

# The Invisible City: Exploring the Third Something of Urban Life

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## Abstract

With this article I intend to contribute to the debate about how to study urban life. Firstly, I argue for the relevance of invisible and silent aspects of cities and in-between sutures, which I understand to mean a third ‘something’ beyond forms and flows. Secondly, I explore several examples and draw on arguments from Wittgenstein and Lefebvre to frame this hypothesis. Thirdly, I use the chess game as a metaphor to illustrate the multiplicity and unpredictability of engagements of urban life. Finally, I propose to approach cities in an open-ended and ordinary way, paying attention to dialectically interconnected processes and the particular conditions of possibility for knowledge.

**Keywords:** Calvino; Perec; Wenders; Wittgenstein; Complexity; Chess Game.

He thought: 'if each city is like a game of chess, the day when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my empire'

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1974: 121).

## Urban Gambit

In the study of urban life, colleagues and students often emphasize one of the multiple aspects of the city and from that they make further generalisations. Dimensions that commonly receive their attention are architectural forms and infrastructures, motions and flows, and human interactions and tactics. Concerned with this issue, I propose to approach cities as composed of inner grammars and made of dialectically interconnected processes. Like a language, or the game of chess, cities are rule-bound and with a diachronic (historic process) and synchronic order (simultaneity). The point that I want to argue is that the experience of a city is always open-ended and its very practice transcends the parts that compose it, its norms and elements, of if you prefer its forms and flows.

What might initially appear as separated 'facts' of urban life are presented here as part of the whole urbanity. Therefore, I argue for the relevance of approaches that attempt to show the invisible and silent aspects of urban life and explore the conditions of possibility for knowing the city. To do this, I propose, first, to focus on interactions and interconnected processes (the city as an experience, not as an object); second, to account for the grammars beyond rules and flows, the urban knots, sutures and social facts that make the city; third, to use the chess game as a metaphor

One of my postulates is that the understanding of urban life is always limited and based on conditions of possibility. The totality of the city is something established by individuals, yet individuals are never able to see the city in its totality. In this line, I propose to study the grammars and in-between sutures as well as the limits for viable understandings. The conception and practice of the city lay in distinct constellations of meaning that cannot be separated from the emotions and situations. If I attempt to show how a square is inhabited in Lisbon, Tallinn, Havana or Alma Ata, I have to describe the encompassing emotions, awkward experiences, and unintended uses that I found as well as my own position. If I do not – if I rely only upon depictions of architectural forms, designs, or categories – I refer rather to a postcard than to a lived space.

Conjunctions and disjunctions, grammars and sutures, belong to the wholeness of the city, functioning as a third infrastructure between urban forms and flows. As Filip de Boeck argues, inhabiting the urban resists linear mapping and requires strategies of amalgamation. In de Boeck's view, the city is a polymorphic form based on urban knots that simultaneously conduct and disjunct (2013). AbdouMalig Simone describes them as 'networks of concrete becoming' (2002:

24) and ‘spectral order of things’ (2004: 92) that form the social infrastructures of the city.

The city contains many features and elements, and simply cataloguing them or their mobility is not enough to define the specific qualities of urban life or to understand their practices and inner grammars and regimes of knowledge. Hence, I find it necessary that any attempt to show the wholeness of a lived space must strive to transcend from the elements and norms that constitute it and do so in an open-ended way. After framing this hypothesis through a literature review, I expose several examples that illustrate such methodology and enable us to decipher the contradictions of urban life, often invisible and silent.

### **Oasis versus Desert**

Cities are a never ending process, a constant fight between the oasis and the desert. They deploy an edge logic, a sort of ‘theatre of rise and fall’ (de Boeck 2013) unfolded by bringing dissimilar persons into proximity and, by doing so, conceding a second, third, an near infinity of possibilities of re-creation. As asserted by de Boeck, cities have a mounting and elusive quality (2002: 58) that provokes a need for sutures between discourses, representations, actions and structures.

Kinshasa cannot be understood without reflecting upon reflection, upon reflecting realities, mirrors, images, imitation, imagination, and (self) representation... a series of kaleidoscopic, multiple, but simultaneously existing, worlds. Each of these micro cities constantly reflects the others, though this reflection is not always symmetrical.  
(de Boeck 2002: 17-18)

A city does not exist 'in itself' - it is produced. A city is an abstraction that “becomes true” in economic, political, and cultural practices; a social fact (Stanek 2008: 62-63). As noted by Nigel Rapport (1987), the dwellers of a city, as members of a community, they share grammars, manifested in common turn-taking, speech distortions, etiquettes, use of silence, and space performativity. Their interaction is, therefore, a regular sequence of mutual interpretations; a shared language that provides a fund of forms and cases, which individuals adapt to their communicational purposes (Rapport 1993). In this sense, the study of urban life is not reducible to roads and maps, but depends also on the observation of utterances, the ways in which people and places are associated, even of fantasies and charms. If interconnected processes and their particular grammars are ignored, then neither knowledge of roads and houses, nor knowledge of mobilities are sufficient to understand the city.

People agree in the language they use: this is agreement in form of life not opinions.  
(Wittgenstein 1986: §241).

Data and technocratic studios help us to know the elements of the city, but not necessarily to understand urban life. Likewise, the knowledge of the rules and norms prevailing in the city implies nothing about the way in which they are

obeyed, ignored or distorted (similarly, knowledge of the movements of each figure in chess does not make one a good chess player). Discovering the conditions of possibility does not entail knowledge of meanings – just of the conditions. This knowledge is nonetheless relevant when complemented with the study of social practices and situated experiences.

