

The Effects of Space on Sex Worker
Experience
A Study of Amsterdam's Red Light District
Koski, Hannah

Key Words: Sex Work and Women

Academic Director: Connors, Kevin. M.Ed.

Project Advisor: Timmermans, Petra. International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe, Coordinator.

Vassar College, New York
Departments of Anthropology and Sociology

SIT Study Abroad
Sexuality and Gender Identity Program
Amsterdam, Netherlands

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for The Netherlands: Sexual and Gender Identity, SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2007

Abstract

This report is the outcome of a month-long exploratory study on the ways in which a space influences the experiences of the sex workers operating within it, using the Red Light District in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, as the site of focus. Data was obtained by way of qualitative methods including focused interviews and unstructured observation and analyzed with a pro-prostitute perspective and within various spatial theoretical frameworks. It is concluded that while the clustering and visibility of sex workers in the Red Light District results in a certain standardization of practice and experience, the independent nature of window sex work allows the women to reshape these norms according to personal style. Recommendations for potential future studies include similar spatial approaches to other forms of sex work, an exploration of newly emerging sexualized spaces, and an examination of current government efforts to limit the amount of sex work occurring in the Red Light District.

Acknowledgments

Above all, I must acknowledge those individuals who willingly offered me their valuable time and knowledge during my research for this study. Without their generosity, this report would have been unfeasible, and I sent out my many thanks.

To Petra Timmermans, thank you for acting as an outstanding project advisor. You could never know how I valued your comment and criticism, which helped me to produce the best report possible. I am so grateful for all the time and energy you offered me, even from overseas.

To Clair Norton, my wonderful housemate, thank you for listening to my many rants and cynicisms, for enjoying excessive wine consumption with me, for our romantic breakfasts, for sharing your love of Fresh Prince, Made, Dismissed, and other educational television programs, and lastly, for letting me be your wifey.

To Kevin Connors, thank you for your constant support and reassurance, for answering all of my stupid questions, for hosting many a delicious luncheon and cheese and wine soirées, and for always having a smile on your face.

To all my fellow students and friends, thank you for everything. It was your company and all our time shared that made this experience worthwhile and it is that which I will remember most fondly.

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Assumptions

Over the course of this report's composition, its focus has been altered dramatically, due in no small part to the assumptions I made prior to beginning my study. My original interests had been in comparing the Red Light District in Amsterdam, a site of window sex work, to streetwalking sex work in the *tippelzone*¹ in Utrecht. I had only a fundamental, second-hand knowledge of both spaces, and from this knowledge assumed that the characteristics and experiences of clientele and sex workers in each space were markedly different. I further assumed that these differences must be the results of regulation, thinking them examples of regulated and unregulated space, accordingly.

I thus submitted to my project advisor my proposal to study the effects of regulation on sex worker experience, using the Red Light District and Utrecht *tippelzone* as representations of regulated and unregulated sites. My erroneous assumptions and project flaws were immediately made known to me. First and foremost, while the style and form of regulation may differ in each, both the Red Light District *and* the *tippelzone* are regulated spaces, both under the government of the local municipalities in which they are located. Still interested in the experiences of sex workers in each locale, I decided to shift my focus to a comparative study of the effects of the organization of space. I intended to look at various elements of the experience in each, such as clientele and sex worker characteristics, client-sex worker interaction, and the nature of the sexual exchange.

¹ A *tippelzone*, translated as street zone, is described as a zone where "street prostitution is tolerated by the police and certain facilities, such as medical services and a living room, are available to the prostitutes" (Soomeren 2004: 3).

Throughout the research process, I came across a wealth of literature relating to Amsterdam's Red Light District, but little discussing any tippelzones² at all, let alone the Utrecht tippelzone in particular. Furthermore, entering the tippelzone in Utrecht requires special permission and attempts to make the contacts necessary to acquire this permission were futile. At this point in my research, I assumed that without a comparative study, I would not obtain sufficient information and data to complete my report. This assumption skewed my first few interviews so that their purpose was still to seek points of comparison between the window and streetwalking sex work. Unfortunately, for this reason they did not yield the richest data possible for the research question that I ultimately addressed.

In short, my assumptions have led to many reforms in the concentration of my study. As the reader will soon discover, the final product barely makes mention of either regulation³ or the tippelzones. The information provided me by three sex workers working in the windows in Amsterdam quickly revealed that there were fascinating points of analysis to be made in looking at the Red Light District alone.

² While there was some literature available on the tippelzone, it was not accessible to me because the majority of the writings were in Dutch.

³ Regulation inarguably shapes the sex worker experience and underlies all spaces of sex work, and establishes who can work legally and where. While this point should be and is recognized, it is not central to either my central research question or my analysis, and as such will not be discussed in depth.

Introduction

Although sex work was early on regarded as a dishonorable but necessary evil, the secular authorities of Amsterdam also saw the impossibility of forbidding prostitution⁴ in a port city, and in order to protect the city's "honest" citizens, sex work was confined to designated spaces. During this time, the area around de Oudekerksplein, de Warmoesstraat, and de Oude Achterzijds Voorburgwal, collectively known as de Wallen⁵, became well-known sites of visible prostitution (Doorninck, *History...*). Here you had cellar bars and beerhouses with waitresses that men could "buy out" and take to a rendezvous house, where rooms could be rented by the hour. In other neighborhoods of Amsterdam as well, small brothels and sublet rooms could be found. However, the twentieth-century saw the beginning of an anti-prostitution movement and in 1911, the Dutch national government passed the "Morality Acts," under which the operation of brothels was made illegal⁶.

Despite this ban on brothels, sex work in the Netherlands remained, and "many women choose the streets, the pubs, or their own house as a working place" (Doorninck, *History...*). De Kalverstraat became a popular site of streetwalking, along with public parks and gardens. In the neighborhoods of the Oudekerksplein, there were women who worked from home, tapping on windows from behind closed curtains, which the police chose to condone. Throughout the years, the curtains were opened further and further, and eventually home prostitution "expanded in the Amsterdam red-light district and gave de Wallen the

⁴ A more detailed discussion of sex work in The Netherlands will be presented later on this report in the section *Sex Work in The Netherlands* of the literature review.

⁵ I use De Wallen synonymously with Red Light District and District. Throughout the remainder of this report, I will use the names Red Light District and District, unless directly quoting a source that uses De Wallen.

⁶ The ban on brothels was repealed in October 2000, to be discussed in the *Sex Work in The Netherlands* section of the literature review.

character that still makes it famous today” (Doorninck, *History...*), namely the windows behind which sex workers still sit.

Sex work has long been a persistent feature of urban life, and has manifested itself in different forms and spaces throughout history and different societies, red light districts being only a single example. The life of the sex worker has been “documented by researchers working within a variety of theoretical and disciplinary traditions,” but little of this material focuses on the “*spaces of prostitution*” (Hubbard 1999: 1). It is in this void that I am interested.

How does the organization of a sexualized space influence the experiences and practices of the sex worker operating in that space? This is the primary research question I explored in my independent study project and that which I address in this report, focusing specifically on female⁷ sex workers in the windows of the Red Light District in Amsterdam. For the purposes of my study, a sexualized space will be defined as a space in which sex work takes place and there is a monetary exchange. Sex workers will be defined as “people who sell sex for money in direct interactions with their clients” (Brewis and Lindstead 2002: 309). I will use the terms sex work and sex worker throughout my report, as these are the terms often preferred by many of the women working in the sex industry, unless referring to or quoting an article, interview, or other source that uses the terms prostitution and prostitute. My interest in the spatial effects on the sex worker’s experience was inspired by my preliminary and very basic understanding of sex work as it occurs in the windows of Amsterdam’s Red Light District, all of which is derived from previous researcher writings and other secondary sources. Given the opportunity to study in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, I immediately sought to learn all that I could from sex workers themselves. The following

⁷ Because it is a relatively rare phenomenon (de Graaf 1995), I do not deal with male sex workers or female clients.

report, in which I explain the logistics of my research and my interpretations of the gathered data, is organized as follows:

To begin, I present a brief overview of the literature related to my study. A good deal of this will be expanded upon after the review in a subsection on sex work in The Netherlands, including history, current policies, and the many forms of sex work that can be found, all of which are necessary for contextualizing my study. The literature review is followed by an explanation of my theoretical framework, the philosophies and concepts with which I analyzed my data. Next I describe my methodology and how I went about collecting that data. This is followed by the most substantial segment of the report, in which I present my analysis. The analysis is divided into three thematic sections: 1) about the Red Light District, describing the space in its three forms, to be discussed, 2) the ways in which the space shapes the sex worker's experience, and 3) the ways in which the sex worker in turn reshapes her own experience. This analysis is summarized in my conclusions, along with some suggestions for potential future studies. Finally, the report ends with the bibliography, providing full information for the primary and secondary sources utilized in my report, and the appendix, in which the reader can find copies of all interview guides, as well as a map and some photographs of the Red Light District that may be useful in better understanding the space.

