

Displaced Memories: Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya

Abstract

This paper reflects on Malaysia's twin capital cities – Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya – drawing on diverse insights about cities, images, absence and memory from Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. The paper examines the contrasting spaces, aesthetics and symbolism of Malaysia's two adjacent capitals. It explores how Malaysian identity and memory are framed within these cities' historical, cultural and geographical contexts: their landscape settings of jungle and water; their translation of particular architectural and urbanistic styles; and their cemeteries. It examines how Kuala Lumpur's commemorative sites have been displaced and transformed over time. Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya are explored as an illustration of Calvino's idea of 'Twofold Cities': places that are described, and function, in relation to their twin, their opposite, or their bifurcation. Malaysia's capital cities are also used to illustrate two themes that frame Calvino's dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan: Cities and Empire, and Cities and the Orient.

Keywords

Urban Form • memorials • postcolonialism • orientalism • Malaysia • Italo Calvino

Quentin Stevens[✉]

School of Architecture and Urban Design,
RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia
e-mail: quentin.stevens@rmit.edu.au

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Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1974) tells of cities that are remembered. It also recounts a Western view of cities in the East, through a dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. The story that follows imagines how a Western explorer might seek to describe and understand cities, signs, identity and memory in Malaysia's twin capital cities, Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya; their towers and waterways, their monuments and cemeteries. The first voice we will hear is that of Polo, recounting his stories to Khan. All quotations are from Calvino's text, except where otherwise indicated.

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I have spoken to you of many cities that tell many kinds of stories - or at least, cities from which stories can be interpreted. I have described to you an entire realm of cities; happy and unhappy, real and imagined. I have told you stories of everyday life and of death, of dreams and forgetting, noting what is seen and what remains hidden. The stories and cities of which I tell you are not utopias. The city is a frame for a story, but a city has no plot; and any such story is a fiction, not a real place (Weaver & Pettigrew 1992). What I tell you from my travels will confirm what you already know, O Khan, from your rule: that cities and their stories are complex, deceptive, fragile and ever-changing (Fernandes & Silva 2014). There are three new kinds of stories of cities that I will now tell you. The first revolves around you, Great Khan.

Cities and Empires

When I tell you of cities, I am also speaking to you of your empire, and the empires of others: the Tartars, the Mongols, the Venetians. Each city is a world, and each empire is a world of cities. When I came to you as you visited Kin-sai, "ancient capital of deposed dynasties, the latest pearl set in [your] crown", you asked me if I had ever happened to see a city that resembled

it; "its bridges arching over the canals, princely palaces with marble doorsteps immersed in the water, its balconies, platforms, domes, campaniles, island gardens glowing green in the lagoon's grayness". I answered, "I should never have imagined a city like this could exist". The cities within your Empire are filled with differences. Later, you opened your atlases, "where all the cities of the empire and the neighboring realms are drawn, building by building and street by street, with walls, rivers, bridges, harbors, cliffs". "Your atlas preserves the differences intact", I said. But as I have travelled, I have come to "realize that differences are lost: each city takes to resembling all cities". When I spoke to you of Fedora, I noted that:

In every city of the empire every building is different and set in a different order: but as soon as the stranger arrives at the unknown city and his eye penetrates the pine cone of pagodas and garrets and haymows, following the scrawl of canals, gardens, rubbish heaps, he immediately distinguishes which are the princes' palaces, the high priests' temples, the tavern, the prison, the slum. This - some say - confirms the hypothesis that each man bears in his mind a city made only of differences, a city without figures and without form, and the individual cities fill it up.

All cities, like all stories, are constructed of the same elements. What differs and what changes is that which is invisible. What I bring to you, O Khan, is not maps or wares from the cities of your empire, but the stories and dreams we live through them:

what drives men to travel up rivers and cross deserts to come [to cities, like Euphemia,] is not only the exchange of wares, which you could find, everywhere the same, in all

the bazaars inside and outside the Great Khan's empire... You do not come to Euphemia only to buy and sell, but also because at night, by the fires all around the market, ... the others tell, each one, his tale of wolves, sisters, treasures, scabies, lovers, battles. [It is in] the city where memory is traded...

