

Extract from:
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'The Female Body Politic: Remodelling the Book of the City of Ladies'

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The specific version of the manuscript that I closely study is part of a compilation that de Pizan assembled for Queen Isabeau of Bavaria between 1410- 1414, which is held at the British Library.



The illuminations show the city in three stages of construction and appear on the first page of each chapter: the first one takes over two columns of the text, but the second and third crown just the left hand side column of text.



My work 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. It comprises of an installation and digital films that spatially and materially reconstruct the three pages of the manuscript, and present 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 hand written and illuminated on sheets of vellum, an extremely durable writing and drawing surface made out of animal skin, which was also used for architectural drawing. In my work, each of the three chapter pages expands into a whole skin of vellum, supported and framed by a specially designed table.

The table design adapts to the shape of the skin drawing forth its visceral origin: the body of an animal.



However, each table is also named after each of the three virtues, Reason, Rectitude, and Justice guiding Christine in each chapter. The three tables are arranged radially forming circular pattern, supported by slender wooden legs.



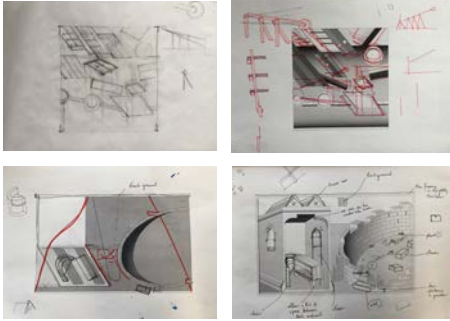
The vellum skins lay the tables like tablecloths, but are also drawing surfaces carrying diagrams of the process of design, key ideas driving the research and markings for the positioning of all the other elements.



Here is an example of work in progress during gilding for an earlier drawing on vellum.



The piece entitled *Between the Retina and the Dome*, was part of *Words and Works 2019*, Biennale of Artistic Research at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, November 2019.



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 pictorial representation was as accurately as possible translated into digital models that were 3D printed at the same scale.



The miniature models propped up in 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.



But where are the women? The decision to omit the figures 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.



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 sitting with an open book at her desk, at the moment when the three virtues appear at an impossibly narrow space behind it.

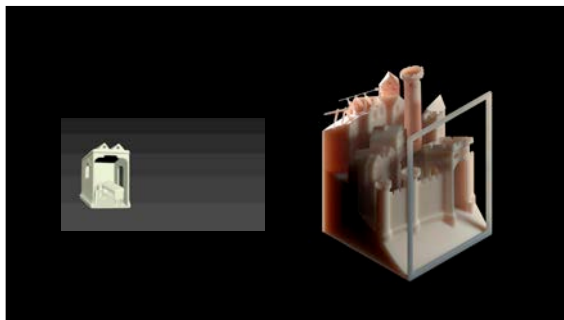


This scene, strongly resembles depictions of the Annunciation in Books of Hours. Like Christine, the Virgin Mary is often depicted within a study/room reading from an open book, when she is startled by the angel. The angel delivers news of the immaculate conception and birth of a son.



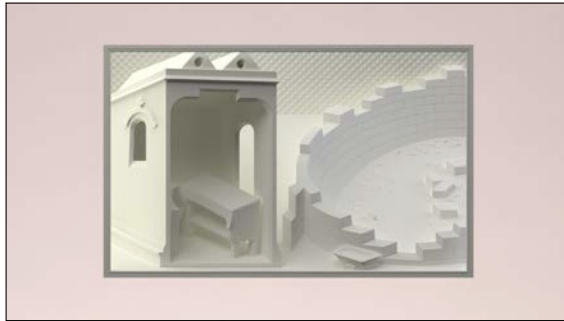
Here the three virtues announce to Christine her immaculate conception and foundation of an edifice: the birth of a city.

The action continues to the right of the study in a green space that she calls the 'Field of Letters', which had to be cleared from debris, the slander found in famous men's books. The two figures duplicate in overlaid chronotope: Reason carries a block of stone, a tray of mortar rests on the half built wall and Christine is holding a trowel caught in the act of laying the foundation wall.



The animation, attempts capture this magical transformation from de Pizan's/Christine's study and the process of research and writing a book into the conception of an allegorical city as defender of the female sex.

A room of one's own, framing the intellectual pursuit of a female mind transforms into a womb-like foundation that will nurture the growing foetus of a new city for women.



My study of de Pizan's text written than 600 years ago, creates a stark realisation: that, even today, her desire for a city built by and for women remains unfulfilled. Our cities have been almost entirely conceived and constructed by men, primarily, for men.

