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**PART 1**

**CROSSING THE THRESHOLD:  
THE ORGANISATION OF DOMESTIC SPACE**



# INTRODUCTION

On 20 February 1595, all the movables belonging to Pieter Hendrick Winkelman, his wife Katelijne Vander Capelle and their two children were listed by reason of Pieter's death.<sup>1</sup> The appraiser, Sproncholf, went through all eleven rooms of the family's house and recorded all the objects found in those spaces. The inventory that resulted from this action has a room-by-room layout – only money (and some silver objects) and jewellery were listed separately. The appraiser used a mixed nomenclature for defining the rooms: some rooms were labelled with a one-purpose or specialised label such as *contoor*, 'kitchen', 'sleeping room' and 'laundry kitchen', whereas other rooms were named after their location in the house (and according to their location relative to other spaces) such as 'room above the *salette*' or 'front room'. Winkelman's post-mortem inventory therefore illustrates a possible layout of a house of a relatively wealthy family (highest social class in the sample) at the end of the sixteenth century. But even more importantly, his inventory shows that most of the rooms in the dwelling were not completely separated from each other, but were rather connected in space and function. In the Winkelman family's house, the service room (*bottelarij* or buttery), for example, was located near the kitchen so within easy reach of the kitchen staff. The nursery, on the other hand, was situated next to the bedroom (*'t kynder camerken neffens de slaepcamere*). This allowed the mistress of the house to monitor her children, because it shortened the distance between her and her infants. Service rooms such as the *vaulte*, the laundry room and the wood cellar were mentioned together as a group at the end of the inventory, illustrating their shared supporting role in the running of the household. Pieter's *contoor*, in turn, was clearly spatially connected to the hall.

Historian Chris King formulated a critique on a current in consumption research that has refocused its attention from architectural morphology of houses to home life; in his view, 'the built environment has often been treated as a passive backdrop or container for the expanding world of movable domestic objects rather than being seen as an integrated and active component of "material culture" conceived as a totality.'<sup>2</sup> And according to Amanda Vickery, 'the home is the setting, though perhaps not always the subject for most discussions of consumerism.'<sup>3</sup> King

proposes, therefore, to question the changing material environment of domestic contexts in this period as well as the furnishings and material objects contained within them.<sup>4</sup> In this first part of the book, we will question the changing character of domestic spaces and their contents as constitutive of a broader changing domestic culture, a domestic culture that interacted with the world outside. In this context, it was the interaction between people (or users and often owners of space), objects, fixtures and fittings and the orientation of the room itself in the spatial layout of the house that constituted a room's role in the house or household. The chapters in this first part aspire to question the disposition of rooms and the arrangement of the interior. This means that some of the methodologies used in building history and archaeology (especially of access analysis) are not entirely abandoned, and some of their basic assumptions are even firmly integrated in the current study. In one of the first chapters, for example, we will show that shops were usually functionally and spatially separated from the rest of the living space and that *contoren* were often part of or an annex to a larger room. Furthermore, the spatial layout of houses did not simply provide a setting for the daily life of the household but also 'a material means of expressing cultural identities and actively negotiating changing social, economic and political relationships'.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, it is the connectivity between rooms that will be of particular interest, because it plays an important role in the (changing) functionality of some spaces. It also epitomises changes or continuities in underlying cultural and social practices. In addition to the methodology of access analysis that has focused predominantly on how a building works to interface the relationship between occupants, and especially between residents and visitors, we will focus on the interaction between daily functions like working, eating, sleeping, cooking, leisure, sociability and service.

In this type of research, it is important to be aware that not every citizen lived in a large multistorey house. Indeed, the practicalities of available space and pre-existing facilities dictated spatial arrangements.<sup>6</sup> The gradual depopulation of the city probably made rent and housing in Bruges cheaper and life more comfortable than it was in the expanding and crowded cities of Antwerp and Brussels.<sup>7</sup> The very poor lived in wooden cabins with straw roofs or in attics and cellars in the poorer neighbourhoods of the city,<sup>8</sup> but the slightly more affluent citizens or lower middle groups occupied a couple of rooms in larger houses or rented small houses. Only the much wealthier higher middle groups were able to afford houses with several rooms and multiple floors. Nevertheless, a concern with domestic space can most probably be

found throughout the social pyramid, but wealth seems to have been an important determining factor in the ability to rationalise and organise the domestic environment.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, Lena Orlin concluded for Tudor England that the evolution towards more purpose-specific spaces ‘may have developed out of desires other than privacy, including the will to impose order on possessions and activities.’<sup>10</sup>

