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## BOOMING BUSINESS —Rotterdam

### Preface

A flurry of promising start-ups in innovative spaces has created a buzz in Rotterdam. Monocle visits the sprawling port where disused sites have been redeveloped and meets the entrepreneurs making the most of the opportunities.

### WRITER

Charlotte McDonald-Gibson

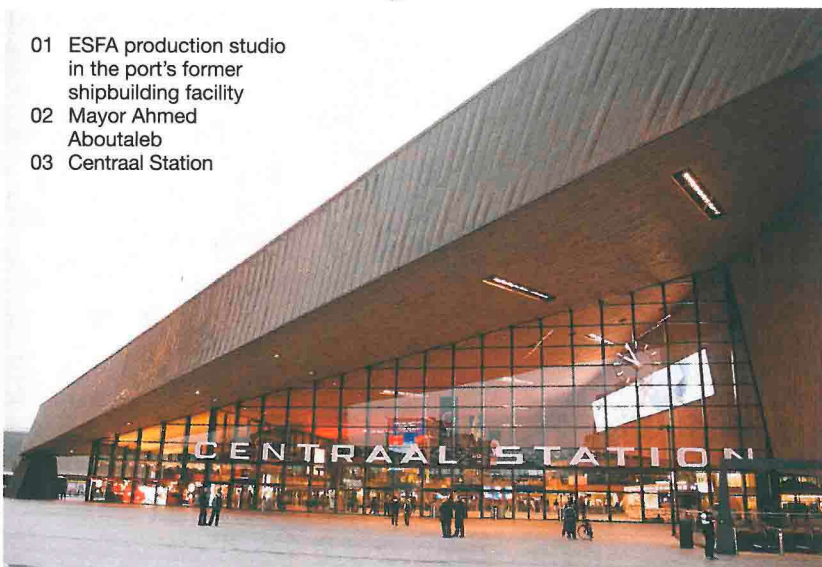
### PHOTOGRAPHER

Benjamin McMahon

In a cavernous factory on Rotterdam's old docks a group of young apprentices busily assemble components for a series of electric bikes and e-scooters. Their hi-tech production line is small and exact but around them the vast hangar hints at the building's weighty industrial past. In the 1950s this was one of the busiest shipbuilding yards in the Netherlands, home to 10,000 workers producing hundreds of vessels including the luxury cruise liner and flagship of the Holland America Line, the *SS Rotterdam*.

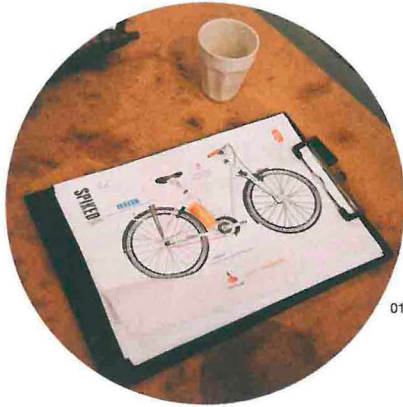
"It's a good feeling to be in an old environment that has a lot of history connected to craftsmanship in Holland," says Hans Hoogbergen, operational manager of the Electric Scooter Factory (ESFA). It set up shop alongside a clutch of other small start-ups in 2011 and plans to make 250 e-scooters, 1,000 e-bikes and 500 pedal bikes this year. "We are supported by the Port of Rotterdam. It believes in our policy of producing sustainable mobility products and creating a learning facility for people with an employment gap."

