



INTRODUCTION

Introduction: the material culture of public space in early modern Europe

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Abstract

This special issue draws on new research conducted by the *PUBLIC RENAISSANCE: Urban Cultures of Public Space between Early Modern Europe and the Present* project, funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area (see: www.hiddencities.eu). The project considers how public spaces, from street corners to major city squares, were shaped by the everyday activities of ordinary city dwellers between 1450 and 1700. We have focused on the urban fabric, and the ways in which meanings are attached to specific sites in the city (and objects in museum collections) that are often overlooked – the material culture of public space. Our themes are familiar to urban historians – sociability, the circulation of knowledge, information or gossip, authority and its contestation – although by moving between textual sources, maps, the built fabric and museum artefacts, our interdisciplinary and cross-Europe approach is structured around material objects in the early modern period.

A sculpture of St Peter trampling the devil presided over Exeter's principal crossroad, Carfax, the junction of High Street and North Street where the monumental Great Conduit provided water to the citizenry (Figure 1).¹ The statue formed part of a corner post of a prominent building on the intersection, occupying the site for as much as half a millennium, indeed outlasting the monumental fountain which it overlooked. St Peter is depicted carrying a church, and although this may allude to the saint's wider significance as the first bishop of Rome ('the rock upon which I will be build my church', Matt. 16:18), it is perhaps more significant in this context that he is also the dedicatee of nearby Exeter cathedral.² In this regard, it can be suggested that the sculpture extended the reach of the enclosed cathedral precinct to this principal

¹The sculpture is now housed in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (accession number 1/1988; <https://rammcollections.org.uk/object/1-1988/>, accessed 7 Aug. 2022). The discussion that follows is informed by Nick Holder and Kate Osborne, 'Carfax and St Peter's Statue', published online 2020, in 'Hidden Cities', <https://hiddencities.eu/exeter/carfax-st-peter> (accessed 7 Aug. 2022), with further reading.

²On the cathedral from a significant bibliography, see N. Orme, *Exeter Cathedral As It Was 1050–1550* (Exeter, 1986).



Figure 1. Statue of St Peter, Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery, Exeter City Council.

intersection, at the heart of the city's vibrant political and commercial life. It is also worthy of note that the oak sculpture – which is dated to around 1500 – is unprecedented in Exeter for its scale and use of colour, and it has been suggested that it may be the work of a craftsperson from the continent, connected to the quite large immigrant communities from France, Germany and the Low Countries that resided in the city.³

The Carfax was a significant location in any city, and in Exeter it was markedly so on account of the fact that the grandest of the city's water fountains, the Great Conduit, was located there (Figure 2).⁴ Bringing drinking water to the centre of the city, high on the hill above the river Exe, was a considerable engineering achievement, pursued over a number of centuries through a complex system of underground

³See the museum catalogue entry record: <https://rammcollections.org.uk/object/1-1988/> accessed 8 Jul. 2023.

⁴M. Stoye, *Water in the City : The Aqueducts and Underground Passages of Exeter* (Exeter, 2015), especially 139–40, 171 and 211.

