Drawing Creator of Worlds.
Criticism and Representation of the City in Comics

Sara Conte, Valentina Marchetti

Abstract

In the Walking city *illustrations, large insect-cities walk the earth, while the materialization of what will be the interconnection concept is the protagonist of the project for the* Plug-in-city. *This was a vision where megastructures populate the world, while single housing units, transfigured into space capsules, hook and unhook there. In these utopian visions, Archigram blend graphic codes of* Marvel *covers, Pop Art references and the language of science fiction comics. The graphical medium, thanks to the immediacy of the sign and the vividness of the colors, is the ideal tool to give back a radical image, which is able to bring out bolder concepts than the traditional ones. The fusion between architecture and comics thus becomes instrumental in the creation of a futuristic vision, which starts from the analysis of a nearby reality. The world of comics also deals by nature with the drawing of an environment aimed at portraying real or ideal cities or real caprices, where architectures distant in time and space are mixed, sometimes with fantasy elements or projects never realized, to form new plausible imagery. Today more than ever, the comic strip is not limited to passively reflect the society, but it offers a criticism and it opens reflections also on architectural and urban issues. Through the analysis of the drawings of some exemplary comics, the research proposes to highlight the creation of visionary worlds capable of focusing on specific architectures and on the contemporary city.*

Keywords: comics, visionary architecture, criticism, drawing, representation

Introduction

The comic strip, due to its nature of drawn image belonging to the worlds of representation and communication, represents one of the media that, in its attempt to make consistent the worlds of fantasy, utopia and imagination, has best highlighted the fantastic and sometimes innovative aspects of architecture, contributing to the formation of a collective idea of the future city (fig. 1). It is no coincidence that Archigram merges the graphic codes of Marvel covers with the style of Pop Art and the language of science fiction comics to represent the *Walking city* or *Plug-in-city*. In fact, architectural design does not exhaust its potential in the representation of elements aimed at construction, but is above all the concretization of a vision, the prefiguration of a space's transformation and the projection of an idea. At the same time, drawing is a criticism tool able to support a practical and theoretical reflection on the surrounding reality, as well as on the idea of real or ideal city, both present and future. The bond between comics and architecture goes beyond affinity and is a mutual and continuous influence that converges towards the representation of a vision of the city. The attitude of comics towards the exploration of architectural space is born with the medium itself. The construction of the set and the choice of its representation proceed in parallel with the creation of the story where architecture is used to develop new methods of constructing narrative time and to make criticisms of society or architecture itself. The symbolic power of architecture,

portrayed or involved in storytelling, allows readers to identify urban background scenarios or to involve them in fantastic worlds, arousing wonder or fear in them [Conte, Marchetti 2020]. In fact, as Enki Bilal points out, "Cinema by definition shows everything that happens, while literature requires the reader to imagine everything. Comics mix these two aspects" [Gravett 2014] thus giving more importance to drawing or words, the comics provide complete imaginaries and at the same time they stimulate the creation of mental images which are added to the visual narrative. On an iconographic and symbolic level, the comic strip makes recurring references to the idea of the ideal city and to the imagery of utopias. In fact, it is possible to connect Sant'Elia's drawings to the Neo Tokyo portrayed by Otomo in *Akira*, passing through the set designs of Friz Lang's masterpiece, *Metropolis*, in which Erich Kettelhut's contribution is undeniable. The references are not only formal: in the comics of the beginning of the 20th century, such as *Little Nemo in the Slumberland* or *Yellow Kid*, the city becomes with its skyscrapers an urban signal with a symbolic and alienating effect. Thanks also to the role assumed in the strips, the city began to enter the collective imagination, and was later deepened in American productions from *Flash Gordon* to the superhero metropolis, up to Frank Miller's *Sin City* (fig. 2). At the dawn of the twentieth century, in fact, the city, its spaces, its social dynamics and the urgency of narrating a rising class and its problems are some of the fundamental elements on which a critical imaginary of the city and its current or future transformations is being formed. In *Contratto con Dio* (1978), Eisner starts from an imaginary degraded neighborhood to draw the real New York through the typical characteristics of the buildings, alleys and architectural elements that make it recognizable.

