Japanese City in Manga

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Abstract
Today's Japanese city features an interest in renewal and technological modernity which have led to a continuous regeneration, poised between nostalgia for the past and the rush towards the future. These concepts are observable in *manga* settings, Japanese comic productions that sometimes reflect the difficult co-existence between traditional bases and contemporary transformations, as in Jiro Taniguchi's stories, while at other times prophesying the metropolis of an apocalyptic future, like in Katsuhiro Otomo's *mangas,* or imagine a parallel, multidimensional reality, as in the *cyberpunk* stories by Tsutomu Nihei. Through the imagery of these three authors, among the most representative of Japanese *manga,* this text attempts to discover the Japanese city, reflecting on its roots, its modernity and its future projections.
Keywords: comics, *manga,* Japanese cities, visionary architecture, fantasy.

Título: La ciudad japonesa en el manga
Resumen
La ciudad japonesa actual muestra un especial interés por la renovación y la modernidad tecnológicas, lo que ha dado lugar a una regeneración continua de las ciudades, suspendidas entre la nostalgia del pasado y la carrera hacia el futuro. Estos conceptos pueden observarse en la configuración de manga, el cómic japonés, que a menudo refleja la difícil convivencia entre los pilares tradicionales de la sociedad y las transformaciones contemporáneas, como sucede en las historias de Jiro Taniguchi; otras veces profetiza la metrópoli de un futuro apocalíptico, como en los mangas de Katsuhiro Otomo, o nos permiten imaginar una realidad paralela, multidimensional, como en las historias *cyberpunk* de Tsutomu Nihei. A través de las imágenes de estos tres autores, que se hallan entre los más representativos del manga japonés, este artículo trata de mostrar cómo se representa la ciudad japonesa, reflexionando sobre sus raíces, su modernidad y sus proyecciones futuras.
Palabras clave: cómics, manga, ciudades japonesas, arquitectura visionaria, fantasía.

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1. Introduction

In post-war Japan, in order to recover from defeat, the race towards progress at any cost has created a gap between the traditional arts of the ancient culture and modern economy—and cultural successes—on an international scale (Rambert & Thevenet 2010: 159). Metamorphoses also emerge in *manga* settings (Japanese comic productions), that offer visions reflecting traditional Japanese cities, their transformation and their future projections within worlds of fantasy, sometimes extreme.
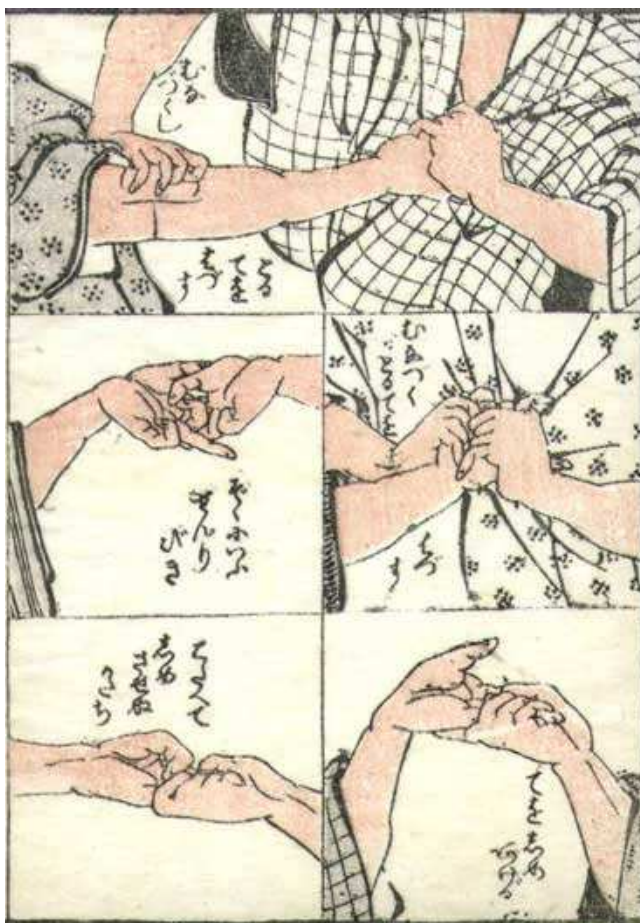

Figure 1. Katsushika Hokusai, in *Hokusai Manga* (1814).

