

Homecoming: Returning to Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* after 50 Years

Abstract

The articles in this special collection are a tribute to Italo Calvino and a work of fiction that has not lost its power to fascinate readers and scholars for over half a century. This special issue draws attention to how this very short work of fiction continues to serve as a source of inspiration for geographers, as well as for scholars all across the humanities and social sciences.

Keywords

Italo Calvino • Invisible Cities • fiction • geohumanities • cities

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Introduction

Revisiting Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* more than 50 years after being introduced to readers is a tribute to a work of fiction that has not lost its power to fascinate readers and scholars for a half century. Underlying this special issue is the conviction that the capacity of Calvino's *Invisible Cities* to inspire readers continues today unabated. This special issue draws attention to how Calvino's *Invisible Cities* remains a source of inspiration for any scholar trying to make sense of the city – any city – suspended between reality and imagination, as an unfolding of meanings shaped by concrete socio-spatial relationships but experienced through a semiotic system that may be no more than a figment of our collective and individual imaginations.

As human geographers, our interest in Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is self-evident. Cities are nodal points of the ecumene; their emergence and rise to prominence have been the hallmark of the civilization process and hubs of human activity and creativity. No wonder that ancient texts shroud their founding and history in myth. The Hebrew Bible tells us that Cain, who murdered his brother Abel, was also the founder of the first city (Genesis 4:17). Homer's *Iliad* is about the siege and the sacking of the mighty city of Troy.

A main attraction of Calvino's rather thin volume is how skillfully its playful and fanciful vignettes of 55 cities fundamentally challenge accepted, ostensibly common-sensical views on how cities can and should be viewed by directing our attention to their invisibility—all that we feel, remember, and imagine that has no substance. Perhaps there is a parallel between Calvino's work and that of cosmologists who grapple with the idea of 'dark matter'. Contrary to normal matter, dark matter does not interact with electromagnetic fields and hence does not emit, reflect or absorb light and hence cannot be 'seen' in the sense that it cannot be detected by light-measuring instruments. Or maybe his concern is stealth, to disguise or hide meaning, like some military technologies that render airplanes invisible to radar.

In the worlds of fantasy or science fiction, invisibility is a power attained through magic or pseudo-science. A cloak of invisibility is a magical device, as Xenophilius Lovegood describes it in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*: "We are

talking about a cloak that really and truly renders the wearer completely invisible, and endures eternally, giving constant and impenetrable concealment, no matter what spells are cast at it." In popular imagination, invisibility is the promise of invincibility. Published in 1897, H. G. Wells' science fiction novel *The Invisible Man* tells of a scientist who devises a way to change the refractive index (in optics: n) of a body to be that of air so that no light is refracted or absorbed. He successfully applied the method to himself and became invisible, but failed to reverse the procedure. The protagonist then exploits his predicament to commit cruel crimes. After being beaten to death by an enraged mob, his corpse becomes visible again, but only after being covered by a policeman.

In popular imagination invisible cities are akin to the lost cities that populate the realm of legend, myth, fantasy and magic. Eldorado and its purported riches have been an enduring quest. Sodom and Gomorrah, destroyed by the wrath of God, survive only as a cautionary tale. But even these lost cities can find new life and visibility, as has the Russian legend of Kitezh, a city said to have vanished beneath Lake Svetloyar in central Russia during the early 13th century. Under attack by the Mongol Golden Horde, the defenseless residents prayed for salvation, and disappeared beneath the lake before they could be murdered by the Tatars. The legend originated in an anonymous book written in the late 18th century, but the visibility of Kitezh's invisibility has continued to grow in art and popular culture ever since. Based on the legend, the Russian composer Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's opera – his last – *The Legend of the City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya*, was completed in 1905 and debuted in St. Petersburg in 1907. Or, more recently, Kitezh is rediscovered in the 2015 video game, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, by the hero Lara Croft.