## Functional Specialisation: A Subject of Discussion

Within the ongoing scholarly debate on domestic spaces, it has been repeatedly stated that the sixteenth-century house was characterised by a growing number of rooms and an increasing specialisation of room use (a process of so-called ‘functional specialisation’ or ‘spatial specialisation’), whereby spaces were divided from each other and each daily activity (e.g. eating, sleeping, cooking receiving guests) had its own locus.<sup>11</sup> In this vein, scholarship on the so-called great rebuilding in Tudor England in the later medieval and early modern period has been concentrated largely on early modern architectural changes in the plan and form of houses (open halls gained ceiling, fireplaces were installed and rooms were separated) in cities and in the countryside.<sup>12</sup> Although these architectural transformations have been identified especially in early modern England,<sup>13</sup> the same trends ‘towards more specialised domestic spaces and more elaborate material culture and decoration within the domestic sphere’ have been identified ‘across different social groups and many different national contexts.’<sup>14</sup> For several Renaissance Italian city palaces, for example, Elizabeth Currie found that rooms other than the bedroom became more ‘carefully thought over and developed their own distinctive character’ over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>15</sup> Even in sixteenth-century Antwerp, Carolien De Staelen noticed an evolution towards a more differentiated room use, especially in the larger houses, which she labelled as organising living space ‘according to Italian fashion.’<sup>16</sup> But apart from her study, the spatial developments in the late medieval and early modern middle-class houses in Flanders and Brabant have remained relatively underexplored. Perhaps this might have been a consequence of the long-defended idea that it was only in the second half of the seventeenth century that the ‘functional specialisation’ of rooms first made its debut in the Low Countries.<sup>17</sup>

A strong current in scholarship has further elaborated on this idea of increasingly segregated spaces to formulate the hypothesis that spaces were increasingly

accorded a rank within the spatial (and social) hierarchy of the house.<sup>18</sup> This hierarchy was based on the assumption that 'buildings and interiors were constructed to convey social meanings as well as for practical purposes.'<sup>19</sup> Some scholars started to use the terminology of sociologist Erving Goffman<sup>20</sup> to differentiate between 'frontstage' and 'backstage' spaces, meaning public versus more private rooms.<sup>21</sup> Goffman saw human behaviour as a stage performance. He argued that even in ordinary situations, individuals tend to present themselves and their activity to others. Through this 'impression management', individuals guide and control the impression others form of them, doing (or not doing) certain kinds of actions while sustaining their performance before them.<sup>22</sup> These performances have a 'front' and 'back' aspect and were staged in a certain space or a particular material context. Historians have further developed this theory and talk about 'frontstage' spaces or public display spaces where people performed a particular part of their (and their family's) identity and 'backstage' spaces or less important spaces where props are stored, 'costumes can be adjusted, and an actor can come out of character.'<sup>23</sup>

Using Goffman's theory, scholars have argued that some rooms, such as exotically furnished studies, sumptuous parlours and well-furnished chambers, became important social 'frontstage' spaces, while other rooms, such as kitchens, bedchambers and service rooms, became more or less private, secondary 'backstage' (work) places.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, it follows that historiography has hardly done justice to these 'secondary' and more mundane spaces as subjects of study, especially compared to the more public and often more decorated reception rooms.<sup>25</sup> It is only recently that this 'old' debate on the hierarchy of spaces was re-examined and that spaces such as kitchens, laundry rooms, cellars and corridors but also seemingly 'private' spaces such as bedrooms were reconsidered from a user perspective.<sup>26</sup> So although still very much associated with female, backstage and repetitive everyday labour, these service rooms are gradually receiving more attention from historians of home life. This growing attention is highly warranted, because it was exactly these spaces that played a vital role in the (changing) spatial dynamics in the domestic geography as a whole.<sup>27</sup> Lena Orlin underlines this by stating that 'for most early moderns [...], the highest degree of particularisation was associated with storage and service rooms.'<sup>28</sup> It remains debatable, however, whether the appearance of a separate cooking space, for example, can be linked to the 'old' modernist linear approach of the functional specialisation concept, because kitchens could have housed several functions at the same time. But the main question here concerns the cultural values or shared ways of thinking behind the (re)structuring of the domestic environment.<sup>29</sup>

