

Fabio Colonnese

Department of History, Drawing, and Restoration of Architecture, Rome, Italy

## The Narrative Potential of Architecture After-life in the Comics

### Introduction

A single architectural design can captivate the mind of young students and scholars in unpredictable ways, especially when it refers to unbuilt architecture. Many of these “interrupted architectures”, as defined by Luciano Patetta (1969: p.44), are often analyzed, imitated, quoted, or digitally reconstructed<sup>1</sup> but also simply ‘inhabited’ and ‘explored’ in the mind and sketches of so many architects. Lacking three-dimensional bodily verification and constructive compromises, these architectures have an existence out of time and space. Pure and untouchable, they can stimulate unpredictable reactions and uses. For example, the author used to set role-playing games in unbuilt projects, such as Giuseppe Terragni’s *Danteum*, to share its mental exploration with players and friends.

Drawings and model pictures of unbuilt architectures can strongly affect both the individual and collective imagery, as literature ‘institutionally’ does. Although the way this may happen is often ineffable, the study of modern architecture as an aesthetic and social expression requires an expansion of the reference cultural horizon that includes the manifold media production of the 20th century. In this sense, the related study of architectural representation and literary fiction is a field largely yet to be explored.

The relationship between the real world and the fictional world of writers is complex and layered. Many of the countless entries surveyed by the authors of the dictionaries of fantastic places (Manguel, 2000; Ferrari, 2007) testify to the writers’ desire to transfigure the actual shape of cities, territories, and single buildings through fantasy. In literature, this relationship is regulated by the instrument of description, which relies on the ability of the human mind to construct images starting from the letters lined on the page of a book. Conversely, in comic books such a relationship is regulated by a combination of pictures and text (Varnum & Gibbons, 2001). A hybrid “*environment* where discourses are produced” (Barbieri, 1991: p.208), comics involve the reader on both an optical/iconographic and a mental/linguistic level.

Comics artists are accustomed to set their stories in real places not only to elaborate historical or contemporary graphic novels, like Vittorio Giardino’s works located in Prague, but also to create an alternative reality, shifted in time and space (Thévenet & Rambert, 2010; Van Der Hoorn, 2012). Think of the

---

<sup>1</sup> See the work of B. J. Novitski, Takehiko Nagakura, Kent Larson or Stefen Lauf.

alternative New York developed in Marvel comics since the 1960s yet constantly influenced by real events, such as the Twin Towers attack; or think of François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters's works set in alternative versions of Brussels or Paris, occasionally enriched by the utopias of Jules Verne, Albert Robida, or the architect Auguste Perret (Schuiten & Peeters 2014).

This relationship between fiction and reality is developed through a process of falsification or deformation of reality aimed at the construction of the 'literary place.' In this process, an artist is free to select and combine the environmental and architectural components through the montage (Lus-Arana, 2019). The unpredictable inclusion of the Royal Palace of Caserta near St Peter's church in Rome seen in the third episode of *Mission Impossible* cinematic series reacts to the impossibility of shooting the film inside the Vatican gardens. Instead, a comic artist can hybridize existing places with lost or unbuilt architectures as an opportunity to attribute a utopian/dystopian dimension to places or to use architecture pieces in a critical and narrative key. For example, Grant Morrison's *Seven Soldiers* enriches the actual New York of projects never completed (Starr, 2005). This sort of architectural after-life is strongly pursued in the graphic novels of the Italian architect and artist Manuele Fior's. Through an analysis of his recent *Celestia* (Fior 2019; 2020) and an interview the author had with him,<sup>2</sup> this paper focuses on the agency unbuilt architecture can have on the subjective imagery of architects and on the after-life comic art can provide to it. In particular, the Hospital Le Corbusier designed for Venice is here assumed as a study case and a witness through the words of architects Francesco Venezia, a project by Steven Holl, and the narrative-oriented drawings of Manuele Fior.



Fig. 01. D. Gonzales, *Les Horas Claras* (Detail of Le Corbusier's Hospital).

Source: Courtesy of D. Gonzales, 2011.

---

<sup>2</sup>The interview took place in August 18-19, 2020.

