Using comics to promote green and inclusive architecture – Alex Fitch (University of Brighton)

(Note, if reading this alongside the powerpoint slides, text in red = go to the next slide for an accompanying image)

Architects and architecture have been the subject of a number of notable graphic novels in recent years, including Chris Ware’s *Building Stories*, Richard McGuire’s *Here* and David Mazzucelli’s *Asterios Polyp*. A number of comics creators also have a background in architecture and related fields, including Dave Gibbons, Alison Sampson, and Owen Pomery. However, outside of the range of titles available to the general comics-reading public, a small number of architects are also using sequential art to explain their designs to clients and other stakeholders. Proponents of this use have created architectural projects concerned with the integration of recycling, green spaces, and community involvement in their projects. This is not to say that comics that explore sustainable architecture and community involvement in the built environment cover topics particularly suited to the medium. It is more the case that it seems the kinds of architecture practices that utilise comics as a way of explaining their projects, are also the kind who are interested in sustainable and community led activities. At most, considering this correlation, perhaps these are the kind of firms that are forward thinking, regarding both comics and sustainability.

01.20In today’s talk, I’m going to look at three examples. These include: Erect Architects’ *BinToGather* project, which was realised as part of the Royal Institute of British Architects’ ‘Constructing Communities’ season, and includes comic strips to explain the design and implementation of a recycling initiative. I’m going to explore architects C.J. Lim and Ed Liu’s book *smartcities, resilient landscapes + eco-warriors,* whichincludes a number of comics looking at the possibilities of eco-friendly architecture which could be built in such locations as North Dakota and Jiangu Province, as well as imagining a utopian future based on greater integration of green spaces in cities. Finally I’ll look at Sabba Khan’s involvement with the ‘Shape Newham’ initiative, which brings her parallel careers as an architect and graphic novelist into the revitalisation of a public space in this East London Borough.

As noted at the start, there are comics about and by architects, so it might not be surprising that architects whose interests are in disseminating their field might use comics to explain and promote their work. However, at this conference, this is an idea where I’m preaching to the converted. Even in the outside world, to interested parties, comics may be considered a growth industry; but in the field of architecture, it seems to be a medium that has only recently been considered as a delivery mechanism, suitable for the transmission of ideas.

When one thinks about how architecture and human interaction with architecture is depicted, there are various tools traditionally used by the architect. These include building plans, which might be obscure in their interpretation to anyone not schooled in reading such images (although they offer some similarity to comics, consisting of boxes nestled next to each other containing text and images). When one considers the imagery often found near buildings under construction, one often sees idealised computer generated renderings of the proposed building, or promotional videos turning these into 3D models. With these examples in mind, they are either hard to understand, or don’t actually give the viewer a relatable consideration of what the building might look like in the real world beyond a simulation, or how it might be used.

Although there are rare examples of informative comics on building sites, such as Will Morris’ Adventures in Design strip, which wrapped the hoardings of the V&A’s Design museum in Dundee, the comics one finds on most sites are used to offer safety instructions on PPE for workers aiding the construction of the building. They may include simple instructions such as don’t lean while on a ladder, or try not to trip over wires; and such patronising messages is probably why some companies have commissioned children to create safety posters for building sites. These presumably have some success, or they won’t be commissioned, so with this in mind, if a comic can help construction workers to not hurt themselves during the erection of a building, then the use of a comic to encourage sustainable behaviours in parts of a building’s surroundings – i.e. by the recycling bins – is probably not so untenable.

Erect Architecture is a practice based in Hackney. They’ve worked on a number of projects around the capital, often with a focus on community projects. Bin toGather was an initiative proposed by the firm to be used in ‘Here East’, a media park built on part of the former Olympics site in Stratford, East London, which houses media companies alongside small campuses representing the Universities of Staffordshire, Loughborough and UCL. The project was mooted by Erect Architecture as a way of incorporating recycling into the everyday activities of people visiting the site, to make it a communal activity and make it a fun activity. Suggesting that comics as a way of communicating such a project was unusual, the project coordinator Susanne Tutsch said in a talk at the University of Brighton: “I think they thought we were a tiny bit bonkers because this was, sort of, just a comic we drew, where we were taking the idea to an extreme, where people come together, from the bus stop, actually, because everyone is so disjointed from the rest of London, in how you get to it. How can the swap shops work, how does it increase activity?”

