Comics Beyond the Page in Latin America

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Introduction

The use of the graphic language of comics as a teaching resource goes back to the very origins of the medium. A friend of Goethe’s, the Swiss teacher Rodolphe Töpffer (1799–1846) was not just one of the first comics artists but also one of the first educational practitioners of comics, as he started using drawn sequences with texts to keep the attention of his young students, a practice that led to the publication of a small album called *Les Amours de M. Vieux-Bois* (1839). At the same time, not least when designing and drawing backgrounds, whether historical, present or future, illustrators and comics creators have long turned to architectural forms as a key tool. In the early twentieth century, for example, Richard Fenton Outcault (1863–1928) set his famous Yellow Kid around Hogan’s Alley, a typical street of New York’s slums, and Winsor McCay (1869–1934) located Little Nemo not just in the imaginary universe of Slumberland but also in the colourful urban landscape of Chicago’s skyscrapers. In this chapter I will look at both of these elements of the comics world: education and architecture, with a particular focus on a Uruguayan case study.

Comics are now widely recognised as an extremely effective vehicle for disseminating, conveying and debating ideas and concepts in education at all levels (primary, secondary and tertiary). To cite one contemporary example, the French company Cabrilog, which specialises in the development of teaching tools, has created interactive geometry
software for the teaching of geometry and trigonometry based on the enigma and problems posed by the infinitely growing cube that is the central character of *La fièvre d’Urbicande* (The Fever of Urbicande) created by François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters (1985). In Uruguay, the work of architect and graphic designer Alejandro Rodríguez Juele, illustrator and comics scriptwriter Nicolás Peruzzo, and humanities scholar Victoria Saibene, are all significant in this field. These figures are key members of the Bandas Educativas (Educational Strips) collective, which brings together many authors (many of whom are comics professionals) who develop and disseminate a significant amount of digital teaching material to support the teaching of national history at primary school level. Rodríguez Juele himself developed and published a series of stories based on little-known incidents in Uruguayan history past and present (*La isla elefante* in 2011 and a series of stories based on the experiences of the Uruguayan Army as part of the Peace Corps in the Congo, published in *Lento* magazine).

Comics and architecture are, in any case, closely linked. In his paper at the XV COMICON, which took place in Naples in April 2013, Italian architect and comics scholar Andrea Alberghini (2013) said:

> If we define architecture as the device which allows individuals and communities to represent themselves in a particular social context, the connections between this art and the language of images seem obvious. Specifically, comics and architecture share a basic generative tool: drawing. While it is true that the aim of architecture is to build and transform the world, the function of drawing is a propaedeutic one, as it prefigures the result of such transformations, translating ideal aspirations into images, and constituting a powerful critical and reflective tool.

Nowadays many architects and architects’ groups see comics as an important vehicle for disseminating and debating their projects and proposals, as well as for expressing their different ideological stances. Some examples of such approaches can be found in the work of the Spanish firm bRijUNi architects, notably ‘*Vivir y dejar Rotterdam [Living and Leaving in Rotterdam]*’ (2006), or the well-known monograph by the Danish architect Bjarke Ingels about the work of his firm, BIG, entitled *Yes is More: An Archicomic in Architectural Evolution* (the title making direct reference to the graphic medium; Bjarke Ingels Group 2009). The list of architects who have utilised comics has grown over the past 20 years or so. Prominent figures who have availed themselves of comics include: the
Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, who, together with Tomas Koolhaas and Louis Price, used comics in *Byzantium*, part of the voluminous *S, M, L, XL* (1995, 354–61); François Henninen, Tony Neyieux and Florian Tayssié, who created a mural in the shape of a gigantic comic strip to present the plan for the city of Valencia in 2005; the French architect Jean Nouvel in the work *Littoral*; the Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre De Meuron, with the support of ETH Zurich, as part of their proposal for *Metrobasel: A Model for the European Region* (2009); or the award-winning *00110 Arquitectura*, a collective of young Spanish architects whose ‘Efecto Arenal’ and their ‘Cómic Urbano’ won a special mention in the 2017 edition of the European 14 competition. There are also a growing number of studies that analyse the various perspectives taken by comics that address architecture and architectural forms, including works such as *Sequenze Urbane: La Metropoli nel Fumetto* (2006), a book by Italian architect and comics scholar Andrea Alberghini; *Comics and the City* (2010), a compilation by Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling; and Laura Cassaré and Sebastiano D’Urso’s essay *Goodbye Topolina: Su architettura e fumetto* (2013).

