(IM)POSSIBLE SPACES

Italo Calvino in an age of Urban Crisis

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Architecture asks us to imagine that happiness might often have an unostentatious, unheroic character to it, that it might be found in a run of old floorboards or in a wash of morning light over a plaster wall — in undramatic, frangible scenes of beauty that move us because we are aware of the darker backdrop against which they are set.

— Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*

INTRODUCTION

In 1959, Italo Calvino came to America. The Italian writer spent six months in the United States, writing letters to friends and recording his impressions of the cities he encountered. He loved the throbbing pulse of New York and despised Los Angeles' amorphous sprawl. Chicago he deemed "productive, violent, tough," whereas Savannah, Georgia he exalted for its beauty and grace. All of these letters and writings later became the *American Diary*, a travelogue eventually incorporated into *Hermit in Paris*, a posthumous collection of autobiographical writings. In the American cities of the early 1960s — often spaces of bitter conflict — Calvino discovered flashes of beauty. In an age of Urban Crisis, characterized by sprawl, overpopulation, and a lack of variation between cities, Calvino was well aware of difficulties facing not only American cities, but also cities around the world. Yet, rather than accept a defeatist view of the metropolis' future, the Italian writer searched out possibility amid the ruins. But while, in *American Diary*, he limited his exploration to small moments, such as a fascination with the American TV dinner or an appreciation for driving along empty highways, Calvino soon expanded his pursuit of urban possibility.

In 1972, twelve years after his travels through America, Calvino published one of his most renowned works, *Le Città Invisibili*. An immediate success, William Weaver translated the book into English two years after its original Italian publication. *Invisible Cities*[1] enjoyed similar success in America: Joseph McElroy of *The New York Times* stated that the novel was "Like no other book in the world," (472) and Robert Taylor of *The Boston Globe* pronounced Calvino's ability to "to make gazeteering more than a device [or] philosophical issue" a "technical triumph" (27). Composed of fifty-five prose poems about cities both mythic and real, *Invisible Cities* centers on a dynamic and continuous conversation between Marco Polo, the Venetian explorer, and Kublai Khan, the emperor of Tartars. As such, it does not possess a clear plot. Instead, the narrative flows from city to city, interrupted only by interludes of conversation between Polo and the Khan. Although *Invisible Cities* takes place in the thirteenth century Mongolian Empire and references the historical Marco Polo's travelogue, its protagonists and the cities themselves transcend time and space. Indeed, Kublai Khan presents an atlas upon which the hyper-modern city co-exists with the ancient and mythical: "New York, crammed with towers of glass and steel on an oblong island between two rivers, with streets like deep canals, all of them straight, except Broadway" (*Invisible Cities*, 139). In short, Calvino's cities are both timeless and deeply embedded into his 1970's milieu.

While *Invisible Cities* is not plot-driven, it grounds itself in a recurring dilemma: the Khan's empire is destined for ruin. In a desperate effort to save his falling kingdom, Kublai sends the Venetian explorer throughout it in an effort to reclaim it. Polo refuses to do so. After the Khan asks, '"On the day when I know all the emblems…shall I be able to possess

[1] I will be working with the English translation of *Le Città Invisibili* for this project.

my empire at last?'" Polo responds, "'Sire I do not believe it. On that day you will be an emblem among emblems'" (IC, 23). Yet at the same time, the Venetian also refuses to accept the empire as simply a sea of ruins. Though he concedes that the Khan's "empire is sick," he charges himself with the "explorations…[of] the traces of happiness still to be glimpsed" within it. Polo reiterates this sentiment when he later notes that "if you want to know how much darkness there is around you, you must sharpen your eyes, peering at the faint lights in the distance" (59). This project will focus on the latter theme. At a time when it was becoming increasingly difficult to live in cities, Calvino was steeped in a culture that was obsessed with the prophetic 'ruin' of the modern metropolis. *Invisible Cities* undoubtedly engages with this apocalyptic mindset, yet its larger project is to look past the catastrophic predictions and instead unveil what makes cities livable.

Comment [TC1]: The referent of "latter" is not clear here. Is this sentence necessary?

In order to examine how *Invisible Cities* approaches the subject of 'lightness' within the dark modern metropolis, we must first look at the book's structure. Each city falls under a thematic group, of which there are eleven — from Cities & Desire to Thin Cities, from Cities & Eyes to Hidden Cities. Five cities fit into each theme. There are nine chapters in the book — chapters two through eight each contain five cities; chapters one and nine each contain ten — and each chapter is girded by an italicized conversation between Polo and the Khan. But within this precise, mathematical structure there remains ambiguity and disorder. For one, the Khan and Polo do not speak the same language and so the Venetian explorer must "express himself only with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder and horror, animal barkings or hootings" (IC, 21). As such, their conversations collapse into abstractions. Likewise, the cities themselves are often amorphous and defined by contradiction. The city of Leonia, for

example, is governed by paradox — "the more [it] expels goods, the more it accumulates them…" — and the very structure of Zemrude shifts in conjunction with the mood of its inhabitants (115). Spider web cities, suspended cities, cities on stilts, cities encompassed within a thin net — Polo visits them all. By thrusting his non-representational cities into a rigid numerical structure, Calvino opens a liminal space between the concrete and the abstract.

