-imagined’, to use a phrase by urban planner and political geographer Edward Soja (1996). Stories and images determine many of the experiences in and of the city. This happens in prepackaged ways, as is the case with the tourist attractions Holland Experience, Heineken Experience, Ajax Experience and red-light district tours, or with the *I amsterdam* city branding campaign (Zuckerwise 2012; Goggin 2011; see also Bharain Mac an Bhreithiún’s chapter in the present volume). It also happens in less direct, more flexible ways, through the diffuse impressions of Amsterdam that abound around the world, affecting perceptions of visitors and locals alike. International media representations of Amsterdam, and diffuse notions circulating the world about this city, tend to focus on its ‘coffee shops’ (where cannabis is legally sold) and its red-light district, which non-locals often take as a pars pro toto to define the city (Schwammenthal 2007). Not only Amsterdam is real-and-imagined, a place on mental as much as on geographical maps, so is the Red Light District, often considered a sex-and-drugs theme park (Nijman 1999; van Straaten 2000).\(^1\) Prostitution, while ostensibly catering to physical urges, is real-and-imagined as well. Prostitution-related policies in Amsterdam are shaped by a ceaseless interplay between social-economic realities and a discursive arena involving competing visions of the city and the sex work industry. Importantly, the imaginaries surrounding the red-light district influence policymakers’ perceptions and thus their policies, echoing the ‘Thomas theorem’ that says that what is defined as real is real in its consequences. And new policies influence existing imaginaries of the district in turn. As will be argued below, the interplay between the imaginary and the real prostitution spaces of Amsterdam is not straightforward but is complicated by social and cultural trends located at different scales: local, national, and global.

This interplay is not particular to Amsterdam. In Belgium, for example, a historic shift in the dominant conceptualization of prostitutes from ‘vixens’ to ‘victims’ affected (albeit in fragmented ways) national prostitution policies; the recent restructuring of Antwerp’s red-light district (the Schipperskwartier) was sparked and informed by image-affecting processes of globalization (immigration, tourism, and urban resurgence) (Schroyen 2010; Loopmans and van den Broeck 2011). Nor is this interplay particularly new. Amsterdam’s prostitution sector has been globalized to some extent for centuries. During the two centuries after Amsterdam’s rise to global prominence as a maritime trading centre around 1600, its political elites generally adopted a fairly tolerant approach towards prostitution, consistent with a pragmatic view of urban social management. In the two centuries after the temporary annexation of the Netherlands by Napoleonic France in 1810, however, prostitution in Amsterdam was successively regulated, criminalized, tolerated, and then formally legalized. At every stage it took on a different form and occupied a different place in the city, both literally and metaphorically. The interplay between ‘city image’ and socio-spatial reality was central to each of these transitions.
In what follows we will provide a genealogy both of the concrete place of prostitution in the city and of the place held by prostitution in the city’s self-representations and international image. This will show how these two dimensions of the social-spatial dynamic of prostitution in Amsterdam – the dimension of its physical, lived existence and that of its imaginary or mental representations – tend to interact, something which should inform policy decisions concerning its tenacious, (in)famous, and shape-shifting prostitution sector.

Amsterdam’s Imagined Moral Geography: Historical Roots and Shifts

Attitudes towards prostitution in Amsterdam have changed several times over the last four centuries. What has not changed is the orientation of Amsterdam’s sex work sector towards the global flows of people and commerce that have permeated the city since ca. 1600. This is reflected in the geography of prostitution in Amsterdam. The Wallen, where the main red-light district is presently located, was already a magnet for prostitution and its ‘ancillary service industries’ during the seventeenth century (Schama 1987, 468; van de Pol 2011). These originally flourished so profusely here because the area straddled Amsterdam’s busy shipping port. The port itself has long since changed location, losing much of its former importance, but prostitution and a reputation for sexually tinted entertainment had taken root in the Wallen and were there to stay. This history goes some way towards explaining the present geography of window prostitution in Amsterdam.

