

## The Begijnhoven: Analysis of Other Hybrid Types in the Medieval City

Martínez-Millana, Elena

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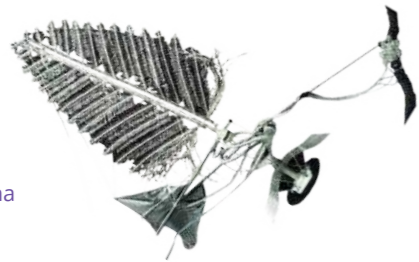
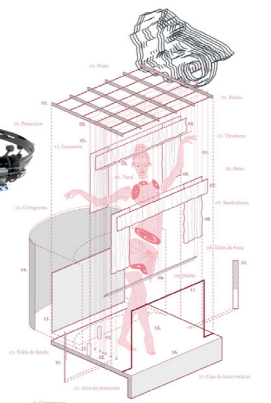
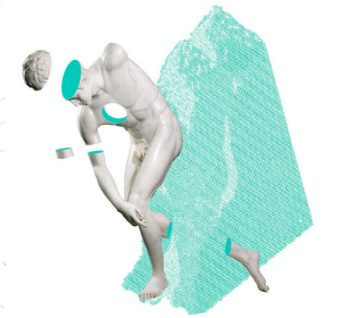
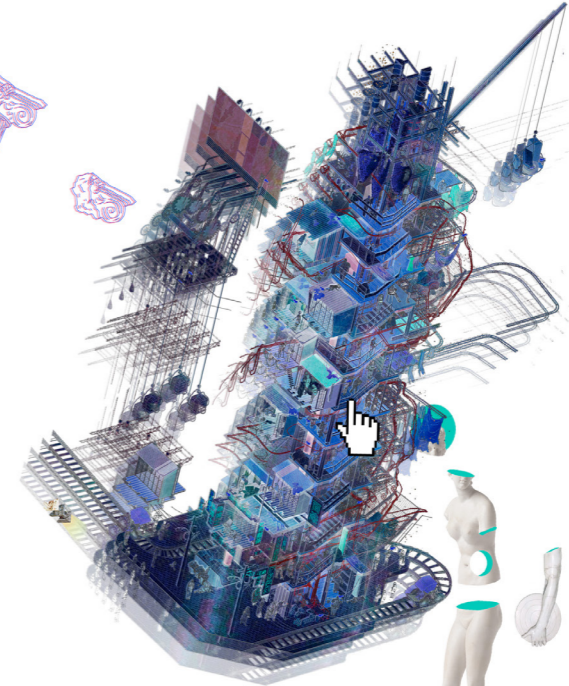
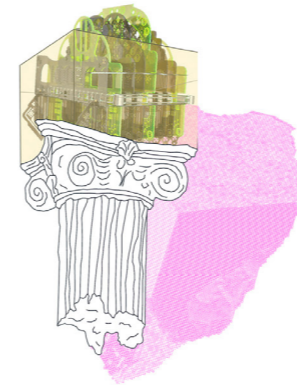
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# Topic 05 / European Urbanization.

It refers to people's movements and materials across Europe and its borders as well as the urban processes that these movements activate or transform. It emphasises how architecture extends and modifies social science research in this area.

# The Beguinages Cities within Cities.

Analysis of other hybrid types in the medieval city.

This research explores the paradoxes of domesticity in Beguinages. These organisations can be analysed as a different medieval hybrid type, as cities in their own right as well as cities within cities. They emerged in the European medieval cities in the thirteenth century, and were inhabited by the Beguines for almost eight centuries. This research aims to move towards a more architectural and gender perspective by retrieving, revising and relating this to the work done by other researchers. It is possible to find in the past, the emergence of a new situation where women break with the way of life based on the nuclear family and who have the will to transform the spatial conditions they inhabit - the house and the city that they have inherited from established urban form. This research intends to demonstrate how women were effective in this and the fact that the Beguinage human-space relationship occurred with a gendered perspective. Two issues are analysed which reinforced each other: the changes they made in the spatial properties of the places they lived in; and the multiple-uses that were in the Beguinages. This research shows how women updated the existing domesticity by means of

