

Aren't we destroying our cities in the name of modernism and development? INVISIBLE CITIES by ITALO CALVINO –A literary review

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Abstract- The main intent of this paper is to look into how modernism has drastically affected our modern day cities and how over time all the cities lose their character and appear the same despite its geographical locations and the rich history they hold. Modernism completely changed the face of earth and made all the cities appear the same in the end of the day. It has made us forget about our rich past and the memories we have of these cities are not of what the city actually was. We have lost the connection we once had with the cities and also there is no longer the feel of sense of belonging with any of these cities. The interesting point is that somewhere all around the world be it the east or the west all the cities are dealing with the same underlying issues and problems. Through this paper we intend to trace the rise and fall of modernism. The book INVISIBLE CITIES by ITALO CALVINO was written in 1972 and it put forth its thoughts not in the usual literature manner but in prose poetic manner as a conversation between the emperor and his ambassador. The author relates the cities to the modernist cities using VENICE as the reference base city and talks about how modernization has impacted them and has made them lose their character. All the 55 cities under the 11 categories and also within each category he brings into light the transformations. These cities are not far different from our present day cities especially the Indian cities. All these cities deal with the basic underlying issue of modernization and urbanization. Towards the end of the narrative all the cities appear to feel or appear the same with the same outlook. This is the exact scenario of our present day cities be it Hong Kong, New York or Mumbai, they all appear the same and deal with the same issues. The author brilliantly through his words takes us on a journey through the cities and puts the impact of modernization into our minds. This book although written in 1972 stands valid and relevant till today and maybe will be relevant twenty years later too.

Index Terms- Invisible cities, Italo Calvino, Modernism , Transformation of cities, Urbanization

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper deals with the effect of modernism on our present day cities and how our cities have lost the battle against technology and human greed. The failure of cities is beautifully captured by the author Italo Calvino through his book Invisible

cities [1] in which he cites the advent of modernism and the destruction of the cities all around the world in a prose poetic life which calls for a very interesting take on modernist way of thinking. The book really makes us question our understanding of what we used to think as development and as we read through the book we begin to question a lot of our views on development. As architects we feel it is our responsibility to design the way our cities grow and as we read through the book we completely agree with the author's views of how modernism and technology have completely taken over the essence of our cities.

Modernism became a part of our lifestyle and also the architectural language of the world after the late 19th century. It involved the process of standardizing all the buildings using technology and appropriate materials. It became even more relevant after the world war II and there came a need for a quick and standard remedy for the rapid housing need that was created post the war and concrete and glass became the synonyms for this both in the east and west

West meets east

Both the western and eastern part of the world had a unique way of life and architectural identity which clearly differentiated these cities but somewhere in the name of modernism and development we have ended up losing this character of our cities. To a point it is understandable that there was a need for this change and also change is the only thing constant but we need to ponder upon whether the entire world has to adopt the same methodology to embrace these changes or whether we could have all changed keeping the underlying character and features of our cities intact.

Evolving Cities

Cities have been constantly changing since time immemorial but this book makes us wonder whether we haven't made our cities evolve a bit too fast in order to satisfy our desires. Why is there a need to achieve an Ideal city? It is not that hard to let our cities evolve naturally keeping their essence intact.

II. MEMORY AND IDENTITY:

Memories and Identity are correlated and interconnected. Through this, it also reminds us how the old cities used to have a unique identity attached to it which remains as the memory of the cities to the inhabitants and the visitors'. Over the course of years

in the name of development and modernism, cities started losing their identity or uniqueness. We all associate an ideal city with those that last in our memories

Desire and Development:

Because of the human desire to achieve the ideal city or ideal settlement, we started to cling on to modernism, leaving behind our memories and in turn the essence and the uniqueness of the city. We all are destroying our cities with our greed and our desire of achieving an ideal city instead of realizing the real beauty of our cities

Signs - an entrap:

Actually when we dig deeper into these so called modernized cities, we can realize that it is just a trap or a sugarcoated pill to hide all the filth and the darkness. The cities are not really what they appear to be, rather there are so many layers to it

Trade - A Beginning:

