

الإبداع الفني في عمارة المدن في المدن اللامرئية لإيتالو كالفينو

Artistic Creativity in The Architecture of Cities in Italo Calvino's

Invisible Cities

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The aim of this study is to explore the architectural themes of *Invisible cities* and identify them specifically in “Thin Cities”. Each city, In this novel, is described to represent a certain mood and a symbolic meaning. The novel possesses no plot, only descriptions of fictional cities that has been invented by Italo Calvino’s imagination. It contains a powerful connection between its literary skill and architectural theories. The novel represents the postmodern literature due to the freedom given to the readers to explore the cities with their imagination and the fragmentation style that Calvino uses alongside the surrealistic creativity.

Keywords: Cities, Architecture, Calvino, Thin Cities, Surrealism

المستخلص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى استكشاف الموضوعات المعمارية في رواية المدن لأمريّة، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على فصل "المدن الرقيقة". تصف كل مدينة في هذه الرواية حالة مزاجية معينة ومعنى رمزيًا. تقتصر الرواية على أوصاف لمدن خيالية ابتكرها خيال إيتالو كالفينو ولا تحتوي على حبكة سردية. تتميز الرواية بوجود ارتباط وثيق بين براعتها الأدبية والنظريات المعمارية. تُعتبر الرواية مثالاً على أدب ما بعد الحداثة، نظرًا لما تمنحه من حرية للقراء لاستكشاف المدن بخيالهم، فضلًا عن أسلوب التفيت الذي يستخدمه كالفينو، إلى جانب الإبداع السريالي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المدن، العمارة، كالفينو، المدن الرقيقة، السريالية

1. Introduction

The structure of the book as Calvino says is like a diary of his moods, everything he felt in the years while writing the book had been transformed into the cities. These short stories are written like a series, Calvino wrote them in a long duration and the process entered many phases which made the book rather different than normal plot stories. The reader faces an interesting experience while reading about many fictional cities without any plot structure, the only thing to keep in mind is that Marco polo is the narrator who narrates his travels to Kubla Khan. It is a basic plot carried as a report by Marco Polo to Kubla Khan about the cities. Italo Calvino in this book is making a direct narration that enables him to criticise the modern architectural and urban phenomena that dominated the world for a half century and to present new ideas that defies its rules (Dimitris, 11).

This book reflects some sort of dream like experience to the reader, the cities that Calvino explains are not normal structured cities, they contain different structures and architectures from the real world cities.

The story is narrated by Marco polo to Kubla Khan. Polo entertains the emperor with his stories about the cities that khan has never seen. Polo speaks of fifty five cities in total. These cities fall in this book in eleven categories that refer to

them. There are also dialogues between the emperor and polo separated from the descriptions of the cities. In polo's descriptions of the cities there is no full clarification of the cities, few details are given in a poetic narration that are meant to evoke the readers' imagination and urge them to think and imagine for themselves.

Marco Polo (1254–1324) is a traveller who explored the Middle East parts and spent seventeenth years in china. His travels are documented in his book *The Million* which renamed in the English translation as *The Travels of Marco Polo*. In china, Polo met the Mongolian general Kublai Khan who made china under his rule and took parts of Russia and the Middle East. In literature, Kublai Khan is a character of great power who controls many regions with his tremendous influence, and the most famous work of literature which refers to this character also is the English poem *Kubla Khan* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In real life, Marco polo was given great care by the emperor Kublai Khan and had been sent by orders of the emperor to regions he controls, and he also was interested in hearing the stories of the strange countries that Polo had visited. According to some versions of the million, Polo also governed Yangzhou for three years. Marco Polo in *Invisible cities* is not different from the real Polo, both of them tell stories to the great emperor to entertain him, but the difference is in the cities that they narrated, the fictional character tells stories of cities that does not exist and have a relation to his original city, Venice. (kennedy, 1)

2. Surrealism

Invisible cities considered as a surrealist work due to the imaginative incredible descriptions of the cities. Surrealism, the movement that was founded by the French poet Andre Breton in 1924, claims that the enlightenment era had restricted the mind in its rationality and calls for expanding the limits of the unconscious mind even if it seems irrational. The movement wants to free the mind's thoughts from the boundaries of rationalism and to put more emphasis on the

imagining unconscious thoughts. Breton is also a Marxist who intended his movement to make the minds revolt against the rational society.

Surrealists wanted to explore the powers of the unconscious minds in imagination. They were influenced by Freud's work *The Interpretation of dreams*. In this work, Freud talks about dreams as evidence of the inner conflicts of human beings, their desires, emotions and motifs. He speaks of dreams as the unsaid facts of the human thoughts, and that they explain a lot about the Psyche of the individual.