the Beguinages in the Middle Ages. Some of the architectural strategies employed in the Beguinages contribute to delve into the complex genealogy of the domesticity of the house and the western city, and conclusively to human thought so that it is not only construed from the masculine experience. The Beguinages are a paradigmatic case of transformation of the existing city - becoming more than a gated community, whereby women introduced other ways of inhabiting within the city: the space of intimacy extends from the house to the city, within the city. These complexes might be placed as a precedent for these institutions that emerged in the Enlightenment grouped by the notion of heterotopias, such as prisons and hospitals, which are connected genealogically to monasteries and convents. This paper values its usefulness by perceiving the past as it is, an ocean of knowledge weighed against the illusion of progress that ignores that which preceded it.

**Key words:**

**City, Domesticity, Intimacy, Gender, Middle Ages.**

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## 1. Introduction.

The Beguine communities began to develop in numerous cities during the thirteenth century in the region of the Low Countries, Lage Landen or Le Pays-Bas, an area now occupied by present countries: the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, areas in the north of France and western Germany. The main cause of their emergence, as explained by Sarah Joan Moran in *Unconventional Women: Religion, Politics, and Image in the Court Beguinages 1585-1713*, was the development of cities in the High Middle Ages which encouraged many women to migrate to them in search of work.

During the first decades of the existence of Beguinages, between 1230-60, the number of inhabitants of these communities rose to hundreds, in some cases they reached a thousand. This figure contrasts with monasteries and convents by comparison at the time, which was much lower, as noted by Walter P. Simons in *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1560*. Unlike these other communities, the Beguines were accessible to many women as they allowed property ownership rights and the right to work for self-support and finance.

## 2. The Beguinages: Cities within cities.

The Begijnhof, or Béguinage, in Dutch and French, is the architectural complex which was inhabited by communities of

Beguines. Although the first were built outside the cities and within their own walls for protection, a "short time later they started to settle on the inside, or as the city expanded, they ended up being within the city walls."<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the Beguinages can be analysed from their origin as architectural complexes that emerged within the medieval cities, but even more so, as how this particular human-space relationship occurred with a gendered perspective, a wall that might be analysed as a "hint of condemnation of the present."<sup>2</sup>

Although these Beguine communities disappeared by the end of the twentieth century, from the three hundred Beguinages that were accounted for in 1566, many still remain. The Beguinages were therefore inhabited by women for almost eight centuries. Ernest W. McDonnell explains in *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture*, that these complexes were formed without central coordination or a sole founder, and that many were interconnected through medieval pathways. This paper aims to move towards a more architectural and gendered perspective here by retrieving, revising and relating the work done by other researchers.

Therefore, this paper intends to show how women were effective in the transformation of the house and the city they had inherited by reflecting upon two aspects that reinforce each other: on the one hand, by analysing the changes they made in the spatial properties of the places they lived in; on the other hand, by showing how the benefits and challenges

of sharing space by means of the multiple-uses that were in the Beguinages, gave shape to these complexes in serving the needs of the larger community. The hypothesis is that Beguinages emerged as cities in their own right as well as cities within other cities.

## 3. Domesticity within the Beguinages: Other medieval hybrid types.

The Beguinages were very heterogeneous in their formal configuration, but they had in common diverse mechanisms of how they became set up, and so it is possible to identify the following organisations:

### 3.1. City Transformation / Type1.

Organised houses around a large central square or garden, with the facade facing the city, this being the rear wall. The Beguinage in Amsterdam founded in 1345 is an example of this configuration (Fig.1, 2 and 3).

In the engraving of the city of Amsterdam from 1572 (Fig.1, zoom), one can see the Beguinage architectural complex in relation to the city. The reversal of the usual access to the houses was the main feature that allowed the complex as a whole, to be used from its interior.