In the era of modernism, first all the people are attracted to the industrialization and mass production. In the end it shows how people fall prey to over-exploitation and the others took over. In the name of development and commerce we have destroyed our cities enough

Name - Tagline:

In the era of modernization we have tagged each city with names imagining it to be something even without proper understanding of what the place originally was meant to be. Most cities just differ merely in a name and not in its present character

Deterioration Phase:

Eventually somewhere along, with the cities people also started losing their identity. And the modernization of one city not only affects the city but also the surroundings, in turn the world as a whole. Finally all the cities look the same with only the names of the cities changing showing the failure of the cities to cope up with modernism.

Loss of Human Value

In the name of modernism and development the basic element of any city, that is the people have been neglected. The newer developments of modernism have only looked into the aesthetic aspect of how our cities look but have forgotten how humans relate to these cities. We need to see whether these cities are perceived by the humans as the cities from their memories. We need to ponder on whether the cities are for humans or for the image of what we perceive a city to be. Cities back then and even now have grown as a result of human desires but not with respect to the nature and character of that place.

Scapegoat of Modernism.

Our cities have become a victim of all the development and greed /human desires. This has created a misconception in our minds that the only way of development is by aping the western lifestyle and Architecture. This the author Italo Calvino [2] clearly portrays through his masterpiece of invisible cities. Although the book has been written by keeping Venice in mind as the ideal city in which all desire to live, he talks about how all the cities have completely lost their character over time and what remains of all these cities is just a mere image or memory of what these cities used to be. Somewhere these original cities exist only in our minds and not in reality. All the cities be it the east or the west look alike be it Mumbai, Hong Kong or London. At the time the author wrote this book modernism had not completely reached the east but through both his characters Marco Polo [3] and Kublai Khan [4] he explains indirectly how the west is trying to influence the east with the similar Architectural language which is clearly seen through the lines

III. TRANSFORMATION

Transformation in Cities

What we interpret from the book is that from the beginning of the book to the end the author takes the reader through a journey as to how cities used to be in the past and he praises the older memories he has of cities such as Diomira, Isidora etc. At the beginning of his work he talks about cities on a more positive note and towards the middle of the book he starts talking about how the cities begin succumbing to the rapid modernization and urbanization. Towards the end he takes a more pessimistic view as to how the cities fail due to loss of identity as a modern city.

Structure of the book

When he wrote this book, he was in Paris with a group of French writers and Mathematicians called Oulipo, who seek new structure and pattern in constrained literature writing with respect to mathematics. This influence is visible in the mathematical pattern of the structure of the book. The author creates a pattern throughout the work by arranging the topics under each category in a particular manner under 11 chapters.

Cities and Memory

Calvino takes us down his memory line of how the ancient cities remained unique to its identity and compares his imaginary cities with the present day cities to show how the modernism has taken over the cities and what remains now are only the memories how the cities used to be. Two cities under this category have been briefly explained below for better understanding of the transformation.

