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Amsterdam is crumbling into the canal

Tourist hotspots at risk of collapse and sinkholes which has led to bicycle bans in some canalside areas

By Senay Boztas AMSTERDAM

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It's been a long time since Elizabeth Burt-Schultz witnessed the familiar sight of a bicycle squeezing past her home, where the street slopes down dramatically towards the canal.

“The canal wall has been unstable for some time,” she said, pointing to the steel walls and sand stopping her corner of Amsterdam from falling into the water.

“Further down the road, the canal fell in.”

[As tourists gradually return to Amsterdam](#), many will have no idea that the charming canalside pavements and beautiful bridges that provide perfect backdrops for their selfies are, in fact, falling down.

Sinkholes have opened up, vulnerable bridges are closed to traffic, 125 miles of canal wall are badly damaged and at risk of collapse, while 20 metres have crumbled.



A wall being restored along Amsterdam's Grimburgwal

Even Amsterdam's ever-present cyclists have been told not to bike in certain areas. The city is facing a bill of at least £1.7bn and two to three decades of rebuilding to save its 17th and 18th century from the water.

“A lot of canal walls and bridges need to be repaired urgently,” said Egbert de Vries, vice mayor responsible for water management. “Unfortunately, we have had some situations where some things collapsed or sinkholes appeared.”

He blamed large numbers of tourists, cars and lorries for putting pressure on a system which was not designed for modern life. Before the pandemic, huge numbers of tourist boats would create turbulence, which further impacted the canal walls.

Amsterdam is below sea level and was built on a swamp before growing hugely in the 17th Century. Its foundations are millions of wood pilings, which support almost the entire city. The Royal Palace alone sits on 13,659 of them.



A 'garden' built to shore up the canal side until permanent works can happen

But many wood pilings have moved or collapsed under the pressure of modern traffic and tourist footfall. Bridges and canal walls crack, which lets in water. The water cleans out mortar and increases the risk of sinkholes.

Amsterdam boasts more than 370 miles of canal walls and 1,797 bridges. The logistics are complicated with engineers having to disentangle phone and internet cables and work around the city's famous houseboats.

Between 2016 and April last year, just six bridges and 0.8 miles of canal wall were rebuilt.

Now, Amsterdam is developing a plan for 850 bridges and another 125 miles of walls in an attempt to clear the maintenance backlog.

From October, heavy vehicles of more than 30 tonnes will be banned in the centre, while €300m is reserved for repair work up to 2023.

Construction workers rebuilding the crumbling canal wall in the Grimburgwal district

Other residents are concerned the rush to repair will destroy the city's beauty.

Eveline van Nierop, 80, has lived in Amsterdam centre for more than five decades. She is part of a campaign group to preserve old, canal-side elm trees, rather than destroying them to rebuild the canal side, then replanting.

She said, "Amsterdam is the elm town of the world, but thousands of trees are under threat." Others are concerned that the city may ignore its own rules when dealing with listed bridges.

Walther Schoonenberg, an architectural historian at the VVAB local interest group, said: "The canal ring is on the Unesco World Heritage List, and many bridges are listed, but they are simply destroying things and replacing them with modern constructions that

superficially appear old.” Mr De Vries said he was open to ideas that are “cost-effective” and meet safety standards.

The Dutch have a song similar to “London Bridge is Falling Down,” he said.

“There’s a famous song,” said Mr De Vries, “saying that we are built on pilings but if the pilings collapse, then who is going to pay for it? The answer is: the inhabitants of Amsterdam.”

“It makes sense that tourist money is spent on the canals, because people come here to see them.”

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