Architecture Theory in Graphic Narrative

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Abstract

This essay begins with a review of *Mister X*, a comic serial taking architectural modernism as its point of departure. The graphic narrative renders a dystopian view of architecture and urbanism, as well as a biting critique of the architect as theorist. Rather than demonstrating that architecture is mute and impotent, however, the *Mister X* story theorizes architecture as unpredictably powerful and effective, albeit malicious. The essay examines four architectural failures suggested by the *Mister X* text, identifying how these limitations of the formal, material object of architecture, are, paradoxically, its very possibilities for social effect.

Dean Motter's *Mister X* is a contemporary pop culture text, a comic serial taking architectural modernism as its point of departure. On one level, *Mister X* presents a straightforward dystopian view of architecture and urbanism, as well as a rather biting critique of architects' reformative desires. Indeed, the comic chronicles an alternative architectural modernism seen as a sad comedy of failures and reversals. On another level, however, *Mister X* suggests unexpected possibilities for recovering the modernist dream of social and personal transformation through architecture.

It might be expected that the *Mister X* serials are, first and foremost, geared to a relatively wide readership in search of easy diversion and uncomplicated entertainment. While this may have been true of comic audiences in the past, the complexity of graphic works such as *Mister X* ensures that they appeal to a relatively narrow and sophisticated readership that has evolved in tandem with the alternative comics movement. Readership dynamic is complex, but most analysts agree that the audience for the more challenging comics is getting both older and smaller.¹ Alternative comic retailer Ralph Mathieu notes that 'a big part of the present audience have been long time followers of that [superhero] part of the comic book industry'.² As this audience matures, more challenging serials are gaining readers who are 'older and more professional than in the years past'.³ Mathieu points out that these readers are now finding that 'most of the superhero comics they're reading are not going to offer them anything they haven't read in some variation countless times before'.⁴ Although this has resulted in a further narrowing of the reader base for alternative comics such as *Mister X*,⁵ it has also rejuvenated comic serial production and encouraged the exploration of more sophisticated themes and more subtle artistic qualities than had been possible in the past.⁶ One result of these shifts is that a comic like *Mister X* is able to present nuanced architectural commentary to a well-educated lay audience with much more practical influence on our cities than previous comic audiences ever had.⁷

Another important and often underappreciated audience for a comic such as *Mister X* is the generation of comic artists who followed Dean Motter's innovations in *Mister X* and in subsequent comics. Thematically, stylistically and aesthetically, *Mister X* has inspired and continues to influence the work of many figures in the alternative comics world. Through

their work and the later work of Mr. Motter himself, the reach of *Mister X* has been multiplied far beyond its own nominal distribution. Author Warren Ellis notes that any familiarity a reader might feel when seeing *Mister X* for the first time was due to the fact that ‘so many of us studied these books and so thoroughly mined out what Dean Motter and his many fine collaborators were doing.’ He continues by saying, simply, that ‘*Mister X* changed the way comics looked, and it changed the way we looked at comics. And it told a hell of a story in the process’⁸

This combined audience is obviously not composed primarily of architects. Nonetheless, the motifs of the *Mister X* work are highly specific to the field of architecture. At its heart, the comic is a dark commentary on architecture theory, presented in part as a counterfactual history of modern urbanism and building design. We will see that the comic, in its own way, also makes a significant contribution to architectural discourse.

Historically, the first serial issues of *Mister X* were published in 1984,⁹ and the latest issue was released as a book in 2009.¹⁰ The founding of the *Mister X* series roughly corresponds to a period in architecture when theoretical work began to use expressive forms deriving from sculpture, cinema, and graphic design, normally coupled with textual narrative. Between 1976 and 1977, for example, Bernard Tschumi had produced his poster-like *Advertisements for Architecture* series,¹¹ and by 1981 had published his text and graphics project *Manhattan Transcripts*.¹² In the early 1980s, Daniel Libeskind presented his graphic *Chamber Works* portfolio,¹³ and showed his text/construction *Three Lessons in Architecture* at the Venice Biennale¹⁴. In various ways, these and other works by architectural thinkers sought to extend the range of forms in which architectural theory could be expressed. However, by the time the journal *Assemblage* took over from *Oppositions*, in 1986, theory production in architecture had begun once again to revert to more textual modes of expression.¹⁵ One of the most important contributions of *Mister X* is the comic’s carrying forward of an important graphic narrative tradition in architecture theory, one that has now been largely abandoned by the architecture discipline itself.

As Bernard Tschumi, Daniel Libeskind, Lebbeus Woods, Rem Koolhaas and others within the discipline of architecture have recognized, and as *Mister X* still amply demonstrates in the alternative comic tradition, graphic narrative and related approaches provide especially compelling vehicles for expressing ideas that speculative texts or images alone often struggle to get across. As a contemporary comic, *Mister X* remains singular in its accessibility, narrative power, visual sensibility and close focus on the motivations and effects of modern architecture and its theorization. Given its audiences, its modernist themes, and its sustained exploration of what we might call ‘graphic theory’ in architecture, *Mister X* is a profound meditation on modern architecture and its contemporary legacies.

From the beginning, *Mister X* as a comic work has been concerned with many of the thresholds and oppositions that have occupied modern architecture theory over the past century. *Mister X* explores various demarcations and tensions between architecture and urbanism, theory and practice, history and contemporaneity, and, at a more general level, between architectural ideas, intentions and objects, on the one hand, and personal impacts, social effects and material outcomes, on the other. The cover of the most recent *Mister X* publication, *Mister X Condemned* (Fig. 1), signals this ambition to bridge between pairs of related but distinct domains. In this image, Mister X is about to emerge from his world through a doorway in the shape of an *x*. He is mobile, if temporarily frozen, as he looks directly at the reader, viewing the world beyond the comic page with undivided concentration. He holds a briefcase, suggesting an intention to carry his work across the boundary between his world and ours – between the world of comic entertainment and the world of architectural theory. He pauses on the threshold, seemingly inviting us, too, to make

a crossing – in the other direction. His hesitation in this image communicates a theme that will come to be seen central to the *Mister X* work. But to excavate more than Mister X reveals to us here, we will have to enter his world. X marks the spot.