Meanwhile in Europe, starting from the 60', authors such as Moebius were looking for a total graphic freedom by expanding their architectural settings towards parallel universes. These imaginary worlds, the offspring of moon landings and space missions, are proposed as architectures in which one could live and portrayed in decomposed and freer pages. Series such as *Valérian* by Christin and Mèziéres or *Les Naufrgés du temps* by Forest and Gillon or the first albums by Moebius and Druillet show a positivist attitude towards the future and a freedom that is expressed in the definition of scenarios, objects, shapes and colors. With the end of positivism, the emergence of other types of worlds increased. Examples are the ones

Fig. 1. Capriccio *realized with images from* Biomega *by Tsutomu Nihei,* Abara *by Tsutomu Nihei and* Batman. Death by design *by Chip Kidd and Dave Taylor (designed by authors).*

proposed by the duo Schuiten-Peeters who, in their Belgian-French saga *Le Città Oscure*, describe imaginary megalopolises where fantasies and references to existing places make up a universe in continuous expansion. In this universe, the cities, poised between utopia and reality like Italo Calvino's *Le Città Invisibili*, are the undisputed protagonists. Fusing Art Nouveau aesthetics, retro suggestions and utopian visions of every era, *Le Città Oscure* becomes a reflection of reality in a not far future.

In Japan, the homeland of the metabolist utopia, manga settings reflect the difficult balance between tradition, traces of the past and extreme innovation. In the stories of Katsuhiro Otomo, of which *Akira* represents one of the most interesting examples, metropolises are prophesied as the product of an apocalyptic future capable of erasing every trace or link with the past. Moreover, the mangaka Tsutomu Nihei imagines cyberpunk worlds where mega-structures, totally hybridized with nature, create multiple, simultaneous, and infinite spaces that seem to respond to the rules of a non-Euclidean geometry.

Fig. 2. In order: Little Nemo in Slumberland by Winsor McCay, on New York Herald 26th July 1908; Yellow Kid edited on New York Journal, on 27th March 1898; Flash Gordon by Alex Raymond n°173 of 1965 (designed by authors).

The fusion between architecture and comics thus becomes fundamental to the creation of a futuristic vision that is the result of the analysis of a nearby reality. Indeed, cartoonists, architects and artists could foresee the times to come and to imagine worlds that can only come in the future. Through drawing, cartoonists depict real or ideal cities or real caprices, which seem to refer to the works of Canaletto, to Aldo Rossi's *Analogous City* or to James Stirling's *Interrupted Rome*, where architectures distant in time and space are mixed, sometimes with fantasy elements or projects never realized, to form new verisimilar imaginary.

Although the boundary existing between the design of imaginary objects functional to the story and the design of real objects designed for construction is very thin, the design of images can also be consequential [Barbieri 1991]. Indeed, the same architectural imaginary, that comics, science fiction and cinema have contributed to create, is based on the sedimentation of perceptions, signs and memories that become with time real arche-

types. In particular, referring to Gilbert Durand and Paolo Portoghesi, three main ones are identified: the archetype nature, the archetype history and the archetype machine [De Domenico 2013].

These three archetypes can also be recognized in the construction of the cities portrayed in the comic strips mentioned so far and in those we intend to examine. Considering the reference context in which the research moves, there are three main cases that will be treated. The first focus, starting from the analysis of *Batman. Death by design*, explores the use of drawing and comics as a critique tool used to express a position regarding the contemporary-future urban development and in this case the relationship with the architectural tradition. The second deals with the Japanese dystopian vision that, starting from Otomo's Neo Tokyo, outlines megalopolis with no links to the past and able to reinterpret Sant'Elia's visions in an imaginary world devoid of any positivism. It then moves on to the labyrinthine architectural scenarios constructed by Nihei, where we find references to the

Fig. 3. Examples of background rendering in shojo. Vignettes from Perfect World (2020) by Rie Aruga, edited by Star comics (designed by authors).

works of the Metabolists or architects such as Paolo Soleri. Finally, the last part deepens, through the study of the work *Souvenir dell'Impero dell'Atomo*, the construction of a retro-futuristic environment based on the association of styles coming from different periods or places, distant from each other in time and space, and of iconic futuristic architectures.

