

# westergasfabriek

ruimte voor creatieve bedrijven en evenementen

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## Factory Fresh (Amsterdam Index 2006)

**The story of the Westergasfabriek's reincarnation as a 'cultural park' is a tale of how citizens and officials can work together to breathe new life into an industrial wasteland.**

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by [Louise Schouwenberg](#)  
published in the yearly magazine [Amsterdam Index 2006](#)

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**Years afterward, visitors often still vividly recall special events they attended at the Westergasfabriek. Particularly memorable is the unorthodox location: a 19th-century gasworks, where the names of the buildings harken back to a prosaic past: the Gasholder, the Engine Building, the Purification Hall, the Boiler House and the Transformer House.**

**The first major event** to be held in one of the former factory buildings was during the Holland Festival in 1993. The audience thrilled to Ton de Leeuw's direction of the spectacular opera *Antigone*, but the traditionally round Gasholder building drew just as much attention, with its weathered floors and massive walls, cast-iron ceiling and immense scale. Many more events followed, including the Triple X art festival, the Drum Rhythm Festival, Brazilian Carnival, the theatre festival Winterparade, the alternative art fair Kunstvlaai, and numerous fashion shows by new and established designers.

**The many highlights** include a spectacular performance of Karlheinz Stockhausen's Helicopter String Quartet in 1995. The quartet played from four helicopters overhead; the audience on the ground heard the music through speakers, mixed with the sounds of the engines. The Gasholder, for its part, hosted a very special version of the opera *Rêves d'un Marco Polo* directed by Reinbert de Leeuw in 2000 and 2004.

Rob Zuidam wrote in the daily paper NRC Handelsblad: *"Low clouds rush past an excavator-ravaged wasteland and old factories, some in decay. The Netherlands Opera and musicians from the ASKO/Schönberg Ensemble have left the comfort of Amsterdam's Muziektheater and set up camp at the old Westergasfabriek. The Gasholder, dating back to 1902 and made of brick and an incredible amount of metal, reminds one of an Anselm Kiefer painting, with its peeling paint and rust*

### Amsterdam Index

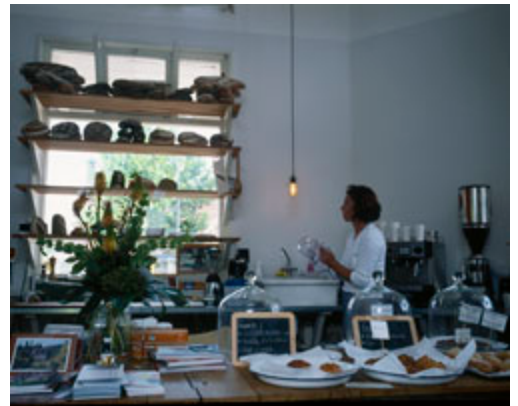
Amsterdam Index is a brand new yearly magazine about creative Amsterdam. It looks at the city through the eyes of the creative individuals that work and live in Amsterdam.

Amsterdam Index 2006, together with a pocket-cityguide is available in several bookstores in Amsterdam, such as the Bijenkorf and Ako-bookstores.

More info: [www.amsterdam-index.nl](http://www.amsterdam-index.nl)



Zuiveringshal



Bakkerswinkel

metal, reminds one of an Arsenik Nietel painting, with its peeling paint and rust-eaten ceiling. It's the perfect backdrop for Claude Vivier's *Rêves d'un Marco Polo*."

**Over the past decade**, buildings at the old gasworks have been rented to various cultural organisations. They've included the Amsterdam School of the Arts' advanced theatre and dance programme DasArts, the theatre companies Orkater and Toneelgroep Amsterdam, and Cirque du Soleil. The site has also hosted big dance parties and figured regularly in TV commercials, videos and films.

