THE CHANGING CITY AS REPRESENTED IN COMIC BOOKS: CHICAGO SEEN BY CHRIS WARE

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Resumo

The cities of the early twentieth century, as imagined in the comics, reflect the problems experienced by large American cities of that time. Several issues raised by urban sociologists, such as immigration, slums, crime, and individualism are taken as starting points for the characterization of cities in the comics. It is possible to clearly identify in Chris Ware's comic books a deep understanding of the society and the city of Chicago during the modernist transformations, focusing on the nostalgia felt by its citizens with regard to the processes of change the city was going through and their powerlessness in the face of development and progress. Representations in the comics can shed a different light on how urban space is appropriated and perceived from the characters' perspective, thereby directing the reader's attention to important and critical issues for understanding the complexity of the city.

Keywords: comic books; transformations in cities; urban memory; individualism; seizing the urban space.

Introduction

Today, it is commonplace to question how the ideas, concepts, shapes, and models are transported to other places, appropriated, mixed with new cultures, and transformed into new elements. According to Christian Topalov (2012), this mixture is processed as a nebula in which professionals are separated and differentiated, but constantly come together in competition and rivalry. What binds them most strongly is their common language. Topalov provides a metaphor to explain this flow of words: a particle accelerator, where a particle is injected in the accelerator and changes its nature whenever the cloud, i.e., the field of study, is observed. This cloud embodies multiple trips, words, books, drawings, and reflections.

It is interesting to note that both the participants in this trip and the means by which ideas travel play an important role in the transformation of the object itself. This is neither diffusion nor the influence of the starting point of the object, but, rather, a brand, a loan, a selection, and a translation of the object by other cultures. Every model type promotes different reflections for different types of individuals, giving rise to various interpretations. According to Topalov, it is a way of looking that has nothing to do with chance; the object is reconstructed through information, selection, and reflection.

This article presents some preliminary results of the research project *Urban Chronicles: Representation and Criticism of the City through Comic Books* being conducted at UFRJ as part of the Master's Program in Urban Planning. This research aims to explore the various models and strategies used by CB artists in order to promote the understanding and knowledge of the city and the comparison with architects' experiences with comic books. The goal is to produce a synthesis of these analyzes with an experiment or exploration model of a comic book city. During this research, there arose a question about concepts studied in urban sociology and the way they are viewed in comic books as critical elements due to transformations in the city and urban life. On the other hand, it is interesting to comprehend how concepts and ideas have traveled across distinct fields and consolidated as a hybrid element, a comic book (CB), which is a synthesis of multiple concepts.

CB cities are not mere representations of actual cities. Their authors have created them based on interpretations, descriptions, criticisms, and stimuli provided the city around them. These are representations of an actual, multifaceted, and complex city: experiences, textures, odors, colors, movements of passersby; cultures that have left their mark on it over the generations; its 'emotions' reflected on its inhabitants; and its sensations expressed on stone and brick walls and pavements over time.

Far from merely mirroring or copying reality, CBs embody their authors' interpretations and reflections, thereby verging on Stuart Hall's (1997, p. 16) concept of representation qua the use language to express something meaningful to someone else. Representation is then an essential part of a process by means of which meaning is produced, shared, and exchanged among cultures. Therefore, CB images conceal an intentional encoding process—the use of visual signs, icons, and indices—that enables meaning attribution to concepts and conceptual relationships among them. This process, in conjunction with the reader's culture and life history, allows reflection and interpretation of the represented object (Hall, 1997, p. 18-21). The goal of early CBs was to introduce broad semiliterate masses and immigrant non-English speakers to a medium that was hostile to them. The themes presented by them uncomplicatedly and the stereotypical characters promoted their readers' prompt identification with them. Far from taking offense, they felt that CB stories had been written about their own experiences, providing them with an escape from reality; also because CB stories were presented in an understandable and accessible format. Thus, while lowlier readers enjoyed CB stories, others went as far as to interpret their authors' design choices and writing, taking note of their intentions.

In some comics, problems faced by cities of that time, which haunted their inhabitants' minds are clearly visible. Consequently, it is possible to relate them with concerns that urban sociologists would have when they began to take interest in studying the city and its community. Amongst these interpretations, it is possible to highlight Chris Ware's representation of Chicago, of which *Lost Buildings* is a case in point.