After World War II modern Japanese comics were created through the work of Osamu Tezuka, also known in Japan as the "supreme god of manga". He came from an extraordinary graphic culture—Katsushika Hokusai in the nineteenth century coined the word *manga*, "random pictures" (Bouquillard & Marquet 2007)—, which inspired many nineteenth century European arts (figure 1). The elements that distinguish manga from western comics are expressions and stylizing of character design (big eyes, disproportions, etc.), cinematographic panel cuttings, graphic lines to represent fast movement, complexity of narrative plot. Little attention is paid to the setting in which the stories take place and they are often overlooked: with typical use of textures for backgrounds, and archetypes for settings, such as school buildings, where most of the adolescent stories take place, elevated to archetypes of reader's imagination (Bi 2007). Settings became significant for the progress the stories around the '70s and '80s, with authors whose work is characterized by a European cut, able to create within their stories, real interior or fantastic worlds, and able to influence the story in the same way and sometimes more as the characters. Among these Jiro Taniguchi who, through sensitive and detailed settings, captures the soul of the ancient cities, while authors such as Katsuhiro Otomo use the more modern architecture of contemporary cities as background to claustrophobic stories of *fantasy* or *cyberpunk*. Recently, comics have become able to invent parallel universes originated by technological aberration of the city and its structures, as seen in Tsutomu Nihei's *manga*.

In *mangas* it is possible to trace, in a realistic and futuristic way, the main themes characterizing the image of the contemporary Japanese city: the enormous growth in the last seventy years, modernization of construction methods, the use of new formal models from Western architectural culture.

As in other parts of the world, the balance arising from the slow improvement of human interventions, in line with nature, has been replaced by acceleration to changes and consumptions so that the contemporary city has been transformed into a dynamically changing body. However, the Japanese city looks different from western suburbs and, behind the apparent chaos, it's possible to see a hidden order, far from the logic of western cities, closer to the spatial concepts of Japanese culture.

Through the visions of these three authors, we examine *manga* settings, using the linguistic codes of comics, graphic and spatial analysis, seeking references to real or imaginary architectures, through the comparison between present and past, and looking for common elements.

The hypothesis is that, through spatial visions which enjoy a complete creative freedom, as those of the comics, which have in

common with the architecture the field of representation, it is easier to recognize the inventive mechanisms that contribute to building an idea of architecture and the city. While remaining in an imaginative area, it starts by real elements and reassembles them in a fantastic, therefore new key.

2.1. Nostalgia for the ancient city in Jiro Taniguchi's *manga*

Jiro Taniguchi, born in Tottori in 1947, is one of the authors who conveyed with great sensitivity the locations of their stories through a detailed and careful style and a design that emphasizes less overt expressiveness of the characters. Balancing reality and fantasy, Taniguchi uses a minimal narrative model, often autobiographical, which can be placed together with current post-modern literature, represented by authors like Banana Yoshimoto and Murakami Aruki. The settings of his comic books faithfully reproduce, through the detailed description of small things, the soul of the Japanese city and its contradictions. He often recreates new scenarios through famous architecture, such as Hoffmann's *Palais Stoclet* in Brussels, Wagner's *Wiener Postsparkasse* in Vienna (Bi 2007), or the architecture of the industrial era, which, placed in different situations (transposition of place) and intended for different uses (transposition of use), become backgrounds for the setting of fantastic stories. The city of Taniguchi's *manga* is related to traditional and intimate urban spaces such as Kyoto, where the author often sets his stories.

However, when the narration moves to ultra modern settings, as in Tokyo of *The Quest for the Missing Girl* (Taniguchi 2008) (figure 2), the reader seems bewildered and immediately starts nostalgia for humanized environments. In *The walking man* (Taniguchi 2003), it's easy to breathe a nostalgic and dreamlike atmosphere and the longing for a vanished world. Here the story fully overlaps the glance of the protagonist, whose only purpose is to walk along the streets, or through green parks, marvelling at little things hidden in reality, almost a lifestyle choice, and a philosophical and mental natural path.

