Dōmu by Katsuhiro Otomo.
From Reality to the Imaginary, Architecture As an Integral Part of the Narrative

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Abstract

Katsuhiro Otomo (Hasama, 1954) is universally recognized as one of the masters of the Japanese comics industry. Akira (1982), a science fiction story set in a location characterized by endless skyscrapers, is certainly his most internationally known work. Two years before giving life to the world of Akira, Otomo laid the foundations for the creation of a coherent urban scenario in Dōmu, A Child's Dream. Dōmu's story is entirely set in an intensive Japanese condominium, a huge snake building called Tsutsumi Danchi. An architecture that Otomo represents in too much detail to be his own invention. The reference for Tsutsumi is in fact the Shibazono Danchi, a building of intensive housing located in the Saitama prefecture. Otomo, like an expert director, selects the location, distorting and shaping it to fit his vision. Through dramatic and highly detailed perspectives, Otomo makes the Tsutsumi Danchi one of the protagonists of the story. The paper aims to investigate how much drawing allows one to manipulate a simple suburban architecture to satisfy a creative vision. A dead inanimate object within the narrative becomes alive, pulsating with information. The drawing thus allows, like a cinematographic shot of a visionary author, to create a new world (tangential to the real one) but absolutely new and which has a life of its own.

Keywords: Otomo, Manga, Comics, Japan, Danchi

Introduction: Katsuhiro Otomo's ouvre

During his youth in Hasama (Miyagi Prefecture, north-eastern Japan), Katsuhiro Otomo was a frequent visitor of the small local cinemas, where he used to attend several films on the same day. Among his favorite films were *Easy Rider* and *Butch Cassidy*, motion pictures that were the children of the more authorial and less frivolous New Hollywood that preferred shots calibrated between dynamism and drama. Otomo's passion for this type of storytelling finds in the comics an outlet immediately within his reach, leading the young author to decide to dedicate himself body and soul to the *mangaka* profession [Barder 2017].
In 1973, when he was only nineteen, he moved to Tokyo; after just over a decade he will manage to di-rect one of the most successful Japanese animated feature films ever: *Akira* (1988), the culmination of a path marked by a grueling apprenticeship started in the world of comics, with hundreds and hundreds of pages drawn every year. During the first years of his career, Otomo published numerous short mangas in Kodansha's *Young Magazine* (A "*Seinen*" magazine, suitable for a mature audience aged 17 and over), leading to the serialization in 1982 of his most famous series - *Akira* in fact - which was immediately a huge success. The years preceding *Akira* are those of the continuous training, in which the author is inspired by numerous Western works of art (an example is the mechanical hand holding a reflective sphere that appears in the

short story *Fireball* of 1979, a reinterpretation of Escher's *Hand with Reflective Sphere* of 1935) and from comic books, finding inspiration in the work of the French collective *Humanoides Associes*. On the pages of *Metal Hurlant*, the group's magazine-manifesto, the visions of the famous Jean Giraud (aka Moebius) are the ones that most inspired the then twenty-year-old Otomo. It is possible to notice this stylistic influence in particular in the short stories collected in the volume *Memories* (1977-1982), which show an attention to the themes and to the construction of the narrative typical of the *Humanoides*, but even more to the graphic style, through the use of long shots, more cinematographic cuts, barren and boundless landscapes, as well as a delicate and very careful hatching, able to convey the materiality of the different surfaces.

In the manga *Akira* (1982-1990) these characteristics are a fundamental component. Through masterfully calibrated drawings, Otomo gives form to a cyberpunk story set in the streets of Neo-Tokyo. The pages are a riot of meticulously detailed urban scenarios, in which Otomo uses his expert eye to dramatize the scenes [Beaujean 2019]. Cinematic shots, bold cuts and a fast pace lead this manga to be universally recognized as a masterpiece of Japanese comics. Given the extraordinary success, after a few years of serialization of the manga, an animated film adaptation is planned. Otomo, who had already worked a few years earlier on two anthologies of animated shorts entitled *Manie Manie* and *Robot Carnival* [SF-Encyclopedia 2021], is in charge of directing the project. The architectural quality already seen in the manga, also the result of the work of the background artist Satoshi Takabatake [Takabatake 2020], is further enhanced in the film. The team of artists led by Otomo gives life to a dynamic, bright, extremely lively and pulsating Neo-Tokyo; mammoth skyscrapers pile up seamlessly. While not enjoying immediate commercial success with time *Akira* became a cult recognized worldwide, helping to define the visual and thematic imagery of the cyberpunk genre.

