CHAPTER 3.2

COMICS IN DESIGN STUDIO, AND BEYOND! GRAPHIC NARRATIVE AS A TOOL TO REPRESENT, NARRATE, AND RETHINK ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

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The Emergence of *Archicomics*

This chapter looks at several works produced by architects and students in order to discuss and illustrate some uses of the comics medium as a tool both to visualise and explain, to develop stories and discourses, and start morphogenetic processes that lead to novel architectural form, or even rethink architectural space.

The presence of cartoons, comics, and graphic narrative has an at least centennial history that can be dated as far back as Le Corbusier's childhood. However, the introduction of comics in the design studio is not a recent development[1]. Only in the late 1960s and 1970s, the comics medium was embraced by architects who located themselves outside the mainstream and considered the traditional tools not suited to the representation of a new architecture that defied the constraints of 'architecture-as-object'.

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[1] An examination of Le Corbusier's forays into graphic narrative can be found in Stanislaus von Moos, "Voyages en Zigzag", in *Le Corbusier before Le Corbusier*: *Applied Arts, Architecture, Painting, Photography*, *1907-1922,* eds. Arthur Rüegg and Stanislaus Von Moos (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, c2002), 22-43; Luis Miguel Lus-Arana, "La Ligne Claire de Le Corbusier", in *Le Corbusier 50 Years Later* (Valencia: UPV, 2015), 1233-1252.

The 1960s witnessed new ways in which the static, permanent, and immutable could turn into the unstable, movable, performative, ephemeral. Ultimately, these types of action, which needed to be simultaneously 'told' and 'shown', were recognised as narrative structures and actions. Here, the comics medium appeared as a natural extension of architectural drawing at a time where film or animation were far less available and, we could argue, less suited in many cases. From Archigram, with Peter Cook as a leading force, to Street Farm, Superstudio, Archizoom, and many others, the mechanics of comics decidedly entered the world of architectural 'little magazines', and, soon enough, architecture schools[2].

This effervescing graphic/narrative experimentation permeated some architectural design studios, especially when tutors were part of the same scene. This is the case with the Architectural Association (henceforth AA) during the 'Electric Decade', as Peter Cook christened the period from 1963 to 1973. During the tenure of Alvin Boyarski, AA became a place of multiple experiments, often resulting in compelling graphic productions, and sometimes including different instances of graphic narrative[3]. Unsurprisingly, Cook's 5th-year studio in 1970-1971 was one of those. Several students contributed comics as part of their studio presentations[4], such as future Street Farm member Stuart Lever, future iconoclast Piers Gough (together with Diana Jowsey and Philip Wagner), and future music set designer *par excellence* Mark Fisher. In fact, Fisher would extend this exploration in an entry for the exhibition *Five Young Architects* (ArtNet Gallery, 1974). His seven-page story, entitled *Les Aventures de M. Nemo de Bonpland*, was a nod to Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. In his oral presentation, he pointed out that the comic strip-form allowed him to focus on communicating the idea in a fresh and eminently readable way, even if the details were still not clear. For him, this was a process that recovered the architect's pleasure in the development of a comics-medium representation when compared to other, less laborious forms of representation[5].

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[2] For a historical overview, see Luis Miguel Lus-Arana, "Comics and Architecture: A Reading Guide", in *The Routledge Companion on Literature, Architecture, and the City,* ed. Jonathan Charley (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 347-384.
[3] See Peter Cook, "The Electric Decade: An Atmosphere at the AA School 1963-1973", in *A Continuous Experiment: Learning and Teaching at the Architectural Association*, ed. James Gowan (London: AA, 1975), 137-146.
[4] Peter Cook, "75 New Architects", *Architectural Design,* Vol. 42 (1971): 753-751.
[5] Tony Mitchell, "Five young architects: a preview of the work they are exhibiting under that title at Artnet, a London gallery", *Building Design*, No. 219 (1974): 12-

Although this effervescence passed, comics never left the architectural scene and the last fifteen years have witnessed a blossoming of 'archicomics' as a trend. We are currently experiencing a '1970s redux'[6], with the 'star-architects' boom overlapping with the digital revolution. This has followed a few consecutive global crises that have prompted architects to re-introduce forgotten agendas and focus on discourse and narratives. In this context, it is perhaps less shocking that such an old-fashioned tool as comics may be witnessing this growing attention. The trend has benefitted from both the respectability that the medium has gained, with its upgrade into the 'graphic novel', and the 'pull effect' the World Wide Web and social media have had in spreading a wide range of different experiments with the comics medium. The medium's new status has promoted the hybridising with other literary genres, giving birth to comic-style essays, journalistic reports, biographies and autobiographies, and several other forms that are also permeating into architectural scholarship. Parallel to this, comics are gaining an increasing presence in project presentations, exhibitions, manifestos, and many other by-products of architectural practice, as shown in recently published compendia and the sub-genre of the architectural 'comic-essay'. As in other disciplines, the last decade has produced an increasing number of undergraduate and postgraduate theses that use comics as part of their narrative[7].

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13. An overview and analysis in comic book-form of the many ways in which the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, together with more recent practices, have appropriated comics as a representation tool can be found in Luis Miguel Lus-Arana, "Architecture Between the Panels: Comics, Cartoons and Graphic Narrative in the (New) Neo Avant-garde", *Architectural Design,* Vol. 89, No. 4 (2019): 108-113.

[6] We are stealing this line from an informal conversation with Simon Sadler that took place in July 2022.

[7] These include: Gerhard Flora and Philipp Oberthaler, *40 jahre wildnis* (Wien: School of Architecture and Technology, 2015); Pierre Lacroix, *Paysages Résilients. Approche Systémique du Territoire post-Effondrement*, Master in Landscape Architecture, Gembloux Agro-Bio Tech (Liege: Liège Université, 2016-2017). Significant examples also include Johanna Regger, *In Mind, Räume der Erinnerungen,* Master Thesis (Graz: Technische Universitat, 2016); and Tings Chak, *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention*, Master Thesis (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2014). Of particular interest at postgraduate level is Yasser Megahed, *Practiceopolis: A metaphor of the Contemporary Architectural Profession* (Newcastle, UK: University School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, 2019): a PhD Dissertation, it takes the form of a 266-page graphic novel that interweaves reality and fiction to reflect about the status quo and of the contemporary architectural profession.

After Peter Cook vindicated the role of "cartoon as a teaching device"[8] in 1975, students' own initiatives in the comics medium run parallel to those by educators, who actively promote their use in the design studio[9]. The reasons for this 'eternal return' to comics are the same now as they were in Le Corbusier's times. At a time where digital technology threatens to homogenise architectural graphic production, the comics medium presents slower, more subjective, less mediated forms of representation. Comics are seen as working well at a moment where the existential crisis the architectural professions impel architects to look closely into the development of new narratives.

Professionally, architects need stories. Behind each architectural product, there is a design process, and, behind it, the stories that promoted and guided its development. In the postwar, these stories have gradually grown as significant as the final object itself. As comics also articulate narrative units, the demands of a story can lead architects on disruptive design paths.

Architects also need to communicate in a visual form, generally through drawings. Comics are one of the drawing media available to articulate combinations of surface patterns, visual depictions, styles, and direct traces of the practitioners' bodies, incorporating language systems (such as words and numbers) and material properties.

Moreover, in the Western tradition, architects have been using drawing as an invaluable thinking tool, with the correspondence between thoughts into drawn lines and depictions creating continuous feedback loops. The 'arthrologic'[10] system of the comics medium can represent experiences of space in four dimensions, where spaces morph into unsuspected, often non-Euclidean configurations that open up parallel and intersecting worlds of possibilities.

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[8] Cook, "The Electric Decade", 144.

[9] Recent examples of these include the works of: Jimenez Lai (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 2015; Lexington, KY: Kentucky School of Architecture, 2017), Melanie van der Hoorn (Innsbruck: University of Innsbruck, 2013; Graz: Technische Universität, 2015), Jorge Tuset Souto (Montevideo, 2014-2017); Jon Yoder (Kent, OH: Kent State University, 2016); and Enrique Bordes (Madrid: Universidad Politécnica, 2007-08).

