

SOLARIUM

It is often claimed that the Dutch word Zolder (attic) is a corruption of the Latin Solarium -though strangely enough, that is the very opposite of what I am. In Ancient Rome, a solarium meant a flat roof, a terrace: a place atop one's own house where, together with loved ones, one might bask in the sun. Who would not want that?

In contrast, I -Attic- after centuries of evolving architectural styles, am above all dark, dusty, and damp. With perhaps one or two, three windows at most, I shield the house against autumn storms, desiccation, and decay. What we do share is this: as the crown of the house, closest to the elements, the clouds, the swallows, and the celestial bodies, we both stand nearest the sky. That the word solarium today is also used for a tanning bed with artificial sunlight is therefore a downright absurdity.

Seven of the roughly two hundred Attics and Solaria along the Bloemgracht in Amsterdam each present below their own anthology of remarkable events from the past four hundred years.

Perhaps the Bloemgracht is a mirror of any canal or street - just as, through ten handshakes, you are connected to anyone in the world you might wish to meet.

Bloemgracht 10 — The New Kid on the Block

I believe I am one of the youngest attics here on the Bloemgracht. More precisely, I am partly an attic-like rooftop extension and partly a Solarium, thanks to the small roof terrace. The customary gabled V-shape along the canal is nowhere to be found here. On the contrary, here we find an O-shape. Perhaps the designer, in making me the topmost floor, wished to offer a wink to the Sun - or the Moon.

First and foremost, there is the circularly framed view of the Westertoren. Is there anywhere in the world an equal to this crowned structure by Hendrick de Keyser? Although the tower graces the view from all attics on the sunlit side of the canal, it is here that the vista is truly magnificent.

My predecessor, with its stepped gable, was demolished immediately after the Second World War and replaced by an electricity substation for the neighborhood. Toward the end of the last century, the transformer on the ground floor was entirely concealed behind and beneath the new building. By sheer coincidence, my new owner, Shahab - a sympathetic Iranian - was offered the original seventeenth-century gable stone of the house. He had it built into my new façade, not only as a reference to the former building and its function, but also as a nod to Shahab's profession in the packaging industry.

"The Box" quite simply depicts a box. In those days, cardboard did not yet exist. The silvery color and the folded seam therefore suggest a tinned metal box, widely used at the time. With near certainty, the boxes produced by the box-making workshop established here by the developer Claas Mauritsz were intended for the many confectioners in the vicinity - such as those at Bloemgracht 77, 81, and 127.

Well acquainted with Shahab is his colleague across the canal, Joost Ritman at number 15. Until some ten years ago, one could enjoy through the round window- the annual, hallucinatory New Year's fireworks orchestrated by the Ritmans at the Prinsengracht/ Bloemgracht bridge. A few hours before the twelve strokes of the Wester tower rang out, most canal residents had already gathered there, eager not to miss a single moment of the spectacle. Up here, there was no need to step out into the cold; the view was as if from a private VIP box.

Ritman amassed a fortune through the mass production of plastic cutlery for the airline industry. Remarkably, he invested a large portion of it in an illustrious collection of spiritual and philosophical books and manuscripts. The collection - the Bibliotheca Hermetica Philosophica - ultimately found its resting place in the Huis met de Hoofden on the Keizersgracht.

In the seventeenth century, number 15 was also home to the famous botanist and anatomist Frederik Ruysch, known as "Doctor Death." There he established a kind of museum as a tourist attraction: a cabinet of curiosities containing hundreds of preserved body parts, butterflies, sea plants, rare birds, and more. His method of preservation was astonishing and unmatched; body parts, children's heads, and other no-longer-living specimens kept in spirits appeared so lifelike that Tsar Peter the Great - often traveling incognito - came to inspect them personally. To the later regret of the Amsterdam city council, he purchased the lion's share of the collection. Ruysch also taught the Tsar how to extract the teeth of his nationals. He played a leading role in improving public health care in Amsterdam - and beyond.

