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Beyond the façade

Town halls, publicity, and urban society in the fifteenth-century Low Countries

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Introduction

In 2017, the deputy mayor of Leiden Marleen Damen selected the best proposal for the renovation of the city's town hall.² The municipality had asked several architectural firms to develop plans to update the monumental building so that it could function more efficiently and sustainably. During the public tender phase of Leiden's town hall renovation, the design selection committee was especially concerned with the semi-public aspects of the building. It commended the winning proposal above all for using the public lobby as a multifunctional meeting space and the garden to provide a quiet and enclosed contrast. The beating of the 'heart of the city', the committee explained, needs undisturbed working places.³ Another architectural firm proposed a design emphasising the many functions of the town hall (see fig. 0.1). As such, it anticipated tensions between work circumstances and the buildings' public character. As the plan indicates, different spaces are given different colours, which represents specific functions combined with indications of expected (or desired) sound. Blue signifies work spaces and quietness, green meeting rooms and murmur, and yellow public spaces and noise. In this way, the plan addresses frequent users of the building, who experience a variety of aural disturbances, and establishes public areas in which noise made by visitors should be tolerated. On this design, the building would include relatively secluded and undisturbed offices, as well as accessible spaces with more activity and consequently bustle. In centring their plans around the building's multifunctionality, both of the proposals exposed the tension between access and efficiency.

The winning plan embraced C.J. Blaauw's design of 1929, which included an enclosed garden. In this way, the 2017 proposal purported to strengthen the building's cultural-historical heritage. The renovation, deputy mayor Damen explained, would not only make the building sustainable and resilient; through it 'a piece of history comes to life'.⁴ However, beyond C.J. Blaauw's façade, which the architect modelled after the 1593-97 design, there is little left that recalls the shape and organisation of the historical buildings that stood there before 1929. Yet the town hall had existed since 1381. The late medieval examples of these buildings laid the historical foundations of town hall development. This is also the case when it comes to the ways in which urban governments have consciously addressed challenges to do with access and efficiency by

² 'Stadhuis wordt hof van Leiden', *Leidsch Dagblad*, 18-03-2020.

³ As is explained in the motivation accompanying the official permit letter: 'Architectenselectie stadhuis – beoordeling ingediende offertes', Leiden, 23-05-2017. Thanks to the former town hall's project manager Bouke Kapteijn for providing me a copy of the text.

⁴ <https://architectenweb.nl/nieuws/artikel.aspx?ID=40994> (18-03-2020)

establishing a well-thought-out material setting – concerns that are often considered more modern.⁵

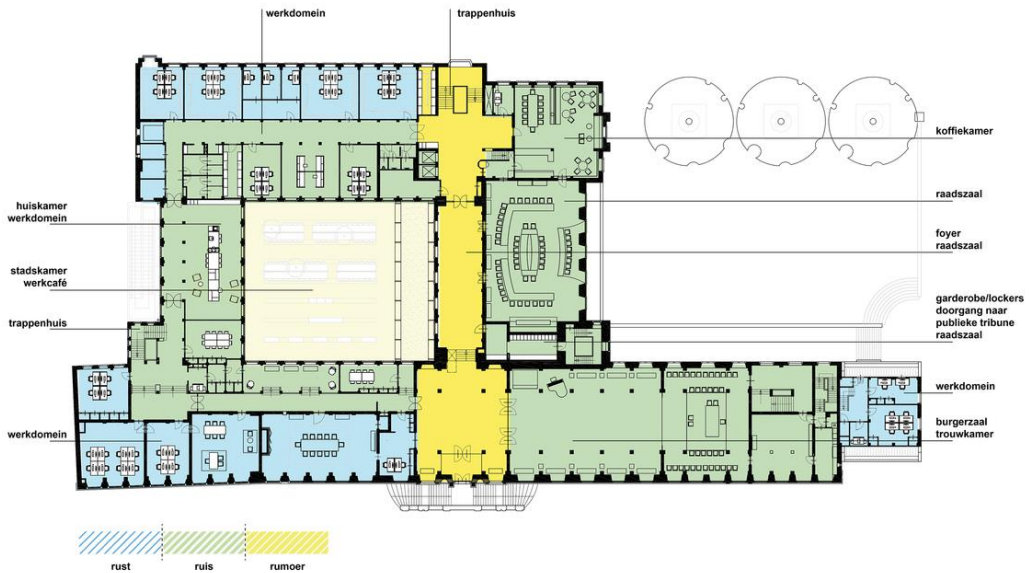


Fig. 0.1. Floor plan of Leiden's town hall today, with proposed functions for different spaces and sound levels indicated. The inner square is the 'garden' and the long space behind the staircase is the public lobby. © Cepezedinterieur. <https://www.cepezedinterieur.nl/projects/236-stadhuis-leiden>

As this study will show, the many functions served by medieval town halls have always presented challenges to access, efficiency, and the publicity of governance and justice. Having invited members of urban society to make use of the city's administrative services, magistrates needed to keep the doors to the town hall and at least some of its chambers open. This study will demonstrate how the construction and functioning of town halls encompassed ideas about publicity, which influenced spatial division and inventory, and about how the edifice should be used, by whom, and under which conditions.

The magistrates of 1456 Aalst, for example, paid a carpenter to make a double wall in the deliberation room, which would prevent people outside the chamber from hearing their

⁵ J. Resnik, 'In and Out of Sight, Site, and Cite', *Faculty Scholarship Series* 680 (2008): 771–809; L. Mulcahy, 'Architects of Justice: The Politics of Courtroom Design', *Social & Legal Studies* 16, no. 3 (2007): 383–403; L. Dahlberg, *Spacing Law and Politics. The Constitution and Representation of the Juridical* (New York, 2016), 35–36; T. Kilian, 'Public and Private, Power and Space', in *The Production of Public Space*, ed. A. Light and J. Smith (New York, 1998), 115–34.

deliberations.⁶ As we shall see, in the cities under study – Ghent, Aalst, Gouda, Leiden, and Haarlem – artisans continuously built, repaired, and replaced buildings, rooms, and walls, as well as added doors and items such as chests and paintings. During the fifteenth century the town hall developed into an accessible building that housed more and more public services. The administrative scope and jurisdiction of urban governments expanded, as did the number of town hall employees, and proliferating documentation. These changes, I argue, met with ongoing efforts to adapt town halls, above all by reorganising spaces and regulating the behaviour of those who needed access to them.

Art and architectural historians have written extensively on premodern town halls, including in the Low Countries. A considerable amount of their research has emphasised how the buildings functioned as either monuments, which expressed a conscious civic identity and sense of autonomy, or seats of power for a small civic elite. These two perspectives are central in even the most recent studies.⁷ It is widely recognised among scholars in this research area that present-day and historical town halls were and are civic institutions that accommodated ‘the public’, alongside being centres of local governance and stages for political representation.⁸ That said, research on medieval town halls has often ignored the many members of urban society who used them. This despite the survival of numerous historical sources, that mention interactions among people inside the buildings, whether these be government officials, defendants, merchants, audiences, and even children playing. These people and their interactions are at the heart of this study. In probing their sometimes conflicting motivations and actions, this study investigates how different members of urban society used and negotiated town halls. This is a social history of such buildings.

This study observes interactions among actors, especially inside the town hall, from a socio-cultural and micro-spatial perspective. These approaches are generally absent from the historiography on medieval town halls and their politics. I analyse how people negotiated meanings and experiences of space and behavioural boundaries in these buildings, in which chambers, demarcations, and doors shaped practice and perception. For instance, medieval historians often overlook that, in the course of the fifteenth century, the public courtroom (*vierschaar*) was moved inside the town hall and became an increasingly more permanent space. In this space, judges, defendants, and audiences came together. The doors to the courtroom were often opened,

⁶ ‘In dandre weke van octobre wrachte Rubbine de Pleckere upt scepenen huus ende maecte een dobbel weech inde vertreccamer omme dat men de argumetne van scepenen niet hooren en zoude’. ARA, reg. 31450, f.56r.

⁷ S. Köhl, *Das Brüsseler Rathaus. Repräsentationsbau für Rat, Stadt und Land* (Petersberg, 2019), 10.

⁸ S. Chattopadhyay and J. White, ‘City Halls. Civic Representation and Public Space’, in *City Halls and Civic Materialism. Towards a Global History of Public Space*, ed. S. Chattopadhyay and J. White (New York, 2014), 4.

facilitating interaction between actors inside and outside the space. This could increase courtrooms' vulnerability in cases of unrest such as fights but also publicly expressed comments on judicial practices. The magistrates sometimes argued that such unrest challenged the safety of legal parties and crowds. I argue, however, that city officials also anticipated courtrooms' and other chambers' open and interactive character. Urban citizens found their way into public spaces and indeed the aldermen used this to promulgate public messages. For confidential meetings, though, they chose more enclosed rooms. Town halls, then, had secluded *and* public components.