Figure 1. Representation of the Rothschild Building in Chicago before and during its demolition. In: Ira Glass and Chris Ware's *Lost Buildings* (author's clipping from CB/presentation).

Chicago: innovation and change

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the most important characteristics of the city of Chicago were its fast pace and rapid growth. This caused the city to remain featureless, chaotic, polluted, and overpopulated. Its bourgeoisie was also concerned with its growing ethnic and cultural heterogeneity.

According to Jean Castex,[1] in spite of being controversial,[2] the plan presented to Chicago' city administration by Daniel Burnham at the

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[1] Information provided orally by Jean Castex during the seminar *between transference and translation: how to study international circulation of models in the field of urbanism and social reform?*, held at PROURB/FAU/UFRJ in April 2012, organized by Prof. Margareth Pereira.

[2] The ideological concepts surrounding the City Beautiful place invention/innovation and continuity/tradition on opposite sides. On the one hand, Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright's search for a typically American culture and language and, on the other hand, Burnham's belief that "repulsion towards all that was European" was a manifestation of

Columbian Exposition in 1893 is that which promoted its massive growth in the following decades.

Unlike other cities, Chicago was unrestricted by historic tradition or previous heritage. The Great Fire of 1971, resulting in the reconstruction of the entire city, cemented this detachment from the past and provided it with a dreamer's nature.
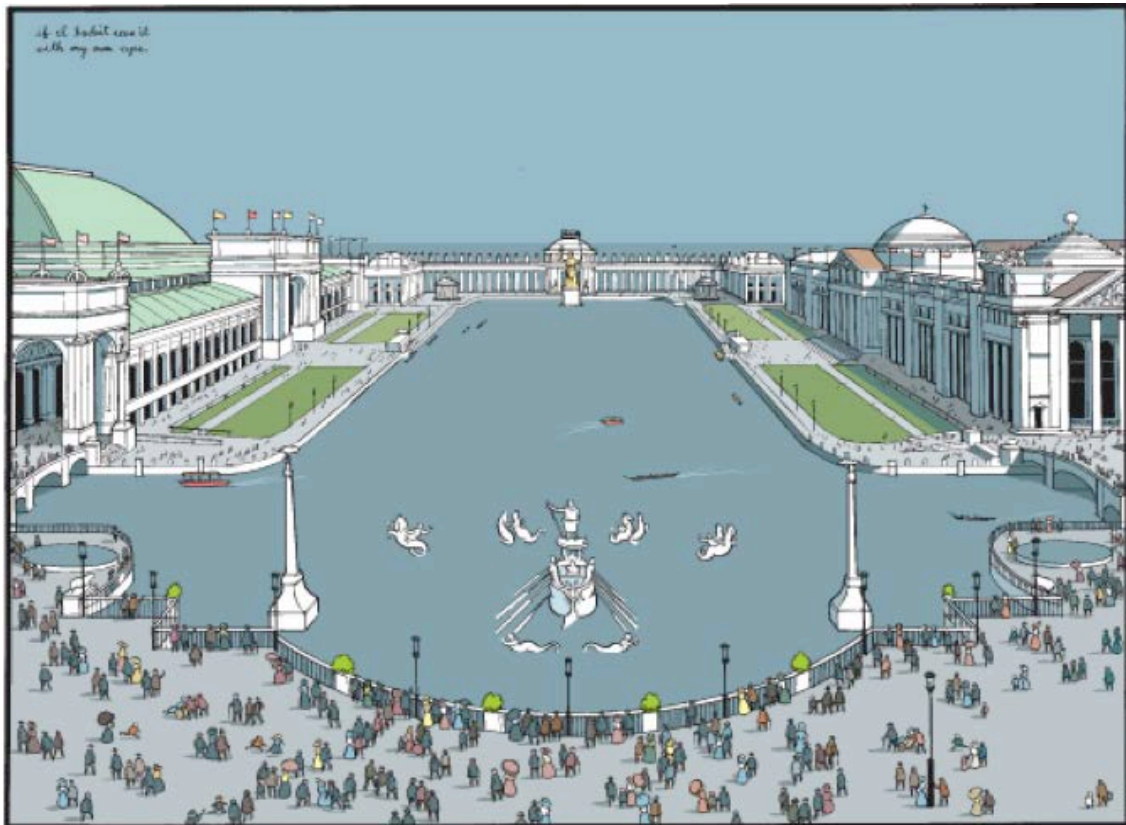

Figure 2. Representation of the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In: Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Boy in the World.*

Daniel Burnham is, according to Peter Hall, seen as the "prophet" of the City Beautiful movement.[3] The White City's plan[4] is based on monumentality and

American architects' immaturity and insecurity (Hines, 2000), since America was not isolated from the rest of the world and was heir to a preexisting tradition.