How do you go from short mangas set in limited urban scenarios, typical of Otomo's early career, to *Akira*'s iconic settings? How did the mangaka learn to control the architectural space so well, expanding it and enhancing it if necessary? The answers to these questions can be found in the pages of Otomo's work immediately preceding *Akira*, dated 1980 and entitled *Dōmu*.

Fig. 1. K. Otomo, Cover of the Japanese edition of Dōmu (Otomo 1983, p.1).

The manga called *Dōmu*

The graphic and thematic characterization of Otomo's production in the late 1970s seems to be heading towards a more classic science fiction (as demonstrated by his work on the aforementioned *Robot Carnival* and the character design for the animated film *Harmageddon*). Yet, on his first approach to a long-term story, the mangaka decides to opt for a contemporary urban scenario, leaning on one of the maxims of Japanese comics, "tell what you know" [1]. Inspired by the master Osamu Tezuka, who after completing his studies in medicine created *Black Jack* (the story of an illegal doctor ready to treat anyone who needs him), Otomo draws on what he already knows well: life within a huge housing complex on the outskirts of Tokyo. In one of his rare statements that arrived in the West, he says: *"At the time [when he just moved to Tokyo] I was living in a newly developed area just outside of central Tokyo. The people I met were the type one only finds in a big city. For example, a carpenter I used to drink with at a nearby bar went into a total moral decline soon after I met him. On the other hand, the bartender at that same bar was a former criminal trying to become a decent citizen [...] While I was living in the area, a huge new public housing project was completed and soon filled with low income couples with newborn babies. They never seemed to adapt to this sort of crowded urban living, but they found themselves trapped in that world. Nevertheless, I enjoyed being around those people"* [Otomo 2001, pp. 241, 241].
Otomo was a keen observer, but also a voracious reader of manga of all kinds. His reference author was Shotaro Ishinomori, known for creating characters such as *Kamen Rider*, the *Cyborg-009* group or *Ryu, the Cave Boy*. Among Ishinomori's minor works is *Sarutobi Ecchan*, the story of an ordinary-looking girl who lives in a Japanese residential neighborhood and who hides incredible powers. Otomo takes inspiration from this work to rework the theme of the "child with special powers", declining it in a more modern and mature way. One of the protagonists of *Dōmu* is in fact a little girl with psychic powers named Etsuko: the little one will be the only one able to counter the heinous crimes committed as

a game by an old man - also a possessor of psychic powers - named Mr. Cho. These crimes attract the attention of the police, who begin to investigate the series of suicides and strange deaths that occurred at the *Tsutsumi Danchi*, the scene of events that immediately presents itself in all its alienating majesty. Serialized on the pages of *Futabasha*'s *Action Deluxe* magazine from 1980 to 1981, the manga *Dōmu* (a neologism coined by the author composed of the ideograms "dream" and "child" and translated into the Italian edition as *Dōmu - Sogni di Bambini*) is a turning point in Otomo's career. For the publication in volume (*tankobon*), Otomo complements his story by adding pages; like a skilled movie director, he inserts additional scenes to improve the management of the story's rhythm (fig. 1). In almost 240 pages he tells a complete story, which combines horror elements with others of the most refined science fiction, all set in an urban setting so truthful and realistic to be scary. Otomo at the time already had an assistant to help him [2], and when the serialization of *Dōmu* begins, the mangaka is at work on two other short stories (*Apple Paradise* and *The Feeling of War*), producing 553 published pages during that year. According to cartoonist James Harvey (one of the leading experts of the Japanese master) such productivity is mainly due to the birth of his son Shohei, and the consequent need to earn more [3]. The American comics industry has well-defined roles (screenwriter, pencil artist, inker, colorist and letterist), in Japanese comics instead, especially in the first years of activity when it is difficult to pay an assistant, the individual author must take care of most of the work. A conception of the profession as a mission, which in contemporary Japan can be found in every work environment. *Dōmu* becomes for Otomo a game changer, which allows him to make the leap from the short story to one with a greater foliation, bringing him considerable success: in 1983 *Dōmu* won the *Japan Science Fiction Grand Prix Award*, a prestigious literary prize never awarded to a comic book before. The reasons behind this success are many: a compelling story, a mature and aware storytelling, a growing tension, and above all a graphic quality that in *Dōmu* reaches a completeness that will only be surpassed by the subsequent masterpiece: *Akira*.

