

The Electric Tram Networks of London and Turku, 1901–72: Exploring Public Transport as Public Space in European Cities through Narratives of Experience

Jason Finch (Åbo Akademi University)

Tauri Tuvikene (Tallinn University)

This paper introduces a four-country project funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) joint research programme ‘Public Spaces: Culture and Integration in Europe’. Public transport as a topic mainly attracts interest in fields such as engineering and remains of peripheral interest in the humanities. Yet it is one of the central public spaces for urban citizens today as well as in the past. In the project, ‘Public Transport as Public Space in European Cities: Narrating, Experiencing, Contesting’ (PUTSPACE), we aim to humanise transport research by studying diverse narratives, experiences and contestations of public transport, as they have unfolded in ways of imagining and expressing, governing and use, as well as citizen engagement in cities across Europe.

As well as introducing PUTSPACE overall, we present here one of the project’s four work packages, asking how the history of public transport influences the ways it is narrated and experienced today. Theorising place in the terms of Westphal (2011) and Finch (2016), we gain a stratigraphic view of public transport’s historical layers in this work package by investigating two diverse but comparable European cities, London and Turku. Each of these cities had an electric tram network which closed entirely in the third quarter of the twentieth century, London’s in 1952 and Turku’s in 1972. In both cities, the electric tram began as a symbol of modernity, then faced political and social struggles which culminated in closure as out-of-date technology. Subsequently, heritage discourses of the lost networks have co-existed with projects, partly realised in London after 2000, for new tram or light rail networks. The paper builds on early literary fiction (Morrison 1894) and non-fiction (Ford 1905) juxtaposed with much later recollections of the tram network in wartime and after in literary texts and work by enthusiast-historians (Moorcock 1988; Wills n.d.; Laaksonen 2009; Lappalainen 2015).