UK NEWS WEBSITE OF THE YEAR 2024
The Telegraph

# ‘Without weapons nobody takes you seriously’: The unbelievable story of Rotterdam’s anarchistic microstate

AVL-Ville had its own currency, constitution and weapons programme before the police shut it down. Now its founder has new plans

AVL-Ville launched as a piece of ‘post-Millennial escapism’ in spring 2001 Credit: Atelier Van Lieshout

Gavin Haines
Travel writer
27 October 2024 11:00am GMT

I’m in the leaky basement of an old factory in Rotterdam. The floor is wet, the air cold. Rusty bars protrude from crumbling concrete walls. It’s an atmospheric space for a story. And the Dutch artist Joep van Lieshout has a good one, having founded a notorious but ultimately doomed microstate nearby.

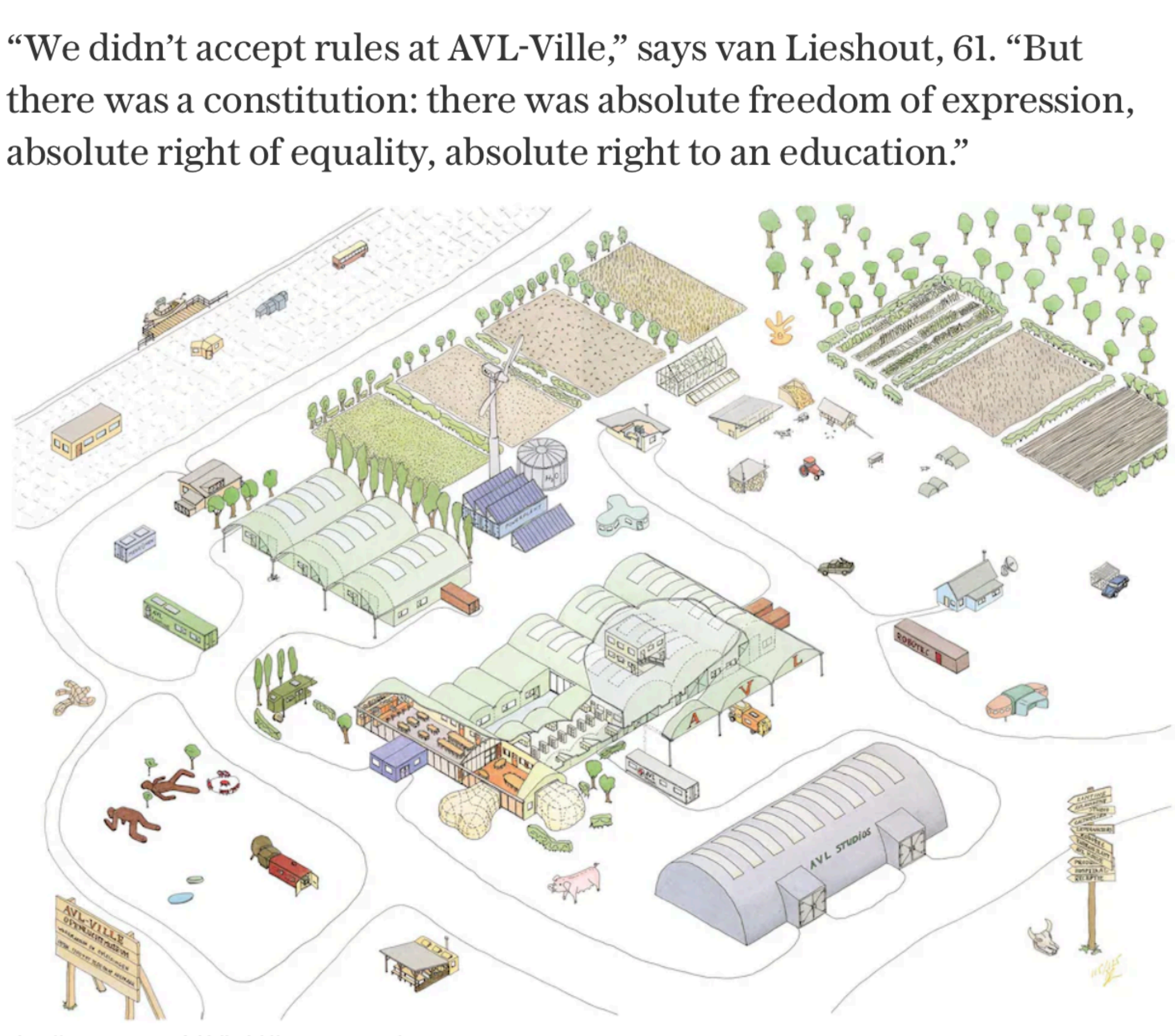
“We had a lot of problems with the king and prime minister,” he recalls, looking every bit the renegade statesman with his bright purple scarf, which contrasts with our decrepit surroundings. “They don’t like you building a state within a state.”