Literature Review

The purpose of my independent study project is to investigate the impact of space on the experiences of sex workers within that space, or more specifically, how working in the Amsterdam's Red Light District influences the experiences of the women in the windows. In this literature review, I will discuss the existing writings and research pertinent to and utilized in my research and how my own project contributes to this body of work.

The Netherlands is internationally renowned for its progressive attitudes and policies toward activities that are criminalized elsewhere, most notably soft drugs and sex work. This historic culture of tolerance has long shaped both the nature of sex work in The Netherlands and the related policy-making by Dutch government officials. An understanding of this historical development of the sex industry in The Netherlands, along with the current related policies and legislation, are crucial to the contextualization of the sex work that is presented in this report. Because of the importance of this context, the history and policies of the sex industry in the Netherlands will be discussed in greater depth in the following section, *Sex Work in the Netherlands*. Three main works constitute this information. In *The Fine Art of Regulated Tolerance: Prostitution in Amsterdam*, Chrisje Brants explains the Dutch tendency of tolerance and in particular the idiosyncrasies of Dutch policy with regard to prostitution. Johannes Boutellier's *Prostitution, Criminal Law, and Morality in the Netherlands* provides a general history of the development of prostitution and does so with a focus on the role of moral opinion in shaping that development. Finally, a publication issued by the former Mr. A de Graaf Stichting⁸, written by Marieke van Doorninck, explains in understandable terms the current prostitution policies, as well as the government's objectives in their implementation.

⁸ The Mr. A de Graaf Foundation has since been forced to close due to lack of necessary funding.

I use these mentioned works to aid the reader to understand sex work within the culture and law that it occurs in The Netherlands. However, this study does not address sex work in general, but more narrowly that which takes place in the windows of the Red Light District. Because of this specificity, a sufficient contextualization also requires knowledge of the other forms of sex work and sexualized spaces and the ways in which the nature of the sex work differs for each. In an introductory chapter to *Prostitutes and Their Clients: Sexual Networks and the Determinants of Condom Use*, Mr. A De Graaf supplies brief explanations of street and window prostitution, sex clubs and brothels, and escort and home prostitution, commenting on factors such as whether the work is private or public, independent or under a proprietor, the amount of socialization, and the location, length, and price of sexual contact with a client. Along with the history and policy on sex work in The Netherlands, the details of de Graaf's explanations are provided in the *Sex Work in the Netherlands* section. This information both helps to understand some of the ways in which sex work can vary depending on its form, such as earnings and location of sexual contact, and also to explain the Red Light District by what it is not, that is, what makes it a distinct space.

In studying the experiences of sex workers in the Red Light District and relating them to space, it is undoubtedly important to understand the historical, social, and cultural context of sex work in the Netherlands (Zatz 1997). In the case of Amsterdam's Red Light District, this context involves not only history and policy, but also the site's identity as an infamous tourist destination. In *Redefining Amsterdam as a Tourist Destination*, Heidi Dahles posits that the image of Amsterdam is one of "history, heretics, and whores" (1998: 56), founded on a youth culture of sexual liberalism that emerged during the sexual revolution of the sixties and seventies. While Dahles considers Amsterdam in whole as a destination, Nancy Wonders and Raymond Michalowski offer a closer look at the Red Light District in particular as a

tourist site in *Bodies, Borders, and Sex Tourism in a Globalized World: A Tale of Two Cities*. In this article, the authors discuss the commodification of the bodies in the windows and liken the District to an open-air shopping mall and relate these images to the Red Light District's international celebrity. With this information, along with some data provided by primary resources, I describe the Red Light District as a location existing in the social imagination, and argue that this mental representation and the tourists it invites contribute to the shaping of the sex worker experience.

In addition to drawing upon the above literature with which I contextualize my study, I also use works that provide narrative accounts and observations of working in the Red Light District. While my own interviews are undoubtedly preferred, these works still provide some information about the details of window sex work from the prostitute perspective.

In 2003, graduate student Katherine Gregory conducted an intensive study of the life of one window prostitute in Amsterdam's Red Light District. Over the course of several months, Gregory sat in the doorway of the window and during this time interviewed, conversed with, and observed her informant. The outcome of her research was a book entitled *The Everyday Lives of Sex Workers in the Netherlands*, published in 2005. Through description and partial interview transcriptions, Gregory provides the reader with information on several details of the everyday life of a woman working in the Red Light District. The reader learns about the physical gesturing between prostitute and client prior to negotiation, the fifteen minute "suck and fuck" that is a standard among window prostitutes, emotional maintenance including the use of physical barriers, such as a no-kissing rule, motivations for working in the sex industry, namely to make money, and a wealth of other information. While this book offers a great source of secondary information to supplement my interviews,

it is obviously only a single account of one sex worker and is by no means representative of all those working in the windows of the Red Light District.

Prostitution has long been a topic of inquiry and study. Literature on the subject ranges in scope from historical and geographical accounts of sex work, to theories about motivations for entering the sex industry, to writings by prostitutes themselves. In the Netherlands specifically, much of the recent literature is devoted to the explanation and evaluation of Dutch prostitution policies and policy agendas, with a few other writings reporting the actual details of sex workers' lives and experiences. This literature will help provide the background information and contextualization necessary for understanding my own project, as well as some supplementary information.

Unfortunately, I had limited time to conduct my research, and was thus unable to explore my topic in desired detail. Furthermore, I lack the credentials and experience necessary of producing a research study that might contribute to this body of literature, have any effect on Dutch policy or on the lives of sex workers, or ignite any other significant change. Under these conditions, my project was only exploratory, and my main objective in conducting it was the improvement of my own knowledge and understanding of the sex industry in The Netherlands and how its unique sexualized spaces shape the nature of sex work. I hope only that I contribute some knowledge to the subject and that future readers of my independent study project will also be able to learn through reviewing and adding to what I will have written.

Sex Work in The Netherlands

A Brief History...

A 1413 Amsterdam city statute declared: “Because whores are necessary in big cities and especially in cities such as ours – indeed it is better to have these women than not to have them... the court and the sheriff of Amsterdam shall not entirely forbid the keeping of brothels” (Brants 1998: 621). This ruling offers an early example of Dutch pragmatism, termed *gedogen* and defined by Chrisje Brants in *The Fine Art of Regulated Tolerance: Prostitution in Amsterdam* as a “regulated tolerance” involving self-regulation enforced by administrative rules, and always with criminal law as an underlying threat (1998: 624).

In this climate of acceptance, sex workers were able to operate relatively freely, assuming their presence caused no public nuisance and invited the attention of police and government officials. However, the French occupation of The Netherlands from 1810 through 1813 introduced a system of regimentation. Under this system, sex workers were required to be registered by the police and undergo regular medical examinations for sexually-transmitted diseases. When the French withdrew, the regulation of sex work did not disappear but shifted from the national to the local level. Amsterdam no longer required either registration or medical examinations, and sex work continued to exist as a necessary phenomenon tolerated in concentrations.

Shortly thereafter, The Netherlands was swept by an anti-prostitution sentiment, born as a protest against human trafficking. This movement saw regulation as the government’s acknowledgement and support of the profession, which was at that point in time regarded as a perversion. With this redefinition of sex work by the public, the state no longer had the legitimation to regulate the industry. Simultaneously, there emerged a feminist view about the sexual politics of sex work that considered the working women to be victims of men’s

malevolent doings. At the end of the nineteenth century, growing pressures from Christian puritans and others of the anti-prostitution movement, accompanied by feminists, led to the government introduction of a new law centered on banning sex work without punishing the victimized sex worker. In 1911, the “Public Morality Acts” and Article 205bis of the penal code stated were passed, stating that it was “forbidden to give opportunity to prostitution” (Boutellier 1991: 201). In other words, there was a ban on brothel⁹ keeping and while “working as a prostitute [was] not punishable, ...exploitation and profiting from a prostitutes’ earning [were]” (Outshoorn 2000: 23).

