

CUT LOOSE

On the surface Antwerp is quiet and unassuming. But the Belgian city is smashing up its diamond-dealer image with a new collection of edgy hangouts and designer digs, says Hazel Lubbock. Photographs by Sivan Askayo



AS A FASHION STUDENT in London in the 2000s I knew Antwerp to be an incubator of ideas. Until the 1980s, the port city's pattern-cutting block for design had been set by Mary Prijot, who headed up the new fashion department at its Royal Academy of Fine Arts in the 1960s. Her style was strict and uniform. Undergraduates studied classical costume and cut hemlines below the knee. Then something curious happened: a group of students who came to be known as the Antwerp Six rebelled and rewrote the rules. Drafting their own unique looks by taking an individual approach to design, the group, including Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten and Walter Van Beirendonck, altered the fabric of Antwerp forever.

Far from shop-lined Meir, the street that roughly connects the train station and cathedral, creatives continue to shape the city. When Van Noten moved his atelier to Het Eilandje, a desolate area adjacent to the red-light district around the docks, there was nothing but sex shops. And while some say the neighbourhood has been up-and-coming for several years, its regeneration is really only happening now. Modern-art galleries, multi-performance hubs (Het Bos is the buzzed-about new arrival), wine bars and a handful of brasseries have opened in old warehouses. The skyline has been transformed by the red sandstone Tetris-block Museum aan de Stroom (MAS), devoted to everything Antwerp, and the funnel-shaped Red Star Line Museum. To the north, Zaha Hadid's diamond-inspired building for the Port Authority is being polished up for its unveiling this year.

Nearby, on the edge of the River Scheldt, a giant curvaceous concrete caterpillar – a disused hangar for shipping containers – is the setting for the academy's graduate fashion show every

UNIQUE IN OTHER FASHION CITIES, PEOPLE DO NOT DRESS UP TO GO OUT. THEIR'S IS A CLEAN, SOBER STYLE

June. Last year, Madeleine Coisne presented her Centers collection, for which she was granted the Mode Museum's annual MoMu Award for creative vision and technical ability. Inspired by the criss-cross tiles of Antwerp's railway arches, the collection incorporates geometric patterns with boxy Japanese shapes and rich colour in a range of textiles. The magpie in me covets her fellow student Raffaela Graspontner's exquisite leather work (laser-cut rainbow shapes, scalloped edges, sequin embroidery) and bold colour-blocking similar to David Hockney paintings. The shipping hangar is where concepts are realised, where careers begin. In summer, it becomes an urban beach club for a young crowd to let loose on the riverfront. Which couldn't be more fitting.

The infrastructure here makes it easy for ideas to evolve: you can reach most places on foot or bike around. London, Paris and Amsterdam are all little more than an hour away. But Antwerp is inexpensive, and that offers more opportunity for people to do innovative things. In the eastern 2060 area, among Turkish grocery shops and African hairdressers, is Atelier Solarshop, a concept store owned by Piëtro Celestina and fashion designer and academy graduate Jan-Jan Van Essche. The space started as a design studio before the pair began experimenting with various collaborations: art exhibitions, pop-up vintage-furniture shops and a Sunday breakfast club with food collective Otark Productions. Now it incorporates all these things, including pieces

Clockwise from this picture: the roof terrace at Hotel Julien; Normo café; a display at Wouters & Hendrix jewellery shop



Clockwise from this picture: a dish of red beet, goat's cheese, radish and smoked sea bass at t'Zilte; Loft Styles; a display at The Recollection; Veranda; Hotel Julien; Dogma Cocktails



from Van Essche's own menswear label. 'There are a lot of new initiatives happening outside of the mainstream and the city centre. For example, club night Noord Feesjes throws underground parties in existing venues in the area – a Polish disco or a Moroccan nightclub,' says Celestina. 'You get an interesting mix of regulars and young people out to discover new things.'

In a city where a bottle of beer costs less than a bottle of water, launching a cocktail bar may not seem like the most solid business plan. Undeterred, 24-year-old Didier Van den Broeck opened Dogma Cocktails in an unassuming street in the Old City. Jazz music crackles over conversations in Flemish, French and English, and worn leather sofas give it the feel of a 1920s sitting room. Some say Van den Broeck is crazy, mistaking his passion for madness. 'Rents here are low, so setting up a bar is easy,' he explains over the rattle of ice as he mixes two Cobra's Fangs for an interior designer and his model girlfriend sitting at the bar. 'It's persuading people to spend €10 or €15 on a cocktail they've never heard of that's tricky.'

He's not the only one to take a chance. Mixologist Alexander Jones and chef Michaël Timmermans are the duo behind pop-up gin bar Jones. The twentysomethings serve G&Ts with top-notch tonic water and garnishes of ginger, cracked peppercorns, samphire and edible flowers, paired with inventive sharing plates: foie gras with beetroot, elderberry and coffee; crab salad with citrus jelly and sorrel; panna cotta with lavender and marinated fennel. The pair are already scouting locations for their next bar-and-bites concept. Then there's Normo, a ramshackle micro-roastery and café with a handful of tables and brewing kit heaped haphazardly about. Students pile in bang on 11am to get their cold-brew caffeine fix, sharing tables with bemused bricklayers on their coffee break.