[3] The City Beautiful movement was driven by rampant and uncontrolled growth of North American cities and inspired by hygienist ideas as applied to nineteenth century European cities in the form of major avenues and boulevards (Hall 1996 [1988], p. 94). The movement is considered to have been launched by Daniel Burnham at the 1893 Chicago Exposition and reached its peak with the creation of the Chicago Plan. It sought to create a functional and mainly human city and restore its beauty (Hines, 2000).

[4] In the Chicago Plan, Burnham applied his vision of the future with a diagrammatic system of motorways across the Chicago area, which, in an unprecedented manner, linked the whole region and intersected in downtown Chicago. The plan prescribed the development of Chicago within a radius of 60 miles by means of a system of concentric and radial boulevards connecting the downtown area of the city to its suburbs and connecting the in-between suburbs to one other. The civic center was the hub of the new project, crowned by

restoration of visual and aesthetic harmony, from which social harmony would consequently follow. Chicago's fast development inevitably attracted a large wave of immigrants in search of work, which led to a deep racial divide due to degradation of Chicagoans' quality of life and the emergence of slums. This issue was studied in depth by Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (2009 [1921]), researchers at the Chicago School of Sociology, which gave rise to the fields of urban sociology and urban ecology.

The Chicago School of Sociology, by means of field research,[5] observed how these new communities sprang up. Park and Burgess began to pose abstract questions to urban sociology[6] and political sciences that not only conceived scientific knowledge, but also the city proper as the result of the synthesis of a complex and ever-evolving environment. Manmade landscapes and the determination of internal quality of social groups became increasingly important. City buildings[7] served the dual purpose of mobility and containment of community life. Their studies were greatly influenced by Simmel's ideas, which became a reference in studies of cities. Anchored in his teachings, Park and Burgess (2009 [1921]) studied city problems such as marginalization, crime, and delinquency caused by the troublesome social integration of immigrants into the metropolis.

In *The City*, Park (1984 [1925]) claims that the city is a product of human nature because it represents a certain state of mind, with its own culture, customs, and traditions: a diversified urban culture. Robert Park's interest in "natural history"—a concept instantiated by the cycle of relationships among species, seen everywhere, according to him (e.g., in gangs, strikes,

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a building with a dome, from which two large diagonal avenues would branch out. This was one of the few project elements that were never carried out (Castex, 2009; Hall, 1996 [1988]).

[5] The basis of field research is the concept of direct contact, put into practice in the nineteenth century by Jane Addams in Chicago, Hull House, grounded on the model of London's Christian social service centers. The use of this methodology has been challenged by sociologists outside of the Chicago School for its origins in social work and lack of reliability in data collection from direct sources (Hall 1996 [1988], p. 47-52).

[6] Branch of sociology that studies social relations within the urban space, which constitutes the foundation for research on cities.

[7] Roads, railways, canals, and other ways of transportation.

and revolutions)—led him to study urban ecology.[8] The language of urban ecology would eventually shed light on social control, process, and organization of the city and provide new institutions for the composition of society.

The situation in Chicago from 1919 to 1939 could be depicted by some keywords such as specialization,[9] competition,[10] and congestion.[11] The city became a major hub for industrialization, skyscrapers, and building innovations (e.g., elevators). All railways converged to Chicago; its electric power was continuously generated, and its artificial lighting grid rivaled that of Paris, outstripping the latter of its title of City of Lights. This is a title that Chicago would uphold throughout the twentieth century and that promoted countless changes and immeasurable development and progress with the Modern Movement and International Style.