Especially when the rogue state is armed, as AVL-Ville was. Its arsenal included mortars, machine guns and an armoured Mercedes retrofitted with a 57mm cannon. “We had to make weapons because if you don’t have armaments nobody takes you seriously,” says Van Lieshout, whose genial manner belies his career as a confrontational sculptor.

Dutch artist Joep van Lieshout Credit: Fotograaf Kleyn

Sprouting from a strip of wasteland in Rotterdam harbour at a time when many maritime businesses had relocated to the newer out-of-town port, AVL-Ville launched as a piece of “post-Millennial escapism” in spring 2001. Part art experiment, part self-sufficient commune, its two dozen or so residents were all employees of Atelier van Lieshout, the eponymous studio founded by van Lieshout in the mid-90s to “undermine the myth of the artistic genius” and blur the boundaries between art, architecture and design.

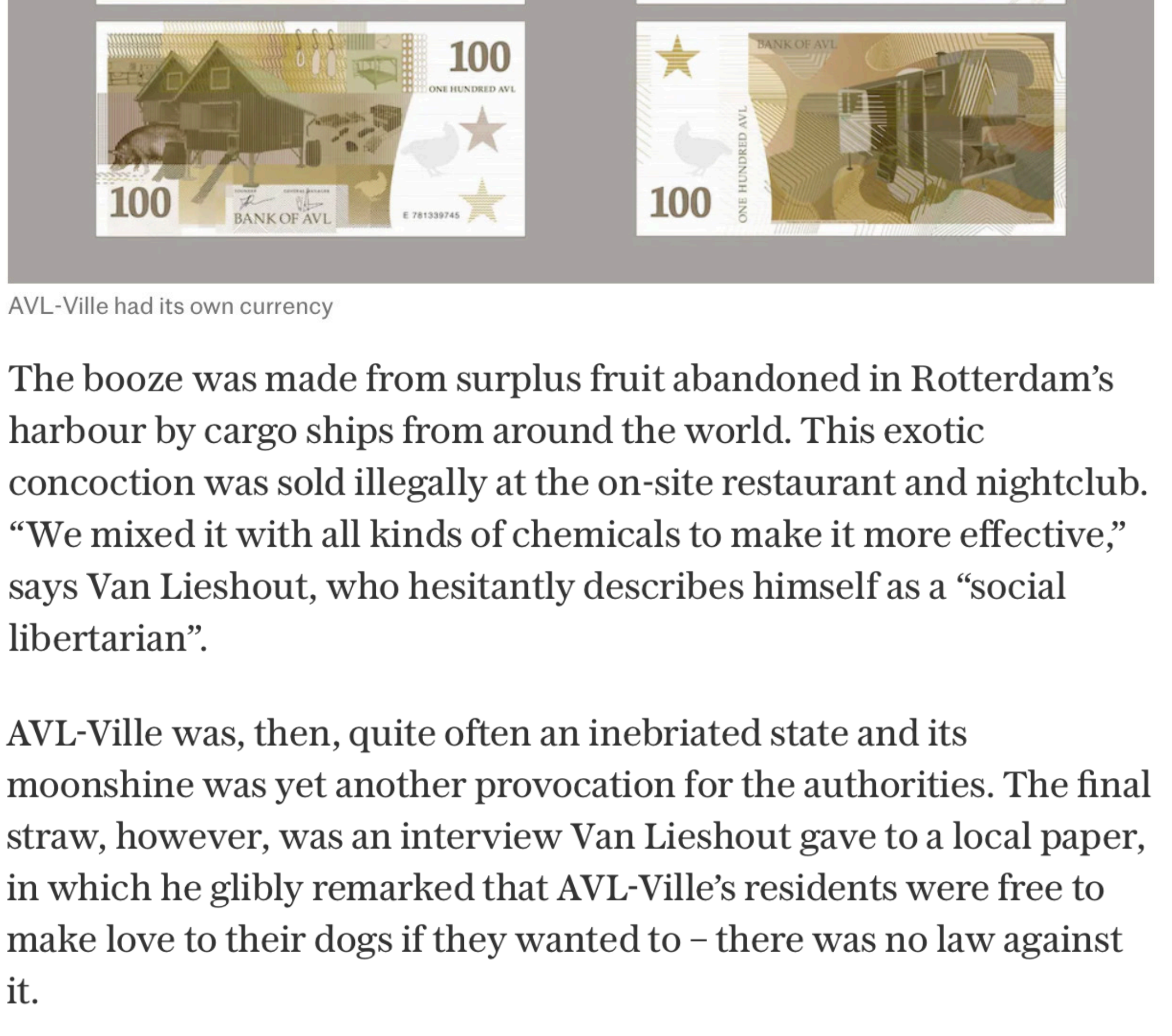
“We didn’t accept rules at AVL-Ville,” says van Lieshout, 61. “But there was a constitution: there was absolute freedom of expression, absolute right of equality, absolute right to an education.”



