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Introduction

Text, Image and the Urban

John Hinks

Textualizing the city creates its own reality, becomes a way of seeing the city – but such textuality cannot substitute for the pavements and the buildings, for the physical city. Before the city is a construct, literary or cultural, it is a physical reality with a dynamics of its own…[[1]](#footnote-1)

The essays in this collection discuss how the city is ‘textualized’. They address many aspects of how texts and images are written and produced in, and about, cities. They demonstrate how urban texts and images provoke reactions, in city-dwellers, visitors, civic and political actors, that, in turn, impact upon the shape of the city itself. Many kinds of urban texts – both manuscript and print – are discussed, including chapbooks, periodicals, poetry, graffiti and street-signs. The essays derive from a range of disciplines including book history, urban history, cultural history, literary studies, art history and urban planning.

The essays may be wide-ranging but the cohesion of the collection as a whole is achieved by addressing some key questions in urban cultural history, including the relationship, changing over time, between text, image and the city; the function of the text or image within an urban environment; how urban texts and images have been used by those in positions of power and by those with little or no power; the ways in which urban identity and values have been reflected in ‘street literature’, graffiti and subversive texts and images; and whether theories of urban space can help us to understand the relationship between text, image and the city. These essays add to our understanding of the nature of urbanism from a historical perspective, the creation and representation of urban space, and the processes of urbanization. They explore how the creation, distribution and consumption of urban texts and images actively affect the shaping of the city itself – a symbiotic process whereby text, image and city create and sustain each other.

Text, Image and the Urban

The critical perspective unifying this volume enables histories of the material text and image to begin to challenge established conceptions of urbanism, and to bridge textual practice and theoretical perceptions concerning the city. This collection opens up a valuable and original dialogue between disciplines, enabling the development of a new critical approach to ‘textualizing the city’: an exploration of the longstanding, but continually evolving, symbiotic relationship between text, image, urban life and landscape.

**Section One, ‘Cities in the Margin’**, focuses on textual and writing spaces in the city for marginalized and subversive practices. It comprises essays by Caroline Archer, on *Paris: Text and Image Underground*, by Jack Mockford, on *Confusing the ‘Schema’: Flash Notes and Fraud in Late-Georgian England* and by Rathna Ramanathan, on *London’s Little Presses.* The section explores how the city provides space in which new kinds of document (using the term broadly) can be created, and, conversely, how the production of new texts and images creates spaces that form emancipatory, temporary or subversive practices to occur. The notion of ‘the margin’ connects text, image and city, and the essays in this section consider textual and urban boundaries, and their mutual exploitation.

**Section Two, ‘Textual Topographies: Urban Space in Manuscript, Print and Visual Culture’**, discusses the production, imagination and politics of city space and place, in essays by Rosa Smurra, on ‘*Studium’, Manuscript Books and Urban Landscape: Bologna, 13th/14th centuries*, by Daliah Bond, on *Defining the Scottish Chapbook: a description of the ‘typical Scottish chapbook’*, by John Hinks, on *The Urban Context of Eighteenth-Century English Provincial Printing*, and by Geraldine Marshall, on *Birmingham’s Graphic DNA: reading the ‘word city’ through signage, architectural letter forms and the typographic landscape.* From the spatial geography of scribes of medieval romances, to the urban nature of most pre-industrial European print, this section highlights historical space and urban formations that allowed the growth of textual culture.

The Literature of the ‘Urban’

A survey of the vast corpus of relevant literature soon reveals an underlying problem of definition. Scholars from several disciplines, especially (but not only) in the USA, tend to use ‘city’ and ‘urban’ to refer only to large metropolises, while others – including many who would describe themselves as urban historians – routinely extend the concept of ‘urban’ to include towns of all sizes (anything larger than a village), many of which have been especially significant, economically, culturally and socially, particularly in European history. As Peter Borsay rightly observes, in an essay on the creative potential of urban space, while there are obvious differences between large and small towns, the smaller ones should not be written off ‘as sterile backwaters’, as the evidence of much historical research indicates that ‘they were a remarkably buoyant group of settlements, perfectly capable of absorbing and contributing to the processes of change going on around them’.[[2]](#footnote-2) So long as we are clear about what a particular writer means by ‘urban’ and ‘city’, the problem is not insuperable, though it is essential to be constantly aware of it. Perhaps a more important and more interesting question is why *urban* spaces are so important historically. Peter Hall, writing about the ‘golden ages’ of great cities, asks:

Why should the creative flame burn so especially in cities and not in the countryside? What makes a particular city, at a particular time, suddenly become immensely creative, exceptionally innovative? Why should this spirit flower for a few years, generally a decade or two at most, and then disappear as suddenly as it came?[[3]](#footnote-3)

The innovative power of the city lies in several spheres, not least economic, social, political and cultural. Examining the city in its cultural context implies, as Agnew, Mercer and Sopher suggest:

… an emphasis on the practices and ideas that arise from collective and individual experiences, and that are constitutive of urban life and form. The practices and ideas are not themselves uniquely urban but derive from the social, economic and political situations that have shaped group and individual existence. In turn the practices and ideas – in short ‘culture’ – have shaped urban worlds.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The same authors further comment:

In their form and in the lives of their inhabitants, cities have reflected the working of dominant, residual and emergent cultures. To study the city in cultural context therefore requires us to acknowledge that cities are cultural creations and that they are best understood as such.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Of course, there are many differences, not simply increased scale, between the city of the past and the modern city. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift comment:

The city is everywhere and in everything. If the urbanized world now is a chain of metropolitan areas connected by places/corridors of communication […] then what is not the urban? Is it the town, the village, the countryside? Maybe, but only to a limited degree. The footprints of the city are all over these places, in the form of city commuters, tourists, teleworking, the media, and the urbanization of lifestyles. The traditional divide between the city and the countryside has been perforated.[[6]](#footnote-6)

They also make the important point that modern urban sprawl does not ‘negate the idea of cities as distinct spatial formations or imaginaries’.[[7]](#footnote-7) The naming of places is still important:

The place called London, for example, has been fashioned and refashioned through commentaries, recollections, memories and erasures, and in a variety of media – monumental, official and vernacular, newspapers and magazines, guides and maps, photographs, films, newsreels and novels, street-level conversations and tales.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Writing his song ‘London Pride’ in 1941, Noël Coward eulogized not only the determination of Londoners to carry on more or less normally during the Blitz but also the way in which the city itself acted as a powerful memorial text: ‘Cockney feet mark the beat of history; every street pins a memory down’. Paul Du Noyer comments: ‘A folk song with the cadence of a church hymn, “London Pride” begins amid the “coster barrows” and expands into a meditation on the city’s collective memory, preserved by tradition, imprinted in the very streets’.[[9]](#footnote-9) As Kevin Lynch observes, ‘Every citizen has had long association with some part of his city, and his image is soaked in memories and meanings’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Dianne Chisholm notes that ‘Memory is possible because it is collective. An individual knows herself or himself as a being of enduring, if evolving, character because she or he possesses memories that are collectively articulated, revised, and confirmed.’[[11]](#footnote-11)

Despite memory, collective and individual, urban change on a considerable scale seems to be inevitable:

… the fabric of a city is not only always in process of changing, and not only is this change normally visible, but even when it is not, it becomes part of collective memory both informally and in the written and rewritten official and unofficial histories of cities. In cities change is continual, and the city changing through time has been likened to a palimpsest…[[12]](#footnote-12)

Maiken Umbach’s work on the historical significance of urban architecture is relevant here. Reflecting on how cultural historians used to aim to identify *causes* but now prefer to seek for *meaning*, she writes:

Meaning is by definition fluid: traditions invented, remembered, half-forgotten; identities tried out and half-discarded; futures imagined, planned, defended, half-abandoned. In shedding light on this shifty terrain lies architectural history’s potentially greatest contribution to history at large.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The visual history of the built urban environment helps us, just as does the broader cultural history of the city, to identify both continuities and discontinuities. The past is complex and the nuanced memories recorded in text and image do more than resonate *in* the present, they actually connect *with* the present. Amin and Thrift argue that the authentic modern city was ‘held together by face-to-face interaction whose coherence is now gone. If the authentic city exists, it is as a mere shadow of itself, one that serves only to underline what has been lost’.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, this argument fails to take sufficient account of the contribution of the culture of text and image, with its potential to preserve or recapture some of what has been lost, as well as its power to reflect, to stimulate and to reinforce new connections and interactions.

