

Rooms with a view

Amsterdam's historic canal houses offer vertical living at its very finest, says Deborah Nicholls-Lee



STROLLING around Amsterdam's magnificent canal district, it's hard to imagine the modest fishing village that once stood here on peaty land drained from swamps. Today, the Dutch capital's concentric canals and the impressive 17th-century properties that line them are UNESCO-listed, with the names of the three principal canals, the Herengracht, Keizersgracht and Prinsengracht (gentlemen, emperors and princes), reflecting the aspirations of their earliest occupants, when the trade routes established by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) made Amsterdam the richest port in the world.

Despite this influx of wealth, the merchants seeking residences in this burgeoning city were shrewd when it came to space. The classic Amsterdam canal house was tall and thin, with properties typically reaching four or five storeys high, as it was the footprint, not the living space, that determined the tax rate. Even the characteristically large windows were as practical as they were palatial, playing an important role in reducing the weight that was borne by the properties' stilted wooden foundations.

This vertical living commanded excellent views, but necessitated a narrow stairway. As a result, large objects were—and still are—delivered to the house on a rope via a hook built into the gable, hoisting to the store rooms merchandise shipped from the colonies

or, to the main residence, luxurious furnishings acquired with the profits.

The double-fronted *grachtpaleizen* (canal palaces), however, had less recourse to hooks and their broad, grandiose staircases took centre stage. The Grachtenmuseum (www.grachten.museum) tells the fascinating story of Amsterdam's expansion and is itself an example of one of Amsterdam's most splendid residences. The property was designed in the Dutch Baroque style by the esteemed 17th-century architect Philips Vingboons and features, still in situ, wall panels of idealised landscapes painted by renowned 18th-century decorative artist Jurriaan Andriessen.

‘Large objects are still delivered on a rope via a hook built into the gable’

The building dates back to 1663, on the cusp of the city's fourth expansion, when the canal system was extended to the east, wrapping around the medieval centre to form the distinctive fan shape we see today. These quiet outer rings, distanced from the busy harbour to the north, offered luxurious urban living that was still in proximity to the city centre and its important financial and administrative buildings.

Amsterdam's population had grown fivefold since the fall of Antwerp in 1585, when the victorious Spanish expelled the city's Protestants. As Antwerp's port was choked by blockades and its mercantile population fled north, Amsterdam established itself as the main trading centre in the Netherlands. What had once been primarily Baltic trade was extended to the East and West Indies, bringing the scent of tropical spices to the city's busy wharves.

The wealth and splendour of the Netherlands' Golden Age had, of course, a more sinister side. The city was indebted to slavery and gable stones depicting the enslaved and commodities, such as tobacco, coffee and sugar, still embellish many of the canal houses' decorative façades. One dazzling property that has not shied away from this inglorious past is the Van Loon Museum (www.museumvanloon.nl). This former home of Willem van Loon, co-founder of the VOC, is still occupied on the uppermost floors by his descendants and has staged a number of exhibitions exploring Amsterdam's colonial history and the family's role in it. A visit to the Van Loon Museum also offers a fascinating insight into the upstairs-downstairs world of a 17th-century canal palace, from the kitchen in the basement, where up to 15 servants would work against a background of copper pans and blue Delft tiles, to the high-ceilinged drawing room on the *bel étage*, where the windows are at their largest, providing the best canal views and flooding the rooms with light. →

Waterfront homes for sale

Weteringschans 18, €6.9 million (about £5.93m)

Built in 1883, this historic property is situated on the Singelgracht and enjoys fantastic views across the canal towards the Rijksmuseum. An impressive 4,639sq ft of light and airy living space spread over five floors boasts high ornamental ceilings throughout and includes three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a large open-plan kitchen. Outside, a pretty garden awaits with its own private jetty. Engel & Völkers (00 31 20 716 2418; www.engelvoelkers.com)



Weteringschans 245, €1.6 million (about £1.37m)