For large stretches of its history, prostitution in the Wallen has been oriented towards a highly transient population, both of prostitutes and their clients. In the seventeenth century, the clients were often seamen and the prostitutes came from the Dutch Republic’s hinterlands, sometimes from as far away as Denmark. Since the late twentieth century, tourists from all over the world engage in commercial sexual transactions in the red-light district, usually with immigrant girls from Central and Eastern Europe or Latin America. In other periods, too, Amsterdam’s prostitution sector could be seen to thrive on fleeting male visitors and migrant women. In Napoleonic times, the French empire’s soldiers were key purchasers of sexual services in Amsterdam. Later in the nineteenth century, the providers of such services were increasingly girls from Germany, Belgium, or France.

The internationalized character of Amsterdam’s prostitution has tended to sensitize local policymakers to external or ‘outside’ perceptions. While city magistrates usually tolerated prostitution as an inevitable or even useful urban element in a busy port city continually visited by hordes of sex-starved mariners, the occasional crackdowns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries prevented tales of Amsterdam licentiousness from gaining too much currency abroad. In early-modern times, then, the city’s social and moral policies were already partly predicated on image-management considerations (Schama 1987, 470-80; Zuckerwise 2012). In the nineteenth century, the impact of externally generated views on Amsterdam’s prostitution policies became very apparent. Regulation of brothels and mandatory medical visitations of prostitutes were first instituted in
At Napoleon’s behest to control the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. An abolitionist movement strongly opposing this regulatory system and brothels developed during the 1870s, following the lead of British anti-prostitution activist Josephine Butler. Indeed, Dutch abolitionism was integrated in a formidable Europe-wide activist network, and the victory it obtained with the 1911 Morality Laws, which banned brothels throughout the Netherlands (Amsterdam had banned them already in 1897), was partly a response to international vigilance on the issue.

Such policy changes were invariably related to larger shifts in the dominant discursive constructions of prostitutes and their place in the city, reflecting an internalization of external perspectives. Before Napoleon’s interventions, Amsterdam officials cloaked their recognition of the social utility of prostitution – its contribution to social order – in mild, rather symbolic expressions of moral condemnation. Regulation was similarly based on a view of prostitution as a ‘necessary evil’. But the image of prostitutes became more negative than before. As depraved seductresses and potential carriers of disease, they were now thought to carry full responsibility for any evils resulting from their sexual transactions (de Vries 1997; Mooij 1998). Abolitionists, in contrast, portrayed prostitutes as exploited victims and ‘white slaves’. During the last decades of the nineteenth century this view gained traction throughout Europe and North America (Keire 2010). Another shift occurred after the Second World War, with prostitution increasingly pathologized through a psycho-social lens, encouraging soft-handled care-based approaches (Boutellier 1991). Almost simultaneously, the sexual revolution, for some, re-signified prostitution as sexual liberation. These new notions and perceptions encouraged more liberal policies of decriminalization in the postwar period.

Both policies and discourses on prostitution in Amsterdam are, historically, intimately tied to the spaces of prostitution in an intricate triangular dynamic. Nineteenth-century regulationists considered the secluded and discrete brothel the appropriate place for controlled prostitution. Formal control and humiliating visitations, however, produced evasions on the part of sex workers, many of whom illegally practiced so-called ‘free prostitution’ outside of brothels, in central areas with many public entertainment facilities. Under pressure of this competition, brothel owners ran stricter regimes and illegal brothel-based coercion (‘white slavery’) increased (Bossenbroek and Kompagnie 1998; Deinema 2006). Consequently, brothels were increasingly branded as spaces of wicked exploitation. The resulting prohibition of brothels led to a spatial dispersal of prostitution in Amsterdam, with prostitutes operating rather inconspicuously from hotels, massage salons, or even tobacco shops, blending into new neighbourhoods and everyday urban life (de Wildt and Arnoldussen 2002; Middelburg 2010). Its existence subtly veiled, attitudes towards prostitution softened. This set the stage for decriminalization and the emergence of window prostitution, in particular in the age-old hub of sexual transactions, the Wallen. Coupled with the social-economic marginalization and depopulation of this historic inner-city district during the 1960s and 1970s – itself the effect of large-scale suburbanization and worsening perceptions of inner-city life – this historic legacy made the Wallen a convenient place for experiments with openly practiced sex work.
Policy changes and interventions tend to affect the spatiality of prostitution in Amsterdam, often in unintended ways. In turn, shifting spatialities affect policies, but usually through the mediation of local imaginaries of the prostitute as well as of her spaces of operation. Local imaginaries, however, are not exclusively generated locally. The social experiment of tolerating window prostitution _de facto_ during the last decades of the twentieth century, a policy known in Dutch as _gedogen_, created a red-light district of international fame, earning Amsterdam the dual reputation (in the Western world at least) of being Europe’s Sin City and its progressive utopia/heterotopia. Cultural liberals across the world portray Amsterdam in a positive light and attribute a liberating and harmonious live-and-let-live attitude to the city, generally believing this to be linked to exemplary – if perhaps rather quirky – social policy experimentation. This view was recently endorsed by a number of Hollywood celebrities whose enthusiastic comments about Amsterdam were compiled on video and posted on the city promotion _I amsterdam_ website.² Cultural conservatives, by contrast, take a negative view, scolding Amsterdam for what they see as its crime-ridden immorality or hopeless naïveté. In 2009 American Fox News talk show host Bill O’Reilly, for example, claimed criminal organizations basically ruled Amsterdam due to the city’s liberal policies (and parroted city authority rhetoric on how Amsterdam draws the wrong types of tourists, claiming it cannot attract ‘family tourists’ anymore). These images have played a major role in the more recent shifts in Amsterdam’s prostitution policies with which we are principally concerned in this chapter: the formal legalization of brothels in 1999 and the restrictive backlash embodied by Plan 1012 since 2007.

