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Beyond the façade

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

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Conclusion

At some time or another, most people living in cities today have entered a town hall, whether to apply for a new passport or driver's license, get married, obtain a birth certificate, or register as a new resident of the city. The last time I entered Amsterdam's town hall, however, it was for none of these reasons. I used it as a passageway, for the ground floor lobby connects the Waterlooplein market with streets on all sides of the building. Electric sliding doors provide easy access. In the public area behind those doors, one can pay a visit to a passport photographer or walk to the attached ballet and opera venue. The council chamber is on the first floor. Unless the council opts for a secluded meeting, audiences are allowed to take a seat on the balcony without registration. As I see it, the fact that the building is an open space, which can be used for services, is important, for it emphasises the town hall's public character. The current city administration, it seems, feels the same way. Like its counterpart in Leiden, which I discussed in the introduction, Amsterdam's town hall is being renovated. The municipality aims to make its public areas more accessible by creating space for food markets, events, and exhibitions. In this way, they mean to establish a more open, lively, and co-created space.¹ It remains to be seen how different people will take up this space; as of yet, it is unclear how public this space will eventually become. After all, the town hall will be regulated to a certain extent, with limitations on entrance times and demonstrations, for instance. Moreover, there will be no free commercial space: market traders must pay rent on a monthly basis. Vendors who need to move from the Waterlooplein have already complained about the high prices. In any case, how public are spaces of commerce?² Still, the renovation plan's emphasis on the building's public character and multiple functions is noteworthy, especially given that people can request or apply for most documents via the internet or witness council meetings through online streams. Despite this, the city administration imagines the town hall as an accessible meeting space.

In the Low Countries, town halls came into existence during the late Middle Ages, when municipalities needed to claim and communicate political legitimacy. More than that, though, town halls and the ways in which they are used express how authorities relate to the urban societies they

¹ www.amsterdam.nl/projecten/stadhuis-verbouwt/; <https://architectenweb.nl/nieuws/artikel.aspx?ID=46049> (visited 29-08-2020)

² 'Het kranige verweer van de verkopers op het Waterlooplein', *Het Parool* (20-01-2017). There is clear tension between the desire for co-created place, and the possible quasi-private aspect of commercial activities. D. Harvey, *Rebel Cities. From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London, 2012), 3–26.

govern and vice versa. That goes as much for today as then. Medieval town halls in the Low Countries, like their contemporary equivalents, were multifunctional. They housed public services and served as sites for the administration of justice. They also hosted market activities and were frequently visited by a variety of urban dwellers. Some of these visitors listened to council meetings or trials; others were clients or just passing by. Fifteenth-century magistrates demonstrated in various ways that the town hall was a public space. Nevertheless, they also regulated access and behaviour, attempting to determine and influence communication flows. Some citizens contested these boundaries, claiming space or interrupting meetings to advance their own interests. Magistrates and city inhabitants, then, negotiated the town hall's publicness, establishing behavioural expectations and shaping these buildings' meaning as public sites. Although magistrates curated the building – they chose what was built next, organised performances, and controlled interior spaces – other members of urban society contested these settings and therefore influenced town halls too.

This study has analysed the organisation of space and behaviour within the town hall as a process impacted by various actors. I have approached the town halls of the Low Countries (chiefly during the fifteenth century) from a comparative and multidisciplinary perspective. In so doing, I have expanded existing research by looking beyond town halls' front doors and façades. What is more, I have investigated the voices and actions of various urban inhabitants within the building, thus correcting the existing bias in favour of oligarchic structures and an all-too unilateral conception of urban governance. The fact that town halls were used by different people for various ends clearly created tensions between accessibility, efficient governance and judicial administration. Through their motivations, activities, and perceptions, governmental and non-governmental actors endowed the town hall with meaning when it came to both its practical and symbolic functions. Focusing on specific buildings, I have adopted a micro-spatial perspective. This vantage point shows how legal and political practices, as well as forms of contestation, engage in a delicate negotiation of socio-legal and political relations in the urban community. The built environment determined how historical actors could make or contest claims to authority, as well as how they could use open and closed spaces, objects, and visual messages.

