

the moment when the three virtues appear at an impossibly narrow space behind her desk (Figure 3). This scene strongly resembles depictions of the Annunciation in Books of Hours. Similar to Christine, the Virgin Mary is often depicted within a study/room reading from an open book, when she is startled by the angel, who delivers news of the immaculate conception and birth of a son. Here the three virtues announce to Christine her immaculate conception and foundation of an edifice: the birth of a city. The action continues to the right of the study in a green space, which she calls the "Field of Letters," which had to be first cleared from debris, the slandering of women found infamous men's books. The two figures from the previous adjacent scene appear again in the same space but at a future time: Reason carries a block of stone, a tray of mortar rests on the half-built wall, while Christine is holding a trowel caught in the act of laying the nascent foundation wall.

To enter the figurative space of the city we decoded the illusory depth depicted in the illuminations and fleshed it out into three dimensions, following a design process in reverse. The pre-linear perspective illusory pictorial representation was as accurate as possible translated into digital models that were 3D printed at the same scale.

(Figure 4). The miniature models propped up on rough blocks of wood representing the columns of text that the illuminations crown, become nuclei of the promise of a city that has not been built yet.

The decision to omit the figures of the women from the models brings to the foreground the evolution of the city and its tectonic qualities. Furthermore, the absence of the female bodies accentuates de Pizan's insistence that the stones and the buildings of the city are the renowned women themselves. The new models are of female bodies transformed into female buildings.

My study of de Pizan's text, which was written more than 600 years ago, provokes a stark realization: that, even today, her desire for a city conceived and built by and for women remains unfulfilled. Our cities have been almost entirely conceived and constructed by men, primarily, for men. The physical fabric that hosts, represents, and shapes the body politic is still largely devoid of the trace of female imagination and female touch. What will our cities look like 600 years from now, and how much will women be involved in shaping them both physically and allegorically? In search of guidelines and principles on how such a city might be conceived, I found more clues in de Pizan's text.

When they first appear to her, the three virtues bring her three gifts: a mirror, a ruler, and a vessel. In the text, de Pizan's describes these as measuring devices that the three virtues urge Christine to directly employ in the construction of the city. Through a process of poetic interpretative design and making, I engaged in a remaking, a translation of these objects into symbolic guiding principles for the design of a new city, while also foregrounding the overlapping metaphors of the body, the city, and the book.

TITLE

The Book of the City Ladies

AUTHOR(S)

[Christine de Pizan](#)

PUBLICATION TYPES

[Book](#)

PUBLISHED

1405

PUBLISHER

Christine de Pizan

LANGUAGES

[French](#)

TOPICS

[Shared space, Utopia](#)

LINKS



Collections and Annotations that reference this Citation

Annotation

Francisco Moura Veiga on [Le Livre de la Cité des Dames](#)

Annotation

Katia Frey on [Le livre de la cité des dames](#)

Annotation

Penelope Haralambidou on [City of Ladies](#)

Collection

[Reading Room](#)

Collection

[Fantastic refuge](#)Francisco Moura Veiga on [Le Livre de la Cité des Dames](#)

18 May, 2021

I came across this book whilst researching utopia and its built manifestations. While De Pizan's book is not an architectural text, it does speak of the process of building a city, from foun-

dations to detailing and populating. It proposes this new city in its materials, forms, and functions as a spatial manifestation of a message – a fictitious built manifesto. I found this striking as, without allocating any definitive meanings to forms or spaces, De Pizan proposes a clear connection between an intended message and the spaces that embody and materialise it. According to this proposal, the architect is placed in a position of utter responsibility for the correspondence between ideals and forms/spaces. I would like to add here a comment by Jill E. Wagner in 'Christine de Pizan's City of Ladies: A Monumental (Re)Construction of, by, and for Women of All Time':

...Reason's throwing is a reminder that the creation of an authentic woman's space requires force – the act of throwing. The architect cannot sit passively and hope for such a space to create itself.

Katia Frey on Le livre de la cité des dames

8 April, 2021

Christine de Pizan, a successful writer and one of the first women living from her profession, aims with this allegorical text, to rehabilitate the position of the woman in society and in theory. She narrates a utopian project of a female community performing the conception, planning, and building of the city. This city is carried on by exemplary women and personified virtues: reason setting the foundations, rectitude constructing the buildings, and justice erecting the city fortifications. As the author, Pizan reverses the traditional narrative of the founding of the city, which makes use of a typical assignment of roles based on gender and space. As the town planner and architect, she conceives of the city as a refuge and place of self-fulfilment for female identity, in anticipation of Virginia Woolf's plea for 'a room of one's own'.

Penelope Haralambidou on City of Ladies

11 December, 2020

My practice-led research, entitled *City of Ladies*, in collaboration with research assistant John Cruwys, was presented at Domobaal gallery in London in January 2020 (Figure 1). The specific version of the text that this project interprets is part of Harley 4431, a compilation that Pizan assembled for Queen Isabeau of Bavaria between 1410–1414 and one of the most important manuscripts held at the British Library since its foundation as part of the British Museum in 1753. The illumination embellishing the frontispiece of the compilation shows de Pizan offering the book to the queen, placing the image of

the volume in *mise en abyme*.

My research focuses on the under-explored description of the making of the allegorical city in the text, but perhaps most importantly on its depiction in the accompanying illuminations. 'Illumination' is a miniature illustration and derives from the Latin *illuminare* (to light up) referring to the glow created by the use of silver, gold, and bright mineral colors. Illuminations took the form of decorated letters and embellished borders but also framed figurative scenes illustrating the content of the text.

According to art historian and curator Christine Sciacca in *Building the Medieval World*, the creative ways in which architecture is represented in illuminated manuscripts 'offers a unique insight into what these buildings meant for men and women of the medieval era. Buildings were not simply structures to inhabit – they symbolised grandeur, power, even heaven on earth.' Illuminations often contain historically significant details of construction methods and drawing instruments and intricate architectural elements were used as decorative motifs framing important texts and charts.

In *The Book of the City of Ladies*, the illuminations appear on the first page of each chapter. They show the city in three stages of construction: the first one takes over two columns of the text, but the second and third crown just the left-hand side column of text. The exhibition *City of Ladies* comprises an installation and a digital film that spatially and materially reconstruct these three pages of the manuscript and feature a blossoming of the pictorial city from two dimensions into three. The work attempts to claim de Pizan's message for architecture and is in search of a way of projecting it into the far future.

Manuscripts were handwritten and illuminated on sheets of vellum, extremely durable writing and drawing surface made out of animal skin, which was also used for architectural drawing. In my work, I represent each of the chapter front pages with a whole skin of vellum, supported and framed by a specially designed table. Each table is also named after each of the three virtues, Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, which recount the women's stories and guide Christine's city building in each chapter. The three tables are arranged radially forming a circular pattern, supported by slender wooden legs (Figure 2). The vellum skins lay on the tables like tablecloths, but are also drawing surfaces that carry ideas, diagrams of the process of design, and markings for the positioning of other elements. Their pure white surface is decorated in gilding, using silver, gold, and white gold leaf, a medieval illuminating technique that I started experimenting with in an earlier piece entitled, 'Between the Retina and the Dome,' 2018, which studies the underlying structure of our perceptual system and how this casts and is cast on, architecture.

At closer inspection, the first illumination, double in width, presents not one but two consecutive scenes. On the left, we see Christine inside her study writing in an open book, at