Infrastructural Forms: Comics, Cities, Conglomerations

Dr Dominic Davies

Abstract

This chapter introduces comics as a distinctly spatial, infrastructural, and urban form, comprised of narrative building blocks and an architecture all their own. Through a series of examples taken from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and from both the global North and the global South, it shows how graphic narratives are able to intervene into the socio-spatial dialectic of urban life. Urban comics not only reveal the infrastructure of the city as a material embodiment of competing and often invisible interests. They also recalibrate and re-conceive urban space towards more socially and spatially just ends – often from the ground up.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3584-5789

Introduction

In the introduction to this *Companion*, a classical approach to urban environments was defined

according to the "Three Ds" of density, diversity, and dimensions, terms that together capture the

vast, networked assemblages both driving and comprising today's urban revolution. Mega-cities from

New York to Cairo and Rio de Janeiro have all becomes sites where global economic forces collide

with local social and political interests. These conflicts produce complex conglomerations of property

regimes, vast infrastructure projects, and informal constructions that serve the interests of the super-

rich just as surely as they immiserate peripheral populations As the capitals of Capital, today's global

cities are dense and intense nodes in a world-system of uneven exchange and unequal development,

places where investment and extraction pulverise the very infrastructure beneath our feet and melt it

into air with a foreboding sense of inevitability. As the Marxist critic Marshall Berman remarked of

the notorious real estate developer, Robert Moses, who decimated impoverished parts of New York

in the mid-twentieth century: "To oppose his bridges, tunnels, expressways, housing developments,

dams, stadia, cultural centres, was – or so it seemed – to oppose history, progress, modernity itself"

(Berman 294).

This chapter responds to the "Three Ds" of urbanisation with its own list of "Three Cs": it makes the case for *comics* as an artistic and narrative form that is particularly capable of capturing the density and dynamism of increasingly global *cities*, comprised as they both are of a complex *conglomeration* of variously inter-related and unevenly autonomous moving parts. Whether the accumulations of capital that coagulate into points of urban redevelopment and gentrification, for example, or the interstices of slums and favelas that are at different times ignored by and resistant to the state, the unequal spaces of today's cities are brought into a field of mutual play and narrative position by comics and graphic narratives. This aptitude for arresting the socio-spatial dynamics of the city has been described variously as a "spatial form" (Fraser) and an "infrastructural form" (Davies), but as numerous critics have agreed, it is always a distinctly *urban* form (see Ahrens and Meteling). Comprised of narrative building blocks and an architecture all their own, comics are able to intervene into the socio-spatial dialectic of urban life (see Soja), not only revealing the infrastructure of the city as a material embodiment of competing and often invisible interests, but also recalibrating and re-conceiving urban space towards more socially and spatially just ends – often from the ground up.

In this chapter, I will offer some brief examples of twentieth-century comics to draw out the historical connections between their distinctive form and the dynamics of modern urban life, focusing particularly on New York. Then, in its second half, I will turn to two comics from the global South, the first from Cairo and the second from Rio de Janeiro, to show how graphic narratives not only arrest and diagnose the violence of urban life, but how they have also played a role in coordinating new forms of urban community and protest. With these examples, I want to draw out two key contributions that comics can make to literary urban studies. First, I suggest that comics show how various social and cultural stories, and competing political and economic interests, are built into the physical layouts of cityscapes, revealing the role played by the built environment as it variously facilitates, contains, or deters narrative movement and direction. And second, beyond these purely diagnostic capacities, I will argue that comics also exemplify the socio-spatial formation of page and

place, pushing scholars to rethink the relationship between the literary and infrastructural forms that are the materials of our analysis by showing how the former might sometimes intervene into and reshape the latter. Comics not only represent the city, but shift our frames of analysis, sometimes challenging our urban imaginations with plans for different, future cities: as I will conclude, they encourage us not simply to *see* the city, but to see *like* a city as well.

First, however, it will be helpful to begin with a brief definition of comics, and to sketch out a theoretical consideration of what I will describe here as their infrastructural form.

Narrative Systems, Infrastructural Forms

In his groundbreaking work on the production of narrative meaning in comics, the Belgian scholar Thierry Groensteen describes *bande dessinée* (a comic strip) as a *system* that is underpinned by a spatio-topical apparatus. Comics, as I use the word in this chapter, might be short cartoon strips or graphic novels hundreds of pages long, and they might be published in codex-bound books or ephemeral magazines or – as is increasingly the case – online. But regardless of the medium or platform, they are almost always comprised of separate, sequential panels arranged spatially across the surface of the (web)page. Importantly for Groensteen, each comics' panel captures a single spatio-temporal moment that is then put into narrative play not only with the panels arranged chronologically either side of it (as are the words in a written sentence, for example), but also with the entire system of panels that comprise the graphic narrative as a whole. Panels are arranged into frames and grids of varying (in)formality and (ir)regularity, and they are separated by gutters and page margins – liminal zones in which, though they are absent of visual material, narrative action nevertheless continues to take place.

