



Miguel Chevalier - Inventing the future Ariella Masbounji, 2008

Beautify the public space. This has generally been the goal whenever the City commissions artists to intervene in municipal public spaces, and artistic intervention has become common practice notably with the urban reconfigurations which now seem to systematically accompany the welcome revival of tramways in cities.

Thus, Miguel Chevalier's *Fractal Cloud*, designed for Marseille along the Boulevard de Dunkerque where the tramway now crosses (unfortunately the commission was abandoned), was meant to stimulate the imagination by creating a palpable virtual cloud in an inorganic space, arousing confusion of the senses and nocturnal awe.

But beyond the laudable contribution to enhancing the city experience, the artist is liable to supply much more ambitious prospects of renewing the image of the city and architecture, revealing hidden realities, offering new openings and pushing the boundaries, in short, becoming fully involved in guiding the future of our cities towards an era where loss of certitude reigns and extensive creativity is at play to reinvent the city of tomorrow.

By the simple interpretation of space, the artist can - like a landscape architect but on a completely different register - reveal the invisible in order to provide footholds for a new conception of the city and region. Grasping the imperceptible, this is how Miguel Chevalier brings tangibility to the speed that characterizes our era, the superposition of images that are fleetingly yet undoubtedly fixed in our minds, the urban kinetics sifted through our perceptions. To render Kyoto-Tokyo in a high-speed train and later a drive around the Paris ring road - *Round Trip Tokyo/Kyoto* (1994) and *Périphérie* ("Outskirts" 1998) - he superposed video and still images that reveal the magic of simultaneous perceptions consubstantial with our urban existence. He invites us to reflect on an architecture of speed that could create lasting sensations and urban landmarks. An invitation to interpret the city differently and to enrich it with real and virtual imaginary realms. Art actually has this power to create an imaginary realm and influence events by changing space or perception.

On an even more conceptual level, Miguel Chevalier alerts us to a future he fears yet has seen the beginnings of on his international travels: the destruction of nature as it gets devoured by a ruthless, advancing urban chaos, wiping out any notion of *the immeasurable* as landscape architect Bernard Lassus described it. This is visible in much of his research and particularly in the imaginary landscapes *RGB Land* (2006) presented at the Woodstreet Gallery in Pittsburgh (USA), a contemporary "virtual land art" piece that delights us with an explosion of color and shape that shifts and changes with the movements of visitors.

These imaginary landscapes are most often deserted, evoking - as always with Miguel Chevalier - a kind of disappearance of nature and the recreation of it at will, using machine calculations, algorithmic formulas and fractal models to reinvent earth, water and sky without a trace of human presence, as if pre-dating life in some wondrous paradox of mathematical science and earthly essence. It's a landscape constantly in flux, offering dizzying panoramas and alternating land and air views, a landscape saturated with primary colors that makes no reference to reality. But this artificial and virtual nature finds itself "attacked" by a "generalized

urbanity" - the reign of an unbounded, widespread urbanity (which philosopher Françoise Choay warns us about). This all-consuming urbanization, with no reference to any identifying architecture or typology of a given territory, first rationally conquers the plains then begins fearlessly attacking the virtual mountains, unlike contemporary reality where too steep a slope is an impediment in our current state of technology. This scenario of *Pixel City* (2008) that passes from delight to horror could easily rival science fiction, yet via its unreal reality, the artist endows it with a fascination that heightens its impact.

In his work, the artist evokes awareness of the generic city, theorized by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas. The *generic city* Koolhaas describes unfalteringly self-replicates without the least concern for any individuality, is born and reborn in function of its needs and contingencies, and generates its own morphology in an objective, pragmatic way. It's also a city which creates its own history over time with little concern for the traces that would symbolize its future, demolishing without the slightest nostalgia. By their very similitude, generic cities impose their own configuration like an aesthetic devoid of criteria and distinction, with no concern for individuality. This generic city is also illustrated by *Metacities* with tangles of networks that create the generalized urban sprawl and contemporary abstract landscape, accentuating the way infrastructures generate a city that no longer makes a distinction between center and suburbs, and homogenizes the land. *Metacities* intends to create a set of digital cities which encompass and surpass what Miguel Chevalier calls the metapolis, after François Ascher.

