



Speculative Architectures in Comics

Francesco-Alessio Ursini

Abstract: The present article offers an analysis on how comics authors can employ architecture as a narrative trope, by focusing on the works of Tsutomu Nihei (Blame!, Sidonia no Kishi), and the duo of Francois Schuiten and Benoit Peeters (Le cités obscures). The article investigates how these authors use architectural tropes to create speculative fictions that develop renditions of cities as complex narrative environments, and “places” with a distinctive role and profile in stories. It is argued that these authors exploit the multimodal nature of comics and the potential of architecture to construct complex worlds and narrative structures.

Keywords: architectural tropes, comics, narrative structure, speculative fiction, world-building, multimodality

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Speculative fiction and comics have always been tightly connected across different cultural traditions. It has been argued that the “golden era” of *manga* (Japanese comics) in the 70’s and 80’s is based on the preponderance of works using science/speculative fiction settings (e.g. *Akira*, Ohsawa 9–26). Similarly, classic works in the “Latin” comic traditions (i.e. Latin American *historietas*, Italian *fumetti*, and French/Belgian *bande dessinées*) have long represented an ideal nexus between the speculative fiction genre and the Comics medium, one example being *El Eternauta* (Page 46–50). British and American comics can also claim such a tight relation, whether they involve superhero stories with a science fiction slant (e.g. Marvel’s *Fantastic Four*) or dystopian settings situated within a science/speculative fiction approach (e.g. 2000 A.D.’s *Judge Dredd*, First Comics’ *Dreadstar*; Benton 21–24). Thus, comics across traditions and cultures bear a cultural debt to the speculative fiction genre, broadly conceived.

One central aspect of this well-established relation is that a great narrative emphasis is placed on *world-building*. This process is usually defined as the construction of fictional worlds in which stories unfold. Authors can spend considerable narrative and conceptual resources in developing the places, geography, history, societies, and cultures that make up these worlds (Wolf 10–49; Jameson 268–269). Furthermore, authors use these resources to establish which fictional rules govern these worlds, and what kinds of stories and forms of speculation they can offer to readers (Wolf 50–64).

World-building has become a central aspect of most speculative fiction works, at times superseding other aspects of storytelling. Very often, speculative fiction comics present “bounded” worlds, which are usually built as complete conceptual systems, often occupying delimited locations (e.g. the Milky Way in the Japanese saga *Ginga Eiyuu Densetsu* “Legend of Galactic heroes”). When this is the case, authors usually develop specific narrative “rules” that underpin these worlds, and the stories that take place in them. In so doing, comics authors often explore concepts that are usually ascribed to speculative literary fiction. Worlds in comics can be built to explore speculative *tropes* that also act as narrative rules for stories. Tropes, in turn, are defined as concepts that are explored in a narrative, often also acting as “rules” to develop its plot (Childers & Hentzi; Miller).

This process of world-building, given the multimodal nature of comics, presents interesting challenges for any formal analysis of comics and their features. Comics offer the visual channel of panels and pages (and their content) as a modality for this process. At the same time, narration and dialogue offer a linguistic, textual modality by which authors can develop world building as part of a narrative, in parallel (or in connection) with the visual modality. Comics *qua* a multimodal medium permit authors to “shape” worlds and the speculative tropes they entertain, using them as narrative devices that shape a comic’s story.

The goal of this paper is to offer an analysis on one specific aspect of world-building: the use of “speculative architectures”, fictional architectures that allow authors to speculate on non-fictional architectural concepts (Clear 277–282). The authors that I discuss are Tsutomu Nihei, and the duo Francois Schuiten and Benoit Peeters. Their works are well known for featuring complex architectural tropes that allow authors to build complex narratives, rich with philosophical undertones. Although many other authors employ architectural tropes in their works (e.g. Jirō Taniguchi; Enki Bilal), Nihei and Schuiten and Peeters also present a “punk” attitude in their works (cyberpunk in Nihei’s, steampunk in Schuiten and Peeters’). That is, these authors explore tropes and worlds featuring complex technologies, but less than ideal life conditions, themes usually found in steampunk and cyberpunk (cf. Foster 422–424; Guffey & Lemay 435–437). In proposing this analysis, I aim to answer the question of how speculative architectures can guide authors in the construction of complex narratives. Before I do so, I introduce the theoretical notions that I employ in my analysis.

I first clarify my use of “speculative fiction” and “science fiction” genre labels. It is acknowledged that while science fiction can be construed as fiction involving scientific speculation as a key element (Latham 1–9; Bould & Vint 9–22), speculative fiction can also focus on other forms of speculation (e.g. social, historical). Taxonomy-wise, science and speculative fiction stand in a “sub-type” relation: science fiction may be considered a sub-type of speculative fiction (Landon 26–30). Hence, I use the “speculative” label to discuss architectural topics in these comics, as it can be applied to the works under discussion without any loss of precision.

Second, although these authors operate in different cultural traditions (Japanese *manga* for Nihei, Franco/Belgian *bande dessinées* for Schuiten and Peeters), they can be conceived as authors working within the same medium. Thus, I use *Comics* (with capital “C”) as a superordinate term, and *comic*, *manga*, *bande dessinées* as subordinate terms for style- and culture-specific media. Our interest, then, lies in how Comics authors from distinct comics traditions implement architectural notions and philosophies in their respective, complex approaches to world-building.

Third, I employ Groensteen’s notion of “comics as a system” (Groensteen *Comics and Narration* 90–100; Groensteen *The System of Comics*, 130–140). Comics can be treated as multimodal semiotic systems involving a visual modality (i.e. illustrations, panels) and a linguistic/textual modality (i.e. language and narration in balloons, sound effects). From a single panel to a page, and to a collection of pages to a story, comics combine different modes into a narrative. The different parts of a comic story are related to the story as a “whole” (Cook 289–291).

