Beyond the façade
Town halls, publicity, and urban society in the fifteenth-century Low Countries
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Inside the town hall

In his history of the Southern Low Countries (1568), the rhetorician, historian and alderman Marcus van Vaernewijck (1518-1569) wrote about Ghent’s town hall.¹ He judged it a particularly ‘noteworthy’ example of such buildings. Indeed, to him the town hall looked so ‘artistic and new’ that ‘no-one could improve it’. Van Vaernwyck added, however, that this was limited to the building’s exterior. He complained about the building’s interior. The timber seemed weakened, and he wished that the former master builder (who had since died) had finished the job, making the hall’s inside as impressive as the façade.² Writers of urban chronicles such as van Vaernwyck tend to equate a given town hall’s importance with its symbolic significance and reputation. They place special emphasis on the buildings’ size and outer decoration. A number of modern historians have also remarked on the impressive exteriors of town halls in the late medieval and early modern period. Beyond their impressive façades, these structures were ostensibly simple and subject to ongoing change. This chapter looks behind the outer walls and front doors of these civic structures. It explores what city governments built within town halls and examines the gradual development of these interiors over the long term. This approach shows how the buildings functioned on a daily basis and how the materiality of buildings and furnishings both influenced and articulated urban administrations.

Town halls were common in the fifteenth-century Low Countries. Still, the practical services that they provided were far from self-evident among contemporaries, as chroniclers from the era suggest. For instance, Ghent’s city chronicles (the membrieboeken) only mention construction works on town halls after 1481, despite the fact that the city’s aldermen had already been using such buildings, which went through many renovations.³ The chronicles refer to a ‘new aldermen’s

¹ As was customary, Van Vaernwyck was alderman for one year, 1564. However, he was then chosen as alderman for the other bench in Ghent, the Gedele, four years later. He died during his term. His work, Den Spieghel der Nederlandischer oudheyt was later published as De Historie van Belgis (which is used for this study): M. van Vaernwyck, De Historie van Belgis, ed. D. Vanderhaeghen, vol. 2 (Ghent, 1829), 224; K. Lamont, Het wereldbeeld van een zestiende-eeuwse Gentenaar Marcus van Vaernwyck: een ideeën- en mentaliteitshistorische studie op basis van zijn kroniek, Van die beroerlicke tijden (Ghent, 2005), 81–83. Van Vaernwyck pays particular attention to the council chamber; I attend to this passage in chapter 4. Although Van Vaernwyck’s work is not considered to be of the highest quality in terms of either literary style or content, his work is of use to scholars on account of his descriptions of the city’s monuments. H. van Nuffel, ‘Vaernwyck, Marcus Van’, in Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek, 1979.
³ A. van Heule, Memorieboeken der stad Ghent van ’t jaar 1301 tot 1793, vol. 1 (Gent, 1852), 101. The membrieboeken are significant sources for the history of urban space in Ghent and even more so for legal and political history. The book
chamber’, but not to the whole building of which it was a part. This is striking, for the same source records the construction of town halls in Bruges in 1376, Brussels in 1401 and 1443, and several other projects in Ghent itself, such as bridges and the belfry.4 In 1517, however, the memorieboeken mention the erection of a new town hall. The aldermen of the city paid for the building project to be blessed by placing golden coins under the first stones to be laid.5 It appears that the chroniclers did not deem the town halls built before 1481 worthy equivalents of other, comparable structures nearby whose reputation was already established. Perhaps Ghent’s fifteenth-century edifices were seen as practical buildings. Although they facilitated the aldermen’s activities and underwent periodical reconstructions, they did not occasion commentary, still less praise. Van Vaernewijck, however, acclaimed Ghent town hall’s 1481 council chamber, which was still in use during van Vaernewyck’s term and remains so up to present day. The rest of the building’s interior was indeed often rebuilt or renovated. It took until 1527 for the main hall to be ready for use. In the early sixteenth century it served as the public courtroom. Today it is known as the Pacificatiezaal.6 It would seem that for van Vaernewyck and the urban chroniclers, 1481 marked the beginning of the town hall’s construction. This was the first purpose-built structure used by Gent’s aldermen. Still, they were especially proud of the façade constructed after 1517.

Many art and urban historians have examined the rise of purpose-built town halls in the Low Countries. Like Van Vaernewyck, they have recognised that their external architectural

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4 Addressed as ‘stathuus te Bruusle’. The town hall was enlarged in 1443. Van Heule, Memorieboek, 1:217. According to Raymond van Uytven, Henri Pirenne stated that the town hall was apparently not seen as one of the most important features of the city, in contrast to the Belfort and the seal and bells of the city. Van Uytven, however, considers this a myth. Van Uytven, ‘Flâmische Belfriede’, 126.

5 ‘Item, in dit jaer ende schependom was gheleyt den eersten steen vanden nieuwen wercke van den Schepenhuyse, ende daer was gheleyt onder den eersten steen eenen gouden guldene, te weten van der sale ende de capelle ende de turre’. A. van Heule, Memorieboek der stad Ghent van ’t jaar 1301 tot 1793, vol. 2 (Gent, 1854), 39; Van Tyghem, Het stadhuis van Gent, 1:76–79. The first time the word ‘town hall’ (stadhuus) was mentioned in the memorieboeken as reference to the building in Ghent was in 1492. Van Heule, Memorieboek, 1852, 1:375.

6 This was mostly due to construction works. The hall owes its name to the so-called Pacification of Ghent in 1576, in which the Habsburg provinces formed an alliance against prince Philip II. W. Blockmans and P. van Peteghem, ‘De Pacificatie van Gent als uiting van kontinuïteit in de politieke opvattingen van de standenvertegenwoordiging’, Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis 89 (1976): 322–34.
splendour is not matched on the inside. In a study of Brussels’ town hall, for instance, architectural historian Sacha Köhl has discerned the dominance of that building’s exterior design. Indeed, the period of the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries saw what has been called a ‘civic architectural contest’. During this period, town halls in Bruges, Brussels, and Leuven incorporated features such as full-length arcades and corner turrets. As such, they had a significant influence on new architectural trends. According to Köhl, most of the spaces behind the embellished façade of Brussels’ town hall were used only for the most important festive, political, and judicial purposes. They remained unoccupied for most of the week. Those members of staff who were present on a daily basis worked in ‘rather modest conditions either packed in the dark and narrow rooms of the ground floor or hidden in small annex buildings’.

Buildings such as Brussels’ town hall, however, are extraordinary when compared those elsewhere in the Low Countries. Town halls in the Northern Low Countries were relatively modest with regard to size and exterior decoration. Only in some cities, such as Gouda, did magistrates order the construction of a new building. By and large, they repurposed existing houses to serve as town halls. When these buildings seemed inadequate for administrative use, they were simply expanded, leading to ‘whimsical complexes’. Thus far, town halls such as these, which were not especially prominent in the urban landscape, have received little attention.

More importantly, the buildings’ interior organisation and furnishing have been widely neglected. This is due to the emphasis often placed not only on façades, but prestigious objects too. Yet as this chapter will show, the interiors of these buildings were clearly designed with practical use in mind. These internal spaces often preceded the construction of iconographic exteriors or new edifices, yet it is the latter that modern scholars see as most architecturally important. In contrast with town halls’ façades, their interior organisation was less subject to competition between cities. Indeed, there are striking commonalities amongst municipalities when it comes to material partitions and spatial divisions, as well as in how buildings were practically used on a daily basis.

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7 Köhl, *Das Brüsseler Rathaus*, 121.
11 Most studies have focused on the exterior of buildings, seeing them as displays of the dignity and legitimacy in the service of both princes, municipalities, and urban economies. Köhl, ‘Princely Architecture’; Cunningham, ‘For the Honour’; Hurx, *Architecture as Profession*, 92.
12 D. Smail, *Legal Plunder. Households and Debt Collection in Late Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2016), 9.
Towards an analysis of interior design and its impact

An examination of the remaining drawings, sketches, and plans for medieval town halls certainly supports the conclusion that their architects paid most attention to the façades. Whereas the elevations feature intricately drawn sculptures and other decorations, plans for the interiors generally consist of a few straight lines.\textsuperscript{13} That said, a more complex image is revealed by city accounts, which include many expenses relating to town hall interiors. There are long lists of ironwork and masonry, indicating many internal walls serving to define spaces within halls, and ostensibly utilitarian objects such as chests, wardrobes, benches, candles, cloth, doors, and locks. This study approaches these items as overlooked yet meaningful objects. The quarters allotted to aldermen and other urban functionaries can be understood in terms of their daily usage.\textsuperscript{14} In emphasising functional aspects and objects over iconography, the sources shed a different light on municipal edifices. They make it possible to analyse town halls’ practical organisation and importance. This is not to deny, however, that symbolism of power appears in utilitarian items and space, no less than through elaborate façades.