Although sex workers never disappeared in Amsterdam, there was a certain silence around the issue following the passing of the 1911 article against brothels. City officials were able to use the brothel ban as a tool for zoning, that is the concentrating of sex workers to designated areas, and the practices of the workers were condoned so long as they were not bothersome or violent (Outshoorn 2007). There was little concern with sex work until the sexual revolution of the late sixties and early seventies during which the city’s Red Light District “grew into a free zone for sex industries” (Boutellier 1991: 205). The growth of Amsterdam’s sex industry was so overwhelming that soon it could no longer be controlled or concentrated and resulted in considerable public nuisance. Citizens complained of drunkenness, rowdiness, and violence. Sex work ceased to pose a moral quandary and was now a technical-judicial problem of public order. It was during these years that “one could hear the first arguments for a policy-based labor legislation” (Boutellier 1991: 206) that would enable the government regulation of the sex industry.

⁹ Under this law, brothels are defined to include sex clubs, windows, and other businesses that are run for the purposes of prostitution (Kilvington 2001).

The Current Policies...

The development of Amsterdam's current policies on sex work was founded on two basic ideas: that sex work is inevitable and should be regarded as a normal profession because if illegal, it will attract other forms of illegality, and that by bringing acceptable forms of sex work into the open and protecting them, other criminal activities, such as human trafficking, can be dealt with more effectively (Brants 1998). Thus, on 1 October 2000, the Dutch government chose to repeal Article 205bis and the ban on brothels and in doing so decriminalized¹⁰ the exploitation of voluntary prostitution. The details of the new legislation are explained in *Prostitution Policies in the Netherlands*, issued by the former Mr. A de Graaf Foundation (Doorninck 2001):

There is a maximum penalty of six years imprisonment for the following situations: 1) if a brothel owner or accomplice forces somebody to prostitute him or herself, 2) if a trafficker brings somebody across the border for the purposes of prostitution, 3) if a brothel owner or accomplice organizes the prostitution of a minor¹¹ 4) if a person takes money from a prostitute who is forced, and 5) if a person takes money from a prostitute who is a minor.

There is a maximum penalty of eight years imprisonment in the following situations: 1) when the aforementioned crimes are committed by two or more persons, 2) when the minor is under sixteen years of age, 3) when the crime results in severe bodily harm.

There is a maximum penalty of ten years imprisonment when two or more persons commit the crime to a minor under the age of sixteen or it results in severe bodily harm.

“If something is forbidden then you're not allowed to regulate it” (Outshoorn 2007), and so the removal of the brothel ban from the penal code allowed te local government to establish not only offences and penalties, but also the standards for the conditions of operating brothels. Today, brothels are managed at the local level by municipalities under a system of licensing. In order to a brothel to obtain and maintain its license, it must be clean, hygienic, and free of fire-risk. Prostitutes may not be forced to drink alcohol with their clients nor may

¹⁰ Decriminalization should be not confused with legalization. Decriminalized acts are no longer considered to be crimes but may still be subject to regulation, while legalization removes all legal detriments from a previously illegal act (Hubbard 1999).

¹¹ A minor is defined as someone under the age of eighteen.

they be forced to have unsafe sex with their clients, and health advisors must have access to women working in brothels, all of which is in addition to not allowing minor, forced, or illegal women to work in prostitution (Thérèse van der Helm 2007). If these requirements are not met, the brothel will be closed under city ordinance (Doorninck 2001).

The hope is that the removal of Article 250bis from the penal code will help to improve the working conditions of sex workers, protect them from involuntary exploitation, and combat the criminal affairs related to prostitution¹². Furthermore, they ensure that those legally able to work in the industry can do so as legitimate professionals, and thus have access to the employment benefits enjoyed other working individuals. Although decriminalization does not eradicate the stigma attached to sex work, under the new system of regulation in The Netherlands, legal sex workers can officially “operate visibly and become part of public life” (Kilvington, Day, and Ward 2001: 84).

Various Sexualized Spaces...

“The manner in which [sex] work is organized has an influence on both prostitute and client, in respect to both how the solicitation takes place and how the contact is actually implemented” (de Graaf 1995: 9). In order to better understand the organization and practice of sex work in the Red Light District, one must be familiar with the other sexualized spaces to which it can be compared. The various sexualized spaces in The Netherlands include street prostitution, window prostitution, sex clubs, brothels or private sex houses, escort prostitution, and home prostitution, each to be described below¹³. In 2004 in The Netherlands, it is estimated that of the approximately 8,000 sex workers operating, five percent work on the

¹² There is considerable debate about the effectiveness of the new legislation. For information on this discussion, see *Prostitution Policies in the Netherlands*, available at the Prostitute Information Center, Enge Kerksteed 3, 1012 GV Amsterdam or www.pic-amsterdam.com.

¹³ All descriptions come from Prostitutes and Their Clients: Sexual Networks and Determinants of Condom Use by Ron de Graaf, (see Bibliography).

streets, twenty percent in the windows, forty-five percent in sex clubs and brothels, fifteen percent in escort services, five percent at home, and ten percent in other, private spaces¹⁴. It should be noted that anomalies in earnings, time, circumstance, and so forth exist for all forms of sex work, and these descriptions are only generalizations.

Street prostitution is a public and independent form of sex work. In The Netherlands, some municipalities have established special *tippelzones* in which street prostitution is tolerated and monitored by police. The solicitation of clients takes place on the streets of the specified area and sexual contact most commonly takes place in the client's car, although occasionally it can take place in a hotel or at the client's house. Sexual contact, which often includes a hand job, oral sex, and/or vaginal sex, is short, averaging about ten minutes. Street sex workers can determine their own hours and amount of time worked and do not pay any proprietor, although pimps are common. It is noted that street sex workers are more likely to be drug-addicted, transsexual, or migrant women¹⁵. Streetwalking pays the least of all the forms of sex work. According to common stereotype, in the hierarchy of sex work, street prostitution is often regarded as the lowest form (Janssen 2007).

Window prostitution is also a public and independent form of sex work. The solicitation occurs from behind a window, which is rented from a proprietor who has little influence on the woman's activities. Sexual contact with the client takes place behind a closed curtain in a workroom with a bed and typically includes oral and vaginal sex. Contact lasts between fifteen and twenty minutes. While the earnings of window sex workers are

¹⁴ Because it is difficult to estimate the number of prostitutes due to hidden and illegal rings, these numbers are only estimates. These figures are taken from *The Intermediary Project for Prostitutes*, Annual Report 2002-2004 (see Bibliography).

¹⁵ This information comes to *Prostitutes and Their Clients: Sexual Networks and Determinants of Condom Use* by De Graaf (see Bibliography), and actual statistics are not provided.

better than those of street walkers, they are still relatively low, and the women must pay to rent the window.

Sex clubs are a private, more business-like form of sex work in which a certain percentage of the sex workers' earnings often goes to the owner or in which a client pays a rate of a room, as well as for sexual service.. Workers typically socialize with their clients first in a bar before engaging in sexual contact. Contact takes place in a private room in the club, for which the worker pays forty to sixty percent of her earnings. Contact lasts considerably longer, usually around an hour, although not all of the time is directed towards the sexual gratification of the client. Sexual contact can include more than oral sex and straight vaginal sex. Sex workers in clubs are often required obey general rules of conduct and dress.

Brothels, or private sex houses, are similar to sex clubs but are operated on a smaller scale, with fewer sex workers and no bar. There is no socializing beforehand, and a client makes his choice from the available sex workers upon arrival at the brothel. Sexual contact is much like that in a sex club, taking place in a private room and often involving more than only oral and vaginal sex. The average contact is shorter than that in a sex club, about forty minutes, and involves less socializing, although there is still conversation. The brothel owner receives less than half of the sex worker's earnings, but workers in brothels still make less than those in sex clubs.

