

## Let There Be Light

### Discovering Eindhoven

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[ D E R E K B L Y T H ]

Back in the 1880s, when Van Gogh was plodding through the Brabant potato fields, Eindhoven was just a small Catholic town. Now it is the fifth largest city in the Netherlands, with an acclaimed modern art museum and a world-class design academy.

I thought I knew the city. Many years ago, I got off the train to take a look around. It struck me as a rather soulless place compared to other Dutch towns. Hardly surprising when you learn that the centre was heavily bombed by the Allies during the Second World War. All I can remember is dull post-war architecture and a large blue Philips sign hovering in the sky.

I caught the next train. Not thinking that I would ever go back. But then I did. And I discovered that Eindhoven has changed.

The blue Philips sign, now a protected monument, is still up there. But the huge multinational electronics company that once dominated the city has left town and turned out the lights.

You can thank globalisation for that. After shaping Eindhoven for almost a century, Philips moved its production base to Asia in the late 1990s. Then it transferred the company headquarters to Amsterdam, leaving just the research and development department behind in Eindhoven. And then it stopped making most of the things it used to make.

It was a terrible blow when Philips left, a local art dealer told me. For more than a century, the company had dominated Eindhoven, like General Motors in Detroit. Philips was involved in everything from providing workers' housing to sponsoring classical concerts.

The first thing I saw when I stepped out of the station was a statue of Anton Philips, one of two brothers who founded the company, looking solid and serious in his heavy overcoat.

'You should take a look at the railway station,' the art dealer told me. 'It's modelled on a 1950s Philips radio.' I was doubtful at first, then I noticed that the station clock looked like a tuning dial and the concrete tower to the left could almost be an aerial.



### **Fifty thousand light bulbs for the Tsar**

That's just the beginning. On a walk through the centre, I passed the Philips Museum and the Frits Philips concert hall. Then I came across the Philips Dorp, a model urban district built in the early twentieth century for factory workers who had migrated here from poor rural areas like Drente and Friesland. Two brick columns on either side of the road marked the boundary of the workers' settlement. PHILIPS, it said on one column. DORP, read the other.

The company had its own healthcare system, long before other Dutch companies, along with a final-salary pension scheme. It operated a company bus service, a bakery, a technical school and Etos, a discount cooperative store for employees.

Even the local football team PSV Eindhoven was founded by Philips in 1913 for its workers (the initials stand for Philips Sport Vereniging). Some of the finest Dutch players like Ruud Gullit and Ruud van Nistelrooy once wore the distinctive PSV strip with the company name prominently displayed on the front.

The company started out in 1891 in a former textile mill. It is now the Philips Museum. Opened in 2013, it tells the story of Gerard Philips, who studied electrical engineering in Glasgow before setting up a small company to produce carbon filament light bulbs.

In 1898, Gerard Philips won a major contract to supply the Tsar of Russia with 50,000 light bulbs for the Hermitage. Gerard sent a message from Russia with the good news. His employees in Eindhoven must have assumed it was a mistake, because Gerard had to send a second telegram that left no one in any doubt. 'Vijftigduizend, cinq mille, fünfzig tausend,' it said.

By 1900, Philips was employing 400 people in Eindhoven, many of them young girls with nimble fingers who could thread the fragile filaments. Forty years later, Philips had 25,000 employees on its payroll, in a town that numbered 113,000. At the company's peak in the 1970s, it was employing 400,000 people across the world.

It is no exaggeration to say that Philips changed the way people lived in the twentieth century. With the invention of the light bulb, factory labourers could work longer hours, the company pointed out. Its street lighting would reduce the number of road accidents, Philips wrote to the Dutch queen after her car was involved in a road accident.

By the mid-twentieth century, Philips dominated the market in consumer products, moving seamlessly from light bulbs to radios to television sets. By the 1960s, Philips was riding high on the consumer revolution, manufacturing products like the Philips electric razor, vacuum cleaners, cassette players and compact discs. It even created its own record label to ensure that teenagers had pop songs to play on their new Philips equipment.

The company liked to engage in promotional stunts, like illuminating the Eiffel Tower in 1937. It went on to create a pavilion at Brussels Expo 58 to demonstrate the world's first multimedia experience, called *Poème Electronique*. More recently, Philips lit up New York's Empire State Building using the world's most efficient light bulbs.