Fig. 1, from *Mister X Condemned*, 2009. Image copyright by Dean Motter, and used by permission of the artist.

disorder and control

Even cursory examination shows that the many references to architectural modernism in the *Mister X* comics are direct and explicit, just as the founding scenario of the narrative will be familiar to any architect.

Simon Meyers and Walter Eichmann, both architects, are commissioned to design a new metropolis, Radiant City. As one of the project's financial backers explains, this city was to become 'the greatest man-made achievement the world has ever known'.¹⁶ In an exaggerated rehearsal of common assumptions about the limitations of individual architects, each member of what has now become an architectural team provides the complementary set skills necessary for the realization of a major architectural project.

'Simon, was a brilliant mathematician who had created perfectly balanced habitats that could withstand any of nature's tantrums. No earthquake or hurricane could bother a Meyers structure. Walter, on the other hand, had come up with *psychetecture*, the theory that the very shape and size of a room could alter a person's mood or neurosis. Together, this team couldn't miss'.¹⁷

Popular assumptions that would make architecture a combination of rationality and intuition, or a balance between science and art, are thus immediately displaced. Here, architecture tends toward precise instrumental practice, rather than some creative fusion of *ars* and *techne*. Both Simon Meyers and Walter Eichmann deploy rational knowledge in the service of well defined ends. In the comic scenario, the architectural object is intended to be a means of technical control exerted over a delinquent world marked out by a willfully *destructive nature*, violent and unpredictable, on the one hand, and a *debilitated individual*, moody and neurotic, on the other. The architectural object is thus defined as the outcome of applied

knowledge deployed in the service of professional intentions; and as the means by which a subject is afforded protection from unruly forces that both surround and penetrate him. If aesthetic, intuitive, and unconscious dimensions of architecture are eclipsed by this instrumental view of architectural practice, the notion that architecture could or should be sheltering, even therapeutic, has the familiar post-enlightenment ring of the more utopian moments in modernist thought.¹⁸ A little less familiar, perhaps, may be the rendering of these concerns in terms of the twin themes of disorder and control which set the plot in motion and to which the comic narrative constantly returns.

With these general premises established, the architectural duo is in a position to begin its work. As the story unfolds, Radiant City, even under construction, proves to be horribly dangerous to its citizens. The city produces a range of debilitating effects entirely the opposite of those intended. A woman moans, ‘Its all wrong (..) This city was not meant for people. (...) We’re all being murdered, you know. And this city is the weapon’.¹⁹ Very early on, Simon Meyers dies leaving Walter Eichmann as the narrative’s sole architect/anti-hero. But Eichmann disappears. By this time, his theory of psychetecture is discredited and his reputation is ruined. Before long, however, Eichmann reappears, now as Mister X, a secretive man of many identities,²⁰ consumed with the task of arresting and reversing the destructive power of the urban nightmare he has created.

Fig. 2, from *Mister X Condemned*, 2009. Image copyright by Dean Motter, and used by permission of the artist.

The opening panel of the *Condemned* book (Fig.2) deftly illustrates the most important element of this long back-story.²¹ Figures fall, or jump, from buildings of unsettling geometry, rendered in impossible perspectives, and coloured in ominous blacks and greys. Behind the buildings, regulated by yet another vanishing point, are a receding set of parallel lines, suggesting a containment fence preventing escape, or the outlines of the musical score by which the city orchestrates its terror. Even without the caption, then, we have a clear sense that this city has ‘gone terribly wrong’. We are not surprised to discover that the fault is thought to lie with the ‘architecture itself’. In the midst of this dark vision, however, this

panel still manages to suggest that hope remains and the city may yet be saved. The yellow 'light' identifying many of the windows in these buildings suggests life, warmth, and the possibility of resistance, or, at the very least, a refusal of complicity in the city's madness. There is already in this panel a sense that Mister X may find allies in his quest to undo the harm he has caused.

marking theory

Simon Meyers and Walter Eichmann may together complement one another, but there is no simple symmetry between the two characters. Among other important differences, Meyers applies knowledge from other fields (mathematics and engineering), while Eichmann's *psychetecture* is his own theory, although one assumes that it carries a debt to psychoanalysis or psychotherapy.²² We will see how important it is that in both his Eichmann and Mister X guises, the central character is an architectural theorist. Even at the level of narrative, architectural theory is central. The comics essentially follow the adventures and frustrations of Mister X as he seeks to correct his theory and reverse the damage its application has wrought.

If there were any doubt as to Mister X's vocation as a theorist of architecture, the comic countlessly over-determines this identity. From the very beginning, in the figure of Eichmann, Mister X is explicitly and restrictively identified as the creator of *psychetecture* – necessarily he is something of a theorist. He is also graphically identified with the activity of theorizing. In a characteristically economical gesture, Mister X is granted the icon *par excellence* of the modern architect, a device that also functions as the symbolic mark of the speculative and corrective gaze – Mister X is assigned the round glasses of the heroic architect, which places him squarely in a genealogy within which Le Corbusier is the best known figure. These glasses function as the personal mark of the architect's unique 'vision,' as well as a powerful symbol of the commerce among (in)sight, speculation, and prescription: in short, *theoria*.

Fig. 3 is a good example of how the comic visually amplifies this idea. Here, the two dominant compositional elements are the character's glasses and his pen. Mister X grasps the pen as he works to reverse the damage he has wrought. Here, the pen is rendered in such a way that the barrel aligns with the eye of Mister X, presumably along a line of sight ending on the inscribed surface. The notion that theory, proceeding from vision, finds its practical expression in the 'marks' comprising the treatise, or drawing, could hardly be better expressed. The caption reinforces this idea with a richly ambiguous reference to 'plans'. We see that these are to be understood at once as both intentions for a future (how long Mister X is going to 'stick around') and records of theoretical activity (documents outlining his current revisions to *psychetecture*, which remain outside of view on the very edge of the panel). Mister X is, without a doubt, an architect-theorist.

Fig. 3, from *Mister X Condemned*, 2009. Image copyright by Dean Motter, and used by permission of the artist.