Hence, world-building in a comic can be realized via three modes: visual, linguistic, and a combination of these two modes. My specific focus is on how architecture tropes are used in each mode. Specifically, I focus on how the places and cities in which the stories are presented to readers, as key elements of world-building in a narrative (cf. Ursini, “Control, Tropes, Focalization”; Ursini, “Where is the Future?”).

A fourth issue deserving clarification is my analysis of the relations holding between the units making up comics and the stories they present. Groensteen’s works and similar proposals (e.g. Cohn 59–65) suggest that the units making up comics create the rhetorical relations that in turn construct a story. These works, however, do not explore the nature of these rhetorical connections in detail. Luckily, Bateman’s GeM model and its application to comics (Bateman & Wildfeuer) provide the relevant apparatus. In this model, the *page* is conceived as the minimal multimodal unit, the “whole” text from which an analysis of the parts can be performed. Collections of rhetorically connected pages are labelled as *documents*, whether they be books or other formats. Comics can then be analysed as document sub-types, usually forming rhetorically coherent narratives.

Rhetorical relations, in turn, are defined and analysed according to *Rhetorical Structure Theory* (Bateman 107–181; cf. Mann & Thompson 250–256). In this model, Rhetorical Structure Theory is extended from the analysis of language texts to multimodal texts. Rhetorical relations are investigated as the logical, temporal, and narrative relations between a text and its parts that make the text coherent. In the case of comics and other multimodal formats, rhetorical relations can be established between visual and linguistic units and the text they belong to. Thus, each Comics text acts as the *nucleus* or central unit, and its constituting units (e.g. panels, text balloons, pages) as the *satellites*, units presenting information related to the nucleus.

As Bateman (116–124), and Bateman and Wildfeuer (377–380) point out, in comics two relations seem to play a crucial role: the *background* and *elaboration* relations. The *background* relation holds when one information unit (e.g. a panel) increases the ability of a reader to comprehend a larger information unit (e.g. a page or a text). The *elaboration* relation holds when one information unit presents specific instances of a concept that constitutes a larger unit. For instance, a *Captain America* issue can present a fight between Captain America and the arch-nemesis Red Skull taking place in Washington D.C. The pictures in each panel illustrating where this fight occurs stand in a *background* relation with the main story. They help the reader understanding where this story takes place. The dialogue between the Captain and Red Skull can then *elaborate* why, for instance, the two characters are fighting (Bateman & Wildfeuer 388–391). Therefore, background and elaboration relations allow authors to unpack information about a text and its concepts, tropes, and narrative structure, through different but interacting modalities.

The relation between stories and the panels and pages that constitute them add hierarchical levels of complexity, but preserve the use of rhetorical relations. Hence, rhetorical relations can be established between text and illustrations constituting a panel, between panels and pages, and between pages and narrative.¹ For my analysis, the crucial aspect is that tropes may be used to establish these rhetorical relations through visual and textual (i.e. multimodal) channels. This holds for comics, in which world-building tropes usually double as rhetorical “constraints” on a narrative (Orbaugh 114–117; Mikkonen). The remainder of the paper, then, presents my analysis of my target authors and their works.

¹ Note here that intertextuality and intertextual relations can be analysed as rhetorical relations between the panels, pages, or other units from one text and information units from other texts (see Bateman 270–275). Here I leave aside a discussion of intertextuality for obvious reasons of space.

Nihei's Works: Architectures of the post-human

Tsutomu Nihei is a Japanese comic artist (“mangaka”) who became known for his series *Blame!* (1998–2003), *Biomega* (2004–2009) and *Sidonia no Kishi* (“Knights of Sidonia” 2009–2015) (Ohsawa 164). These works have been serialized on the magazines *Afternoon* (Kodansha, *Blame!* and *Sidonia no Kishi*) and *Ultra Jump* (Shueisha, *Biomega*). Nihei’s works fall squarely within the *manga* age-based *seinen* (“young adult”) genre (Bryce & Davis 36–39; Shodt 28–34), mostly because they feature thematically complex plots, violence, and occasional nudity. Nihei was originally an architect who decided to attempt a career as a mangaka, after briefly working for a New York firm (Ohsawa 166). His works involve the use of complex architectural notions (e.g. “megastructure” in *Blame!*, “arcology” in *Sidonia*) as tropes that guide the world-building and narrative processes.

Blame! was published monthly between 1998 and 2003 for 66 issues (called “logs”), which were then collected in 10 volumes (*tankōbon*). Given its setting, it can be considered a blend of cyberpunk and post-apocalyptic genres (Johnson, “Nihei Tsutomu 1” 190). It features the story of Killy, a solitary man with an incredibly powerful gun, who wanders through “the City”, in search of a human with “net terminal genes”. The City is depicted as a gargantuan structure that lacks any rational organization. Sentient robots known as “builders” randomly build and restructure locations. The few scattered human communities are hunted by the “silicon life”, artificial entities bent on killing any humans without net terminal genes (i.e. most humans). Killy seems to spend millennia wandering the City, before apparently completing his quest (Nihei, *Blame!* vl 10).

The City’s size is also an important theme in the story. It is hinted that the City is a Dyson sphere that started on Earth and reached at least Jupiter’s orbit (Nihei, *Blame!* vl 10). Its plans can only be controlled by accessing the “net sphere”, a future version of the internet that also includes the City’s regulatory system. Crucially, the chaotic nature of the City is the result of a man-made disaster occurred millennia before the main story, as revealed in the prequel *NOiSE* (*Blame!* vl 1: 145–150). On an already vastly overpopulated Earth, a terrorist cyber-cult blocked all access to the net sphere. Without human control, the City and the robots controlling its construction began to build randomly. The result is an endless architectural chaos, in which non-Euclidean perspectives reminiscent of M.C. Escher’s paintings abound, and kilometre-deep barriers exist between the distinct layers of the City.