In the past few years Rotterdam's City Hall has joined forces with the privately owned Port of Rotterdam to redevelop defunct harbourside locations. They were left vacant when the advent of large container vessels shifted much of the port business to deeper waters (known as the Maasvlakte) further down the coast. Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb, a Dutch-Moroccan who came to office in 2009 (and broke precedent here as the first mayor from an immigrant background) speaks of "a new buzz and excitement" around Rotterdam. A city that once turned its back on its roots and focused on



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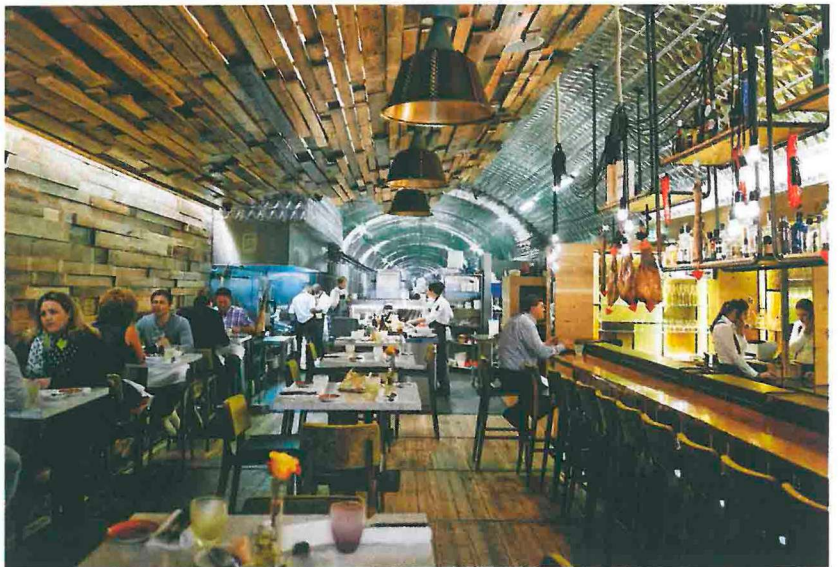
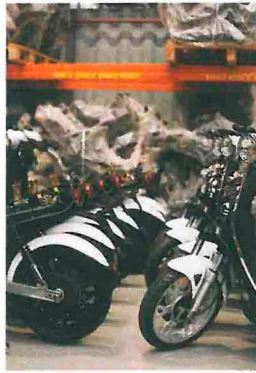
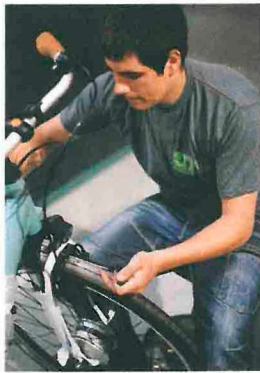
- 01 ESFA production studio in the port's former shipbuilding facility
- 02 Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb
- 03 Centraal Station

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the service industry has now rediscovered its heritage as an international city with a passion for creating. “In Rotterdam the existing infrastructure, its skill base and the availability of space makes it especially well placed to take advantage of the new ‘maker movement’,” says Aboutaleb. He cites the new technology in ventures such as RDM Maker Space – a huge hall now home to 3D printing facilities and start-up workshops – as well as other established SMEs such as Spark, an award-winning 25-strong design agency located on the north shore of the Maas.

One young businessman enjoying the opportunities Rotterdam’s pro-business stance has to offer is Kevin van Wijk. Products for his Vico footwear company are designed in Rotterdam from a new start-up hub in the redeveloped Central District, where the striking new Centraal Station was unveiled earlier this year. “It’s a different mentality then elsewhere in Holland; it’s a mentality of creating things physically,” says Van Wijk as he shows MONOCLE around his converted 1960s-era premises. “It’s a harbour city and a working-class city; it has been building and changing for the past 40 to 50 years.”

That sense of renewal is also deeply rooted in the city’s history. Rotterdam was forced to undergo a rapid rebuild after it was flattened during the aerial bombardment of the Second World War. While that left the city with many eyesores, it also meant planners were unburdened by legacy. Over the decades they have been free to tear down and rebuild, spurring architectural experimentation. Last year, Rem Koolhaas’s De Rotterdam tower – the largest building in the Netherlands

**Ones to watch**

Tech start-ups are booming in Rotterdam thanks to a combination of cheap office space, a young and highly qualified workforce and dozens of incubators and hubs to bring investors and entrepreneurs together.