In order to better express and show these ideas, I draw support from the literary works of Georges Perec and Italo Calvino; the cinema of Wim Wenders; the art of Flo Kasearu, Antti Laitinen, Jeremy Woods and Anne Vatén; and research done by Pille Runnel and Ehti Järv. These works explore both the in-between sutures of urban life and the conditions of possibility for knowing their city. While studying and representing a slippery, interactive, and contingent totality such as the city, I can merely produce limited forms of knowledge that are always conditioned by cultural reflections, psychological states, political relations, historical circumstances and physical surroundings.

As Doreen Massey suggests, it is more difficult to verbalise the social significance of the city than the physical one. For instance, the intangible qualities of the city vary depending on the area in which the person or group is located. They are, thus, inter-subjective and experiential (Massey et al. 1999: 6). By this she refers to a multiplicity of engagements, meaningful in their ordinary character. In this line, Henri Lefebvre remarked that the city is first and foremost determined by the actions taking place in this space, which led him to argue that urban life may be expressed, but cannot be explained by a discourse. Furthermore, the city is acted rather than read – it has texture rather than text (Lefebvre 1991; Laanemets 2002).

For Lefebvre, a space is a social product that includes not only materiality but also a thought concept and experience. In his influential *The Production of Space* (1974/1991), Lefebvre postulates a three-dimensional analysis of spatial production: 1. Spatial practice: the material dimension of social activity and interaction. 2. The representation of space: discursive interpretations, definitions and descriptions. 3. Spaces of representation: processes of sense making. These dimensions, or moments, exist in a state of uncertainty, as approximations that denote at once individual and social processes and are dialectically interconnected (Schmid 2008: 29-39).

Overall, the city is a space where interactions and encounters happen in an intense way. In this sense, Jennifer Robinson (2006) criticises the world cities literature for its emphasis upon the narrowing of concepts and models that entail hierarchical relations. Robinson argues that the binary of innovation-imitation must be broken down. Instead, all cities should be looked at as ‘ordinary’, with their own inner logics and local appropriations and distortions. In her view, all cities are places that have innovative and dynamic aspects as well as challenges and barriers. Hence, she proposes to compare the dynamics of multiple cities and see how the reasons for urban outcomes diverge significantly across different contexts.

This line of thought contradicts two widespread spatial theories, namely the ‘architectural Deluzism’ (Spencer 2011) that argues that the complexities and the dynamism of contemporary life cannot be cast into the simple forms, precludes the establishment of any fixed patterns of occupation, favours structures without a hierarchical structure and produces a space whereby the subject is compelled towards a nomadic and flexible disposition; and the postmodern ‘thirdspace’ (Soja 1996) that postulates the autonomous existence of three spaces (physical, mental and social) privileging the third as the one from where all space can be grasped and understood. On the contrary, the third ‘something’ explored in this article does not appear as separated from other dimensions of urban life, or distinct, but rather ordinary, mutually alterable and experiential.

Nowadays, urban planning and economic criteria dominate the scientific treatment of the city (Nawratek 2012; Krivý 2012; Martínez 2013). However, focusing only on global networks, city labelling, and attraction of the so called ‘creative class’ entails, as Amin and Thrift (2002) remark, a danger of underplaying the significance of other aspects of urban experience that help to define cities. Indeed the city is outside of anyone’s control. No-one is able to encapsulate urban life in any definitive form or label that might keep the rest of the people in line and turn-off world phenomena. In this line, Simone stresses the provisionality, heterogeneity and unpredictability of urban life. He characterizes cities as ‘huge intersections of bodies in need’ (2004: 3); ‘the conjunction of seemingly endless possibilities of remaking’ (2004: 9); ‘densities of stories, passions, hurts, revenge, aspiration, avoidance, deflection, and complicity’ (2004: 11) and ‘places of thickening connections’ (2004: 137).

## Philosophy in the City

At this point Wittgenstein’s insights into the language use and the human production of meaning can prove helpful. Wittgenstein claims that intentions, wishes and desires do not belong to norms and perceptions, but to expression – they can be spoken and enacted but not specified in single terms. As he states:

I can know what someone else is thinking, not what I am thinking. It is correct to say ‘I know what you are thinking’, and wrong to say ‘I know what I am thinking’. (A whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a drop of grammar).

(Wittgenstein 1986: Iixi 2\*26)

Wittgenstein postulated that our capacity to communicate relies upon basic rules practiced between persons, rather than on the exactitude of our sentences. These rules and terms refer to an out-there ‘reality’, yet in contrast they freeze its becoming and complexity. From this, we can infer that anything that has meaning does not necessarily belong to language, and that language-games – actions in which the language is woven and played – approach contingent ‘realities’ in a more precise way, showing knowledge ‘within’ the real, rather than ‘of’ the real.

Indeed, the practice of human language does not fit exactly into any formal system and depends on many non-linguistic aspects.