Comics as a critique of architecture and the city: the case of Batman. Death by design

Compared to other superhero stories, those belonging to the Batman universe are able to give greater importance to the creation and drawing of objects and architectural spaces in which the protagonist moves. Because of the very genesis of the language of modern comics and its relationship with urban space, it is difficult to think of the spaces portrayed in comics as mere descriptive apparatus, yet there are comics that are practically without background, such as old-style *shojo* where, although there are spatial coordinates of reference, the background is replaced by screens or shades (fig. 3). The central role of the objects and the city within the Batman universe is connected to the lack of superpowers of the protagonist, who therefore interacts with the environment in an active way by using gadgets, pulleys and cars. The same scenery of Gotham City, imaginative representation of New York in Bill Finger and Bob Kane's mind, becomes the protagonist of the story, renewing itself and assuming different values according to the designer, the narration, or the cinematographic version. The Gotham drawn by Mazzucchelli in Frank Miller's *Batman Anno Uno* is a city on a human scale, a symbol of corruption, alternating between misery and splendor. The hero's need emerges from its representation through the choice of distorted shots, dark shadows, non-white paper support, and Lewis' muddy colors. Although conceived by the original creators as a dark and gothic version of New York, Gotham has evolved in the imagination, due to the work of directors, set designers and cartoonists, absorbing values, meanings and images, aimed at representing decadence, corruption and splendor.

Fig. 4. Greenside's old Wayne Central Station; Roomhaus's proposal for the new station; architect Greenside jr. drawing the final design of the station inspired by his father's work (designed by authors).

An even more important role is played by the city and its architecture in *Batman. Death by design*, written by Kidd and drawn by Taylor, where Gotham is used to criticize contemporary architecture and in particular Rem Koolhaas' Bigness concept. The story is inspired by real events, such as the demolition of the *Pennsylvania station* in 1963 and the collapse of a crane in downtown Manhattan in 2008. The comic becomes a warning and a message, as powerful as a critical essay, about contemporary architecture and the processes that build and demolish cities today. The building speculation together with the most glamorous contemporary architecture, personified by the international archistar Kem Roomhaus, are the main antagonists of the story. The debate between demolition and preservation of architecture takes on great importance. The object of contention is the *Wayne Central Station*, Gotham's historic ruined station and legacy of Bruce Wayne's father. The Roomhaus' new project foresees a huge building with organic shapes, which recalls the architecture of Moebius and Calatrava (fig. 4). Starting point of the story are a series of collapses, prompting Batman to investigate the materials used, compliance, and the involvement of businesses and unions in the construction of the old station. However, these collapses also involve new architecture, such as the newly opened *Celing,* which Roomhaus "describes as a very simple design taken to its extreme, creating a new current of architecture called mini maximalism. The content

of the little cloud picks up and synthesizes Bigness' concept by redefining it as mini-maximalism". For Koolhaas, in fact, "the Bigness is the point at which architecture becomes both maximally and minimally architectural: maximally because of the enormity for the object; minimally because of its loss of autonomy, it becomes an instrument of other forces, it becomes dependent" [Koolhaas 2006, pp.22, 23]. In addition to building speculation, the authors thus criticize the idea of out-of-scale architecture, indifferent to real needs and self-referential.