As is typical for comic book heroes, Mister X's identity is doubly marked, once in secret and once in public. Regardless of the contingent identity he assumes at any moment, the reader knows his secret identity is that of Walter Eichmann. In public, he appears in dark glasses and trench coat (see Fig. 1). His simple costume works both to conceal his Eichmann identity and to reveal him to be Mister X. In his study of comic superheroes, Scott Bukatman points out that the costume serves to transports the heroic character from the realm of the somatic and bodily to the register of the symbolic.²³ This operation is explicit in Mister X. Most obviously, he has the requisite costume (dark glasses and trench coat), but also his name is little more than the 'letter' itself, an unmistakable index of the symbolic register. As if this were not enough, the letter *x* is inscribed and re-inscribed on the glasses themselves (as reflections), on Mister X (as shadows) and throughout the city (in the crossing of searchlight beams and elsewhere). In Fig.4, for example, Mister X is shown removing part of his disguise as he retreats out of sight, while on his back are ambient shadows cast in the shape of a doubled *x*. This image makes it clear that while Mister X may mark the city, the city also marks him. Even when thus identified, however, he remains essentially unknowable, an 'x-factor'. These repeated signs of Mister X's identity nonetheless insist upon and underline his re-birth into the *logos* – into language, into knowledge, into theory.

Fig. 4, from *Mister X Condemned*, 2009. Image copyright by Dean Motter, and used by permission of the artist.

At once reader and text, logos and lexis, letter and law, Mister X is *theorist par excellence*.

It would be interesting to pursue some of the narrative's insights into the identity of the architect and the various effects of his activity. However, I want to focus here simply on the question of the role of the architect-theorist in 'adequating' his object. I think it is no exaggeration to say that the theory-object relationship is at the very heart of this comic narrative. Investigating this issue will demand that some attention be directed to the particularities of the object as it is formulated in *Mister X*. Perhaps the obvious place to start is with Radiant City, the principal object of Mister X's theoretical efforts, and the explicit objective of the design project upon which the *Mister X* series is founded in the first place. However, I want to begin elsewhere.

object and artifact

In the second volume of the series, Mister X is approached by an old rival named Blitzstein, now a senior bureaucrat responsible for Planning and Programming in the recently completed Radiant City. Blitzstein offers to build an important monument that Mister X had designed years earlier, but which was never realized. For my purposes, it is not particularly important that this offer turns out to be a jealous and self-serving attempt to further discredit the architect-theorist. Rather, I am interested here that Mister X himself refers to the monument as an historical 'artifact'.²⁴ In the context of the plot, this is apparently a simple reference to the belatedness of the project's realization. On another level, the term serves to highlight a doubling of the architect's own belatedness: first, in the sense that he is too late to realize his theoretical errors; and second, in the sense that he is too late to arrest construction before damage is done (and also, perhaps, in the sense that in the age of the postmodern, he is even a little late to be modern architect).

In *Mister X*, this belatedness is marked in the homophonic slippage between the letter *X* and the prefix *ex*.²⁵ This tight commerce between the architect and his object is underscored in the text by many other references to a mutual fusion of identities and many images of imprints and overlaps. An explicit example of this architect/object (con)fusion is the angry accusation leveled at Mister X in the first series: 'you became a machine, (...) you became the city,

Walter'.²⁶ This idea is also powerfully imaged on the cover of a later issue and reiterated in many other places in the comic text.²⁷ The ambiguity of this condition can be seen in Fig. 5. At this point in the *Condemned* story, Mister X attempts to penetrate a building he is unauthorized to enter (he soon trips an alarm). Although he is the author of the theory that produced the building, Mister X, in this sense an 'insider', remains very much an 'outsider' in his quest to enter the building. He is shown carefully negotiating the scaffold-like exterior of the building in a marginal zone formed by exterior columns and horizontal slab extensions. Typically, Mister X balances on the edge, neither in nor entirely outside the building, but mapped onto to it a very direct way. The panel is effectively monotone, highlighting the composition which juxtaposes and parallels Mister X and the oversize letter that forms part of the building's exterior signage. Ambient urban lighting registers Mister X's shadow against the building's exterior walls, just as it marks the wall with the shadow of the giant letter next to him. As material bodies, building and character are opposed – one an object, one a subject, one light in colour, one dark. As cast shadows of intermediate density, however, they are similar. In the rhetoric of the rendering, Mister X is at once distinct from, while also appearing to share in, the condition of the buildings he has created.

In a sense, architect and object are equally artifacts – both late; both 'out of time' (in slightly different ways); and together effectively coterminous in the graphic presentation of the story. There is ample opening here for the pursuit of parallel questions involving instrumentality and identity, but I will not follow these now. It is enough, I think, to note that the relationship between Mister X (architect-theorist) and his monument/city (design-object) is intimate and complex, simultaneously distanced through theory and joined in identity.

Fig. 5, from *Mister X Condemned*, 2009. Image copyright by Dean Motter, and used by permission of the artist.

In any case, I want to pursue the term *artifact* a little further. The simple etymology of the word refers to a thing made-with-skill (from the Latin *ars*, skill + *facere*, to do), a product of art or craft. This is certainly consonant with a traditional understanding of human products, architectural works included. The term *artifact* also carries with it a sense of magic, charm, enchantment, and duplicity, especially as seen in related roots such as *factum* and *factitious*.²⁸ Furthermore, in common usage, as in archaeology, artifacts are understood practically as material residues, or tangible presences, of processes or conditions themselves no longer present. In this last sense, the artifact's presence marks an absence never more than partially recoverable.

This begins to take us in a direction rather different from one that would establish its bearings with a study of the term *object*,²⁹ something both toward which attention is directed, and by which opposition or resistance is offered (consider the related word *obstacle*, something that stands in the way). Of course, Radiant City is indeed *object-ive*, as the intentional (if not intended) outcome of the architects' work, and *object-al*,³⁰ in its independent and stubborn resistance to Mister X's attempts to correct its problems. However, it is quite consistent that in *Mister X* the architect's efforts should lead to something the text will characterize as artifact not object. This is no less true for the city than for Mister X's monument. However much Radiant City is an object, intentional and resistant, it is also magical, fragmentary, fateful and factitious: an *artifact*.