It is said that his mentor and colleague, Doctor Nicolaes Tulp, introduced him to Rembrandt in the painter's studio further along the Bloemgracht. Ruysch, somewhat vain, wished to be immortalized with his own version of an anatomical lesson. Yet he found Rembrandt's style "too woolly" and outdated. In the end, he chose the young and rising talent Jan van Neck. His daughter, Rachel Ruysch - exceptionally successful for a woman of her time - remained living with her father until her death and assisted him, much as the Ritman children now assist their father. Following the example of the influential Ruysch family, the Ritmans purchased the two adjoining houses next to number 15. What treasures their attics contain remains a matter of speculation. They have always kept themselves apart from us - but one can surely imagine.

Bloemgracht 76 - Window onto the World

After completion of the canal belt in the early seventeenth century, plots were issued according to the existing pattern of waterways and paths - the so-called Third Expansion. A kind of Vinex suburb *avant la lettre* arose, with space both for the well-to-do burghers to live and for commerce to flourish. The canal became the edge of the Jordaan behind it, where laborers and craftsmen lived and worked.

This blend of enterprise and status-conscious residence also attracted the Blaeu family. Whatever possessions, maps, and globes had survived the fire in the Gravenstraat were largely brought here to the canal. The new printing house, shop, and publishing business beneath me promised a fresh beginning. Sailors and travelers from far and wide marveled at the remarkably accurate city views and maps of cities, countries, and continents. The printing house and shop occupied the ground floor; the family lived on the first and second floors; and I, the Attic, occasionally served in those early years as guest quarters.

The corrective knowledge of certain sailors proved so valuable to father Willem and later to his son Joan Blaeu that I was allowed to house them free of charge. The growing problem in the house, however, was the storage of countless travel accounts and surplus prints. The adjacent building at number 74, which they were compelled to purchase, offered additional space. Yet even so, paper, books, travelogues, copper plates, and parts of printing presses piled up at my rear, and later even along the canal side, leaving ever less room for guests.

The Dutch East India Company knocked ever more frequently as a regular client. Whatever one may think of that VOC mentality as the first multinational corporation, I was proud witness at the time to the printing here of the world's first Atlas Maior. Joan also occasionally produced writings for his cousin P.C. Hooft and for the freethinker René Descartes, whom his father had known from Tycho Brahe's school of geometry. Descartes lived for twenty years in various places throughout the Netherlands - largely philosophising from his bed - including at the Westermarkt.

At that time, storage for sale remained neatly organized and numbered, and the globes stood in tidy rows awaiting sailors, dignitaries, admirals, and nouveau riche buyers. Cosimo II de' Medici spent hours in the shop, only to purchase maps of Italian cities more precise than the Italian ones. Up here, he selected a small globe for his journey back to Italy. On one occasion Joan even brought Rembrandt upstairs, who was seeking a reliable walking map indicating inns around Ransdorp.

But when Joan II took over the business after his father's death, everything changed. He was seldom found in the printing house, preoccupied instead with administrative positions, later for both the VOC and the West India Company. When customers arrived, he would stroll through the house wearing an ever-larger wig. One day, lamentation rose from below. After his first wife, his second wife Elisabeth also died beneath me. Storage soon became a shambles, until at one point a group of movers emptied everything out. The house was sold.

In any case, the spirit of this house has ever since remained bound to a yearning for adventure, to the desire to know the world. Not until the nineteenth century did this reconnect with a related entrepreneurial drive. Beneath me then lived Johann Schliemann, the successful German businessman and amateur archaeologist. I am not aware of all his wanderings and adventures, but I do know that during his world travels he discovered Troy in Turkey - a stroke of fortune that made him world-famous. In addition to the eighteen languages he spoke, he left behind some sixty thousand letters and eighteen diaries. He carefully stored these writings in cardboard boxes with me along the canal side. Behind them stood wooden crates filled with artifacts - pottery and the like - and certainly not only from Troy. Some were thousands of years old.

After these most fascinating periods of my attic existence, I shall now confine myself to the present occupant, Richard. He turns out to be an amiable Frenchman, a former architecture student and minister of the Walloon Church. Now advanced in years, he prefers to sleep here in my loft, unwilling to part with his overly expensive sofa bed that sits well but sleeps poorly. Instead of maps and globes, the space is now filled everywhere with books - an atlas with the new postwar borders of the former Yugoslavia, books on Africa, Asia, Europe, many travel, art, and cookbooks. He hardly knows what to do with these volumes he no longer consults. For on the small table before the window overlooking the canal and the green, swaying elms in the sunlight lies a silver book with a moving, luminous screen. That, he says, is the new window onto the world.

