

Utopy and comics' imaginary cities

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1. Introduction

Urban settings of comics and animated movies, often adopted in movies, have contributed to create, into collective imagination, a concrete idea of utopian city, fell in social and urban contexts, utopian or dystopian, well-defined. An unconventional architecture takes often origin in these settings. It requires neither to stand, nor to provide real spaces since architectures belong to fantasy. By glancing its languages, comics rework daily experience and real ambient, through multiple points of view. There is a strong affinity between architects and cartoonists, both drawing architectures that do not exist. They try different solutions to introduce the city through the urban scenarios; they have the same memory and architectural imagination¹. These visions, transposed on paper through drawings, are developed in an ideal spatial model that does not meet the laws of physics and three-dimensional space perception, whose only limit is creativity. The unrealistic geometries of Giovanni Battista Piranesi's² and Tsutomu Nihei's³ are two examples.

References, to the ideal city and to the utopias imagination, are frequent in the settings of futuristic comics. Although with different targets and contents, same language is often shared by fantastic city of comics and city of utopias: megacities, underground or flying cities, styles of past and references to archetypes, are combined with technologies of the future. However, contrary to the *non-places/ou-topos* created by Sir Thomas More, important for their speculative and social value but indifferent to their location in physical places, the urban settings of comic fantasy become metaphors to test the concrete representation of a place utopian⁴.

Paraphrasing the syncretic view of creation, expressed in the *Table of emerald*⁵ by Hermes Trismegistus and resumed in Alejandro Jodorowsky *Incal* saga⁶, in this paper we analyze three examples of cities in the comics and three model of ideal cities, through a method that highlights grammar tools, compositions, languages, styles and real, or imaginary, architecture references: the heavenly city, the earthly city and the underground city.

¹ CIORCOLINI L., *Il testimone reticente*, in *CONTROSPAZIO*. Roma, Gangemi editore, 2005. n. 117, p. 8-21.

² MARTELLA, L., *La città disegnata di Piranesi*. In MEZZETTI Carlo. *Dalle città ideali alla città virtuale*. Roma: Edizioni Kappa, 2005.

³ He's a comics author, borned in Fukushima in 1971, he studied architecture in USA and later returned to Japan finding in manga's world the space to imagine parallel universes for own architecture.

⁴ OPPEDISANO, F.O., *Il cinema di fantascienza come luogo della significazione dello spazio utopico*. In MEZZETTI Carlo. *Dalle città ideali alla città virtuale*. Roma: Edizioni Kappa, 2005.

⁵ *The Emerald Tablet* is the most famous document of the Hermetic writings and is attributed to Hermes Trismegistus.

⁶ Chilean director, novelist and playwright from surreal style, author with Moebius of *Incal* comics saga.

1.1 What is below: Ter 21

Men always considered the underground as dwelling of gods and demons, or as a space populated by unknown civilization like *Akakor*⁷ in South America. Actually, some cultures have been considered the subsoil as a place where to settle, the subterranean architecture of *Fairy Chimneys* in Anatolia and the *Sassi* of Matera, are two out of the samples. At the beginning of 20th century Herbert George Wells wrote that the city of the third millennium would be dug in the hills so it wouldn't be populated by skyscrapers. In facts, utopian-military projects, as the nuclear shelter near Pittsburgh of Max Abramovitz – commissioned by the U.S. Government – and the Seine's underground city by Paul Maymont, approach the narratives of science-fiction and comic books, where inventions of underwater and underground cities are many, like the *Amarù* by Brick Bradford and the *Ter 21* by Moebius.