In adopting these perspectives, this study contributes to recent scholarship on civic politics and town halls. Research in this area has gradually shifted its focus so as to see these buildings as a medium for the values of the urban community as a whole. The studies are heavily informed by debates around the concept of *Öffentlichkeit* (translatable as the public sphere, publicity, or

publicness) and visual symbolic communication.³ As I have argued, publicity in and around the town hall was a key aspect in shaping material and social environments; notions of publicity shaped patterns of inclusion and exclusion in the context of urban politics and justice. This only further underscores the effects of forms of negotiation and contestation between authorities and other members of urban society.

Moreover, the public space of the town hall was co-produced not only by people, but material agents too. By engaging with spatial and social theories, this study recognises the impact of material environments, laws, procedures, items of use, and artworks, in addition to human actors such as builders, officials, and circumstantial visitors. The ways in which town halls were used constantly changed, be it through human behaviours or material factors, such as a new wall. Although construction works often went on for long periods, from the perspective of this study every adaptation interrupted existing circumstances. For example, municipalities gradually started to stage urban courtroom sessions in the town hall itself, where it was given a permanent physical place. Theoretically, this space could be more readily controlled. Material and spatial interventions such as this shaped how town hall users (some of whom more privileged than others) moved and behaved. In what follows, I return to my contribution to overarching discussions, before exploring the possibilities for further research.

Town halls became common in the fifteenth-century Low Countries, developing into the main buildings in which urban governments, public services, and law courts were housing. Construction works on town halls and courtrooms (and the attendant employment) grew. There are multiple plausible reasons for this. Economic prosperity, available plots, but also other, more urgent factors (such as the need to rebuild following fires) might have played key roles. These more extreme factors, however, are relatively exceptional and hardly explain the ideas and needs according to which town hall interiors were designed and furnished. In chapter 1, therefore, I have focused on a different type of building history: one concerning interior material divisions and equipment. It shows how construction works were ongoing projects, highlighting analogous developments across the five town halls under study, as well as case-specific features. All town halls gradually came to contain fixed spaces, demarcations, and objects, based on specific desires. These spaces

³ Studies on *Öffentlichkeit* and the town hall mainly flourished in Germany and Central Europe, such as in Hungary. B. Szeghyová, 'The Topography of Justice. Symbols, Rituals, and the Representation of Urban Justice in Early Modern Northern Hungary', in *Faces of Community in Central European Towns: Images, Symbols, and Performances, 1400-1700*, ed. K. Horníčková (Langham, 2018), 68.

were included in phases, through practices of displacement and reorganisation. An increasing number of spaces were allotted specific locations in the buildings.

The council chamber and public courtroom of the different cities are particularly comparable in terms of how they were positioned and furnished. The urban courtroom moved into the town hall, where it had a permanent place. Public justice took place inside these buildings. Courtrooms were constructed so as to give audiences a place or maintained their visibility, through devices such as fences and railings. Whereas richly decorated town hall façades and high belfries suggest civic identity, pride, and prosperity, internal spaces and demarcations developed in a relatively gradual and pragmatic way. The objects that the buildings contained, such as chairs and closets, were also largely practical. These buildings served as office and storage spaces, in other words; this emphasises how they functioned as centres of public services and archives. Still, the array of these spaces, number of services provided within them, and way in which walls divided the building, all had implications for the buildings' accessibility and its uses. The ways in which town halls were organised also shaped how they served as a stage for legal and political procedures and how magistrates and others applied ideas about order and disorder.