Following these insights, Wittgenstein further argues that the limits of language can only be experienced, not taught or read, and that thoughts are not without context, which generates the need to attend carefully to the use of words and their placing. In this sense, he states: 'the limits of my language mean the limits of my world' (1974: 5.6). Here Wittgenstein confronts us with the idea that language limits our experience of the world, as well as making the world accessible and ordered. Thus, language imposes a constraint that is at once enabling and disabling. Forms are certainly restrictive, but they have the ability of representation, reproduction and combination.<sup>1</sup>

With the aim of demonstrating the difference between a hypothesis and a rule, Wittgenstein asks the reader to consider all the situations in which we would accept the proposition that 'there is a hippopotamus in our room' (1982). His conclusion is that this depends on what we take to be the exact meaning of 'hippopotamus'; in a metaphorical way it could refer to a fat individual, or to an awkward person; or it could be merely encapsulated in a picture of the 'river horse'; or it could be named and then created in a maieutic way. In spite of their limitations, we need forms and contexts to give sense to our experiences. It is, however, the very existence of the world which escapes language.<sup>2</sup> Hence, I can say that words solidify urban life, whilst language games follow urban life. Language in general, and language games in particular, are situated in the middle of rules and flows, forms and contents.

After acknowledging these limitations, Wittgenstein urges that descriptions should be embedded in life by following the play of language. This move has several implications: first, the rejection of perfect representations, since all forms are grounded on resemblances and dissimilarities;<sup>3</sup> second, the study of language games, since they focus on action rather than on falsehood; third, that language-games should be understood as the very forms articulated in life, as the constitution of language in reality. Wittgenstein also draws a distinction between sense and nonsense, between what can be said and what can only be shown. Here he aspires to present what cannot be said by recognising the limits of what can be said, to conclude that silence is the only correct answer to certain questions. Eventually, this undermines any doctrine of ineffability, even for his own theory.

Since even the meanings of our words depend at many points on contingent empirical truths, to describe the city is also an activity of clarification and elucidation with limited tools.<sup>4</sup> The circumstances in which words are used determine their sense as well as our access to the world. Our experiential knowledge is based on a puzzle between what is inside and outside us – a puzzle that people reconstruct in a mirroring and transcendental way by using language, the senses and embodied imagination. Wittgenstein suggests that what is needed in order to unfold the world is to trace out the connections between its elements. He considers

seeing connections as the crucial part of any process of understanding, where ‘Seeing’ is meant literally: the connection between word and meaning is made by pointing at reality and its context, rather than by grasping it (1986).<sup>5</sup>

The ultimate contingency of the world contrasts with the human tendency to solidify what is fluid. Words have a durability non-existent in the city, but insufficient, nonetheless, to describe the transcendence of its elements. For instance, the word ‘city’ and its utterance do not necessarily bring about what occurs in the urban space. One could pronounce ‘city’ 100 times and not indicate any existent phenomena in the urban space. Words solidify the swiftness and liquid quality of a city, but they remain an abstract representation and are not substitutes for it. Durability is a crucial matter here – words and categories (as with any socio-cultural convention) are able to solidify what is fluid, contingent, and flippant. Yet at the same time language and its categories, as a human creation, have far less durability than the material that they describe or denote.

Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight, regular streets and uniform houses. (Wittgenstein 1986: §18)

Wittgenstein also employed the analogy of a chess game to illuminate what it means for language to be governed by rules. Both language and chess are regulated by norms that have no direct foundation; since they cannot be justified by reference to reality, they are autonomous and could be different (Wittgenstein 1986). Rules and their applications are varied, yet they provide a context in which they make sense. In response to the simple question ‘What are the constituent parts of a chessboard?’ we may suggest 32 black and 32 white squares; or say that it is composed of 32 rectangles, each containing two squares, one white and one black; alternatively, we could also say that it is composed of the colours black and white and the schema of squares and so on... (Wittgenstein 1986: §47). However, the division of the chessboard into simple constituent parts does not show any absolute truth, nor does it explain the intrinsic logics of chess. In this way, Wittgenstein reminds us that the practices of rule following are ultimately distinct from how those same rules are conceptualised – mastery in chess can only be achieved by dealing with constraints in practice, not by looking at separated representations (1986).

In most of his work, Wittgenstein is concerned with the implications of the ultimate absence of any meta-rule, and hence with the paradox of needing to assume rules, whilst it is impossible to provide them with sufficient foundation. Rules and forms are not sufficient to know the world, but they are necessary nevertheless. Consequently, rules are constitutive, but also contingent and without any guarantee.

Both knowledge within the city and the mastery the game of chess require an experiential understanding of the practice. The capacity to see the intercourse between rules and flows, thus becomes crucial to appreciate the reasoning that

they constitute. Furthermore, rules and flows cannot be totally conceived of in separation, their combination provide a position and a vector (Shields 1997: 3-5). Flows are inclusive, interactive and irreversible, entailing a strong power of erosion and variation. However, any categorisation of flows requires rules and forms, which simulate an abstract existence.<sup>6</sup>

## Soft and Hard City

In *Soft City* (1974), Jonathan Raban describes how the city might estrange individuals from themselves, yet at the same time invite them to remake it consolidating it into a shape that they can live in. In this sense, to live in cities is an art of creation rather than discovery, an adaptation dependent upon soft conceptions and hard facts.

I cannot apprehend the city by studying the parts separately, in the same way that I cannot look at one piece of a puzzle for three months and think that I already know the colour and configuration of the whole. It is the possibility to relate this piece with others (and their circumstances) that creates sense and reveals what is common to them. As Wittgenstein argues, a fact is not a truth about the world, but just a part of the world and one of the atoms that create the totality by virtue of interactions (1974: 2.01). We find parts, and through the study of their interactions and situations we might figure out how the totality is, yet not demonstrate it as an ultimate truth.