Figure 1. Moebius, Dan O'Bannon, *The long tomorrow*, 1976

Moebius, the French artist Jean Giraud, who was born in Nogent-sur-Marne in 1938, is the creator of parallel universes able to influence the world of imagination, also outside of comics. His working method research the ecstasy in creation, to achieve a perceptive condition through drawing, evoking the Surrealist vocabulary of *fixed explosion* and the *vigilant dream*⁸ and approaches the meditative state of Oriental philosophies. Through simple and strong design, bright colours and dramatic stories, the environment ceases being mere background to the characters' actions to become connection to a metaphysical world coming from psychedelic, where adventure and symbolism are crossed through an essential and enigmatic sign. Architectures, of environments in his comics, come from selected combinations of matching, metamorphosis, deformation, estrangement, nonsense, in line with the Surrealists' techniques. In a recent conference⁹ he explains how forms arise from a pure graphic process: at the beginning the drawing is aleatory, where spirals, zigzag

⁷ *The chronicle of Akakor* (Die Chronik von Akakor, 1976) which deals with the myths of the original Indians of South America have been reported by German journalist Karl Brugger, together with those of other 13 cities hidden in Peru and Brazil.

⁸ GRILLO Eduardo, *Tensione e ritmo "nel corso del testo": analisi del fumetto Arzach*, in *E/C rivista dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Semiotici* on-line. <http://www.ec-aiss.it/>, 2007.

⁹ Hervé Le Guyader, Moebius, *Les Nomades soirees, "Chimères et Métamorphoses"* at the Fondation Cartier, Paris.

and dashes, gradually form shapes in a process similar to surrealist's graphics. The hyper-technological component of this architecture is blended with magic-supernatural components, making ambiguous and surreal environments.

In the story *The Long Tomorrow* published in 1976 by *Les Humanoids Associes*, the city developed into a gash in the bowels of the planet (Fig 1), stratified in multiple levels connected by a web of bridges, stairs and elevators. The result is a chaotic and tangled urban space, evoking the vegetative apparatus. The buildings, as in the Japanese cities, extend in all directions with no apparent homogeneity, reminiscent of a mix among buildings typical of the North African casbah and high-tech bunkers.

In the *Inca's* saga, written by Alexandro Jodorowsky and published between 1981 and 1988, the story evolves into a game of archetypes and surrealist symbols, where the traditional sci-fi themes are reformulated. The city-well *Ter-21*, in the galaxy's human, using the urban inventions of "*The Long Tomorrow*", has a circular shape and is distributed across multiple levels separated according to specific social criteria. The top end is a cone populated by elite people, under which lie other layers like the bottom sewer-dump and the red ring. Surrounded by an acid lake, where the waste is dissolved, the dump has a tower, dug at its centre, that allows access to the underground world of Earth-centre, marking the beginning of the journey toward the purification.

