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FASHION DISTRICT ARNHEM: CREATIVE ENTREPRENEURS UPGRADING A DEPRIVED NEIGHBOURHOOD

ARNHEM, THE NETHERLANDS

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The Arnhem Fashion District, which started in 2005, offers workspaces, shops and places to live for fashion designers. More than fifty fashion designers and other creative entrepreneurs have located their business in this neighbourhood. For a few years most of the fashion chain has been present: design and sales of designer clothes and accessories, a model agency, a fashion photographer, stylist, small-scale production facilities (sample workshop) and a fashion incubator (Arnhem Mode Incubator) which mainly supports start-up entrepreneurs to develop their business skills.

How the Arnhem Fashion District was developed

The Arnhem Fashion District started in 2005 as part of an urban upgrading process with the objective to bring liveliness and economic activity back into the deprived neighbourhood Klarendal. This old workers’ neighbourhood with more than 7,000 inhabitants, not far from the city centre, did not have a good reputation for a long time. Since the 1970s, it had become a depressed area: high unemployment, low incomes, little schooling and drug-related problems. Its lively shopping axis gradually fell silent.

An area like this is in general, however, quite popular with students and artists, and Arnhem has a lot of them. Therefore, upgrading this part of the city complied with the city’s wish to better promote the famous Fashion Design department of the ArtEZ Institute of the Arts together with the fashion reputation of Arnhem itself. Internationally known fashion designers such as Viktor & Rolf and Alexander van Slobbe studied at ArtEZ; fashion labels like People of the Labyrinths and Spijkers en Spijkers have been based in Arnhem for years and also two larger fashion retail chains (Score and Open 32) have their headquarters there.
There was also a strong wish to find out how talented fashion designers could be supported to keep them in Arnhem. As a result, the Fashion District was established offering designers a combination of affordable workspaces, shops and living apartments. The whole project was a co-operation between the housing association Volkshuisvesting Arnhem and the City of Arnhem. Volkshuisvesting Arnhem invested twenty to thirty million euros in making the premises they own in the neighbourhood suitable for the designers as well as in buying real estate at locations that were important ‘stepping stones’ in the neighbourhood. The City of Arnhem invested in reconstructing streets and public spaces, as well as projects for coaching and training designers to become more entrepreneurial. As a third party, the province of Gelderland has financially supported the project.

From the start the Fashion District was defined as a project, with the end date pending on a critical mass of entrepreneurs and their ability to become self-organising. This has worked out well, as one can see that since 2011 more and more responsibilities have been taken over by the entrepreneurs themselves, resulting in the association of entrepreneurs in the neighbourhood taking its place as an important new stakeholder. Current attention focuses on bottom-up co-operation with other organisations of entrepreneurs in the area and investment in a marketing strategy for the Fashion District as a whole. As a result, the association organised several fashion-related initiatives, such as regular fashion shows and the exciting yearly Fashion Night. Also, new initiatives such as MoMarket are born in other parts of the neighbourhood. MoMarket will take place every first Sunday of the month, where designers from all over the country will be able to sell their designs.
Strengths and weaknesses

The project was successful for Klarendal. Unemployment has gone down (nowhere in the city more than in this area), the number of jobs has increased, the neighbourhood is safer and private individuals and companies are investing in real estate again. Different surveys indicate that the people from the neighbourhood are finally regaining confidence in their future and
becoming more satisfied with their housing conditions.¹ The National Renovation Platform awarded Klarendal the Golden Phoenix for the best area transformation in the Netherlands and in 2013 the even more prestigious Golden Pyramid State Prize was awarded to this area for its development.

The upgrading of a deprived neighbourhood has been connected with start-up support for fashion designers. Besides, the project has succeeded in keeping more creative talent in the city. More than fifty jobs were created in the creative sector. Since 2009 also a sample workshop, that can organise small-scale production up to 150 pieces, has been located there. It also supported a project – Arnhem Fashion Connection – aiming at a closer co-operation between ArtEZ’s fashion department (the fashion designers) and the vocational training institute RijnIJSsel (the so-called fashion makers).