**Nestpick:** Online accommodation matchmaking worked for Airbnb and now a Rotterdam-based team is applying the same principle to student accommodation, pairing landlords with tenants. It has already expanded to other Dutch cities, tapping into an interest from international students in the English-language universities of the Netherlands. [nestpick.com](http://nestpick.com)

**Linguistadores:** Tackling the growing online language-learning market, Linguistadores provides an interactive personalised service, using songs, news articles and videos. It offers lessons in English, Spanish, French, German and Dutch at €4.95 a month. [linguistadores.com](http://linguistadores.com)

**Suprmen:** At the forefront of the emerging civilian drone sector, this start-up offers aerial photography and video from unmanned aircraft. Founded by three brothers based in the Startup Port, the drones are already being put to innovative uses, including inspecting oil rigs. [suprmen.com](http://suprmen.com)

- 01 Specification for an ESFA-produced bicycle
- 02 Scooter by ESFA
- 03 Worker assembling an electric bicycle
- 04 Finished scooters
- 05 FG Food Labs restaurant by Centraal Station
- 06 Local entrepreneur Femke Snyders
- 07 Erasmus Centre for Entrepreneurship
- 08 Young entrepreneurs at the Startup Port
- 09 Shoe by Vico
- 10 Leon Pals, Startup Port founder



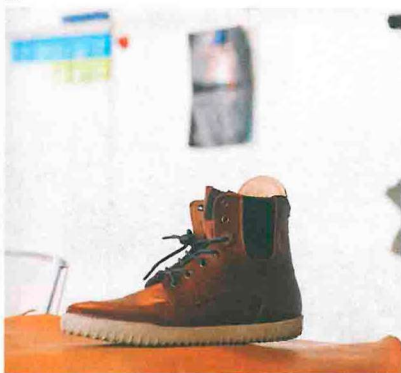
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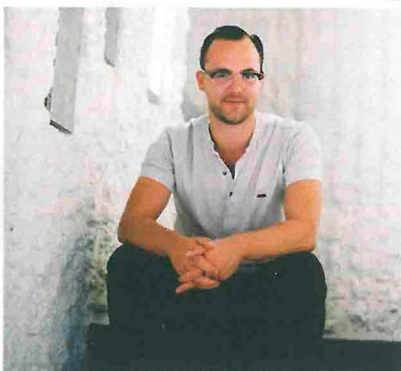
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– finally opened, its stacked blocks looming over the river. “A lot of tourists come to see the architecture in Rotterdam and we’re building new icons,” says Maarten Struijvenberg, Rotterdam’s vice-mayor for economy and employment. He meets MONOCLE in his office at City Hall, where a map showing the scale of Rotterdam’s sprawling port – the busiest in Europe – occupies an entire wall.

One downside to the changing cityscape is that companies with ample resources move to gleaming new premises and their old offices are left empty. But Leon Pals, a 29-year-old entrepreneur, was quick to spot the opportunities Rotterdam’s 14 per cent vacancy rate presented. “There was so much empty space so we got a good deal,” he says, gesturing around a floor in the same office building – a former investment banking office – where Vico and 14 other companies now work.

Pals launched the Startup Foundation in 2012, sensing a lack of networking opportunities for Rotterdam’s growing entrepreneurial class. His first two

workshops proved so popular that he found himself hosting events every month and when people started requesting weekly meet-ups he decided it was time to launch a full-time space. The Startup Port opened last September, with room for up to 60 people. “We don’t come for the desk and chair: we are here to be part of the community,” he says as he walks around the space. There is much laughter and ducking as a tiny drone buzzes through the air like a mosquito. It is the product of a start-up that rents out unmanned craft for photography projects. “We teach people and they teach each other.”

Rotterdam has always attracted talent. (Its Erasmus University is one of the top in the world and the Willem de Kooning art and design academy is also one of the best in its field) but in the past graduates have headed to Amsterdam or overseas. One Willem de Kooning graduate who stayed was Cas Bouhof, who runs the marketing firm Below Enemy Lines and helped start an alternative currency aimed at the city’s creative and small business community. “There is a feeling here that everything is possible and that only started happening three or four years ago,” he says from his corner of an abandoned grain silo that now serves as a bright, affordable space for the self-employed. “I still meet people who are 60 or 70 years old who are really sceptical about Rotterdam. They remember how

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it was when everything was being rebuilt and that was a really sad period. People in their twenties and thirties don't know what that feeling was; they only know that this is our city and there is a lot of opportunity."