Situated between the Rijksmuseum and Frederiksplein, this beautifully renovated two-bedroom, ground-floor apartment occupies a little more than 1,453sq ft of living space and enjoys herringbone wooden floors throughout. The 538sq ft garden offers beautiful views towards the property's private mooring and the Reguliersgracht. Carla van den Brink (00 31 20 671 7272; www.vandenbrink.nl/en)



Less than 10 minutes' walk away is the Willet-Holthuysen House (www.museum.nl), another opulent canal house open to the public. The palace was built for the mayor of Amsterdam in 1685, but later passed into the hands of the Willet-Holthuysens, art collectors with extravagant tastes, who drew inspiration from the lavish Louis XVI furnishings they had admired on trips to Paris.

Three hundred years on and the appeal of the Grachtengordel (canal belt) and its historic properties has not waned, especially among foreign buyers. Pieter Joep van den Brink, of Amsterdam estate agency Carla van den Brink, estimates that about half his viewings are in English. 'It's so charming,' he says. 'In every building in the canal area, you have a beautiful view.'

Faced with a desperately overcrowded rental market, many expats and non-residents now see buying as their best option. Some are seeking a *pied-à-terre*, as they occasionally work in Amsterdam; others, says Mr van den Brink, 'buy it as a city hub and from this location they experience Europe'.

Dutch culture is a good fit for foreign buyers, with English spoken widely. 'It's easy



A 1633 map shows the expansion of Amsterdam, with a future phase outlined to the left

Ornamental gardens and *hofjes*

Concealed behind many of Amsterdam's grand houses are intricate landscaped gardens, which open en masse to the public in June during the Open Garden weekend (www.opentuinendagen.nl). Look also for the hidden *hofjes*: small inner courtyards concentrated in and around the city's Jordaan district. Here are some highlights open all-year round:

Museum Van Loon, Keizersgracht 672

Stretching between the main building and the grandiose neo-Classical porch of the property's coach house, this stylish, symmetrical garden (*below left*) hosts intimate opera concerts in the summer

Huis Marseille, Keizersgracht 401

Entry to Amsterdam's first photography museum, with its elegant shuttered windows and spectacular ceiling paintings, includes access to a shady garden,



bursting with greenery, with a bronze statue of Hermes as its focal point

Museum Willet-Holthuysen, Herengracht 605

If you're not visiting the museum, a stroll past the hotels and restaurants of the Amstelstraat affords a peek through an ivy-clad iron gate to this parterre garden (*below right*) with its immaculate topiary

Karthuizerhof, Karthuizersstraat 89-171

The imposing buildings that surround this pretty garden with its white picket fence and antique water pumps were once 17th-century almshouses

Hofje Van Brienen, Prinsengracht 89-133

Wrought-iron lanterns, window boxes of scarlet geraniums and flowerbeds bursting with hydrangeas greet visitors to this charming paved *hofje*



living,' says Mr van den Brink, and there's no need for a long commute. 'If you live here, you bike to your office. You have everything: the culture, the freedom, but also the work-life balance.'

Canal houses have proved a solid investment for buyers. A glance at the Herengracht Index, the oldest index in the world, reveals the uninterrupted capital gain investors have enjoyed when buying in the canal district, albeit with a little 'sitting on their hands,' says Mr van den Brink, to ride out economic recessions.

Properties on the market range from buildings split into apartments of 40sq m-100sq m (430sq ft-1,076sq ft), to entire canal palaces of up to 1,000sq m (10,763sq ft). Mr van den Brink shrugs his shoulders when clients ask what the upper limit is on real estate in the canals. Recently, when the property market was widely reported as slowing, his agency achieved a record-breaking sum of €21,000 (£18,000) per square metre with Christie's International Real Estate—almost twice the average price for the location.

Attracting the most interest are properties that have been meticulously renovated. 'If the wood panelling is still there, the sliding doors, the ceiling with paintings and the silk wall covering, the curtains, the golden mirror, the marble fireplace and the original oak floors, then people go crazy,' says Mr van den Brink. 'That's the Rijksmuseum, the Champions League of monuments.'