Instead of focusing on external iconology, this chapter navigates built environments. Although the buildings serving city aldermen were diverse, their interior spaces were divided in similar ways. In reconstructing the case studies, I have used sources that vary in terms of both veracity and detail. Whereas some city accounts contain detailed expenses (especially those of Aalst), others occasionally refer to indistinct construction works and building materials of different kinds (as in Gouda). Viewed in comparison with one another, however, the sources agree when it comes to their underlying material and spatial logic. A study of interior organisation serves to establish an understanding of the spatial boundaries within which the themes addressed in the following chapters (including accessibility, regulation, imagination, and challenges from without) play out.

To begin, I focus on what was involved in the construction of these buildings, including the existing material environment, costs, and construction workers. I then go on to discuss the development of the connection between form and function, and the impact that this had upon spatial arrangements. As I will show, the construction or expansion of town halls had to do with

\textsuperscript{13} See especially chapter 6, ‘Communicating the Design’, in: Hurx, _Architecture as Profession_, 241–312. Likewise, art historian Charles Burroughs has noted that there were occasionally detailed drawings for façade designs in Renaissance Italy, suggesting that the drawing itself was already a prestigious object. He also argued that façades emphasise the view of a building from the outside. As such, he suggests, they belong to public space and a public cognitive domain, rather than forming part of the building. C. Burroughs, _The Italian Renaissance Palace Facade_ (Cambridge, 2002), 13, 73.

\textsuperscript{14} This trend is clearly visible in modern historiography on domesticity, the house, and its chambers. M. Kowaleski and P. Goldberg, eds., _Medieval Domesticity. Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England_ (Cambridge, 2008); H. Morgan, _Bed and Chambers in Late Medieval England. Readings, Representations and Realities_ (York, 2017), 5–6.
either allocating new spaces with specific functions or reorganising existing spaces. In other words, I present a history of town hall construction as one of interior spatial organisation. Two developments are especially notable with this regard to this history: the relocation of the council chamber and a shift from open-air justice towards court settings inside town halls, namely the interior *vierdaar* (public courtroom). I then analyse the internal divisions and materiality of council rooms and public courtrooms, exploring their locations within town halls and how they were separated from one another. Drawing largely on city accounts, these sections reconstruct these spaces. Lastly, I attend to town halls’ inventories, emphasising the practical aspects of different rooms. Seen in the round, the town hall emerges as a building that facilitated the aldermen and town officials in their administrative and legal tasks. Urban autonomy and forms of political and judicial authority were not only reproduced through strong iconographic messages on the building’s façade. Behind such exterior displays, these forms of power were also made possible by a pragmatic organisation of spaces within the walls and windows, as well as represented in material ways.

Many actors, material and non-material, have contributed to the construction and interior (re)organisation of town halls. The buildings were ordered by aldermen, designed by architects, and erected by carpenters, to give just three examples. According to social and architectural historian William Whyte, historians tend to forget ‘the practical imperatives of architecture and their effect on the building they study’. It has been thoroughly demonstrated that town hall architecture represents political, legal, and communal contexts and ideals. Sculptural ornamentation certainly plays a key role in this work of representation. But the same contexts and ideals are also reflected in spatial partitions. After all, architecture entails more than representation; it also shapes material environments. Walls and objects positioned in space influence the ways in which an edifice is used and (re)constructed. Existing partitions and surrounding built environments, for instance, can shape possibilities for building new spaces or reorganising interiors. The expansion of Haarlem’s town hall, for example, was restricted on some sides of the building because of its close proximity to a Dominican convent and its land. That said, those involved in choosing material elements (such as builders) also had an influence. As Marvin Trachtenberg has explained, buildings exist in a state of becoming. This involves construction, the alteration or replacement of material elements, as well as a given structure’s lifeworld. By this last term, he means the desires, needs, and tastes that prevail in its socio-cultural context, as influenced

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by human agents and other buildings.\textsuperscript{17} With regard to construction work in early modern Florence, Trachtenberg argues that builders consciously employed principles of spatial design in a coherent manner.\textsuperscript{18} This chapter shows that those who ordered construction works in the fifteenth-century Low Countries had manifest a desire for town halls that were spatially organised in a clear and orderly way. This resulted in a certain uniformity in town halls’ interiors.

Town hall designs, whether in the form of drawings or written instructions, have not survived. This means that it is different to trace the specific ways in which historical actors influenced the construction of town halls. It is known, however, that ideas concerning shape and iconography were shared among architects and masters of works. Those responsible for building town halls regularly visited building sites in other cities and likely exchanged drawings and sketches.\textsuperscript{19} What is more, they shared their expertise in different cities, especially when it came to large-scale renovations and construction works. For instance, the Kelderman family, famously operated in both the Northern and Southern Low Countries, including in cities such as Ghent and Gouda. The family’s first generation had already worked on the consoles of the public courtroom in Mechelen’s town hall somewhere between 1377 and 1385. Family members remained in the town’s service for decades afterwards. Around 1450, a member of the third generation – Jan III – worked on Gouda’s town hall. In particular, he was involved in the masonry, staying at the construction site for 296 days. In 1452, he joined the construction works for the Middelburg town hall. Other family members, such as Rombout I, worked in Leuven and produced glass windows for the town hall in 1459, amongst other things. A descendant of the family, Matthijs I, laboured as a construction worker on Leuven’s town hall in 1439, between 1447 and 1449, and again between 1450 and 1452. He also worked on the town hall of Middelburg. Another member of the family was involved in the construction of the town hall in sixteenth-century Ghent.\textsuperscript{20}

The Kelderman family provides an example of how knowledge about town hall design and its application accumulated over the long-term. It also indicates the breadth expertise of some of those involved in construction works. Architects and masters of works used their expertise and knowledge in different cities, where they were responsible for designing many aspects of civic buildings. As I noted above, Van Vaernewyck explained how these architects and masters of works

\textsuperscript{17} M. Trachtenberg, Building-in-Time. From Giotto to Alberti and Modern Oblivion (New Haven, 2010), x–xii.
\textsuperscript{19} Hurx, Architecture as Profession, 91–93. Stephan Albrecht also suggests that in several fourteenth-century German towns, master builders travelled to other cities before designing town halls in their home city. Albrecht, Mittelalterliche Rathhäuser, 27.
could shape design and construction. He describes how the replacement of a master of works in Ghent resulted in a change to the construction plan, which had been based on the council of builders from Mechelen and Antwerp. However, there were limits to architects’ and master of works’ autonomy. According to architectural historian Merlijn Hurx, the final design for a given town hall was a product of a committee of experts, which might have included patrons, financial administrators, as well as under-masters and master-carpenters. The construction works in Ghent were furthermore overseen by an alderman, Jan van Wyckhuyse, and overdeken, Hendrik van Tevele, who represented the smaller guilds. These men were mostly concerned with financial supervision.

Although the precise role of builders and overseers is unclear, it is likely that they produced general plans of the edifices. City accounts include more detailed information on small-scale construction works. Expenses relating to specific manufacture works, such as demarcations and porches for the council room or public courtroom, were assigned to various construction workers. Without doubt, artisans brought their knowledge of how to work with key materials with them. It seems, then, that a variety of people were involved in construction works and able to determine designs and the materials used to realise them. This goes especially for projects that went on for longer periods. Different users of the town hall with various needs took turns, as did masons and woodworkers in working on these buildings. Detailed expenses related to construction works indicate what the people involved – including employees (construction workers) and particularly their employers (the magistrates) – desired to have built or altered. Later I discuss city accounts that indicate what aldermen required in seeking to improve and otherwise modify the built environment.

