

## Shell City

by Matt Huynh

Matt Huynh is a Sydney-based comic creator and illustrator. Huynh's graphic novels pursue experimental formats and diverse genres. His inky, energetic brushwork has appeared on magazines and prints, to clothing, accessories, health resources, tattoos, film, performance projections, vinyl toys and dolls.

When he's not at the drawing table, he can be found conducting instructional workshops, public presentations, exhibitions and live art demonstrations.

### His inspiration for *Shell City*:

"For me, comics are the clearest means of engaging audiences. I use the medium to find surprising ways to connect with audiences, both on a purely visceral level and to challenge conceptions of personal and communal identity."

*Shell City* was commissioned by Adobe and created using Adobe® Illustrator® CS4 software.



I start with a pencil sketch, using ordinary HB pencils on cartridge paper.

Usually, working off a thumbnail would be fine, but here I worked on A3-size paper to capture all the intricate details.



I scan the sketch and place a low-resolution image of it into a new Adobe® Illustrator® software document.

Sometimes I might jiggle the elements about to get the composition right, but since I've worked out most of those problems during the sketch stage, I go straight to "inking" up the image.

I rely predominantly on the Blob Brush tool, because it's very compatible with the way I work with traditional media. It lets me lay down line work quickly and intuitively with my tablet, so that my inks have energy and spontaneity.

I've chosen to use Calligraphic brushes with maximum pressure sensitivity to allow lots of variation in my line weights.

I also push the fidelity and smoothness tolerances to a minimum so that it captures all the nuances of my hand's gestures.

I use the Blob Brush tool to draw freely without thinking about joins or shapes or any other kind of organization. It makes it easier for me to navigate around the many disjointed elements later. I just go back and neatly group or join up the lines.



I lay in the base: flat colors and shapes. For some areas, like the turtle, I use a very broad brush with the Blob Brush tool to quickly slap down the shapes. For the angular buildings, I use the Pen tool to create harsh edges and geometric shapes.

At this stage, I'm not aiming to find the right colors or achieve any kind of finish. I'm only concerned with establishing the composition. The weight of solid shapes may throw off the balance or make an image much heavier than you'd expect from looking at just sparse line work.

The spark above the center satellite antenna is a Zig Zag effect applied to a circle shape. It's very simple, but I like taking an aggressive comic book "ka-pow!" device and draining it of its fervent energy by using restrained, perfect geometry.