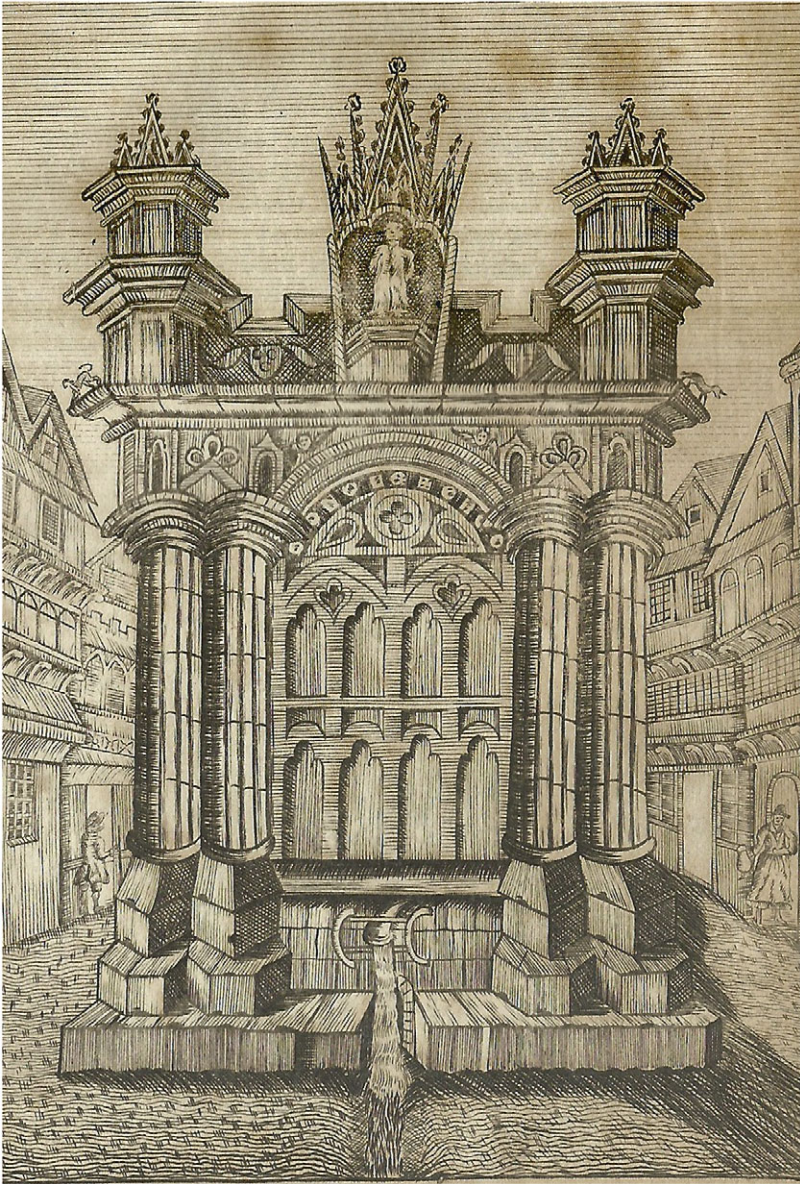


Figure 2. The Great Conduit, from Alexander Jenkins, *The History and Description of the City of Exeter*, 1806.

tunnels and cisterns.⁵ Making that water available at this central point of use was consequently a reason for civic pride and was the subject of considerable investment over a series of construction campaigns of 1461, 1501 and 1534–35. Interestingly, while the first campaign relied on cathedral craftsmen and funding by private donors,

⁵*Ibid.*

Exeter's Tudor chronicler, John Hooker, reported that the Great Conduit was 'repayred & mayntayned at the cities costes', indicating that it was acknowledged as a civic amenity of some importance.⁶ Indeed, as Hooker also noted, it vied with the fountain on the Cathedral Green – which was known as St Peter's Conduit – as the most important fountain in the centre.⁷

While, of course, much more could be said about the St Peter's sculpture at the Carfax, it should be clear that these brief comments serve to illustrate the value of considering such objects and their meaning as examples of the material culture of public space. The positioning of a sculpture whose iconography was so closely associated with the episcopal seat, adjacent to the civic amenity of the Great Conduit, suggests quite complex issues of jurisdictional conflict or tension over the supply of water to city residents. The sculpture's possible production by non-native craftsmen underlines the relatively cosmopolitan nature of the city's trading connections. Whether or not these concerns were at the forefront of how the sculpture was understood, more simply it served to visually communicate the city's devotional association with St Peter at a site where significant numbers of people had cause to wait for often considerable periods of time as they took their turn to fill buckets of water for domestic consumption. For fountains were public amenities to which much of the population had recourse, and as such served as sites of everyday sociability.⁸

