

# V!RUS12

## RADICAL MODERNS

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# A DREAM BORN IN THE METROPOLIS: CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE MODERN CITY IN LITTLE NEMO IN SLUMBERLAND Tânia Cardoso

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### ABSTRACT

The modern Era, of revolutionary and progressist nature, was a great catalyst, not only at an industrial level, but in terms of communication and rupture of past paradigms. In this period the representation of the city was particularly intense: studies and ambitious projects emerged as reformers of issues associated with urban problems of that time. It is also at this moment that Comics gain importance and prominence in Society and especially in the City. The representation of the city gains a new dimension; it becomes an element of inspiration. Windsor McCay was an artist ahead of his time. Is he himself a Radical Modern to question the *zeitgeist* and the development of modern cities through his graphic experiences and reflections present on his work *Little Nemo in Slumberland*?

**Key-words:** urbanism; utopia; metaphor; comics.

## INTRODUCTION: THE EMERGENCE OF THE MODERN CITY<sup>1</sup>

Modern life derived from a revolutionary Era with great economic, political and social changes in the Western world. The major catalyst for this Era was the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century which shaped a typically bourgeois and capitalist society emphasizing industrial production and geared to a mass society at the expense of artisanal production.

After the Industrial Revolution, comes an impressive demographic growth of cities. The city became the dominant element in its relationship with the countryside and the urban population grew in a frightening and unregulated manner. From 1820 to 1870 the city is full of engines, canals and railways in a decentered pattern without a set limit. Until 1920 the industrial metropolis flourishes in a spirit of reform that gains strength as the cities became more complex (Warner, 1972).

The immigrant population grew visibly in industrial cities like Chicago or New York. Humanitarian thoughts, especially doctors and hygienists, denounce the state of physical and moral deterioration in which the laborers live. In the center and in the suburbs, they lived in unhealthy habitats, often away from the workplace or in slums crammed with dumpsters, with a high incidence of disease and mortality, and no green spaces (Choay, 1965, p.5). The unrestrained appropriation of space increased its unhealthiness, the housing deficit, public insecurity and poor infrastructure. Shantytowns and slums began to multiply (Scott, 1969, pp.6-7).

There is concern for the improvement of sanitary conditions of cities, education and the creation of a political and social awareness in the population. It was urgent to study the situation<sup>2</sup> and propose an urban planning that would order the urban and social structure of the city. City-planners reform and develop cities and metropolitan areas through a large-scale planning (Scott, 1969, pp.1-7; Santos, 1988; Borges, 2012, p.22). With the development of transportation systems and communication means, the distances became shorter and connections multiplied destroying spatial barriers. The industries have established themselves in the suburbs causing daily commuting and therefore a dispersed and fragmented urban explosion. Life has accelerated and everyday life was changed accordingly.

Large tree-lined avenues were created, as well as boulevards, squares, parks and public gardens transforming underdeveloped areas into centers of urban life. Theaters, opera, cabarets, cafes, concert-cafes and vaudeville were increasingly being attended. This *modus vivendi* was reflected not only in the way of being and experience the city, but also in the way artists see, feel and represent the city (Choay, 1965, pp.1-5; Borges, 2012, p.21).

The urban man was different men. His life was different lives. [...] The events, facts, things were multiplying, and took place inordinately [...] The world of that man is massifying, however, he is increasingly aware of their individuality (Moya, 1972, p.04).

In the twentieth century, in response to the chaos of the big city, urban space was forced to the reins of functionality, seen as a whole around a utilitarian rationality. According to Françoise Choay (1965), various scholars of the city perfected

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the Master's research in Urbanism '*Urban Chronicles: Representation and Criticism of the city through Comics*' by Tânia A. Cardoso for the Program of Postgraduate Studies in Urbanism of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars of the Chicago School of Sociology, like Robert E. Park, were essential to find out who, why and how those places were inhabited. At the same time charitable entrepreneurs like William Kent and Jane Adams sought, through their own projects, to provide better conditions to the poorest class and consequently to the cities (Scott, 1969, pp.10-11).



projections of the future as an antithesis of the disorder, but many could not give a practical form to society issues thus staying in the field of utopia.

The city of Chicago became an example. The city expanded by attaching surrounding areas, making large infrastructural works and promising better conditions hoping to host the major exhibition of the quater-centenary of America's discovery, *World's Columbian Exposition* (1893). However, rather than marvel at the local industries on display, visitors were particularly delighted with the beauty and splendor of the exhibition buildings set (Scott, 1969, pp.31-33). According to Mel Scott (1969, p.45) the fair just gave a tangible shape to a desire that sprouted from a greater wealth in the city, from the vulgarization of travel and the search for an image that projected the national pride of a powerful country.

The Municipal Societies of Art, inspired by the 1893 exhibition organized by Daniel Burnham, began to gather to discuss the artistic development of cities. The key point to consider in these meetings was the city plan as the starting point, using as a model the city of 'Haussmannian' Paris. Classical and Renaissance works like the *Parthenon* or the Basilica of St. Peter were preferred for State buildings, extolling the city (Scott, 1969, pp.44-60).

The State and the logic of the market pointed to an increasing dominance of the consumer society and with it an enhancement of media for the dissemination of ideologies and policies. The instrumentalization of technical resources by the State machine and the Cultural industry were used as a process to reach many, seen not as people but as mass (Benjamin, 1994).

The city emerged in such mass media resources, not only honoring the great urban centers as a place of progress, social advancement, opportunities and major technological advances, but also spreading modern urban proposals in 'spectacle' images of the city.

## **DREAMING WITH THE PERFECT CITY**

It is possible to consider that at the moment of Urbanism's<sup>3</sup> creation, based on epistemological ruptures, the importance of dissemination of ideas and development of education, is located at the same historical period of the birth of Comics. Both the drawings of Rodolphe Töpffer<sup>4</sup> as the development of leaflets culminated in the creation of weekly comics in American newspapers in the turn of the nineteenth century to the twentieth. The big newspapers sought to provide information and entertain the masses with comic strips representing, mostly, the lives of immigrants and life in the big American city.

Life and urban development were driven by the printouts and content of the leaflets and newspapers and, accordingly, it is possible to consider a parallel. In this period the story *Little Nemo in Slumberland* of Winsor McCay stands out.

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<sup>3</sup> It has appeared for the first time in *Teoria general de la urbanización* by Ildefonso Cerdá (1816-1876) in 1867 appointing 'a new subject, intact and virgin 'that would have the status of' a real Science' (da Silva, 1992, p.71).

<sup>4</sup> Töpffer (1799-1846) is considered the father of comics. It was one of the first authors to use the sequential Art form to tell a narrative mixing image and text.



Starting by drawing circus posters in *Art Nouveaux*, Winsor McCay<sup>5</sup> quickly exceeded his knowledge. His experiences and ruptures with tradition make him one of the most important figures of the History of Graphic Arts and Animation (Canemaker, 1987; Sendak, 1987; McCay, 1989).

Perhaps it is due to his entrepreneurial and intrepid spirit, the result of the innovation and the hectic pace of the period, or to the graphic features of his work that makes him relevant to the Modern Radicals theme. *Little Nemo in Slumberland* started to be published on October 15, 1905, in the *New York Herald*, until 1911, when it moved to the *New York American* until 1913. It was not a very popular comic compared to others, with a more humorous and satirical character like *Krazy Kat* by George Herriman or *The Yellow Kid* by Richard F. Outcault (Dorigatti, 2014).

In the story, *Little Nemo* is approached by a commissioner of King *Morpheus* who wants to show him the right way to get to the Kingdom of Dreams. McCay describes not only the child's dreams but also creates incredibly rich worlds in beautiful and diverse details. His sensitivity to line, color and space is an expansion of his life surrounded by *Vaudeville* and the attractions of *Coney Island*. *Nemo's* dreams are filled with clowns, acrobats, dancers, fantastic or grotesque animals, magicians and mirror halls (Winsor, 1989; Sendak, 1987).

