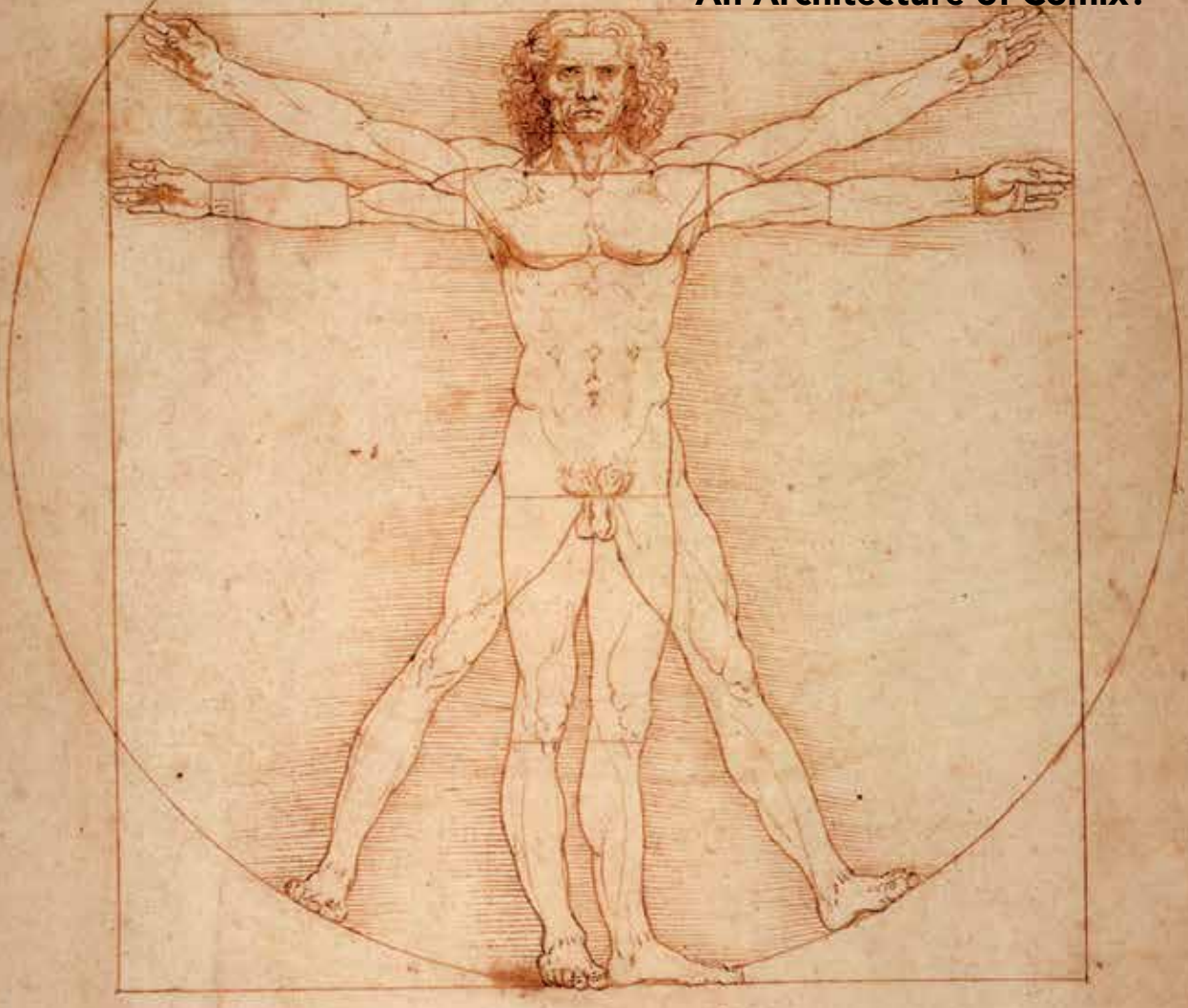
Toons 'N' 'Tec:
An Architecture of Comix?