**A popular dance spot is here, too.** Originally called Kantine West when it opened in the mid-1990s, the restaurant and club later changed its name to West Pacific, and again recently to Pacific Parc. With Kantine West, founder Koen Vollaers and his team managed to turn an old factory building into a local hotspot. According to tradition, the chairs are still pushed back after 11 p.m. to make room for dancing to old favourites into the wee hours. Vollaers, a specialist in mobile catering thanks to his experience with the restaurant-on-wheels Cantina Mobilé and the theatre festival Boulevard of Broken Dreams, was the ideal person to work in a location that was originally intended to be temporary.

## An ongoing adventure

**Temporary? Hardly.** In 1993, the Westerpark district asked Liesbeth Jansen, a seasoned consultant and programmer of cultural festivals, to plan the Westergasfabriek's events agenda for a year. More than ten years on, the complex's owner has her running the buildings. All of them have been renovated and are suitable for occupancy. In the next few years, several new ones will be built at the west end of the site. These will be rented out to still more cultural and creative organisations.

*"We receive stacks of requests from hopeful tenants," Jansen says. "At first, the temporary aspect encouraged people to stop procrastinating. Everything had to happen immediately, which produced tremendous energy and enthusiasm. And with the site becoming well known, interest has soared."*

**In choosing the businesses**, she says, her "main criterion is their vision. Do they specifically want to work here? Are they pursuing adventure and innovation? Whether or not they aspire to public recognition, they must add to the location's diversity." Though the Westergasfabriek doesn't hire space to individual artists, Jansen says they're considering setting up an artists-in-residence area.

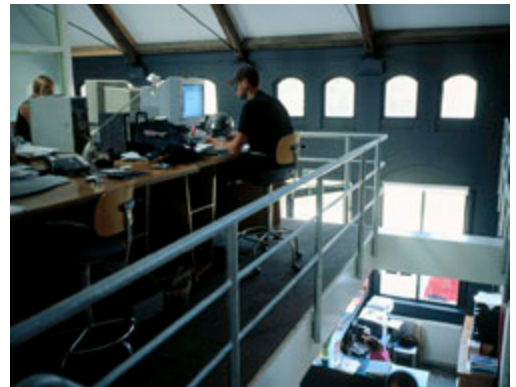
**But is there still enough creativity left in Amsterdam**, what with its high rents, which hamper artists and fledgling entrepreneurs as they do not in cities like Rotterdam? Jansen says yes. *"Audiences are in Amsterdam, not Rotterdam. Other cities have to put a huge effort into attracting a culturally minded public. Amsterdam has and always will have it."*

**Current tenants include** De Kunstbende and Bekijk 't, two organisations that try to interest young people in art and culture; Household Hardware, which imports traditionally designed goods from developing countries; Radiomakers Desmet, who do what it says on the tin; interactive-media designers IJsfontein; and orson+bodil's clothing studio and shop. Cinema Het Ketelhuis ('The Boiler House') shows quality Dutch and European films.

Besides Pacific Parc, eating and drinking spots include the café EspressoFabriek,



Terrace near wetlands



Office IJsfontein



Pacific Parc



Gashouder



the bar Westergasterras, and the bakery De Bakkerswinkel, which also sells filled picnic hampers to park visitors. Tenants and outsiders organise minor and major happenings for the public at the site. Sometimes the Westergasfabriek Foundation is in charge, and the entire park is given over to extravaganzas like 2004's night-time outdoor art festival Midzomernachten ('Midsummer Nights'), which drew thousands. At the end of 2005, the Yule festival will bathe the park and several buildings in a light show.

**The British Imperial Continental Gas Association** built the Westergasfabriek between 1883 and 1903. The complex closed in the 1960s after natural gas was discovered in the north of the country and replaced coal gas. Some of its buildings were torn down, including the gasworks and the water tower. The municipal electricity company used the remaining structures for many years for storage and maintenance work. The reddish-brown brick lends a nostalgic look to the buildings, nearly all of which were designed by architect Isaac Gosschalk in a variation on the Dutch Renaissance style. (A significant exception is the imposing Gasholder, which was designed by an engineer named Klönne.) But although the buildings had long been an Amsterdam West landmark, in the 1960s there wasn't much inclination to treat them as a historical legacy. Neighbouring residents wanted the site turned into a park. The Westerpark district and the city spent years discussing its fate: how to zone the area and how to clean up the pollution left over from its industrial past.