Dealing with the socio-cultural history of town halls in the Low Countries, this research explores the buildings' multiple functions; the way it facilitated both openness and enclosure; how order and disorder were negotiated by magistrates and other members of urban society; and how the built environment, images, and objects served as communicative devices, reflecting and informing the functions and meaning of the town hall. Indeed, magistrates sometimes ordered the construction of town halls and were therefore able to plan how the buildings were to be used, at least to a certain extent. I will show that by managing the different characteristics of town halls, municipalities often distinguished between more or less public and private spaces. But the buildings' interior physical shape and strategies for organising town hall practices were continuously and gradually adapted through spatial, material, social, and visual means. The mostly absent perspective on how contemporaries used and experienced these buildings can be acquired by examining these spaces over a long term and using different disciplinary tools. This study analyses an extended period of town hall constructions and use. It includes evidence of frequently occurring modifications of such buildings, in addition to studying few largescale construction projects. I show that these moments of adaptation impacted both material and social circumstances, in which various people negotiated how town halls would be used and experienced.

This study draws on research and approaches from socio-cultural urban and legal history, art history, and social and spatial theory. It attends to both textual and visual sources, which concern the planning or initial design of town halls, as well as their daily use, regulation, and adaptation.⁹ In addition to using spatial plans and architectural remains, I analyse court records indicating how common people and authorities acted and sometimes came into conflict, both inside and beyond spatial and behavioural boundaries. In this way, I show how quotidian practices in the town hall were shaped through material and cultural means. This study thus offers an alternative perspective on how town halls were built, organised, and experienced. It does not focus

⁹ See for discussions on how regulation, more than planning, impacts urban form on a long term: T. Slater and S. Pinto, 'Building Regulations and Urban Form. An Introduction.', in *Building Regulations and Urban Form, 1200-1900*, ed. T. Slater and S. Pinto (New York, 2018), 1, 18.

solely on the iconographic and ceremonial components of the buildings but connects their interior structure and decoration with utensils and the communal ways in which town halls were used. As such, the study sees town halls less as political and economic arenas or advertisements of civic pride, and more as administrative and representative centres for urban society.¹⁰ In drawing on research and theoretical accounts on space, materiality, urban politics, and the culture of law, I will show that the development of town hall was co-created by a large variety of actors, both human and material.

In addition to taking up the perspectives indicated above, I expand the comparative geographical scope of existing scholarship to encompass town halls in Flanders and Holland in the Low Countries.¹¹ In the following sections, I explain how I have studied the buildings and those that used them. I set out how I have analysed both the general features of late-medieval town halls and those aspects that were more strongly embedded in their local socio-cultural contexts. I begin by discussing debates in the historiography of town halls, public space, and publicity. I then go on to introduce the theoretical framework, before explaining and contextualising the case studies, methodology, and structure.

Town hall foundations

Nowadays town halls are open and public buildings, used by municipalities worldwide.¹² With regard to Europe, the history of town halls can be traced back to the late-medieval city. In his foundational study of building types, the architectural historian Nicholas Pevsner suggested that late-medieval town halls were the first governmental public buildings. This is because they housed

¹⁰ S. Köhl, 'Princely Architecture: Town Halls in the Burgundian Netherlands', in *Staging the Court of Burgundy*, ed. T-H. Borchert et al. (Turnhout, 2011), 191–200; C. Cunningham, 'For the Honour and Beauty of the City: The Design of Town Halls', in *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art, Society and Religion, 1280-1400*, ed. D. Norman, vol. II: Case Studies (London, 1995), 29–54.

¹¹ Local surveys and broader research on town halls have primarily focused on examples in the Duchy of Brabant, Germany, France, Austria, Hungary, Poland, Italy, and guild halls in England. Here I just name a few, as the list of local surveys is extensive. In his study on the town hall of Brussels, Sacha Köhl made comparisons with other buildings in Brabant. Köhl, *Das Brüsseler Rathaus*, 22–47; S. Albrecht, *Mittelalterliche Rathäuser in Deutschland. Architektur und Funktion* (Darmstadt, 2005); A. Salamagne, ed., *Hôtels de ville. Architecture publique à la Renaissance* (Rennes, 2015); Cunningham, 'For the Honour'; R. Tittler, *Architecture and Power. The Town Hall and the English Urban Community c.1500-1640* (Oxford, 1991). Juraj Šedivý studied examples in Hungary, Poland, and the Danube (*Donau*) and Bohemia areas, including examples in the Czech Republic and Austria. J. Šedivý, 'Mittelalterliche Rathäuser im mittleren Donaugebiet. Von Räumen der örtlichen Eliten zu Symbolen der städtische Massen.', in *Political Functions of Urban Spaces and Town Types through the Ages. Making Use of the Historic Towns Atlases in Europe*, ed. R. Czaja et al. (Cracow, 2019), 161–98; S. Pils et al., eds., *Rathäuser als multifunktionale Räume der Repräsentation, der Parteien und des Geheimnisses*, (Innsbruck, 2012).

¹² L. Kolbe, 'Foreword', in *City Halls and Civic Materialism. Towards a Global History of Urban Public Space*, ed. S. Chattopadhyay and J. White (New York, 2014), xx.

a government, but were used by a larger public.¹³ What is more, legal scholars have suggested that town halls (which housed the urban law court) shaped the foundations of wider ideologies relating to public and legal space, and many aspects of courtroom design.¹⁴ Purpose-built edifices for public meetings and administrative purposes were uncommon in the highly urbanised Low Countries until the fifteenth century. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the recent and rapidly expanding historiography on town halls and cultures of law turn centrally on questions concerning the reasons behind the building of town halls, how they functioned, and which groups of people they served. In what follows, I will first summarize the key debates. Then I clarify what I aim to contribute to them: seeing town halls in inclusive terms, instead of a ‘permanent mark of urban patriciate’.¹⁵ I argue that town halls were multifunctional buildings, gradually shaped and used by many urban dwellers, which is especially visible when analysing the town halls’ interior developments.

Although the use of the term ‘town hall’ (*stede huys*) became increasingly common in the fifteenth century, contemporaries also often referred to it (or buildings that served some of its functions) with names such as ‘aldermen’s house’ (*schepenhuis*), ‘council house’ (*raethuis*), or ‘council chamber’ (*raetcamere*). All of these names indicate that the principal function of these buildings was to provide a common meeting room for the city council.¹⁶ An aldermen’s house could refer not to a town hall, but to an edifice used by a given city’s aldermen. Modern dictionaries (including the Dictionary of Middle Dutch) do not define town halls as edifices that also housed sessions of the urban law court and contained courtroom spaces. The incorporation of courtrooms, however, is an important difference between medieval and contemporary town halls.¹⁷ In this study, I use ‘town hall’ consistently, referring to a wider definition. It is important to keep in mind, though, that the functions of these buildings kept on changing. These functions ranged from housing governmental meetings to providing office space, community services (such as civil and criminal hearings, fiscal administration, orphan care, and marriage registration), prisons, and public space.

¹³ N. Pevsner, *A History of Building Types* (London, 1976); K. Giles, ‘Public Buildings in Early Modern Europe’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe*, ed. C. Richardson, T. Hamling, and D. Gaimster (London and New York, 2017), 98–114.

¹⁴ J. Resnik and D. Curtis, *Representing Justice. Invention, Controversy, and Rights in City-States and Democratic Courtrooms* (New Haven, 2011); Resnik, ‘In and Out of Sight’; L. Mulcahy, *Legal Architecture. Justice, Due Process and the Place of Law* (New York, 2011); Mulcahy, ‘Architects of Justice’; D. Evans, ‘Theatre of Deferral. The Image of the Law and the Architecture of the Inns of Court’, *Law and Critique* 10, no. 1 (1999): 1–25.

¹⁵ ‘Das Rathaus ist ein typischen dauerhaftes Zeichen von Repräsentationen des städtischen Patriziats’. K. Grefböhner, ‘Rathausbau im späten Mittelalter. Repräsentation und Raumbedarf - Forschungsüberblick und Bibliographie’, *Mediaenistiek* 23 (2010): 61, 69.

¹⁶ See *raethuis*, *raetcamere* and *schepenhuis* in the MNW.

¹⁷ See *stadhuis* in *Algemeen Nederlands Woordenboek* (online). The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (online) gives the following definition of ‘town hall’: ‘a building containing local government offices and, in the UK, usually a hall for public meetings, concerts, etc’. The MNW mentions the court function of the *schepenhuis* (17-02-2020).

Scholars debate the extent to which the proliferation of town halls' functions and the buildings' construction, expansion or adaptation were accompanied by actual growth in the size and responsibility of city administrations. When it comes to larger, purpose-built town halls in the Southern Low Countries (especially Brabant), art, architectural, and urban historians have often doubted the extent to which the buildings were constructed to fulfil practical needs. In their view, the administrative tasks of local municipalities did not correspond with the spaces created within purpose-built edifices, which instead served symbolic and ceremonial functions. Sacha Köhl, for instance, suggests that the expansion of the town hall of Brussels, as well as the construction of its famous tower and façade, was mainly driven by the city guilds, who wanted to celebrate the part that they had played in the prosperous city's economy.¹⁸ Building competition among cities in this area and period resulted in projects that were intended to surpass each other.¹⁹ It accordingly seems that these town halls above all functioned as a focus of civic pride and expression of wealth and power.²⁰ This idea has been broadly affirmed by scholars such as Albrecht Classen, who has argued that, by and large, later medieval German town halls reflected 'patrician and burgher values' and the rise in urban wealth, as in the Low Countries.²¹ Others confirm that the buildings foremostly encompassed symbolism of civic pride, demonstrating urban independence and political urban identity. This is the case in Stephan Albrecht's work on German town halls and the extensive volume on the French *Hôtels de ville* edited by Alain Salamagne.²² Indeed, members of the governing elite frequently used town halls as symbolic political stages on which to proclaim the election of new officials,²³ hold banquets, receive dignitaries and courtly delegates,²⁴ and even as the primary stopover during Joyous Entries (in which the ruler swore his oath to the city).²⁵ As clear landmarks

¹⁸ Köhl, 'Princely Architecture', 197; Albrecht, *Mittelalterliche Rathäuser*, 27.