Likewise, a knowledge of the order does not entail either the knowledge of the whole nor of its elements. In isolation no piece of a puzzle, or of Tetris game, or of chess game says anything. Here we can also refer to Borges' essay on the bizarre taxonomy of animals belonging to a Chinese emperor, in which the boundaries of meaning are transgressed by an out of joint and playful re-categorisation of the elements.<sup>7</sup>



The Storyteller, the void and the border – photo from Wim Wenders' 'Wings of Desire'



I find the films of Wim Wenders to offer a great example of transcendental knowledge and conditions of possibility in cities. Take for instance the film 'Wings of Desire' (1987, *Der Himmel über Berlin*), wherein the two angels, Daniel (Bruno Ganz) and Cassiel (Otto Sander), appear able to see what is invisible to mere mortals and to overhear every thought yet incapable of any sensual experience or physical contact with the world. These angels are onlookers, having a partial access to the whole, limited to the conscious world. Even if the angels have been watching and listening to people since the end of the war, they cannot understand and imagine many mundane things such as colours, smells, tastes, love, pain... These angels may guess what feelings are, but they cannot directly experience the sensations of living (Wenders 2001). Being that the angels transcend time, they cannot be in time and experience expectations, or nostalgia. It is only in the human condition that the sense to look after the future, to dream or to dwell in time and space arises.

Cassiel: Sunrise and 7:22 a.m. Sunset at 4:28 p.m. Moonrise at [...] Twenty years ago today a Soviet jet fighter crashed into the lake at Spandau. Fifty years ago there were the Olympic Games. Two-hundred years ago Blanchard flew over the city in a balloon.

Daniel: Like the fugitives the other day.

Cassiel: And today, on the Lilienthaler Chaussee, a man, walking, slowed down, and looked over his shoulder into space. At post office 44, a man who wants to end it all today pasted rare stamps on his farewell letters, a different one on each. He spoke English with an American soldier--the first time since his schooldays--and fluently.

In *Wings of Desire*, Wenders creates a documentary of West Berlin by exploring the articulations between sensations and pure forms and transcending into a same togetherness. Wenders has the ability to communicate the third something of urban life in an understandable way. Indeed, one of the main qualities of Wenders is how he fills ordinary spaces with iconic empathy, showing urban regimes of knowledge through bounded encounters. This iconicity comes from the way ordinary spaces are shown (through figurative movements, juxtapositions, superimpositions, framing, lightening, etc). The multiple engagements of the ordinary are thus shown through the recontextualisation of common things and in its sensation. This makes us not only look at the ordinary, but also access its knowledge through the perception (just as we know of colours or smells through their very experience).

Roads, streets, airports, vehicles, airplanes, neon lights, kiosks... ordinary spaces are presented in Wenders' movies as instantaneous, yet strange; temporary, yet transcendental; foreign, yet familiar; faraway, so close. 'Wings of Desire' is a very porous film; by showing voids and pointing at invisibilities it invites the spectator to create its own articulations and reconstructions. 'Only those films with gaps in between their imagery are telling stories... A story is first awakened in the mind of a viewer or listener', Wender claims (1997: 99). Voids allow for the forging of new connections, but they also have a context and a location.

Wenders demonstrates a particular interest in capturing landscapes that are about to disappear: 'The fact that something is due to go is always a good reason to include it in a scene. *Wings of Desire* is full of examples. Almost none of our locations exist any more' (1997: 133). Berlin plays a crucial role in this movie, not just as static background wherein the narrative happens, but as a city that calls a story into being: 'a place needing to be told' (Wenders 2003). In Wenders' films, the city constitutes a centre of gravity rather than a variable or category. As he acknowledges, this film 'isn't about Berlin because it's set there, but because it could not be set anywhere else' (Wenders 2003: 233). Something similar occurs with *Lisbon Story*, *Tokyo-ga*, *The American Friend* and *Alice in the Cities*. These films too evolve through the cities that they depict, showing the invisible aspects of the life happening there, rather than representing Lisbon, Tokyo, Hamburg or New York.

We live in the cities/And the cities live in us (Wenders 2001: 363)

In *Les Fleurs du mal*, for instance, Baudelaire describes neither the population nor the city of Paris (eg. 'Le cygne'). It is precisely this renunciation of representing the evident that enables him to show the logic and regimes of knowledge within the city. Places speak for themselves through the presence of bounded figures and the meaning of the whole city emerges from that. Meaning exists beyond the city itself, in a speculative attempt conditioned by personal dispositions. In *Wings of Desire*, the city of Berlin appears not as a mere representation but opaque, as a non-transparent sequence of images and encounters. In this way I do not refer just to the aesthetics, but also to how actions occur in the film, as a search rather than as a cause. For instance, Marion, the artist, stays in Berlin when the circus leaves, looking for Daniel without knowing anything about him. Standing at a coffee *imbiss*, she meets the detective Columbo and asks his counsel: 'Lieutenant, I bet you must know how to find people'. Columbo's answer tells us of the unfinished searches and unfulfilled desires of urban life: 'Well, I know how to look for them, but I don't always find them'.<sup>8</sup>

Stories give people the feeling that there is meaning, that there is ultimately an order lurking behind the incredible confusion of appearances and phenomena that surrounds them [...] I totally reject stories, because for me they only bring out lies, nothing but lies, and the biggest lie is that they show coherence where there is none (1991: 54, 59)

Cities are the product of dense and estranged relation of people. Meanings emerge from guesses and bounded contextualisations, not always visible. Flo Kasearu's art-work 'Riga Runaway' (2010) is another a fantastic example of how to show in-between sutures in the city. In a car racing persecution of a pure form, the shape of the city is revealed behind the projected light. The artwork becomes a sort of phantom tour allowing the spectator to experience the transit from Riga's city centre to the suburbs following the reflection of a white horse.