In the introduction of *L'arte di Jiro Tanguchi,* Davide Castellazzi writes: "Taniguchi entra negli interstizi delle storie, incitandoci ad ammirare ciò che il personaggio si ferma ad ammirare, cioè i suoi disegni" (Castellazzi 2003: 7), but also the city.
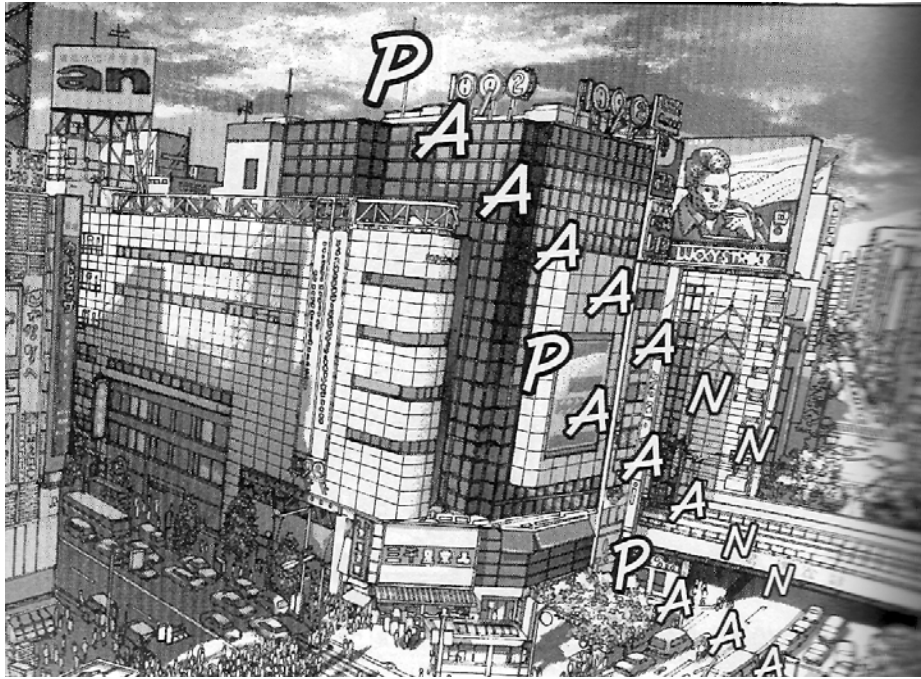
Figure 2. Shibuya quartier, Tokyo, in *The Quest for the Missing Girl.*

2.2. The Japanese city: between tradition and modernism

The backgrounds that emerge from Taniguchi's *manga* are of reality filtered through poetry, in which the setting, between tradition and modernism, seems to suggest an invisible order between dream and reality. The city's characteristics and the attention to the landscapes, faithfully reported through detailed drawings, evoke a "circular" balance between man and nature that comes from a different philosophical and religious attitude of Japanese culture regarding spatial rules. In Western culture this relationship appears symmetrical and tri-partite, mediate by God. On the other hand, the Japanese treat nature as a direct incarnation of the *Absolute* (Maraini 2006: 13): man merges with nature, the subject with the object, the individual with society, the spirit with materials. The relation between art and nature—that in Western culture is realized through mimesis or through geometry and mathematical abstraction—becomes knowledge and imitation of the invisible mechanisms of the natural world. For example, in Japanese gardens the actions of man mix with actions of nature, so that they cannot be separated. Fosco Maraini writes: "la sensazione più immediata è quella di una completa armonia tra uomo e natura" (Maraini 2006: 13).

Figure 3. Elements of traditional *machiya* (typical Japanese house) in Jiro Taniguchi's *manga:* veranda (*engawa*), entrance, floor of compacted earth (*doma*), room (*zashiki*), staircase, window (*mado*), cage window (*mushikomado*), sliding doors (*fusuma* and *shoji*) and carpet (*tatami*).

In architecture, traditional buildings called *machiya* (single family homes in commercial and residential dual-use), are inspired by a similar concept of circularity. Inside, spaces are brought together along an axis, with no apparent hierarchy, forming flexible environments where the public and private world, interior and exterior, pure and impure, are mixed smoothly through the use of different materials, difference between trampling levels, filters and simulated passages between inside and out. To represent this relation, Kisho Kurokawa[1] uses the example of the *kanji*[2] "en", which means, bond, relationship. This relation is represented, inside a *machiya,* through some compositional elements, that define a sort of grey area: the veranda *engawa,* the covered open space *nokishita,* the passage *toriniwa,* the inner garden *tsuboniwa,* the room *zashiki* (figure 3).