What captured our attention while revisiting Calvino's *Invisible Cities* was the sense that the author's main concern in dealing with the inherent invisibility of cities – glaringly visible in the book's title – is how to make the invisible visible. Framed as a travelogue, Calvino's vignettes toy playfully with this genre. Rather than the fabulous stories of the original *Travels of Marco Polo* that seemed to have combined fact and fiction, Calvino's accounts are really meditations on memory and forgetting, life

and death, imagination and actualities, reality and appearances, desires and regrets, views and points of view, visions and divisions, permanence and transience, and human experience most broadly. Calvino's concern is with the city as observed in the eyes and the mind's eye of residents and visitors who may never have visited the city.

Calvino's implicit argument is that there is a fundamental discrepancy between what the city looks like and what it seems to be, between what it is and what it purports to be. In this sense, invisibility is not a quality of the city but the result of our own blindness. However, this is not the loss of eyesight, but is perhaps better described as selective vision, or selective visual attention: what happens when we are so familiar, or jaded, with our lifeworlds that we no longer pay attention to what we see. The city is taken for granted and recedes into the background of our perceptions, thereby becoming practically invisible to the (minds)eye. In a 1927 essay on monuments the Austrian writer Robert Musil observed: "The remarkable thing about monuments is that one does not notice them. There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument." This is true of other features of the physical environment and ideational assumptions that are constitutive of culture and are taken for granted as an aspect of the natural order of things. Viewed in this way, Calvino's subversive objective is to restore visibility to that which has faded into invisibility.

At another level of interpretation, invisibility is a semiotic feature of the conversation between Marco Polo and the Emperor Kublai Khan. The explorer describes 55 cities that belong to the imperial realm. Those cities are 'invisible' not in the sense that they magically disappeared or were obliterated from the face of the earth leaving no traces behind, but because they are too far away to be seen by Polo and Khan. Simply put, invisibility is the result of the limitations imposed by the vantage point afforded by the place — the imperial garden — where the conversation takes place, and with the sadness of knowing that, with all his power, Khan's empire will always remain invisible to him.

In this respect, the underlying distinction is between the cities that are visible and the cities that are reported (Calvino, p. 67). Being reported by Marco Polo, invisible cities are summoned by their verbal descriptions and recreated in words. In the words of Marco Polo:

No one, wise Kublai, knows better than you that the city must never be confused with the words that describe it. And yet between the one and the other there is a connection. (Calvino, p. 61).

Calvino maintains that the relation between words and the things they describe is essentially prone to deception and that falsehood reigns supreme. At one point he asserts that "There is no language without deceit." (Calvino, p. 48); later, however, he claims that "Falsehood is never in words; it is in things" (Calvino, p. 62). These two claims are obviously contradictory but evince the idea that it is inherently impossible for language to relate the truth about the things that populate the world. Using words is essential for describing things that are hidden from sight, but the insights that words convey are always susceptible to be mistrusted as a mere point of view or be dismissed as an exaggeration, perhaps even a lie. Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is also a cautionary tale about the limited capacity of words to lift the veil of invisibility.

We are fortunate to have six articles inspired by *Invisible Cities* that pursue these ideas in varied directions. In "From Invisibility towards justice," Manisha Desai provides a detailed analysis of the Right to Pee (RTP) campaign in Mumbai, India, an effort advocating for women's rights to safe, clean, and accessible public toilets. The campaign has highlighted the

broader gendered perspective on sanitation and its implications for women's rights in urban spaces, particularly Dalit and Bahujan women whose lower caste status and gender make their rights invisible within Indian society. The article traces the progress of the RTP movement from facing initial frustrations to securing recognition and commitments from higher government officials. This recognition was critical to getting sanitation issues included in city and state policies. The RTP campaign has also had broader successes, particularly the inclusion of gender-sensitive approaches to other urban plans and policies. Yet Desai also touches on the challenges that remain, such as sustaining collaborations, ensuring government accountability, and maintaining public attention on sanitation issues. Despite these challenges, the RTP campaign is portrayed as a significant force in reshaping the discourse on urban sanitation, women's rights, and the lived realities of marginalized communities in the city.