Trying to Control the Uncontrollable: Legalizing Prostitution and Plan 1012

In 1999, the Dutch government decided to repeal the brothel ban of 1911. In effect, prostitution was legalized as of 1 October 2000. Just like the introduction of the brothel ban, its repeal was the result of changing social views, and not just in the Netherlands (e.g., Denmark legalized prostitution in 1998). Around this time, the Dutch government – a so-called ‘purple coalition’ comprised of the leading social-democratic party, the PvdA, and two liberal-democratic parties, the VVD and D66 – extended the civil liberties of Dutch citizens not only by legalizing prostitution but also by passing legislation regulating euthanasia and gay marriage. Legalization itself was largely supported across the political spectrum. For economic liberals on the right, the decisive argument was that the old Morality Laws of 1911 constituted an infringement on the right to free choice of labour. For the left, the idea that legalization would facilitate the regulation of prostitution was at least as important. Some conservatives similarly supported the repeal of the brothel ban on the premise that legalization would make it easier to fight persistent problems in the sex industry such as forced prostitution and the prostitution of minors. It was argued that the ‘toleration’ of prostitution, the creation of a grey zone between criminalization and legalization, had made it impossible to criminalize some forms of prostitution while allowing others. For-
mal legalization would enable the state to define what types should be allowed and which not. This supposed normalization of prostitution was said to make it easier to protect prostitutes. A majority of the Dutch public supported legalization, believing it would counter exploitation of prostitutes, who were generally regarded fairly positively but were thought to be routinely victimized by pimps (WODC 2002).

Legalization, however, also had its critics, both at home and abroad. Some charged that, by the time of legalization, the red-light district had already lost its emancipatory charm and had become harshly commercial (Nijman 1999). Abroad, Amsterdam came to be seen by some as a hub of international human trafficking rings, criticism reminiscent of the ‘white slavery’ rhetoric of the fin-de-siècle (Skinner 2008). The Amsterdam council itself came to suspect that legalization did not have the desired effect in terms of increasing the controllability of the sector. In 2005 Amma Asante and Karina Schaapman – two city councillors for the local social-democrats, the latter a former prostitute herself – published a report titled Het onzichtbare zichtbaar gemaakt (Making the Invisible Visible). They argued that the withdrawal of the brothel ban had in fact made it harder rather than easier to regulate prostitution. With a population of 730,000, Amsterdam accommodated 8,000 to 10,000 prostitutes in 2000, 30 per cent of whom worked behind the famous windows of the city’s red-light districts. Another 30 per cent worked in other sex houses (brothels), 10 per cent on the street, and 30 percent in the sector designated ‘other’, mostly as escorts and from home. In five years the share of window prostitution had halved, while the category ‘other’ had grown rapidly. Most problems seemed to be concentrated in this ‘other’ sector and in street prostitution. Thus, the most troubling branch of prostitution was not only the least regulated sector, but also the fastest growing one. Legalization had not improved the conditions of prostitutes at large, but had resulted in illegal prostitution going underground.

