



Artist's Impression of the 'Kop van Zuid' after completion of current projects (courtesy of DPI Animation House/FPW Rotterdam)

Rotterdam renaissance

a city rebuilt on its own ruins

A pile of rubble in 1940, Rotterdam's skyline knows no rivals in Europe today

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY RONALD VAN ERKEL

It still gets to me occasionally. A strange, unsettling feeling, a mix of exhilaration and alienation. A feeling I associate with one city, and one city alone. That place is Rotterdam, or more precisely, those few square kilometers that form the city centre. I might be strolling along the sky scraper-lined Weena boulevard from Central Station to City Hall when I suddenly remember that none of the buildings around me are much older than ten or twenty years. It's a perplexing realization that the city I see today did not exist sixty years ago. If I could use a Star-Trek transporter and 'beam down' an ordinary Rotterdammer from

before 1940, this person would have no idea where he or she was.

I'm sure I would quickly beam my time traveler back to the past, before I would have to confront him or her with the facts of history.

During the Second World War, the historic centre of Rotterdam suffered a German bombing raid that killed 800 people, injured thousands more and destroyed tens of thousands of houses, factories, workshops, hospitals, churches, cinemas, hotels and public buildings. The subsequent fire storm lasted for days. When peace came in 1945, Rotterdam's city centre was a barren wasteland, the port, already

the largest of Europe at the time, completely devastated and unusable. A city that had existed for over 500 years had been wiped away, a fate it shared with other ancient European cities such as Coventry and Dresden.

Though famished and impoverished, Rotterdammers kept their will and determination intact. Even while under German occupation, Rotterdam had drawn up a master plan to rebuild its inner city in a new and imaginative way. The city would be everything it wasn't before the war: modern, spacious, healthy, car-friendly. And so a unique and tantalizing experiment began.

I grew up in the midst of this experiment. As a small boy in the early Sixties, when the port had once again surpassed New York as the busiest in the world, my parents would take me through wide, deserted streets and windswept urban emptiness to an enigmatic statue symbolizing the resurrection of Rotterdam after the war. It was Osip Zadkine's *The Destroyed City*. A three-dimensional counterpart of Munch's *The Cry*: a huge, agonized human figure with arms raised to the sky and a great hole where its heart ought to have been. Through that hole you could see the sky from which the bombs had come.

But now the sky was already being punctured by the spires of the new Rotterdam. New buildings were going up everywhere at an astonishing pace as The Netherlands experienced a post-war economic boom. Grand projects such as Van den Broek & Bakema's *De Lijnbaan* (1955) Europe's first pedestrian-only shopping center and Maaskant and Van Tijen's huge *Rotterdam Business Centre* (1953) had already become part of the emerging cityscape, although huge empty stretches would remain well into my adulthood.