Material culture and public space

Over the past decades, the study of material culture has become increasingly common among historians of the early modern period, as objects have ceased to be the 'exclusive' preserve of archaeologists and art historians.⁹ Objects – which might range from small portable items to entire buildings – have been examined as documents that offer insights that written sources may not so effectively afford, though more often than not such evidence types are considered together, as complementary to one another. Broadly defined material culture frequently serves to build up the evidence base for spatially determined areas of research, as the fast-growing scholarly interest in the domestic interior reveals, or as established approaches to religious settings in relation to liturgical and other devotional objects show. A recent 'handbook' of *Material Culture in Early Modern Europe* has chapter entries that deal with spatially determined contexts for material culture that include

⁶Hooker cited in *ibid.*, 140.

⁷Hooker cited in *ibid.*, 188; not only did the two fountains rely on two separate aqueducts, but especially following the Reformation conflict between the cathedral and the local government surrounded management of the cathedral aqueduct.

⁸For comparable material, see for example M. Jenner, 'From conduit community to commercial network? Water in London, 1500–1725', in P. Griffiths and M.S.R. Jenner (eds.), *Londinopolis: Essays in the Social and Cultural History of Early Modern London* (Manchester, 2000), 250–72, and K.W. Rinne, 'The landscape of laundry in late Cinquecento Rome', *Studies in the Decorative Arts*, 9 (2001–02), 34–60.

⁹From a significant and growing bibliography, suffice to cite three 'handbooks' that indicate the degree to which material culture approaches have become common: I. Gaskell and S.A. Carter (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of History and Material Culture* (New York and Oxford, 2020); C. Richardson, T. Hamling and D. Gaimster (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York, 2017); A. Gerritsen and G. Riello (eds.), *Writing Material Culture History* (London, 2015).

churches, homes, courts and public buildings, for example.¹⁰ These chapters turn to objects produced for the interiors of such settings, while only one chapter deals with material culture in the public realm through a discussion of streets, in which Andrew Gordon considers paving and offers a brief discussion of street signs.¹¹ As this collection will show, however, the material culture of public space goes well beyond these limited object categories, and indeed also invites us to reconsider the validity of hard boundaries between public and private space, between inside and outside, between the public and private realm, and so on.¹²

The research context from which the current special issue emerges is a project funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) entitled *Public Renaissance: Urban Cultures of Public Space between Early Modern Europe and the Present*. Over the course of three years, our interdisciplinary team has examined urban spaces not through the familiar frameworks of ceremony and ritual – the performative stage-set for events organized by government authorities and elites – but rather through attention to the everyday use of those same urban spaces. In considering the material culture of public space, we have applied an interpretative framework derived from Henri Lefebvre’s influential formulation of the *production* of space, a process which puts people, objects and places into a dynamic relationship that produces meaning. Material objects (or their traces, as in some cases the object itself may not survive) gain meaning through spatially determined interactions that take place in the urban public realm. In this respect, of course, Michel de Certeau’s consideration of ‘spatial practices’ and of the everyday are equally important, as objects frequently help to reassemble the movement and interaction of people (individuals or groups) at particular sites.¹³

So then, to return to our example at Exeter’s Carfax, our interest is not simply in the sculpture of St Peter, nor indeed its location and proximity to the public amenity of the Great Conduit water fountain. Rather, we are concerned with how the sculpture’s meaning is shaped by its location, at a site where myriad daily interactions took place as people gathered, waited and eventually collected water. The sculpture can be defined as an object related to the material culture of public space because of its location; it gains meaning from its proximity to the fountain and the groups of people that assembled there. In this, it is not exceptional. It stands as an example of how we might think of particular sites in the city, and objects associated with them, as constituting a specific category of object: the material culture of public space.

It is of course evident that we know a great deal about many of the built spaces of early modern cities, the people that inhabited them and the objects of material culture that can be related to such public spaces; in the most general sense, these three research areas can be related to the fields of architectural history, social and urban

¹⁰Richardson, Hamling and Gaimster (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook*, section II.