## What's in a Name? The Nomenclature of Domestic Space

Although the value of inventories to study domestic space has been widely disputed, they offer plenty of possibilities. The layouts of 53 per cent of the inventories in the sample present a room-by-room division, suggesting that the appraising was based on 'a perambulation of the house'.<sup>30</sup> Other inventories were of a piece-by-piece model, based on the listing of individual items or groups of items, with or without logical order.<sup>31</sup> Even though inventories are static, subjective and not exhaustive sources, the nomenclature that is used in the room-by-room inventories could still give a good idea of the room disposition of houses, a feature of inventories that has been insufficiently considered.

In the process of inventorying goods, it was the task of the appraiser to assess goods and chattels and value them as accurately as possible. So it was of the utmost importance that these goods were also accurately described and that the more valuable items were distinguished from the less valuable ones. When walking through the house, the appraiser therefore had to systematise a method to structure the domestic space and to link certain items to certain spaces. Hence, the appraiser (and others) used a specific nomenclature for the spatial diversity, suggesting a shared way of thinking about domestic space.

In inventories in general, and in the Bruges inventories in particular, there were different ways to distinguish each room from another; some rooms were identified by function, others by their orientation in the house (upstairs or downstairs) or location on the floor (back or front). Only in exceptional cases were rooms identified by the main colour scheme of the interior (e.g. white room or green room) or by the individual or individuals that used them (e.g. 'room of the consul of the Spanish Nation', 'sleeping room of the deceased') (table 2). In the literature, it is often suggested that most rooms in pre-modern inventories were defined according to their orientation in the house, especially because scholars were convinced that room use was not yet fixed.<sup>32</sup> In the Bruges case, however, the difference between the number of rooms that were defined according to function or room use and the number of rooms that were defined according to orientation is rather small (graph 4).<sup>33</sup> So even though defining rooms by their location was still in use, more diverse purpose-specific labels entered the nomenclature throughout the period as well.

But what does it mean when an appraiser identifies a certain room as 'shop' or 'kitchen' and another as 'back room'? What does it reveal about contemporary assumptions underlying the structuring of domestic space? What prompted the

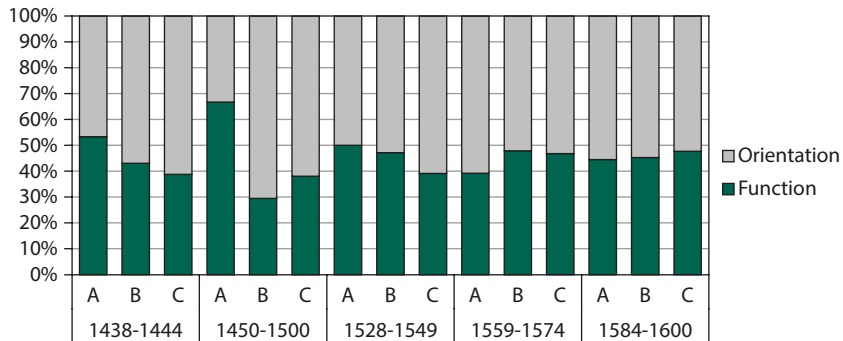


Table 2. Variety of Functional Room Labels

SAMPLE PERIOD	VARIETY
1438–1444	8
1450–1500	9
1528–1549	6
1559–1574	21
1584–1600	14

Source: Database of inventories © IB, JDG & IS

Graph 4. Room Labels in Bruges Inventories (all sample periods, n=265)



Source: Database of inventories © IB, JDG & IS

appraiser to define a particular room as, for example, 'kitchen'? And were these labels then in some way illustrative of the gradual evolution towards the debated functional specialisation of spaces?

