

THE STORY OF ST. RITA'S CHURCH

FROM PARISH TO BUNK AMSTERDAM

Bunk

St. Rita's Parish in Amsterdam-Noord started with a simple problem: too many Catholics, not enough church. What followed? A rollercoaster of ambition, disaster, and reinvention, until it finally became Bunk as you know it today.

BIG DREAMS FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Back in 1918, Catholic housing associations Dr. Schaepman and Het Oosten built affordable homes across the IJ. But there was a catch: no nearby church. Northern Catholics had to trek across the water or all the way to Nieuwendam for mass. A tiny chapel on Laanweg helped for a while, named after 15th-century Italian Saint Rita of Cascia (more on her later).

The parish leaders had bigger plans. They bought a massive 15,000m² plot along the Noordhollandsch Kanaal and envisioned an epic Catholic complex: a convent, five schools, housing, and a towering church. No half-measures.

The architect? Alexander Jacobus Kropholler—self-taught, newly Catholic, and already making waves with his bold church designs. The construction crew? Catholic, of course. Unless their prices were too high. Then, all bets were off.

WHEN THE ROOF (LITERALLY) BLEW OFF

On May 23, 1921, Pastor J. Kok placed the first stone. The official ceremony followed on July 13, complete with a mass. Kok was confident about the turnout: *"The site is big enough for half of Amsterdam."*

Then, four months in, Mother Nature threw a tantrum. On November 6, a brutal northwesterly storm hit Amsterdam. Roof tiles became missiles, trees went airborne, and boats in the harbor broke free. A fishing boat sank, a man was knocked out cold in Vijzelstraat, and barracks on Zeeburgerdijk collapsed (luckily, empty at the time).

In Noord, the storm went straight for St. Rita's. A gust lifted the scaffolding, smashing it into the roof structure. Chaos. Even the old chapel on Laanweg got hit when a tree crashed through it.

The next day, a reporter from *De Tijd* surveyed the damage. The church stood there, battered and capless, but its towering walls and pointed windows held firm. Pastor Kok wasted no time. He hit the streets, fundraising like a pro. Donations poured in, repairs were made, and on April 15, 1922, St. Rita's was officially blessed.

WAR AND THE FOKKER BOMBING

For years, St. Rita's thrived. Families packed the pews so tightly that extra chairs had to be brought in for special occasions.

Then came July 17, 1943. The parish was celebrating its 25th anniversary with a full house when air raid sirens blared. The target? The nearby Fokker aircraft factories. The problem? The bombs missed.

Instead, devastation rained down on the Van der Pek and Vogelbuurt neighborhoods. A massive 500-pound bomb tore through St. Rita's floor, leaving a gaping hole right in the middle of the congregation. Two children and nine adults lost their lives. The nearby St. Rosa Convent and Stephanus Church were also hit. Across Noord, more than 200 people died, with hundreds more injured.

A SLOW DECLINE, A SECOND LIFE

Repairs followed, but bad luck wasn't done with St. Rita's yet. During construction, a worker fell from the scaffolding and was seriously injured. The church board took the opportunity to make some structural changes: extending the nave, replacing the tower. Leading the renovations? Kees van Moorsel, a student of Kropholler, who, by then, had a questionable reputation due to wartime collaborations.

By the 1950s and '60s, attendance was slipping. By 1973, St. Rita's was too big for its shrinking congregation, so part of it was rented out to the Amsterdam Public Library. Pastor Jan van Bohemen fought to keep the parish alive, reaching out to the Surinamese community, but the congregation remained mostly white-haired and dwindling.

The final nail in the coffin? Urban renewal in the '80s. Families moved away, new residents had little connection to the church, and by 1995, St. Rita's shut its doors for good. The last pastor retired, and the building sat in limbo.

For a while, Universal Studios set up offices inside, sharing space with the library. Then, in 2020, Bunk Amsterdam moved in, turning the historic church into a modern budget hotel. These days, instead of Sunday sermons, you'll find guests checking in, conversations buzzing, and the smell of coffee and cocktails in the air. St. Rita's mission to bring people together? Still going strong—just with much better drinks.

SAINT RITA: PATRON SAINT OF LOST CAUSES (AND EXAM PANIC)

Born in 1381 in Roccaporena, Italy, Saint Rita's life was nothing short of dramatic. Legend says that as a baby, bees fed her honey—a sign of her future holiness. She married a violent man, had two sons, and longed to be a nun. When her husband was murdered, her sons vowed revenge, so she prayed for them to die before they could commit a mortal sin. And... they did.

She finally joined a convent, where she received a mysterious wound on her forehead—said to be from Christ's crown of thorns. On her deathbed, she asked for a rose, despite it being the dead of winter. Miraculously, one bloomed just for her.

Canonized in 1900, she's now the go-to saint for lost causes, rocky marriages, and students having a meltdown before exams. So if you ever find yourself cramming for a big test, you know who to call.