



Book reviews

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Jaap Evert Abrahamse and Heidi Deneweth (eds.), *Transforming Space: Visible and Invisible Changes in Premodern European Cities*, Studies in European Urban History (1100–1800) volume 58. Turnhout: Brepols, 2022. 250pp. 68 plates. 17 figures. 2 graphs. 2 tables. €87 hbk. €87 ebk.
doi:[10.1017/S096392682300069X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S096392682300069X)

Transforming Space is a collection of contributions that were originally presented during the European Association for Urban History conference in 2016. The volume rejects the assumption that hardly any important transition in the outlook of pre-modern city centres can be observed until the industrial revolution. The editors look at (re)development from another perspective, looking beyond formation and expansion and exposing ostensibly smaller and invisible modifications and transformations of inner cities. Zooming in ‘to the meso- and microlevels of districts, neighbourhoods, individual houses and plots of land’ (p. 27), the contributors – archaeologists, historians of art and architecture and urban historians – show how the transition and intervention in space happened gradually and continuously.

Section I – Mitigating geopolitical and fire risks – begins with the work of Liisa Seppänen on the transformation of townscape in Turku (1300–1830). Seppänen discusses various principal agents of change over time, such as migration, religious institutions and the crown; as well as agents delaying change, such as Scandinavia’s cold and damp climate that made timber buildings more comfortable and brickmaking a slow process, thus slowing down building with masonry. Like Seppänen, Rafal Eysymontt, considering Silesian urbanization in the later Middle Ages, explores new suburbs as clear examples of transitions, and in addition not only looks to extensions of the city but also to changes in the skylines. Rightly described as innovative by the editors, Janna Coomans, uses actor-network-theory (ANT) to analyse fire prevention in the late medieval Low Countries as an interaction of human behaviour and politics with place and technology. According to Coomans, fire hazard was a crucial force in medieval and pre-modern urban development, though not homogeneous and uncontested. Like Seppänen, she emphasizes that building in brick and stone was not a self-evident transition in the pre-modern city.

The second section focuses on religion as an accelerator of urban change. Anna Anisimova argues that before the Acts of Dissolution of religious houses in 1536–40, monastic lords took the initiative in urban development in England, such as the filling-in of marketplaces close to monastic gates. The Dissolution did not alter much in the

towns' morphology, though many former sites of religious houses were re-allocated. Colin Arnaud, comparing Bologna and Strasbourg, questions the divergent evolution of towns where either Protestantism or Catholicism prevailed after the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, for example when it comes to transformation or rather renovation of religious buildings. Arnaud concludes that the divergences in urban set-up were deep-rooted and already existed before the period of confessional divisions. Maurizio Vesco and Valeria Viola study the famous cross-shaped form that was implemented in Palermo's seventeenth-century city plan and investigate the design's success with regard to citizens' spatial practice. The intervention did enhance urban mobility, but the new streets were scarcely used for religious processions, one reason why life in buildings along the roads was pushed inward.

Finally, section III explores the impact of economic and demographic change on existing housing blocks. Jaap Evert Abrahamse studies urban developments in the medieval city centre during Amsterdam's seventeenth-century explosive growth, especially the transformation of an edge zone: the town wall that shaped the periphery became the inner-city Singel canal. A main shipping route lined with small building blocks (with no gardens), it was far from being as charming as the housing blocks close to, for example, the *Keizersgracht*. Although authorities tried to increase its allure, it remained more of a mixed-use canal. Heidi Deneweth investigates the slowly transforming city of Bruges due to changing plot and property structures, although it still retained its original form until the nineteenth century. Studying three different neighbourhoods with regard to socio-economic and demographic changes, leading to changing property rates and divergent real estate strategies, Deneweth shows how these slow transformations caused increasing segregation between city centre and peripheral neighbourhoods and divergent developments of building blocks. In the final chapter, Sarah Collins utilizes a micro-geography methodology through GIS that shows continual redevelopment on street and plot level in eighteenth-century Newcastle upon Tyne, which would be difficult to trace through assessment of cartographic analysis alone. Meso- and macro-scale redevelopments in Newcastle did impact access to these streets and thus commercial and business activities. Through Collins' micro-analysis, initial and considerable changes in the physical and functional use of space as introduced by private owners of the cities' real estate are observable.

The editors are reticent about the book's potential influence on further discussion on urban change. This is perhaps due to the volume's 'eclectic' character (p. 26). To some extent, this is inherent to volumes based on conference proceedings, but it could perhaps have been better mitigated. The volume is not always tightly edited and lacks some coherence accordingly. Most of the (few) cross-references are a bit forced. Although Abrahamse and Deneweth's introduction more than adequately discusses existing scholarship regarding the volume's various themes, not all contributions are evenly connected and in general they do not really engage with the editors' historiographical framework. However, the collection of chapters (including many supporting images) is definitely worthy of study by historians of urban planning and transformation in its social or material aspects, and many contributions will speak to a wide range of social, cultural and economic historians. As a whole, this volume invites urban historians to engage with meso- and micro-levels that might uncover many more (in) visible urban developments of the pre-modern city.

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