An illustration of AVL-Ville at its peak

AVL-Ville had its own flag – a twist on the Dutch standard – its own currency and a functioning clinic, built by Van Lieshout inside a shipping container. Despite being no larger than a few football pitches, the free state had a farm, a slaughterhouse and a rickety public transport system consisting of a horse-drawn cart and tractor. “It was free to use but there was a mandatory alcoholic drink,” says Van Lieshout.

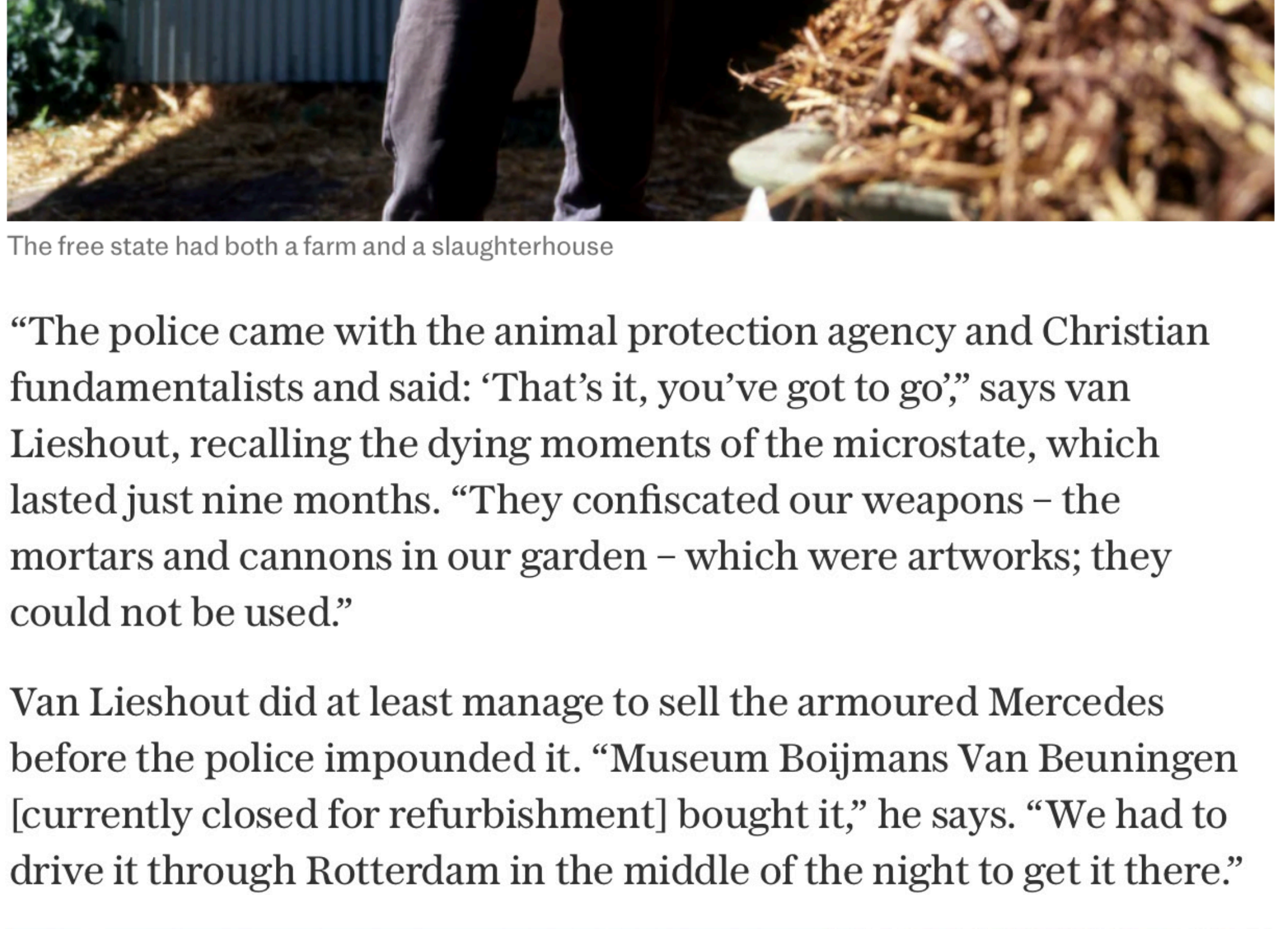
AVL-Ville had its own flag – a twist on the Dutch standard – its own currency and a functioning clinic, built by Van Lieshout inside a shipping container. Despite being no larger than a few football pitches, the free state had a farm, a slaughterhouse and a rickety public transport system consisting of a horse-drawn cart and tractor. “It was free to use but there was a mandatory alcoholic drink,” says Van Lieshout.



AVL-Ville had its own currency

The booze was made from surplus fruit abandoned in Rotterdam’s harbour by cargo ships from around the world. This exotic concoction was sold illegally at the on-site restaurant and nightclub. “We mixed it with all kinds of chemicals to make it more effective,” says Van Lieshout, who hesitantly describes himself as a “social libertarian”.