Recently, the city council has been active in minimizing prostitution, but in doing so it has focused its efforts on fighting the most visible and least problematic part of the industry: well-regulated, highly visible, and spatially concentrated window prostitution. The main result of these shifting perceptions and of the renewed problematization of window prostitution is Plan 1012, launched in 2007 (Heart of Amsterdam 2009). This plan calls not only for the strong reduction (up to 75 per cent) of window prostitution in the red-light district, but for the removal of all ‘criminogenic’ businesses from zip code area 1012, the heart of the historic centre which includes, besides the red-light district itself, the central train station and some of the city’s main shopping streets. The novel term ‘criminogenic’ refers to companies that may not be directly involved in any illegal business, but are deemed likely to be, at least in part, built on ‘black money’. The city claims that this applies to many souvenir shops, non-global fast-food places (thus excluding McDonald’s, Burger King, and the like), grocery stores, coffee shops, and sex-related businesses in and around the Wallen. As such, the policy visions underlying Plan 1012 lump together window prostitution with other manifestations of Amsterdam’s liberal policies which, like the famous coffee shops, constitute the core of Amsterdam’s popular image in the United States and the rest of
Europe. Closing down the windows remains one of the spearheads, however, and since 2007, the city of Amsterdam, in cooperation with a few non-profit housing associations and the non-profit restoration company Stadsherstel, has been buying out owners of buildings with window prostitution (Aalbers and Deinema 2012). In all cases, prostitution activities were halted. In addition, many prostitution licenses have been discontinued.

Proponents of Plan 1012 stress that many women in the red-light district are in a dangerous and precarious position, and that restructuring the area will help fight unacceptable excesses of the sexual services industry, such as human trafficking and coerced prostitution. However, as we have seen, previous policies — nineteenth-century regulation, the 1911 ban on brothels, and legalization under the 1999 repeal act — all shared this same aim. Undesired practices have evaded all previous attempts to eliminate or control them, with prostitution becoming more dispersed throughout the city and often growing harsher and more opaque in the immediate wake of such interventions. Past experiences with prostitution seem to teach us a paradox: more (formal) control results in less controllability. While in many ways representing contradictory approaches, regulation, prohibition, and legalization all entailed a form of official recognition. In all three cases a formal definition of prostitution was developed, and all three kinds of intervention could be seen as efforts to control the phenomenon. Prostitution, however, appears to thrive particularly well outside of formal frames. Attempts to formalize it therefore tend to produce counter-reactions — the increased informalization of specific manifestations of prostitution — leading to spatial dispersal and to evasive behaviour. For four centuries, prostitution in Amsterdam has displayed Mercury-like qualities. Every heavy-handed approach to this sector has caused many prostitution-related activities to slip out of the hands of the authorities and to retreat underground.

**New Control Efforts in the Globalized Red Light District**

Has anything changed this time around, altering the dynamic between policies and prostitution in Amsterdam? While Amsterdam has been linked to global trading networks for centuries, two manifestations of recent, intensified globalization are immediately visible in Amsterdam and the red-light district, i.e., large-scale tourism and international immigration. Tourism and migration both shape real-and-imagined Amsterdam and play a crucial role in the real-and-imagined red-light district. Tourists see and possibly pay sex workers, most of whom migrated to the Netherlands. The red-light district is a globalized place; yet globalization is not something ubiquitous. Globalization is located in specific places that meet specific conditions, but that does not mean it is only located in similar places. Bangkok and Phuket (Thailand), Jamaica and Amsterdam cater to global sex tourism, but they do so in different ways and for different reasons. Amsterdam is located in a much more affluent country than the other dominant places in the imaginary of global sex tourism. Furthermore, Amsterdam’s red-light district not only imports a large number of its customers, it also imports the lion’s share
of its sex workers (around 75 per cent) – making Amsterdam’s sex tourism different than elsewhere. Moreover, the municipality has more resources at hand to police excesses and restructure neighbourhoods.