## Complex negotiations

**Nowadays, administrators far and wide** are eager to find out how this huge former factory complex was transformed into a 'cultural park' that neither receives government subsidies nor needs to succumb to the pressure of attracting large numbers of visitors. To get there, various cultural sectors, government, local residents and property developers had to agree on an extraordinary plan.

**On the negative side**, all parties involved made sure to bind the others to agreements in writing: for example, the owners had to promise to house creative businesses and keep rents low. On the positive side, it's clear that enthusiasm and effective communication all round ultimately led to a result everyone can be proud of.

**Olof Koekebakker wrote** about the Westergasfabriek's rebirth in his book *De transformatie van een voormalig industrieel complex in Amsterdam* ('The Transformation of a Former Industrial Complex in Amsterdam'). It would make great fiction, with its tale of stubbornly promoted interests, obstacles, enthusiasm, and plain luck culminating in an almost inconceivable happy ending.

**Transforming the complex** into luxury housing seemed the obvious choice; by then, that had become the customary fate of big old industrial buildings in Amsterdam. But the city decided to go against the grain and zone the huge old factory for some sort of cultural use. The idea came partly from the underground scene, which for decades had been noticing and taking advantage of the beauty and potential of unusual buildings such as abandoned factories, schools and churches. On top of that, it had become an accepted notion that a well-maintained arts scene was an essential element of any vital city. Even the market stood to



"Do Something" - future art project



Zuiveringshal **Oost** - temporarily for rent



Artolive - Art for rent



Cité des Arts - finished in 2007



gain, as Richard Florida, a professor of economic development, had pointed out in his widely discussed book *The Rise of the Creative Class*: where creative people go, business follows.

**Officials in Amsterdam** learned from other cities' experiences and mistakes in the 1990s with former factory sites like the IBA Emscher Park in Germany's Ruhrgebiet and the Parc de la Villette in Paris. Today, the old German coal mine and steel factory is used for cultural festivals, and the old Parisian abattoir has made way for a futuristic museum park.

In 1989, the Westergasfabriek's buildings became listed. In 1991, the electric company moved out, and the local government invited proposals for new development plans for the entire site, including the buildings. It received 334 submissions, and ultimately, the choice came down to two: a plan for a contemporary music centre, and the so-called Rhizome plan, which mainly reflected locals' wishes to make the buildings available for a variety of uses, in some cases by neighbourhood residents and their organisations.


**As expected**, the residents voted for the Rhizome plan, but the city council ultimately chose the music centre. Then a fateful coincidence took place: bureaucrats demanded reports, and that meant delays. In the meantime, something had to be done to prevent squatters from moving onto the site. In 1993, the council decided to hire out the empty spaces to various cultural organisations for a year. A year turned into two, which turned into three. And gradually, the site's temporary use proved so valuable that there arose a general eagerness to make the project permanent, and the music centre found another location on the IJ waterway. A development plan holding all the parties to keep things the way they were was drafted in 1996, and it's been in use ever since.