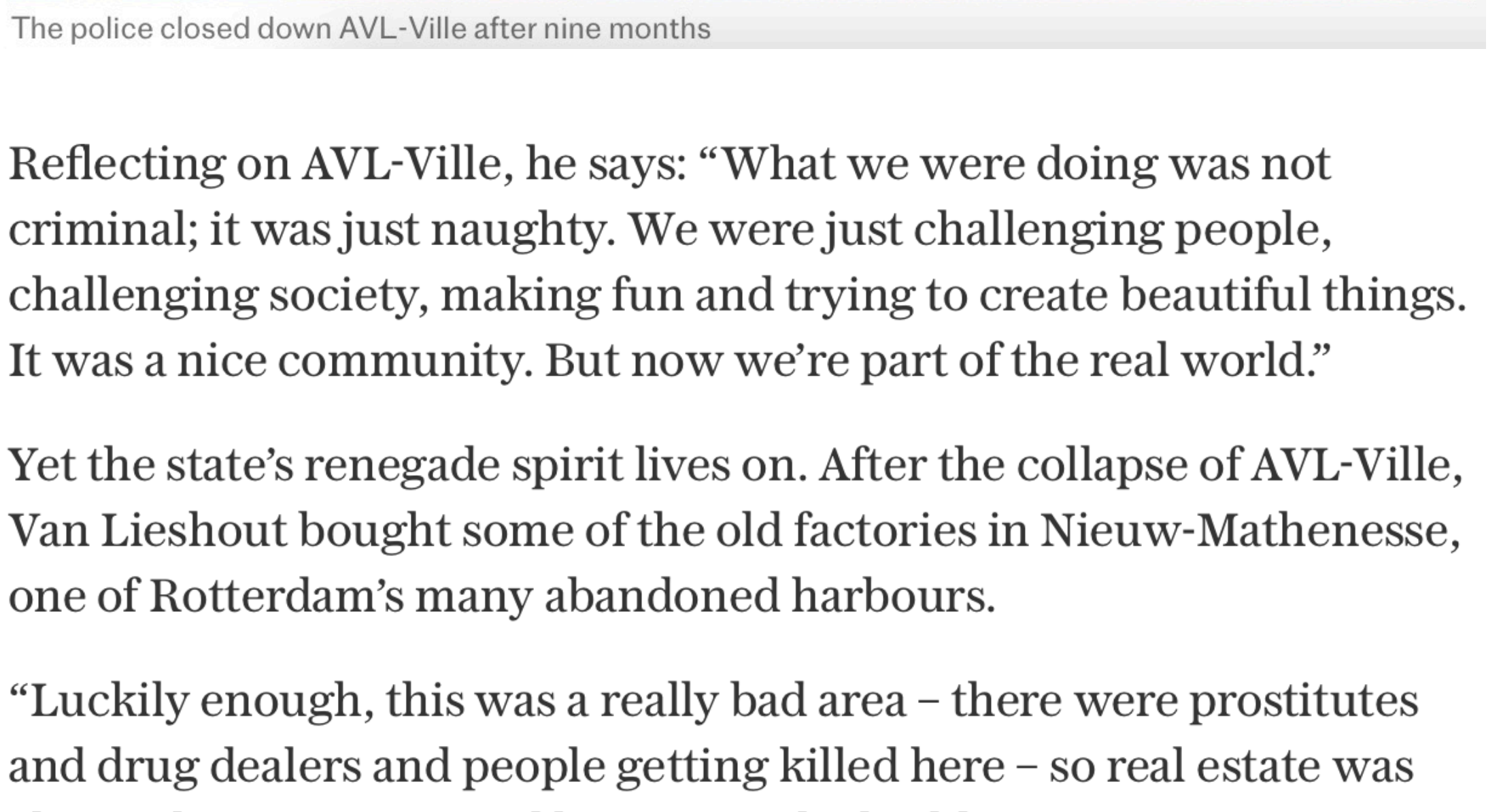
AVL-Ville was, then, quite often an inebriated state and its moonshine was yet another provocation for the authorities. The final straw, however, was an interview Van Lieshout gave to a local paper, in which he glibly remarked that AVL-Ville’s residents were free to make love to their dogs if they wanted to – there was no law against it.



The free state had both a farm and a slaughterhouse

“The police came with the animal protection agency and Christian fundamentalists and said: ‘That’s it, you’ve got to go’,” says van Lieshout, recalling the dying moments of the microstate, which lasted just nine months. “They confiscated our weapons – the mortars and cannons in our garden – which were artworks; they could not be used.”

Van Lieshout did at least manage to sell the armoured Mercedes before the police impounded it. “Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen [currently closed for refurbishment] bought it,” he says. “We had to drive it through Rotterdam in the middle of the night to get it there.”