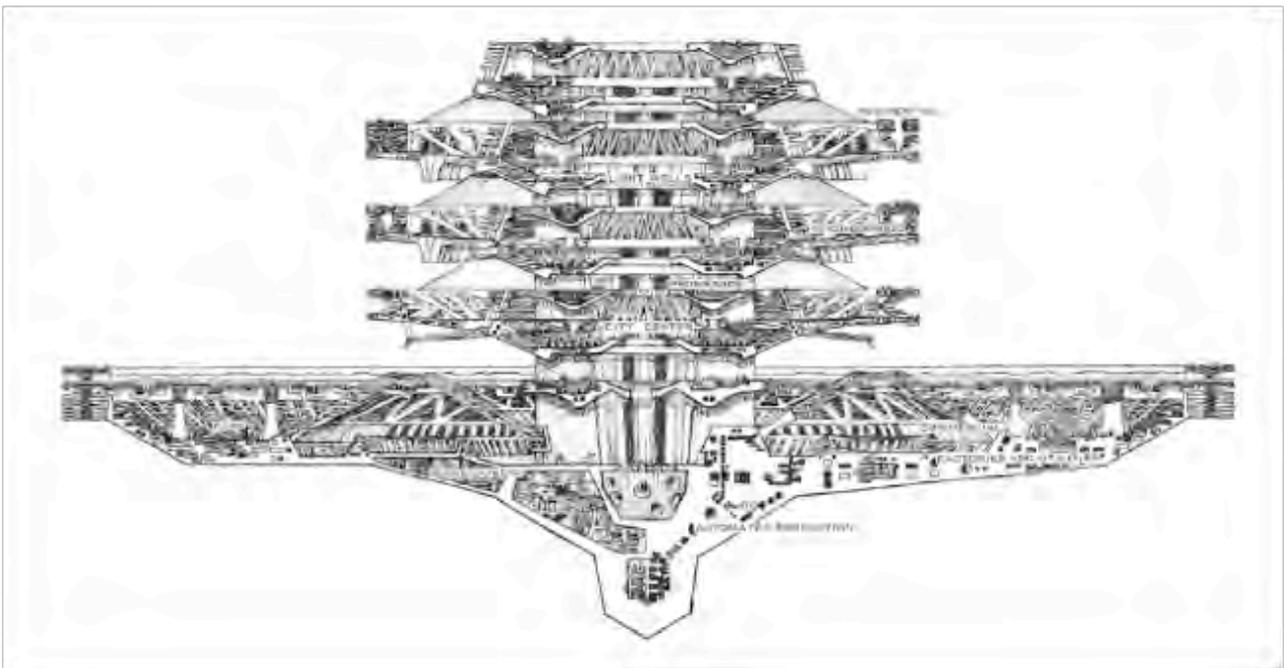


Figure 2. Paolo Soleri, *Arcology: the city in the image of man*, 1969

This Moebius' urban vision, rich in symbolism and references, formally ended and split by functional parts, find common points with the *Arcology*¹⁰ by Paolo Soleri, a visionary project dating back to 1969¹¹ (Fig 2). The city is developed as a super organism isolated in the desert, stratified on multiple levels partly excavated in a canyon in order to compress and compact urban structures and combat urban sprawl. At the top end of *Arcology's* centre, surrounded by highways, raises

¹⁰ *Arcology* is a neologism, also used in science fiction, combining the words architecture and ecology.

¹¹ SOLERI P., *Arcology, the city in the image of men*. London: Mit press Cambrige, 1969.

an inverted cone that contains the most important social functions and the public and commercial activities at the bottom. A ring around the larger cone, partially dug into the canyon, represents the area of residential buildings.

At the same time the Soleri's city is self-sufficient for energy production, climate distribution and recycling. The used energy and materials converge in a sort of dump-funnel placed underneath the city where, like in a womb, return back to mother earth to be recycled. On the contrary of the dystopia in *Ter 21*, Soleri's vision is focused to the utopia of a fair society, eco-oriented, self-sufficient and able to live in harmony with the nature. Common with the vision of Moebius / Jodorowsky is the animistic concept of reality and architecture¹². The Soleri's theoretical work, is realized through the experiment of a real city, smaller size compared to *Arcology*, located in the desert of Arizona: *Arcosanti*, is a city designed for 5,000 inhabitants, under construction from over 30 years and still incomplete, because built by craft volunteers who follow the original design and using only local materials.

1.2 What is between: Les Cites Obscures

The myth of the ideal city was born in Greece with the polis, defined as political and philosophical ideal in Plato's dialogues of *Republic* and *Laws*, finally turned into an utopian form in his description of *Atlantis* in the *Critias* and in the *Timaeus*. Throughout the Middle Age, the myth of the ideal city is intended as a model on Earth of the heavenly city described in *De Civitate Dei* by St. Augustine. Since '400, the ideal city becomes princes' instrument of hegemony through the urban design of the city-fortress that, in *Sforzinda* of Filarete, reaches the top of its expression. During the *Age of Enlightenment*, utopian projects reflect the demands of social equity and progress that found expression in the phalanstère first, and in the industrial city¹³ later.