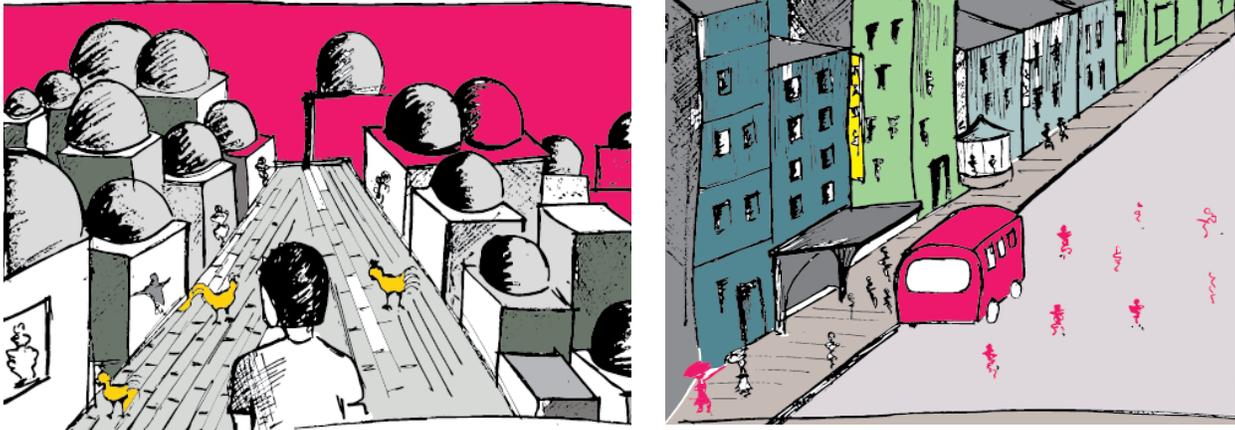


Fig 1-Sketch of the city DIOMIRA AND MAURILIA
“Desired cities have already become memories
Zora has languished, disintegrated, disappeared. The earth has forgotten her”
-Zora, (Invisible cities, pg8, 16, chapter-1)

IV. CITIES AND DESIRE

Calvino relates cities and human desires and conveys to us the message that in the human’s desire to achieve an ideal city he is losing the essence of what our traditional cities strived to achieve and is losing its uniqueness.

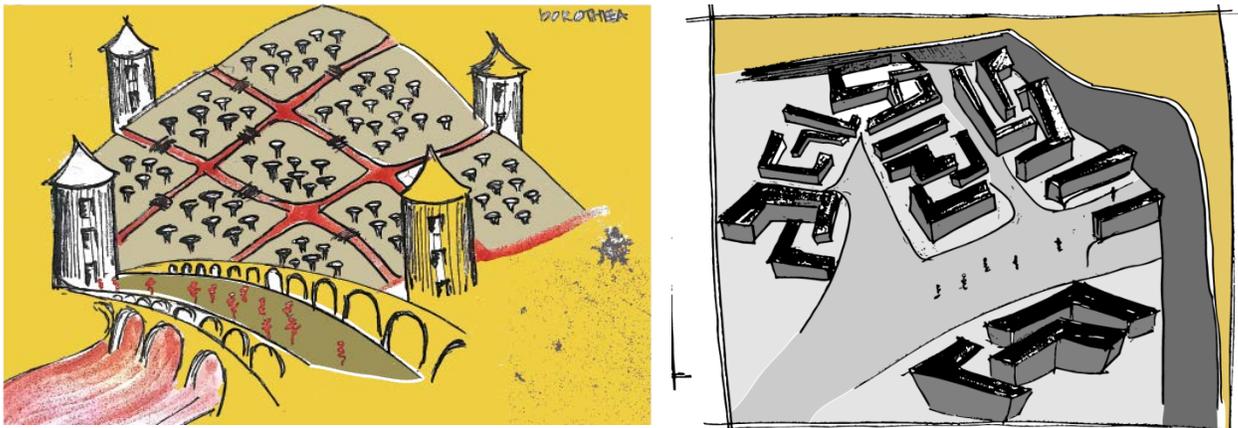


Fig 2-sketch of the city DOROTHEA AND ZOEVIDE

“Which gives form to desire takes from desire its form, you believe you are enjoying Anastasia wholly when are only its slave”
-Anastasia, (Invisible cities pg 12, chapter 1)

V. CITIES AND SIGNS

At the beginning Calvino talks about how the various spaces in the city are clearly indicated using signs and how we can clearly identify what a building is and who it belong to but towards the latter half he talks about how these signs deceive us and cities are actually covered in filth and dirt like in Olivia but at the first glance it appears like a white peacock. We relate to most spaces with various signs and characters.