The role of architecture as a speculative trope in *Blame!* is thus rooted in Nihei’s use of the notion of “megastructure” (De Domenico, “Japanese City” 53–57) and in a cyberpunk, post-human aesthetic that is characteristic of Nihei’s artistic vision (Johnson, “Nihei Tsutomu 1” 191–195). Megastructures, in engineering and architecture, are defined as structures of immense size, such as the Great Wall of China or Burj al Khalifa in Dubai (cf. Spiller 45–51). The Japanese design movement known as “Metabolism”, Nihei’s chief theoretical reference, proposed that megastructures integrating artificial and natural elements could be used to develop new, integrated urban spaces (De Domenico, “Japanese City” 58; Johnson, “Nihei Tsutomu 2” 120–122). These architects saw the building and development of metropolises as integrated with their surrounding environment, and following principles of natural growth. Cities could harmoniously grow indefinitely over decades if not millennia, one example being Tokyo, merging with forests, lakes, and other natural formations.

In *Blame!* The City and its (mega)structures represent a deeply distorted view of this philosophy, coupled with the loss of knowledge that the lack of access to a regulatory system would then comport. The City grows at a “natural” pace, but does so in a chaotic manner, not unlike a natural phenomenon. However, it does so by consuming all natural resources in its path, including human beings. Thus, the City also represents an extreme rendition of a typical cyberpunk trope: the urban sprawl as collection of locations, devoid of a coherent underlying rational plan (Johnson,

“Nihei Tsutomu 1” 195–199). As Nihei also acknowledged, *Blame!* tries to explore how the lack of control on the development of urban structures would become completely anarchic, to the extent that it would create a hostile world for life (Ohsawa 155–163). World-building is consequently performed in a cryptic, chaotic manner.

With respect to narrative and rhetorical aspects, *Blame!* is known for its sparse text, whether it be narration or dialogue, and for the complex illustrations that present the City in its chaotic glory. Most of the rhetorical structures that underpin the story are presented via 1- or 2-page “splash pages”, pages introducing a central illustration and possibly a few in-set panels (McCloud 24–28). For instance, Killy’s arrival to “the capital”, one of the few zones in which humans seem to have retained complex social structures, presents a 2-page silent view (Nihei, *Blame!* vl 3). The subsequent pages present several silent illustrations of the capital’s environments (*Blame!* vl 3: 20–24). Near the end of his quest, Killy enters a new “room” of the City, which has a length of 143,000 kilometres (i.e. Jupiter’s diameter: *Blame!* vl 9: 180, fig. 1).



Figure 1: The “Jupiter room”. Note the absence of any text, and Killy’s minuscule figure in the right corner. All of Nihei’s works are in black and white, as it is the case for most manga.

Although these are a few relevant examples, they illustrate how Nihei’s work uses architecture as a central speculative trope. Splash pages, or in general panels of larger size, are amply used to build the world in which this story takes place, and with it the architectural chaos of the City. Each of the logs/issues present readers with panels that generally have a *background* relation with respect to the story. Although the City is organized in a very chaotic manner, it is still necessary to present readers with “portraits” of this chaos via the presentation of new locations. The use of long sequences of silent illustrations for these locations, instead, form repeated, sequential uses of *elaboration* relations. For instance, Killy is often seen walking through zones that may suddenly change architectural style, if not direction of gravity (e.g. Nihei, *Blame!* vl 4: 50–56). Crumbling manors can lay beside high-rise buildings, connected via claustrophobia-inducing tunnels (*Blame!* vl 8: 80–85). Overall, the chaos of the City and its all-consuming, unchecked growth as a world-building element are mostly narrated via images, leaving the reader to decode their content.

Nihei’s subsequent work, *Biomega*, can be interpreted as a blend of cyberpunk, horror, and other concepts into a cross-genre fiction (Johnson, “Nihei Tsutomu 1” 196). It features the story of Zoichi Kanoe, a synthetic human trying to stop a deadly Nano-engineered virus turning humans into

“drones” (zombie-like creatures). As Zoichi fails in his mission, the virus extends to all lifeforms on Earth, creating a “grey goo” catastrophe that terraforms the planet, fusing organic and technological matter. While Zoichi escapes on an artificial satellite, the terraformed mass turns into an immense cylindrical structure called “the Restorative”, extending from the Moon’s orbit to Neptune’s (Nihei, *Biomega* vl 5: 3–4, fig. 2).

