

# Designing for the women of the Begijnhof in Amsterdam

*Understanding the architectural settings and the needs of the Beguinages of the Begijnhof in Amsterdam, during the Middle Ages, Reformation and contemporary period.*

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## *Abstract*

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the origin, history, and the architectural setting of the Begijnhof in Amsterdam throughout significant periods of change, the Middle Ages, the Reformation and the contemporary era. The combination of these aspects depicts the architectural setting of the Begijnhof that support the needs of the female inhabitants, the Beguinages. This research has been conducted by literature study and a case study of the Begijnhof in building plans (archival research). The results show the architectural settings of the Begijnhof are translated for the needs: independence, safety, religion, work and reputation. These aspects influence and enhance each other. The architectural settings are translations of these needs, most of them are outside the domestic sphere, in the courtyard and its attributes. When designing for the Beguinages, it turns out it is important to design holistically, socially oriented and slow paced.

## *Preface*

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## 1. Introduction

The man-made environment which surrounds us reinforces conventional patriarchal definitions of women's role in society and spatially imprints those sexist messages on our daughters and sons.<sup>1</sup>

This quote by Leslie Kane Weisman in her manifesto *Making room: women and architecture*. Weisman illustrates the current man-made world, which was designed with the neglect of women and the job performed by them.<sup>2</sup>

This stems from two causes; the first one is the sexist way of thinking that was believed by our society for many centuries, that the woman is a homemaker which provides reproductive and unpaid work. On the other hand the man is the breadwinner, which belongs in the public world, by performing productive and paid work. Kristiaan Borret explains this dichotomy in public and private spheres through different models, one of which is the feminist model, where most models view it as putting the public sphere up front, and the private sphere is left with the residue, assuming there is a hierarchy between both spaces. This private space is defined as the family life, the domesticity, the homes.<sup>3</sup> And work performed within this space is not productive. The second cause for this way of thinking is; most architects and urban planners were male, even today in the Netherlands, in architecture ratio of female to male is 23%-77%.<sup>4</sup> Since architecture is a profession historically ascribed to the public sphere, women have had more trouble in admitting to the discipline. Some eventually succeed, especially since the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more and more women are breaking these stereotypes by flourishing as great architects and receiving recognition for it.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to look at our current and historically man-made environment and distinct the thoughts of these outdated ideas, such as; a person who assumes unpaid work and family care is out of the norm; for instance carrying a stroller has not been considered in the standard norm, and even today it is not easy for those people to manoeuvre in public transportation or in malls. Also, most diaper changing stations in public areas are only located in women's restrooms, or there are rarely public places to breastfeed infants. But more importantly, the way of designing our public spaces seem to neglect how women might feel when being there at night. So, our man-made world has been designed by men from their perspective as users; a minoritarian and privileged one that traditionally did not assume care work, and just performed the productive work, traditionally outside the domestic space. Today inequality still exists, the Gender Equality Index shows the gender percentage of doing daily housework. In 2019 the percentage for women was 79% and for men 34%. In the Netherlands the equality is second highest scoring in the European Union, the percentage between men and women in doing daily housework is 81% and for the men for 47%.<sup>6</sup> However there are some exceptions to this rule. What about the worlds made for women, such as the Beguinages communities that lived in the Middle Ages? It is interesting to look at these religious female communities, as they were inhabited and maintained by women, the Beguinages. A well preserved and famous version of one these communities is the Begijnhof in Amsterdam, this Begijnhof, founded in 1307, is since its origin inhabited by catholic females. It is

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie Kane Weisman, "Women's Environmental Rights: A Manifesto", *Heresies 11*, Vol 3. No. 3, (1981) 6.

<sup>2</sup> Weisman, *Heresies 11*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Kristiaan Borret, "On Domains The Public, the Private and the Collective", *OASE 54*, (2001), 50-61-58.

<sup>4</sup> "Ronde tafel over vrouwen in de architectuur", BNA, accessed April 14, 2020,

<https://www.bna.nl/nieuws/rondetafel-over-vrouwen-in-de-architectuur>

<sup>5</sup> Kirsten Hannema, "Architectuur congres Den Bosch markeert een omslag in de door mannen gedomineerde architectuur", *De Volkskrant*, November 18, 2018.

<https://www.volkskrant.nl/cultuur-media/architectuurcongres-in-den-bosch-markeert-een-omslag-in-de-door-mannen-gedomineerde-architectuur~bc8bb656/>

<sup>6</sup> "Gender Equality Index", European Institute for Gender Equality, accessed April 14, 2020, <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2019/domain/time/NL>

interesting to dissect what attributes make the Begijnhof in use and function so powerfully timeless and what can our man-made environment learn from the Begijnhof?

In the Middle Ages there were many Begijnhoven in the Netherlands and Belgium, but in 2009 there were only two left in the Netherlands that still have most of their architectural characteristics.<sup>7</sup>

One is in Haarlem and one in Amsterdam. The Begijnhof in Haarlem has since origin, a new function, however the Begijnhof in Amsterdam has relatively the same function since its origin. These Beguinages lived around a courtyard, in Dutch, 'hof'. They were a religious community of women that was a bit self-sufficient.

The current research about the Begijnhof is partly about the concept of charitable courtyards in the Middle Ages and partly research about the emancipation of the Beguinages in the Begijnhoven. However, there is a lack of knowledge about the almost unique aspect of the Begijnhof; it has been built as a medieval design for women. This research aims to provide more knowledge about the Begijnhof in Amsterdam on a gender-study based perspective, by unravelling the female influences of the Medieval Begijnhof in Amsterdam (1307-present day) through the material of architecture. This may be significant for understanding what makes the Begijnhof timeless, the successful attributes or tools unravelled could be used in future projects. To find answers on the main research question of this thesis; *What was the architectural setting of the Begijnhof in the Middle Ages that supports the needs of the Beguinages; and how are those architectural settings in contemporary times?* There will be added sub questions: 1. Beguinages: origin, history and the roles of Beguinages, 2. Begijnhof architectural setting during most significant periods of change, the Middle Ages, Reformation and the contemporary period. 3. Architectural settings in support of the Beguinages' needs.

There have been published studies about the Begijnhof, the current literature of the Begijnhoven has been looked at in two perspectives, the first one is the tangible aspect of exemplary group living in a courtyard, taught to those in the fields of architecture and urban planning. The main focus lied in their peculiar way of living that has been mostly intact, even hundreds of years later.<sup>8</sup> However, in more recent years the Begijnhoven gained a new focus point, an intangible one, where the origin of Begijnhoven is seen as a landmark of female emancipation in Europe.<sup>9</sup> And lastly, there is literature about the Begijnhof in Amsterdam, that is not focussed on the intangible aspects. In current literature, they are elaborating the Begijnhof throughout history. One of the most expanded historical researches has been done by Ger van Dijk in his book *Van 'Der Beghinelande' tot Begijnhof te Amsterdam: de geschiedenis van het Begijnhof van 1307 tot heden*.<sup>10</sup> (From the Beguinages land until the Begijnhof in Amsterdam: The history of the Begijnhof from 1307 to the present).