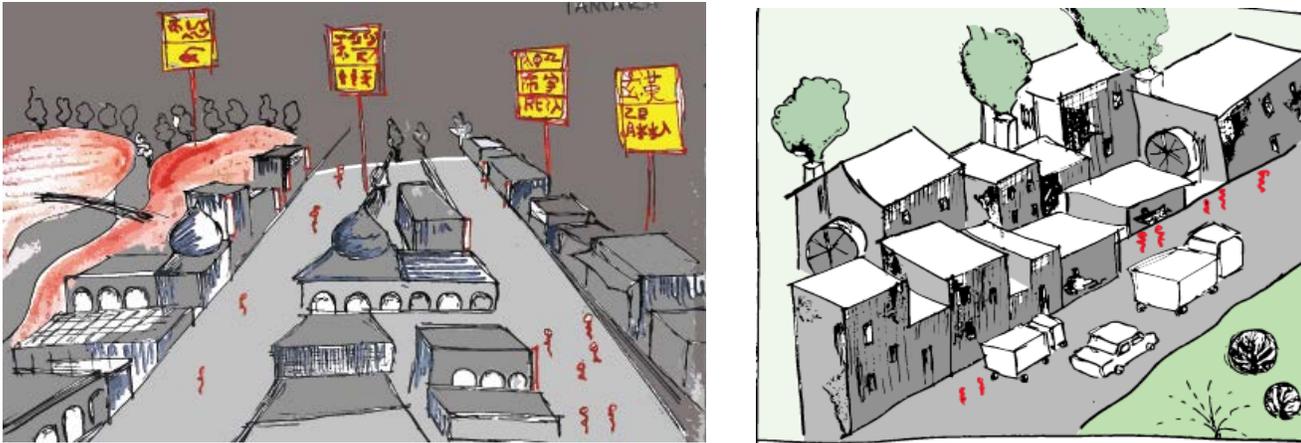


Fig3-Sketch of the city TAMARA AND OLIVIA
"Signs form a language, but not the one you think you know."-Hypatia (Invisible cities, Pg 48, Chapter3)

VI. THIN CITIES

These are the cities which are highly imaginative and nearly impossible and far ahead of its time. Through these cities Calvino shows how the cities are deteriorating due to the over exploitation and thinking of what a city is meant to be. By trying to plan cities without considering its future growth we are only creating more catastrophes. We all are destroying our cities with our ambitions and imaginations.

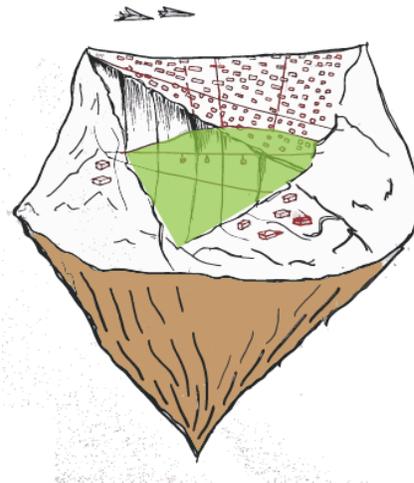
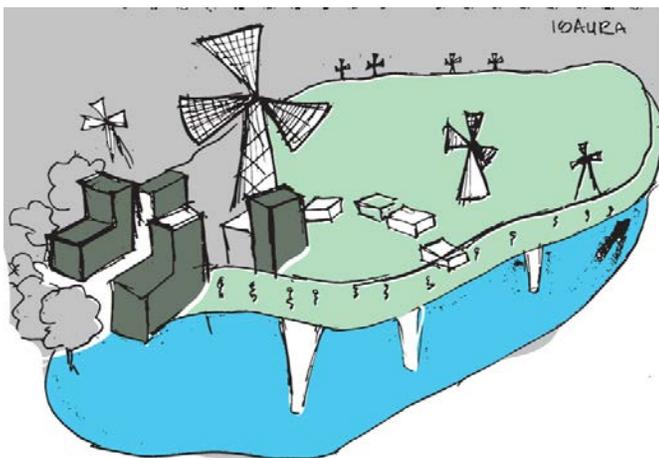


Fig 4: Sketch of the city ISAURA AND OCTAVIA
"Suspended over the abyss, the life of Octavia's inhabitants is less uncertain than in other cities. They know the net will last only so long."
-Octavia, (Invisible cities, pg 75 chapter 5)

VII. TRADING CITIES

During this era of modernism, there was extensive trade and commerce along with new transportation systems, communication networks and technologies. At the beginning all the dwellers are attracted to the wealth the trade brings them and also their metal wealth and architecture that take over the city's skyline but towards the end of the journey it shows how the people fall prey to over-exploitation and other creatures take over. In the name of development and commerce we destroyed our cities enough and yet we continue to add the pressure on to these cities. At the present scenario machines have completely taken over man. All the developments are focused only towards the economic growth.

