



Miguel Chevalier - Méta-cities in progress

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Patrick Amine

The city may even be rated higher, since it stands at the point where Nature and artifice meet. A city is a congregation of animals whose biological history is enclosed within its boundaries; and yet every conscious and rational act on the part of these creatures helps to shape the city's eventual character. By its form, as by the manner of its birth, the city has elements at once of biological procreation, organic evolution, and aesthetic creation. It is both natural object and a thing to be cultivated; individual and group; something lived and something dreamed; it is the human invention, par excellence.

—Claude Lévi-Strauss¹

We no longer apprehend European and world cities, as well as outlying towns, in the same way we used to do. They have changed due to their own internal developments, their architecture, contemporary and electronic urbanization, and then in particular via the new lifestyles and new ways of moving about people have adopted. Space has been transformed. We no longer get the same sensations from these cities and from nature. For, our ways of thinking have changed, and our relationship to our body immersed in a precise space has been transformed.

For, a rich and dense fabric of new networks has developed as Time passes, as the structures of socioeconomic and philosophical changes are altered, and as new contemporary technologies used by specialists and the general public are adopted.

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The art of Miguel Chevalier proceeds via a multidirectional system of proliferations. It lays out a set of parameters that are deployed upon its own terrains of artistic intervention and visual-art investigation.

Around his studio, we can see virtual plants sprouting and branching out. The flowers that grow beneath electric lighting and the digital technologies used are perhaps reminiscent for some of the poisonous flowers of a Baudelaire! Here, Nature and artifice combine at top speed, developing new territories, as if under pressure to do so.

Chevalier has designed this exhibition at the Fernand Léger Gallery in Ivry-sur-Seine* from a variety of perspectives, with various reflections on the notion of urbanity, of geographical enlargement, and while reflecting on the infiltration, into the urban and architectural fabric, of new visual-arts parameters and of new visual elements created for that purpose.

In Room #1, Chevalier has endeavored to take into account urban-planning changes

¹ *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), trans. John Russell (New York: Criterion Books, 1961), p. 127.

within the town of Ivry-sur-Seine—a “Meta-Ivry”—and to reveal its rhizomatic character, in the sense Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari used this word. Yet this term is meant particularly in the sense of multiple ruptures in the apparently “linear” or “wired” fabric of the sites he highlights in accordance with the parametric categories of the virtual universe generated by machines and computer programs. The definition offered for the word city is no longer truly what it was called according to the *Encyclopédie Universalis*: an “urban area that forms a homogeneous whole, a historical, architectural unity.”

It is a matter of showing there how a model evolves, changes, and is transformed, in particular via an intervention of digital processes imagined by the artist. Here, one will find various installations, one of them entitled, as a matter of fact, “Meta-Ivry,” and a second one “Meta-Cities,” which is reflective of a virtual planetary city that is “rootless,” that has no orthonormal bearings, no distinctive characteristics, and lacks any “exotic” notion! These urban spaces make reference to the models of Baron Haussmann, Otto Wagner, and Ildefons Cerdà (1815-1876; an engineer, urban planner, and Spanish architect who carried out the “extension” of Barcelona, called the Eixample or the Cerdà Plan), as Chevalier points out.

The growth and development of the town of Ivry-sur-Seine over these last twenty years must be seen for what it does: urbanity devours the Natural and this urbanity begins to disappear, as Chevalier makes clear. One can call these urban spaces Meta-Territories. This follows his twenty years of investigations into Digital Cities and into the many mutations of nature-related elements. Confronted with the multiplication of networks, the artist investigates the way in which the sites and the often hybrid architectural forms of cities are appropriated by people.

In this approach, one finds a philosophical notion. The artist seizes upon and becomes intensely imbued with all the urban symbolism that arises before him. Chevalier uses the many possibilities of computer programming and 3D printers to manufacture the shapes to which he is seeking to give material form in his urban architectural investigations.

In taking as a model Ivry-sur-Seine, the town in which the artist has set up his studio, Chevalier has designed this “city” as a generative town, a new “Meta-Ivry,” through his visual-arts creations and his volumetric structural models. He collides straight into this panoramic view of urban sites and integrates it into his system, into his grammar of forms, of proliferating spaces, in order to reconstruct another type of universe—as may be seen in Room #1. This meta-universe is one of the many reflections of the town of Ivry-sur-Seine’s intersecting spaces, but it is one that could also be another town on a different scale. It is a new town that is drawn up without any preconceived grid.

How does this “Meta-Ivry” installation take on material form?

The artist uses 3D software in order to employ new libraries of architectural forms he will remix with video images of the town. A new series of images is thus generated on the basis of images captured in the streets of Ivry-sur-Seine, a collection of a set of elements: old and recent buildings, streets, tracks, traffic networks, various old and current films about the town, all this quite dense documentary material being collated with multiple jumbings of various architectural forms, which surely give rise to some happy accidents! It must be noted that Jacopo Baboni Schilingi has created a sound universe that forms osmotic connections within the flow of sequences. The result is a ceaseless proliferation of networks, new virtual models, webs that hover between fiction and reality. Here, the sites are contaminated.

The town of Ivry-sur-Seine, which is undergoing massive changes, as can be glimpsed over the last decade, was an industrial town, one with various medium-sized industries. Such structural change, with its transition toward the tertiary sector and new economies, “is being expressed through the transformation of large spaces that are disappearing and giving way to the rise of apartment blocks and office buildings,” as Chevalier emphasizes when describing his approach and his thinking, which employ generators and new digital tools, as we can grasp and can see in his installations during this new exhibition at the Fernand Léger Gallery in Ivry-sur-Seine.