I do not quite understand what he means when he claims that, with something he calls "Goegel," he travels at the speed of light to the Paris of his youth, which he sometimes so dearly misses. Apart from a few replaced beams, some new roof boarding, and a coat of paint here and there, I myself have scarcely changed over the centuries.

Bloemgracht 82 — The Lives of Heroes

Attics, too, can be traumatized, you know. Today it seems as though not a cloud ever darkened the sky. A gentle sun filters through my attic window. The current residents know what I know, and have transformed those events into sleeping quarters, the scene of the crime into a peaceful little study. Beside this, every other history here pales into insignificance.

Such as that of my builder, who constructed this warehouse among other buildings - a Norwegian trader in stockfish. Three hundred years is so long ago that all I truly recall is the unbearable stench of dried cod. Fortunately, that was followed by pleasanter aromas drifting up to me: coffee and tea stored below, and the roasting beans from the Art Deco shop run by the grandparents of Yvonne and Ruud - until the Second World War.

Yvonne and Ruud are my owners now. They bought me at the end of the last century. Yet nothing can erase the recurring horror of that grey morning in late April, ten days before the war would end.

It had been a bitterly cold winter. Even so, early swifts brushed against my carelessly mortared roof tiles. Mrs. Ten Have, from the top floor, had until then rented me out to Durk Wolters, a truck driver from Groningen who carried out strictly secret operations relocating Jewish people in hiding to safer addresses. I had been divided into small cubicles, erected from street debris.

In the middle room there were often consultations with two frequent visitors, Jan and Ko. At times they would clean weapons together, smoking a cup of tulip-bulb chicory coffee beside them. More than once, in the side room, I witnessed the budding love between Durk Wolters and Mrs. Ten Have - his landlady. About that I prefer to remain discreet, given her husband's forced labor in Germany at the beginning of the war. After her husband's identity card had been forged in his name, she herself became a courier and accomplice to the resistance group.

Jan and Ko returned that early morning to report on a successful attack on a member of the NSB. Durk was still in bed. As commander of the Sabotage Unit of the Council of Resistance, he was worried. He realised that, with the war nearly won, this hiding place might by now have become an open secret. Sadly, it had.

Not much later that April morning, the stretch of canal was sealed off with barbed wire. Police cars stood everywhere. Policeman and NSB member Maarten Kuiper stormed up the long, steep staircase to the top floor with two German soldiers. Weapons at the ready, they asked Mrs. Ten Have whether she was harboring resistance fighters. Though she turned pale, she answered no - despite the cupboard full of weapons in the hallway to the kitchen. They paid her little further attention and proceeded up the small staircase to me.

There they overwhelmed Durk, Jan Keune, and Ko Stevense, who were shot on the spot and pierced with bayonets. I was powerless, able only to endure as bullets riddled my beams. But I can tell the tale.

Not long afterward, my heroes were carried down the stairs in sacks by Bleekemolen, the undertaker favored by the occupiers. I later heard that Maarten Kuiper was sentenced to death after the war and hanged.

Bloemgracht 127 — Pearls of Imagination

It is no coincidence that, in recent times, I have been inhabited by creatives and people from the cultural world: a filmmaker, a former curator of the Stedelijk Museum, an architect, and a musicologist.

From above, I look out over a small inner courtyard and the rear wall of Galerie Fons Welters. At the end of the last century, Job Koelewijn created there his legendary artwork *The World Is My Oyster*, cutting open the gallery wall. A hole the size of a football goal suddenly offered a view into what was then the neighbors' neglected garden. By removing the bricks, the gaze upon reality was unveiled. But did he know that from the gallery one could also glimpse the former studio of Rembrandt van Rijn?

Of what unfolded below in those days, I recall little beyond this: after his bankruptcy, Rembrandt moved to the Rozengracht and worked here. His companion, Hendrickje - twenty years his junior - and his son Titus managed the shop there, formally employing him so as to shield him from his creditors. Ah, Rembrandt. He rarely came upstairs. Advanced pupils worked below on underpaintings and applied layers of color. Only when the master permitted it could they proceed with their own work. Beginning students mostly copied and drew up here with me. They stretched canvases and prepared them with chalk and rabbit-skin glue. I shall never forget the sweet scent of linseed oil and turpentine, nor the stench of boiled hides and bones for glue.

