The fortieth meeting of the Urban History Group was held in Rutland Hall at the University of Nottingham on 27–28 March 2008. With over seventy delegates attending, the conference featured two days of seminars, discussion and socialising, all focussed on the subject of ‘Urban Boundaries and Margins’.

**Day One**

**Session One: Plenary Session (Gary Davies)**
After registration and the collection of the obligatory conference pack, those who had booked lunch went off to enjoy the various culinary delights on offer. At two o’clock, following a brief welcome speech by the conference organiser David Green, the first plenary session commenced with a screening of Stephen Frears’s documentary *St. Ann’s* (1969). The Q&A afterwards was chaired by Bill Silburn, one of the two original researchers. I found the documentary both moving and thought provoking.

**Session 2.2: Urban Illegalities (Matt Neale)**
Of particular importance in all three papers given in this session was the role of illegality in defining and shaping urban spaces. Margaret Dorey spoke about the idea of ‘hawkers as the corruptive other’, and of how its employment in gendered and age-related terms had impacts on interactions within the market and on the street. This role of illegality as the route to the ‘other’ was resonant in Catherine Casson’s paper, in which the anti-forgery strategies of six medieval towns were investigated. As well as using the pillory to condemn law-breakers publicly and often highly symbolically, towns used banishment as a punishment. With both these punishments, the recipient was (literally and/or symbolically) located as ‘outside’ the market. Finally, Michelle Abraham’s work complemented the two previous papers – which had both involved the idea of the marketplace as an important, perhaps delimited urban space – by considering and mapping the boundaries of something less concrete: non-lethal violence.

**Session 2.3: Contested Boundaries (Gary Davies)**
After a short break for tea, delegates had the choice of three New Researchers’ Forums: ‘Urban Illegalities’, ‘Beyond the City’, and ‘Contested Boundaries’. I chose the latter. The papers matched the theme and introduced different notions of a boundary: physical, cultural and psychological. Of the four papers given, I found Ruth Reichard’s and Cristina Purcar’s the most engaging. Ruth examined the role of the simple curb; I had always thought of curbs as a simple aspect of municipal infrastructure until this paper, but never again. Cristina’s paper looked at the concept of ‘the wrong side of the track’. Interestingly, although the paper examined the towns of the first Transylvanian Railway, my thoughts turned back to the screening. The St. Ann’s area being located at the end of a railway line into Nottingham, quite close to the city centre. (The line no longer exists.)
Session 3.3: Sensory Boundaries and Space (Malcolm Noble)
Continuing with the urban boundaries theme, the ‘Sensory Boundaries and Space’ workshop explored experience of the city in several ways: visually, olfactorily, acoustically. Ian West – one of the not-insubstantial Leicester contingent, albeit from the School of Archaeology rather than the CUH – gave the first paper on ‘The Impact of Artificial Lighting in the Early Nineteenth-Century Workplace’. From the twenty-first century, it is hard to imagine the world unlit, and Ian gave an excellent delineation of some of the issues surrounding the introduction of lighting to industrial workplaces and the ramifications this had for urban society and its built environment, as the patterns of work were revised with the demise of the sun as the regulator of hours. Andrew Brown-May explored noise complaints in nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first century Melbourne, and the issues for urban governance when noise pollution infringed various perceived boundaries. During my perambulation to the railway station I was much more aware of the role electric lighting and the general noise of the city had on Nottingham’s urban environment.

Following this session we all decamped to the wine reception. Unfortunately I could only stay for a short period due to a long-standing arrangement elsewhere. However, the short time I had was productive. The conversation turned to the screening. Curiously, rather than the social conditions portrayed in the documentary, the discussion centred on the filmic style utilised: an illustration perhaps of our concerns in this post-modern world.

Day Two
The second day of the conference involved an early start – especially so for those of us who had to take the 06.40 train from Leicester! Arriving at the end of breakfast, we heard accounts of what sounded like a brilliant, and apparently hilarious, speech by Eric Lampard. Reports of the ‘millionaire’s short bread’ were not so favourable.

Session 4.1: Discourses of sub(urbanity) (Gary Davies)
Of the Friday morning sessions, I attended ‘Discourses of sub(urbanity)’, held in the somewhat ‘chilly’ Library. Of the four papers I found Laura Balderstone’s use of oral history in her research into suburban social networks in and around Leicester and Loughborough and Maureen Flanagan’s examination of the gendered city the most engaging, although both Margo Huxley’s and Sarah Brown’s papers suggested a number of useful approaches that I might utilise in my own research.

Session 4.2: Politicising Space: Margins and Boundaries (Matt Neale)
Philip Baker’s paper made the point that historians have often used lists of pew rents and pew allocations as simple indicators of a parish’s social hierarchy. In reality, the ordering and ranking of pews within a church was a complex activity and, like the distribution of offices, was by no means always exactly correlated with individuals’ social or economic statuses. Similarly, Riitta Laitinen argued that the toll-border was merely one form of spatial delimitation: a form that was often circumvented, transcended, or simply ignored. In the final paper of the session, Michael Glass showed how land that was (in the non-Native American view) unmapped and unowned came to be taken, divided and imagined. Even when
boundaries were applied to what was almost a *tabula rasa* when compared to the spaces of the previous papers, they could be disputed in terms of identity and imagination, and literally, by legal means. The diverse papers of this session had a strong collective message, which highlighted the complexity of seemingly simple, rigid political boundaries.

**Session 4.3: Leisure Spaces (Malcolm Noble)**

Benjamin Heller’s paper was based on the analysis of the social geographies that he had read from three eighteenth-century diaries. He plotted the different social activities on contemporary maps, from which a clear picture of leisure spaces emerged. Jan Hein Furnée considered the social networks of associational culture in the nineteenth-century Hague. His methodology was particularly interesting, as he had used a computer programme to analyze the interconnections between the memberships of different associations, the outcome of which was graphically presented. Finally Bruno Bonomo, a graduate of the Centre, discussed perhaps the most fundamental of urban boundaries: between the domestic and private sphere, looking at the middle-class suburb of Casalpalocco, and the blurred division between these two spheres.

**Final Session**

We were again revived by coffee and tea, after which the final plenary session took place in the Library, where the mass of body heat ensured that it was at least slightly warmer than earlier. Claire Le Thomas’s paper on the construction of Montmartre’s cultural identity through art was of particular interest to art historians in attendance, but the strong emphasis on the representation of the urban space found in all of the session’s papers provoked questions from a wide range of viewpoints. The ‘Ways Forward’ session was dominated by a discussion of the merits or otherwise of forming an Urban History Association. Judging by the contributions, this will be an on-going and heated debate.

**Conclusion**

As graduate students, the experience of attending the conference was an overwhelmingly positive one. Making new acquaintances and finally being able to put names to faces was a very valuable experience, and all of us appreciated the chance to participate in discussion and to ask questions. We were all particularly keen to attend the New Researchers’ Forums, as we may be delivering conference papers ourselves in a few years’ time, and so the chance to see other students presenting their work was greatly appreciated. The more seasoned conference attendees remarked upon the increasingly international (and extra-European) make up of delegates, and this was certainly reflected in the papers on offer. We are all looking forward to the meeting at Warwick next year.

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