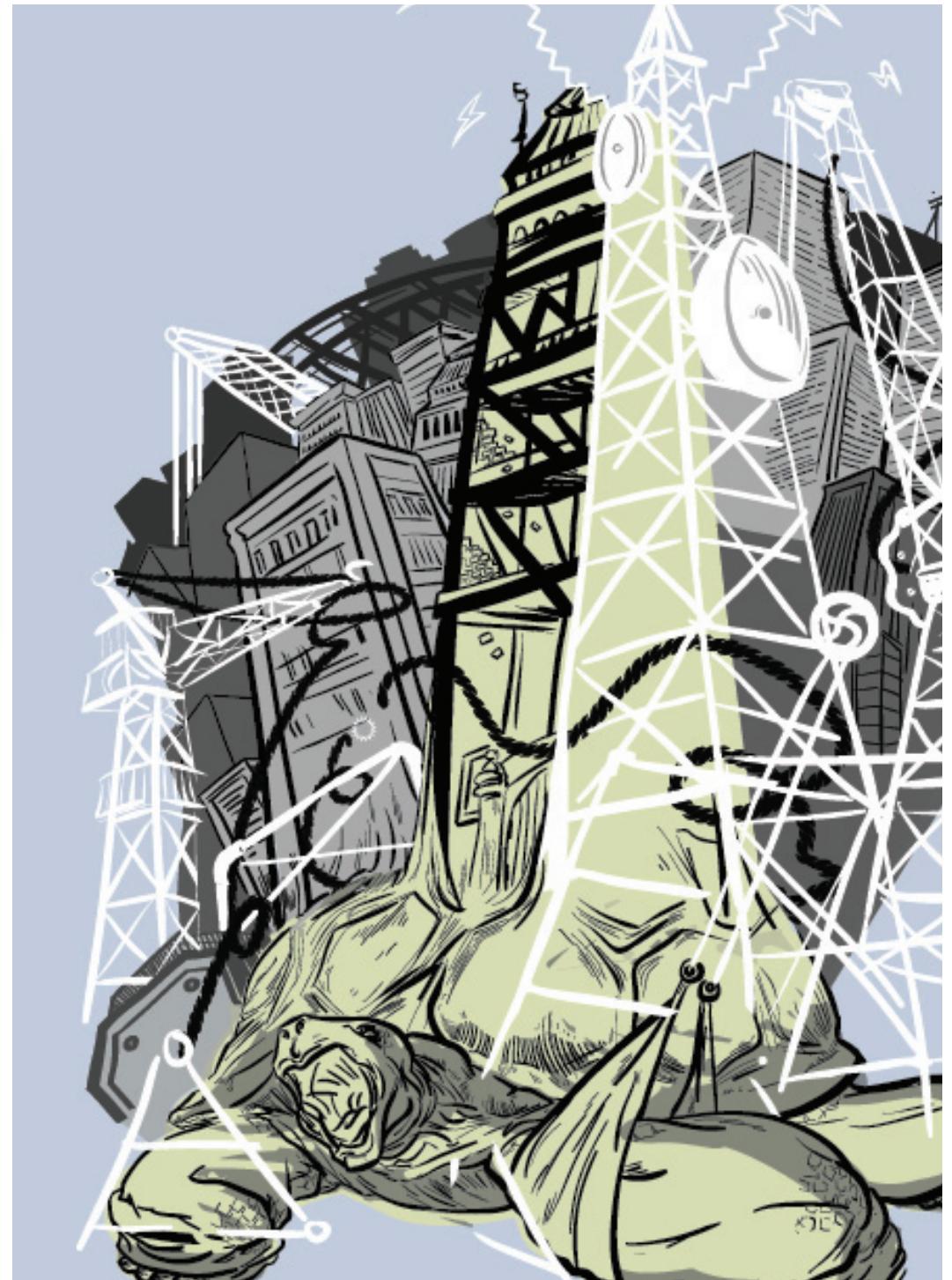
I drew a small section of a rope, perhaps three knots long, with the Blob Brush tool and turned it into a Pattern brush to achieve the pattern on the flailing ropes.



I throw in some shadows and flesh out the detailed line work in the background. It's starting to look busy, so I use contrasting colors to define adjacent elements.

I add some more details to the line work on the buildings.

The horizontal lines of the windows are simply blends. To achieve a greater variation amongst the lines, I use the Eraser tool to randomly erase sections from the lines and dab the lines with the Warp tool.



Having put in all the basic shapes, I notice the composition is tipsy, so I add the giant gear/wheel into the bottom right to balance out the elements.

Once all the shapes are in, I start playing with the color palette. I like to showcase the inherent characteristics of whatever medium or tools I'm using. I like inks that look like inks and would never try to make watercolors look like oils. So in creating digital work, I like to use the perfectly flat, solid colors and gradients that only computers can flawlessly achieve, rather than attempting to mimic traditional media.

I used Live Trace on some brush strokes and ink splatters, turned them white, played with their transparency and threw them over the peeking skyline to give the very clean illustration some attitude.



By slapping in the line work with the Blob Brush tool, I've achieved an energy and boldness that I'm happy with. However, much of the line work is also very rough: the joins are off and there are stray lines flying in uncontrolled directions.

