



## Design Center De Winkelhaak Antwerp, Belgium

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My name is Klara de Smedt, I'm manager of Design Center De Winkelhaak. I know you already had a busy day, but it's still morning and everybody hoped maybe for a smooth powerpoint presentation, but I'm sorry. I have 20 minutes to show you a good practice, I hope, related to design support for small enterprises and I will tell you the story of Design Center de Winkelhaak.

Once upon a time there was a small country called Belgium with many villages, they called themselves cities, and one of them was Antwerp. In Antwerp of course there was a central station, as usual in the middle of the city, and as usual there were also some problems. For example we had problems with drugs, a marginal population, illegal businesses and, not to forget, a red light district with a very aggressive attitude. You are looking now at the dump of Antwerp.

One shiny day somebody decided that the central station would become a high speed railway station and so, as one of the junctions in the heart of Europe, this black spot would suddenly attract lots of businessmen, entrepreneurs, international travellers, and that would result in new office buildings, new accommodation and a lot of opportunities for this area. The city of Antwerp made a masterplan with several impulses to regenerate the area completely. To make it again a healthy and good place for working and living.

The organisation I was going to work at a little bit later, I was still working at Design Flanders at the time, was asked to think about one of these, more specifically the red light area ... I signed my contract and then I pretty soon discovered that I would not even dare pass my new working area. So the question was, what would be self-supporting and give an influence and attract new people to work and live there ... it was not the first time the city of Antwerp was convinced of design as an added value for the city, they were more looking, searching for the best answer for cancer in this place.

First we had to clear the space. What made us choose design? First of all the natural phenomena that creative people seem to be attracted to rundown areas because it's cheap and because it's a kind of environment that inspires, because it's an intensive way of living in this area. We had seen it in other districts in Antwerp and at the time there was already a slight move of creative people into this area.

Secondly, creative people don't work from 9 to 5. Because of this, they want to live as close as possible to their working environment and that is an advantage. If you attract people who want to live and work in the same area then you generate a faster and healthier mix.

And third we were choosing design because we believe it's a form of strong economical development and it still needs support in Antwerp and in Flanders. Our entrepreneurs, the designers, are most of all very, very small enterprises. To become a larger office, to recruit people can be difficult. However if you screen the countries with an international reputation for design – like the Netherlands and Italy – we found out that in these countries the larger studios do exist and more importantly these companies are investing in image, export, promotion, etc. For a small company this is almost impossible... so we believe that by supporting these one-person companies, to coach them, stimulate them, help them ... in practical ways, they will more easily expand and in the longer term this would result in a better organised and well known sector with a higher economic growth ... in Flanders.

We got a brand new building in the worst location in Antwerp, funded by Europe, the Flemish government and the city of Antwerp, and we only had money for the building, not like the Koreans, we had no money for operating. We asked private companies to invest in the Design Center to guarantee our services and promotion until we broke even from our own activities.

The buildings were demolished in 1998 and we opened the new building in 2002, by that time the book 'The Rise of the Creative Class' by Richard Florida was very popular and although the building might not have arrived at the right place it sure was the right time.

The Design Center has two main functions: a public part downstairs in the basement and the business centre for designers. We provide infrastructure and services for small entrepreneurs in the creative sector – architects, web designers, graphic designers, product designers, copywriters. We focus on one person companies which have already several years of experience and the ambition.

What do we offer? First of all, colleagues – working alone in your kitchen or under the roof means also isolation and lack of inspiration, building this network and having people around to think together and inspire each other is the most important part of the offer. Infrastructure – and a very professional one, to work efficiently and impress your client. The designer can postpone their investment since we provide all furniture, photo studio, library, printing machine, kitchen equipment, cleaning, beverages, office supplies, everything that a good administration has. Networking, organising workshops, offering an environment with just one goal, to make them grow more easily, to make them more professional. The Design Center is an incubator, you cannot stay until you are 65, you have to see it as a temporary stage for a maximum of five years. And if they buy property in the immediate area when they leave it's a success for us. The cost to them is 685 euros a month – all costs are included.

We have 18 offices, 45% of them are women, the average age is 35. Since 2002, 19 companies have left the building not one of them because of failure – 5 of them have brought property in the immediate area. 2006 was the first year we broke even. In June 2007 we will announce our first biennale for Industrial design in our gallery. ... We still have a long way to go, the neighbourhood still suffers from a bad reputation but our designers believe in our concept and are very ambitious and enthusiastic to grow and we hope to help them.

For more information on Design Center De Winkelhaak visit the SEEdesign library at:

[www.seedesign.org/seedesign/case\\_studies.aspx](http://www.seedesign.org/seedesign/case_studies.aspx)

or got to [www.dewinkelhaak.be](http://www.dewinkelhaak.be)

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