Escort prostitution is considered the most professional form of sex work, and is both private and can be either dependent or independent, depending on how clients are solicited. Sex workers can recruit clients by means of advertisement or solicitation can be designated to an intermediary agency. In the case of the latter, the sex worker must pay the agency for each contact. Sexual contact takes place in a hotel or the client's house and lasts considerably

longer, with an average of a little over an hour and a half. Escorts often have steady clients and tend to earn the most money for their services.

Home prostitution resembles escort prostitution, with solicitation occurring through personal advertisements. Sexual contact takes place in the home of the sex worker, evoking the notion that it is not really a commercial contact. Companionship and conversation are important elements of the exchange. Contacts last a relatively long time. However, because home prostitution occurs in the woman's private space, this form of sex work is difficult to research and information on its nature is scarce.

Acknowledging these other sexualized spaces, which are not addressed in this study, and how sex work is organized differently in each, will help the reader to recognize some of the ways in which space influences the sex worker experience, such as solicitation, the amount of socializing, and the acts, locations, lengths, and prices of sexual contact. Furthermore, their mention offers the context to understand how window prostitution in Amsterdam's Red Light District is distinct and related specifically to that place.

Theoretical Framework

First and foremost, my discussion of sex work and sex workers in Amsterdam's Red Light District is framed within a pro-prostitute perspective, grounded in the right of self-determination as established by the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights, which states that voluntary¹⁶ prostitutes have the legal right to work. This view regards sex work as "a social activity, as a job that people do, alongside many other more 'normal' activities which are not held to be definitive of their identity" (Brewis and Lindstead 2002: 309). While there are undoubtedly instances of trafficking, pimping, and other coercion, it is important that the sex worker not be disempowered nor victimized. Furthermore, a pro-prostitute perspective renders clear that sex work and the experiences of the sex workers of whom I speak are not to be confused with categories and characteristics of people. Sex work is not an identity, but an occupation like any other.

Secondly, as I am considering the role of space in shaping experience, I will rely heavily on various spatial theories in the analysis of my data. Each of these theories draws primarily on the notion of space not only as an external reality, but also as a social construct and concept to be understood in terms of the meanings that people attach to it, as established by Henri Lefebvre (1991). Lefebvre also identified three categories of space, including: 1) spaces of representation, being the physicalities of a space, 2) representations of space, being the knowledges, images, and discourses that shape that space, and 3) spatial practices, being the behaviors and routines that constitute the everyday space. According to Lefebvre, it is through the tensions and interactions between these three forms that spaces are produced. I use Lefebvre's understanding of space to argue that Amsterdam's Red Light District is not

¹⁶ Voluntary in this context is defined as participating in sex work by economic choice and without coercion (Gregory 2005).

only a physical reality and landscape, but also exists as an imagined site, created by ideas, images, representations, and dialogues of the District, and is additionally constituted by the practices of those acting within it.

In a response to Lefebvre, Robert Shields emphasized the importance of spaces as circulating representations and used the term “social spatialization” (1991) to describe the process of an individual’s mental construction of a space. Shield’s called these mental images “space myths” and argued that they take form and become social realities through behaviors. Amsterdam’s Red Light District very obviously holds a unique place in the social imagination, often thought of as an renowned site of sexual liberation or sin¹⁷. With the theory of social spatialization, I suggest that these common space myths of the District are fundamental in shaping the practices of the sex workers working in the windows as well as those visiting and moving through the space, such as tourists, both of which in turn influence the experiences of the sex worker.

In *Making Space for Sex Work: Female Prostitution and the Production of Space*, among other works, Philip Hubbard relates Lefebvre’s concept of space specifically to red light landscapes, theorizing these districts as created by “a relationship between different understandings, occupations, and uses of [the] space” (Hubbard 2003: 80). He suggests that spatial practices occurring in red light districts, including the routines of sex workers, are the result of a conflict between the spaces of representation and the representations of space (2003: 87). Hubbard’s work reiterates my own assumption that the lives and experiences of sex workers are profoundly shaped by the sites in which they work, and in this respect aids in my discussion of how space, in all of its forms, influences the experiences of sex workers.

¹⁷ These images are to be discussed in the following pages of this report. For more information, see *Redefining Amsterdam as Tourist Destination* by Heidi Dahles (see Bibliography).

Sex work inarguably takes place within particular spatial settings, and as such the distribution, landscapes, and utilizations of space are central to the study of commercial sex (Symanski 1981). I will use the spatial theorizations of Lefebvre, Shields, and Hubbard to argue that the Red Light District of Amsterdam exists in its physical realities, representations, practices, and the social imagination, and that the relationships between these existences shape the experiences of the sex workers within that specific context.

Methodology

Data Collection Methods...

My independent study project relies most heavily on qualitative methods, utilizing focused interviews¹⁸ as the main means of data collection. This method was appropriate for the exploratory nature of my study because it allowed me the ability to control and guide my interview so that all crucial topics could be addressed, yet was easily adaptable so as not to interrupt the flow of conversation and prevent unconsidered matters of importance from arising. Furthermore, focused interviews allowed my participants to speak for themselves and thus use their own vocabulary and repertoire of concepts instead of me imposing my own upon them. My participants consisted of sex workers, researchers and professors, and individuals of organizations and as such varied in approach, duration, and content, to be discussed below. All interviews were one-on-one and both orally and manually transcribed. Prior to every interview, I explained my research, interests, and objectives and allowed my participants to ask any questions they might have had. I explained that participation was voluntary and that they may refuse to answer any or all questions or withdraw from the interview at any time. All interviews were conducted with informed consent and participants were promised confidentiality¹⁹, although all participants besides sex workers gave permission for me to use their names in my report.

In addition to focused interviews, I also employed unstructured observation, an approach generally adopted when a researcher “has a clear idea of the purpose of the observation [but] may not be so clear about the detail” (Bell 2005). Because of time

¹⁸ Focused interviews are interviews guided by central themes or topics, but are open to adaptation.

¹⁹ Confidentiality is defined as “a promise that [the participants] will not be identified or presented in identifiable form” (Sapsford and Abbot as cited in Bell, 2005).

constraints and the difficulty in gaining access into the sex industry, I was not able to undertake participant observation, which involves participation in the daily lives of the individuals being studied. For my unstructured observation, I visited Amsterdam's Red Light District on numerous occasions in order to obtain data from a variety of times of day and night and from all days of the week. I walked both the major canal streets of the District and the smaller alleys and side streets, keeping in mind my primary research question and occasionally stopping to manually record any pertinent data. My observations yielded significant information on the physical landscape, the practices and characteristics of sex workers behind the windows and of others in the District, and on the interactions and negotiations between clients and sex workers prior to any closing of the curtains. However, personal observation does not allow the individuals I observed to self-identify, and thus any data yielded from this method is of my own perspective, possibly resulting in bias. A discussion of how bias is handled in my methods concludes this methodology section.

Participants and Interviews...

Because my primary interest behind this independent study was to learn about the lives and experiences of sex workers as they are impacted by the space they work in, I preferred that the majority of my data come directly from the sex workers operating in the windows of the Red Light District. The only means by which this was possible was to approach the women during their working hours. As recommended by Mariska Majoor, I choose to visit the Red Light District shortly after the beginning of the first shift of window rentals, at approximately eleven o'clock in the morning, under the assumption that the District would be less busy and if women were unoccupied they would be more willing to speak with me. Because many of the windows were empty at this hour, I made no deliberate selection in

whom I approached. To each sex worker I quickly introduced myself and my study and immediately offered a payment of thirty euros, since speaking with me would take from the woman's working time. In this way, I was able to obtain two interviews with sex workers. I obtained a third interview by way of snowball sampling, when one participant mentioned that I should return to the District the following day and speak with the woman with whom she shared her window. Unfortunately, because each interview required payment and no woman I approached was willing to be interviewed otherwise, these three participants, whom I shall call Nurcan, Sunny, and Monique as they desired, were all the interviews that I was able to attain from sex workers. Interviews were kept simple and brief, each lasting between fifteen and thirty minutes. Content included questions on the details of their working lives in the Red Light District, of their interactions with clients, of their attitudes toward their work and workplace, and of previous experiences in other sexualized spaces²⁰.

Because I was unable to gather the desired number of interviews from sex workers alone and feared not having adequate data, I also sought interviews with individuals familiar with the sex industry in the Netherlands and the Red Light District in particular. These interviews were conducted under the assumption that because of their experiences with sex workers in The Netherlands, those individuals might be familiar with sex work in the Red Light District and be able to both provide information and offer their opinions on how certain spaces affect the experiences of the workers.

