

Making Good and Breaking Bad: Materiality and Community in Netherlandish Cities, 1380–1520 *

On an evening late in November 1446, two men and a woman roamed a neighbourhood in Leiden looking for trouble. They called at ‘English Maertgen’s place’; when the door remained shut, they attacked it with a knife and threw rocks through the glass windows.¹ The group then proceeded towards a nearby city tower and yelled until a housemaid living nearby opened the gate at its foot. One member of the gang claimed that his father ‘was drying some herring [in the tower] and left a fire unattended underneath’ which they had to put out, ‘otherwise calamity would come of it’. They entered, sat down and drank through the night.² Whether they were simply drunk and malicious, as the subsequent court verdict would lead us to believe, or had bones to pick with either inhabitants or officials, this was quintessential bad behaviour. The terms used in the original verdict noted it as such: ‘quade hantieringe’ and ‘onstantelike saken’ (‘bad deeds’ and ‘disruptive matters’). Here, as in many similar cases, these terms referred to both disturbance of the peace and deliberate material destruction. The impact on the peace and the significant costs of repairs made acts of vandalism rather grave infractions. Such disruptions were also a physical and literal breaking of public/private boundaries: a transgression of the limits of one’s home and its immediate surroundings, and in this case also a defiance of governmental space.

The example points to a fundamental, almost banal opposition. For late medieval townsmen and women, distinguishing between good and evil was not only crucial for establishing the city of God; the dichotomy also pervaded their earthly, quotidian affairs. In northern European cities using Dutch, Flemish and Germanic dialects, the adjectives good (*guede*, *goet*, *güte*) and bad (*quade*, *quait*) appeared often in court records and could refer to an impressive range of objects, places, people and behaviours. Bad weights and bad meats signalled market (im)morality; bad roads hampered the flow of goods; and bad drainage caused leaks, floods and stench. ‘Bad taverns’ was a common

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1. Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken [hereafter ELO], 0508, 4A, Correctieboek A, p. 265 (1447). This establishment might have been a tavern or perhaps a brothel.

2. ELO, Correctieboek A, p. 265 (1447).

euphemism for brothels, while ‘bad deeds’ or ‘wanderings’ were often-used terms for public disturbances and vandalism. Conversely, a ‘good stew’ distinguished a decent bathhouse from a brothel; ‘good men’ designated citizens involved in urban governance, worthy of office, while ‘good’ or ‘honourable women’ fulfilled many roles in community life and legal processes. Norms of civic conduct thus distinguished good from bad behaviour and showed what it meant to live as a hardworking, God-fearing and useful member of society. Such members supported the common or public good, as variously formulated by governing elites.³ Bad conduct was the opposite of these things: disruptive and detrimental to the urban civic body.

This broadly applicable opposition, as it operated in everyday life, had an important material-spatial component, as this article will show by focusing on what I term urban ‘living environments’. In the cities under discussion, living environments encompassed clusters of neighbours, their houses and all the spaces that directly surrounded them: streets, alleys, yards and quays, as well as bridges, crossings, docks and even waterways. Such environments thus straddled private property and publicly accessible spaces. They offer an important site for investigations of social relations in practice, especially those relating to safety and communal well-being. These micro-communities did not need a formal organisational structure to exist or function, and could be ‘good’—that is, thriving, peaceful and wholesome—or bad and ‘broken’ in multiple ways that medieval residents and local policy-makers did not perceive as categorically different. Nuisance, pollution, deviance, vandalism and disorder were all points on a spectrum of depravity. Such acts were serious transgressions and powerful subversive tools for those seeking to express resistance. Conversely, making, maintaining and mending things, including mending peace between inhabitants—indeed the prevention of breakdown in any such way—were all forms of good works with symbolic and ritual importance in community formation. Constructing bridges and (re-) building churches famously exemplified the symbolic power of social making. A group of neighbours digging and maintaining a well had the same implications, albeit on a smaller scale, but has been given substantially less scholarly consideration.

This article seeks to ground neighbourhood social practices in a material and spatial context. It gives a new primacy to the physical complexity of living environments and the high costs and stakes of caring for them, arguing that shared and reciprocal care for material

3. E. Lecuppre-Desjardin and A.-L. Van Bruaene, eds, *De Bono Communi: The Discourse and Practice of the Common Good in the European City (13th–16th c.)* (Turnhout, 2010); M. Boone and J. Haemers, “‘The Common Good’: Governance, Discipline and Political Culture”, in A.-L. Van Bruaene, B. Blondé and M. Boone, eds, *City and Society in the Low Countries: Urbanisation and Urban Historiography* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 93–127; C.D. Liddy, *Contesting the City: The Politics of Citizenship in English Towns, 1250–1530* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 28–33, 83.

aspects of community life deeply affected socio-political and cultural practices. The importance of this material-social approach is twofold. First, it offers a way to move beyond an institutional perspective on neighbourhoods, which has been the core focus of historiography. Secondly, it offers a new way to explore micro-communities and the function of neighbourliness in a pre-modern context, on which consensus is currently lacking. It seeks the smallest common denominator, so to speak: 'the neighbours' rather than the whole 'neighbourhood'.