The comic envisions recycling as a fun leisure activity, turning it into a playful game for adults to take part in, as a contrast to their daily work environment, and an activity that reminds them of being children. The comic uses the iconography of recycling leaflets and posters – common on communal noticeboards – and adds a ludic quality, to encourage the activity beyond more staid instructions. The fourth page of the comic proposal shows how this is an engagement with existing space on the site – ‘activating’ an unused courtyard. However, perhaps as a way of trying to generate a response from the reader, it verges on satire by suggesting people might only engage with recycling, if it could be incorporated into a game of basketball or an art activity.

In the end, while Here East decided not to commission Erect Architects to construct some kind of ludic recycling initiative in Stratford, the project was partially realised as a form of pop-up architecture as part of the ‘Constructing Communities’ season at the Royal Institute of British Architects in 2016. Here the firm built a wooden adventure playground for adults, and by creating a structure that people could interact with for the duration of the London Festival of Architecture, the construction could work alongside the comic as a way for people to see how the Bin toGather project might work, if situated in their community. Photos of this were then added to the end of the comic, presented on Erect’s website as a combination of the initial proposal and its partial realisation in a different location.

So, why might comics be a good medium to engage a community with recycling, and the act of incorporating recycling activities into the architecture of the built environment? Thinking about this in terms of pedagogy – how and why comics might be useful as an educational tool – there has been some research into the idea over the last two decades. Hammond and Danaher note the use of comics as a medium to educate reluctant readers, or readers who don’t have the native language of a country as their primary language. They suggest that comics make the task of understanding a text “more enjoyable or likely to enhance learning” (Hammond and Danaher p. 200). As the visitors of Here East include college students, there is relevancy to studies of this group’s appreciation of comics; Cheesman notes how the medium is also a useful tool for tackling less appealing subjects, particularly in the field of science. She comments, regarding her own personal experience, that: “I like to start my classes by sharing a comic because it tends to put my students in a more receptive mood for the lesson that follows” (Cheesman, p. 48), and that “Comics are a great way to ease the pain” (ibid). While there are enthusiastic recyclers in the community, many people approach the task grudgingly as a chore, so a comic describing this activity can be an enjoyable read in and of itself, and so may be beneficial to uptake of the practice. Furthermore, a comic that makes the task itself also seem enjoyable, may be beneficial too. Susanne Tutsch may think the initial use of a comic to propose this initiative by her firm is ‘bonkers’, but its acceptance by RIBA in the London Festival of Architecture suggests the initiative and documentation was a fruitful one, even if it wasn’t realised in the location it was originally intended for.

Another push against reluctant activities is when architecture practices propose sustainable architecture on a much larger and grander scale. C.J. Lim and Ed Liu from the practice Studio 8 Architects have collaborated on a variety of books mixing text and comics, to engage the reader with architectural theory, and propose sustainable initiatives that cities might engage with. These include renovating brown sites in a sustainable way, in and around existing infrastructure. *smartcities, resilient landscapes + eco-warriors* proposes a variety of innovate land uses in a number of cities around the world, in countries as diverse as Britain, America, South Korea, China and Denmark.

