

They're everywhere! They're everywhere! Like some B-movie invasion, Dutch designers seem to have conquered the world. There's no place to hide (they're in our wardrobes and our pedal bins!) and no place to run (they've taken control from Las Vegas to Gdansk). The only choice is to pull on a pair of G-Star jeans and a MEXX tee shirt, lie back on your Tejo Remy chair, pop open a Grolsch in a Swingtop bottle – and surrender.



JURGEN BEY



MARCEL WANDERS



Invasion of the Dutch Designers



MARCEL WANDERS

The invasion is complete. There are no more battlegrounds. Dutch designers have conquered the world on all fronts. They've taken control of our buildings (at least their design) and neighbourhoods: Las Vegas' Guggenheim Museum (Rem Koolhaas/OMA); low-income housing outside of Madrid (MVRDV); a new masterplan for Gdansk, Poland (Mecanoo). They're hiding in our closets: G-Star.

MEXX. Oilily. Laundry Industry. Viktor & Rolf. Gsus. They've infiltrated our offices, our homes, our restaurants, our museums, and every design headline: Hella Jongerius has commissions ranging from Ikea to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Piet Hein Eek collaborates on Conran restaurants in London and his furniture is sold (and collected) around the world. Marcel Wanders is, the 'hottest

designer in the world' according to icon Magazine. BMW, Vitra, Cappellini and Maharam all have Dutch designers working for them. And (dare we take this horror-movie metaphor one step further?) there are even giant blobs 'attacking' in the form of Kas Oosterhuis' building projects.

Nobody is safe! The invasion is complete.

It came from Outer Space: Or did it? Looking at designs by Dutch architects that have 'landed' recently – the Mezz Pop Center in Breda (Erick van Egeraat), for instance, or the ING Group headquarters in Amsterdam (Meyer en Van Schooten) – it seems like this Dutch invasion came by way of outer space. But in truth – it emerged from a swamp.

'The whole country was designed, just in order to inhabit and use it. So I think we take more care.' Aaron Betsky says he's hypothesizing, but you have to give him some credit. He is, after all, the director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam. And he did co-write the

bible on Dutch design, *False Flat: Why Dutch design is so good*. He knows what he's talking about.

'Both the environment and objects are designed with more care here – everything from tax forms to stamps to the roads and cities. This comes from the country having deliberate policies to cover these things, and I speculate here, from this being an artificial country.' Because it started from a swamp.

When you create every square meter of land, you're careful about how you use it, what you build on it, and what you use while you live on it.

That mainstay of Dutch society, the polder model – everyone working together; everyone happy when they leave the bargaining table – also stemmed from these muddy roots. It's a valuable system for deciding how land is to be used, according to Betsky. An example: the Skatepark Blaak, a skateboard park on the southern edge of Rotterdam, that seemed to satisfy everyone from the workers in the adjoining

offices to the boarders on the half pipe when it was constructed a few years ago.

Of course, there's more to the story than a swamp. There are centuries of government policies and the social welfare system and many other forces at work. Along the way they brought us guilder notes that blossomed in bright sunflowers, postage stamps that were more works of art than commerce, the first industrial designers (at Philips), bloated postal Road-runner bike carriers, Gerrit Rietveld's Red/Blue chair, Gispen's tubular steel furniture, the CD player – and that's just the short list!

Cut to the chase? Today we have a worldwide invasion of Dutch design.