In the intangible aspect of gender and Begijnhoven in Europe, Walter Simons dives in to these female communities and their way of living in his book *Cities of Ladies*, he focusses on the Begijnhof culture. Another key player in the research field of Begijnhoven is Sarah Moran, she wrote her book *Unconventional Women*, which focusses on the Beguinages communities as well as gender.<sup>11</sup>

This history thesis has been done through the study of secondary sources of information (literature review) and primary sources of information (archival research), which consist of the building plans and municipal documents. The literature has been collected through different databases, such as the library of the Technical University of Delft, public library of Amsterdam and the archive of Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. The case study will be analysed by building plans, collected from the

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<sup>7</sup> Guido Theunnissen, *Begijnhoven in Nederland: Begijnhof Amsterdam*, (Amsterdam, Begijnhofkrant, 2009) 2-4.

<sup>8</sup> Kirsten Hannema, Peter van Assche, Sander van der Ham, et al. *Hofjes van Nederland* (Den Haag: Deltahage, 2013), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Suzanne van Aerschot - van Haeverbeeck, "Vlaamse begijnhoven", *UNESCO Info*, april/may/june 2011, 18. <https://www.unesco-vlaanderen.be/media/70159/ui81.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Ger van Dijk, *Van 'Der Beghinelande' tot Begijnhof te Amsterdam : de geschiedenis van het Begijnhof van 1307 tot heden*, (Amsterdam: Van Dijk, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Moran, *Unconventional Women: Religion, Politics, and Image in the Court Beguinages*, (Providence, Rhode Island press, 2010).

municipal archive of Amsterdam, De Bazel, and also Het Nieuwe Instituut, in Rotterdam. The structure of the thesis focuses on a more general perspective on the origin and history of Begijnhoven and the Begijnhof in Amsterdam. Moreover, the roles and day-to-day activities fulfilled by the Beguinages and their needs in spatial design. The second chapter will be chronological order in significant periods of change throughout history. The Begijnhof throughout history has been through a lot of changes in architectural setting, due to different (political) reasons. In this chapter the focus will be aimed at the most significant periods of change, which starts with the origin in the High Medieval period, secondly the Reformation and lastly the Begijnhof in contemporary period. Chapter four will focus on the architectural settings of the Begijnhof from all analysed era's and focus on the architectural settings that support the needs of the Beguinages. A hypothesis is that the Begijnhof in Amsterdam was most likely founded by a wealthy man or organisation as part of a charity, as this happened often in the Middle Ages. The Begijnhof is probably designed for women by men, however maintained by women. It might be interesting to unravel the original plans made by men, as they depict their spirit of the time, what a woman was supposed to do, and also to unravel the made interventions by these women to their man-made environment throughout the centuries. This research limits itself to the Begijnhof in Amsterdam as a case study. The found attributes may or may not be fit to generalise for future projects to make our man-made world more human-made. This is because it is about a specific religious group of women, the Beguinages, who lived as single women, with a desire of independence. Secondly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there has been less access to data due to archives closing. This limits the research in analysing building plans of the Begijnhof. Finally, some conclusions that led from architectural settings can be intuitive or an educated guess.

## 2. Beguinages: origin, history and the roles of Beguinages

Historically, there have been two perspectives from which Begijnhoven, in general, are focused on in research. The tangible, which is exemplary courtyard living, and the intangible, a landmark of female emancipation. In this chapter, the focus is on the intangible aspect of the origin and history of Begijnhoven.

During the start of the twelfth century in the Netherlands and Belgium, the High Medieval period, a new orthodox religious movement started arising, which focussed on living by rules of Benedictus of Nursia, father of the Benedictines. This was most likely the period wherein women and church disintegrated more, since there were in Christianity little to no meaningful functions for women. The Church was a male community, Catholic men could aspire to reach different functions, from Pope to preacher. Which is why around at the start of the twelfth century women began their own religious life without church order. This is why the Begijnhoven are perceived as one of the first landmarks for the (religious) emancipation of women in Western Europe. These women were called *Mulieres religiosae* in the twelfth century, which later came to be known as the Beguinages.

At first hand, these women were perceived as heathens, due to their separation in way of living from the Church at that time. After two centuries, in the fourteenth century, the Beguinages gradually received a more respected place in Christianity and society.<sup>12</sup>

The Medieval period is a period where Christianity has a lot of influence. There were no government related welfare systems for those in need, as we know today. The sick had to be cared for by women, and for the poor it was common for the wealthy upper class, driven by Christian duty, to give to those less fortunate. This group of the elite also established hospitals, infirmaries, orphanages, etc. as charities.<sup>13</sup>

In this time society established clearly defined gender roles for women and men, the women were expected to be a housewife and the men were expected to work and finance his family. As a consequence women were also perceived as a vulnerable group in society, as there were a lot more women than men, due to the gruesome wars, crusades and violence. Some historians believe this left out the men who were criminals and louts, which made it even more difficult for a large number of women to create a family.<sup>14</sup> Many women took to the church to live as nuns, but even the churches were bursting out of their joints due to too many nuns. This is when a lot of women chose to live as Beguinages, for more safety and independence, without marriage.

Beguinages are often compared with nuns, even if this is not exactly the case. They were both religious women, who took vows of chastity, sobriety and obedience, they lived together in somewhat secluded housing. However, there were also key differences between nuns and Beguinages, for the Beguinages were not obligated to live that way for the rest of their lives. They could leave that life behind if they desired. They could break their vows of chastity in order to get married. They were also allowed to own earthly possessions, which means they could own and maintain their houses, and they lived by their own income and had free disposal of their own goods.<sup>15</sup>

The wealthy upper class and the Church helped those considered “fragile” women. They helped the Beguinages by creating an exclusionary space for them, where they could live safely and carry out their religion. In the fourteenth century, the first tracks for most Begijnhoven were set.<sup>16</sup> In the case of the Begijnhof in Amsterdam, the founder is presumed to be a wealthy man named Coppe van der Lane. After his death, his widowed wife, Lobbrich van der Lane, gave full ownership to the ladies of

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<sup>12</sup> Wim Tepe, *Begijnen in de Lage Landen* (Aalsmeer: Luyten, 1987), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Willelmin Floets, “The social missions of Dutch 'hofjes' in architecture” (PhD diss., TU Delft, 2011), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Richard B. Woodward, “A lost world made by women”, *The New York Times*, July 13, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/13/travel/13journeys.html>

<sup>15</sup> Simons, Walter. “*Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200 – 1565*”, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Van Dijk, Ger, *Van 'Der Beghinenlande' tot Begijnhof te Amsterdam*, Amsterdam, 8.

the Begijnhof in 1364. Before Van Der Lane's death, the Beguinages already lived in the Begijnhof, but did not own it.<sup>17</sup>

In the fourteenth century there were in the Netherlands other Begijnhoven than in Amsterdam, every self-respecting city at that time had their own Begijnhof, such as the cities of Delft, Haarlem, Zierikzee, Middelburg, Leiden, Dordrecht and Utrecht.<sup>18</sup> However, the only two which remained mostly intact are those of Haarlem and Amsterdam.<sup>19</sup>

The Beguinages were religious and followed religious rules, which included praying, going to church, etc. However, they had more to give to society by performing unpaid or underpaid social work. They worked for a living, they had low paying incomes from jobs as caretakers, educators, or washer women.<sup>20</sup> Ger van Dijk mentions in his book about the history of the Begijnhof in Amsterdam, that the city municipality perceived the Beguinages as a valuable asset to the city, as the women were taking care of the sick, washing clothes and educating orphans.<sup>21</sup> The roles of the Beguinages influenced their needs in spatial design. For instance, the washing of clothes in Medieval times, was done by laying the textile in the sun on a large grass field, known as a bleaching field. The sun and oxygen helped in the process of bleaching. This led to a characteristic aspect of the Begijnhof in Amsterdam, for there is a bleaching field in the midst of the houses, next to the church.

