

Illustrating Alternative Urban Imaginaries*

Luise Vormittag, 2016

In Italo Calvino's book *Invisible Cities* the emperor Kublai Khan receives Marco Polo, the Venetian explorer, who recounts his voyages to fantastical cities. The cities are rendered as poetic miniatures, hardly longer than one page each, that conjure up places governed by peculiar and idiosyncratic laws and customs: cities, that appear both cursed and enchanted, where streets are repeated ad infinitum, cities made up entirely of signs, cities where girls stroll down a lane with a puma on a leash, cities wrestling with constant voluptuous forces of renewal and destruction.

In fact it is not entirely clear if the exchange between Marco Polo and the Emperor is actually taking place, or if it is being imagined by one of the characters. The book situates itself in a hallucinatory space where the fictitious nature of reality and the truthfulness of fiction blur into one another. The cities described are philosophically abstract fantasies, but they are also realistic and truthful renderings of the images, stories and legends we harbour when imagining cities: our own cities, cities we have visited in the past and cities we might visit at some point in the future. We recognise ourselves and the places we inhabit as we journey through the book.

The title *Invisible Cities* suggests that the places described by Marco Polo evade sight, evade being pictured. This begs the broader question if or how cities can actually ever be seen and depicted. Clearly no city can ever be grasped in its totality by a single person or image.

There are public discourses, public signifying and picturing practices that suggest and regulate urban narratives. For example the 'hero shot' of the Shanghai skyline (incidentally located on former territory of Kublai Khan), produced in 2008 before the skyscrapers on the right were built, works to create an image of a dynamic, self-confident and prosperous city (Campkin, Mogilevich & Ross 2014). This image looks like a photograph, but is actually a composite – a fiction – an imagined and hoped-for future.

Set against these practices, are other narratives that emerge from more individualised cognitive, bodily and emotional experiences and memories.

Below top: Gensler, Shanghai, 2008

See Campkin, B., Mogilevich, M. & Ross, R. (2014) for their thoughtful analysis of this image, published as part of their Guardian Cities series Picturing Place. Available [HERE](#).

Below bottom: Allies & Morrison's Elephant & Castle plans, 2016



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Urban imaginaries make up a city's lived reality. They are complex and partial visions of a place, that are continuously constructed and re-constructed in the dynamic that arises between public signifying and picturing practices on the one hand and private knowledge, experiences and memories on the other. 'Imaginary' here is not a fabrication or falsity but a creation and imagining; perhaps also imaging and picturing.

It is poignant to note how similar the words 'imaginary' and 'imagery' are. Undoubtedly image-making practices intervene in and contribute to the production of urban imaginaries. I am interested in how critical image-makers might be able to make something visible, and thereby open up a discursive space to engage with alternative imaginaries.

But how does one illustrate the invisible?