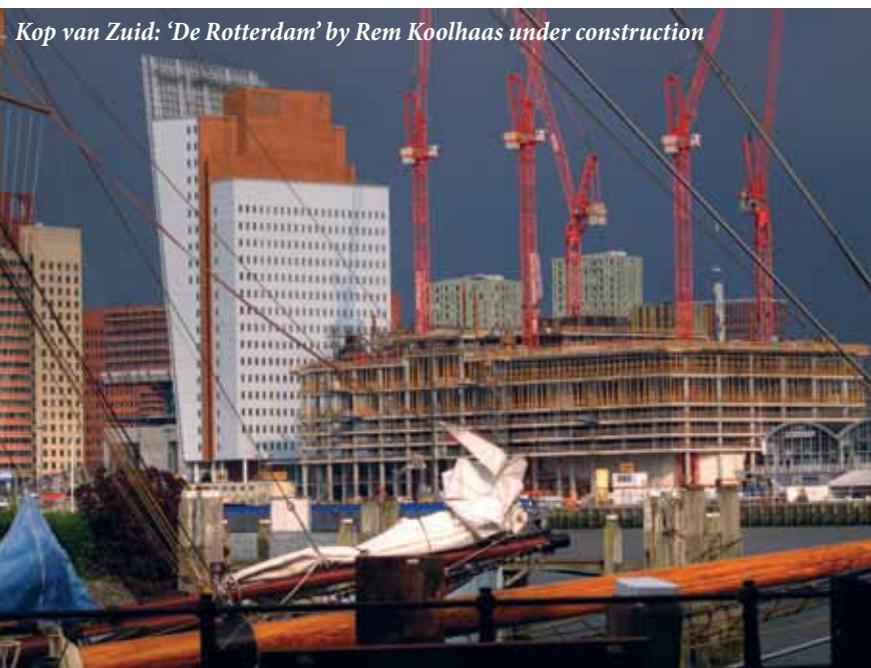
These vast holes in the urban fabric



The Destroyed City by Osip Zadkine: a poignant memorial to the bombing raid of 1940

earned Rotterdam the reputation of being inhospitable and unattractive, but to me and other Rotter-

dammers they held the promise of something wonderful. And the promise was fulfilled. Today Rotterdam's densely built centre is much livelier and crowded with often attractive, sometimes spectacular architecture unparalleled anywhere in The Netherlands. In an effort to lure affluent former city dwellers back from the suburbs to the inner city, high rise apartment buildings such as *The Red Apple* (2009), *The Coopvaert* (2006) and dozens of others have been going up. What's more, there is the perpetual question: what are they going to put up on that building site?



Kop van Zuid: 'De Rotterdam' by Rem Koolhaas under construction

Peeping through cracks in the fences around building sites has become one of the most popular pastimes among Rotterdammers who wouldn't know what to do if one day the city was declared 'finished'. The anticipa-

New buildings have sprouted
where once there was only rubble

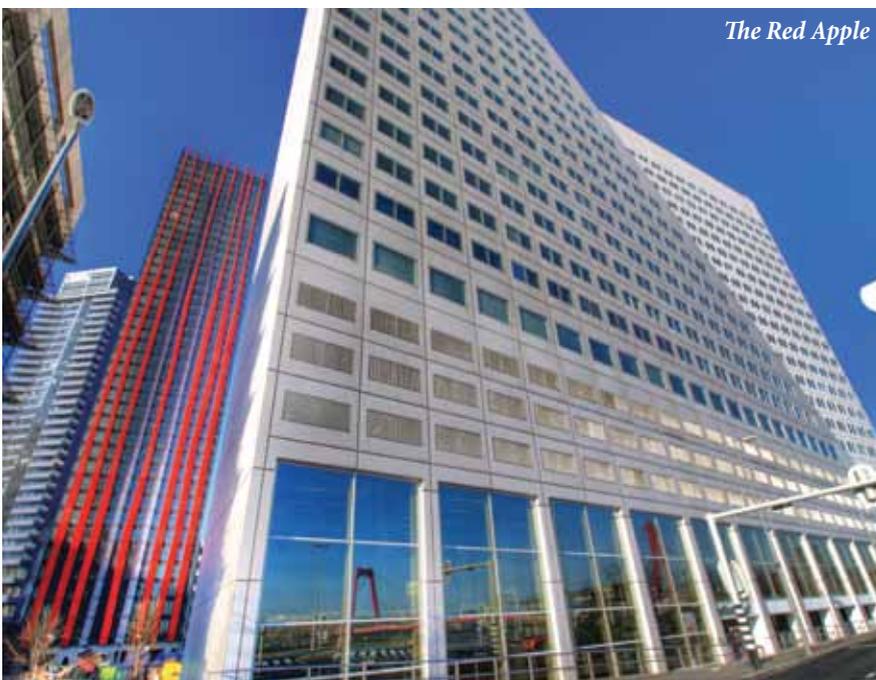


tion remains, even if the rebuilding of the center is nearing completion and construction activity has

largely moved to the docklands on the south bank of the Nieuwe Maas river where the ambitious *Kop van*

Zuid (South Head) dockland redevelopment scheme is now in its final phases. In the past, passenger ships used to sail from here, carrying thousands of immigrants to the New World.