¹¹A. Gordon, ‘The materiality and the streetlife of the early modern city’, in Richardson, Hamling and Gaimster (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook*, 130–40.

¹²For a detailed discussion of the parameters of the material culture of public space as applied to evidence from early modern Italy, see F. Nevola, *Street Life in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven and London, 2020); see also F. Nevola, ‘Private lives in a public Renaissance: spaces and practices’, in M.B. Bruun and S. Nauman (eds.), *Handbook of Early Modern Privacy* (Oxford and New York: forthcoming, 2024).

¹³The key texts here are H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford, 1991), and M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1984). See also, among a growing bibliography, S. Rau, *History, Space and Place* (London, 2019).

history and archaeology/art history. Contextual and interdisciplinary approaches are increasingly common across all these specialist areas of historical study, but by focusing on the ‘material culture of public space’ our approach rests on keeping all three aspects in play and to the fore in the questions we ask. Such an all-encompassing approach – that includes the study of objects large and small located in public spaces as well as the examination of the material dimension of the spaces themselves, and the ways the actions of individuals and groups attached meanings to these – offers an innovative and productive way of reconsidering the urban cultures of public space.¹⁴ Such an approach has the particular value of enabling an informed spatial analysis of everyday or overlooked interactions and behaviours. Whereas the rituals and processions of the ‘ceremonial’ city can be studied through documentation generated by governments and ruling groups, it is harder to reassemble everyday social practices, or acts of contestation as they operated on and through the streets of the city. As the articles in this special issue show, lending greater attention to what may often appear as ephemeral or workaday objects can provide a way in to considering the spaces where those objects acquired meaning and the people involved in that act of meaning-making.

Beyond this special issue, as a research group we have approached the material culture of public space in the early modern period across a number of regions of Europe through two distinct and innovative approaches to our collaborative research outputs.¹⁵ Firstly, we decided to create a series of public-facing smartphone apps that provide location-aware historical guides to the cities chosen for our primary case examples.¹⁶ The app guides encode the Lefebvrian ‘triad’ of people–objects–places to produce meaning, by way of itineraries that connect together a guide character to a series of sites and objects in the city, to convey a particular set of themes. So, for instance, Exeter’s Carfax forms part of a trail led by a mid-sixteenth-century upwardly mobile haberdasher of the middling sort, Thomas Greenwood, a city steward; he speaks of various sites in the city that are associated with good governance and his relatively minor role in ensuring it. As such, the app trails instantiate through embodied practice the research questions that have driven our enquiry. The public history aims of the apps are discussed elsewhere, but the underpinning research for the sites and objects discussed is also accessed through the project’s map-based website.¹⁷

This second digital aspect of the project presents the sites and objects mentioned in the app through a series of images and web articles structured as a database and searchable through a map-based interface (Figure 3). Metadata tags for each item and a simple algorithm allow the website to draw comparisons across the objects and sites presented, thus suggesting similarities across the dataset, currently made up of 5 cities,

¹⁴For an extended application of this approach, see Nevola, *Street Life*.

¹⁵It is worth noting that the project was largely delivered during the Covid-19 pandemic and while digital outputs were anticipated from the outset, these took on greater prominence in our activities in the light of much reduced opportunities to conduct archival research and visit the case-study centres we identified. The project was never intended to provide a complete coverage of the continent, and has not considered evidence from Eastern regions, although it would clearly be worthwhile to do so.

¹⁶Five apps were created for Deventer, Exeter, Hamburg, Trento and Valencia; they can be downloaded free from the AppStore and GooglePlay or from the live links on the project homepage: www.hiddencities.eu, accessed 8 Jul. 2023.

¹⁷F. Nevola, D. Rosenthal and N. Terpstra (eds.), *Hidden Cities: Urban Space, Geolocated Apps and Public History in Early Modern Europe* (Abingdon and New York, 2022).