Despite these practices and studies, and the close affinity between comics and architecture, there are relatively few examples of comics being used to teach architecture, either at degree or postgraduate level. Experiences are limited and partial even at first-rate academic institutions. Some isolated examples include Paloma Úbeda Mansilla’s study for the Universidad Politécnica de Madrid, ‘El cómic contextualizado en la clase de ESP para arquitectos: El diseño de una unidad’ (2000), where she points out that ‘teaching methods in some particular fields in the world of teaching fail to meet the needs for designing activities which fit with the most immediate and real interests of students in an enjoyable way’. Spanish architect and teacher Koldo Lus Arana has also published papers in the context of the Harvard Graduate School of Design as well as MAS Context no.20 Narrative (2013). Finally, Jimenez Lai from China has published *Citizens of No Place: An Architectural Graphic Novel*, an essay on contemporary urban planning (2012).

The current position of this line of research and work within the School of Architecture, Design and Urban Planning of the University of the Republic of Uruguay, a state higher education institution, differs little from this general reluctance to embrace comics. In the last 20 years, this institution has displayed rather endogamous behaviour in terms of its vision of architecture as a cultural product, and it has focused particularly on architecture’s social and technological aspects, obviously fundamental facets for all study of architecture, not least in the diverse contexts of Latin
America. The new curriculum introduced in 2015 gave no indication that this endogamous attitude would be modified, which means that the programme has gradually been distancing itself from contemporary discourses and debates within the discipline, specifically in terms of a vision of architecture as a wider, complex and open cultural product and as a field for innovative exploration and new initiatives. Such shifts have, at the same time, been evident in other cultural disciplines (most notably, for example, in the symbiosis carried out in the field of music, where typically popular musical genres such as candombé or rock are being mixed with music commonly labelled ‘cultured’ or highbrow). Architecture is a discipline that requires constant connections with other areas of national culture, something that provides the architect with the necessary analytical tools with which to approach their work, art and trade. But such needs have not been addressed with the necessary intensity or direction that contemporary society demands of the world of academia.

Bit by bit and not without difficulty, comics are trying to enter the School of Architecture. Unfortunately many colleagues see comics as a minor figure in the pantheon of the University, a popular cultural pastime rather than the domain of ‘high culture’. One might wonder what Rodolphe Töpffer, Le Corbusier, Yona Friedman, Peter Cook or even Benoît Peeters might have to say about this belief, but it will no doubt not be the last example of the cultural myopia of academics, determined to defend their own cultural perceptions rather than challenge clichés and expand intellectual frontiers and boundaries. As a response to this context of superiority, then, in this chapter I undertake a critical evaluation of a teaching experiment that took place between 2014 and 2017 within the School of Architecture, Design and Urban Planning at the University of the Republic of Uruguay, one which complements another, more recent, experience in the Teacher Training Institute, the latter aimed at training secondary school teachers. In essence, I want to demonstrate why comics are a powerful medium for teaching and analysing architectural ideas.

The course(s)

The original aim of the course was not only to study architecture and its visual representation in comics but also to delve into comics’ potential for communicating critical reflection about architecture itself and the city and, therefore, for being an effective way of learning about the built environment. As a precursor, I should mention the activities led by Benoît Peeters during two fleeting visits to the university, during
which he gave talks and facilitated a workshop with students. During his visits to the School of Architecture, Design and Urban Planning in 1988 and in 2016, I had the opportunity to discuss comics and architecture with Peeters. In his talks, he examined the genesis of his work and its direct and explicit links with architecture, noting that his colleague and partner in his comics works, the Belgian François Schuiten, is the son of architects and that one of his brothers is a renowned theorist of contemporary Belgian architecture. The workshop that I ran was named after Peeters’ well-known comics series *The Obscure Cities* (originally *Les Cités obscures*; also published as *Cities of the Fantastic* in English).