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[1] One of the founders of Metabolist Movement.
[2] Ideogrammatic characters of Chinese origin, which is based on the Japanese writing.
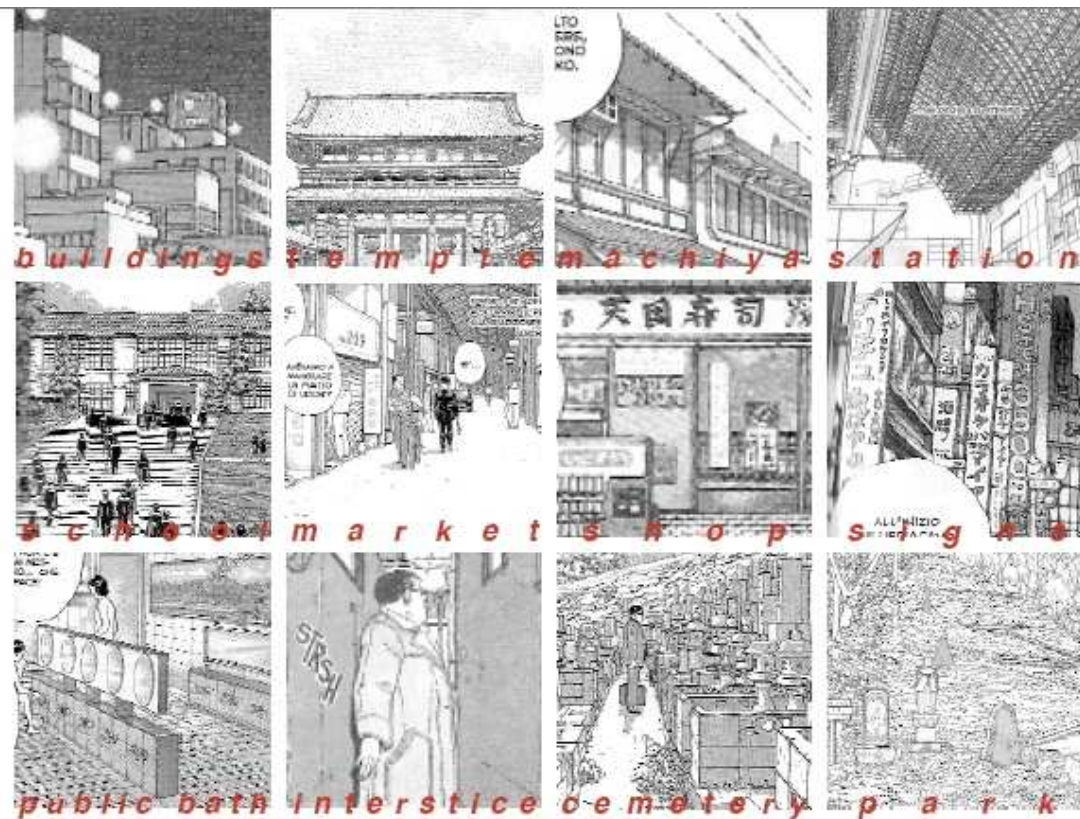
Figure 4. Elements of Japanese city in Jiro Taniguchi's *manga:* buildings, temple, traditional house (*machiya*), station, school, market, shop, signs, public bath, interstice, cemetery, and park.

Using the hologram principle proposed by Yoshinobu Ashihara (La Rocca 1997), that says that the smallest element contains the information about everything, it's possible to trace the aggregative principles of the contemporary Japanese city in the *machiya* space: the concept of fluid and interchangeable space; the lack of hierarchy among volumes mixing each other without any order; the use of building techniques as pre-building, modules, assembling, lack of urban roles. The city's image is thus made up of several different elements that add one to another one, without any apparent rule, like a *meccano* (figure 4).

3.1. *Akira*'s Neo-Tokyo

In the *fantasy* and *cyberpunk manga* settings by Katsuhiro Otomo, who was born in 1954 in Hasama, the contemporary and the future city are represented by negative connotations, as a claustrophobic place of social and technological degradation, like in *Domu* and *Akira,* published between 1982 and 1992 that was transposed, in 1988, into a cartoon. In *Akira,* the post-nuclear architecture of *Neo-Tokyo* of 2030, realized with extraordinary realism, recall scenes of contemporary Tokyo, partly destroyed or demolished by a nuclear war, partially preserved in its ultramodern buildings.

Figure 5. Neo-Tokyo, in *Akira* by Katsuhiro Otomo.