As with aspects of the Bin toGather project by Erect Architects, some of C.J. Lim and Ed Liu’s proposals are whimsical and impractical, but in-between elements that might seem like science-fiction, are ideas that could be incorporated into modern cities. For example, their proposal for a multi-level development in Fargo, North Dakota where agricultural land is planted on the top of buildings with living spaces below, is a sensible use of space in a city, where rooftops are not used for any particular purpose except perhaps solar panels. Some of the implementation of this on the page looks more like a 22nd Century idea rather than the 21st, with magical lifts that emerge from the floor without a shaft, and reach upwards through the floors of apartments. However, the idea of stacking homes, car parks and greenspaces together, reduces the overall footprint of an urban area. Having this idea explained by a comic, adds a narrative to the imagery. This helps readers understand the multiple uses of the building, how different levels, and different people within the space interact with each other. To quote Paul Fisher Davies: “The task of comics, as we have seen, is to create narrative drawings… drawings that are meant to communicate action, sequences of events which add up to a story” (Davies 63). Lim and Liu utilise this idea, which is unusual in the field of architecture. They use a stark art style that illustrates the architectural qualities of their drawing, and contain these drawings within panel borders, adding speech balloons to turn architectural drawings into a narrative comic. Other examples in their book have less narrative, and so the presentation of drawings in panels on the page perhaps only mimic a comic, and invite the reader to find a narrative, but there is no explicit one. For example when illustrating their idea of an agricultural city in China, Lim and Liu’s pastoral scenes on page 200 of their book, depict bucolic scenes which could be read as a traveller’s eye view, or even a bird’s eye view through this landscape. Indeed, at the start of the chapter introducing this city, the authors state that they turned to Constable for inspiration in this idealised landscape. However, when one compares the grid of images on page 200, with the grid of topographical maps two pages later, one can see they also exist purely as illustration, to give a more idealised rendering that suggests three dimensional space, in comparison to the more diagrammatical content of page 202.

However diagrams, particularly in proximity to comics, can suggest a readable page as well. Stylised icons representing birdlife, frogs and bees show visitors on a map where to find such creatures on one page, while the next shows hospitality features for those visitors wanting comfort breaks. Perhaps the regularised form of these diagrammatical elements is by designers who are as much interested in making an aesthetically pleasing page, as much as an informative one. However, this geographical mapping of birds, bees and frogs, still suggests a subtle narrative, albeit one created by the idea of movement through a landscape when encountering different forms of nature. A more traditional form of comics is found on pages 232 to 233, which provide a manifesto of sorts about how living in a more eco-friendly city, where nature is brought into all aspects of the conurbation, might provide a more enriching life. Here we see inhabitants from cradle to grave enjoying life in this fictional location, with the language of comics providing a journey across the double page spread, as the reader encounters locals engaged with a variety of different activities. While this comic sees the drawing style pared down still further, it is also experimental, with an individual panel including a top down perspective from a distance, a close-up of part of the landscape, and a side-on drawing of people picking vegetables simultaneously. As such, the comic structure mimics the theme of the manifesto – a city can be multi-use for a variety of people, as can a single drawing.

I asked C.J. Lim about the use of narrative comics in the book, as a tool to explain human interaction with the built environment. He said: “I’ve always been interested in story-telling, and I always feel that buildings, architecture, territories, spaces that we design and construct, and build, are vessels to celebrate narratives of humanity. And, I think that’s the basic principle of most of my work”. As Paul Fisher Davies notes, comics deal with continuities of time and of space, they: “signal to us changes of location and time by visual means… and by verbal means in caption boxes” (Davies p.74). The variety of comics, and comic styles, in Lim and Liu’s work utilise these methods to tell a story about people inhabiting spaces. At the same time, in the context of their work as architects, they are using the language of comics to encourage readers (and one might infer, architectural clients and related stakeholders as the primary readers) to look at these comics with an eye to seeing how the architecture and contrasted environment on the page, is being sold to them, as an idealised place to work and live.

The final architect I’m going to look at in this talk is one who combines her comic book practice and architectural practice in various projects. Sabba Khan is part of the architecture firm Khan Bonshek and also has released a number of self-published comics, before being picked up by Myriad Editions and Abrams. Khan’s comics often have the built environment as part or as the entirety of their subjects, and incorporate types of architectural drawings that we have seen in the previous examples. For example, ‘Broken Borders, Edges Blurred’ has an urban landscape seen from the vantage point of a drone or similar flying object as its first panel, and various drawings of a room, showing how people are situated within the interior of a house, for the next nine panels. The next page shows a transparent drawing of a house, showing how the interior space aligns with the outside walls, while the large panel on the third page shows a wall in isolation, as a metaphor for the isolation of one of the characters. We see similar ideas at work in her other comics, even when working with a different writer – showing an architect’s eye of windows, streets, interior spaces and buildings in isolation. However, in contrast to the psychological stories seen in some of her short comics, her projects which display images of real streets, show an intent to engage with social inclusion. One example is the leaflet and poster that Khan designed to promote 62 Gladstone Street, an art space intended to mix the work of members of the local Muslim community with those from the non-Muslim community. This shows a house in isolation on one image, and as part of a terrace on the poster – an institution unique and also part of something bigger.