In my case, I wanted to work with the city of Montevideo and wanted findings to be presented in the form of a short comic strip. In fact, the first use I made of comics as a teaching strategy was designed not so much to teach architecture as landscape, part of a Landscape Project course that was included in the degree of the same name. This course took place at the East Regional University Centre located in the east of Uruguay, in the city of Maldonado, not far from the seaside resort of Punta del Este. This partial exercise included the participation of a very diverse group of students in terms of age and background, with some graduates from secondary school or from courses in technical gardening, as well as technicians who qualified for the degree because of their previous experience in related areas. As a result it was necessary to offer a series of brief lectures about the origins of comics and their relevance within contemporary society, as this form was not familiar to most of the students. The methodology was a workshop in which students were put into groups of two or more to optimise knowledge exchange, time and resources.

The first presentations addressed the impact of rampant processes of urbanisation typical of large tourist developments. Students were required to set out potential political and design strategies to avoid the deterioration caused by such processes and to restore environmental quality. Supporting bibliography included the graphic novel *Brüsel* (Schuiten and Peeters 1993), part of the aforementioned cycle *The Obscure Cities*, which narrates events in the imaginary city of Brüsel (a distorted reflection of the real Brussels), which is subject to rampant growth and consequent destruction of the old urban fabric with new, high, svelte and aseptic tower blocks; and the theoretical essay *Vers une cité végétale: Projets urbains et ruraux de demain* (Towards a Vegetal City: Urban and Rural Projects for Tomorrow), written by Luc Schuiten and Pierre Loze (2010), a piece that offers a series of strategies for the recovery of our urban landscapes and the integration of green spaces as the fundamental and predominant elements of urban life.
One study submitted by the students depicted a verdant landscape with a stark blue river and trees. Each panel of their comic, however, depicted that landscape rife with tower blocks, highlighting the consequences of uncontrolled urbanisation (the tower blocks here are a kind of alien force that gradually occupy the virgin territory in rampant fashion). A huge fist in the final frame depicts the response of a despoiled nature that finally rebels in an attempt to re-establish some kind of original balance. The work demonstrates how the narrative form of comics can be used to highlight the shifting nature of the architectural landscape.

In the wake of this early foray into using comics, I subsequently ran the first version of the full course, submitted via the standard university curricular review procedures. This course was aimed at advanced students of the degree of Architecture and the degree of Design and Visual Communication, as well as some foreign students (particularly French and Mexican) who were taking the course as part of the university's exchange programme (most of them with some pre-existing knowledge of the field of architecture). The teaching team consisted of myself and my colleague, the architect and comics scholar Carolina Tobler. The development of the course was complemented by the one-off participation of comic-strip authors, including the aforementioned Rodríguez Juele and the architect, urban planning scholar, doctoral candidate and lecturer in the History of Contemporary Architecture, Diego Capandeguy.

As part of the planning process we developed an in-depth preparatory study, setting out a series of stages aimed at minimising the difficulties and uncertainties that the course posed for both students and faculty. These arose, primarily, from the novelty of the course, at least as far as the institution was concerned, as there were no precedents for developing a teaching strategy in this area. The only somewhat direct referent was the aforementioned experience of the group Bandas Educativas, though that had been aimed exclusively at primary and secondary school students and more as a way of illustrating stories. There were, moreover, some difficulties with the fact that the student cohort was diverse in its make-up and not everyone was familiar with the strategies and potential of contemporary comics. In this particular case, the presence of foreign students, especially those from France, enriched the course, no doubt due to the more pervasive presence of comics in French culture. On the course, we tried to put together teams of students from different backgrounds so that they would be confronted with a wide range of views and approaches.