Johnny Rodger

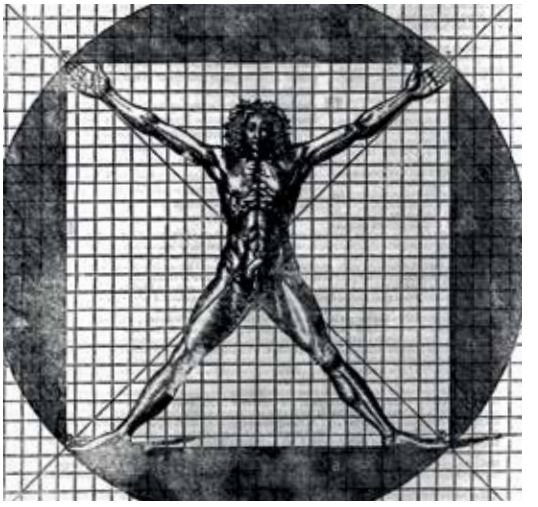
John McShane tells us (Issue 23) that the first regular comic magazine in the world was published in Glasgow in 1825.

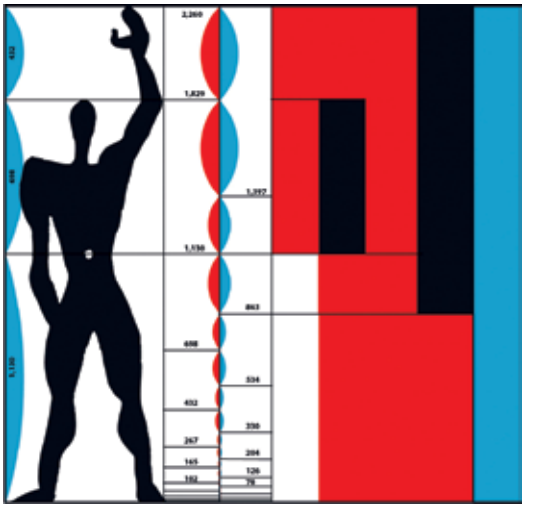
By adopting his definition of the comic strip as one where panels of drawn pictures have temporal connection in the serial depiction of a theme, the case could equally be made that the first ever strictly recognisable cartoon was drawn in Milan around 1490. Furthermore, it appears that the idea for that drawing was put forward and published in Rome around 20 BCE. The work I refer to is, of course, the *Vitruvian Man* by Leonardo da Vinci. It should be of no small interest to cartoonists that the foundational book of Western architecture, dedicated to the first Emperor of Rome, contains a passage which purports to analyse the proportions of a typical human body and describe it in terms of its fit inside a drawn circular and a square-shaped panel (*Vitruvius's De Architectura*, Book III, chapter 1).

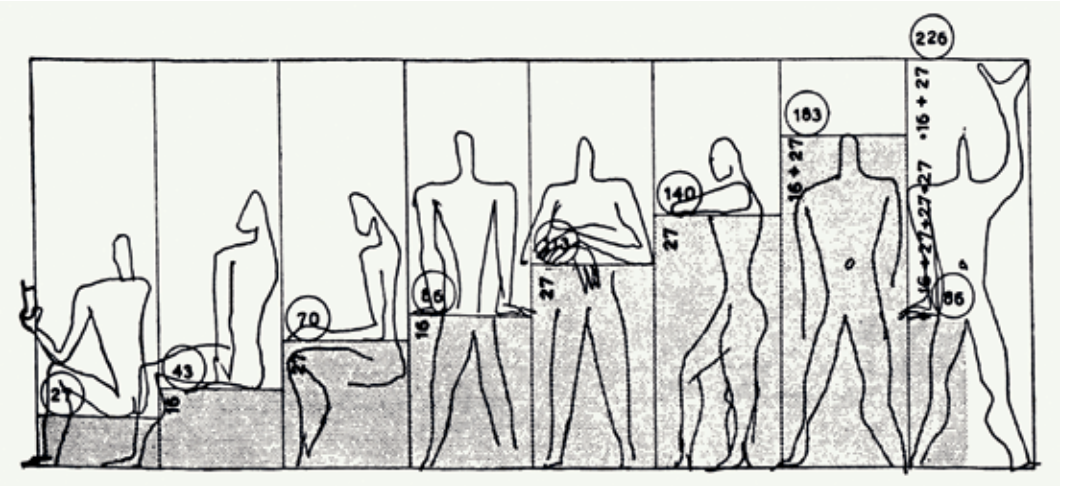
Leonardo's version of this 2D man was probably the last human being to figure in the graphic calculations of architects until the 20th century and Le Corbusier's *Modulor*. Yet if in 20 BCE Vitruvius himself had made a drawing to accompany his written description then that drawing (and any others that Vitruvius may have created to accompany his book) was lost, and it wasn't until the fifteenth century that the graphic Vitruvian Man as we know him was created by Leonardo. Indeed, with the rediscovery of classical learning that characterised the Renaissance, there was something of an obsession among artists for calculation of the ideal geometric proportions of the human body, and in particular with attempts to graphically realise Vitruvius's verbal description.