The effect of verisimilitude is achieved through the choice of framing, distance, and angle of the settings. The glass terrace of the *Celing*, which recalls the crowning of the *Twin Towers*, is initially portrayed from above, to emphasize its dominance over the city whose streets are highlighted in the background using orange, and to reinforce the parallel with the aerial walkway idea that characterizes the drawings of Sant'Elia, the sets of *Metropolis* and more generally the imagery of the future city. The sense of involvement is then underscored in the following vignettes which, assuming the human point of view, best render the sense of vertigo and discomfort caused by being suspended in the void. These imaginary architectures are rendered with great realism. Indeed at the end of the book, Taylor emphasizes how his Gotham is the result of the work done in architectural studios and of the search for numerous architectural references which allow the creation of a verisimilar world

Fig. 5. From top left: collapse of the crane; the Celing transparent terrace rising above the streets of Gotham; the city seen from above; Batman lying on a scaffold after a fall during a fight (designed by authors).

poised between imagination and reality. The human point of view is also used in the vignette relating to the collapse of the crane. Dynamism and movement are rendered using three-point perspective and the thickness of the lines, which increases in relation to the progressive approach. The bottom-up shots increase the feeling of oppression and discomfort, identifying the tall buildings with the symbol of power and reinforcing the criticism towards this type of architecture. While the top-down ones help to emphasize the height of the buildings and the city in general, placing emphasis on the verticality of the architecture that characterizes both Gotham and New York (Fig. 5). Also in *Le Città Oscure* series by Schuiten and Peeters, a critique of the development of the contemporary city and its mechanization is evident. In a mix of real references and Art Nouveau style, the cartoonists trace imaginary worlds made of cities closed in on themselves, where architecture is total and absolute.

Magastructures and dystopias: from Katsuhiro Otomo's Neo Tokyo to Tsutomu Nihei's paper architectures

In the beginning of the twentieth century, especially due to Futurism and the spread of the ideology of the machine, the idea of urban landscape in Italy changed from static to mobile. Among the architects who contributed to the construction of an Italian version of utopia between the two wars, it was Antonio Sant'Elia who presented a new way of thinking about architecture and the future city. Although unfinished, his paper architecture has been able to find realization outside of architecture itself. Starting from the German experimental cinema of the 1920s, passing through the representations of megalopolises present in numerous anime and manga, his work has become a fertile legacy for directors, illustrators, and writers. Through the *Manifesto of Futurist Architecture*, Sant'Elia enunciates a desire to break with tradition by imagining an architecture that cannot "be subject to any law of historical continuity" and that "has its reason for being only in the special conditions of modern life" [Sant'Elia 1914]. In his drawings, the architect uses geometric forms of Assyrian-Babylonian derivation whose monumentality is capable of distancing themselves from humankind. Buildings as separate entities are also found in the idea of the city presented in Lang's *Metropolis*, in Otomo's *Akira* manga or in Nihei's works, where modern man must resign himself to being a mere element of urban space. In the development of *Metropolis*, Lang inserts different elements that refer to the work of San'Elia. The same sketches made by Kettlehut show urban perspectives where high steel and glass towers rise above multi-level streets, overhung by suspension bridges, which have become a recurring element in many manga, anime and science fiction films (fig. 6). Another fundamental component taken up with different values by Lang and Otomo is the aforementioned break with the past. In this way, as Riffel argues, the city "is not just a generic avatar, but an avatar of a modern form of thinking, and as such, it must represent a complete break with history" [Rosati 2020, pp. 20-25]. Neo Tokyo, with its post-nuclear architecture and various cyberpunk contaminations, rises indeed from the ruins left by an explosion that razed it to the ground and is therefore totally new.

The urban form of these cities is in continuous transformation and the man inside is no longer the protagonist of the space. The *Mangaka* emphasizes the relationship

between man and city through perspectives where the human figure is absent or reduced to balloons or small silhouettes. The verticality is emphasized both through the perspective views portrayed by highways and bridges outside, which allow you to see the island in all its size and height with evident similarities to Manhattan, and using immersive shots in the streets or alleys inside. In this case Otomo exploits the use of central perspective, sometimes cutting off the end of the buildings and giving the idea of an infinite wall that rises above its inhabitants. Another recurring element is the ruin, represented with aerial perspectives, which emphasize the claustrophobic and unhealthy atmosphere of the city. However, among the ruins of the surrounding buildings one can recognize the facades of famous ones, showing how everything that was destroyed was then transformed and amalgamated into the new ultra-modernist structures (fig. 7).