I located these individuals after researching organizations dealing with sex work in The Netherlands and professors and researchers specializing in sex work, many of whom had been utilized by former students of the School for International Training. I contacted these individuals via phone, e-mail, or personal visit, and explained my research and what I hoped

²⁰ For general interview guides, see Appendix I.

they might contribute. Although some individuals and organizations did not respond to my emails or were unable to allocate the time for an interview, most were more than willing to offer me their time and knowledge. In the end, my participants included: 1) Mariska Majoor, founder of the Prostitute Information Center²¹ in the Red Light District, 2) Dr. Joyce Outshoorn, professor of Women's Studies at Leiden University and an expert on the policy-making of sex work in the Netherlands, 3) Drs. Marie-Louise Janssen, graduate of the University of Amsterdam and currently completing her PhD focusing on the life stories of Latin American sex workers in the European sex industry, 4) Thérèse van der Helm, member of the GGD Netherlands, Dutch Association of Municipal or Regional Public Health Services, and 5) Sanne Bogers, member of HAP Foundation in Utrecht²². These interviews lasted from approximately forty minutes to an hour and yielded valuable data not only on the experiences of sex workers, but also on the history of sex work and regulation in the Netherlands, possible points of comparison with other sexualized spaces, and insight on impending changes in the sex industry and related policy. These interviews are flawed in that they are not from the perspective of the sex worker, with the exception of former sex worker Mariska Majoor, but they were important for obtaining adequate data and useful in providing information not necessarily on the experiences of sex workers, but pertinent to my research regardless.

Methodological Concerns...

As explained by Drs. Marie-Louise Janssen, “sex workers are not a homogenous group but are characterized by great diversity. You can't speak of all sex workers” (Janssen 2007). It is absolutely necessary that the great experiential diversity of sex workers be noted. No

²¹ The Prostitute Information Center is an organization that provides information to all individuals desiring information on the Red Light District.

²² The HAP Foundation focuses on AIDS prevention among sex workers through both direct and indirect prevention campaigns.

data obtained on the experiences of sex workers, no matter its source, is representative of sex workers in general. Sex work in the windows differs from sex work of other forms, window sex work in Amsterdam's Red Light District differs from window sex work in other locations, and the experiences of one sex worker in the District differ from those of all other workers in the District. In short, my sample is not representative not only because of its small size and being limited to English-speaking women working the daytime shift during the week in the month of April, but also because no experience is the same for any two sex workers.

Other major methodological concerns in my research and analysis are the impact of my role as researcher and bias, as is the case with any qualitative study. The way in which my participants perceived me may have influenced their responses, undermining their validity. I would be making unfounded assumptions if I were to comment on how my participants self-identified, but I am well aware of the ways in which I personally have been identified: an educated, upper-middle class, white, American female, which might be considered a privileged position. Furthermore, many sex workers have grown tired of being made objects of study. Although I did not sense any resentment, intimidation, or other negative reaction to my perceived identity during my interviews, that does not guarantee that the data I obtained was not somehow altered. Additionally, as discussed with unstructured observation, any analysis of my data is from my own perspective and is thus biased.

I combated these obstacles by showing utmost respect for my participants and ensuring that my interview questions were open, understandable, and interesting. In my analysis, I frequently critiqued and reflected upon my data construal and conclusions. Despite these measures, it is important to understand that the analysis in this report should not be held as objective fact, but as the result of my own personal interpretation.

Analysis

About Amsterdam's Red Light District

In this section of my analysis, I explain the existence of Amsterdam's Red Light District in the three forms established by Lefebvre: spaces of representation, representation of spaces, and spatial practices (1991). I will draw upon secondary sources, unstructured observation, and personal interviews in order to provide an accurate site description of the District and the windows within it, to explain how the space exists in the imagination as a representation and an image, namely in light of its popularity as a tourism site, and finally will provide a general description of the daily practices and experiences of the sex workers operating in the District. This analysis of the sexualized space of the Red Light District is necessary in order to fully understand how the space actually influences the experiences of the window sex workers. It should be noted that these descriptions are only generalizations and are by no means definitive of the site or of the people within it, for outliers always exist.

Spaces of Representation...

The Red Light District is an accessible, beautiful neighborhood in Amsterdam that is no secret to anyone (Gregory 2005), and is "one of the oldest historical neighborhoods in the city" (Janssen 2007). It consists of two major canal streets, Oude Zijds Voorburgwal and Oude Zijds Achterburgwal, as well as several smaller alleys and side streets and the area surrounding the Oude Kerkplein, or the Old Church²³. Floating boats, bicycles, and trees line the canals, and cyclists and cars are always passing through. At a quick glance, Oude

²³ See Appendix II, Figure 1 for a map of Amsterdam's Red Light District.

Zijds Achterburgwal, the main strip of the District, resembles any other canal street in Amsterdam. Yet along with the cafes and restaurants, bars and pubs, hotels, residencies, schools, museums, and coffeeshops that can be found along these streets, the Red Light District also contains an array of erotic shops, live sex theaters, and the largest concentration of sex workers in Amsterdam (Thérèse van der Helm 2007).

The District is a window prostitution area, and the windows²⁴, incorporated into the buildings, line the sides of the streets. Some windows are set at ground level or down a small set of stairs, in which case the “window” is often in actuality a glass door, or they may be slightly above the ground and require clients to walk up a small set of stairs. These windows are accessed by a separate doorway that is shared with all others living in or utilizing that particular building. Each window is marked as a commercial sexual location by either a red lantern or florescent light, which shines dimly during the day and brightly illuminates the sex worker inside at night. Each window has a thick, red curtain that pulls horizontally shut upon a client’s entrance. A sign reading “kamer te huur” marks the empty windows, which are more common during the day than at night.

The windows²⁵, rented from a proprietor or landlord, vary in size, comfort, amenities, and luxuriousness, all depending on price. As Mariska Majoor explains, “You have them small, you have them big... but it’s always a room with a single bed high off the ground [with] sheets on it. Sometimes there’s a pillow, sometimes no pillow... but always a towel, a big one, and that’s the place where you have sex with the client. You have mirrors around the bed. There is a sink, a washbasin, and sometimes a locker and sometimes a chair. Sometimes it’s fancy decorated, and sometimes it looks like a dirty old kitchen. That depends on the price you paid for the window.” A daytime shift window rental, from ten o’clock in the

²⁴ See Appendix II, Figure 2 for a photograph of some windows during the day.

²⁵ See Appendix II, Figures 3 and 4 for photographs of the interiors of two windows.

morning through seven o'clock in the evening costs around sixty euros, and a nighttime shift rental, from seven o'clock in the evening through four o'clock in the morning costs a hundred and ten euros (Nurcan 2007), although again, this depends on the size and quality of the room.

Behind the occupied windows are sex workers of all ages, ethnicities, sizes, shapes, and overall appearances. There seems to be no one demographic or physical characteristic that is shared by all. However, although there were variations, the working clothes of the women are “a little bit standard” (Majoor 2007). Common outfits include lingerie, bikinis, bras, panties, and thongs, although some women wear jeans and tank tops or other more conservative attire. Fabrics are often of bright colors and made of see-through materials, such as lace. Many women wear knee or thigh-high stockings and in my observation, I did not see one individual not wearing high-heeled sandals or boots. Bright make-up, jewelry, and body piercings are common additions to an outfit. As an example, one sex worker described her common working clothes, consisting of “white, black, or red lingerie, and also those tights that clip into your panties... and high heels, always. [Her hair] is always long, always a lot... and [she] always wear[s] red lipstick” (Sunny 2007).

In my observations, it noticed that there was some difference between those who worked during the daytime shift and those who rented windows in the evening and night. In general, the women who worked during the day were older, more conservatively dressed, and “less attractive” by stereotypical standards²⁶. At night, the sex workers were visibly younger, most likely in their late teens, twenties, or at the oldest, their thirties. Although there are still women of many races, ethnicities, sizes, and shapes, the women working the night shift tended to be, again by stereotypical standards, more attractive. Their working clothes were more revealing, with no woman wearing more than a bikini and some women wearing as little

²⁶ It is difficult to comment on the attractiveness of individuals since this is an entirely subjective opinion.

as thongs and nipple tassels. High-heels and tall boots were still the norm. It was explained to me that “usually, the younger girls work at night because the public on the streets is younger at night, and in the daytime you see more older women and you have more older and relaxed people on the street” (Majoor 2007), although other reasons for this tendency likely exist.