‘Reading’ the City

Turning this around, can the city itself be ‘read’ in something like the same way as a text or image? Amin and Thrift discuss the ‘legibility of the city’[[15]](#footnote-15), as does (from a somewhat different angle) Kevin Lynch[[16]](#footnote-16), while Peter Fritzsche offers a persuasive case study of ‘reading’ Berlin during the years either side of 1900:

This book is about the ‘word city’, the accumulation of small bits and rich streams of text that saturated the twentieth-century city, guided and misguided its inhabitants, and in large measure, fashioned the nature of metropolitan experience. In an age of urban mass literacy, the city as place and the city as text defined each other in mutually constitutive ways.[[17]](#footnote-17)

To complicate matters, as Maiken Umbach observes, ‘What can be “read” almost by definition allows for multiple readings. And what is derived from real history, as opposed to a universal ideal, acknowledges the contingency of meaning, in the future as well as the past’.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In addition to the possibility of ‘reading’ the city itself, through its built environment and, in a different way, through its cultural self-expression, the city produced, notably during the long eighteenth century, a variety of information systems equally capable of being read in a more literal sense: ‘street numbering and naming; printed directories; guides; urban histories; two-dimensional maps and prospects; the circulating library; the newspaper and journal press’.[[19]](#footnote-19)

A tendency in recent years has been to ‘decentre’ the city, examining particular neighbourhoods within the urban area rather than treating the city as a whole:

… much recent academic work on cities has concentrated upon specific localities *within* cities using ethnographic fieldwork data in order to elaborate narratives of city life that no longer claim to represent ‘the urban’ but, instead, are *stories* from the city.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The collection of essays edited by Westwood and Williams specifically aims to disrupt the ‘real/imagined’ binary, in order to provide ‘novel ways in which theorisations of the city may be developed in the future’.[[21]](#footnote-21) The step from urban fieldwork ‘stories’ to imaginative literature about the city is a short one. Much has been written about the city in books and other media; Westwood and Williams comment that ‘novels and films are instructive and offer us another language in which to pose key questions and to search for answers’.[[22]](#footnote-22) In a rich field, Richard’s Lehan’s *The City in Literature* is outstanding[[23]](#footnote-23), as is the wider ranging work of James Donald:

… I focus on the city as an attempt to imagine not only the way we live but above all the way we live together. That is only in part a sociological question. The city has always stood not only for the vanities, the squalor and the injustice of human society, but also for the aspiration to civilized sociation.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Donald rightly identifies both the tension between ‘the city’ as a metaphor of urban life and specific stories about specific cities or neighbourhoods, and the way in which writing about the city actually helps to shape the city itself, at least in the imagination:

My city is at the same time abstractly conceptual and intensely personal. It is *the* city, not *a* city. It is an imaginary space created and animated as much by the urban representations to be found in novels, films, and images as by any actual urban places. […] for me to write about the city is inevitably to invoke London.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The relation between novel and city, then, is not merely one of representation. The text is actively constitutive of the city. Writing does not only record or reflect the fact of the city. It has its role in producing the city for a reading public.[[26]](#footnote-26)

So, the city is simultaneously the producer and the product of cultural creations including texts and images. The role of the city or town in manufacturing urban knowledge is a key one, as Peter Borsay explains:

Towns were the engines of the knowledge system, creating, collecting and circulating ideas and information. It was to the town that people came to trade not only in goods, but also knowledge.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The Spatial Turn

Many scholars recognize a recent ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities. The concept is particularly useful in cultural history and urban history:

Recent works in the fields of literary and cultural studies, sociology, political science, anthropology, history and art history have become increasingly spatial in their orientation. From various perspectives, they assert that space is a social construction relevant to the understanding of the different histories of human subjects and to the production of cultural phenomena.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Historians of the book – or, more broadly, of text and image – have responded positively to the ‘spatial turn’ in cultural history and in the humanities as a whole. A recent collection of essays explores many diverse facets of ‘the geographies of the book’, indicating ‘how deeply geography is involved in the production, distribution and consumption of books, and how that makes a difference to the ways in which books and their histories should be understood’.[[29]](#footnote-29) The work of Charles Withers and Miles Ogborn exemplifies this geographically inflected history of books and texts.[[30]](#footnote-30) The history of the book – a wide and naturally interdisciplinary field of study – has, in the wake of the spatial turn, drawn closer to urban history, which has served to refocus the work of a number of historians, myself included[[31]](#footnote-31), on the role of the city and town in producing and distributing both informative and imaginative texts and images which shape the understanding and image of the urban:

The city is conceived less as something found or simply ‘out there’ and more as something constituted partially through representation and discourse and as a site of interlocking and conflicting meanings of cultural, political and economic relations. The wholeness of the city (often presented uncomplicatedly in conventional urban studies, using geographic boundaries to demarcate and define) is viewed not only as a physical entity but also as a narrative device and as a plethora of signs and symbols infused with power relations.[[32]](#footnote-32)

This collection of essays aims to explore the intriguing ways in which texts and images interact with, and help to explain, the nature and meaning of urban space.

1. Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: an intellectual and cultural history* (Berkeley, California UP, 1998), 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Peter Borsay, ‘Invention, Innovation and the “Creative Milieu” in Urban Britain: the Long Eighteenth Century and the Birth of the Modern Cultural Economy’ in *Creative Urban Milieus: Historical Perspectives on Culture, Economy, and the City,* ed. Martina Hessler and Clemens Zimmerman (Frankfurt, Campus Verlag, 2008), 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilization: Culture, Innovation and Urban Order* (London, Phoenix, 1998), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John A. Agnew, John Mercer and David E. Soper (eds.), *The City in Cultural Context* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1984), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Agnew, Mercer and Soper, *City in Cultural Context,* 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (London, Polity, 2002), 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Amin and Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban,* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Amin and Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban,* 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Paul Du Noyer, *In the City: a Celebration of London Music* (London, Virgin, 2009), 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City,* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1960), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Dianne Chisholm, ‘The City of Collective Memory’, *GLQ: a Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies,* 7 (2001), 195-243 (196). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Elizabeth Wilson, ‘Looking Backward: Nostalgia and the City’, in *Imagining Cities: Scripts, Signs, Memories,* edited by Sallie Westwood and John Williams, (London, Routledge, 1997), 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Maiken Umbach, ‘Urban History: What Architecture Does, Historically Speaking…’, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians,* 65 (2006), 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Amin and Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban,* 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Amin and Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban,* chapter 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Lynch, *Image of the City*, 2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard, 1996), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Maiken Umbach, ‘Memory and Historicism: Reading Between the Lines of the Built Environment, Germany, c.1900’, *Representations,* 88 (2004), 26-54 (31). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Borsay, ‘Invention, Innovation…’, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Westwood and Williams, *Imagining Cities*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Westwood and Williams, *Imagining Cities*, *Imagining Cities*, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Westwood and Williams, *Imagining Cities*, *Imagining Cities*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Lehan, *City in Literature.* [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999), x. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. James Donald, ‘Imagining the Modern City’, in Westwood and Williams, *Imagining Cities*, 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Borsay, ‘Invention, Innovation…’, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Barney Warf and Santa Arias (eds.), *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London, Routledge, 2009), 18. A useful review essay on the ‘spatial turn’ is Ralph Kingston, ‘Mind over Matter: History and the Spatial Turn’, *Cultural and Social History,* 7 (2010), 111-121. On the ‘construction’ of space see also Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Miles Ogborn and Charles W.J. Withers (eds.), *Geographies of the Book* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2010), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007); Charles W. J. Withers, *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See for example: John Hinks, ‘The Book Trade in Early Modern Britain: Centres, Peripheries and Networks’ in Benito Rial Costas (ed.), *Print Culture and Peripheries in Early Modern Europe* (Brill, 2013), 101-126; John Hinks and Catherine Feely (eds.), *Historical Networks in the Book Trade,* (London, Routledge, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. John Eade and Christopher Mele, *Understanding the City: Contemporary and Future Perspectives* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2002), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)