The main thesis here is that the production of a wholesome, safe, 'good' living environment required both social harmony and well-functioning material (infra-) structures. Networks of neighbours formed the basis from which more formalised organisations could develop. Neighbours continuously negotiated their contributions to infrastructures and facilities that were shared with others. Partly because of this material and spatial engagement, they assumed different monitoring tasks and played key roles in the validation of legal processes, as well as in preserving social peace. Local residents acted as witnesses and also confirmed agreements among neighbours on how spaces were used, who could build which kinds of facilities, and who secured certain privileges in using alleys, quays or roads. They made or undermined the reputation of nearby inhabitants, and had the power to establish that something was accurate and true, be it a household's claim to access a well or the recounting of a violent incident. By taking such diverse validating roles, groups of local residents acted as links between more formal organisations, most notably urban governments, and the local or household level. At the same time, because of that linking function, communities of residents often maintained a certain level of autonomy and self-governance.

Understanding the links between material environment and social dynamics at the neighbour level reveals an important layer in urban politics. To date, the main focus of historians has been on the provision of social support and ritual commitments, as discussed in more detail below. This article proposes a next step inspired by the spatial turn and actor-network theory, which has proven influential and productive in many cognate research fields.⁴ I build on two fundamental premises shared by these approaches. First, that material objects and the spatial environment affect social transformation and interactions in significant ways, and therefore can be considered a type of actor within these processes. Secondly, that power relations are (re-) enacted in heterogeneous networks of humans, materials, animals, objects, spaces,

4. For a concise introduction and its application in urban studies, see M. Müller, 'Assemblages and Actor-Networks: Rethinking Socio-Material Power, Politics and Space', *Geography Compass*, ix (2015), pp. 27–41; I. Fariás and T. Bender, *Urban Assemblages: How Actor-Network Theory Changes Urban Studies* (London, 2012).

infrastructures, tools and technologies—aspects which historians should therefore try to include when analysing social dynamics.⁵

Such an assessment of community also augments a recent broadening of notions of citizenship. Focusing on diversity and practices rather than formal privileges, as proposed by, among others, Maarten Prak and Christian Liddy, opens up different perspectives on what civic participation entailed *within* urban communities.⁶ Similarly, Tom Johnson has argued that ‘common people’ were routinely involved in both rural and urban legal practices, and through their participation influenced political processes.⁷ This article’s focus on micro-communities operates in the same spirit, complicating and unpacking the meaning of civic and legal norms for daily lives. To do so, I have chosen an intermediary path between micro-historical and macro socio-economic analysis. While the latter mainly deals with questions of (urban) demographics, social mobility and occupational structures, the former is inspired by anthropological approaches to neighbourhood life. For England, this has generated a rich tradition of community biographies: intensive area studies based on parish administrative records, wills and deeds, and the proceedings of wardmote and leet courts.⁸ Recently these source types have also been explored using digital tools such as social network analysis.⁹

Rather than reconstructing relations in one specific place, I focus on processes and types of social interactions that can be recovered for five different cities in the Low Countries during the long fifteenth century: Ghent, Leiden, Deventer, Utrecht and Gouda. Geographically, the selection covers the Netherlandish urban network, which was a remarkably urbanised political and economic configuration, where towns were also in regular communication with each other. All the selected cities had (semi-) independent town governments with princely sovereigns, but differed in size and economic activities—including, most notably, textile industry, beer production, and long-distance

5. N.C. Heynen, M. Kaika and E. Swyngedouw, eds, *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism* (London, 2006); R.C. Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe* (New York, 2013). See, for a more cultural-material approach, various chapters in R. Evans and V. Allen, eds, *Roadworks: Medieval Britain, Medieval Roads* (Oxford, 2016); R.P. Schiff and J. Taylor, *The Politics of Ecology: Land, Life, and Law in Medieval Britain* (Columbus, OH, 2016).

6. M.R. Prak, *Citizens without Nations: Urban Citizenship in Europe and the World, c.1000–1789* (Cambridge, 2018); Liddy, *Contesting the City*.

7. T. Johnson, *Law in Common: Legal Cultures in Late-Medieval England* (Oxford, 2020).

8. J. Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society: A London Suburb in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1987); B. Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003); P. Maddern, ‘Order and Disorder’, in C. Rawcliffe and R. Wilson, eds, *Medieval Norwich* (London, 2004), pp. 189–212. See also, on leet courts, Johnson, *Law in Common*.

9. C. Berry, ‘“To Avoide All Envy, Malys, Grudge and Displeasure”: Sociability and Social Networking at the London Wardmote Inquest, c.1470–1540’, *London Journal*, xlii (2017), pp. 201–17; J. Colson, ‘Local Communities in Fifteenth Century London: Craft, Parish and Neighbourhood’ (Univ. of London Ph.D. thesis, 2011).

trade. This is not to argue, however, that a spatial-material approach is relevant only to this particular region: similar processes probably characterised the production of living environments in cities and towns elsewhere, and continued well into the early modern period.

Like many other parts of Europe, the Low Countries were legally pluralistic, with different and at times competing law courts coexisting in the same region. Within this legal landscape, Netherlandish cities developed during the late Middle Ages strong traditions of centralised urban justice. Each town had its own set of privileges, common laws and courts. On one hand, royal or seigniorial authorities were therefore less dominant in assuming jurisdiction over legal conflicts within towns than they were in cities in, for instance, England or France. On the other hand, administrative sub-units within cities such as wards or parishes did not have the same competences and written records as they had in some English and Italian towns.