Thus it grows around an empty[3] space (the *Imperial Palace* for one, atomic ground zero for the other) and it shows a vertical development of buildings and triggers off a series of infrastructure and of a large number of districts. However, while in a contemporary megalopolis the spaces and energy flow seem continuous, in *Neo-Tokyo* time degradation and the damage of war, seemingly healed, stops the city's development. Visually it seems a contrast between the central districts, similar to an inaccessible citadel made up of tall buildings like cathedrals made of metal sheeting, that recall Bruno Taut's *Die Stadtkrone,* and poor neighbourhoods where social deprivation reflects the buildings decadence (figure 5). However, there is a third forgotten city, removed from memories, that lives alongside the first two: one of voids of war, off-limits quarters in the city, contaminated by atomic explosion, which spreads like a sick organism into the ancient city (figure 8). Here the infrastructures, no longer used by the large amount of traffic for which they were designed, seem to evoke the skeleton of a huge prehistoric animal (figure 7). The energy of the city which, for Metabolists[4], makes the metropolis able to reproduce and respond to external changes by modifying itself, is lost along with the faith of man in technologies.

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[3] He describe Tokyo like a city that "ruota intorno ad un luogo [...] in cui il centro stesso non è altro che un'idea evaporata" (Barthes 1984).
[4] The Metabolism is a Japanese group of architects and designers, their programmatic intentions are set in motion manifest: "Metabolism 1960: The proposal for new urbanism".

Figure 6. Neo-Tokyo, in *Akira* by Katsuhiro Otomo.

Akira's Neo-Tokyo is the city of chaos and violence, like some districts of Tokyo today, the Pan-Asian city, rather than Nipponese. This huge ruined town recalls the giant lizard Godzilla, victim of nuclear radiation, a fierce and destructive monster, metaphor of disaster caused by man when he abuses nature (Rambert & Thevenet 2010: 160). In Katsuhiro Otomo's vision, where architecture becomes steel and glass traps of a town without soul, a clear critique appears against modernism and its technological aberrations, caused by the exceptional growth that Tokyo has undergone from post-war to the present.
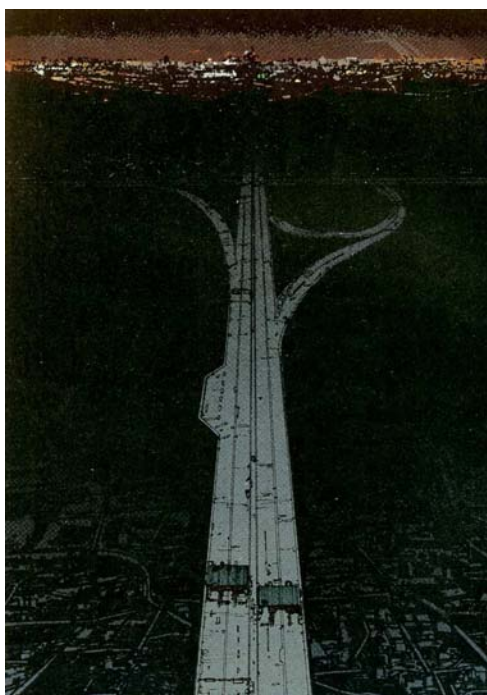

Figure 7. Neo-Tokyo's infrastructure in Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*.

3.2. Tokyo, a synesthesia city

Probably Tokyo, more than any other city, has inspired the architectural imagery of *manga* and other forms of storytelling, often generating visions of an apocalyptic future. Japan's capital since 1868, when Edo changed its name to Tokyo *East Capital,* it is the largest metropolitan area in the world, with more than 34 million inhabitants. Divided into 23 prefectures (*ku*), its central area is the *Central Business District* with three municipalities, divided in nine main districts, whose functions are both similar and diversified. These are linked through a network of infrastructures serving as skeleton of the metropolitan functions and that represent the physical structure around which the city is developed.

Figure 8. Neo-Tokyo plan in Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira*.

Tokyo is a simultaneous metropolis, appearing without a past, strongly attached to its present and projected into the future. There's no centre, no squares but wide open spaces in front of the stations, the metropolis is an aggregate of several urban subsystems, linked through mobility functions. The city's space appears centrifugal and confusing. Everything is new and constantly changing, each building has an average life span of 26 years (Sacchi 2004: 32), surprisingly shaped constructions alternate with transparent skyscrapers covered by images, lights and ideograms. Volumes inter-penetrate, space is continuous and fluid, and roads relate to buildings and connect various levels. Infrastructural types are multiplied, piling up, roads

overlap highway viaducts that are grafted with railway bridges and underground stations while, on a smaller scale, walkways between buildings, overpasses, escalators, overlap with the urban transportation types. Despite apparent chaos, in Tokyo a repetitive order is recognizable, found both on a small and large scale. The main and secondary infrastructures are modelled on paths of ancient medieval Edo, while the urban aggregations are similar to clusters, corresponding to a logical fractal evolving. By visual analysis, the common city elements seem to be: capillary network infrastructures; simultaneity of uses; fragmented properties; aggregations of shapes; limited spaces; synesthesia[5] of images, sounds and lights; modifiability; flexibility.