Urban memory and individualism in *lost buildings*

CB artist Chris Ware's persistent interest in the city is remarkable. In several of his stories, he elects the building as the focus point, or icon, as the main element in the relationship between man and the city and in the way that the former acknowledges the passage of time and urban memory. He develops this relationship more intensely in *Lost Buildings*: an image and radio broadcasting collaboration with Ira Glass (a National Public Radio announcer) on the subject of Chicago's cultural historian Tim Samuelson's, his mentor Richard Nickel's (an urban preservationist and photographer), and Louis Sullivan's love for buildings.

In this project, in which the artist shows his drawings to a live audience, Ware conducts a conversation between the comics and building structures. In this way, Ware manages to map several concepts he intends to explore in the depiction of the city, through its lost icons—the relationship between

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[8] Which used analogies concerning competition and cooperation mechanisms to shed light on intra-urban organizational forces of the urban dynamics conducive to a state of socio-spatial order.

[9] Performance of specific tasks and paid according to their skills.

[10] Increasing rivalry within the middle classes.

[11] The urban way of life in which society faces scientific progressivism in conflict with capitalist corporations (a political issue for the Chicago mob).

aesthetic and vernacular, melancholy and joy, loneliness and belonging, history and present—in the formal structure of CB narratives (Raeburn, 2004). In this manner, he emphasizes communal visions, hopes, and dreams embedded in daily life fragments of inhabitants of the city he is depicting. Ware appropriates Goethe's ideas when he claims:

> What you do with comics, essentially, is take pieces of experience and freeze them in time.[…] In comics you make the strip come alive by reading it, by experience it beat by beat as you would playing music. […] Another way is to pull back and consider the composition all at once, as you would the façade of a building […] as you would look at a structure. […] Architecture is frozen music.[12] […] This is, I think, the aesthetic key to the development of cartoons as an art form (Ware cited by Raeburn, 2004, p. 25 – 26).

Levels of sensoriality and multiplicity in urban space rise with complexity. However, this also causes an increase in the feeling of alienation and rootlessness. The loss of spatial experience as a catalyst for urban space significance leads to a sense of nostalgia on the part of city dwellers (McQuire, 2008). Ware depicts this sense of loss in his comics by means of the state of disrepair of Chicago's buildings and their subsequent demolition. The author sees the decay of these buildings resonation with the sense of loss as evidence of the passage of time. At the same time, he evokes their past grandeur via nostalgia, employing his CB characters to express a sense of anguish by contrasting their previous urban memories against contemporary changes in the city and urban life.

Figure 3. Garreth Theatre before, during, and after its demolition. In: Ira Glass and Chris Ware's *Lost Buildings* (author's clipping from CB/presentation).

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[12] It is important to note that this Goethean concept should be interpreted in light of the historical context in which it operates and the specificities of CBs.

Decay, shown in its entirety through its relationship with the built environment, encourages the reflection about the sort of indifference instilled in individuals by modern cities, thereby exploring Georg Simmel's concept of individualism. According to Simmel (1998), freedom is more easily exercised in large cities with respect to small communities. Nevertheless, the kind of individualism that derives from this concept of freedom conceives the individual as a universal and generic being.

In the eighteenth century, the individual became equal to others and free from the oppression exercised by social institutions such as the State or the Church. Citizens became rational, afflicted by contradictory forces that tended to crush them through anonymity and, at the same time, give them individual autonomy. In the nineteenth century, there was continual differentiation amongst individuals, e.g., individualization via social division of labor. Everyone is now unique, specific, and irreplaceable (Simmel, 1988). This put the individual in conflict with society because of the changes demanded of the city by the Industrial Revolution, thus causing a loss of traditional ties and a growing sense of anonymity and individualism in big cities (Vieira, 2012).