Utopian and wonderful these cities act as an alternate universe. The existing visual signs in *Little Nemo* give information to the reader and carry him in his memory to real cities like New York or Chicago. To Adriana de Caúla and Silva (2002, pp.18-20), in her Master's thesis *Imaginary Cities: Utopia, Urbanism and Comics*, the work of Thomas More, *Utopia*, appears as a critical and antagonistic parody about English society of the sixteenth century, and the term Utopia has become characteristic of a range of projects and ideal, fantastic and imaginary civilizations. According to Quiring (2010, p.201) the '[...] imaginary city of memory is nothing but an enormous metaphor by which complex information is drawn together, condensed, and allegorically structured [...] in which the passage of time is spatial and where space is loaded with flows of experiences and meanings which come from real experience memory.

### **LITTLE NEMO IN SLUMBERLAND BY WINSOR MCCAY**

In 1893 rises in Chicago the promise of a White City, 'a dream born over the swamps' (Smoldener, 2010, p.26): the *City Beautiful* movement. Driven by Daniel Burnham city plans and by the Municipal Art Societies the movement intended to create a functional and human city, but mostly to restore its beauty (Hines, 2000). These ideals strongly shaped the imagination of Winsor McCay. *Little Nemo in Slumberland* is still one of the most influential comics worldwide. McCay was a man aimed at spectacle and together with the best typographers of the *New York Herald* met the ideal conditions to create *Little Nemo*. His dreamlike imagination lies in the figure of a boy who entertains and encourages the reader to wander through audacious worlds and magnificent architecture looking for a princess.

Language, according to Foucault (2002), is not the real representation, but it identifies with it. It is similar and different in the same space, but it is not its copy. This representation serves as a kind of bridge between the real and *mimesis* being neither one thing nor the other. In the representations of *Little Nemo in Slumberland* dreams often blend with reality, the boy does not seem to be aware

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<sup>5</sup> Born in 1867, McCay was a graphic artist, a political cartoonist, a small editor, a *vaudeville* artist and an animator. He was strongly influenced by Grandville, Frost and mostly by Mucha's *Art Nouveaux* style (Sendak, 1987).

that his dreams are not real, but another dimension, which represents the metamorphosed<sup>6</sup> vision of McCay about reality.

These representations exploit the reorganization and the juxtaposition of architectural elements creating new spaces, with a fantastic image, of strong character and grandeur (Franco, 2012, p.8). They can almost be compared to the drawings of the Roman ruins of Giovanni Battista Piranesi presented in dream form, which he called *Carceri*, which resulted in a set of 'magical and illusory images' (Caúla e Silva, 2002, p.18). The approach of the imaginary creation in relation to the city experienced by the authors, in the case of Piranesi the city of Rome and McCay the city of Chicago/New York, puts them in the position of a graphic utopia, by the critical position of the authors facing real cities through the creation of their imaginary aspects.

In the pages published on March 29 and April 5 of 1908, Nemo comes to a devastated city and receives a baton of wishes to solve all the problems of the poor and oppressed, accordingly to the hygienist ideals of the time.

Magically, *Nemo* begins to change the dreams suburban neighborhoods, ugly, poor, dirty and depressing places. The streets are represented as constructions without harmony, the buildings are all different and arranged in a disorderly manner.

With a wave of the magic wand, the boy creates luxurious and wide boulevards in a Neoclassical style, reminiscent of the 1893 exhibition pavilions, and also creates large open spaces with lush gardens 'fighting' the sick spaces of the city.

The author adopts the position of the City Beautiful showing his predilection for civic order and beauty in a critical rationalism that envisions perfection relegating to the background social, economic and mobility issues (Scott, 1969, p.76-78). It is possible to compare the work of Richard F. Outcalt, *Yellow Kid*, where the author showed the miserable state in which immigrants lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, describing very plausibly the state of social segregation in cities (ghettos and shantytowns) in the center of large cities. Although they have very different approaches both authors sought to address issues and important social issues through humor.

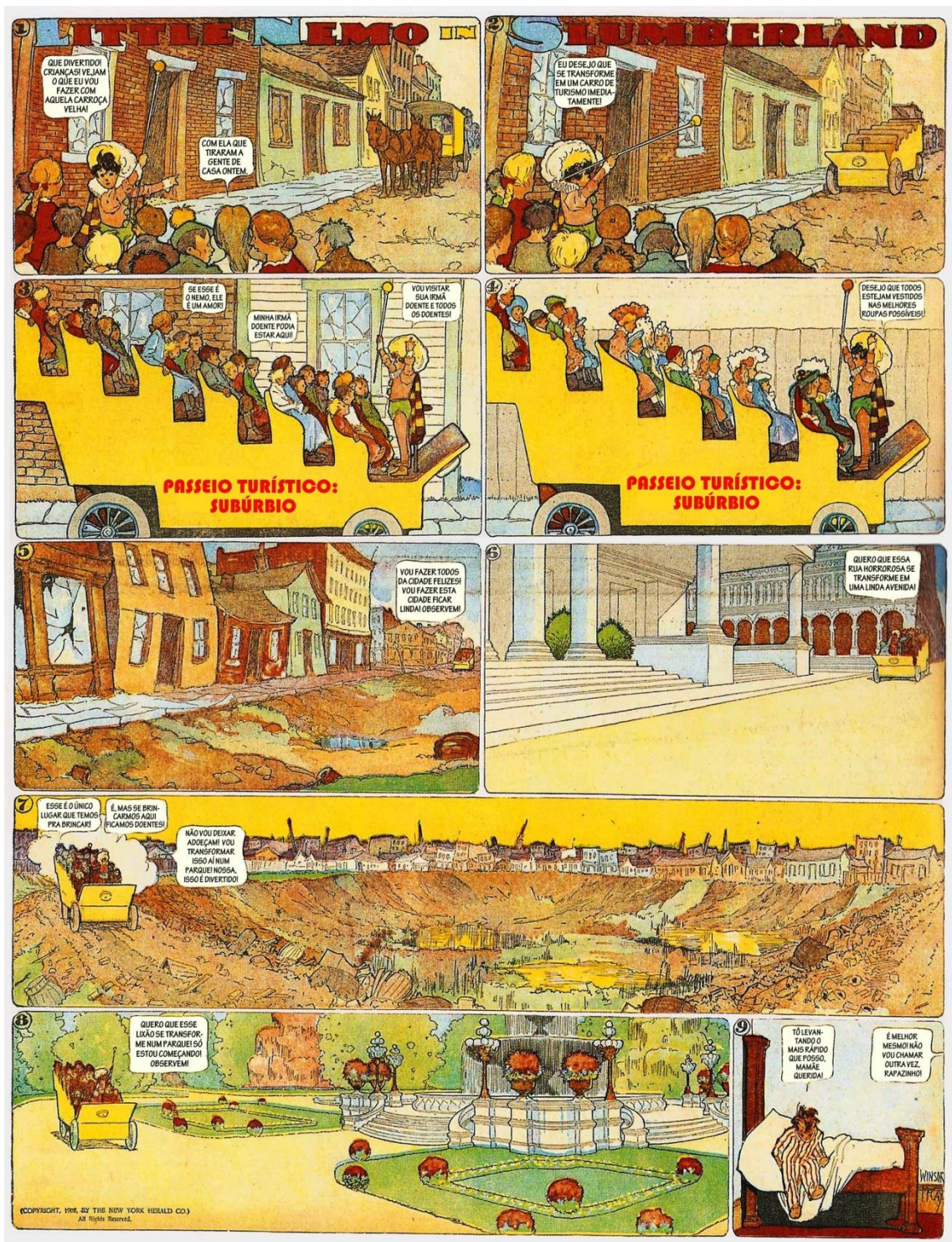
In the page published on March 21 of 1909, the disorienting and frightening aspect of old neighborhoods is visible through McCay's representations. Unlike King *Morpheus* city of the world of dreams, this city changes, grows rapidly and moves creating a threatening and claustrophobic atmosphere in a metaphor for the need for space due to rapid growth and uncontrolled transformation of cities (Warner, 1972).