This idea of a ruined Tokyo, subject to destruction, can also be linked to the post-atomic legacy of the events of the Second World War. The representation of the city absorbes and reflects the anxieties and ideas of various generations and social strata, which the *Mangaka* translate through the creation of imaginary Tokyo into shaky and extemporaneous realities. Other significant examples of this attitude can be found in the Neo Tokyo 3 of *Evangelion*, in perpetual crisis of destruction, or in the city of *One-Punch Man*, which reshapes the topography of Tokyo into sub-cities that are in turn destroyed by endless calamities (fig. 8).

Also the biological cities that characterize the manga of Tsutomu Nihei, an architect by background and specialized in the design of skyscrapers, are the main protagonists of his manga, surrounded by ruin and decadence. Through his constructions, Nihei portrays a world that is a cyberpunk metaphor for the contemporary metropolis. This world is made up of constantly evolving mega-structures, which extend as far as the eye can see through the juxtaposition of architectural elements and hybrid spaces in which nature and artifice come together. From a formal, conceptual and aesthetic point of view, Nihei's work can be traced back to the metropolises integrated into the landscape imagined by the Metabolists. Incorporating history and nature, the metabolist new cities should have
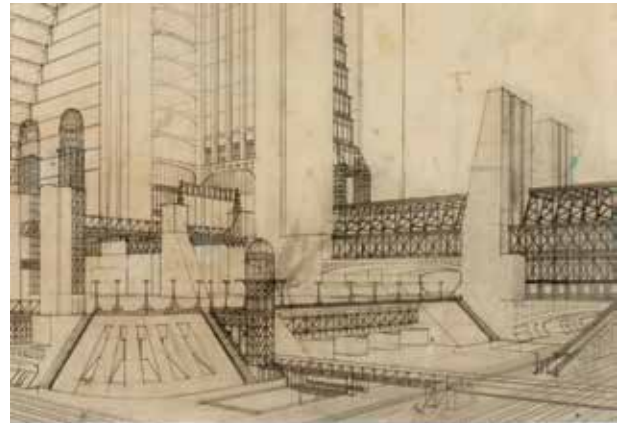
Fig. 6. The recurring forms of future cities. Excerpt from The New City by Sant'Elia, 1914; among the streets of Metropolis by Lang, 1927; composition of projects from The Metropolis of Tomorrow, 1929 by Ferriss (designed by authors).

expanded like living architectural organisms in harmony with nature. Nihei exaggerates this biomorphic aspect by proposing megastructures that grow in a natural but chaotic way. There is a strong reference to the famous scene in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, where enormous skyscrapers seem to rise from the ground in a unity between architecture and nature. His nervous lines, the use of black and chiaroscuro refer instead to the engravings of Piranesi, while the complex labyrinthine spaces drawn look to the works of Escher.

Nihei's world is populated by a post-humanity unable to dominate the architectural element, which has in fact taken over the human component. This position is emphasized by the mangaka through aberrated perspectives, tilted shots, inhuman points of view and the chromatic choice, where the contrast of black and white emphasizes the vastness of empty space and the oversized scale of the megastructures. Nihei sets these dystopian worlds thanks to the drawing. As pointed out in an interview in 2001, the buildings' details and the construction particulars, which may appear as secondary elements, are the result of a careful study, carried out also through the realization of plans and sections and aimed at making the environments work at their best to give verisimilitude. The story proceeds through continuous environments in which the orientation is lost and even gravity seems to change in an irrational way. Even points of reference such as the earth line or the sun are sometimes eliminated, as in the case of *BLAME!*, underlining the totality of these hyper-urban spaces. In these environments, nature does not follow the rules of rational urban planning but is totally out of control and assumes characters that can be considered hostile for the very survival of the human race (fig. 9).