According to Simmel (1998), city dwellers display a type of rational attitude that internalizes the leveling principle of monetary economics. This blasé attitude is characterized by aloofness and diminished ability to discern; things, people, and experiences are perceived as indifferent by the blasé individual (Vieira, 2012, p. 35). Simmel characterizes this indifference as *blaserie*, typical of the modern metropolitan individual.
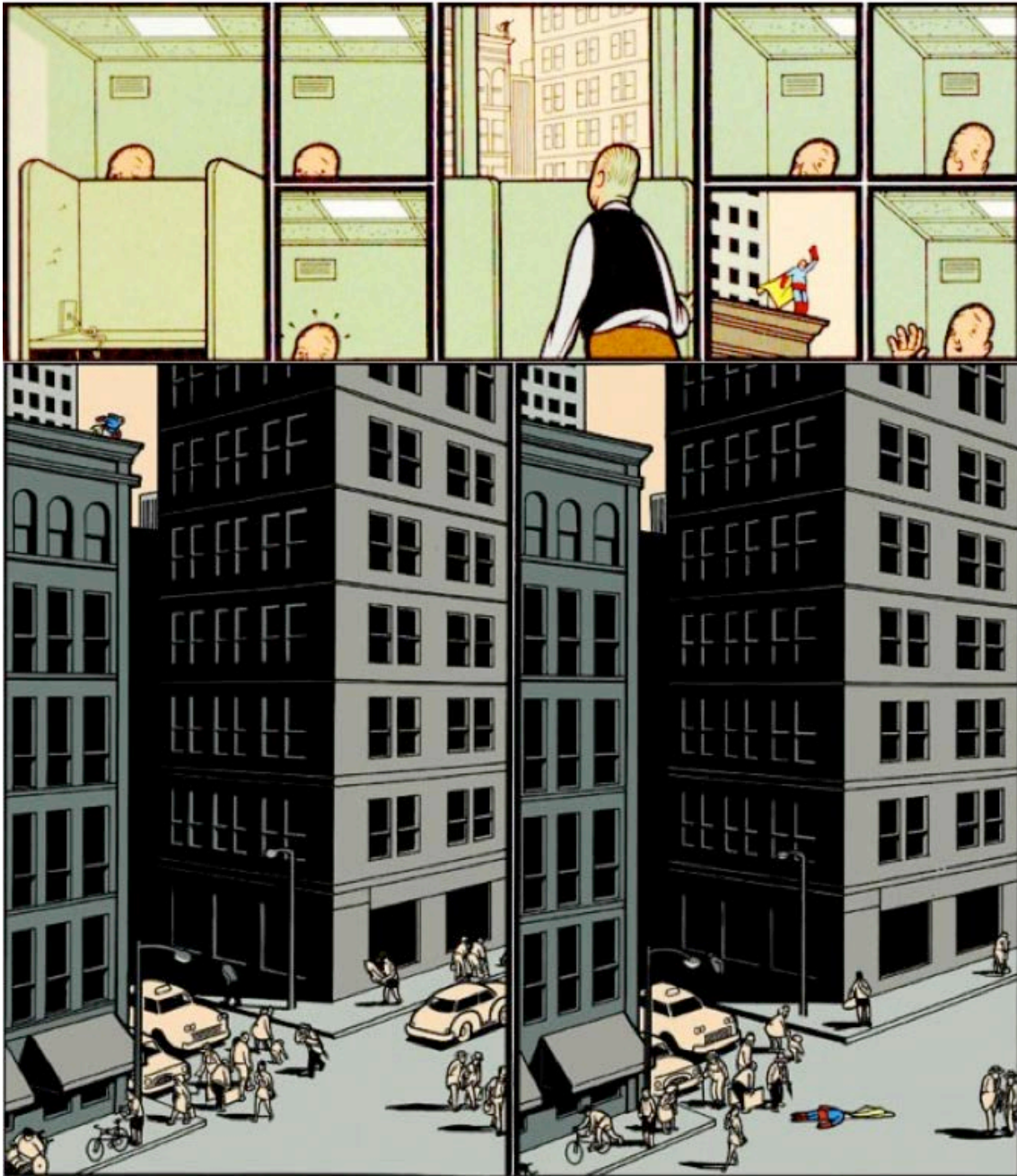