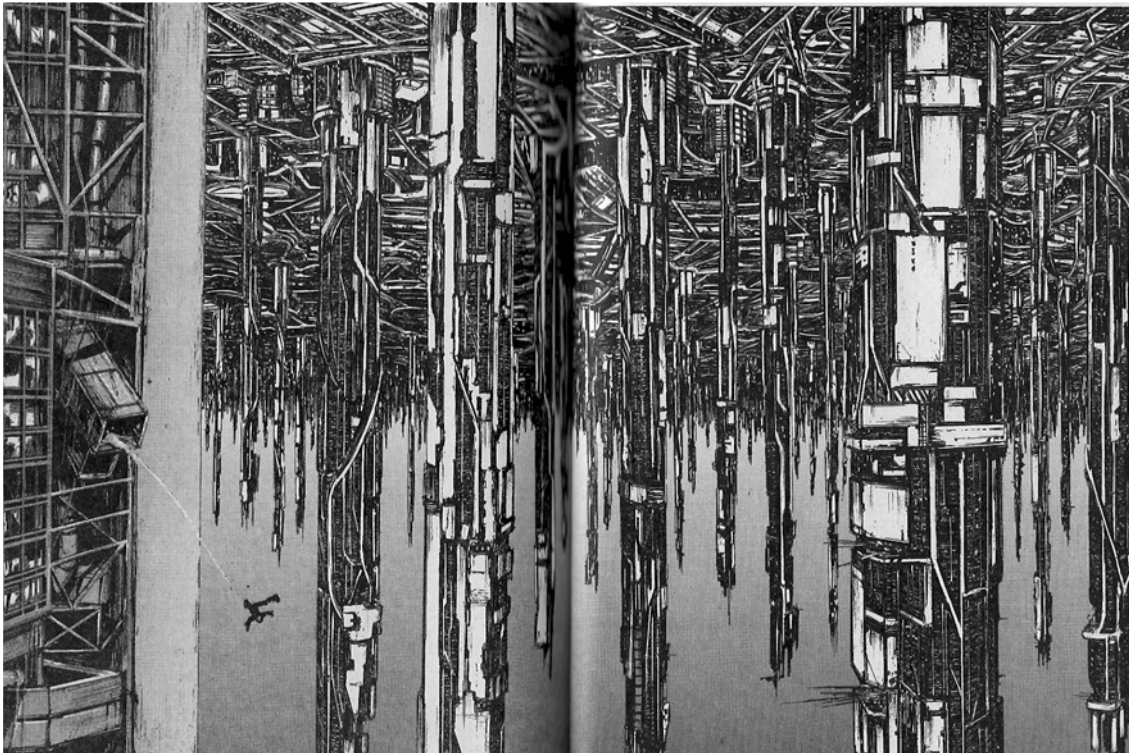## 4.1. The spatial imaginary of Tsutomu Nihei

Figure 9. Disorienting urban space, in *Blame* by Tsutomu Nihei.

The attempt to build other worlds, starting from architecture, is the characteristic of Tsutomu Nihei's *mangas*. Born in Fukushima in 1971, he studied architecture in the U.S. and later returned to Japan finding, in the world of *manga,* space for imaging a parallel universe for its architecture. His style, characterized by a dark aesthetic, contrasts the use of fine lines, engravings reminiscent of past

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[5] Synesthesia is defined here as the multi-sensory effect that strikes Tokyo's visitors, simultaneously bombarded by images and sounds coming from the screens on buildings, traffic noise and the neon signs.