As this description suggests, the analogies between the readerly experience of the comic and the pedestrian experience of the city are already implicit in the underlying spatio-topial apparatus of the form itself. As we wander through the comics page we are bombarded with visual stimuli, much

as in the modern metropolis we are confronted with a vast conglomeration of materials –
advertisements, hoardings, alleyways, façades, and so on – within which we must situate ourselves
and from which we must compose some narrative sense. Little wonder, then, that comics critics have
long spoken of the "architecture" of the comics' page (Groensteen 58), likening the process of
drawing graphic narrative to building design and even to urban planning itself (see Labio; Arana). As
André Suhr observes, in many ways comics's "framing, as the organisation of space-units on a page,
is a reproduction of the organisational rationality at work in the modern city" (Suhr 241-243).

The geographer Jason Dittmer has cemented these formal analogies between the layout of cities
and the composition of comics by translating Groensteen's notion of comics-as-system into the
symbiotic terms of urban and narrative *assemblage*. He takes the example of US comics artist Chris
Ware's *Building Stories* (2012), a graphic narrative that comes not in a codex-bound book, but a box
that resembles a board game. Inside the box, readers discover small comics of varying sizes and
shapes, each of which tells a different story about everyday life in the same fictional apartment
building. Readers can engage the individual comics in any order they wish, "navigating" the urban
environment at their leisure: but as they move through the material, the comics' narratives begin to
intersect and a larger story of the city-as-system emerges. As Dittmer observes, the title of Ware's
comic, *Building Stories*, thus captures two ends of the socio-spatial dialectic from which urban space
is composed: "it signifies doubleness, being both a story about buildings and a work that calls
attention to the effort that goes into the production of narrative" (Dittmer 479). The effect is not only
to demonstrate how urban assemblages are comprised from what Michel de Certeau called "the
practices of everyday life", though this is achieved. It is also to highlight "the ability of the comics
form to inculcate new sensitivities toward dwelling in assemblage among readers" (Dittmer 479) –
or in other words, to allow creators and readers to get a grip on the myriad social and economic forces
that are always concretising into and breaking apart the urban spaces in which they live. Comics
pages, like the city itself, are dialectical conglomerations, assembling, reassembling, and

disassembling the social sight lines and political solidarities that are both enabled and foreclosed by built environments.

In my own work, I have sought to draw out these more explicitly political affiliations and correspondences by shifting the emphasis on the *architecture* of the comics page to the notion that comics' grids, gutters, fragments, and frames constitute a narrative *infrastructure* instead. I do so for two main reasons: first, because the term "infrastructure" signifies the imperatives of access to various services – water, housing, transport, security – that are crucial to the sustenance of urban life and the functioning of the city more generally; and second, because the emphasis on infrastructure captures the extent to which any local urban environment is today enmeshed in the uneven and unequal – but always global – assemblage of the twenty-first-century neoliberal economy (Davies 29). These are insights gleaned from the growing field of critical infrastructure studies, which have unsettled the analytical tools of classical urban studies (see, for example, Simone, Graham & Marvin, Anand et al.). Indeed, we might say that what critical infrastructure studies brings to classical urban studies, comics bring to literary urban studies: an agile method that flips between traditional methods of modernist state planning and the informal and sometimes insurgent construction of cities and stories that increasingly *take and make place* in the global city's internal peripheries (see, for example, Holston).

By comics' "infrastructural form", then, I want to invite readers to consider the homologous relationship between the infrastructure of the city – its physical layout, its borders and boundaries, the underlying systems enabling and inhibiting forms of urban social life – and the infrastructure of the comic – its grids and gutters, frames and borders – which similarly constrain but can also enable the construction of new narrative directions and forms. What is crucial to grasp here is the way that urban comics themselves invite this comparison; indeed, they are often motivated by it. Over and over again, in comics about the city we find artists blending hand-drawn depictions of urban infrastructure into the lines and angles that organise the space of the page, with the effect of revealing how the layout of urban space itself opens up some narrative possibilities and closes others down.

Walls become gutters, railway tracks become page margins, public squares become splash pages, and so on: the infrastructure of the city is assembled by artists into a spatial conglomeration that becomes the narrative infrastructure of comics themselves.

