

Neighbourliness in Utrecht through the ages¹

‘... for our benefit and to create more peace and friendship among ourselves...’

Quote from the neighbourhood statutes of *Lauwerecht*, a Utrecht suburb (1391)

Introduction

On the tenth of February 1551, the neighbours of the *Springweg* area in Utrecht were celebrating Shrove Tuesday in a large garden, when they heard the cry ‘Murder, murder!’ from the street. Some of them went to see what was happening. They saw how four strangers threatened a fellow neighbour and his daughter. For their rude behaviour, the four had already been thrown out of a nearby brothel, now they turned their frustration upon the father and daughter. The neighbours did not need more encouragement. They grabbed whatever weapons they could lay their hands on and chased the intruders out of the district.

Questions

This immediate, unanimous assistance surprises people nowadays. “Now we are not so keen on risking our lives for others. I would dial an emergency number”. Such a reaction reflects the change in our sense of solidarity and community spirit. Five hundred years ago people were more focused on their social group than we are. In those days people had to face many tasks together, tasks that were taken out of their hands by governments, mostly the local government, in the course of time.

How this sense of ‘we’, of community spirit, could dissolve is the theme of this paper. Yet it is debatable whether neighbourhoods and neighbourliness have completely disappeared, as some anthropologists and sociologists claim, and only neighbours remain². Man is a social being, after all.

In this connection it might be inspiring to read Frans de Waal’s *The Age of Empathy. Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society*. De Waal wondered why zoologists primarily focus on the aggressive behaviour of animals and ignore their reconciliation, cooperation and daily social encounters. Taking the whole interaction pattern into account he was able to discover some inspirational insights in the emotional and social life of primates.

The same can be said of neighbourhood research. Historians tend to focus on neighbourliness as a model for containing aggression. Thus they explain neighbourhood rules and regulations as a form of functionalism and calculation. Yet, when we look more closely at the many aspects of neighbourliness, aggression is surely an important subject, since it disturbs community life, but it is only one of many aspects. This leaves us with the question: how are we to define and interpret past and present neighbourliness?

This question is all the more urgent now that neighbourhoods have reappeared on the political agenda. In the Netherlands, for instance, neighbourhood life in the large cities was repressed for centuries. Nowadays, politicians realize that an active neighbourhood may encourage the integration of immigrants and contribute to the independence of the old, the sick and the elderly. In the *Wet op de Maatschappelijke Ondersteuning (WMO)* - Law on Social Support - of 2006 it is officially stated that neighbourhood support is one way of keeping people who need some kind of assistance in their own homes and thus delay hospitalization. The future will learn whether this presupposition rests on solid grounds, but it can be said in advance that neighbourhood support is not a matter of course these days: it may only be given voluntarily and can in no way be expected or commanded.

Definition of neighbourhood and neighbours

To arrive at a workable, dynamic definition of neighbourhoods and neighbourhood life we need to start from a flexible, hybrid concept. Neighbourhoods are made up by human beings and are therefore as volatile as people can be. As they are lively organisms that model themselves according to circumstance, they cannot be captured in static terms.

So how are we to circumscribe them? People who share a habitat are neighbours, that is obvious. But the size of a neighbourhood may vary. In medieval and early modern Utrecht, the institutionalized

neighbourhoods were clearly defined in space, yet always coexisted together with other units, like the larger quarter and parish or *ad hoc* creations, for instance, the houses that were held responsible for the maintenance of a stairway leading to a canal. In this respect it can't be stressed enough that qualities of neighbourhood life and organisation may reverberate in larger units like the city quarters, the parish, the guilds, the civic militia and even the city administration, as they all emanate from the neighbourhoods.

When we want to trace neighbourliness, the question what neighbours do together is even more pertinent than the question how they organize themselves. We have to look at what neighbourhoods actually achieve. More important questions behind these observations are: how does a neighbourhood structure ensure that people occupy their place in society? How is the community spirit being fostered?

Phenomenologically, neighbourliness depends on notions such as circumstance, necessity, involvement, cooperation and preparedness for action. The further we recede in time, the more necessary it was for people to work together, as there were none of the institutions we now know for them to fall back on.