Some people in the neighbourhood were wary about this creative reorientation of their area. But gradually they warmed up to the project as they saw that living conditions are improving. Quite important, however, for the success has been that also other businesses came to the neighbourhood: a few very popular café-restaurants and a cultural centre in former army barracks. This brought another hundred jobs to Klarendal. Recently the fashion and design hotel Modez started business with twenty unique rooms, all decorated by fashion and product designers educated in Arnhem – under the guidance of fashion illustrator Piet Paris.

A unique feature in the Fashion District is that one can buy designer clothes and accessories directly from the designers themselves. Moreover, craftsmanship and sustainability are important values of the project. For example, Elsien Gringhuis, one of the designers, develops highly innovative patterns in which waste is maximally reduced. Another, Pauline van Dongen, combines high-tech materials and new technologies with traditional techniques and craftsmanship. In this way the Fashion District offers space for experiments and functions as an open innovation system, a so-called living lab.

However, the relative success of the Arnhem Fashion District is not an isolated story. It is an important element of the wider policy of the city to focus on fashion and design as one of its two most promising economic clusters (the other one being energy and environmental technology). This is supported by the province of Gelderland and recognised by the national government. Proof of this ambition is shown in other examples such as the Mode Biennale Arnhem, whose fifth edition has taken place in 2013. MoBA presents the state of the art of

innovative fashion design at an international level every two years. During six weeks MoBA 13 informed and inspired a large audience of fashionistas, students, tourists and professionals with exhibitions, fashion shows, workshops, seminars, and an educational programme. Of course there was a close cooperation with the Fashion District, entrepreneurs in the city centre, cultural institutions and the like.

Another stimulating support of the creative economy is that, not only in the Klarendal neighbourhood but also in the city centre, designer fashion shops have been attracted to strengthen Arnhem’s fashion signature: apart from Humanoid, Trix & Rees, and Jones which already existed, fashion shops such as Coming Soon, Sjaak Hullekes, People of the Labyrinths and By Maeve have recently appeared on the stage. Another ambition is to make a better connection between the Klarendal district and the city centre by realising a kind of design-oriented corridor between the two areas.

And last but not least, Modekern, the initiative to collect and digitise the archives of Dutch fashion designers for further research and public presentation was recently allotted to Arnhem. Here the fruitful co-operation between Gelders Archief (the Gelderland Archives), ArtEZ, the Museum of Modern Art Arnhem and Premsela, the Netherlands Institute of Design and Fashion\(^2\), supported by the city of Arnhem and the province of Gelderland, contributes to Arnhem’s position as city of fashion and design of the Netherlands.

The Klarendal project also has its weaknesses. From a study we undertook with ARCCI in 2010-2011\(^3\) it appeared that the entrepreneurial skills of most of the designers located in the Fashion District were underdeveloped. This endangered the long-term sustainability of the project. Therefore, it was a nice opportunity that by the middle of 2011 the Arnhem Mode Incubator was launched and started coaching and training programmes for existing and new designers, tackling their lack of entrepreneurial skills. Also the provision of new retail space to fashion designers is now the object of a tougher screening of their entrepreneurial skills and business plans. Finally, as said before, more common initiatives are taken by the Klarendal designers in the last few years to attract more customers to the neighbourhood: fashion shows, the yearly Fashion Night, workshops and tours and participation in the Arnhem Stock Days in which leftovers and unique pieces are sold.

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\(^2\) From January 2013, Premsela merged with the Netherlands Architecture Institute and the e-culture knowledge institute Virtueel Platform to form The New Institute.

Conclusion

The establishment of the Arnhem Fashion District has been a clear success as far as the upgrading of the neighbourhood and the further positioning of Arnhem as a city of fashion and design are concerned. However, there is still quite some work to be done in order to guarantee the long-term sustainability of the project.

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