



Comics as a Means of Architecture Representation

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Abstract. Comic strips are establishing themselves as a graphic skill to represent architecture. The narrative function of the drawing finds effective application both in supporting the architect in the design process and in its communication. The relationship between architectural drawing and sequential art has always been very strong. Le Corbusier, in his famous “Lettre to Madame Meyer” in 1925, draws up a narrative of the Villa Meyer project through sequential images with marginalized captions. Although the use of sequential drawing in architecture is widespread and well established, its effectiveness as a tool to communicate architecture allows today to reach an ever wider audience. In the representation of architecture, one of the reasons for using the sequential drawing tool can be identified in the efficacy derived from the serial juxtaposition of appropriately prepared images: the message that emerges from a narrative structure surpasses that inherited in each single frame. Such characteristic finds obvious analogies in different languages, such as movie language, textual language, and design language.

Keywords: Architectural representation · Comic strips · Drawing
Storyboard · Graphic novel

1 Introduction

Will Eisner in his essay *Comics & Sequential Art* (1985) states: “*This work intended to consider and examine the unique aesthetics of sequential art as a means of creative expression, a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deals with arrangement of picture or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea. It is studied here within the framework of its application of comic books and comic strips [...]*”. Citing Scott McCloud, to this definition of comics, we can add a second statement: “*juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer*” (McCloud 1993).

From the two quotations, some fundamental characteristics of the comics emerge, first of all the presence of sequentially organized images that, following their own narrative plot within a certain time and space, connote a narration. In *Graphic storytelling and visual narrative*, Will Eisner defines a story as “the narration of a sequence of events deliberately arranged for telling [...] kind of like reporting an event [...] except that the teller controls the events” (Eisner 2008). “All stories have a structure. A story has a beginning, an end, and a thread of events laid upon a framework that

holds the two together. Whether the medium is text, film or comics, the skeleton is the same. [...] The structure of a story can be diagrammed with many variations, because it is subject to different patterns between its beginning and end” (Eisner 2008).

If we consider the comic strip under this point of view, the affinities existing between cinematographic (storyboard), textual and design language appear evident. The narrative datum consists of several levels, which constitute an overdetermined narration, named by Thierry Groensteen “site” (Groensteen 2011). The site defined by Groensteen, organized in sequences arranged in a system, is expressed in the concept of drawing itself and, in particular, finds application in architectural and urban representation. We need only consider the example of the serial visions proposed by Gordon Cullen in his work “The Concise Townscape” (Cullen 1961), or the work of “The view from the road” (Appleyard et al. 1964), where Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch and John R. Myer, put the representation of the city in terms of sequential images that define a narration.

In architecture, the use of the storyboard defines a well-established support tool in the early stages of the creative design process and, subsequently, in its communication. The storyboard, understood as the predisposition of narrative units, is often chosen in the communication of a project concept or privileged mode in which support and guide the designer during the ripening process of the project idea. The narrative units of the storyboard connect to each other according to the technique of film editing (Barbieri 1991), revealing the intimate structure of the frames put in motion.

The vignettes represent a space that assumes a temporal connotation and allows one to read a spatialized time (i.e. translated into space) or as a temporalized space, associated with the quantity of iconic signs contained in it (Alberghini 2006). Signs and icons are the expressive means for translating a story into images. In the language of comics, these symbols approximate the idea of stereotype according to a different meaning, that is, the identification of objects and images easily recognizable in the collective imagination or, in this case, in the reader’s experiential memory (Eisner 2008).

In its various meanings, the drawing allows us to select and highlight the main elements of a scene optimizing effective communication that condenses the information you need in just a few signs. In this context, the use of pictograms and infographics would be most incisive. The medium of comics, combining images and texts, is characterized by the synthesis and immediacy in transmitting a message, revealing its effectiveness in this change of paradigm.

