(IM)POSSIBLE SPACES

Invisible Cities in an age of urban crisis

Libby Perold | March, 2016

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 November 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," (73) whereas Savannah, Georgia he exalted for its beauty and grace. All of these letters and writings later became *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 challenges 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, the book was translated into English by

William Weaver two years after its original Italian publication. *Invisible Cities*[1] enjoyed similar success in America. For example, 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 "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 the Venetian explorer Marco Polo 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 cities transcend time and space. Indeed, Kublai Khan presents an atlas in which the hyper-modern city co-exists with the ancient and mythical, finding "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 1970s 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 explorer on a mission 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 my empire at last?'" Polo responds, "'Sire I do not believe it. On that day you will be an emblem among emblems'" (23). That being said, however, 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"'

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

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, both in written and visual form[2], 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. Though *Invisible Cities* undoubtedly engages with this prevailing apocalyptic perspective, it does not wallow in catastrophic predictions but instead reveals what makes cities livable, light[3], and possible.

In order to examine how *Invisible Cities* approaches the subject of 'lightness' within the dark modern metropolis, we must grasp 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 is ambiguity and disorder. For one, Kublai and Marco do not speak the same language so Polo must "express himself only with gestures, leaps, cries of wonder and horror, animal barkings or hootings" (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 …" (115) — and the very structure of Zemrude shifts in conjunction with the mood of its inhabitants. Spider web cities, suspended cities,

[2] In addition to this written piece, I have completed an online project as a digital manifestation of my following argument. See the appendix for further information as to why I have chosen to create website and how I see the intellectual link between Calvino and the internet.

[3] Calvino was very interested in the concept of 'lightness,' and included it as the first 'memo' in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium.* See Letizia Modena's chapter, "The Inner City of the Imagination" in *Italo Calvino's Architecture of Lightness* on Calvino's approach to Lucretian lightness.

cities on stilts, cities encompassed within a thin net — Polo visits them all. By thrusting his enigmatic cities into a rigid 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. Letizia Modena also notes the importance of "inner cities" in Calvino's text, nothing that "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"' (44). These words represent the book's overriding contention: that the metropolis confronts and incorporates the imaginary and hidden; that cities aren't nor need be grounded in reality, but share in the "secret" and "absurd."

But while Calvino invokes utopian cities, collapsing cities, and "unhappy" cities[4], this is not merely a fictional device, nor is it unique to Calvino. In the 1960s, urban designers and theorists perceived the city as unhealthy and broken. Ferocious sprawl took cities as its victims and postwar urbanization led to rapid expansion and renewal projects, often viewed as destructive to the city by urban theorists and designers (Modena, 14). In response, a variety of architects and urban designers proposed enterprising solutions to the problem of urban decay. For one, a group of French visionary architects collaborated as the movement *l'Urbanisme Spatiale*, "envision[ing] future cities that might

[4] Calling cities — even conversations — 'unhappy,' and 'happy' was unique to Calvino. For example, in Raissa, one of the *Hidden Cities*, Calvino writes that "at every second the unhappy city contains a happy city unaware of its own existence" (149). Furthermore, Polo is unsure whether or not to "classify" Zenobia "among happy cities or the unhappy" (35). At one point, Calvino even writes that the communication between Polo and the Khan "was less happy than in the past" (38).

counter the heaviness and chaotic asphyxiation of the building surface … [they] placed buildings, rooms, and thoroughfares aloft on highly elevated support structures" (Modena, 143). 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). As well, *Superstudio* and *Archizoom Associati*, two Italian design firms, championed the *L'Architetturra Radicale* movement. To them, the crisis of the modern metropolis called for radical, anti-capitalist perspectives. "Preferr[ing] counterutopia to utopia as their instrument of social critique and crisis response," the Italian architects condemned everything from capitalism's overindulgences to the modern city and assumed an ironic, almost caustic attitude toward the future of the city (Modena, 67). With projects like *No-Stop City*, which envisioned the metropolis as an endless conveyor belt, the studios threw a polemical hat into the ring. The similarly radical International Situationists also criticized capitalist cities and found utopian ideals in individualistic experiences. This group of radical cartographers tackled the city in a hands-on, experiential form, seeking nonconformist delight within the city as protest against large, capitalist entities.

Of course, a mere gesture toward the urban problem 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. Perhaps inspired by the title of *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). Ricciardi is merely one voice in a secondary literature that also focuses attention on Calvino's craft, lyricism, and boundless imagination. But the mainstream 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 listened closely to the debates surrounding the "urban paralysis" (Modena, 57). Without doubt, his cities, much like the myths from which their names were taken, reflect the concerns of his contemporary audience. 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" ("On *Invisible Cities*," 180). While secondary literature on Calvino has spent much ink on *Invisible Cities*' playful 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). In 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," a pursuit Calvino suggests 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" (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. Thus, this project will 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.

Using the spatial tropes of megalopolis and labyrinth, Calvino reveals potential happiness within impossible, infernal spaces, thus blurring disparate responses to the crisis of the modern metropolis. From the mid-sixties to the early seventies, the urban dilemma provoked distinct and sometimes opposing responses from the world's creative thinkers. These responses were widely known in public discourse, and yet, as *Invisible Cities* and other items in Calvino's catalogue suggest, Calvino wasn't satisfied with either 'answer' to the dilemma of the modern metropolis. For him, the 'answer' was not so easily about utopia *or* dystopia, paradiso *or* inferno. Instead, he set about finding traces of possibility amidst urban ruin. Indeed, the opening of *Invisible Cities* introduces this pursuit. Even in "a moment … when we discover that this empire … is an endless, formless ruin," Kublai Khan finds "through the walls and towers destined to crumble … the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing" (5). This project aims to discern that pattern.