Thus, we see for example, the astonishingly outsize members in the less successful attempt to fit an ideal mannie simultaneously in the circle and the square by Leonardo's fellow artist and architect Caesariano. The key to Leonardo's success of course, was to do away with the simultaneity pose, and present the man standing in temporal sequence, standing one way in the circle, and turned another way in the square, all telescoped into the one drawing. Without that sequential aspect, the ideal mannie would have to be either extraordinarily well endowed in the hand, foot, and, as Caesariano clearly thought, in ahem … *other* departments (– a sort of superman, as it were, and appropriately enough for the world of comics), or a trained fairground contortionist. Thus the successful Leonardo depiction consists, in McShane's definition above, of a cartoon strip. Albeit one with its sequence abstracted into a single space.

Or does it? Do the panels of a cartoon not necessarily and by tacit readers' consent (unmentioned for example, by McShane) exist in spatial contiguity rather than in concentration and coextension? Is the Vitruvian Man even recognisable to the average reader as a cartoon? Even if it is not strictly so, then I'd argue that the above exploration and discussion of space, enclosure, drawing, proportion and the human body at least illustrates the long and intimate connection between the two arts. Indeed, from one point of view, architecture and the building appear to have played a formative role in the development of the art of the comic. Since the very beginning of its history, and right up to its most up-to-date manifestations, the comic has employed both architectural forms and architectural techniques to structure its discourse.





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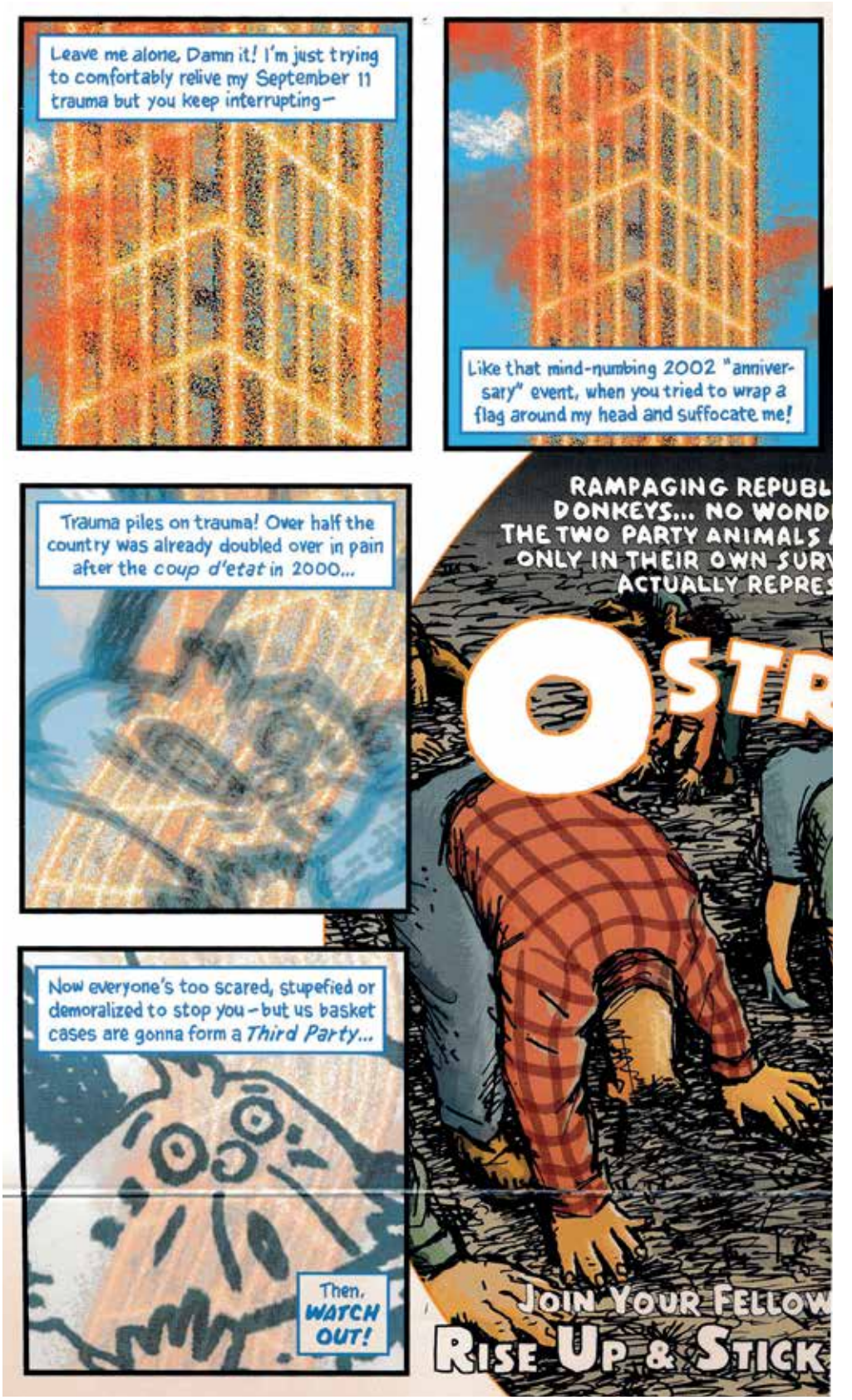
My House in Town.