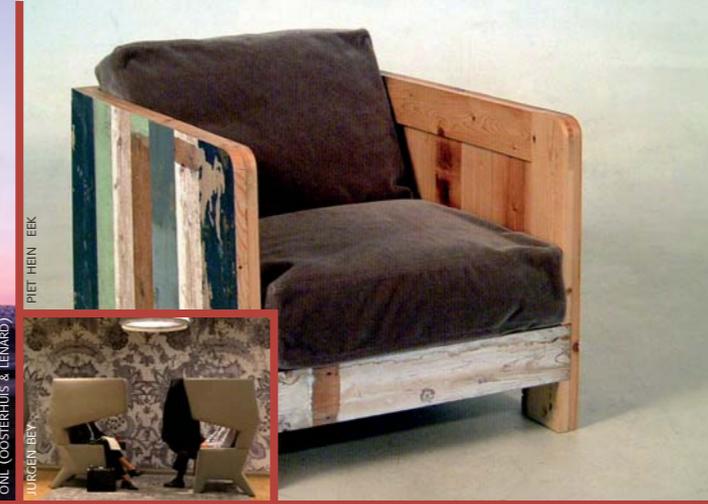
Take us to your leaders To pay homage to contemporary Dutch design, start with industrial design and home décor. In Amsterdam, there are two mandatory stops. First: *The Frozen Fountain*, a bright orange storefront on the Prinsengracht that could easily be mistaken for an ice cream store.

On weekends, this temple to design is packed with style-conscious locals; during the week, in-the-know tourists file in, quickly folding their maps, trying to look hip. It's the place to find out, first-hand, why Dutch design is so important.

'I think it's because we have the right climate,' say Dick Dankers, founder of Frozen Fountain. 'We Dutch have always been open to new influences and so have a natural openness to new designs.'

Dankers laughs about the British design store Habitat's attempted romance with Amsterdammers. 'When Habitat came here, they were selling the same glass for 6 guilders that HEMA sold for 1.50. The Dutch wouldn't put up with that. In the US or UK, HEMA would be a top design store. Here? It's just HEMA.'

But Dankers' Frozen Fountain is anything but HEMA. For over two decades, the store has featured self-producing (primarily Dutch) designers and craftspeople. A tour through the store is a tour through the top names in Dutch industrial design.



The metal cases that line the store are by Piet Hein Eek, better known for his furniture made from wrecked wood. ‘The cases look like they could have been made in 1910, but they fit into 2006,’ says Dankers. ‘Piet connects to the big Dutch designers before the war. He picks up their traditions, but not consciously.’

Inside Eek’s cabinet is a vase by Marcel Wanders. Its shape was formed by placing eggs inside a condom. Dankers trots over to his computer to show me another Wanders design: the snotty vase. ‘He filmed people sneezing in slow motion and then created a mould that duplicated the shape,’ he explains. Most people would be more apt to recognize Wanders’ lighting (a one-way mirror shade encompassing a crystal chandelier) or his knotted chair, both handled through his company, Moooi. Wanders’ latest? The Happy Hour chandelier, which features a live person and several bottles of liquor suspended from above.

You won’t find the Happy Hour chandelier at Frozen Fountain, but you will find a complete area devoted to the oldest company in the Netherlands, *Koninklijke Tichelaar Makkum*, producing ceramics since 1594. Its presence illustrates an important aspect in Dutch industrial design: an eagerness to mix the old with the new, a kind of traditional cutting edge.

Evidence, the Koninklijke Tichelaar Makkum partnership with top designers Hella Jongerius, Jurgen Bey and Job Smeets.

‘Hella is not very well known here in the Netherlands,’ says Dankers. ‘But in New York they go mad over her. She’s had shows and Maharam, the most-exclusive

home textiles company in the US, commissioned work from her. It’s the same in Tokyo and France, where she was designer of the year.’ Despite this alleged lack of fame in her home country, Jongerius’ Nymphenburg Sketches have just been acquired by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

There’s no question about designer Jurgen Bey’s Dutch fame. He won the Prince Bernhard Culture Fund Award for Applied Arts and Architecture last year. And, as for Job Smeets, of Studio Job (also featured at the Stedelijk), says Dankers: ‘Job is somewhere in between art and design. His work has a sense of humour to it. I asked him why he’d made a candleholder oversized. He said, “You know how when you make something little and everyone thinks it’s cute? When I hold this candleholder next to me, I look tiny and everyone thinks I’m cute!”’ Dankers smiles. ‘You know what? He was right!’