Invisible Cities also situates itself between fiction and reality. The book's title in and of itself makes clear that its concern extends beyond the 'real'. In fact, every city is named after a mythic woman, from Aglaura to Moriana to Pyrrha. Letizia Modena notes the importance of "inner cities" in Calvino's text: "Polo does not actually report on cities that he has actually visited but instead on *invisible cities*, or urban images in what Calvino called the 'inner city' — that is, on the screen of [Polo's] imagination" (2). Arguably one of the most famous lines of the book takes place in the dialogue between Polo and the Khan: "Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else" (IC, 44). These words are representative of the book's central theme: that the metropolis deals with the imaginary and the hidden; that cities aren't nor need be grounded in reality, but share in the 'secret' and 'absurd'.

Comment [TC2]: Parallel structure?

But while Calvino invokes utopian cities, unhappy cities, collapsing cities, this is merely a fictional device, nor is it unique to Calvino. In the 1960's, urban designers and theorists were seeing the city as unhealthy and broken. This was the age of the Urban Crisis. Ferocious sprawl overtook cities and rapid postwar urbanization led to ghettoized

Comment [TC3]: Dystopic?

Comment [TC4]: saw

neighborhoods. In response, a variety of architects and urban designers proposed enterprising solutions to the problem of urban decay. For one, a group of visionary French architects emerged under the movement *l'Urbanisme Spatiale*. The group, says Modena, "envisioned future cities that might counter the heaviness and chaotic asphyxiation of the building surface…[they] placed buildings, rooms, and thoroughfares aloft on highly elevated support structures" (143). On the other hand, *Superstudio* and *Archizoom Associati*, two Italian design firms, championed the "architecturra radicale" movement. To them, responding to the Urban Crisis required a radical, anti-capitalist mindset. With projects like 'No-Stop City', which envisioned the metropolis as an endless conveyor belt, the studios threw a polemical hat into the ring. Meanwhile, in Paris, a group of radical cartographers rooted in the larger International Situationist movement were tackling the city in a hands-on, experiential form. The situationist 'answer' was to find delight within the city in an emotional and interior format. Of course, a mere gesture toward the Urban Crisis and its discontents barely starts to unpack its complexities. Nonetheless, it serves to counter the popular impression of Calvino as a solipsist, always in his own head and pre-occupied by his own imagination. While older and less political by the time he wrote *Invisible Cities*, Calvino was still captivated by debates on the Urban Crisis and approaches to fixing the cancerous modern metropolis. His cities, much like the myths from which their names were taken, might be fictional, yet they nevertheless reflect the real concerns of his contemporary audience.

Comment [TC5]: Sources for info in paragraph?

Comment [TC6]: insert strong verb?

Perhaps inspired by the title *Hermit in Paris*, Calvino scholars have identified him as a recluse or, a 'writer's writer.' Alessia Ricciardi, for example, laments that "Calvino…[became] a solipsistic thinker removed from the exigencies of history" (1073). Of

course, Ricciardi is merely one voice in secondary literature that also focuses attention on Calvino's craft, lyricism, and boundless imagination. But the standard perspective of Calvino still falls short by glossing over Calvino's engagement with the world around him. From close friendships with city planners to his personal book collection, Calvino followed the debates surrounding the Urban Crisis closely. In a lecture at Columbia University in 1983, Calvino noted that "the idea of a city which the book conjures up is not outside time…the book touches on some of the questions that [urban planners] are faced with in their work; and this is no coincidence…the background from which the book springs is the same as theirs" (On *Invisible Cities*, 180).