The surrealism movement uses contradictory images to push the readers to think deeper and unleash subconscious meanings. Surrealist writers do not rely on plots, their emphasis is on the characters and the images, and the hidden meanings that the reader must discover by analyzing the work. Mostly, they use poetic language to take their readers in a journey similar to dreams that defy logic.

(Licciardi,1)

Calvino's work is a mixture of many creative aspects, it is a surrealist architecture novel of many cities that requires the imagination of the reader to unravel its themes and ideas. This work depends heavily upon the settings and the descriptions more than the dramatic events and the plot. Calvino's main characters are important of course, but the most important characters are the cities itself. Each city is given a woman name and represented as characters of this novel. When the reader approaches this work, the cities are his main concern. Normally in literary works of novel, the plot structure and the events are what moves and interest the readers to continue reading it, but in *Invisible cities* the reader looks for more hints about the cities that Polo speaks of and feels the urge to continue to the end in order to find more about the cities that he describes.

Writing about cities and presenting them as the main characters might be very difficult and complex. They contain life itself, and can be described as mini worlds or

universes. Each city has history of its own and a number of details that makes it unique. The art of creating a map is hard enough to begin with, the fabric structure that differentiates each city from the other, whether it was a small town or a big city. The mood of the city and the traditions of the inhabitants, the way of living in a city is harder than creating a single character due to the immense imagination that is required to build these things harmoniously. Creating cities requires more than drawing the roads and describing the buildings, whether they were old, new, huge or mini buildings. Verbanci elaborates the fabric of the cities and explains the surrealistic nature of cities by saying:

“Cities are constantly transforming themselves, like languages, from the cosmological centrality of ancient cities to the perspective of the Renaissance individual composed in the universe, to the social, functional space of modernism, to the postmodern conception of urban fabric as fragmented, a ‘palimpsest’ of past forms superimposed upon each other. Spaces of very different worlds seem to collapse upon each other, much as the world’s commodities are assembled in the supermarket and all juxtaposed in the postmodern city.” (1)

The most important element is the mood of the city. There is a conversation between Polo and Khan states that these cities are related to Venice, the birthplace of Marco Polo, but still these cities have a distinctive features and moods as individual cities. Although Polo does not give the great khan many details, Kubla Khan can still imagine the cities and understand their architecture and moods.

There are many hidden ideas that these cities contain under their surrealistic structures. These structures can be interpreted by the reader imagination to a theme or an idea that he or she finds fitting. There is no clear ideas given behind these descriptions and they can be interpreted in many different ways, and this is what makes this work a typical postmodern work. The space that is given to the reader to involve him with the creation of the work is a postmodern technique. Another unclear

technique is using women names for the cities. The fifty five cities that Calvino invented carry all women's names (zobedia, Isaura, Octavia ...) . It might be because most great cities carry a female identity and Calvino wanted to relate these cities to that,, or it might be just a feminist attribute that Calvino made in this novel, as a message to identify the sublime female characteristics which inspires art and literature toward sensuous creativity. These interpretations are not definite because this work does not give certain answers to the reader to take; the only right answers are what the imagination of the reader suggests.

Invisible cities is the result of Calvino's lifelong interest in the city, civic values, and urban architecture, which is reflected in numerous books, both fictional and non-fictional." (Modena, 15). Through his life, Calvino travelled and lived in many cities that affected his passion. His biography is full of cities that he lived in. Some opinions regard *Invisible Cities* as a work of utopian desire and not a fictional fantasy dreams and associate it with Thomas more work or other utopian works. Other considers *invisible cities* as an effort to abandon the original concept of utopia to a more individualistic modern utopia that defies the rational concept and cherish the subjective utopia. Another approach is made by Barengi, who claims that Calvino's cities style is a mix of subjective dreams, feelings, hopes and objective messages (Modena, 8). Whether these approaches touches the heart of truth or not, the essence of such a work lays in Calvino's skills and imagination that enables him to reshape his cities into fragmented images of cities that appear to the reader as unreal cities. In the course of explaining Calvino's point of view, it is better to take a model of his work such as *Thin Cities* and try to grasp the hidden themes and ideas behind it.

3. Thin Cities

Some descriptive details can refer to social contemporary problems, but they are not a clear directed criticism, these descriptions can easily refer to the human

thoughts in general and not to the real world issues. In “Thin Cities”, we encounter five cities (Isaura–Zenobia–Armillia–Sophronia–Octavia). Each city carries unique features that separate it from the other cities and relate it in a way to Venice, and these architectural features can be interpreted as a theme or a message sent to the readers to be interpreted individually and by using the reader’s imagination.