Finally, there are the individuals passing through the Red Light District that comprise part of the space’s physicality. During the day, I observed children playing, residents going to and from home, people walking dogs, families and couples, large groups of tourists, smaller groups of men and women, lone elderly men, and drunk and homeless men. As with the sex workers, there seemed to be no one characteristic shared by all of these individuals. While there was still quite a variety of individuals to be found in the District at night, the crowd was overall younger and more male-dominated, and seemed to be mainly comprised of large tourist groups. In the evening it is often busier because “it’s more of the tourists walking around and going, ‘oh my god, I’ve been to the Red Light District’” (Nurcan 2007). Both during the day and at night, police officers strolled about either on foot or bicycle, always in pairs. “You never go more than ten minutes without a police officer going by” (Monique 2007).

Representation of Spaces...

Amsterdam is a famous tourist attraction for both sex tourists and non-sex tourists alike (Janssen 2007). The city is renowned for its history and architecture and as well as its outstanding museums, including the Rijksmuseum, the Van Gogh Museum, and the Rembrandt House Museum. It’s home to the Anne Frank House and the world class Concertgebouworkest. And of course, no tourist is ignorant of its many coffee shops and it’s

red light district, *De Wallen*. “The Red Light District is internationally known for its concentration of commercial sex venues” (Gregory 2005: 53) and regardless of whether it is held as a site of sexual liberation or a site of sin (Dahles 1998), it is the place most commonly associated with images of the city (Outshoorn 2007). Despite the Tourist Board of Amsterdam’s efforts to attract an older, more sophisticated visitor, Amsterdam and the Red Light District remain popular tourist destinations for younger travelers and backpackers, with about sixty percent being under the age of thirty years (Dahles 1998), and sex work is the major cash cow among this group (Outshoorn 2007) in that it brings so many tourists to the Red Light District for the purposes of both voyeurism and sexual exchange.

It seems that a substantial cause of the District’s fame is the visibility of sex work characteristic of window prostitution. As described in *Spaces of Representation*, the windows line the busy, centrally-located streets, behind each of which stands a woman offering her sexual services in exchange for money. Wonders and Michalowski liken the arrangement to an open-air shopping mall, suggesting that in the District, “the commodification of bodies has been perfected to the level of an art form” (2001: 553). Joyce Outshoorn explains that for many coming to The Netherlands, “you come [to the Red Light District] and you think that you’ve pretty much arrived” because “it’s such a visible place.” It is not only the opportunity of sexual contact with a sex worker that produces such thrill, but also mere voyeurism and the ability to look upon sex workers whom in many other countries are hidden and persecuted under illegality. Tourists, male and female both, often slowly stroll the streets, looking upon women of every size, shape, and color in the windows, or to reiterate the analogy of an open-air mall, they view the women on display. Very often, “they just watch” (Nurcan 2007). For this reason, many regard the Red Light District as a place of leisure where the tourist can enjoy illicit thrills unavailable elsewhere (Hubbard 1999).

Amsterdam has long been among the most frequently visited destinations in the world, in part because “De Wallen is big business and attracts a lot of tourists” (Outshoorn 2007). “As an identifiable site for commercial eroticism, the prostitution window lingers in the Western popular imagination as an emblem... of The Netherlands” (Gregory 2005: 58). This, along with the voyeurism involved, is the representation of the space and space myth with which I am concerned in my analysis.

Spatial Practices...

It must be emphasized that the following are only generalizations about the “standard” occurrences in the Red Light District, and that there is always variation and exception.

As already explained, women rent their windows from a landlord for either a daytime or a nighttime shift, prices varying accordingly. Nurcan added that windows can be rented on both a daily or permanent basis. In the case of the former, a woman is not guaranteed the use of a window, but if it is not available, she does not have to pay for it. With permanent windows, the landlord cannot rent the space to another sex worker, but if the permanent renter is ill, on vacation, or otherwise unable to work, she still must pay the going rate for that window for the day or night. Other than renting windows, landlords have no control over the sex worker’s practices. However, not all window sex workers work independently, and many women “have pimps and just aren’t in a good situation” (Nurcan 2007).

Sex workers exhibit a variety of behaviors once behind their rented windows, as noted in my personal observation. I observed women standing close to the windows, sitting in their chairs or stools with legs crossed or spread, dancing or moving their bodies rhythmically, talking on cell phones, reading books and magazines, tending to their personal appearance, conversing with neighboring sex workers, touching themselves, and chewing gum and eating

or drinking. Sex workers exhibited varying levels and techniques of interaction with the people passing by outside their windows. Most commonly, women would make eye-contact, smile, blow kisses, tap on the windows, gesture, and occasionally open the door a little and call out²⁷. Some women attempted to make contact with every individual, others only with a selective few, and some seemed to pay no attention to the world outside and hardly interacted at all. In my observations, there was a noticeable difference in the behaviors and interactions of sex workers from behind the windows during the day and at night. At night, women were more likely to stand close to the windows than to sit and were rarely engaged in other activities, but instead nearly all the women concentrated their efforts on making contact with those passing by their windows. While there continued to be a great deal of eye-contact and smiling, the night hours saw far more non-verbal gesturing as well as verbal solicitation. Mariska Majoor noted that this was not unusual, and that “you have a different atmosphere when it gets dark.”

Potential clients, along with a wealth of non-potential clients, walk the streets and alleys at varying paces, looking inside the windows as they pass. In fact, these moments of voyeurism are said to be a ritualistic and pleasurable prelude to the selection of a sex worker (Hubbard 1999). I witnessed potential clients initiate contact by stopping, approaching, and tapping on a window, as well as sex workers initiating contact by luring in seemingly indecisive individuals by those tactics discussed above. However, it was difficult to decipher which individual instigated the contact. At the moment contact is initiated, “the art of commercial negotiation” (Gregory 2005) begins. Negotiation about services and price is often not immediate, but follows a brief neutral conversation in which sex worker and client might ask each other’s names and how they are doing. During this time, the sex worker can

²⁷ Officially, any direct solicitation of clients by the sex workers, such as tapping on the windows and calling out, is not allowed, as explained by Mariska Majoor.

check the man more closely for dangerous signs, such as smelling of alcohol, and get a better sense of who the man is. In other words, they “taste each other a little bit” (Majoor 2007) before discussing price and possibility. Of the negotiations I observed, all typically lasted for approximately thirty seconds to a minute, and at most two minutes.

Negotiations all take place with the potential client standing outside. If prices and services are agreed upon, the woman will open the door to let the client in, and close both it and the thick red curtain behind him. As is the case with the sex workers, it is not possible to characterize the clients frequenting the Red Light District in any one way. Nurcan explains, “It can be just as easy a Dutch guy of eighty years old or an American who is eighteen years old.” Marie Janssen stated that in her opinion, “typical clients don’t exist. It can be everybody and anybody.” Sanne Bogers, who has worked in both the streetwalking and window prostitution areas of Utrecht, The Netherlands, added that “men shop around” and the same men can be seen in both locations, although she explains that tourists are more likely to frequent the Red Light District than a tippelzone.

Obviously, as an observer, I was unable to witness the sexual exchange that takes place behind closed curtains. However, in one interview the normal occurrence was explained to me: “When he comes inside, you let him pay first... he gets straight sex and a blow job... a little bit of this, a little bit of that, one position and if he’s lucky two positions. But he only comes once. ...As a window prostitute, you can have many customers and if you have customers that are fucking too long, then it gets painful” (Sunny 2007). The typical exchange is thus a “suck and fuck” (Nurcan and Monique 2007) and according to Monique, usually lasts between fifteen and twenty minutes and costs fifty euros. “Fifty euros is the minimum price. Prices only go up” (Monique 2007). While bargaining may occur around prices, lengths of time, and sexual services, the minimum price of fifty euros is never challenged. If clients

want more than the standard suck and fuck or a longer exchange, they are charged accordingly. Nurcan stated that very often, clients “want you naked and [to] touch your breasts and a couple of positions, so most of the time [Nurcan can] make a hundred and fifty to two hundred euros for each customer,” and she reported to on some occasions have earned over a thousand euros from one sexual exchange. After the exchange, the client leaves and the sex worker washes and arranges herself, then reopens the curtain and resumes her customary activities.