Leave me alone, Damn it! I'm just trying to comfortably relive my September 11 trauma but you keep interrupting—
Like that mind-numbing 2002 "anniversary" event, when you tried to wrap a flag around my head and suffocate me!
Trauma piles on trauma! Over half the country was already doubled over in pain after the coup d'etat in 2000...
RAMPAGING REPUBL
DONKEYS... NO WOND
THE TWO PARTY ANIMALS
ONLY IN THEIR OWN SUR
ACTUALLY REPRES
STR
Now everyone's too scared, stupefied or demoralized to stop you—but us basket cases are gonna form a Third Party...
Then, WATCH OUT!
JOIN YOUR FELLOW
RISE UP & STICK

As John McShane pointed out in that article – perhaps the most cited Drouth article ever – the tenement house appeared as a structuring device in a story 'My House in Town' in issue 20 (1826) of the world's first ever periodical comic *Glasgow Looking Glass*. And that tradition continues right up to the current day with Art Spiegelmann's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004)which uses the story of one building complex (the World Trade Centre in New York City) to focus on the cosmopolitan existentialism of one nation and its people, and also Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012) which tells the history of a building through the vicissitudes of the biographies of its inhabitants past and present.

But is it simply a case of a lesser art (comics) exploiting the ready-made and finished forms and techniques of the other, higher art in order to achieve ends that are entertainment-based and less vital to civilisation? If *Vitruvian Man* is a cartoon, does that mean it is worth less than Leonardo's high art painting *Mona Lisa*, or than the architecture of his work on the cathedrals at Milan and Piacenza? Or is there a more profound relationship or history in the connection between these two arts?