It came from planet Droog

A sense of humour takes us to the other stop on our design pilgrimage: *Droog Design*, on the Staalstraat in Amsterdam.

Started in 1993 by Gijs Bakker and Renny Ramakers as a platform for contemporary Dutch design, Droog Design (the ‘droog’ referring to the dry wit or unadorned style of many of the designs) has championed such Dutch icons as Tejo Remy’s Milk Bottle Lamps (a dozen suspended milk bottles), his Chest of Drawers (several discarded drawers strapped together) and Eibert Draisma’s Talking Coffeemaker. Now their store is full of alien-looking products that elicit a chuckle, as well as an ‘ah ha!’ like the terry cloth Matwalk, a bathmat/slipper combo that allows you to shuffle around the

bathroom after a shower. Today Droog Design has a growing range of ‘affordable’ products, such as the best-selling Strap, by NL Architects, a style diva’s answer to the bungee cord.

Bakker explained in icon Magazine this year: ‘We want to make design more normal. You make something more normal when it is accessible to people. Not only the top people.’

Attack of the architects!

The nation that gave us Amsterdam School Architecture now gives us marvelous creations that have to be seen to be believed. Rem Koolhaas/OMA completed the Seattle Central Library in 2004; MaxWan has developed a master plan for the Barking Thames Gateway area in London; and architects around the world copy the Kas Oosterhuis blob style that spawned the 1.5km long acoustical barrier, The Hessing Cockpit, along the A2.

But it’s not just the brick and mortar (or steel or glass or aluminium) that are translating to foreign drafting tables. ‘The ways of actually working have been worked out here in Holland,’ says Betsy. ‘I visit architectural schools around the world and see students working in a way that would have been considered Dutch a few years ago.’ That polder model is emerging from the swamp again.

The creature in the closet

Like any good B-movie assault, the Dutch invaders have managed to climb inside the dark closet – but this time they aren’t hiding. Dutch designers and brands are on the High Streets – and on the backs of the most A-list of dressers: Cora Kemperman on top; Marlies Dekkers underneath and Viktor & Rolf on the cat-

walk. (Not to mention a change of clothing from MEXX, G-Star, Laundry Industry, Gsus or Mart Visser!)

Even with all the big names dropping into closets around the world, Dutch fashion design is not as prolific as Dutch industrial, home or architectural design. Still, it has its fans.

‘I defy any woman from Milan, Paris, New York or LA to brave the weather on a bicycle and look as good as a Dutch woman does,’ says Victor Portes, who has just put together a book about the Dutch fashion industry. Called *Dutch Catwalk: An Overview of the Dutch Fashion Industry*, the book covers the entire fashion industry: design, logistics, branding, modelling.

‘Fashion is an entire ecosystem; design is just one part of that,’ says Portes. *Dutch Catwalk* is a goldmine of opinion from some of the top names in fashion. What do they have to say about Dutch design?

‘Dutch fashion is about independence. It’s about having an individual style. Historically, Dutch artists like Van Gogh, Rietveld or Mondriaan have always had a sense of independence. This is an element that can be seen as typical of Dutch design. What’s coming out of the Netherlands tends to be a little bit edgy and contains a lot of humor. At the same time it is stripped clean of any static,’ writes Geert De Rooij, cofounder of clothing company People of the Labyrinths.

‘Because in the Netherlands we don’t have a long tradition of designing, Dutch fashion is much more uninhibited than fashion in traditional clothing-countries around the world,’ writes top designer Hans Ubbink. ‘This lack of tradition has

made design by the Dutch more liberating. If you are confined by a legacy, it doesn’t allow you to look at fashion as something that is solely contemporary.’

And from James Veenhof and Steve TePas, founders of Amsterdam International Fashion Week: ‘Where Paris and Milan represent the traditional couture industry, Amsterdam offers a younger more dynamic alternative. There is room here for new ideas and fresh thinking.’