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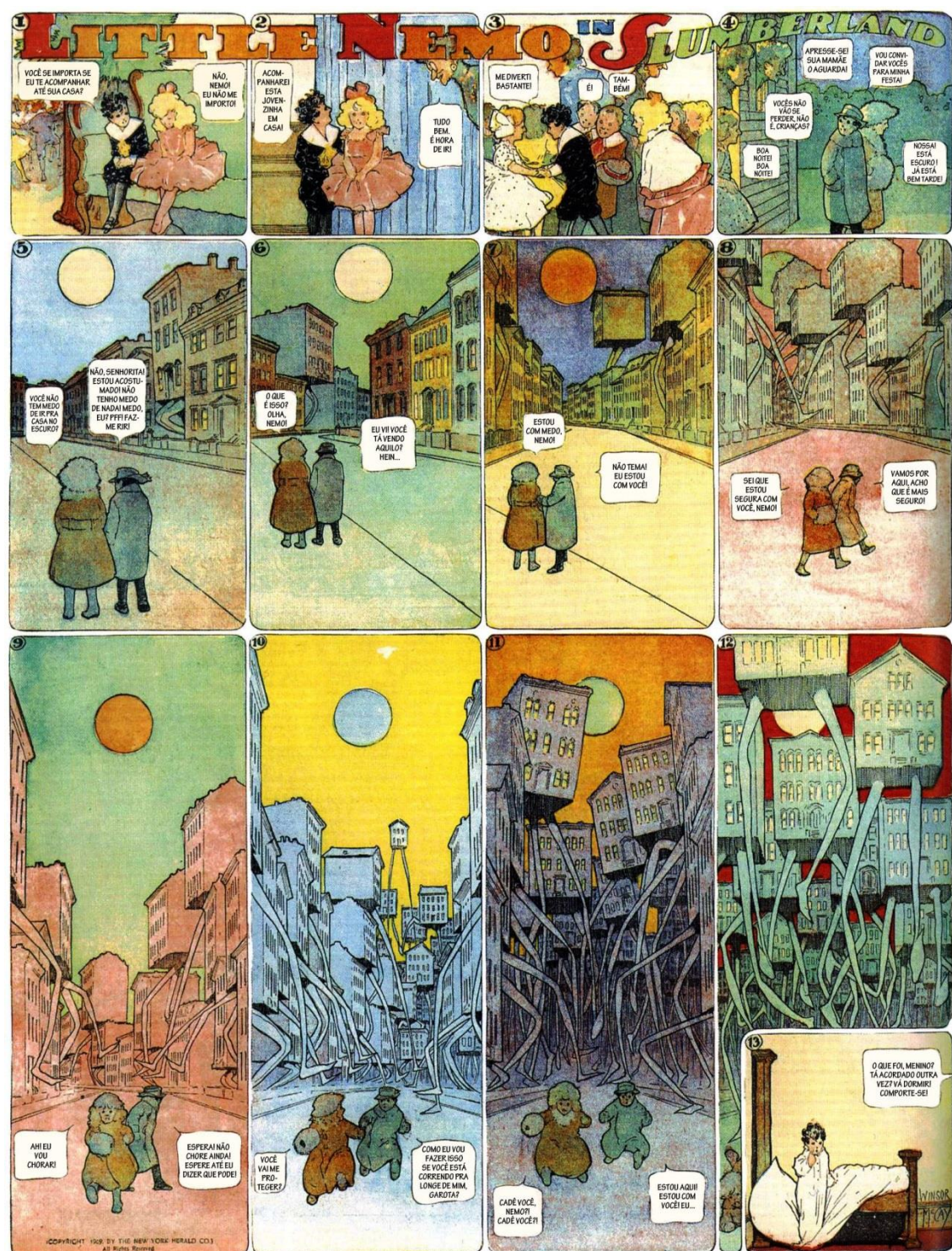
<sup>6</sup> According to the studies of Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914) and Umberto Eco (1936-2016) the metaphor highlights the process of representation, invention and interpretation; it also plays an important role in the generation of sense and knowledge (Sørensen, 2011). According to Eco (1984, p.127) '[...] metaphor is the role of socio-cultural format interpretation of the subject [...] only produced on the basis of a rich cultural environment [...]']'.



**Fig. 1:** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created by Winsor McCay; page originally published on the 29 of March of 1908 in the *New York Herald*. Credits: Public domain; translation by Muraktama Lemos and Yuri Riccaldone.



**Fig. 2:** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created by Winsor McCay; page originally published on the 5 of April of 1908 in the New York Herald. Credits: Public domain; translation by Muraktama Lemos and Yuri Riccaldone.



**Fig. 3:** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created by Winsor McCay; page originally published on the 21 of march of 1909 in the New York Herald. Credits: Public domain; translation by Muraktama Lemos and Yuri Riccaldone.

On the 25 of February of 1906, *Nemo* comes to *Slumberland Palace* formed by concentric arches and decorated with lacy golden leaf. The porch that leads to the capital of dreams resembles the golden door of the *Palace of Transports* in the 1893





exhibition in Chicago, built by Louis Sullivan<sup>7</sup>. *Coney Island*, with its attractions and entertainment, is also a reference suggesting noble fun worlds and balancing forces between the unbridled amusements of fairs and the values of beauty, unity and order. McCay uses linear perspective prodigiously and boldly creating particularly detailed views especially in the representation of architecture and urban landscapes.

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<sup>7</sup> Sullivan created the only building of the exhibition outside the neoclassical tradition; it had intricate shapes and colorful decorations on the walls, without the consent of the organization.



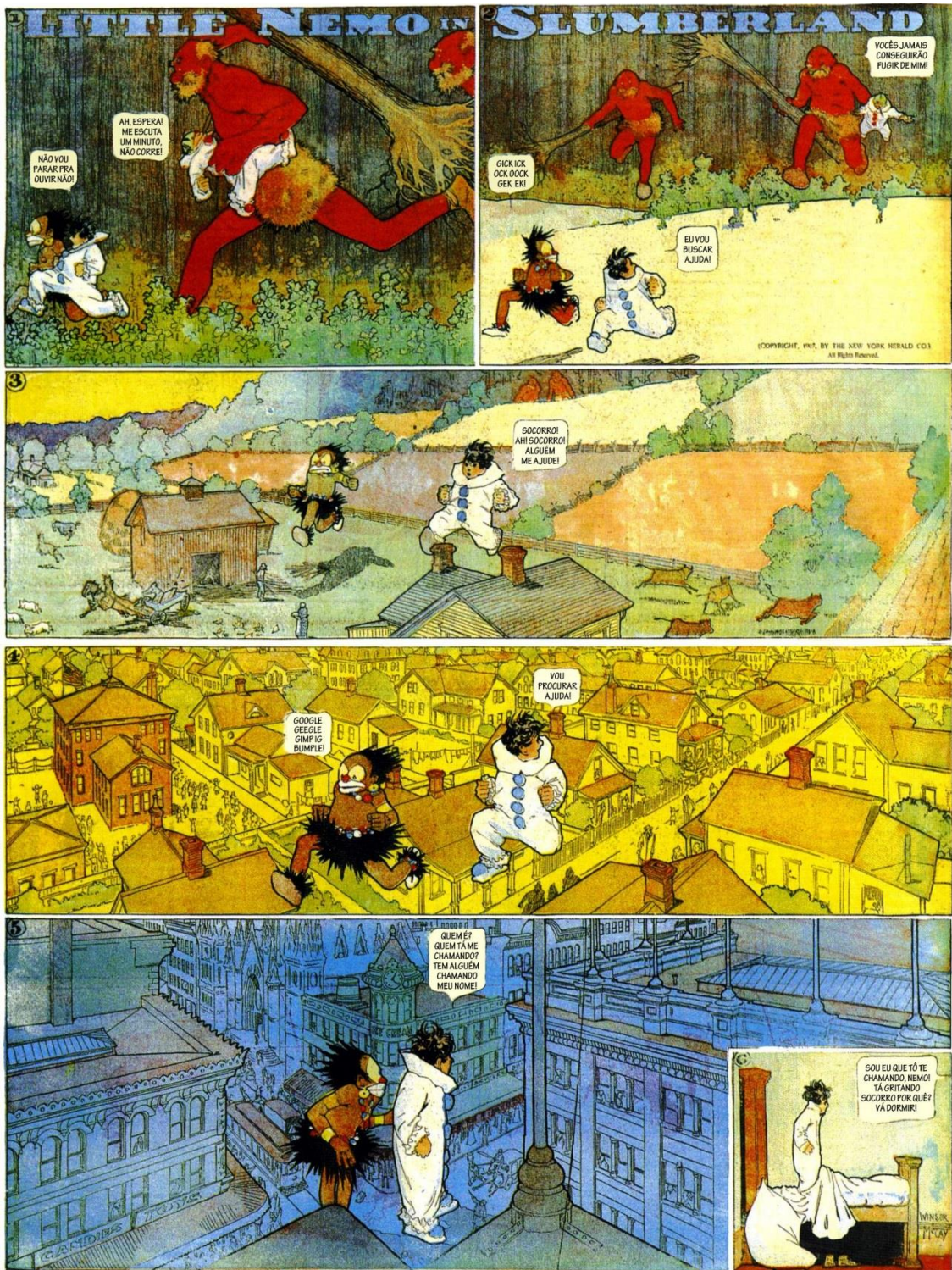
**Fig. 4:** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created by Winsor McCay; page originally published on the 25 of February of 1906 in the New York Herald. Credits: Public domain; translation by Muraktama Lemos and Yuri Riccaldone.