In the opening panel of the third series, a wrinkled letter re-introduces Radiant City, implicating everyone involved in its creation. 'You built this travesty of an urban experiment. We all did. The beautiful city of dreams. What do you think you can do about it? (...) *The buildings are beginning to speak to us*'.³¹ If these buildings speak, however, it is neither in the sense that semiotic theories of architecture would understand the term, nor in quite the way an earlier 'emotive' *architecture parlante* would have it.³²

People throughout the city are depressed, hysterical, suicidal. A woman finds that she is fading away, literally disappearing.³³ A child enters one end of a playground tube-slide but never emerges.³⁴ A woman vanishes, drawn in and through the mirror of a public washroom. After examining the Mondo Towers building, Mister X announces a discovery: 'A *distraught* portal. The ill-conceived psychetecture of this building is causing the entranceway to exist on several planes at once'.³⁵

If Radiant City speaks, then, this is a speech of resonance and depth; let us say of timbre, accent, and rhythm; of voice. If this is speech, perhaps it is speech akin to that of Roman Jakobson's in which the 'fully militant tone' and the 'sustained swishing and whistling' were elements Kristeva so admired in his public reading of the poetry of Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov.³⁶ For Kristeva, this is a speech of concrete effects, profoundly material, and in no way reducible to meaning or signification. In *Mister X*, Radiant City's unintentional but sinister discourse operates directly through its physically constituent elements: through rooms, buildings, public spaces.³⁷ This city grasps and moves its citizenry; it enfolds them, it displaces them, it renders them helpless - it terrifies them as it acts upon them. This city is perhaps *ou-topic* (no place); it is certainly not *eu-topic* (a good place). It is at once open and unforgiving, real and un-real. If this is an *architecture parlante*, it is one that is performative in the extreme. But clearly the city is something more than just the locus of a message or the site of speech, however 'effective'. In *Mister X*, the city is nothing less than an *artifact become delinquent*: material, uncanny, unpredictable, and now physically menacing.

Fig. 6, from *Mister X Condemned*, 2009. Image copyright by Dean Motter, and used by permission of the artist.

Radiant City is delinquent in the temporal sense as well. It is a place out of time, a past vision of a future that never quite arrived. The city fabric is filled with severe modern skyscrapers, pre-war Deco buildings, mid-century storefronts and diners. The skies are populated by Zeppelins, biplanes, and flying automobiles of vaguely prewar vintage. Anthropomorphic robots share the sidewalks with an eclectic citizenry whose images are drawn freely from twentieth century urban types, although with an emphasis on the American city, circa 1940 (see Fig. 6 for a condensed example of this imagery). Indeed, references to the fashions, icons, ideologies, and historical figures of Modernism are explicit. The name ‘Radiant City’ is only the most obvious of these. In a later issue, Mister X is compared to ‘[Johannes] Itten at the Bauhaus’.³⁸ Later, an architect discussing Mister X quotes Philip Johnson on the failure of modernism.³⁹ In the city, a spartan urban park is named the ‘Gerritt Rietveld Playground’.⁴⁰ In another extended sequence, Mister X is taken to a place reminiscent of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*.⁴¹ Radiant City’s ‘look’ is formulated almost entirely without recourse to the historical archive of images or events after mid-century. This is a city at once familiar and strange, a mid-twentieth-century Metropolis for twenty-first century Jetsons – dysfunctional now, or on the verge. If *Mister X* is an urban lament, it is one that marks the collapse of the modernist dream into an urban nightmare. But this is not a story of renunciation. The failure of the city is a cause for anguish, but not abandonment. If Radiant City is a dystopian metropolis at the end of the millennium, it is a *modern* city gone wrong: flawed, certainly, but not forsaken; sinister maybe, but still performative; a delinquent artifact, perhaps, but one continually subject to the architect’s therapeutic passions. In Fig 7 Mister X is shown grasping the tools of his trade, pencil and set square. The debris on the floor, the opened storage box, the use of the walls themselves as media all reinforce a profound sense of urgency in this task of putting modernity right for everyone, not least for himself and for architecture itself. The vertiginous angle of view and the tilt of the image in the frame suggest that we might all benefit from having things straightened out.

Fig. 7, from *Mister X Condemned*, 2009. Image copyright by Dean Motter, and used by permission of the artist.

Michael Hays once suggested that much of the architectural writing of the 1970s could be understood as a repudiation of modernist belief in social transformation through architectural form. As Hays points out, much of this newer work proceeded under the assumption that the only social possibilities of architecture available beyond accommodation with a debilitating world system were to be found in a resistance firmly rooted in formal procedures of object making considered somehow *outside* dominant social values. Hays goes on to characterize the writing of the 1990s as an attempt to consider the possibilities of the discipline no longer in terms of autonomous and resistant formal moves, but rather in terms of architecture's wider role in opening or constraining possibilities for *conceptualizing* (that is, neither *remaking* nor *resisting*, but simply *conceiving*) the present socio-historical condition.⁴²

I think that a careful reading of *Mister X* suggests that a different program is possible, not one reducible to the outlines of a 'cognitive project', but one not entirely divorced from such a project, either.⁴³ In the comic, theoretical activity is not principally concerned with forging links to practices and discourses previously considered 'extrinsic' to architecture, as important as these undoubtedly are.⁴⁴ Rather, the comic apparently returns to a modernist interpretation of the problems of object production and theory adequation. As surely as *Mister X* can be understood as a return of architectural theory to the architectural object, however, the comic renders the entire project highly circumspect and ambivalent. For one thing, rather crucially, Mister X's theory is a failure. In the second series, Mister X and Blitzstein have a conversation about psychetecture:

Blitzstein: 'I've never liked your designs. I still believe that men should shape buildings, not the other way around. But I will congratulate you on one thing, though: your theory does work, doesn't it?'

Mister X: 'Not the way I intended.'