2 Sequential Drawing and Visual Communication

In the second half of the twentieth century, with the spread of visual dominant technologies, a change in the literacy processes has come about. Through appropriately structured images, messages are transmitted and decoded faster and easier. Besides textual communication, especially on web platforms, there are more and more graphs that schematize and develop the most complex information (Lo Turco and Tommasetti 2016). Tools such as pictograms and infographics, or media such as advertising and graphics, give us profitable connections with the world of comic strips. In the

optimization of the visual communication process, the images present the gestaltic characteristics of maximum visual economy, inducing the formation of schematic mental images, constituted by perceptual invariants of the objects. The peculiarities of the essential images stored in the visual memory, allow an immediate recognition. The effectiveness of this principle has been demonstrated by the experience illustrated by the psychologists Ryan and Schwartz (Ryan and Schwartz 1956). They demonstrated how the content of a stylized drawing is more easily recognizable (Di Napoli 2004). A sketch is more effective than the photographic image because our attention can focus on the outlines (Ramachandran 2011).

In the process of image reception, the brain modulates the stimuli and then reorganizes them in a non-homogeneous procedure. Vision is a system of spatial distribution of nervous activity. Nerve cells incorporate the stimulus into three parameters: position, form and specificity. Retinal cells are more sensitive to discontinuities than to nuances and the spatial properties of the visual scene are recognized in grayscale. If the visual stimulus has less nuances, the information increases and the receptive system is more efficient (Falcinelli 2011).

The pictograms are made up of minimal graphic elements which, when combined, give rise to more elaborate forms. The basic forms are established by the conventions applied to the signs (Falcinelli 2011). The cave paintings represent the first evidence of an effective visual communication. The Maya civilization has given us a series of sequential images where visual and a textual part are associated. According to Scott McCloud, in the relationship of interdependence between text and image, the Maya tables are placed in the additive category where the words “amplify or elaborate on an image or vice versa” (McCloud 1993). Mayan hieroglyphics, present in front of people’s images, would seem to be modern balloons that have the function of delimiting sequences or accompanying visual contents (Cohn 2016). Neil Cohn emphasizes the need to analyze the narrative and sequential nature of subsequent images, a more dense system of information than verbal language. According to Cohn, the combination of sequenced images could be traced back to a narrative structure, with the aim of constructing a visual alphabet independent from the linguistic one. At this juncture, the studies called “panel transition”, theorized by McCloud (1993) have been resumed and expanded (Cohn 2003): the images, the vignettes, are approached through the dimension of space and time (Cohn 2013). Scott McCloud articulates the panel transitions according to six different types: from moment to moment, from action to action, from scene to scene, from aspect to appearance and *non sequitur*. In order to guarantee the flow of the narration it is necessary to define the so-called “closure”. The closure is a mental automatism that completes the lack of informative data between two images, defining a narrative duration that changes from reader to reader. According to this theory, Will Eisner declares that a comic becomes real when, within the sequence that punctuates the images, there is a rhythm that defines a flow (Cassarà and D’urso 2013). An application of the use of sequential images is that of the so-called storyboard, a graphic tool created by Walt Disney in 1927 in the creation of animated films (Rea and Irving 2015). The use of the storyboard tool is now widely used in architecture for the construction of sequences, which generate historical fragments in the commemoration of a place. In the educational approach it is now common practice to operate through the strategy of using sequential images, on the traces of the well known

research conducted by Gordon Cullen in the study of urban landscape. A notable example is that conducted by the University of Chile Bio Bio, where the ethnographic and social approach in the study of the local context, is returned in the form of storyboards. Through the storyboard, the students involved expressed a narrative through the representation of multiple frames and points of view in a multidisciplinary approach (Aroztegui et al. 2010).