Having shown how the materiality of town hall interiors gradually developed, I argue that these changing conditions should be a key point of departure in the study of social networks in and around the town halls of the late-medieval Low Countries. As I have established in chapters 2, 3, and 4, a broad variety of urban inhabitants engaged with each other and space, matter, and visual culture in town halls. In doing so, they both pushed back against existing things and ideas, and were strongly impacted by them. Some actors were relatively privileged: magistrates deployed strategies such as having new spaces built or formulating space-specific regulations. But certain forms of matter could also be privileged, such as stone walls, which were more likely to endure than wooden demarcations. The different characteristics of these materials impacted practices in various ways – this is clear, for instance, with regard to sound. Demarcations shaped public and enclosed spaces, influencing behaviour within and around them. Municipalities were also influenced by matter, as well as by social expectations. Moreover, in many fifteenth-century cities, municipal authority and legitimacy was still in the process of formation and frequently contested. Non-governmental agents deployed many tactics, making use of the same spaces and materialities. Town halls, especially their interiors, provide evidence of the ongoing negotiation of political and legal power between magistrates and urban society. This process of negotiation may have been hidden behind town hall façades, which explicitly – but certainly not exclusively – communicated to landlords and people beyond the city, making claims about their cities' prosperity and autonomy. Town hall interiors reveal more about the internal dynamics and character of these urban societies

themselves, indicating various claims to legitimacy in public space. Looking behind town hall front doors and exteriors, the contemporary historian discovers forms of social interaction. This shaped social norms, political and legal ideas and expectations, and how these buildings were used and lived.

Publicity was – and remains – an essential means through which governments claimed authority and legitimacy. The town hall was an important place for conveying both and influencing communication flows. As a location of formal decision making, dispute resolution, and trials, the building had to facilitate both confidentiality (through enclosure) and publicity (through accessibility). Divisions between open and closed spaces and practices, I argue, were often contested. Magistrates may have been privileged in shaping openness and enclosure, but other users of the town hall sought out audiences before which to make their own claims and articulate their needs. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 turn on the questions of how and where these conflicts occurred, and with what outcomes. To examine these themes, this study has relied not only on city accounts, law codes, urban chronicles, and legal treatises, but also documents of practice, such as criminal records. The buildings came alive through encounters with their users.

In chapter 2, I analysed modes of access in and around town halls, looking at routes across thresholds both leading into and within the buildings. I have shown how ritualised political and legal procedures were given spatial form. By using the building for open and enclosed sessions, magistrates influenced communication streams. They both needed audiences to validate their decisions and had to maintain the confidentiality of particular forms of information. Material structures allowed them to physically direct, open up, or enclose movement, sound, and sight and thus maintain efficient procedure. This logic is reflected in the ways in which town halls were spatially organised. At the same time, there was tension between the need for seclusion and the buildings' accessibility. As I have discussed in the third chapter, magistrates dealt with various disturbances in courtrooms, either brought about in the course of daily use or made on purpose by visitors. Officials maintained the necessity of keeping the building clean. They also sought to limit noise – both circumstantial and deliberate – for it could disturb or interrupt deliberations or trials and therefore impede publicity. Verbal and physical attacks were often prosecuted, with magistrates invoking urban citizens' shared responsibility for maintaining properly functioning political and judicial practices, for they served the common good. By regulating and prosecuting disturbances, officials sought to influence how town halls functioned and claim a monopoly on legal authority. I argue that these ends were also pursued through the imposition of certain kinds of punishment: culprits had to ask for forgiveness in spaces that magistrates had carefully chosen for the occasion – often the public courtroom with an audience present. On other occasions, they

also had to pay a fine – expressed as a number of stones – that was put towards the reparation of the council chamber or acquisition of a new window, for example. In these different sentences and media, magistrates communicated the message that disturbances damaged their procedures and thus their authority, of which town halls were the material expression.