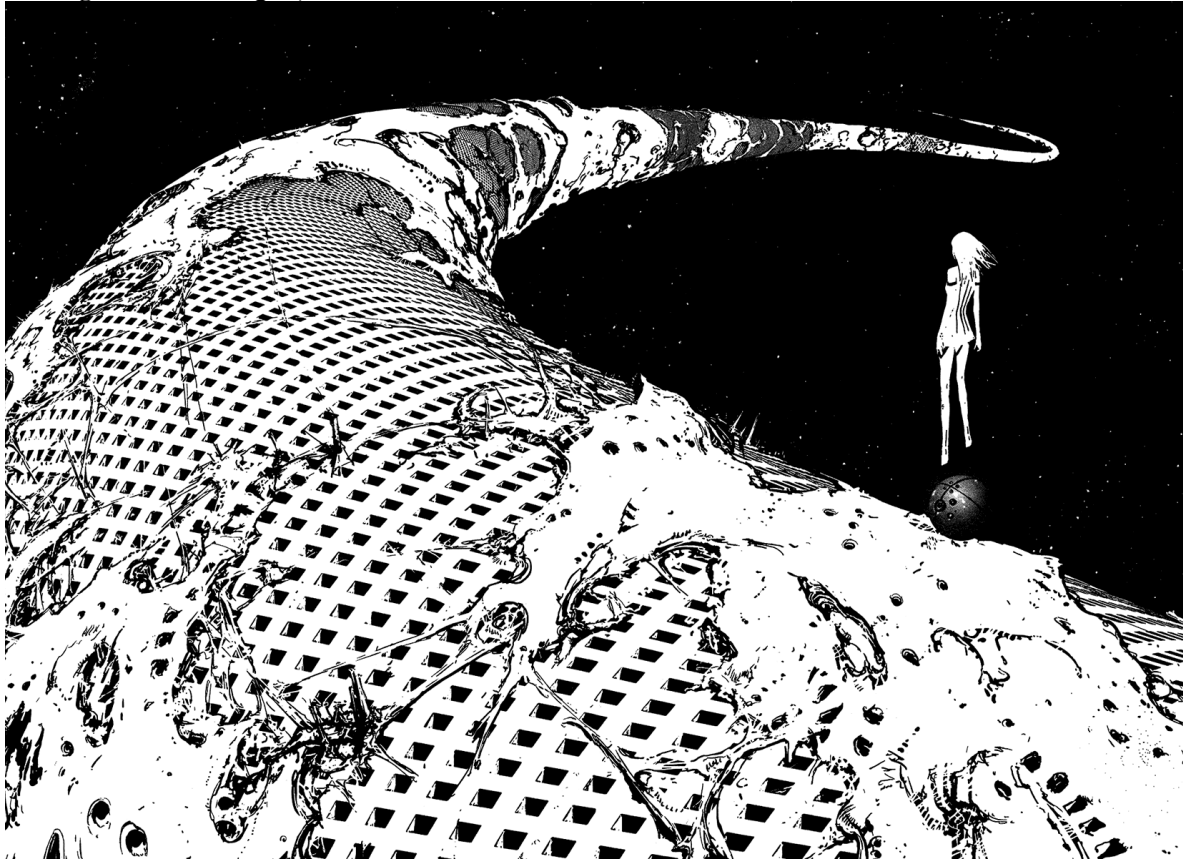


Figure 2: Zoichi’s assistant AI, appearing as a slender woman, silently observes the Restorative stretching through the Solar System.

This structure becomes home to new bio-mechanic lifeforms, who harbour only faint memories of their origins on Earth. On this unique world, Zoichi continues his quest to find the culprit behind this cataclysm, thus preventing her from also destroying the Restorative.

In the case of *Biomega*, anarchic architectures are swapped for complex and dark urban sprawls in the first part (Nihei, *Biomega* vl 1–4), and then for the unique environment of the Restorative (*Biomega* vl 5–6). The Restorative appears like a highly regular structure, akin to a giant fibre cable in space (fig. 2). This novel world is divided into sections, often as big as Earth’s continents, but each with its unique and novel bio-mechanic flora, fauna, and humanoid civilizations (*Biomega* vl 5: 9–13). While the devastated Earth features complex cities in which humans are prisoners/zombies, the Restorative appears as a unique fantasy-like environment, vaguely reminiscent of Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä*.

As in *Blame!*, the use of silent splash pages is employed to introduce key places, hence establishing *background* relations between these pages and the story. For instance, when the “grey goo” catastrophe engulfs Earth, only a few silent panels show this event (Nihei, *Biomega* vl 4: 170). The emergence of the Restorative as a new environment is then presented shortly afterwards, as the

immense cable-like structure propels itself outside the Earth's orbit at immense speed (*Biomega* vl 5: 3–4). The pages and panels following key splash pages also employ *elaboration* relations, showing how the Restorative is structured (e.g. *Biomega* vl 5: 5–8). The only brief explanation of the Restorative's nature is offered when Zoichi manages to land on it, and uses a mini-satellite probe to gather information (*Biomega* vl 5: 8).

Hence, in *Biomega* world-building is realized via a careful construction of a visual identity for the two worlds in which the story takes place.² Earth and its decadent architecture present a world in which humans are prisoners of the forces that guide the expansion of the virus. Once these forces lose control of the virus, the virus remodels Earth and creates the Restorative. The Restorative, in its organic architecture representing Metabolism notions of natural/artificial "hybridity", is a world that allows new, post-human and "post-organic", hybrid life forms to survive (Johnson, "Nihei Tsutomu 1" 196–198). As in the case of *Blame!*, much of the world-building process occurs via the use of visual information, although the use of textual information often offers further clarifying information to readers. The apocalyptic, cyberpunk interpretation of Metabolism notions offered in the first part of the series yields to a perhaps more neutral view in its second part, in which new "hybrid" life-forms simply try to survive.

Nihei's latest work, *Sidonia no Kishi* (2009–2015), presents a further conceptual shift. The Sidonia spaceship hosts the last Earth survivors after the "Gauna", powerful aliens, destroyed Earth. The final war between humans and Gauna takes place in the "Lem" system, a distant solar system that the humans wish to terraform. Sidonia is a gargantuan ship (29 kilometres of length, with a radius of approximately 10 kilometres), defined as an "arcology" (Nihei, *Sidonia* vl 2: 18) by its inhabitants. The label, a blend of "architecture" and "ecology", designates a complete, closed artificial environment that encompasses enough natural resources to be self-sustaining (Spiller 87–88). Sidonia contains a tower that acts as the main living environment for its inhabitants. The main tower also acts as an engine and, as times of extreme need, a rail-gun. Most of its inhabitants live in apartments built on the external sides of the main tower, modelled after traditional and contemporary Japanese culture.

Sidonia also presents a conceptual evolution, from an architectural perspective. The labyrinthine alleys and tunnels connecting distinct places are still present, as in the case of *Biomega* and *Blame!* However, most areas are presented as clean and lively environments, at times featuring peaceful signs of life (Nihei, *Sidonia* vl 1: 71–72, fig. 3 on next page).

Still, Sidonia's environment can be dangerous to humans: when battle maneuvers are performed at zero gravity, citizens failing to follow safety measures die by the thousands (Nihei, *Sidonia* vl 1: 89–90). Nevertheless, this space arcology acts as a cosmic ark and "foster Earth" to its survivors. The very peculiar architecture of the Sidonia arcology helps humans to continue their fragile lives, unlike the cases of the City and the Restorative.