Your empire is filled with real stone cities like Fedora that show us what is necessary, and also many miniature Fedoras in glass globes... that show us "what is imagined as possible", an "imagined way of making it the ideal city". The empire that is the atlas also gathers all the cities "that will exist one day... The catalogue of forms is endless... it reveals the form of cities that do not yet have a form or a name"; it also gathers the forms of future empires. From the mixture of two cities in your atlas (Troy and Constantinople),

a third emerged, which might be called San Francisco and which spans the Golden Gate and the bay with long, light bridges and sends open trams climbing its steep streets, and which might blossom as capital of the Pacific a millennium hence... in an empire more vast than the Great Khan's.

Cities are finite places, but empires extend across landscapes, across the plains and forests, until the empires, too, end; end where it is difficult to cross the river, the mountains, the sea, or end at the line where the armies fought and stopped. There are empires beyond the empire one knows and controls, places where only travellers and stories go. I speak to you now as a visitor from another empire in the West.

Cities and the East

My stories to you started with travelling for three days toward the east; my first journey to Domira. Every city is east of somewhere, and every city has a view toward the east, and imagines its treasures, imagines possessing them. Many cities imagine themselves as the centre of something, but they are also gateways to somewhere else. My city, my centre, Venice, has always been a gateway to the East. There are many easts. The ancient 'middle' east, powerful in memory for its long, deep conflict and contrast with the west. It is the image of an Other, of difference. There is the 'far' east, China: far from Europe, but to the Chinese, and to you, great Khan, it is the middle kingdom, and the east is only sea and beautiful islands. And there is the Indonesian and Austronesian, the southern east, that east in the empire of the sea. The truly far east which differs again from its centre. The east at odds with the middle kingdom, but always mixing with it, always trading, exchanging, and sharing stories. Great Khan, you have ridden and conquered far to the east, but a traveller will later tell you of a city further east than you have ever ridden. You have asked me to tell you of another city. But "[e]very time I describe a city, I am saying something about Venice", my gateway to understanding the lesser-known cities in the east. In our dialogue, you and I can together discover the treasures of the cities of the East among their rubbish. When I travel back to the northwest, to Euphemia, I can exchange these stories of the East, and know their true value.

Twofold Cities

When I was describing one city to you, often I was telling the story of two (Calvino 1983). Each city is unique, but a city may be twinned, counterpointed, or divided. Mirrored cities never offer a perfect, equal reflection, but a transcription. The second city always consists of more or less, or represents difference or change (Guidicetti 2003). Sometime, as on a chess board, white is counterpointed with black, the good with the bad, and we

see the duplicity and ambiguity of cities, their imagery and their stories (Fernandes & Silva 2014). There is only one Eudoxia, but it has a carpet that shows its true overall form. "Every inhabitant of Eudoxia compares the carpet's immobile order with his own image of the city... and each can find, concealed among the arabesques, an answer, the story of his life, the twists of fate." But one can never be sure whether it is the perfect patterned carpet or the city itself which is "the true map of the universe", and which is "the approximate reflection". People in Beersheba also believe their city may reflect a more perfect heavenly model, imagining:

that, suspended in the heavens, there exists another Beersheba, where the city's most elevated virtues and sentiments are poised, and that if the terrestrial Beersheba will take the celestial one as its model the two cities will become one... They also believe... that another Beersheba exists underground, the receptacle of everything base and unworthy that happens to them, and it is their constant care to erase from the visible Beersheba every tie or resemblance to the lower twin.

Valdrada, "built... on the shores of a lake", presents to the arriving traveller two cities: "one erect above the lake, and the other reflected, upside down". But:

Not everything that seems valuable above the mirror maintains its force when mirrored. The twin cities are not equal, because nothing that exists or happens in Valdrada is symmetrical: every face and gesture is answered, from the mirror, by a face and gesture inverted, point by point. The two Valdradas live for each other, their eyes interlocked; but there is no love between them.