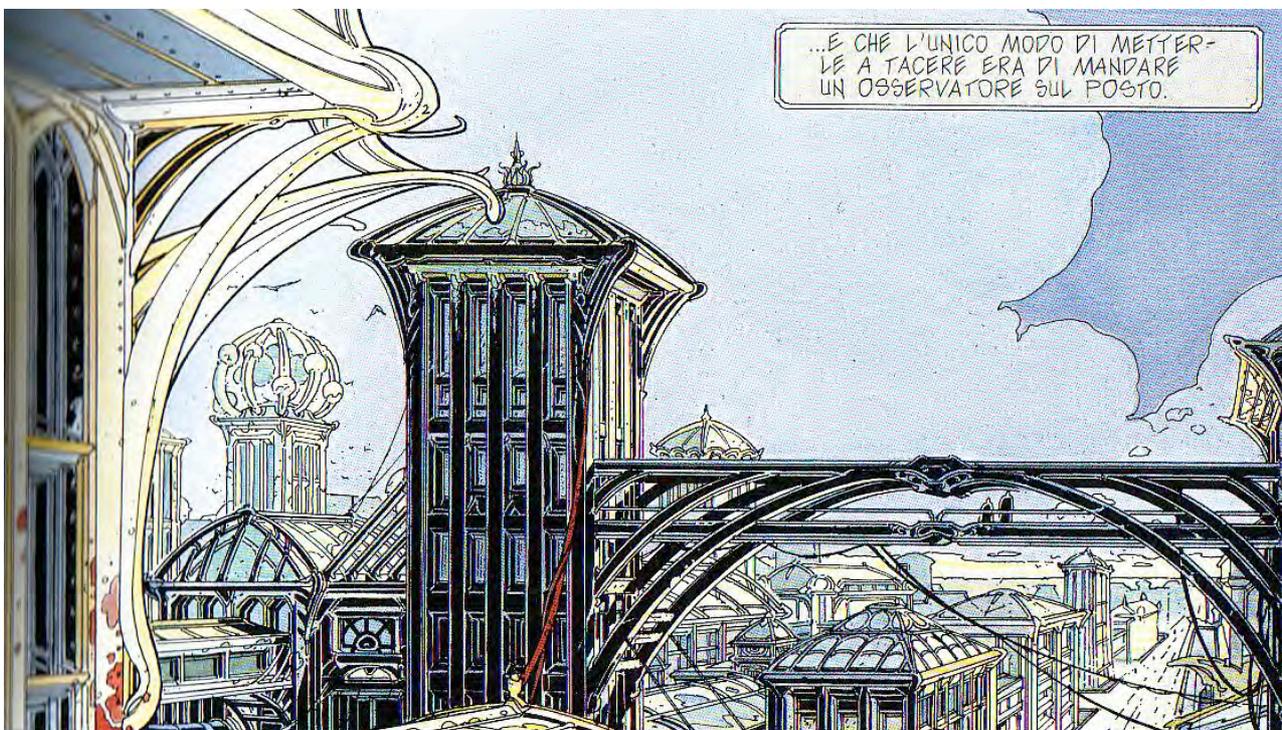


Figure 3. Xhystos: Francois Shuiten, Benoit Peeters, *Les Cites Obscures*, *Les murailles de Samaris*, 1982

¹² SOLERI Paolo, *Quaderni: Ideas, Programs, Projects*. 2002.

¹³ Cfr. AAVV, *La città dell'utopia*, Milano: Garzanti Sheiwiller. 1999.

Apparently, *Les Cites obscures* – by the Belgian Francois Schuiten and the French Benoit Peeters – belongs to the latter strand and, in the homonymous comic book series published by Casterman in 1982, delivers a diachronic time-space where architecture and urbanism, among the nineteenth and twentieth century, is used to represent towns and places in non-time universes. The city is the core element of these stories, seen as an utopian and abstract principle, as well as a machine in which man becomes marginal, annihilated like a puppet. The architecture, indifferent to man and memories, is obsessively repeated and the city self-generates its clones. *Les Cites obscures* are cities that belong to the imaginary's dimension, same as described by Italo Calvino in *Le città invisibili*, while Schuiten drives the minds to great artists of the past, from Gustave Dore and Giovan Battista Piranesi to the American comics' master Winsor McCay¹⁴. The *steampunk's*¹⁵ settings are developed in an industrial visionary age, characterized by the advanced use of steam technology, by modern materials such as plastic and by historical styles, as *Art Nouveau*. The series is set in the city-state of a mysterious parallel world called the *Dark World*, where the fantastic architecture figures communicate, through the used style, how the city wants to appear.