Although the notion of neighbourliness may seem diminished nowadays, yet a latent neighbourhood consciousness is always slumbering, ready to be activated when necessary. The predominantly white quarter I live in rose to action in the early 1980s when a heavily polluted area was to become public again: we wanted the soil to be properly cleaned and the area to have a social function. It is now one of the most beautiful parks of Utrecht where families come for picnics and youngsters for playing and skating. Neighbours also take a stand when it comes to the safety and cleanliness of the streets. Through their commitment playgrounds and chill grounds were created. They organize annual festivals and gather to sing a leaving baker a touching farewell. On these occasions enough people appear to make a difference. Neighbourhood support is common over here.

Neighbourliness does not only facilitate cooperation, it also causes conflicts and aims at reconciliations. I do not believe that this was any different in the past than it is now, but in earlier times conflicts had fewer changes to linger on, as people had to perform so many duties together. Or share joys and sorrow. This whole spectrum keeps the neighbourhood alive. Its roots are old. A few of them I would like to expose here. I limit myself to the city of Utrecht, because its neighbourliness is one of my areas of expertise.

Sources and evidence

My research is based on written and material sources within the prosperous Episcopal city of Utrecht, a city-state in the Low Countries that was independent until 1528. This town grew from approximately 6,000 inhabitants in 1300 to approximately 30,000 in 1600.

References to neighbourhood life can be found in geology, archaeology, legislation, criminal records and verdicts, especially the letters of remission that granted grace after manslaughter, and civil lawsuits. Yet, neighbourhood life is hard to trace, as most references are only given incidentally. A fundamental explanation for the lack of references is the fact that administrators and municipalities tried to ignore or even erase neighbourhoods and thus don't shed light on them. In this paper I will explain why city councils tried to curb their judicial, political and social powers from 1300 onward. Consequently the data on neighbourhoods and neighbourliness are often the by-product of detailed research into local questions and fights, public ordinances and genealogical research. Yet, in twenty years of research I could gain enough material for a coherent reconstruction.

This picture is based on evidence, analogies and the understanding that history develops along organic lines. Especially on the micro level of society, people will always revert to customs that have proved their value. For a reconstruction of neighbourliness it is important that we bear in mind what people had to deal with and how they could go about it. For continuity's sake, there must have been a coherent pattern. Detailed information on neighbourliness in Utrecht is provided by neighbourhood statutes from the late fourteenth century onward until well into the seventeenth century.

In fact, we are best informed on neighbourhood life in the seventeenth century. Not only did statutes of various neighbourhoods survive, but also - very precious - an account book of the Snippevlucht, one of the richest neighbourhoods in the town. The fact that most of the archival material dates from this century has led historians to suppose that neighbourhoods stem from this period. I cannot understand this. For why should such an archaic institution be introduced then? It does not make sense, especially when we take into view the hostile attitude of seventeenth-century

magistrates towards neighbourhoods. All this will be elaborated upon in the section ‘Repression after the Reformation’.

The content of all the preserved rules and regulations show many similarities and form a coherent pattern that can even be seen in communities that have retained a form of neighbourliness today. Therefore I see no problem to continue this line back to times on which we have little information. After all: what other institute could have fulfilled the many tasks and challenges people were facing on a daily basis? It is impossible to imagine them doing all these chores on their own initiative without a form of communication and frame of reference. The neighbourhood is the only institute I can think of that could command the continuous efforts of people and bear the accompanying responsibilities. Neighbourliness was perfectly suited to meet the many facets of life. It was a way of life.

Tracing the origins of Utrecht’s neighbourhoods

When highlighting medieval society, most attention is commonly devoted to political, economical and social developments. One dimension is usually neglected: the organization structures of ‘common people’ which were, however, vital for the bonding process. In Utrecht a range of data has survived that indicate a strong neighbourhood tradition.

Nearly 2000 years ago settlements already existed in the area where the later town of Utrecht was to arise. In 47 AD the Romans built three fortresses near the spot where the river Rhine forked in two branches, de *Oude* or *Leidse Rijn* leading to the North Sea and the Vecht to the *Almere* (the present *IJsselmeer*). Their presence in the middle fortress on what later was to become Dom square attracted settlers. They lived around the fortress. Archaeological research testifies that people continued to live here after the Romans left c. 270 AD. They lived east and west of the castrum.