+(*définition François Ascher à mettre en annexe ou en note* : A metapolis is a set of places where all or part of the inhabitants, economic activity and territories are integrated in the (ordinary) daily functioning of a metropolis. A metapolis generally constitutes one single pool of resources, work forces and habitat. Its spaces are deeply heterogenous and not necessarily adjoining, and it includes at least a few hundred thousand inhabitants.

These metacities develop along a matrix structure in the form of varied polyhedrons with no center and in perpetual transformation. Do they thus evoke the fear (or desire?) of an urbanization without borders that adapts to market changes and the needs of their users? Are they based on the acknowledgement that the city is eminently malleable, forgetful of itself and its geography, which is totally denied here, when in fact urbanists base their urban projects solely on the unchanging and identifying data of geography, reflecting upon the relationship with the site and its history to provide footing on an ancestral base without denying the indispensable contemporary contribution, since, failing to evolve, the city ineluctably dies? The evolving city is another of Miguel Chevalier's obsessions, as much in the movement of people and things as in their perception of the world, not to mention the city's perpetual transformation so well described by Charles Baudelaire: "The shape of a city / Changes more quickly, alas! than the heart of a mortal". But, contrary to the "non-spaces" that are growing more frequent according to Marc Augé, Miguel Chevalier also creates hyper-spaces located in the intersections and interactions between different territories, offering a kaleidoscope of visions, flows and local practices, thereby creating a form of social and spatial utopia in a world of speed, change and generalized urbanization. This powerful artistic intuition meets up with a highly topical urban concept - that of the endlessly sprawling city's need for polarities and multicentricities in order to re-inject identity and socio-economic vitality into its new territories, associating transport and urbanism to respond to the major issues of sustainable development.

The accent placed on the architecture of networks seems undoubtedly pertinent in the eyes of urban developers. When it comes to building a road or railway, generalized urbanity is such a product of network urbanism and sectorial rationales incapable of combining several issues in their blind responses to urban quality and lifestyles, that they hardly think twice about disfiguring a landscape, isolating a territory, creating multiple annoyances and producing something that's purely functional. The sectorial approach blatantly ignores the obvious impact which the market, commercial establishments, housing developments and industrial

zones that individually make up our contemporary world have on a form of urbanization. And Miguel Chevalier, armed with this notion, builds his metacities on the rationale of material and immaterial networks, because the immaterial ones are even more constituent of urban values than the more material ones. But he transcends the simple functionality of this to make generators of these urban utopias, furthermore evoking a form of immaterial architecture that would be the essence of itself.

These metacities, like many of the artist's works, are interactive. Perhaps in this we can see the great importance he places on coproduction, so terribly denied by contemporary urbanism where user participation is most often reduced to being informed of what we imagine to be a radiant future. Almost every work mentioned here invite the viewer to become a full-fledged participant in it.

Metapolis (2002), a work created for the Marco de Monterrey Museum in Mexico, creates the *city of cities! "glocal"* according to the artist. It also fabulously illustrates a form of globalization where architecture crosses borders and references belong to every creator's mental library, but also where heritage and modernity blend more easily than in real life which presents two stumbling blocks: the observable refusal of modernity in so many French cities buttressed on anything resembling classified evidence of history, but also the reproduction of fake cities or villages that reassure the user in a time where the future is feared. But this work also warns us of the disappearance of heritage on several continents and suggests happily blending time periods, like cities have always done over the course of history.