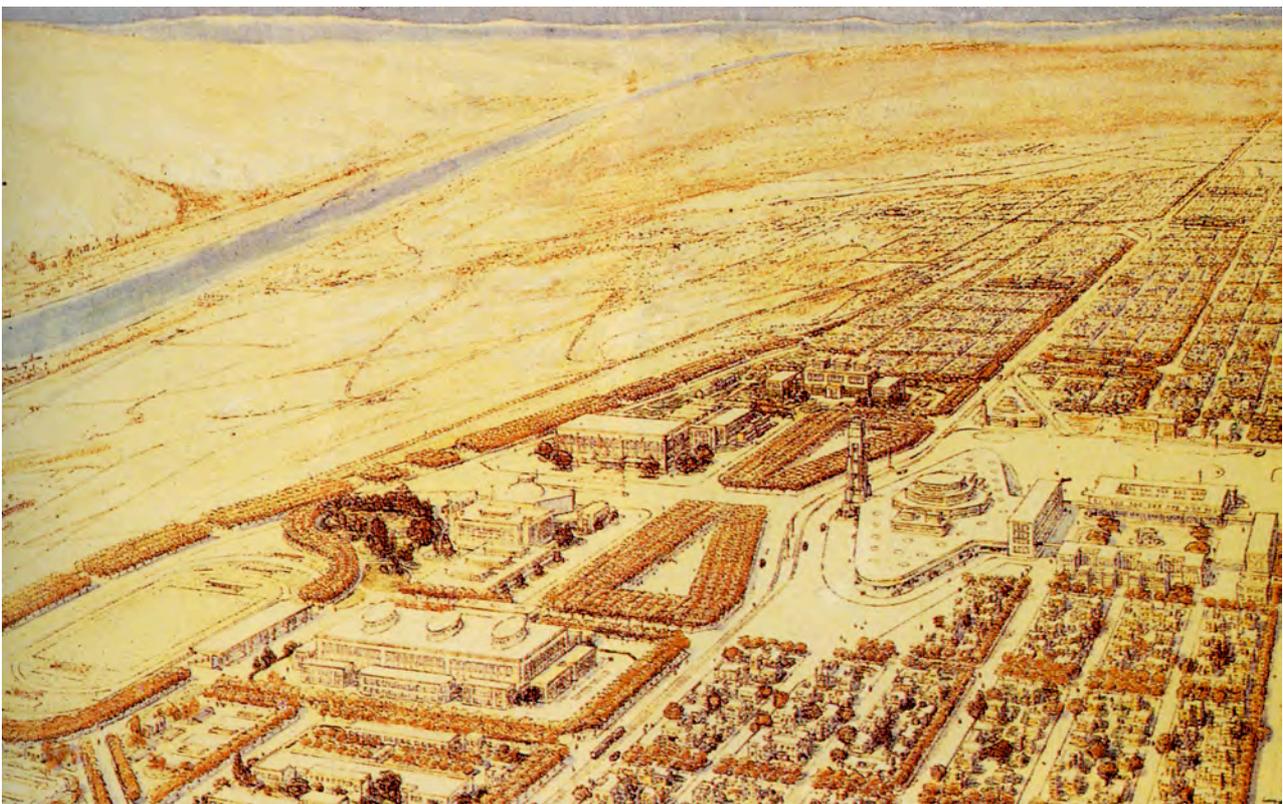


Figure 4. Tony Garnier, La cité industrielle, 1917

So in *Xhystos'* city (Fig 3), that appears in the episode *Les Murailles de Samaris*, published in 1982 in the journal *A suivre*, a city that is a mixture of advanced technology and nineteenth-century bureaucracy is represented through Art Nouveau lines – mediated by Victor Horta's Brussels and Hector Guimard's Paris – and forms and materials of the

¹⁴ Cfr. *Ucronie della belle époque* in ALBERGHINI Andrea, *Sequenze urbane: la metropoli nel fumetto*. Delta Comics: Rovigo, 2006.