¹⁹ M. Hurx, *Architecture as Profession. The Origins of Architectural Practice in the Low Countries in the Fifteenth Century* (Turnhout, 2018), 91–93.

²⁰ H. van der Velden, 'Cambyses for Example: The Origins and Function of an Exemplum Iustitiae in the Netherlandish Art of the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Simiolus* 23 (1995): 5.

²¹ A. Classen, 'Urban Space in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age. Historical, Mental, Cultural, and Social-Economic Investigations', in *Urban Space in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age*, ed. A. Classen (Berlin, 2009), 100–101.

²² Albrecht, *Mittelalterliche Rathäuser*; S. Albrecht, 'Architektur und Öffentlichkeit im Rathausbau', in *Rathäuser als multifunktionale Räume der Repräsentation, der Parteiungen und des Geheimnisses*, ed. S. Pils et al. (Innsbruck, 2012), 69. In France, town halls are rare until deep into the fifteenth century. B. Chevalier, 'Les villes et leurs hôtels', in *Hôtels de ville. Architecture publique à la Renaissance*, ed. A. Salamagne (Rennes, 2015), 19.

²³ J. van Leeuwen, *De Vlaamse wetsvernieuwing. Een onderzoek naar de jaarlijkse keuze en aanstelling van het stadsbestuur in Gent, Brugge en Ieper in de Middeleeuwen* (Brussels, 2004).

²⁴ F. van Tyghem, *Het stadhuys van Gent. Voorgeschiedenis - bouwgeschiedenis - veranderingswerken - restauraties - beschrijving - stijlanalyse*, vol. 1 (Brussels, 1978), 89. See for example the banquets during tournaments: M. Damen, 'The Town as a Stage? Urban Space and Tournaments in Late Medieval Brussels', *Urban History* 43, no. 1 (2016): 56.

²⁵ K. Overlaet, 'The "Joyous Entry" of Archduke Maximilian into Antwerp (13 January 1478): An Analysis of a "Most Elegant and Dignified" Dialogue', *Journal of Medieval History* 44, no. 2 (2018): 231–49.

in the urban landscape, a town hall could function as the civic counterpart to regal edifices, such as palaces or fortifications.²⁶ The town hall built in Ghent in 1481, for example, possibly served as a symbolic device for asserting municipal political autonomy during the power struggle with Maximilian.²⁷ Both political conflict and economic prosperity, therefore, could impact the construction of purpose-built town halls or embellishment of existing structures.

However, in prioritising pomp, circumstance, and town halls' façades above their interiors, scholars have neglected the broader contexts and sets of relations in which town halls were embedded. Town halls' symbolic, ceremonial purposes coexisted with the ways in which they were used on a daily basis by town officials and urban society at large. For instance, the aldermen's judicial power expanded in the same period as the new town hall was being built in Ghent. Magistrates were still able to limit the bailiff's assignments and increasingly assumed the tasks of the *vinders*, who presided over parish courts and dealt with smaller conflicts among citizens.²⁸ Increasing political and legal autonomy concerned growing governmental responsibility and impacted town hall construction. At the very least the Ghent aldermen needed a larger space, if only to allow those requiring or convinced to use their services to visit them physically.²⁹ In contrast, historian Ruud Meischke stated that magistrates in the Northern Low Countries did not require much more space for their administration, which is part of the reason that these town halls were rather modest. Indeed, only a few cities in that region ordered the construction of new buildings, such as in Gouda.³⁰ But Meischke's argument does not apply when taking into account

²⁶ Albrecht, *Mittelalterliche Rathäuser*, 27.

²⁷ Around the same time, in 1478, the coalition government of Bruges (consisting of urban guilds and merchant elites) invested in the decoration and extension of the belfry for similar reasons. Bruges' belfry, which stood atop the market hall, also symbolized the prosperous economy. This well fitted the idea that both the political power of guilds and the reconstruction of the belfry were for the 'common good'. J. Haemers, *For the Common Good. State Power and Urban Revolts in the Reign of Mary of Burgundy (1477-1482)* (Turnhout, 2009), 203–4.

²⁸ J. Haemers and W. Ryckbosch, 'A Targeted Public: Public Services in Fifteenth-Century Ghent and Bruges', *Urban History* 37, no. 2 (2010): 211; J. Decavele, 'Bestuursinstellingen van de stad Gent (einde 11de eeuw-1795)', in *De gewestelijke en lokale overheidsinstellingen in Vlaanderen tot 1795*, ed. W. Prevenier and B. Augustyn (Brussels, 1997), 300.

²⁹ F. Buylaert, 'Familiekwesties. De beheersing van vetes en private conflicten in de elite van laatmiddeleeuws Gent', *Stadsgeschiedenis* 2 (2007): 9.

³⁰ Another well-known early purpose-built example is the 1474 town hall of Veere. R. Meischke, 'De stedelijke bouwopgaven tussen 1450 en 1530', in *Keldermans. Een architectonisch netwerk in de Nederlanden.*, ed. H. Janse et al. (The Hague, 1987), 88. Aldermen's houses existed in Mechelen around 1285, in 13th century Aalst, but also in Maastricht after 1243. According to Van Uytven 'characteristic' town halls were built in e.g. 1374 Mechelen, 1376 Bruges, 1395 Sluis, 1401 Brussels, 1409 Aalst, 1418 Kortrijk, 1448 Leuven and 1482 Ghent. R. van Uytven, 'Flämische Belfriede und südniederländische städtische Bauwerke im Mittelalter: Symbol und Mythos', in *Information, Kommunikation und Selbstdarstellung in mittelalterlichen Gemeinden*, ed. A. Haverkamp (Munich, 1998), 149. Köhl admits that the town halls in Brabant were exceptional, also in comparison with England and France. As he explains, this was the result of the strong monarchies in those countries, leaving little space for the articulation of local autonomy and identity. Köhl, *Das Brüsseler Rathaus*, 52.

the many smaller adaptations or expansions that took place in the fifteenth century. These alterations indicate some of the cities' administrations' frequent, specific requirements.

Generally, the allocation of existing houses to administrative staff met the needs of an urban administration, without a purpose-built space being required. This was the case in Leiden, for instance. Still, town halls often contained different spaces: a public courtroom, council chamber, writing room (used by clerks), and orphans' chamber. The latter was an office used by officials responsible for orphan care, the so-called *weesmeesters*, and as an archive for their accounts. (In Ghent orphan care was conducted by the aldermen of the *Gedele*). Robert Tittler has identified some basic patterns in the size and complexity of English town halls. He argues that, for the most part, these underlying structures had to do with the size of a given community and its need for public buildings, fiscal resources, as well as the extent to which the authorities extended access to non-officials.³¹ New buildings could concern a replacement or reconstruction of existing edifices, which were often in a state of decay or too small for municipalities' growing administrative apparatus and council sizes. Indeed, over the course of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the Low Countries also saw a growth in governmental responsibilities for public services, combined with formalisation of political and legal procedures, and the emergence of a more administrative bureaucracy. The number of officials fluctuated frequently, however, depending on economic or political challenges, for instance.³²

The construction of the building itself also relied on the urban council's income and financial means. This too was determined by economic trends and political circumstances. Notoriously rebellious towards its landlords, Ghent was left with large debts, certainly after the early 1450s.³³ In general, the cities that I discuss experienced an economic decline in the later fifteenth century, partly as a result of military and political disputes.³⁴ Most of the cities' treasuries – used for administration, public services, and works on town halls – were provided for through

³¹ Tittler, *Architecture and Power*, 33.

³² A. van Steensel, 'The Emergence of an Administrative Apparatus in the Dutch Towns of Haarlem and Leiden during the Late Medieval and Early Modern Periods, circa 1430-1570', in *Serving the Urban Community. The Rise of Public Facilities in the Low Countries*, ed. M. van der Heijden et al. (Amsterdam, 2009), 42–61. In general, the expenses on provisions such as administration of justice, street works or fiscal administrations corresponded with the increasing population, but also strongly concerned growth in expenses for public facilities. See e.g. M. Boone, 'Openbare diensten en initiatieven te Gent tijdens de late Middeleeuwen (14de-15de eeuw)', in *L'Initiative publique des communes en Belgique: fondements historiques (Ancien Régime): actes Colloque international, Spa, 1–4 sept. 1982* (Brussels, 1984), 71–114.