PART I: Extra-Muros

About a decade before Calvino began writing *Invisible Cities*, his urban design peers confronted a serious problem: rapid urban expansion. For example, the population of Turin — the city in which Calvino spent most of his life — more than doubled between 1950 and 1981 (Hohenberg and Lees, 368). In part, the ever-relentless megalopolis ignited the age of the urban dilemma. Meaning 'large city,' the term was resurrected in the mid-twentieth century as urban planners were examining cities so overgrown that they had started to link to one another as a giant metropolis. Famous megalopoli include the US eastern seaboard — from Boston to Washington, D.C. — and Europe's 'blue banana' cities, stretching 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.* Focusing his attention on the megalopolis of America's northeastern cities, Gottmann charted the megacity's birth and implications. Among the latter, he discovered practical problems such as traffic congestion, inadequate water supply, and slum formation. Furthermore, Gottmann foresaw the psychological repercussions of megacities. "The city," he wrote, "was [once] a well-defined, densely settled territory, often surrounded by walls or palisades. Some time ago, it 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 … [for inhabitants] adapting to such a scattered way of life … [and for officials who] often get lost when trying to classify according to the traditional categories of urban, rural, rural non-farm, farming, etc." (197).

In his renowned text *The City in History,* Lewis Mumford also used the megalopolis to speak of the urban ailments that surrounded him. By his lights, the cities of the mid-twentieth century were

no longer "islands dotting a wide agricultural sea," but "relatively undifferentiated urban tissue, without any relation either to an internally coherent nucleus or an external boundary of any sort" (529-40). Mumford saw fields of conurbations — or greater urban areas — and detected a disease within them, the "inorganic" and "cancerous" megalopolis. Of course, Mumford was not alone in his concern for the city's health. According to Modena, "There was a growing consensus that the city as [urbanists] had known it was dying — suffering from a terminal illness that had to be battled with extreme measures" (78).

The megalopolis holds several distinct characteristics. While most quickly revealed through census data on about overpopulation, megalopoli also expose themselves via psychological characteristics. In an interview with *Challenge Magazine* Jean Gottmann emphasized that, "While a high density of population is, of course, characteristic of this region, it is by no means its most important feature … Perhaps the biggest problem arises out of the *size* of the things that have to be planned" ("Megalopolis: Super City," 55). Mumford also cited the enormity of the megalopolis, noting, "To have the biggest museum, the biggest university, the biggest hospital, the biggest department store…was to fulfill the ultimate urban requirement … In short, every successful institution of the metropolis repeats in its own organization the aimless giantism of the whole" (531).

Besides the sheer magnitude of the megacity, its aimlessness agonized urban planners. Although cities once centered around a citadel and were bounded by a wall, the modern megalopolis had a presented both a void in at its center as well as a broken boundary at its edges. This was Gottmann's conception of the *extra-muros*. And, according to Mumford — although he was not alone in this point of view — this aimlessness in turn engendered complete urban standardization. In a particularly dystopian line, Mumford writes that the "universal megalopolis, mechanized,

standardized, effectively dehumanized, [is] the final goal of urban evolution. Whether they extrapolate 1960 or anticipate 2060 their goal is actually '1984'" (527). In other words, the megalopolis embodies the urban designer's worst fear: homogony. Modena locates a contradiction inherent in this period of rapid 'development,' which ushered in such homogeneity: "Paradoxically, rapid urbanization was considered to be effacing the city, leaving in its stead various types of *anti-city* (especially the megalopolis) that was characterized by standardization, anonymity, and de-individualization" (78). Touching on the notion of 'progress' after World War II, Modena notes a paradox: development was the ultimate form of progress, and a cause for celebration after the war. Yet even so, this catalyst for progress was simultaneously a catalyst for destruction, especially of cities.

There is little doubt Calvino shared the urbanists' concerns over the megalopolis' edgelessness and indistinctness. In a lecture at Columbia University about *Invisible Cities*, Calvino referred to the megalopolis when speaking on the urban crisis, noting that "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 and his "*extra-muros*," as well as Mumford, Calvino emphasizes the nebulous, amorphous qualities of the megalopolis. He nodded toward increasingly homogenized cities in *Hermit in Paris:*

> And besides, cities are turning into one single city … where the differences which once characterized each of them are disappearing … we continually move from one airport to another, to enjoy life that is almost identical no matter what city you find yourself in … We are now close to a time when it will be possible to live in Europe as though it were one single city (169).

Here Calvino does not explicitly mention the megalopolis yet his fear of the "single city," where one metropolis is indistinguishable from another, remains palpable. Within the megacity, travel still occurs, yet its purpose — to see new places — has become redundant. But unlike Gottman and

Mumford, Calvino is not so quick to deem the megacity an agent of total crisis. While visiting megalopoli in the great empire of *Invisible Cities,* Polo undoubtedly finds places of ruin, such as "an empire covered with cities that weigh upon the earth and upon mankind, crammed with wealth and traffic, overladen with ornaments and offices, complicated with mechanisms and hierarchies, swollen, tense, ponderous" (73). Nonetheless, though the megalopolis presents a "'gaudy and unlivable present, where all forms of human society have reached an extreme of their cycle,'" Polo finds inside its ruins "'the invisible reasons which make cities live, through which perhaps, once dead, will live again'" (135-6). Indeed, Polo's tales do not attempt to mask the danger of the megalopolis, but instead look to uncover a sense of lightness and possibility within the destruction.

Given its author's disheartening, seemingly hopeless attitude toward the megalopolis, we would expect *Invisible Cities* to present a similar tone of despair. Certainly, some cities do. The city of Trude, for example, represents the persistent uniformity of the megalopolis. Polo recalls: "If on arriving at Trude I had not read the city's name written in big letters, I would have thought I was landing at the same airport from which I had taken off" (128). Penthesilea, on the other hand, contains the merciless sprawl of the megacity. In it, "you advance for hours and it is not clear whether you are already in the city's midst or still outside it … And so you continue, passing from outskirts to outskirts … The question that now begins to gnaw at your mind is more anguished: outside Penthesilea does an outside exist?" (156-8). Penthesilea, a gateless city that spreads until all that is left is outskirts, thus lacks an edge and center. Within the *Continuous Cities* — Leonia, Trude, Cecilia, Penthesilea — Modena finds a consistent hopelessness, writing that "The final cities remind the reader of the worst manifestations of urban growth outside of the novelistic universe: the *anti-city*, or megalopolis […] is impassable: unlivable on one hand, unknowable on the other. The anti-city, as urbanists were then

wont to call it, eschews human understanding on all sides" (122). Modena correctly sees the *Continuous Cities* for what they are: dystopian, infernal. Polo is left to wander around "the soupy city diluted in the plain," more coreless sprawl than city (156).