Furthermore, Sidonia seems to blend the chaotic development of the City with the complex structure of the Restorative. The evolution of indigenous life forms is one example of such dynamicity (Nihei, *Sidonia* vl 4: 5–6). The post-human nature of "Sidonians" provides another example. Most inhabitants are clones of the 500 survivors from a past catastrophe, and are usually into adult age in a few years (e.g. the Ren sisters). Genderless humans, who develop a distinct gendered body only when they choose a partner, are also common. Most Sidonians can also photosynthesize due to genetic manipulation, vastly reducing the needs for organic food production on Sidonia. The addition of a "chimera", a creature combining human and Gauna genes (*Sidonia* vl 10: 100–102), further broadens the range of new "types" of humans. Thus, the evolution of humans to a post-human phase is nurtured within the Sidonia arcology, given its harmonious blend of

² It is worth noting that volumes 5–6 were not part of the original plan for the work, as Nihei continued the story under pressure by his editors. The sudden change in setting was Nihei's wish for continuing the work (Ohsawa 171).

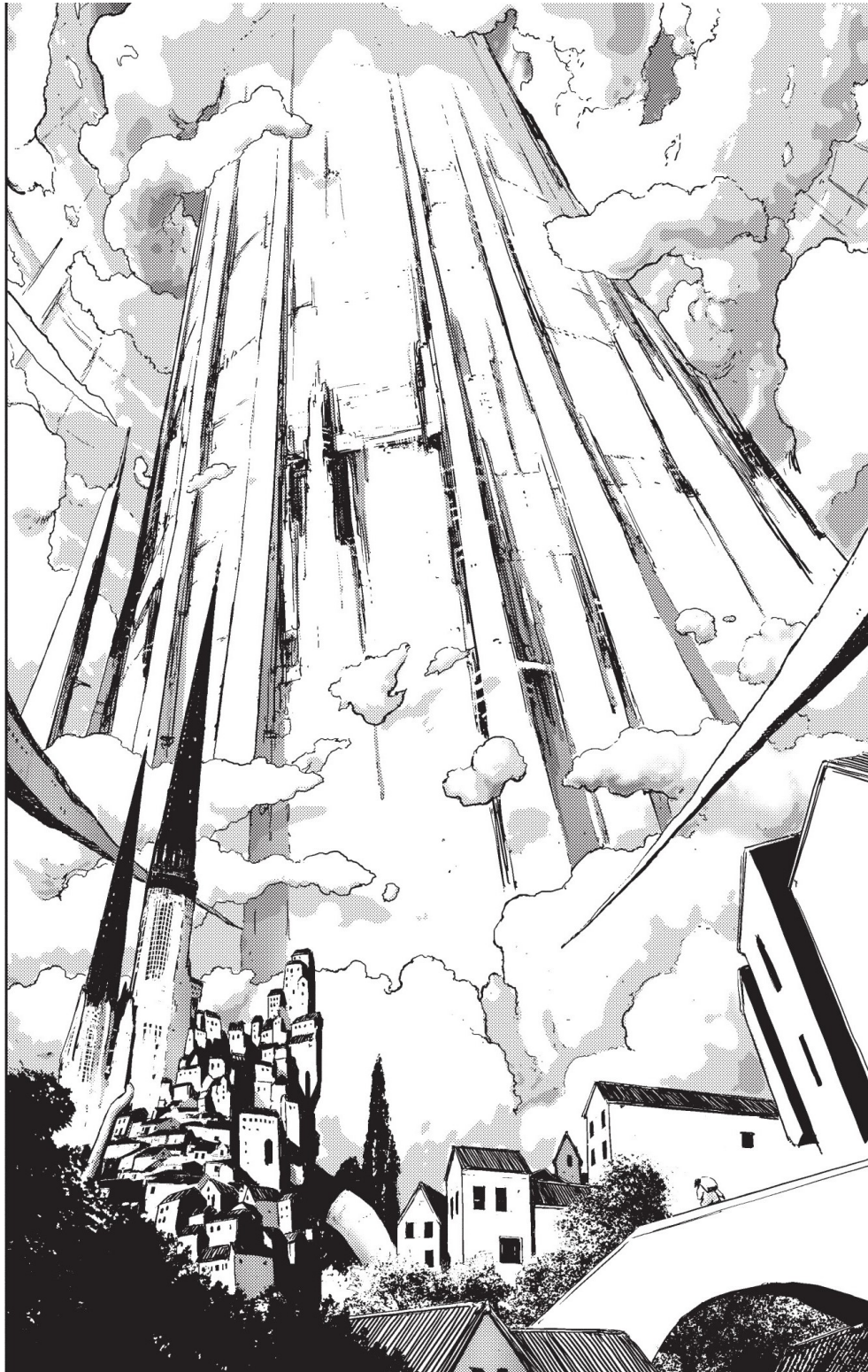


Figure 3: Sidonia's view. Notice that the perspective hints at the size of the ship being large enough that citizens may even forget of its boundaries, and that it can have its own atmosphere and clouds.

natural and artificial life forms, but also in response to the threat of the formless, unfathomable Gauna (Johnson “Nihei Tsutomu 3” 62–64; Ohsawa 169–193).

From a narrative perspective, this work also features a transition to a richer use of the textual mode. Within the story, a book known as “100 views of Sidonia” offers an overview of Sidonia’s principal attractions and attractive locations. Illustrations from the books of Sidonia open each chapter in the story, with a few chapters offering extra “views” that characters mention in passing (e.g. Nihei, *Sidonia* vl 10: 30). These illustrations stand in a *background* relation with the main text; they offer more information about Sidonia as an independent world. Differently from the case of the City and the Restorative, these images are accompanied with text, since they are presented as pages from an illustrated guide. In general, new places and architectural wonders are introduced via splash pages, standing in a *background* relation with the narrative enriched with text. Their visual identity and narrative role are elaborated via both modes, as the story unfolds.