Utrecht became a place of some importance when the Franks decided to turn Utrecht into a missionary centre. In 630 they built the first church on the stone ruins of this fortress. In 695 the Anglo-Saxon monk Willibrord was ordained a missionary bishop: he was to convert and pacify the Frisians, with whom the Franks were continually at war. Nevertheless wars and animosity dragged on. In 754, Willibrord’s successor, Boniface, was killed by Frisians. Under the reign of Charlemagne (768-814) the bishopric was officially incorporated into the archdiocese of Cologne. After his death the Empire fell apart. Utrecht became part of the unstable *Middenrijk* in 843. The Vikings met no resistance during their raids. The bishop and his court fled the town in 857, a successor returned around 925. By that time this territory had become part of the German kingdom. Lay settlements were not only to be found around the *castrum*, but also near riverbanks and the old Roman road.

In these uneasy times the lay communities were left to their own devices. The domanial system had never been introduced in the *civitas*. This means that the settlements had to face calamities themselves. Their ‘natural’ enemies were fires, floods and wars. On a daily level, quarrels had to be prevented and harmonized and people in need had to be helped. In doing so, they will have been guided by their familiar traditions and organization structures. The political and judicial powers were in the hands of landowners. This was already the case among the Germanic tribes, where justice was spoken by *dinggenoten*, a court of judges who were all full fledged landowners. They were presided over by a chairman whom they had elected among themselves. He presented the case, partook in the vote, and carried out the sentence, more or less like the sheriffs of later times. This assembly also issued laws. Such a court took counsel with fellowmen, as good communication and understanding were of vital importance when so many tasks had to be accomplished together. People had to take care of the environment: quality of water, wood and food supply and the fencing of property and territory; harmony in the community, with regard to marriage, inheritance and quarrels; care for the needy: women in childbed, orphaned children, sick, elderly and dying neighbours and their funerals.

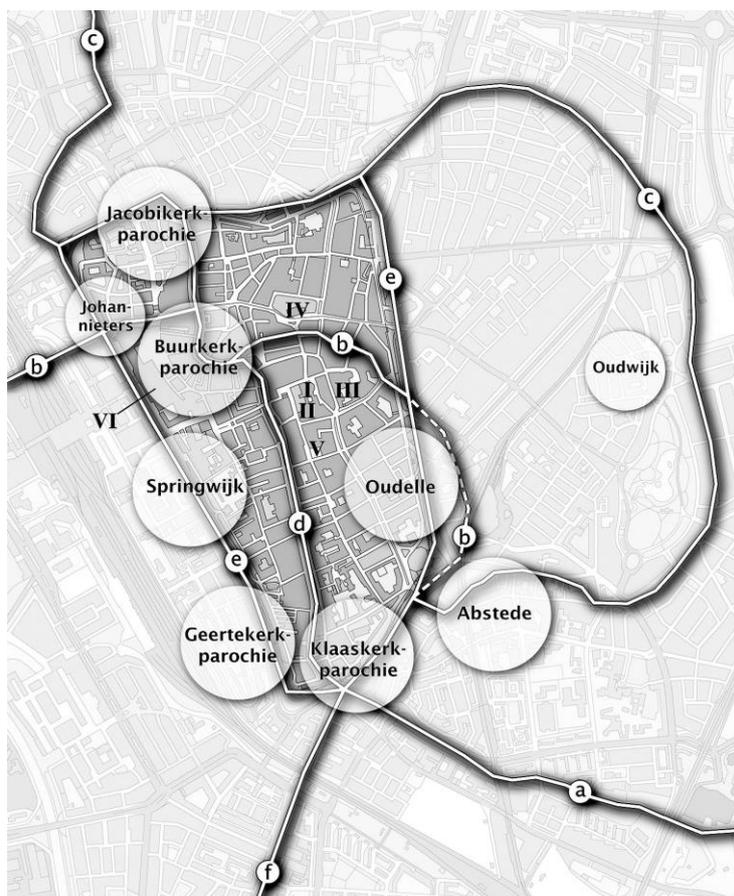
Neighbourhoods in the *civitas*

After 925 a period of stability and prosperity began for Utrecht. With the support of the German kings and emperors, the bishops could develop the Church. Utrecht got the privilege of a mint in 936 and of tollage in 953. By 1122, when Utrecht’s city privileges were confirmed by the Emperor, Utrecht had developed into an international market town with four annual markets. The bishop stood at the head of the *civitas*. In principle, the settlements were subordinate to him, yet there is no evidence of bondage. Growing settlements like Utrecht needed the expertise of professionals on every level, including