## 2. Venice, Le Corbusier, and the Hospital

In agreement with the municipality of Venice, in 1964 Le Corbusier began designing a new hospital in Venice on the site of a former slaughterhouse in the S. Giobbe district of Cannaregio. The complex was expected to have a vehicle access directly from the bridge that connects Venice to the mainland, becoming a privileged gateway to the city. After Le Corbusier's death in 1965, his collaborator Guillermo Jullian de la Fuente led the project to definition, but Venice administration eventually decided to abandon the idea. Despite this 'interruption' (or perhaps precisely because of it), the project became one of the icons of contemporary architecture. Its modular and 'extendable' settlement principle, which had been inspired by the analysis of the Venice historical fabric, and the innovative conception of the rooms fueled an enormous interest in the project. It indirectly favored and legitimized not only a new sensitiveness toward the criteria to insert modern architecture in historic centers but also the research of Dutch structuralism and Team X's "mat architecture" (Sarkis, 2001; Reichlin, 2012).

The few words of Le Corbusier, the general drawings of the project, and the photographs of the small wooden model influenced generations of architects. Far from being exhaustive, these documents required a certain effort to fully understand the three-dimensional result and this difficulty stimulated countless hypotheses, sketches, and models. Some architects and artists focused on the objective contents of the project, producing careful three-dimensional reconstructions and animations (Sinatra & Marsella, 2006) also with a critical approach (Gonzales, 2011; Fig.01). Instead, others focused on the sensory and emotional sphere, in subjective and unpredictable terms. In telling what he had learned from Le Corbusier,<sup>3</sup> the Italian architect Francesco Venezia recalled the influence that the Venice hospital had on him when he was a student. In particular, he was attracted by the analogy between the hospital and the wooden structures on stilts that every summer were built near his house in Posillipo, Naples. Those temporary structures served to define a horizontal walking surface above the rocks to facilitate the access to the sea. Beneath the walkway, the thin pillars formed a suggestive in-between space, which was more attractive for a boy to explore. Venezia remembered the rays of the light filtered by the wooden 'ceiling' and the reflections of the moving sea that crept underneath. In this sense, Venezia projected the memory of his personal experiences onto the hermetic pictures of the hospital. He figured out the charm of walking through the spaces below the halls, between the lapping of the water, the smell of algae, and the iridescent reflections onto the intrados.

---

<sup>3</sup> Venezia, Francesco. *Cosa ho imparato da Le Corbusier*, Casabella Workshop Conference, Milan, April 29, 2019.

A few years later, Francesco Venezia transferred a part of these suggestions into several projects, generally not realized, for public buildings and museums often on the edge of the water, such as in Regensburg, Amsterdam, or Seoul (Venezia 2006). In 1991, analogous suggestions led Steven Holl to design the new Palazzo del Cinema of Venice as a partial, deformed, and ‘expressionist’ version of Le Corbusier’s building. The drawings show irregular concrete slabs supporting large rooms suspended over a basin of water (Fig.02). Here, the light penetrating between the cinemas connotes the lower space as a sort of mystic cave designed in opposition to the upper, transparent hall. His watercolors stress the phenomenological aspects of the project, interpreting the Venice *genius loci* as a sort of temporal anomaly able to affect the perception of space (Holl, Levene & Márquez Cecilia, 2003: pp.160-167)