Cities are also reflected in language, in how they are described. For Aglaura,

There is little I can tell you about [it] beyond the things its own inhabitants have always repeated: an array of proverbial virtues, of equally proverbial faults, a few eccentricities... Ancient observers... attributed to Aglaura its enduring assortment of qualities... these accounts create a solid and compact image of a city... This is the result:... if I wished to describe Aglaura to you,... everything previously said of Aglaura imprisons your words and obliges you to repeat rather than say. Therefore, the inhabitants... do not notice the Aglaura that grows on the ground. And even I, who would like to keep the two cities distinct in my memory, can speak only of the one, because the recollection of the other, in the lack of words to fix it, has been lost.

When I tell you, Great Khan, these stories of cities, I am imagining them and re-creating them, and your own questions, memories and imagination also refract and transform them. They do not remain the same city. As I told you of Euphemia, memories are traded in the city. But the city itself is also built up from memories that are traded and retold (Guidicetti 2003).

Laudomia shows how a city may be twinned and refracted across time, with its past and its future mapped out across space:

Like Laudomia, every city has at its side another city whose inhabitants are called by the same names: it is the Laudomia of the dead, the cemetery.... The properties of the double city are well known. The more the Laudomia of the living becomes crowded and expanded, the more the expanse of tombs increases beyond the walls... On fine afternoons the

living population pays a visit to the dead and they decipher their own names on their stone slabs: like the city of the living, this other city communicates a history of toil, anger, illusions, emotions... And to feel sure of itself, the living Laudomia has to seek in the Laudomia of the dead the explanation of itself, even at the risk of finding more there, or less: explanations for more than one Laudomia, for different cities that could have been and were not, or reasons that are incomplete, contradictory, disappointing.

Laudomia also has alongside it another twin city, of the unborn. Cities exist in time, and time is asymmetrical, only unfolding, never folding inwards and closing. Cities and their formal order "must adapt to the passing of time and not remain illusively static" (Guidicetti 2003, p. 202). Thus when I speak of cities, I seek to emphasize their uneven contents and relationships. "The third part often adds something new, opens up new horizons... The negative utopias of perfection and of perfect symmetry... would lead to... immobilization". Seeing perfect order in the city would prevent man from questioning, dreaming, progressing (Guidicetti 2003, p. 205).

Cities that appear to be double are usually just the one city unfolding over time; they are shaped by time (Guidicetti 2003). Such is Berenice,

the unjust city [of] intrigues, [where] the hidden Berenice, the city of the just [lies] in the shadowy rooms behind the shops and beneath the stairs... in the seed of the city of the just, a malignant seed is hidden, in its turn... This seed ferments in bitterness, rivalry, resentment; and the natural desire of revenge on the unjust is colored by a yearning to be in their place and to act as they do. Another unjust city, though different from the first, is digging out its space... all the future Berenices are already present in this instant, wrapped one within the other.

Another Hidden City, Marozia, shows a similar unfolding, from a "grim and petty" city of the rat, to a city of the swallow, of playful flight toward "an opening horizon". "Marozia consists of two cities... both change with time, but their relationship does not change; the second is the one about to free itself from the first." Cities are never truly symmetrical or duplicate, inasmuch as time, and a city's history, only flows in one direction: forward.

Cities that appear to be somehow bifurcated into halves are usually just two sides of the one city. In Leandra, a city protected by "gods of two species", one set of gods follows the families when they move house, the other belongs to a house, and remain there when the new tenants arrive. Both "believe they are the city's soul" and the dreamers of the future, whether of "the careers the children will follow when they grow up... or what this house in this neighborhood might become". These "gods" bring us to reflect on whether we believe a city's memory, meaning and identity dwell in its people, or in its places.

Isaura, "city of the thousand wells" has "two forms of religion". According to some people, Isaura's gods live in the depths of an underground lake. For others, they live in all the mechanisms that raise the water, in "a city that moves entirely upward". One religion suggests being anchored to the past, the other a view toward the future. Visiting Zenobia draws a contrast between the city as it has developed until today and the city that its founders might have wanted, leading us to divide cities into... "two species: ... those that through the years and the changes continue to give their form to desires, and those in which desires either erase the city or are erased by it". The city shapes its residents' desires; but it also comes to reflect those desires, even when those desires erase it.