In some Netherlandish towns neighbourhood organisations started to produce documents during the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the main focus here is on earlier evidence hidden in larger, general series. Court traditions and record-keeping also varied slightly for each city, but there are two important aspects that they had in common and which shed strong light on neighbourhood practices. First, they shared a discourse on neighbourliness that revolved around the notions of harmony and peace versus nuisance. Secondly, each city government was preoccupied with investigating and prosecuting ‘private’ or ‘minor’ misdeeds and quarrels, which encompassed an enormous variety of topics.¹⁰ The initiative to start legal proceedings commonly came from two directions: from (groups of) inhabitants accusing each other, or from urban officials investigating offences—sometimes after reports or complaints from neighbours. This division between *accusatio* and *inquisitio* cases was reflected in the keeping of different registers. It resembles the modern legal distinction between civic and criminal law, but did not function in that rigid way. But however they were brought to the attention of authorities, interpersonal quarrels, including those relating to economic transgressions and environmental nuisances, were considered a threat to the public and a breaking of communal peace. This reflected a conception of disorder that radically differed from twenty-first-century views, one that was informed by an organic idea of the city as a body and that closely linked morality to environmental order and physical well-being.¹¹

I start by outlining the scholarly debates on local community formation, and then proceed to discuss why material aspects had such an important and distinctive function, which has to do with the

10. Maddern, ‘Order and Disorder’; Johnson, *Law in Common*, pp. 47–50, 82–3.

11. C. Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities* (Woodbridge, 2013); Maddern, ‘Order and Disorder’, pp. 205–12.

complexity of ownership and the high value of properties and objects within living environments. The core of the article discusses community formation as a continuous negotiation on a spectrum of making and breaking, of good and bad. These practices are grouped around making things, especially houses and their attendant facilities, and breaking things: acts of deliberate destruction within living environments, and by implication, disruptions of domestic social order and peace.

I

To talk productively about community in the context of the highly local and informal neighbourhood clusters in focus here, a few analytical steps are necessary. Community as a concept contains tensions between present and past meanings, and is used on many different yet interconnected scales. I propose a definition that integrates spatiality and materiality, and which functions beyond a rigid distinction between formal and informal collectives. This then helps to uncover some of the complexity of both political and spatial boundaries in practice, a theme which will be addressed in more detail below.

That pre-modern townsmen and women had meaningful relations with people living nearby has been widely recognised in the historiography, but debates on what functions those relations fulfilled and how they changed over the long term are far from resolved. There is currently no consensus about pre-modern understandings of local community or neighbourliness, nor are there many studies that attempt a panoramic view of the topic.¹² The polarisation in interpretations of neighbourhood life is partly the result of a long-standing linear narrative concerning the erosion of 'traditional' community structures, which was posited in the late nineteenth century. In short, it argues that the rise of the modern state corresponded to the decline of the social and political significance of local collectives within living and work environments, and undermined the solidarity or cohesion of such networks. Macro-factors often mentioned are shifts in the (spatial) organisation of work, the Industrial Revolution, societal commercialisation, and increasing social distance between economic classes.¹³ Benedict Anderson sparked research on individualisation and constructions of modern identities, while the earlier sociologist Norbert Elias's theories of civilisation processes in Europe suggested that new ideals of civilised living within

12. S. McDonough, 'Being a Neighbour: Ideas and Ideals of Neighbourliness in the Medieval West,' *History Compass*, xv, no. 9 (2017), e12406; A. Shepard and P.J. Withington, 'Introduction: Communities in Early Modern England', in *eid.*, eds, *Communities in Early Modern England: Networks, Place, Rhetoric* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 1–17.

13. C. Lis and H. Soly, 'Neighbourhood and Social Change in West European Cities: Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries', *International Review of Social History*, xxxviii (1993), pp. 1–30; Prak, *Citizens Without Nations*, criticises the focus on national identities as core sites of civiness.

the privacy of the household emerged at the expense of public, social and community life in streets, taverns, or salons.¹⁴

In these narratives, medieval communities often function as paragons of that traditional image of community cohesion. Some historians have viewed the sharing of social and material care among medieval neighbours as a positive and supportive force: less hierarchical than institutions such as guilds, yet guided by the same Christian principles of fraternal or neighbourly love and charity. This assumes a high degree of communication and stability among neighbour networks. Moreover, some historians have seen the socio-economic heterogeneity of many residential clusters as positive and desirable.¹⁵ These networks then dovetailed with notions of community on a city-wide level, forged and sustained by local town governments, especially in the more urbanised regions of the Low Countries and Northern Italy, and with a culture of public civic and religious rituals.

These accounts of pre-modern group ties have provoked critical reactions. First, in terms of social bias: the involvement of propertyless (unskilled) labourers in neighbour collectives is hard to estimate. These people have been considered as too mobile during their lives to develop any sentimental attachment to either their dwellings or their neighbours.¹⁶ They likewise may have been less interested in protecting possessions through social alliance and litigation—if they had access to the urban law courts in the first place—or in promoting themselves among these local citizens as trustworthy and honourable, which could be helpful in pursuing other economic and political ambitions.¹⁷ At any rate, cities needed immigrants: all urban growth was sustained by it, and the social involvement of nearby residents may have been more prominent in larger cities, where distance severed family support networks.¹⁸ Secondly, some scholars have emphasised

14. N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, tr. E.F.N. Jephcott (Oxford, 1978); G. Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1988); H.P. Duerr, *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozess, I: Nacktheit und Scham* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988); G. Duby, *A History of Private Life: Revelations of the Medieval World* (Cambridge, MA, 1988). See, on Anderson in a premodern context, D. Woolf and N.L. Jones, 'Introduction', in *eid.*, eds, *Local Identities in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (London, 2007), pp. 1–18.