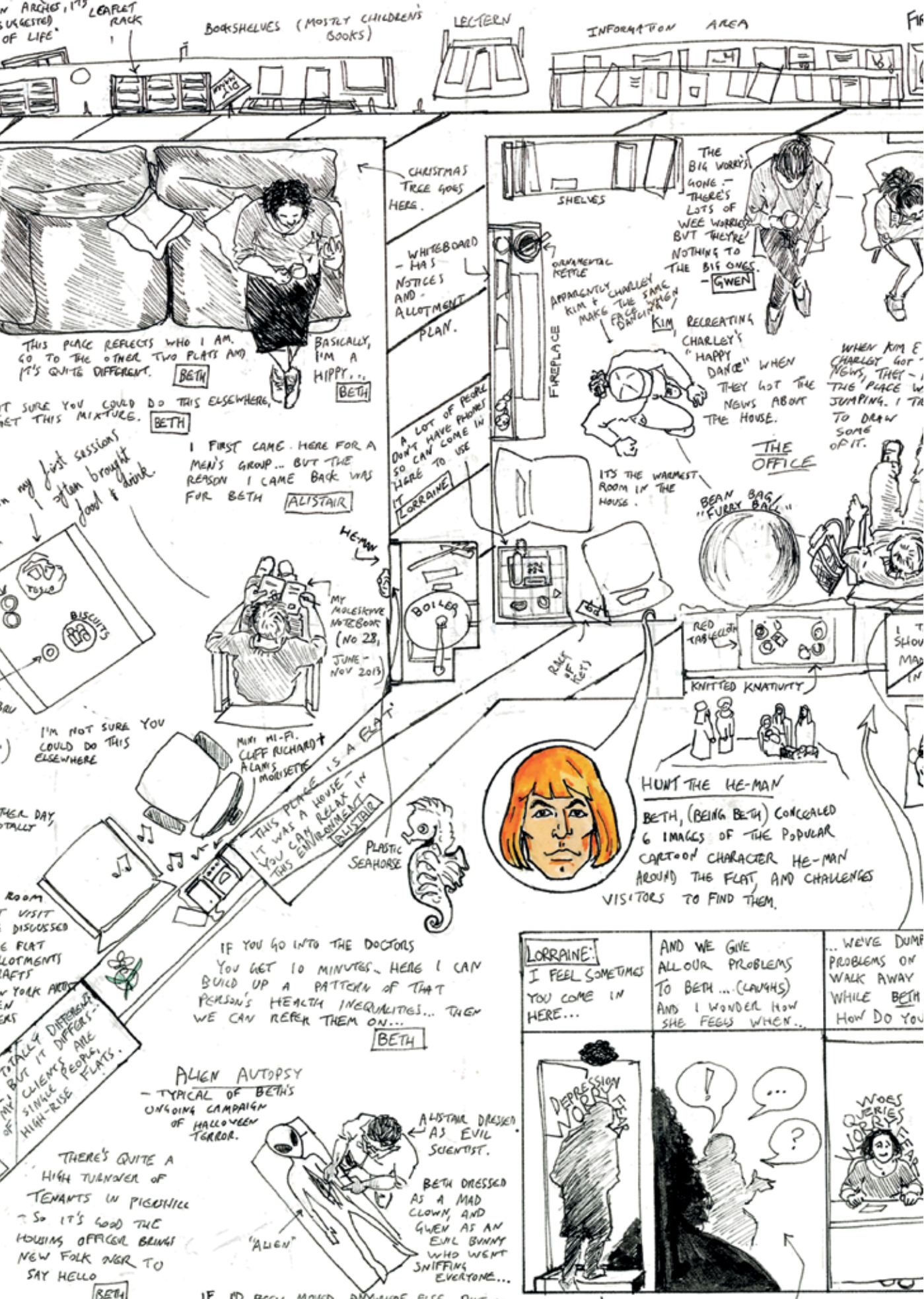
Both arts use the drawn line to enclose and represent space for inhabitation by their respective subjects, and indeed, drawing is fundamental to them. Furthermore, it is arguable, if we accept McShane's thesis on the emergence of the art of the comic, that both these styles of drawing came into a new stage of their modern development and became institutionalised at the same time, in the early to mid –nineteenth century. If the first regular comic magazine was published in 1825, then only nine years later the first regularised professional body of The Institute of British Architects was set up. Ray McKenzie has asserted that the great European beaux arts school format established in the 17th century, which took the Renaissance workshop tradition, and institutionalised the training of artists, designers and architects, had, by the nineteenth century, enshrined drawing at the heart of that education and 'systematised it into an inflexible pedagogic routine'.[1] A major context for the development and institutionalisation of both these arts in the early nineteenth century would of course be the dawn of the Industrial Revolution at that time. Drawing became a cog in the process of artistic production, routinized to be effective, reliable and enduring in its value. And if the mass production of cartoons only became possible, as McShane outlines, with new industrial techniques and heavy duty machinery, then architectural drawing equally had to develop at that time a more responsible, efficient, consistent and dependable language for the design of buildings strong enough and safe enough to house such machinery not just for printing technology but for all the other industries (railway stations, factories, warehouses, sewage works, townhalls etc) which were booming, and for the massive numbers of people that worked in them.

