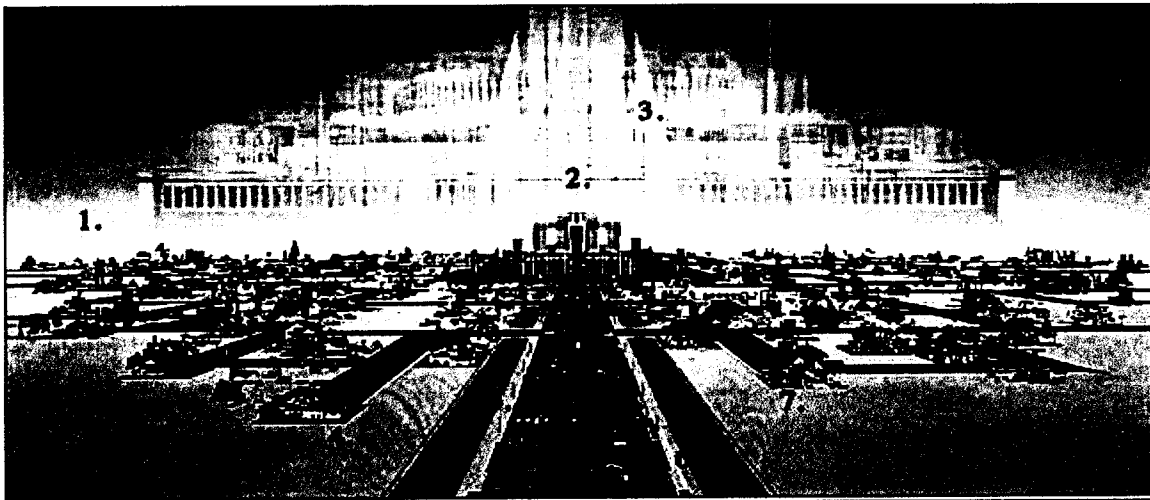


# Arts



November 28, 2004  
CLOSE READING

## The Shining City on the Hill, Version 2.0

By J. D. BIERSDORFER

'AUTOMATIC CITY'

Benjamin Edwards

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery, 730 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street. Through Dec. 30.

In his paintings, Benjamin Edwards likes to explore what he describes as "the infiltration of your head." That may bring to mind dark Orwellian conceits or science fiction plots, but Mr. Edwards's work actually focuses more on the bright, cheery world of corporate architecture, big-box retailers and other venues he refers to as "standardized consumption places." Aided by satellite maps he downloads from the Internet, inexpensive 3-D home design software, old prints and drawings of city plans, and architects' blueprints of idealized structures never built, he uses his computer to create and render models before applying paint to canvas.

The result is his own virtual world as reflected in the paintings in his latest exhibition, "Automatic City," at the Greenberg Van Doren Gallery. The work depicts a dynamic capitalist city where Cubo-Futurism collides with the pristine landscapes found in video games like "The Sims."

"With this show I've developed this language of breaking things down into parts and building them back up again, forming these kinds of hybrid formations," Mr. Edwards, 34, said. "I've kind of been developing this whole virtual world where this language is applied to everything from houses to office parks to corporate headquarters to signage."

His previous works (which can be viewed online, along with "Automatic City," at [www.benjaminedwards.net](http://www.benjaminedwards.net)) have explored the cultural influences of Starbucks and Wal-Mart. Mr. Edwards credits his interest in the topic to growing up in California's suburban

sprawl and to more recent trips around the country. "I came about it looking at the American landscape, and if you travel from place to place, things start to look the same," he said.

#### 1. INSPIRATION

Among the works that inspired "Automatic City" was Thomas Cole's 1842 painting "Voyage of the Life: Youth," part of a four-part series that follows an archetypal hero's journey along the River of Life. In that painting, an ethereal city representing glory, fame and power floats above the earth. (The Cole painting is on view in the National Gallery of Art in Washington.)

#### 2. TWIN CITIES

The city of grandiose visions rises above the sprawling city of consumption below it. As the artist puts it, "it's a utopian theme park kind of thing floating there like a dream city off the in the ever distant horizon."

#### 3. UTOPIAS

Iconic and mostly unbuilt architecture designed by visionary 20th-century urban planners make up the city in the sky. Look closely, and you can make out the monumental Tylon and Perisphere buildings from the 1939 World's Fair in New York and Frank Lloyd Wright's design for a Mile-High Skyscraper, among others. Elements of the Stalinist Palace of the Soviets monument and Le Corbusier's utopian "Radiant City," both unbuilt, are also echoed.

#### 4. OFFICE BUILDINGS

Using photographs from [www.terraserver.com](http://www.terraserver.com), a database of images taken from aircraft or satellite, Mr. Edwards was able to get detailed images of the headquarters of companies like ExxonMobil and Halliburton to use as references for many of the corporate structures in his city. He took about 20 different corporate headquarters, enhanced the images on his computer, made 3-D models and then "collided them all together" on screen to create the structures in the painting.

#### 5. ROAD

Evoking the classic artist's perspective of parallel lines leading off into the horizon, a single road leads not to the vanishing point, but into the heart of the city.

#### 6. LOGOS

The road into town is littered with colorful shapes, faintly recognizable as bits of common corporate logos that have been blended together. "Where's that line between conscious and subconscious? Mr. Edwards asks, "and how much has corporate iconography infiltrated your consumer psyche?"

#### 7. HOUSES

Hundreds of rambling yet generic houses dot the landscape, bringing to mind the McMansions that have sprung up in suburban cul-de-sacs across America.