However, *Little Nemo* not only reflects the dream character of the city. In some of its pages McCay also shows the conflict between the panoptical view and the wandering through the city. At the pages of September of 1907, *Nemo*, is a giant in

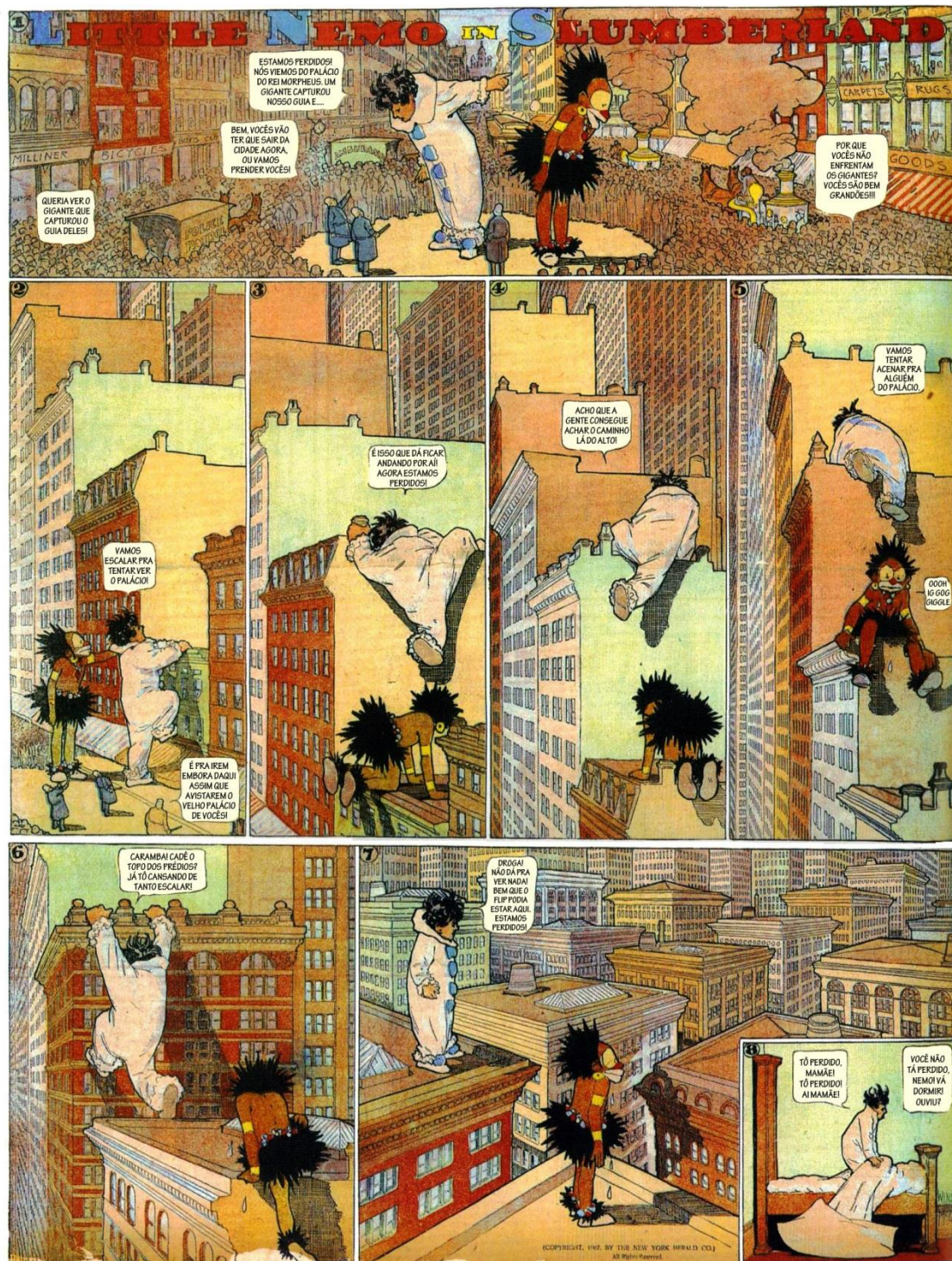


the middle of a city composed by tall buildings reminiscent of New York. The boy feels lost and tries to climb to a higher point in order to find a complete or panoptical view of the city. However, his gaze is limited by buildings of blind facades and opaque windows causing *Nemo* to say that he sees nothing even while looking at various buildings.

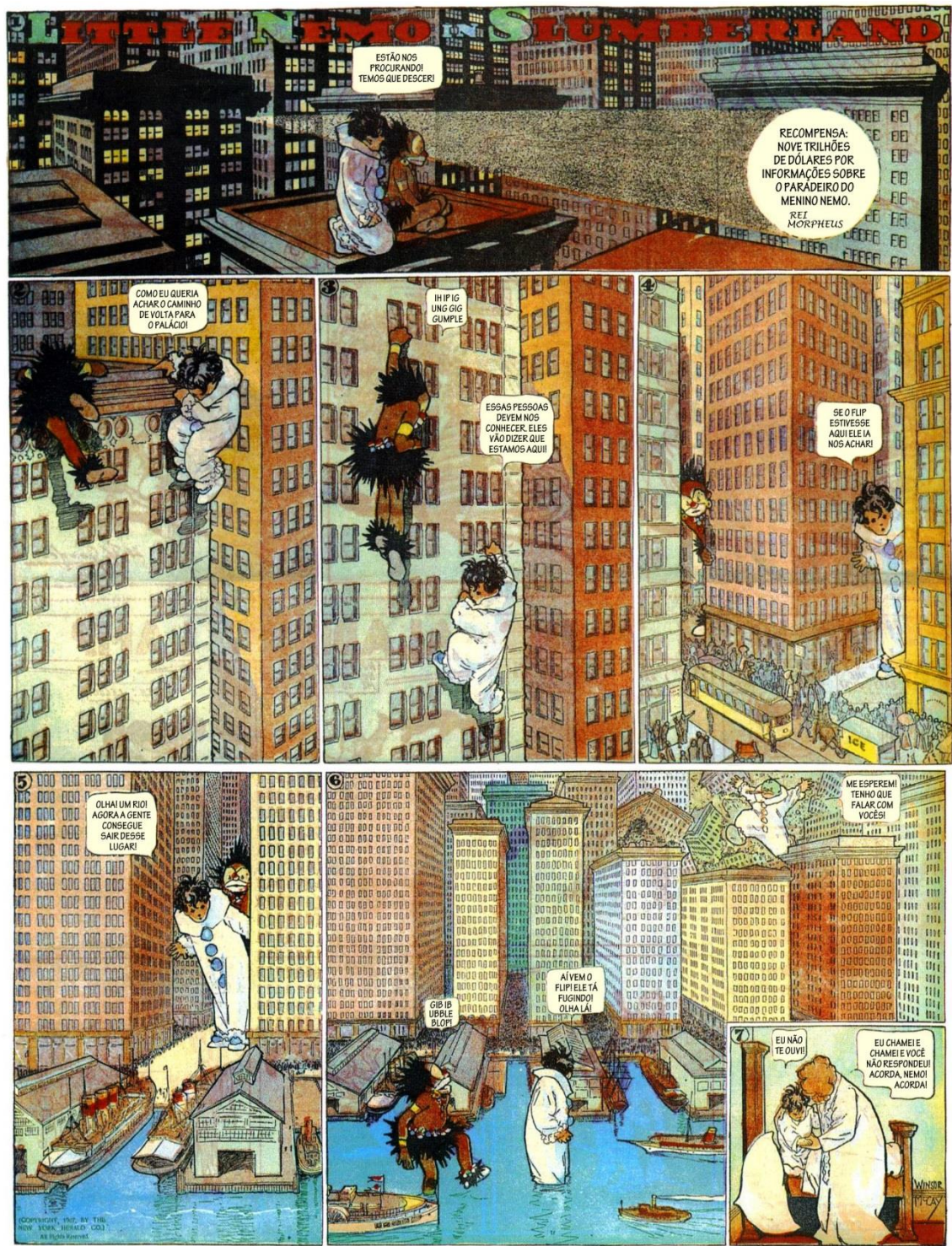
The creation of avenues with direct communication and unobstructed views were clear intensions of the *City Beautiful* movement. There is an intention for disproportionate control over the city and the lives of its residents (Scott, 1969, p.48, Warner, 1972, p.2). To Frahm (2010, p.40) '[...] Little Nemo dreams of a city that is not to be read by the panoptic gaze, a city where you have to walk [...]'. Not able to find that totalizing view, *Nemo* finds himself completely lost and '[...] his dreams express the fear of the city [...]' (Frahm, 2010, p.40).