Another engraving of the Beguinage from 1544 shortly before this (Fig.3),

shows an isolated Beguinage. In it, the city into which it became situated or formed is hidden, but the doors of the traditional houses can be seen and although they are not accessible, its condition of a city within a city prevails.

### 3.2. City Transformation / Type2.

Houses arranged along streets within a separate walled area. Examples of these are the Beguinage in Brussels founded in the thirteenth century (Fig.4 and 5), or the one in Ghent founded in 1271 (Fig.6 and 7). In the engraving of Ghent, one can see that the access door to the interior of the Beguinage is open and inside there are Beguines and laypeople. Even though the Beguinage was constituted as a city within another, it was not always closed off.

The Beguinages transformed the conditions of use of the courtyards and created a meaning to it of interiority, a space of intimacy extending from the house to the city, the space to which all other city inhabitants had access to.

### 3.3. City Transformation / Type3.

As a counterpoint, it is interesting to analyse the configuration of those smaller scaled Beguinages that were reproduced and multiplied in the same city.

For example, in Cambrai, after the disappearance of the first Beguinage - that of Sainte Ursule founded in 1239 - up to six Beguinages were founded and dispersed throughout the city. The one



Fig.4



Fig.5

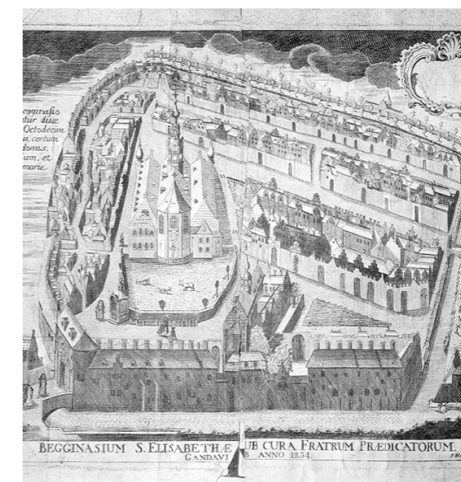


Fig.6

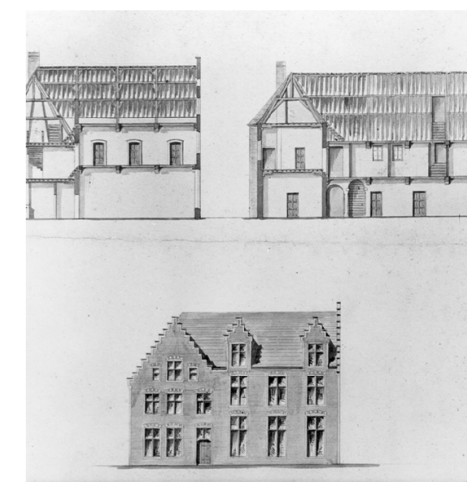


Fig.7

shown here is the Beguinage of Saint Vaast, founded in 1545 (Fig.8, 9 and 10).

These classifications show the diverse configurations of the Beguinages and the fact that all of them were established within an inherited city. The traditional house type is the basis or structure from which the Beguinage is defined, thereby updating the city's traditional

relationship between house and city. It is therefore possible to identify them as a particular form or 'type', and its various combinations to form multiple kinds of developments from topological considerations, hence its particular heterogeneity and mutability. The Beguinages, like the monasteries and the convents, can be considered as diverse types of medieval hybrids. Nevertheless,