15. P.C.M. Hoppenbrouwers, 'Maagschap en vriendschap: Een beschouwing over de structuur en functies van verwantschapsbetrekkingen in het laat-middeleeuwse Holland', *Holland: regionaal-historisch tijdschrift*, xvii (1985), pp. 69–108; J. Decavele, *Gebuurteleven en dekenijen te Gent 14de–20ste eeuw* (Ghent, 1992); H. Soly and C. Lis, 'Beter een goede buur dan een verre vriend: Buurschap en buurtleven in Westeuropese steden aan het eind van het Ancien Régime', in B. de Vries et al., eds, *De kracht der zwakken: Studies over arbeid en arbeidersbeweging in het verleden* (Amsterdam, 1992), pp. 81–107.

16. J. Boulton, 'Neighbourhood Migration in Early Modern London', in P. Clark and D. Souden, eds, *Migration and Society in Early Modern England* (London, 1987), pp. 107–49.

17. Berry, 'To Avoid All Envy'; K. Wrightson, 'The "Decline of Neighbourliness" Revisited', in Jones and Woolf, eds, *Local Identities*, pp. 19–49, at 31. The link between trust and inequality is made in I. Forrest, *Trustworthy Men: How Inequality and Faith Made the Medieval Church* (Princeton, NJ, 2020).

18. M. Rubin, *Cities of Strangers: Making Lives in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge 2020); M. Danneel, *Weduwen en wezen in het laat-middeleeuwse Gent* (Louvain, 1995), pp. 414–19.

the repressive aspects of medieval neighbourhood life, depicting a fairly unforgiving society, obsessed with reputation. Neighbours produced venomous gossip and at times acted as henchmen for local authorities. From this perspective, domestic environments were sites of routine conflict and violence.¹⁹ In short, these various interpretations set up key contradictions, such as that between the grasp of urban governments and the supposed autonomy and self-governance of local neighbours' communities, and between the strength and stability and the conflictual nature and constant changing of social networks.

As in many related fields of historical enquiry, the original linear narratives of local community formation have been substituted by an emphasis on diversity and complexity, both geographically and over time. Neighbourhoods were spheres of reciprocity and moral obligation, with written and unwritten rules and benefits for insiders, and whose strength and impact could vary across periods, generations and different urban areas. Indeed, certain individuals, families, or groups of artisans could reshape networks and therefore change the nature of a local group.²⁰ Such a relative and relational conceptualisation of community, which does not prioritise a certain type of social bond, be it family, occupation, gender, or class, is especially helpful when complemented with a more spatial-material layer. It fits better the reality of larger cities with high levels of mobility, where it was impossible to know everyone within even a certain district or block. Metropolises such as early modern Paris and London diverged in that sense from more face-to-face societies, such as the medieval English villages studied by Barbara Hanawalt.²¹

On that spectrum, Netherlandish towns, varying from, say, 4,000 to 40,000 inhabitants, fall somewhere in the middle. They contained various scales of community, formal and informal, operating at once. From the twelfth century, the Low Countries developed a particularly strong tradition of urban citizenship (*poorterschap* or *burgerschap*). Citizenship legally bound inhabitants to a city and in the process defined and established it as a socio-political and economic entity.²² Yet in practice people's social and political identities were far more complex, quite apart from the fact that they moved or travelled.

19. Shepard and Withington, 'Introduction', pp. 2–5; Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, pp. 185–265; M. Carlier, 'Solidariteit of sociale controle? De rol van vrienden en magen en buren in een middeleeuwse stad', in ead., ed., *Hart en marge in de laat-middeleeuwse stedelijke maatschappij* (Louvain, 1997), pp. 71–93.

20. D. Garrioch, *Neighbourhood and Community in Paris, 1740–1790* (1986; Cambridge, 2002), pp. 3–5.

21. B.A. Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bind: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1986). See, on London, Boulton, *Neighbourhood and Society*.

22. Each of the many cities within this network secured their own common law: a similar yet distinctive set of economic and political privileges. See, for a recent overview, Van Bruaene, Blondé and Boone, *City and Society in the Low Countries*. See, for different approaches to units of community (yet not the micro-neighbourhood level), C. Deligne and C. Billen, eds, *Voisinages, coexistences, appropriations: Groupes sociaux et territoires urbains* (Turnhout, 2007).

Inhabitants identified with a county or region, but mostly with a city, town, or village, and within that city maybe also with a specific parish, confraternity, or guild.²³ In contrast to some cities in Italy and France, clans of extended families did not dominate patches of urban space in the Low Countries.²⁴ While the micro-community, centred on a part of the street, alley, or courtyard, or on certain water infrastructures, is the scale that is in focus here, it is important to recognise that all these associations were rarely mutually exclusive: they overlapped and reinforced each other. The limited extant evidence makes it virtually impossible to untangle them, or to reconstruct what people saw as their most important or primary unit of community.