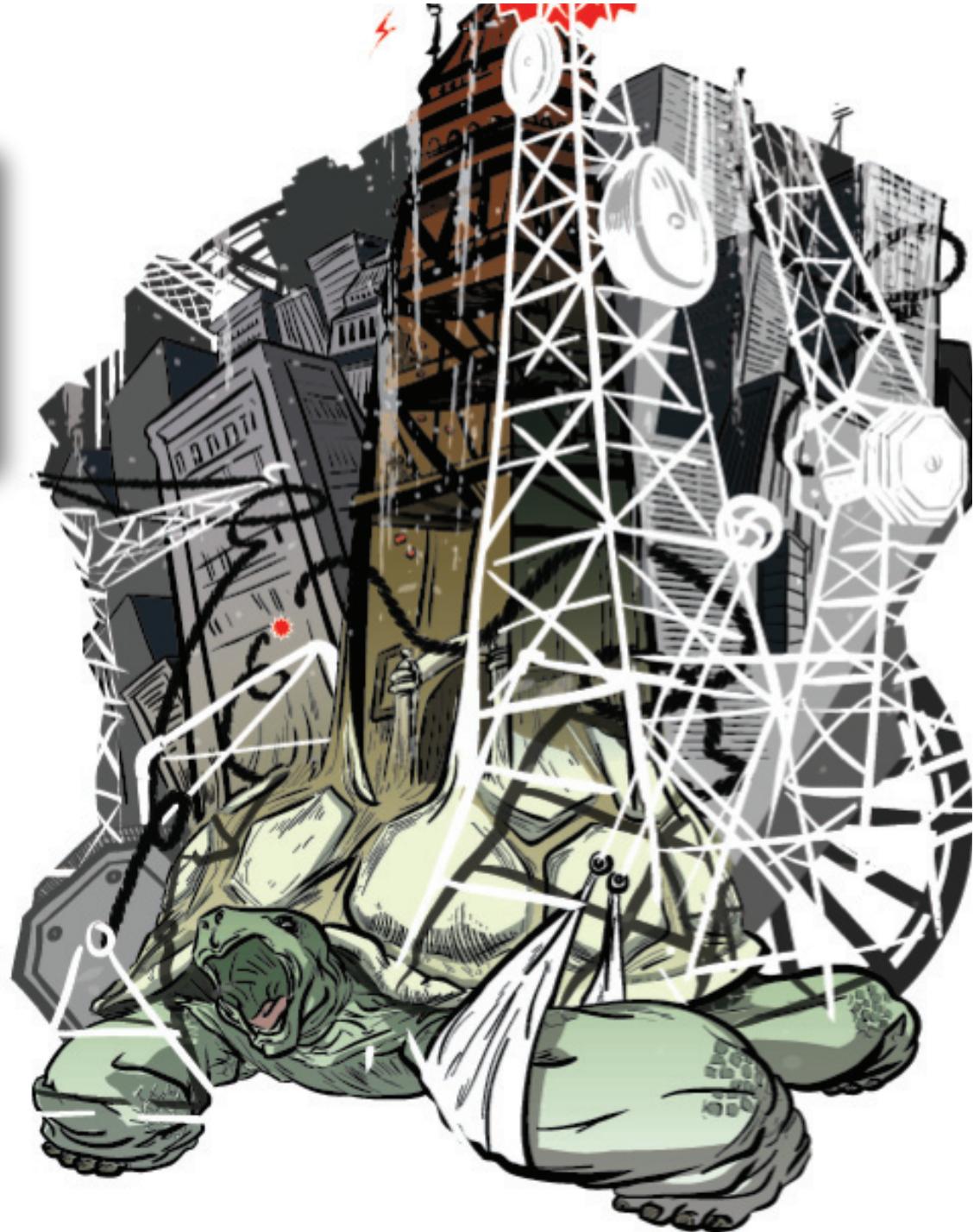
So I zoom in and clean up the line work with the Smooth tool and delete some of the excess anchor points where needed, such as on the imperfect satellite dishes.

I also use the Eraser tool to clean up some lines, especially the uneven edges around the image's tough, industrial elements.