centuries, with dark shading where shapes seem to come out of the shadows. His *mangas, Blame, Abara, Biomega,* are characterized by *cyberpunk* settings and by a sterile and inhuman atmosphere which comes from technological aberration of the city and its structures. But, if in *Akira* the link with the architecture of the contemporary city is still strong, in Tsutomu Nihei's *manga* landmarks are not immediately recognizable. In *Blame* the urban image is articulated and labyrinthine: it leaves the reader disoriented. In it, it's no longer possible identify the top, the bottom, the order, the hierarchy (figure 9).
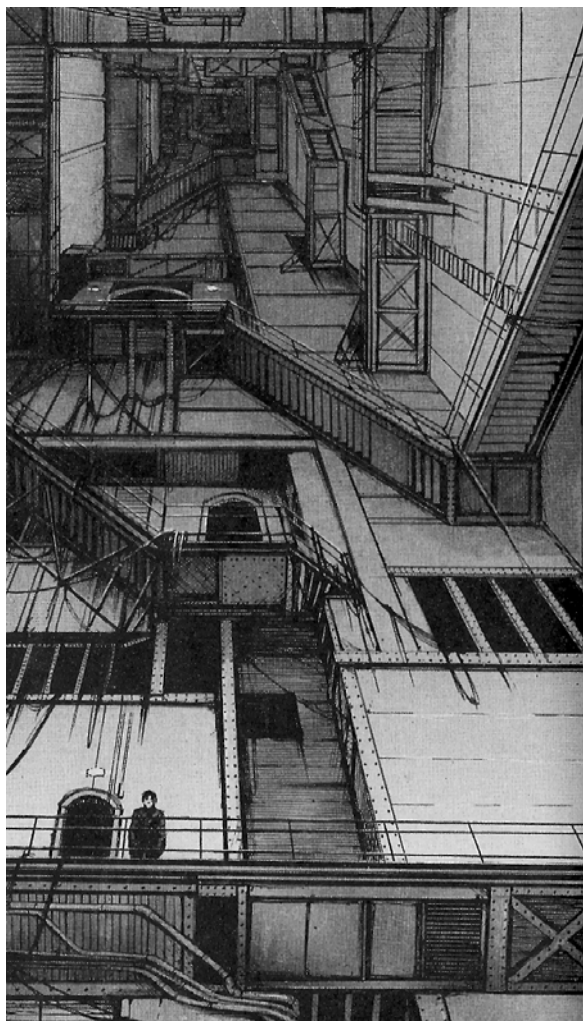

Figure 10. *Escherian* space, in Tsutomu Nihei's *Blame*.

The multifaceted and symbiotic space seems to meet the rules of a *non-Euclidean* geometry, where the different faces of a polyhedron merge and inter-penetrate, no longer recognizable as a fluid, continuous and infinite body (*en*), multiple and simultaneous space, which folds in on itself, like the *Tesseract* in Robert Heinlein's

tale[6]. Settings are configured in multifaceted stylistic creations: now a scene appearing like a dizzying space from smooth and perpendicular surfaces; suddenly changes into a fluid and surrounding place, crossed by *Escherian* stairs (figure 10), narrow mechanical bridges where twisted tubes proliferate, together with cables and wires. It seems to be a balance between architectural image, aesthetic of machines and biological metaphor, where the artificial city elements, bridges, catwalks, cables, pipes, look like the organs and entrails of a mechanical body, with their own life, as if behind the space represented there were a hidden mechanism, similar to a scene, which gives him a life.

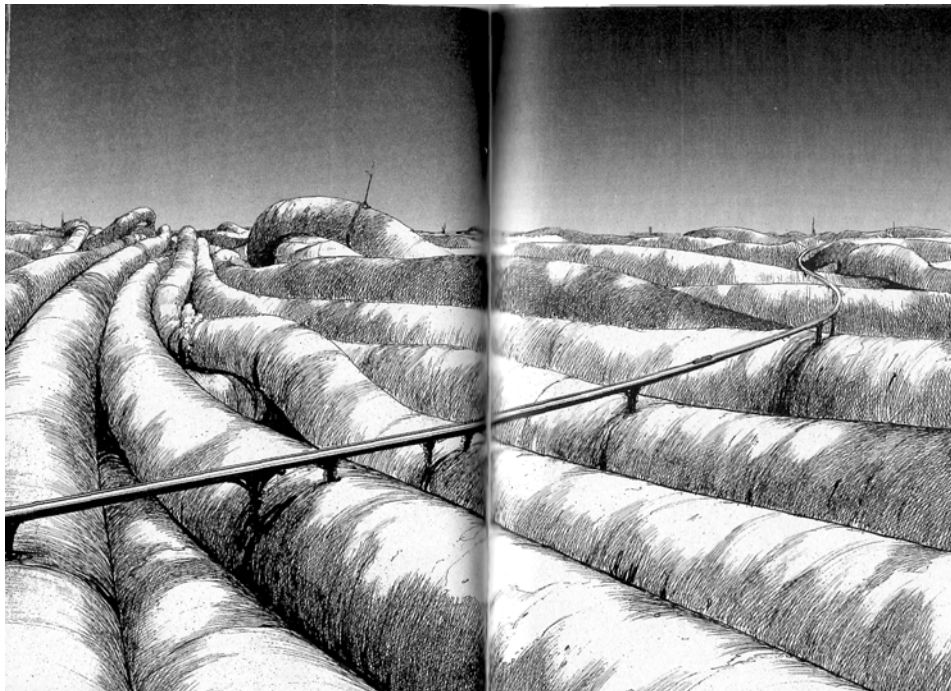## 4.2. New references between virtuality and reality

Figure 11. Biological urban space, in Tsutomu Nihei's *Abara*.