[10] Thierry Groensteen, Bart Beaty (trans.) and Nick Nguyen (trans.), *The System of Comics* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007). For further insight on the comics as an arthrologic system, see Hannah Miodrag, *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013).

About place: comics, architecture, and the city. Graphic narrative and the experience of urban space

Architectural designers use the comics medium to represent combinations of image and text, vistas and plans, sequences and diagrams. The medium can make it easier for readers to go through the profuse amount of information that describes an architectural design.
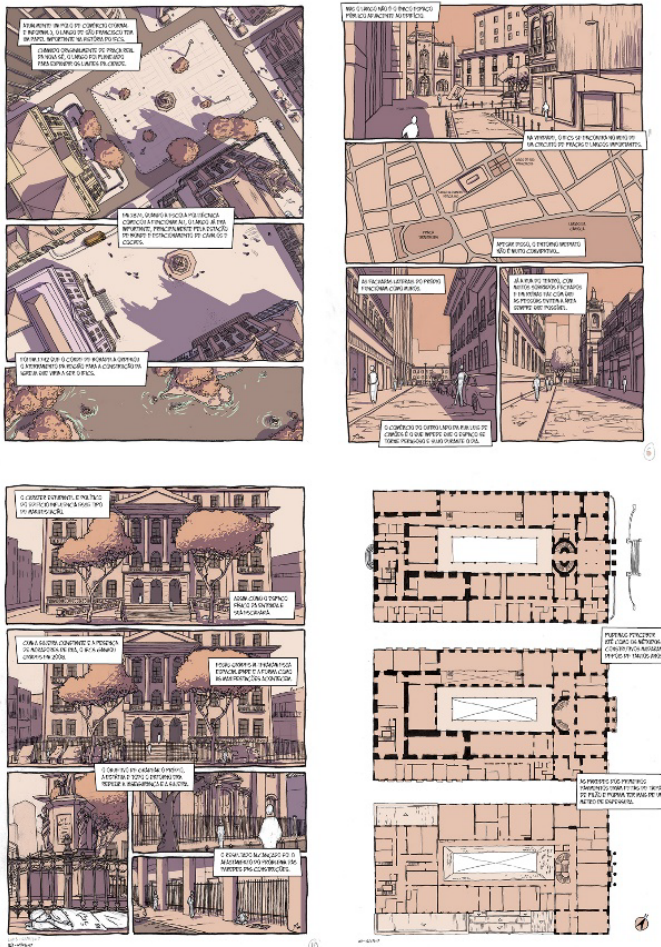

Fig. 1. Raphael Pinheiro, *IFCS e o Largo de São Francisco*. Graduation Thesis, School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2017. Advisors: Prof. Rafael Fonseca and Prof. Rodrigo Cury (Selected pages).

An unwritten rule of the comics medium states "show, don't tell!". One is expected to write in a caption box – or put in the mouth of characters – nothing that can be shown in images. Comics, however, are very good at 'telling and showing simultaneously', at dissecting and arranging information by combining written data with images. In the comics medium, architectural designers turn 'discourses' into 'stories', making the reader a participant in the exploration through the characters while also introducing nuances that are lost in traditional architectural representations. Among those, the comic form has proven particularly suited to represent the urban environment. From Richard Felton Outcault's *Hogan's Alley*, 1894, to Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, 1905, comics' urban history has paralleled that of other media which developed together with the modern metropolis, such as the mass-distribution press, advertisement, film and television. With their multi-panelled pages, ellipses, and changing points of view, comics are suited to embody the sequential and simultaneous experience of urban space. Rapha Pinheiro's 2017 *IFCS e o Largo de São Francisco (fig. 1)* features an illustrated chronicle of the evolution of the building of the Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro through the centuries, and how it reflected the changes in the city itself. Drawn in *ligne claire* style[11] and coloured with a limited palette of pastel tones, the 19-page story skilfully combines maps, aerial views, sectioned perspectives, ground plans, and partial views within a seemingly simple panel layout. Purposeful repetitions of similar viewpoints over time, side-by-side comparisons, multi-panel pans, combine to tell the intricate story of the building and its surroundings, while inculcating a specific 'mood' in the reader.

Precedents in the use of panels to show can be traced back to Le Corbusier's City of Tomorrow in *L'Esprit Nouveau*[12], where four consecutive panoramic panels introduce it in a typical, demiurgic top-down view, with symmetrically views where characters are mere tools. A converse approach is seen in his 1925 *Lettre à Madame Meyer*, where, after an opening aerial view of the building, a series of views of a walking visitor[13] do not explain

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[11] Coined by Joost Swarte in 1977 with regard to Hergé's *The Adventures of Tintin*, it combines clear strong lines, no hatching and intense colours.
[12] Le Corbusier, "Une Ville Contemporaine" (1922), *L'Esprit Nouveau*, No. 28 (1925).
[13] Bruno Reichlin, "Jeanneret/Le Corbusier, Painter-Architect", in *Architecture and Cubism*, eds. Eve Blau and Nancy J. Troy (Montreal: Canadian Centre of Architecture; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997).

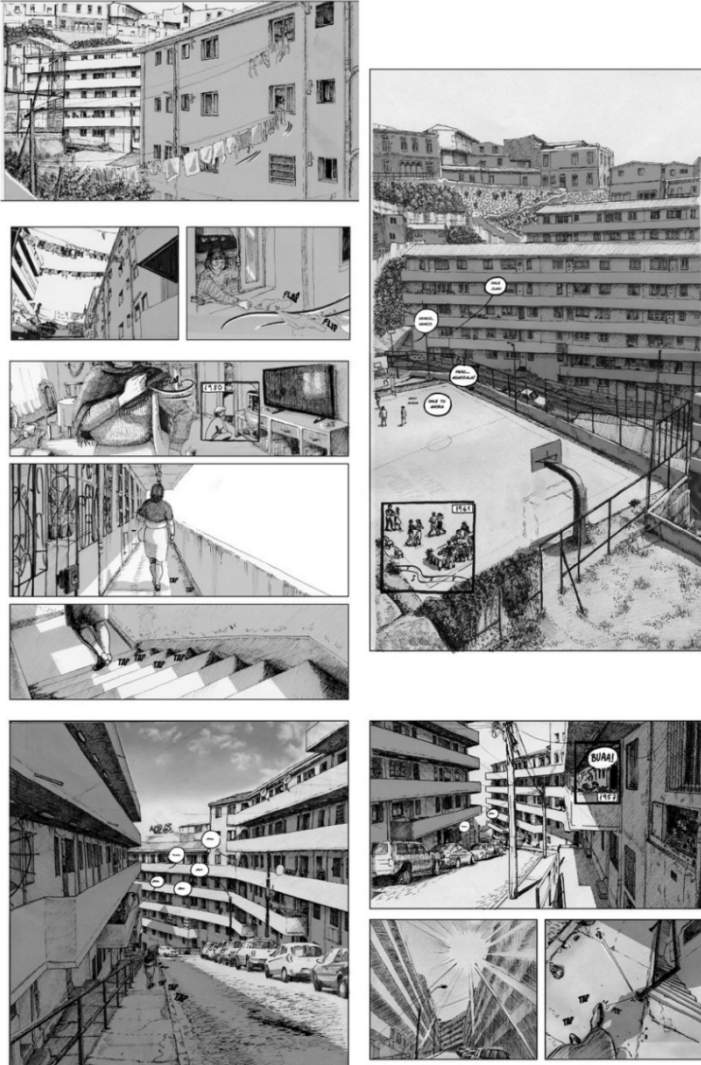the layout of the house but rather convey the intended atmosphere of the architectural space.

Fig. 2. Isis Zuñiga Campos, *La experiencia arquitectónica del cómic: Estudio del comic como lenguaje para la representación de atmósfera y lugar en una obra de arquitectura.* Master Thesis, Dep. Arquitectura, Universidad Técnica Federico S. María, Valparaíso, Chile, 2021. Tutor: Sandro Maino Ansaldo (selected pages).