Once I witnessed one of his pupils paint a guilder on the floor, to test Rembrandt's reputation for frugality. Or perhaps it had to do with his debts? Unlike the painted coin, he had little patience for beginners. His eyesight was no longer good. He reached for it and missed. He gave a tight, pained smile and shuffled away without a word - surly, even.

In the final years of Rembrandt's life, hardly any pupils came at all. Hendrickje succumbed to the plague, then Titus. All that remained with me was storage: unfinished canvases, blank cloths, stretchers, stacks of paper, worn brushes, and rancid jars of oil paint. Black rats gnawed at my beams. In summer, the canal stank like the pestilence itself. People died in droves from the dreaded disease. No one had the faintest idea how it arose or how it might be fought. Rembrandt survived the worst of it, but died a year after Titus, still in his house on the Rozengracht - because of entanglements with creditors, and grief, I suspect.

After his death, the building became yet another sugar bakery - there were already a dozen along the canal. Sugar from the plantations arrived monthly at the IJ harbors from Suriname. During that period, dozens of tin "boxes" filled with sugar stood up here with me, exuding an intoxicating sweetness. The foul air of cloth-dyeing workshops that followed, as well as the acrid vinegar fumes that rose in the mid-eighteenth century from the vinegar factory De Veldhoen, displeased me greatly.

From the nineteenth century onward, the canal declined. In the worn-out Jordaan, poverty took hold. By the mid-1960s of the last century, most canal houses had fallen into disrepair; debris - mattresses, furniture, prams, all manner of refuse - floated in the water. Stadsherstel Amsterdam performed brilliant work by purchasing fourteen houses, including mine, and restoring them. We Attics were rid of wood rot, deathwatch beetles, and mold. Necessary surgical interventions restored us to health. Itching zinc gutters were re-covered anew.

Above all, it delights me that today, with residents such as Thomas, Naomi, and Erna, I once again resonate on the right wavelength. I am put to good use. Engaging conversations take place here, and the aromas of cooking are a blessing.

Bloemgracht 182 — Does Time Forgive?

Was I a guilty attic? The building was meant to become a municipal post office, with residents above - of whom I would simply have been the attic. Built just after the turn of the previous century, I am, compared to most of my superannuated fellow attics along the canal, not old at all. Little is known of my predecessors.

Long before that, from here one looked out upon the fortification bastion De Blom and the windmill De Bloem, after which the canal is, of course, named. After a summer storm the mill was dismantled and moved to the Haarlemmerweg, where it still stands today. Perhaps for that reason I was granted a pointed turret, as a kind of termination of the canal - or as a gesture of welcome from the Lijnbaansgracht. But blame? I am merely a shell.

Granted, I would have preferred different passersby to make use of my space. It was simply my misfortune that my building had to become NSB Circle House 35. With boat excursions, a smoke, real coffee or something stronger, Amsterdammers - especially truck drivers - were recruited at the Noordermarkt to join their "comrades." Truly, there was nothing I could do.

Many a police officer climbed my stairs after hours to play cards and drink, often still in full uniform. After removing Jewish babies from their cradles, beating protesting fathers, or dragging families from their beds at night, they felt entitled to a drink. The Circle House was an ideal place to earn promotion. If you had introduced new members, tracked down Jews or sent them on transport, and got along well with a superior during a card game, a raise in salary and rank lay within reach.

Maarten Kuiper had maneuvered himself into such a position as a police detective with the Sicherheitspolizei (SiPo) and the Sicherheitsdienst (SD). Perhaps his half-Hitler moustache helped.

He was entrusted with weighty tasks; a few weeks before liberation he personally killed Hannie Schaft near Bloemendaal, and he was likely involved in the dismantling of the fellow attic - the Secret Annex - of the Frank family. He misused me as a place where those who resisted or violated curfew were frequently and brutally beaten.

