

“INVISIBLE CITIES”: CALVINO'S ORIENTALISM AS A TOOL OF CRITICISM AGAINST MODERN ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

“Invisible cities” is a novel written by Italo Calvino, published in 1972 and translated in English in 1974. The significance of this work, stands on the numerous discussions that this book has evoked over the years, concerning the exchange of ideas between literature, arts, and architectural theory and the sciences of urban environment. This book is often considered as a typical example of postmodern literature, since it has an inconsistent narrative style and provides a great deal of narrative freedom to the reader himself. [1] Nonetheless, through the included brief descriptions of the “invisible” cities, it delivers a vigorous critique against the architectural and urban phenomena, caused by the half-a-century dominance of modernism in architecture and urban design. In some cases, Calvino's critique is straightforward, using examples of dystopian brutalist built environments, but in most cases, he produces a strong contrast by adding descriptions of a lost and nostalgic architectural past, and by reviving the exotism of oriental architectural qualities.

Description

The story is organized around a discussion between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, where Polo entertains the emperor with his tales about all the cities of his empire that he has never seen yet. A total sum of 55 cities is described in this novel, narrated by Polo. The cities are divided in eleven subcategories, depending on the context that they belong to. Among these narrations, short dialogues between the Venetian explorer and the emperor are interspersed, to offer more information about the general concepts that are exposed in Polo's stories, and to construct the overall literal frame of the novel.

Most narrations of the short tales are obscured, with a poetic attitude, and do not intend to give a clear image of the described cities, but they rather manage to stimulate the readers' imagination and thinking, and to offer ground for discussions about urban life and environment. Topics, such as ontology, ethics, semiotics, linguistics, and metaphysics, are raised by the way the descriptions of the cities and the discussions of the main characters are depicted by the author. [2]

Aim of the paper

By the time that this book was written, the modern movement in architecture was the dominant architectural style and the framework of most architectural and urban theories. From the first decades of the 20th century, till the late 60^s, modernism was undeniably applied in both architectural and urban scale, shaping up the global urban morphology.

From the late sixties a growing tendency gradually appeared, which questioned the validity of the modernist claims of purity and mechanization of dwelling. One of the first aspects of modern architecture that were criticized severely was the urban environment, and the failure of modern urbanism to produce qualitative and viable spaces. [3]

Therefore, in the following decades, there was a noticeable shift towards an inquiry for new ideas and new architectural theories. In the end of the 1960s, the neo-rationalist movement appeared in Europe, and one of the main representatives of this movement was the Italian architect Aldo Rossi. Neo-rationalist architects, blamed modernism for the sameness and boredom of the urban environment, and for the lack of identity and historical succession. Aldo Rossi's book "The Architecture of the City" was manifesting his ideas, concerning the urban space. Rossi showed great interest about the overlooked from the modern movement, unseen features of the urban space, such as the historical context and the spirit of the place ("genius loci"). [4]

The main aim of the paper is to reveal the ways and the methods, that the author uses to demonstrate the failure of modern architecture and modern urban design. From the declining urban environments of the "continuous cities" of the last part of the book, till the contrast of the nostalgic descriptions of idealized utopias of the orient. Except from the descriptions of the 55 cities, the interfering dialogues between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, offer great deal of further information about the frame of ideas posed by Calvino in this book.

Although the main story of the novel is dated to the era of Marco Polo and the Mongol empire, the apparent time span of the historical urban atmosphere of the described cities is quite wide, and ranges from the ancient years till the near future. At the same time it offers a wide range of architectural ethnical styles as well. All this variety of periods and styles serves the escalation of contrast between the lack of identity of modernism and the new architectural ideas of the – newborn by that time – post-modernist movement. This paper will try to underpin the way Calvino uses Asian architectural descriptions and atmosphere to contradict modernism.

Furthermore, other resources will be examined, such as the extensive reviews of his work, written by journalists, critics, architectural and literature theorists. There are also, numerous letters, lectures and essays, written by Calvino himself, talking about his novel and its connections with other scientific fields. A thorough record of these, can be found in Letizia Modena's book "Italo Calvino's Architecture of Lightness". [5]

References

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