¹⁵ It 's a science fiction setting features a dystopian future in which advanced sciences such as cybernetics, robotics and computer science, are associated with '80s underground culture and style of the and to instances of social rebellion.

"engineers' architecture". A utopian city, isolated, built on purpose, by a consistent design, where the apparently innovative architectures are actually intended to reinforce the structure of power.

From another point of view, *Xhystos* approaches the vision of Tony Garnier's *Industrial City* (Fig 4) as "an image without reality", as he wrote. But while Garnier naively imagines a balance between nature and industrialization in order to produce a social change, in *Xhystos* – northern city from cool colours – there are neither traces of nature nor of freedom. It appears as an artifice, mediation among nature and technology, through buildings whose structure is made by metal and glass looking like plants and where columns become stems. Thus the utopian vision of a Garnier of an industrious and progressive city is transformed in dystopia, a reality closely controlled by the power of bureaucracy, product of the city itself.

Samaris (Fig. 5) appears as the opposite of *Xhystos*, a south city with tall and smooth deltoidal walls, reminiscent of Tibetan monasteries, topped by Islamic domes, which communicate a feeling of closure and inaccessibility to foreigners. Inside, the city appears as a stage where late Renaissance architecture acts, as a codified memory program, to foreigners who need to grasp the city order and strictness. Same as in the ideals projects' of fortress-city in the Renaissance, also the design of *Samaris'* complies with an abstract logic, not identified by visitors, whose purpose is to be an instrument of control by the government.

In fact, behind the facades that evoke a kind of *Strada Nova*, several hidden scenic mechanisms, driven by hydraulic devices that run on a tangle of rails and able to modify the urban structure in time of danger, live together. The city turns out to be a hoax, a sham, a *trompe l'oeil* city that operates traps to defend its integrity. It's an anthropomorphic and thinking city with a head and limbs, like in the drawings of man-city-fortress by Francesco di Giorgio Martini, dynamic interaction between predictability and unpredictability, mechanisms of connection between past and future, unstable landscapes, the city is not real and its mysterious space evokes a non-Euclidean dimension. Schuiten and Peeters connect *Samaris* and *Xhystos* in a kind of *Moebius strip*¹⁶ in a poetic of duplication that recurs in other episodes.

1.3 What is above: Laputa

Man has always tried to impress cosmological meanings in the rituals of city's foundation, drawing geometric schemes that reflect, through location and orientation, mediated symbolism of sky. The Aristophanes' *Nubicuculia*, the city of birds, represents a fantasy parallel of a flying city, which becomes satire metaphor of politics of its times. The Jewish's *heavenly Jerusalem* revival in the *Apocalypse of John*, restated in the Middle Ages through the *De Civitate Dei* of St. Augustine¹⁷, clearly reflects religious symbolism in actual shapes and sizes coming from the iconography of medieval towns: the high walls where 12 doors are inserted, the temple shaped town-square. Also in the prototype of the ideal city there's a desire of perfection resulting from the worldly city, an event in the land of divine radiance.

In 1986, Hayo Miyazaki, one of the most important *anime*'s¹⁸ authors, realized for the Ghibli studio his first movie *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* "*Tenkū no shiro Rapyuta*" (天空の城ラピュタ). The setting, which comes from *Laputa*, the floating

¹⁶ Cfr. ALBERGHINI A., *Sequenze urbane*. Cit.

¹⁷ Cfr. Bettetini M., *La città celeste cristiana*, in *La città dell'utopia*, op.cit.