Within this mosaic of social clusters, there was ample social demand for neighbours' networks, arrangements and small allegiances.²⁵ Sometimes there was also room for institutionalised versions. In several Netherlandish cities, but clearly not all, more grass-roots initiatives of collectives (*gebuurten*) gained (semi-) official status alongside centrally implemented administrative divisions such as wards or quarters. They commonly encompassed a small cluster, such as a part of a street. The earliest references to Netherlandish *gebuurten* date from the fourteenth century, while their number, influence and visibility in archival records increase significantly after 1500. Around 1600, for example, Leiden and Ghent both had over two hundred known *gebuurten*, and Haarlem about a hundred. Many continued to exist in some form until the end of the *Ancien Régime*.²⁶ The vast majority of studies of these neighbour communities have prioritised their social-cultural aspects. In Holland in particular, the collective commemoration of members'

23. Netherlandish craft guilds are a well-explored case in point. See B. De Munck, *Guilds, Labour and the Urban Body Politic: Fabricating Community in the Southern Netherlands, 1300–1800* (London, 2017); J. Dumolyn, *De Brugse opstand van 1436–1438* (Kortrijk-Heule, 1997); M.R. Prak, ed., *Craft Guilds in the Early Modern Low Countries: Work, Power, and Representation* (Aldershot, 2006); C. Lis and H. Soly, eds, *Werelden van verschil: Ambachtsgilden in de Lage Landen* (Brussels, 1997). On confraternities, see P. Trio, *Volksreligie als spiegel van een stedelijke samenleving: De broederschappen te Gent in de late middeleeuwen* (Louvain, 1993); M.D. van Luijk, "'Ter eeren ende love Goodes": Religieuze lekenbroeder- en zusterschappen te Leiden, 1386–1572', *Jaarboek der Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis van Leiden*, x (1999), pp. 23–58.

24. Danneel, *Weduwen en wezen*, pp. 407–15; Hoppenbrouwers, 'Maagschap en vriendschap', pp. 69–108; B. Hanawalt, *Of Good and Ill Repute: Gender and Social Control in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1998); C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago, IL, 1985).

25. Y.H. Le Maresquier-Kesteloot, 'Le voisinage dans l'espace Parisien à la fin du Moyen Age: Bilan d'une enquête', *Revue Historique*, no. 605 (1998), pp. 47–70. References to neighbours were one key way of describing a place in the city, of relational 'place-making'. N.A. Eckstein, 'Prepositional City: Spatial Practice and Micro-Neighbourhood in Renaissance Florence', *Renaissance Quarterly*, lxxi (2018), pp. 1235–71; B. Vannieuwenhuyze, 'Buren, straten en aanknopingspunten: Plaatsbepaling in het laatmiddeleeuwse Brussel (dertiende–zestiende eeuw)', *Stadsgeschiedenis*, iv (2009), p. 107.

26. G. Dorren, *Eenheid en verscheidenheid: De burgers van Haarlem in de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam, 2001), p. 69; K. Walle, *Buurthouden: De geschiedenis van burengebruiken en buurtorganisaties in Leiden (14e–19e eeuw)* (Leiden, 2005); Decavele, *Gebuurteleven*; R. Bruinje, 'De gebruiker aan zet: Zoektocht doorheen de archieven van de Gentse gebuurten' (Vrije Univ. Brussels M.A. thesis, 2015).

rites of passage, such as annual feasts and burials, are presented as the core of the *gebuurten*'s function and meaning. However, in many cities neighbourhood communities also performed tasks relating to urban sanitation, infrastructural maintenance and fire safety. This is often noted as a matter of fact, without attributing significance to it, or reflecting on its implications.²⁷ An exception are several recent histories of urban public health, which emphasise that the care for and organisation of the material environment were integral to the meaning and function of neighbourhoods.²⁸

Finally, including an informal micro-spatial neighbourhood scale presents a more fragile image of the authority of urban governments. The fact that urban central authorities produced the vast majority of sources dealing with neighbourhood life creates a tricky and often underestimated bias. Urban magistrates issued detailed regulations in ordinances on almost every imaginable aspect of urban life. However, their effective grasp on inhabitants, spaces and practices in cities may have been much more modest in reality. Documents of legal practice attest to the limits of municipal political power, and its need to delegate to and co-ordinate and negotiate with other institutions and with smaller collectives—for example, in order to finance infrastructural works. Such negotiations also make the boundaries between public and private highly complex. For their part, residents were strategically navigating municipal regulations and legal structures in order to resolve their disputes.

In sum, instead of a narrative of long-term decline, a more interdisciplinary and spatio-material approach to neighbours, seeing them as operating in dynamic networks and in relation to the needs and challenges of their environments, rehabilitates some of the contingency that longer-established perspectives have often obscured. There is little need to make a rigid distinction between formal and informal collectives, nor to assume a top-down focus on the integration of such neighbourhood structures into processes of state-making. Alliances and clustering of interest groups could, moreover, be temporary and adapt to changing circumstances. Furthermore, as Nicholas Eckstein notes, a material-spatial focus also adds a few historiographical points of contention, namely about planned or unplanned urban space, and

27. Dorren, *Eenheid en verscheidenheid*, pp. 67–78; L. Bogaers, 'Geleund over de onderdeur: Doorkijkjes in het Utrechtse buurtleven van de vroege Middeleeuwen tot in de zeventiende eeuw', *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, cxii (1997), pp. 336–63. Exceptions to this lack of interest are Le Maresquier-Kesteloot, 'Le Voisinage dans l'espace Parisien'; H. Deceulaer, 'Implicaties van de straat: Rechten, plichten en conflicten in Gentse gebuurten (17de en 18de eeuw)', *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent*, l (1996), pp. 121–47.