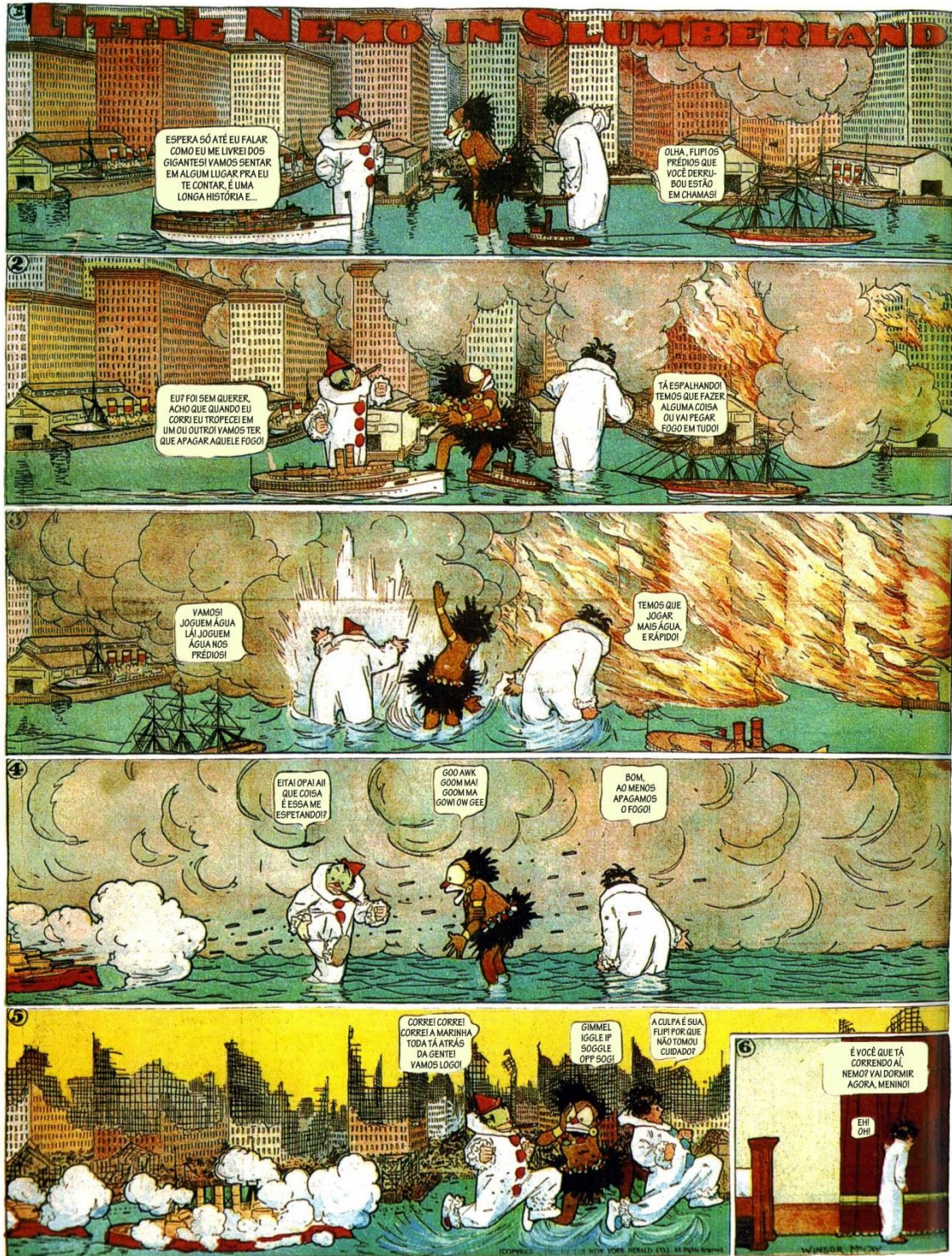
**Fig. 5:** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created by Winsor McCay; page originally published on the 15 of September of 1907 in the *New York Herald*. Credits: Public domain; translation by Muraktama Lemos and Yuri Riccaldone.



**Fig. 6:** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created by Winsor McCay; page originally published on the 22 of September of 1907 in the *New York Herald*. Credits: Public domain; translation by Muraktama Lemos and Yuri Riccaldone.



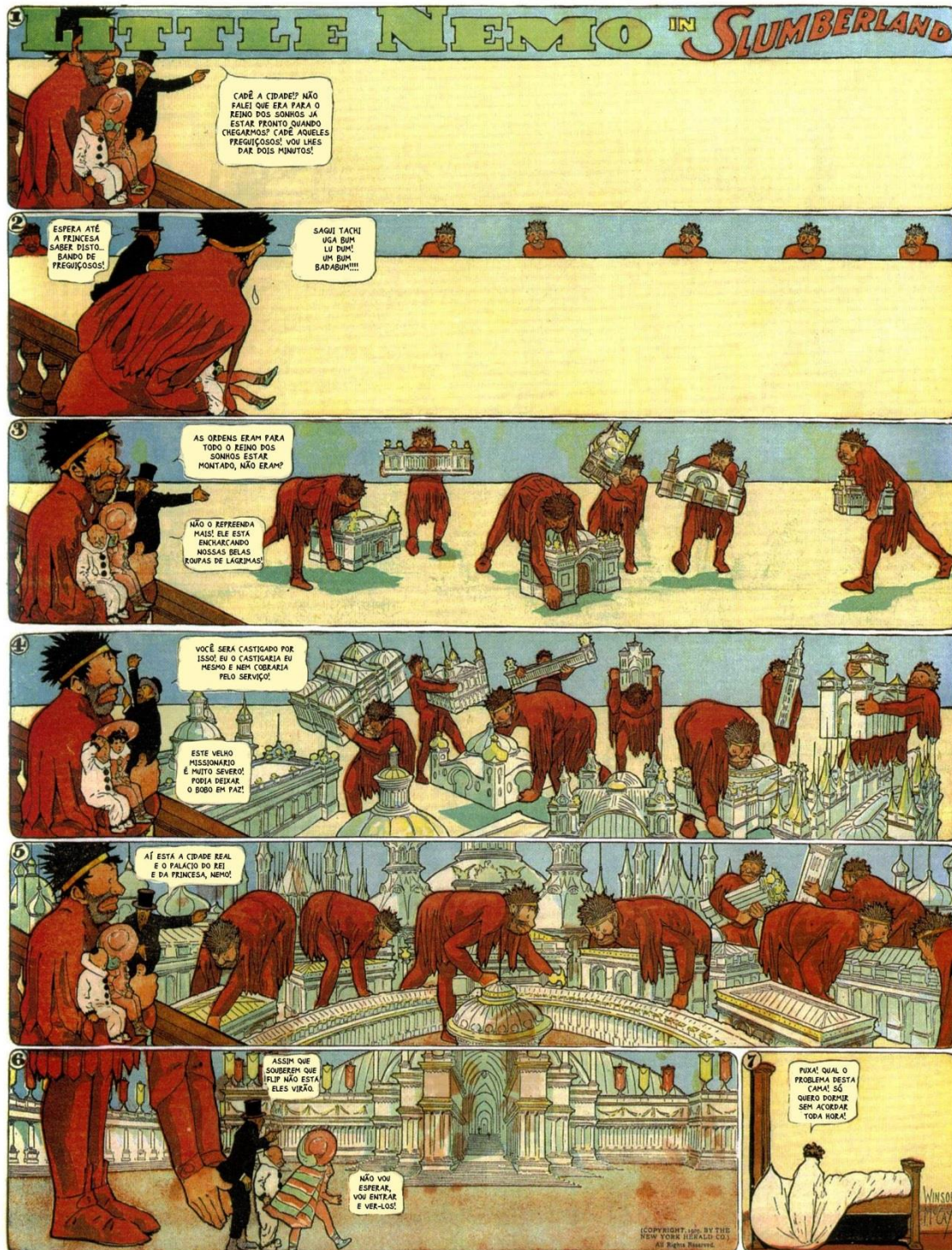
**Fig. 7:** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created by Winsor McCay; page originally published on the 29 of September of 1907 in the *New York Herald*. Credits: Public domain; translation by Muraktama Lemos and Yuri Ricaldone.