'Riga Runaway' (2010) is an artwork of Flo Kasearu. I want to express my gratitude to her for providing the material and encouraging the research.

The white horse is here a perennial repetition, mechanical, confusing, yet also desirable and with an illuminating and revealing quality. It is a window and lens to the city, which shows its shape by hiding and showing physical aspects, telling us about the character of urban life by merging formal aspects with sensual ones. The colour of the horse also varies depending on the background, finding bricks, concrete, cement, asphalt, and so on. Indeed, the horse-light is not always visible, but needs a background to run over: walls, roads, façades, gaps and voids from which to emerge.

Kasearu's art-work involves a pure form, a physical surrounding, and also the presence of someone who observes and contextualises the scene from a car. The invisible aspects of Riga are shown and partially experienced after merging these three elements. Another great example of the same can be seen in other great examples of that in the GPS self-portraits



of Antti Laitinen and Jeremy Wood. In the case of Laitinen, he printed his portrait on various maps and tried to orientate in several cities following the lines of his face, carrying a GPS recorder to draw the path he walked.

The project 'Walk the Line' (2004) was realized by Antti Laitinen. Figure 3 is a self-portrait of Antti Laitinen in Helsinki. For more info see his website: <http://www.anttilaitinen.com/walk1.html>

Meanwhile, Wood has been creating maps from his GPS track recordings for years. For instance, in his project 'Traverse Me' (2010) Wood drew a 1:1 scale map on foot in the University of Warwick, creating 383 kilometres of traces over 17 days. For the presentation of the project in the Warwick Arts Centre's Meade Gallery, he wrote: 'I responded to the structure of each location and avoided walking along roads and paths when possible... Security was called on me twice on separate occasions and I lost count of how many times I happened to trigger an automatic sliding door'.



The project 'Traverse Me' (2010) was realized by Jeremy Wood. For more info see his website: <http://www.gpsdrawing.com/maps/traverse-me.html>

Another good example is Pille Runnel & Ehti Järv's study of children depictions of the city (2014). The researchers asked more than 400 children to draw their conception of the urban space, to show what they dislike or are afraid of, what are their favourite shops and corners of freedom or why the major is doing a bad job. 10 years old, Helari, for instance, selected the garages as the best hiding place of her town:



Helari: 'I have drawn my very good hiding place. This is my favorite and only hiding place, which is located between the garages. This is my hometown Pärnu, where I like to live very much'. Thanks to Pille Runnel and Ehti Järv for the pictures of the drawings.

Finally, Anne Vatén photo-exhibition 'Some Places Where My Heart was Broken' aptly shows the impossibility of disconnecting emotional experiences from the conception of the space. Over years, she has photographed the location where different partners broke up with her, writing down for each the alleged reason: 'I wanted to talk about our relationship. He thought that we had broken up already a month ago' (Vatén 2014).



Thanks to Anne Vatén for sharing the pictures and notes.

## The City a User's Manual

In Georges Perec's book *La vie mode d'emploi* (1978) the description of everyday life resembles an enlarged chessboard wherein the author tells the histories of the room's inhabitants by moving as the chess knight figure (traversing private rings and depicting a sort of jigsaw-puzzle after several self-imposed codes). In Perec's depiction, the encountered elements do not pre-exist the whole, which is neither older nor more immediate. Likewise, the parts do not condition any totality, this is done rather by the interaction among the joined elements.

The street, try to observe the street, what it's made of, what it's used for. The people in the street. The cars... Decipher a bit of town... deduce the obvious facts: the obsession with ownership, for example... The people in the streets: where are they coming from? Where are they going to? Who are they?... Try to classify the people: those who live locally and those who don't live locally. (Perec 1997: 50-53)

As the Oulipo literary group suggested, thinking through constraints provides the most efficient way of testing categories and given assumptions. Their texts are organised on the basis of random mathematical systems that, from word games, evolve as an epistemological process.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, Perec unceasingly engaged with how categories are composed, taking raw public materials in order to return them enriched with personal interpretations and fresh interconnections. In this sense, most of Perec's literary works are led by a solitary player who, almost disarmed, faces a challenging urban space – in other words, a city that constantly begs him for interpretation and interaction. As were many scholars in his generation (Lefebvre, Guy Debord, Foucault, etc), Perec was struck by the way space is 'broken up and... diversified' (1997: 6). He did so however through seemingly childish questions: What happens if nothing happens? How do I show the 'en-dotic' (that which opposes the exotic)?

The daily papers talk on everything except the daily. The papers annoy me, they teach me nothing. What they recount doesn't concern me, doesn't ask me questions, doesn't answer the questions I ask or would like to ask... To question the habitual... we live it without thinking, as if it carried within it neither questions nor answers, as if it weren't the bearer of any information. This is no longer even conditioning, it's anaesthesia. We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep. But where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space. (Perec 1997: 206)

Perec writes beyond the dialectic that refers to the everyday as marvellous or as banal, and describes the infra-ordinary as truly significant. Of course, he was not the first to do so. For instance, through the example of art forgery, Sigmund Freud argued that the most effective way to discover the authenticity of a painting is to focus on minor details, such as how fingernails and the slope of a thumb are depicted. Similarly for the father of psychoanalysis the core dispositions of the personality lay behind trivial elements of daily life.

