Jeffrey Shaw  Netherlands

A city is simultaneously a tangible arrangement of forms and an immaterial pattern of experiences. Its architecture is also an architecture of the imagination. Its identity is a psycho-geographic network of information—a labyrinth of narrative pathways secreted within its urban design. The city that is reconstructed by media technology is a new territory of exploration. Mirroring the objective world into a virtual imaginative space, it deconstructs the material structures and evokes a fluid poetics of space and person and intimate experience.

In The Legible City, the visitor is able to cycle through a simulated representation of a city. This virtual city is constituted by computer-generated three-dimensional letters that form words and sentences along the sides of the streets. Using ground plans of actual cities—Manhattan, Amsterdam and Karlsruhe—the existing architecture of these cities is replaced by a new architecture of letters and text.

Cycling through these cities of words is consequently a journey of reading. Choosing the path one takes is a choice of certain texts and their spontaneous juxtapositions. The identity of these new cities becomes the conjunction of the meanings the words generate as one travels freely in the virtual city space.

The Manhattan Version of this work (1988–89) is based on the area bounded by 34th and 66th Streets, and Park and 11th Avenues. The texts are eight separate fictional story-lines in the form of monologues, respectively by ex-Mayor Koch, Frank Lloyd Wright, Donald Trump, a tour guide, a confidence trickster, an ambassador and a taxi-driver. Each story-line has a specific location in the city, and each has a different lettering colour, so that the cyclist, by choosing a colour, can follow the path of a particular narrative.

In the Amsterdam Version (1990) the area represented is the old inner city as far as its nineteenth-century boundary. In this version all the letters are scaled so that they have the same proportions and location as the buildings they replace, resulting in a transformed representation of the real architectural contours and features of this city. The colouring of the letters matches the brick and stone tones of the real buildings. The texts are factual and are derived from archive documents which record events in Amsterdam from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The texts are located in the areas of Amsterdam to which they refer. The original vocabulary and spelling found in those texts are also respected.

In the Karlsruhe Version (1991), purchased for the collection of the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe, the area represented is bounded by Karl Wilhelm Schloss, the Fritz-Erler Straße, the Karlstraße and the Kniestraße. The text also follows the Ettlinger Straße to the station, ending at the site of the future ZKM building. The texts are largely based on existing historical accounts relating to the city. There are references to people who were interesting residents, such as Karl von Dries, the inventor of the 'walking bicycle'. Also, texts have been quoted from contemporary promotional brochures published by the city of Karlsruhe. In areas of Karlsruhe where the existing architecture is fairly uniform, the letter proportions have been abstracted to one size, while for those outstanding buildings the letters have been positioned and scaled to describe their actual appearance.

The computer being used for The Legible City is a Silicon Graphics workstation. It carries out the interactive real-time calculation and display of images that is an essential aspect of this work. Gideon May created all the special application software for The Legible City. Dirk Groeneveld has cooperated on the design for The Legible City since its conception, and has selected, edited and written the texts for all three versions: Manhattan, Amsterdam and Karlsruhe.

A modified folding bicycle is used as the interface between the viewer and the image. Its steering handle and pedals are linked to the computer, and give the viewer interactive control over travel direction and speed. A video projector is used to project the computer-generated image onto a large white screen. Another small monitor in front of the bicycle shows a simple ground plan of each city, with a moving dot to indicate the momentary position of the cyclist.