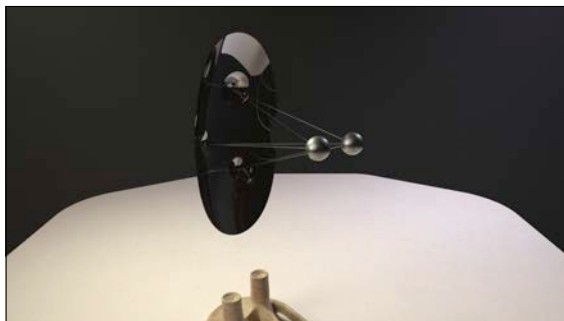
The physical fabric that hosts, represents and shapes the body politic is still largely devoid of the trace of female imagination and female touch.

What will our cities look like in 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 help the construction of the city. Though a process of poetic interpretative design and making, I engaged in a translation of these objects into symbolic guiding principles for the design of a new city, while also foregrounding her overlapping metaphors of the body, the city and the book.



Mirror

Reason holds a mirror as a device for measuring self-knowledge and self-worth and suggests that Christine will need this to plan the city. My translation is a new mirror portraying binocular vision as an alternative visual matrix embedded in the body, a female vision against the male sharpness of linear perspective, as an instrument to help plan the city. The proposed mirror made out of polished metal, as most mirrors were in medieval times, is held by a wooden base that references the visual perceptual system. Self-knowledge and recognition of the value of the female point of view, literally and metaphorically, becomes the basis of a conception of a new city. The mirror is equivalent of the face or the head and Reason's table becomes a 'dressing table'.



Ruler

Rectitude holds a ruler, a yardstick of truth what separates right from wrong, which Christine should use to design the interior of the city and to build its high temples, palaces and houses, its roads, squares and marketplaces. In the history of measurement, distance units were often based on human body parts, such as the cubit, the fathom and the foot with variations in length by era and location. However, one aspect is always constant: the measurements refer to the male body and even the word for the object for measuring, refers to a male 'ruler', the king. My interpretation of the ruler is a direct imprint of female hands, particularly my hands. The ruler fits like a glove. It points to a city that is made for female human bodies and their needs. Rectitude's table becomes a 'drawing table'.



Vessel

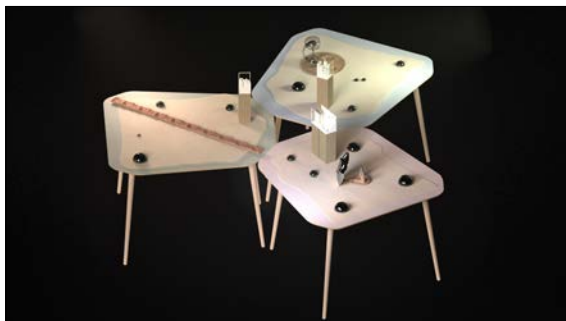
Finally, Justice offers Christine a fluid measuring vessel, calculating portions of fortune for each individual. It is used to adorn the city with gold and embellish high turrets and roofs of the completed buildings.

I see the vessel as a calculator of female values. My complex vessel, resembles a splitting cell and is a double hourglass measuring time and promoting long-term thinking as values usually absent from design. The vessel represents the main body, the abdomen, and its presence on Justice's table makes this a 'dining table'.



Moving between the physical and the digital my work exists in time and in matter. So far, it has been a solitary endeavour a space to think through de Pizan's work through drawing, design and making the objects, which I would also like to use as part of a performance.

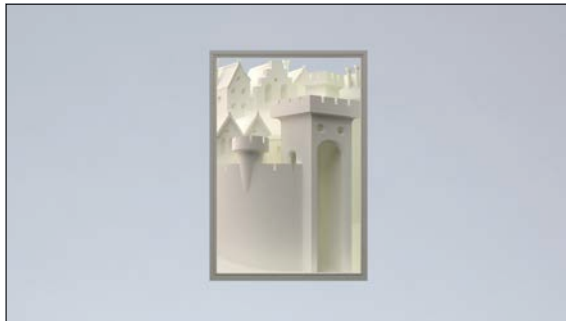
However, following the essence of the book as a collection of stories my aim is to open up this as a collective work.



Using it as a first reading, I would like to prepare, not a manifesto, but an invitation to a collective rethinking, a seed,



a call in the form of a competition for the design of female buildings for a future city that will take the form of an exhibition and an edited book towards a novel interpretation of the Book of the City of Ladies.



I would like to end with a provocation.

At a time when we are facing humanity survival challenges, perhaps as a direct result of the unfettered growth of our man-made cities, could de Pizan's book conceal a prescient allusion? That the solution might lie in the imagination of the other half of humanity, the half that has not yet been in a position to conceive and construct its own version of the city, or to put forward a better, more sustainable and visionary urban future that cater for the needs and desires of both sexes.