Urban Comics: Making Sense of the City

What I've described above as comics' infrastructural form is not an abstract relationship, but a concrete and historical one. Comics are both products and producers of the modern metropolis, co-developing in lockstep with revolutions in urban life and related shifts in the twentieth-century's globalising culture and economy. While the origins of comics are widely disputed (some critics put them as far back as the Egyptian hieroglyph), they first arrived in their modern form in the late nineteenth century, when they were published as strips in daily newspapers alongside advertisements and regular columns (Ahrens & Meteling 4). The printed platform of the newspaper is of course inextricably linked to the rhythms of both industrial and urban work, and the analogies between the Fordist-era assembly line and the mass production of comics by a team of writers, line-drawers, and colorers has been well-documented (Priego; Brienza & Johnston ed.). Circulating through the city – and especially New York city – in papers and magazines, comics were in, of, and about urban space, all at once. They both borrowed from and fed back into urban imagery (advertisements, posters, metro maps, graffiti) and even adapted to the form of the city itself (particularly the modernist grid).

Little wonder, then, that the figure most associated with comics today is inextricably linked to the city in general, and New York City in particular: the superhero. Whether their powers derive from other-worldly, supernatural abilities (Superman, Spider-Man), or an unlimited stream of capital and fantastical technologies (Batman, Iron Man), they are almost always allow superhero characters the freedom and ability to move through and patrol the city at will. (There is an old joke that Spider-Man's web-slinging, which allows him to zoom through Manhattan by swinging from one sky-scraper to another, would be a pretty useless superpower in rural terrain). In this sense, the superhero is a sort

of neo-*flâneur*, a panoptical figure capable of bringing together the totalising power of both street- and aerial-level viewpoints in pursuit of their often dubious, vigilantist ends. As Dan Hassler-Forest points out, the superhero is in many ways the logical fantasy of the urban subject under capitalism, on the one hand providing "phantasmal escape" from the ground-level violence and poverty of the modern metropolis, while on the other protecting the interests of private property from criminals without ever interrogating – and indeed, more often upholding – crime's structural causes, from inequality to mass disenfranchisement (Hassler-Forest Chapter 3).

It is no coincidence that the rise of the contemporary "graphic novel" in the 1980s and '90s took place alongside the shift to a post-Fordist economy (see Baetens & Frey). Without questioning the richness and diversity of today's graphic novels, we can see its emphasis on singular, "high-brow" works by individual *auteurs* as part of both the late capitalist fragmentation of organised labour and the associated restructuring of cities around finance-based economies, especially in the global North (see Norcliffe & Rendance). However, this is not to say that visual-narrative books about cities by individual artists did not exist prior to capitalism's late stage, nor that they came about only in response to the global urbanism of today. Indeed, one of the earliest pioneers of graphic books, the Flemish artist Frans Masereel, was drawn over and over again to the affective and aesthetic effects of urban modernity. A newspaper cartoonist by training and trade, throughout his life Masereel experimented with book-length collections of sequentially arranged wood-cut prints that – though "silent" (they included only images and no text) – are powerful, narrative-driven explorations of life in the early twentieth-century's emerging concrete metropolises. With a working-class background and a sympathy for socialist politics, Masereel used his laborious technique to literally "cut" images of cities out of wood, leaving a mark on the page that echoed the physical toil of the urban workers that he so often depicted therein. In works such as his 1925 book, *The City: A Vision in Woodcuts*, Masereel continually emphasised the human effort behind modernity's urban infrastructures and grids, always drawing out "the sensuous nature of the urban experience against the dehumanising forces of industrialised and planned modernity" (Fraser 16).

Masereel's preoccupation with the city is shared by one of the most influential comics *auteurs* of the twentieth century: Will Eisner. As well as being an early theorist of the comics form, Eisner was also the first to self-identify his work, *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories* (1978), as a "graphic novel", rather than a cartoon or comic – despite the fact that, as its subtitle suggests, the book is in fact a collection of short stories. The graphic narratives collected in *Contract* all centre on tenement life in a Jewish quarter of the Bronx, and they all draw the same provocative parallels between the infrastructure of the comic and the infrastructure of the city that I have been describing above. Using the page-as-panel to escape the spatial enclosure of grids, gutters, and frames, Eisner places an emphasis on the sensory experience of the city (Fraser 17), particularly as that experience is itself remoulded and overturned by urban development and creeping gentrification. Indeed, as Greg Smith argues, it was precisely the elasticity of the city – all that is solid constantly melting into air – that drove Eisner's artistic innovations, his "obsession with making the city speak in his comics [leading] him to his formal experiments" (Smith 183).