Sophronia is twinned, but only by being "made up of two half cities". Its relation to time is quite different: "One of the half-cities is permanent, the other is temporary, and when the period of its sojourn is over, they uproot it, dismantle it, and take it off, transplanting it to the vacant lots of another half-city". One half-Sophronia contains "the great roller coaster... the carousel... the Ferris wheel... the death-ride with crouching motorcyclists, the big top with the clump of trapezes". The other half-city houses all the city's institutions: "the bank, the factories, the palaces, the slaughterhouse, the school, and all the rest" and is built "of stone and marble". Unexpectedly, when "every year the day comes", the workmen remove the solid and substantial half of the city, and carry it away on trailers. It is the half-city of thrilling, ephemeral experiences which remains; the city of work and seriousness that can always be replaced.

These latter cities – Isaura, Zenobia and Sophronia – although they are presented as twin, as somehow more than just one city, are all thin; all are somehow cities of lack, rather than plenitude. These cities are physically slight, made of cables, ribbons, stilts, tents. Their desire is for weightiness, religion, and completeness, perhaps a desire to be reunited with their Other; they reflect a sense or a dream that they are, or can be, more (Guidicetti 2003). In all these stories of twinned cities, it is the story rather than the city which has two dimensions: the real and the dreamt of or spoken, the enduring and the ephemeral, the past and present.

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With that, Polo had finished with his stories, and though the sun was still high, winter was drawing near. So he bade his farewell to the Great Khan, and began the long journey back to his native Venice, a city that he now knew better than ever, but would also be seeing with fresh eyes. A city slowly sinking under its own weight, its memories and the rising tides.

Another traveller, a scholar, timidly approached for an audience with Khan, carrying copies of Polo's writings, and his own atlases and inscribed tablets.

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O Great Khan, I am not as well travelled, learned and eloquent as Polo. I have looked down every street in the cities I have studied, and I have seen them as if laid out from above on a great carpet. I will tell you what I know of Cities and Empires, Cities of the East, and Twofold Cities. And I will speak to you of cities, desire, memory and what is invisible.

Divided Cities

Great Khan, Marco Polo has told you of many ways in which cities may be twofold: cities accompanied by another that mirrors them, but in a way that reveals the city's faults and hopes, its history and its ambitions, its soul. A twin city that tells a story of the first, and thereby tries to re-write it. The stories that Polo tells you are also constructing such analogous cities.

Let me tell you now of a twin city far, far in the east. These are two real cities that are both the capital of an empire. They rise close by one another, although they tend to both look askance. In this pair of cities, we find a messy confluence and divergence of different ideas, different memories, and different cities of the east. The first city arose in the middle of a territory without cities, amidst villages and jungle and water. The idea of a city was brought there by outsiders, merchants from China. It was, like many cities, built so that men could dig holes and transport minerals to other, bigger cities. It was built as far upstream as large boats could travel. It was a city that dug its own territory away, so that its map is now filled with holes, which are in turn filled with water, and the roads must weave between the holes and the many remaining jungle-covered hills. In its first form, the city was a small grid of streets with a market, a temple, and a clocktower in a square, built at

the muddy confluence of two rivers. The city prospered in its one function. Soon the British arrived to administer this empire, and built a capital on the opposite riverbank. The urban places they built - government offices, churches, a men's club, the cricket ground, the lavish houses and gardens of the Residents-General elevated on a hill, the railway station, and the memorial to the glorious dead of the great war framed at the end of Victory Avenue - were all copies from cities from home. But the architecture was an orientalist echo of the Mughals - descendants of the Great Mongol Khans - imported by the British from their colonial rule in India, to recognise and represent the local Muslim sultans in whose name they ruled (Moser 2012; King 2008). A statue of the Resident-General stood facing the first mosque built at the river confluence. Workers came from India and built another grid of streets adjacent, with their own temples and stores. This city has always been a city of confluences and divides. It is a mixed city, of British and Chinese and Indian histories. Mixed, but still in parts.