¹⁸ Cartoons derived from the comic series, through which the graphical style of Japanese comics (*manga*) has spread worldwide.

island described by Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, associates *steam punk*¹⁹ references to the heavenly city's archetype. *Laputa* is in fact the legendary castle wheel, abandoned for centuries by its inhabitants, keeping the secret of a forgotten and advanced technology that allows the city to travel in the sky, hidden by clouds for hundreds of years (Fig 7). Starting from the movie's headlines, the graphic style evokes the nineteenth-century lithographs, where, among the movement of dirigibles and flying machines that run through the sky, several different kind of floating cities make their appearance: stone buildings like skyscrapers, castle wheels, cities looking like stone vessels, the result of a advanced technology and retro style, representatives of an Arcadia no more trusting in science and progress. *Laputa* is last survivor that collects the rests of a far past, an abandoned ruin miraculously suspended in the sky, whose rests are plagued by the vegetation grown with no rules, reminiscent of the temples of Angkor. Built around a spherical globe, it has seven main levels of coaxial walls, surmounted by cylindrical towers topped with domes. The spherical nucleus is internally split into several layers: at the centre, a Platonic solid (a bright blue octahedron contained within a nucleus of roots) is the source of energy that allows *Laputa*, although its weight, to float in the air. Outside, the overlapping curtain walls – linked each other by stairways, bridges and arches – have blind arcades and windows with lancet and ogee arches. At the embattled top edge, surmounted by cylindrical towers topped with domes, there is a platform, a roof garden with water channels and Greek columns. In the crown lush vegetation whose huge top, standing like an umbrella from the top of the towers, is enclosed in a glasshouse, reminiscent of the iron and glass architecture of the nineteenth century. For a kind of magic, from the glasshouse the sight of the walls disappears and only the profile of window's frames is visible.



Figure 7. Laputa: caste in the sky, Tenkū no shiro Rapyuta, (天空の城ラピユタ). H. Miyazaki, 1986

¹⁹ The setting takes place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in a ucronic world, above the modern electricity's applications, which uses the steam engines' technology for advanced purpose, as the flight.

If, from the iconographic point of view, *Laputa* evokes the *Tower of Babel* by Pieter Brueghel, painting of 1563 (Fig 8), ideally it takes from the prototype of *the City of the Sun*, by Tommaso Campanella²⁰ in 1602. *The City of the Sun* is placed in that utopian's vein born with Plato and continued by Thomas More, that will have its rivals in the Howard's *garden city* and in the visionary architects such as Ledoux and Boullée. Same as *Laputa*, *the City of the Sun* is concentric, consisting by seven large rings of walls – where towers stand out – and by a central element that stands on the top, protecting the spiritual essence of the city: it was *the temple of the sun* in the city of Campanella and the shrine of the trees in the city of Miyazaki. However, moving close to the highest platform of the city, the presence of water channels and Greek columns, seems taking us to the Atlantis that was described in Plato's *Critias*²¹. It's clear the strong symbolic connotations in *Laputa*. The sphere that supports the city represents the Earth, but also the cosmos' perfection. Inside this, the core that allows the city to fly is an octahedron, one of the five solids that Plato describes in the *Timaeus*, gathering the Pythagorean tradition.