The police closed down AVL-Ville after nine months

Reflecting on AVL-Ville, he says: “What we were doing was not criminal; it was just naughty. We were just challenging people, challenging society, making fun and trying to create beautiful things. It was a nice community. But now we’re part of the real world.”

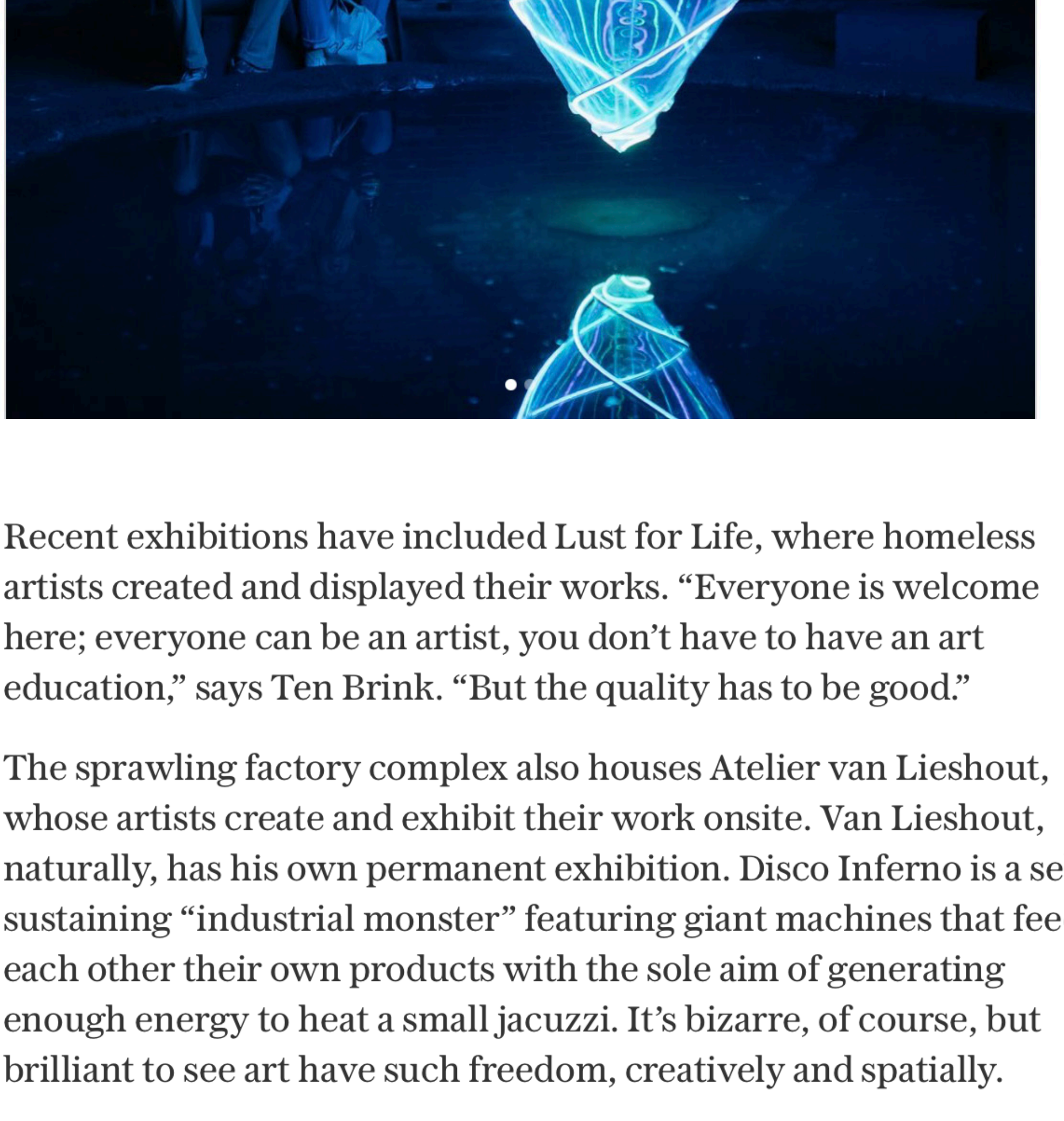
Yet the state’s renegade spirit lives on. After the collapse of AVL-Ville, Van Lieshout bought some of the old factories in Nieuw-Mathenesse, one of Rotterdam’s many abandoned harbours.