To address lack of knowledge about comics we included a series of talks and presentations about different aspects of the history of comics,
their evolution and basic structural concepts (codes, composition, means of communication, etc). Thematically, we used the city of Montevideo as our urban focus, asking students to consider the city itself, its evolution and its likely future. Many lines of argument touched upon dystopian visions of that future. Some looked at population growth related to immigration, particularly from Asia, which at one point had been modelled as a political strategy by government advisers to solve Uruguay’s extremely low population growth rate.

A broader cultural context was established by including references to cinema, including films such as Richard Fleischer’s *Soylent Green* (1973) or Marco Brambilla’s *Demolition Man* (1993), and literature, including texts such as *Paris in the Twentieth Century* by Jules Verne, a little known novel by the French author, written in the late nineteenth century but only published in 1994, and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, written in the 1930s. As well as the treatise written by English architect and critic Charles Jencks in 1971, *Architecture 2000*, we also required students to read material related to the creation of comics, including Scott McCloud’s *Making Comics* (2007), *Comics and the City* (2010) edited by Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling, and the graphic novels *Dropsie Avenue* (1995) by Will Eisner and *Transmetropolitan* (1999) by Warren Ellis and Darrick Robertson. The latter were chosen as they fit with the ideas about the future evolution of the city of Montevideo outlined above. Eisner’s story clearly and accurately illustrates the inception and development of urban life from the point of view of those who inhabit, build, enjoy and endure it. And, with a high degree of cynicism, Ellis’s work describes life in a dystopian city of the future, in which the abundance of heterogeneous social groups, famous and small-time criminals, and corrupt politicians constitute a simultaneously peculiar and recognisable urban society that is being permanently bombarded by digital images that create an almost schizophrenic urban space.

The most difficult element of the course was defining a script around which to structure a narrative. Being a comics scriptwriter is a complex task and, in addition to knowledge of the topic or topics being addressed, it also demands an ability for concision so that underlying concepts and ideas can be explained within the context of the page. At the same time, we had to address preconceptions that stemmed from the different university degrees that were being taken by the students on the course. Such differences are evident in some of the students' proposals. Architectural students tended to emphasise spaces, buildings and other urban elements, such as the street, the square or the city block as a way of thinking through the way setting is constructed. Graphic design
students took a different approach, however. In one example, some design students used graphic resources in the style of Richard Hamilton’s early works of the mid-1960s, specifically his collage *Just What is it Makes Today’s Homes so Different, so Appealing?* (1956), and the canvas painting by the US pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, *Whaam!* (1963), both works referred to openly during the course.

The second version of the course, aimed at a group of students with a similar level of training, set out to address some of the shortcomings of the first, mainly those related to lack of knowledge about comics. A series of short exercises in the form of workshops were put in place, supported by presentations by staff about the development and making of comics. Much as in the previous version, these were intended to help students learn about the guiding principles of the genre and about different comic strategies developed by various relevant authors, from Winsor McCay to Chris Ware, through classic authors like Moebius, Hergé or Hugo Pratt.

An initial exercise looked at the graphic and expressive strategies of comics based around a series of categories which were applied to a particular story and author. We chose the US graphic novel *Asterios Polyp* (2009) by David Mazzucchelli because we saw it as encapsulating a number of graphic characteristics that, apart from being evidently explicit, were relevant to the objectives of the planned analysis. On this basis, among others, the following aspects were addressed: the formal aspects of the panel (types, layout, gutters, framing, shots, etc), transitions or passages from panel to panel (action to action, scene to scene, etc), the page (ways of reading, treatment of time, etc), and specific iconography (conventions, visualisation of metaphor and onomatopoeia). The story developed by Mazzucchelli seemed particularly relevant as it addressed the existential and professional crisis of a renowned architect and academic teacher.