As mentioned before the Beguinages needed safety, which is translated in gable roofed houses around a courtyard to create seclusion. The water around the Begijnhof enhances the safety, with a two small bridges or drawbridges as entrances to the courtyard, one is a more noticeable gate. Another important need is carrying out their religion, they have a very prominent gothic church in front of the gate. They did not need to leave the perimeter in order to go to church, along with this church, they had one or two chapels. Also, their need for washing clothes, a bleaching field, is a remarkable aspect in the Begijnhof. Furthermore, their independence is highlighted, as they have their own houses and gardens they can maintain.

These needs are portrayed in an image of the Begijnhof found in Ger van Dijk's book, *Van 'Der Beghinenlande' tot Begijnhof* (figure 1). The book focusses on the history of the Begijnhof, Van Dijk cultivated the literature for this book from literature study, interviews and the Begijnhof archive. This is one of the oldest images of the Begijnhof, from mid sixteenth century, drawn by an anonymous person. This image depicts a bird view of the Begijnhof.

After at first many years of repulsion by society, the Begijnhoven gained more respect and more structure in their organisations. As mentioned before, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century there were many Begijnhoven in the Netherlands and Belgium. All of them were independent institutions with their own authorities. However, there was a joint structure they followed, which meant joining the Beguinages' forces in order to maintain their haven, as well as its reputation as an institution.<sup>22</sup>

It is a partnership that started from the bottom up, which aimed to achieve a goal of security and safety for the Beguinages, independent of church and state. The organisation of the Begijnhoven

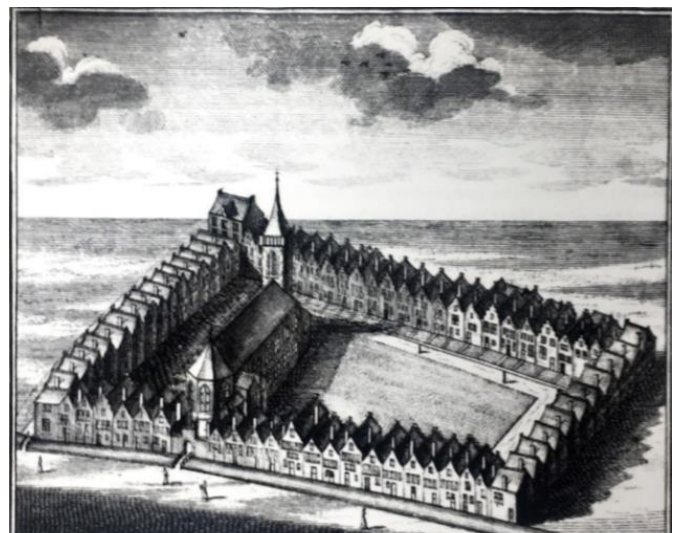


Figure 1: Ger van Dijk, *Het Begijnhof omstreeks 1544, 1544*, Van 'Der Beghinenlande' tot Begijnhof (Amsterdam, Van Dijk, 2004), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Tepe, *Begijnen in de Lage Landen*, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>20</sup> James Murray, *Bruges, Cradle of Capitalism, 1280-1390* (Cambridge: University Press, 2005), 329.

<sup>21</sup> Van Dijk, Ger, *Van 'Der Beghinenlande' tot Begijnhof te Amsterdam*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> De Moor, 'Eendracht maakt macht', 9.



was done by the women themselves. This was also the case for the Begijnhof in Amsterdam. The board consisted of two to three mistresses. There was a masterly mistress, who was responsible for the disciplines of the Begijnhof and spiritual matters, and there were one or two mistress assistants, who were responsible for finances and daily order.<sup>23</sup> When chosen as one of these three positions, in some Begijnhoven the position was for life, but in most cases it was for a limited time. After being masterly mistress, they were part of the board, which focused on maintaining their rules for their way of living. An important aspect of the Begijnhoven is they had to live by certain rules, usually set up by themselves. The archive of the Begijnhof in Amsterdam stores documents from 1600, including the rules of the Begijnhof, which mostly meant the Beguinages had to live piously and obedient.<sup>24</sup> The organisations may be slightly different from city to city, however it is clear that men did not have a say in the board of the Begijnhof.<sup>25</sup> There were men on site from time to time, they there as mere clients for their social work, or as invited guest preachers at the church in the Begijnhof.<sup>26</sup>

Primary sources help us to understand more about the day-to-day activities of the Beguinages. An itinerary of the Beguinages in the second half of the nineteenth century shows the daily activities, which states what and when the Beguinages are to do (figure 2). At the fifth point, after getting up at six in the morning to pray, on point five it states that the daily chores will be elaborated. Also, at points six it states to join in common prayer while still attending to their chores. At point thirteen it states that they should attend a spiritual reading, also while attending to their chores.

In conclusion, the Beguinages originated in the beginning of the twelfth century as religious female emancipation, when women were particularly vulnerable in the fourteenth century due to a surplus of women, because of the crusades and wars that cost the lives of many men. The wealthy upper class or church organizations founded Begijnhoven. We see the characteristics of the Begijnhof in Amsterdam in the sixteenth century can be related to the needs of the Beguinages.

In the seventeenth century they achieved their own independent organisations. We know that throughout the centuries, most Beguinages worked for a living, these needs have been met in spatial design, which include needs for seclusion, churches, bleaching fields and houses with gardens. In the next chapter the Begijnhof in Amsterdam will be analysed in spatial design throughout significant periods of change, due to innovations and political situations changes were necessary to meet the contemporary demands of those times.