Fig.1



Fig.2

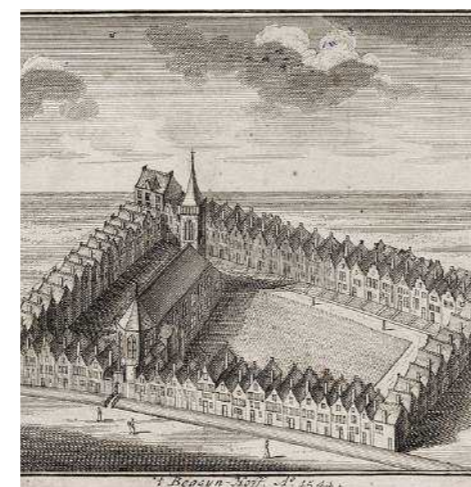


Fig.3

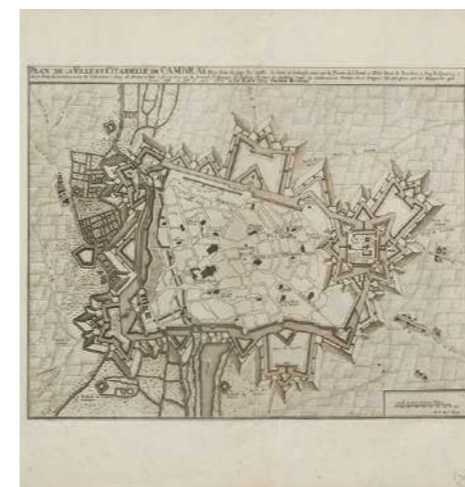


Fig.8

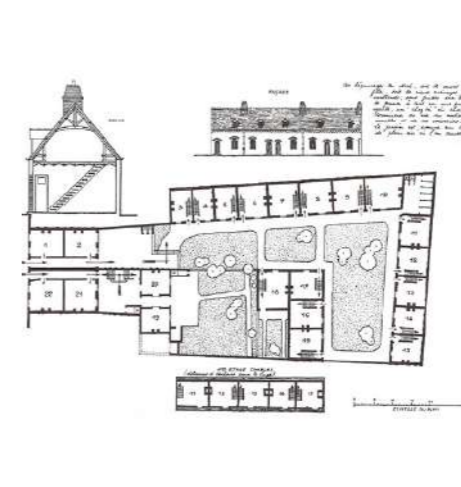


Fig.9



Fig.10



the Beguinages clearly constitute a different type: carried out by secular women and configured from an existing building type that constitutes the city – i.e., vernacular dwellings. The analysis of the Beguinages raises fundamental questions on architectural design issues, specifically about the notion of type within the exiting city. These architectural complexes updated the domesticity by means of the existing house type and the established urban form.

The notion of ‘type’, which has been so used and abused in the twentieth century, regains its definition as structure of the form which is capable of multiple developments; as Rafael Moneo explains in ‘On Typology’, type can be “thought of as the frame within which change operates, a necessary term to the continuing dialectic required by history”, not a mere mechanism of reproduction for “mass production.”<sup>3</sup> This definition is closer to that which Quatremère de Quincy gave in the second half of the eighteenth century in the ‘Dictionnaire historique d’architecture’, than the redefinitions made in the 20th century.

The Beguinages were constituted as cities within the existing cities, and in this sense, as in ‘Fragments of an Ideal City’, Dick van Gameren and Pierijn van de Putt describe the Beguinages, or Begijnhoven in Dutch, as an early example of urban enclaves, and placed them as a “precursor for the historical models of ideal cities.”<sup>4</sup> The authors explore underlying typologies of the urban enclave, and suggest a “collage of utopias” as a suitable model for contemporary city. Beguinages is pointed out as an early example because they achieved the “ideal of a better society”, through the existing house type and the established urban form.

## 4. Gender and domesticity in the Middle Ages.

This research shows two main configuration modes of the Beguinages in the medieval cities; with these, one can see the variety of compositions that could be adopted within their perimeters. Sarah Joan Moran, in ‘On Locked Doors

and Open Windows’, explains that the houses that constituted the Beguinages go from Beguines to laypeople and vice versa with apparent ease. The Beguines bought adjacent houses or sold them according to their funds. The mixed-use spaces within these architectural complexes, together with the opening of them to the other citizens, were justified by the need to support themselves economically. As specialist researchers have demonstrated, the Beguines worked at washing, cooking, grinding, making beer, textiles, laundering, amongst other tasks. Moreover, as Daphne Spain explains in *The Importance of Gendered Spaces for the Public Realm*, they achieved public importance by caring for the sick, the elderly and the poor, and contributing on the education of the women.