The scenario: the genesis of the *Tsutsumi Danchi*

The main setting of the *Dōmu* events is the *Tsutsumi Danchi*, a residential complex so well characterized and central to the unfolding of the story that it can be considered to all intents and purposes as an active character in the events. Like a living organism, the *Tsutsumi* changes over the course of the story to meet the narrative needs of its author. "My interest in illustrating is a matter of seeing the people and things around me and not a matter of longing to see beautiful scenery. More than the picturesque, I love those places alive and sweltering with humanity… Come to think of it, I suppose I enjoy places sweltering with humanity precisely because they lack artificiality. Tokyo itself looks like a mess. Inharmonious, completely devoid of artificiality. Next to traditional Japanese architecture you might suddenly find a Spanish style villa. Some people say it's ugly but I'm fascinated by such places." [Otomo 2001, pp. 241, 241].
Otomo is fascinated by the disorder of the Japanese capital. Fascinated by all those small distortions that make it so lively and less artificial. His watchful eye moves from the picturesque characters that populate it to its streets, which are also full of useful ideas for narrating. Since what makes a drawn image alive and credible are often even the small details, it is common practice in the world of comics to use photographic references in order to grasp those aspects that give credibility and life to a drawn scene [4]. For *Dōmu*, Otomo feels the need to have original images, alive, not artificial, capable of allowing him to create a coherent scenario. He will tell: "I had the idea for the basic plot, but I had difficulty in deciding where to set the story. One day I read a newspaper and a small article caught my eye. It said that at the Takashimadaira Estates (a huge public housing project complex on the outskirts of Tokyo) dozens of people killed themselves each year by jumping from the buildings. I suddenly realized that there was the setting for Dōmu" [Otomo 2001, pp. 241, 241].
In the Japan of the Economic Miracle, this kind of huge housing complexes were not something rare: immediately after the Second World War, Japan embarked on an unstoppable economic growth, which saw construction as one of the leading industries. Intensive urbanization transformed the Japanese soil within
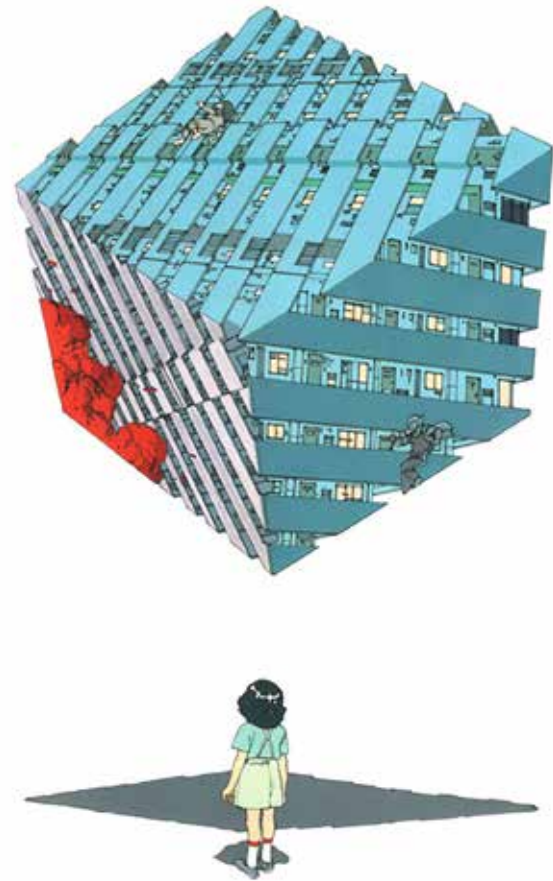