accomplished craftsmen. This could best be gained in a free atmosphere. I believe that the adage ‘city air sets free’ also applies to pre-urban settlements. After all, Utrecht was already considered a *civitas* in 723, when the Frankish major-domo Charles Martel donated two of the Roman fortresses with all their belongings to the young Utrecht church. Thus the lay settlements on Utrecht soil came under church administration and jurisdiction. But to what extent? In many ways the bishop needed lay support to establish and maintain his court. He delegated secular law to laymen of high descent, who also organized the defence of the *castellum*. These *ministerialen* were to become Utrecht’s knighthood. Probably the bishop’s *schout* (sheriff) had some kind of supervision and judicial authority over the lay settlements, but the practical organization of these communities will not have changed much from the olden days. Floods and fires continued to be threats. The daily routines and settlement of disputes would still be mainly the task of the people themselves. To underline this: it was not until the fourteenth century that the city magistrate could start extracting judicial rights from lower lay institutions. By the end of that century it finally had judicial monopoly over the secular parts of the town.

Around 1122 - when Utrecht’s privileges as a town were confirmed - seven lay communities could be detected: around the Dom square, near the riverbanks south and north of the city, and along the old Roman road west of the city. Thus the Dom square remained the heart of the *civitas*. Each of these communities had its own character. Their strength is best demonstrated by the fact that four of them had already built a parish church before 1122. The oldest probably dates from the late tenth century. It was called the *Buurkerk* or *ecclesia civilis*, the church of the laypeople who were called *buren*. This term means neighbours as well as citizens.

Map: The city of Utrecht in 1122



Numbers I-VI indicate the immunities of the chapter churches and St. Paul's Abbey
a-f denote waterways: a Kromme Rijn, b Oude Rijn c Vecht d Oudegracht e city moat f Vaartse Rijn

Neighbourhood structures preserved in civic administration

In 1122 the city was a solid bishopric within the German Empire. Although no larger than 132 hectares, the town had developed into an international market centre, attracting merchants from north- and central-Europe. The population grew from about 2,000 in 1100 to 20,000 in 1500. The fourteenth century was Utrecht's golden age. As the town lay in the outskirts of the German Empire, it tended to pursue its own policies. This is the main reason why Utrecht is such an interesting subject for in-depth research into cultural-historical patterns.

The administration of the city was modelled upon the organization structure of neighbourhoods. A sheriff is already mentioned in 1081. *Schepenen* or aldermen are named in 1122, in the earliest remaining city charter. They were already then advised by *raden* or counsellors, property owning members of the lay community. This council got official status before 1196 and became the administrative and legislative assembly of the community in 1304. This board was elected by the aldermen of the guilds, who in their turn were elected by the guild members. In principle, only men that mastered a trade could win both guild membership and citizenship. Ordinary people could not afford these prerogatives.

The chairman of both the *schepenen* and the councillors was called *burgemeester* (burgomaster). As is observed above: the term *burger* is both an equivalent and derivate of the term *buur*. This council aimed at monopolizing force and justice and usurped nearly all legal powers of subordinate institutions before 1400. At the same time it must be observed that the city defence was created along neighbourhood lines. Originally, craftsmen of a same trade shared quarters. These aggregations formed the foundation of the 21 guilds that existed in Utrecht in 1304. The guildsmen constituted the *burgerwacht* or civic militia. All capable citizens between 20 and 60 had to join this corps. Each guild maintained an allotted section of the city wall, which also confirms that craftsmen of a same trade used to live in specific sections of the city.

The fact that the administrative structure of the city is a copy of older settlements is revealing. It shows the strength of the neighbourhood: it was solid enough to be adapted to new circumstances and yet retain its essential values.

Neighbourliness in the city

The social tasks of neighbourhoods did not end in 1122. The city administration needed the people's assistance when defending the city, extinguishing fires, keeping watch, and taking care of waste disposal and poor relief. To perform these tasks, there must have been some form of neighbourhood organization, even though we only get glimpses of their existence. Yet, on the basis of older and younger information there is no other organization that could have performed these tasks.

On a daily basis neighbours were responsible for the maintenance of the streets, of the staircases leading to the wharves and of the wharves themselves and of fire-fighting equipment such as buckets, ropes and ladders: all these items were examined by the magistrate each year. Neighbours also kept an eye on strangers, regulated mutual relationships in case of problems, and asked the city council's intervention if conflicts seemed insoluble. Poor relief and mutual aid were a matter-of-course, of which many examples can be given.