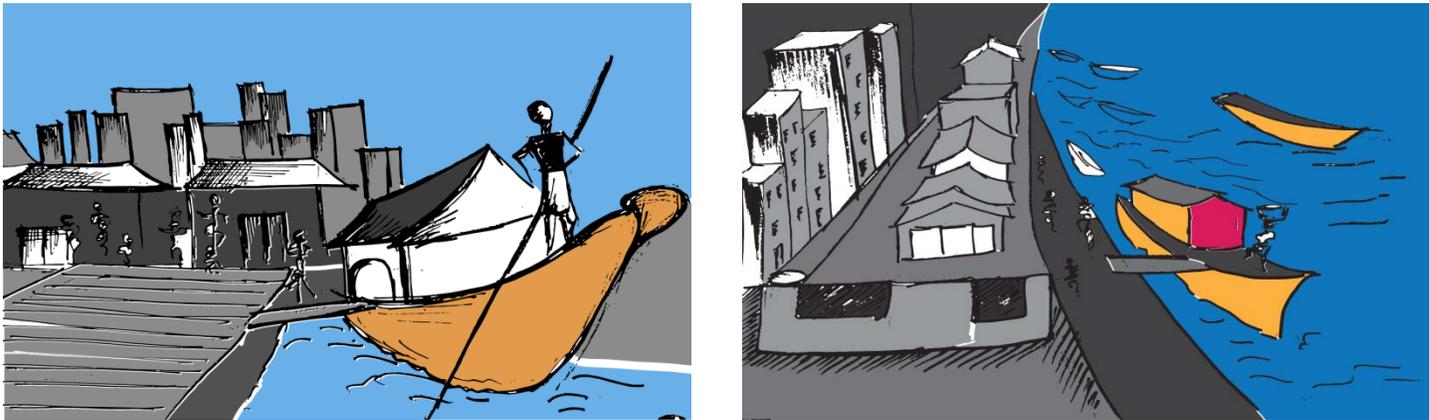


Fig 5- Sketch of the city EUPHEMIA AND ESMERLDA

“The inhabitants repeat the same scenes, with the actors changed; they repeat the same speeches with variously combined accents”
-Eutopia, (Invisible cities, pg 65, chapter 4)

Cities and Eyes

Calvino brings very sharp contrast in these cities, he talks about how at the first arrival i.e. during the beginning of modernism everything appeals to our aesthetic sense but as time passes by we realize the cities are not what they appear to be but deeper inside it is rotting with issues of rapid modernization. We just look at any city with our eyes; we forget the hidden character of our cities

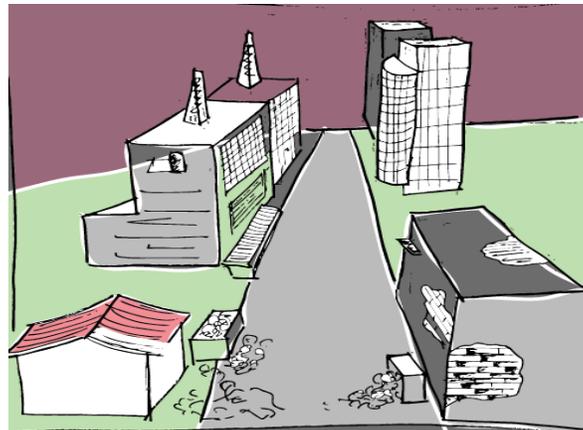
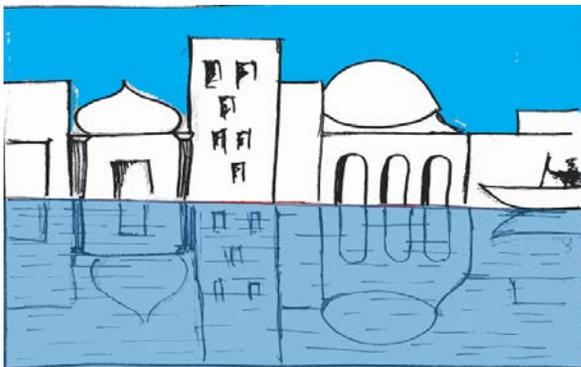