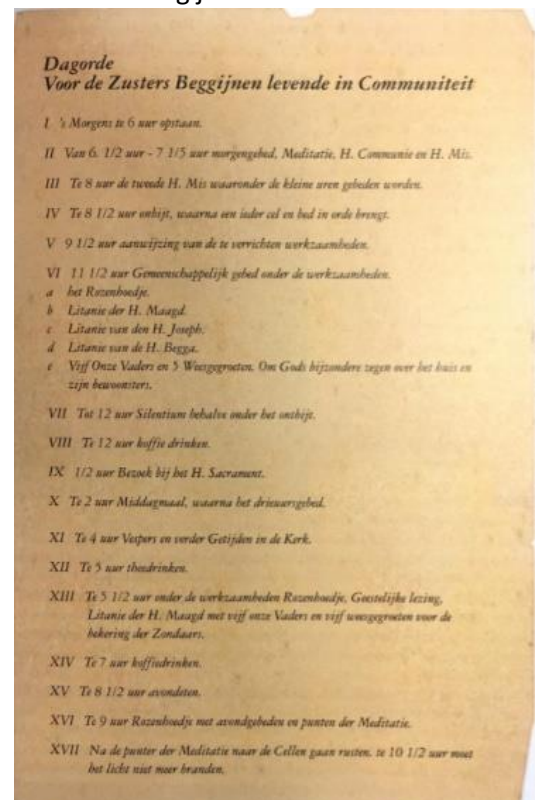


Figure 2: Ger van Dijk, *Dagorde van de Begijnen*, presumably 1872, *Van 'Der Beghinenlande' tot Begijnhof (Amsterdam, Van Dijk, 2004)*, 101.

<sup>23</sup> Tepe, *Begijnen in de Lage Landen*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> Winny Bierman, "Een wankel evenwicht" (Master Thesis, University of Utrecht, 2012), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Tepe, *Begijnen in de Lage Landen*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 39.

### 3. Begijnhof architectural setting during significant periods of change

In this chapter there will be a chronological order in significant periods of change throughout history. Starting from the Middle Ages to the Reformation until contemporary times.

#### 3.1 Begijnhof architectural setting in the Middle Ages

The city of Amsterdam has its roots in the tenth century, it consisted of a Dam at the Amstel river. After two centuries, during the Middle Ages, the city had an economic boost mainly due to a safer sailing route through Amsterdam, instead of the North Sea. Amsterdam had a toll on this route, which led Amsterdam to an era of economic growth.<sup>27</sup>

We know the Beguinages as a group in Amsterdam, were first mentioned in documents in 1307. A city plan of Amsterdam in the Middle Ages from 1300 proves that the current site of the Begijnhof was back then a few houses and an open green space (figure 3). It was at that time at the outskirts of the city, near de city walls. Which means the ground costs were relatively cheaper. See figure 3, the blue marked area is where the Begijnhof is in the current situation.

In 1364 the Begijnhuys or Begijnhouse was first mentioned, instead of a *hof*. It is presumed that this house was not in the same place as the current Begijnhof at Spui, but at the Kalverstraat (figure 4). The current Begijnhof is mentioned as a courtyard around 1345 in a privileged letter from the councils of Amsterdam to the Begijnhof.<sup>28</sup> This means there were two major changes in the Middle Ages, their move to their current location at Spui and their architectural type of living, from a single house to living around a courtyard. This is probably inspired by other Begijnhoven in the Netherlands or in current Belgium. The Begijnhoven of Belgium are categorised by UNESCO World Heritage in three categories: the urban type, the square type and the mixed type.<sup>29</sup> The urban type is characterised by a street structure, the square type is around a courtyard and the mixed type is a square combined with streets. The courtyard of the Begijnhof in Amsterdam makes it the square type.

In the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Begijnhof consisted of an area surrounded by water on the north side and on the south side a fence that went from the current wooden house until the gate at the Gedempte Begijnensloot. Alongside the fence was swamp ground and then a small canal. The Beguinages slowly muted the canal partly and swamp ground with sand, stone, grit and waste, then in 1417 bought that ground from the city. That street is now called Gedempte Begijnensloot (translates to

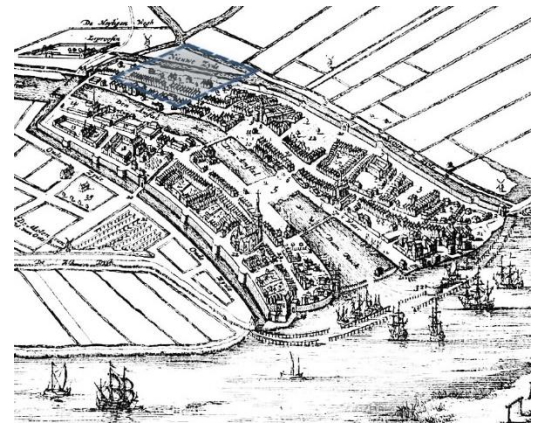


Figure 3: City archive of Amsterdam, *Out Amsterdam gelyck het geweest is omtrent den jaere 1300, 1300*, citymap, unknown, accessed on March 19, 2020, [shorturl.at/boIM1](https://shorturl.at/boIM1).

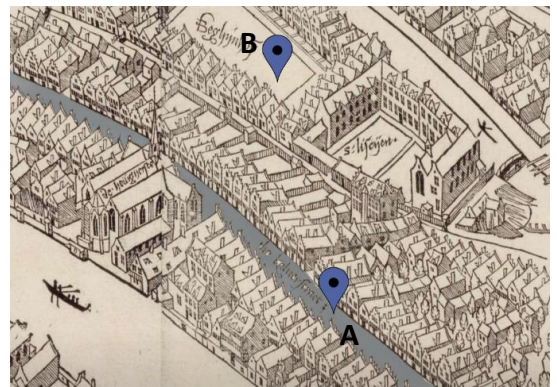


Figure 4: From Kalverstreet (A) to current location (B). City archive of Amsterdam, *De vermaerde koopstadt van Amstelredam, 1545*, Cornelis Anthonisz, accessed March 19, 2020, [shorturl.at/beopE](https://shorturl.at/beopE)

<sup>27</sup> Gemeente Amsterdam, "De geschiedenis van Amsterdam", accessed on march 16, 2020, <https://www.amsterdam.nl/toerisme-vrije-tijd/over-amsterdam/geschiedenis/>

<sup>28</sup> Van Dijk, Ger, *Van 'Der Beghinelande' tot Begijnhof te Amsterdam*, Amsterdam, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Van Aerschot - Van Haeverbeeck, "Vlaamse begijnhoven", 18.

mutated Beguinages canal). At the north side of the Begijnhof, the former Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal, which is now called Spuistraat, also used to be water. In figure 5 the situation of the Begijnhof is depicted from before 1417.

Another characteristic of the Begijnhof has been established in the Middle Ages, the English Church. This church is the most prominent building in the Begijnhof. At that time it was not known as the English church, this name came after the Reformation. It was then called the *Begijnenkerk* (Beguinages Church). In the municipal archives it states on several drawings, that the Begijnchurch is from 1419. Before that time there were two smaller chapels in the Begijnhof.

Another main change in architecture throughout Amsterdam, was going from wooden exteriors to brick exteriors. At the end of the Middle Ages in 1421 and 1452, there were two great fires in Amsterdam, these fires escalated quickly due to wooden houses. A small fire could lead to large parts of the city burning. This led to the city municipality ordering not to build in wood anymore, but in stone, which was a relatively more expensive material than wood.