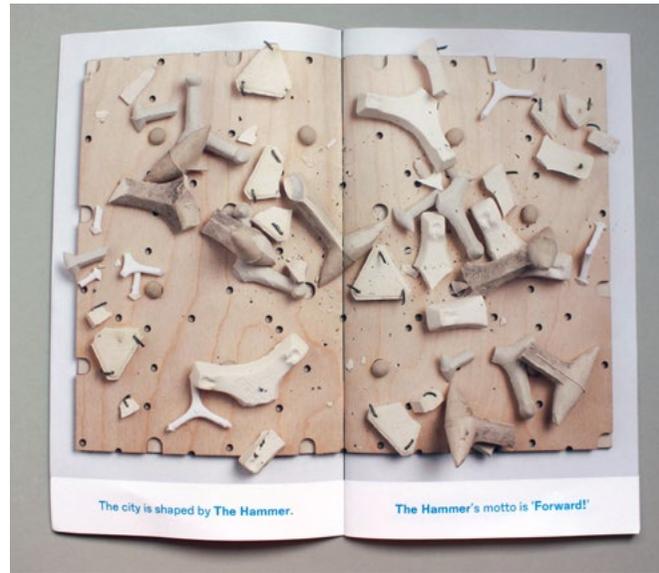
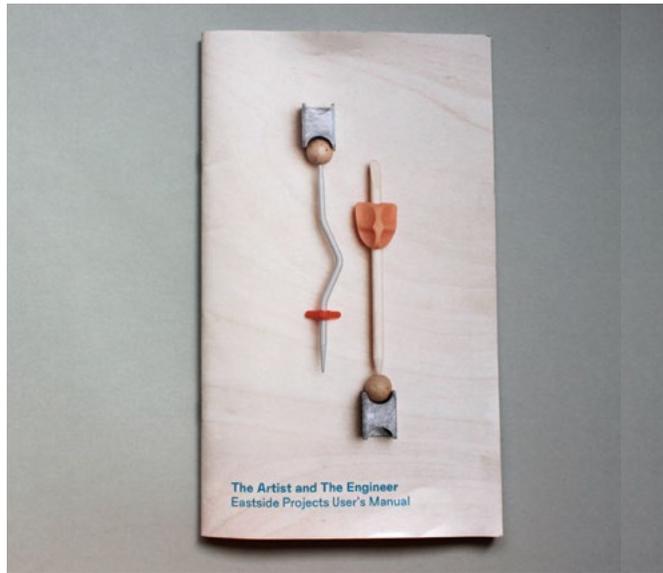
Invisible Cities Made Visible 1: *Disruptions*

There is a lineage of so-called 'conceptual architects' working in the 1960s, 70s and 80s whose work mainly consisted of radically re-imagining and picturing place in order to stimulate debate. Groups such as **Archigram**, **Superstudio** and **NATØ** didn't participate in the usual business of architecture by planning and constructing buildings. Instead their work took the form of illustrated, semi-fictional urban imaginaries in editorial-style presentations (such as periodicals and books), the circulation of which was intended to provoke discussions on the role and responsibility of the discipline of architecture. They tend to use fictional elements in their work, often devising speculative 'what if...' scenarios to underpin their projects, sometimes imagining provocative and extreme future scenarios (e.g. **Archigram's** *Instant City*).

Left: Archigram Instant City (1964). Airships and hot air balloons transport urban centres into rural areas, exposing these communities to the joys of urban living.

Right: Superstudio, image from: The Continuous Monument: an Architectural Model for Total Urbanization (1969-1970). Modernist architectural principles taken to an extreme: all architecture is created with a single act.





The discussions this work provoked at the time tended to remain in academic (AA) and specialist art- and design circles. I am curious about how this tradition of giving visual form to fictional urban imaginaries might work if we include a broader range of voices. Is it possible to open up a discursive space that extends beyond the subject-specific intellectual network that these architectural practitioners were part of?

Invisible Cities Made Visible 2: *Continuous Cities*

Marco Polo describes the city of Leonia:

The City of Leonia refashions itself every day: every morning the people wake between fresh sheets, wash with just-unwrapped cakes of soap, wear brand-new clothing, take from the latest-model refrigerator still unopened tins, listening to the last-minute jingles, from the most up-to-date radio. (Calvino 1997: 114)

Eastside Projects in Birmingham is both the name of a gallery space and a group of practitioners who since 2008 work at the intersection of art, architecture and graphic design. One of their general guiding principles is that an environment should preserve a record of its past action. When it was revealed that an old local library building was going to be knocked down in preparation for the erection of a new one, this planned erasure of an existing site acted as a catalyst for the production of *The Artist and the Engineer* (2013), an illustrated booklet which proposes to put this principle of additive layering at the core of a new urban planning policy for Birmingham. In the simple

Eastside Projects with Peter Nencini The Artist and the Engineer (2014), booklet proposing an alternative urban planning philosophy to the city of Birmingham via an illustrated story.