One day, someone posing as a prospective member secretly scattered a sack of hard peas across the staircase. One after another, some four SD officers slipped badly and tumbled down the stairs. The culprit was tracked down and brought upstairs to me. A haze of cigar and cigarette smoke suffocated me while blood crept between my floorboards. The cruelties carried out between filing cabinets filled with corrupt records were a horror.

Two weeks before liberation, tipped off that the resistance was based a hundred house numbers farther along the Bloemgracht, Kuiper plotted - of all things - a raid on number 82 here. Again, I could do nothing, which to this day fills me with vicarious shame. Time heals all wounds, they say. But how, then, did that fire start - months ago? Since then, I have felt unmoored. Worse still, the blaze proved disastrous for my short-term memory. Of what transpired here between those extreme events of the Second World War and the fire, I recall at most a few insignificant fragments. Or perhaps I have repressed it.

Even after destructive investigation, no one ever found evidence for what was termed a "short circuit." Structural restoration - after the plastic surgery of my scorched wooden skin and the water-swollen paneling from extinguishing the flames - took a great deal of time. That now seems, at last, nearly behind me.

My space echoes hollow - unused and uninhabited. As far as I know, no new residents are in sight. I have no idea who my current owner may be. It is all confusing. Perhaps it will help me, at last, to let go of my past.

Bloemgracht 40 — A Heavenly Revision

Though my old attic profile still stands proudly upright, much has been sawn away within me. At the end of the last century, the central slopes of my roof were removed. I am now half Solarium. Large sliding glass walls transform this section into a loggia when drawn aside. My two intact ends have recently begun serving as bedrooms for the daughters of the house.

Earlier still, my roof tiles were replaced with improved, smoked Dutch ones. My present owners, Rixt and Steffan, lady and lord of the house, found an open loggia when they purchased me. The renowned landscape architect and previous resident, Michael van Gessel, had at that time managed to secure permission from the municipal authorities. Enclosing it with sliding glass walls was allowed just before heritage regulations were tightened. On the condition, however, that if even the slightest alteration were made thereafter, everything would have to be restored to its original state - including battens, laths, and roof tiles.

The heritage committee, incidentally, was charmed by the walkable glass floor panels beneath. They described my "roof construction, consisting of pine A-frames connected with yokes to the wall plates, as beautifully articulated in transparent fashion." With the glass roof façades slid open, the loggia once again turns toward the cosmos. Steffan has embraced and amplified that quality by scanning the firmament with his telescope on clear days. Remarkably, in the early nineteenth century, the childless Jan Frederik Keyser had already had a small section of roof opened here for his telescope. Keyser was a private tutor in bookkeeping and Italian, and a distinguished scholar in navigation, mathematics, and astronomy. Many pieces from his renowned collection of scientific

instruments stood up here; alongside them, Italian literature and cupboards filled with aging ledgers and accounts upon which mice feasted.

Until the 1960s, the house sheltered four interrelated families, averaging five persons each, who for generations stored their belongings with me. Now only one family inhabits the entire house. Three generations of Veldhoen - Arie, Aatje, and David, all artists - lived and worked below me, though that is by the way. Aatje, born and raised here, lived in the house from the 1930s onward until, still very young, he unexpectedly became the father of David. Soon thereafter, David's mother, Lotje, happened by chance upon the two upper floors at Bloemgracht 64 - my neighboring attic. David would spend the rest of his childhood at number 64. As a young adult, he later lived and worked for several years at number 40 above his grandmother, in his grandfather's studio. Since then, I have regarded Bloemgracht 64 as my sister attic.

We attics were built not so much to admit the sun as to keep out rain, damp, and wind. Yet the interplay between diffuse and cast shadows, between direct and indirect light, stirs the imagination. Ancestors and former residents inhabit the shadows I provide them. They are shy of the light, but perceptibly present - something like that.

Much older now and long past his wild years, David encountered himself again here as a nine-year-old boy. Dust from that time still lay gathered in the corners. All sense of the passage of time dissolved. And then that silence. A fear welled up of becoming stuck in timelessness. Did something move there?