Figure 4. Representation of a suicide and onlookers' apparent curiosity, which almost immediately turns into indifference on the part of the city inhabitants. In: Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Boy in the World*.
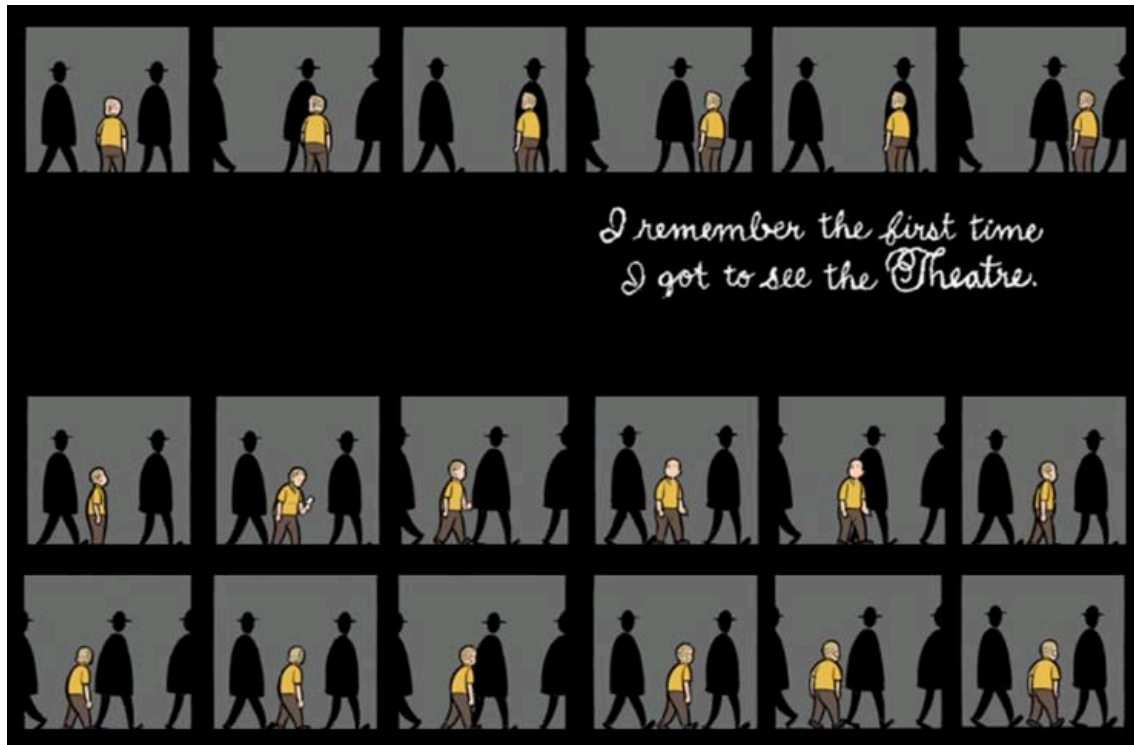
Figure 5. Representation of Tim Samuelson's experience when walking the streets of Chicago while silhouettes represent the rest of its inhabitants: anonymous and indifferent. In: Ira Glass and Chris Ware's *Lost Buildings* (author's clipping from CB/presentation).