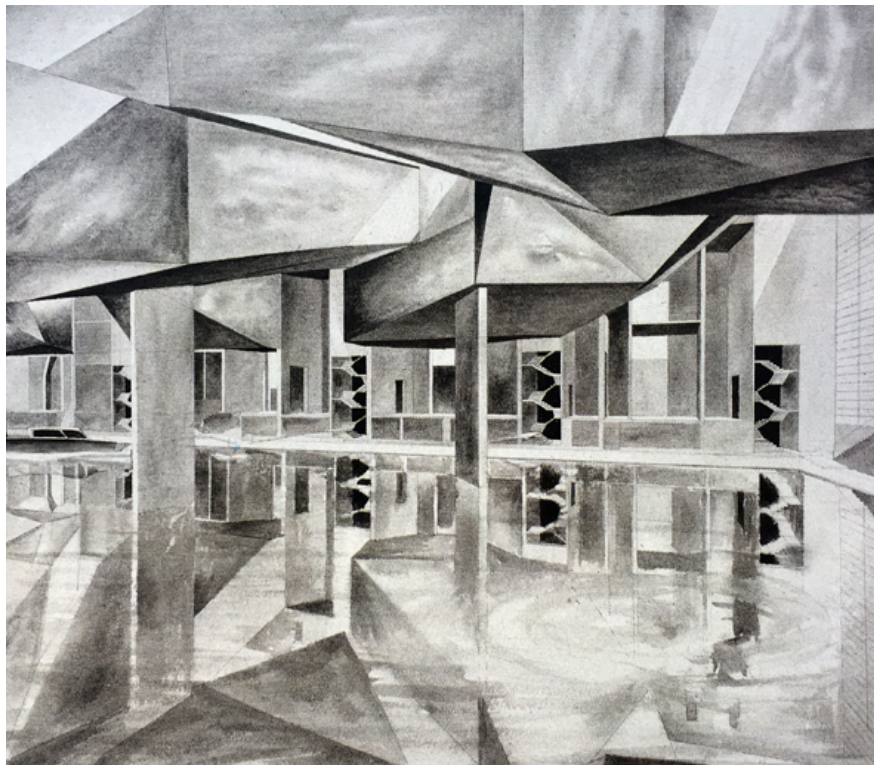


Fig. 02. S. Holl, Palazzo del Cinema, Venice, 1991. Watercolor of the basin of water.

Source: Courtesy of S. Holl, 1991.

### 3. Celestia, Fior, and the Hospital

Published in two volumes, *Celestia* is a graphic novel painted by Manuele Fior along five years. The story is set in a lagoon city that looks like Venice but is curiously isolated from the mainland as the main bridge was blown up to prevent an invasion. Added to this, the city presents architectures that were never built (Colonnese, 2021). The silent appearance of these ‘ghosts’ produces a gap in the perception of the place, which moves from the present to another time and space. The reader is asked to understand (and create) the actual place only through the words and actions of the characters that live this enigmatic context. Some of

them are endowed with telepathic powers and involved in a struggle to take the control of a city in the grip of anarchy. The Masieri Memorial, the small palace designed by Frank Lloyd Wright on the Grand Canal and never built, hosts the meetings organized by the mysterious Dr. Vivaldi. He is training his students as telepathic soldiers, but his son Pierrot refuses to join the plan. The other key character is Dora. Already starring *L'Intervista* (Fior, 2013), Dora is a powerful and frightened telepathic girl chased by different factions. Thanks to their mental gift, Pierrot finds Dora, who is trying to avoid Vivaldi's students. He takes her away with him, first to his own apartment, then to a brothel and, after a clash with members of the rival faction, away from Celestia.

In addition to other recognizable architectural pieces of Venice, Dora and Pierrot's escape reveals the monumental presence of Le Corbusier's Hospital (Fig. 03). The two protagonists sail the waters of the thick and muddy lagoon aboard a metal barge. They move around the remaining sections of the ancient masonry bridge that connected Celestia to the mainland. Pierrot's mother had died in the explosion that destroyed the bridge and he is disturbed by occasional mnemonic flashes of that night.