Today, gigantic and luxury cruise ships moor at *Kop van Zuid's* international cruise terminal with great regularity. The atmosphere of arrival and departure remains. The robust and maritime character of the area does too. It is a unique part of Rotterdam, combining the present and the past, old warehouses and daring modern architecture. Here, high rise apartment buildings flank the riverside and their silhouettes complement the emblematic *Erasmus Bridge* (Ben van Berkel, 1996) that spans the river and connects *Kop van Zuid* directly with the city center. *Kop van Zuid* is the location of the country's tallest office building (the 538 foot *Maas*



The Red Apple

Tower) and tallest apartment building: the prestigious 45 storey *New Orleans* by Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza. Completed in 2011, most of the heftily priced apartments were sold within no time. The city's most expensive urban dwelling can be found in the *Montevideo Building* (2005) next door. Its duplex penthouse on the 43rd floor (with private swimming pool) sold for over \$3 million. It is a record that is bound to be broken as piles are driven into the ground and designs drafted for a whole series of new developments, including famed architect Rem Koolhaas's *De Rotterdam*, which holds the promise of yet another striking landmark on the city's skyline. As Koolhaas puts it: "De Rotterdam is conceived as a vertical city: three interconnected mixed-use towers accommodating offices, apartments, a hotel, conference facilities, gym, shops, restaurants, and cafes." Construction started in 2009 and completion is scheduled for 2013. Koolhaas: "The towers are part of the ongoing redevelopment of the old harbor district and aim to reinstate the vibrant urban activity – trade, transport, leisure – once familiar to the neighborhood."

Although Rotterdam suffered a great tragedy, it gave the city the opportunity to rival places such as Singapore and San Francisco with a skyline that has no match on the European continent, where the historic inner cities are still mostly dominated by the spires of ancient churches. To the chagrin of history buffs, however, the building frenzy is not limited to spaces left open after the war or the redevelopment of derelict docklands, it now also targets some of the very buildings that were constructed immediately after the war. A good example is the *Central Station*.

Designed by Siebold van Ravesteyn and built in the Fifties, Rotterdam's Central Station was celebrated as a fine example of post-War optimistic, modernist architecture. The arrival of the high-speed railway con-



The Maas Tower, the tallest office building in Rotterdam



The Erasmus Bridge, completed in 1996

Rotterdam, 1940-1945

On May 14, 1940 a fleet of Heinkel bombers destroyed the city center of Rotterdam in a successful attempt to blackmail the Dutch army and nation into surrender. 'After Rotterdam, Utrecht and then on down the line, city after city...' the Germans threatened. In Rotterdam more than 800 people lost their lives, 80,000 lost their homes. The Dutch army capitulated. A brutal five year occupation followed. The whole country suffered, Rotterdam and its people more than most. During the war Rotterdam with its harbor remained a target. In March of 1943 a number of Allied bombers missed the targeted harbor installations and accidentally destroyed a densely populated city neighborhood killing 400 people.

On November 11, 1944 the Nazis surrounded the city and deported 52,000 men to Germany to perform slave labor. They would not return until after the war. About 400 did not return at all.

During the devastating 'Hunger Winter' of 1944/45 more than 2,500 Rotterdammers starved to death, many others just barely survived.

At the end of the war in 1945 the city lay in ruins.



*Rotterdam 1945,
the rubble has been cleared,
a desolate wasteland remains*

necting Rotterdam to Amsterdam and Paris, the extension of the Rotterdam subway network as well as changed ideas about the function of a railway station in the urban fabric have made the old Central Station redundant, no matter how important the building was as a monument of post-war architecture. Yes, was, because it is gone and is rapidly being replaced by a futuristic station that will be able to meet the demands of the modern age in the decades to come. Chances are that my hypothetical great grandchildren will be living in a Rotterdam that might again look very different from the one I know. With some luck, in that far away future there may indeed be a 'StarTrek' device. Whatever the future holds, I hope I will get beamed up, if even for an hour, and get to have peek at whatever the Rotterdam of the future looks like. 🖱