On many occasions, however, city inhabitants chose to disturb legal procedure and challenge urban authorities. These actors deployed disturbances and physical and verbal attacks to make statements and contest court decisions or arguments. They too used the town hall as a stage to send messages, taking advantage of specific thresholds and stepping into public spaces to increase the impact of their actions. In these moments of contestation, many actors appropriated town hall space. Issues surrounding legitimacy and how public space should be organised, then, remained in question, forcing authorities to communicate and justify their claims. Extant law codes and regulations, evidence of built demarcations, doors and locks, and criminal records all indicate how magistrates sought to influence the ways in which town halls were used. Many of these sources, though, also provide snapshots of contestation, in which officials used their privileged position to strengthen material and social boundaries. Criminal records in particular show how authorities presented disruptions as damaging the common good, thus twisting them to their own advantage. Still, members of urban society continued transgressing thresholds and communicating their own opinions. The evidence of these events attests to specific forms of negotiation between different actors in town halls.

Legal and political power was also communicated by means of objects and images, which are the focus of chapter 4. These paintings and objects indicate how space and hierarchy were negotiated, often participating in wider visual programmes that put forward rhetorics of authority and legitimacy. Some of these objects were acquired by culprits as part of their penal process. The combination of well-known justice scenes and case-specific objects and images, such as stained-glass windows or wax objects bought by convicts, connected legal bodies with urban society. Representations of divine justice were addressed to both judges and audiences, who were reminded of their shared responsibility to ensure that justice was conducted properly. Images that art historians refer to as ‘Dual Justice scenes’ depict the Last Judgement, in combination with contemporary courtroom settings. Other justice scenes also depicted allegories in present-tense urban settings. These paintings offer rare realistic depictions of town halls. Specific elements include open spaces and the presence of witnesses. The images present in town halls’ legal spaces, in other words, emphasised that accessibility and publicity were important factors in establishing legitimacy. Legal treatises prescribed the presence of images in legal spaces that would prompt reflection. Magistrates sometimes added paintings. More often, though, they sentenced culprits to

acquire wax objects, stained glass windows, amongst other objects. Artisanal objects were often included in penal rituals in cases in which legal authority had been questioned or the protocols of civic justice infringed upon. Officials and others, as well as newly acquired objects, engaged with existing visual rhetorics. In so doing, they (temporarily) altered the visual messages being put across, highlighting the legal consequences of contesting the authorities' legitimacy.

Urban authorities took the initiative in building town halls, aiming to attain economic, political, and legal success. But the buildings' multiple functions, alongside the urban dwellers that visited them, challenged material and mental boundaries, sometimes in unanticipated ways. In turn, magistrates shaped socio-legal messaging strategies in response to these forms of contestation, using specific town hall spaces for forgiveness rituals and fines that contributed to the construction of chambers, windows, or visual decoration (by way of items such as paintings and wax objects). These elements materialised and visualised contest, which magistrates tried to integrate into their rhetorics of legitimacy.

The ways in which a society materialises itself – from the built environment to the written word – emerge from negotiated and contested expressions of collective life in specific environments. In the late-medieval urban context, the town hall is only one amongst many materialisations of society. Still, many different actors left traces in town halls in the form of written, material, and visual evidence of their experiences. This makes town halls excellent cases through which to study how human actors engaged with both each other and non-human actors, and the significance of these interactions. Drawing on spatial and social theories, I argue that the building, use, and meaning of town halls were articulated through spatial environment, materiality, policies, and human behaviour. In addition to crossing physical boundaries, such as the porch or front door, people who walked into the town hall moved into a distinctly different space shaped by regulations, procedures, people, and materiality (including partitions, doors, and images). Indeed, in elaborating on Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, historians working on (public) space have often noted that buildings and other spaces are comprised not only of physical extension, but also mental constructions (not to mention political and legal structures too).⁴ Historian Leif Jerram, though, has warned that this has increasingly led scholars to marginalise material form. 'Place', he suggests, is often interpreted as being connected to qualities or representations associated with that location, instead of referring to a 'concrete place'.⁵ I have demonstrated, however, that town halls were not

⁴ See e.g. Arnade, Howell, and Simons, 'Fertile Spaces', 517; D. Romano, *Market and Marketplaces in Medieval Italy c.1100 to c.1450* (New haven, 2015).