His father had vanished into thin air. Here, afterwards, he had spent many afternoons as a child with his brothers Martijn and Jaap and his sister Eva. In early summers, listening to the rapturous cries of swifts, he found comfort and joy in the gutter, beneath the brilliant cauliflower-shaped clouds racing across a deep blue sky. Beneath my roof tiles, he staged little plays with his neighbor boy Frits. He built a miniature zoo from hundreds of tiny bricks, which little brother Jaap promptly trampled. If I remember correctly, he also constructed a bamboo prison - to lock him inside. Once, despite its ultrasonic senses, a bat in panic flew straight into him. When dusk began to fall, he would hurry downstairs as fast as he could. Yes, we attics most certainly possess a dark side.

Bloemgracht 51 — Farewell, Attics

You might say that Bloemgracht 10 and I are non-identical "twin Solaria." Though we resemble each other but little, we share a common history. In both cases, the attics disappeared. Here at number 51, only half a house remained.

Henk Spreeuwenberg, my architect - and a sculptor besides - wished to build a live-work house for himself here. He purchased the half-house, drafted a plan for demolition and new construction, and submitted the design to the heritage authorities. But even as half a house, it was still considered a listed monument. Spreeuwenberg was permitted to build whatever he wished - provided it was erected atop the restored half-building.

Though he held the heritage authorities in high regard, he had no choice but to take the matter to court. Demolition was ultimately permitted, and it is to that ruling that I owe my existence as a Solarium. Spreeuwenberg designed me at the end of the last century with modernist inspiration: abundant glass for maximum light, air, and view. As a result, I became something of an odd duck along the canal. Unlike most attics here, I am not composed of brick and a skeletal gabled roof construction of pine and oak beams, clad in baked roof tiles. Instead - unlike my twin Solarium - steel, concrete, glass, and natural stone façade panels peer, very much of their time, at the predominantly classical neighboring houses.

In summer, my terrace boards can grill you alive, and I, the Solarium roof extension, resemble what is called a microwave: a glass box in which, bizarrely, something may be heated to boiling without fire.

Henk found himself compelled to shield the glass wall and terrace with a large sailcloth awning. Temperatures of around fifty degrees within ten or twenty years are already being predicted. Others calculate that our attics may instead face a new Ice Age should the warm Gulf Stream falter - who can say? Might a buffering green roof layer in cities offer relief in either case?

Peering past the awning across the neighborhood toward the Wester Tower, Henk once said, "You hardly notice it, because it happens so gradually... but ten years ago I still saw clouds of swallows here." Meanwhile his wife, Gerda, prepared cappuccinos for three young neighbors she had invited up. "With one-third fewer insects since then, you're left with one-ninth the swallows," she calculated. "Ah well, Henk - ten years ago people were still happily skating here almost every winter. Now the canal doesn't even freeze..."

It all seems to have begun, more or less, after the Enlightenment. Now reason bites its own tail like a serpent. If the present crises were caused by the dominance of reason, can they also be solved by it?

Never before has the canal - now preening itself in freshly lacquered reflection - looked so beautiful. Many fellow attics here have been monetized as a revenue model, luring tourists in search of ersatz folklore, or affluent tenants and buyers. I, for one, understand no foreign tongues.

Behind that cosmetic veneer, a certain unease is also growing among canal residents, I observe. Attics are like a slowly vanishing species, found now only beneath bloodless mansard and gabled roofs from architectural catalogues in equally generic housing estates. The ancient attic - as the memory of the house, as a mysterious repository stirring the imagination - makes way elsewhere for flat roofs with solar panels and contemporary Solaria. In the roof catalogue of MVRDV, we no longer appear at all. Concrete, polystyrene, bitumen, and EPDM will protect against the elements. But the Bloemgracht will remain a living monument to the last of the Attics.

Note

All texts, though fictional, are based on (historical) facts and persons corresponding to the house numbers featured on the Bloemgracht. With regard to Bloemgracht 182, the numbering of the building (architects: Alphons Jacot and W. Oldewelt, who also designed the Hirsch Building in Amsterdam) was altered in 1977 to house numbers 288–300. Rembrandt's studio at Bloemgracht 127 was in reality demolished. In 1871 this genius loci was merged with the adjacent property into a single double-fronted building with gateway and a connecting straight cornice crowned by an ornamental crest. For the plausible assumption that Maarten Kuiper was in fact a visitor to NSB Circle House 35 at Bloemgracht 182, no proof exists.

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