³³ In the fifteenth century alone the city revolted in 1453, and between 1477-92. D. Nicholas, *Medieval Flanders* (London, 1992), 395–98; M. Boone, 'Een middeleeuwse metropool', in *Gent. Stad van alle tijden*, ed. M. Boone and G. Deneckere (Brussels, 2016), 86.

³⁴ J. Marsilje, 'De geografische, institutionele en politieke ontwikkelingen', in *Deugd boven geweld. Een geschiedenis van Haarlem, 1245-1995*, ed. G. van der Ree-Scholtens (Hilversum, 1991), 24.

excise duties raised from their strongest industries.³⁵ From the second half of the fifteenth century, the economies of Gouda and Haarlem, for example, were primarily built on the brewing of beer, inland shipping, and cloth production. Indeed, the manufacture of cloth was Leiden's most important industry.³⁶ Excise duties, however, could lead to internal and even regional struggles. In 1444, for instance, delegates of Haarlem, Leiden, and Gouda had to justify raising excise duties before the Council of Holland in The Hague, for this measure had renewed tensions between the *Hoeken* and *Kabeljauwen*, two factions of regional elites.³⁷ Although these parties originated in a conflict over the succession of William IV of Holland (who died in 1345), they would later clash over other issues, such as trading rights.³⁸ This apparently did not stop the magistrates of Gouda from financing building works on their 1450 town hall by imposing excise duties on grain, which was used by the city's breweries.³⁹

There were many other factors that contributed towards the building of town halls. These include the availability of locations or the urgency of a given city's need for a town hall. Fires or partly destroyed buildings, for example, often left councils in dire need of chambers.⁴⁰ The direct motivation or cause for the construction of a town hall is often unclear; many historical developments underlie their formation. In light of this complexity, this study aims to investigate town halls beyond snapshots of construction and use. Although significant building projects and the city accounts itemising their costs make it possible for historians to observe large alterations to town halls, they largely developed piecemeal over long periods. I focus, therefore, on both long-term developments and discontinuities in the adaptation and spatial reorganisation of town halls. As this study will show, users of town halls modified the buildings according to their desires. Most

³⁵ J. Marsilje, ed., *Deel 1. Leiden tot 1574*, Leiden. De geschiedenis van een Hollandse stad (Leiden, 2002), 83.

³⁶ The city was market leader with regard to beer production. Its breweries produced no less than 44 million litres in 1480 (in comparison: the Haarlem brewers produced 20 million litres in 1514, and Ghent's produced 18 million litres). P. Abels et al., eds., *Druzend jaar Gouda. Een stadsgeschiedenis* (Hilversum, 2002), 94–119; W. Blockmans, *Metropolen aan de Noordzee. De geschiedenis van Nederland, 1100-1560* (Amsterdam, 2010), 290–92, 569; J. Marsilje, 'Een ontlukende stad: economisch en sociaal leven in het middeleeuwse Haarlem', in *Dengd boven geweld. Een geschiedenis van Haarlem, 1245-1995*, ed. G. van der Ree-Scholten (Hilversum, 1995), 47.

³⁷ Marsilje, *Deel 1. Leiden tot 1574*, 90.

³⁸ For a study of these political disputes, see: M. van Gent, '*Pertijelike saken*'. *Hoeken en Kabeljauwen in het Bourgondisch-Habsburgse tijdperk* (The Hague, 1994). The conflict also took place within cities, especially when urban councils were unbalanced (with too many members associated with one of the parties). This resulted in the occasional eruption of violence, for example in Leiden: H. Brand, *Over macht en overmicht. Stedelijke elites in Leiden (1420-1510)* (Louvain, 1996), 86–91.

³⁹ G. Pot, 'De bouwrekening van het Goudse stadhuis van 1450', *Bulletin & nieuws-bulletin Koninklijke Nederlandse Oudheidkundige Bond*, no. 3 (1950): 145. As I will discuss in chapter 3 and mainly in chapter 4, tensions about excise duties on grain indeed occurred in the city. These tensions were accordingly brought into the courtroom, and even found their way into the town hall's visual programme.

⁴⁰ Such examples are manifold. Fires and destruction played a central role in the construction history of Leiden's town hall, and in Aalst and Gouda. I further discuss this in chapter 1. See also: Van Uytven, 'Flämische Belfriede', 149.

importantly, I hone in on a history that goes beyond town halls' façades. By adopting a larger chronological scope than previous studies and comparative approach, I describe and analyse developments in legal and political practices *within* the buildings, looking particularly at how town halls operated and were adapted and maintained in specific spatial contexts.

This study approaches town halls as multifunctional buildings, which were organised, challenged, negotiated, and reflected upon by urban society at both an individual and collective level. From architects, council members, judges, lawyers, culprits, defendants, and witnesses, to traders and passers-by, these actors included both official and private individuals and institutions. By claiming and engaging with space, materials, and procedures, these actors collectively participated in organising both spaces and behaviour in town halls. Through this process, town halls were endowed with meaning through and on behalf of the urban community as a whole.

Publicity, contest, and materiality

Urban politics and the administration of justice often took place outside government buildings, on the street or in market squares, taverns, and churches.⁴¹ It was not only magistrates that claimed these urban spaces. The *Vrijdagmarkt*, Ghent's largest square, for example, was used for political rallies; family and guild disputes; the reading of public decrees from buildings overlooking the square; jousts; religious processions; public executions; and other civic practices.⁴² Urban elites often steadily expanded their political power by claiming more urban territory and jurisdictions.⁴³ Control over open space was extremely important, for it allowed magistrates to communicate their claims to legitimate governance to a broad public. Publicity, as Carol Symes emphasises, was power. The open domain in which such public power existed was not the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) as defined by Jürgen Habermas. In his account, the bourgeois public sphere did not exist in the Middle Ages and was in any case based exclusively on literacy. Rather, late medieval public places were where urban citizens came together to endow the urban polity with meaning. They did so by receiving civic messages through both visual and aural means. This meaning-making process took place, for example, during public proclamations. Having seen and heard such

⁴¹ M. Howell, 'The Spaces of Late Medieval Urbanity', in *Shaping Urban Identity in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. M. Boone and P. Stabel (Louvain, 2003), 9.

⁴² P. Arnade, *Realms of Ritual: Burgundian Ceremony and Civic Life in Late Medieval Ghent* (Ithaca, 1996), 47; P. Stabel, 'Public or Private, Collective or Individual? The Spaces of Late Medieval Trade in the Low Countries', in *Il Mercante Patrizio: Palazzi e Botteghe Nell'Europa Del Rinascimento*, ed. D. Calabi and S. Beltramo (Milan, 2008), 37–54; Haemers and Ryckbosch, 'A Targeted Public', 217.

⁴³ J. Dumolyn, 'Economic Development, Social Space and Political Power in Bruges, c. 1127–1302', in *Contact and Exchange in Later Medieval Europe. Essays in Honour of Malcolm Vale*, ed. H. Skoda, P. Lantschner, and S. Robert (Woodbridge, 2012), 35.

proclamations before, people recognised what they likely meant: that a decision made by authorities was now official.⁴⁴

Historians have argued that late-medieval urban inhabitants often challenged meaning-making processes and publicity: contest between authorities and urban population was at the heart of civic politics. This study shows that a particular negotiation of publicity and legitimacy was shaped in the material and social realities of town halls, and vice versa. Buildings and objects impacted access, regulation or actions, and both authorities and other urban dwellers influenced or gave meaning to space and matter in their advantage. Christian Liddy has explored the use of sound and sight with regard to urban politics. Civic power was fragile, he assumes, and oligarchies were sensitive to challenges to their authority. The ability to act in public, in the interest of the community, demonstrated the magistrates' legitimacy. At the same time, urban councils tried to control publicity and public opinion, for it was in their interest that discourses among the general population leaned in their favour.⁴⁵ Confidentiality, therefore, was power too. Publicity (openness) and confidentiality (exclusion) are inextricably connected in political procedures, as well as in the administration of justice. The town hall seems to have been an ambiguous arena with regard to publicity and confidentiality. It has been argued ruling elites increasingly enclosed legal and political procedures through concrete architectural and spatial interventions.⁴⁶ Indeed, as Tittler pointed out, civic authorities organised town halls in ways that established rules that determined who had access to the community. As I show in this study, these rules also covered the circumstances under which the community had access to the building and civic authorities. Magistrates formulated access policies that regulated movement and talking in specific spaces such as the council chamber and courtroom. Accordingly, the town halls served as an 'integrative device', which the magistrates

⁴⁴ C. Symes, 'Out in the Open, in Arras: Sightlines, Soundscapes, and the Shaping of a Medieval Public Sphere', in *Cities, Texts and Social Networks, 400-1500: Experiences and Perceptions of Medieval Urban Space*, ed. C. Goodson, A. Lester, and C. Symes (Farnham, 2010), 280–302; J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, 1989). Habermas' work originally appeared in German, titled *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962). The word 'publicness' more directly refers to the underlying Habermasian concept of public sphere, although Habermas used 'publicness' and 'publicity' alternately. In this study's perspective, I believe the term 'publicity' is significant, as it more strongly implicates relationships between open and hidden/confidential aspects of communication and (public) opinion. I. Volkmer, 'Between "Publicness" and "Publicity": Conceptualizing Discourse "Assemblages" of Public Legitimacy in Transnational Spaces', *Review of Communication* 10, no. 1 (2010): 53–60.