**Fig. 8:** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created by Winsor McCay; page originally published on the 6 of October of 1907 in the *New York Herald*. Credits: Public domain; translation by Muraktama Lemos and Yuri Riccaldone.

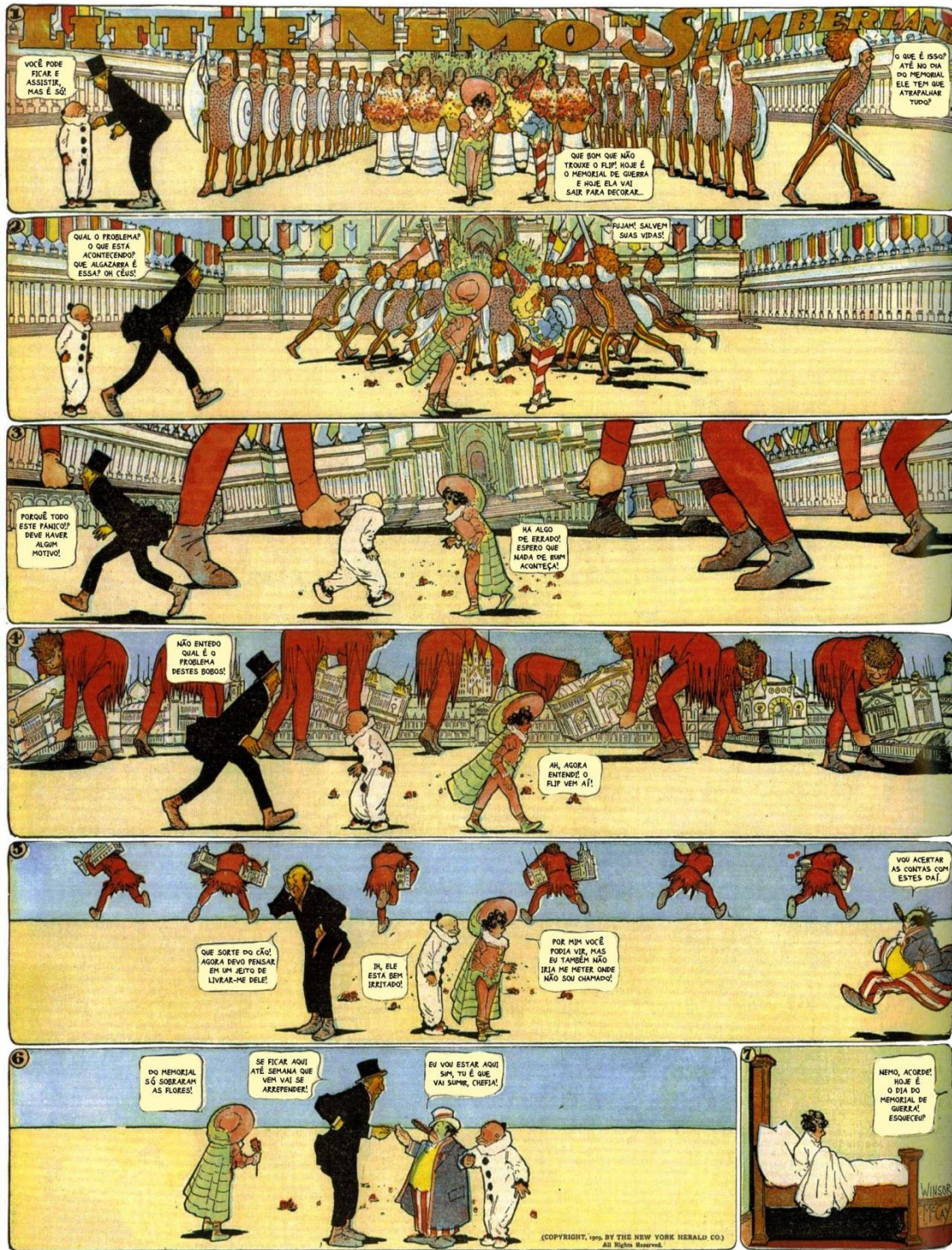
The flow of the story is given by speech bubbles that guide the reader because the representation of the city, which grew out of control, is marked by a sense of claustrophobia and of labyrinth causing fear and alienation in the character: 'the city is too big' (Frahm, 2010, p.41). In the episodes of May of 1909, one lackey of

the kingdom of *Morpheus* plans to build the *Slumberland* country in a vacant lot. He commands an army of *Bobos* to assemble and disassemble the city of dreams to his pleasure and can even make the city grow from the ground.