Overall, *Sidonia no Kishi* is a work in which Metabolism as a philosophy and speculative architecture trope is explored in a more optimistic perspective, and visual and textual information interact systematically. Therefore, world-building follows a more “traditional” trajectory, as readers are introduced to the world of Sidonia via a wealth of information. More in general, I can conclude that Nihei’s works can be seen to form a narrative trajectory that explores the relation between artificial environments and humans underpinning Metabolism concepts from several different perspectives. At the same time, different rhetorical solutions are explored. While the visual modality plays a key role in *Blame!*, *Sidonia* presents a more integrated combination of text and image, echoing an increased harmony between post-human characters and the worlds they live in.

Schuiten & Peeters’ *Les cités obscures*, and a Comparison

Les cités obscures (“the mysterious cities”, in English) is series of volumes published by Belgian Casterman that started in 1983 and still features new releases. Francois Schuiten is credited with the creation of the stories, the original concept, and the illustrations, while Benoit Peeters, a famous Comics scholar himself, is credited with texts and concepts (Peeters 3–7). Unlike Nihei, Schuiten is not an architect. However, he grew up under the influence of his architect parents and brother, Luc, who was his co-author on *Les Terres Creuses* (1981–1988). Furthermore, Schuiten studied architecture as a university student, developing a lifelong fascination with *Art Nouveau* design. Benoit Peeters, as the co-writer of *Les cités obscures*, contributed with geography and cartography tropes that have become the other key narrative elements of the series. Both authors are also avid fans of early precursors of speculative fiction, one example being Jules Verne. The many “retro-futuristic” vehicles and the appearance of Verne himself as a character (e.g. Schuiten & Peeters, *Les cités obscures* vl 5) are clear examples of this fascination. Thus, this series can be considered as speculative fiction with perhaps “steampunk” undertones (Darius).

The stories take place on a twin Earth that orbits the sun at the opposite orbital point of “our” Earth, an idea echoing the ancient myth of a “Terra Obscura”. This twin Earth features a single, Pangea-like continental mass (Schuiten & Peeters, *Les cités obscures* vl 9: 80; see also fig. 4), in which several cities act as the central hubs for each nation. Outside these cities, most countries are scarcely populated, given the rugged and wild nature of the continent (*Les cités obscures* vl 4: 40–41). Some of these cities closely resemble corresponding cities on Earth: for instance, “Brüsel” is the counterpart of Brussels. Locations that have Earth counterparts also feature “connections” between the two planets (i.e. secret tunnels acting as wormholes). The fictional cities of this twin Earth act as possible architectural counterparts of their “real” referents, hence underlying their speculative nature (De Domenico, “Utopia” 244–245).

This concept is used to create a level of meta-fictional narration in the series. For instance, Jules Verne is claimed to have used technology from this twin Earth as a basis for his novels

(Schuiten & Peeters, *Les cités obscures* vl 6), and to have reported Captain's Nemo "real" adventures as fiction, when he visited "our" Earth. Similarly, spin-off works have been presented as "cultural artefacts" that travelers could bring back. One example is *le guide de les cités*, a lengthy atlas describing the world of *les cites* and its many aspects (Schuiten & Peeters, *Le guide de les cités* vl 1 :11, Fig.4):