Considering sequential art as a medium that has a certain amount of repetition in terms of structure – for example regular sized panels on a comic page adhering to a nine-panel grid – it’s worth comparing this with Khan’s documenting of her architectural practice. In the photos on their website, we see repetition of bricks and steps, forming a pattern in the image. This can also be seen in some of her comics – the repetition of an act of faith, and a rolling pin turned ink stamp, designed to create the art of a repetitive comic on the page. The latter is also another example of an inclusive activity – related to the act of making roti bread, which will be shared with the family.

These ideas of repetition, an interest in architecture, and inclusion – to bring together people of and outside a certain community – are combined in her public art project, commissioned as part of Shape Newham, an initiative in East London. As the artist herself explains, her contribution, Pilgrim’s Way is: “a public art project with Newham. So, this is a site in East Ham, taking local residents’ lived experiences and turning them into a story on the paving. People can, sort of, go and read on the floor. Probably be laser-cut stuff that’s then embedded into the concrete. I really like looking at comics and storytelling and how that can move in lots of different dimensions.”

These laser-cut multi-colour panels are not strictly comics, although they do combine text and images in frames. They feature comments by the local community, along with metaphorical images of hands to represent collaboration between locals and may be read in a sequence, but can be read in different orders. Certainly, they will be encountered embedded into the surface of the street by people navigating it in one direction or another depending from which end, a person enters the street. I’m presuming the blue rectangles in the drawing of Pilgrim’s Way itself represent the intended location of the panels, so will be encountered and read from left to right by someone walking the street in that direction, and also encountered and read from right to left. As such, it’s worth noting that some people who live in this multi-national neighbourhood will have come from cultures who read from right to left, so it is very appropriate that the panels of image and text can be read by people walking in either direction in a different order, along the street.

This is a project that is inclusive of local community voices, and brings these voices into the very fabric of an architectural surface, into the pavement of the street itself.

Bradford Wright notes how comics is a medium that often “affirms the individual’s obligation to society” (Wright 203) and as such comics in different decades reflect differing societal change, as well as how individuals fit within that phenomenon. In times of societal change, The Arab Spring, the Me Too movement, the re-emegence of Black Lives Matter in recent weeks as a reaction to numerous tragedies, activists have not only taken to the streets, but left their mark on the streets in terms of drawing text and iconography onto the pavements and walls of cities. Activists are not only literally leaving their mark, but are also using the streets as a platform for societal change.

The comics by architects that I’ve looked at in this talk offer visions of a sustainable future - in pages by C.J. Lim and Ed Liu - and in a brochure and its realisation as a structure by Susanne Tutsch and Erect Architects. The latter also invites and encourages participation in recycling by members of a community, and similarly, Sabba Khan’s work brings together members of different parts of a community in work actually embedded in the substance of a street, as well as in the form of comics and posters that encourage social cohesion.

Dominic Davies notes in his book on architectural comics in marginalised communities that: “urban comics can help us... to rethink, and perhaps even to rebuild, more socially and spatially *just* cities in the twenty-first century” (Davies 3). His book considers this phenomenon in cities neglected by economics and natural disasters, however social cohesion and sustainable architecture are needs for urban environments even in the First World, with inequality and lack of ecological provision present here as well.

The comics and initiatives I’ve shown in the presentation today, demonstrate that these projects by people with an interest in architecture and comics, are bringing inclusive and sustainable ideas to architecture practices in the UK. Perhaps as forward thinking creators who are happy to use comics to explore green and community focussed projects in the architecture world, they are well placed to see these initiatives realised in the public realm as well.

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