If the tumultuous churn of urban development necessitated innovations in the comic's form, this is nowhere where more evident than in Eisner's later book, *Dropsie Avenue* (1995), where he presents a spatial history of the urbanisation of the Bronx by representing the same fictional block (the eponymous Dropsie Avenue) as it evolved through time. Through carefully layered pages that flip between street-level and aerial views of the area, Eisner conceives a collective, multi-generational account of its infrastructural transformation from a patch of arable farming land in 1870, to a bustling grid of multicultural streets in the 1970s, through to its gradual deterioration and decay in the 1980s and '90s. Only in the twenty-first century did the Bronx begin to gentrify, and the boom of development that is again changing the face of the neighbourhood today only cements the value of Eisner's attempt to capture those everyday urban lives otherwise erased by modernity's ceaseless metabolism of plunder and renewal. Comics here present themselves as archaeological or psychogeographic tools, as well as infrastructural ones. Eisner himself makes a comparable observation in his preface to the collected edition of the *Contract with God Trilogy*:

> Streets seem to have discernible life. Some start out ostentatiously and gradually descend into slums while others begin as poor and disreputable neighbourhoods and rise to ostentation through what city planners called gentrification. Dropsie Avenue, this fictitious stage, where my past and my imagination collided, has a history similar to real streets in the Bronx. [...] graphic narrative is a language that can provide metaphors appropriate to such a heavy theme. (Eisner xviii-xix)

As Eisner describes here, comics posit the city as a "stage" or backdrop, but they also show how the city is always a backdrop in motion, an infrastructure that shifts and changes with the waves of investment, redevelopment, and urban decline. Graphic narrative thus dramatises the way in which urban lives do not play out on solid ground, but are rather continually determined and unevenly enabled by the infrastructures on which they rely. In the case of *Dropsie Avenue* – where the street itself is the only continuous point of reference for the reader, driving the narrative forward – the city is implied as *both* the setting *and* the protagonist at the same time.

Drawing together this history of comics in and about New York, Julia Wertz's more recent "unconventional" illustrated history of the city, *Tenements, Towers & Trash* (2017), is an exposition of the infrastructural agility of graphic narrative, drawn in the long tradition of Masereel, Eisner, and many others. Incorporating architectural photographs into her graphic narrative (16-17), interrupting her multi-panel sequences with huge splash-pages of urban façades (30-31, 230-231), and tilting the city sideways to view the blueprints and foundations underlying its various buildings (162), Wertz's graphic book infiltrates the city's side alleys and backyards to reveal the multiple dimensions and densities of urban space. Wertz's book brings to a head the crossovers between architectural and graphic design, and the synergies between urban comics and planning forms, which extend back to Le Corbusier himself – as Koldo Lus Arana notes, the great Modernist architect drew up his urban plans in a style "very close to the sensibility of the *ligne claire* that would characterise *bande dessinée* after Hergé, on the one hand, and the synthetic spirit of American cartoons", on the other (19-20). In the twenty-first century, these intrinsic connections are perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in Olivier Balez and Pierre Christin's biographical comic, *Robert Moses: The Master Builder of New York City* (2018). Though ostensibly a biography of the maniacal real estate developer, Robert Moses

– the man who redeveloped both Marshall Berman's and Will Eisner's neighbourhoods in the Bronx – Balez and Christin centre their comic on his conflictual encounter with one of the twentieth-century's greatest urbanists, Jane Jacobs.

Jacobs, best known for *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) – a manifesto in favour of the cultural and social life not of the suburb or skyscraper, but the public space of the street – is at first the "urban hero" of *Master Builder* (Balez & Christin 98). Against the motorways and highways displacing whole communities, Jacobs mobilised a grassroots vision of the city "as a complex organism that breathes and perpetuates itself," and that was being increasingly suffocated by the redevelopment of green spaces and the proliferating use of the automobile (78-79). And yet, in their concluding pages the authors trouble the now widely accepted narrative of Jacobs as "urban hero" and Moses as "the great builder" (98-99), with the former standing in simplistically for the "the urban village" and the latter for "the corporate city" (Zukin xii). Moses' infrastructural "legacy has allowed the city to endure", contend Balex and Christin, while Jacobs' emphasis on the local dynamics of the street not only provided the "precursors of inner-city gentrification" (98), but has also dovetailed ideologically with the post-Fordist fragmentation and retraction of the state and the splintering of urban infrastructure into neoliberal forms (see Graham & Marvin).