In recent decades, historians of home life and material culture studies have approached these room labels in inventories with a certain suspicion. When scholars linked the labels with the rooms' contents, it soon turned out that these rooms were 'still' multifunctional in nature even when they were labelled with seemingly specialised names.<sup>34</sup> The labels were therefore quickly considered to be meaningless, and the functional subdivision of rooms reflected in the name tags was seen as an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century (elite?) phenomenon.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, scholars such as John Loughman and John Michael Montias concluded that for sixteenth-century cases, room labels were useless and that 'the function of a room can only be inferred from its contents.'<sup>36</sup>

Yet when considering the value of sixteenth-century room labels and the spatial layout of houses, we have to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. In a recent article, Giorgio Riello stated that ‘the repetition of similar nomenclatures or locations of objects suggest the existence of a shared way of thinking about the domestic space that is conveyed in inventories.’<sup>37</sup> Indeed, there must have been a good reason why an appraiser would have named a room a ‘sleeping room’ even though other objects referring to other room functions were present there as well. Perhaps the appraiser was influenced by the object cluster that most attracted attention? Or the appraiser had learned that, notwithstanding these other objects in the room, this particular room layout combined with these particular objects indicated a room that was predominantly used to sleep in? In the case of the sleeping room, this could have been the bed with all its appurtenances; in the case of the kitchen, it was probably the hearth and all the cooking gear. Nevertheless, it was certainly a room that was, at least in words, separated from other rooms.

Seemingly specialised rooms such as kitchens and sleeping rooms often contained other object categories as well (like a well-made bed in a kitchen) and were therefore able to accommodate other, potentially related, household activities, perhaps during other times of the day or on particular occasions.<sup>38</sup> So in these cases, cooking and sleeping can be considered as the *primary* functions of these particular spaces, accompanied by other, secondary functions.<sup>39</sup> Hence even when a room was not entirely ‘specialised’ in use, there still was a certain hierarchy in the functions that were fulfilled there. Therefore, the room labels appraisers used were therefore highly suggestive of a more rationalised spatial disposition of household activities. It does not mean, however, that it was always clear to the appraiser what functions a space exactly served. The double labels such as ‘*camere ofte cuekene*’ and the use of the undefined label ‘room’ or *camere* (with or without additional information about its orientation in space) could all point to the often varied character of certain spaces and the difficulty appraisers could have in defining a room.<sup>40</sup>

Table 3 illustrates the percentages of inventories with a room-by-room layout (per sample period) that were equipped with seemingly purpose-specific rooms. This table is revealing in several ways. First, it seems that some of the nomenclature changed over time, as new labels entered the vocabulary of the appraisers, such as *salette*, and others disappeared, such as ‘dining room.’<sup>41</sup> It also suggests that certain rooms, such as the *contoor*, occurred only exceptionally. But the most interesting result is that the kitchen was the most commonly used label to identify a particular type

Table 3. Percentage of Inventories with Specialised Room Labels in Bruges (total number inventories with rooms per sample period; n=337)

PERIOD	SLEEPING ROOM	KITCHEN	DINING ROOM	CONTOOR	SALETTE	SERVICE ROOMS
1438–1444 (38)	3%	<b>68%</b>	11%	0%	0%	45%
1450–1500 (37)	3%	<b>54%</b>	41%	3%	0%	14%
1528–1549 (52)	4%	<b>67%</b>	50%	0%	0%	2%
1559–1574 (154)	5%	<b>81%</b>	6%	5%	2%	7%
1584–1600 (56)	16%	<b>88%</b>	0%	4%	16%	14%

Source: Database of inventories © IB, JDG & IS

of room throughout the whole sample period. No less than 88 per cent of the sampled households in the sixth sample period had at least one room labelled as kitchen!

However, even though the room label ‘kitchen’ clearly remains present throughout the period, the material constellation of and the common thinking about seemingly fixed spaces such as kitchens might still have changed. Our aim for this chapter therefore is to consider the material culture of seemingly specialised rooms as a pars pro toto to measure the evolutions in room use in Bruges houses throughout the sixteenth century. Other rooms such as dining rooms and sleeping rooms will be measured in their connectivity with the kitchen and with other spaces from the hypothesis that the more specialised a room became, the more other spaces needed to house some of its ‘redundant’ functions. But first, we will start our analysis at the threshold of the house, questioning the permeability of domestic spaces and the alleged dichotomy between the public life of commerce and the private life at home. We will then further enter the house, questioning the characteristics of the kitchen and its associated service rooms, moving further to other somehow, functionally connected spaces such as dining rooms, *salettes* and sleeping rooms. Reconstructing fifteenth- and sixteenth-century room uses and domestic geographies is a challenging task, because there was no such thing as a typical Bruges house type.<sup>42</sup>