Fig. 2. K. Otomo, Promotional image for Dōmu (Otomo 1989, p. 11).

a few decades, demolishing historic fabric to make way for skyscrapers or directly spreading like wildfire throughout the available territory. This rapid construction is explained by the highly efficient *Design-and-Build* system, where the design and construction part is in the hands of a single contractor who takes care of everything. The system is employed by a handful of companies known as the *Big Five*. It is estimated that they are behind about a third of Japanese construction [Montagna 1994], making the gigantic housing complexes such as the *Takashimadaira* interventions that it is not difficult to define frequent and that in Japan take the name of *Danchi* [Botting 2003]. When everything is delegated to a single client, who has in speed and productivity his strong point, it is impossible to expect an aesthetically (or conceptually) satisfying result. This has brought Japanese cities to an extreme standardization where a series of banal and anonymous architectures extends as far as the eye can see. *Takashimadaira* is a result of this urban fabric. An housing complex that articulates in unimaginative repetitions becomes an alienating and disturbing place. A perfect location to set a story of deaths occurred in mysterious circumstances.

Otomo presumably first collects some newspaper clippings depicting the complex, then he goes personally to the *Takashimadaira* and makes a photographic survey. The anonymous thirteen-storey slat buildings, arranged in lazy repetition, are located in the north-west of Tokyo, enclosed in a lot bounded by *Takashima-dori* high-traffic road and *Akatsuka* park. All around, a small-scale fabric gives even more prominence to the grandeur of the complex's intensive construction. Starting from this conformation Otomo begins to imagine a story by adding, where necessary, other buildings as a reference. Within the manga there are often buildings and interiors that have nothing to do with the *Takashimadaira* but rather seem to be coming from a different *Danchi*. Some Japanese fans have managed to identify the main source of inspiration for *Tsutsumi*: it is the *Shibazono Danchi*, a housing complex located in the Saitama prefecture (north-west of Tokyo) [Mizushima 2012; Caponyan 2013]. The block is composed of buildings with different shapes. A fifteen-story snake building unfolds 500 meters in length. Other buildings, some of which have courtyards and others (service build-
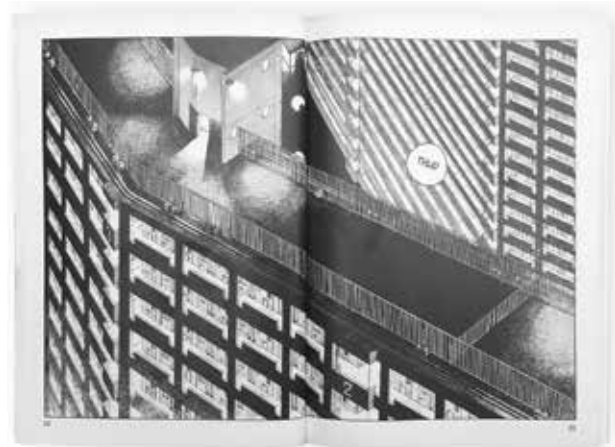

Fig. 3. K. Otomo, Double splash page from *Dōmu*. The author uses axonometry to detach the viewer from the scene and give a repetitive rhythmic scan to the image to suggest the alienating nature of these residential buildings (Otomo 2004, p. 22-23).

Fig. 4. Comparison between a page from *Dōmu* (Otomo 2004, p. 48) and references taken from Google Maps and Google Earth (graphic elaboration by the authors).

ings) have a stockier look, extend over the area. A circular square in the center and discreet street furniture all around fill the voids between buildings.