The company's sleek image was reflected in the industrial buildings it constructed. Dominating the city centre is the *Lichttoren*, the Light Tower, a striking 1909 modernist building topped off with a seven-sided tower where Philips once tested light bulbs. The sleek white building next door, known as *De Witte Dame*, or The White Lady, was built by Philips to manufacture radio tubes.

The company went on to develop a huge industrial site called *Strijp S* where it put up a series of Bauhaus-style concrete and glass factories. It also funded the construction of a sleek observatory on the edge of the city park, and unveiled a striking flying-saucer shaped building known as the *Evoluon*.

Completed in 1966 for the company's 75th anniversary, the *Evoluon* marked a high point in Philips history. It was a stunning, futuristic building designed by the Eindhoven architect Leo De Bever and the company's chief product designer Louis Kalff. Conceived as a technology museum (and a showroom for Philips products), it once attracted half a million visitors every year.

But visitor numbers began to fall sharply in the 1980s, and the *Evoluon* finally closed down in 1989. Not long after, the company began to cut production in Eindhoven. It stopped making televisions, DVD players and almost all the other products that had made it famous, closed its factories and fired thousands of employees (it now employs about 120,000 people).

'You need to dismount when your horse is dead,' announced the head of Philips, Frans Van Houten, during a press conference in 2014. 'What was relevant twenty years ago is no longer relevant today.' The focus in future would be on lighting and healthcare devices, he said, standing in front of a screen with enlarged photographs of the two stern Philips brothers who had founded the company.

Twenty years ago, the distinctive Philips logo – a shield with stars and waves in a circle – appeared on CD players, televisions and record players in almost every home. 'When I was growing up,' a Dutch friend told me, 'Everyone had a Philips television in their front room, so you could walk along the street with a Philips remote control changing the channels as you went along.'



## Design

No more. My hotel room in Eindhoven had a Samsung television, a Bosch coffee maker and a Princess hair dryer. Nothing was made by Philips. It was like visiting Wolfsburg and seeing everyone driving a Toyota. Worse still, the company was planning to drop its sponsorship of PSV Eindhoven's shirts. Soon you would only see the logo when you changed a light bulb or glided into a hospital scanner.

The company didn't just ditch its products. It dumped the town it had built from almost nothing (and whose new logo resembles the waves on the Philips shield). By the late 1990s, Eindhoven was starting to look like a city without a future. With rising unemployment and the highest crime rate in the country, many young people left to look for work elsewhere. But then something interesting happened. In the course of a few years, this depressed company town turned itself into a smart design city.



You can see the results in the vast Strijp S factory district where Philips built several huge factories to assemble radios in the 1930s. It used to be known as the Forbidden City because of the high security fences that surrounded the site. But, by the end of the twentieth century, the Verboden Stad had become a graffiti-sprayed urban wilderness.

In 2004, the Trudo housing association took over the site. Working with the city council and the Dutch national heritage organisation, it drew up a master plan to redevelop Strijp-S (now written with a hyphen). The Dutch architect and urbanist Jo Coenen, a graduate of Eindhoven University of Technology, was put in charge of the project.

Trudo has transformed Strijp-S into an inspiring post-industrial quarter where old Philips factories are now occupied by loft apartments, design studios, pop-up shops, kids' workshops and a 3D print factory. Little now remains of the company that once occupied this site, apart from an exhibition of old radios and a Philips clock with the letters P-H-I-L-I-P-S instead of numbers.

One of the many new projects is Urban Shopper, a vast industrial hall in the Anton building where twenty creative startups occupy small cabins with round roofs made from transparent corrugated plastic. The businesses include a hairdresser, a shoe shop, and a vintage store. Some look as if they are struggling to survive, but others look as if they have hit on a product that people want to buy.





On wasteland behind the factories, the New York architects LOT-EK have stacked 250 rusted shipping containers to create a mini urban district called The City. The aim is to encourage artists, galleries and small shops to settle in this industrial warren of alleys and walkways.

Early in 2015, another startup called Broeïnest opened in a raw industrial building known as the Glasgebouw. Created by the young architect firm Atelier to the Bone, it provides a flexible space for an emerging generation of nomadic designers and architects. As well as offering a space to meet, Broeïnest provides drawing tables, a laser cutter and a café.