We highlighted the connections between the communicational structure of a comic strip and architectural design by drawing on *Comics and Sequential Art* (1988) by Will Eisner and *Making Comics* (2007) by Scott McCloud, which take an analytical approach based on semiotics and on architecture as a language. In class we discussed and debated the logic implicit in the notion that architecture has always been an appropriate and pertinent medium for the transmission of certain values. This approach was developed in the 1990s by writers, philosophers and semioticians like Paul Virilio (*Esthétique de la disparition* (1980)), Jean Baudrillard (*Los objetos singulares* (2002), with the collaboration of the French architect Jean Nouvel) and Umberto Eco (*Apocalípticos e integrados* (1968, although first published in 1964) and *Tratado de semiótica general* (1975)).
In a second exercise we set out to explore strategies for the graphic interpretation of a given text. Here we selected extracts from Georges Perec’s novel *La Vie mode d’emploi* (Life: A User’s Manual) (1988), in which Perec offers a comprehensive and obsessive description of the spaces and situations that arise among the residents of a typical Parisian building, each chapter in the novel describing the particular characteristics of the occupants. The scenes in the novel were taken as a kind of plot-script that could serve as the basis for the development of a formalised graphic interpretation. Working individually or in pairs, students had to tackle one of the chapters. We provided students with some examples to inspire them, including the well-known 1875 etchings by Bertall (Charles Constant Albert Nicolas d’Arnoux de Limoges Saint-Saëns) which depict life in a mid-nineteenth-century Parisian building via a classic architectural style, a graphic strategy used more recently by the group of Japanese architects Bow-Wow to present many of their projects. We also referred to the work of the Spaniard Francisco Ibáñez, *13 rue de la Percebe* (1961), which takes a similar approach to Bertall.

We gave students total expressive freedom to develop their story, whether in terms of number, size, form, expression or layout of the panels. The aim was to ensure harmony between expressive resources and narrative, so that readers could grasp a full understanding of the episode being narrated.

The third and final exercise of the course, longer and more demanding than the previous tasks, centred on the critical development of a model of a city chosen in advance. Apart from a critical commentary on the model, the aim was to conjugate and make explicit the links between comics, architecture and the city. In view of the difficulties that arose in the previous version when trying to determine an anecdote around which to construct a plot, we presented the situation posed in King Vidor’s film *The Fountainhead* (1949) as the key reference point. Setting aside the romantic situation between architect Howard Roark (Gary Cooper) and Dominique Francon (Patricia Neal), the daughter of a wealthy property developer, the film presents the conflict between the young and idealistic professional facing the harsh demands of reality imposed by the client’s aesthetic perceptions and economic concerns. Students were asked to address that clash between idealism and pragmatism, a classic trope in the history of architecture.

These models covered a wide range of projects drawn from different moments in the history of architecture. Some examples included the Ideal City of ‘Baltimore’ (attributed to the school of Fra Carnevale, 1470), a collage city that existed many centuries before the architectural
theorist Colin Rowe coined the term; the Royal Saltworks in Chaux (Claude Ledoux, 1775), an example of high abstraction by eighteenth-century French rationalists; the Garden City (Ebenezer Howard, 1903), an idyllic organisation of territory that aimed to improve the extremely poor living conditions of the working classes following the Industrial Revolution; the Gross Berlin (Albert Speer, 1937), the new capital of the Third Reich which attempted to immortalise its ideology; The Seaside Urbanization, Seaside, Florida (Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, 1984), where most of the location shots of The Truman Show (Peter Weir, 1998) were filmed; Kowloon (1993), considered, until it was demolished, as the densest and most chaotic concentration of humans in the world; and Waterfront Dubai (OMA, 2008), which sought to recreate the grandeur and the charm of the great Arabian palaces with gardens and fountains. Each team of students had to research their allocated model, learning about its history, genesis and the ideas and architectural and city planning concepts underlying their case study. Students were also asked to express their findings in the form of a comic strip.