Blitzstein: 'No, you wanted the city to influence people in a positive manner. Instead, it's driving everyone crazy.'⁴⁵

Blitzstein is right. After a fashion, psychetecture does succeed, at least in the sense that this theory is able to produce an architectural object of significant effect. However problematically this happens, the active and transformative possibilities of the object are indeed preserved in psychetecture, even as it fails to accomplish its explicit goals. This success, however inverted or ambiguous, returns architecture to an old obsession. Although the idea that works of architecture could produce direct social effects is usually associated with twentieth century writing in architecture,⁴⁶ related ideas are present at least as far back as the architectural enlightenment.⁴⁷ In *Mister X* the notion of object-effect is invoked once again, but this time in terms of outcomes explicitly at odds with intentions. The object is now something of a reproach to the theorist. As Blitzstein points out, however, the object stands at the same time as a rather perverse validation of the theorist's efforts.

In a sense, the torment Mister X feels at his inability to control the city he designed is not much different from the sense of frustration, even betrayal, felt by many architects, now and throughout history, when confronted by the escape or 'delinquency' of their works. It is tempting to explain this loss of designer control over architectural works by reference to slippages of intention with respect to making; or by attributing such effects to authorial 'self-bafflement' and unconscious influence; even by remarking the simple resistance of material itself and its inescapable alterity with respect to 'motivating' ideas; or even more simply, by noting the uncontrollable proliferation of decision points and action vectors resulting from the sheer range of participants in the processes of realizing an architectural design. Certainly, all of these are at play in architectural production.

Mister X implies something else, however. In the comic, the notion of a return of theory to object making is intimately tied to the possibility of another relationship to the architectural object, and in the end to some sort of reconfiguration of the modernist social project in which the material object figures so prominently.

Simply to conceive of the architectural object as an artifact, *material, unpredictable and uncanny*, is to immediately suspend the possibility of any tight instrumental control over it. However, to consider the architectural object as an artifact now also *active, delinquent and powerful*, is to reinstate a belief in a significant field of object effectivity extending out beyond the work itself. In its combination of insistence and incommensurability, the artifact in *Mister X* is probably as close as one is likely to get to an architectural figure for what Lacan called the *real*: at once the ground we traverse and the substance that eludes us.⁴⁸ It is surely true that a history of architecture could be written in which the vicissitudes of theory would be carefully registered against a never-finished encounter with the real as it problematically re-inserted itself at the point of exchange between an architectural desire for control and a disruptive and unsettling object forever refusing that desire. The artifact in *Mister X* is the figure through which the narrative powerfully rejects the modernist myth of instrumental control and direct social transformation, but also by which it partially redeems that project in its re-affirmation of the inconceivably material insistence of that same object.

In *Mister X*, the possibility of some re-inscription of the socially transformative project of modernism is held open precisely in the coupling of Mister X's *eternal hope for theoretical adequacy* and Radiant City's *equally endless delinquency and escape*. Perhaps triangulated from these two positions is the possibility of an object at once uncontrollable and therapeutic, an architectural artifact as a talisman of sorts. However, it is in the very lack of conclusion in the narrative, and in the obsessive marking and re-marking of belatedness, that the implications of *Mister X* are most clear: any socially transformative project in architecture is necessarily and simultaneously overdue, unavoidable, and interminable. I think we must grasp the text's insistence on dystopia as nothing less than a strangely utopian moment in which the text calls for a continual re-inscription of the modern project beside, rather than

outside, its own history of apparent failure. There is no question that architecture does and must work upon the *real*, that it cannot avoid properly transformative relationships with the raw material of the world, just as it cannot hope to predict or constrain them. I interpret *Mister X* as an affirmation that this constitutive failure of intention, this lack of control, reflects less a ‘correctable’ failure of the discipline, its conceits or its motivations, than a necessary registering of the perpetual escape of the real itself, here figured in and as the architectural or urban object. And, finally, I would read the text as an invitation to set out upon a re-mapping of the relationships between architectural theories and objects in which neither the *real* nor the *social* could possibly be bracketed.

awaiting a return

Can we say that *Mister X* is just another text, in the present context at best no less, but surely no more, than another set of propositions about architecture or urbanism, worth reading or not depending on personal tastes or theoretical interests? Certainly it is nothing new to call for a reconsideration of the modern project, nor to make another case for re-thinking the role of theory in architecture. As one way of beginning to answer this question, I would say that the issue of the text’s ‘readership’ has to re-emerge at some point. It is obvious that the audience for this sort of comic serial is not the usual audience for architectural theory. Indeed, despite the limited readership for alternative comics of this type, *Mister X*’s audience significantly dwarfs typical ‘theory’ readership, and I am quite sure that this pop audience cares no more for Philip Johnson than for Jacques Lacan. While I acknowledge my own interests in considering the text from a very narrow perspective, I also believe my interpretations have done little harm to the general sense and direction of the *Mister X* narratives. Despite the gloss, in other words, at a basic level *Mister X* really is about architectural theories and objects, design efforts, and the effects of architectural works. The basic compositional and narrative elements of Fig 8 – the illuminated gaze of Mister X, the crossed shadows cast by an outside light, and the abiding desire ‘for the plans’ – elegantly capture this central theme a single powerful fusion of image and dialogue. Why would a mostly non-architectural audience of comic fiction be interested enough in a story of this type that they would wait anxiously each month for the next installment? And what does that mean?

Fig. 8, from *Mister X Condemned*, 2009. Image copyright by Dean Motter, and used by permission of the artist.

As has been pointed out elsewhere, theorists in architecture currently tend to neglect the architectural object.⁴⁹ They are often preoccupied with explorations of representation or modes of formal innovation, investigations into the broad conceptual fabric of the discipline, or with studies of the discipline's ideological relationships with the social field writ large.⁵⁰ *Mister X*'s audience, however, apparently cares about the architectural object *per se* in some meaningful way. Powerful desires and fears about buildings and spaces are at the very core of the comic narrative, and this cannot be incidental to the comic's attraction for its readers.