The frequent depiction of a building in cartoons either to structure the space or as a realist, decorative or symbolic (as in the Spiegelman comic cited above, for example) background is perhaps their most obvious and straightforward use of architectural forms. If a comic strip seeks to depict human life in its social and physical context at any historical stage beyond the paleolithic then it seems almost impossible to avoid drawing architectural forms. With the case of architectural technique, however, things are more complex. Is a drawing of a building – interior or exterior – always an architectural drawing? – does it always use architectural technique? To answer those questions we need to examine in more detail the established canon of types of architectural drawing, what they are used for, and the history of their establishment as such. Although I argue above that there was a major systematisation and institutionalisation of the architectural drawing tradition in the early nineteenth century I point also to an original establishment of the format during the Renaissance. Various architects, artists and workshops had input to this process, one of the most obvious and traceable being Raphael, when he was asked by Pope Leo X to make a survey and record of the ruins of ancient Rome.

In 1519 Raphael, both a painter and an architect, explains in a long letter to the Pope that the 'method of drawing proper to the architect is different from that of the painter'. There is a need for three specific types of measured drawing in architecture, he writes, and he describes the plan, the elevation and the section. These drawings are essentially different from those of the painter, because they detail a building with measured exactness, and are also used to instruct a builder. Thus, in a platonic rejection of the subjectivity of the artist, Raphael writes of architectural drawings, that

> There should be no [perspectival] diminution at the sides… since the architect cannot take any correct measurements for these foreshortened lines – and it is vital in this procedure for him to have the measurements correspond to the reality.[2]

These three strictly architectural drawings, as defined by Raphael, operate purely as two dimensional, they are that is to say, depthless designs. The plan, for example, as a horizontal expression of a vertical intention, and the section as an analysis of effects of light and gravity on a structure. While in many comics there is a tendency towards exploitation of these


LEAFLET RACK
BOOKSHELVES (MOSTLY CHILDREN'S BOOKS)
LECTERN
INFORMATION AREA
CHRISTMAS TREE GOES HERE.
THIS PLACE REFLECTS WHO I AM. GO TO THE OTHER TWO FLATS AND IT'S QUITE DIFFERENT. BETH
BASICALLY, I'M A HIPPY... BETH
I'M SURE YOU COULD DO THIS ELSEWHERE, GET THIS MIXTURE. BETH
I FIRST CAME HERE FOR A MEN'S GROUP... BUT THE REASON I CAME BACK WAS FOR BETH ALISTAIR
WHITEBOARD - HAS NOTICES AND ALLOTMENT PLAN.
A LOT OF PEOPLE DON'T HAVE PHONES SO CAN COME IN HERE TO USE IT LORRAINE
SHELVES
ORNAMENTAL KETTLE
FIREPLACE
APPARENTLY KIM & CHARLEY MAKE THE SAME FACE DANCING
KIM RECREATING CHARLEY'S "HAPPY DANCE" WHEN THEY GOT THE NEWS ABOUT THE HOUSE.
THE BIG WORRY'S GONE - THERE'S LOTS OF WEE WORRIES BUT THEY'RE NOTHING TO THE BIG ONES. - GWEN
WHEN KIM & CHARLEY GOT THE NEWS, THEY - THE PLACE WAS JUMPING. I TRIED TO DRAW SOME OF IT.
THE OFFICE
IT'S THE WARMEST ROOM IN THE HOUSE.
BEAN BAG "FURRY BALL"
BOILER
RACK OF KEYS
RED TABLECLOTH
KNITTED KNATIVITY
HE-MAN
MY MOLESKYNE NOTEBOOK (NO 28, JUNE - NOV 2013)
MINI HI-FI. CLIFF RICHARD & ALAN'S MORISETTE
I'M NOT SURE YOU COULD DO THIS ELSEWHERE
TO DO
BISCUITS
THIS PLACE IS A FLAT. IT WAS A HOUSE - YOU CAN RELAX IN THIS ENVIRONMENT ALISTAIR
PLASTIC SEAHORSE
HUNT THE HE-MAN
BETH, (BEING BETH) CONCEALED 6 IMAGES OF THE POPULAR CARTOON CHARACTER HE-MAN AROUND THE FLAT, AND CHALLENGES VISITORS TO FIND THEM.
IF YOU GO INTO THE DOCTORS YOU GET 10 MINUTES. HERE I CAN BUILD UP A PATTERN OF THAT PERSON'S HEALTH INEQUALITIES... THEN WE CAN REFER THEM ON... BETH
TOTALLY DIFFERENT BUT IT DIFFERS - CLIENTS ARE SINGLE PEOPLE, FLATS. HIGH-RISE
ALIEN AUTOPSY - TYPICAL OF BETH'S ONGOING CAMPAIGN OF HALLOWEEN TERROR.
ALISTAIR DRESSED AS EVIL SCIENTIST.
BETH DRESSED AS A MAD CLOWN, AND GWEN AS AN EVIL BUNNY WHO WENT SNIFFING EVERYONE...
"ALIEN"
THERE'S QUITE A HIGH TURNOVER OF TENANTS IN PICKHILL - SO IT'S GOOD THE HOUSING OFFICER BRINGS NEW FOLK OVER TO SAY HELLO BETH
LORRAINE: I FEEL SOMETIMES YOU COME IN HERE...
AND WE GIVE ALL OUR PROBLEMS TO BETH... (LAUGHS) AND I WONDER HOW SHE FEELS WHEN..
... WE'VE DUMP PROBLEMS ON WALK AWAY WHILE BETH HOW DO YOU
DEPRESSION WORRY FEAR
!
...
?
WOES WORRIES WORRY FEAR