Railway trains only begin to exist when they are derailed, and the more passengers that are killed, the more the train exists. Aeroplanes achieve existence only when they are hijacked... Behind the event there has to be a scandal, a fissure, a danger, as

if life reveals itself only by way of the spectacular, as if what speaks, what is significant, is always abnormal. (Perec 1997: 205)

Perec's inquiries into the endotic prioritise the habitual despite the fact of being habituated to it. Aiming at documenting three kinds of *vieillesse*, '[t]he aging of places, the aging of my writing, and the aging of my memories' (Perec 1993: 27), Perec explored how each location accumulates a history within the repeated experience of the same place, making each visit a culmination of those that came before it. One of the repeated leitmotifs in Perec's work is the neo-ludic attempt to depict the interplay between city and person. For instance, in 1969 he published *Lieux* (Places), a project in which he selected twelve Parisian locations and described one of them each month *in situ* (réels), and once from memory (souvenirs). For that project, Perec imposed upon himself an algorithmic constraint, such that no place was described twice in the same month. Each of these writings was subsequently sealed in a dated envelope and titled either 'réels' or 'souvenirs'.<sup>10</sup> The intention was to open the archived writings upon completion of the project twelve years later, but it was never completed and Perec published some of the 'réels' in several journals,<sup>11</sup> later collected in the posthumous *L'infra-ordinaire* (1989).<sup>12</sup>

Space melts like sand running through one's fingers. Time bears it away and leaves me only shapeless shreds. (Perec 1997: 91)

In a way, people select what they want to hear and see, yet not to the end, since vectors, restrictions and distortions always emerge, at least as far as we remain spatial and talkative bodies in societies. Thus the city is also made from different angles and trajectories. For instance, Perec recognizes the city after re-crossing its places. Rather than on the streets, he finds meaning on the journey, on the personal trajectory – a space infused with memory and expectations. In *Les Choses*, he writes words as signs of anchoring, roaming and erring, which ultimately may be understood as both: a continuous appropriation and a worldly distortion.<sup>13</sup>

When moving through a city we are surrounded by places that encapsulate stories to be unfolded. Nevertheless, places and buildings do not reveal to us what used to be and, even less, what is about to become. Places don't tell a story – people do. There is no city without an encounter as well as no story without the right distance. Stories and encounters both create a sense of belonging as far as they both talk about individuals' memory, priorities, and imagination – thus collectivity. This is what Italo Calvino worldly describes in 'Invisible Cities'. Places always contain traces and scars, as well as corners of freedom.

There is the city where you arrive for the first time, and there is another city which you leave never to return. Each deserves a different name. (Calvino 1974: 125)

In Calvino's tale 'Invisible Cities', Marco Polo, the celebrated Venetian traveller in the Orient, offers the Mongolian emperor Kublai Khan an account of his supposed visits to a series of imaginary cities, each of which bears a woman's name. As the story unfolds, Marco tells the emperor about the multiple urban sites he

visited during his numerous travels. In his descriptions, the city always appears bigger than the imagination of its dwellers and not subjected to their needs, appealing rather to the reader's reconstruction. Likewise, the places cannot choose the story and the form in which they appear, they are told only through a strangers' line of thought.

Calvino knits the text with three textures: figures of speech; sensory images and an addressed intellectual proposition. These three textures are not separate, but rather merged in a non-transparent way. The closest depictions of urban life are those combining personal trajectories and language games. This, however, does not overcome the ultimate paradox of urban representations: to write the city is the opposite of knowing it, yet at the same time, the only way to describe it. To name the parts of the city is to save them from the totality and obviate the articulations and the interplay among them. Finished stories about a city cannot be told – there are merely brave attempts to make sense of it. While being representations necessary to share thoughts and experiences as comprehensible symbols, these forms inevitably fail to tell the whole story. Indeed, any representation contains its own inherent distortion in which the whole is inevitably interpreted and reduced by language and figures. Nonetheless these forms are required in our attempts to learn and understand. The difficulty, then, is how to complement them with experience.

There is no language without deceit... falsehood is never in words; it is in things.  
(Calvino 1974: 48 / 61)

'Invisible Cities' can be also read as a literary game. The novel is organised into nine parts and the cities are grouped into eleven subtitles: cities and memory, cities and desire, cities and signs, thin cities, trading cities, cities and eyes, cities and names, cities and the dead, cities and the sky, continuous cities, and hidden cities. The experience of the city is not just visual, logical and dynamic, but also dependent on embodied imagination and unintended encounters and interactions. In this way I find a Sisyphian character at the core of the city, which is the never-ending attempt of many individuals to make sense of the ultimately variable and flippant. What may change the story of the city is not so much a new way of telling it, but rather any new attempt to understand it, to create connections, to redeem sites from the continuum of history.

Our city and the sky correspond so perfectly... that any change (in the city) involves some novelty among the stars. (Calvino 1974: 151)

While objective analysis of urban life might include scientifically accurate forms such as population size, industries, history, geography, and so on. Calvino's cities are deliberately written as subjective and selective views of urban habits. The cities Marco Polo recounts appear, therefore, not only as imaginary, but described as intentional states. By expressing his mood, the narrator positions himself in the



surroundings and uses his 'stati di animo' (disposition, state of mind) as a cognitive aspect of a city (Dunster 2010: 64-69).