Indeed, the *Continuous Cities* present a bleak perspective of the megalopolis. But while Calvino remarked that the book was "a dream born out of the heart of the unlivable cities we know," he also subverts the common understanding of the megalopolis. Long before the *Continuous Cities* are introduced, Polo suggests to Kublai Khan that the exploration of the megalopolis must not be only a survey of ruin. Here, one particular snippet of conversation between Polo and the Khan is instructive. Echoing Mumford's description of the 'inorganic,' 'cancerous' megalopolis, the Khan suddenly snaps, "'I know well that my empire is rotting like a corpse in a swamp, whose contagion infects the crows that peck it as well as the bamboo that grows, fertilized by its humors …'" (59). In response, as noted above, Polo both agrees with the diagnosis and reveals the truth of his explorations, saying "'Yes the empire is sick … [Yet] this is the aim of my explorations: to explore the traces of happiness still to be glimpsed … 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.'" Perhaps we might view Polo as a proxy for Calvino. If so, we can take these words as Calvino's own instructions to find 'faint lights' in the darkness of the megalopolis. In contrast with the *Continuous Cities*, many other cities in the text display typical elements of the megalopolis — overpopulation, a loss of boundaries and centers, and a sense of homogeneity — yet leave 'traces of happiness still to be glimpsed.'

Overpopulation, the most concrete of megalopolitan problems, is a recurring theme throughout *Invisible Cities*. For example, in Procopia, Polo observes the number of residents grow, until he finally sees "the hump of the hill become covered with a thicker and thicker crowd … at all

levels and all distances, those round, motionless faces are seen" (147). While the haunting image of the 'round, motionless faces' in Procopia reflects the dystopian perspective of most urbanists' view of the megalopolis, Calvino also undermines such heavy-handed, bleak attitudes by concluding Procopia's tale with humor. He writes:

> Even the sky has disappeared. I might as well leave the window. Not that it is easy for me to move. There are twenty-six of us lodged into my room: to shift my feet, I have to disturb those crouching on the floor, I force my way among the knees of those seated on the chest of drawers … all very polite people, luckily (147).

Polo's description of Procopia contemplates the view outside of his hotel room window, until, in these final sentences, he reveals the overcrowded space inside. By mentioning that others are "crouching," Polo highlights the room's discomfort. He is located in a bedroom, yet people must sit "on the chest of drawers." But Polo also interjects humor into his description, making sure to note that his twenty-five uninvited roommates are "all very polite people, luckily." Even Polo worries about being polite: "to shift my feet, I have to disturb those crouching on the floor." The account of Procopia thus juxtaposes two extremes — unpleasant overcrowding with painstaking manners — so the scene turns light-hearted in its absurdity. Like a packed elevator, Procopia, though outlandish and bizarre, is also all-too familiar. By injecting irony into hopeless Procopia, Calvino suggests that the megalopolis still allows for a sense of humor, if not joy.

While overpopulation was a tangible, historical fact, the second component of the megalopolis — a loss of boundaries and centers — concerns the psychological anxieties toward the modern city. Polo tells the story of the edgeless Armilla, which has "no walls, no ceilings, no floors: it has nothing that makes it seem a city, except the water pipes … a forest of pipes that end in taps, showers, spouts, overflows" (49). Armilla is abandoned, and to Polo, it is unclear if the city is "unfinished or … demolished" (49). In a limitless city, it is no coincidence that its only structures — the water pipes —

overflow as well. By describing the pipes as a "forest," Polo reifies the image of a city's "limits" as tangled, boundless, and unconstrained. At one point during his depiction of Armilla, Polo entertains apocalyptic theories: "You would think the plumbers had finished their job and gone away before the bricklayers arrived; or else their hydraulic systems, indestructible, had survived a catastrophe, an earthquake, or the corrosion of termites" (49). Such reckonings, coupled with the preceding descriptions of this abandoned city with no walls, floors, or ceilings, seem to tell a dystopian tale. Yet, Armilla is not entirely deserted: "At any hour, raising your eyes among the pipes, you are likely to glimpse a young woman, or many young women … luxuriating in the bathtubs or arching their backs under the showers suspended in the void … or combing their long hair at a mirror" (49). With this illustration of the "luxuriating" women, Calvino pairs the apocalyptic with the pastoral. In Armilla, the classical image of the nymphs bathing is set not in a traditional bucolic landscape, but in an apocalyptic, infernal, abandoned city-space. Though nature does not sparkle in Armilla, however, "the threads of water fanning from the showers" still "glisten" (49). Calvino breaks from an antiquated sense of beauty yet still leaves moments of purity within Armilla's destroyed cityscape.

The final and perhaps most dangerous component of the megalopolis is its promise of uniformity. In *Hermit in Paris*, Calvino exhibited concern over the lack of distinction between Rome and Paris, writing, "we continually move from one airport to another, to enjoy life that is almost identical no matter what city you find yourself in" (169). These words take form in the invisible city of Trude. Polo recounts, as noted above, "If on arriving at Trude I had not read the city's name written in big letters, I would have thought I was landing at the same airport from which I had taken off" (128). Undoubtedly, Trude is quite bleak. It's only distinguishing feature, the city's name on its airport, is superficial at best.

Nevertheless, outside Trude, *Invisible Cities* seems to subvert urban theorists' fatalism regarding the increasing homogeneity in urban spaces. Take, for example, Diomira, the first city of the text. This city, with "sixty silver domes, bronze statues of all the gods, streets paved with lead," will not surprise the visitor, "who has seen them also in other cities" (7). But even in a city whose treasures are already "familiar to the visitor," Polo finds the new and different. Calvino writes:

> But the special quality of this city for the man who arrives there on a September evening, when the days are growing shorter and the multicolored lamps are lighted all at once at the doors of the food stalls … is that he feels envy for those who now believe they have once before lived an evening identical to this (7).