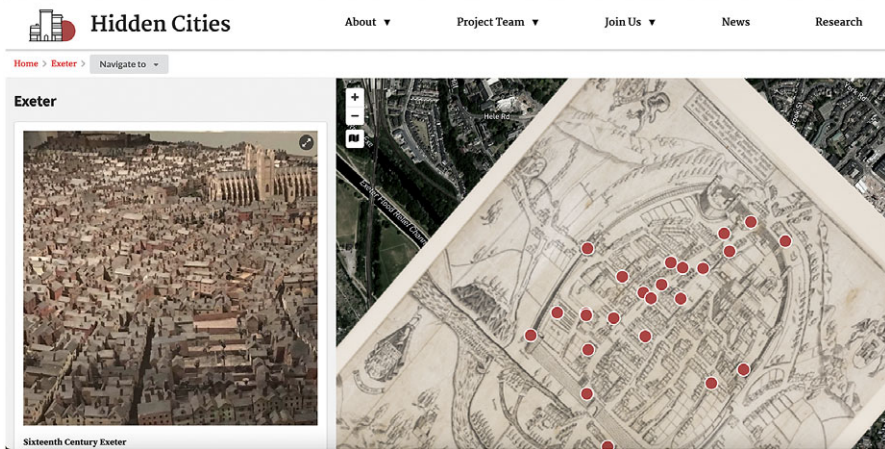


Figure 3. Screenshot of the 'Exeter' page of the Hidden Cities website (www.hiddencities.eu/exeter, accessed 19 Aug. 2022).

62 place records and 175 object entries. In designing the project website, we wished to foreground the location-based aspect of our interpretation, adopting a two-layer map design with georectified historic maps overlaid on a modern satellite image.¹⁸ The database of sites and objects is ordered as a geodataset, so that each item appears as a point on the map which opens to an image with a short article, and other records linked to the same city. However, once users start to interact with specific site/objects, so a new category sub-menu box opens up, offering 'Related Places from Other Cities', which selects site/objects from other cities in the database for comparison (Figure 4).

We created a simplified list of tags that allows us to attach around six categories to each entry with the objective of creating links across the dataset.¹⁹ While this remains an experimental approach, the ultimate aim was to identify the similar characteristics of public spaces and the material culture associated with these in a semi-automated way, across the data sample. So then, for example, the White Hart Inn in Exeter creates links to a tavern in Trento, a coffee house in Hamburg, and perhaps a little less straightforwardly, a friary in Deventer (on account of its socially permeable nature). Our tags combine more objective categories (e.g. architecture, marketplace, tavern) with more subjective ones that are informed by considerations of use and practice (e.g. ritual, punishment, communication), as well as sensory or intangible aspects (e.g. sound, informal, sociability). While, of course, we wanted to draw out the more obvious connections and similarities of use such as those around taverns, bakeries or

¹⁸The map-based visualization for the website was designed by Dave Heyman of www.axismaps.com; we note that a georectified map is modified and therefore transforms the original, although this is done in line with the public history objectives of providing an XR experience of the contemporary urban environment using a historic map. See also F. Nevola, 'Introduction', in Nevola, Rosenthal and Terpstra (eds.), *Hidden Cities*, 6–7.

¹⁹We drew up a tag list through trial and error with the help of our web designer, Tom Cadbury (Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter), and looking at comparable terminology assembled by the Collections Trust: <https://collectionstrust.org.uk/terminologies/>, accessed 10 Aug. 2022.