28. See, for England, L.J. Skelton, *Sanitation in Urban Britain, 1560–1700* (London, 2015); C. Rawcliffe, 'The View from the Streets: The Records of Hundred and Leet Courts as a Source for Sanitary Policing in Late Medieval English Towns', in ead. and C. Weeda, eds, *Policing the Environment in Premodern Europe* (Amsterdam, 2019), pp. 69–95.

perceptions of public and private spheres.²⁹ My intervention into the by now extensive and diffuse debates on these topics questions further the function of dichotomies ‘on the ground’, and shows the complexity of both spatial and mental boundaries in practice.³⁰

II

Materiality goes some way to explain neighbour vigilance and gossip, given the porosity of the boundaries separating families and households: thin walls, narrow streets and crowded lodgings.³¹ In Montaillou, to invoke a well-known example, a curious villager was even able to lift slightly a neighbour’s roof in order to gain a better view of what was happening inside.³² ‘Neighbour’ (*sąsiad*) in sixteenth-century Polish often meant subletter: a person or family living in another room in the same house.³³ Yet the primacy of the material in either enabling or disabling social boundaries or connections ran much deeper. Since the wave of urbanisation of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a process of physical and social realignment had taken place in many northern European cities, as houses were increasingly arranged alongside streets rather than on plots surrounded by yards. Moreover, the development of stone houses, timber-framed or in many hybrid forms combining building materials, generated new possibilities for dividing houses into separate dwellings and constructing different levels within them. More closely located beside, behind, above and below each other, neighbours thus often shared zones of sound and scent. Even their sight zones overlapped in many respects, as they viewed the same street or courtyard, peeked through windows and shutters, and encountered each other daily at their doorsteps. Neighbours were in that sense integral to domestic space; part of the private.

The importance of materiality and proximity in shaping communities can be better understood with some insight into the economic value of properties, objects and (infra-) structures. Today, our daily environments are populated with mass-produced and easily substituted utensils, furniture and building materials. By contrast, not only did

29. Eckstein, ‘Prepositional City’, pp. 1244–5. See, on neighbour disputes around water, M.E. Foncke, ‘Water’s Worth: Urban Society and Subsidiarity in Seventeenth-century Holland’ (Univ. of Amsterdam Ph.D. Thesis, 2021).

30. Liddy, *Contesting the City*, pp. 52–84; N. Offenstadt and P. Boucheron, *L’espace public au Moyen Âge: Débats autour de Jürgen Habermas* (Paris, 2015); M. Boone and M.C. Howell, eds, *The Power of Space in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe: The Cities of Italy, Northern France and the Low Countries* (Turnhout, 2013); C. Billen and C. Deligne, ‘Urban Space: Infrastructure, Technology and Power’, in A.-L. Van Bruaene, B. Blondé and M. Boone, eds, *City and Society in the Low Countries: Urbanisation and Urban Historiography* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 162–91.

31. Garrioch, *Neighbourhood and Community*, p. 33.

32. E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, een kettens dorp in de Pyreneeën (1294–1324)* (Amsterdam, 1984), p. 61.

33. D.A. Frick, *Kitb, Kin, and Neighbors: Communities and Confessions in Seventeenth-century Wilno* (Ithaca, NY, 2013), p. 60.

most late medieval Netherlandish townspeople own many fewer things than their twenty-first-century descendants, but the price of houses, interiors, (artisanal) tools and facilities such as drainage, sewage and water supply was much higher. This was equally true for repairs and replacements of constructions.³⁴

Some data from fifteenth-century Ghent illustrate the value of things and of real estate in this region and era. In 1477, in a rare public case of self-policing, Ghent's magistrates convicted the city treasurer, Jan van Melle, of corruption, and proceeded to auction all his possessions. A detailed list of his goods has come down to us, amounting to 37,000 groten Vlaams (d. gr.).³⁵ This was a fortune. The average price of a house in Ghent in this period ranged between 4,000 and 5,000 d. gr., and the most expensive houses cost about 20,000 d. gr. Thus, Van Melle's inventory alone was worth almost two luxurious houses. Strikingly, a golden necklace with pendant sold at the auction for 5,712 d. gr. and thus equalled in worth a decent house.³⁶ But even Jan van Melle's eleven tablecloths went for an average of 50 d. gr. each, an amount for which a fifteenth-century Flemish labourer would have had to work about sixteen days.³⁷ An overcoat lined with fur, damask and velvet sold for 1,680 d. gr. to a certain Loy Popelier.

By contrast, many townsmen and women were constantly concerned about securing the essentials of food, clothing and shelter.³⁸ For instance, between 1483 and 1493, a certified craftsman in Ghent had to work between twenty-two and thirty-one years to be able to buy an average-priced house of 4,000–5,000 d. gr., assuming that people could only reserve 5–10 per cent of their income to save up for such a purchase. A servant (*diender*) would have to work between forty-three and sixty-two years, and a day labourer between fifty-five and seventy-eight years to accumulate enough wealth to buy a medium-sized house. Of course, many cheaper and simpler types of housing existed. But the calculation does demonstrate that the acquisition of real estate was unattainable for the vast majority of inhabitants if they did not previously own or

34. D. Lord Smail, *Legal Plunder: Households and Debt Collection in Late Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), reconstructs value through confiscation politics in Italy and France.