While Le Corbusier's letter shows how the design space is 'experienced' rather than intellectually 'understood', Isis Zuñiga Campos's *The architectural experience of comics (fig. 2)* shows a combination of the two approaches. An analysis of Población Quebrada Márquez, Pedro Goldsack's extensive housing complex in Valparaíso, Chile, 1946-49, Zuñiga Campos's work introduces urban space through a series of *manga*-inspired partial views. It results a slightly downscaled, vernacular version of the Tsutsumi Housing complex, a modern housing estate that starred in Katsuhiro Otomo's *Domu,* 1980.

Domu shared many of its features – children with telekinetic powers, architectural mayhem – together with a painstaking attention to buildings: a bombastic recreation of a near-future, dystopian Neo-Tokyo of his successful *Akira*, 1982-90, and its successive destructions. The Tsutsumi Housing complex*,* with its massive facades and continuous outside galleries, is reminiscent of Alison and Peter Smithson's Robin Hood Gardens in London, 1972, which was also a micro-city towering over its suburban surroundings.

This resonance with the Chilean housing complex also comes with its differences. Otomo's complex does not feature Quebrada's sloping streets and appears to house a typically middle-class population. It is also apparently built in a strict but also rather clean concrete-brutalist style. Unlike Otomo's Neo-Tokyo in *Akira*, it is set in the present, and its architecture is depicted in an equally impressive but radically less dramatic way, the quiet vistas of its inhabitants dwarfed by its tall façades in mundane, calm postcards.

The biggest difference, and the one that ties it with Zuñiga's work, is that *Domu*'s setting is a fiction strongly inspired by a real place. The fictional Tsutsumi Complex is actually the Shibazono Danchi[14] (1978) in Kawaguchi, Saitama Prefecture. Otomo extensively used it as a reference, making *Domu* an exercise in depicting a real-world place through the medium of comics. The fact that Shibazono has become a case study in multiculturality – with problems arising from the cohabitation of the traditional Japanese residents and an increasing number of Chinese newcomers – makes this parallel with Zuñiga's *Quebrada* more compelling. One of *Domu*'s more attractive and unusual features is its combination of

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[14] See Alekos Diacodimitri and Federico Rebecchini, "Dōmu by Katsuhiro Otomo. From Reality to the Imaginary. Architecture as an Integral Part of the Narrative", *Diségno*, No. 9 (2021): 193–204.

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science fiction with a 'slice of life' approach. Unlike *Akira*, where architecture is a protagonist in a much more dramatic way, *Domu* takes its time to calmly introduce us to the spaces, with characters biding their time inside the complex. The tale has a slow, morose pace. Zuñiga shares the slice of life approach, displaying only a thin veneer of fiction. The work tells the simple story of an inhabitant of the neighbourhood, a middle-aged woman who takes a walk from her apartment to Echaurren Square, down in the Puerto neighbourhood, where she meets her son. Zuñiga takes this opportunity to show the architecture, and its deterioration over time. Superimposed panels open like windows on top of bigger ones recall the visual device used by Richard McGuire in his germinal *Here*[15]. These offer glimpses of how the daily life of the Quebrada has waned over time, 'capturing' "the feeling of loneliness […] associated with the deterioration of the neighbourhood and community life"[16] but also 'haptic' conditions of the site. Zuñiga argues that these depend on the page layout:

> aspect-to-aspect transitions are crucial for atmospheric storytelling, as they can show multiple details at once, mimicking the feeling of being in an immersive environment […]. When seeing an image of the sea, the reader will be able to imagine the noise of the waves and the characteristic smell of the ocean.

The same could be said of humidity, when characters sweat in bright sunlight, or sound qualities, with the reverberation being shown through characters' reactions or sound effects. This examples that comics, as a 'cold' medium, have a strong 'anamnestic' ability, displaying a combination of precision and looseness, cold representation and subjective views that bring the reader closer to the story-world, to the characters and user's experience of place.

'Fictionary'. Fiction as a design environment

Fiction is a great asset in architectural design. Fiction's uses range from providing design pretexts to organizing information in a consistent way or providing a whole design environment. In terms of design pretexts, we find Breuil's and Borhaven's *ABBA – A Story of Cinematic Spaces (fig. 3)*. Here, the comic springs from a 4th-year studio where students were commissioned

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[15] Richard McGuire, "Here", *Raw*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1989): 69-74.
[16] Agustina Iñiguez, "La experiencia arquitectónica del comic: Un lenguaje para la atmósfera y el lugar", accessed July 24, 2022. https://www.archdaily.co/co/964015 /la-experiencia-arquitectonica-del-comic-un-lenguaje-para-la-atmosfera-y-el-lugar

to design five buildings that had been the subject of recent competitions in Stockholm.
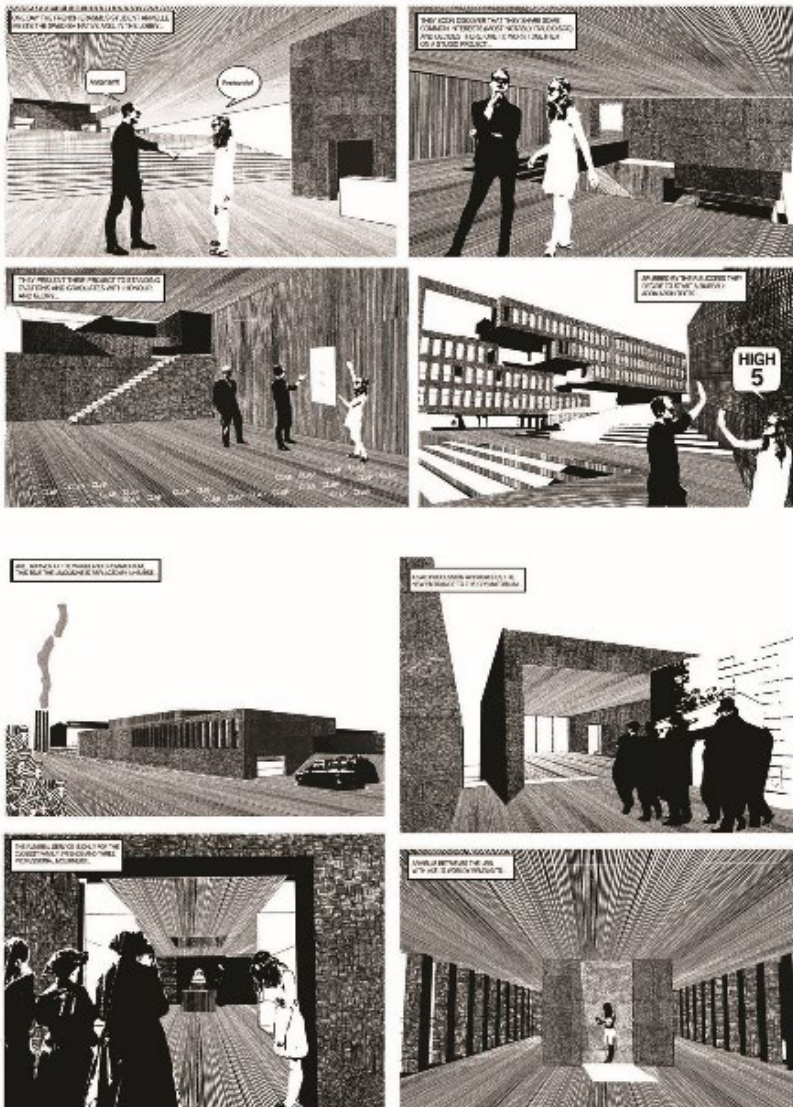

Fig. 3. Armelle Breuil and Axel Borhaven, *ABBA – A Story of Cinematic Spaces*. Carl Fredrik Svenstedt Studio, 4th Year, Fall Term, KTH – Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, 2014 (selected pages).