The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls. (Calvino 1974: 10-11)

Nobody can find cities absent of past and future. If that were to happen, we would consider ourselves in a labyrinth rather than in an inhabited space. That is why cities slip away as the enemy of cartographers: there is no place in maps for ghosts or doubts. The cosmology of maps is purely physical, constellating a net of naked Kantian *a priori*s. They, cartographers, only see the whole of the city while dreaming.

Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes. (Calvino 1974: 18).

Kublai Khan, the Mongolian emperor of Calvino's tale, aspires to master his land in an abstract way, solely by knowing its forms and names. In this illustration, the writer explores the tension between 'system' and 'thing', digging into the paradoxical way in which they mutually articulate each other. This is recognisable in one of the most brilliant passages of the book, wherein Polo begins to describe a bridge stone by stone and Kublai Khan asks: 'But which is the stone that supports the bridge?' 'The bridge is not supported by one stone or another but by the line of the arch that they form', Polo responds. The great Khan remains silent before asking: 'why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me' ... allowing Polo to conclude that 'without stones there is no arch'.

### **Before the Game is Over...**

In this article I argued that it is possible to learn more from tales about invisible cities than from configurations of the ideal ones. The city is much more than an assemblage of the possible (the unstable flows) and the prescribed (the imposition of structures that secure order). There is urbanity without architecture: also without commutes. However there is no city without dense and intense social sutures. Overall, the city emerges from inter-subjective experiences, personal trajectories, encounters, embodied imagination, memory and proximity. Hence, it cannot be represented just as a collection of buildings and streets, neither can it be fully located on a map.

As Rob Shields suggests, the empirically visible never exhausts the urban. Despite the omniscient ambition of technologies, the city is an example of phenomena too extensive in scale to be empirically visible (Shields 2004). Rather than a category, a fabric, or a system of actor-network, the city occurs as a result of encounters between bodies in need and spatial and temporary constrictions. Therefore, understanding the sutures between forms and flows is more relevant in urban studies than demonstrating and planning as such. The quality of the city is based

on the different encounters within. There might be only one city out-there, as there is always one 'reality', but I cannot grasp it in its immediacy and wholeness. I may aspire to measure it or to understand it but not both at the same time. Likewise, I cannot find the final form of the city, only how it looks like. Any attempt to capture the city makes us aware of its infinite contingency and of the irreversibility of the becomings. It is like Heraclitus' river, I may know its chemical formula and the composition of the elements (H<sub>2</sub>O), what is the course and lay of its riverbed. Nonetheless, I will never know the river to its end, nor swim it in the same way or water. Likewise, in crossing even the same street in the morning and evening, I will surely discover different aspects in it.

Dispositions are altogether part of the city, thus, happiness or fear concerns urban studies as much as literature or psychology. This assumption involves acknowledgement too of the importance of attention and interest. The city offers passages of thought that wind to unexpected destinations, yet it also conditions with squares, rules, and mechanical rhythms. The city might, as such, be experienced at some times as a playground and at others as a battlefield. Thomas Hansen and Oskar Verkaik present the city as 'charismatic'. For them, urban life rests on special forms of knowledge, networks and connectedness, being heavily mythologized and enframed through circulating narratives that condition the empirical experience (2009: 6). The city dramatises the main process of its discovery. Urban life is in this sense Byzantine, full of rituals, betrayals, enigmas and new beginnings; experienced as an avenue jutting off at sublime niches, astonishing relics and murderous angles. In the city different actors explore between each other various scenarios and ways of collaborating, without always producing specific outcomes – cultivating several levels of cooperation in a space that is regulated, yet full of tricks and emotions. There is, as such, a multiplicity of open-ended engagements – just as in chess.

In the city I imagine possible orders and tactics in time and space, from which follow decisions led by logic and intuition simultaneously. Neither in urban life, nor in the chess game, do we have all the suitable information to take decisions. In addition, we are never sure about the consequences that will follow our move. At least in 2014, the machine does not always beat the human mind in arranged chess games. It's impossible to freeze everything when one has to interpret streets and explore conceivable trajectories. Here the 'have to' is relevant. In the city as in the chess game, I am compelled by situations, urges, drives and various impulses to do it.

I can never capture all the components in play in the city. Even if the figures of the chess game are conditioned by pre-given rules, spatial forms and acting codes, the unfolding process is also determined by uneven intentions, underway efforts, fantasies, emotions and contingent strategies. From this starting position, the game grows progressively, becoming increasingly engaging and complex until it irremissibly ends (always in an unexpected way). Error is also certain in the game

of chess, and the player cannot blame the referee, the wind, or the quality of the pitch. Hence the loser has always something to learn about him/herself (Rasskin Gutman 2009). Players analyse a movement, discard 95% of options, imagine three alternatives and finally choose just one. Likewise, involvement into the multiplicity of urban life compels the researcher to escape from the solipsism of the forms, and to put into practice language games and embodied imagination.

In a similar way, the city engages us in a form of constellation of ramified judgements to be taken and mostly experienced as a personal journey with a beginning and end. But in the chess game, as in the city, the conception of possibilities is not just based upon the places which one can access or move to (i.e. the black ones), but by the forbidden ones too (i.e. the 32 white). This also informs the strategies and acts deployed, offering an almost infinite combination of moves that depend on the predisposition and ability of the player. Besides the squares that I physically cross, composed of façades, avenues and traffic lights, there is another city impossible to visit. This is the city in which I fancy and find mysterious beasts and myths. A place rather imaginary, invisible, and directly related to our personal disposition – the Lisbon of Fernando Pessoa or the Berlin of Alfred Döblin – places which are nonetheless real in the way they become experienced and understood.