In this urban comic about urbanism, we can therefore begin to grasp the contradiction of twentieth-century modernism: as Berman describes, Moses' frenetic developments and endemic corruption may have melted all that was solid into air, but his innovations nevertheless constituted "a new breakthrough in modernist vision and thought", demonstrating the *potential* of vast infrastructural intervention, if not fully realising its benefits (Berman 302). *Master Builder of New York* thus recognises – in both its historical content and the gridded infrastructure of its narrative form – that ''the old 'bottom-up versus top-down' model", which continues to frame debates about city planning *and* our analysis of literary texts, is "out-of-date and rooted in very Western preoccupations about urban change" (Burdett 349). As Ricky Burdett has argued, we need now to look to the "intensity of urban churn currently being experienced in areas of rapid urbanisation – from Dhaka

and Mumbai to Lagos, Lima, Cape Town, and Cairo" (349) – vast urban conglomerations that are providing new planning models for both urban theorists and comics artists alike.

Graphic Infrastructures: Seeing Like a City

In the spring of 2008, the Egyptian artist, Magdy El Shafee, published his first graphic novel, *Metro: A Story of Cairo*. Within a matter of weeks, the Egyptian police had raided the publisher's offices, confiscated all copies of the book, and forbidden the printing of any more. The authorities justified their seizure by pointing to a panel that depicted the comic's female protagonist, Dina, partially undressed, as well as the inclusion of coarse phrases in Egyptian Arabic dialect, but it was clear even then that what really troubled them was the radical urban politics contained in El Shafee's long-form comic. While an English version of *Metro* translated by Chip Rosetti (the edition to which I will refer here) circulated in the US and UK in subsequent years, the original Arabic comic was not republished in Cairo until 2013, long after the Arab Revolutions of 2011.

El Shafee's comic taps into the public unrest that was already permeating through Cairo in the late 2000s, and which would come to a head with the mass occupation of Tahrir Square in January 2011. Read today, the comic functions as a dynamic barometer both of the gradual immiseration of Egyptian citizens and the revolutionary atmosphere that was immanent in the social life of the city itself. Indeed, throughout *Metro*, El Shafee's protagonist, Shehab, frequently reflects on why a revolution hasn't yet happened: "People are numb. […] They put up with so much, they just say, 'well, that's how things are in this country of ours'" (El Shafee 84). The graphic novel responds to this political apathy by highlighting the limitation of what the urbanist Ash Amin has called "telescopic urbanism": an urbanism incapable, that is, of thinking of the city as "a field of shared life and common rights", determined to grasp it instead "as a space of disjunctive juxtapositions and autonomous communities, of selective provision from and access to a divided commons" (Amin 477). The Cairo into which El Shafee's graphic novel intervenes cannot be imagined in its totality: its

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different spaces of dispossession and endemic urban poverty are disconnected not only from one another, but also from those areas that are projected as sites of economic promise and prosperity by Egypt's telescopic regime. In truly Debordian terms, both the spatial organisation *and imagination* of the city plays a vital role in maintaining the deep inequality of the corrupt status quo, even as that same infrastructure space would later become the enabling platform for revolutionary activity, something the occupation of Tahrir Square and the widespread use of protest graffiti later came to exemplify (see Gregory; Abaza).

El Shafee's project in *Metro* is therefore to short-circuit Cairo's telescopic regime and precipitate the revolutionary action already circulating through disparate parts of the city by imaginatively and infrastructurally *joining them up*. Each chapter of the graphic novel takes place around a different metro station, its titular transport infrastructure functioning as a kind of spatial meta-template throughout. Cairo's metro map appears as an orientation device for readers, as segments crop up in contextualising panels of their own, but it also appears in the city itself, printed on billboards and at bus stops in El Shafee's urban backgrounds. This segmentation and reorientation of the metro map thus splices up telescopic visions of the city to draw new, multi-scalar connections and assemblages between otherwise disparate spaces that combine both abstract and street-level viewpoints. The comic captures the abstract totality of de Certeau's "concept city", though without losing sight of the everyday spatial practices from which the city itself is also composed. Meanwhile, the "underground" location of the metro further connotes the "underground" *sub*culture of comics production: this metaphoric conflation implies the comic's deciphering – or perhaps more accurately, given that Shehab is a computer programmer, *decoding* – of the social violence, inequality, and injustice that is reproduced by Cairo's uneven infrastructural development.

Metro's narrative follows Shehab, who – trapped in a cycle of spiralling debts and implicated (falsely) in the murder of a potential benefactor by corrupt state officials – decides to rob a bank with his friend Mustafa. Through a verbal refrain, the city's underlying physical circuitboard becomes an infrastructural metaphor for this economic and political "entrapment." The metro is repeatedly

described as a "cage" by Shehab, a grid that imprisons those caught up in the city's disorientating modernity (see El Shafee 4, 21, 26, 86): as he at one point comments, "this isn't a system – it's a prison, with a long line of prisoners who don't know how to get out" (48). With this phrase, Shehab anticipates a key slogan of the Arab uprisings – "*asha'b yourid esqat el-nidham*", or "the people want to topple the system" – the word *nidham* meaning not only "the regime", but "the system" as a whole (Kraidy 6). In this dual meaning, the metro system is presented not only as an infrastructural metaphor for Egypt's oppressive urban governance, but for the much larger – and usually "invisible" – global economic system that sustains and exacerbates inequality at the local level.