“Luckily enough, this was a really bad area – there were prostitutes and drug dealers and people getting killed here – so real estate was cheap,” he says. “I started buying up the buildings.”

Those buildings are now home to Brutus, a raw exhibition space for “taboo-breaking” artists. Occupying 6,000 sq metres, it’s the largest presentation place for contemporary art in the Netherlands, according to Sanne ten Brink, its director.

“Artists can do things here that are too complicated, too dirty, too absurd, too strange, too controversial for the traditional institutional model,” she tells me, as we walk around an exhibit by Ossip, a little-known but prolific septuagenarian artist from The Hague.

Brutus is run independently of Van Lieshout and exists in opposition to traditional white cube galleries. “Brutus killed Julius Caesar with 23 knife stabs,” notes Van Lieshout. “Caesar was the establishment.”



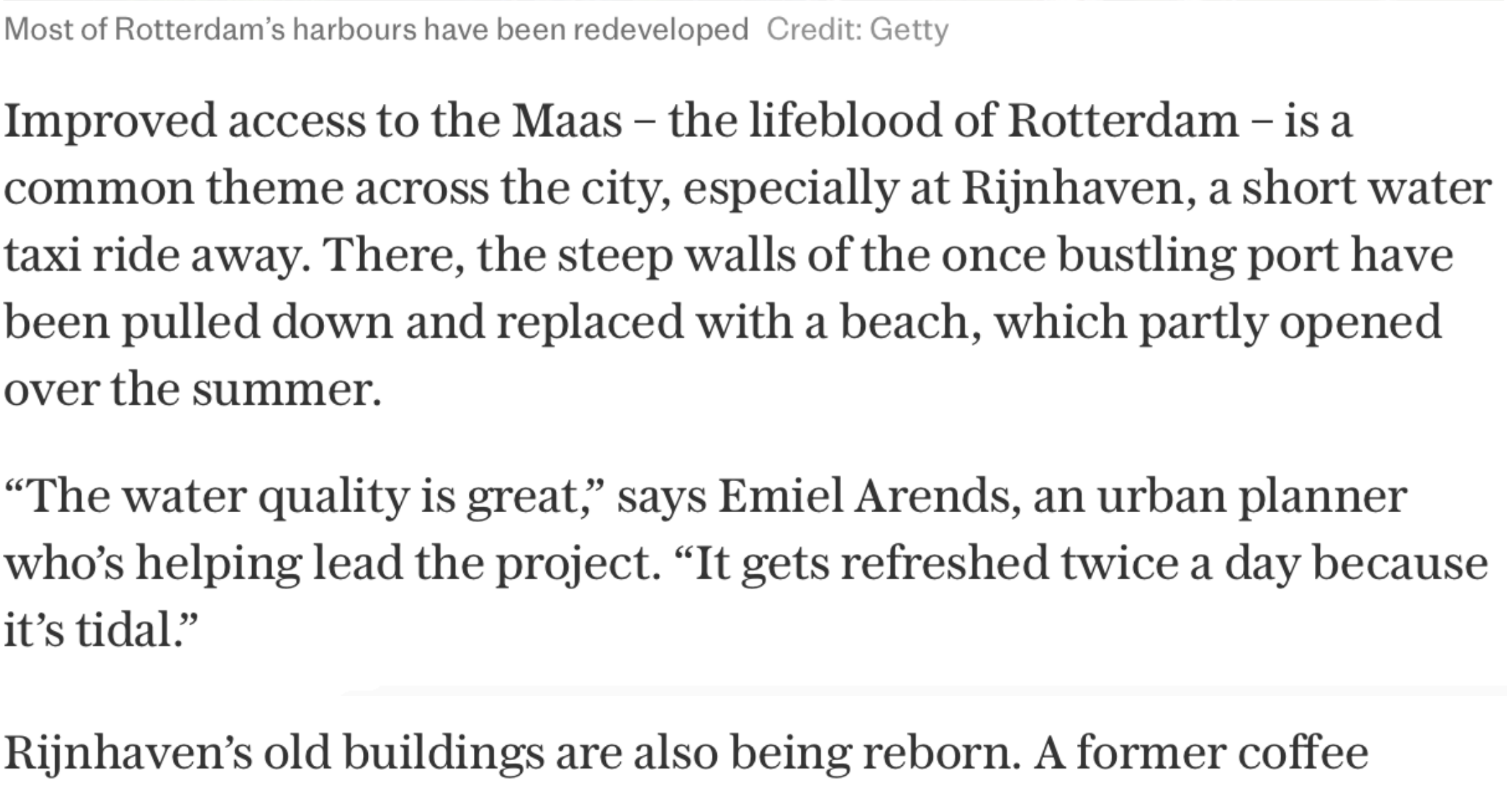
Recent exhibitions have included Lust for Life, where homeless artists created and displayed their works. “Everyone is welcome here; everyone can be an artist, you don’t have to have an art education,” says Ten Brink. “But the quality has to be good.”