These fires also struck the Begijnhof, one of the chapels they had dedicated to Virgin Mary, along with a few more houses were destroyed.<sup>30</sup> In 1397 the chapel devoted to Mary had an altar and a bedside clock, in 1414 it has been presumably expanded, however due to more and more Beguinages, there was yet again the need to expand, which they did in 1419. But they could not use it for long, because in 1421 the great fire of Amsterdam burned it to a crisp. This led to rebuilding with stone material. They soon built a new chapel, which also burned down in the next fire, in 1452. After rebuilding the chapel, the Beguinages used it for 126 years, until the day of the Alteration of Amsterdam, which is in the Reformation of Amsterdam a mile stone. In the current Begijnhof most facades are from brick, except the *Houten Huysje* (wooden house) which is one of the oldest façades in Amsterdam,<sup>31</sup> and it is made from wood, which means the fire was contained until it reached this house.

In conclusion, the main changes during the Middle Ages were defined by their need for more space, which led to a move from the Kalverstreet to Spui, and the type of Begijnhof, from house to square or courtyard type. The Beguinages partly muted the canal on the south side of the Begijnhof and bought the ground from the municipality, which gave them more ground to grow. Due to the great fires of Amsterdam in 1421 and 1452 the Begijnhof had lost a few houses and their chapel, which led to rebuilding houses, and rebuilding the gothic style church in 1419. These changes have been summarized in table 1.

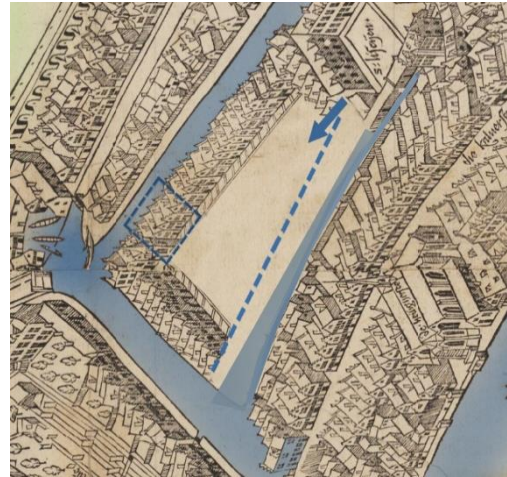


Figure 5: City archive of Amsterdam, *De vermaerde koopstadt van Amstelredam*, 1545, Cornelis Anthonisz, accessed March 19, 2020, [shorturl.at/beopE](https://shorturl.at/beopE)

Map by Anthonisz' as underlayer, the square dashed box is where the chapel would be. The arrow was the entrance to the Begijnhof, and the dashed line is where the fence was, from the wooden house to the gate.

Main changes Begijnhof in the Middle Ages	
Kalverstraat	→ Spui
Begynhouse Single house	→ Begynhof Courtyard
Water surrounding entire Begijnhof	→ Muting canal partly in front of south side.
Chapel and a few houses destroyed due to fire (1421 and 1452)	→ New church and houses in stone material.

Table 1: Significant changes of the Begijnhof during the Middle Ages.

<sup>30</sup> Tepe, *Begijnen in de Lage Landen*, 151.

<sup>31</sup> NU, "Oudste huis van Amsterdam ontdekt", accessed on march 17, 2020, <https://www.nu.nl/wetenschap/2836809/oudste-huis-van-amsterdam-ontdekt.html>



### 3.2 Begijnhof architectural setting in the Reformation

In the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Reformation started after the famous ninety-five thesis by Martin Luther in Germany, which criticised the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>32</sup> It took over a century but this eventually led to a breakage from Roman Church Catholicism to Protestantism in Europe. It's influence was strong in the Netherlands and Germany, but also noticeable in Sweden, Norway, England, Denmark, Scotland, Switzerland and France.

In the Netherlands this led to the iconoclasm in 1566, which meant destroying what depicted Catholicism, such as in churches, chapels and statues. After a decade, the Reformation took a big step on May 26<sup>th</sup> of 1578, the Alteration of Amsterdam. In just one day the city's council and spiritual leaders, which were entirely Roman Catholic, were taken over by Calvinists. This made it easier to reinforce their beliefs and set strict rules for the Catholics.<sup>33</sup> For the Beguinages this meant a period of uncertainty, due to prosecutions of Catholics. The Beguinages were forced to make changes after the Alteration.

In architecture this led to hidden churches, there are to this day four hidden churches in Amsterdam, one of which was in the Begijnhof's Wooden House.<sup>34</sup> These hidden churches arose because the new Calvinist city council confiscated Catholic buildings in the city. The Beguinages owned their houses, which meant the city council could not confiscate them. However, their chapel was confiscated as well as their Church.<sup>35</sup>

In the Reformation the church on the Begijnhof underwent most changes (figure 6). It had been taken over, and used as a hospital for wounded English soldiers, until 1586 when a building had been added next to the church, presumably this would be the smaller building in figure 7.

After adding the new building, the Calvinistic city council gave the church to the Scottish and English Calvinists, which they then dubbed The English Church. The Church had been held intact, until a renovation in 1727. The Northern façade had been altered and the gallery had been removed.

The Beguinages were not allowed to practice Catholicism publicly or privately, but they had a hidden Church in the Wooden House. During the Reformation the Wooden House was owned by the Beguinage Willemtgen Heyndricks, she even bribed Scots to turn a blind eye. There is a document in the municipal archive of Amsterdam, which states the Beguinages were indicted for praying, which went to court. They pleaded in a letter that this was not exercising Catholicism, because everyone prays with their family, as they considered their community at the Begijnhof a family.<sup>36</sup>

Up until at least 1760 there was a second entrance to the courtyard, in the form of stairs. This led to a second bridge over the canal (figure 8).



Figure 6: Added building next to Church and stairs entrance. Van Dijk, 37.



Figure 7: City Archive Amsterdam, View to the Engelsche Kerk, on the Begijnhof, Amsterdam. Etching, hand coloured. 1729



Figure 8: Both bridges to the entrances Begijnhof. City Archive Amsterdam, 1970,

<sup>32</sup> "The Reformation", History, accessed march 19, 2020,

<https://www.history.com/topics/reformation/reformation>

<sup>33</sup> "Alteratie van Amsterdam (26 mei 1578)", Historiek, accessed on March 19, 2020,

<https://historiek.net/alteratie-van-amsterdam-1578/70691/>

<sup>34</sup> "Sacramentijnen van Amsterdam", Begijnhofkapel, accessed on March 25, 2020,

<https://begijnhofkapelamsterdam.nl/sacramentijnen/sacramentijnen-en-het-mirakel/>

<sup>35</sup> Tepe, *Begijnen in de Lage Landen*, 151.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 158.