CONCEPT STORES CAME TO ANTWERP RECENTLY WHEN, BY COINCIDENCE, FIVE OPENED AT ONCE

A new generation of chefs are shaking up the restaurant scene too. In Berchem, the Jewish district, The Jane is habañero-hot stuff with a months-long waiting list to prove it. The old military chapel has been punked up by Piet Boon with a PSLab chandelier that looks like an upside-down sparkler, a giant neon Day of the Dead skull and tattooed glass windows depicting rams' heads, pulled teeth, roses and demons. The devil is in the detail too, with surprising elements to be discovered in every forkful. Plates become garden-beds for Thai-style salmon tartare with deconstructed daffodils of courgette flower, mushroom stamen and basil leaves. There's a lively paella of squid, clams, piquillo and artichoke vinaigrette. The rhythm of the menu is slow and steady, with a dozen courses presented over several hours by waiters in G-Star pinnies, who shake your hand and pour Champagne over peach mousse, strawberries and granita for an apéritif. If this is the church of exceptional culinary art, then I'm here to worship 30-year-old chef Nick Bril and Sergio Herman, who closed his three-Michelin-starred Oud Sluis in the Netherlands to launch The Jane last year. It was no surprise that it received its own star within months of opening.

Unlike in other fashion cities, people do not dress up to go out here. Antwerpers have a clean and sober style, more effortlessly confident than kooky. In rough-around-the-edges Bato Batu bar there is no sense of trying to stand out or, indeed, fit into the crowd. 'Being in Antwerp is like being in the home of a beloved

family member, where you can just be yourself,' says stylist Pholoso. 'There is no pressure to be somebody.' Her Stylebook blog champions emerging and established Belgian designers including Bruno Pieters, Dior creative director Raf Simons, Peter Pilotto, Christian Wijnants, Been by D'Heygere and Wanda Nylon. Taking one of her tips, I bag a pair of Ann Demeulemeester trousers for €100 at Labels Inc, a sort of high-end jumble-sale store which sources samples directly from designers. Among the treasure are heaps of AF Vandevorst, Raf Simons and Haider Ackermann; all monochrome tailoring and statement handbags.

Concept stores first really came to Antwerp in 2007, when, by coincidence, five opened within a few months of each other. My favourite, Graanmarkt 13, encompasses a fashion and lifestyle shop, restaurant and art gallery, with an apartment to rent above. Designed in the pared-back style of Belgian architect Vincent Van Duysen, each floor of the townhouse has cool concrete surfaces, cleverly concealed spaces-within-spaces and chalky accents. It's impossible to see Graanmarkt 13 as anything other than one entity. Guests in the apartment eat from the same ceramic dishes as diners in the restaurant. You can buy the fabulous Michaël Verheyden chair in the master bedroom. Paintings by a rotation of little-known artists hang in the gallery and on the shop walls.

Architecture and art in Antwerp are as entwined now as they were when Flanders produced the Flemish masters in the 15th century. 'Antwerp is built from creativity – thinkers, craftsmen – with literal waterways and walkways from another era of grandeur,' says local fashion journalist Kristopher Arden-Houser.

Today's artists may not be as well known as Rubens, but the scene is spirited. Axel Vervoordt's gallery in the Oude Koornmarkt is a good place to start for the modern major players. Belgium's most influential collector, he has been the art world's name to know since the 1960s. He and his sons are currently developing Kanaal, an ambitious project to form a new district alongside the Albert Canal, just outside the city. Old warehouses and a chapel on the former distillery site will be transformed, and new homes added in Cube blocks. At its heart will be the Vervoordt Foundation Museum, housing an enormous collection of works. For contemporary art, the Tim Van Laere Gallery has a lively mix of names, including post-feminist painter Kati Heck and visual artist Nicolas Provost. Ingrid Deuss's gallery showcases photographers such as Isabel Miquel Arques, whose book *Portret met garnaalkroket* celebrates the scene with portraits of Belgian artists.

Most evenings, Graanmarkt 13's basement restaurant is filled with the chatter of artists, actors and designers. 'People don't care that Dries Van Noten might be eating at the next table,' says owner Ilse Cornelissens. 'It's always nice to see someone famous, but not really something people make a big thing out of.' Antwerpers are by nature modest. Theirs is not a skyscraper city, always on the move. It's calm. There's space to grow, develop – and with that creativity can be fostered. T

SHAPE SHIFTERS

Antwerp was put on the fashion map when a group of six students shunned the traditional silhouettes favoured by the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. Mavericks Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten,

Walter Van Beirendonck (now head of the school's fashion department), Dirk Bikkembergs, Marina Yee and Dirk Van Saele changed the way Belgian fashion was perceived when they showed their avant-garde collections at London fashion week in 1986. They opened up the scene for smaller cities and less recognised schools previously snubbed by the established fashion capitals.