**The factory grounds** remained in the hands of the Westerpark district, which held a design contest. The winner, Kathryn Gustafson, an American, made over the desolate area into a lovely 14-hectare park with help from Francine Houben of the Mecanoo architectural firm. Development company MAB bought the buildings in 2000. (Maya Meijer, formerly involved with MAB, is the current owner.) The site's cultural destiny was secured with the establishment of the company Westergasfabriek BV, which manages the buildings, and the Westergasfabriek Foundation,

## Excquisite taste

*De Bakkerswinkel has found a crowd-pleasing recipe: traditional baked goods teamed with an eye for design.*

**Just next to the entrance** to the Westergasfabriek, there's a fantastic spot for breakfast and lunch that combines creative activity with pastoral tranquility. The windows and outdoor seating area offer a view of the Haarlemmervaart canal, the old gasworks buildings, and the edge of the beautiful parkland. Inside, the renovated Regulator House reflects the past as well as the present. The furniture, by renowned designer Piet Hein Eek, is made of recycled wood, and the delicious pies, quiches, snacks and sandwiches sold in the shop and café are baked from scratch according to traditional recipes. De Bakkerswinkel is part of a chain of five



Playing in the parc is allowed

small traditional bakeries. In business since 1999, it's already earned a reputation. The key is quality, according to owner Piet Hekker.

**Following in his baker father's footsteps** may have seemed a logical choice, but Hekker actually went to hotel school first before switching to hairdressing, and it was only after years spent working as a stylist in London that he entered the baking business in the early 1980s. He bought one of his dad's shops in Zoetermeer and decided pretty much straight away to do something different. *"London shaped my taste," he says. "I witnessed so many trends in architecture, design, fashion. I became interested in the causes and effects of fashions and social trends. Those insights all fell into place when I started De Bakkerswinkel. Quality isn't just in the ingredients of the bread; it's evident at all levels. That's why I carefully select the people who run the shops. But the interior and even the plates are important, too."*

## Slow food

**His menu shows thought**, too, in its descriptions of the origins of many ingredients. De Bakkerswinkel bears hallmarks of Slow Food, an international organisation of small businesses that champion the use of natural ingredients, slow ripening processes and traditional preparation methods. The Slow Food philosophy fits Piet Hekker to a T. It also seems ideally suited to the spirit of the age.

"The end of the 20th century was marked by recession across the board," Hekker says. *"At times like that, you shouldn't do the obvious – that is, lower the price of a staple item, such as bread, by increasing production and compromising quality. It's exactly these moments when people need quality. Market response is quick and short-sighted. People want something different, and they look for it in colour, packaging, and slogans. From the very start, I wanted to stand out on the basis of personal quality. I see enough young bakers and designers who believe in that quality. And I've proven that a market for small-scale definitely exists."*

**But there's more** to the success of De Bakkerswinkel than just the quality of its products. The shops stand out, too, mainly thanks to Hekker's collaborations with people from other disciplines, such as Piet Hein Eek, interior designer Onno Donkers and food designer Marije Vogelzang. Vogelzang caters special events through-out the country, such as themed art exhibitions and musical and theatrical shows. The teaming up of this young creative thinker and Hekker, the go-getting tradesman, is bound to result in special projects in Amsterdam too. The shop has begun selling picnic hampers to park visitors, and the duo are dreaming of opening an 'alternative wedding location' above the restaurant and a 'food laboratory'.

[www.debakkerswinkel.nl](http://www.debakkerswinkel.nl)

## Fashion Lab

*Alexander Van Slobbe and Guus Beumer of the gas factory's resident clothing label orson+bodil say that for them designing is about experimentation, not commerce.*

**Dutch fashion brand orson+bodil** doesn't have a shop or a studio in the capital's retail heart: instead, it's chosen the Westergasfabriek as home. It was a conscious choice, say the men behind the name, designer Alexander van Slobbe and design

theorist Guus Beumer. Their aspirations and interests, they say, lie mainly in fashion itself, in developing new visions and doing research, rather than in the commercial side of the business.

**In 1993, Van Slobbe was the first Dutch designer** to have his own show in Paris, opening doors for others. He also inspired many young designers as the head of the fashion academy in Arnhem, where he shared his passion for the field. Besides doing commercial work for companies including Puma and Connexion, Van Slobbe teamed up with Beumer to launch the menswear brand SO, which became especially popular in Japan, and the women's brand orson+bodil. Van Slobbe has been called a 'designer's designer': he's an icon to many in the business. He's earned international acclaim and taken home prizes such as the Prince Bernhard Cultural Fund award in 2003.