Polo's description of Diomira presents two challenges to the prevailing anxieties over urban homogony. For one, the visitor's experience of the September evening is so specific, personal, and grounded in a particular moment, that its recreation in another city seems impossible. Though other cities may look similar during September evenings, Diomira possesses a "special quality," evident upon the visitor's arrival by "the multicolored lamps," which must be lit "all at once." In addition, Polo depicts the visitor as envious toward those "who now believe they have once before lived an evening identical to this." By doing so, he suggests that those who experience sameness are privileged because they get to enjoy Diomira again. In other words, Diomira suggests that homogony may not be as destructive as the urban theorists assumed.

Though Diomira destabilizes the mainstream, hopeless perspective on standardized cities, Eutropia does the opposite. Rather than unearthing possibility within the seemingly impossible, Polo's tale of Eutropia questions our very need for variety. Calvino writes: "On the day when Eutropia's inhabitants feel the grip of weariness and no one can bear any longer his job, his relatives, his house, and his life, debts … then the whole citizenry decides to move to the next city" (64). On his arrival at the new city, each inhabitant changes his or her job, spouse, hobbies, and friends. In Eutropia,

"…variety is guaranteed by the multiple assignments, so that in the span of a lifetime a man rarely returns to a job that has already been his" (64). Yet it becomes clear that constant change is but another form of standardization: "Thus the city repeats its life, identical … the inhabitants repeat the same scenes, with the actors changed … Alone among all the cities of the empire, Eutropia remains always the same" (64). Keeping in mind Polo's earlier emphasis on the "residue of unhappiness," as well as "traces of happiness still to be glimpsed," we see that Eutropia's need for variety guarantees its own unhappiness. Eutropia's "miracle" is thus ironic; its quest to combat uniformity only ensures repetition. In this city of difference, inhabitants rehearse sameness, "open[ing] alternate mouths in identical yawns" (65).

Given the megalopolis' components — overpopulation, edgelessness, standardization — it is tempting to view the modern metropolis as a catastrophe. But that is not Calvino's project. Not only does he note in his Columbia lecture that "there are already numerous books which prophecy catastrophes and apocalypses: to write another would be superfluous," but he also emphasized the importance of discovering "hidden reasons which bring men to live in cities: reasons which remain valid over and above any crisis" ("On *Invisible Cities*," 181). In the modern city, though sprawling and edgeless, we can find humor in the cramped room of Precopia or purity in the "luxuriating" women amidst the poor plumbing of Armilla. In Eutropia, Polo questions the need to counter megalopolitan homogeneity. So, when we look back to the preface to *Invisible Cities*, we find several gestures toward the megalopolis. The empire is "an endless, formless ruin," and there exists "corruption's gangrene" but there remains within the ruin a "pattern so subtle it could escape the termites' gnawing." For Calvino, the megalopolis represents a superficial ruin that, upon closer examination, retains 'patterns' of humor, beauty, and possibility.

PART II: Down Below

Daedalus was the great designer of modern cities. As the myth goes, King Minos called the Ancient Greek artisan to his throne and instructed him to build an edifice that could house the Minotaur. The King demanded of Daedalus a structure so puzzling and impenetrable that no enemy of his could emerge alive. Soon after, the labyrinth came into existence. In the modern day, the labyrinth connotes a trap, a dystopian, even infernal, space of chaos and turmoil. It is not merely an enigma or puzzle, but a place of destruction and impossibility.

Yet the labyrinth also served as a compelling structure for architects and designers in an age when cities too became traps. The visionary architects in the International Situationist movement were particularly enamored of this mythic 'trap,' and often compared 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 certainly engaged with contemporary urban theory, in which the Situationists figured heavily. Given his participation in French intellectual circles of the mid-60s and early 1970s, it is likely that Calvino was well-acquainted with Situationist theory. Furthermore, Calvino demonstrated interest in the labyrinth. For one, Beno Weiss notes that Calvino, in his 1962 essay, *La sfida al labirinto* ("The Challenge to the Labyrinth"), 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). And although the labyrinth is only mentioned once in *Invisible Cities* — in the city of Ersilia, the inhabitants "stretch strings from the corners of their houses," eventually form a "labyrinth of taut strings and poles that rise in the plain" (76) — the labyrinth remains a dominant trope throughout the novel. For example, Kublai considers 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" (38). Polo also encounters the cities on foot, wandering through disorienting spaces of spiral cities, zig-zag cities, and geometric cities. Yet the labyrinth of *Invisible Cities* doesn't signify calamity. Instead, this disorienting space forces Polo — and thus the reader — to encounter the city tangibly. The labyrinthine city cannot be possessed but must be experienced. Like the megalopolis, the labyrinth appears to project a catastrophic narrative but contains lightness in its depths.

According to Peta Mitchell, the "prevailing metaphor of the city of modernity is that of the labyrinth," and its inhabitant, "the urban wanderer who is cast adrift in the maze of its streets," must encounter entropy to be able to make sense of it (111). When we talk about the labyrinth today, we spend much time on perspective. Unlike the map, which provides a bird's-eye view, the labyrinth is immersive, supplying instead a ground view. In doing so, it ensures a degree of blindness because one walks in the structure without the privilege of an aerial view. Michel de Certeau made use of the labyrinth in his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* by representing walking in the labyrinthine city as an epistemological act. While de Certeau postdated Calvino, his perspective of city as labyrinth serves as a helpful framework through which we might better grasp *Invisible Cities*. In his chapter "Walking in the City," de Certeau resurrects Daedalus to relate urban walks with the centuries-old labyrinth. While his son, Icarus, represents the natural urge to see the city from above, Daedalus, "in mobile and

endless labyrinths far below," embodies *us*, who experience the city down below day after day. Unlike the Icaran "voyeur-god," the Daedalan "ordinary practitioners" or 'Wandersmänner' write an "urban text" that they themselves cannot read (92-3). As such, "the paths that correspond in th[ese] intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility." De Certeau's Daedalus thus undermines traditional, Icaran cartography by introducing the labyrinth as a new map.

Therefore, while theorists and writers for centuries have likened the blind experience of the labyrinth to a fatal trap, Calvino finds lightness in its dark depths. Unlike the perspective of the map, which is atmospheric, all-seeing, and thus removed from the city itself, the perspective of the labyrinth allows for an experiential, tactile relationship between city-dweller and city, producing a disorientation that opens the imagination. The geometric structure of the labyrinth is one of ordered chaos that frees the individual to discover his own perception of the city and wander it limitlessly.