Also for the *Shibazono* it is likely that Otomo used both photos taken personally (for details and shots at eye level) and photos taken from newspapers or illustrative brochures of the building (relatively young as it was built in 1978) [5]. In no case has there been a slavish reproduction of a photo, Otomo never seems to have traced portions of images. His drawings are always the result of a skimming of information with an autonomous perspective reconstruction of the image. In the assembly of different references, Otomo gives life in all respects to the *Tsutsumi Danchi*; it is no longer the *Takashimadaira*, nor the *Shibazono*, what is proposed on paper is the result of the vision of an experienced comic book director, who selects the most suitable shots to tell his story. Otomo shapes the architecture of his references as a demiurge: through his intervention the facades of the buildings gain or lose details depending on the needs; significant portions are removed and others added, the distances between them are shortened or dilated, the buildings are delocalized, cut, rotated, mirrored and repositioned on stage. Significant in this sense is a promotional image of the manga that depicts a cube suspended in the air with the young Etsuko observing it from beneath (fig. 2). Each face of it is the deformation of a facade of the *Danchi* which is projected onto the plane becoming two-dimensional. Along the vertices of the cube this projection re-gains its three-dimensionality, in an Escherian play of perception. Elements such as an explosion or a character in flight are also projected, becoming the manifesto of Otomo's play of spatial deformations for dramatic, visual or narrative purposes. Only by deconstructing frame by frame the system built by the author it becomes possible to understand its vision.

The reconstruction of the *Dōmu* settings

Just as in the real world there are numerous cinema enthusiasts who go in person to the most iconic locations of their favorite films in order to deepen their production development, in the same way this research experience aims to propose a sort of "virtual survey" of the architectures that Otomo chose to use as location for his story. The ultimate aim of the research is therefore to elaborate a simplified model of the fictitious residential complex of *Tsutsumi Danchi* within which it is possible to reconstruct the spatial location of the events narrated in the story. In this way it is possible to reconnect the imagined places to the corresponding real references, understanding where and how the space has been deformed and altered by the author to favor the needs of the story. The space is then configured as the result of a stratification of references, assembled not necessarily to have a coherence with reality, but rather to place itself at the service of the narrative. It is evident how Otomo works on his comic as a real director, and as such he treats his locations with the same approach: the *Tsutsumi* acts as a stage for a story with strong horror connotations and must therefore also convey, to some extent, a sense of estrangement in the reader through an enhancement of its most alienating characteristics. From a graphic point of view, this translates into the representation of what we can call a "*Frankenstein building*". A mutating place, composed by chunks and bits of other buildings, giving no reference points to the reader. The numerous night scenes (in a play of light and shadow) as well as the stylistic homogeneity of the references (which conceals any location problems) further enhance the sense of estrangement that the *Tsutsumi* manages to instill.