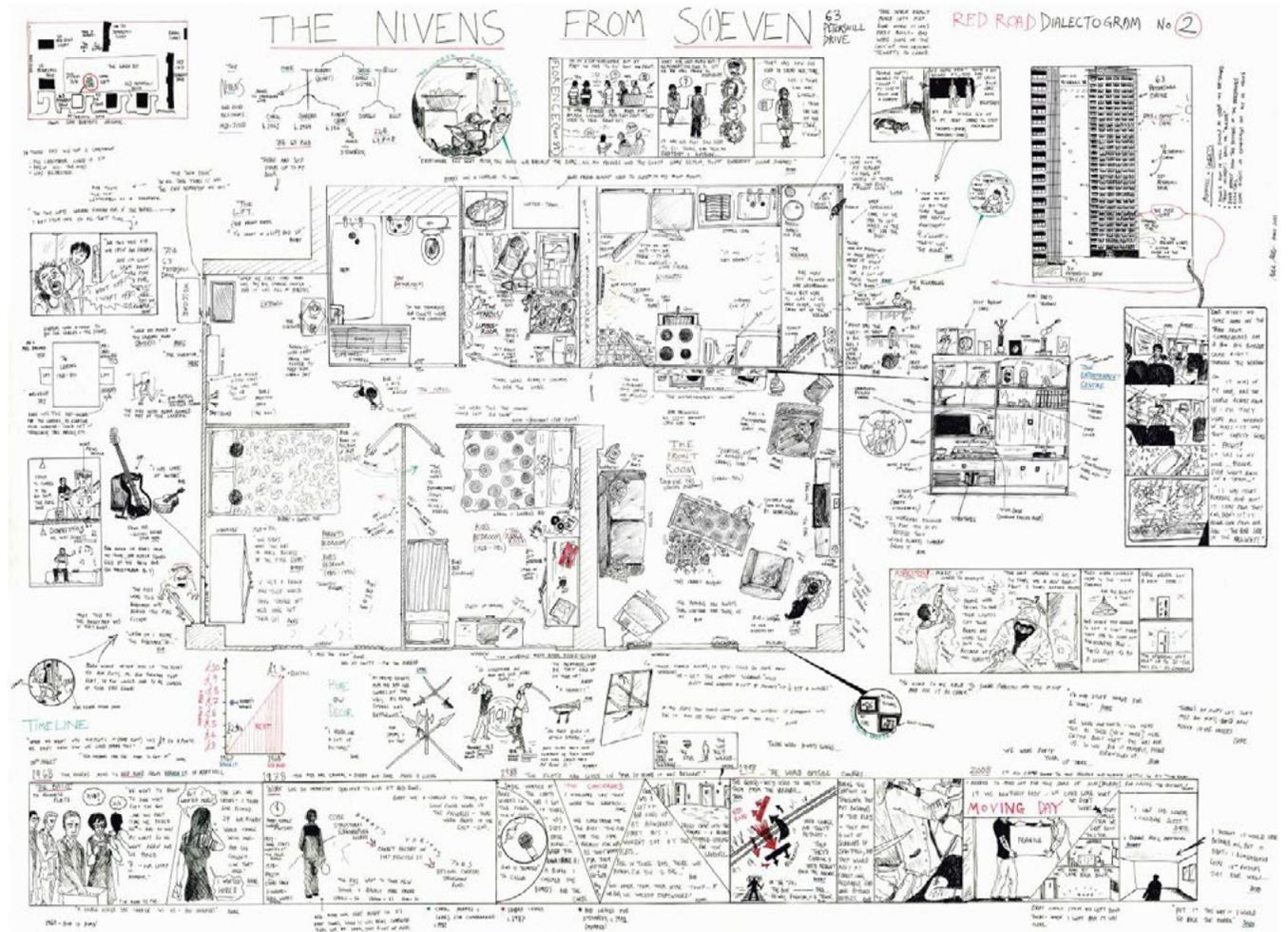
language of a children's book it tells the story of a dispute between the figures that appear on the coat of arms of the City of Birmingham: the artist, the engineer and the anthropomorphised hammer. At the end of the story these three characters agree to change the motto of the city from 'Forward!' to 'Layered!'. Illustrator **Peter Nencini** created visually striking models to illustrate the booklet. Photographs of these models are placed alongside the text. In Nencini's images urban development does not erase its past, but uses the principles of accumulation and layering to build up a 'legible' environment.