The sprawling factory complex also houses Atelier van Lieshout, whose artists create and exhibit their work onsite. Van Lieshout, naturally, has his own permanent exhibition. Disco Inferno is a self-sustaining “industrial monster” featuring giant machines that feed each other their own products with the sole aim of generating enough energy to heat a small jacuzzi. It’s bizarre, of course, but brilliant to see art have such freedom, creatively and spatially.

To sustain these enormous spaces and Brutus’s artistic programme, Van Lieshout and his business partner are working with an architect to turn some of the old factories into a “cultural cluster”, consisting of artist studios, flats (50 per cent affordable; 20 per cent social; some supporting communal living), a restaurant, kindergarten and sports club. Assuming their plans are approved, Van Lieshout’s share of any profits will be funnelled into an endowment fund to keep Brutus going “forever, or until a war or comet comes”.

For once, the municipality appears to be onboard with his plans, placated perhaps by the promise of inheriting his artistic legacy when he dies. Brutus’s exhibition spaces will, however, remain raw. “I want to keep the original atmosphere of the building,” says Van Lieshout, as we walk through puddles. “I believe it’s important to keep these kinds of awkward spaces.”

Such spaces are under increasing pressure in Rotterdam as it emerges from the long shadow of industry. Like most old harbours in the city, Nieuw-Mathenesse is earmarked for redevelopment, including flats, office space and a tidal park, which is already taking shape.



Most of Rotterdam’s harbours have been redeveloped Credit: Getty

Improved access to the Maas – the lifeblood of Rotterdam – is a common theme across the city, especially at Rijnhaven, a short water taxi ride away. There, the steep walls of the once bustling port have been pulled down and replaced with a beach, which partly opened over the summer.

“The water quality is great,” says Emiel Arends, an urban planner who’s helping lead the project. “It gets refreshed twice a day because it’s tidal.”

Rijnhaven’s old buildings are also being reborn. A former coffee warehouse is being transformed into the Netherlands Photo Museum’s new home, to open next year. And work is nearly complete on Fenix, a migration museum overlooking the “Pier of Tears”, where many migrants arrived in Europe and many more departed for the new world, Albert Einstein among them.

Einstein, of course, supposedly said that the definition of genius is “taking the complex and making it simple”. Back at Brutus, Van Lieshout is proudly doing the opposite and has an “extremely noisy” jacuzzi to prove it.