In the didactic approach, the storyboard becomes at the same time an instrument of knowledge and communication (Priego 2016). In the sequential drawing there is also a high descriptive and informative potential, which effectively returns the urban visions in the representation of existing or fantasy cities, such as those of the urban sequences created by François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters for *Les Cités obscures* (Urso 2014). Normally, in the process of producing a comic book the storyboard is placed between the initial stages. The next step is the one that sees the definition of the so-called “founding units”, represented by images, strips and boards. The different founding units must be designed so as to establish a link structured on several levels. In the construction of a comic strip, the narration works with the composition of the board in a very limited space. Hierarchically, the vignettes constitute the first founding units. The topology defined by Groensteen, provides that the vignettes must be organized through the site, in relation to their position on the board and in the context of the entire work, depending on the specific relevance within the story. An effective metaphor of vignette space can be found in *Le Processus* (Mathieu and Rabillon 1993), the third volume of the *Julius Corentin Acquefacques series, prisonnier des rêves* by Marc-Antoine Mathieu. In this work, Mathieu draws a space marked by walls divided according to an orthogonal plot that separates the different environments, the vignettes of history. From the twisting of the orthogonal grid a spiral is created, which penetrating the third dimension determines a spatial continuity between the pages in the three dimensions (Cassarà and D’urso 2013). This model of vignette organization refers to “the plot”, introduced by Groensteen in 1990 with the concept of “network”. Quoting Jan Baetens and Pascal Lefèvre, the comic strips can not be reduced to a succession of vignettes, they require a reading capable of going beyond linear relations (Baetens and Lefèvre 1993). Within the network, each vignette has its own spatiotopic and chronotopic coordinates, to which the so-called “hypertopic coordinates” are added, defined by the interweaving on the basis of the overdetermined “series” of belonging. Groensteen defines a series as “a continuous or discontinuous succession of images linked by a system of iconic, plastic or semantic correspondences” (Groensteen 1988).

In the sequences of a comic book, the images are inserted creating a sense independent from the story. The series as follows produces a place that overlaps the site, intersecting with a sequence. Similarly to the physical space, the site produced in the sequences can be traversed or visited, here relationships are created and unraveled (Groensteen 2011). Hypertropical coordinates are often associated with vignettes that open or end a chapter, but are also used in the composition of the board’s figurative space, as happens in the interlacing designed in *Sambre* (Le Pennetier and Yslaire 1986), conceived by Yslaire and Balac (Fig. 1) (Groensteen 2011).

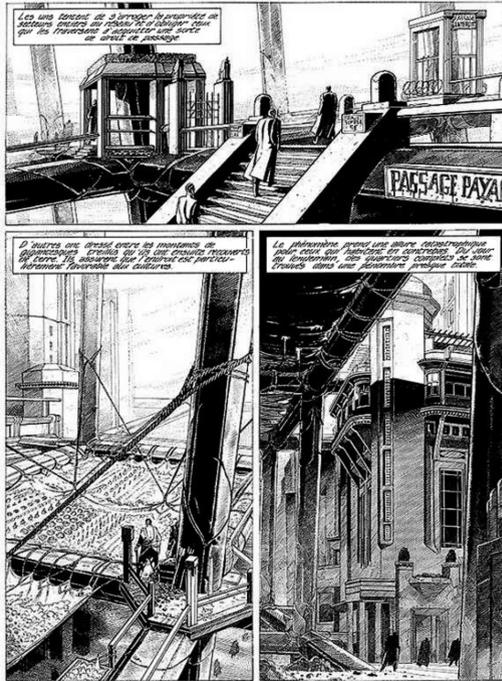


Fig. 1. François Schuiten & Benoît Peeters, extrait de *Les cités obscures—2—La fièvre d’Urbicande* (Schuiten and Peeters 1985)

The analogy between the site defined by Groensteen, the comics and the architectural space opens up a series of reflections useful to enrich the values of graphic expression in architecture. Aldo Rossi, referring to the theater and the city, affirms that architecture is the fixed scene of human events (Rossi 1966).

In architectural representation, drawing has always been aimed at the necessary “objective” representation of space, often neglecting the founding role that assume the “subjective” positions of the actors participating in the process of designing and constructing a space first and its users then.

The graphic representation must not be limited to the description of the metric data, architecture does not derive from a sum of widths, lengths and heights of the constructive elements that enclose the space. Taking possession of space, knowing how to “see” it, is the key to understanding the buildings (Zevi 1948, Cassarà et al. 2013).