The *artifact*, in the sense I have used the term, suggests something that is unreachably beyond the subject while at the same inextricably part of his (lack of) being. The notion that buildings might act somehow 'unilaterally' is indefensible, to be sure, but the proposition that architectural works, as necessarily part of the real, 'impose' themselves is certainly not. Reflecting on the readership of *Mister X* may at least serve to remind us that the power of architecture rests on the willingness, even the drive, of subjects to grant it that power; to treat the object as a source of influence; and ultimately, to enact architecture as a field of possibility for, but never determination of, social action and change. If there is to be any sort of adequate re-inscription of the socially transformative project in architecture, then it will have to take account of these notions in the context of the desires and investments of 'subjects', and to accept that architectural works will always remain what Michel de Certeau called 'fluctuating objects'.⁵¹

Clearly we are speaking here of some sort of 'field of interaction' conditioned by projective desires, brute facticities, and by the wholly non-negotiable constraints and unfolding possibilities of the real figured in the uncanny pairing of a subject, forever in search of completion, and an artifact, at once too full and never quite full enough to bring that search to an end. It should be clear that this does not mean that what we call the architectural object is trivial. Far from it, if only because such a material work always and uneasily straddles the gulf between our desires, affects, and their insistences, on the one hand, and their very limits and transformations in the real, on the other. If architects have lost faith in a project that would return the architectural work to its precarious position here, apparently many others have not. Of the comic audience, this much can certainly be said: there are many people anxiously awaiting the return of *Mister X*.

failings and virtues

What else can *Mister X* tell us? We know that the development of architectural form too often proceeds from an entirely optimistic belief that intentions about anticipated use and activity will be supported in the final configuration of the work. This is particularly true for projects with explicit intentions involving some form of social program.⁵² Understandably, the desire to right social wrongs or improve the qualities of life is often so strong that it overpowers the need for self-critical analysis of possible unintended effects of the work. All too often intentions are unconsciously projected as outcomes, and the success of the work is too often simply assumed to be evident. Forms are hardly innocent, and rarely are their effects transparent. In the shadows of built form there are hidden implications which can quickly overcome the best of intentions and the most conscientious of programmatic and representational strategies.⁵³ In attempting to illuminate injustice and cast the light of social equity through architectural work, architects can too easily ignore the shadows their works produce.

If architects can no longer dare claim to effect wide social change solely through architecture's own operations, it would certainly be too facile to dismiss any more incremental or transitory possibilities for object-mediated effect. In the end, however, it is clear that people, not buildings, enact change. Although the role of the user or occupant is central to the notions of the architectural work developed here, the issue of audience warrants a few more comments. As we have seen, *Mister X* suggests that we might shift our attention from the work of architecture to the 'architectural' desires of a reading public. The architectural work as artifact embodies a stubborn and opaque resistance which serves to mark the presence of the real itself. As the obstinate shadow of the object – which is, however resistant and problematical, always already 'for a subject' – artefacture vouchsafes a place where the subject is never safe, where the light of reason will never fully penetrate, a place of deep shadow from within which the real might strike. I've mentioned that the popularity of comics like *Mister X* suggests that there is an under-appreciated social desire for a therapeutic or transformative work of architecture. Another way of putting this is to say that there is something of a social site already nascently receptive to the less obvious and potentially startling effects of the architectural object. *Mister X* also serves to demonstrate, however, that as such desire waxes, so does doubt. If *Mister X* has anything to teach us in this regard, it is that uncertainty and doubt – all the shadows of hesitation and pause – endlessly accompany an architectural desire for transformation in the social realm.⁵⁴

On this account, what sort of 'social work,' if any, can such an architecture claim to be doing? On first sight, there seems to be failure all around. And this despite the unarguably 'social' dimensions of architecture. Just as the work might properly claim to 'body forth' in its brute facticity, stubborn opacity and irreducible material presence, it also begins to recede as an effective presence. The broadly modern desire for the architectural work to possess an active social presence and a coherence that would make possible the implementation of its social agenda seems to be frustrated at every turn.⁵⁵ The architectural work as an active and activist body appears to be foreclosed in at least four ways:

1. Incompletion As any number of twentieth century cultural theorists have shown us, there is no possibility of a self without an other around which the self is formed, and in the shadow of which the self proceeds.⁵⁶ Gaston Bachelard and others have also made the point that there is no self that is also not spatial – let us say 'architectural' – in the most profound of senses.⁵⁷ However, it is also clear that there is no architectural presence without 'activation' by a subject, no architecture of effect without someone to effect it. The architectural work is never pure and autonomous, never a body of agency except in relay through the very social actors it hopes to act upon. The architectural work can claim no internally coherent identity from which to press its activist agenda, and can assume no external identities upon which to press its social claims.

2. Contamination By the same token, the work of architecture is part of the world it hopes to change. In the context of a larger critique of the concept of architectural 'autonomy,' architectural writers have frequently stressed the degree to which architecture enters into all sorts of debts and affiliations with its physical, economic, political and social environments.⁵⁸ Despite occasional claims of self-enclosure, the architectural work remains subject to – and cannot avoid embodying in some form – powerful political and cultural aspects of its world. Clearly, the architectural work can claim no incorruptible place from which to act, and can never constitute itself as 'outside' the world upon which it seeks to visit change.⁵⁹

3. *Recession* In a passage that has garnered no end of attention in architecture, Walter Benjamin commented long ago that there is something interesting and perhaps unique in the way that those who encounter the architectural work do so ‘distractedly’, rather than in a more attentive or classically contemplative manner.⁶⁰ The impact of an architectural object on those who encounter it is highly unstable. The degree to which various ‘mis-uses’ of the object are possible indicates both an unraveling of intrinsic coherence and a ‘fading’ of the work under engagement. Indeed, the architectural work gains formal freedom precisely to the degree that it ‘disappears’ in the flow of activities and practices that surround it. In this sense, the architectural work can claim no meaningful continuity of presence, and can offer no bulwark against its own disappearance.

4. *Reservation* A persistent feature of architecture is the great many ways that the architectural work remains ‘tongue-tied,’ unable to articulate its messages in any but the most reduced and compromised of forms. Despite ingenious and sometimes compelling efforts in architectural semiotics, the myth of an *architecture parlante* remains just that. If architecture speaks today, its voice is heard by only the few who speak the language and can follow its shifting trajectories.⁶¹ However much architecture’s messages may resonate within those who encounter them, it will always fall to a work’s audiences to make it speak. Ultimately, the architectural work can raise no voice it can reasonably call its own, and indeed it is this inarticulateness that ‘calls’ into being those manifold voices that always remain out of (its) control.