That sense of opportunity is fostered by the city municipality, which offers incentives for new business and programmes to spur innovation. Though the economic crisis means it has scaled back its spending, deputy mayor Maarten Struijvenberg says it has resulted in more creative partnerships. "We have to co-operate more with schools, businesses and universities to pinpoint what areas have a good chance [of success] and have interest from companies," he says from the ornate City Hall, one of the few buildings to have survived the Luftwaffe bombardment.

One businessman proving to be an enthusiastic partner for the municipality is Vincent Taapken, the urban developer behind New Industry Development, which revitalises old industrial buildings. So far he has helped convert a tropical-themed swimming complex into a multi-use bar and events space, and transformed an old machinery factory and metal plant in a traditionally working-class southern riverside location into bright offices for a fashion company and an engineering firm.

Inspired by London's Docklands and South Bank developments, Taapken plans to build an apartment block and restaurant in the Piekstraat riverside. "Before, this was derelict and now there are 100 people working here," he says as he takes MONOCLE on a ferry and water-taxi tour of his favourite Rotterdam haunts. "There is a new perspective. Prices go up and there are bigger companies attracted to the area."

Taapken even badgered the municipality into starting a ferry service to the Piekstraat development and crowd-funded the money for the dock, which opened earlier this year. With similar initiatives spreading across the city, he believes Rotterdam's moment to shine has finally arrived. He urges businesses and local government to seize the opportunity presented by tourism, sustainable industry and the young creative class. "The ingredients are all there," he says. "It just took a while to make a nice meal of them." — (M)



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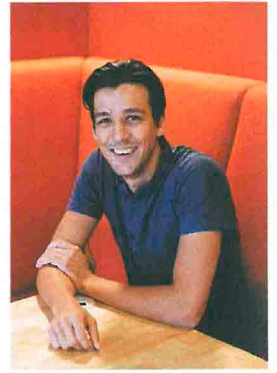
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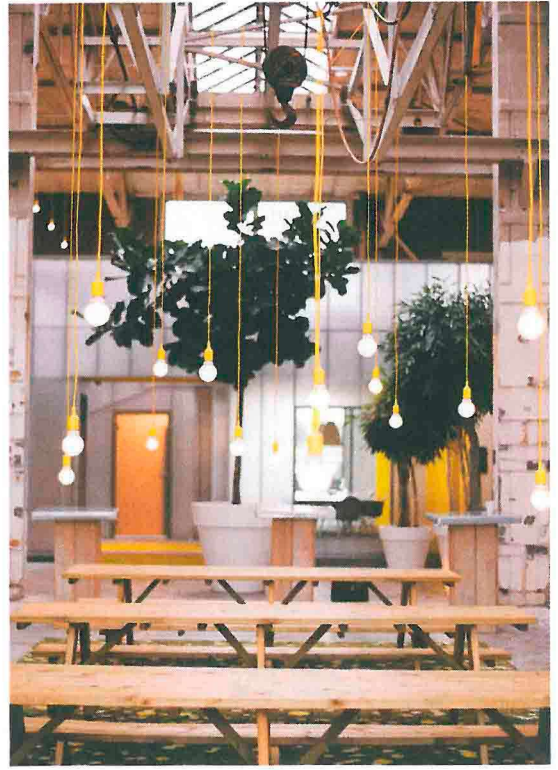
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- 01 Cas Bouhof, who runs Below Enemy Lines
- 02 Website for alternative currency the Dam
- 03 Break time at a former grain silo that now houses offices
- 04 Ahmed Aboutaleb at Rotterdam library
- 05 Hendrik Halbe, director of Erasmus Centre for Entrepreneurship
- 06 Vincent Taapken
- 07 IMD, an engineering firm based in a former factory on the River Maas