No one grasped this more than the Situationist International (SI), an avant-garde group of artists, theorists, and intellectuals who, in the 1960s, used radical cartography to describe the city as a space to be experienced and not just 'mapped'. Launched in 1956, the Situationists saw their ideas as a natural extension of Surrealism, which also embraced chaos as artistic inspiration. Places like the Palais Idéal du Facteur Cheval in the south of France fascinated the Situationists because it was an "architecture of disorientation," a place where "one can only lose oneself" ("Next Planet"). That being said, Paris was the focal point for radical, disorienting cartography. It was there that Guy Debord, the group's leader, conceived of "psychogeography," a sort of mapping that emphasized the psychological effects of the built environment on city inhabitants. Psychogeography relied on the Situationists' technique of the *dérive*, which Tom McDonough called "urban drifiting," or a "search for an

encounter with otherness" (10). Frequently compared to Baudelaire's *flânerie*, the *dérive* was thought to allow "human freedom [to] take urban form" (McDonough, 30). The psychogeographical *dérive* renounced planned experiences in favor of spontaneity. In addition to the *dérive*, Debord and the Situationists looked to redevelop the practice of cartography, a pursuit that led to Debord's two psychogeographic maps of Paris, *Guide Psychogeographique de Paris* and *Naked City.* Both maps blended cut-outs from commercial street maps and Debord's own hand-drawn arrows. By detaching these spaces from gridded streets, Debord emphasized aberrant routes, "an urban navigational system that operated independently of Paris's dominant patterns of circulation" (Sadler, 88).

Radical cartographers were not the only ones to find the labyrinth a structure of inspiration. In fact, many writers, from Dante to James Joyce have touched on its image. Harold Bloom is not surprised by this pattern, noting that "literary thinking is akin to walking in a labyrinth" and that the "highest imaginative literature bids you to become utterly lost in it, with no Ariadne's thread to get you out" (xvi-ii). Calvino, then, was one in a long line of the literary tradition to make use of the labyrinth. Nevertheless, Calvino's perspective on the labyrinth strays from that of the mainstream literary tradition. Uprooting its dystopian associations, Calvino found possibility inside the impossible structure. Like de Certeau, who saw the city as a text and stories as "spatial trajectories" (115), Calvino believed one could 'read' the metropolis. Calvino reveals this mode of thought in *Hermit in Paris*, in which he writes that the city is "a giant reference work, a city which you can consult like an encyclopaedia" and that one could "interpret Paris as a book of dreams" (172-3). As well, in *Invisible Cities*, he associates city with text through Polo's account of Tamara, a city in which "your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages" (14). Like postmodern texts' detachment from linearity, the

city as a spatial representation of the book also abandoned the 'linear' grid and embraced a similar sort of nonlinearity.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the labyrinth can be found in *Invisible Cities*' structure and content. In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium,* Calvino even speaks of the book's labyrinthine form: "[…] I built up a many-faceted structure in which each brief text is close to the other in a series that does not imply logical sequence or a hierarchy, but a network in which one can follow multiple routes and draw multiple, ramified conclusions" (71). It is not surprising that a text so obsessed with symmetry makes use of a structure classically made of symmetrical, concentric circles. In fact, the structure of *Invisible Cities* can be read concentrically; the first and the last chapters each contain ten cities, and every city in between contains five. Moreover, geometrical renderings of the labyrinth (fig. 1, 2) place a strong emphasis on the center, as did Calvino when he discussed the book's structure. While the last sentence of the text was important, according to Calvino, "the meaning of a symmetrical book should be sought in the middle" ("On *Invisible Cities*," 182).

Fig. 1 *Roman Labyrinth.* Digital image. *Crystalinks.* Web.

Fig. 2 *The Labyrinthos.* Digital image. *Theoi.* Web.

The content of *Invisible Cities* also speaks to labyrinthine cities and the implications of mapping. This is most immediately revealed in Kublai Khan's atlases, which appear in Chapter 9. Not far removed from our common conception of the map, Khan's atlases depict an empire "building by

building and street by street, with walls, rivers, bridges, harbors cliffs," and "continent by continent, the borders of the most distant realms, the ships' routes, the coast lines" (135). No two of the Khan's atlases are the same; some even abandon the physical world. One contains cities of the past and those of tomorrow, "reveal[ing] the form of cities that do not yet have a form or a name," while another evokes "nightmares and maledictions" (138-163). Yet all of the atlases' contents, tangible or fantastical, take cities — bastions of the lived experience — and catalogue them on the page. Kerstin Pilz likens Kublai's atlas to "a reference manual reminiscent of the encyclopedia, flagship of the Enlightenment" (238), a fitting comparison because both are concerned with indexing knowledge. But while the Khan understands his cities through his atlases, Marco Polo experiences cities on the ground, immersing himself in their good and bad characteristics. Polo's accounts of maze-like cities can be divided into three of the characteristics of the labyrinth: its relation to walking and thus blindness, its relationship to and refusal of the map, and its networked and branch-like nature. With these characteristics, Calvino uncovers lightness in the labyrinth. Polo's on-the-ground perspective allows him to encounter the cities not by 'possessing' them from above, but by experiencing them. In these cities, he finds truths that could not be charted on a map. Rather, the labyrinth, while disorienting and chaotic, allows those tactile truths to be unmasked.