How Space Shapes the Sex Worker Experience

“Dutch window prostitution represents a highly visible symbol of normalization” (Gregory 78). In the Red Light District, there is a certain protocol around practice, negotiation, prices, and services that are relatively standard among all sex workers behind the windows. As I have described above, there is a “standard” attire worn by sex workers, a “routine” interaction involving solicitation and negotiation, and a “basic” sexual exchange of a suck and fuck for fifty euros, lasting approximately fifteen minutes²⁸. This seems to be related to two spatial factors: the clustering of windows and the visibility of sex workers in the Red Light District.

For example, all of my participants working in the Red Light District stated that fifty euros was their minimum price for their services, without exception. Nurcan explains that many clients will ask the price for only a fuck, to which she responds, “It’s still fifty euros. I don’t do anything for less.” Monique adds that occasionally on difficult days, towards the end of her working shift when business is slow, she may be more accommodating to a client’s particular requests, such as varying positions or a massage, but this act “is not changing the

²⁸ Again, I must emphasize that these are generalizations and that there is variation and exception.

money. Fifty is the minimum price always.” Because there is such a clustering of sex workers, it would be difficult to charge lower prices without arousing resentment from other workers. This has recently been an issue with migrant women working only briefly in the windows during tourist season (Janssen 2007). However, if a sex worker charges much more than what others are charging, she is unlikely to attract many customers, who could find similar services with another woman for less.

There is a similar standardization of attire that results from the visibility of the sex workers. Because they are on display, to use the wording of Wonders and Michalowski, and are being watched and chosen from by potential clients, sex workers want to look appealing. As a sex worker in the Red Light District, “you cannot sit behind the window with too many clothes on, because the men want to see something” (Majoor 2007). Although not always the case, and although the tastes of different men may differ, a sex workers physical appearance can play an important role in attracting potential clients. Because she is on display along with many other sex workers, there is also a sort of competition, so that she must dress similarly to those around her. In short, it seems that the clustering and highly public nature of window sex workers in the Red Light District gives birth to a daily mode of commercial operation that is “regimented and almost choreographed” (Gregory 2005: 89).

The norms and standards both in physical appearance and working attire, as well as the nature of the sexual services, seem to be established in large part by the tourist presence and space myths of Amsterdam’s Red Light District. Many regard the site as “the sex capitol of Europe” to be visited specifically to “get good sex at great prices,” as stated by one experienced sex tourist of the District (World Sex Guide 1997-2006). Indeed, many of the sex workers are aware of their function as a tourist attraction, as one comments: “You’re standing in your underwear in front of the whole world, and they’re staring at you like you’re some sort

of special monkey” (Majoor 2007), sometimes even going so far as to take photographs (Monique 2007). However, all my participants working in the Red Light District added that this voyeurism and often disrespectfulness among tourists is something they got accustomed to very quickly.

A great deal of these visitors “just want to have a good time... They usually want to come as quickly as possible. Most of them are horny, especially the young guys” (Majoor 2007). The most typical request from clients is the very simple and basic “straight sex and a blowjob” (Sunny 2007) that they expect of an exchange with a sex worker. It is clear that tourists visiting Amsterdam’s Red Light District have a certain mental image of the site and of the sex worker in mind, one shaped by their own cultural values about sex work, stories told and narratives heard from others’ visits to the District, and presuppositions about legalized Dutch window prostitution. It is an image that often involves a nearly nude woman offering a quick, no-strings attached fuck (Nurcan 2007). This mental image is an example of Shield’s theory of social spatialization, in which the Red Light District is established as a physically and psychically distinct space and is bound up with certain expectations.

The expectations of tourists play a large role in shaping the experiences of the sex worker. They create the norms to which many sex workers must conform. Tourists, and likely non-tourists as well, bring with them certain ideas about window sex work and sex workers in the Red Light District. They have preconceived notions about what is “prostitution-like” (Gregory 2005: 78). In short, the women in the window of the Red Light District perform their roles as sex workers according to the expectations of those looking in at them. They

perform “as they are supposed to” (Outshoorn 2007), according to the images that exist at that time²⁹.

How the Sex Worker Re-Shapes Experience

There may be a “prostitution-like” role that every sex worker in the Red Light District must keep in mind, but each of my interviews, as well as my personal observation, revealed that each woman undoubtedly performs this role with her own distinct style. The solicitation, client selection, and services are “different for everybody” (Majoor 2007). The women in the District “all have their own way of working” (Nurcan 2007).

Because window sex workers are self-employed, with the exception of those working under pimps, traffickers, or who are in other forced positions, as a form of sex work it offers a great deal of independence. Mariska Majoor comments, “I consider window prostitution the most independent way to work of the organized forms.” In this setting, when you are working with your body and come into very close contact with strangers, “it is important to be independent and to be able to say yes and no without asking permission. It’s really, really important to be able to make your own choices” (Majoor 2007). Among my participants, the experiences of working in a window brothel were often related to previous experiences working in a sex club. Nurcan explains: “[In sex clubs] you have to take every customer that comes in, even if you don’t feel confident or even if you don’t feel secure around that guy. ... You have to let them lick your pussy, you have to do different positions, and you have to go in a bath with them.” Monique adds, “There’s always people watching you [in sex clubs] and saying you have to kiss.” Sex clubs may offer a privacy that cannot exist with the highly

²⁹ It is interesting to note that the images of the sex worker have not always remained the same. For example, Joyce Outshoorn explains that in the 1960s, the prototypical image of the sex worker was that of a social worker operating in a nice, clean, cozy District. The images of the Red Light District and the women working within it are always shifting (Outshoorn 2007).

public nature of window sex work, but they demand that the woman obey a number of rules. Sex club workers “get rules about how to dress, about working hours, about how much they have to pay, if they have to sit with customers and drink, and that sort of thing. Some don’t even allow sex workers to work with condoms” (Outshoorn 2007).

For these reasons, my participants greatly preferred their work in the Red Light District, where they have their own room and space. Comparing her experiences, Nurcan sums up that “I don’t want to work like that. I want to be my own boss. I want to make sure that I don’t have to do anything I really don’t want to do. I just want to make sure that if somebody comes in my door, if I let you in, then I am the one who took the responsibility to let you in. If something happens, then it’s only me to blame.” Monique shares a similar sentiment, stating that she wanted to make her own rules, so she quit her work in a sex club. “Working [in the windows] is the best way. You decide what’s going to happen, not somebody else. ...Here, I’m my own boss. I can go and come when I want” (Monique 2007). In the Red Light District, “you work behind the windows and that is your own little business” (Majoor 2007).

The independence of window sex work and the control that it allows the sex workers permeates nearly all elements of the sex worker-client interaction, exchange, and experience. To begin, there are different means by which sex workers can lure and solicit potential clients passing by their windows. In my observations, I noted some women hardly looking at the individuals on the streets, others only smiling and waving, and some gesturing and opening the doors to call out. Sunny stated that she usually smiles, opens the door, and occasionally screams out, while Monique never does more than smile or make eye contact, explaining that she dislike’s anything more, thinking “that’s cheap.” Nurcan states that she both smiles and makes eye contact, but also plays the radio loudly, listens to a lot of hip-hip, R&B, and dance

hall music, and is always dancing and having fun. She says, “I always try to laugh and smile and make fun, and most of the time I think that’s what attracts my customers, and I think that a lot of Black guys come in because of [the music].” In making a generalization, Mariska Majoor suggests that, “tapping on the windows is usually something for African or South American women. Dutch women and European women are working more with their bodies and with their eyes.”

