

The City as Space

‘Spatializing’ History and Future of Urban Law and Governance?

The ‘spatial turn’ appears in increasingly diverse fields of research and academic literature.¹ At first, one might associate this with research utilising spatial digital tools, such as GIS, in its analysis. However, thinking in terms of ‘space’ goes much further than such geo-graphic representations of physical or cartographic space.

Space in and around Dutch cities is scarce and has been for quite some time. As part of the most recent local elections in our own Tilburg, vivid debates emerged around one of the city’s major traffic arteries, the Ringbaan West, and whether space for cars should be reduced in favour of public transport and parks. In late medieval Dordrecht, the urban government was similarly forced to weigh the interests of two urban economic sectors against one another. In 1527, it ended up banning a cloth dyer from discharging dye into the harbour, which presented an environmental hazard to the local fishermen.² These questions of economic and environmental space tie in with the public sphere and debates surrounding the urban political space. Even today, after citizenship became nationalised around the turn of the nineteenth century, a city like Deventer has not abolished its old ‘grand citizenship’ for those living within the municipal borders and who descend from a male holding that grand citizenship in 1866. In that year, their right to graze their livestock on the urban meadow was replaced by a fixed monetary compensation of 30 guilders per year, now turned into € 13,61!³ Should urban politics and participatory processes solely cater for the rights and needs of existing citizens, or also take outsiders (i.e. prospective citizens) into account, and to what extent?

Henri Lefebvre’s questioning who and what has a claim to urban space, has inspired a critical literature on the city as space and on urban spatial inequalities.⁴ His work sparked an important change in perception, from ‘a focus on the city as a spatial entity to a focus on a spatial dynamic through fragmented, contested urban space’.⁵ Edward Soja draws attention to the ‘socio-spatial dialectic’. As he argues, ‘the spatial shapes the social as much as the social shapes the spatial’. Especially relevant for us are the consequent

¹ Jo Guldi, ‘What is the Spatial Turn?’, < <https://spatial.scholarslab.org/spatial-turn/what-is-the-spatial-turn/>>. See also: Barney Warf and Santa Arias (eds.), *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Routledge, 2009); Jörg Döring and Tristan Thielmann (eds.), *Spatial Turn. Das Raumparadigma in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften* (Transcript Verlag, 2008).

² See the TIRO-project ‘Governing the Commons in the Rhine Delta’ directed by dr. Marco in ’t Veld and dr. Merlijn van Hulst.

³ See: <<https://www.deventer.nl/grootburgerrecht>>, visited on 23 March 2026.

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, ‘Le Droit à la Ville’, in: *L’Homme et la société* 6-1 (1967), pp. 29-35; *ibid.*, *La Production de l’espace* (Anthropos, 1974).

⁵ Richard Rodger and Susanne Rau, ‘Thinking spatially: new horizons for urban history’, in: *Urban History* 47-3 (2020), pp. 372-383.

spatial dimensions of justice and injustice, which are embedded in and constrained by spaces ranging from the body to the city to the entire globe, governed by plural normative orders.⁶ As part of the GLG-theme 'Urban Constitutionalism and Governance', we ask ourselves what the city as 'space' means for us, considering both these larger debates and our own research. The 'spatial turn' debates tie in with one of the focus points of our research theme: who owns the city and what makes the city?

Taking the 'spatial' literature as our starting point, we would like to stimulate a conversation on what it means for us and our research aided by three concrete thematic sessions. Perspectives from legal and urban history will be coupled with perspectives on current legal and governmental developments related to the city and the urban community.

We will seek to connect past, present, and future in questioning the city as (1) sovereign space; (2) environmental space, and (3) political space.

Program Outline

Date: Thursday 24 September 2026, M534

12.45-13.00 Welcome & Introduction

13.00-13.45 Session 1: The City as Sovereign Space (prof. dr. Dave De ruyscher, dr. Maria Cavalcanti)

13.45-14.00 Break

14.00-14.45 Session 2: The City as Environmental Space (dr. Marco in 't Veld; prof. dr. Arie Trouwborst)

14.45-15.00 Break

15.00-15.45 Session 3: The City as Political Space (dr. Maurits den Hollander; dr. Julien van Ostaaijen; dr. Niels Karsten)

15.45-16.00 Wrap up & Conclusions

16.00-17.00 Drinks & Bites

⁶ Edward W. Soja, trans. Sophie Didier and Frédéric Dufaux, 'La ville et la justice spatiale / The city and spatial justice', in: *Justice Spatiale/Spatial Justice* 1 (2009), <<https://www.jssj.org/article/la-ville-et-la-justice-spatiale/>>; *ibid.*, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010).