⁵ L. Jerram, 'Space: A Useless Category for Historical Analysis?', *History and Theory* 52 (2013): 400–404, 410.

only under continuous construction, but sites of constantly changing uses and regulations. As such, they were subject to ongoing and shifting forms of social negotiation. Built and experienced space involves the reciprocity between material and mental constructs.

The composition of town hall users constantly changed, as did the governmental bodies in charge of constructing these buildings. Many users, therefore, encountered buildings whose materiality and meaning was already established. In chapter 1, I deal with interventions made in town halls, the ways in which material structures replaced, supplemented, or renovated. In so doing, I show how magistrates both reproduced and altered existing spaces and objects. Spatial structures and forms of materiality have implications for legal procedures, regulations, and meanings, as this study has shown, have been significant. In chapters 2 and 3, I show how historical actors used partitions, doors, and thresholds. These material features were available to them and they were used to influence accessibility and sound within town halls. But the buildings themselves, the ideas behind their functioning, and political and legal procedures, also pushed back against those trying to impose an order on town halls.

Take for example the interior courtroom, a space that became common in the fifteenth century. It may have been that, in each city, particular magistrates established the public courtroom. At the same time, though, public courtrooms in the region often functioned in similar ways and shared material characteristics, even though each town hall had a unique shape. This strongly suggests that specific courtrooms emerged on the basis of wider trends. Legal treatises, for instance, emphasised publicity and transparency, urging courts to establish publicly accessible spaces. That said, existing spatial circumstances could have impacted these writings. It is likely that the multiple functions served by these edifices and the amount of space available drove officials to make use of moveable wooden panels and establish partial demarcations in the *vierschuur*. In turn, it was difficult to conduct enclosed deliberations without regulations being in place and dedicated rooms. This called for the construction of separate spaces. In sum, town halls doubtlessly shaped interactions among people as well as legal and political procedures, both of which in turn influenced further material changes to the building and inventory.

In engaging with other actors – both social and material – medieval urban society was flexible and power structures were fragile. This is suggested by the fact that town hall interiors underwent many adaptations, with objects often being swapped out. Regulations and forms of dispute resolution also changed frequently. There is no evidence, for instance, of access to town halls being limited to certain urban dwellers or to those from beyond the city, in any general way. People intervened when events or procedures were disturbed, interrupting established protocol, expectations, efficiency, and orders. If damaged, mutual understandings could be repaired. Visual

elements could be added to existing iconography, changing socio-legal narratives. This was done by magistrates and non-official actors, in ways that were influenced by walls and ideas. The forms of practice, inventory, and legal rituals in and around the edifices were not inherently hierarchical or disciplinary. Rather, the items produced or events performed at town halls indicate how society functioned at the particular moment under discussion. This functioning was shaped by power relations and forms of social privilege and contestation.

A suitable approach to researching how socio-cultural, political, and legal dynamics in urban societies were negotiated involves analysing different actors using evidence provided by various sources, including documents of practice and objects. Both benefitting from and contributing to multidisciplinary research, this approach helps in attempting to understand why activities or developments occurred in a specific context. As such, it deserves greater attention and application in work on socio-cultural relations in and beyond cities. This study has shown that people actively engaged with materiality. The used source material did, however, not explicitly indicate how it impacted them. Yet how social networks were negotiated by both human and material actors deserves further exploration in the medieval urban context. ANT, then, can be a useful conceptual framework to analyse how materiality is an active actor in shifting social relationships. Other studies have convincingly integrated sources on the reception and agency of materiality, for instance with regard to the settings of churches and households, and public urban places.⁶