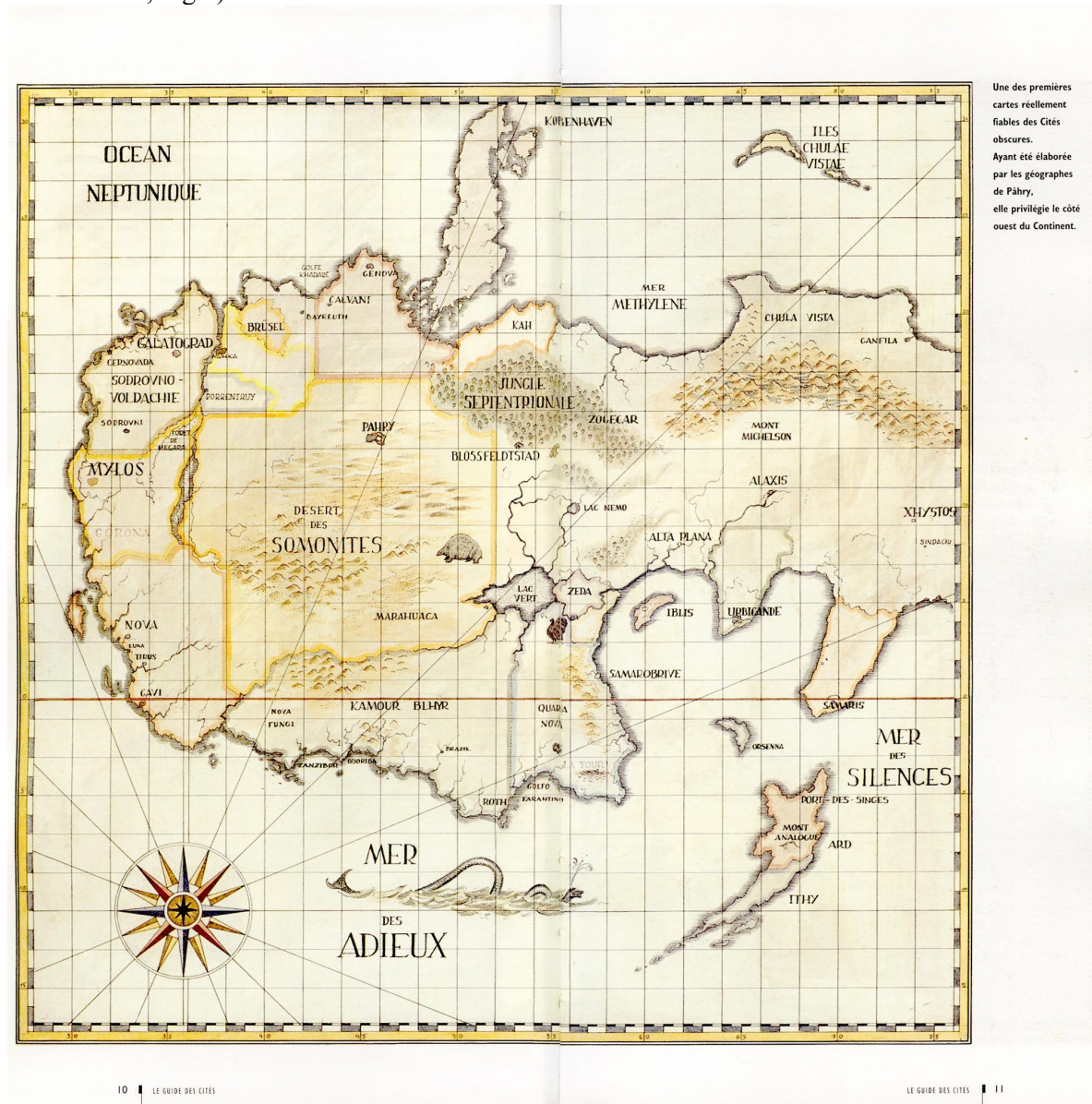


Figure 4: A map of the populated part of les cités obscures' twin Earth. Some key cities can be noticed, one example being Brüssel in the North-West corner, near the Neptunian Ocean.

As the authors have stated, these works flesh out the world of *Les cités obscures* beyond its complex investigation of architectural and geographical notions (Peeters 1–8). Maps and other world-building materials are used to build a web of *uchroniae*, or speculative interpretations of “real” places/cities on Earth.

The strongest and more pervasive speculative trope, as the authors have acknowledged, lies in the use of architecture as a trope to explore other philosophical concepts (Stiénon 2). For the most part, the cities of *les cités obscures* are depicted as being built according to the tenets of *art nouveau*, in particular the work of Belgian architect Victor Horta (Darius; Peeters 8–20). However, *art nouveau* is not the only style that features in the series, as other styles can be associated to each city, or may co-exist within the same city. For instance, Brüssel features the co-existence of low-rise apartments reminiscent of 19th century Brussels with remarkably tall skyscrapers, which feature anchoring docks for zeppelins and other flying vehicles (Schuiten & Peeters, *Les cités obscures* vl 3; cf. fig. 2). The city of Samaris, an illusion created via a complex system of *trompe l'oeil* and moving walls, is heavily reminiscent of Venice (*Les cités obscures* vl 1). Mylos, a technologically advanced city in which workers are treated as cogs in industrial structures, features gigantic factories co-existing with *art nouveau* style buildings (*Les cités obscures* vl 2–3).

Crucially, the authors also use this series to investigate how the process of “Brussellization” can affect individuals’ lives (e.g. Peeters 42–50; Stiénon). Brusselization is defined as the construction of high-rise buildings into low-rise, gentrified zones, and is usually seen as a form of haphazard, chaotic urban development (State 4). Since Brusselization focuses on creating new skyscrapers or other high-rise buildings irrespective of the urban context in which they are built, it is considered a dehumanizing, oppressive approach to architectural development. Within the narrative structure of the series, then, this architectural trope is explored to investigate the lives and problems of most their protagonists, and how they are oppressed by a world and cities that are not built for human needs.

From a rhetorical perspective, the use of *art nouveau* and other co-existing styles plays a key role in the process of world-building, as it unravels a precise visual identity for each city, but also for the world they inhabit. Differently from Nihei’s works, panels and pages illustrating each city/place and their architectures are enriched with textual information. For this purpose, panels and pages present a wealth of *background* and *elaboration* relations to the main story and textual information. Each city and key location in a story are usually introduced via 1- or 2-page splash pages (e.g. Urbicande and Samaris in Schuiten & Peeters *Les cités obscures* vl 1: 1, 34). These pages, and the often-ample text they are complemented with, usually introduce the cities’ architectural identity; therefore, they stand in *background* relations with their respective stories. Panels and pages that follow such pages usually offer plentiful views of these places, thus establishing *elaboration* relations with the main narrative.

Several stories feature a first-person narration in which the narrator muses upon the architectural wonders of the cities. For instance, the story *La route d’Armilia* (i.e. Schuiten & Peeters, *Les cités obscures* vl 4) presents the story of a traveller that must deliver a package to the city of Armilia. The volume features dozens of splash pages presenting “postcards” that the narrator describes with a wealth of detail, not unlike the “100 views of Sidonia” in *Sidonia no kishi*. For instance, while one illustration introduces a view of Brüssel’s skyscrapers, its matching narration

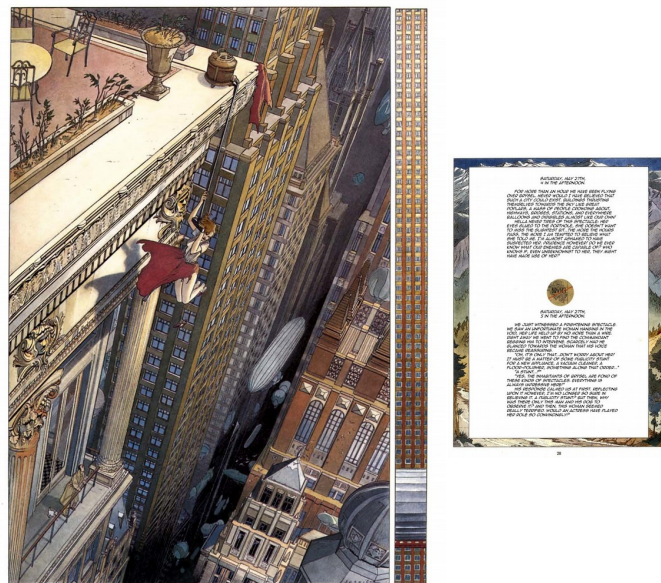


Figure 5: Brüssel's skyscrapers. Note the Zeppelin docked at a much lower level, on the right-side page. The use of colour or black and white illustrations varies from volume

elaborates the role of these skyscrapers in the city's context (Schuiten & Peeters, *Les cités obscures* vl 4: 24–25, fig. 5):

Thus, each volume presents a city as a complex place with a distinct visual and architectural identity, thereby acting as a distinctive, even if silent, character in the narration.