The reconstruction experience is structured in different operational phases. In the first phase, an in-depth scan of the whole manga was carried out: page by page, panel by panel, we went to identify all those shots in which the background architecture of the events narrated was (even partially) recognizable. The version of *Dōmu* used for this research is the one published in a single volume in the United States by the publisher *Dark Horse Comics* in 2001 [6]. As for all Japanese comic publications of those years, Dōmu was adapted for the western publishing market by reversing the pages, mirrored to make them conform to the sense of reading from left to right, opposite to the Japanese direction of reading. This implies that, in order to be able to correctly recognize the buildings represented, it is necessary to mirror the pages to bring them back to
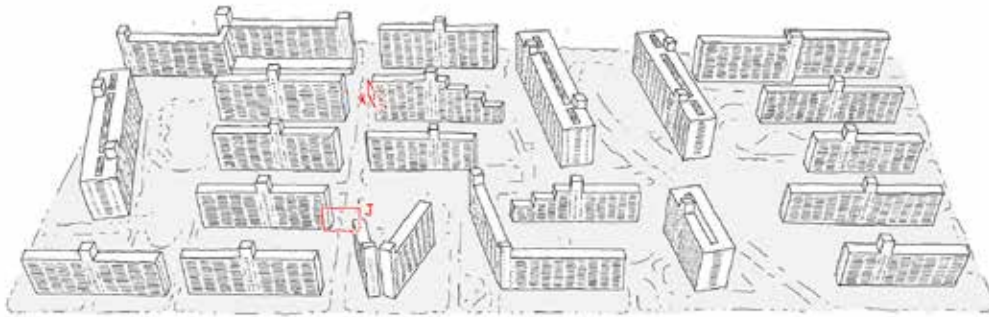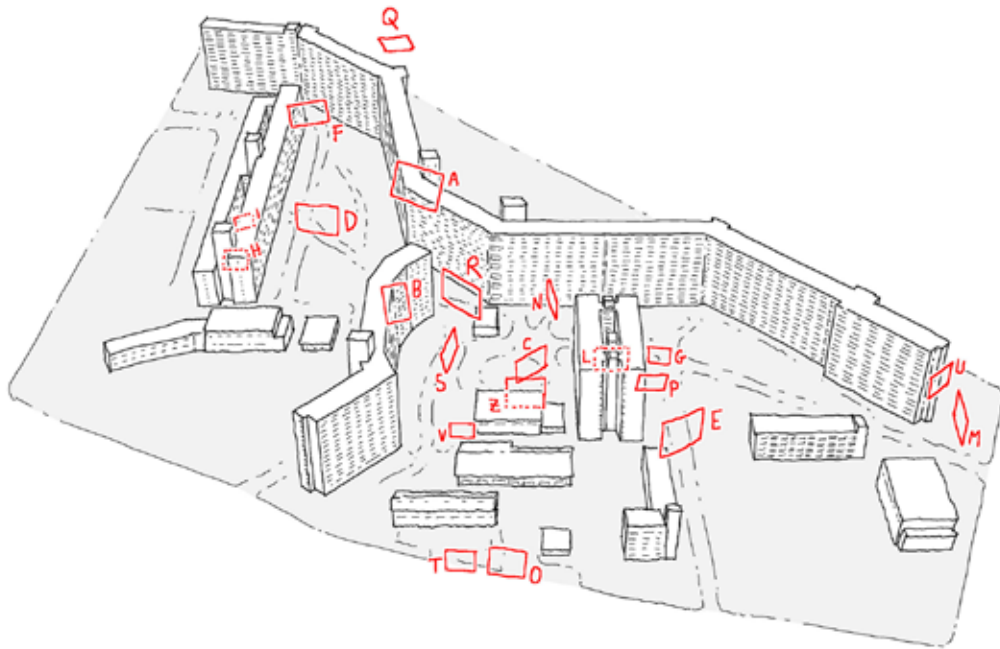
Fig. 5. Bird's-eye perspective reconstruction of the Shibazono Danchi, digital drawing created on ProCreate. The red frames locate the shots of the manga that were possible to link with the real buildings (graphic elaboration by the authors)

Fig. 6. Bird's-eye perspective reconstruction of Takashimadaira Danchi. Digital drawing made on ProCreate. The red frames locate the shots of the manga that were possible to link with the real buildings (graphic elaboration by the authors)

their original sense of reading. Only in some special cases this operation is not necessary: some double splash pages (two pages placed side by side to compose a single panoramic image, see fig. 3) and some establishing shots without dialogue have not been overturned in the western adaptation. Once identified, all the frames were linked to each other. The aim was to find any spatial inconsistencies within the same narrative sequence. Often, exactly as happens in the world of cinema, a rigorous logical and spatial correlation between the exterior and interior of a scene is not necessary: the illusory space of the scenography, be it real or drawn, tends to favor the needs of the narration, exploiting some morphological aspects of architecture to circumvent reality. For example, in fig. 4 we see a page where two buildings that are supposed to be of the same housing complex are shown. The two are actually the result of two different references, the *Takashimadaira* for the upper image and the *Shibazono* for the lower one.

Once this complete list of all recognizable shots was obtained, a second operational phase focused on the recognition of the architecture through a systematic comparison of the drawings with the reference buildings used by the author. Through the 3D navigation of *Google Maps*, all the recognizable portions of the buildings and the spatial location of the camera for each shot within the two residential complexes were identified (figg. 5, 6). A letter was associated with each useful shot, so as to refer to the specific page of the manga. Although the internal paths of the residential complexes are not covered by the *Google Street View* photographic acquisition campaign, where possible the data deduced on the 3D model of *Maps* has been integrated with that of *Street View*, to have a better photographic quality of the facades and to compare the images going into more detail (figg. 7-9).

The shots were inserted through rectangles within a simple bird's eye view of the two residential complexes, reconstructing the position of each shot and mapping the entire model with Otomo's drawings. This mapping has led to several considerations.

It has been noticed that most of *Dōmu*'s settings have *Shibazono* as a reference (21, compared to only 2 in *Takashimadaira*), a complex with a more articulated conformation that is best suited as a location.