**Interior development**

This section discusses how functions were allocated on the basis of town hall’s material circumstances and spatial arrangement, as informed by the city accounts. It focuses first on the expansion and construction of buildings. This is important because the construction history of...
every town hall varies: whereas some town halls were purpose-built as either freestanding structures or adjoining other buildings, others made use of existing houses that the aldermen had bought or adapted. That is certainly the case with early examples. Consider Ghent’s relatively well-documented aldermen’s house of 1321, which was a renovated building. In this earlier period of this building’s history, plenty of space seems to have been dedicated to non-civic purposes. Indeed, some of its rooms were rented out as storage spaces. In later years, the magistrates and other officials required more office space, resulting in the incorporation of new properties. Only after 1481 an edifice was built specifically for the aldermen to use. The town hall in Aalst, by contrast, has always been a freestanding building in the midst of the city, located next to the market square. This was also the case in Gouda from 1450 onwards. The complex in Haarlem is different. It was built on the foundations of the count’s court. Having been bestowed upon the city of Haarlem during the reign of William V of Holland (1330-1389), the court had then burned down. By 1370, the municipality had erected a new town hall, which then consisted of just a single main hall. Later they needed to enlarge the edifice by building new structures. Leiden’s town hall differs considerably from the cases discussed above. Squeezed between other houses, the building was expanded by buying and renovating nearby properties.

Existing buildings were an important factor when it came to expanding and adapting town halls. These structures were located in the centre of the city. Whenever an empty field, square, or another possible construction site – such as in Haarlem – became available, it presented the possibility of building a separate, purpose-built edifice. In cities such as Ghent and Leiden, both existing town halls and sites for new constructions were surrounded by privately owned houses. Without doubt, existing physical boundaries and construction grounds partly determined the scope of renovations and adaptations. I will show, for instance, how ongoing changes to Leiden town hall’s interior make sense in terms of the hall’s gradual expansion and the integration of adjacent edifices. There are more similarities among the floor plans of purpose-built town halls. This implies a more direct approach to the integration of ideas about spatial logic. Various expansions and local circumstances aside, these buildings’ had similar main functions, which remained consistent up

25 Van Tyghem, Het stadhuis van Gent, 1:33.
28 William V gave part of the land to the Dominicans, whose convent was behind the former court. Thereafter they rented some of the spaces underneath the main floor in the erected town hall in between 1370 and 1388, until their monastery was rebuilt. Even so, in Haarlem a preceding town hall was located at the Great Market until 1370. Cerutti, Het stadhuis van Haarlem, 42, 47–52.
until the late fourteenth and fifteenth century. Older aldermen’s spaces were mainly used when a particularly spacious room was needed for deliberation. Such rooms were often called the council chamber. These chambers were not yet part of multifunctional and purpose-created governmental buildings; but the structures housed all principal governmental offices connected to the municipalities’ daily tasks. This changed in the fifteenth century, in which spaces that were specifically dedicated to distinct functions start to appear in cities’ accounts. During this period, buildings expanded and the number of separate spaces within them multiplied.

Tables 1.1-1.5 provide a chronology of certain spaces in five town halls up to the end of the fifteenth century. Besides indicating construction histories, the tables attest to the existence of spaces allocated specifically to civic functions, such as the council chamber and a writing room, as well as dining spaces. I have included rooms in the tables following their first mention in the city accounts, unless other sources (such as urban statutes or court records) clearly prove that they existed beforehand. City accounts, however, often indicate the first traceable construction works that either produced or took place in a given space. The tables show that some recurrent spaces (especially the public courtroom and the writing room), appear in the city accounts several years after the main construction was finished and the council chamber was in service. It is possible, of course, that certain chambers were not documented in the city accounts, or given new names but not new functions. After they are first mentioned, though, the rooms generally recur in descriptions of municipal expenses, suggesting that they were built or allocated and their names endured. The following sections explain how these town halls were expanded and reorganised, exploring examples of these activities in chronological order.

Of all the town halls under examination, Aalst’s is the oldest. It is also the only one to have a permanent location. Since 1225, the building’s basic contours have remained essentially the same. This is despite a great fire in 1360, which destroyed much of Aalst, and attacks from Louise van Male and soldiers from Ghent between 1380-85, which caused a significant amount of damage to the building (along with the loss of a great deal of documentation). Although extensive renovations began in 1407, Aalst’s city accounts mention a new council chamber for the first

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30 The edifices occasionally included meat halls in the lower levels or served as the city’s weight. I will explore the multifunctional dimension of town halls in later chapters. On the implications of this spatial fusion, see: J. Coomans, ‘In Pursuit of a Healthy City. Sanitation and the Common Good in the Late Medieval Low Countries’ (University of Amsterdam, 2018), 93–94.
31 For the selection of sources, see Introduction, 28-30. If existence of certain chambers preceding their first mention is likely, this is indicated in the tables through lighter colours.
32 Piot, ‘L’ancien Hôtel de Ville d’Alost’.
33 Nicholas, Medieval Flanders, 149.
time earlier, in 1403, when the aldermen ordered a new lock. It is therefore unclear whether the room was in use between 1385 and 1403; the accounts (which survive back to 1395) do provide no information with regard to this question. Most likely the organisation of building’s interior remained relatively constant through this period, save for the introduction of the public courtroom in 1407 (which I discuss in detail later). In 1451, however, costs for new windows in the so-called vertreccamere or deliberation room were itemised. Carpenters worked on a guards’ chamber in 1457, building an entrance and door. By then it seems that there was also a rentmeester or steward’s room, for it is recorded that it was newly decorated. In 1475 construction workers added wooden panels and a door inside the building, creating a space with ‘a small contour’ for use as a writing room. Whereas the attic stored food and probably cloth, the ground floor served as the city’s weighing house. Most expenses concerned the first level, the floor of the council chamber, which underwent major changes in the fifteenth century.

In Gouda, a great fire of 1438 destroyed an aldermen’s house, which contained a council chamber and public courtroom. The house is mentioned in a 1403 rentboeken (rent records) and the city’s first surviving accounts, which date to 1437. Shortly thereafter, city accounts refer to a vierschaar, implying that the aldermen used another building temporarily while the new town hall was being built. These construction works started in 1450 and went on for some years, during which the edifice was not fully functional. In 1456 city accounts mention a council chamber, writing chamber, and ‘backroom’ (aftercamer) as separate spaces. They also refer to an undefined plaque that was put up in the public courtroom. There were also other spaces. Cost items refer to an orphans’ chamber and clerk’s room in 1459 and 1461 respectively. Then, in 1495 and 1497, construction workers built a ‘new office’ and ‘frontal office’, which likely served as a writing room and treasury.

It is difficult to trace spaces dedicated to specific functions inside Haarlem’s town hall before 1417, the year of the first extant city account. Urban statutes of 1390, which concern

34 ARA, reg. 31415, f.64v.
35 ARA, reg. 31445, f.32v.
36 ARA, reg. 31451, f.31v; reg. 31469, f.90v.
39 SAMH, AC1.1136, f.23r, f.23v.
40 The orphans’ room was an office used by officials responsible for orphan care.
41 SAMH, AC1.1137, f.14v; 1138, f.24r; 1148, f.24v; 1160, f.25v; Denslagen, ‘Bijzondere gebouwen’, 221.
legislation on the carrying of arms, mention a measuring rod for knives that could be found in the public courtroom. This suggests a permanent space.\textsuperscript{42} Most of the building was taken up by the Gravenzaal, a large hall suitable for guests and feasts.\textsuperscript{43} In 1435 a debt collector was paid for carrying out his duties in the council chamber. It is clear, then, that the town hall had a council chamber, a public courtroom, and a space known as ‘small chamber’.\textsuperscript{44} The exact location of these rooms, however, remains unclear. New construction works took place in 1441, adding two buildings – a small and large public courtroom – to the front of the town hall.\textsuperscript{45} In 1454-57, another edifice was erected to provide space for what the city accounts call a ‘new chamber’, which consisted of two levels.\textsuperscript{46} One of the new spaces was the writing chamber, as cost items attest.\textsuperscript{47} This was the last large construction work that took place in the town hall in the fifteenth century, although other spaces appear in the city accounts around 1473-76. Amongst other things, the expenses concerned the construction of a chimney in the treasury, additions to the writing chamber, new windows in the burgomaster’s chamber, and the building of the messenger’s room.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{42} Huizinga, Rechtsbronnen der stad Haarlem, 39–41.
\textsuperscript{43} Cerutti, Het stadhuis van Haarlem, 55.
\textsuperscript{44} SAH, inv. no. 329, f.121v.
\textsuperscript{45} SAH, inv. no. 333, f.135v.
\textsuperscript{46} SAH, inv. no. 341, f.33r-f.34r; 342, f.43r-f.45r; 343, f.34r-34v.
\textsuperscript{47} SAH, inv. no. 343, f.34v.
\textsuperscript{48} SAH, inv. no. 348, f.57r; 350, f.72v; 361, f.123r.
Fig. 1.1. Ground floor plan of the town hall in Aalst, based on Joostens architects. Published in: C. Piot, ‘L’Ancien Hôtel de Ville d’Alost’ (1865). De indicated spaces are: (1) the weighing house; (2) the gebiedhuisje (publication platform); and (3) the belfry.