Within her paper, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* serves as a metaphor for the ongoing struggle to recognize and preserve the elements of the city that offer hope and dignity for residents amidst the "inferno" of urban challenges. In her closing thoughts Desai suggests a possible reconceptualization of public space that acknowledges the importance of the values and aspirations of the poor and migrant communities. The RTP campaign, while grounded in the language of rights and gender discrimination, still does not fully address the complexities of caste, indicating the multifaceted nature of urban inequalities. The campaign's efforts are framed as part of a broader, riskier path towards enduring positive change, symbolized by the "swallows" in contrast to the "rats" of the city, echoing Calvino's reflections on the persistence of hope and justice in urban spaces.

Danielle Drozdowski's "How memory embeds in the city" explores how memories are marked in material form in the urban landscape of Kraków within its Planty, the park created from what was once its medieval moat. Her focus is the connection between affect and object as manifest in the many monuments and markers found in the Planty. In her exploration, she draws parallels between Calvino's narrative style and the representation of two of this park's monuments. These are monuments to Grażyna (from a poem by Adam Mickiewicz) and Lilla Weneda (from a drama by Juliusz Słowacki), characters and literary figures deeply embedded in the fabric of Polish Romantic nationalism. The first part of Drozdowski's analysis focuses on the physical and symbolic characteristics of these monuments, while the second part considers how they are perceived by contemporary passers-by, drawing on survey data to understand their visibility and impact on national consciousness. She sees in these memorials a complex interplay of visibility and invisibility, in which national narratives are both present, yet somewhat obscured from view. In effect, she is posing the question of whether the proliferation of memory markers might actually lead to forgetfulness. She also considers whether these monuments, which are part of the everyday landscape, still maintain their intended link between the past and present or if they become invisible elements of the urban environment. In the end, Drozdowski suggests that even when a city's material markers of memory are intended to preserve and communicate historical consciousness, there is a risk that they may become unnoticed or taken for granted and slip into invisibility within everyday cityscapes. She leaves open the question of what cultural practices might prevent this slippage.

"Cities on the edge, cities of enchantment" by Matthias Egeler and Dagrún Ósk Jónsdóttir focuses on the themes of storytelling, enchantment, and human dwelling in *Invisible Cities*, drawing connections to the geographical and cultural worlds of Iceland's Strandir region. They see *Invisible Cities* as less about cities than about the art of storytelling, and it is this stress on storytelling that

anticipated important developments in humanistic geography, geocriticism, and the geohumanities. He recognized the importance of storytelling to create a sense of place as well as to Heidegger's conception of the close connection between building, dwelling, and being. The authors see Calvino's work remaining just as relevant today as it ever was. As Egeler and Jónsdóttir argue, this relevance is especially true in regions like Strandir where human habitation is dwindling, making it difficult for those who remain to sustain a sense of place, dwelling or being. In this situation, Egeler and Jónsdóttir see value in Calvino's allusions to enchantment and the supernatural. Indeed, many of the cities described by Calvino are steeped in the supernatural, with gods and otherworldly beings playing significant roles. Egeler and Jónsdóttir argue that this enchantment need not be confined to grand cities, but can also be found in remote, sparsely populated regions like Strandir.

Using Brúará as an example, the authors describe the rich tapestry of folklore and storytelling that surround this farm. Its entire landscape is imbued with stories of elves and hidden people, a parallel world of beings living in rocks near human farms. These beings are similar to humans in many ways, but are surrounded by magical, enchanting auras. In the end, Egeler and Jónsdóttir argue that even in the most remote and crumbling settlements, the act of storytelling and the use of enchantment helps sustain a sense of place and dwelling. At the same time, modern technologies such as electricity seems to be driving these hidden people further and further away from humans. This idea about the impact of technology also resonates with some of the dystopian stories Marco Polo relates, like Berenice, where all enchantment has vanished, or those examined by Manisha Desai and Hadas Shadar in their articles in this special issue. Egeler and Jónsdóttir suggest that to reclaim a lost sense of enchantment, one must "reset oneself with nature," a process that aligns with the need to reconnect with the environment. The article concludes by noting that it is the broad human need to create meaning and connection through storytelling that makes Calvino's observations "both valid and timely well beyond the time and place of his day."