Clockwise from this picture: Korsakov Café; The Jane restaurant; the bathroom of The Apartment, Graanmarkt 13



Clockwise from this picture: The Recollection interiors shop; lighting at Graanmarkt 13's restaurant; furniture at Magazyn; Helder shop



THE CITY'S TOP 10 VISIONARIES

CENTURIES OF RADICAL THINKERS HAVE MADE THIS SMALL PLACE BIG ON CREATIVITY

ABRAHAM ORTELIUS

Thought to be bonkers at the time, the 16th-century cartographer was the first to imagine that the continents had once been joined. His *Theatre of the World*, a collection of beautiful maps, is considered the earliest atlas.

PETER PAUL RUBENS

Chubby naked women, tigers, exotic fruit and silks: Rubens' paintings are rich in colour and subject, depicting scenes of excess. His baroque masterpieces, seen in buildings such as the Cathedral of our Lady, have influenced artists from Thomas Gainsborough to Jenny Saville.

ANTHONY VAN DYCK

You could say that the selfie trend started in the 1600s with van Dyck, best known for his portraits, including those of himself and Charles I. He became court painter to the English royal family after studying under Rubens.

EUGEEN VAN MIEGHEM

Thrown out of Antwerp's academy for being too 'free' with his subject, the 19th-century artist joined an anarchist group. It was no bad thing:

WHERE TO STAY

Ilse Cornelissens and husband Tim Van Geloven opened **The Apartment** last summer.

The sunny terrace feels Mediterranean and the interiors are distinctly Scandi-slick. www.graanmarkt13.be. From £935 per night, sleeps six

More bed and coffee than anything else, **Room National** is perfectly placed for shopping on Nationalestraat. The room to book is all-white 01, designed by sisters Vera and Violetta Pepa. www.roomnational.be. Doubles from about £100

Contemporary boutique **Hotel Julien** has a busy bar, small spa and fantastic views of the cathedral from the roof terrace. www.hotel-julien.com. Doubles from about £130

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Chef Seppe Nobel makes simple dishes with honey from **Graanmarkt 13**'s rooftop beehives and vegetables from the kitchen garden. www.graanmarkt13.be. About £55 for two

Eye-catching interiors and superb cooking make **The Jane** the hottest table in town. www.thejaneantwerp.com. About £85 for two

Hip bakery **Konditori** supplies The Apartment (see Where to Stay) with Paris-quality croissants, homemade bread and cloud-light custard-cream pastries. www.konditori.be

WHERE TO SHOP

At **Graanmarkt 13** buy ceramics and glassware from the restaurant and The Apartment. Fashion, too: Christopher Wijnants is a favourite label. www.graanmarkt13.be

Find preloved designer pieces for a fraction of the original price at **Labels Inc**. Like a second-hand store, only better. www.labelsinc.be

PETER DE POTTER

For his *Angelic Starts* work, the digital artist downloaded homoerotic pictures posted on random Facebook profiles, added handwritten words such as 'Refusal' and 'Monogamy' and published them on Tumblr. If anything will make you think twice about putting pictures of yourself online, it's knowing that de Potter could find them and use them as part of his next series.

DEVON HALFNIGHT LEFLUFY

Opening Ceremony ordered Halfnight LeFlufy's first collection before he had even graduated. His recent True Believer collection has a brilliantly chaotic narrative, with references to hip-hop, California, escapism and experimentation with trippy colours.

MANON KUNDIG

The technical skill in Kündig's theatrical menswear is astonishing. Her S/S 2014 collection was almost fetish-like, with collages of Google images on acid-printed silks wrapped around the models' entire bodies, even their faces. The otherworldly figures were like Doctor Who baddies with Red Riding Hood scarves.

At **Houben** there's a tight edit of designers including Christopher Kane, Céline, Thom Browne and Simone Rocha. www.houbenstore.be

Loft Styles looks like a film-props warehouse with industrial lights, chesterfields, model planes, mannequins and battered trunks. www.loftstyles.eu

Ingenious blooms by Mark Colle fill **Baltimore Bloemen**; he does exciting things with flowers for Raf Simons, Dior and Viktor & Rolf. www.baltimorebloemen.be

Academy graduates Karin Hendrix and Katrin Wouters have an eponymous shop, **Wouters & Hendrix**, where they make fashion-forward jewellery with unusual chicken-feet clasps and jagged edges. www.wouters-hendrix.com

Interior-design studio **Helder** spills into a shop for sleek lamps, handmade jewellery and tongue-in-cheek embroidered badges. www.studiohelder.be

Magazyn is the place to go to pick up design objects for your home in copper, glass and leather. www.magazyn.be

The Recollection is packed with modern-lifestyle essentials: Maison Martin Margiela homeware, art books, Aesop products. www.therecollection.com