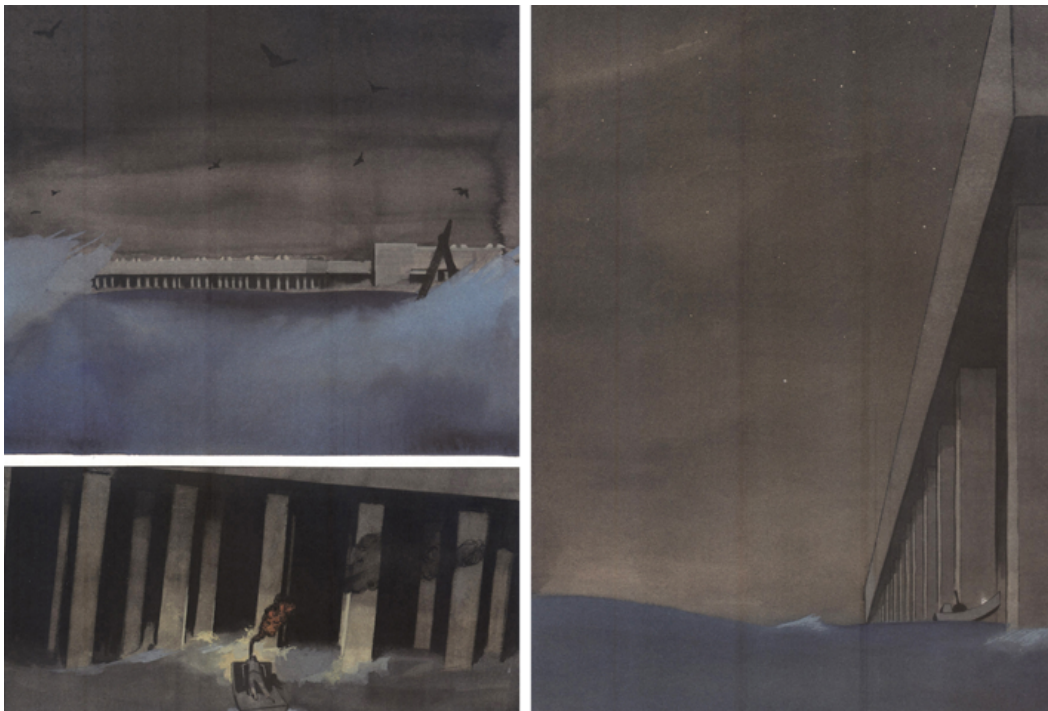


Fig. 03. M. Fior, Le Corbusier's Hospital.

Source: M. Fior, *Celestia I*, 2019, p 107, 109, 113.

Frightened by the storm, shouting angry at each other, the two finally arrive near a concrete structure raised on high pillars. Despite looking like a ruin, its 'belly' looks like a safe shelter. After securing the boat to one of its pylons, Pierrot spreads a cloth on the deck under which the two fugitives spend the night illuminated by a weak electronic lamp. The day after, clear sky and sunlight

give the structure and the couple a different look. Upon Dora's question, Pierrot reveals that the structure was a hospital and his mother, whom he remembers very little of, once worked there. Curious and hungry, the two protagonists set off on foot past the sandy dunes that mark the boundary of the city and civilization as they know it, the hospital's structure is shown one last time.



Fig. 04. M. Fior, Castles. Louis Kahn's Salk Institute and Ricardo Bofill's Xanadu, Kafka's Castle, and the Muralla Roja.

Source: M. Fior, *Celestia I*, 2019, p 142; *Celestia II*, 2020, p.14, 49, 61.

In the distance, a sort of red 'castle' appears. It is the Muralla Roja that Ricardo Bofill designed and built in 1968 near Alicante, Spain. In the 'outer' world, they find more 'castles', designed by Bofill and by Louis Kahn as well. They are inhabited a crowd of telepathic children, who are helping the lone adults to survive and are waiting for the right moment to rebuild the world (Fig. 04). Those places and children will help Pierrot and Dora to heal their own pains, find their place in the words, evolve, and return safe home, ready to have their own baby.

#### 4. Considerations

*Celestia* is composed of 258 pages. They can be grouped into 20 scenes (10 in each book) of 7-to-16 pages each, and an epilogue of 4 pages. All scenes, like the escape from Celestia here described, are characterized by a different color palette and a specific place or architecture, which produce a layered literary place filtered through the changing ambience.

Most of the scenes show that architectures are as important as the characters and are intrinsically linked to their actions, experiences, and mood. On several occasions, Pierrot's and Dora's bodies are confronted with windows, balconies, sills, balustrades, roofs, as well as immense fluted columns.

When the wreck of Le Corbusier's hospital appears under the rain, the waves that toss the boat seem to reflect the screams of the two characters. The hospital itself, seen through the protagonists' eyes, looks oblique in the sooty drawings. The reference to Pierrot's mother gives the structure a narrative depth (Fig.05). The reader is legitimized to think that Pierrot came into the world right there and the refuge may look like a return to the mother's womb.