"Since the methodology of the studio was to work on the five projects at the same time", Breuil recalls, "[they] decided to think about the five projects as a whole"[17], identifying common traits and requirements, and using unifying formal techniques. All of the projects were designed with a common grid, and the shared requirement of "atriums and large open spaces", prompted them to explore "the typology of the stair as a means of circulation and as a meeting space". Consequently, they ended up thinking of the overall intervention as "a story in which actions would happen, composed with cinematic spaces". Since the brief also required them to produce at least four interior views of each project, they had the opportunity to continue exploring this 'single project' approach by 'cinematically' tying all these views together in a single, 21-page-sized panel comic book story. Set in an alternative reality, the plot presented fictionalised versions of themselves in a present-day Stockholm where all five buildings get built[18]. The thin storyline is a mere excuse to respond to a presentation requirement of the project and achieve the goal of the studio, which 'was to find a coherent answer to five recent, but programmatically and contextually widely differing, competition briefs. Even the graphic style was the pragmatic response to a tight schedule, and the result of "a sitting of 33 consecutive hours" required to meet the deadline. However, both the tongue-in-cheek tale and the high-contrast photographic style work perfectly as a showcase of the buildings' features and as a device to spark the reader's interest and sympathy. An antithetical approach can be found in Lois Innes's *Closer to Home (fig. 4),* a project that "outlines a local de-carceration programme through community-based rehabilitation and crime desistance"[19]. Using London's oldest Category C prison, HMP Brixton as her subject, Innes created an alternative reality for 2020. The medium of

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[17] All quotes from: Non-Architecture Editorial Team, "ABBA. A Story of Cinematic Spaces", accessed July 24, 2022,
https://www.nonarchitecture.eu/2020/05/10/ abba_a-story-cinematic-spaces/
[18] They meet at the School of Architecture and the Built Environment in Royal Institute of Technology of Stockholm and find success by winning the competition for the Lilvevalchs Gallery. At the inauguration party, tragedy strikes when Axel falls to his death, "victim to one the building's architectural features". His demise sets the premise for the next stop, the Woodland Crematorium, before the story takes a turn: a grieving Armelle, carrying the urn with the ashes of her colleague, passes by the Stockholm Public Library, which inspires her to write a book entitled *Axel: Larger than Life.* The story ends at the Nobel Prize Center (last of the five buildings), where Breuil is presented with the prestigious award, before meeting Axel in the last panel. Axel, in angelical form, offers her a glass of champagne.
[19] Teleri Lloyd-Jones, "Class of 2020: Lois Innes", accessed August 24, 2022,
https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/central-saint-martins/stories/2020-innes

comics allowed Innes to present both the fictional narrative and the project's results, from an actual visit to HMP Brixton and the imaginary announcement of the fictional 'Closer to Home' program, fictional board meetings, and the final design, all seamlessly tied together via a shared drawing style and the use of recognisable comic strip elements.

Fig. 4. Lois Innes. Closer to Home. Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London (UAL). MArch Graduation Thesis, 2020.

Fiction plays a significant design role in Jordan Charles's "Urban Proxy"[20] *(fig. 5)*. A short graphic novel, it walks the line between an architectural essay, a studio presentation, and a fictional story. Again, the plot is mostly window dressing to showcase a project, in this case a classic trope of mobile-informal-flexible-emergency architecture such as the ship container. Throughout the story, Charles develops a basic typology into several solutions to accommodate different users' demands and groups together urban aggregations. However, the development of the story and characters was also crucial to the design process. As Charles notes, "typically when conjuring a set program for a space, generalisations are made to make the process more straightforward"[21]. As architects, we use "generalisations to conveniently encompass a set of design criteria needed for a beginning template of sorts", which is then customised by the user. Charles wanted "to reject generalisations and attempt to focus on the individual", and, in order to do so, he "began to think of various characters" whose varying needs responded to an urban environment where he felt "change occurs more frequently than ever before".

With design improvisation becoming a *leitmotif* of the project, plus a strong autobiographical element, Charles started by wondering "what characters reside in the city that may seem as if they don't belong", with the belief that, if he "found individuals that didn't fit within the accepted public etiquette, then I could find those that improvised the most". Looking for patterns of 'unusual behaviour', he came up with a set of characters – a skater, a *traceur* [sic], a dancer, a tagger, and a chef, who set the wheels of the story in motion. These characters "utilized the built environment in […] unique ways that resided outside [...] the norm" and helped the author create an ecosystem for the design to act as feedback loop, be showcased and evolve. The result is a 40-page novelette drawn in a manga style that blends digitally-rendered elements and a story that merges escapism with a personal manifesto on flexibility, improvisation, and urban configuration.

Fiction becomes even more crucial when working with projects which exemplify what the Chicago-based office Design with Company have termed "slipstream architecture". This concept encompasses an architecture that "reveals latent conditions of reality through narratives and design fictions". Taking this approach, architects distance themselves from the traditional notion of 'speculative architecture', a term coined as an analogue

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[20] Jordan Charles, *Urban Proxy* (Kent, OH: Kent State University, c2014).
[21] All quotes from *Unbuilt surreal*, accessed August 24, 2022, http://www.unbuiltsurreal.com.

of 'speculative fiction'. Speculative, visionary, or prospective architecture always entails a degree of plausibility, as improbable as it may be.
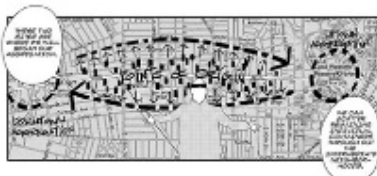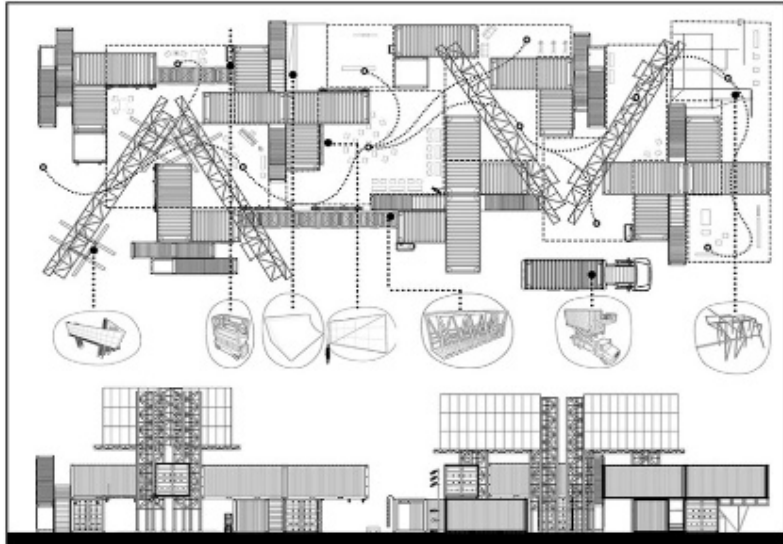

Fig. 5. Jordan Charles. *Urban Proxy* (Kent State University, c2014).

Converse to 'the architectural speculator', Design with Company propose
the 'architectural fabulist', "who estranges the everyday through
architectural fables, to create a contemporary landscape of pleasurable
cognitive dissonance, making the familiar strange or the strange familiar"[22].
This type of project is the trademark of schools such as The Bartlett,
London, where students use fictional constructs to build scenarios from
which imaginative spatial and programmatic conditions emerge. For
example, in *European Union: The Gardens of Fantastica*[23] (*fig.6*), Steven
McCloy reimagined the *EU* as a nomadic organisation that regenerated a
new city every five years, starting with Paris. In strict surrealist fashion, the
project sprang from a short piece of found text: "a blurb on Michael Ende's
realm of 'Fantastica' as described in Manguel and Guadalupi's *The
Dictionary of Imaginary Places*"[24]. The text provided McCloy with many
of the referents that helped him to develop the iconography of Fantastica's
architecture. Borges, Lewis, Magritte, or Arcimboldo would be present
through bowler hats, umbrellas, apples, melting clocks, flying eyeballs,
assortments of fruits, and long-legged elephants, among other common
tropes. The comics medium would also feature, in the presentation boards,
with panels, sequences, caption boxes, and the occasional speech balloon.
Even more interestingly, before starting the project design, McCloy drew a
short story, described by him as 'storyboards' – perhaps to insert himself in
a lineage that dates back to the work of groups as Superstudio – that were
"not an illustration of a ready-formed project […], they are the start, and
they are done deliberately as the first 'clues' or rumors on what my final
year project would be, invented as I sketched them down, before being
carefully re-traced in a few iterations"[25]. Thus, the 10 pages of *On Arrival
in Fantastica* introduce us to the project through the experience of a
character (an avatar of the author and the reader at the same time) who
becomes one of *Fantastica*'s gardeners and the vehicle for 'exposition'. He
learns how Fantastica works, from other characters, including its geography
and working philosophy, in a journey filled with one-point perspectives.