Fig. 1.2. Ground floor plan of the town hall in Gouda, taken from W. Denslagen, Gouda, 216-217. The walls indicated by vertical black stripes were built in 1450. Other depicted demarcations were created in 1517. (1) the location of the council chamber; (2) the location of the public courtroom.
In Leiden, the overall size of the town hall doubled in 1381, when the magistrates bought an edifice next to the original building (which predates 1350). However, the city accounts only mention an aldermen’s room in 1426. The accounts then designate a set of new spaces between 1449 and 1452. These include a council chamber, orphans’ chamber, and writing room. By this time there was a public courtroom, as expenses for a new lock in 1449 attest. Save for the inclusion of a meat hall and wanthuis (a predecessor of the cloth hall), which were allocated as part of a new construction of 1418, no further buildings were either bought or made until 1455. This indicates that space was made for the orphans’ chamber, for example, within the existing town hall. The city accounts record the construction of this chamber in 1449, noting that stone, wood, and chalk was used to build a wall and furnish its interior. It is impossible to trace exactly how the town hall building was reorganised, for the only other recorded construction works concern an attic above the orphans’ chamber. The orphans’ chamber must have been situated on the ground floor, for it included the door to the cellar. The writing room that was subsequently added in 1452 was again a significant undertaking. It seems to have been built over a considerable period.

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50 SAL, 0501, SA I, inv. no. 512-552, Rekeningen van de poortmeesters, later burgemeesters (1399-1476), 522, f.114r, included vestmeestersrekening, f.3v; 523, f.135r.
51 SAL, 0501, inv. no. 522, vestmeestersrekening, f.8r.
52 SAL, 0501, inv. no. 522, f.3v.
53 SAL, 0501, inv. no. 522, f.4r.
54 SAL, 0501, inv. no. 522, f.7r.
for it included a large amount of masonry work, new glass windows, and a door and lock.\textsuperscript{55} In 1455, Leiden’s council argued that the complex be expanded to create a new council room upstairs as well as a financial officer’s room, kitchen, reception hall, and eventually a new ‘front chamber’.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{55} SAL, 0501, inv. no. 523, f.135v.-f.136v.
\textsuperscript{56} SAL, 0501, inv. no. 524, f.164v; van Oerle, \textit{Leiden binnen en buiten de stadsvesten: de geschiedenis van de stedebouwkundige ontwikkeling binnen het Leidse rechtsgebied tot aan het einde van de gouden eeuw}, 1:88. ‘[O]m beneden een nuwe halle te maken voirden vreemde luyden, ende een koken diende ander stede huys, ende boven een raetcamer, ende een rekencamer vor den ouden burgemeesteren’ SAL, 0501, inv. no. 381, \textit{Vroedschapboek 1449-1458}, f.44r. (1455)
In 1481, a fight between two political factions – the Hoeken and Kabeljauwen – caused a fire, which ignited gun powder that was stored in the building. The town hall was partially destroyed, including the council chamber.\(^{57}\) It is unclear exactly the aldermen conducted their deliberations in the years following this incident, but cost items indicate ongoing renovations over a number of years. The council of Leiden created a small room on the town hall’s ground floor for the financial officers, given that the other chamber contained soot.\(^{58}\)

The gradual expansion of town halls, through the addition of both new buildings and new rooms, is also evident in the case of Ghent. The earliest buildings, which clearly contained the aldermen’s main meeting space, were known as the ‘aldermen’s chamber’ around 1321-22 and then the ‘council chamber’ from 1332.\(^{59}\) Apparently, the building was not large enough to accommodate extra offices, for in 1342 a new treasury was located in a building adjacent to the main edifice.\(^{60}\) Two newly allocated spaces appear in the expenses around 1357: a guards’ room and the Colatiecamere, a large upstairs hall that hosted the meetings of the Collatie, Ghent’s large council.\(^{61}\)

The guards’ chamber seems to have been a separate room, which was furnished with sleeping mattresses and fire-making facilities.\(^{62}\) In 1410 the city accounts refer to painting work conducted in a ‘middle room’, which was apparently next to the council chamber. It may have functioned as a deliberation room.\(^{63}\) Another space, known as the ‘new room’, was recorded in 1441. It may have been located on a main floor, for in 1472 construction workers built a new deliberation room ‘above the “new room” in the aldermen’s house of the Keure’.\(^{64}\) Van Tyghem has suggested that this new room was in an adjacent building. It might have served as temporary accommodation for the aldermen during building works, both around 1481 and after 1517. After all, this new room

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\(^{57}\) ‘So ist gheboirt dat die hele verdiepinghe van dye Raetcamer opgeboert is van der aerden, ende storte in een ogenblic weder neder ter aerden, overmits dat onder dese camer een grote verdiepinghe was daer bussen, boscruct endeende [...] ende tvier is onversiens in dit boscruct geocomen ende sloech dat huys ter neder’. Cornelius Aurelius, *De cronyscke van Hollandt, Zeelandt ende Vrieslant, met die cronike der biscoppen van Uutrecht (Divisiekroniek)*, ed. A. de Hamer, 2011, f.380r; Dröge, *Het stadhuis van Leiden*, 6.

\(^{58}\) The new room was also not known for its cleanliness, given that it was referred to as the location of the urinal corner. ‘[D]at men den pishoeck hiet’. SAL, 0501, inv. no. 382, Vredeschapsboek 1465-1504, fol. 122r. (1481)


\(^{60}\) Van Tyghem, 2:30.

\(^{61}\) This council consisted of representatives from the poorterij, the powerful weaver’s guild, and the smaller guilds. In addition to the magistrates, the council could easily convene a meeting of one hundred people. The council was primarily involved in monitoring the city’s finances, but could give compulsory legal and political advice too. Boone, *Gent en de Bourgondische borgten*, 28–33.


\(^{63}\) Van Tyghem, 2:46. The function of deliberation room is suggested by Martens, on account of its location. M. Martens, *De muurschilderkunst te Gent (12de tot 16de eeuw)* (Brussels, 1989), 164.

\(^{64}\) City accounts of 1472-73 also indicate this possibility in referring to a space ‘downstairs in the new room’. Van Tyghem, *Het stadhuis van Gent*, 2:98–100.
was isolated from the main council chamber, which would be integrated in the early sixteenth-century town hall. After 1481 the aldermen of the Keure, therefore, seem to have had two buildings at their disposal. That said, one was finished only in 1484, which has occasionally caused confusion in interpreting the expenses pertaining to these years.

The construction works at the Ghent town hall between 1481 and 1484 immediately resulted in the introduction of novel spaces, although it seems that was only in 1485 that an upstairs room in the collatiezolder was reserved to provide the landlord (castelein) with office space. In 1494 the financial officers (auditeurs) moved into a new room in an edifice adjacent to the existing town hall. The room was first bought around 1484; the functions it served before the auditeurs' arrival are unknown. The building was in need of renovation, as indicated by cost items including masonry and new windows. Between 1494 and 1499, the city accounts again mention construction works and the placement of windows, this time in a kitchen, an unspecified ‘white room’, the under clerk’s office, and the house ‘where the king of the children lives’. The so-called king was a city official; the magistrates entrusted him and his companions – the children – with tasks concerning urban sanitation in places that they deemed important for the common good and communal health. One such place was the square in front of the town hall. As figure 1.5 shows, the two spaces sited beside the 1481 town hall were working places for financial officials and possibly the under-clerk and ‘king of children’. Lastly, around 1501 city accounts mention a new kitchen and dining room, both furnished with new closets and windows. By 1516-17, the construction work on the new town hall had begun. Until then, the aldermen of the Keure had regularly acquired and adapted spaces. Of the complex that existed before 1516, only the building of 1481 remained, still housing the council chamber; all other structures were demolished.