Fig. 05. M. Fior, *Le Corbusier's Hospital*. Pierrot: «My mother worked here.».

Source: M. Fior, *Celestia I*, 2019, p 115.

While the Masieri Memorial and Bofill's 'castles' admit the characters in their internal rooms, the hospital reveals no sign of interiors. It looks like a massive roof, ready to be colonized or occupied. Dora does not know it and the reader discovers it mostly through her eyes. Throughout the long sequence, the point of view is always close to the protagonists and there is no overall vision intended to

‘illustrate’ the building or its details.

Fior uses an “interrupted” architecture such as the hospital to move Venice forward in time and ‘sideways’ in the space but to mark the key moments of the story and even to give his own critical point of view. Besides a shelter, the hospital is also sort of urban gate, playing a fundamental threshold of their journey. Like trees in a forest, its concrete pillars mark the boundary between the world known by Pierrot and Dora — the sphere of ideas and conventions — and a world where they will be requested to rely on their instincts and feelings, up to trust the words of children.

As an architect, Fior has an education and a curiosity towards the buildings he loves more that affect the literary places he creates for his graphic novels. To him, a new comic book is an opportunity to ‘inhabit’ and ‘explore’ forgotten pieces of architecture or unbuilt projects, offering them an after-life. At the same time, as any architect does, Fior is neither passive nor contemplative but reveals an attitude to an active interpretation of architecture, city, and landscape. He ‘literally’ (and ‘literary’) redesigns every single piece he takes from reality, mixing it up with elements belonging to parallel realities.

Celestia is Venice but, at the same time, it is not. Celestia is a literary place located in an ‘earlier future’ and described through progressive deviations from reality. As in the practice of Augmented Reality, where layers of information integrate the visible reality, Celestia results of three different layers: the actual urban fabric; some “interrupted” architectures designed for Venice and never built; and a series of existing buildings ‘moved’ to Venice.

Both the interrupted and the existing architectures added to Venice, from Wright’s to Le Corbusier’s and Bofill’s, share a utopian potential, in social and formal terms. They belong to an age in which architecture was still reputed to be able to raise the spirit of the masses and embody their dreams, as well. As additional characters, the ‘added’ architectures play a central role, show peculiar qualities, and a special status. Accessing them requires special conditions, such as the telepathic faculties that allow Pierrot to enter the Masieri Memorial; the memory of the mother, which allows him to find the hospital apparently forgotten by everybody else; or the guide of children that allows Pierrot and Dora to get to and into the outer castles.

## 5. Conclusions

Architects use to feed their own imagery with suggestions coming from not only actual buildings but also unbuilt architectural projects, whose pure, virtual dimension is negotiated through their personal, subjective experiences, like any literary space. Both Francesco Venezia and Steven Holl were influenced by the pictures and captions of Le Corbusier’s hospital, which affected, more or less directly, their architectural thoughts and designs.

While famous unbuilt projects keep on living and inspiring architects’ ideas and choices even decades after their ideation, both digital reconstructions and



popular artistic expressions offer the opportunity to let them reach a wider public. As a peculiar form of illustrated literature, comic art offers the opportunity to create original settings by transforming reality through a careful choice and representation of architecture, as demonstrated by the graphic novels of Fior.

Celestia represents a place where reality and dreams meet as well as real architectures mingle with those only designed, as in the mind of an architect. At a first level, they are just places for developing the plot. Moreover, being fantastic places or existing buildings redefined by their move in a different context, they are free from preexisting meanings and social implications and available to the artist's connotation. At a second level, they can be recognized as special places, as suggested by their own role in relationship with the characters. In this sense, they work as intertextual gates for the reader, too, who can be interested in knowing the story of the project and the designer, as well.