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[22] Stewart Hicks and Allison Neumeyer, "Tales from the Fabulous Middle",
Conference in the event *MAS Context: Analog* (Chicago: New Projects Gallery, 15
October 2011). See "Mascontext.com", accessed October 1, 2018,
http://www.mascontext.com/events/mas-context-analog-2/mas-context-analog-
stewart-hicks-allison-newmeyer>
[23] Steven McCloy, *European Union: The Gardens of Fantastica* (London: Bartlett
School, 2013), accessed May 1, 2023, http://www.presidentsmedals.com/Entry-
34091
[24] See Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi, *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*
(New York, NY: Macmillan, 1980).
[25] Steven McCloy, Interview with the authors via e-mail, June 2022.
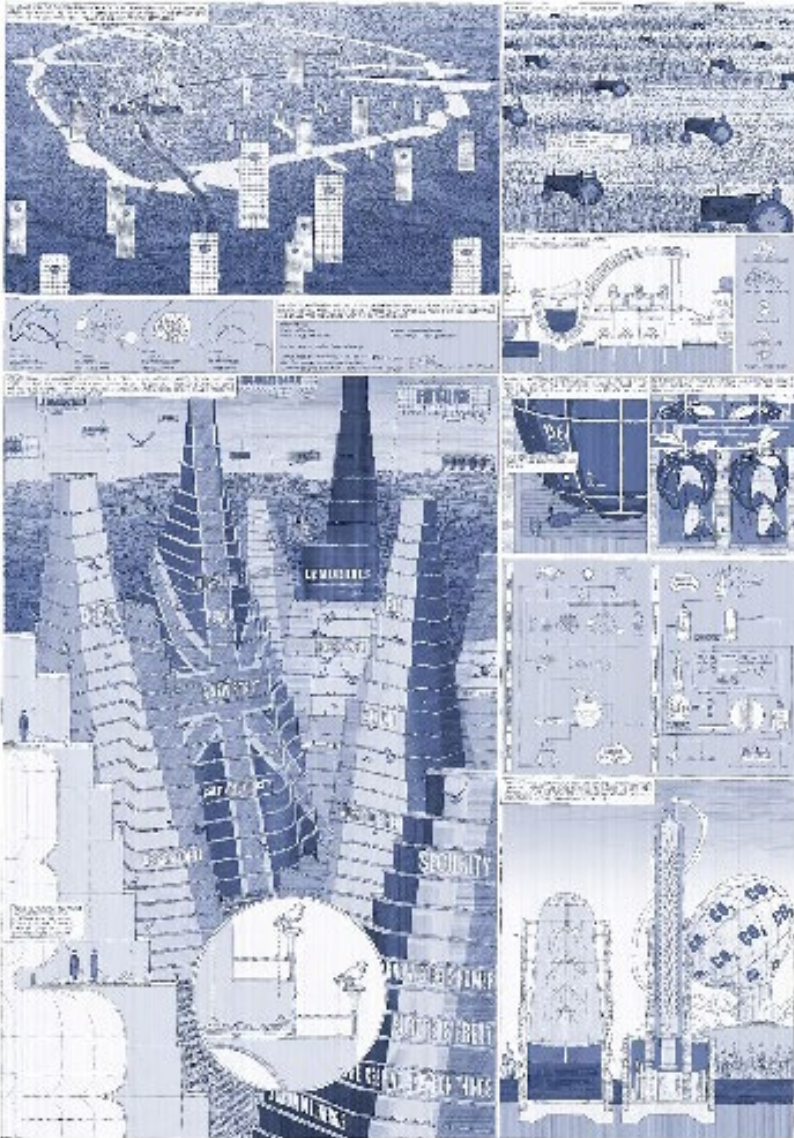
Fig. 6. Steven McCloy. *European Union: The Gardens of Fantastica* (Bartlett School of Architecture, 2013). One of the final presentation boards (right).

These, together with the somewhat 'decimononic' atmosphere and weirdly-shaped vegetation, bring us back to the surrealism of Alan Resnais's movie *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961. *On Arrival* exemplifies the advantages of the comics medium – the combination of vagueness and precision, matter-of-factness and lyricism, to activate ideation, to make the designer take instant decisions, unaware of where they might take him. Drawn in a linear style, with just a few black spots here and there, *On Arrival* refers to a long tradition of architectural representation, as well as *ligne claire* style, taking the reader to the worlds of François Schuiten, Marc-Antoine Mathieu, and Claude Renard's *Les Aventures d'Ivan Casablanca*, 1984-1986, all cited by the author as an influence. A similar graphical approach can be found also in the work of important architects. For example, Oswald Mathias Ungers' presentation of the 1975 project for the Ludwig Museum in Cologne might also pass as a lost page from McCloy's story, with its symmetries, grid-patterned gardens, geometric floating trees, oversized human limbs, and Magritte-esque men in bowler hats, all presented in a sequence of panoramic panels.

Space, time, architecture… and comics

Other than their ability to simultaneously 'show' and 'tell' architectural and urban space, and house fictions where the design process can develop, comics have some additional, specific properties on the representation of space that spring from the very mechanics of the medium. In 1934, when cinema was still at the beginning of the 'talkie' era, Erwin Panofsky argued that "the unique and specific possibilities [of film] can be defined as dynamisation of space and, accordingly, spatialisation of time"[26]. The latter also applies to comics, whose romance with the representation of architectural space 'throughout time' can be traced back to its origins as a medium, reconciling apparent opposites such as sequentiality and synchronicity. Examples include Winsor McCay's works and Frank King's *Gasoline Alley*, 1918-59, who often experimented with polyptychs, or multi-panel pans, by juxtaposing a comic grid on top of a single background, like a house in varying stages of construction (March-April, 1934), a street (August 24, 1930) or a beach (May 24, 1931). Thus, looking into each panel, the reader experiences a specific space and time, while, when looking at the whole page, forms a picture of the entire location.

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[26] Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures" (1934), in *Film: An Anthology*, ed. Daniel Talbot (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1959), 18.
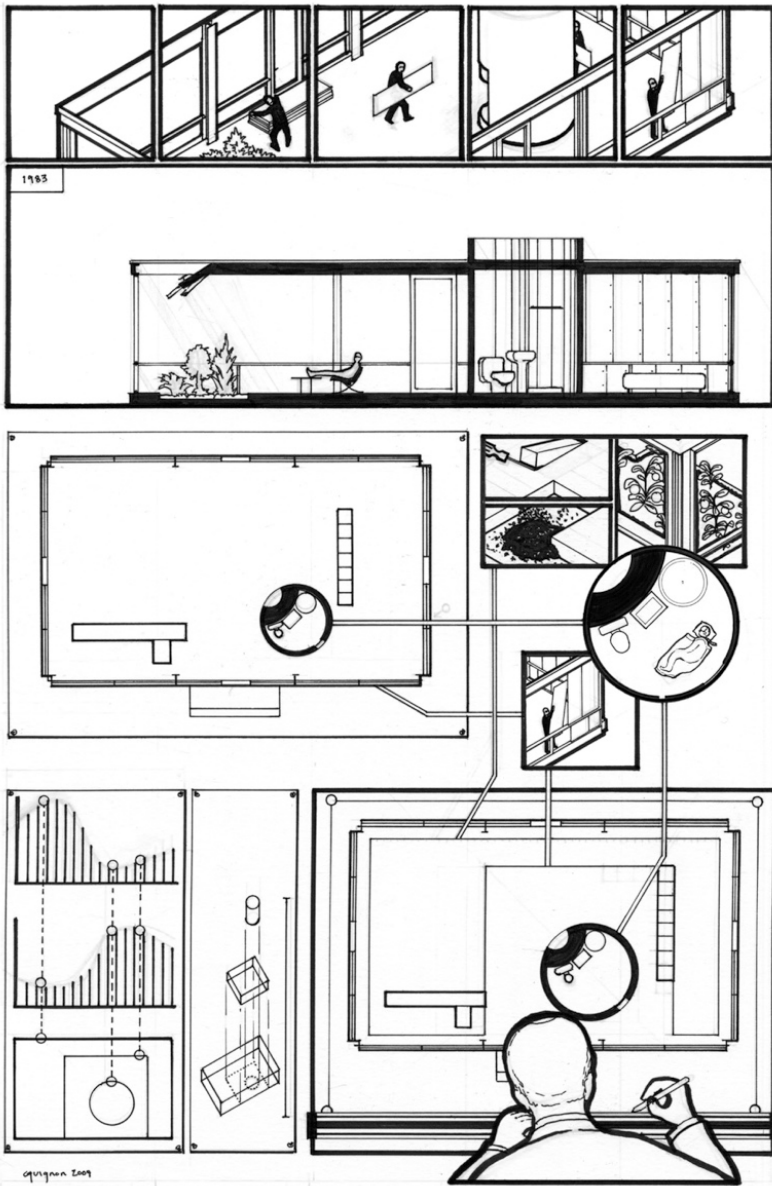
Fig. 7. Chris Guignon, *Parable of the Glass House*, 2009. One out of 6 pages reformatted for MIT's "Little t" as a newspaper print (Fall 2009).