In his installation, we are shown this reinvented town whose lines zoom past at high speed within an endless panoramic view. It is a sort of conglomerate of several cities that seem to blossom together. Verticality is fully foregrounded, particularly in its urbanist structure. Transparent buildings dot this landscape wherein 2D and 3D images are juxtaposed, and they are gradually transformed through the generative process.

The real town might seem like another invented town, and in a way it does appear in the form of another image, with its multiple virtual and modular facets. Chevalier constructs what he calls Meta-Cities. And these Meta-Cities are fluid! A new project is being superimposed upon the existing residential and commercial town, where montage, geometrical transformations, and various artificial topographies enter into the picture, thus forming an architectural design model. This "restructured" Town might, in the future, be a new object of curiosity! What we have here are territories in progress invented by the artists and their software programs, a field for the imaginary.

This Meta-City is algorithmic and generative. It engages in "self-management," as Chevalier says. To some extent, what he is referring to here are the views of Yona Friedman (b. 1923). An architect and artist, Friedman worked out what he calls "the spatial city," whose "mobile structures" might be able, in a way, to follow its inhabitants!

Alongside his installations, Chevalier presents a series of immobile works and sculptures executed via laser-cutting techniques and 3D printing. These are cubic architectural forms in plexiglass of varied colors that play upon superimpositions and create transparency effects.

Chevalier has thus composed in 3D a labyrinthine town with hybrid architectural forms, that of Meta-Cities. This is his way of giving the virtual realm material form, volumetrically, he says. In this liberated space with no physical constraints, the town becomes an exponentially metamorphosic subject, a site for experimentations in which one is plunged into a space that opens onto new visual sensations and thoughtful reflections. This invented Meta-City creates, simultaneously, a territory in which the immersed subject's "Conscious" and "Subconscious" merge in these new digital creations—which themselves have no apparent boundaries. On this point, what Chevalier is questioning, via an atypical work he has created, is the future of town architecture; and in a way, he is bringing out points of divergence from the models of some contemporary architects' creative works—though not without some reservations.

In the second room, using an iPad one can intervene where four different universes allow visitors to enter this "Meta-City" and to stroll right and left, from top to bottom, within a virtual space that stretches from the inner worlds of this town to the combinatory architectural elements designed by the artist himself.

We know that architecture is always the organ of a collective dream, as Walter Benjamin wrote of Haussmann's Paris.

I believe that one must see contemporary European towns as "something more . . . than a congeries of individual men and social conveniences—streets, buildings, electric lights, tramways, and telephones, etc.; something more also than a mere constellation of institutions and administrative devices," as a great American sociologist, Robert T. Park, has underscored.² And one thereby arrives at initiating the idea that The city is instead a mood. It is a matter of appropriating it in another way.

In a way, the town, in the singularity of its neighborhoods, could be conceived of as a town of moods within which new aesthetic approaches issuing from artists' reflections come to be integrated, these artists being well-versed in the fashions of intellectual research set within the determinate contexts of new digital technologies and 3D imaging. These artists are ready to reveal new dimensions for a town by drawing, from within their memories, upon its cultural resources and its renown. This "mood" is not distilled as some kind of intangible atmosphere: "instead, it is alive in its stones; it is their voice. In a town, everything is but a

2 Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *The City: Suggestions for Investigations of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1925, 1967), p. 1.

mood because the town, the stones themselves, have the floor to speak." All these (redefined and reinvented) elements resonate, giving echo to Chevalier's creative works.

You know the pictures of Giorgio de Chirico in which he painted his metaphysical towns as he saw them, particularly Turin and Rome. The town has to be conceived as a metaphysical space in which men and stones exchange their attributes. It was said that citizens are "living stones," according to an old tradition (Ignatius of Antioch), "real bodies of the city." It can be said that stones are in turn transformed into spirit, so as to become "the mineral mind" of society (Emmanuele Coccia). The gods point out that stones sing out history, dictate the law, and reduplicate the town in its own image.

So, it is the imagination that is liable to transform the character and the space of a "dedicated site," a town district, through variegated, polychromatic dreams, and this is rendered possible by imaginaries that are quite distant from one another. That is particularly so when it is artists who work out symbolic, singular, and original creative processes via new technologies—here, while drawing inspiration from the town of Ivry, for example. There is a phrase from Italo Calvino apropos of his *Invisible Cities* that can have another resonance in our ears: "Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else. . . . Desires are already memories."³ And these memories and desires persist through Time.

The imaginary of an artist like Chevalier invents new territories that offer springboards for reverie and knowledge. Its branchings spread out, contaminating one another, so as to compose new networks. His generative universe allows one to create this image of a "World City," as he emphasizes in his investigations. Each and every object ultimately becomes itself a medium. His Meta-Cities are symbols that open the space of exchange through language. In a way, Chevalier is inventing a form of the digital sublime.

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*Fernand Léger Gallery, Ivry-sur-Seine: Exhibition of Miguel Chevalier's Meta-Territories 2015 (October 2 - December 19, 2015).

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3 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, Translated from the Italian by William Weaver (San Diego, New York, London: A Harvest Book, A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974), pp. 44, 8.