Insert Fig. 1: The opening page of the original Arabic edition of Magdy El Shafee's *Metro*, which foregrounds the politics of seeing and sight in relation to pre-Revolutionary Cairo's telescopic urbanism.

Nevertheless, at several key moments in the narrative, Shehab also *eludes* the regime's "cage" by descending *into* and travelling *along* the city's subterranean transport infrastructure, a movement that locks the contemporary Cairene metro into a rich network of historical and literary associations with the revolutionary "underground", from pre-Haussmannian Paris to Dostoveysky's St Petersburg (see Lehan 56-57, 145-147). It is in Shehab's capacity to navigate the metro system better than his pursuers – he is able to evade their "sight" and surveillance – that his escape from political disenfranchisement and socioeconomic precarity becomes possible. His street-level and underground movements through the city elude telescopic visions of urban Cairo, in the process *making visible* the contours of the discriminatory system by showing how they concretise into the city's infrastructural conglomerations. To return to Amin's terminology, *Metro* reveals "the myriad hidden connections and relational doings that hold together the contemporary city as an assemblage of many types of spatial formation" (Amin 484). Indeed, this thematics of urban vision is placed centre-stage on the comic's very first page, which begins with a thin, uneven close-up of Shehab's eyes, accompanied by a statement of law-breaking intent: "Today, I decided to rob a bank" (El Shafee 1; see Fig.1). The agility of the comic's infrastructural form grants us access to multiple urban levels all at once,

imbuing the city with a larger visual politics of democratic accountability ("we can see you!") and anticipating the visual and artistic strategies – graffiti, street performance, protest banners, citizen-led smartphone journalism – that would flood into Tahrir to depose the regime just a few years later in January 2011.

El Shafee's *Metro* is just one example of the exciting explosion of graphic narratives that has taken place across the global South in the twenty-first century, often in response to the violent reshaping of cities under neoliberal globalisation. As a subcultural activity, comics creation is practised by urban artists and collectives who have realised the potential of the form to engage with, diagnose, rethink, and challenge the proliferating infrastructural violence and social discrimination of today's telescopic urbanism. As we have seen, the top-down planning regimes of twentieth-century cities have been a staple theme of urban comics, especially in cities such as New York. Moving beyond these, graphic narratives from across the South use comic's infrastructural form to capture the co-mixed and multivalent cultures of urban public spaces, joining these to wider movements against the increasingly segregationist tendencies of urban privatisation, gentrification, securitisation, and displacement. There is much that literary urban studies can learn from these visual-narrative texts. In and through their form, these comics reclaim and celebrate a *public* urban culture, making visible an "insurgent citizenship" – to use a term coined in the Latin American context by James Holston – of both urban informality and community-led infrastructure construction. With this in mind, let me turn finally to an example from Rio de Janeiro, one that exemplifies the connections between comics and cities, as well as the conglomerations of local materials and global forces from which they are each comprised.

The well-known Brazilian artist, André Diniz, first published *Morro da Favela* in Brazil in 2011, with UK and French editions following in 2012. Though the title translates literally from the Portuguese as "Favela Hill", the English version was published as *Picture a Favela* and the French edition as *Photo de la Favela*. The title of the original Brazilian Portuguese edition refers to a specific geographical location, Morro da Providência, a favela situated behind the Central Do Brasil train

station in Rio de Janeiro. As the comic's own preface informs readers, this is the hill occupied by the nineteenth-century soldiers who, returned from the infamous Canudos War in the northeastern state of Bahia, brought the word "favela" back with them to Rio. Once used to describe a bush common to the Bahian scrubland, it planted new roots in Rio and grew into its contemporary usage where it describes all informal, "improvised housing communities" in Brazil. But the title of the English and French translations decouples the comic from this local context, positioning it instead in an international field of urban image-making and global branding – a visual field that it nonetheless then sets out to challenge. It is no coincidence that *Picture a Favela* is a biography of the famous Brazilian favela photographer, Maurício Hora, whose lifelong aim was always, in his own words, "to give the people from Providencia visibility, give them a face, in these important changing times for Rio" (see Maresch). Aimed partly at international readers, *Picture a Favela* aims to disrupt Rio's global city branding by bringing the lives and labours of favela inhabitants into view.