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65 Van Tyghem, *Het stadhuis van Gent*, 1:75.
67 Van Tyghem, 2:142.
68 Van Tyghem, 1:93.
69 Van Tyghem, 2:148.
70 Van Tyghem, 2:148–51. There is no explanation of what is meant by the ‘white chamber’. Possibly it is an alternative name for a deliberation room, in contrast to a colourful decorated room (the council chamber). In the Old Palace of Westminster in London, which goes back to the fourteenth century, the parliament met in the Painted Chamber, whereas the Lords held their deliberations in the White Chamber. [https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/originofparliament/birthofparliament/overview/meetingplaces/](https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/originofparliament/birthofparliament/overview/meetingplaces/)(visited 14-01-2020).
73 Van Tyghem, 1:96.
Clearly, town halls were not homogeneous and did not contain a fixed amount of designated spaces. Whereas some types of room can be found in all of the town halls under study here, others were rather specific. Every town hall contained a council chamber, public courtroom, and writing room. That said, writing rooms were only documented relatively late (after 1433 in Ghent; between 1452 and 1455 in Gouda, Leiden, and Haarlem; and after 1475 in Aalst). Another example of a type of room that emerges in the city accounts is the *vertreccamer*, in which the aldermen would gather for private deliberation. Although these sources only occasionally mention this room, it was generally present. It would seem that a space of this kind and the name it was given were not only new, but becoming indispensable. Other common spaces were guards’ rooms, orphans’ chambers, and storage spaces (attics, cellars, and sheds). Although city accounts do not mention a burgomaster’s chamber, clerks chamber, or treasury in all cases, these rooms were common by the end of the fifteenth century. Only occasionally do the accounts refer to separate spaces for kitchens, urinals, or dining places. The basic town hall, therefore, initially consisted of a council chamber. Public courtrooms began to appear towards the end of the fourteenth century; by the early fifteenth century they were a key feature of town halls. Along with the writing room, the council chamber and public courtroom remain steady interior spaces across different town halls. More specific rooms can be found in the city accounts in the years following the construction of a new town hall or addition of new buildings to the existing complex. Although there were many similarities in basic spaces, this history underlines the fluidity of town hall structures, with frequent spatial reorganisations and an increasing variation of offices by the end of the fifteenth century.

City accounts reveal that alongside the civic architectural contest among town halls in the Low Countries, there was also a relatively steady expansion and development of their interior spaces. Just as before the onset of intercity competition, these spaces fulfilled the foremost functions of the medieval town hall: namely those of providing a place in which people can gather and debate with the aldermen and, subsequently, for administering justice. In the fifteenth-century town halls were expanded or reorganised so as to include more spaces with specifically allocated roles. These projects occurred in phases and did not entail the acquisition of new buildings or construction of purpose-built town halls. Indeed, it is likely that many of the new spaces were made by means of physical demarcations and furnishing within existing rooms. This will be my focus in the following sections.
Fig. 1.5. Plans of the town hall (Keure) of 1482-1484 and 1500-1502, taken from F. van Tyghem, *Het stadhuis van Gent* Vol. I (Brussels 1978) 77, 94.
Demarcations

Around 1484 Ghent’s town hall consisted of one main building with a spiral staircase climbing one side. As the 1488 expenses indicate, the council chamber was accessible through a portal and ‘storey through which they entered and left the aldermen’s room through the back’. Van Tyghem presents a plan featuring one spacious room and the city accounts do not mention any interior demarcations. That said, a wall divided the old town hall’s first floor at the time of the nineteenth-century renovations. Yet the city accounts contain different names of spaces. The picture that emerges is quite unlike the open halls depicted by Van Tyghem, who, unable to find evidence confirming either the absence or presence of demarcations, intentionally left the question of interior organisation unanswered. In this section, I demonstrate that walls and partitions existed, at least in the other town halls examined in this study. They were important material factors in the constitution of such buildings. Not only did they create different offices with specific characteristics within the building; they also determined sound and movement.

Fortunately, medieval construction works are indicated on the ground floor plan of Gouda’s town hall. We can postulate, therefore, that a stone wall separated (parts of) the building at both the front and the back. The city accounts mention no expenses for a portal in 1455, which suggests a solid wall. The 1865 floor plan of Aalst’s town hall (fig. 1.1) shows demarcations from the nineteenth-century. These do not correspond with the later medieval organisation of the space, save for its circumference. In reconstructing the spatial organisation and interior demarcations of the building, I have therefore relied on city accounts and their descriptions of what was built. Not all cost items concerning construction works give clear indications as to the built environment. Some assumptions can be made, however, based on examples relating to various town halls. Cost items from Aalst in 1456, for instance, describe that for the deliberation room carpenters built a ‘double wall’ and an oaken entrance with a door. The same chamber was mentioned previously in the city accounts of 1451. It follows that these works adapted an existing room so as to fulfil the magistrates’ needs. These needs were recognised by the clerk who wrote the cost items down. As we shall see in chapter 2, demarcations such as this addressed the aldermen’s need for

75 Van Tyghem, 1:532.
76 SAMH, AC1.1135, f.22r; AC1.1136, f.23r.
77 The stairs, as visible on the plan, were placed in the same era. P. Devos, De gemeentehuizen van Oost-Vlaanderen. Band 1, Inventaris van het kunstpatrimonium van Oost-Vlaanderen, XVI (Ghent, 1982), 54–56.
78 ARA, reg. 31450, f.50v, f.56r.
confidentiality. In 1457 a woodworker widened the entrance to the guards’ chamber and placed a
door, which suggests that a demarcated space already existed.79

In 1474 the aldermen paid two persons for carpentry work, which would result in a new
office.80 The woodworker Pieteren den Monic finished the office in 1475 by making wooden
panels to enclose the new writing room.81 Den Monic had also constructed two wooden windows
in the scutsel of the council chamber. This was done, the accounts indicate, so that the aldermen
could open them during mass. The mass was held in their chambers but through these two
windows also visible to those standing in the frontal space.82 This clearly indicates that there was
a separation on the first floor, where the council chamber was located. Accounts of 1481-82
confirm this, for they too mention that a painter was paid to polish and paint a partition between
the guards’ and council’s chambers.83 Several chambers in Aalst, then, were separated in different
ways, often involving wood. Indeed, most of the hired persons were woodworkers. This was also
the case Ghent, where, for instance, a woodworker made a new office in the town hall in 1471.84
In Gouda an artisan made a bescot in 1488. Although this possibly means wooden cladding, it was
likely a partition between different rooms.85 Some city accounts also suggest that wooden
demarcations could be altered – for instance, by adding a second wall – or rearranged. In 1474 in
Aalst, a new oak scutsel was made in the deliberation room for ‘convenience’, followed by the
addition of a door to a former porch.86

The fact that the sources indicate the presence of wooden demarcations and only a small
number of stone separations in the sources, suggests that the town halls’ interiors were largely
organised using moveable materials. Building archaeologist Kate Giles states that in pre-modern