All these aspects gave rise to the radical singularity of the domesticity of the Beguinages, which is that they were constituted as unfinished architectural complexes that could vary by growing or reducing in size. In them, the location of the majority of the elements was circumstantial, versatile and flexible, and therefore in their configuration they far from followed a strict pattern of functional organisation, but rather they took into account other topological variables. Some of these issues point out the virtues and shortcoming of past and current domesticity.

Beguinages might be placed also as a precedent of those institutions emerged in the Enlightenment grouped by Michel Foucault in ‘Espaces autres’ by the notion of “heterotopias”, such as prisons and hospitals, which were configured as cities within others cities.<sup>5</sup> The Beguinages, as monasteries and convents, may be justifiably added to this list. As Robin Evans explore in *The Rights of Retreat and the Rights of Exclusion: Notes Towards the Definition of Wall*, there exists a genealogical connection between those buildings from antiquity which were destined for the retreat and those that emerged for the exclusion. Both built the “paradoxical possibility of a densely packed nest of isolated individuals.”<sup>6</sup>

Also, Foucault defined domesticity as a way of domination in ‘Surveiller et Punir. Naissance de la prison’.<sup>7</sup> And Sigmund

Freud in ‘Das Unheimlich’ explored the “uncanny” dimension of the house. More recently, Hilde Heynen point out in ‘Dwelling, Mimesis, Culture’, that the house is the key metaphor that Freud used on his reflection on the uncanny, because “the most uncanny experience occurs in the environment that is most familiar to us.”<sup>8</sup> Anthony Vidler agrees with this in ‘The Architectural Uncanny. Essays in the Modern Unhomely’. Even more, the etymology of the word domesticity, the domus, is linked to this dimension. So, domesticity in Beguinages might be analysed from the “uncanny” dimension inherent to it. That’s why Beguinages are a paradigmatic case of transformation of the existing city – becoming more than a gated community, whereby women introduced other ways of inhabiting within the city: that space of women’s intimacy was effectively extended from the house to the city, within the city. Even more, the Beguinages are justifiably added to the list of urban enclaves grouped by the notion of heterotopias – prisons, hospitals, asylums, but also convents and monasteries. Because of this obverse of the rite of exclusion, and women was excluded from the city’s public realm, it is the personal right of retreat. That the Beguinages analyses points out the uncanny inherent to domesticity, it unveils that mirror inversion, the possibility of change.

The Beguinages, as in ‘Fragments of an Ideal City’, remains as a source of inspiration for large-scale projects in the city, but even more than that, they might be useful to offer a more in-depth knowledge about the relationship between domesticity and gender, in this case “what has been.”<sup>9</sup> They enable a deeper understanding of the complex genealogy of domesticity in western culture, so that it is no longer or not only construed from the masculine experience. In conclusion, it has been possible to show how women modified existing forms of domesticity by means of the Beguinages, construed as cities within cities, as are heterotopias, in the Middle Ages. This paper intends to value its usefulness by perceiving the past as it is, an immense ocean of knowledge weighed against the illusion of progress that ignores that which preceded it.

## Notes

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9. BENJAMIN, Walter, 1999. “N: On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 462. “It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.” [Awakening. N2a,3].

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**Elena Martínez-Millana** is currently a Research Fellow -funded by the European Union and Polytechnic University of Madrid Social Council Fellowship- at Delft University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Department of Architecture (2018-19/2019-20). She is a PhD Candidate, her doctoral thesis is titled “Disassembling Domesticity: Inhabiting Heterotopias”, and she is a member of the Collective Housing Research Group at the Polytechnic University of Madrid (GIVCO-UPM) since 2015. This research has been awarded by the Spanish Biennial of Architecture and Urbanism XIV BEAU (2018) –Research Category–, and was included in the Spanish Pavilion exhibition at the Venice Architecture Biennale (2018), moreover, she has participated in several scientific conferences, etc. Elena has been a Predoctoral Fellow in the Architectural Design Department (DPA-UPM) -funded by the European Union and the Community of Madrid-, where she has been Teaching (2017-18/2018-19) and Mentoring (2014-17).

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