Fig. 7. K. Otomo, Splash page from Dōmu. Perspective view from below in vertical picture. By keeping the picture vertical and moving the camera far away from the scene, the author avoids overloading the scene with excessive drama, communicating sobriety and detachment. Time seems to stop before plunging back into action (Otomo 2004, p. 134-135).

Fig. 8. Photo collage (Inu 1941-1966 2014) and references taken from Google Earth. The images refer to the drawings presented in Fig. 3 and Fig. 7 (graphic elaboration by the authors).

Fig. 9. Comparison between an establishing shot extracted from Dōmu (Otomo 2004, p. 113) and a photo of the reference building (Inu 1941-1966 2014).
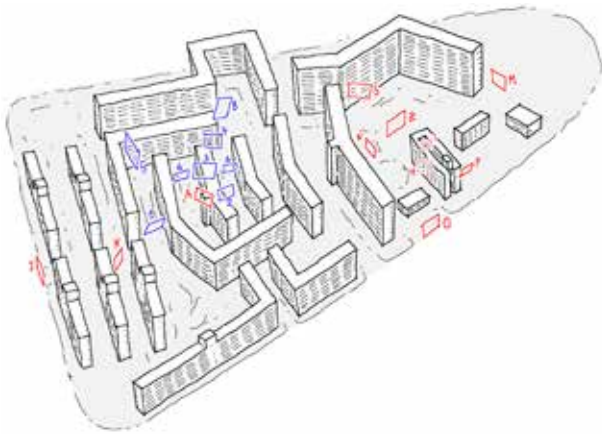
Fig. 10. Reconstructive model of the Tsutsumi Danchi, the residential complex invented by Otomo. The frames in red represent the images directly attributable to the real references, while those in blue are the direct invention of the author. Intuitive military cavalier axonometry. Digital drawing made on ProCreate (graphic elaboration by the authors).

Otomo hardly reproduces the details of the buildings slavishly; his goal is to replicate the scenographic presence of the references, the sense of incumbency that they cause, often enhancing it through a perspective deformation designed to increase the perceived height or depth. For scenes that need visual continuity Otomo uses single recognizable elements (a water tank, a structure with fire escapes) rather than aiming for a coherence of views. The goal is to have dramatic shots, dynamic when they need to be and static when the narrative demands it.

The study of the single pages also shows how many shots do not have direct references to reality. Even forcing shots and viewpoints, neither the *Takashimadaira* nor the *Shibazono* allow to reconstruct the aforementioned views. It follows that precisely these shots are the real creation of Otomo who increased the extension of the *Tsutsumi* producing images in which the buildings multiply in sequence. The serial repetition of the *Takashimadaira* is applied to the *Shibazono*. Operating translations, additions and exaggerations the *Tsutsumi Danchi* is born. The views for which there is no univocal reference (indicated with the blue color in fig. 10) allow, if combined with those extrapolated from the real (indicated in red,

and equivalent to those seen in fig. 5 and fig. 6) to draw in a more complete way the development of the *Tsutsumi*. The model of Fig. 10 tries to give spatial coherence to images that do not seek it at all, leading to a *danchi* which is none other than one of the many conformations that the *Tsutsumi* could have in Otomo's mind. Every single frame, whether it is consistent with reality or entirely invented by the mangaka, provides a quantity of visual information. This quantity, like pieces of an incomplete puzzle, can be assembled to reconstruct the development of the *Tsutsumi*. In specific frames the alienating seriality of *Takashima* (on the left in fig. 10) finds links with the corners of the *Shibazono*. The development of the complex is articulated taking pieces mostly from the *Shibazono* (which we have seen to be the main reference) and then being denied by a more rigid and serial extension in some suggestive bird's-eye shots of the area (fig. 11). *Tsutsumi Danchi* slowly takes shape thanks to distant but often overlapping frames, becoming a new and original architecture.