79 ARA, reg. 31451, f.31v.
80 ‘Inde derde weke van octobre wrachten ende temmerden de vorn. Michiel ende Joos Brugman int seepenen huus
ende begonsten daer te makene een contoirkin’. ARA, reg. 31468, f.93v.
81 ‘Item was bi den vors. voorsaten besteed an Pietren den Moninc te makene ende te scuttene van spierschen houte
een scryfeamerkijn binnen Seepehen huuse an de deure met eene ekene contoire omme’. ARA, reg. 31469, f.90v.
82 ‘Item betaelt Pieteren den Monic, scrynmakere, van ghemaect thebbene twee nieuwe spiersche veynstren int scutsel
van seepehen camer omme die oepen te doene als men messe doet upden voors. autaer ten hende dat de liede van
buiten den dienst zouden moghen zien doen up den vorsten zoldere’. ARA, reg. 31462, f.44r. In 1480, for example, a
man called Henricke van Vreghem, in service of the council chamber, was paid to officiate mass on a daily basis. ARA,
reg. 31474, f.30v.
83 ‘Item es besteedt gheweest an Gooric den Baut scildere te varwene ende te prumierne met gheluwer olyvarwe
tscutsele tusschen seepehen camere ende der waeccamere’. ARA, reg. 31475, f.42r.
84 Van Tyghem, Het stadhuis van Gent, 2:98.
85 SAMH, AC1.1152, f.16r.
86 ‘Betaelt Pietren Warrant, scrynmakere, over zine stoffe ende handghedade van ghemaect thebbene van spierschen
houte een afscutsele inde vertrec camere upt seepenen huus gaende ten aysemente ende van makene eene deure in
doude poortael’. ARA, reg. 31468, f.93r.
English guildhalls, portable wooden panels served to demarcate different spaces. City accounts strongly suggest that this was also the case in fifteenth-century Aalst and likely Ghent and Gouda too. Wood’s relative perishability as compared with stone might explain why interior demarcations are absent from town hall plans generated through archaeological research. It also explains why the lack of stone load-bearing walls on the ground floor of town halls (as those same plans indicate) did not prohibit material partitions on upper floors. The possibility that wooden panels might have been used for interior organisation suggests that a considerable number of spaces could have been constructed in single halls.

With regard to Leiden and Haarlem, in all probability different chambers were separated by means of stone constructions. In Leiden, the addition to the town hall came in the form of adjacent buildings (likely built in stone). In Haarlem, the additional chambers were in newly built spaces next to the existing hall, clearing the latter for daily business. But here too city accounts hint at the possibility of wooden enclosures. For example, in 1482 a clerk convinced Haarlem’s magistrates to pay for a wooden railing to be built in the writing room. This expense indicates another form of interior demarcation used in town halls: semi-permanent railings that were generally used to separate the public courtroom from its built environment.

The interior public courtroom

In the fifteenth century, legal proceedings largely took place indoors. Temporary open-air court spaces lasted until the late Middle Ages. They were sited in a wide variety of locations, including under a venerated oak or linden tree, just outside the city gate, in a cemetery, in front of churches, at crossroads, in market squares, close to landmarks such as market crosses, and – as was the case in Leiden – on coloured stones in the streets. Local courts in the countryside could still hold session in the open air, with no fixed days or composition of members, presided over by that district’s bailiff. For this reason, scholars have occasionally misinterpreted the *vierschaar* as a...

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88 ‘Jannes van Yeck, clerck, van dat hij vanden steden wegen verleit ende betaelt heeft te weten eerst eenen kistemaker van een houtten tralye in die scrijfcamer te maken’. SAH, inv. no. 367, f.152v.
90 See for example fifteenth-century Drenthe. P. Hoppenbrouwers, *Village Community and Conflict in Late Medieval Drenthe* (Turnhout, 2018), 101.
temporary outdoor space or a temporary indoor structure that was used only sporadically. Confusingly, 1391 Leiden’s city accounts give an example of a temporary courtroom construction. When the carpenter Jacop Coenraetssoen built and broke down a vierschaar in four days, he also received payment to ‘occlude’ the room. This possibly concerned a temporary construction. However, the bescieten of the room, which in this context means ‘to close’ or ‘to cover’, neither clarifies the location of the vierschaar nor indicates whether the courtroom was built in a chamber or demarcated or altered by covering or closing down another space. In other words, the expenses could imply either a construction or partition that temporarily served to demarcate a legal space. Technically speaking, the records’ wording does not even rule out an exterior court: the building of the vierschaar and enclosure of the space could have concerned two different tasks. Indeed, in Leiden court sessions went on being held outdoors on the blauwe steen (the blue stone in the main street, close to the town hall). A record of 1463 indicates that the city ordered a ‘stone to lay the captive upon, and where one may judge, as one usually does on the blue stone, according to the laws of the city’.

The public procedure by which people were deprived of their citizenship took place at that location until at least 1574. And although criminals were no longer beheaded at the blue stone after 1464 (but rather in the courtyard of the Gravensteen, the city’s prison), the gallows were sited there until at least around 1613. By the fifteenth century, however, the regular court sessions in the vierschaar were held indoors, in a more-or-less permanent construction, as was the case in other cities. These interior public courtrooms were markedly different. Still, despite differences in terms of location and layout, they always included a physical partition. After all, the word vierschaar itself derives its meaning from the public court’s original, clearly recognisable material shape: a space demarcated on four (vier) sides by benches, ropes, or fences. Public courtrooms were often easily accessible to a larger public, whether because they were located close to the main entrance of a given town hall or in an edifice outside the main complex (as in the case of Haarlem). Aalst, however, was different. Given that the ground floor of the town hall contained the weighing house,

91 See e.g. Martyn, ’Painted Exampla Iustitiae’, 352.
93 See bescieten in the MNW.
94 ‘[V]anden stien om die gevangen dair te leggen. Ende datmen dair op die plaetse soude rechten mogen, geliken men opjen blauwen stien gewonenic is te doen naden recht vander stede, dat dan die stede die stien op maken soude’. SAL, inv. no. 530, f.102v.
95 J. Orlers, Beschrijvinge der stad Leyden (Leiden, 1614), 35–36, 613.
96 Mulcahy, Legal Architecture, 86.
the aldermen organised public courtroom sessions on the first floor, which had several functions. City accounts of 1565 mention that the vierschaar had previously been situated in the same area as the council chamber. Expenditure on the physical shape of the public courtroom indicates that there was a permanent space within the council chamber. In 1407 (in the first reference to the vierschaar in the city accounts) cost items show that the public courtroom consisted of a raised platform and a stone wall, although the latter may not have extended all the way to the ceiling. Physical access to the vierschaar was regulated by means of a 'little door', which suggests that the courtroom was enclosed on all sides, even if it remained partially open on the vertical axis. This construction remained until at least the sixteenth century: in 1531 woodworkers repaired the benches used during court sessions and created new wooden enclosures.

Both Gouda’s and Ghent’s public courtrooms share a number of key features with Aalst’s. They were often located in the same space as the council chamber. In Gouda’s town hall between 1437 and circa 1455, a verhemelte or canopy covered part of the council room and city accounts refer to two windows within the vierschaar. Here too the public courtroom was an assigned place, marked by a canopy, that shared the space with the council chamber. One space was therefore used for different functions. This partly changed when a plaque (bearing an unknown inscription) was placed in the vierschaar around 1456, suggesting a permanent location. By 1517 at the latest there was an enclosure with a door. In 1405, Ghent’s public courtroom was also demarcated by means of a canopy in the town hall (the aldermen’s house of the Keure). A few years later, woodworkers and masons altered the space, erecting a wooden enclosure and seats for the aldermen. By this time the public courtroom clearly had a set location and probably a permanent inventory too. The possibility remains, though, that the chairs and partitions could be removed and the courtroom’s shape altered. In a few places Ghent’s city accounts refer to a temporary vierschaar elsewhere. This is the case with entries for 1433 and 1438, for instance, when the law court used a construction in the town hall’s chapel and the collatiezolder on several occasions. Most of the time, however, the law court assembled on the main floor of the town hall, as ongoing

97 ‘[I]nde groote camere van scepena daermen vierscare houdt’. ARA, reg. 31546, f.29r.
98 ARA, reg. 31418bis, f.66v.
99 ‘Item naghele ende hanseele vanden dorkine inde vierscaere’. ARA, reg.31418bis, f.72r. Specifically, the word dorkine means ‘little door’. See dore in the MNW, and the diminutive dorkijne.
100 ARA, reg. 31513, f.29v; 31515, f.27r.
101 ‘Item gegheven Jelis Paerlaey van die raetkamer die een helft boven teverhemelen ende van twee ramen in die vierscaer’. Heinsius, ‘De oudst-bewaarde stadsrekening van Gouda’, 315.
102 ‘Item gegeheven Jelis Paerlaey van die raetkamer die een helft boven teverhemelen ende van twee ramen in die vierscaer’. Heinsius, ‘De oudst-bewaarde stadsrekening van Gouda’, 315.
103 Van Tyghem, Het stadhuis van Gent, 2:44.
104 Van Tyghem, 2:47, 50.
105 Van Tyghem, 2:67, 70.
expenses on benches and chairs indicate. A city account of 1470 suggests that these assemblies took place inside, in the frontal part of the hall. It mentions a gold-coloured railing or fence in the windows on the side of the vierschaar. The fact that this railing was on the street side of the building can be extrapolated from a decree sent by Maximilian in 1480. In the decree, he orders a culprit to place a head cast from metal in the town hall, as part of the sentence he received for infringing upon Ghent’s jurisdiction (I elaborate on this example in chapter 4). It specified that the head would be placed ‘in the wall, on the street side of the aldermen’s house of the Keure, above the railing’. In housing both the public courtrooms and council chamber in the same space, the case of Ghent resembles several other town halls. In Mechelen, for instance, the vierschaar was located on the main floor at street level, with an adjacent council chamber (and a deliberation room upstairs). Another example is the town hall of Den Briel, whose fifteenth-century layout had much in common with Gouda’s main floor: directly behind the main entrance was a lobby containing a public courtroom, and there was also a council chamber in the back of the building.