Indeed, Calvino deemed *Invisible Cities* "a last love poem addressed to the city," even when "it [was] becoming increasingly difficult to live there" (180). While much ink has been spilt/spilled on on *Invisible Cities*' playfulness and metaphysical meditation on fantastical spaces, such analyses have overlooked the novel's concern for the modern city. In other words, *Invisible Cities* both asks and answers the question: what makes cities livable? Through two seemingly dystopian spatial tropes — the labyrinth and the megalopolis — Calvino constructs his own 'cities' to speak to "the unlivable cities we know" (180-1). Although Calvino was certainly aware of the "the crisis of the overgrown city," he also knew that writing another book that forewarned "catastrophes and apocalypses…would be superfluous" (181). Drawing on strategies from contemporaneous movements in urban planning and theory — namely that of the spatial urbanists, radical architecture, and the International Situationists — *Invisible Cities* "find[s] the hidden reasons which bring men to live in cities: reasons which remain valid over and above any crisis." Calvino suggests this

Comment [TC7]: Not actually a rephrasing of previous sentence, drop "In other words"?

pursuit may be "risky." In the last lines of the book, Marco Polo advises readers of the two paths to "escape suffering," the "inferno of the living" (IC, 165). One can either "accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it," or seek "who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, and then make them endure, give them space." For Calvino, it is via the latter path that the "lightness" of the city endures. This project will thus examine two "infernal" images — the megalopolis and the labyrinth — and seek to find the not-inferno within them. For while the Urban Crisis triggered polarizing discussions about ideal, utopian, unhappy, and infernal cities, Calvino posits that cities are nuanced spaces where livable and unlivable elements overlap and nest within one another.

By what means does Calvino recount such ideas? Firstly, he tells the story of cities through the trope of the megalopolis. Quite literally meaning 'large city,' the term was resurrected in the mid-twentieth century as urban planners were examining cities so overgrown that they started to link up to one another, thus constructing a giant metropolis. Famous megalopoli include the US eastern seaboard — from Boston to Washington, D.C. — and the European 'blue banana' cities, from Genoa, Italy to Leeds, United Kingdom. In 1957, Jean Gottmann wrote a renowned article on this very subject, titled *Megalopolis or the Urbanization of the Northeastern Seaboard.* Examining specifically the megalopolis of America's northeastern cities, Gottmann investigated how the megacity came to be, as well as its consequences. Among the latter, he listed practical problems such as traffic congestion, inadequate water supply, and slum formation (194-5). Yet Gottmann also foresaw psychological repercussions in the formation of megacities: "The city…was [once] a well-defined, densely settled territory, often surrounded by walls or palisades. Some time ago, it

Comment [TC8]: Correct?

Comment [TC9]: Non-? Or put "not-inferno" in quotation marks? Not sure, in any case, what you mean by this…

Comment [TC10]: England?

broke out of such rigid frames and developed outlying sections, *extra-muros*…[now] it extends out on a rapidly expanding scale, along highways and rural roads…" (196). According to Gottmann, such expansion brings "new psychological problems…[such as peoples'] difficulty adapting themselves to such a scattered way of life…[or officials who] often get lost when trying to classify according to the traditional categories of urban, rural, rural non-farm, farming, etc." (197).

Although Calvino was likely aware of these functional issues as byproducts of the megacity, the megalopolis' edgelessness and indistinctness were far more interesting to him. In his lecture at Columbia about *Invisible Cities*, Calvino specifically cited the megalopolis when speaking on the Urban Crisis: "The image of 'megalopolis' — the unending, undifferentiated city which is steadily covering the surface of the earth — dominates my book" (On '*Invisible Cities*', 180-1). Like Gottmann's vision of the '*extra-muros*,' Calvino emphasizes the nebulous, amorphous qualities of the megalopolis. Yet he is not so quick to deem it a crisis. While Polo visits megalopoli in the great empire of *Invisible Cities,* he undoubtedly finds places of ruin, "half-deserted regions, scrubby villages of huts, marshes where the rice refused to sprout, emaciated peoples, dried rivers, reeds" (IC, 73). Even so, although the trope of megalopolis tells tales of a "gaudy and unlivable present, where all forms of human society have reached an extreme of their cycle," hidden inside of that are "the invisible reasons which make cities live, through which perhaps, once dead, will live again" (135-6). Polo's tales do not attempt to mask the danger of the megalopolis, but rather hope to uncover inside the weight of megalopolis a sense of lightness; of possibility.

Comment [TC11]: All 3 citations necessary?

The megalopolis was at the forefront of urban designers' minds in Calvino's day/time. The sprawling and indistinct megacity had become a reality — a city dweller could look outside his window, see the traffic congestion and note that it was a marker of an increasing urbanization. Not so with the labyrinth, Calvino's second spatial trope. From the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur to Jorge Luis Borges' short stories, this impossible space finds room on the page and seldom in the 'real world.' As the myth goes, the labyrinth's original purpose was to house the vicious Minotaur. Enemies of King Minos were thrown into the serpentine maze so disorienting that they would be unable to leave alive. Inevitably, the labyrinth as we now know it, has become likened to a trap, a space of chaos and thus turmoil: a dystopian, even infernal, space. Given Polo's final words about the inferno in *Invisible Cities*, it is no surprise that Calvino takes up the labyrinth as a subject for his book. Yet more than an infernal, fictional space, the labyrinth served as a compelling structure for architects and designers in the age of Urban Crisis. The visionary architects in the International Situationist movement were particularly enamored with this mythic 'trap,' and found productive comparisons between the 20th century city and the labyrinth. Opposing mainstream cartography — deemed overly rationalized and sterile — the situationists saw the city as an imaginative space, conducive to wandering, or as they called it, the *dérive*. Instead of following common street maps, the situationists developed their own *psychogéographie*, a "form of cognitive urban mapping whose subversive power came from overturning notions of objective-scientific rigor in favor of a creative and subjective mental cartography" (Mitchell, 119).