This research is limited to five case studies; many town halls remain understudied and their connections with urban society at large deserve in-depth exploration. Well-documented examples include the Hanseatic cities in the eastern parts of the present-day Netherlands, such as Zwolle and Deventer, but also Kampens' town hall, which still exists today. The ways in which publicity was negotiated in similar buildings elsewhere, in Europe and beyond, deserves further investigation as well.⁷ My research has found hardly any evidence of the marginalisation of specific groups in urban society with regard to town hall access. Does this hold true, however, when it comes to other political and legal institutions? And how do patterns of accessibility develop into the sixteenth century and beyond? As this study avers, although publicity, governance (or political power), and citizenship were discussed in a specific place, it was widely communicated, for it

⁶ For example, the reception and impact of relics, heirlooms, and deliberately buried objects. Gilchrist, *Medieval Life*. ANT as conceptual framework is explored in recent studies on public health in the medieval urban context. Coomans, 'In Pursuit of a Healthy City', 22, 179; G. Geltner, *Roads to Health: Infrastructure and Urban Wellbeing in Later Medieval Italy* (Philadelphia, 2019), 22–23.

⁷ I share this call with S. Chattopadhyay and J. White, eds., *City Halls and Civic Materialism. Towards a Global History of Public Space* (New York, 2014).

concerned the city as a whole. A more comparative study of the constitution and negotiation of publicness in other urban (including private or corporate) edifices would uncover more broadly applied ideas that shaped more-or-less public medieval spaces.⁸ Furthermore, a focus on historical moments at which political activities, court sessions, and audiences were given dedicated spaces would illuminate continuities or discontinuities in how public space was negotiated in social networks. Yet, as this study has shown, openness and inclusivity coexist with enclosure and exclusivity. This study shows how late-medieval aldermen contextualised political and legal contests in spatial settings, in the process of which they distinguished incidents that occurred in and outside town halls. More evidence is needed, however, to analyse the extent to which the forms of contestation that went on in buildings and spaces overseen by magistrates diverged from similar incidents in spaces that lay beyond their reach. Moreover, future research might focus on how both premodern and modern urban planning and regulation originates in municipalities' desire to monitor and direct city life, whilst they kept exploring other forms of publicity.⁹

In his recent study *Building and Dwelling*, Richard Sennett argues for an open city, calling for complex, creative, and interactive forms of dwelling. In earlier works, he suggested that too much direction would create spaces in which people do not interact.¹⁰ Spaces designed for interaction and publicity require a delicate touch. Both the introduction to this study and this conclusion began with examples of how the municipalities of Leiden and Amsterdam are rethinking the town hall as a place for exchange: a public space in which urban society meets government. Accordingly, they have focused on how different domains relate to each other and the conditions under which the desired interaction arises. Perhaps these cities should embrace contest and flexibility and create a gradually changing town hall. This study has dealt with such interaction and negotiation going back to the late medieval town hall. In so doing, I have aimed to open doors that have so far largely remained shut.

⁸ Such spaces could include churches, guild houses, the higher courts of law, but also prisons, or trading offices. G. Geltner, *The Medieval Prison. A Social History* (Princeton, 2008); J. Wubs-Mrozewicz, 'Rules of Inclusion, Rules of Exclusion: The Hanseatic Kontor in Bergen in the Late Middle Ages and Its Normative Boundaries', *German History* 29, no. 1 (2011): 1–22.

⁹ For example, a more in-depth study on the freedom of movement and access for privileged urban inhabitants (in engaging assemblages, that is), or in comparison to *buitenpoorters*, people from other cities, or foreigners; and, a study on devices deployed for publicity, and safety, but which are also used for surveillance. For instance, towers and city gates, or cameras in present-day society. A paradigm worth exploring concerns 'Mobilities'. Mobilities include movement and movement enhanced by technology, movements of images and information (one-to-one and infrastructures) as well as borders, limitations and regulations of movement. It would be beneficial to further explore Mobilities to study people and exchanges transgressing different assemblages. M. Sheller and J. Urry, 'The New Mobilities Paradigm', *Environment and Planning* 38 (2006): 212–14.

¹⁰ R. Sennett, *Building and Dwelling. Ethics for the City* (New York, 2018); Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*.