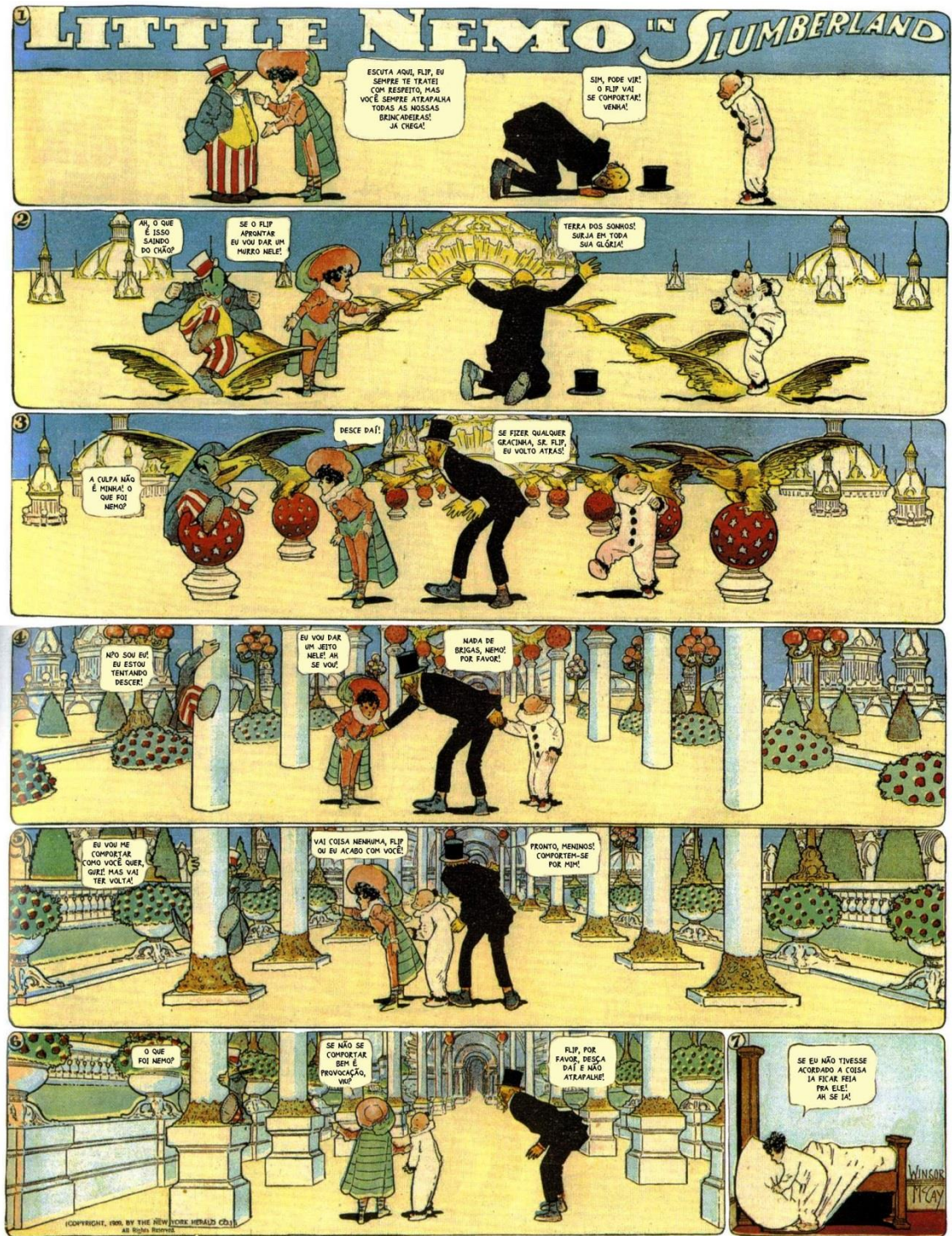


**Fig. 9:** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created by Winsor McCay; page originally published on the 23 of May of 1909 in the *New York Herald*. Credits: Public domain; translation by Muraktama Lemos and Yuri Riccaldone.





**Fig. 10:** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created by Winsor McCay; page originally published on the 30 of May of 1909 in the *New York Herald*. Credits: Public domain; translation by Muraktama Lemos and Yuri Riccaldone.



**Fig. 11:** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created by Winsor McCay; page originally published on the 6 of June of 1909 in the *New York Herald*. Credits: Public domain; translation by Muraktama Lemos and Yuri Riccaldone.

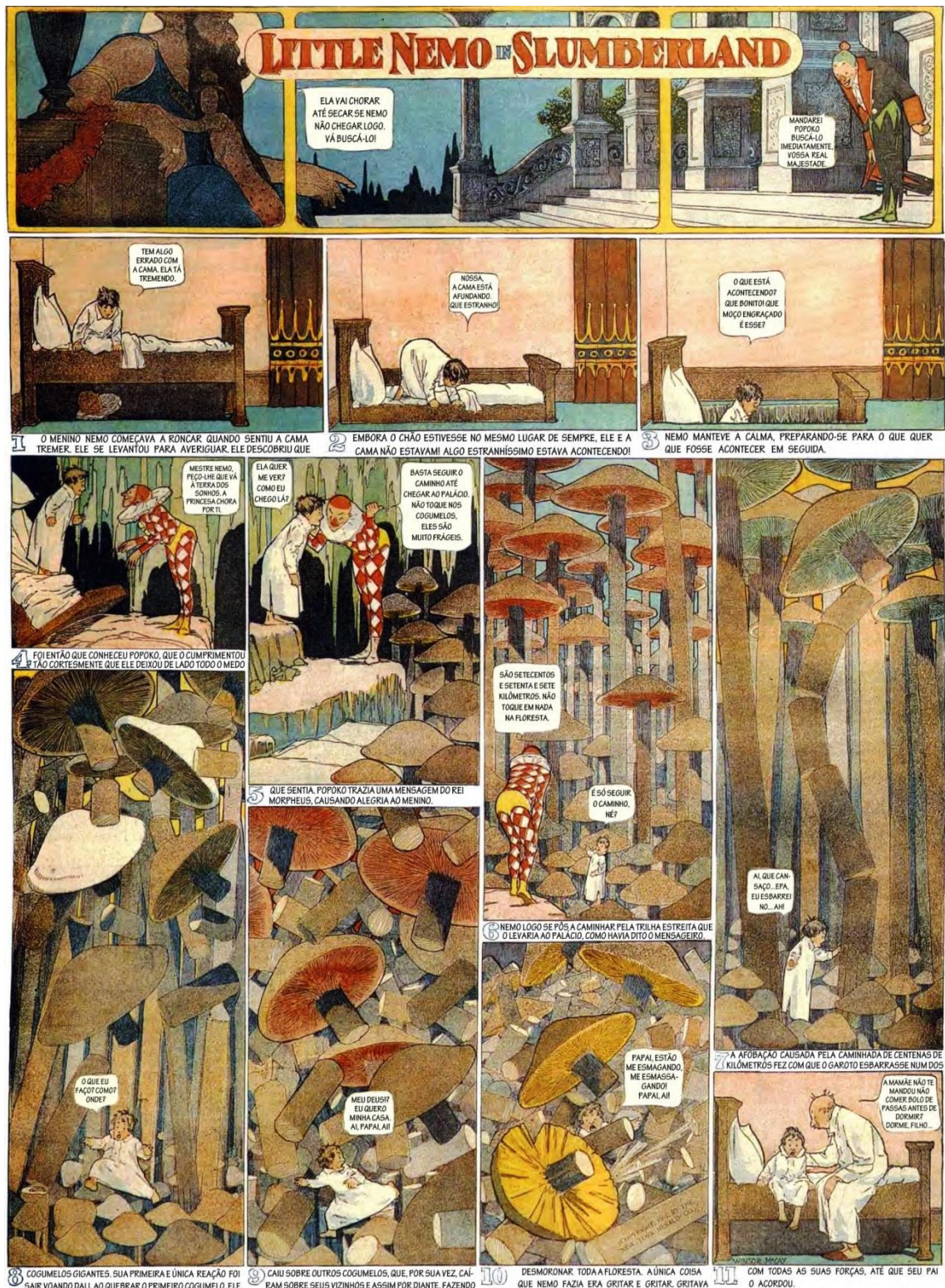
It seems to be a response to a previous sequence that shows the erosion of *Art Nouveaux* style in children's scribbles by a saboteur. What is the difference between the imagination of the character *Flip*, a child belonging to the People of Sunrise, with his scribbles, and the magician, who, like a city-planner, plans and solves the entire city's problems commanding an army of giants able to install the White City



in a glance. The city is no longer a simple scenario and becomes the promise of a new world: a symbol of the American dream (Thévènet and Rambert, 2010, p.24; Smolderen, 2010, p.29).

McCay created the most surreal images: like cities where the houses grow legs and go walking along the street, shrinking cities and where *Nemo* becomes a giant, gardens full of giant mushrooms, talking animals and other dreamlike situations (Dorigatti, 2012). The author uses the own language of comics to intensify these surreal images and actions in the narrative.

In the page on the 22 of October of 1905, *Nemo* walks through a forest of giant mushrooms, the height of the frames is increased until the boy drops one of them, considered the narrative climax. From there the height of the frame starts to decrease as the forest falls creating a sense of claustrophobia and agony. The same graphic style is repeated in other boards, like in the one of 26 of July of 1908, in which his bed gets bigger and bigger legs, and as the story unfolds, the graphics accompany this growth.

