Entering the City (Brussels, 15-16 Oct 15)

Brussels, Oct 15–16, 2015
Deadline: Mar 15, 2015

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Organized in Brussels on 15 and 16 October 2015, the international conference, Entering the City: Spaces, Transports, Perceptions, and Representations from the 18th Century to the Present, is an initiative of the MICM-arc research project (micmarc.ulb.ac.be) based at the Université libre de Bruxelles.

The conference will provide a forum for exploring the ways and means of entry into the urban space and the resulting impressions and representations of that experience, one closely related to the themes of mobility, culture and metropolitan identity at the heart of the MICM-arc research project.

Enclosed by fortified walls, ancient and medieval cities were delineated by clear boundaries. Access via land routes was clearly marked by city gates. Historians have extensively studied the controlling function of such thresholds as well as their symbolic dimensions. The growth and industrialization of urban centers changed the way in which they were approached from the exterior. In the 19th century, new modes of transportation and suburban sprawl rendered old city gates obsolete and radically changed the ways in which cities were accessed. Today, roundabouts and off-ramps seem to have replaced those gates, and the infrastructure that lines the routes connecting one town to another makes it difficult if not impossible to perceive their boundaries. Moreover, an increasing part (if not the majority) of entrances into urban space are no longer the result of a gradual progression along a traditional route, but often pass through the intermediate zones of train stations and airports that lead to urban zones without further transition. These changes affect travelers and the experience of travel. Beyond analyzing the entry-points to the city, it is also necessary to envisage the symbolic, subjective dimension of passing from one space to another, to study the perceptions and representations associated with entering the city.

The aim of the conference is to reflect upon the manners in which the city is entered, in terms of the evolution of peripheries, modes of

transport, the urban planning of the spaces involved and the experience of entering the city itself.

The organizers envisage a resolutely interdisciplinary exchange involving the participation of historians, geographers, architects and urban planners, sociologists, and art historians. Papers will permit comparisons between different historical periods and different urban centers, with special attention being given to the case of Brussels. The period in question extends from the 18th century to the present day and embraces a range of models from the pre-industrial town to the post-industrial metropolis.

The first focus of the conference is devoted to the spaces through which both occasional and regular travelers move to access the city, as well as the means of transport involved.

The slow and steady arrival with a defined point of entry defined by the transportation and origin of the journey of the 18th and early 19th centuries was supplanted and upended by new and varied manners of entering the city: more rapid, sometimes underground or through the air, centralized through train stations, relegated to the peripheral zones in the case of airports, or allowing travelers to avoid central zones in the case of ring roads.

Of particular interest in the present context are approaches that theorize the act of entering the city, the notion of city limits, questions of accessibility, the spatial forms of urban entrances, and particular means of transportation. More particular points of inquiry might include:

- Is it possible to create typology of city entrances (spaces, infrastructures, landscapes)? Can one speak of the homogenization of these paces via the existence of a particular sort of dominant architecture, or are should such entrances be understood as attempts by various municipalities to distinguish themselves from their neighbors?
- What sort of skyline has presented itself to the traveler at the city entrance at different points in history? Are there models of city planning specifically adapted to these functional and symbolic zones?
- How are the entrances to cities built, designed, and landscaped? What sort of infrastructure (hotels, museums, markets, businesses) and functions (economic, touristic, cultural, healthcare, etc.) are grouped around the urban transport infrastructure found at a city's points of entry? What forms do these infrastructures take? What aspects are rendered visible or invisible? What symbolism is implied by architectural choices? What considerations are made in conjunction with

spaces of mobility and consumer activities?
- What public and private forces model the entrances to cities? Take for example, the neighborhoods surrounding train stations dominated by hotels and hotel-related businesses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

A second area of focus of the conference will be devoted to perceptions of entering the urban space.

The spaces that mark arrival in the urban space and their appearance, be it infrastructure or landscape, affect the way in which the city is first perceived, shaping experience and memory. The arrival by boat in Venice cemented the city's reputation as a town built on water, just as architectures of iron and glass of the 19th century train stations defined the typology of the new modern metropolis. Choices of materials and architectural gestures continue to define present day ambitions embodied in the new train stations and airports of the present day. Before arriving at a destination, the conditions in which it is approached (speed, view, sounds, smells) offers a unique impression of the city. As a result a particular panorama or a neighborhood can be disproportionately influential upon first impressions without necessarily being representative of the larger urban area which remains to be discovered. The starting point of the journey, be it a small or large town, a foreign country, perhaps a suburb, and the frequency of the route traveled (for work or tourism, as an immigrant or asylum seeker), both have an impact upon the perception of one's first encounter with a city. In moving from one city to another, the traveler leaves one point of reference and encounters new environments and experiences through mobility that affects the vision of each city that is visited. Questions evoked by the perception of the arrival in a city might include:

- What marks the entrance into a city and how is it perceivable or staged through physical boundaries, signs, and monuments? What might the absence of evident dramatization reveal? How has the appearance of city entrances evolved with the evolution of the city itself?
- How does the time passed in entering a city and eventual stops along the way allow for perception of its age, architecture, social structures, topography, in a word, its identity?
- How do means of transportation affect the perception of one's entrance into a city?
- How does one know one has arrived? What factors upon leaving a train, plane, parking lot constitute thresholds or symbols of arrival?
- How are our perceptions of arrival in a city influenced by the place from which we come or the frequency with which we make the journey? What

characterizes the experience of a tourist compared to that of a commuter or regular resident?

The third area of focus deals with representations of arrival in the urban space.

A mix of experience, previous knowledge (through travel guides or the description of others), personal sensations all contribute to the representation of arrivals in the urban space, which in turn can be studied from a historic, artistic or symbolic point of view.
The arrival in a city often provides the starting point for fictional plots or the articulation of their form and is a literary topos in and of itself from the Bildungsroman to contemporary novels. The act of entering the urban space often represents the hopes of the traveler and is associated with the expectations they have for a city in which they will grow and develop as they perceive it for the first time. The expectations created by travel guides and the accounts of other travelers are complemented by representations in art and literature and are juxtaposed with new perceptions as the traveler enters the city. Capturing and transforming memories, filtering and accumulating perceptions, diverse forms of literature and art frequently deal with the entrance into the city.

Questions related to this inquiry involving representation of urban spaces in both their anticipation and the actual experience of entering a city include:

- How do travel guides of the past and present describe the entry points of the city?
- How do new modes of communication lead travelers to forge an impression of a destination before they arrive?
- What forms has the entrance into the urban space taken in literature? How have these forms developed over the past three centuries? Is there a recurring dramaturgy that unifies their treatment?
- How have sites of modernity linked to movement inspired avant-gardes? Do they remain a pertinent field of artistic exploration?
- Are there current creative projects linked to the notion of entering a city?
- It is not unusual for municipalities to situate artworks that influence traveler’s perceptions at the entry points of their territory and other zones of mobility. Is this a contemporary trend or the conjugation of a historical practice?

The questions proposed here in connection to the three zones of inquiry are far from exhaustive and represent a few suggested starting points

for further reflection.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

The received propositions will be selected according to their pertinence, originality and capacity to encourage exchange through complementary reflection.

Please send your title and proposed abstract, in English or French (a maximum of 2500 characters) before 15 March 2015 to micmarc[at]ulb.ac.be.
Final selection will be made at the end of March 2015 and the results will be communicated in early April.
You may also direct questions regarding this call to micmarc[at]ulb.ac.be.

Reference:
CFP: Entering the City (Brussels, 15-16 Oct 15). In: ArtHist.net, Feb 13, 2015 (accessed Nov 16, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/9480>.