35. To calculate with and convert various physical coins, city scribes used units or monies of account. In large parts of the Low Countries, the standard unit of account was the Flemish groat (Vlaamse groot, d. gr. Vl., consisting of pounds, schellingen and penningen). As elsewhere in Europe, a pound (libra, lb.), was divided into 12 schellingen (solidi, s.), and 240 penningen (denarii, d.). Thus: 1 lb. = 12 s. = 240 d.

36. W. Blockmans, *Studien betreffende de sociale structuren te Brugge, Kortrijk en Gent in de 14e en 15e eeuw: Tekst* (Kortrijk, 1971), pp. 255–9. The fact that it concerned auction prices suggests that the list was not inflated with value.

37. M. Boone, M. Dumon and B. Reusens, *Immobilienmarkt, fiscaliteit en sociale ongelijkheid te Gent, 1483–1503* (Kortrijk, 1981), p. 68.

38. W.P. Blockmans and W. Prevenier, 'Armoede in de Nederlanden van de 14e tot het midden van de 16e eeuw: Bronnen en problemen', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, lxxxviii (1975), pp. 501–38; D. Nicholas, *The Metamorphosis of a Medieval City: Ghent in the Age of the Artevelde, 1302–1390* (Lincoln, NE, 1987). For a more general discussion, see S.A. Farmer, *Approaches to Poverty in Medieval Europe: Complexities, Contradictions, Transformations, c.1100–1500* (Turnhout, 2016).

inherit something—especially in years of high inflation and economic recession, of which there were many in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Low Countries.³⁹

The high value of buildings, things and animals gave a fundamentally different weight to people's relations with their material and natural environments. This insight has several important implications for the formation of micro-social networks. High costs incentivised those living in proximity to each other to distribute the financial burden of domestic constructions and facilities. Inhabitants often shared gutters or brick walls with neighbours. They also shared latrines, pipes, cesspits and wells. Yet those involved in such interdependent relationships with one or more nearby households also faced certain risks: that others would not contribute as promised, would move away, or otherwise not use spaces according to shared moral norms and principles. Such material commitments therefore required social investments: mutual agreement and trust. This confirms from a new perspective the importance of trust in late medieval urban society, which has been recognised in other contexts.⁴⁰ Moreover, agreements on material-spatial arrangements also substantially raised interest in policing each other's behaviour.

At the basis of such practical and daily reciprocal commitments were various dramatic developments in the legal status of possessions during the later Middle Ages. In contrast to earlier centuries, houses and land were no longer passed down to younger generations mainly or even exclusively through inheritances; in many towns they could be sold, and therefore became 'mobile' (chattel) instead of 'immobile' goods (patrimony). Even land (and thus also roads, waters and quays) within the city could be mobile in that sense: a form of capital that could be exchanged for other forms of capital, or for rents.⁴¹ The urban property market thus evolved from the thirteenth century into a highly regulated but very complex system of exchange, especially in the Low Countries' growing cities.⁴² The complexity of exchange was principally the result of the continuous subdivisions, modifications, alterations and sometimes mergers of domestic spaces. It also further complicated the common distinction between owners and tenants, to which we may add partial owners and 'users': those residents who had, for instance,

39. Boone, Dumon and Reusens, *Immobilienmarkt*, pp. 66–73.

40. Forrest, *Trustworthy Men*, pp. 11–45. The element of trust and a shared sense of community is discussed extensively in T. Dutour, *Sous l'empire du bien. Bonnes gens et pacte social: XIII^e–XV^e Siècle* (Paris, 2015); G. Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages: Guilds in England, 1250–1550* (Oxford, 2015); id., 'Crafts, Guilds, and the Negotiation of Work in the Medieval Town', *Past and Present*, no. 154 (1997), pp. 3–31.

41. M.C. Howell, *Commerce Before Capitalism in Europe, 1300–1600* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 49–92. See also, on domestic property, S. Rees Jones, *York: The Making of a City, 1068–1350* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 270–309.

42. V. Harding, 'Space, Property, and Propriety in Urban England', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, xxxii (2002), pp. 549–69; B. van Bavel and J. Luiten van Zanden, 'The Jump-Start of the Holland Economy during the Late-Medieval Crisis, c.1350–c.1500', *Economic History Review*, lvii (2004), pp. 503–32.

a right of way through an alley, could get rid of rain and waste water through certain pipes, or were entitled to use a water well. In sum, what may have been originally a single plot with one affluent owner or one family—perhaps with tenants—could become over the course of decades and centuries a possession with obligations, rents, annuities, but also practical privileges belonging to several different parties. Living spaces, thus imbued with layers of historical rights and rents, made the private in a pre-modern context less exclusive and individualistic and more conditional and historical. In the words of Vanessa Harding, ‘contemporaries recognised the simultaneous existence of a plurality of interests in one space’.⁴³