It is also possible to recognize Walter Benjamin's concept of *flâneur* in Ware's representation of Chicago. Samuelson stands out from the crowd as an insulated individual, wandering and observing the buildings as he walks up and down the streets and commits to memory, a somewhat nostalgic attitude, stimuli transmitted by the city. By recounting Tim Samuelson's experience at Garrick Theatre, Ware shows, simultaneously, images on a lower panel in which Tim, as a child, walks on a busy street looking at the buildings, while other citizens[13] walk by mechanically, detached from their surroundings.

His work almost constitutes an archive illuminating the decaying elements in the history of modernity that have been neglected, lost, and forgotten. Notwithstanding, by imagining history not as a catalog of artifacts or relics, but as lived experience, a rich social tissue, it is possible to reconstruct the idea of decay as a whole object (Worden, 2010). This is a contextualization

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[13] Typical figure of modernity, who, given the loss of contemplative and focused appreciation skills in modern society, is happy to wander and observe the urban space, capturing its aspects, from a subjective perspective in relation to objective culture and the constant flow of stimuli caused by city life.

process, i.e., it is all-inclusive with respect to the environment and history in which it belongs.

From the elements represented in Ware's *Lost Buildings* (2004), it is possible to perceive the city bit by bit, showing the typical and multiple behaviors that exist in modern cities. City icons represented in CBs constitute an act of both imagination and contemplation, thereby promoting reflection on how space is used by CB characters. *Lost Buildings* pursues a dialectical relationship between lived experience and history, individuality and the built environment (Worden, 2010, p. 109). It alludes to a never-ending desire to experience the past from the unstable perspective of the present, a point also considered by Aldo Rossi (2001 [1966]), who claimed that the primary elements of the city, when alive and inhabited, are like a past that has not yet been experienced in the present.
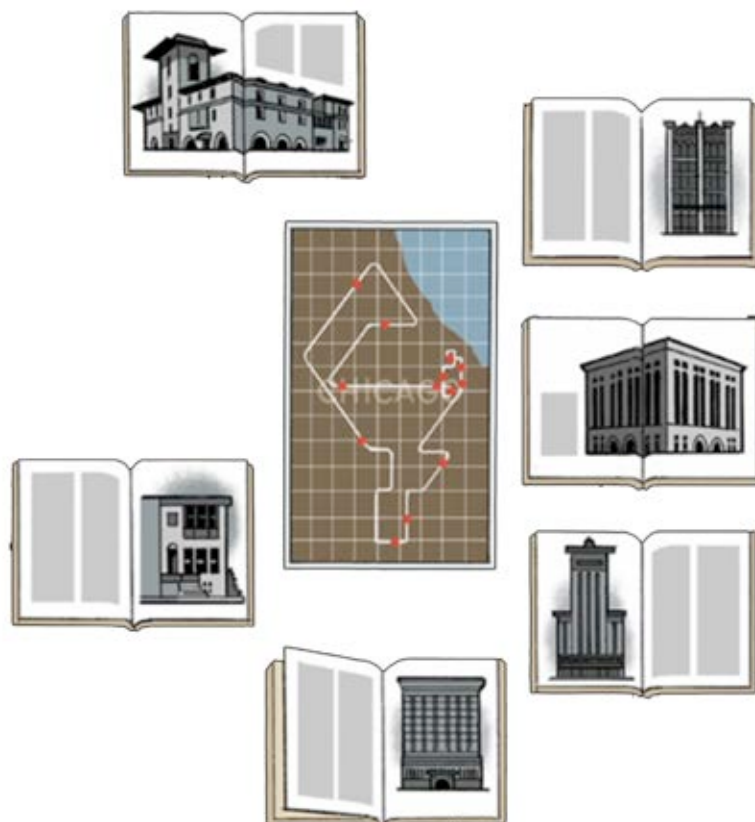

Figure 6. Representation of the route taken by Tim Samuelson and Richard Nickel in Chicago with its Louis Sullivan buildings in highlight. In the CB/movie, this route is gradually shortened and Sullivan buildings disappear from the map. In: Ira Glass and Chis Ware's *Lost Buildings* (15min. 06sec.).

The aesthetic and melancholy fragmentation of images exposes the contingency and impermanence of modern American cities: the lack of belonging and identity as well as the loss of community values present in traditional environments. The purpose of using architectural icons in Ware's comics is to bring the temporal flow of narrative to a standstill, filling it with historical elements in a context that does away with the autonomy of fiction and encourages mnemonic connections with the reader's experience. In the introduction of the CBs, their characters' lives and routes are directly associated to the changes underway in Chicago. The sketch of a real cityscape, of buildings drawn after Richard Nickel's photographs, is at the same time imaginary, subjective, and objective, always yielding to the artist's expressions and feelings and complying with the message he wishes conveyed (Worden, 2010, p. 111-112). Thus, Ware seeks to provide his audience with a sense of familial belonging in the introduction to the comics, so that architecture per se is seen as a sentimental object evoking immediate experience of space and its resulting transience.

In the end, one can observe a correlation between the periods and structures of buildings shown through a circular element reminiscent of a wrecking ball.[14] It appears as a disruption in the homogeneous images of modern glass-and-steel buildings while evoking remembrance and the future. Remembrance indeed, because this circular shape is employed in the story to register past moments and the future, because it suggests the metal ball used in demolitions in the sense that one day this building will too be demolished to make room for something different. He tries to show that the present can only be reconstructed in with respect to the past (Worden, 2010).