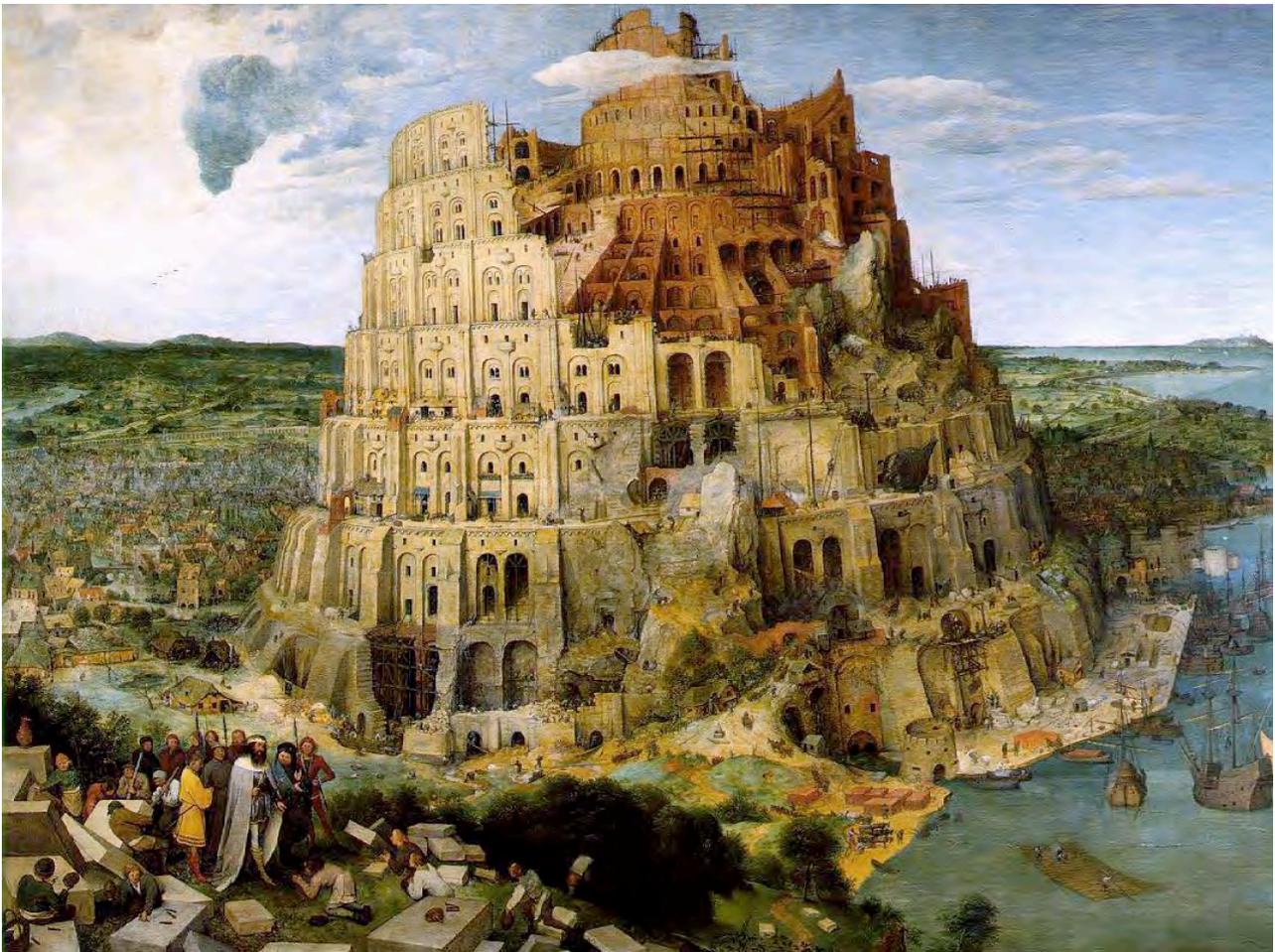


Figure 7. Pieter Brueghel, Tower of Babel, 1563

²⁰ CAMPANELLA T., *La città del sole*, Feltrinelli, 2003

²¹ In the *Critias*, Plato described *Atlantis* as a hill enclosed by different sizes' concentric circles, two made's ground and three made's water.

2. Conclusions

The examples of this trilogy, although varied, seem all being characterized by a strong orientation to the transformation and metamorphosis, and by a push toward a dystopian dimension. The urban image, multiple and overlapping, hides dimensions behind its facades. Living and anthropomorphic cities, with head and limbs, are able to modify their structures according to external conditions, or according to their own wills. Man becomes secondary and defenseless, overwhelmed by mega-cities that represent his own creations. These city visions take over, in negative, the same role as the architecture in the utopian attempt to improve society, showing how it could become in a dystopian future.

Same as this, it intends to develop architectural fantastic and unconventional visions, that we find in some architecture veins from Libeskind to Eisenman, from Zaha Hadid to Rem Koolhaas. In the same visionary vein, however, we find the researches of architects like Lebbeus Woods, Marcos Novak, Felix Robbins, Herta and Paul Amirian, which intend to escape from present to explore other worlds. Their architectures, posed in between comics and architectural dimension, seem as living by their own life. The hypothesis is that it's possible – through cases of comics that have a total creative freedom although share with architecture a common graphic representation area – to recognize the inventive mechanisms that contributes to increase city imagery and to rebuild reality in new shapes and roles.

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