Conclusions

The result of *Dōmu*'s in-depth and systematic study is a model capable of logically describing an imaginary architecture characterized by a relevant ephemeral component. The representations transcend real references and become something new in the hands of the author, making *Dōmu* a perfect example of how architecture and its visual manipulation can be fundamental in the success of a creative vision linked to a narrative work. The model created gives substance to this random form, to this mental project that has never materialized as a total image put on paper. The possibility of being able to spatially arrange and systematize the invented drawings with the more real ones in a single reference allows us to investigate the creative process of a world-famous author and grasp the logic behind it. The result is that the *Tsutsumi* turns out to be a mutable and alienating place, which changes and unfolds in a disturbing way as the story progresses. This mutability is exemplified in the pyrotechnic finale, where the *Tsutsumi* seems to scale in size in a frantic rhythm to finally reach a liberating explosion (fig. 11). In the epilogue, the mystery is solved and the *danchi* returns to normal, crystallizing into a renewed state of calm.
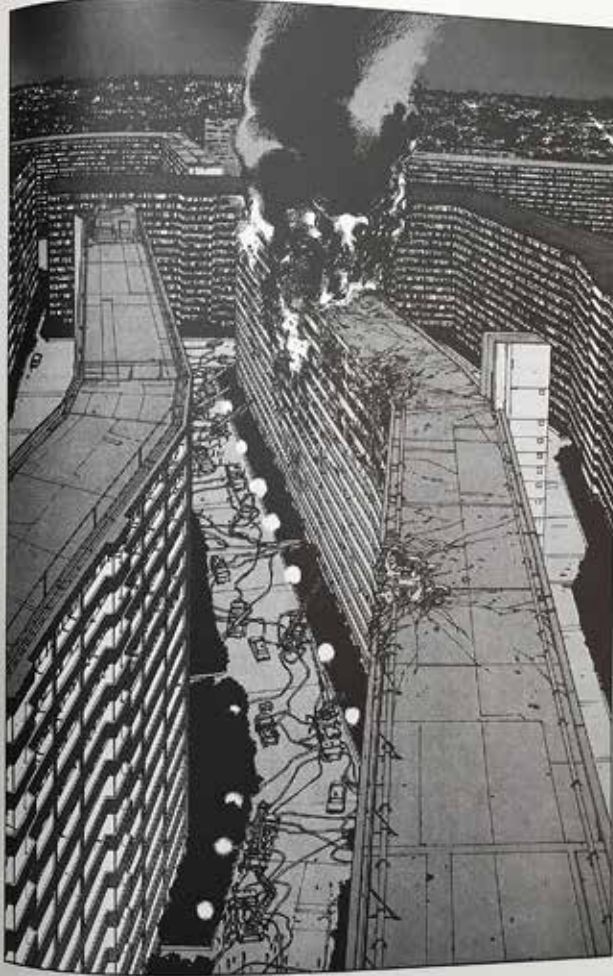
Fig. 11. K. Otomo, Splash page extracted from Dōmu. The bird's eye view shows the rescuers reaching the burning building (Otomo 2004, p. 203).

Notes

[1] Vincenzo Filosa, cartoonist and translator of numerous manga masters, says in an interview: "The rule that ran in all the editorial offices of the Japanese magazines of the '60s,' 70s, '80s (such as Garo, Comic Baku, Beat Comics) was: tell what you know, tell no more, tell what you know" [Moccia 2021] (min. 27:45) (accessed 2021, August 21).

[2] Akihiko Takadera was Otomo's only assistant at the time. It is very likely that he was the one who took care of much of the actual creation of the backgrounds (Anime news network n.d.).

[3] James Harvey in 2014 compiles the most exhaustive and complete time-line of the work of Katsuhiro Otomo, accompanied by the number of pages drawn, assistants and personal considerations. Timeline courtesy of the author:

[4] Hideaki Anno in the volume Proto Anime Cut shares part of his collection of photos of construction sites, demolished buildings and light pylons, used as a reference for the scenarios of the Evangelion anime. Riekeles 2011, pp. 244-249.

[5] Kawaguchi Shibazono Danchi #14. (n.d.). <https://www.emporis.com/buildings/1518231/kawaguchi-shibazono-danchi-14-kawaguchi-japan> (accessed 2021, August 21).

[6] The other reference is the edition published within the initiative *I Classici del Fumetto- Serie Oro di Repubblica*, n.52, to date the latest Italian edition available and on which the same reversals of the 'US edition.

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