Walking is integral to the experience of the labyrinth. Indeed, one cannot truly experience the labyrinth if not on foot. Urban theorists were noting the link between walking and the modern city since Baudelaire's 19th-century *flâneur*, through the Situationist International's *dérive*, up to de Certeau's conception of the *Wandersmänner.* There are slight distinctions among these three practices, yet nevertheless the conception of the modern city goes hand in hand with this idea of wandering city streets on foot. For de Certeau, walking in the labyrinth was also closely linked to blindness; ordinary

pedestrians walk '"down below,' below the thresholds at which visibility begins" (93) and Calvino also notes this sentiment with Polo's description of Baucis. "After a seven days' march through woodland, the traveler directed toward Baucis cannot see the city and yet he has arrived," recounts the Venetian explorer (77). Already, of Baucis Polo relates concepts essential to the labyrinth: walking, blindness, and the city. Yet the traveler cannot see the city because it rests on "slender stilts that rise from the ground … and are lost above the clouds … Nothing of the city touches the earth except those long flamingo legs" (77). Here, Calvino reverses the conception of the Daedalan view as far below and blind. Instead, the city itself rises above the labyrinth. In a way, Baucis is almost utopic: its inhabitants have little reason to come back down to earth and leave the city because they have "everything they need up there." Therefore, Polo must hypothesize about Baucis' residents. He produces three theories: "… that they hate the earth; that they respect it so much they avoid all contact; that they love it as it was before they existed and with spyglasses … they never tire of examining it" (77). The inhabitants of Baucis have seemingly escaped the labyrinth yet yearn to go back to it. With an Icarian view, they are 'voyeur-Gods', yet despite "having already everything," Baucis' residents can only reflect "with fascination their own absence" in the labyrinth they've seemingly escaped. Calvino shows the city of Baucis using two instruments — the spyglass and the telescope — perhaps to reveal their own blindness in spite of their voyeuristic outlook. So, while they seem to occupy a utopian city in the clouds, in fact the city of Baucis is wrapped up in the labyrinth; it is both fascinated with the labyrinth down below, and experiences the labyrinthine blindness. Another point to note on Baucis is that the city lies at the exact center of the text. Even Calvino noted that "scholars of structural semiology maintain that one must seek at the very center of the book, and by doing so have found … the city of

Baucis" ("On *Invisible Cities*," 182). If the text's structure is comparable to the form of a labyrinth, then the center — the labyrinth's most tangled, maze-like part — must embody its image.

Polo's interests in blindness related to walking in the city does not end with Baucis. In Marozia, a city of the rat and the swallow, again Calvino reveals these dichotomous views — terrestrial and bird's-eye — yet he finds that binary relationship is a more nuanced. In Marozia, a sibyl has deemed two fates for the city: it will first be a city of rats and eventually transform into a city of swallows. At first, Polo seems to privilege Marozia of the swallow. He tells Kublai that Marozia city of rats is riddled with "leaden passages" and its inhabitants scurry "like packs of rats who tear from one another's teeth the leftovers which fall from the teeth of the most voracious ones" (154). This rat-city is quite putrid, sullied. At the same time, Marozia of the swallow ushers in possibility. The latter city promises a place where "inhabitants … will fly like swallows in the summer sky, calling one another as in a game, showing off … as they swoop, clearing the air of mosquitos and gnats" (154). The "new" city of the swallow embodies everything that the "old" city of the rat does not: lightness, freedom, clarity.

Yet Marozia of the swallow might not be as utopic as one might have thought, nor Marozia of the rat as counter-utopic. After having come back to Marozia, Polo does in fact note "the old century is dead and buried, the new is at its climax." Nevertheless, "the wings [he sees] moving about are those of suspicious umbrellas under which heavy eyelids are lowered." So, while the inhabitants of the new Marozia "believe they are flying," it is "already an achievement if they can get off the ground flapping their batlike overcoats" (155). The new Marozia is just a repetition of the old Marozia. Its inhabitants do not fly like swallows but attempt to "flap" their "batlike overcoats." Everything is heavy, and they have not transformed into free swallows, but heavy, sunken bats — also known as rats with wings. Inevitably, Polo asks, "Was the oracle mistaken?" Not quite. He theorizes, "Marozia consists of two

cities, the rat's and the swallow's; both change with time, but their relationship does not change; the second is the one about to free itself from the first" (155). Thus, Marozia does not follow a linear progression of old to new, but an eternally circular relationship between those who walk and those who fly; the terrestrial and the aerial; the down-below and the up-above. While the sibyl and its inhabitants feel as if "it is time for the century of the rat to end and the century of the swallow to begin," Polo sees this determination for flight as futile. Conversely, if one "move[s] along Marozia's compact walls, when you least expect it, you see a crack open and a different city appear." Sometimes it is the labyrinth that gives light, and the cartographic eye is heavy, comprised of "batlike overcoats."

The labyrinth provokes a sense of chaos, antithetical to the orderly, gridded map. As such, *Invisible Cities* examines the labyrinth's relationship to and refusal of the map, especially in its portrayal of Eudoxia. To view Eudoxia, one is offered a carpet, "laid out in symmetrical motives whose patterns are repeated along straight and circular lines, interwoven" (96). Already, we might locate vestiges of the labyrinth in Eudoxia's carpet — a symmetrical pattern, interwoven lines — yet the carpet itself serves as a map onto which the city is charted. At a certain point, Polo remarks, "you become convinced that each place in the carpet corresponds to a place in the city and all the things contained in the city are included in the design." Even the inhabitants of Eudoxia "compare the carpet's immobile order with his own image of the city" (96-7). As such, Eudoxia is a city so consumed with its own image reflected in the "immobile order" of the carpet, that its own inhabitants look for "answers" and "the story of [their lives]" "concealed among the [carpet's] arabesques." Their search for life in the static carpet-map seems hopeless. Instead, Polo finds possibility in another form. To Polo, "the city of Euxodia, just as it is" — therefore not the city in the carpet — can act as a "true map of the universe." Unlike the carpet-map of Eudoxia, the city itself "spreads out shapelessly, with crooked streets, houses

that crumble one upon the other amid clouds of dust, fires, screams in the darkness" (97). In Eudoxia, we see a unique reversal of the map's meaning. Here, the map has come to stand for the labyrinth: embracing shapelessness, the chaos of "crooked streets," and the all too human moments of "screams in the darkness." The carpet, on the other hand, holds labyrinthine characteristics with its contorted lines and detailed arabesques, yet it stands for "immobile order" and gives an "incomplete perspective."