Although Calvino never explicitly mentions the International Situationists in his essays or letters, he was certainly engaged with contemporary urban design, in which the situationists figured heavily. Gianni Celati, Calvino's close personal friend and colleague, later wrote of his and Calvino's shared library, which included urban theorists from Lewis Mumford to Françoise Choay (Modena, 61). In addition to his fascination with Joseph Fourier, the 19th century utopian, as well as his participation in French intellectual circles of the mid-60's and early 1970's, it is likely that Calvino was acquainted with situationist theory. Furthermore, Calvino demonstrated interest in the figure of the labyrinth. Remarking on Calvino's 1962 essay, *La sfida al labirinto* ("The Challenge to the Labyrinth"), Beno Weiss notes that Calvino perceived the labyrinth as "the archetype of the world's literary images due to the multiple and complex representations...that contemporary society offers the world" (71). The term 'labyrinth' is merely mentioned once in *Invisible Cities.* In the city of Ersilia, the inhabitants "stretch strings from the corners of their houses," which eventually form a "labyrinth of taut strings and poles that rise in the plain" (76). Nevertheless, the labyrinth remains a dominant trope throughout the novel. Kublai sees Polo's descriptions as particularly labyrinthine, remarking that "you could wander through them in thought, become lost, stop and enjoy the cool air, or run off" (IC, 38). Polo also encounters the cities on foot and, like one of Minos' enemies who will soon encounter the Minotaur, is left to wander through the disorienting spaces of spiral cities, zig-zag cities, and geometric cities. Yet, the labyrinth of *Invisible Cities* doesn't delineate calamity. Instead, this disorienting space forces Polo — and hence the reader — to encounter the city tangibly. The labyrinthine city is a place to be not possessed but rather experienced. Like the megalopolis,

the labyrinth seemingly projects a catastrophic narrative. Nevertheless, Calvino urges us to discover lightness in its depths.

With the spatial tropes of megalopolis and labyrinth, Calvino shows potential happiness within impossible, infernal spaces, thus blurring the disparate reactions to the Urban Crisis. In the mid-sixties to the early seventies, the attendant panic provoked distinct and sometimes opposing responses from the world's creative thinkers. The spatial urbanists re-illuminated utopian ideals set forth by Thomas More, advocating for lightness amidst the weight of "the shortcomings of the modernist paradigm in architecture…sprawl, heaviness, and immobility" (Modena, 133). The "*architecturra radicale*" movement, on the other hand, "preferred counterutopia to utopia as their instrument of social critique and crisis response" (Modena, 67). Condemning everything from capitalism's overindulgences to the modern city, or "the final haven of Man" (Superstudio, "Twelve Cautionary Tales for Christmas"), radical architecture assumed an ironic, almost caustic attitude toward the future of the city. The International Situationists, who were just as radical, also advocated against the capitalism and found utopian ideals in the individualistic experience of the city instead. These responses were widely known in public discourse, and yet, as *Invisible Cities* and other pieces of Calvino's writing suggest, Calvino wasn't satisfied with either 'answer' to the dilemma of the modern metropolis. He too traveled the world and saw crisis in most of the cities he visited. But for Calvino, the 'answer' was not about utopia *or* dystopia; paradiso *or* inferno. Instead, it was about finding traces of possibility amidst the ruin. The opening words to *Invisible Cities* reveal this Calvinian 'answer'. He writes, "There is a moment…when we discover that this empire…is an endless, formless ruin," and no doubt,

this moment is not solely that of thirteenth century Mongolia, but also of the postwar Urban Crisis, of Calvino's own time. Yet despite this 'endless, formless ruin,' "through the walls and towers destined to crumble, [Kublai Khan was able to discern] the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing." This project aims to discern that pattern.

Comment [TC12]: Why distinction between single and double quotes?

Comment [TC13]: Until now, you seem to suggest you are interested in "lightness." Now you are discerning a "pattern." Perhaps you should choose one of the two reigning metaphors, and then dedicated a sentence or two to defining it precisely (via synonyms if need be) rather than mentioning it in passing. An introduction would also normally specify your methodology, preview your chapters (one megalopolis, one labyrinth?), and allude to the digital design aspect of your project.