Fig 6-Sketch of the city VALDRADA AND MORIANA

“At times the mirror increases a thing's value, attimes denies it. Not everything that seems valuable above the mirror maintains its force when mirrored.”
-Valdrada, (Invisible cities, pg 54 chapter 3)

VIII. CITIES AND NAMES

Calvino brings in these cities in the middle of the journey to indicate how in the era of modernization we have tagged each city with names imaging it to be something even without proper understanding of what the place originally was meant to be. All the cities appear just the same, only the name differs.

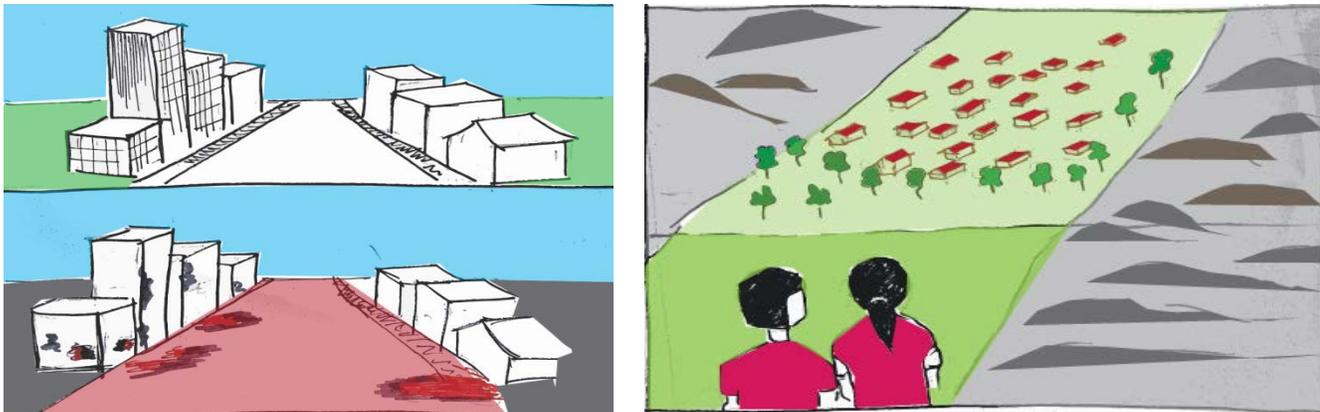


Fig 7- Sketch of the city ALGAURA AND IRENE

“Everyone hears about this city...
They assume about this city...
They name the city...
But no one has ever visited the city...
It is different to see from the outside and it is different to live inside”
-Irene, (Invisible cities, pg 125, chapter 8)

Cities and the Dead

Only in the 5th chapter does he bring in the aspect of complete deterioration of cities and its death due to modernization and how the people within the cities begin to lose their identity and they try to survive somehow but they fail indicating the failure of modernism.



Fig 8-Sketch of the city MELONIA AND LAUDOMI

"Perhaps Adelma is the city where you arrive dying and where each finds again the people He has known. This means I, too, am dead." And I also thought: "This means the beyond is not happy."
- Adelma, (Invisible cities, pg 95, chapter 6)

Cities and the Sky

In these cities he starts looking not only at the city level but also begins talking about how modernization of one city not only affects the city but also the world as a whole and leads to the downfall of the whole system .These cities appear as a starry sky dotted with identical looking metal buildings. The so called modernization of one city affects not only the city but eventually the whole world. "And these innovations do not disturb your city's astral rhythm?" I asked. "Our city and the sky correspond so perfectly, "they answered, "that any change in Andria involves some novelty among the stars."- Andria, (Invisible cities, pg 150, chapter 9)

Continuous City

Here he completely criticizes modernism and talks about how over time all the cities appear just the same and completely loses it identity .There is absolutely no change in their appearance only the name differs and also the cities ever expanding extent makes it impossible to understand where a city begins and ends.All the cities lost their character and identity in the name of modernism irrespective of their history.