This is one of the strategies used by Chris Guignon in his *Parable of the Glass House*[27] (*fig. 7*), a 9-page silent story in which the oil crisis of 1973, together with the subsequent embargo and stock market crisis, leaves Philip Johnson bankrupt[28]. Unable to afford heating the house, he chops up his wood furniture, ultimately deciding to live in the much-easier-to-heat bathroom, and take advantage of the partial collapse of the roof and the glass walls to grow an interior garden for food. The last page(s) show a final twist, a 'moral coda' that reveals that the story has occurred in Johnson's mind, prompting him to make some adjustments to the design of the house before construction. *Parable* springs from Guignon's interest in two aspects of architectural representation. First, the possibility of encrypting the 'narrative' of the project in its representation, a feat that is not always easy. He follows Mark Wigley's assertion that "architectural representation is, at its core, storytelling […]. Basically, what we do in schools of architecture is to teach people how to stand beside a bunch of representations of a project and tell a credible story"[29]. But what happens when we leave the room? Are these drawings able to tell that story? The second aspect in Guinon's study was to test the substitution of naturalistic drawings in favour of more schematic drawings, one that helped the observer engage with the design at a programmatic level. In his search, Guignon found that

> the work that most compellingly integrates ideas of storytelling, time, space, multidimensionality, and architectural representation, did not belong to an architect […] but rather a comic artist with an appreciation for architecture: Chris Ware[30].

Thus, *Parable* became an exercise of style in the manner of the American contemporary cartoonist Franklin Christenson "Chris" Ware. Guignon succeeded in mimicking Ware's deceptively schematic drawing style and his diagrammatic page layouts, where issues of multiple converging points of view, temporal displacements, and synchronicity play a fundamental role. This is prominently featured on pages 4 and 5 of the story, which are a double-page spread with an axonometric view of the house inside a 3x5 panel grid. Each panel represents a different moment in its history[31].

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[27] Christopher Tohru Guignon, *Parable of the Glass House* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Architecture, 2009).
[28] *Ibidem*.
[29] Mark Wigley, "Story-Time", *Assemblage*, No. 27 (1995): 80-94.
[30] Guignon, *Parable of the Glass House.*
[31] This is a nod to a trick used by Chris Ware in "Big Tex", *Acme Novelty Library*, No. 7 (1996), which was, in turn, an homage to King.

Guignon plays with "the use of frames to chop up a single object or space to represent that object or space as it exists at multiple points of time"[32].

Comics and the explosion of space

The works of King, Ware, and Guignon already hint at the unique possibilities of comics to represent architectural space and the user's experience, but also how the particular syntax of comics, with its use of constant ellipsis and articulations 'expand' our perception of it and can ultimately activate its 'reinvention'. If comics work swiftly in their communication of urban space, and can aptly combine information in the form of vistas, the same can be said about the ways in which they can improve the observer's experience when reading orthographic projections. An example of this is Antonello Calabrese's and Antonio Lento's rendition of Glenn Murcutt's Marika-Alderton House[33] (*fig. 8*).
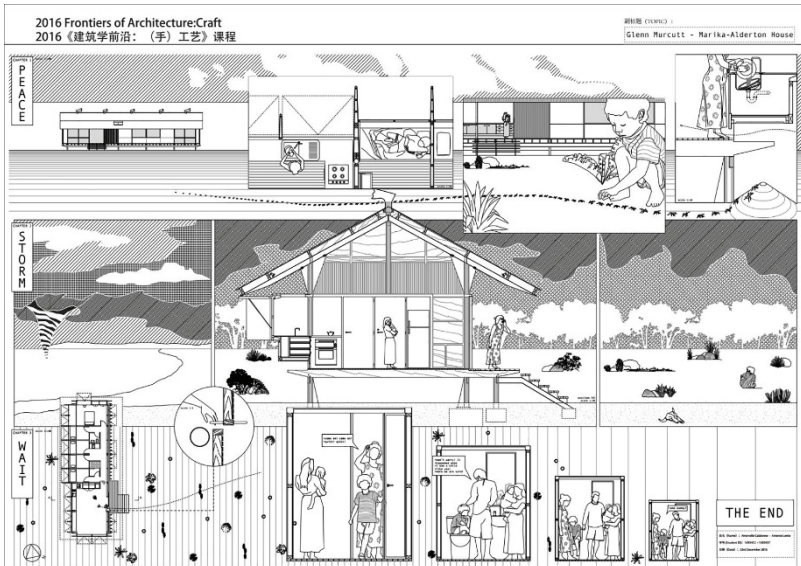

Fig. 8. Antonello Calabrese, Antonio Lento, Marika-Alderton House (*Frontiers of Architecture: Craft*, 2016)

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[32] Guignon, *Parable of the Glass House.*
[33] Antonello Calabrese, Antonio Lento, "Glenn Murcutt. Marika-Alderton House", 2018, *ISSUU*, accessed May 1, 2023, https://issuu.com/antonellocalabrese

This comprises a one-page board divided into three horizontal rows – or chapters – labelled "Peace", "Storm", and "Wait". It depicts what appears to be a short lapse of time in the family's daily life. Two women, a baby and a man undertake different tasks inside a house while a child plays outside. When they see a storm coming, the child is called inside, and they take refuge in the house. Drawn digitally, with a dead line and some mechanical hatching, the comic makes use of the conventions of the medium, with background and overlapping panels, gutters, caption boxes and speech balloons. The environment where the characters move has been constructed strictly using orthographic projections, such as elevations and cross sections, plans, and construction details, properly labelled with their corresponding scale. It is a 'plan' that also reads as a comic book page, or a comic story used to display a set of plans.

A further step in this direction can be found in Lim Eu Jin's work. A Malaysian architect, he has specialised in the research on the representation of architecture and the city through comics, as shown in recent works such as *In the Shadows of the City* (Godown Museum, 2021), and *Drawing the Blue Mansion* (Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion, 2016), or in personal works such as *Drawing Kurau Lunch* (2018?) and *Drawing Razak Mansion* (2017). In all of them, Lin plays with the conventions of architectural representation, the comic book page and the syntax of comics, in order to produce a comprehensive experience of space. Jin's *Drawing Soane's* (2014-15) *(fig. 9),* is a student work that also displays these congruences. It offers a guided tour through the John Soane house at No. 12 Lincoln's Inn Field, London, over a fictional day in the life of its owner, who is entertaining some guests. Starting with a straightforward comic book layout, the 12-page story soon displays a complex set of graphic devices. Playing with the traditional overlap of the comics grid and a building's structure, cross-sections become page layouts, with vistas of the different spaces 'inhabiting' their orthographic projections, now turned into panels. Cross-sections and floor plans are combined in a single drawing, or 'unfolded' and confined in a 9-panel grid, with the corner panels featuring specific vistas of the space from their respective points of view: polypthycs, alliterations, superimpositions, etc., all contribute to an all-encompassing experience of space.