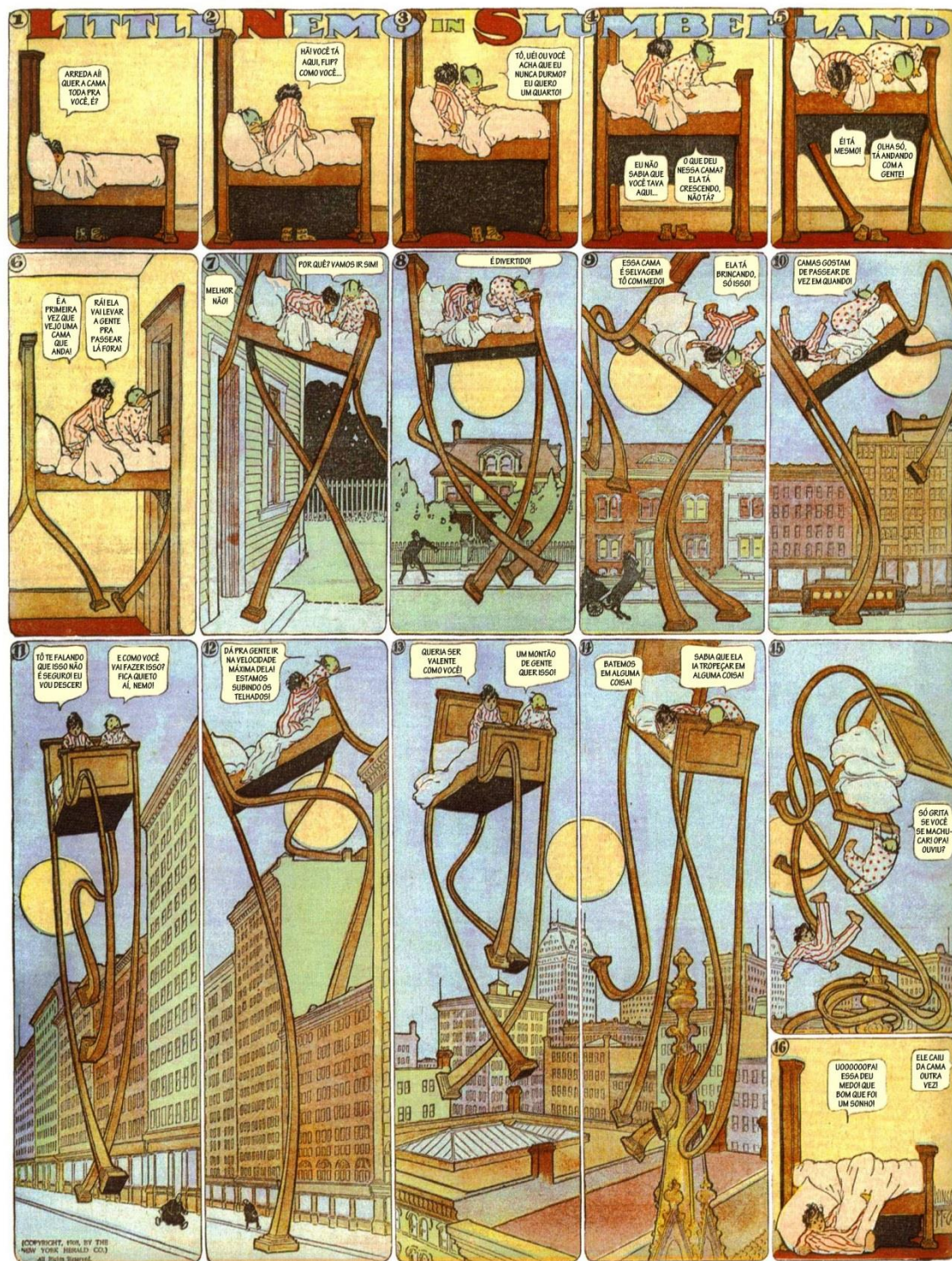


**Fig. 12:** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created by Winsor McCay; page originally published on the 22 of October of 1905 in the *New York Herald*. Credits: Public domain; translation by Muraktama Lemos and Yuri Riccaldone.

# VIRUS 12

R A D I C A L  
M O D E R N S

a n o 2 0 1 6 s e m e s t r e  
r e v i s t a d o N o m a d s . u s p | N o m a d s . u s p j o u r n a l  
I S S N 2 1 7 5 - 9 7 4 x | C C B Y - N C  
D O I 1 0 . 4 2 3 7 / v i r u s \_ j o u r n a l



**Fig. 13:** *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, created by Winsor McCay; page originally published on the 26 of July of 1908 in the *New York Herald*. Credits: Public domain; translation by Muraktama Lemos and Yuri Riccaldone.

Winsor McCay was a pioneer in experimenting with the formal elements of the pages of comics through its creative arrangement and through the design of the frames in order to increase the impact of the story and the expectation throughout the narrative. There is a direct connection between the use of the language of



comics with the message to be transmitted to the public in an attempt to metalanguage. His innovative approach to the design and layout of the page has shown the potential of comics through experiments with scale, transformation, perspective and with the expression of his own point of view (Gravett, 2006).

## Conclusion

Large urban transformations in modern cities in the late nineteenth century to the twentieth century were particularly inspiring for authors from different fields. There is a constant search for the ideal city, away from the problems and serious issues of modern cities such as overpopulation, poverty, informal growth, confusion, dirt or noise.

In *Little Nemo*, it is clear the desire and the need for control over the growth of the city in its representation. The author seeks mainly to represent the fear of complexity and lack of control of urban rhythm. 'The desire for control is stronger than the lust to get lost' (Frahm, 2010, p.40) and in that sense the panoptical gaze is what cleans the city of all its contradictions making it a timeless and controlled element (Frahm, 2010, p.43).

'[...] in the dreams of Little Nemo, this gaze gains no control over the city. The same is true for the comic page. The gaze is forced to move and develops its own rhetoric of ambivalence between control and the loss of control. This is the struggle of power in the modern city that comics reveal. [...]' (Frahm, 2010, p.44)

McCay seeks beauty, control and harmony in his cities and his characters reflect the autocrat thoughts of the city-planners of the time. The author believed in an ideal city based on the *City Beautiful* movement and intended to convey the wonderful imagination of the time through *Nemo's* travels reflecting the *zeitgeist* in the representation of the cities of the land of dreams. At the same time and through the use of visual signs, the shape of the buildings and their scale in relation to the boy, he wanted to show the terrible scenario that is being lost in the hurly burly of the unordered and unbalanced cities.

To Josep-Maria Montaner (1999, p.148) the essential component of any fiction is the time factor considering that the 'author takes as its critical premise certain phenomenon of contemporary society [...] and extrapolates this situation until a specific date [...]' where the city and society are described based on these premises, representing them in a very plausible way. For the author, the drawn architectures are common links between the various utopian fictions, whether literary, cinematic or comics, based on the 'ability to represent through drawing a spatial and narrative reality' (Montaner, 1999, p.152).

The artists use comics as an entertainment element in which they can represent and actively criticize urban life and issues related to the city's growth, seeking to convey a message through metaphors and comparisons with the prophesized cities in texts and projects of various artists, architects and scholars of this time.

The work of McCay could not have been created separately from the vibrant times of its creation (the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century). His work alludes to the growing introspection and civic awareness of the period reflecting the issues, urban transformations and his own commentary. The intrusion of reality in the world of dreams of *Little Nemo* shows that McCay is truly a Radical Modern due to his encouragement to experimentation in the graphical medium and promoting critical reflection through this language (Canemaker, 1987, p.259; O'Sullivan, 1990, p.38).



*Little Nemo* was the great creation of McCay and revolutionized an entire industry not only for its graphical quality and visual experimentation but also for the social commentary that was not typical in comics of the time.

Even today, artists like Moebius, Schuiten & Peeters in their series of comic books, the 'Obscure Cities', Marc-Antoine Mathieu, Jean Philippe Bramanti; architects like Archigram and Superstudio in the 1960s, and more recently, Jimenez Lai, Rem Koolhaas and Jean Nouvel, raise relevant issues related to the present and the future through metaphors based on the modern cities' premises and projects, in a mixture of questioning and wonder. Through the critical look of the author and its interpretation of reality it is possible to create fantastic new worlds. This reality is metamorphosed and expanded through the manipulation of the graphic language of comics and its narrative capacity. In this way it builds real meaning for imaginary places which are then decoded by the reader.

The potential of comics as a medium for representation and its meanings is well-known and is able to propose a critical look at the ways and ideals of modern life. The *City Beautiful* had the ability to show cities 'of a past that America has never known' (Scott, 1969, p.108) and through the use of comics these cities were fully lived and experienced by its readers.

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