If any city were to represent the role of the map, it is Esmeralda, the city of endless zig-zagging canals. Curiously, Esmeralda is the first city in which Polo introduces the rat and the swallow. Echoing Marozia, Polo notes that in Esmeralda "the rats run in the darkness of the sewers … they peep out of manholes and drainpipes, they slip through double bottoms and ditches" (89). On the other hand, the swallows "cut the air over the roofs … darting to gulp a mosquito, spiraling upward" (89). Yet this is not merely a comment about views onto the city. Yes, the rats are "below," and the swallows fly above. Nevertheless, the swallows represent an aspect of the map which nears Guy Debord's *psychogéographie*. Polo reasons that "a map of Esmeralda should include … all these routes, solid and liquid, evident and hidden," but even so, "it is more difficult to fix on the map the routes of the swallows." This is because they glide, making "long invisible parabolas … spiraling upwards." So, while Esmeralda's inhabitants "are spared the boredom of following the same streets everyday," and instead can "move along higher, discontinuous ways," it is the swallow that represents the utmost discontinuity in its routes. The map might include "all these routes" of Esmeralda's inhabitants, but even so cannot "fix … the routes of the swallows." As such, the map of Esmeralda, "marked in different colored inks," cannot completely capture the experience of this labyrinthine, zig-zag city.

Apart from its relationship with the map, Esmeralda reveals another important aspect of the labyrinth: its networked and rhizomatic structure. Esmeralda is made of "a network of canals … and

streets." To get from one place to another, "the shortest distance between two points … is not straight line but a zig-zag that ramifies in tortuous optional routes" (88). These routes provide endless options for Esmeralda's inhabitants, especially because "the network of routes is not arranged on one level, but follows instead an up-and-down course of steps, landings, cambered bridges, hanging streets." It is not quite clear, then, whether the labyrinth of Esmeralda is torturous or euphoric. While its networked layout "ramifies in torturous optional routes," this enables its inhabitants to "enjoy every day the pleasure of a new itinerary to reach the same places" — even "the most fixed and calm lives in Esmeralda" have the benefit of varied and adventurous routes.

While Polo does not assign such a clear judgment on Esmeralda, he tells a cautionary tale of overly planned cities through Zora. When Polo first describes Zora, he notes that not one of its visitors can forget it. But this is only because the city "is like an armature, a honey comb in whose cells each of us can place the things he wants to remember" (15). As a result, "the world's most learned men are those who have memorized Zora" (16). This orderly city, made not of networks but of a "succession of streets, of houses along the streets", can be memorized by heart. Any one inhabitant "remembers the order by which the copper clock follows the barber's striped awning … the café at the corner, the alley that leads to the harbor" (15). In the end, Zora, a city which neither "possesses a special beauty [nor] rarity" ends up "languished, disintegrated, disappeared," in its attempt "to be more easily remembered." With the example of Zora, Polo cautions against cities that are too planned, against cities that evade being rhizomatic in hopes of being "remembered." If so, like Zora, they risk being forgotten.

For centuries, the labyrinth and its components — its duality of walking and blindness, its antithetical relationship with the map, and its networked structure — represented a torturous enigma.

Like a trap, the labyrinth had an entrance but no exit. But while *Invisible Cities* makes use of the labyrinth, both in its structure and content, it ruptures this notion of the labyrinth as an impossible space. Rather, Polo's accounts reveal the labyrinth as livable, and its inverse — the planned and completely ordered city — is not as utopian as one would have thought. In throwing the two together, Calvino not only shows us the stark juxtaposition of planned and chaotic cities, but he also seems to advocate for something in between: a representation of the swallow's liberated flight; a world in which its inhabitants do not rely on charting their city onto a carpet; a city that refuses memorization. In doing so, he presents this idea of ordered chaos.

CONCLUSION

In a book concerned with the "invisible order that sustains cities," it is no surprise that the game of chess figures into Marco Polo and Kublai Khan's continuous dialogue. In fact, the two play a game of chess, in which "the ambassador trie[s] to depict for the monarch's eyes the vicissitudes of his travels, the conditions of the empire" (121). In turn, the Khan believes that "knowledge of the empire [is] hidden in the pattern drawn by the angular shifts of the knight," until the game loses meaning and he must ask, "What [are] the real stakes?" (122-3). Polo reveals the 'stakes' by pointing out the materiality of the chessboard, which "'is inlaid with two woods: ebony and maple.'" One square "'was cut from the ring of a trunk that grew in a year of drought,'" and inside that square "'a barely hinted knot can be made out: a bud tried to burgeon on a premature spring day, but the night's frost forced it to desist'" (131).

Like any other part of *Invisible Cities*, a chessboard is not just a chessboard, nor is a carpet merely a carpet, a swallow merely a swallow. So, while the Khan is concerned with winning at chess and thus possessing his empire, Polo believes the game is not about "a gain or a loss," but instead focuses his attention on hidden narratives that animate once-stagnant objects. This "overwhelm[s]" the Khan, who is amazed by Polo's ability to unearth "the quantity of things that could be read in a little piece of smooth and empty wood" (132). While the Khan is occupied with "checkmate," Polo "was already talking about ebony forests, about rafts laden with logs that come down the rivers, of docks, of women at the windows" (132).

If we can take the chessboard as a metaphor for the city, then this image of the wooden square, taken from a tree "that grew in a year of drought," says everything about the importance of looking for possibility even when it doesn't seem to exist. For the Khan, this square is disheartening. After

much contemplation, he realizes that his "empire's multiform treasures were only illusory envelopes" and in turn were "reduced to a square of planed wood" (131). However, in the same square Polo finds a story of a sprout that hopes to blossom and is destroyed by nighttime frost. He finds a "'larvum's nest,'" and traces of "'the wood carver'" on the square's edge. The Khan sees merely a square, but Polo finds an entire ecosystem of life itself, which contains birth, destruction, and labor. As if inspired by the chessboard, the Khan later says to Polo that he feels as if he is "'prisoner of a gaudy and unlivable present, where all forms of society have reached an extreme of their cycle.'" Nevertheless, Kublai "hear[s], from [Polo's] voice, the invisible reasons which make cities live, through which perhaps, once dead, they will come to life again" (136).

This project has aimed to look at the ways that Calvino brings back to life his invisible cities. In a time when the modern metropolis was considered 'cancerous,' even fatal, Calvino does not attempt to avoid these tropes of 'sick' cities or disorienting cities. Instead, he confronts them and consequently destabilizes our typical notions of counter-utopian or unhappy spaces. He makes use of these spaces to show us that we can find moments of possibility within them; that 'impossible' spaces and 'possible' spaces are merely two sides of the same coin. Sometimes Calvino shows seemingly utopian cities and reveals a deep gloom. Sometimes he injects humor into the most infernal cities. Although it is tempting to read each of Calvino's cities as a parable, in fact, each one cannot exist without the others, as evidenced by the fable of the bridge:

> Marco Polo describes a bridge stone by stone. 'But which is the stone that supports the bridge?' Kublai Khan asks. 'The bridge is not supported by one stone or another...but by the line of the arch that they form.' Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: 'Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me.' Polo answers: 'Without stones there is no arch.' (82).