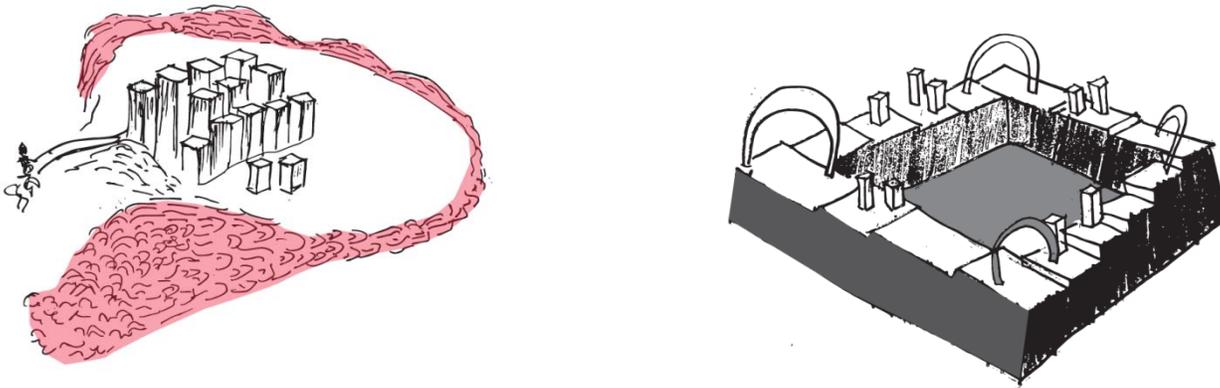


Fig 9-Sketch of the city LEONIA AND PENTHESILEA

“Outside Pentheseilea does an outside exist? Or, no matter how far you go from the city, will you only pass from one limbo to another, never managing to leave it?”-Pentheseilea, (Invisible cities, pg 156 chapter 9)

Hidden Cities

This is the last stage of the cities and how they are completely taken over by other creatures such as rats and humans are fighting for their survival. These cities are completely filled in filth and misery and here the contradicting ideologies such as the rich and poor, just and unjust constantly battle for their survival. All the cities have a hidden side to them beneath the several intricate layers.

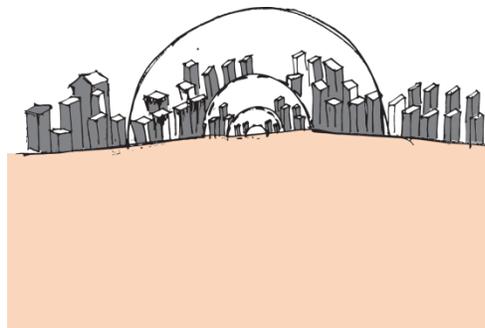


Fig 10: Sketch of the city OLINDA

“The city is transfigured, becomes crystalline, transparent as a dragonfly.”
-Marozia, Invisible cities, pg 155 chapter 9)

A Bold Move by the Author

At the time the book was written very few had begun questioning the idea of modernism. Most people, Architects and countries just blindly followed what someone put forth as the way our Cities should appear rather than thinking for themselves whether that was even the true character of that place.

Also the author never directly criticizes the modernist thoughts and ideas like what any usual author would do rather in such an interesting manner he puts forth his criticism in a prose poetic manner. He really impresses us through his portrayal which is an extremely interesting read.

IX. CONCLUSION

We would like to conclude the paper with the thoughts of how even in the age of rapid modernization and development we need to still not forget about the natural character of the cities. Also we need to start looking at the larger picture and realize that even if it is one building that we are designing it is a part of a city and this city is a part of the world and this world is a part of the

universe. So anything that we do to even the smallest element of this earth might have a bigger impact on the world. Even in this era we need to think about whether the way we are developing is right. In our view we are not progressing in the right manner and we are losing our cities to this kind of development. We need to relook at our development manner and rethink and plan our cities and buildings carefully.

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