Style and architecture combination: the image of the retro future of Souvenir dell'Impero dell'Atomo

As already seen, comics and architecture share the sphere of graphic representation, but the total freedom of the former allows us to better recognize the mechanisms used to build architectures that, although belonging to the sphere of imagination, move from real elements recomposed in a new way. Through sequences of different

Fig. 7. Images collage from the manga Akira, vol. 5 and 6, by Katsuhiro Otomo, showing the scale of the buildings and the use of perspective (designed by authors).

images of the same place, the reader recreates in his mind the entire space of the story, giving it a dominant identity. As Scott McCloud points out, "space is to a comic what time is to a film" [McCloud, 2008, p. 15]. The space of the story, constructed through the mechanism of closure and the use of allegorical architecture, recalls the idea of the theater of memory that, for Frances Yates, gives shape to images of an iconic architecture resulting from the association of memories, dreams, and archetypes [Yates, 1972]. These mechanisms are also used to allow the recognition of deliberately realistic settings, for example in *Tramezzino* by Bacillieri, where the buildings by Caccia Dominioni, Magistretti, BBPR, become landmarks of the city, presenting Milan as the protagonist of the story. Fior in *Celestia*, on the other hand, exploits reality and unrealized projects to create a Venice on the borderline between imagination and reality, where unrealized projects such as Le Corbusier's *Venice Hospital* and Wright's *Casa Masiero* can be recognized. Outside the city, there is a mix of imaginary landscapes and architectures, such as the *Muralla Roja* by Bofill or the *Salk Institute* by Kahn. The recomposition through a spatio-temporal transposition of different architectural styles or citations of iconic architectures, relocated in places or times distant from their origin, becomes fundamental for the creation of imaginary architectures. One example is steampunk, in which architectures of Victorian and Art Nouveau inspiration are mixed with materials typical of the industrial period of the 19th century and modern technologies. In the series *Le città Oscure*, Schuiten and Peeters re-propose the sense of astonishment and wonder peculiar to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by evoking its typical architectural styles. The authors recall the utopian impetus characterizing the architecture and urbanism of the period and bring together suggestions and imaginative elements derived from the Fifties and Sixties and symbolic of progress, such as plastic objects or aerodynamic vehicles. In the *Nikopol* trilogy, Bilal portrays the Paris, London and Berlin of 2023, juxtaposing the architecture of the city with urban icons that are distant from each other and creating a new imagery that is the result of the space-time short-circuit implemented. In *Souvenir dell'impero dell'atomo* the story itself plays on continuous jumps between present, past and future, which are dis-

Fig. 8. In order: One-Punch Man by One; Akira by Katsuhiro Otomo and a scene from Neon Genesis Evangelion Rebuild by Hideaki Anno (designed by authors).
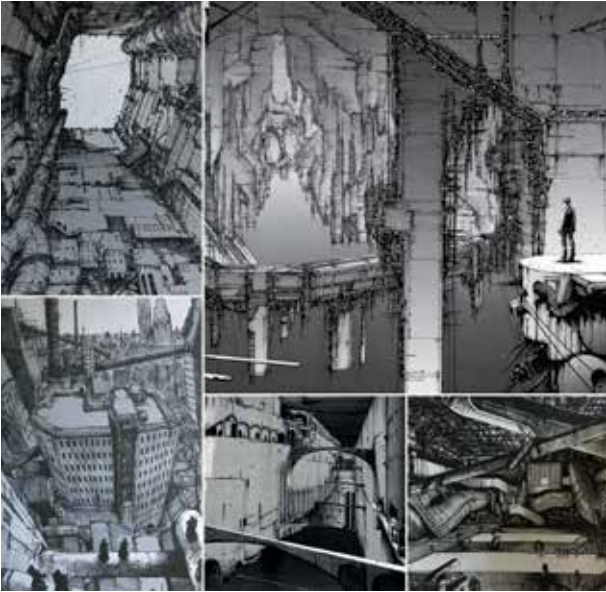
Fig. 9. Images collage from manga Blame! and Abara di Tsutomu Nihei (designed by authors).