The "arch" of the book asks simple questions: what makes cities desirable? What brings people to live in cities? What makes the city persist to live, to prosper? Yet Calvino does not offer simple answers, but instead answers with the cities themselves, the "stones." These "stones" are often small moments in Polo's accounts — the slant of light from lanterns on a September evening in Diomira, the freedom of the swallows in Eudomia — yet, like the squares in Kublai's chessboard, we learn that a multitude of stories live inside the small "stones" of crumbling cities.

Certainly *Invisible Cities* provides only oblique answers to the question of "what makes cities livable?" Calvino may refer to "happy" and "unhappy" cities, "light" and "heavy" cities, and even "the perfect city" but he does not simply divide cities along clear dichotomous lines. Indeed, he writes of cities both fictional and real, of metropolises both abstract and material, but these distinctions he blurs in an effort to re-animate the urban space. While urban designers went to extreme measures to imagine the possibility of new cities — from balloon cities to cities on stilts and conveyor belt cities — Calvino breathes new life into the cities of his present. Through philosophical interactions between Marco Polo and the Khan, the injection of humor and beauty into the megalopolis, and the tactile experience of the labyrinth, Calvino transforms the paralyzed modern metropolis into something dynamic, alive. The Calvinian metropolis doesn't attempt to mask impossible spaces, but instead takes what's there and finds possibility within it.

APPENDIX:
Making Visible *Invisible Cities*

Invisible Cities — and Calvino's fiction in general — is highly aware of its own medium. Throughout the text, Calvino adds a metafictional flare that subtly alerts the reader to the book's existence as a book. Given that the driving narrative element is Polo's narration of cities to Kublai and thus the reader, *Invisible Cities* gestures toward its own role of storytelling, as evidenced by lines such as, "It is not the voice that commands the story, it is the ear," (136). Even the first line of the book explores the relationship between storyteller and audience. Calvino writes, "Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions, but the emperor of the Tartars does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any other messenger or explorer of his" (5). Soon after, we learn that not only is the Khan skeptical of Polo's tales, but that he cannot understand the Italian explorer and must listen to his stories of the cities of the Tartar empire through "improvised pantomimes that the sovereign had to interpret" (21).

In fact, in many ways *Invisible Cities* deals with the limits of communication as it does with the future of cities. While the tales are about cities, they are also about the act of storytelling, of recounting adventures, of the act of writing itself. Calvino was deliberate about this. He wanted *Invisible Cities* to conjure up a "space which the reader must enter, wander round, maybe lose his way in, and then find an exit, or perhaps even several exits, or maybe a way of breaking out on his own" ("On *Invisible Cities*," 178). But what if that space is not a book? *Invisible Cities* is a text that begs to be visualized. In the introduction to the anthology *Image, Eye and Art in Calvino,* Brigitte Grundtvig, Martin McLoughlin and Lene Waag Peterson called Calvino's works not novels but "visual poetics"

(3). In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium,* Calvino himself noted the importance of "the power of bringing visions into focus with our eyes shut, of bringing forth forms and colors from the lines of black letters on a white page, and in fact of *thinking* in terms of images" (92).

Perhaps taking the book's title as an aesthetic challenge, many great artists have been occupied with illustrating *Invisible Cities* since its 1972 publication. In 1999, a special edition of *Invisible Cities* was published in the US with twelve illustrations by the renowned American painter, Wayne Thiebaud (fig. 3). Thiebaud's spindly line drawings are quite different from his typical style, yet perfectly capture Calvino's whimsical, imaginative cities. Mikhail Viesel, a Russian artist, illustrated each of the 55 invisible cities (fig. 4) in a hand-drawn, almost sketchbook style.

Fig. 3 *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino, with 12 drawings by Wayne Thiebaud, 1999

Fig 4. Viesel, Mikhail. Illustration of Esmeralda. Digital image. Web.

The project accompanies an online hypertext version of *Invisible Cities* in Russian. Karina Puente, a Peruvian architect, has also visualized the invisible cities in a multi-step process that involves collage and sketching (fig. 5).

Despite the multifarious achievements of these illustrations, we might ask: could Calvino be re-illuminated in other visual forms? Like the book, an illustration is a static form. What are the implications of translating Calvino from the immobile form

of the novel onto the dynamic web? *Invisible Cities* is not only a book that demands illustration, but also a project that desires interaction. In its current form, we are merely spectators into a continuous conversation between Polo and the Khan. How might *Invisible Cities* change when we have a voice in this conversation? Or, might we feel differently when we not only see the cities about which Calvino wrote, but also interact with them? This project, in part, has explored the hidden spaces of possibility inside infernal structures, thus finding reasons why cities persist to be desirable, "through which, perhaps, once dead, they will come to life again." Its other part hopes to bring to life again *Invisible Cities* itself.

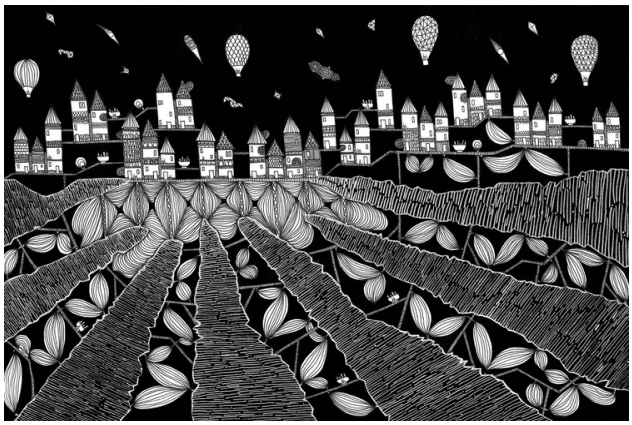

Fig. 5 Anastasia. Image © Karina Puente Frantzen

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