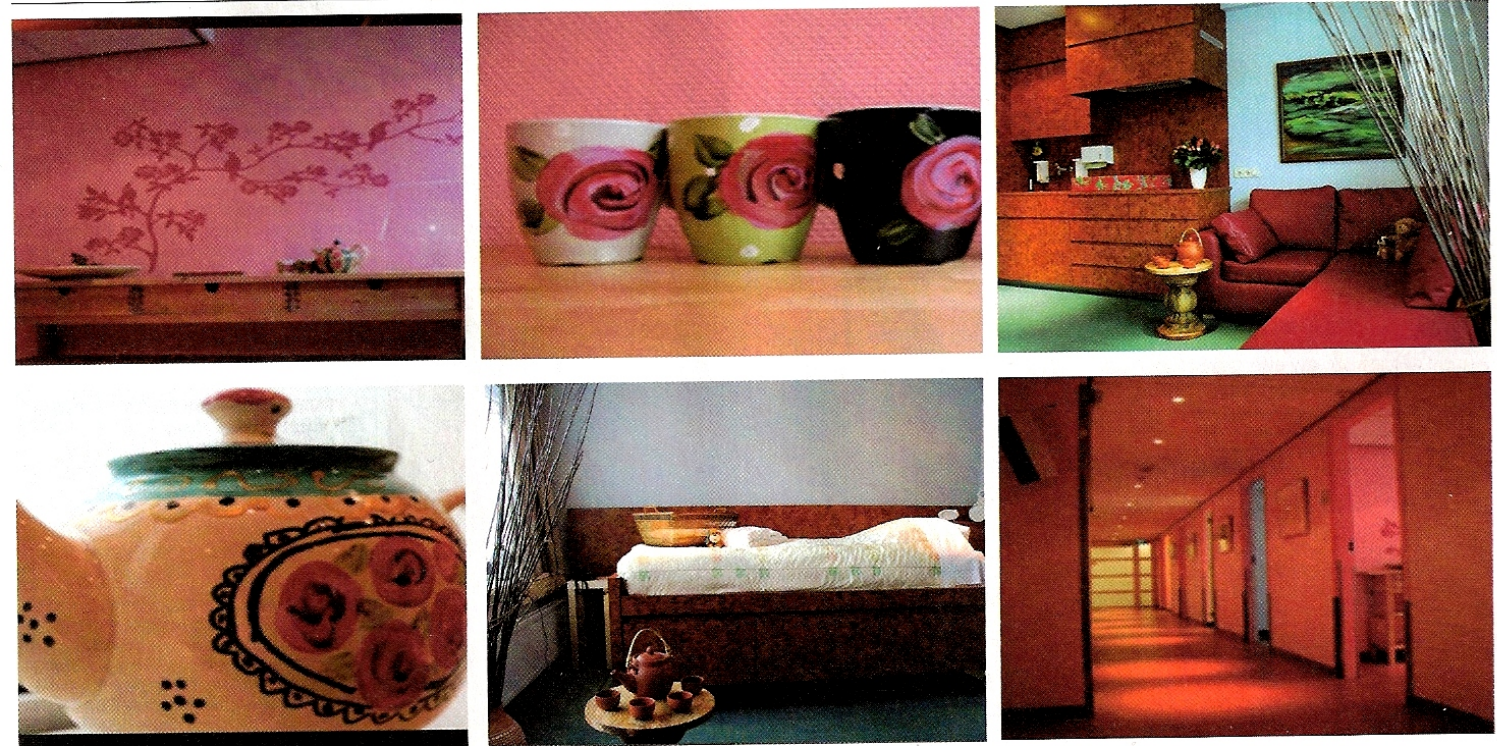


edited by **Lauren Comiteau**

Family

Labour party



Family

The hotel-like Bevalcentrum West birthing centre

Expectant mother **Sophia Kornienko** goes in search of birthing options between the hospital and the homestead

Whether you see it as conservative or progressively back-to-nature, the Netherlands is famous for being a champion of natural childbirth, where the mantra has always been the less medical interference, the better. Unless you run into serious complications, you're unlikely even to see a doctor in the months leading up to – or even on – your due date. And when that big day arrives, more often than not, we're told, it will take place at home.

But according to the Central Bureau of Statistics, homebirths are fast becoming the stuff of legend: the number of hospital births has gone from a mere 22 per cent in 1953 to as much as 71 per cent in 2008, with a large part of that increase in the past several years.

This may have something to do with the loosening of policies regarding pain relief. Just over ten per cent of women giving birth in the Netherlands are given epidurals, as compared to 95 per cent in neighbouring Belgium and in the US. But since last year, all hospitals

here are being encouraged to have an anaesthesiologist available 24 hours a day to administer them, although only two-thirds have so far complied. But for expectant mothers who don't want to have to choose between the hospital and home, there's another option: a birthing centre. The only one in Amsterdam is the Bevalcentrum West, which rents three rooms on

The mammalian hormone oxytocin that facilitates birth 'does not like a sterile hospital atmosphere'

the maternity ward of the Sint Lucas Andreas Hospital that they've done up all *gezellig* with colourful decor, soft lights and private bathrooms (one room is equipped with a larger bath for water birth).

Bea van der Put, one of the 30 Amsterdam midwives who a couple of years ago came up with this innovative homey alternative to meet the growing demand for hospital births, says the mammalian hormone oxytocin, which is released during labour and facilitates birth, 'does not

like a sterile hospital atmosphere and the stress and aggression a woman goes through while being examined by a uniformed medical crew.' Adds Mignon van Lammeren, a midwife from Geboortecentrum Amsterdam which is involved with the centre: 'Some women weren't willing to give birth at home but regarded the prospect of being surrounded by white

coats equally uncomfortable.' Hence this home-in-the-hospital alternative, where if something should go wrong, you're already in the right place to receive care (and an epidural). But hopefully all goes well, 'and then,' says another co-founder, Karien de Munk, 'you don't notice us any more.' **Bevalcentrum West**, Jan Tooropstraat 164 (510 8006/bevalcentrum-west.nl), holds monthly open houses (in Dutch). The cost of a delivery in the centre is €175, covered by some insurers.

Did you know...?

1. The main reason space is so tight in crèches in this city is because it's a lousy business. 'They're simply not profitable,' says Miranda de Wit, head of the Jor en Daan crèche in the Jordaan.
2. Contrary to scare stories about giving birth at home with nothing but the four walls (and a chosen object) to focus on and no pain relief in sight, midwives, says Truus Gale (a midwife herself), come well-equipped. It's a myth that they walk in with just towels. They have good medical equipment and can even administer local anaesthetic.
3. Under the unique *kraamzorg* – or maternity care – system, a nurse will visit your home as soon as you've given birth to not only take care of the baby, but also you and any other previous mini-yous that need minding. And mostly on insurance's dime.
4. That famous Dutch Bugaboo costs about €800 – not including the cover to keep baby's head dry from the inevitable Dutch rain. Try BabyRent instead, where you can hire everything from strollers to car seats. *Nadine Migoni Gostinga*