What drives Plan 1012 is that Amsterdam’s city council explicitly seeks a different kind of tourism and hopes to attract new businesses to the Wallen. Tourists are no longer valued only for the income they generate directly, but also for the status they bring, for the impressions of Amsterdam to which they respond and which they diffuse throughout the world. The city council seeks to increase Amsterdam’s symbolic capital globally, hoping this will generate more income in the long term. It aims to attract higher-end tourism and to change the impressions visitors have of the city. Like the I amsterdam city branding campaign, then, Plan 1012 functions as part of an image-management campaign, with its proponents hoping it will ‘redirect the tourist gaze’ (Zuckerwise 2008, 13). Both are indicative of a general strategy to adjust, revamp, and steer the international reputation of Amsterdam. Recent processes of intensifying globalization have, in effect, turned Amsterdam and its places of prostitution inside out, in the sense that what happens there is exposed to the gaze of the outside world more thoroughly than ever before, through the experiences of tourists and expats, internet information and images, foreign media interest, and international law-enforcement agencies such as Interpol and Europol. As a result, the city government attends and responds strongly to notions of Amsterdam circulating abroad, sometimes to the detriment of the direct interests of other local actors such as the city’s prostitutes.

While it is unlikely to be an effective tool for remedying social problems in Amsterdam’s prostitution sector, an economic argument in favour of Plan 1012 is the general re-appreciation of the value of the city’s central and historic districts. Until the 1980s, the centre was a convenient dumping ground for ‘disrespectable’ elements of society such as prostitutes, but with re-urbanization and globalization, the centre has now become too valuable to function as the city’s social landfill. In the post-industrial age, global cities – not just primary ones such as New York and London but also secondary ones such as Boston, Manchester, and Amsterdam – have come to rely increasingly on knowledge-intensive industries that operate transnationally and tend to concentrate in city centres (Sassen 1991; Taylor 2000). Through processes such as gentrification, the rise of creative industries and the heritage industry, city centres have become more valuable (Taylor 2000; Florida 2002). This spatial-economic paradigm has shifted the imaginary of the centre within the circles of policymakers and real-estate developers alike. Its narrow alleys, canals, and quaint cramped houses are now seen as the preferred hotbed of a post-industrial urban knowledge economy and as a potent nursery for creative enterprise. Firms and residents are jostling for a place here, explaining why Plan 1012 is supported by a number of department stores, investment funds, and high-end hotel chains (Aalbers and Deinema 2012). It is thus also a gentrification strategy, and this apparently requires the clearing-out of all ‘marginal’ elements from the area, as evinced by the creation of a so-called ‘Junkie Free Zone’, another provision of the plan. Proponents appear convinced that clean-ups are necessary to improve the image of the centre, to minimize blemishes to the much-vaunted I amsterdam city-branding campaign, to attract
more investments from abroad, and to create the right breeding ground for the creative urban economy.

One problem here, of course, is that in Amsterdam’s red-light district, prostitution has long ceased to be an economically marginal phenomenon. The district as it is thrives, having become a paragon of yet another manifestation of twenty-first century Western capitalism, the so-called ‘experience economy’ (Pine and Gilmore 1999). Real-estate owners that let windows to prostitutes and owners of other sex-related enterprises in the district make so much money that enormous investments are involved in buying them out. It is hard to find other functions for their buildings that will plausibly recoup these expenses, as architects charged with coming up with renewal concepts for this area have discovered (de Boer 2009). The financial trouble that Plan 1012 has run into signals a social policy inertia effect with respect to Amsterdam’s permissive reputation abroad. In former centuries, Amsterdam prostitution followed the flow of visitors and trade into the city. At present, it attracts them. Whatever the opinions of Plan 1012 proponents about the type of tourists who come to Amsterdam, its Sin City image continues to boost its tourist economy. Foreign visitors, accounting for over half of the sexual transactions on the Wallen, significantly contribute to the high profitability of window prostitution in this red-light district, which makes brothel owners there so expensive and thus difficult to buy out (Flight and Hulshof 2009). The Sin City image, then, has self-realizing effects in Amsterdam’s red-light district, by providing the economic incentives to maintain, reproduce, or even expand sex-related businesses. This obvious economic interest in maintaining the red-light district as a tourist draw is countered by Plan 1012 proponents who aim to draw a different, more upscale tourist crowd to Amsterdam. However, increasing the attractiveness of post-Plan 1012 Amsterdam to upscale tourists may prove a pipe dream if the city’s main unique selling point is abandoned.