Similarly to what happens with the interweaving of the language of comics, even in architecture it can sometimes be useful and appropriate to resort to a narration over determined. The need for an individual narration of space and places is increasingly felt even by architects. They often fail to represent into their projects the individual maturation process that has determined the different design choices.

Chris Ware, referring to his work *Building Stories* (Ware 2012), says “*Comic is about memory*” (Ball and Kuhlman 2010). As in comics, in chronophotography and in cinema, even in architecture the temporal component finds an effective translation into

the potentials expressed by the sequential art (Ball and Kuhlman 2010). In *Lost Buildings* Chris Ware (2003) emphasizes the connections between architecture, comics and cinema, illustrating the similarities between the structures of the comic system and the architecture system: “like comics they proceed sequentially and occupy a small part of a large screen, and like architectural structure the construct patterns and structures on the screen, manipulating and concretizing space” (Worden et al. 2010).

3 Comics as Graphic Skill in Architecture

Architecture has always been represented in comics as a background but has often become the subject of history, as in “*Les Cités obscures*” by François Schuiten & Benoît Peeters (1982) (Fig. 1), or “*I Sotterranei*” by Guido Crepax (1966).

The official union of architecture and comics is usually referred to the 60s, when the Archigram, in the homonymous magazine produced from 1961 to 1974, propose their visions of utopian architecture taking up the typical graphic expression of the comic strip. The style used in the magazine derives from the Marvel comics (De Domenico 2013), rejecting the conventional languages of architecture, encourages experimentation towards innovative architectures.

The French architect Jean Balladur (1924–2002) for the urbanization project of the Grand-Motte coastal strip, realizes a series of tables that adopt a graphic stylization very close to the comics, revived mainly in the characterization of the human figures that animate the scenes (De Domenico 2013).

An emblematic case is constituted by *Lettre to Madame Meyer* of Le Corbusier (1925) (Fig. 2), where the author communicates his project to the client through suggestive drawings, marginal annotations and primitive balloons, contributing to establish a first approach between comic strips and graphic representation of architecture (Van de Hoorn 2012). The style used by Le Corbusier in the *Lettre to Madame Meyer* reminds us of the style of the so-called “*ligne claire*” that characterized the Franco-Belgian *band dessinée*, whose precursor is now recognized in Rodolphe Töpffer, considered the father of modern comic strips (Groensteen 2014).

The connection between Le Corbusier and Rodolphe Töpffer is evidenced by the article “*Toepffer, précurseur du cinema*” (Le Corbusier 1921), written by Le Corbusier in issue 11–12 of the magazine *L’Esprit Nouveau* (1921). In this article Le Corbusier places Töpffer as a pioneer of film editing, publishing some of his proto-comics, including *Monsieur Pencil* (1831/1840) and *Le Docteur Festus* (1831/1846) (Lus Arana 2013, 2015). Töpffer, considered the author of the first comic book, in his works emphasizes the narrative power of drawing solving the comic book as a genre in its own right (Groensteen 2002).

Recently in architecture, drawing as a sequential art has found an increasing use in the unconventional representation of places and ideas. Among them, we mention the graphic analysis conducted by Bernard Tschumi in his work *Manhattan Transcripts*, where he interprets the reality of Manhattan in diagrams and sequences that highlight the relationships between people and places in a deconstructed reality (Tschumi 1994), and the research conducted in “*The view from the road*” (1964), where Lynch, Appleyard and Meyer experiment the sequential form of the image. Moving on American