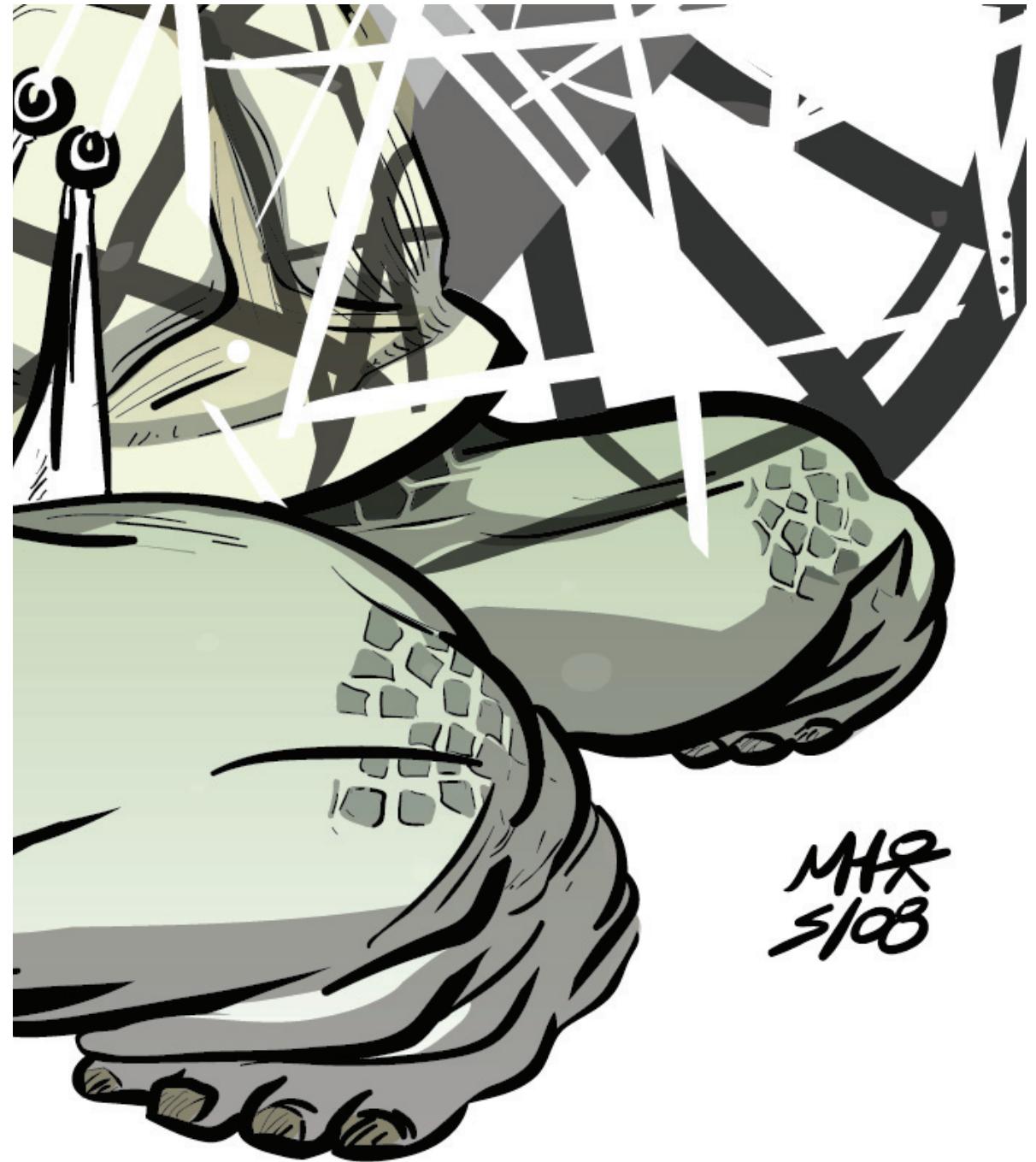


I return to coloring to clean up the piece and add in details like shadows, highlights and finer areas of color like the toenails.