Ravaged Prostitutes and Outperformed Amsterdam

The red-light district still makes good economic sense. More importantly, in its present form it seems to satisfy quite well many of the goals of those concerned with the social management of prostitution and participants alike. The windows of the Wallen are relatively well-regulated, at least compared to the other sectors of prostitution. Because the red-light district has come to cater largely to tourists, the embarrassment of detection is limited for johns (the prostitutes’ customers), despite the area’s transparent orientation towards prostitution. To some extent the same goes for the (mainly foreign) sex workers here, even though their strict reluctance to be photographed or filmed shows that there are limits to their insulation from social sanctions and shame (Aalbers 2005). Furthermore, the red-light district does not strongly offend Amsterdam’s inhabitants or violate the NIMBY (not in my back yard) principle because the district is well-defined, its residents and non-sex-related entrepreneurs have long accepted the prostitution there, and the Wallen is left mostly to the tourists and johns by other locals.

Why then has the broad local consensus, achieved a decade ago, about the so-
cial value of accepting window prostitution as legitimate, dissipated? The answer may lie partly in a steady erosion of Amsterdam’s autonomy in moral affairs, similar to what occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century. Through tourism, increased globalization has allowed the red-light district to grow commercially, but bringing the world in may also have some adverse effects on the liberality that supports it. Although the Wallen stands largely outside ordinary day-to-day social life in Amsterdam, it has arguably become Amsterdam’s foremost symbol in the global imaginary, dominating the city’s external image and even representing Amsterdam society as a whole, presumably to the chagrin of the local government. At a time when inter-city competition for external investment is intensifying, the external image of Amsterdam in the world has taken up a new significance.

If Amsterdam is a real-and-imagined city, and the red-light district a real-and-imagined zone of openly practiced prostitution, who is doing the relevant imagining? While image considerations have long played a role, the novelty, at the present juncture, seems to be a matter of increased intensity and (global) scope or scale. Over the last decade, it seems, international discourses and perceptions about Amsterdam and the Wallen have increasingly shaped local political discourse, presumably as a result of the intensification of globalization. In a way, the worldwide pervasiveness of Amsterdam’s association with prostitution partly defeats the social isolation of the sector from the great majority of Amsterdam’s inhabitants as they are symbolically ‘contaminated’ by this controversial phenomenon in the views of the outside world. Caricatural stereotypes of Dutch people as incessant potheads and as sex-crazed are fairly widespread in the Western world (Schwammenthal 2007). Amsterdammers in particular are regularly confronted with such stereotypes, either jokingly or seriously, when they venture abroad or engage in international contacts. These tend to affect their status in social interactions with non-locals negatively (although in some contexts positively). The external image thus acts upon Amsterdam identities and prevalent attitudes towards prostitution within Amsterdam. Like the regulations of the nineteenth century, Plan 1012 partly represents an effort to contain risks of contamination, posed this time not by the diseases but by the stigmas – potential brand damage – associated with prostitution, not only for the city but also for its inhabitants.

Opinions formed in the outside world, well-informed or not, may be increasingly internalized by Amsterdam policy makers. Especially with the internet, and applications like Flickr, YouTube, Google Street View, and Twitter, people all over the world are enabled to act as a surveillance force in the red-light district. In the mutual confrontation of the red-light district and the world, the local mores of this Amsterdam district are unlikely to prevail. The internet has been called a ‘global panopticon’, and like Jeremy Bentham’s prison design, this panopticon exerts strong disciplining power on Amsterdam policymakers, encouraging more conformity to the globally dominant moral disavowal of open prostitution (Foucault 1977; Mayer-Schönberger 2009). The strong reluctance of the window prostitutes to be photographed by tourists attests to a fear of being exposed beyond their control, especially on the internet where anyone, anywhere may be able to see them.
The way prostitution is imagined influences how and where prostitution takes place in a city and vice versa. The red-light district is where it is, and has become what it is, because of a fair share of indifference in post-war Amsterdam towards prostitution practices and towards this neighbourhood. This indifference is largely a matter of the past, though. An attitude of toleration first gave way to formal legalization and regulation, when because of its increasing visibility window prostitution could no longer be ignored. Now, regulated prostitution is often branded as crude commercialism or as ‘criminogenic’, while until recently many saw it as a progressive tool for labour emancipation. Even though tourism reinforces window prostitution in the red-light district, its status is again challenged, partly because the city of Amsterdam pays ever more attention to its global image. Post-industrial globalization has brought to the fore a global cultural economy, in which there is an increasingly strong agentic role for the imagination in social life and in the economy through branding processes, also in regard to places (Appadurai 1990; Lash and Urry 1994). Amsterdam’s city council is clearly aware of the need for image-management. Ironically, the real distinctiveness of Amsterdam’s former ‘toleration’ policies encouraged the intensification of globalizing, deterritorializing influences in the Wallen and in the city as a whole. Now, Amsterdam’s city council seems to be aiming at distinction, rather than distinctiveness, through conforming to its own conceptions of global norms of civilized urbanity.