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[14] Demolition ball or wrecking ball is a steel or iron ball attached to a crane used in the demolition of large buildings.
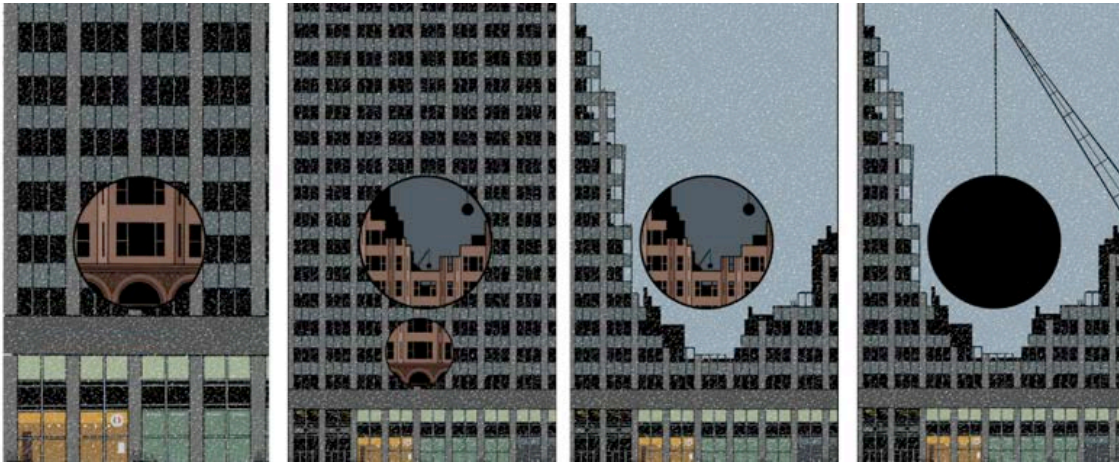
Figure 7. Allusion to the old Chicago Stock Exchange Building employing the image of a wrecking ball, showing both the current building and the old building in order to represent the transience of the American city. In: Ira Glass and Chris Ware's *Lost Buildings* (author's clipping of CB/introduction; images between 21min. 40sec. and 21min. 56sec.).

Conclusion

There is very strong interaction among professionals and a great importance in architectural and urban visual culture. This has been achieved after consideration about images shown in magazines, social networks, and newspapers, interpreted differently by each individual and each culture. It appears impossible to look at an image without making comparisons with another image, the real world or a sensory memory. For Michael Baxandall (1985, p. 58-59), an image works as an exchange between an artist and a reader/viewer, both existing as part of the larger global historical context.

A work of art or the art of life is experienced primarily through sight. In this manner we compare, learn, and seek to understand. By examining not only the work, but also the philosophical and scientific pretensions of a given historical period, it is possible to reveal correlations between methods of image creation and the evolution of ideas in visual cultures. These images can be linked by means of texts and can indicate ways to capture the artist's intent.

Several scholars from Simmel, Park, and Burgess's generation saw the city of Chicago as emblematical and modern: a typical American city. The Chicago School of Sociology generated waves of projects on all kinds of topics, such as research on ghettos, hobos, gangs, crime, prostitution, alienation, indifference, and slums. Likewise, artists were able to capture

the information and experience disseminated by Chicago, interpret and expose to the world their thoughts and concerns resulting from the vibration, constant transformation, and growth of cities in the early twentieth century and their changes over time.

Comic books emerged as a product of modernity and this reflects their strong connections with rapid changes and innovations in large cities as well as with the people who live in them. Rather than mere depictions of urban lifestyles and metropolitan icons, comic books are, above all, syntheses of interpretations of urban conceptions of a specific period in history, the turn of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century. Their authors/artists managed to apprehend, in images and stories, actual problems and conditions of the urban imaginary. CB cities were either depicted as spaces of knowledge, freedom, transformation, and progress or represented more nostalgically as lacking in community ties and compulsorily integrated to a modern chaotic, polluted, and noisy environment—one that advocates the straight line, functionality, and the normalizing urban layout as the savior of decaying and infirm cities.[15]

On the other hand, the characteristics of comic books language not only enable communication of ideas and customs from other times, but also help the reader to think critically about the city. CB artists can convey these messages and provocations in various ways, e.g., by juxtaposing several points of view, i.e., their characters' singular perspectives. CB artists can also resort to the juxtaposition of different times to compare them, allowing their readers to analyze and draw their own conclusions about the events and actions depicted in them and their meaning.

At the same time as CB artists can expose their thoughts by means of pictures, they can also lead their readers to identify themselves with the situations depicted in the books. This identification can be conducive to feelings and memories that help CB readers to immerse in the books. One of the most important things about reading comic books is reading the unsaid. The space between frames and images frozen at the right time

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[15] According to hygienist thinking, it is possible to create analogies between the social body (the city) and the human body.

enable CB readers to read/imagine what was left unsaid and draw their own conclusions.

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