Yet the artist does more than just condemn urban deviation and convey his insights into urban mechanisms; in his own subtle and charming manner, he suggests and offers ways to act in favor of a better city, by little touches one can recognize and reflect upon. Such is the case with *Ultra-Nature* (2004), where he recreates nature in spaces where it's most absent, like the Oslo subway. This underground space in an icy country becomes an artistic adventure for commuters who, as they walk past, make giant flowers bow to them in a riot of warm colors - an unlikely challenge that appeals to the emotions of a public for whom it is a gift. New flowers, more mechanical and less connected to reality, spring from the artist's work with the help of significant advances in computer technology, introducing a strangeness and confusion of senses that can generate some discomfort until reaffirming the enchantment characteristic of Miguel Chevalier's work. These fractal flowers (2008) - some of which refuse to be tamed by color - accept their artificiality, pushing the allusion to a dying nature one step further. But they too shift with the movements of passers-by, appealing to their emotions as they sprout, blossom, wilt, then inevitably die to make room for the birth of new flowers. The cycle of life unfolds in a tightened time frame, revealing for us the fleeting aspect of nature's gifts.

Nature and the city are intermingled in this work which calls out to urbanists and serves as revelation, warning, guide and pioneer, opening new future perspectives. Among them, *Memories and Mutations* (1999) blends the ravaged cityscape of post-war Beirut, the battle scars and urban densification that bears witness to the vitality of a people whose enterprising spirit has been proven, as well as to a city that always rises from its ashes.

And, armed with his technological tools and generative software, Miguel Chevalier strives to imagine space with the design of *MetaMedina*: a utopic medina-town made of Moroccan-style one-family homes (a Frenchman's dream!) similar to riads - dwellings with courtyards that offer shade and privacy linked to institutional buildings. These interlocking units resemble the fractal structures familiar to the artist. This unfinished project - which is not without hope of one day seeing the light - is a bold gamble that consists of using an ancestral urban form based on ancient conventions to build the city of tomorrow with contemporary, nostalgia-free, architecture. The reasoning is guided by the myth of the labyrinth and underpinned by the hypothesis that the apparent anarchy may hide, by superposition, several geometrical orders or not, adhering to different spatial, social and cultural rationales no doubt more suited to the

contemporary world than the generalized urbanity that is affecting Morocco like every territory on earth.

Morocco is undeniably a source of inspiration for Miguel Chevalier who, in his *Digital Arabesques*, evokes the legend of flying carpets. He delights in the paradox between the archaic and the modern, offering residents and visitors a feeling of magic that's rooted in a culture and popular imagination that everyone can make sense of.

In Marrakech on the square Jamaa El Fna, which UNESCO has designated a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity - a symbolic space if there ever was one - Chevalier designed flying carpets made of pixels and digital images that reinterpret the mosaic pattern of the city and float above the square in a high-tech-meets-the-Arabian-Nights display. Venturing contrasts and cultural blends, the artist projects moving shapes onto the flying carpets to create the sensation of an infinite generative capacity, another of his recurrent themes. To this, he adds luminous spheres that float above the city, imprinted with fixed images borrowed from moving geometry. Color, inspired here by earth and sun, is strangely predominant in the work of this contemporary artist who refuses the austerity often prominent among his peers, and prevails in a world where the virtual meets the imaginary. Contrary to the usual effect of such an encounter, here it's not a question of escaping reality but rather making it palpable, making the city come to life, fostering a communal convergence of the public space and the realm of dreams. Here again the artist touches the urbanist at the core of his concerns, for the city only exists by a shared public space which today is jeopardized by the extreme individualism of our lifestyles, urban sprawl and the reign of a segregated and mono-functional urbanism that leaves little room for the "living together" which must be promoted in an ever-changing world. Love and imagine the city - that's what this work tells us, a work which gains stature over time and should soon find its place among concrete actions to change the world, as the virtual comes to the aid of reality to help it create the narrative and urban myths without which urbanity is unable to attain city status.