In his book *Rule by Aesthetics*, the urbanist D. Asher Ghertner demonstrates how global city governance is not simply drawn to a neoliberal "aesthetic" of glass-fronted skyscrapers, slick steel towers, and privately owned public spaces – rather, the city is increasingly ruled and redeveloped according to the requirements of this imaging regime. Global or "world-class city making" thus *subjects* urban governance issues such as public transport and housing provision *to* the image, constructing a global "image-inary" that circulates not between countries or nation-states, but newly emergent and drastically restructured *city-states* primarily billed as playgrounds for tourists and elites (Ghertner 24). According to this urban vision, the city must be transformed in the international imaginary from the dilapidated space of the slum or favela into the gleaming glass-scapes of shopping malls and financial districts. This image-obsessed urbanism results in the splintering of a city, as infrastructural networks are unbundled through increasingly complex layers of privatisation, while common land and other public amenities are steadily eroded. The effect is to fragment and disorient urban social life, to melt it into air, restricting the ability of the poor and disenfranchised to mount a substantial claim upon the right to their city (see Harvey xv).

The redevelopment of Rio ahead of first the 2014 World Cup and then 2016 Olympic games applied these image-making strategies in full force. The city's port area was subject to a major regeneration project known as the Porto Maravilha, one of several large-scale redevelopments designed "to improve the city's urban image and update its infrastructure" (Sanchez & Broudehouz 132), while the neighbouring Morro da Providência was the first favela in Centro to feel the presence of the specially created Pacifying Police Unit, or UPP, as they became known. This rule by aesthetics achieved its goals of urban beautification through "a market orientation and managerial approach" that, though claiming to benefit all citizens, more often resulted "in a commodification of urban space and in socio-spatial exclusions that have an alienating effect upon local residents" (Sanchez & Broudehouz 133). Indeed, these developments were vocally resisted: on Thursday 21st June 2013, for example, a protest of 300,000 people marched through Rio waving signs that read "I'd swap 10 stadiums for one decent hospital in this country" and "I'd give up the World Cup for better education in my country"; meanwhile, favela communities undertook coordinated, citizen-led monitoring of UPP activities through social media and smartphone activism. Nevertheless, in the process of making the city palatable for international tourist, sport, and business "clients", Rio's iconic favelas were often either commodified, "pacified", or removed entirely from view.

Picture A Favela exemplifies the ways in which comics can entangle, interrupt, and politicise this hegemonic imaging of the global city – with its coarse visual form and embedded community narratives, it breaks all the rules of neoliberal aesthetics. Indeed, Diniz's laborious sketching, sharp lines, and thick block prints bear the aesthetic influence of Masereel himself. The comic's dense architectural lines and clustered infrastructural frames work against the smooth, uninterrupted lines of shopping malls and stadiums, while the printing of black ink onto white paper operates as a kind of photo negative, inverting the photogenic surfaces of the global city. Beginning with a somewhat ominous disembodied eye in its opening page, throughout *Picture a Favela* Diniz swaps out the often aerial viewpoint of telescopic urbanism and global city imaging for a street-level perspective that

challenges the voyeuristic tendencies of the metropolitan reader. (The graphic novel itself is unpaginated, so I am unable to offer specific page references here).

The comic begins with Maurício's childhood, detailing the events that led his father to become one of the favela's first successful drug lords. It follows his life story as he cautiously navigates a route through the competing regimes of state- and gang-violence, before eventually escaping conscription into the drug industry by swapping his gun for a camera – or one "shooter" for another. The camera becomes, to use Maurício's own words, "an important social weapon", as his photographing of gang leaders and ordinary favela residents not only inserts them back into the urban frame, but also leads to exhibitions, community art activities, and a general strengthening of social ties. The comic's plot is reminiscent of Fenando Meirelles's 2002 film *City of God*, which similarly details its protagonist's use of photography to escape the brutal drug wars that plague his community. Yet unlike that film, which borders at times on voyeuristic images of poverty and violence, in the comic Maurício builds more positively on the favela's informal infrastructures of libraries, community hubs, and exhibition spaces. In so doing, Maurício makes visible the processes of "insurgent citizenship" and "autoconstruction" that, taking place in spite of global city projects and projections, have "turned the peripheries into a space of alternative futures" (Holston 8).