⁴⁵ Liddy uses 'secrecy' instead of seclusion or confidentiality. However, as I argue in chapter 2, 'secrecy' in the late medieval city was paradoxical, as seclusion was generally widely known and part of political and legal procedure. What was open or secluded depended on many different factors: space, materiality, divergent extents of accessibility, and the composition of assembled people. C. Liddy, *Contesting the City. The Politics of Citizenship in English Towns, 1250-1530* (Oxford, 2017), 7, 29, 125–26, 133–36. About the close relation between publicity, rumour, gossip, and reputation: T. Fenster and D. Smail, eds., *Fama. The Politics of Talk and Reputation in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, 2003).

⁴⁶ R. Tittler, "'...And No Loose People to Trouble the Hall": Oligarchy and the Division of Space in the English Civic Hall to 1640', *History Compass* 10, no. 9 (2012): 629.

used 'to mediate between potentially conflicting values, groups of people, ideas and activities'.⁴⁷ Indoor spaces were gradually standardised, allowing authorities to control space and transform legal and political performances.⁴⁸

Urban authorities claimed political and legal authority and sought to establish control over the buildings and other spaces that they used. In late-medieval town halls, decision making and judicial administration were often confidential and, as such, were conducted behind closed doors. Franz-Josef Arlinghaus has observed how urban councils sought to secure their authority over court systems in late medieval Cologne. To prevent possible escalations and disruptions, they materially portioned and regulated spaces.⁴⁹ But establishing security over legal procedure and excluding particular audiences impacted public participation. Sociologists such as Richard Sennett have explained that the loss of contact between publics and civic processes, whether by means of physical separation or overbearing procedures, lead to dead public spaces in which people no longer interact.⁵⁰ Legal scholars share these concerns with regard to contemporary courtrooms, which have become more separated from the communities that surround them, with court design marginalising the public.⁵¹ David Garland, who has focused particularly on England from the mid-nineteenth century, suggests that administrators of justice increasingly removed direct public participation in punishment, limiting the wider populace to public galleries. In so doing, they attempted to distance the penal system from popular sentiment and thus perpetuate its reputation for impartiality. At the same time, however, the decline of public participation also impeded socio-legal communication: although the enclosure of legal and political proceedings possibly reduced noise, it also limited the extent to which a given public was informed of developments in civic life.⁵²

This study shows how tensions between openness and exclusion (and by extension publicity and confidentiality) play a decisive role in how late-medieval town halls and their courtrooms functioned as public, though increasingly separated and regulated spaces.⁵³ These buildings, after all, were used and visited by many different actors. Historians Andrew Brown and

⁴⁷ Tittler, *Architecture and Power*, 131; Tittler, "...And No Loose People".

⁴⁸ Tittler, *Architecture and Power*, 141.

⁴⁹ F. Arlinghaus, *Inklusion-Exklusion. Funktion und Formen des Rechts in der spätmittelalterlichen Stadt. Das Beispiel Köln* (Cologne, 2018), 30, 44, 91.

⁵⁰ R. Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York, 1977); Kilian, 'Public and Private, Power and Space', 115.

⁵¹ Resnik, 'In and Out of Sight'; Mulcahy, 'Architects of Justice'; Dahlberg, *Spacing Law and Politics*, 35–36.

⁵² D. Garland, 'The Rationalization of Punishment', in *Theatres of Power. Social Control and Criminality in Historical Perspective*, ed. H. Pihlamäki (Helsinki, 1991), 103–6.

⁵³ Here I follow the definition of an ideal-type of public space as posed by urban sociologist Fran Tonkiss. Public space represents social exchange. These spaces may be privately owned and/or regulated, but involve a sense of being out in public. F. Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory. Social Relations and Urban Forms* (Cambridge, 2005), 66–67.

Martha Howell have both argued that entering the town hall was a mark of citizenship; the buildings' boundaries architecturally confirmed and constituted the citizenry. In this view, those allowed to visit the town hall were the real burghers.⁵⁴ According to Liddy, access to confidential information did more than expedite the exercise of power; it was a sign of privilege.⁵⁵ From a micro-spatial perspective, however, there were also transgressions and social hierarchies inside town halls. Interior spaces were demarcated differently and had distinct access and behaviour policies. Most importantly, though, various individuals (not all of whom were formally invited) challenged town halls' social and spatial distinctions. Patrick Lantschner has argued that conflict was never absent from late-medieval urban politics, but was in its very nature. In view of this, political and legal channels were used as means of social struggle.⁵⁶ In town halls, urban councils used building works, regulation, and socio-legal messaging to influence public opinion and control flows of communication, whilst also dealing with various human behaviours and purposes.

Agreeing with Liddy and Lantschner, I see members of urban society taking part in process of contestation. As such, they negotiated ways of accessing space and information.⁵⁷ In so doing, these actors also interacted with matter. Spaces, decorations, regulations, and the organisation of legal and political activities in town halls served communicative purposes, co-creating the meanings associated with procedures and rituals. These actors informed aspects of legal procedure and contributed to structures and practices of openness and accessibility by means of implicit or explicit discursive practices. To connect research on materiality and publicity with the generation of meaning, this study makes use of theories on (social) space and materiality. With regard to space, it engages the work of sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who claimed that spaces were a means of production and products in themselves. In Lefebvre's view, specific spaces are recognisable because they correspond with ideas (held or entertained by those who occupy them) about how they should be used. A social space is thus a social product.⁵⁸ In this study, I approach the town hall as space involving dynamic forms of communication and the affordances of spaces themselves. I conceive of the process of creating meaning as a social phenomenon that exerts spatial agency. An example of this, which I discuss in chapter 2, is the ritualised proclamation of

⁵⁴ A. Brown, *Civic Ceremony and Religion in Medieval Bruges c.1300-1520* (Cambridge, 2011), 10; Howell, 'The Spaces of Late Medieval Urbanity', 5, 9.

⁵⁵ Liddy, *Contesting the City*, 143.

⁵⁶ P. Lantschner, *The Logic of Political Conflict in Medieval Cities. Italy and the Southern Low Countries, 1370-1440* (Oxford, 2015), 17, 40–42.

⁵⁷ See also: R. Giel, *Politische Öffentlichkeit im spätmittelalterlich-frühneuzeitlichen Köln (1450-1550)* (Berlin, 1998).

⁵⁸ H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991), 16, 26–29 The work was originally published in French (1974), titled *La Production de l'espace*; P. Arnade, M. Howell, and W. Simons, 'Fertile Spaces: The Productivity of Urban Space in Northern Europe', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 32, no. 4 (2002): 515–48.

court verdicts. In view of the public (the intended audience), the urban court would emerge from a closed chamber and enter the public courtroom. A court's route through the building depended on the location and layout of doors, corridors, and different spaces, which could, in turn, enhance or alter the ritual's intended meaning.

Under the influence of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and the concept of 'assemblages', which are simultaneously social and material, a number of scholars have been concerned to rethink the relations between politics and space from a socio-material perspective.⁵⁹ As formulated by scholar in architecture and urban design Kim Dovey, a key question in approaching spaces as assemblages concerns how boundaries are used to inscribe territories.⁶⁰ Medieval town halls, for example, were barely segmented along social categories; there is no direct evidence that gender, age, or class determined whether citizens could enter town halls. That said, different access policies applied to officials' spaces, such as the council room. Town halls exhibit what assemblage thinkers call 'circular segmentation', in which 'segments are nested in hierarchal relation'.⁶¹ The council room or courtroom are encircled by the town hall, which itself is encircled by the streets and the wider city. As such, different spaces in the same building can be understood differently on account of their various boundaries, as I discuss in chapters 2 and 3.

ANT inspired this study because it acknowledges materiality's agency in networks of material and immaterial actors, including humans and ideas, which continuously negotiate power.⁶² The physical structures of town halls facilitated governmental practices, for example, but they were also ordered by aldermen, designed by architects, built by carpenters, and used by residents. Indeed, social situations are more-than-human constructions, including objects and ideas (which make a difference). To mention the example of one particular kind of action, humans can take the decision to enclose a space, using a door and lock. It is the presence of objects and structures,

⁵⁹ M. Müller, 'Assemblages and Actor-Networks: Rethinking Socio-Material Power, Politics and Space', *Geography Compass* 9, no. 1 (2015): 29. This line of thought stems from the work of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (most notably in *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980; translated into English in 1987). Among the key contributions of this perspective is that it puts forward 'an understanding of 'power' that moves beyond the Foucaultian conception of disciplinary power to one based more fully on desire [...]. Streets, doors, corridors and freeways are products of desire to connect between places; a corner office with a commanding view emerges from desire for status'. K. Dovey, *Becoming Places. Urbanism/Architecture/Identity/Power* (New York, 2010), 14–15; G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, 1987).