At the next stage students were expected to develop a script that would set out a series of critical comments about the city model, focusing on its positive as well as its negative aspects in what we called a ‘graphic essay’, a play on the contemporary term ‘graphic novel’. This work was presented in the form of a small fanzine using a variety of expressive techniques in line with the story being narrated and the meaning that was being constructed (digital, hand-drawn, photomontage, etc).

This course aimed to address two fundamental aspects: first, to introduce students to topics related to the city and urban design in an attempt, by means of the analysis of the various proposals and examples put forward, to tackle these topics from the point of view of project strategies. And second, to encourage students to experiment with methods and means of the presentation, representation and critical dissemination of ideas by using resources which are unusual in architectural design courses. We concluded that high levels of student participation and commitment on the course were in part due to the fact that using comics stimulated the imagination and helped students create and visualise scenarios and places which were often only expressed as conceptual statements or, at best, simple schemes accompanying written text.

With the modifications and reorganisation brought about by the application of a new syllabus, to attain the marks required to move forward in their studies students subsequently had to choose from a range of courses that included a great variety of themes, perspectives
and approaches. Our course was one of the options offered by the Architectural Composition Workshop. This time around the course was no longer aimed at advanced students but at first-year students. This shift posed a challenge to staff, as we had to adapt the topics, materials and exercises to the new student body.

The first part of the year drew on previous versions of the course by focusing on the study of comics, their history, evolution and current tendencies within the form. Will Eisner’s *New York: The Big City* (1986), Schuiten and Peeters’s *Brüsel* (1993) and David Mazzuchelli’s *Asterios Polyp* (2009) were again used for the analysis of the different aspects which shape the structure of comics. All three were chosen for their clear links to architecture and its problems. But on this occasion we also included work by other comics authors who have a more experimental approach, such as Marc-Antoine Mathieu’s *Le dessin* (2001), Chris Ware’s *Building Stories* (2012) and Robert McGuire’s *Here* (2014). We chose these works for their innovative approach to presenting narrative in graphic terms.

For the main exercise on this version of the course we took advantage of the fact that the Architectural Composition Workshop was looking specifically at the topic of individual urban dwellings designed for a particular user. As a result, the exercise we designed meant that for many students the course offered them an opportunity to continue their work on a pre-existing part of the curriculum but to approach it in more depth. On this occasion, once again to avoid difficulties in terms of developing a narrative script, we set the students the same departure point: the Argentine film *El hombre de al lado* (*The Man Next Door*) (2009), directed by Mariano Cohn and Gastón Duprat. The story set out in the film deals with a topic of architectural interest: a man wishes to add a window to his house which would look out onto the exterior patio of his neighbour’s house, where the film’s protagonist lives. The main character is a famous furniture designer and well-known university lecturer but even more significantly he lives in La Casa Curutchet (*The Curutchet House*), a residence designed for an Argentine doctor in 1949 by Le Corbusier in the city of La Plata (Argentina) and one of only two buildings ever completed in the Americas that was designed by the French architect. The conflict in the film revolves around the clash between Víctor (the working-class neighbour artisan) and Leonardo (the middle-class, sophisticated designer-intellectual); Víctor wants a new window to let in some sunshine and Leonardo wants to protect his privacy. The students were asked to analyse the issues arising from the film and to learn about Le Corbusier’s project, which was also developed by Argentine architect
Amancio Williams. Based on their research, they were required to draw a relevant moment in the film on one page, which allowed us to evaluate the resources they used to convey a particular message at the same time as making the drafting of a storyline quite straightforward. Even though the plot provided the basis for the script, in-depth knowledge of the case study allowed students to establish relationships between abstract architectural spaces and the complex situations that can arise around them when they become sites of social conflict.

Each individual student or pair of students was expected to set their story in a paradigmatic house taken from the history of architecture. The house was to constitute the central element around which the text would revolve. The repertoire of selected houses was very wide ranging, spanning different historical periods, styles, dwellers and architects. International examples included Villa Rotonda (A. Palladio, 1566), the Farnsworth House (Mies van der Rohe, 1946), and Villa Dall’Ava (R. Koolhaas, 1985); Uruguayan examples included Casa Paysée (M. Paysée Reyes, 1954) and Casa Buceo (Martín and Marcelo Gualano, 2007). Other architects that were referred to included the US architect Robert Venturi, the Swiss Mario Botta, the Luxembourg Leo Krier and the Chilean Smiljan Radic, among others.