In "Montage and Architecture", Sergei Eisenstein had eulogised the movie as the perfect medium to record architectural space[34]. However, the comics medium, with its ability to combine sequentiality and simultaneity, to allow

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[34] Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage and Architecture" (1938), *Assemblage*, No. 10 (1989): 110-131.

the reader to wander back and forth at their own pace, in a perfect encapsulation of Bergsonian *durée,* displays advantages when translating the 'experience' of architectural space.
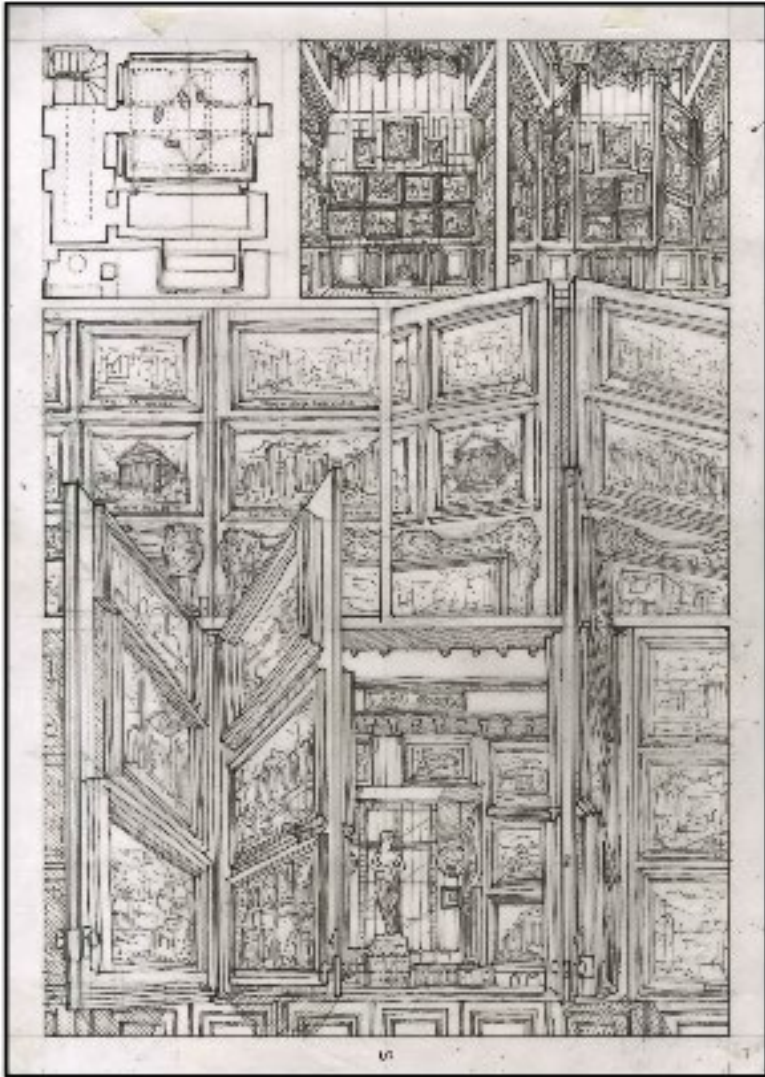

Fig. 9. Lim Eu Jin, *Drawing Soane's* (Masters by Conversion, Mackintosh School of Architecture, 2014-15).

Drawing Soane's excels at evoking what we could term 'the landscapes of the mind' and translating them into 'landscapes of/on the page'. It is neither a blueprint to reconstruct the house nor an exact reproduction of a journey through it, but succeeds at portraying what could be an observer's 'memories' of its spatial and architectural features, memories that forcefully combine the subjective and the objective and which can be faulty. Our memories of a building may alter topological relations to the point of breaking the rules of Euclidean space, transforming it. On this basis, we might consider the potential of this method when applied to non-existent architectural design, or to designs that have not yet been fully conceived, using the mechanics of comics as a 'morphogenetic' device.

Such an experiment can be found in the work of Jimenez Lai. A practitioner of 'automatic drawing' in the form of big murals replete with intricate architectural inventions, Lai is better-known for his architectural comics, which he combines with his design practice in his office, *Bureau Spectacular*. Lai uses the comics page as an architectural design crucible, in "Sociopaths"[35]. A 'whodunnit' that takes place in a house where the recollections of each suspect differ, alongside the shape of the spaces they describe, the story features a mix of comic book and architectural elements. These evolve throughout the tale, in a festival of inventive forms and spaces that perfectly combine as Lai's vocabulary. An application of this method to teaching was rehearsed in Lai's 2015 Visiting Studio at Syracuse University. A multi-part exercise, the studio could be subdivided in two main areas. Firstly, students were asked to search for plans from a list of residential projects, and then create 'Frankensteinian' plan mash-ups with them, which were discussed and turned into three-dimensional models. Lai adds that "running parallel to this exercise was a discussion about developing compelling storylines and narratives"; in the end, "the two were then brought together [by] creating a comic narrative that incorporated the previous exercise in some way". Results varied, and it was up to the students to choose how to appropriate their architectural by-products. In all cases, the comics continued the form-giving process, giving birth to new shapes according to the needs of the narrative[36] *(fig. 10)*.

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[35] Jimenez Lai, "Sociopaths", *Thresholds*, No. 40 (2012): 263-286.
[36] From an e-mail exchange between Nathan Geller and the Authors.

Comics and architecture in a phygital world

Production of architectural form was not the only result of Lai's studio. Taking the exercise in a different direction, Nathan Moshe Geller's *Drunken Philosophers (fig. 11)* did not expand on the already-produced plans, but rather incited the reader to examine them and make new conclusions.
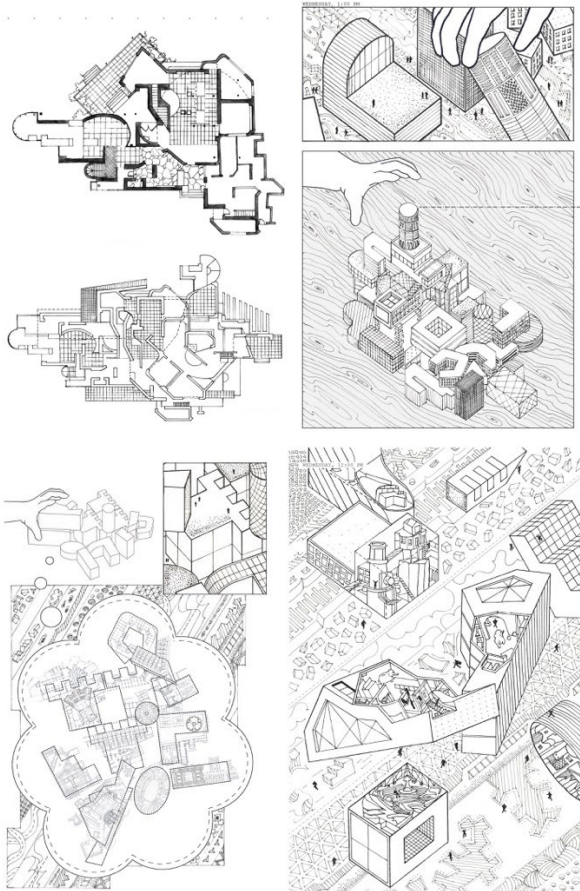

Fig. 10. Nikole Cabrera, 'Frankensteinian plans' and the subsequent Building Blocks, "a comic book about […] a toddler and a baby, in which the toddler is constantly building this world, and the baby repetitively destroying it […] told through the perspective of the imaginary people who live in these blocks".

Consisting of six panels, all of them showing the same space, a bar, with two characters and a few minor variations, the narrative focused on their conversation. In each panel, each of the characters 'spoke' with a speech balloon containing a different 'Frankensteinian plan'. This strategy provokes in the reader an 'induced apophenia'. Looking for relationships between *a priori* unrelated elements, the reader tries to reconstruct the conversation: Are they agreeing? Are they arguing, or laughing at each other's argument? Are those plans alternative solutions to the same, or several architectural issues? The method does not fully follow that of the exquisite corpse. Nonetheless, it is a production mechanism with automatic results. The 'dialogues' and the panel order could be changed and work equally well in multiple combinations, with the endless ability to suggest a myriad of different discourses.