⁶⁰ Architectural studies have been using the term 'assemblages' since the 1980's. They use the term when analysing spatial arrangements as generating and modulating systems of encounters. B. Hillier and J. Hanson, *The Social Logic of Space* (Cambridge, 1984); Dovey, *Becoming Places*, 18.

⁶¹ Dovey, *Becoming Places*, 19.

⁶² B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, 2007); See for a recent survey on applications and implications of ANT: A. Blok, I. Fariás, and C. Roberts, *The Routledge Companion to Actor-Network Theory* (London and New York, 2020).

though, that makes the decision to occlude possible. Without them, another device would be required to close a space. Moreover, a closed door might serve other functions, such as providing a soundproof demarcation. This study shows many examples of how materiality and human actions relate to each other. The used sources occasionally offer descriptions of town hall environment that impacted contemporaries. However, they rarely provide in evidence of people attributing agency to materiality. The “how” of object’s agency’ (to put it in the words of medieval archaeologist Roberta Gilchrist), then, is often unclear.⁶³ Accordingly, a predominance of human impact in the shaping of social situations appears in this study. This is why a thorough application of ANT proved to be less useful in this case.

But materiality certainly made a difference in town hall use and meaning. The material structures and objects that steer actors in certain directions, a corridor for instance, were important factors in play inside town halls. Before people reached certain destinations – whether on purpose or otherwise – they would have encountered doors or openings, decorations or bare walls. According to Anni Dugdale, participants in any activity ‘are already being produced in these material arrangements, even before any verbal performances have occurred’.⁶⁴ This account still implicitly allows for the possibility that individual routes can diverge. It also accords a certain privilege to people who engaged with other actors. For example, the aldermen ordered that town halls be built or altered. Accordingly, their desires could produce or shape material elements with which they and other users engaged (such as a door or wall). Although these magistrates were produced by existing arrangements, they could influence these arrangements too. In other words, they occupied a privileged position when it came to producing arrangements and assemblages.

Michel de Certeau used the term ‘strategy’ to name practices of calculating or manipulating power relationships that sought to establish sites of control. These strategies can enrol physical spaces – they might entail building walls or partitions, for example, so as to assert a social hierarchy or ensure protection. The conceptual opposite of strategies, in De Certeau’s account, are ‘tactics’, ‘an art of the weak’.⁶⁵ Although they operate in the absence of power, tactics are able to negotiate and challenge strategies imposed from on high. In this sense, those who were able to use strategies to shape the town hall – magistrates, aldermen, and the urban council – indeed were privileged,

⁶³ Gilchrist studied better-documented artefacts which created an emotional affect for people because they were closely linked to their own or their relatives’ life course, or transformative events (‘biographical objects’). These objects were, for instance, gifts or passed as heirlooms. R. Gilchrist, *Medieval Life. Archaeology and the Life Course* (Woodbridge, 2013), 216–18.

⁶⁴ A. Dugdale, ‘Materiality: Juggling Sameness and Difference’, *The Sociological Review* 47, no. 1 (1999): 116–17.

⁶⁵ M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1984), 35–38. Originally published in French as *L’Invention du quotidien. 1: Arts de faire* (1980).

for they could influence material structures and objects. The magistrates had the desire to impose fixed frameworks on town halls: first that of the buildings' structure, then in how they were spatially organised and regulated. These structures emphasised and facilitated orderly political and legal procedures. This study, however, underscores the fact that town halls were still highly malleable material and social spaces in the fifteenth century; as they emerged through an ongoing process of construction and negotiation. Governmental and non-governmental agents interacted in and around these buildings, contesting existing assemblages based according to their desires. In the following sections, I explain how I analyse material realities, the production of (social) space, and the agency of urban dwellers in the late-medieval town hall.

Case studies, sources, and methodology

The territory of the Low Countries, which in the period under consideration was either ruled or influenced by the House of Valois-Burgundy and later the House of Habsburg, encompassed large parts of present-day Belgium, Luxembourg, northern France, and the Netherlands. This area contains an overwhelming number of town halls, many of them understudied. Two main concerns have determined my choice of case studies. First, I have chosen to focus on town halls with records that allow me to trace (re)constructions and adaptations over at least a century. Among these cases, I have also selected examples that exhibited a variety of shapes and sizes when compared with one another. The chosen case studies also belong to cities of different sizes. Moreover, the selection needed to allow me to make logical comparisons between cases and establish whether ideas about the construction and use of town halls overlapped or diverged among different cities. I have therefore opted to study cases that were part of urban and political networks with similar political and legal structures (in how cities organised criminal trials or aldermen elections, for instance). Second, the availability of a wide variety of archival sources provided me with evidence of built and material environments, regulations, and the ways in which town halls were used and negotiated. Each of these themes defined this study's timeframe. During the fifteenth century, town halls became permanent physical structures. In the same period, indoor urban courtrooms emerged as the norm. Although it focuses on the earliest phases of these buildings – a formative period in the history of town halls – the validity of the arguments and analyses put forward in this study is not confined to this era alone. Yet the themes I discuss often remain invisible in present-day town halls or reconstructions of the buildings' past, as illustrated in the opening anecdote on Leiden.

Researching how the interiors of town halls were used presents a number of challenges, which might well explain why most studies have kept their distance from the topic. As of yet, few

scholars have attempted to assemble the fragmented pieces of relevant information, which are spread over a large and various body of documents. In addition, archaeological research in this field is complicated, and thus scarce, because most town halls are still in use or have been restored or renovated over the centuries.⁶⁶ Town halls are mentioned relatively infrequently in historical records, with the exception of city accounts. These *stadsrekeningen* differ from one another, however, in the level of detail that they offer.

Accordingly, some building histories are better informed than others, especially with regard to the larger and better-known town halls. This study, however, shows that it is crucial to investigate other types of sources. Although the majority of the urban ordinances, registers, decrees, statutes (e.g. *keuren*), and law codes I have examined for this study do not consistently include regulations pertaining to a town hall, when they do, forms of social contestation are clearly visible. Moreover, by exploring sources relating to different cities, I have detected when and why town hall regulations were formulated and applied. Urban chronicles – such as the *Memorieboeken* of Ghent – describe political procedures conducted inside the building. Influential legal treatises (such as Philip Wielant's *Corte instructie*) and law codes (which also applied to cities beyond my selected case studies, such as Den Briel) exhibit a concern with the regulation and organisation of the town halls' legal spaces, namely the council chamber and public courtroom. Furthermore, I expanded this research to encompass court records, especially Leiden's and Gouda's rich criminal records, as well as accounts from Ghent, Aalst, and Haarlem. Through these documents, I was able to study how magistrates integrated socio-legal messaging about town hall spaces into their legal discourse, as well as explore moments of conflict and contest. Analysing these records brought me into the town hall, where culprits, defendants, witnesses, judges, and lawyers claimed legal space and communicated with each other – verbally and physically – in and around these spaces. Sentences passed by the aldermen often included punishment rituals that were to be performed in or around the town hall and occasionally involved objects and paintings. This body of documents makes it possible to establish the meaning of town hall spaces in political, legal, and more quotidian circumstances. By way of the aforementioned sources and approaches, I analyse and interpret five case studies, as well as put forward some general statements about fifteenth-

⁶⁶ To my knowledge, the only publications on excavations conducted in and around the Low Countries' medieval town halls concern Brussels and Ghent. With regard to Ghent the studied cellars were not part of the medieval town hall, but show fundamentals of former stone houses. In Brussels, archaeologists analysed the brickwork and were able to date gradual building activity and expansions. M. Laleman and G. Vermeiren, 'Ruimte en bebouwing in het centrum van het middeleeuwse Gent', *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent*, no. 64 (2010): 31; P. Sosnowska et al., 'L'Hôtel de Ville de Bruxelles. Apport de l'archéologie à la compréhension d'un édifice majeur au travers d'une étude des maçonneries gothiques', *Studia Bruxellae* 1, no. 12 (2018): 43–75.

century town halls in Holland and Flanders. In what follows, I present the historical, demographic, legal, political, and economic contexts of the cities in question and introduce the sources for each case study in more depth.

Ghent was by far the largest city among the case studies, with around 45,000 inhabitants by the end of the fifteenth century.⁶⁷ It had a strong political and economic position, largely built on its cloth industry, and its authorities constantly advised the magistrates of cities in the so-called Ghent quarter.⁶⁸ These included Aalst, a rather small city of around 3,600 inhabitants, which was a stable player in the international cloth market in the fifteenth century.⁶⁹ I discuss three cities in the Northern Low Countries: Leiden, Gouda, and Haarlem. Along with Dordrecht and Delft, these were among the main cities of Holland. Up to 12,000 people lived in Leiden by the end of the fifteenth century,⁷⁰ Gouda had 9,500 inhabitants in 1492,⁷¹ and Haarlem's population grew from 7,000-8,000 in 1400 to 12,000 by 1500.⁷² The city rights of Gouda were based on those of Leiden, which accorded the latter an advisory role with regard to political and legal issues.⁷³

The cities that I have selected had similar governmental bodies. Of my cases from the Northern Low Countries, cities each had a sheriff, four burgomasters, and a body of aldermen (Gouda and Haarlem each had seven; Leiden had eight). Bailiffs represented the counts. Initially, their authority surpassed that of the urban courts with regard to criminal justice.⁷⁴ Magistrates were chosen by an election committee of forty people (eighty in Haarlem), most of whom were part of the so-called *vroedschap* as well. These *vroedschappen* were elite urban ruling bodies with great impact on decision making. Although they often had the final say on major questions, they were less involved in the daily business of government or administration of justice. These councils lie beyond the scope of this study, except for their involvement in aldermen elections, which were

⁶⁷ The city housed between 55,000-64,000 inhabitants around 1356-58. It was the second largest city of northern continental Europe in the later Middle Ages (behind Paris). Arnade, *Realms of Ritual*, 38; P. Stabel, *Dwarfs among Giants. The Flemish Urban Network in the Late Middle Ages* (Louvain, 1997), 28–31.