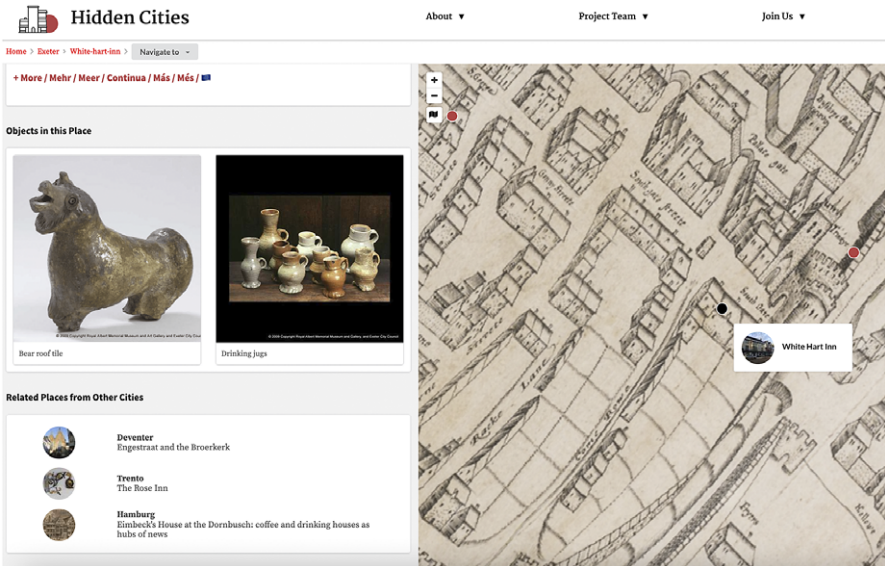


Figure 4. Screenshot of the 'Exeter' page of the Hidden Cities website showing the 'Related Places from Other Cities' viewer (www.hiddencities.eu/exeter, accessed 19 Aug. 2022).

sites used for town criers, so too we hoped to identify or reveal the diversity of sites, for example where news might be exchanged, or justice meted out. This aligns with our aim of broadening understandings of what constitutes the material culture of public space, and indeed better defining the ways in which spaces are, or are used in ways that are, public.

Such experimental digital humanities approaches are not to the fore in this special issue, although the themes of the articles that follow do complicate and provide a more varied understanding of our subject of enquiry.²⁰ In so doing, we have extended the scope and understanding of the material culture of public space beyond streets, paving and street signs. In terms of the formal spaces themselves, urban public spaces encompass a range of ordered and less formal areas – streets and squares, but also open land inside or close to the city walls used for a range of activities from fairs to capital punishment, quaysides or waterfronts, and areas adjacent to infrastructure such as city gates. Beyond this, we have also considered spaces that are enclosed, but provide functions that are in many ways public – for example taverns, but also the spaces and areas around bakeries or places such as printers and bookshops, where news and gossip was exchanged. Each of these areas expand the definition of public space and the material culture associated with it – so that we might consider public amenities (e.g. places to sit, or outdoor areas that provide shade or shelter from the elements), written or printed materials intended for sharing in the public realm (e.g. graffiti, broadsides and printed sheets for fly-posting), as well as permanent features (e.g. shop signs, or coats of arms). Other objects only constitute part of the

²⁰ A more detailed discussion is forthcoming in our project book, F. Nevola, D. Bellingradt, S. Corbellini, J. Gomis and M. Rospocher, *Public Renaissance: Urban Cultures of Public Space in Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam, 2024).

material culture of public space when they are properly inscribed with meaning derived from their context and use (e.g. a tankard from a tavern or a book that moved about the city, away from the library where it was usually housed). As an indicative sample, each of the items chosen for the project database is representative in one way or another with this expanded canon of material culture and its relation to the urban public realm.

The range of objects and sites, drawn selectively from across the European area, serves to underline aspects of how public space and the objects that gravitate around it constitute a common language. We suggest that this can be understood and interpreted much in the same way as the experience of walking into a church is informed not only by ecclesiastical architecture, but by a range of objects and practices assembled there. While there are certainly regional variations, common themes run through how we understand these spaces, and how they were constituted and occupied in the early modern period.