Here the chess game is taken as a metaphor that helps to illustrate the multiplicity and unpredictability of engagements of urban life. On the one hand, the movement of the pieces, bounded by the rules and the squares of the board, escape any ultimate determinism; they are intentional but not teleological. It is, indeed, not enough to know the rules to become a good player of chess. On the other, the decisions taken for every move come from the organic need, position, experience and mental state of the player. In a way, it is like the chess match depicted in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, in which the knight never has enough time, skills and knowledge to resist the contemptuous powers of world forces. Both the chess game and urban life are founded on figurative possibilities within a set of codes; rules and physical constrictions in spite of which its engagement is non-repeatable, entropic, adventurous, imagined, and with a beginning and an end.

In short, urban life is particularly unfolded in midway attempts and eventualities, in the bounded amalgam of practices. The increasing difficulty in the nodal fixings of flows complicates the analysing task, as meanings become more difficult to place and opaque. For just this reason, it is particularly meaningful to study trajectories, grammars and thickenings, beyond the obvious level of city's material infrastructures (de Boeck 2013: 14). Simply by cataloguing the many features and elements of the city, or their motion, I cannot show the specific qualities of urban life and understand its dynamics. Instead, I propose to approach cities in an open-ended and ordinary way, paying attention to dialectically interconnected processes and the particular conditions of possibility for knowledge.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Mladen Dolar asserts that language ‘enables our access to the world by providing its mapping, while limiting this access by its own configuration, and for whatever doesn’t fit this configuration there stands a warning “access denied”’ (2013).
- <sup>2</sup> In the Preface of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein asserts: ‘What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.’ It points, overall, at the existence of a beyond, mute, and indecipherable. Also it questions the possibility to endow the world with an ultimate sense and grasp it in its totality, meanwhile being situated from the inside of world and language (Dolar 2013).
- <sup>3</sup> This understanding of language games is not far from the Lacanian term ‘Lalangue’, in which the psychoanalyst addresses what there is of the real in language, for instance the sound of language alongside its meaning (Lacan 1998).
- <sup>4</sup> See Wittgenstein 1986: §142. For him, the world is wholly composed by mutually independent states of affairs (Wittgenstein 1974). Because words are uniform in appearance, we assume that they refer to uniform entities about which we can generalize, forgetting therefore that words are an application (Wittgenstein 1986). Therefore, he concludes that our uses of words must be studied case by case: even if uses and expressions appear as governed by rules, those rules do not create a monolithic system.
- <sup>5</sup> In his view, meaning depends on articulations rather than on bare representations. Objects and words are simple; they contribute to the stability of the proposition, furnishing meaning

- (Wittgenstein 1974: 3.203). The quality of existence and non-existence, combination or non-combination, pertain to the truth or falsehood of propositions. However, they do not imply understanding.
- <sup>6</sup> For instance, the term ‘water’ refers to a continuous fluid composed of millions of atoms, which might change in state and appearance so as to longer resemble water.
- <sup>7</sup> The list divides all animals into one of 14 categories: those belonging to the emperor; embalmed; tame; suckling pigs; mermaids; fabulous; stray dogs; included in this classification; frenzied; innumerable; drawn with a very fine camel hair brush; et cetera; having just broken the water pitcher; those that, at a distance, resemble flies. Borges presents the list as appearing in an ancient Chinese encyclopædia (The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge) ‘discovered’ by the translator Franz Kuhn. Also Michel Foucault explored the implications of such (fictitious) taxonomy, noting that this classificatory scheme was possible only in language and not in the world. However, for the French philosopher, ‘what is impossible is not the propinquity of the things listed, but the very site on which their propinquity would be possible’ (Foucault 1970: XVI). Foucault, Michel (1970): *The Order of Things*. New York: Random House.
- <sup>8</sup> Another example of showing invisible aspects of urban life might be Handke’s ‘Song of Childhood’ (*Lied vom Kindsein*) repeated in the movie: ‘When the child was a child (...) it had, on every mountaintop, the longing for a greater mountain yet, and in every city, the longing for an even greater city, and that still is so (...)’.
- <sup>9</sup> Queneau 1986: ‘...the Ouvrier de Littérature Potentielle: Ouvroir because it intends to work. Littérature because it is a question of literature. Potentielle – the word must be taken to mean various things... In short: O.U.L.I.P.O.’.
- <sup>10</sup> For more on the topic see Morris 2008: 31-60. ‘If Lieux can be read as an archive, then it is one which remains open and is actively being compiled in the process’. (Morris 2008: 47).
- <sup>11</sup> ‘Guettées!’, *Les Lettres nouvelles* 1: 61-71 (1977). ‘Vues d’Italie’, *Nouvelle Revue du psychanalyse* 16: 239-246 (1977). ‘La rue Vilin’, *L’Humanité*, (11 novembre 1977). ‘Allées et venues rue de l’Assomption’, *L’arc* 76: 28-34 (1979). ‘Stations Mabillon’, *Action Poétique* 8: 30-39 (1980).
- <sup>12</sup> *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1997) in English.
- <sup>13</sup> Eventually, such a détournement of the city reduces any tradition, memory or place into nothing more than a rhetoric artifact. “Il faudra bien, un jour, que je commence à me servir des mots pour démasquer le reel, pour démasquer ma réalité” (Perec 1990: 73).

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