Cities are here conceived as continuous, an archive that is constantly being added to. The urban planner becomes the archivist, working to make the city legible.

Invisible Cities Made Visible 3: *City & memory*

Glasgow-based illustrator **Mitch Miller** has established a form of illustration he calls the *dialectogram* (Miller 2015) where he blends ethnographic research methods with architectural and comic-book drawing conventions to create dense, large-scale illustrations of marginal urban sites facing erasure. His work visualises otherwise invisible social relations, perceptions and habitual uses of a place resulting in a graphic palimpsest of spatially grounded stories.

The illustrations demonstrate the richness and complexity of marginal spaces, thereby challenging the myth of terra nullius, often employed when these sites are earmarked for redevelopment. In Miller's multi-phased process a selfselecting group of participants repeatedly negotiates the nature of a given site with him and each other. An empty



framework in the form of a roughly drawn architectural blueprint is gradually populated with Miller's drawings of collectively and personally held views, stories and experiences relating to the location. What is included and how things are represented is repeatedly debated during meetings where participants gather around the gradually emerging illustration.

Miller's dialectograms illustrate what the city is: a dense cacophony of voices and visions, layered on top of one another, a palimpsest of experiences, perspectives and memories. The architectural and the personal are interwoven in a nuanced and arresting representation that seeks to do justice to the heterogeneous complexity of a place.

Left: Mitch Miller's studio

Above: Mitch Miller: *The Nivens from S(i)even* (Red Road, Glasgow) (2011)
A reconstruction of the family home occupied for over forty years by Bob Niven and his family. Pencil and ink on mountboard, 1189mm x 841mm.

Invisible Cities Made Visible 4: *Awakening desire*

Rather than drawing out what is, Welsh designer [Hefin Jones](#) is interested in creating imag(inari)es of what could be. *Cosmic Colliery* (2015) is a work which mainly consists of immaterial elements: ideas and propositions that were circulated, expanded upon, and transformed via a web of social situations and relations involving a range of local individuals and groups. The project saw Jones circulating a proposal to repurpose a dilapidated colliery in the South Wales Valleys as an international astronaut training facility – a fantasy built on the insight that some of the structural properties of the disused mines would readily lend themselves to be adapted for this use. Participants were invited to creatively engage with this suggestion, drawing on their existing skills to augment and transform the original proposal. The project acted as a catalyst to positively reassess the region's identity as an ex-mining community; an

identity that the community has often struggled to engage with in a productive and positive light. The majority of participants appreciated the fictional nature of the proposal as a creative prompt to reenergise their thinking about the area, alter perceptions and introduce a sense of optimism and possibility.

Hefin's work creates a framework of desire, inviting participants to project themselves into that frame. His work is a collective hallucination, of what could, what might be. He draws on the locality's history, and suggests alternative futures. Something that is under ground, is catapulted up into the sky, into outer space even.

Cosmic Colliery provides an opportunity to picture a wildly different landscape, which in turn enabled the community to collectively engage in radically divergent imaginaries for their region.

Closing remarks:

Like their architect predecessors [Eastside Projects](#), [Mitch Miller](#) and [Hefin Jones](#) maintain their strong authorial impulse and idiosyncratic vision while successfully integrating wider social circles into their work. They produce striking visions for alternative urban imaginaries set within a framework that encourages and allows for a multiplicity of voices.

They bring *Invisible Cities* to light: Calvino's fantastical urban abstractions are made visible as the cities we are already inhabiting with our bodies and harbouring as fantasies in our minds.

[Eastside Projects](#) suggest that a rich city is one that embodies its own archive, [Mitch Miller](#) articulates the social complexities that weave themselves in and around material structures and [Hefin Jones](#) uses fictional concepts to awaken desire and inspire ambitious and divergent thinking for regional development.

All three models participate in the social production of locality. Unstructured and formerly unarticulated imaginaries are given form, made into images and stories. Invisible cities are made visible.



Hefin Jones Cosmic Colliery (2015): Manifesto writing workshop with members of the Ystrad Mynach Boys and Girls Club.

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