The exercise was divided into four stages:

1. a prologue, which had to present the dwelling in question, be drawn in comic-strip format, and be designed to introduce the lay reader to the chosen architectural example
2. a script outline presented on a storyboard which would later define the central body of the story
3. a sketch of the history that had been set out which indicated how to bring text and image together
4. the final presentation using different expressive media to develop the story.

The final presentation was displayed on the predetermined A5 page format, which lent uniformity to work across the class, avoiding previous problems with huge variances in terms of format, quality and type of presentation. This universal approach also meant the stories could be collected in a standardised colour publication of approximately 150 pages (in the event, the expense of such a publication meant that only one copy was printed). The format that we chose was based on the idea that the final work should be envisaged as a small graphic novel or, as in this case, ‘graphic essay’.
The most important references were, in this case, the short critical essay by the Spanish architectural collective bRijUNi architects about the city of Rotterdam, *Living and Leaving in Rotterdam* (2009); the graphic novel created by the US architect Wes Jones, ‘Re:Doing Dubai’ (included in *Beyond No.1: Scenarios and Speculations* (Gadanho 2009)); and *L’Enfant Penchée* by Schuiten and Peeters (1996; part of the *The Obscure Cities* cycle) and *The Building* by Will Eisner (1987).

The storylines that were developed ranged from costume dramas with elements of soap operas, fairly conventional science fiction, to stories with a markedly *noir* tone, as is the case with a story set in the house built by Le Corbusier for the painter Amadée Ozenfant in Paris in 1922. A remote artist’s refuge was transformed into the setting for a frivolous and mundane life but one in which a crime of passion is subsequently committed.

On the other hand, the idyllic residence built by Frank Lloyd Wright, a luxury refuge of sorts built amid the solitude and charm of a virgin forest (Falling Water or Kaufmann House, built between 1936 and 1939 in Pennsylvania), became a dwelling for ghosts and paranormal activity (a storyline that draws on Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980)).

The final outcomes of the course, both the preliminary and final exercises, were compiled in the printed publication referred to above. The document pays testament to a number of issues that, I would argue, highlight the value of comics as a vehicle for learning about and debating issues within the field of architecture.

As mentioned above, our final experience of using comics was aimed at students on the teacher-training course in the area of visual communication and was, therefore, not centred on the links between comics and architecture. These students had little or no training in or knowledge of architecture and, at best, their only experience of architecture had been on courses in History of Art. As a result, we had to rethink the general approach that we had used up to this point, focusing this time on the graphic structures and communication value of comics, as well as on comics’ ability to develop and convey ideas beyond the narrative storyline. For these reasons, the preliminary exercises that we used centred more on these more general topics than on approaches related to a survey of architecture and architectural thought.

We set out to highlight the structural elements constitutive of comics, from the handling of visual planes, panel sequences and composition, through to coherent graphics (drawing style) and the handling of chromatic palettes in relation to the situations and environments in which stories are set. For this course, comics experts took part
Architect Andrés Milano gave a paper on the similarities between comics and film, especially in relation to the handling of shots and framing (close-up shots, plan américain shots, high-angle shots, low-angle shots, etc); another talk, by Uruguayan comics specialist and historian Gabriel Mainero, focused on the ability of the form to relate transcendental stories that go beyond adventure or humour. To discuss these issues we focused on Art Spiegelman’s award-winning *Maus*, first published in 1973 and recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Focusing on these issues meant having to redefine the final exercise of the course. This time we focused more specifically on developing a story based on other famous graphic novels, chosen to represent the diversity of the field, including historical, testimonial, and utopian and dystopian science fiction. The graphic novels selected were: the aforementioned *Maus* (1973) by Art Spiegelman; *Brüsel* (1993) by Benoît Peeters and Francois Schuiten; *It Was the War of the Trenches* (1993) by Jacques Tardi; *El gaucho* (1995) by Hugo Pratt and Milo Manara; Will Eisner’s adaptation of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (2001); and *La mudanza* (*The Move*) (2013) by Uruguayan Nicolás Peruzzo. In their final presentation students were required to include a version of the text as well as a brief analysis of the selected stories by way of a prologue.