Hadas Shadar's "The Planning and the Architecture of Modern Beersheba" is a close reading of *Cities & the Sky 2*, a story that more than any of the others in the book an allegory about a real place, Beersheba in the Negev Desert of Israel. Shadar provides a close reading of the planning and architecture of Beersheba as a means of reflecting on the city's dual nature between what Calvino calls "celestial" ideal and "infernal" reality. A key to her argument is a concise, well-crafted account of Beersheba's planning history. She notes that the city's layout can be traced back to its Ottoman origins in which a grid pattern was employed to impose order and control, a practice continued under British rule. Later Israeli plans were heavily influenced by Zionist ideals and Western urban planning concepts, such as the Garden City movement of the early twentieth century and the rise of Brutalist architecture beginning in the 1950s. These Israeli planners envisioned a lush, self-sustaining city that would defy its arid environment. However, this vision often proved impractical, as the city's design struggled to accommodate the desert's demands and the socio-economic realities of its diverse population. In essence, each step planners took to make Beersheba a celestial city was countered by a host of infernal challenges. Shadar's story underscores the persistent tension between the lofty goals of urban planners and the lived experiences of urban dwellers. Shadar ultimately calls for a deeper understanding and appreciation of the values inherent in Beersheba's architectural legacy, recognizing that what might be seen as infernal on the surface could actually embody deeper human truths. At a broader level, she sees Beersheba's architectural evolution as mirroring

broader struggles between idealism and pragmatism in urban planning and design.

Quentin Stevens's "Displaced memories: Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya," explores the relationship between the two capital cities of Malaysia, through the lens of Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Stevens discusses how these two cities represent different aspects of Malaysian identity, history, and memory, and examines their contrasting aesthetics and symbolism. Kuala Lumpur, the original capital, emerged from a colonial mining town into a bustling metropolis that reflects a mix of British, Chinese, and Indian influences. Over time, its commemorative sites, like the national memorials, have been moved and transformed to reflect shifting national identity and historical narratives. Putrajaya, the newer, planned capital, was developed in the 1990s as an administrative hub centered around an artificial lake. The contrast between these cities is examined in terms of aesthetics, symbolism, and their roles in shaping Malaysian identity. The cities are metaphorically compared to Calvino's concept of "Twofold Cities," where cities are seen as twins, reflecting each other's virtues and flaws, and embodying the complex interplay of history, memory, and identity. Stevens draws parallels between the duality of these cities and the broader themes of memory, identity, and the interplay between the visible and invisible in urban spaces.

Maoz Azaryahu's chapter "Invisible cities and their name(s): Insights into the (in)correctness of names" explores the relationship between names and the objects they represent, focusing on the concept that "he who knows names knows also the things which are expressed by them." Using *Invisible Cities* as a reference, he argues that while names often function as mere labels, there is a deep and complex connection between names and their objects. Calvino highlights some of these complexities between the visible and invisible, the reported and experienced, but also how language, despite its limitations and potential for deceit, attempts to capture and convey the essence of reality. The "invisible" cities are not seen but are understood through the language used to describe them, reflecting on the connection between language and the world. Here Azaryahu draws on Plato's *Cratylus*, the debate over whether names are arbitrary and assigned by convention, or have a natural connection to the objects they denote.

To pursue this idea, Azaryahu focuses on the five cities belonging to the thematic group "Cities and Names": Aglaura, Leandra, Pyrrha, Clarice, and Irene. Each example reveals a different aspect of the relationship between a city and its name. Azaryahu's main argument is that the underlying theme of these five commentaries is the ostensible inadequacy of names to capture the complexity and dynamism of cities. This means that unlike *Cratylus*, who maintains that names seek to perfectly align with their objects, Calvino's cities embody multiplicity and change, making names misleading and insufficient as "rigid designators." Names suggest a permanence and coherence that does not exist since cities are constantly in flux and their identities unstable. Indeed, at the end of his essay Azaryahu reflects on Marco Polo's comment that whereas names on maps give the illusion of distinctiveness, in reality, cities become indistinguishable one from another, until they all seem like Venice, his home.

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