With the city accused by some, such as former U.S. anti-slavery ambassador John R. Miller and the makers of the 2011 Al Jazeera series *Slavery: A 21st-Century Evil*, of being a modern-day sexual slavery capital, the need for better social management of the prostitution sector seems apparent (see also Skinner 2008). But the history of interventions in prostitution shows that fairly crude measures such as medical visitation systems, wholesale prohibition, and full formalization through legalization have many unintended and unwanted effects. This warrants a subtle, balanced, and multifaceted approach to prostitution, rather than the dramatic contraction of the red-light district envisioned by Plan 1012. Time and again, prostitution has been banished to places outside the ‘normal’ social order, but formal limitations lead to expansion of informal sex work markets. Focusing on ‘taming’ only a small part of the sex work industry – that part which takes place in a clearly marked and highly visible red-light district – allows other parts of the industry to continue underground in less regulated, less concentrated, and less visible locations. Rather than combatting actual social ills, the city is fighting a global symbol which is open and visible to the world. Like nineteenth-century brothels, the Wallen functions as a public ‘lightning conductor’ for an extensive and widely diverging industry. Prostitution policies have surprisingly little effect on the prevalence of prostitution; they merely affect the visibility and presence of prostitution in specific locations. The degree of visibility recursively shapes the image of prostitution, which then influences policies on prostitution, thereby closing the circle.

Amsterdam’s window prostitutes are likely to share the dangerous fate of prostitutes in other cities who were ‘evacuated’ from ‘rebranded’ neighbourhoods as a result of gentrification schemes (Ross 2010). Plan 1012 will serve to displace
window prostitutes to less secure locations, either within Amsterdam or in other European cities, rather than to improve their working conditions. At best it will improve the conditions for safe investment, by turning a notorious red-light district into an extension of the highly expensive city centre – although it remains to be seen if Amsterdam can compete successfully with other European capitals for the attention of global investors without its high-profile and edgy tourist niche.

In short, there is every reason to question the wisdom of (effectively) recriminalizing and further stigmatizing the part of the prostitution sector in Amsterdam that is most easy to regulate: certainly in terms of social management goals, but also in terms of city branding and urban marketing strategies, as Plan 1012 aims to largely abandon Amsterdam’s unique selling point in the global imaginary. It might be argued that a renewed red-light district that does away with its crassness (neon signs) and overt commercialism, blends lust, pleasure, and art, and manages to regain some of its former mystique, might be an economic masterstroke for the city. Red-light fashion and art may come to dominate new global niches. The social and economic sustainability of the district itself may be better assured by renewing and thus maintaining its titillating qualities, as well as the symbolic capital of ‘authenticity’ among the red lights. Nevertheless, it seems clear that many of the prostitutes will be displaced in this restructuring move, ending up in a world which for them is undeniably darker.

Notes

1 In the 1980s American artists Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz even recreated a part of the Red Light District, complete with red-lit windows and cosy drapery, in an installation titled Hoerengracht (‘Whores Canal’, a pun on Herengracht, which translates as ‘Gentlemen’s Canal’). The installation was on exhibit in galleries and museums in Berlin and London to great critical acclaim.

2 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5OgAXneO04.

3 Plan 1012 and its implementation (known as Project 1012) are continually revised by the city of Amsterdam. The white paper Heart of Amsterdam: Future Perspectives 1012, referred to here, is the most recent English-language summary of the city government’s intentions and efforts to restructure Amsterdam’s main red-light district and the surrounding areas. For updates on the city’s publications regarding Plan 1012, see the city’s official website: www.amsterdam.nl/gemeente/organisatie-diensten/sites/project_1012/1012/overig/publicaties-o/brochures/.

4 See english.aljazeera.net/programmes/slavery21stcenturyevil/2011/10/20111010134454998749.html.

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