In certain aspects, the work carried out by the students aligned itself with the categories of analysis described by Peeters in *Lire la bande dessinée* (1998), which can be summarised as follows: firstly, there were those who, following the analysis of one of the works cited, proceeded to compose a storyboard of sorts, focusing more on the storyline than the graphics; a second line of work sought to rely on graphic skill, which led to extremely elaborate drawings of high technical execution but clearly very different to their chosen story; and a third approach saw students create their own original story, one not necessarily conceived as a sequel to the original text but presented in a style that was almost an imitation of the original.

**Conclusion**

I start my conclusion by quoting Caín Somé Laserna from the Department of Contemporary History of the University of Seville:

> Conventional University teaching methods based primarily on masterclasses are a thing of the past. Nowadays the introduction of
new technologies and various tools into the University classroom are commonplace . . . looking for new tools must be an essential task for the lecturer and on occasion, those tools, far from being new, are simply tools that were already in existence but whose use is dismissed. Such is the case with comics . . .

(‘El cómic como herramienta de trabajo en el ámbito universitario’, 2012)

Similarly, Jimenez Lai writes in the Preface of *Citizens of No-Place*:

Dancing between the line of narrative and representation, cartooning is a medium that facilitates experimentation in proportion, composition, scale, sensibility, character plasticity, and the part-to-whole relationship as the page becomes an object. More importantly, this drawing medium affords the possibility of conflating representation, theory, criticism, storytelling, and design.

(Lai 2012, 7)

Teaching architecture through comics has not been without its frustrations. Despite our best efforts, staff who taught on these courses have still not managed to carve out a significant space for comics within the School of Architecture, Design and Urban Planning. Nevertheless, in general terms, I regard the courses that we taught as a success in terms of achieving the aims and expectations that we set out. Apart from working with a cultural field often only reserved for experts and connoisseurs, students were able to draw a series of possible links between comics and architecture. As a result students developed a way of approaching and learning about architecture that is not common in our teaching institutions, which are more concerned with preserving their own status than with trying new and provocative teaching experiences and didactic practices. Comics allow for a more direct approach to architectural work, one that has greater visual appeal than that usually found in academic texts and publications. Comics allow us to familiarise ourselves with and learn from significant architectural works and the ideas and concepts handled by their authors. I am convinced that knowledge cannot move forward unless it pushes its own disciplinary boundaries, which makes it all the more a shame that, two centuries after Töpffer’s first experiments, the pedagogical potential of comics has still not been fully exploited.
Notes

1 It is important to mention two other texts that I do not refer to in the body of this essay as they were published after the courses discussed in this chapter concluded. They will form part of core reading for future iterations of these courses. The first is the work by Enrique Bordes, a Spanish ‘comicarchitect’ as he calls himself, entitled *Cómic, arquitectura narrativa*, which analyses the relationship between drawing comics and architecture. In his introduction to this book he writes: ‘la relación entre tebeos y espacios construidos [. . .] va mucho más allá de la metáfora que implica que el autor de cómic construye sus páginas igual que el arquitecto sus edificios [the relationship between comics and built spaces [. . .] goes beyond the metaphor that implies that a comics author builds his pages in the same way that an architect builds his buildings]’. The other is the recent conceptual work by Spanish artist Daniel Torres, *La casa: Crónica de una conquista* (2017).

References

Please note that the list of references includes publications that were taught on the units referred to in this chapter, even if they are not cited in the chapter.