After the Reformation less (wealthy) women desired to become a Beguinage, because the religion in Amsterdam had shifted to Calvinism. This led to financial trouble in the Begijnhof, the debts were piling up, but the income was piling down.<sup>37</sup>

In conclusion, the main changes the Begijnhof underwent during the Reformation were on a broader scale, physically this meant their Church and chapels were confiscated. The Calvinistic city council could not confiscate the houses of the Beguinages, because they owned them. However, they were not allowed to practice their faith publicly or in their Church, which led to secret churches in different houses, mostly in the Wooden House. Their Church underwent physical changes and functions due to ownership by the Calvinists. It was used as a hospital, until a building had been added next to it. After that it was given to the Scottish and English Calvinist, who renovated the northern façade and removed the gallery. This is why it is to this day it is named the English Church. Due to many events, including the Reformation, less women desired to become a Beguinage, which eventually led to the end of the Beguinages in Amsterdam.

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<sup>37</sup> Bierman, *“Een wankel evenwicht”*, 5.

### 3.3 Begijnhof architectural settings in the contemporary period

The Begijnhof in Amsterdam is nowadays a popular tourist attraction. However, it does not have Beguinages anymore as inhabitants, the last Beguinage of Amsterdam passed away in 1971.<sup>38</sup> There had been since the Reformation less enthusiasm for becoming a Beguinage. This slowly led to end of the Beguinages in Amsterdam, as well as in the rest of Europe. However, the current inhabitants of the Begijnhof are still Catholic women, because the function is nowadays a retirement home. In this chapter the contemporary architectural settings are analysed before latest renovation to a retirement home around 1915.

There have always been two entrances to the to the courtyard, one of which has always been at the Gedempte Begijnensloot (figure 9), right next to the church. But the second entrance has had different locations throughout time, the current location is at Spui (figure 10). The entrance at Spui has been added in 1907.<sup>39</sup> This used to be a ditch or small canal (figure 8). The muting of canals happened slowly by adding waste, sand and gravel. Before there was a sewer system in Amsterdam, most inhabitants put their bodily feces in a bucket to throw it in the canals, this caused two cholera outbreaks between 1832 and 1866.<sup>40</sup> It also caused a terrible smell for the Beguinages, which probably was the main reason they slowly muted more and more of the water surrounding them. This explains why nowadays there is no water surrounding the Begijnhof anymore. It was only until 1907 that the city of Amsterdam had an underground sewer system.<sup>41</sup>

The houses on the Begijnhof have been owned by inhabitants, currently there is per house one inhabitant, however this was not the case before. The houses were owned partly by different Beguinages, some of those women came from wealthy families and bought the entire house throughout the years.<sup>42</sup> The oldest façade at the Begijnhof is the Wooden House, it is the only façade made of wood, while the other facades have stone material. However most house structures are made of wood. The facades' architectural styles range from gothic, baroque, renaissance to mixed variations (figure 10). The bleaching field is still noticeable, but lost its function and is now a park, which is slightly elevated.

#### 3.3.1 Houses on the Begijnhof (1855-1915)

To understand the domestic sphere of the Beguinages, floorplans will be analysed of a few houses, the addresses are Begijnhof 23, 24 and 25 and Begijnhof 32 and 33. The locations of these houses are depicted in figure 10. The floorplans of these five houses are analysed. The



Figure 9: Amsterdam City Archive, Gate Gedempte Begijnensloot.

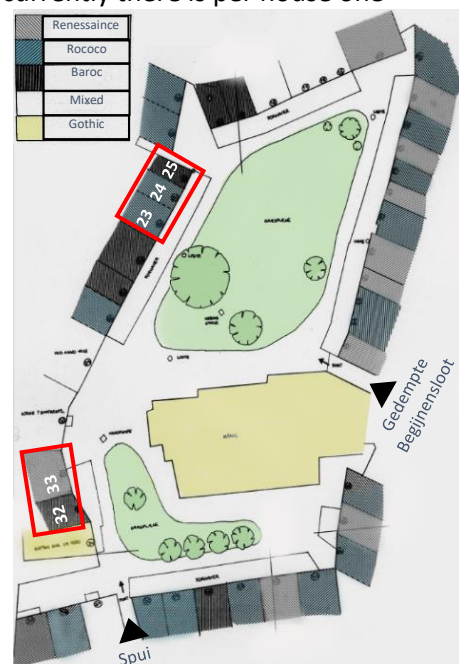


Figure 10: Architectural styles per building

<sup>38</sup> Holland, "Begijnhof Amsterdam", accessed on March 19, 2020, [shorturl.at/IDUW1](https://shorturl.at/IDUW1)

<sup>39</sup> Van Dijk, Ger, *Van 'Der Beghinelande' tot Begijnhof te Amsterdam*, Amsterdam, 11.

<sup>40</sup> "De Geschiedenis van het riool in Amsterdam", *Riool Amsterdam*, accessed April 9, 2020, <https://www.riool.amsterdam/geschiedenis-van-het-riool-in-amsterdam/>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Tepe, *Begijnen in de Lage Landen*, 45.

floorplans are from 1842 – 1912, when there were still Beguinages living in the Begijnhof, before it became a retirement home for catholic women. It is interesting to look at these floorplans for these were the architectural settings of the Beguinages, when they were providing their (social) work.

### 3.3.2 Begijnhof numbers 32 and 33

Both houses have wooden structures, and consist of three levels. The facades are from stone material, mostly brick. Both houses have their front doors on the courtyard side. There are no doors on the back façade. Which makes going through the courtyard the only way of leaving the Begijnhof. This is the case for all the houses on the Begijnhof. This makes monitoring who leaves the Begijnhof easier, and also provides more safety. The windows in the façade facing the street were over a canal, up until the nineteenth century when it was muted. Moreover the windows had metal bars on the windows, this is still the case. These aspects were most likely to make it harder for burglars or other non-wanted people to enter. In Begijnhof 32 and 33 it is noticeable that there is a kitchen on levels two and three, which supports the documents in the archive that state multiple Beguinages used to live in one house. It seems for these houses they each owned one level. There are some Beguinages who could afford it, bought more levels from their house as soon as it would be for sale, until they owned an entire house.<sup>43</sup> Also, the floorplan of the house on Begijnhof 33 shows on ground floor level an area dedicated to a shop, it does not state what kind of shop it is, but this shows the Beguinages ran other kinds of businesses from within their courtyard. This would mean that during this time the courtyard may have been more accessible for outsiders (figure 11).