And as Portes puts it, himself: ‘There is a lot of creative DNA in the Netherlands. Being international is also part of the Dutch DNA. There is a benefit to the Netherlands being the gateway to Europe.’ To appreciate that you just have to look at the intimate wear of Marlies Dekkers; what Hans Ubbink is doing with denim; and the skateboarder brand, Gsus (say it aloud to appreciate its crown of thorns logo). ‘You couldn’t have a brand like that just anywhere.’

The only question that remains: Is today’s design invasion a conquest – or a liberation?

Invasion of the Dutch designers: The Sequel

Dutch designers have given us much to appreciate – and there’s more to come. Dankers says to watch twin brothers Jeroen and Joep Verhoeven. Betsy says NL Architects, SeARCH bv, BAR, S333 Studio for Architecture and Urbanism are the ones to watch in architecture. The assault is far from over. <

Seeing is believing

What’s the best way to appreciate what’s around you?

Here are ten tips to discovering Dutch design:

1. ‘Get on a bicycle. It’s the best way to see the country. Walking is too slow and a car is too fast. Bicycling allows you to see the country in motion, in time, and appreciate it. The cities are designed by manipulating and using space. The Amsterdam Zuid areas where the housing blocks stretch out along the streets, but the corners have ornaments – there’s almost a theatrical drama when all these buildings are massed together,’ says Aaron Betsky of Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam.
2. Fill out your tax form. Get on a yellow and blue train and trundle through the green meadows. Admire a postal worker riding by on a red Roadrunner, then post a letter with a butterfly stamp designed by Irma Boom. One of the most remarkable aspects of Dutch culture is how many of the objects, images and spaces one encounters every day have been designed. Notice.
3. Visit a VINEX location. The Dutch government decided with the VINEX Program to build around 750,000 homes between 1995 and 2015 in newly invented compact cities. Says Betsy, ‘This is one of the few attempts in the world to design sprawl. The Dutch have said that sprawl is happening, so what are we going to do about it? See how they’re weaving new buildings with meadows and dense housing and civic monuments and schools. This is not something that is done elsewhere.’ Ypenburg is a typical location. www.archex.info.
4. Be a fashion spotter. ‘Look and you start finding things you don’t see in London or New York or Paris,’ says Victor Portes of *Dutch Catwalk*. ‘The casual denim, trainers and scarves. The forbidden combinations. If you start to really look, you’ll definitely see a lot of interesting things.’
5. See what the Stedelijk has recently added to its collection and hear the designers, themselves, talk about their craft. Spotting, Recent Acquisitions: Objects of Craft and Design. Until May 21. www.Stedelijk.nl.
6. Visit The Frozen Fountain, Prinsengracht 645, Amsterdam. Tel: 020-622 93 75 and Droog Design, Staalstraat 7a, Amsterdam, Tel. 020-523 50 50.
7. Participate in design: Dutch Design Week 2006 is in Eindhoven, October 21 – 29. www.dutchdesignweek.nl
8. Check out the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, including the largest Rietveld collection and collections of applied art, fashion and design development. www.centraalmuseum.nl
9. Celebrate 90 years of W. H. Gispen & Co., the first firm to use tubular steel in furniture design. www.nai.nl and www.gispen.com
10. Read about design. The 400-page *False Flat: Why Dutch design is so good* (Aaron Betsky with Adam Eeuwens) is the obvious place to start. Irma Boom, one of the European Design Museum’s top designers in 2005, created the gorgeous tome. To learn about the fashion industry – straight from the top fashion mouths: *Dutch Catwalk: An Overview of the Dutch Fashion Industry* (Edited by Victor Portes, Revolving Fund Dutch Catwalk). And to discover the creative side of Amsterdam, including many design-oriented venues, pick up *The Amsterdam Index 2006: A Shortcut to Creative Amsterdam* at a newsstand near you. (www.amsterdam-index.com).