architectural techniques, in fact it is very rare to find the pure architectural drawing employed in the cartoon. What we find instead, is that as the cartoon aims to depict life in its mutation through time, so almost inevitably there is an impulse towards creation of a perspectival depth representing the three dimensional spaces in which life takes place. Where, on inspection of the framework of panels in 'My House in Town', we are apparently presented with a section of a tenement house, in each panel there is perspectival depth into the room in order to show the life going on in there.

In other words this is not a purely architectural drawing – perspective on the interior of the rooms creates dimensions which would not in Raphael's definition 'correspond to the reality'. In the case of the Spiegelman cartoon mentioned above, then the drawing of the World Trade Centre which follows through the whole strip and, to a certain extent, orders the thematic, is not a simple two dimensional elevation, but a perspective drawing which in its depth draws the human characters into relation with its narrative of change. Again in the *Building Stories* series of cartoons by Chris Ware, the main character is often presented in what seems at first a plan drawing of her bedroom, with her in the bed. This type of drawing contrasts the inert, immobility of objects and structural features with the human possibilities for movement through that space (in this case a possibility often unexploited, apparently (and poignantly so) through existential crisis).

On closer inspection however, we note again that these drawings are not true plans, but are set at a slight axonometric angle, thus entailing a certain perspectival element. In sum, we see that life pulses out from, and deep into the pages and panels which seek to frame cartoons in the timeless present that we find in the architectural drawing. The cartoon drawings refuse to be contained by their frames, but the irrepressible life of cartoons is not only down to the depth of their representation but also, surely, something to do with the quality of their very lines in comparison with the architectural drawings. Some writers have even proposed that the line of the measured architectural drawing, as a ruled 'point to point connection' fully determined in advance and 'backed by force of law and contractual obligation', is the antithesis of the 'gestural trace' of the freehand line, which latter is alive on the page and conveying 'something of the texture of the edge of the material.'[3]

Of course there are many different weights and types of line (and indeed panels) to be found in the world of cartoons, and equally it would not do to set up as a defining law of the cartoon that the purely architectural technique is never employed. One vital characteristic not mentioned by McShane is that almost by definition they exist in defiance of the possibility of their own definition – that's what makes them so vital, so exuberant and so ineffable. Take my fellow editor, Mitch Miller's creation of the ' dialectogram' drawing, for example.
It exists as a type of true architectural plan (i.e. no perspective), usually of a real place especially a building or other type of site, drawn freehand like a rough cartoon frame. Yet text, commentary, and other types of drawing – perspectival, elevational and so on – are extrapolated onto, and beyond the frame of that architectural type drawing to create a plane pulsating with the expressive intensity and versatility of a seemingly endless variety of supplementary graphical and textual information and representation. Is it a cartoon? – yes and no.
Is it architectural? Yes and no.

Ultimately then, what we can say is that while throughout a long history, architectural drawings have been produced according to sets of conventions about views, measurements and scales and paper sizes, comics have also been produced according to such sets of conventions and more, but they have also consistently broken them.

(Endnotes)

1 Ray McKenzie, 'Points of Agreement & Lines of Dissent', in *Propositions* I, pp5-9 at p4.
2 Roger Jones & Nicholas Penny, (1983), *Raphael*, Yale UP, p.201.
3 Tim Ingold, (2007), *Lines: A Brief History,* Routledge, London, pp151, 161, 79, 166.