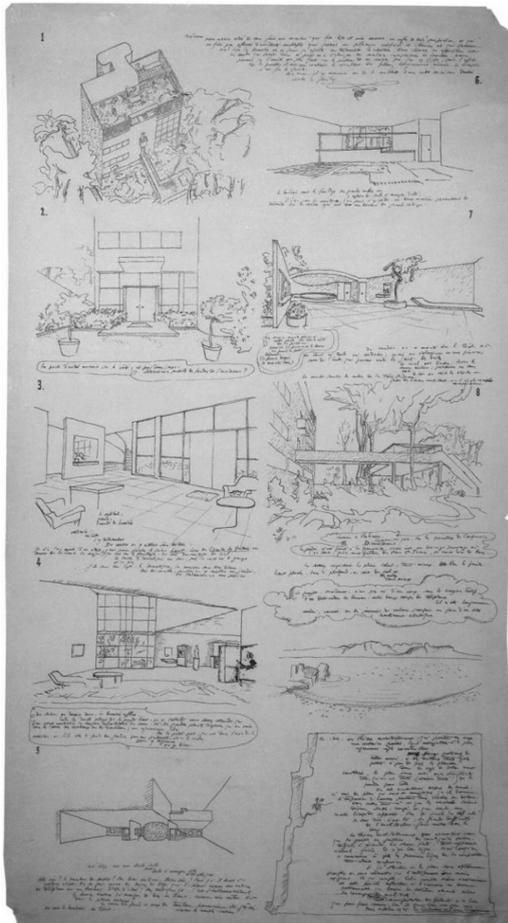


Fig. 2. Villa Meyer, Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, 1925. Lettre de Le Corbusier à Mme Meyer (Villa Meyer, Neuilly-sur-Seine © FLC/ADAGP)

highways, perception becomes the tool to restore order and coherence to the new metropolitan scale (Pagano 2012). During driving a car, the visual sensations identify the objects in progression, in relation to the speed of the vehicle. The choice of a representation that used schematic sequential images in place of more simulative representations such as photography, guaranteed an immediate description in the communication of the perceptual essence of the space (Appleyard et al. 1971). A comparison in the planning reality of the narrative and sequential datum can be found in the drawings of the *Parc de la Villette*, designed by Bernard Tschumi for Paris in 1982. The setting of a generating grid in which the different structures, *Les Folies*, are located, generates a *Promenade cinématique*, or a sinuous path that is organized in consecutive “scenes”, similar to the sequences of a film (G.F., Rewiewer Piccinno 2015).

Starting in 2010, the review entitled *Archi & BD, La ville dessinée* (Paris), presents the relationships between the representations of architecture, city and comics. In the narration through images, we can not neglect the role of the representation of fantastic or utopian realities. Mélanie van der Hoorn in “Bricks and Balloons: Architecture in comic-strip form” (2012) presents a collection of architectural projects represented in the form of comics, proposing a reflection on the cultural contribution that comic strip can support in architecture.

An effective example of the application of comics in the communication of architecture is certainly the comic book “Yes is more. Yes is More. An Archicomic on Architectural Evolution” by Ingels (2011), in which the founder of the BIG group realizes the catalog of the exhibition “Yes is more” (2009) dedicated to the activity of the architecture studio (Fig. 3). The Danish architect justifies his choice on the use of the cartoon format to express in a colloquial way the creative story of their projects, with the combination of words and images that is typical of the comics (Ingels 2011).

A very interesting example of the combination of architecture and comics is the work carried out by Tamassociati *Architettura resistenti* (Pantaleo et al. 2013) (Fig. 4) (Esposito 2014).

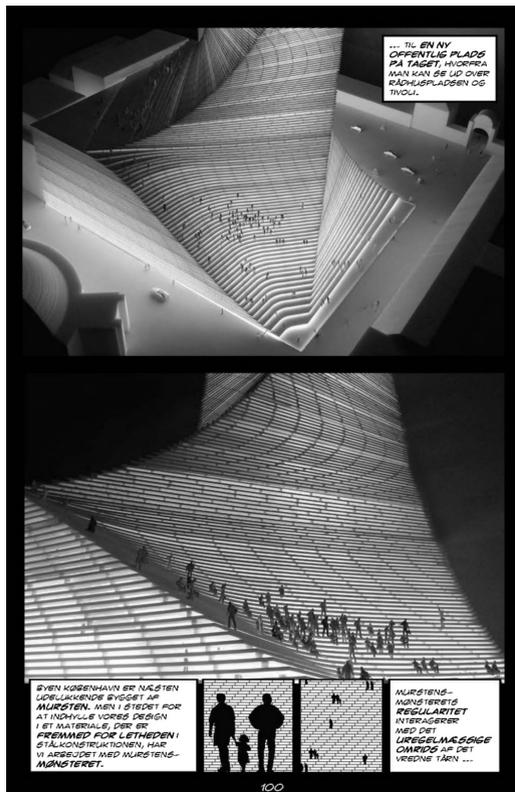


Fig. 3. A page from *Yes is more. An Archicomic on Architectural Evolution* (BIG 2011) (© Taschen)