III

How to make sense of community with these material-spatial and legal complexities in mind? Agreements made between neighbours were a common and legitimate means of keeping the peace, but also a source of conflict. In 1437, for example, a certain Jan Scermer, an inhabitant of Leiden, wanted to rebuild a house over a stream crossing his yard. He pleaded in a case against him, triggered by a neighbour’s complaint, that he had already ‘peacefully possessed this property for over a third of a century’.⁴⁴ This reference to long-term ‘peace’ in relation to the use of a common infrastructure, in this case a waterway, is typical of a claim often asserted in court cases between local residents: that someone had been a good neighbour for a very long time. To come to a resolution, Jan requested instructions on the measurements for his new building project by either ‘the law or the neighbours’.⁴⁵ The ambiguity seems curious, but it was not uncommon. City magistrates gave guidance in by-laws and ordinances to avoid friction and hazards. Neighbours’ ‘customs and easements’ (*buerlike rechten en servituten*) were often eventually codified in local collections of by-laws during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Yet even by that point, municipal rules were rather general and left much freedom and jurisdiction to neighbours. In fact, they stimulated co-operation among neighbours to avoid issues such as unsafe walls, fire hazards and pollution. Even more importantly, by-laws also formally acknowledged the validity of oral agreements between (groups of) residents.⁴⁶

Residents at times called on the higher authorities of the aldermen’s courts to resolve their conflicts, or may have used official legal steps as

43. Harding, ‘Space, Property, and Propriety’, p. 558.

44. ELO, 0508, 41A, Kenningboek A, fo. 63r (1437).

45. Ibid.

46. *Coutumes des pays et comté de Flandre: Coutume de la ville de Gand*, ed. A.E.M. Gheldolf (Brussels, 1868), pp. 76–84; *De middeneeuwsche keurboeken van de stad Leiden*, ed. H.G. Hamaker (Leiden, 1873), p. 4. See, on Bruges, H. Deneweth, *Goede muren maken goede burenen: Verbouwingen en buurtleven in Brugge, 1500–1800* (Bruges, 2020).

part of their broader strategy.⁴⁷ Tensions often occurred when someone made extensions or modified existing constructions. Friction was also commonly caused when new owners moved into a property. Such newcomers had to earn their peers' trust and negotiate their position in an existing socio-material network involving various informal agreements. Furthermore, temporary residents such as lodgers further complicated the composition of households, and may have had limited access to this sphere of reciprocity. In addition to clear financial motives, physical health hazards and issues of safety probably formed part of people's concerns. The problem of stench as a cause of disease and air corruption (*miasma*) made cleanliness of living environments a matter of public health. A polluted living environment was commonly framed as a type of nuisance that put in jeopardy, as the sources at times explicate, both neighbours and passers-by.⁴⁸

Men and women initiated legal proceedings against their neighbours and featured as plaintiffs and defendants. The examples below are mainly drawn from Leiden and Deventer, but similar *accusatio* or 'civic' registers are present in many other local archives throughout the Low Countries. Excluding cases about home ownership and rents, in both Leiden and Deventer disputes between neighbours comprise around 10 per cent of the total number of legal disputes.⁴⁹ In the same registers, neighbours also featured prominently as both litigators and witnesses in numerous financial disputes and conflicts over inheritances, which is another indication of how much nearby residents were tied to each other by systems of credit and debt.⁵⁰

These court records offer details on practices far beyond what we can find in prescriptive sources. First, the testimonies of others living nearby, and even of former inhabitants of the same house, were crucial

47. Unresolved cases were especially prominent in Deventer's records. See Collectie Overijssel locatie Deventer [hereafter NL-DvCO], 0722, Clagheboek ('Liber causarum inter actores et reos'), 5a–b (1423–1439), 5c (1453–1492). See, on civic/voluntary litigation as strategy, D. Lord Smail, 'Aspects of Procedural Documentation in Marseille (14th–15th Centuries)', in S. Lepsius and T. Wetzstein, eds, *Als die Welt in die Akten kam: Prozessschriftgut im europäischen Mittelalter* (Frankfurt am Main, 2008), pp. 139–72.

48. D. Jørgensen, 'The Medieval Sense of Smell, Stench and Sanitation', in R. Beck, ed., *Les cinq sens de la ville: du Moyen Âge à nos jours* (Tours, 2013); Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies*; G. Geltner, *Roads to Health: Infrastructure and Urban Wellbeing in Later Medieval Italy* (Philadelphia, PA, 2019).

49. Leiden's Kenningboeken are extant from 1434 onwards and mostly deal with issues of property and inheritance. I have sampled two consecutive years per decade between 1430 and 1480, which led to a total of fifty-two relevant cases—11 per cent of the total of 483 cases in the sample of the Kenningboeken. Sampled years are: 1436–7, 1446–7, 1456–7, 1466–7, 1476–7: ELO, 0508, 41A–D, Kenningboeken (1434–1486). For Deventer, I have sampled two Clagheboeken. Regarding the first manuscript, 5a (1423–1439), comprising 216 folios, I have gathered a representative sample of approximately 50 per cent, based mainly on legibility, which is at times very poor. From the second Clagheboek, 5c (1452–1493), I have sampled around one-fifth of the pages, which commonly contain one or sometimes two cases per page, across the 300-folio manuscript. Sampled folios are: 1v–15v (c.1452), 50v–r (c.1457), 98v–107r (c.1463), 172r–181r (c.1475), 230r–240r (c.1482), 280r–290r (c.1488). This in total yielded about sixty relevant cases from Deventer.

50. See, for instance, ELO, Kenningboek B, fo. 3r; Kenningboek D, fo. 24v (1477).