Neighbourhoods had numerous tasks to accomplish, but they were not all burdensome or heavy. People lived much more on the streets than we do. Any occasion for celebration was embraced. First of all there were the church-inspired annual feasts, then the rites of passage, and the yearly returning festivities for children and young adults. Neighbours would eat together at least once a year, on Shrove Tuesday, but there is evidence enough that they also had banquets in the summer. All these happy gatherings, and there were dozens of them a year, were organized by the neighbourhood. A neighbourhood meal could only start when fees and fines were paid and disputes settled. When people were in serious conflict, they had to drink the neighbourhood horn together.

The social involvement can best be illustrated by the blessing ritual. When a neighbour was dying the neighbours would come over and bid him farewell with a blessing. In essence this was a ritual of reconciliation and Godspeed. From this ritual it almost follows naturally that neighbours took care of the funeral. They carried the deceased to the church.

With all these tasks, celebrations and funerals going on, neighbourhood life offered many opportunities for encounter and reconciliation. People had to perform so many tasks together that

mutual trust was a prerequisite. Imagine them extinguishing a fire together or fighting side by side in the civic militia. They had to rely upon one another blindly.

People were proud of their community, as is shown to this very day by the churches and hospitals within their quarters. Neighbours were often quite involved with the social institutions within or near their territory. Remarkably, in Utrecht lay people hardly had an opportunity to distinguish themselves in processions. Only the city magistrate and public servants walked as a corps in the grand general processions. Occasionally aldermen of the guilds and the civic militia would have a place of honour in lesser processions. Ordinary citizens could not distinguish themselves in any way in a procession, not as guild members, nor as fraternity brethren, but they simply walked parish by parish, the men ahead of the women. These sole facts demonstrate the weight attached to *civitas* and community spirit in Utrecht.

Organizational structure

In the Middle Ages rich and poor shared the same premises, and both participated in neighbourhood life. Around 1400 the town castles of the nobility stood alongside the merchant houses on Oudegracht, the middle class lived on the main side streets and back streets, while the poor people stayed in shacks in the alleyways between the big stone houses or in the backyards and cellars, and of course near the city wall.

Neighbourhoods often consisted of a clearly distinguishable set of houses that could be seen as a territorial unit. The *Snippevlucht*, a neighbourhood on the west side of the Oudegracht between Townhall Bridge and Bakers Bridge, consisted of 44 houses, in which sixty well-to-do families lived in 1639. A web of neighbourhoods covered Utrecht territory, but a factual map cannot be drawn for lack of data. I presume that Utrecht and its suburbs comprised about 80 neighbourhoods, each consisting of around sixty families. Such a neighbourhood would contain about 300 people, including children, servants and journeymen, by 1600.

The board of the *Snippevlucht* consisted of a neighbourhood sheriff, two neighbourhood masters, seven aldermen, two bookkeepers, a secretary, a policeman and two assistants. The organization of other neighbourhoods will have been comparable. Their services were all unremunerated. No information on the exact election procedure is available, but until the late sixteenth century the board was elected by the neighbourhood council, of which all neighbours were a member. They met whenever a meeting was called for. Neighbours who did not attend had to pay a small fine. In principle only male neighbours could attend a meeting and fulfil a function. There were at least 14 posts to be filled. This means that at least one in five neighbours acquired some administrative experience. Among them were members of middle and lower ranks. And newcomers. This contributed to a broad, solid basis.

Neighbourhoods proved to be an excellent means for integration. New neighbours were informed on what was expected of them in the first neighbourhood meeting they attended. As a token of agreement they drank the neighbourhood horn. After that they were acknowledged as full-fledged members. When they were qualified they could obtain any administrative function within the neighbourhood. Even after the Reformation, members of all denominations met in neighbourhood gatherings and sat on the board together. It is interesting that integration and cooperation were possible on this level, but not in the political arena.

Summing up: in the early, turbulent history of Utrecht, neighbourhoods proved to be the most solid and constant structures. Their judicial and social rules are recognizable in the way the later administration was set up and in the way the neighbourhoods continued to function. As such neighbourhoods remained of vital importance to civic society. Because their organization is usually not recognized, Church and city council are ascribed too much power. Civic pride is an essential element of late medieval mentality.

Rules and regulations

In Utrecht the neighbourhood organization formed the foundation for many other, larger collectives: parish, guilds, civic militia and even some special brotherhoods, namely those that were set up to raise and maintain a hospital within the neighbourhood quarters. Cooperation was the key word. People had to work together through thick and thin, whether they liked one another or not. Therefore it was

important that quarrels did not smoulder and that fights were univocally dealt with. And this is where the rules and regulations come in.