Railings and other partial enclosures were a prominent part of fifteenth-century public courtroom constructions. At one level, this indicates that separation and the ability to restrict access to the vierschaar was important. At another, though, it suggests that people outside the demarcated space had the opportunity to observe and listen to court sessions. This was true of many public courtrooms, even if they were situated in different parts of their respective town halls. This can be brought into focus by comparing the cases of Leiden and Haarlem. In Leiden, the vierschaar had a permanent place on the ground floor of one of the edifices in the town hall complex. In 1449 cost items refer to the courtroom’s entrance, although it is unclear whether this concerned a door at the front of the building or inside. What is known is that by 1495 a lock had been replaced on the vierschaar’s railing. This suggests the prior existence of such an enclosure. During the construction of two courtroom buildings in front of the Haarlem town hall, carpenters included a lock on the larger vierschaar, which suggests a partition. An enclosure is visually depicted in another source: a painting of Christ before Pilate, which made for the Haarlem council chamber between 1465 and 1480 (see chapter 4). The anonymous painter had depicted a clear wooden demarcation, with railings and a small door. Similarly, in the early sixteenth century

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106 In 1476 again referred to as ‘der traeyle dienende in scepenen camera vander kuere’. Van Tyghem, 2:97, 103.
107 ‘Stellene inden muer voren der straten van scepenen huuse van der keure, boven der traillile’. J. Cannaert, Bydragen tot de kennis van het oude strafrecht in Vlaanderen, verryckt met vele tot dusverre onuitgegevene stukken (Ghent, 1835), 127–29.
108 Köhl, Das Brüsseler Rathaus, 40–41.
109 P. Don, Voorne-Putten (Zwolle, 1992), 94.
110 SAL, inv. no. 522, see the included Vestmeestersrekeningen, f.8r.
111 ‘[E]en nuwe slot gemaict an die tralye van die vierschaer’. SAL, inv. no. 564, f.148v.
112 SAH, inv. no. 332, f.167r.
the Dutch engraver and painter Pieter Jansz. Saenredam (1597-1665) portrayed some key material features in his image of Haarlem’s town hall (see fig. 1.6 for an engraving based on this painting, showing these features even more clearly). On this image, the front of the ‘large vierschaar’ features arcades, with a small wall running between the pillars, complemented with a railing on top. The depiction bears striking resemblances with Saenredam’s 1657 oil painting of Amsterdam’s old town hall, which included a public courtroom with a stone enclosure and iron fences. As in the image of Haarlem’s town hall, these are located at the front of the building.¹¹³

![Fig. 1.6. Fragment of Gezicht op de Grote Markt met het stadhuis te Haarlem by Jan van de Velde, based on Pieter Jansz. Saenredam, 1628. Rijksmuseum collection online: no. RP-P-OB-15.533](image)

It is possible to make some general statements regarding the location and materiality of public courtrooms in this period. First, these legal spaces were located in either the main hall of a given town hall, which often also functioned as the council chamber, or a separate space located on the market square. Second, town halls made similar outlays on enclosing or covering these spaces. Demarcations, doors, benches, and railings both mark the permanent presence of interior courtroom space and allowed it to remain adaptable. The doors and circumference (built in

wooden or stone) ensured both the enclosure of the space and the visibility of trials held within it, facilitated by the railings.

Town hall inventories

Construction histories of town halls that emphasise the buildings’ exteriors present an incomplete picture in that they ignore the more complex and equally fluid ways in which interiors were organised. Moreover, as the next section argues, scholarly understandings of these spaces can be further informed by tracing the purposes allotted to these rooms and how people shaped and responded to these functions. I investigate these topics in later chapters. The purposes ascribed to these spaces – which defined the very character of the spaces with which I am concerned in this study – hinged on what they contained, their inventory.

To prevent confusion, I use the terms ‘inventory’ or ‘equipment’ in preference to ‘household’. Scholars have used the household to refer to goods brought together for the use of individuals belonging to a given house. This is justified insofar that the term is used in the sources of the period under study (in the Low Countries the term *huisraet* was common). However, the buildings in which households (in the sense of people living together) resided were constituted by means of furniture and equipment. The groups of people that used town halls changed rapidly, not least because urban magistracies were regularly reformed and different officials used different spaces. Objects and facilities in the town hall were thus intended for general rather than personal use, although they many items and rooms were suited to specific activities. What function accorded to each space, aside that suggested by the name it was given, can therefore be interpreted by focusing on the furniture and equipment it contained.

Tables, candles, chairs, benches, chests, and closets: this is all that Gouda’s city accounts offer when it comes to common objects. In other cities, the list extends to include bells or cloth, but essentially attest to little more than practical furniture that the city aldermen and their aides would needed to in their administrative functions. City accounts regularly contain hints to inventories. Occasionally, a specific inventory indicates the magnitude of a city. This is especially the case with regard to the largest town under study, Ghent. Sometimes they mention the use of a specific closet, for instance. Here I attend to the spaces traced in the preceding sections of this chapter, touching upon the assumed connection between these chambers’ form and function. This section, then, explores inventory, approaching different parts of the town hall as spaces containing

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114 For this discussion, see: S. Rees Jones et al., ‘The Later Medieval English Urban Household’, *History Compass* 5, no. 1 (2007): 120. For ‘household’ in Middle Dutch, see the different variations of *huisraad* via the MNW.
115 SAMH, AC1.1136, f.23r; 1141, f.26v; 1160, f.25v.
practical objects. Of course, items such as tables or chests are portable. More specific functions
defined in the city accounts help connect specific objects to places, actors, and uses. In Aalst, for
instance, a trunk was labelled as belonging to the aldermen (seepehen couffre). This suggests that in
all probability it was used in the council room or possibly the deliberation room.\footnote{ARA, reg. 31413, f.37r.}

On other occasions the accounts reveal an object’s location, such as the scapraede in scepenen
camere (the closet in the aldermen’s room) or, more specifically still, der siege daer seepehen sitten in hare
camere (the chair in which the aldermen sit in their chamber).\footnote{ARA, reg. 31415, f.64v; 31427, f.115r.} Objects also illuminate the
functionality of spaces. For instance, in 1422 the stewards of Aalst furnished their office in the
small room up in the tower. To store the city accounts and all letters and books concerning the
city, they made use of the two ‘fine closets’ that were already in place. To make more space, they
moved some cannonballs that had been stored in the office to the town hall’s attic.\footnote{‘Int camerkin boven Lauwers Clercx torreken so hebben dontfanghers ghemaect een contoir dat daer toe eerst
gheordenneirt ende ghemaect was. So wel blyct met II sconene almarissen omme nu voortan daer in den staet vander
rekenynghe vander stede te houdene ende alle manieren van brieven ende bouken der stede aengaende te slutene. Int
welke contoir vele dunder bussteen laghen die gherumt ende uutghedaen syn ende coste te rumene ende boven up
den selder van seepehen huus te draghene, 4 s.’ ARA, reg. 31427, f.108v.} That same
year, a man called Gossin den Vriesen reinforced three closets. Two belonged to the stewards and
the other to the council chamber, which contained the ‘main verdicts’. Den Vriesen affixed
wooden plates to the inside of the closets and fitted them with a locking system and two ‘proper
thick doors’.\footnote{‘Item so waren de almarissen, te wetene de II in tcontoir vors. ende een in seepehen camere daer dhooftvonnessen
alle in ligghen, binnen ghescut met spierschen berdren met II loke ende II goede dicke dueren’. ARA, reg. 31427,
f.109r.} Similarly, magistrates ordered storage for public courtrooms. In 1440 in Haarlem,
for instance, carpenters made a chest, with an additional plate and iron band, and a closet, which
was also strengthened with iron.\footnote{SAH, inv. no. 332, f.166v, f.167r.} Clearly there was a need to keep documents and other items
safe. Indeed, details pertaining to the objects make it possible to relate them to specific spaces,
persons, and functions.\footnote{In the next chapter I examine the lock system, doors, and location of a closet in a tower.} The council chamber was clearly also used as a space in which justice
was administered, for it contained a closet storing verdicts. Similarly, the stewards of Aalst, who
were responsible for tax collection, had access to closets containing the city accounts, for they
needed to store their calculations.