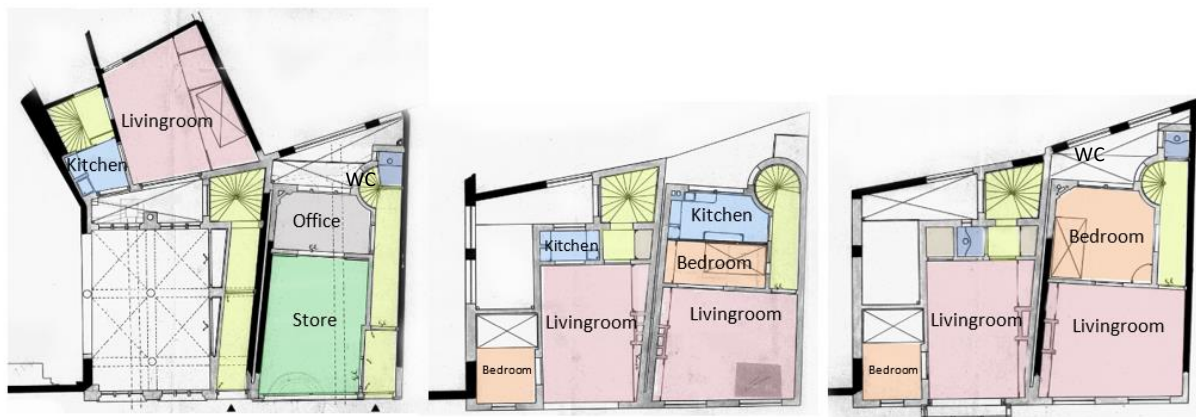


Figure 11: City Archive Amsterdam, Begijnhof floorplans 32 and 33. 1855-1910.

<sup>43</sup> Tepe, *Begijnen in de Lage Landen*, 16.

### 3.3.3 Amsterdam Begijnhof numbers 23, 24 and 25

In these houses also consist of a wooden structure and consist of three levels. These houses also show they have their front doors on courtyard side, with (barred) windows on the back facade. These houses show similarity between each other in functions per level. Here there is also on ground floor level area dedicated to stores, in all three houses, and they are connected to an office. In these houses there is just one kitchen, and it is on the first floor, as well as one bedroom and toilet per house. Except for number 23, which has an extra toilet on ground floor level. These aspects may be indicators that in these houses only one Beguinage used to live, instead of multiple (figure 12).



Figure 12: City Archive Amsterdam, Begijnhof floorplans 23, 24 and 25. 1855-1910.

In conclusion, after the Reformation many factors led to the end of the Beguinages in Amsterdam, but the current inhabitants are still catholic women, because the new function is a retirement home. The floorplans from before the latest renovation, when it was inhabited by Beguinages, shows that most houses wooden structures and about three levels. The multiple kitchens and bedrooms in some houses indicate that there used to live one Beguinage per level, but that there were also houses with only one Beguinage as inhabitant. Moreover, the houses show that the Beguinages had other businesses, than social work or as washerwomen, they had stores on ground floor level, and could work from their own home.



#### 4. Architectural settings in support of Beguinages' needs

In this chapter the needs of the Beguinages are elaborated in physical aspects of architectural setting and the relation to non-physical aspects, such as their emancipation/independence. Starting from a broader scale of the site to the houses of the Beguinages.

On the regional scale, at the origin in the Middle Ages the Begijnhof was at the outskirts of Amsterdam, however the city kept growing vastly and the distance between the Begijnhof and the city walls grew as well. It is beneficial for the Beguinages work to be in the centre of the city for their work, this made more kinds of jobs available. The Begijnhof functions as a city within a city. Due to their location they were able to provide their skills in (social) work to society, they taught the orphans from the orphanage, which was next to the Begijnhof, they attended to the sick and had a business of washing clothes, which makes having water surrounding the Begijnhof essential. Their location may at first not have been meant to be in the city centre, but the city centre expanded and it made different kinds of (social) work possible for the Beguinages.

The site of the Begijnhof were translations of the needs since origin, as mentioned in chapter one, the gates were guarding who went in and out and the courtyard's shape provided safety. The church was for practicing their religion and the bleaching field for one of their trades as washer women. The entire site was owned by the Beguinages, which makes it private property, however it was open for some, such as clients for the washing business, the sick or orphans who were educated by the Beguinages. Assuming from their need for safety, it is probable these outsiders were invited by the Beguinages, which means the entire site could be defined as private space.

The houses on the Begijnhof were owned by the inhabiting Beguinages. This made the houses untouchable by the city municipality, which as mentioned in chapter three saved them from being confiscated by the Calvinistic city council during the Reformation.

The aspects gave them independence they desired, which attracts more women who desired to be Beguinages. A lot of the women who wanted to become Beguinages came from the country in search of independence and religion. There were also women from rich families searching the same life.

These women would buy parts of the houses. Some would buy an entire house, still the houses were in the hands of the Beguinages. Another consequence of ownership is that maintaining it will be done more.

The structure of the houses are made of wood, just like the facades were first too, but now all facades are from stone, except the famous Wooden House. Their independence was an important factor, but may have been just as equal as their reputation, especially during the Middle Ages and Reformation. Due to their reputation as pious women they were respected in society, which means they could carry on their way of live. This in turn enhanced their independence and attracted more women who wanted to life a live without marriage. The more women wanted to join, the more successful the Begijnhof could run as an institution. But this was a double edged sword, because this meant the Beguinages had to be strict in their rules, if they were not followed their reputation could be hurt, which eventually hurts their independence. A lot of wealthy families wanted one of their daughters to be a Beguinage, because it is a respected place for women. So, by following the strict rules and day to day activities of the Begijnhof, gave them the freedom to exist (figure 13).

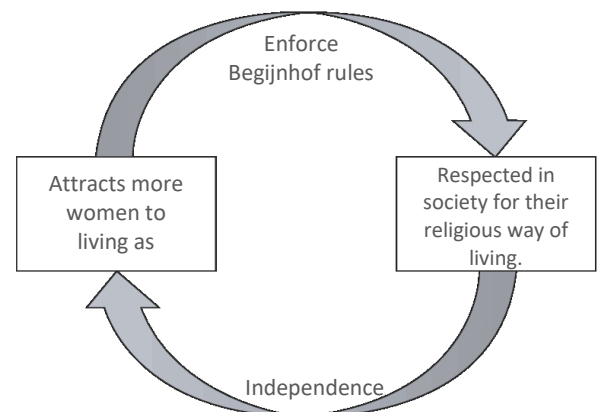


Figure 13: Non-physical aspects Begijnhof, Baeda Al Zamily.

But this was a double edged sword, because this meant the Beguinages had to be strict in their rules, if they were not followed their reputation could be hurt, which eventually hurts their independence. A lot of wealthy families wanted one of their daughters to be a Beguinage, because it is a respected place for women. So, by following the strict rules and day to day activities of the Begijnhof, gave them the freedom to exist (figure 13).

In conclusion, the Begijnhof attributes which support the needs are in different scales, site, courtyard and housing. The site is located at the city centre, which makes different kinds of jobs possible. The courtyard's shape and gates provide the needed security, plus the Church provides their need for practicing religion and the courtyard makes their day-to-day jobs possible. The housing provide the independence, it gives them their own space with most likely a small kitchenette and some houses even have their own business, such as a shop.

Their independence is also protected by their reputation of religious, pious women. This makes the Beguinages stronger, but also vulnerable, for their reputation needs to be upheld. This was until the Reformation, for then the Begijnhof had less and less members, this was bad for their economic state.

From the results of literature study it has turned out the architectural settings of the site Begijnhof were similar to the settings of the High Middle Ages. The needs of the Beguinages were supported by their architectural setting, there are five main needs and their material architectural setting. In table 2 the needs and architectural settings are summarized.