Fig. 10. Images collage from various historical periods illustrated in Souvenir dell'Impero dell'Atomo, showing the different architectural and design styles (designed by authors).

tinguished by different chromatic choices and multiple graphic styles, mixing references to the world of graphics, architecture and the history of science fiction comics. To support the narrative, the drawing of the illustrations acquires the elements of stroke and color related to the historical period and the place where the action takes place. In the vignettes, the story of the future is rendered in gray scale, a metaphor for an imagined but not yet realized world, and contrasts with the present, the past or the story of heroic deeds, lived in reality or in fantasy, treated in color (fig. 10). This uninterrupted succession of style changes, referring to superhero albums, science fiction or to the identity of the places themselves, does not make the comic a mere sample of recognizable quotations, but a real homage to the world of science fiction comics. The authors, through the use and choice of specific architectures, succeed in communicating an idea of retro-future closely connected to the common image of the future shaped by the avant-garde and the Expos. The *Finnish Pavilion* designed by Aalto for the 1939 Expo

in New York is thus transfigured into the seat of interrogation of the distant Empire of the Atom, whose cities take up the sets of *Metropolis* and the buildings designed by Sant'Elia. The terminal of the New York airport by Saarinen is transformed into the palace of the infamous Zelbub, from which one can admire the distant earth. The same venue of the 1958 Expo is the backdrop for a mad car race between past and present (fig. 11). Instead, the *American Case Study Houses* became the symbol of a future way of living, together with the use of plastic seats in the interiors, such as the *Panton Chairs*, the *Eames Plastic Chairs* or the *Tulips*. The characteristic of experimentation and innovation of these timeless icons allows the authors to draw a future world not far from the reader's memory and therefore plausible. Even if these objects are part of our present or past, they assume, thanks to their contextualization, the innovative value that originally characterized them. In all these examples, through the repetition of iconic styles and architectures coming from different places or historical periods, cartoonists create

an atmosphere able to communicate from a symbolic and semantic point of view the representative values of one or more styles and to create a new language, through which they originate the forms of the future imaginary.

Conclusions

Due to the universe of signs, forms and archetypes that they share, comic book settings manage to use both popular codes and those of the typical language of architecture. This contamination of genres allows comics to become a medium of particular interest, on a par with, if not more than, the cinema, in the creation of futuristic, dystopian and fantastic cities.

Through the association of styles or iconic elements (archetype history), comic book artists are able to create new imagery and new languages, aimed at the representation of future cities. However, a future imaginary can also be obtained by endowing architecture with its own life (machine archetype) and by making it able to shape itself and the surrounding world in relation to the natural element. In both cases however, the imagery is reinforced by the choice of perspectives that give more space to the architecture than to the human component, reinforcing for example monumentality, verticality and scale. The style of the drawing also contributes to enhancing the atmosphere by referring to the archetypes of classic and retro science fiction, to the futuristic avant-garde or by emphasizing, through chromatic contrasts, the dark and negative vision of the environment. Openly critical, veiled, or implied, the message communicated through the representation of the future city brings with it iconic and recognizable characters in the subconscious, which allow to relate the contents underlying the architecture, whether they are a positive or negative criticism of architectural theories and contemporary society. In addition, the future worlds that populate the comic strips are able, through the drawing, to reflect and give substance to the fears, anxieties and desires that characterize the cities and society today.

Fig. 11. Images collage showing some of the references mentioned in Souvenir dell'Impero dell'Atomo (designed by authors).

Notes

Although the authors drafted the article jointly, Sara Conte is the author of the paragraphs "Introduction" and "Comics as a critique of architecture and the city: the case of Batman. Death by design" and the related images; Valentina Marchetti is the author of the paragraphs "Magastructures and dystopias: from Katsuhiro Otomo's Neo Tokyo to Tsutomu Nihei's paper architectures", "Style and architecture combination: the image of the retro future of Souvenir dell'Impero dell'Atomo" and "Conclusions" and the related images.

Authors

Sara Conte, Dipartimento di Design, Scuola del Design, Politecnico di Milano, sara.conte@polimi.it
Valentina Marchetti, Dipartimento di Design, Scuola del Design, Politecnico di Milano, valentina.marchetti@polimi.it

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