Of course, in *Picture a Favela*, Diniz makes Maurício's work – of making the favela visible to itself – visible to an international audience too. Little wonder, then, that the comic is obsessively self-reflexive about the politics of urban vision and city imagery. Frames, eyes, perspectives, and points of view are repeatedly referenced in both image and text: Maurício's father keeps his growing drug empire "out of sight"; people are "disappeared" and "vanished" at the hands of the state; and characters constantly peer through window frames and sneak through doorways. These relentless cues thicken the already dense pages, the aesthetics becoming sometimes so cluttered and overshadowed that, like the favelas themselves, they are at times almost visually impenetrable to outsiders. Even the people who inhabit this city have sharp features, bulbous eyes, and angular limbs, shapes that on occasion bleed into the informal lines of the favela itself, suggesting their very bodies as a kind of

infrastructure. *Picture a Favela* thus refuses readers the view of Rio as a global city of neoliberal flows and privatised spaces, an image usually shot from the invisible standpoint of a helicopter or satellite hanging anonymously in the sky. Indeed, the comic even subjects this often unquestioned "eye-in-the-sky" perspective to the reader's gaze: the blazing Rio sun, which looms in the corner of several half- and single-page spreads, resembles a pulsing eye, hanging in the air at the point from which images of the global city are often taken.

Insert Fig. 2: Maurício remembers his project with the French photographer JR, in which his photographs of the eyes of women who had lost loved ones to police violence were blown up and posted onto the walls of the favela itself.

Bringing the politics of the urban image full circle, in the comic's final chapter Maurício recounts his collaborative work with the French photographer JR on a 2008 project that involved printing and pasting photographs of eyes onto the walls of the favela. Belonging to women who had lost loved ones to favela violence, these photographed eyes made the informal conditions of the favela visible by attracting significant media attention, even as their accusatory gaze also held the selective, telescopic visions of the Brazilian state to account. These lines of sight and their corresponding politics ricochet throughout *Picture A Favela*, which even includes a drawn image of the photographic project in the comic itself (see Fig. 2). Finally, at the end of the book, these dense black-and-white panels eventually give way to the visual clarity of Maurício's actual photographs, some of which are included as an appendix. In their sudden juxtaposition with the comic's thick, photo-negative aesthetics, these photographs are given something of the crisp clarity and smooth relief that is so overly fetishised by global city images, though here we are presented not with some mega infrastructure project, but the beauty and ingenuity of the informal constructions and communities of the favela itself. "Despite all the problems, I wouldn't swap the favela for anything", says Maurício in the comic's penultimate page. And then he clarifies: "I don't mean the fantastic views [...] I'm talking about the people. This place is full of wonderful people."

Conclusion

In his influential 1998 study, *Seeing Like A State*, James C. Scott uses an aerial shot of downtown Chicago from 1893 to describe how the urban order envisioned by the state planner is visible "not at street level", but only "from the vantage point of a helicopter hovering far above the ground: in short, a God's-eye view, or the view of an absolute ruler" (57). Yet while the state visualises the city horizontally, across a flat cartographic terrain, its physical infrastructures, not to mention the urban lives they sustain, operate vertically, in three-dimensional space, as Michel de Certeau so influentially argued. Invoking Scott's titular phrase, urbanist Warren Magnusson subtitles his 2011 book, *Politics of Urbanism*, with the phrase "seeing like a city" to raise "the possibility of a new politics, no longer centred on the state but instead on everyday life" (Magnusson 1). It is not simply that two-dimensional maps and crude top-down plans fail to represent the infrastructural realities of urban life, though this they do. These telescopic visions today reproduce a top-down politics of neoliberal privatisation and urban development that occludes the numerous "practices of government and self-government that arise from the necessities of urban life" (Magnusson 9). As Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift reiterate, seeing like a city instead of like a state – or indeed, like a real estate developer – involves seeing "the city from the inside out" (Amin & Thrift 11). Only this visual reorientation, they continue, can set "out a politics true to the machine that the city is, which is able to convert often quite small interventions into very large gains for the many" through and with "the proto-political stuff of infrastructure" (13).

By blending the infrastructure of the city with the infrastructure of their form, and combining cartographic and aerial perspectives with street-level views of everyday life, urban comics tend to see like a city, perhaps even *as* a city, capturing the myriad ways in which urban space is both made and seen. With their historical roots in the everyday rhythms of the world's mega-cities, comics and graphic narratives have found a renewed lease of life in the twenty-first century – one that is not only limited to metropolises such as New York, but that extends across the emerging and expanding cities

of the global South. With a spatial and even infrastructural form that reveals the economic forces and political interests that are concretised into the built environment, they have proved to be an essential tool for narrating urban space. As more and more artists and communities turn to comics to not only make sense of their city-worlds, but to imagine new ones as well, graphic narratives will be an indispensable tool for scholars of literary urban studies also trying to make sense of today's ever-expanding urban assemblages and conglomerations.

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