The earliest remaining neighbourhood statutes in the Utrecht area date from 1391. Under close supervision of the town government they were made up for *Lauwerecht*, a suburb outside the city walls. New regulations were needed, as neighbours and neighbourhood council had different opinions on duties and fines. New appointments had to be made ‘for our benefit and to create more peace and friendship among ourselves’. As always: clarity is a prerequisite for harmony!

Finances are the first issue that is dealt with: both the fines after a fight and the fees for becoming a neighbour and for selling real estate are fixed. Then procedures were laid out in case of diverging opinions: eventually ‘the minority should follow the majority’. Other issues are the attendance of councils and funerals, the cleaning and repairing of streets, and the administration and spending of communal money. When people failed to perform duties, they were not punished or expelled; they simply had to pay a clearly defined fine. In this way, harmony was best served: people could reconcile and reintegrate after an incident or transgression without losing face or honour. The concept of honour was important in those days. People who wanted to borrow money or have an official function, had to be known as honourable.

The rules and regulations of *Lauwerecht* contain all the items neighbours traditionally have to deal with in order to protect the harmony in their small community. They show many similarities with the late sixteenth and seventeenth-century statutes that have been preserved in Utrecht; and with customs and traditions in areas where neighbourliness has survived to this very day. Seeing this continuity I have no problem with pursuing this line back to earlier times.

Repression after the Reformation

After the Reformation, in Utrecht in 1580, the organization of neighbourhoods was radically changed. Henceforth the magistrate consisted of Protestants only. Yet this fact did not reflect their actual strength in town. Protestants were a small minority, especially in the first decades, but clever in obtaining strategic positions in politics, public services and the civic militia. Their uneasiness upon the legitimacy of their power is reflected in the fact that they occasionally had to call in captains of the militia to collect taxes and to carry out the 1623 census.

Out of fear for political agitation from below, city councils began to restrict neighbourhood organization. Many annual feasts were considered ‘papal superstitions’. They were forbidden from 1580 onward. It took nearly a century for these festivities to be effectively eradicated. This shows how much they were appreciated. Poor neighbourhoods were no longer allowed to appoint their own councils. They had to present the magistrate a list with two candidates per post, from which the magistrate made their choice. In rich neighbourhoods poor neighbours were excluded from membership from 1651 onward. Permission of the city council was required for neighbourhood meals. From 1658 neighbours were allowed a ‘friendly meal’ every three years only, which a maximum of two days, whereas they could last three days before 1580. Before 1700 all the wooden houses on the Oudegracht wharves were taken down. This is where middle class and poor people lived. Now the brick houses on the street could shine in their full glory. Step by step the segregation between rich and poor became more outspoken.



Wooden houses on Utrecht's wharves and bridges

Neighbourliness quickly eroded once the city council started taxing the money a mourning house offered to the neighbours who had organised the funeral. In 1628 the magistrate levied a tax as high as one third of the gift's value, raising this to fifty per cent in 1649. As a consequence families stopped giving gifts and neighbours stopped attending funerals. In 1669 the magistrate had to issue a proclamation ordering the attendance of at least 25 people at a funeral.

The social cohesion that had been an outstanding feature of Utrecht for so long was evaporating. This development can only be explained by pointing at the elitization process: the rise of a segment of society that considered themselves to be the elite and increasingly wanted to manifest themselves as such. This process had been going on for centuries, but in the seventeenth century the Protestant elite had become so rich and powerful that they could abandon the social game of 'give and take'. Class differences became ever stronger, as is so eminently described in Simon Schama's *Embarassment of Riches*.

Yet, Utrecht neighbourhoods did persist. It was not until 1925 that city quarters were officially abolished. Hence Utrecht was to be administered from the town hall only. But in working class quarters - like *Wijk C*, *Sterrenwijk* and the *Zeven Steegjes* (Seven Alleys), - neighbourliness remained strong. Cooperation and sharing were taken for granted in these areas. It had to be: since these quarters were so densely populated, people practically lived on the streets night and day. And besides, people had to join hands, as long as their income was insecure. Traditionally, welfare and parish institutions supported poor families, but on a government level substantial support only started to increase from the 1930s onward. In 1965 Social Security became available on a large scale. In addition, the affluent society brought population growth, migration, density of habitation, and private commodities such as water, electricity, gas, toilets and television, and as a consequence people became self reliant. They did not need to be social anymore. Anonymity became a problem. Eventually the lack of neighbourliness created a social vacuum. In 1990 the city council acknowledged this problem and re-divided the city into quarters.

