

HOME IN AMSTERDAM

In this photo-essay series, Katherine Oktober Matthews explores the concept of 'home' in Amsterdam, and what it means to those who have moved here from all around the world.

ELYSIA, WEST CHESTER, PHILADELPHIA

I was born just outside of Philadelphia in a blizzard in January. I grew up in West Chester, the county seat and nightlife center of our suburban paradise just beyond the Mainline, where Katharine Hepburn and Grace Kelly were from.

When my family left the condo where I spent my earliest years to move into our first real house, I was really sad about leaving, but I never felt that way about any place after that. When they sold the house where we grew up, you'd think I would be sad about it, but I wasn't, even though I'd lived there with my mom, my step-dad, and my sister from when I was 7 until I left for college.

I didn't go very far for college, just into Philadelphia. I went to Penn (the University of Pennsylvania) because I wanted to study business, and it just so happens that the best business school is there... not because I felt any need to stay close to my hometown.

After college, everyone I went to school with moved to New York. It was the 'thing to do', so I did it, too. I lived in different areas around New York City, but finally settled in Brooklyn, the place where I lived the longest. I wasn't all that happy in New York, though. It felt like all of life was a competition and it was sometimes depressing feeling like I lived on the subway. I really just wanted to have a different experience. Europe seemed perfect for that, so when I fell in love with a Dutch boy, it was no problem for me to follow him home to Holland.

My parents still live in the same town where I grew up. They moved to a different house, but it's nicer. It does still feel like home in a lot of ways; There's no language barrier, and I see friends who still live there when I go back to visit. It's comfortable and familiar but, I realize after I've been there a week that I'm ready to come back to Amsterdam.

There was a gradual switch, from when I first talked about 'going home,' and I meant going to my parents' house, and when I said it later, I meant going back to Amsterdam. When I went to visit some friends in the US last fall, I realized I felt homesick for Amsterdam. It was the first time I really felt homesick in my life.

The point when Amsterdam really became my home was when my Dutch boyfriend and I broke up, and I decided to stay for myself. I realized my life was here. I got a permanent job and that's also where I met my current partner. We decided we wanted to move in together, and it made the most sense to buy a place. Now I really feel like this is our home. It's hard to believe that we've lived here such a short period of time except for the still-lingering boxes. But we're slowly getting it all into place.

This apartment has felt more like home than any other mostly because of the idea that we own it. That's something special. But even furniture is just something you have to buy; it's really about who you share it with. In this place, it's not the same as sharing with a roommate, when someone else's stuff is all over and their food is taking up the fridge. Now when we open the fridge, it's all our food.

It's important that a home feels like it's yours, as opposed to just the place where you live. But it's funny, even when I'm traveling, I'll say something like "let's go home" and I mean the hotel room. Of course that's not really home, but it's your safe spot where you can walk around naked, and that's an important part of home, too. It's just a safe spot where you have a bed. Maybe that's also why living with roommates felt less like home: nudity was forbidden.

Although, I lived in New York by myself, and even though everything was mine - I even had my very own cockroaches - it was only a place I lived, instead of a home. I guess feeling at home has to do with your intentions. With this place, my intention is to stay. This "home" is no longer just a place to keep my stuff: it's a plan for the future.

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