Whatever else the *Mister X* comic does, it becomes clear with a little reflection that it also undertakes to chronicle these four failures in the unfolding of its narratives. Most obviously, the failure to achieve self-articulation finds expression in the comic’s emphasis on the ‘call’ to theory heard by the architect. It is the various responses to that call that provide for most of the narrative’s momentum. Perhaps what is most relevant here is the way that the comic story retains a properly modernist undertone of hope – by reinforcing the power of possibility that resides in the very failure of modernism architecture’s social agenda and theoretical enterprise – even as it documents with great wit the compound failures of that project.

What possibilities, then, are present in and through these four failures, as *Mister X* calls them to our attention?

In the comic, Radiant City is figured as the outcome of the architect’s efforts to craft an instrument of well-being. This intentional urban work is rendered as a body burdened by the double debt of genesis and persistence, owing its ‘birth’ to the hopes, desires and skills of its architect creator, and owing its ‘life’ – literally, its urban vitality – to the people who will inhabit it. As we saw, however, the city proves to be more than a passive object, apparently possessing an active subjectivity responsible to neither the architect’s intentions nor the life projects of its citizens. Radiant City frustrates both, finally becoming ‘murderous’, a ‘weapon’ with a mind of its own. We saw how this turn of events neatly replays the architectural dream of utopia, albeit in the register of failure – of dystopia. In fact, the appearance of perverse autonomy in the object only refigures the debts the object owes to the subjects who surround it: its ‘perversity’ is just the inverse of the architect’s hopes, while the strengths of its effects are due to its ‘feeding’ on the fears of its citizens. Does this narrative refiguring, then, return the architectural work to passive incompleteness? No. *Mister X* suggests that it is precisely where the object remains in debt to the subject that its possibilities lie. As we saw, Radiant city absorbs a woman through a specular surface of its own; another woman literally disappears into the city. We know that no object ‘acts’, but because the

architectural work is always inter-implicated with a host of subjects, the work gains a charge of effectivity in the place of that debt. Incompleteness prefigures effect: where the subject is harbored in the object, *that* is where the object moves.

What of contamination? *Mister X* highlights the intimate embedment of the architectural work in the world that surrounds it and which it helps constitute. Throughout the comic, the architectural object is always conflated with Radiant City, which itself functions as context, environment and alter ego of the works its ‘contains’. The narrative opens with reference to the central role of architecture in withstanding earthquakes, hurricanes and other ‘tantrums’ of nature, and with the deeply therapeutic desire of the main character, the architect who will soon become Mister X, to put architecture in the service of social well-being. The social and natural worlds provide the very foundations upon which this – and all – architecture is erected, and beyond which it can never hope to escape. Through the figure of the bureaucrat Blitzstein, architecture is seen to function forever in the shadow of political influence and normative desire. Through Blitzstein’s own choice of words, however, we saw that the desires of the instrumental project in architecture are undermined from the start by the ‘artifactual’ nature of the architectural work – by the uncanny excesses of the work as it plays out its worldly possibilities. If notions such as the ‘real’ have value in an architectural context, it is because such terms carry with them a sense of the manifold and unpredictable fullness of a world that can never be wholly circumscribed by normative definitions or instrumental projects. If the architectural work is contaminated by the world, then this contamination is the very source of its uncanny excess, and the very possibility it possesses to open onto more than ‘reality’ can ever lay claim to. The architectural work ‘takes part’ in the world, but precisely because it does so, it also *takes part* of reality and literally re-constitutes it in the sum of its colonizations. From the point of view of a ‘reality’ that always claims more ground than it can control, worldly contamination appears as the ‘transcendental’ resource of the architectural work.

But what is the potential of a work that recedes from view just as it gains utility? If an object is always ‘for’ a subject, then once an object is no longer intended – that is, once its appropriation becomes ‘distracted’ – can anything ‘become’ of its disappearance? As we’ve seen, *Mister X* returns constantly to themes of visibility and invisibility, disappearance and re-appearance, masks, costumes, and persistent remainders. The disappearance of Walter Eichmann, and his reappearance as Mister X, not only provides the narrative with its founding plot, but also grants Radiant City a degree of personalized agency that it would not otherwise have. Blitzstein points out: ‘You became the city, Walter’. And, indeed, Mister X is always proxy for the city itself (while also, however, never ceasing to be its hapless creator and unwilling victim). In the story, the disappearance of Radiant City’s citizenry signals the uncanny reappearance of architecture, its redemption from the recession of distracted appropriation. Artifacture may figure the potential of contamination, as I’ve argued above, but it also operates as a figure for emergence and renewed presence – as a material trope for the power of the remainder. In the vision of architecture seen in *Mister X*, the disappearance of the object, its recession, is accompanied by the return of a ‘masked’ agency that is as powerful as it is covert. The potential for shadowed openings onto social consequence, then, is the remainder of an architecture – that is to say, any and all architecture – destined to operate ‘out of sight’ so much of the time.

Finally, what is held in architecture’s reservation? To call architecture ‘mute’ is at once to bemoan (or perhaps to celebrate) its language deficit, and to open it to the clamor of voices that seek to speak in its place. Such reservation appears to mark failure. However, we know

that in *Mister X*, ‘the buildings ... [begin] to speak to us.’⁶² Does this narrative event then signal architecture’s recovery from its loss of speech? Certainly not. Architecture recovers from this loss, after a fashion, but it does not recover speech. As we saw, Radiant City ‘speaks’ in actions alone. And it is these actions that support a proliferation of discourse. If action can be opposed to speech – if phrases such as ‘actions speak louder than words’ speak their own meanings only on an oblique trajectory away from language – then the emerging performativity of Radiant City is better understood as a surfeit of muteness rather than a deficit of speech. The object acts but gives no voice to its reasons. It does not articulate its becoming and does not explain the malady it visits on its inhabitants. But this reticence, this extraordinary muteness, is no less than an irresistible ‘call’ to discourse. In *Mister X*, it is precisely when the object escapes discourse, when it slips out of the grasp of all those who, like Mister X, have ‘spoken for it’, that the work of architecture engages discourse on its own terms. Here, architecture not only retains its muteness, but effectively passes it on to those who seek to answer its call. As articulation proliferates, those many voices work to mute one another’s claims of privilege. Indeed, the more radically excessive architecture’s muteness – that is, the more the work binds disruption to silence and hence calls irresistibly for articulation – the less any articulation, including that of normative discourse, appears complete and convincing. And it is within the doubt that haunts all speeches demonstrably unable to grasp their objects that possibilities of new modes of engagement with the socio-material world are born.