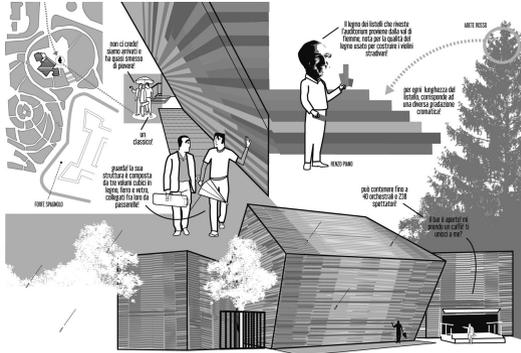


Fig. 4. A page from the graphic novel “*Architetture resistenti*” (2013), by Raul Pantaleo (Studio Tamassociati) and Marta Gerardi (© Tamassociati)

In the redevelopment project of the Wong Chuk Hang district of Hong Kong, “The factory” (2008), performed by Alberto Cipriani (Research Architecture Design) and cartoonist Mauro Marchesi, there is evidence of the intertwining of architecture and comics. All twelve floors of the building were decorated with a comic strip, entitled

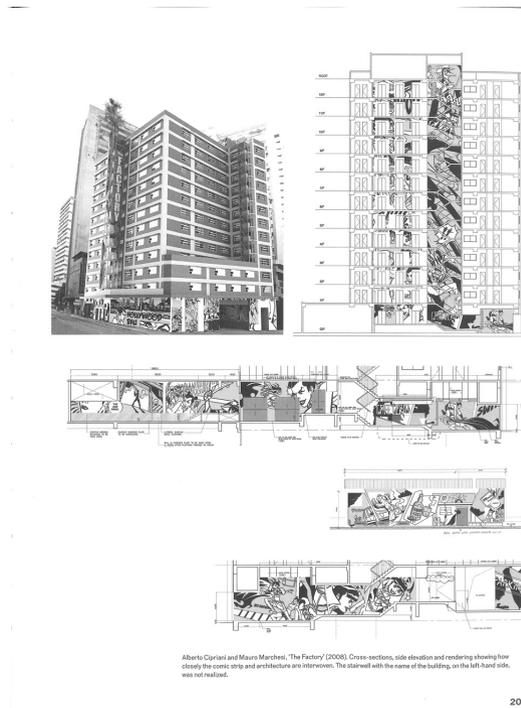


Fig. 5. *The Factory* (2008), Alberto Cipriani (RAD) (© Van de Hoorn 2011, 203)

“Hollywood Bau”, which runs through the entire building (Fig. 5) (Van der Hoorn 2010). In *Station Arts et Métiers Paris* (1994), french cartoonist François Shuiten redesigned the steampunk-style metro station in Paris on the bicentennial of the eponymous museum. The same influence can also be found in the architecture of his comics (Van der Hoorn 2010). There are iconic signs that lead back to a reference culture, where comics, cars and architecture meet together (Fig. 5).

4 Conclusions

Drawing as a sequential art finds its application in the representation of architecture, showing its effectiveness in the phases of conceptualization and design development, in the processes of participated architecture, in the communication phases of the project. The constant growth of the number of media available today, confronts us with a renewed opening of the representation of architecture towards graphic codes usually considered “unconventional”. The introduction of new models of representation, requires a deepening of the paradigms associated with them and a review that verifies the degree of effectiveness and functionality of the various means. The richness of the graphic models and the variety of the functions of the drawing impose a constant re-examination of models and paradigms of the representation of architecture, possibly starting from the didactic approach of our architecture schools.

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