The most recent development is a vast indoor food hall called the Vershal van Veem which opened in late 2015. Located in another impressive industrial building, this vast space is occupied by stalls selling homemade soup, local meat and Dutch cheeses as well as craft beer produced by the in-house brewery Brouwerij Van Veem.

Much of the creative energy behind this transformation has come from young designers who studied at Eindhoven Design Academy, DAE. Founded in 1947 as a school of industrial design, the DAE developed a revolutionary approach in the 1980s that turned it into one of the world's top design schools. It went on to produce some of the country's best-known designers, including the collective Droog Design, Hella Jongerius and Studio Job.

In the past, graduates would head to Amsterdam or Berlin to pursue their careers. But some now stay on in Eindhoven, settling into one of the old Philips buildings. One of the first to realise the city's potential was Piet Hein Eek, who moved his studio into an abandoned industrial building formerly occupied by the Philips ceramic factory. Here he has opened a shop where he displays his quirky bohemian furniture made out of multicoloured fabrics and salvaged wood.



A more recent graduate, Rocco Verdult, has developed a radical vision of design. He doesn't believe in creating products, but prefers to shape social interactions. Verdult tours Eindhoven with a mobile disco to spark off spontaneous dance events, stages unexpected happenings in dreary waiting rooms and walks around depressed neighbourhoods encouraging locals to contribute to a story.

Several abandoned Philips factories in the city centre have also been renovated, including the Light Tower. The ground floor is now occupied by a vast café, Usine, with a raw industrial interior, while the rooms in the light tower have been converted into stunning hotel lofts. Next door, the Witte Dame has become home to the Design Academy, public library and MU art space.

Facing the Light Tower, the Italian architect Massimiliano Fuksas has added a striking glass and steel dome known as the Blob. Opened in 2010, the five-floor building is currently occupied by the Dutch concept store Sissy-Boy. It includes a stunning café on the upper level furnished with wooden tables and chairs by Piet Hein Eek.

On the same square, two organic structures lead down to a new underground bike garage with space for 1,700 bicycles. It forms part of a sophisticated new cycling infrastructure which has transformed a city once dominated by cars. The most imaginative element of the city's bike plan is a spectacular circular cycle bridge called the Hovenring suspended above a busy motorway intersection.

## The World's smartest city

The city's skyline is also changing. Once dominated by a statue of Christ with outstretched arms, it now features the slender Vesteda Tower built in 2006 by the Eindhoven architect Jo Coenen in the style of the Flatiron Building in Manhattan.

The city authorities have recently commissioned art installations to liven up some dull squares, including an amusing work by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, on the far side of the station, which features a huge bowling ball scattering ten yellow pins across a park.



Eindhoven also has one of the most inspiring contemporary art museums in Europe. Founded in 1936 by the cigar manufacturer Henri van Abbe, it was designed to show that Eindhoven was more than just an industrial town making radios.

Originally located in a sober brick building, the museum now has a striking modern extension with large glass windows overlooking a pond. In this beautiful setting, it displays a huge collection of works by El Lissitzky, land art by Hamish Fulton and Richard Long, and eighteen striped paintings by Daniel Buren.

With its new emphasis on art and design, Eindhoven has become a much more interesting place. Yet it remains a city based on technology, as the OECD recently acknowledged when it ranked Eindhoven as the world's smartest city, based on the number of patents registered per head of population.

As darkness fell on the city of light, I set off by bike from the station in the direction of Nuenen. I wanted to look at the new Van Gogh cycle path created by the artist Daan Roosegaarde in 2014, which features thousands of tiny lights embedded in the path that glow at night. The idea was inspired by Van Gogh's painting *The Starry Night*, which he painted in June 1889, one year before he died.

It was impossible to find in the dark Brabant countryside. Next morning, I headed out to the village of Nuenen, where Van Gogh lived for two years. Here he painted the local church, a country cottage, and the famous group of Dutch peasants known as *The Potato Eaters*.

The village has created a Van Gogh trail as well as opening a Van Gogh museum (although it has no original paintings). Facing the museum is a café called *De Aardappeleters* where you can buy Dutch fries served with mayonnaise.

I thought about those potato eaters of 1885 sitting in a dark room lit by a single flickering oil lamp. Within a few years, people like them would be working for Gerard Philips in his light bulb factory on the Emmasingel, helping to turn Eindhoven into the world's smartest city. ■