⁶⁸ Stabel, *Dwarfs among Giants*, 87–88; F. de Potter and J. Broecker, *Geschiedenis der stad Aalst voortgegaan van eene historische schets van 't voormalige land van Aalst*, vol. 2 (Gent, 1875), 183.

⁶⁹ Stabel, *Dwarfs among Giants*, 41, 145; P. Stabel, *De kleine stad in Vlaanderen. Bevolkingsdynamiek en economische functies van de kleine en secundaire stedelijke centra in het Gentse kwartier (14de-16de eeuw)* (Brussels, 1995), 122–55; Boone, 'Een middeleeuwse metropool', 64.

⁷⁰ The city contained 5,000 inhabitants around 1400. Marsilje, *Deel 1. Leiden tot 1574*, 56.

⁷¹ Abels et al., *Duizend jaar Gouda*, 34–42.

⁷² Marsilje, 'De geografische, institutionele en politieke ontwikkelingen', 23.

⁷³ Marsilje, *Deel 1. Leiden tot 1574*, 60.

⁷⁴ In Dutch terminology: *schepenen* (aldermen), *schout* (sheriff), *burgermeesters* (burgomasters), *baljuw* (bailiffs). The aldermen in most cities were able to claim more jurisdiction in the course of the fifteenth century, or limit the bailiffs influence. See the example of Ghent above, or with regard to Leiden: Brand, *Over macht en overwicht*, 40.

held annually in the town hall.⁷⁵ Aalst's governmental body consisted of seven aldermen.⁷⁶ Ghent, in contrast, was governed by representatives of the so-called three members – that is, the burghers, weavers, and smaller guilds. Together, this body was made up of twenty-six aldermen, divided into two benches: the *Keure* and the *Gedele*. Of the two benches, the *Keure* was the most powerful when it came to making decisions. Whereas the *Keure* was largely occupied with criminal law, for the most part the *Gedele* focused on civil law and the guardianship of orphans. The division of Ghent's aldermen into two benches is unique in the Low Countries.⁷⁷ By the fifteenth century, the burghers had three seats in each bench and the weavers five, as did the smaller guilds.⁷⁸ This study focuses mostly on the edifices used by the aldermen of the *Keure*. This is because these buildings were directly integrated into the town hall as it developed and, in serving as criminal courtrooms, they are analogous to the courts of other cities.⁷⁹

In the period under study, all of these governmental bodies left financial accounts, law codes, regulations, and criminal records. On some occasions, these bodies of information were recorded in urban chronicles written by clerks in the service of urban administrations. In studying the built environment, materiality, and motives behind town halls' acquisitions, I rely heavily on city accounts. In Ghent, there is a continuous series of these *stadsrekeningen* going back to 1314. I draw on the work of Frieda van Tyghem, who has published the cost items that made up town halls' expenses.⁸⁰ Contemporary copies of Aalst's city accounts, which include detailed records dating to 1395 to 1540, are kept in the Algemeen Rijksarchief in Brussels.⁸¹ The accounts of the

⁷⁵ The *vroedschappen* were experienced members of the urban elites, having had positions as magistrates before. Marsilje, *Deel 1. Leiden tot 1574*, 56, 73; Abels et al., *Duizend jaar Gouda*, 68; Marsilje, 'De geografische, institutionele en politieke ontwikkelingen', 43.

⁷⁶ De Potter and Broeckaert, *Geschiedenis der stad Aalst*, 2:179.

⁷⁷ Decavele, 'Bestuursinstellingen', 293.

⁷⁸ M. Boone, *Gent en de Bourgondische hertogen ca. 1384 – ca. 1453. Een sociaal-politieke studie van een staatsvormingsproces* (Brussels, 1990), 35; Van Leeuwen, *De Vlaamse wetsvernieuwing*, 35; Arnade, *Realms of Ritual*, 41; Decavele, 'Bestuursinstellingen'.

⁷⁹ In civil cases, many city inhabitants choose to solve their cases themselves at first (with the help of the bailiff). In case they turned to the central court, most cases were taken care of by the *paysierders*, the aldermen of the *Gedele*, or their delegates. The *Keure* handled all formal criminal trials. According to Marc Boone, the city did not have a very costly judicial apparatus, representing 15% of the city's administrative expenses. Buylaert, 'Familiekwesties', 8; Haemers and Ryckbosch, 'A Targeted Public', 211; M. Boone, *Geld en macht. De Gentse stadsfinanciën en de Bourgondische staatsvorming (1384-1453)* (Gent, 1990), 90; D. Nicholas, 'Crime and Punishment in Fourteenth Century Ghent', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'histoire* 48 (1970): 292.

⁸⁰ F. van Tyghem, *Het stadhuis van Gent*, vol. 2 (Brussels, 1978), 7–364.

⁸¹ ARA, reg. 31411-31521. The city archive of Aalst has transcriptions covering the years up to 1432. I would like to thank Wilfried Vernaeve for sharing these transcriptions and his knowledge of the *stadsrekeningen* of Aalst.

selected cities in Holland cover most of the fifteenth century: in Leiden they run from 1391 to 1496,⁸² in Gouda from 1437 to 1522,⁸³ and in Haarlem from 1417 to 1482.⁸⁴

Decrees and law codes are important sources with regard to the regulation of town halls.⁸⁵ Published editions from various cities facilitate a broad view of this topic.⁸⁶ Court documentation makes it possible to analyse cases of order and disorder in town halls. Aldermen's socio-legal communications shed light on how town halls were spatially organised, what different spaces meant, and the tactics used by culprits, defendants, or witnesses, as recorded by the criminal court. Unfortunately, practically all criminal records, verdicts, and witness testimonies from Ghent before 1500 are lost, with the exception of the so-called banishment book (*ballinc bouc*), which includes the summarised verdicts and names of people exiled for long periods between 1472 and 1537.⁸⁷ The book was used for administrative purposes; whenever people returned from exile or pilgrimage, their name was crossed out. It is therefore not a representative sample of the wider range of criminal cases brought before Ghent's law court. Still, it contains single cases that are significant in relation to my interests in this study. In attending to the case of Aalst, I refer to the *dictums*, a compilation of sentences that mostly concern civil justice.⁸⁸ Most of the cases of social contestation that I discuss are derived from Haarlem's rich court documentation, as well as from Leiden and Gouda. B.M.J. Speet had edited the 353 sentences passed by Haarlem's urban court between 1432 and 1470.⁸⁹ Leiden holds the largest series of court records, of which I have studied

⁸² SAL, inv. no. 511-552, *Rekeningen van de poortmeesters, later burgermeesters*, 1391-1476; inv. no. 556-564, *Rekeningen van de vier burgermeesters en de twee trossiers*, 1476-1496. Some of these accounts include a separate *vestmeestersrekening*, records of officials responsible for public works. The accounts up to 1434 are published in A. Meerkamp van Embden, *Stadsrekeningen van Leiden (1390-1434)*, vol. 1, 2 vols (Amsterdam, 1913).

⁸³ SAMH, AC.1.1125-1180, *Rekeningen van de ontvangsten en uitgaven van de trossiers resp. trossier-ontvanger(s)*. A specific record on the town hall construction of 1450 is published in Pot, 'De bouwrekening van het Goudse stadhuis van 1450'.

⁸⁴ SAH, access no. 1573, *Thesauriersrekeningen stad Haarlem, 1417-1482*, inv. no. 321-367. I have studied the years 1483 to c.1510 as well (inv. no. 378-392), but this did not lead to relevant results.

⁸⁵ SAG, series 93, no. 26, *voorgeboden* 1482-1546; 108, no. 2, *voorgeboden* 1402-1436; 261ter, no.1. *Diverse stukken, vonnissen, voorgeboden, vanwege de schepenen van de Keure*, 1511 onwards; series 261bis, *handboeken*, no.4 (1454); SAL, 0501, 381, *Vroedschapsboek* 1449-1458; 382, *Vroedschapsboek* 1465-1504; T. de Limburg-Stirum, *Coutumes des deux villes et pays d'Alost (Alost et grammont)* (Brussels, 1878); J. Huizinga, *Rechtsbronnen der stad Haarlem* (The Hague, 1911); P. Blok, ed., *Leidsche rechtsbronnen uit de Middeleeuwen* (The Hague, 1884); L. Rollin Couquerque and A. Meerkamp van Embden, *Rechtsbronnen der stad Gouda* (The Hague, 1917).