After the second great war, and the end of empires, the city became the capital of its own new nation, the empire of the sultans; a Muslim nation. The house of the Resident-General was occupied by the native-born prime minister, the railway gave way to road traffic, and the British cenotaph gave way to a flyover joining the city's halves together across the river. That memorial was displaced to a hilltop in the Botanical Gardens, and a new monument was built in front of it, to the country's own struggle against the Chinese Communist insurgents. For the Chinese empire still exists, O Khan. The city now had a National Monument, one symbol to obviate all other symbols, all other histories. That too was a duplicate, of the memorial to the Americans' victory over the Japanese in the East China Sea. A monument with allegorical figures, but human figures nonetheless, and therefore *haram*. These twin memorials and their two histories reveal the city's and its empire's changed alliances and enemies.

The modern city's new skyline symbols were the minaret of a new national mosque near where the cenotaph once stood and a parliament in the International Style fronted by a statue of the first prime minister. Later came a skyscraper veiled with a *mashrabiya* and the twin minaret towers of the state petrochemical monopoly. There was a *fatwa*. The State portrayed itself and its memories in Islam and architecture and decorative patterns, not in icons. The statue of the Resident-General was hidden away in the thick shadowy gardens outside the national museum. The prime minister's statue could remain, because it and the Parliament remained withdrawn behind fences where the public never saw them. But the sprawling city still lived its polyglot life and dreamed its dreams. The Chinese and the Indians still built their effigies, but they proudly displayed them in their private places.

Cities and the dead

The Chinese worshipped their ancestors and did not draw a strict line between heritage and legend. They honoured statues of real people as gods and saw their gods as alive. The city's founder was Chinese, but you will only find his likeness inside their temples and museums and cemeteries. Being superstitious, the Chinese built their cemeteries outside the city, out of view, downstream and downwind. The enormous cemeteries, covering several square kilometres, form another city, a city of the dead, once standing outside the city, but eventually swallowed up by it. Beside the Chinese cemetery are smaller cemeteries, to the Japanese, Roman Catholics, and Ceylonese Buddhists, and crematoria for the Sikhs and Hindus. The races mixed in life, but in the city of the dead, they are carefully sorted. The descendants come to sweep clean the tombs of their ancestors. The high-rise offices of insurance companies encroach onto this territory; the fear of death is overcome by the agents who measure death merely in terms of actuarial probabilities. The Chinese built many

of the city's largest monuments within their cemeteries: collective memorials to the victims of the Japanese occupiers (Chinese and otherwise), and to the volunteer Chinese who fought against them. They built the memorial to the Chinese who helped fight and win the Second World War, and to the peace that followed. Its plum blossom tower rises to ten stories, high above the gravestones and jungle and the freeways. Further still outside the ever-growing city, they built more memorials to the local Communist guerrillas who were killed fighting the Japanese, and the war victims, inscribed in English, Austronesian, Tamil, and Japanese. These memorials publicly tell histories that the Islamic national government will not show.

The old capital city also remembered its dead, although under the *fatwa* the memories are not so visible. The former prime ministers lie in rest in the Heroes Mausoleum at the National Mosque. The first prime minister's house, once the Resident-General's, became a memorial. With the passing of each prime minister, their offices were preserved as museums, never re-used. The hillside below the parliament began to fill up with palatial houses, and the lush Lake Gardens slowly became the Government Hill, until the whole hill became a memorial hall to national statesmen. The hill was then re-vegetated on top of this hall, and the fourth prime minister built a still-grander new residence to the East, and a whole new city around it.

The Eastern City

For the new millennium, the government erected a new, pure capital city for this far, far Eastern empire, even further south and east than its twin; a city of princes and servants and emissaries. The visitor only sees its palaces and towers and temples and gardens and boulevards and its picture-postcard lake. Its prisons and cemeteries and shopkeepers remain invisible behind the veil of the mountains and jungle. Like many capital cities, it appears thin, like a sketch; although over time, its life and its dreams will inevitably grow deep and heavy. The new city seeks to tell its story through High Islamic architecture, with its Taj Mahal presidential offices, its Moorish Palace of Justice, its Red-Fort-inspired stone mosque, and another mosque wrought from iron, thin and light, floating over the mirroring lake (Moser 2012). These displaced signs tell a history of other cities, other empires. They repeat the stories of Eastern cities both near and far. Because this city is new, it has no history of its own, nothing to remember. Its few actual monuments only celebrate its own beginnings, not heroes or deaths. The other city is the city of mixing, muddling and death. This city must be the future, and the future must be orderly.