'Drunken Philosophers' underlines the possibilities of the comics medium for architectural design. Rather than an old-fashioned, *démodé* technique relegated to those playing with nostalgia for techniques past, comics is an expanding field in architectural representation. At a point where the narrative aspects of architecture are being foregrounded, and speculation is gaining prominence again both in professional practice and in the design studio, comics prove a valuable asset in a discipline which is still conceived and communicated through drawing. It is particularly telling, for instance, that the presentation panels for Agostino Nickl's *Low-Res City – The Phygital Warehouse*, 2015 *(fig. 12),* part of a series of projects that deal with the 'phygital' (physical + digital) and the concept of 'Realised Augmentity', have an indubitably graphic AND narrative component. In his now germinal, albeit limited, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud defined comics as a series of 'juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.[37]' Such a description of the comics medium, according to some identified shared formal properties but not others (juxtaposed images, sequence and so on) has led, rationally, to the identification of these properties in media other than comics, recently called the "comics form" by Chris Gavaler.[38] Alternatively, framing definitions around questions of contingency and use, Ian Hague asks "how do we

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[37] Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York, NY: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), 20.
[38] Chris Gavaler, *The Comics Form: the art of sequenced images* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

recognise comics?"[39] This question directs this chapter's conclusion, because it considers changes in the media forms that are recognised as comics to be contingent upon historical changes in the ways in which comics are read and used.[40]
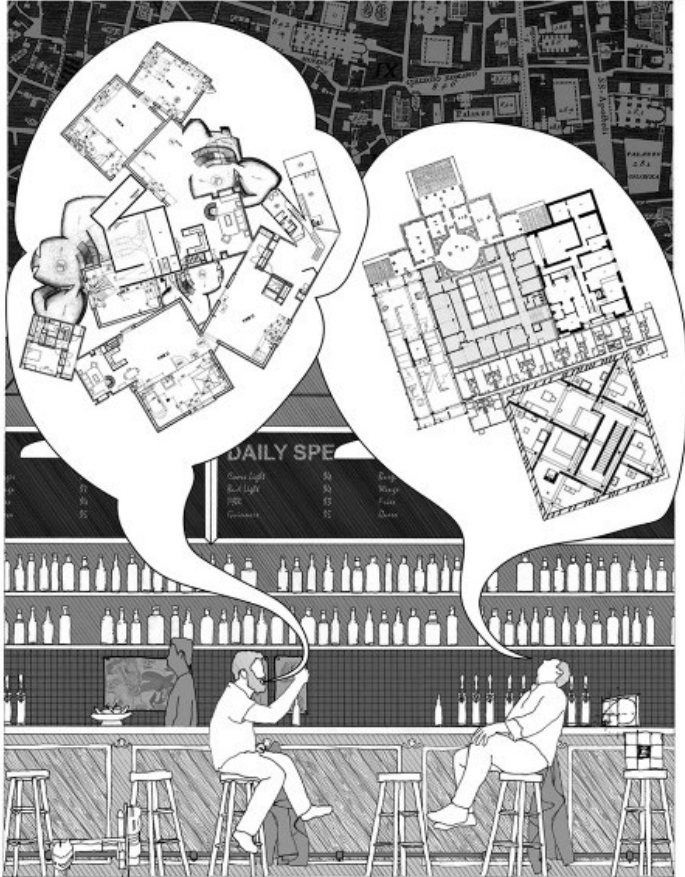

Fig. 11. Nathan Moshe Geller. *Drunken Philosophers* (1 out of 6 pages). Jimenez Lai Visiting Studio. Syracuse University School of Architecture, 2015.

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[39] Ian Hague, *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 10.
[40] Simon Grennan, "Comics Drawing: A (Poly)Graphic History", in *The Cambridge Companion to Comics*, ed. Maaheen Ahmed (London: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Looking at Nickl's boards, with their breaking of the fourth wall, and their mix of axonometric views, characters, panels, superimposed texts, loose sequences, and occasional word balloons, it is up to the observer to decide whether it can be considered a comic or not. And the same goes for Chang Liu's book *Library of Wonder*[41]*,* a refashioning of his eponymous MArch Thesis at the MIT. Is it really 'An Architectural Graphic Novel', or rather an illustrated book? Many other examples can be found, especially as 'comics', in the traditional sense, become mixed with animation, hypertexts, et al., producing a whole new universe of hybrid and combinatory media.
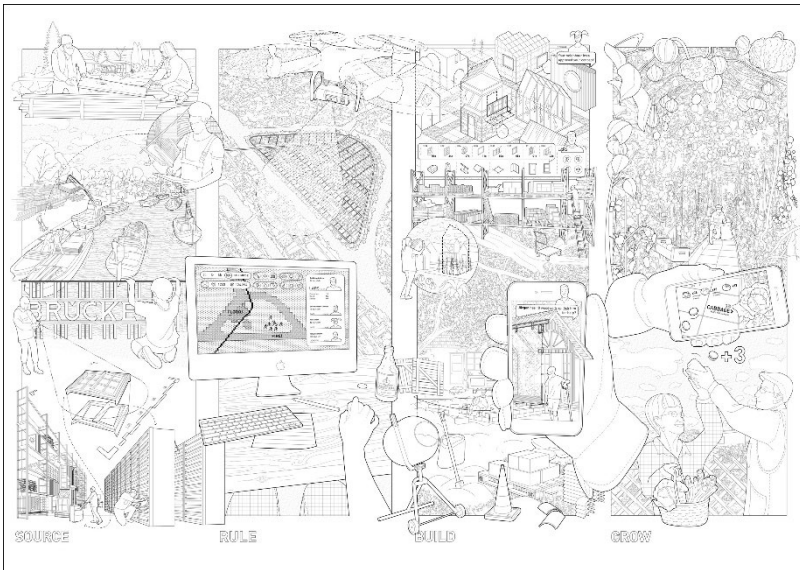

Fig. 12. Agostino Nickl, *Low-Res City 'Modes',* 2017 (courtesy of the author).

Architectural design is an inherently dialectical process, where the designer keeps asking questions and answering them, seeking to find and follow one of many paths towards the final design. Architectural projects come with their own bundle of stories, both the ones that took part in their making, and, sometimes, others used to present them. These stories, inherent to every design process, are foregrounded when dealing with the production of speculative projects, where stories are not just a means to the design, but are

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[41] Chang Liu, *Library of Wonder. An Architectural Graphic Novel,* Master Graduation Thesis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Dept. Architecture, 2017), accessed May 19, 2023, https://www.gooood.cn/library-of-wonder-by-chang-liu.htm

an integral part of it: the project has to be 'told' as well as 'shown', and, inevitably, narrative drawing, in the whole range that goes from the traditional annotated plan to the illustrated book, the traditional, panel-divided comic book page, or the photo-novel, emerges. As the examples discussed in this chapter show, the comics medium is deft in visioning architecture and the city. Comics transform buildings into accessible and sometimes radical stories. They also facilitate immersion, bringing the reader closer to the experience of the user, the visitor, or the *flâneur*.

None of these abilities are exclusive to comics: many of the 'archicomics' produced in the 1960s and the 1970s by the architectural neo-avant-garde might have been produced as animation today. Still, as some of the examples provided show, the rudimentary, artificial nature of the mechanics of the comics sequence, together with their slower production rhythms become, in today's context, also their main asset. We are at a point where digital tools have made image production easier, faster, and more accessible. When David M. Ball and Martha B. Kuhlman compiled the first collection of essays about Chris Ware in 2010, they chose to add the tagline 'Drawing is a Way of Thinking[42]'. Comics are, indeed, a way of thinking, and, what is more, a *tool* for thinking, particularly, we argue, to think architecture. Going back to Groensteen's arthrological theory, the making of comics entails a continuous, meditated -and less mediated- process of relational thinking. In the hands of the designer of forms and spaces, and forms containing spaces, the production of comics offers a particularly attractive mixture of immediacy and reflection: first as a shower and teller of stories, panel after panel. Then, as a reader, once the page-passage/itinerary is complete, where they can look back at the whole page, unveiling unexpected architectural discourses, spaces and shapes. Comics are, definitely, a medium whose hegemony as a popular culture mass phenomenon may have already passed, but whose role as an alternative means to unleash and guide other creative processes seems to be still at the beginning of an ongoing exploration which architecture surely has a lot to benefit from.

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[42] David M. Ball, Martha B Kuhlman, *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010).