The production of space in the early modern city

The contributions that make up this special issue approach our topic in a variety of ways. All the articles structure their main argument through a detailed discussion of an overarching theme – soundscapes, devotional practices, popular contestation and so on – in relation to specific sites in the city. In all cases, it is possible to identify the Lefebvrian triad (people–objects–places) in the production of meaning in public space. Each article deals with evidence from different cities, spread across the region, and we have set out to focus on centres that are less commonly discussed outside local or regional studies. Finally, the articles range across a broadly drawn early modern period, from the later fourteenth into the seventeenth centuries. In part, this geographical and chronological variety is in the nature of special issues of this sort, although it is also reasonable to suggest that the examples that are presented are not strictly confined by time and place, and might provoke readers to reconsider other evidence through the frameworks outlined here. For the sake of argument, the brief overview that follows orders the articles – as they are in this special issue – chronologically, although some connections across the contributions will be made.²¹

Sabrina Corbellini and Margriet Hoogvliet's contribution gets straight into the problem of how we define public space through a discussion of what they term 'indoor public spaces' in relation to the sharing of religious knowledge in the cities of Amiens and Deventer. In the latter, private homes were regularly used as meeting spaces for the Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life (the Modern Devotion), to which all were welcome; these spaces functioned very much as public, in line with the ideals expressed by these reformist religious groups. Contrary to our common assumptions about taverns, they go on to show how both in northern France and the Low Countries these were popular venues for religious gatherings of varying degrees of formality, such that a number of inventories record religious paraphernalia that was used on regular occasions in rooms which were set aside for this use, yet open to all participants. Such observations extend and complicate our understanding of taverns and inns as semi-public venues, places that while privately owned were open to all-comers. Meeting

²¹No footnotes are provided in the discussion of the articles as they each include ample bibliography and theoretical framing.

places of this sort were necessary for the communal sharing of religious rituals, including the shared experience of reading aloud from religious books, making volumes such as Books of Hours – usually perceived as being primarily used in private devotion – function in a public context.

Massimo Rospocher and Enrico Valseriati instead turn to perhaps the most public of all urban spaces, central squares associated with politics and the articulation of authority, to consider how their messages might be transformed at moments of political crisis or through informal acts of contestation. Their contribution, which presents material from northern Italy from the later fifteenth and through the sixteenth centuries, describes how ‘public art’ (inscriptions, sculptures, columns, etc.) located authority, but was also a powerful vehicle for the communication of regime change when these sites and objects were subject to often violent transformations. They turn then to the role of public writing as a form of contestation of authority through a series of richly evocative examples in which sites of information transfer – public loggias, the places of town criers and so on – were subverted by informal graffiti and flyposting by individuals and groups from across the social spectrum. In so doing, they reveal the processes of everyday participation in street politics through documented, yet largely ephemeral, material acts of contestation that took place within the public spaces of the city.

Kate Osborne considers another elusive aspect of the sensory and material urban context through a discussion of Exeter’s sixteenth-century soundscape. A growing scholarship on pre-modern acoustic environments has tended to focus on larger centres – London, Florence, Venice or Bruges – and it is interesting to see how such approaches translate into a smaller urban setting. Bells, of course, play a major part and here – similarly to the tensions that played out around the Carfax fountain discussed at the outset – it was the rivalry between ecclesiastical and civic time that most marked the historic record. In a compact city such as Exeter, industrial sounds, rural noises from the nearby countryside and the sanctioned cries of town criers all overlapped, such that it is difficult to define zones dominated by a particular sonic mark. Osborne reads not just the documentary record, but also the material evidence of bells, or the sites of musters or wool production to infer the sounds that they produced, and the spaces of the city where they might be heard.