In the graphic novel *Celestia*, Le Corbusier's Hospital for Venice appears as no one had ever seen it before. Not only does it appear built and fleetingly inhabited by the two protagonists, but it appears in ruins, with a charm that evokes the words used by John Ruskin about the "stones of Venice". In this sense, it seems to testify to the narrative potential inherent in the modern architecture over the years, with the time emphasizing both their 'spiritual' essence and their perception in different atmospheric conditions.

But Celestia is much more.

Framed by the eyes of the characters, imbued with their human events and subordinated to the narrative, its architectures perform different functions towards the reader, the plot, the community of architects, the projects, and the artist himself. By conceiving the comic as an ark, Fior sets up a sort of architectural afterlife in which forgotten or unbuilt architectural masterpieces were built and are able to fulfill their social mission. But, as the story shows, they are hard to find and to enter, like hidden treasures to be painstakingly searched for. Indirectly, Fior also pursues the promotional and cultural objective of making architecture and the works he loves most known and appreciated. In this way, he also manages to maintain a lively relationship with his own architectural imaginary, which constitutes a central part of his personal formation and identity, fighting the schizophrenia of the contemporary existential condition.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author thanks Dionisio Gonzales and Steven Holl for the permission of reproducing their works, and Manuele Fior for the interview he had in August 2020 and the permission to reproduce pages from *Celestia*.

## Bibliography

- Alberghini, A. (2013). Images comes first. Andrea Alberghini interviews Manuele Fior. *MAS Context*, 20. <https://www.mascontext.com/issues/20-narrative-winter-13/images-come-first/> [Accessed 25 Jan 2021].
- Ciofi, L. (2018). *Le circostanze. I romanzi disegnati di Vittorio Giardino*. [Movie] Ladoc-Colibrì.
- Colonnese, F. (2021). La seconda vita delle architetture incompiute nei fumetti. Manuele Fior e Celestia. In: E. Cicalò, I. Trizio, eds., *I linguaggi grafici dell'Illustrazione*. Alghero: Publica, pp.538-565.
- Ferrari, A. (2007). *Dizionario dei luoghi letterari immaginari*. Milan: Utet.
- Fior, M. (2019). *Celestia I*. Milan: Oblomov.
- Fior, M. (2020). *Celestia II*. Milan: Oblomov.
- Fior, M. (2013). *L'intervista*. Rome: Coconino Press.
- Gonzales, D (2011). Las Horas Claras. [Exhibition] Milan, Nov 16, 2011– Jan 13, 2012. <https://www.dionisiogonzalez.es/027TXT-HorasClaras.html> [Accessed 25 Jan 2021].
- Lus-Arana, Luis Miguel (Koldo). (2019). Comics and architecture: a reading guide: Telling architecture(s): comics, cartoons and graphic narrative in architecture. In: J. Charley, ed., *The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature and The City*. New York: Routledge, pp.347-384.
- Manguel, A. (2000). *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places: The Newly Updated and Expanded Classic*. Cengage Learning.
- Patetta, L. (1969). Architettura interrotta. *Controspazio*, 1.
- Reichlin, B. (2021). L'Ospedale di Venezia. Congetture sulla genesi del progetto. In M. Talamone, ed., *L'Italia di Le Corbusier*. Milan: Electa, pp. 390-411.
- Sarkis, Hashim. (2001). *Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital and the Mat Building Revival*. Munich; London; New York: Prestel.
- Schuiten, F. and Peeters, B. (2014). *Revoir Paris*. Paris: Casterman.
- Sinatra, R. and Marsella, E. (2006). *Le Corbusier's Unbuilt Hospital in Venice*. <https://www.lindustria.it/portfolio-item/le-corbusier> [Accessed 25 Jan 2021].
- Starr, A. (2005). It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's Architecture!. *The New York Times*, July 31. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/31/arts/design/its-a-bird-its-a-plane-its-architecture.html> [Accessed 25 Jan 2021].
- Holl, S., Levene, R., and Márquez Cecilia, F. (2003). Steven Holl 1984-2003. *In search of a poetry of specifics, thought, matter and experience*. Madrid: El Croquis Editorial.
- Varnum, R., and Gibbons, C.T. (2001). *The language of comics*. Word and image. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Venezia, F. (2006). *Le idee e le occasioni*. Milan: Electa.