⁸⁶ H. de Jager, ed., *Middeleeuwse keuren der stad Brielle* (The Hague, 1901); G. Rooseboom, *Recueil van verscheide keuren, en costumen, midtsghaders maniere van procederen binnen de stad Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, 1644); J. Breen, *Rechtsbronnen der stad Amsterdam* (The Hague, 1902).

⁸⁷ SAG, series 212, no. 1, *Ballincboec* 1472-1537. The registers of criminal justice fall outside the principle period under study, but a single case is referred to. SAG, series 214, no. 1. *Registers van de criminele rechtspraak, boeken 'van den crime'*, 1515-1523.

⁸⁸ SAA, inv. no. 926, 1437-1549. The court days of Aalst are reported in the so-called *Ferienboeken*, occasionally including sentences. These series are not of significance for this study

⁸⁹ B. Speet, ed., *Het register van criminele sententiën uitgesproken door het gerecht van Haarlem* (Haarlem, 1989).

1,361 cases documented between 1392 and 1490. These *Correctieboeken* contain verdicts and sentences, including those relating to illicit behaviour in and around the town hall and urban courtrooms.⁹⁰ For the case of Gouda, I examined a corpus of 561 verdicts recorded between 1447 and 1539.⁹¹ These resemble Leiden's *Correctieboeken* in terms of content.

These sources are the main foundations of this study, which explores the spatiality and materiality of political and legal practices in the late-medieval town hall and how they impacted upon the ways in which these buildings were used. Whereas expenses incurred by the magistrates suggests how physical environments were (re)constructed, the regulation and prosecution of misbehaviour either reinforced or negotiated norms in the building and the meaning of material boundaries too.

Contemporaries expressed their desires in a variety of means. In chapter 1 I discuss how town halls functioned as legal archives; city accounts suggest that they offered storage space, closets, and chests.⁹² Town halls also contained many artworks. How did people engage with objects and paintings and how did these items impacted town hall use and meaning? Few of the many objects that once adorned or were used in town halls survive. In view of this, scholars working on the art of law – paintings and objects decorating council chambers and courtrooms – have generally focused on those famous depictions that do remain. These include paintings by Dieric Bouts and Gerard David, which are called 'justice scenes' because they represent legal and political allegories.⁹³ In chapter 4, I argue that paintings and objects were chosen for display in the town hall so as to produce experiences. To analyse the meaning of these material elements and how they contributed to their settings, I also consider paintings in town hall spaces, taking in some examples from cities beyond my primary case studies. Even though they are no longer extant, city accounts, regulations, and criminal records record objects and paintings ordered by magistrates. Criminal records in particular afford insights into how art helped to produce justice, as well the artworks complexity. This study analyses descriptions of these objects; how they were related to criminal and civil justice; the purposes to which they were put; the meanings that different people

⁹⁰ SAL, inv. no. 0508, *Het oud rechterlijk archief van Leiden*, Correctieboeken A, B, C, D, 4, 5A. (1392-1490); further explanation of the taken samples is given in chapter 3. I am grateful to Janna Coomans, who generously shared her database covering parts of these samples.

⁹¹ SAMH, AC2.176, *Criminele vonnis- of correctieboeken*, 1447-1558. These verdicts are paginated, and referred to accordingly. In addition, I studied witness testimonials and procedural documents. SAMH, AC2.126, *Registers met getuigenissen*, 1490-1517; SAMH, AC2.187a, *Criminele processtukken*, Willem Benne, 1512

⁹² For an exploration of the impact of the material turn on studies of the 'materialization' of law: T. Johnson, 'Legal History and the Material Turn', in *The Oxford Handbook of Legal History*, ed. M. Dubber and C. Tomlins (Oxford, 2018).

⁹³ See e.g. the overview by Georges Martyn. A more extensive historiography of the art of law will be discussed in chapter 4. G. Martyn, 'Painted Exempla Iustitiae in the Southern Netherlands', in *Symbolische Kommunikation Vor Gericht in Der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. R. Schulze (Berlin, 2006), 335–56.

attributed to them; how they participated in wider visual displays in town halls, and; the ways in which people experienced spatial and material environments.

Town halls' representations and symbolic orders were multilayered. They addressed and were constructed by different people and aspects of urban life. This complexity also influenced contemporaries' actions and experiences. Analysing the complex semiotics of public space, which often turned on issues of legitimacy, makes it possible to understand how both material and immaterial actors shaped possible and ideal experiences of late-medieval society. To grasp these semiotic complexities, in this study I emphasise the importance of adopting a multidisciplinary approach and combining the many different types of source that I have introduced above. This variety of sources, perspectives, and methods, I claim, can expand historical understandings to encompass the ways in which material objects and people engage with each other behind town halls' façades. In this way, my approach shows that medieval society and public space was more inclusive than a dominant focus on façades allows for.

Structure of the thesis

The four chapters of this study each develop different perspectives inspired by social theory and the kind and content of the available source material. All four chapters are set within a comparative perspective. Chapter 1, 'Inside the town hall', reconstructs the building history of town halls, focusing particularly on how their interiors were (re)organised. In reconstructing how material objects and structures were applied and the practical uses of interior design, it indicates how spatial partitions were understood and used on a daily basis. This chapter emphasises how urban courtrooms moved from open-air settings to fixed and recognisable places inside the town hall. It shows how the creation of specific spaces and material objects concern pragmatic town hall developments. These were analogous in the region. Construction works and adaptations, which went on continuously, were directly related to town hall employees' specific needs and desires. This chapter establishes the spatial and material contexts of this, as well as the ideas behind the construction or acquisition of town halls. The following chapters place peoples' actions, legal and political procedures, regulations, and imaginations in these contexts.

Titled 'Openness, enclosure, and communication flows', chapter 2 begins by discussing the multiple functions that these buildings' served and their circular segmentation – that is, the way in which interior spaces presented different boundaries and access opportunities. It traces several contemporary visitors and employees in the town halls. I visualise and analyse their ability to move around the building by means of access analysis. This method allows me to compare doorways (or rather 'access points') and other material or spatial aspects with which actors had to

grapple or negotiate so as to gain access to particular rooms or spaces. In what follows, I integrate the spatial and material characteristics of town halls into a study of what initial tools (such as doors) actors could use to move around or for other purposes in the building. This inquiry is based on city accounts, legal treatises, as well as judicial records detailing legal procedures and spatial transgressions. I show how space and materiality influenced dynamics of openness and enclosure – or publicity and confidentiality– and therefore the ways in which more or less public and private spaces were organised. To understand how space, materiality, and the intentions that shaped them influenced political and legal procedures and vice versa, this chapter focuses on the administration of justice inside town halls and at the conclave of yearly aldermen’s elections.

Chapter 3, ‘Order, disorder, and contestation’, explores the disadvantages that attended issues of accessibility and town halls’ multiple functions. Criminal records indicate that magistrates defined and tried various disturbances, ranging from deliberate mess-making to verbal and physical attacks. Moments of contestation or conflict established orderly frameworks in which citizens’ behaviour and town hall practices took place. My key argument in this chapter is that the impact and definition of conflicts and other disturbances were both co-determined by spaces and material features and directly contributed to the meanings of the built environment. The town hall was a mental construct influenced by socio-legal messages. Accordingly, this chapter analyses how magistrates referred to town halls in their search for publicity and legitimacy. Indeed, in furthering their agendas, they promoted the idea of a proper functioning town hall that worked in the service of the common good. Drawing on criminal records, I address cases in which both invited and uninvited members of urban society entered the town hall, which they used as a stage of social and political performances.

The fourth and last chapter, ‘A reflective setting: images and objects’, explores visuality in town halls. Objects and images were particularly used to decorate council chambers and public courtrooms, as well as other public spaces in the buildings. These images were bought by members of the urban councils, as well as culprits who had to order objects as part of their punishments. This chapter discusses many previously unknown images, having uncovered them in city accounts and criminal records. They include wax objects and stained-glass windows, as well as better-known items, such as paintings depicting the Last Judgement. I analyse various elements of town halls’ visual displays, focusing on the meanings of images and objects and how they were used in the administration of justice. I argue that these visual elements informed and gave meaning not only to legal procedures, but the built environment too: images shaped the settings in which they were placed. Representations displayed in courtrooms and town halls, for example, emphasised the

open character of these spaces. In addition to attending to permanent visual elements that crop up in the larger region, this chapter traces temporary objects in particular town hall settings.

The conclusion emphasises the importance of this study of town hall interiors. To a previously unacknowledged degree, various actors – both material and immaterial – carefully constructed the way in which town halls were used and accorded meaning. With this in mind, I reflect on how spatial and social theories can be used to analyse and bring together the different perspectives and agents that I discussed in the study: space, built environments, procedures, laws, human behaviours, forms of social contestation, objects, and images. Moreover, I connect my findings with wider debates about how the development of town halls has impacted upon public and governmental spaces, and dynamics of publicity and confidentiality in law and politics. Although different members of urban society questioned, contested, and negotiated forms of authority and publicity intensely behind town halls' façades, these processes were not limited to the boundaries of the buildings.