<i>Needs</i>	<i>Architectural setting</i>
<i>Safety</i>	Courtyard Gates
<i>Independence</i>	Houses they owned Practicing religion in the Church and chapels Aspects supporting their (social) work
<i>Work</i>	Their location in city centre, attributes in courtyard (bleaching field, stores, attending to sick in houses and Church (Reformation) or educating the orphans)
<i>Reputation</i>	Secluded type of living
<i>Religion</i>	Two chapels and a Church

*Table 2: Architectural settings and needs of Beguinage.*  
Baeda Al Zamily, 2020.

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

In this research the main research question has been: What was the architectural setting of the Begijnhof in the Middle Ages that supports the needs of the Beguinages; and how are those architectural settings before the current function of a retirement home? In order to answer this, literature research has been done and case study of multiple floorplans of the Begijnhof from online archives. The Beguinages' needs are categorized in five main needs: religion, safety, reputation, work and independence. It is interesting that their needs and architectural settings overlap and enhance each other. For instance, their need for religion is translated in architecture as a church and two chapels, but these buildings also enhanced their reputation as pious women, which in turn enhanced their independence (figure 14).

This leads to concluding that the needs and architectural settings of the Beguinages enhanced or balanced each other since the Middle Ages, but after the Reformation less women wanted to become a Beguinage, so this balance was disturbed, which eventually led to the last Beguinage of Amsterdam, which passed away in 1970.

When analysing architectural setting of the Begijnhof, it turns out that there are three important factors. First is to design holistically, which means designing on different scales. Secondly, the design is socially oriented, instead of user oriented. Lastly, it is important to keeping in mind this kind of architecture works best when it grows slowly over time, instead of fast pace designing. The Beguinages added or adapted according to their needs in that time. Most of the Beguinages' needs are translated in the exterior, the location and the architectural design of a courtyard. Their need for safety, independence, work, reputation and religion has been translated in the ensemble of a courtyard surrounded by their houses. Inside the houses they sometimes had an office or on ground floor level a storefront.

However, not all floorplans were available at the end of research, due to closing of the archives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The floorplans available on the online database were analysed. This means it is more likely that attributes that support of Beguinages' needs may be missing in this research.

It is for future research interesting to look at the floor plans from different times to understand more about the domestic sphere, where and how did they attend to the sick or educate the orphans? And during the analysing of these floorplans, intuitive and educated guesses, have been made. Lastly, it is not possible to generate this research for all women's needs, for it is specifically a group of religious women, the Beguinages.

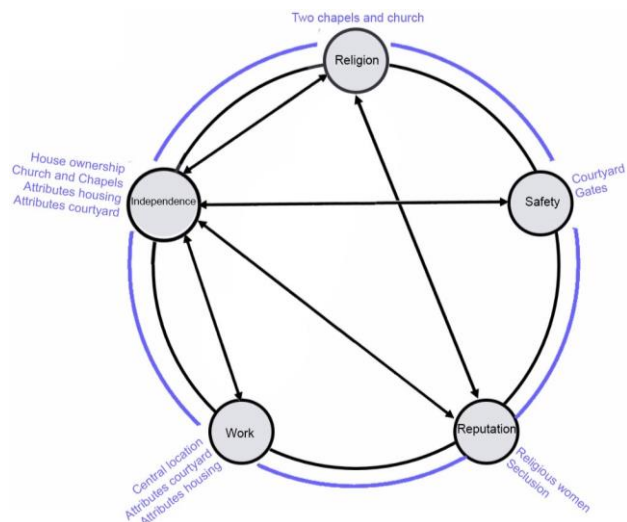


Figure 14: Relations between needs and architectural settings. Baeda Al Zamily, 2020.

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## 7. Images and tables

Figure 1: Van Dijk, Ger. *Het Begijnhof omstreeks 1544*. 1544. Van 'Der Beghinenlande' tot Begijnhof. Amsterdam: Luyten, 2004, 8.

Figure 2: Van Dijk, Ger. *Dagorde van de Begijnen*, presumably 1872. Van 'Der Beghinenlande' tot Begijnhof. Amsterdam: Luyten, 2004, 101.

Figure 3: City Archive Amsterdam. *Out Amsterdam gelyck het geweest is omtrent den jaere 1300*. 1300. Online image. City Archive Amsterdam, Amsterdam, <https://archieff.amsterdam/beeldbank/?mode=gallery&view=horizontal&q=Out%20Amsterdam%20gelyck%20het%20geweest%20is%20omtre%20den%20jaere%20%091300&rows=1&page=1>.

Figure 4: Anthonisz, Cornelis. *De vermaerde koopstadt van Amstelredam*. 1545 – 1553. Online image. City Archive Amsterdam, Amsterdam, <https://archieff.amsterdam/beeldbank/detail/c5f7bbc6-8ded-b178-9d89-2fb374898a0f/media/05565bab-76c5-76e9-1951-4e82d697cbcd?mode=detail&view=horizontal&q=De%20vermaerde%20koopstadt%20van%20Amstelredam&rows=1&page=9>.

Figure 5: Anthonisz, Cornelis. *De vermaerde koopstadt van Amstelredam*. 1545 – 1553. Online image. City Archive Amsterdam, Amsterdam, <https://archieff.amsterdam/beeldbank/detail/c5f7bbc6-8ded-b178-9d89-2fb374898a0f/media/05565bab-76c5-76e9-1951-4e82d697cbcd?mode=detail&view=horizontal&q=De%20vermaerde%20koopstadt%20van%20Amstelredam&rows=1&page=9>.

Figure 6: Van Dijk, Ger. *Begrafenis van een begijn op het Hof te Amsterdam*. 1664. Van 'Der Beghinenlande' tot Begijnhof. Amsterdam: Luyten, 2004, 37.

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Figure 9: City Archive Amsterdam, *Het Begijnhof, de Begijnensloot en het koor van de Engelse- of Begijnenkerk*. Links Begijnensteeg 9 en rechts Begijnensteeg 10. Online image. City Archive Amsterdam, Amsterdam, [shorturl.at/jyzF6](http://shorturl.at/jyzF6).

Figure 10: City Archive Amsterdam. *Tekening van het Begijnhof en een aantal woningen*. Online image. City Archive Amsterdam, Amsterdam, [shorturl.at/ouCOV](http://shorturl.at/ouCOV). (Underlayer)

Figure 11: City Archive Amsterdam, *Begijnhof floorplans 23, 24 and 25. 1855-1910*. Online image. De Bazel Amsterdam.

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Figure 12: City Archive Amsterdam, *Begijnhof floorplans 32 and 33. 1855-1910*. Online image. De Bazel Amsterdam. [shorturl.at/iACLR](https://shorturl.at/iACLR).

Figure 13: Al Zamily, Baeda. *Non-physical aspects of the Begijnhof*. 2020. Master thesis Begijnhof TU Delft.

Figure 14: Al Zamily, Baeda. *Relations between needs and architectural settings of the Begijnhof in Amsterdam*. 2020. Master thesis Begijnhof TU Delft.

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