The women also exercise control over which types of men they ultimately invite into their windows and to whom they provide sexual services. “You always have a bunch of people standing in front of your window and you have to pick your potential customer” (Majoor 2007), often done first by making eye contact, and “some girls do that to every man, to every customer approaching them, and some girls are very selective” (Majoor 2007). There are both concerns about safety and personal preference involved in this decision. Both Nurcan and Monique expressed that they will not allow men who are drunk, who have been using drugs, or who are not clean into their windows. As Nurcan explains, “I’d rather have fifty euros less than have fifty euros and a black eye because some guy didn’t like the way he was treated or some guy was too drunk to know what he was doing.” Again, however, this is not the case for all. Sunny had a different opinion of drunken clients, claiming that, “it’s easier when they’re drunk. ... You can say sorry, your cock isn’t working. It’s much easier than normal guys.” The women also prefer men of different ages, races, and ethnicities. Nurcan said that she found black, Moroccan, Turkish, and Indian men to be very rude and disrespectful, and preferred older men, especially Americans and Germans, because “they pay well, they don’t argue about the money, they’re polite, and they say thank you after.” Sunny stated that she will not take black men, because they “aren’t [her] type,” or Moroccan men because “they are too aggressive and expect too much for fifty euros.” While Monique did

not comment on any races or ethnicities she preferred, she explained that she prefers younger men because they “cum sooner and are usually cleaner.” Unlike in a sex club, where sex workers have no choice but to see every man who comes in³⁰, the women in the windows are able to select their clients according to their own tastes. “You choose the type of customer that you feel comfortable with” (Majoor 2007). And if a man approaches whom the woman deems undesirable, she can “just say sorry, I don’t want to. Thank you anyways, goodbye” (Nurcan 2007).

As with client interaction, solicitation, and selection, the sex worker also controls the sexual exchanges that take place behind her curtains and is the ultimate decider of what will and will not be done, for how long, and at what price. For example, Nurcan explains that, “Some girls take their bra off and that comes with the fifty euros, and other girls don’t. I’m like you get a suck and fuck for fifty euros and I think that that’s more than enough for your fifty euros. If they want me to take my bra off and touch my breasts, they have to pay fifty euros extra.” This way of working compared to that of one of her friends, another sex worker in the Red Light District, who “does like, nearly everything for fifty euros only” (Nurcan 2007).

Sunny, on the other hand, stated that for her, “everything is with the hand. I don’t use my pussy or my mouth.” She explains that she has developed certain tricks so that most of the time, her clients are not even aware that they are not experiencing vaginal penetration, called “phantom penetration” (Gregory 2005: 151). Phantom penetration exists along with many other sex worker tricks, some of which were explained by Mariska Majoor: “There are certain positions and certain things you can do to make [the client] cum quicker. ... You have mirrors around the bed, so you can play with that. You can show certain parts of yourself through the

³⁰ These reports of sex clubs only speak for the experiences of the women whom I interviewed. There are sex clubs that offer greater autonomy and independence for sex workers than others.

mirror and then they freak out completely. And while he's fucking you, you give him a small massage of the balls because it makes him cum quicker. If you do these things well, it makes the work easier and so much quicker."

How long a sex worker allows her client to remain inside her window also varies. For Sunny, "It takes like, five, maximum seven minutes inside," although she recognizes that "they should get fifteen minutes, but I kick them out when they don't pay more. I don't have time for that." Monique, however, explains, "I'm a quiet girl, so they like to relax with me. They are not like, 'Oh, I'm here with a prostitute.' ...Sometimes if a familiar guy comes here and it takes a half an hour, I'm fine. I don't care about an extra five or ten minutes because they come back."

And finally, all of my participants working in the Red Light District had certain sexual acts that they refused to perform for any client, at any price. None were open to anything without a condom, kissing, anal sex, or sadomasochism. As Monique put it, "Basically, I won't do any dirty, disgusting things."

In short, the experiences of sex workers in the Red Light District may be guided by certain norms imposed upon them by way of expectation and space myth, but these standards are only that. They are by no means definitive of the women's daily modes of operation and can be reconfigured according to personal style. In the words of Sunny, "You need to be able to play." Sex work in the Red Light District "is exciting. It's fun. You make good money and it's very interesting. If you like to have sex with people, if you don't mind having sex with lots of people, if you can switch that button, then you can play with that" (Majoor 2007).

Conclusions

“Prostitution has long remained the subject of academic scrutiny, seemingly fascinating generations of sociologists, historians, anthropologists and criminologists whilst simultaneously dividing feminist scholars who regard it as a form of sexual slavery or as the ultimate emancipatory gesture by women of a patriarchal society” (Hubbard 1999:1). Despite this extensive pre-occupation with sex work by academics and recognition of sex work’s various forms, there has been little material produced dealing with the spatial settings in which these forms occur.

Driven by the belief that space is not simply a passive backdrop to human and social behavior but plays a role in determining those actions, I have sought to research the ways in which working in the windows of Amsterdam’s Red Light District, as a distinct space, influences the sex worker’s experiences. Utilizing Lefebvre’s notion of space, I have argued for and defined the Red Light District’s existence in three forms: 1) in it’s physicalities and landscapes, or space of representation, 2) in it’s common mental representation and image, or representation of space, and 3) in the routine behaviors of those operating within it, or spatial practices. Guided by the theoretical frameworks of Shields and Hubbard, I argued that these three forms interact and influence the experience of the sex worker in the District. I have concluded that the clustering and public visibility of sex workers leads to standardizations in working attire, sex worker-client interaction and negotiation, and the nature of the sexual exchange, much of which is shaped according to tourist expectations and space myths. However, because of the independent nature of window sex work, sex workers in the Red Light District are able to play with and alter those standards as desired, so that all aspects of the sex worker’s experience are ultimately structured by her personal style and preferences.

Throughout the research process for this report, I was presented with information that was not pertinent to the question at hand, but is undoubtedly deserving of further inquiry. In my interview with Joyce Outshoorn, she commented that, “The selling of sex and the buying of sex and the locations are changing. The spaces are shifting.” She spoke specifically of the recent growth of sex sites on the Internet, an increasing number of women selling sexual services from their homes, and of the return of bar prostitution as examples of these shifting spaces. A look into sex work and sex workers in any of these locations would make for an interesting study.

Additionally, Joyce Outshoorn informed me that there may be upcoming changes in the government’s approach to and policy on sex work in The Netherlands. She explained that, “City Hall is trying to see if they can narrow down on the amount of business going on in de Wallen.” Because sex work has been decriminalized and cannot be shut down, the local government is seeking indirect ways on limiting sex work, namely through cracking down on illegal money transactions. Their ultimate intention of their actions is to shut down all the windows in the Red Light District, but Joyce Outshoorn comments, “I think they’re realistic and know that window sex work happens, so they’ll only try to limit it and get it on less canals and not on so many of the side streets.” In this, there is a definite potential study on the development and successes or failures of the government’s actions, and possibly on the effects that it might have on sex workers.

Finally, early on in this report I provide a brief description of all the forms of sex work that exist in The Netherlands aside from window sex work. I believe that a similar, spatially-focused study of any of these spaces, or a comparison between the same forms of sex work in two different locations, would offer an interesting topic of exploration.

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Appendices

Appendix I – Interview Guides

Guide for Interviews with Sex Workers

1. Background Information
 - a. How long have you been working in the Red Light District and how did you come to work here?
 - b. Where did you work before working in the Red Light District?
 - c. Have you worked in any other forms of sex work? If so, which?
 - d. Could you compare your experiences working in each space? How are they the same or different? What do you like or dislike about each?
2. Client Interaction and Negotiation
 - a. What are your typical clients like?
 - b. How do you interact with your clients from behind the window?
 - c. What happens once they approach the window?
 - d. What is negotiation like?
3. Sexual Exchange
 - a. What happens once a client enters the window?
 - b. What is the typical client request? What is the typical exchange?
 - c. How long do exchanges usually last?
 - d. How much do you charge?
4. Working Space
 - a. Could you describe your work setting?
 - b. What do you like or dislike about working in the windows and in the Red Light District?
 - c. How does your work in the Red Light District differ from other places that you have worked?
 - d. If you could change anything about either the Red Light District or working in the windows, what would you change?
5. Attitude Toward Work
 - a. How do you feel about working in the Red Light District?
 - b. How do you think that other people feel about the women working in the windows?
6. Regulation
 - a. How do you think that regulation has affected your work?
7. Concluding Questions
 - a. Do you have any questions that you would like to ask or comments that you would like to add?

Guide for Interviews with Professors, Researchers, and Members of Organizations

1. Could you tell me about the organization and setup of the Red Light District?

Figure 2: The Windows Along the Street in the Red Light District, Amsterdam, The Netherlands



Figure 3: Inside Two Windows in the Red Light District, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