From Nihei imagination new references seem to emerge. The references to architectural imaginary present in these settings, remind us of the visions of *Stairs'* by Mauritius Cornelius Escher, Giambattista Piranesi's *Prisons* and Yona Friedman's *spatial cities*. But mainly they recall the Japanese city and its utopian imagery and, in particular, that of the Metabolists and their *urban organnector*. Here the city is seen as a living organism, a pool of cells continuously evolving: a transformation process based on auto-organization of

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[6] In Robert Heinlein's tale "And he built a crooked house" of 1941, a building shaped unfolded hypercube, a *tesseract,* is built by the protagonist, an architect, for its customers (Heinlein 1973: 195-218).

urban elements, similar to an aggregation of cells, a set of multiple and organic of different urban shapes in continuous development. The space is fluid and interchangeable, the architecture of the street is seen as a connection between the street and building, and urban architecture as connection between architecture and the city. This is the same as in the urban configurations of Nihei (figure 11), also the Metabolists move within a *non-Euclidean* space and evoke a figure of an amoeboid city that, in addition to returning fantastic connotations, brings us back to theories of complex systems and those of fractals by Benoit Mandelbrot.

Figure 12. Growing space, in Tsutomu Nihei's *Blame*.

The urban space and the relation with infrastructure recalls the biological metaphor of Kisho Kurokawa which, reversing the relationship with the European city, identifies buildings as modular and interchangeable elements (soft body) and infrastructure such as unifying elements (spine). The Metabolists recognize the energy flow of the city, in the form of traffic and moving of information re-interpreting it as a data project. Kazuo Shinohara reads in contemporary Japanese cities an aesthetics disorder, reinforced by the lack of binding zoning rules, which brings us back to Rem Koolhaas theories' on *Junkspace* (2006), but also warns that anarchy, by definition, cannot become a design method. Instead, in Nihei's

imaginary space (figure 12), technology becomes the neural system of shapes and urban structures which, thanks to cybernetics, can make movements and modify their own body: a city with its own life. A parallel with *fuzzy logic*[7] and its applications appears natural, which begin to be experienced in architecture, where human decisions are transferred to the control of machines. Settings that recall other *sci-fi* environments, in particular *Hal 9000,* the computer board of Stanley Kubrick *2001: A Space Odissey.* We talk of buildings that can change the orientation in relation at the external climate change, or that automate the internal micro-climate. In terms of composing, they are experimenting new forms, which take life from elementary solids, subjected to internal deformation process, like through a natural law, such in Peter Eisenman's *Max Reinhardt House* in Berlin, that start like in the process that governs the axial growth of crystals; suggestions that show us how the scenario of the comics are not so distant from this architecture.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study attempts to explore the mechanisms of grammatical architectures present in the *manga* and to obtain a comparison between forms of fantasy and existing ones, to better understand the reality of the Japanese city and predict future developments. In this regard, the visual incentives produced by *manga* designers, reflect the essence of the Japanese city, as a sketch whose meaning is perceived. The city that appears to us, responds to logics other than Western urban planning, characterized by a different concept of space and urban organization, that also derives from concepts related to the culture of the past and to the philosophical-religious relationship between man and nature. Within it are signs of technological aberration, which changes the city's morphology, by degrading material. The city elements, bridges, stairs, buildings, cables and pipes, are de-structured and reorganize themselves through a seemingly random logic, as in artificial growth in some ways similar the fractal evolution in the natural world. A *synesthesia* city, where the sensory perception combines the vision of past, present and the impetus toward the future, but that is intimately linked to the concept of traditions, based on the invisible mechanism of the natural world.

The exchanges between architecture, city and comics show that there is a territory across the two fields, as stated by the great comic author Benoit Peeters: "en faisant mine de peindre le monde, ils contribuaient à l'inventer" (Thevenet & Rambert 2010: 96).

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[7] Japan was the first country to use fuzzy logic applications—started in the 70s by the English engineer E. Mamdani—on a massive scale (Pizzaleo 2004).

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