

Veiled Cities (Oxford, 26–27 Sep 24)

Maison Francaise d'Oxford, Oxford, UK, Sep 26–27, 2024

Deadline: Apr 19, 2024

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Veiled Cities - Haunted Urban Realities in Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth Century Art, Architecture and Material Culture.

A two-day international conference at the Maison Française d’Oxford, 26–27 September 2024.

Organisers: Prof. Juliet Simpson (Coventry University); Prof. David Hopkin (University of Oxford).

This call for papers is addressed to art, visual and material cultural historians of urban spaces between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (in Belgium, France and internationally) – as well as of the art, literature, music that solemnized the city. However, our focus is not on cities of light and movement, but enclosed, secret and haunted cities. The previous workshop in this series concentrated on Flemish cities: in this workshop we aim to discover other urban worlds that align with that Flemish experience, outlined below.

The city has an autonomous existence, its own character, not subsumed into other identities of nation and class. This character is expressed through its own traditions, its legends, its folklore... and their imaginaries in architecture, print and image-making. And what is true of the city is also true of its parishes, neighbourhoods and quarters.

All that is solid does not melt into air: the city is material, tangible, and the past is made immanent in its stones, in its relics.

All that is solid is not actually solid. Traceries of stone, and lace conceal as much as they reveal. The city is layered and contains many portals to other worlds. It is a place of ghostly and miraculous encounters.

Anonymity is not anomie. Lives are hidden, in rooms and courtyards, glimpsed fleetingly through doorways and windows, but they are not empty.

The city is not disenchanted. Its traditions, its stories, its art and crafts matter to its inhabitants. Nor is the city legible: it is a patchwork of secrets, mysteries, and possibilities.

The ‘dead city’ is not dead, but its life is contained in multiple interiors and enclosed spaces such as gardens, chapels and beguinages. There is an aesthetics of reclusion. Every room is a potential refuge, curtained and muffled against the outside world. Each interior creates the possibility of personal space, of an inward reality, and so becomes a porous space of self, gender and artistic re-invention.

These statements are not a rejection of nineteenth-century sociology and its concern for the new society being created in the metropolises of the industrial era. Nor is it a rejection of more recent historians and critics who have celebrated the light, movement and diversity of the modern city. However, perhaps attention to the ‘capitals of the nineteenth century’ may miss what was going in

other cities. Revolutionary Belgium, and Flanders in particular, had also experienced the shock of modernity – the contraction of space, ephemerality, the compression of temporalities. Their cities too were connected, touristed, transformed by the power of capital and technology. Indeed the veiled city, with its lost quarters and secret lives, may have been born from these radical dislocations.

Although the cities of the Low Countries richly illustrate our themes we do not claim they were unique. Our key ambition is to discover and illuminate how we rethink and reimagine other potent 'Veiled Cities' as sites of haunted realities and as potent spaces of hidden histories, communities and world-making. Thus, we seek in this conference to question and re-conceive a different imaginary and geography of the nineteenth-century urban space. 'Veiled Cities' open portals to other 'realities' and their spaces, artistic, social and affective that do not conform to constructs of a linear, progressive urban 'modernity', or of its narratives of alienation.

We invite papers which develop our core concern with 'Veiled Cities' and their 'haunted' urban realities:

Suggested topics (but not limited to):

- Sites of the urban uncanny
- Cartographies of other Veiled Cities
- Hidden heritages – of art, craft, religion, social community
- Secret communities/lives – including female artistic and religious communities
- Urban pilgrims
- Devotions, objects, processional cities
- Idolatries
- Occult materialities
- Fabled Veiled Cities - urban spaces through the lens of legends, marvels and folk tales
- Enchanted interiors
- Openings, traces, marks, symbols – the layered, secret urban-scape
- Sacred geographies
- Craft utopias

Please send a 300-word abstract plus short bio (150 words max) to the organizers: juliet.simpson@coventry.ac.uk and david.hopkin@history.ox.ac.uk, by Friday 19 April 2024.

The intention is to develop a publication developed from the collaborative outcomes of the 'Veiled Cities' project. Further details will be announced at the conference.

Reference:

CFP: Veiled Cities (Oxford, 26-27 Sep 24). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 5, 2024 (accessed Feb 12, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/41374>.