What can we read in a city with no explicit figures? When Polo spoke to you of Tamara, he noted that:

If a building has no signboard or figure, its very form and the position it occupies in the city's order suffice to indicate its function: the palace, the prison, the mint, the Pythagorean school, the brothel... Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think...

But are the statements of the city so easy to parse? The new Eastern capital seeks to model itself on the ancient royal seats; but this city is not a chess board, it does not mirror the grid of the grand Chinese capital where the Great Khan's palace stands, where every person and every function has its place. The traveller will immediately recognise the President's onion-domed palace, but the building that stands high on a rise at the other end of the grand central boulevard is just a Convention Centre where merchants and experts hawk their wares; a shed, and an undecorated one at that (Fernandes & Silva 2014). The many

buildings that line the great axis are all grand, but no-one can read what their various purposes are. The city is clearly important. Its geometry tells you that. Even the lake and the landscape it sits in were sculpted to make it grand. But this tells you nothing, like Polo's account of Zaira:

In vain... shall I attempt to describe Zaira, city of high bastions. I could tell you how many steps make up the streets rising like stairways, and the degree of the arcades' curves, and what kind of zinc scales cover the roofs; but I already know this would be the same as telling you nothing. The city does not consist of this, but of relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past: ... the line strung from the lamppost to the railing opposite and the festoons that decorate the course of the queen's nuptial procession; the height of that railing and the leap of the adulterer who climbed over it at dawn... A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand,... every segment marked in turn with scratches...

Remember, Great Khan, that the new city in the East does not have a history of its own. It can only hope to rewrite the story of its ugly step-sister, and of the empire that they rule over; and to speak of the future, a future looking East. The Millennium Monument on the Eastern city's lakefront is a tall, abstract obelisk, but weightless, ungrounded, made of hollow metal and tapering to nothing at both ends. When viewed from afar, reflected in the broad lake between the two great mosques, perhaps one might think it is just another minaret. As one approaches, it appears to merely signify the millennium, like a giant sundial that only tells that one moment in time. But, just as in Zaira, as the visitor comes close, the story of the whole nation is revealed, subtly scratched into the railing of the processional ramp that curves around the monument. As the ramp rises, 141 glass panels in the balustrade provide a chronological series of etchings, with images and text in both English and Austronesian. These images of the past are small, thin, faint, almost invisible. There you will find many tiny reproductions of the elements that make up the great city and the nation: images of buildings, industries,

infrastructures, landscapes, and maps of the territory. Like the great carpet that is a mirror of Eudoxia, these are perfect, fixed images of the nation's past. But unexpectedly, in this pious Muslim city without billboards, portraits or statues, there are also many, many graven images of people engraved here in the glass. There are sultans, legislators, presidents; European diplomats, administrators, plantation owners and industrialists; soldiers, surrendering enemy soldiers, and protestors; sportspeople and office workers and television cameramen. Etched in transparent lines in the glass, they are seen and not seen.

Everywhere else in the new capital, the nation and its history are described not through images, but through indices: abstract symbols. The great public square in front of the President's new palace is actually circular. It displays all the flags of the far-flung states, displaying them equally. The monument to the Eastern capital's own founding is also a flag, a national flag, in steel, draped, static. These places are memories of symbols, and vice versa. The State's commemorations of the war no longer revolve around the classical cenotaph and the National Monument in that other, twin city, no longer the capital. The soldiers now march in a new, empty square. Or perhaps they do not even march; there is no public audience to confirm it.

This young, far-flung empire continues to extend and revise a journey and a narrative of the East. It is an uneasy amalgam. In its twofold cities, we see cultures, styles, identities and memories displaced and disjointed. There are two capitals that struggle against each other, but together they still also struggle to fully represent and lead the empire. There is another city of the future rising rapidly nearby, a science park within a Multimedia Super Corridor, near the airport and the high-speed train. And there is another capital, for the true king of the valley, which had itself replaced the old royal port. Some say that this is an eternal truth of empires and of cities, O Khan: that they can never be whole, complete, at rest. The gardens keep filling up with houses, the valley keeps filling up with cities, and the cities keep filling up with stories.

ORCID

Quentin Stevens  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0912-0426>

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