The last two articles in the special issue share an underlying common theme of how crimes of different sorts marked the urban environment, leaving a trace not just in the written record but often also in texts displayed in public. Blanca Llanes Parra discusses evidence from the Iberian peninsula of the use of *carteles de desafío*, printed posters that were displayed in public space that described the motives – often in considerable detail – for which someone challenged a rival to a duel. Duels were prohibited from at least the fifteenth century, and examples discussed here that largely date to the seventeenth century from Madrid suggest that in many instances these performative displays did not result in actual duels, albeit that high homicide rates in the city were at least in part a result of them. Such elite practices also fuelled literary production that presented honour culture for wider consumption in cheap print accounts that flooded markets thanks to peddlers distributing pamphlets in the city’s streets. So, we see how the material culture of cheap print, both in the form of *cartels* and pamphlets, relied on public space to reach their intended audiences.

Print takes on a rather different function in the article by Peter Hansen, Jesper Jakobsen, Ulrik Langen and Rikke Simonsen that discusses the execution in Copenhagen of Gertrud Nielsdatter, her subsequent dissection by Nicolaus Steno and the

ultimate publication of her anatomized body in Thomas Bartholin's *Anatome Quartum Renovata* (Leiden, 1673). The authors recover the identity of Nielsdatter from the historical record and consider the spaces in the city through which the exercise of criminal justice transformed her body from that of a criminal, by way of the city scaffold, to a scientific subject in the anatomy theatre. Here, we move between external public spaces of the performance of justice, in line with Foucault's well-known analysis of the criminal body, through to semi-public professional spaces of scientific spectatorship, and beyond to circulation among specialist audiences on the printed page. Each step of this journey can be interpreted through buildings and material objects with clear urban spatial definition in the fabric of seventeenth-century Copenhagen.

Each of the five articles then, in differing ways, follows the material trace on the urban fabric of how individuals and groups operated within public space to resolve, challenge and renegotiate relationships of various sorts. Conflict or rivalry emerges in various articles as a primary driver – where public space is the chosen setting within which a particular grievance is made public – through displayed forms of writing of varying degrees of formality, or through institutional spectacles of punishment.²² While a number of the examples reveal how public spaces were adopted to contest the established order, it is equally true that these forms of contestation tended to adopt (and subvert) the ways such spaces were used by central authorities to encourage normative behaviour. So then, sites and rituals around capital punishment of the sort discussed for Copenhagen would have been recognizable to citizens of Exeter, Madrid or Verona, just as ephemeral forms of contestation of authority, through graffiti, flyposting or even cries of protest, were not limited to one or other centre, even though their traces rarely survive outside the written record.

A relatively strong cross-cutting theme in the special issue are the changing relationships between the spoken and written word as these operate in urban space.²³ So then, we find books shared in the enclosed public space of a tavern, where the written word is consumed by many, through collective reading practices; here, the written word becomes public through audience and location. In other instances, oral proclamations become encoded on the walls of the city through flyposted declarations, while a consideration of soundscapes seeks to capture the ephemerality of town cries through identification of sites where these were uttered. On other occasions, forms of written contestation adopted sites of government authority to amplify their visibility, much as the duel notices were performatively displayed for similar reasons. Rather than suggesting a hierarchy between written and oral communication, these examples all document the fluid relationship between them, while indicating an underlying constant that public space was chosen in all instances to maximize audiences. In this sense, quite simply, public spaces created opportunities for a wider public to access what was being shared.

While this special issue does not provide an exhaustive or complete account of the nature of the material culture of public space, it significantly extends the way that such an approach can be productively deployed.²⁴ By considering the material culture

²²The influential formulations of 'public writing' and 'visible speech acts' suggested by Armando Petrucci are implied here. See A. Petrucci, *Public Lettering: Script, Power, and Culture*, trans. L. Lappin (Chicago, 1993).

²³See for example S. Dall'Aglio, B. Richardson and M. Rospoche (eds.), *Voices and Texts in Early Modern Italian Society* (New York, 2019).

²⁴For a more systematic discussion of this approach, see Nevola *et al.*, *Public Renaissance*.

associated with urban public spaces we can nuance and add detail to the language of architectural form that has tended to be the primary focus of discussions about streets, squares and marketplaces, to identify the richness and variety of social practices associated with these in the early modern period.

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