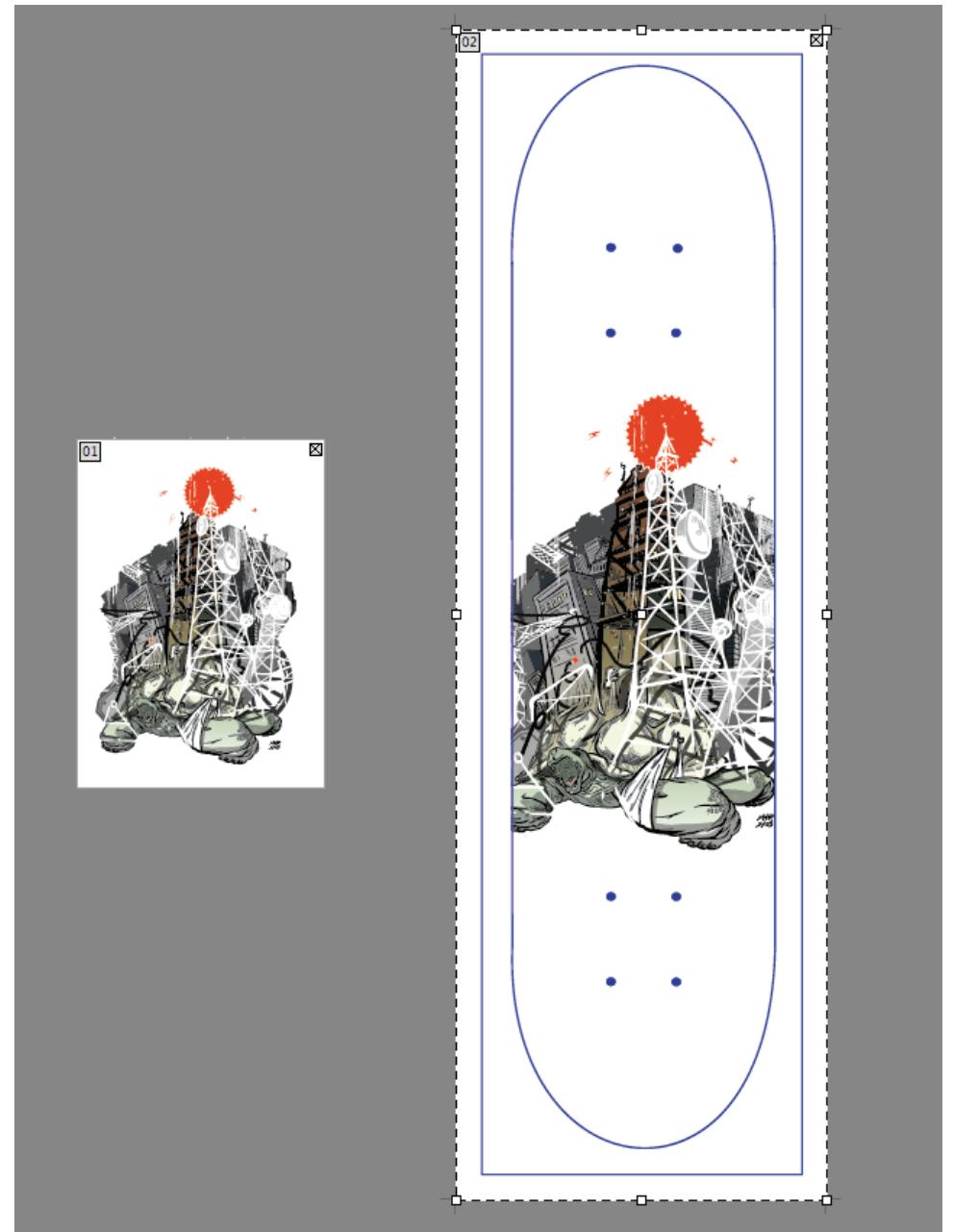
I add in shadows by applying a grayed-out version of the base color or a transparent black using the Multiply blending mode.



Finally, I use the Blob Brush tool for  
an authentic signature!



To see how my finished illustration looks on different types of output, I add a new artboard to my file and place my drawing on a skateboard template.



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