## **A shop and a 'lab'**

**Walking into the orson+bodil shop** and studio, you're reminded of a research centre rather than a boutique. *"Besides a fashion collection, orson+bodil is a lab," Beumer says, "where we investigate processes in our field, and give ideas a chance."* The shop-cum-studio is located in the old transformer house. A stone's throw away in the boiler house, the affiliated fashion 'research centre' Co-Lab recently made its home. During renovation, bare walls and traces of the gas factory's industrial past were preserved in both buildings. Orson+bodil's interior decor reflects the same approach. Architect Herman Verkerk has used temporary, basic materials to build cabinets, walls and suspension systems which are austere in shape, simple in construction, and have a restrained, functional beauty. In these aspects they reflect Van Slobbe's clothing designs, which are similarly sober and rely heavily on construction, function and history.

**The shop and studio are connected**, so that Van Slobbe maintains contact with customers. Sometimes he works here with other designers who share his vision and approach. For instance, he developed a fashion collection with Claudy Jongstra; the two designers' shared quest for purity, construction and design produced unique results. Van Slobbe also works regularly with fashion designer and artist Pascale Gatzen, jewellery designer Connie Groenewegen, artist Joke Robaard, photographers Niels Schumm and Anuschka Blommers, and traditional businesses such as ceramics factory Konink-lijke Tichelaar – which lays claim to being the oldest firm in the Netherlands – and an old-fashioned Turkish sewing studio.

**The Co-Lab, a loose group of people** some of whom work and confer with orson+bodil, conducts research into new production and marketing models for the fashion business. Planned studies will look at the classic industrial marketing model, an artisanal project, and the potential of fashion in the absence of the traditional collections and biannual shows.

## **A craftsman's niche**

**Today, according to Beumer**, there's an obvious need for new marketing models. Brand-name clothing has taken over the market from designer fashion, because

major brands can respond better to globalisation than individual creators. As a result, most designers today work for major brands and often lack sufficient room to question the business or introduce new insights. Consequently, fashion has grown stale, having become mainly a product of marketing strategies. Brand positioning seems to be more important than quality.

But Beumer says he believes the popularity of brands is declining. *"How boring will the world be if every high street in every city has not only the same Blokker and H&M but also the same Prada and Gucci shops?" he asks. "And how many more upscale shops can we handle? Take away the designers and there's very little variation or innovation. Ultimately, people really do crave more variety, and more attention, too."* This is why orson+bodil choose not to compete directly with the major international brands, preferring instead to concentrate on the niche between prêt-à-porter and couture.

**Currently, this niche** lies somewhere between industrial and old-fashioned production methods. Van Slobbe crafts his designs with extreme precision, in close cooperation with a small traditional Turkish sewing studio. Industrial methods can produce extremely complicated designs these days, but only handcrafted methods create the psychological effect orson+bodil are after. By using semi-finished industrial products and hand finishing, the brand is able to flexibly produce a limited number of high-quality yet affordable items, which they've dubbed 'prêt-à-porter deluxe'.

**While contemporary fashion** often translates 'luxury' as extravagance, in Van Slobbe's work, attention and refinement are not ostentatiously trumpeted on the outside, but more often concealed on the inside. *"Fashion is a visual language and as such has become synonymous with visibility, with representation," he says. "It's not the product but the virtual image of the product in the media that matters. The brands have taken that aspect of fashion and grossly inflated and exaggerated it. Craftsmanship, which to us means first and foremost the craft of the cut, makes people more aware of quality and the three-dimensional character of a piece of clothing."*

**Some have even compared** orson+bodil's workshop to the Bauhaus studios of the 1920s, which also served to unite differing strengths in cross-disciplinary collaborations. There, too, research was considered fundamental. It's an attitude that's alive and well today at the Westergasfabriek.

...De magnolia staat op springen...