Present-day challenges

In a process that lasted several centuries, neighbourhood and street life were made redundant. Nowadays they are being reclaimed. Youths of all cultures manifest themselves in streets and parks. Street language, street behaviour and street dance underline this development. Utrecht is now incidentally facing street fights. They are a test for a civic society. In my neighbourhood there are two skate tracks where Utrecht youngsters show their skills. As far as I can see on my daily walks they do this in harmony. There is a clear structure which they themselves set out. And why not?

Concerning problems on a neighbourhood level, there is a growing awareness that solutions must be custom-made. They cannot be imposed. Each quarter has its own policemen to whom problems can be reported. Street coaches and mediators are familiar in Utrecht's problem areas. Thus structures are created where problems can be discussed with the parties involved. For some decades there have been projects in these areas for neighbours to explore the neighbourhood's history and to exchange life stories and cook, dance and do amateur acting together. The necessity for integration and cooperation is also stronger because of the recession.

This kind of cultural exchange is important for Dutch people as well. The intercultural tensions expose a Dutch weakness that is especially felt on the neighbourhood level. The crux of it is that, together with the loss of neighbourliness, the sense of civic pride and cultural identity diminished. As customs and traditions became less familiar, people forgot their meaning. They could not explain their life style and routines to newcomers, let alone stand up for them. In the confrontation with the strong traditions of newcomers and the accompanying self-awareness and cultural identity, the Dutch cannot hold their own. And this leads to uneasiness, to say the least, the more while non-Western cultures are considered inferior. This uneasiness, however, serves as an incentive for some people to explore their own history, traditions and values. The above mentioned projects are a result of this growing awareness.

And trying as these processes can be, the exploration and exchange on a ground level are necessary. In this era the initiative and responsibility to solve social problems cannot be limited to

politics alone. It requires efforts from all participants, including the municipalities. They have their own responsibilities. In Utrecht there is a tendency to restructure the organization and support of neighbourhoods after each council election. This creates unrest. Community life became uprooted through regulations from above, now governments, both national and local, should have the courage to become a facilitating partner and to respect working initiatives, especially when they come from the people themselves.

A beautiful example of neighbourhood participation is to be found in two lower class areas in Utrecht, *Rivierenwijk* and *Kanaleneiland*. The pastors who are involved in social welfare projects over there, do not offer solutions, but give neighbours a structure to work out problems themselves. The neighbourhood house is the centre of all activities. Here the people gather for coffee, home-cooked communal meals, courses and theatre. Here they write their own newspaper and discuss whatever problems arise. Gradually they create their own solutions³.

Even in areas where neighbourliness had vanished, people recognize the value of community spirit. Ever more streets and suburbs organize an annual festival which is largely subsidized by the municipality. In this way residents try to recreate the sense of solidarity and involvement that *Springweg* neighbours demonstrated in 1551.

This mutual contact is important as integration problems are causing ever stronger tensions. Moreover, the Law on Social Support presupposes neighbourly help. This wish can only come true when neighbours have a self understood willingness to help each other. Reciprocity is a meaningful notion these days. The ever greater weight that is now ascribed to neighbourhoods underscores the meaningfulness of historical research into neighbourhood patterns as it provides us with a model to understand and guide neighbourhood processes.

Literature

Llewellyn Bogaers, *Aards, betrokken en zelfbewust. De verwevenheid van cultuur en religie in katholiek Utrecht (1300-1600)*, Utrecht, 2008 (www.levendverledenutrecht.nl for information and ordering, summary under the English flag)

Lilian Linders, *De betekenis van nabijheid. Een onderzoek naar informele zorg in een volksbuurt*, Den Haag, 2010

Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: an Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, New York/London, 1987

Titus Schlatmann en Marieke Sillevius Smitt, *Geloven in de buurt*, 2007 (for ordering: www.rosverlag.de)

Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy. Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*, New York, 2009.

¹ The following is a summary of the chapter in my thesis *Aards, betrokken en zelfbewust*, on neighbourhood life in Utrecht in the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Times. Literature and references can be found here.

² For instance, Linders, *De betekenis van nabijheid*.

³ Schlatmann and Sillevius Smitt, *Geloven in de buurt*.