The architecture trope constantly intersects with the geography and history tropes, a fact that becomes evident in *The Invisible Frontier*, the eighth and ninth volumes of the series. This is a story that describes the journey of Roland De Cremer, a new cartographer at a remote cartography institute of Sodrovnia. The institute contains a replica of the main continent of this parallel world, and which the cartographers try to update, even if funds are scarce and political interference increases over time. In this case, the construction of a scaled version of the world represents perhaps the opposite tendency displayed in previous volumes of this series. Rather than the architecture of cities dwarfing and oppressing the protagonists, protagonists play with models of *les cités* and reduce them to human-scale tools for complex cartographic representations (Schuiten & Peeters, *Les cités obscures* vl 9: 20, fig. 6 on next page).

In this and the other stories in the series, the main protagonists are usually the narrators as well. Thus, they offer often thorough descriptions of the places and cities they visit and wander through. Hence, text and illustrations tend to interact in a systematic manner, offering information that stands in a *background* relation to each story, while also contributing to the overarching world-building process. More in general, from a rhetorical perspective *les cités obscures* appears to be a perhaps more traditional work, not unlike *Sidonia*, since the interaction of visual and textual information is far more systematic. Overall, the series presents an overarching narrative structure in which readers are guided through architectural speculations underpinning the stories via a wealth of multimodal information.

Overall, a general aspect of *les cités obscures* that emerges from this discussion is that the relation between human protagonists and cities, *qua* “place” protagonists, takes a different shape than in Nihei's work. This is not surprising, for Brusselization amounts to a philosophy in which buildings and architectures form a more oppressive environment for humans. Metabolism, on the other hand, presents a more neutral if not positive approach to the relation between human constructions and human lives. Thus, while Nihei explores this architectural trope from different angles, Schuiten and Peeters remain consistent in their use of Brusselization.

Furthermore, both authors use architectural tropes to explore the “sublime” and the “grotesque” aspects of worlds in which cities growth beyond sizes that are comfortable for humans. These worlds can thus be terrifying, oppressive, mysterious, or even wondrous, but they are never stale or familiar (cf. Csicsery-Ronay 150–212). Thanks to the multimodal nature of comics, this result is achieved by “showing” the grotesque and sublime architectures of each world, often leaving the reader to interpret which label best suits each place, if not both. For instance, although the Restorative and Brüssel may appear as respectively a grotesque alien landscape and a labyrinth of skyscrapers, they can also be conceived as interesting, if not sublimely complex new worlds that readers can explore.

Consequently, the different uses of these tropes affect narrative structures across their respective works. It is fair to say that the almost textless nature of *Blame!* allows Nihei to present the chaotic nature of the City as an alien environment. In *Sidonia no Kishi*, however, Nihei appears to integrate visual and textual information, via an increased use of the *elaboration* relation, as he opts to present a perhaps more orthodox use of metabolism in his stories. Schuiten and Peeters, instead, follow a more standard use of *narration* and *elaboration* relations between visual and textual information, also because they are seemingly concerned with guiding the readers through the wonders and perils of each city. Thus, each world and their cities are presented in thorough detail, allowing the readers to appreciate their wonders and their problems, via the eyes of each protagonist (e.g. Roland).



Figure 6: Roland talking with his colleague Djunov. The replica city on the hills is Mylos, which the despotic forces of Sodrovnia plan to annex.

Yet another consequence of these distinct uses of architectural tropes via different rhetorical relations is reflected in how the world-building process comes about. It is worth noting that *Sidonia no Kishi* and *Les cités obscures* share a similar drive to build a coherent, well-defined world in which the stories are set. Therefore, they feature a clear, integrated use of these relations to achieve this result. This drive is not present in *Biomega* and *Blame!*, works which can be said to focus more on atmosphere-building, rather than world-building. At the same time, these works all share a “punk” essence, as I foreshadowed in the introduction, which can be observed in how their architectures build less than ideal worlds: dystopias such as the City and Sidonia, and uchronias/dystopias such as Brüssel and Mylos, among others. Therefore, they offer a critic, speculative perspective on how cities, worlds and their architectures can shape narratives in Comics.

Conclusions

This paper has analysed how the works of Tsutomu Nihei and Francois Schuiten and Benoit Peeters employ speculative architecture concepts. As my analysis suggests, the authors’ use of architectural tropes plays a crucial role in their world-building efforts, although in different manners. One subtle difference lies in the specific tropes that the authors explore. Nihei seems to explore different interpretations of Metabolism, while Schuiten and Peeters focus on Brusselization and its impact. These architectural ideas double as rhetorical, narrative tools, since they are used to build complex worlds. These authors also share one common feature: they use complex, speculative architectures as visual but also narrative tools to present the stories and their worlds. The *background* and the *elaboration* relations are used with different declinations and methods, to present these ideas and use them as narrative tropes. Nevertheless, the clear identity and world building processes hinge on the crucial role of architecture as a tool for world and story building. The original question, how speculative architectures can guide authors in constructing complex narratives, can thus be answered as follows. Authors can use architectural tropes as rules that determine how fictional worlds are built and presented to readers, across different narrative modes.

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