Isaura, the city of a thousand wells, raises the question of multiple points of views. Underneath this city lies a subterranean lake, and wherever people dig a hole, water just comes out of it. The gate is related to the lake and the water moves through it, while there is columns raised to the sky carries buckets beside each of the wells, and a windmill that carries water by drilling in the lake. Polo speaks of two forms of religious point of views in this city, one of them is those who believe that the gods are underneath them feeding the streams of the lake, and others who believe the gods are in the buckets that rise in the sky as they appear to them. By this separate point of views which shows the ambiguity of the divine in the minds of the people, Calvino’s is criticising the whole system and interpretations of belief in the metaphysical world. This city is actually can be related to Venice because of the water that surrounds it. As polo himself says “Every time I describe a city,” remarks Polo to the inquisitive Kublai, “I am saying something about Venice.” (Calvino, 86)

Zenobia is the dream city for its inhabitants, although it has nothing to offer them. This city is built above earth in the air on pilings that supports the houses, these houses are built of bamboo and zinc, and there are lots of balconies and platforms in them. The whole city is linked by ladders that cross the houses. They built it high because the terrain is dry. Polo says that if you ask an inhabitant of the happy life he will definitely speak of Zenobia. He ends the description with a question related to all cities which is whether Zenobia is a happy place or not. he answers “ those that through the years and the changes continue to give their form to desires, and those in which desires either erase the city or are erased by it” (Calvino,35). A

lot can be comprehended by this statement, it can be interpreted into sticking to the ideals, conviction and the notion of believing in something by the heart whether this thing is up to the expectations or not.

The third city that Polo describes among the “Thin Cities” is Armilla. This city has no houses, ceilings, floors and normal inhabitants, it is structured by pipes vertically and horizontally, the water pipes make this city similar to Venice which is built over the water too. Nobody knows when Armilla was abandoned by humans, but Polo says that sometimes if you raise your eyes you can see a young woman or women. The water channels in the pipes belong to the nymphs and naiads that are slender and not tall in stature. In this city the maidens are enjoying themselves by showering or perfuming, combing their hair at a mirror and singing in the morning. This city was deserted by human beings, which might be due to the invasion of the nymphs or it was built as an offering to them to win their favour.

Sophronia contains two half cities. One of the sides is permanent, with the great roller coaster, steep humps, carousel and death ride motorcyclists. The other half is built with stone, marble and cement. This part contains the normal city side, with the schools, banks and factories, but each year there is a day where everything is being removed to another half city. They take down the buildings and load them on trailers. The headlong of the roller coaster starts to count the months and days that the caravans have to return and life comes back again.

Polo starts the description of the fifth city with “ if you choose to believe me, good. Now I’ll tell...”(Calvino, 75). This statement shows how the description of Octavia can be unbelievable. It is located in the air between two steep mountains; there is nothing below this city except the void. The structure of the city is of two crest nets like spider webs. It is a city of ropes, chains and catwalks. They built the houses like sacks. Everything is built upon ropes, there are cable cars, trapezes and rings for childrens’ games and clothes hangers. Polo describes this city as less

uncertain than the other cities, its inhabitants know that the net will last so long. They believe this city is safe and normal just like the rest of the cities.

Describing these cities with words might be unclear and requires great mental abilities to draw the specific details of the Cities, but having an insight to the “Thin Cities” shows how the mechanism of the *Invisible Cities* works in the mind of the reader. The visual representations of these cities are much more vivid and easier. Many painters depicted the works of Italo Calvino and painted them as they have imagined and comprehended these cities. Joe Kuth, Matt Kish and other artists painted *Invisible Cities* and posted their works on tumblr. They made a Hashtag #seeingitalocalvino to combine all the paintings related to Italo Calvino’s works. All the details that Calvino inserted in his Cities represented in the paintings of *Invisible Cities*, as if he is drawing a novel more than writing it.

In conclusion, putting the purpose of writing this novel aside, the element of Calvino’s creativity is in the invented descriptions of these cities. Whether it is directed to be in a utopian frame or written to defy rational thinking, *invisible cities* is a masterpiece in fictional writings. The cities are meant to resemble images from Venice, the homeland of Marco Polo. There is similarity between these cities and Venice, as if Polo is imagining pictures of his city and describing as he feels toward them. Calvino made the descriptions shorthanded to enable his readers to imagine these cities, or Venice, as they feel.

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