Means of communication also appear in city accounts, which clearly indicate the
administrative importance of town halls. In Aalst, plaques displayed the names of aldermen,
stewards, and clerks,122 fees for aldermen and lawyers,123 bakers’ names and signatures,124 and the rates at which coins were converted into the local currency (the Vlaamse Groot).125 The other case studies were similar in this regard. Leiden’s city accounts, for instance, mention chairs and a chest in which the burgermeesters could lock up their books and accounts.126 The aldermen of Haarlem had plaques resembling those in Aalst, which they used to display the laws of the city (keuren), ordinances, and currencies.127

It seems that above all else the spaces used by city officials were set up to meet their administrative needs. Seen from this perspective, the council rooms were almost completely identified with the administrative tasks performed and decisions taken in them. This is reflected in the items they stored. Many of the rooms that I discuss suggest that space was used pragmatically. Consider the list of expenses from Haarlem in 1440 that I mentioned above, which includes a wooden stave. This stave, the account notes, was used to store buckets in the public courtroom.128 In 1378 one hundred buckets were bought for the town hall Ghent, and in 1448 the aldermen of Leiden noted that there were many buckets in the council chamber. This firefighting equipment, as Janna Coomans suggests, can be interpreted as materially representing a fight for the common good, in this case concerning the danger of fires, which posed a threat to the entire city.129 Whatever its metaphorical significance, such inventory also emphasises the town hall’s practical uses. These buildings frequently served as storage spaces. Grain, cloth, and later artillery was kept in the attic in Aalst.130 Carpenters also made a wooden construction for storing firewood.131 Wine jugs could be found in the cellars of Ghent’s town hall, which came in handy when the magistrates received guests, whom they presented with gifts of wine.132 Money paid for light sources and fireplaces also serves to highlight the practical dimensions of town hall inventory.133 Cloth is another prominent material in the accounts. It was used to decorate chairs and tables in several

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122 ARA, reg. 31438, f.102v.
123 ARA, reg. 31422, f.35v.
124 ARA, reg. 31477, f.38r.
125 ARA, reg. 31479, f.24v.
126 SAL, inv. no. 524, f.165r; 525, f.113r.
127 SAH, inv. no. 231, f.129v; 332, f.167r; f.36v; 353, f.38r; 354, f.39r; 360, f.72v.
128 ‘Item om een sparre dair met die emmers in de vierschair an hanget gegheven’. SAH, inv. no. 332, f.166v.
130 See e.g. ARA, reg. 31475, f.100r.
131 ARA, reg. 31443, f.68r.
133 This is visible in almost every year of the city accounts, which specify that light was needed during the night, see e.g. ARA, reg. 31458, f.35; van Tyghem, Het stadhuis van Gent, 2:33.
spaces, especially council rooms.  Although cloth might have provided comfort and ornamentation, it served as a form of insulation too. Town halls, after all, must have been cold on occasion, as the high expenditure on heating attests. For instance, a cloth canopy was used in Leiden, but not all year round. It was stored in the chimney during summer, and then brought out and hung up in the room during winter. In Aalst, the aldermen’s working spaces were overlaid with green cloth. Aside from decorative purposes, cloth was used for comfort in council chambers, which were often the largest and most frequently used room in these buildings.

Whereas many scholars have shown how town halls’ exteriors were festooned with the iconography of economic and political power, attending to inventory highlights the importance of practical organisation to town halls. So far I have focused upon furniture and its function. Pieces of furniture appear in large quantities in the city accounts. Town hall inventories did, of course, contain images and art objects. I discuss their use and symbolic meanings in chapter 4, for the interpretation of these images bears upon the ways in which town halls functioned. They are also related to procedures and behaviour within town halls, which I discuss in chapters 2 and 3. In this chapter I have emphasised that in the first instance spaces were furnished pragmatically but also strategically. Town halls had storage facilities for office equipment and documentation, as well as building materials, firewood, gun powder, cloth, and grain. Considering the increasing number of fixed demarcations inside these buildings, and the allocation of furniture for specific functions, the inventory of town halls can be seen as materially representing the administrative tasks that were carried out in the building.

Conclusions

The history of how town halls were built and used concerns not only their overall architectural structure and external embellishment, but their interior spatial functions and organisation too. The expansion of town halls complexes and allocation of new spaces with specific functions suggest that these buildings often have complicated and contingent histories. Moreover, additions to town halls’ spaces were being displaced and reorganised. In that sense, both modern scholars and contemporary chroniclers have been right to stress how town halls’ interiors differ from their façades. These interiors were organised in pursuit of a distinct order. New spaces were included in

134 ARA, reg. 31488, f.34; 31475, f.37r; SAL, inv. no. 427, f.134; SAH, inv. no. 340, f.41r, 350, f.71v; Van Tyghem, 2:137.
135 ‘Item Dirc Allairts zoen voirscreven gegeven van twie yseren haken mit twie oghen om des winterdages dat verhemelt dair an te hangen dat tsumers staet in die schoorstien op die nyeuwe camer’. SAL, inv. no. 530, f.153v.
136 ARA, reg. 31448, f.34r.
phases. They did not necessarily entail that new buildings be acquired or built; many were created by relocating or dividing existing rooms.

Certain spaces, especially council chambers and public courtrooms, tended to be positioned in a particular way and involved particular material elements. During the fifteenth century the *vierschaar*, which had traditionally been site outside, was moved indoors. Henceforth it was located inside the town hall and became recognisable by the way in which its space was materially and conceptually organised. Most commonly, the courtroom could be found in the same hall as the council chamber or adjacent to it, separated by a stone or wooden division. Haarlem and Leiden present divergent cases in this regard. The construction history of Leiden’s town hall involved a series of connected houses, with an upstairs council chamber and building at street level, which served as a courtroom. In Haarlem, the magistrates placed the courtroom in purpose-built edifice in front of the main hall. Nonetheless, all of the courtrooms have a similar structure: small walls, fences or railings, and a little door.

New spaces and demarcations between chambers developed in increasingly analogous ways. Despite the variety of material circumstances under which town halls were built and took shape – available plots, possibilities for expansion, existing walls, and structures made by previous carpenters and users – some general ideas can be discerned. As I discuss in the following chapters, there was only so much freedom when it came to deciding what could be built. Urban dwellers expected transparency in how the town hall functioned, especially with regard to matters of justice and politics; and existing legal and political treatises and rituals also impacted decisions or even suggested foundations for newly constructed spaces.

There are also similarities among the selected town halls when it comes to the spaces’ inventory. Town halls provided storage space, mostly for utilitarian objects such as chairs, benches, and closets. These served the purposes of the urban administration. It is unsurprising, then, that construction works and the acquisition of furniture went on continuously, adapting the building to its users’ changing needs and, occasionally, their more specific desires. Together, these newly built and adapted elements suggest that these buildings’ interiors were organised in a functional and adaptable way, accommodating for the tasks of town hall officials and visitors. Moreover, interior organisation had implications for accessibility to the buildings, its uses and significance in legal and political procedures, ideas about order and disorder and their applications, and the ways in which all of this was imagined. I will explore these themes in the following three chapters.