

Antwerp – A fashion capital, yet a humble one

With a population of half a million people, Antwerp is the second largest city of the Kingdom of Belgium. The city's seaport is one of the largest in the world. It is the world diamond capital as well as the headquarters of numerous local breweries. At political level it is the springboard for the political ambition of a nationalist leader emerging from a Europe in crisis assailed by self-doubt about its future and place in the world.

Antwerp is like numerous cities in Europe moving into the post-industrial age, counting on knowledge and creative industries to develop its economy and attractiveness. The city has a bohemian feel, far less bourgeois than Belgium's capital Brussels. Its DNA is popular, industrious but also very creative.

Antwerp is a cultural capital, emblematic of a region (Flanders) with a rich cultural history. Together with cities of Northern Italy the region was the main world trading centre in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Flanders was then a centre of excellence in paintings, tapestry but also laces and embroidery. Antwerp is the birthplace of Flemish painters such as Rubens, Anthony Van Dijk, Jordaens and Brueghel who had such influence in the History of Art. Today it is the home of famous cultural and artistic icons such as Luc Tuymans and Jan Fabre, world stars at contemporary art fairs and biennale. The city offers plenty of cultural activities ranging from contemporary dance to theatres and numerous museums: MAS (Ethnography), MUHKA (Contemporary art), MOMU (fashion) to name a few.

Antwerp, as a port city, is naturally cosmopolitan due to emigration (North Africa and Turkey) with an important Jewish population (diamond district), still French speaking, open to the world as an ancient world trading centre, on the border between North and South of Europe, at the intersection of Catholic and Protestant beliefs.

Antwerp is a capital of fashion, more than 20,000 people work in Belgium's fashion industry, worth more than 7 billion euro a year. Over the years the city has gradually developed the infrastructure necessary to put the city on the fashion map and enable the emergence of fashion talents. Today numerous Antwerp (or "La Cambre" in Brussels) trained designers occupy important creative functions in famous international fashion brands (for instance Raf Simons at Dior, Oliver Theyskens at Theory, Peter Philips at Chanel cosmetics etc.). In true Belgian

humbleness the city has been shy about communicating its artists' contemporary creative achievements. Things seem to be changing as the marketing campaign in Brussels' national airport seems to indicate as well as the presence of Belgian fashion designers at this year's Business of Design Week.

The fashion department at The Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, which this year celebrates its 50th anniversary is emblematic of Antwerp's strength. The academy is the birth place of the designers who laid down the foundations for Antwerp's vibrant fashion culture, the so-called Antwerp Six – Ann Demeulemeester, Dries Van Noten, Dirk Bikkembergs, Walter Van Beirendonck, Dirk Van Saene and Marina Yee. The reputation of the Antwerp Academy for excellence in fashion training is equivalent to Central St. Martins in London.

Antwerp's experience shows that cultural influence and leadership are not domains reserved uniquely for large capital cities. The success of Antwerp is down to an environment that stimulates creativity, with free spirit, openness and "joie de vivre". Despite the city's social problems the feel good factor is predominant.

Today, this sense of originality is visible in the city's streets and shopping districts. Quality fashion, jewellery and antique shops together with fine dining restaurants ensure that there is creativity and good taste everywhere. In a world where standard products are found in "identikit stores", from Hong Kong to Anchorage, Antwerp is refreshingly different; a place where you can discover genuinely new things and where retailers are making original statements. Antwerp is the place to go for non-idiotic and "sense/neurone"-stimulating window shopping.

But apart from all the interesting retail spaces, there are also scores of designer brands who choose to base their businesses in Antwerp, many of whom are even able open their own small retail stores, because of Antwerp's relatively affordable rents. Many of these designers, whether in fashion or jewellery, seem to work away in relative world anonymity, quietly honing their craft.

The challenge for fashion talents in any city is to find the financial resources to fund their creativity and exercise the trade in which they excel. Considering the positive image a city derives from creators' popularity it is for city authorities



to consider support measures that enable such designers to conquer the market whether at home or abroad. Creativity is a much sought-after commodity in particular in emerging economies.

The global economy means that successful and sustainable designer businesses need to target the global market opportunity, and this means connecting with international buyers and press, who will often not bother to actually visit Belgium, Flanders or Antwerp. It costs a fortune to launch a collection or a brand in London, Milan, New York or Paris. It is less so in places like in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Hanoi,

Seoul, Sao Paolo, Dubai or Delhi who are busy supporting the development of local brands for increasingly fashion-conscious customers. Unfortunately there will not be a repeat of the Antwerp 6 who successfully launched themselves in 1986 to then conquer the world. Today the cost of entry into the fashion market is much too high and large brands with their formidable marketing and distribution power are making it harder for the smaller players to exist in the media and in the streets of large metropolis.

Philippe Kern
CEO, KEA European Affairs

Visit: www.keanet.eu and www.keanet.eu/keablog
Join KEA Creative Europe on [Facebook](#) and [Linkedin](#)
Join us on Google+ (a google account is necessary)
Follow us on Twitter: @KEATweets

Watch: [KEA – The Video](#)



Rue du Trône, 51 • B-1050 Brussels • T +32 (0)2 289 26 00
F +32 (0)2 289 26 06 • www.keanet.eu • www.keablog.com

KEA China

B1, Floor 7, Building 1, City of Design
Creative Industrial Estate • Shennan Road Central,
Futian District • 518026 Shenzhen • PR China