

Under the Arches: Urban life, art and contemporary archaeology

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Abstract

Bridges conventionally cross rivers, but in the nineteenth century the railway age saw the development of a new type of bridge: the urban railway viaduct. These often substantial structures were necessary engineering outcomes of the need to create a level 'permanent way', and brought about significant innovations in construction techniques as they became larger and crossed increasingly complex networks of buildings and streets. As they crossed these older urban landscapes they transformed them socially and culturally. Urban railway viaducts segregated travellers from slum dwellers, and disrupted visual settings; later becoming unique and spectacular fixtures in their own right. They also provided a new environment for business, leisure and unauthorised activities. They have also inspired a rich variety of cultural references, from Gustav Doré's 'Over London by Rail' (1872) to crime scenes in film and TV soap-operas. As with other elements of the urban landscape, these viaducts are not immune from 'gentrification'; many now serve as up-market micro-breweries or hipster coffee shops. Using an approach rooted in contemporary archaeology, this paper will explore the perception of the urban railway viaduct in popular culture and the contribution this type of bridge has made to the evolution of urban landscapes in modern Britain.