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# The city in the frame

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Intersections between comics and architecture

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## Synopsis

Comics, purely a spatial medium, represent the point where *words*, *sequences* and *images* meet, possessing a big potential of building powerful stories about people, places and emotions. The flexible hybrid graphic medium of comic strips, which combines in their structure, the *narrative element*, *space* and *movement*, have always had a strong connection with the notion of the “city”. Functioning as a narrative generator, the urban landscape is an important plot element, even atmospheric, and symbolic protagonist, remaining ideologically associated to the original story of the comic. A rich and varied manner of expression, not only used as an amusing artistic medium dedicated to children and teenagers, comics can be a stimulating manner of rapidly promoting the political, cultural and aesthetic particularities country of its origin.

**Key words:** Comics, sequence, narrative element.

The increasing popularity of comics, as a way of reflecting on everyday life, can't exist without the full understanding of the architectural framework in which the action takes place. As the desire "to see the city" is present in many comics, different illustrators explored the city, as the definition of the framework within which daily life runs, but also as the origin of modern myths, carefully studying the aesthetics and the atmosphere.

As comics and the notion of "city" have always been linked on a number of levels, every modern metropolis in the world has been made the subject of a comic strip - Berlin, Paris, Tokyo, New York - providing a different and productive view that reads the city with all of its contradictions. Various comic artists have used architecture as an accurate background for conflicts between fearless heroes and frightening villains, or as a foregrounded graphic element, overlapping the limits of their unique version of the city over the limits of the real city, thus becoming a key element for the manner in which events run in a comic series.

The presentation will contain a brief overview of the main technical aspects of the comic strip, along with a historical perspective, but resuming only the history of American comic strip, which gave birth to the contemporary form of this artistic medium. It is important to mention the joining of the American comic strip, with comics produced in other cultures, such as the French and Japanese, together forming the "golden" triad of the domain, to emphasize the complexity of the field as well as the dependence of the comic strip on the economic, social, political, cultural and architectural context. After this, I will examine the city, fictitious or real, from three categories (the city as a negative character, the city of superheroes and the *nostalgic city*) as the support framework in which the whole action takes place, a key element in the manner in which the events take place in a comic strip, being able to play the role of symbolic protagonist, or to become the focus of attention.

Since immemorial times, sharing a story is deeply rooted in humans' social behaviour, stories being the channel to impart knowledge, to discuss moral principles or to satisfy various curiosities. The fact that man felt, since ancient times, the need to express himself using sequential art is underlined by Scott McCloud, which nominates in his book „Understanding Comics” a series of artistic manifestations, starting since prehistory, like: cave paintings, paintings on the tombs' surface of Egyptian leaders, scenes engraved of the surface of jewelry, Japanese medieval parchments, silhouettes painted on Greek vases, scenes depicted on the surface of heroic and religious monuments, paintings found on the interior and exterior walls of churches and monasteries etc. Evolving rapidly into paintings and engravings, comics show a massive increase in popularity with the advent of the printing press, thus making them accessible to the general public and with the first contributions of illustrators in American newspapers,<sup>1</sup> until the natural evolution of things led to the moment in which the comics became an independent publication.

Although today a number of architects have already explored the potential of comic strips in their architectural proposal, the relationship between architecture

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<sup>1</sup> With sixty years before comic strips entered the space of American newspapers, Rodolphe Töpffer (1799- 1846), illustrated the first comic strips, naming them, "[his] little madness", thus creating the first comic juxtaposition of images and text in Europe. Using William Hogarth's remarkable series of paintings, *A Harlot's progress* (1731) and *A rake's progress* (1733) as model, Töpffer created almost a century later, his own graphic manner of expression.

and comics, can shape its starting point from the moment when Le Corbusier manifested his fascination for Rodolphe Töpffer's comics<sup>2</sup>. Also, the architect chose to use the graphic narrative in „Lettre a Madame Meyer” (1925), for the presentation made for his client, of the unrealized project of the Ville Meyer (Neuilly-sur-Seine, Paris), using both *image* and *narration*, in a *sequential presentation*, consisting of fluid sketches, unframed, with similar proportions.

As part of the demonstration the presentation I will also mention the architects and architectural groups that laid the foundations for the alternative presentation of the architectural object, using hypothetical projects to portray a utopian world, as well as remembering the social and economic context in which they developed. In the '60, the visionary architectural groups, like Archigram, Archizoom, Metabolist Movement or Superstudio, created poetic proposals, defined by a strong technological enthusiasm, explored the possible evolution of machines, embracing or questioning the technological utopias and the social aspirations. The combination of visionary architecture, pop culture, art and rebellion, shows the work of architects who were deeply concerned about the rapidly changing needs of society, making also an important contribution by joining the attributes of this type of sequential presentation and the traditional architectural representation.

The architect who creates this type of exercise is allowed, because of mixed nature of comics, to present analytically and critically the story of the architectural proposal. All these elements lead to a number of different graphical results, in terms of composition, dynamics, colour, rhythm in which the story takes place, differing from traditional comics, enriching the presentation of the architectural object, and encouraging us have a much more detailed discussion about it.

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<sup>2</sup> Luis Miguel Lus-Arana. "La Ligne Claire de Le Corbusier. Time, Space and Sequential Narratives." Le Corbusier, 50 Years later, International Congress, LC 2015 (2015)

## Biography

**Geņiana Cristina Dumitrașcu.** Graduated from The University of Architecture and Urban Planning “Ion Mincu” and has currently finished her doctoral thesis at the above mentioned university. With a experience working as a teaching assistant for 1st year Architectural Design Studio classes at the Faculty of Architecture and for 2nd year Product Design Studio classes at the Faculty of Interior Design, both within the University of Architecture and Urban Planning “Ion Mincu”, Bucharest, her research interests focus on the intersection between architecture and comics. With a comic strip about a Romanian communist prison published and several projects, with children and students, about architectural comics in Namibia, Africa and Bucharest, Romania, she wants to take the research further.