The architectural work appears, then, to open onto a set of possibilities dialectically related to the very limitations of agency and identity that, if fully and completely present, would have seemed crucial to any such work’s agenda of social transformation. But it is not enough to recognize simply that the architectural work, in dialectical relationship with both self and world, opens for its audiences the very possibilities of identity and agency unavailable to itself. There is not much in what we have noted here that is specific only to what might be called ‘socially effective’ works. If the effective potentials of architectural works lie in essential constraints/possibilities shared by all works, what accounts for the failure of so many works of architecture to achieve the social potential that their creators have so often explicitly sought? Clearly, detailed proposals for a better world are not enough, nor are their material realizations. As we saw in *Mister X*, Radiant City produces its terror and trauma directly as a result of the architect’s narrow desire to build a better world through autonomous design and theorization. As we follow how Mister X’s utopian dream leads to dystopian nightmare, it is very difficult to forget how so many of the twentieth century’s utopian projects suffered fates almost as dire. The iconic failure of Yamasaki’s Pruitt-Igoe housing project is only the most visible of these. Although this may in some part account for the architectural discipline’s hesitation to act on its deepest intuitions about the violence of our own time, it clearly does not absolve so many of its architects from then retreating to the false comforts of nostalgia and amnesia. It should be clear by now that no ‘new modernism’ will fare well, if, in the end, it is comfort that it seeks.

Mister X does, however, perform a crucial recuperative function. The comic explicitly foregrounds the catalytic role of social and personal trauma in ‘animating’ architecture, and points out that without the clearest possible imprint of the violence and sorrow at the heart of a world that architects hope to change, there is no way for the architectural work’s commutative powers of social agency to find purchase. And this understanding is coupled with a recognition that the peculiar power of the built work is that in its bodily materiality it can – and does – engage us all at the very cores of our being. As individuals and social actors, our being is, irreducibly, being-in-space. If we have learned anything from Mister X, it is that

any agenda for an architectural work that might be considered genuinely therapeutic and socially transformative must be produced as a *resource for action* – ‘beyond’ itself, and not as a world-in-itself, but nonetheless as a physical terrain upon which new actions, which forever prefigure new ‘cognitions,’ can literally take place. Architecture offers itself as a profoundly transcendental resource. Mister X tells us as much: as an ‘artifact,’ architecture has the potential to exceed the limitations of the normative discourses and actions that operate to stabilize it; as a spatial surround into which the subject stretches itself in order to find itself, the architectural work is always poised to offer itself as the ground upon which a subject might exceed itself, both in en-acting and in re-crafting a world situated on a line of flight from sorrow to joy, from fear to desire, and, ultimately, from existing reality to unthought possibility.

Gaston Bachelard commented once that we occasionally encounter spaces that invite us ‘to come out of ourselves’.⁶³ Such invitations can always be refused, however. Marcel Proust’s call for a modernist work that might awake ‘a pilgrimage of the heart’ always carried with it the necessity that readers be willing to engage with the work – to put themselves and their worlds at risk. When Proust identifies ‘the book ... [as] a product of a different self from the self we manifest in our habits, in our social life, in our lives’ and notes that we must ‘[search] within our bosoms and [try] to reconstruct [that other self] there’, he recognizes that the aesthetic work, at its best, sets challenges that can be answered only with sustained attention and effort.⁶⁴ Indeed, without such a base in reception, architectural works will remain acquiescent, their power to engage with normative and debilitating modes of being essentially un-manifested. Modern architecture seems to have stood in suspension between its interests in the formal constitution of the work, on the one hand, and those many desires, polemics and programs for the transformation of its social worlds, on the other. In a real sense, *Mister X* shares this moment of ‘hesitation,’ just as many other architectural works and projects illuminate it in their own ways. As architects, we share in this modernity to the degree that no end of regret or scorn continues to be expressed in the discipline for formulations that seek, but never convincingly achieve, some stable link between the formal and the social in architecture.

Regardless of our individual positions on this problem, as a discipline we cannot seem to dismiss it. Mister X reminds us of this. Not only are there good reasons for this perpetuation of delay, as we’ve seen, but the very possibility of social effects in the architectural work depends upon it. This ‘modern’ hesitation to connect material form and social agenda at the level of the work – in the face of injustice, violence, and trauma all around – re-marks a more fundamental hesitation to reduce to fixity the fluid potentials of its audiences to move from the familiarity of the world as experienced to the possibilities of as-yet-unspecified futures. Such delay serves to remind us that to ventilate the dark recesses of the work would be to foreclose architecture’s prospects, not to open them. The real potentials of architecture lie between the seen and the unseen, in the depths of movement, amid restless forays across the shadow line. If encounter and engagement are to reach toward unanticipated possibility, then architecture’s chiaroscuro will be traversed by theory, not dreamt away.

Figure Credits

All illustrations from Dean Motter, *Mister X Condemned*, Milwaukee Oregon: Dark Horse Books, 2009. All images copyright by Dean Motter and used by permission of the artist.

Fig. 1, front cover

Fig. 2, p.10

Fig. 3, p.37

Fig. 4, p.66

Fig. 5, p.82

Fig. 6, p.58

Fig. 7, p.37

Fig. 8, p.32

Notes

¹ Although most commentators seem rather sanguine about the changing readership of comics, blogger Tyler Sticka laments the complexity of many contemporary comics largely because, on his view, this means their audience base is destined to shrink even further than it has already. See Sticka, 'Comics' Lost Audience'.

² Mattieu, 'Is The Current Comic Book Audience Too Old for Superhero Comics?'

³ Comic book shop owner Brian Kelly, in Pennefather, 'The Amazing Adventures of Metro Detroit's Comic Industry'.

⁴ Retailer Dan Merrit further observes that 'ninety-five percent of my clientele is over twenty. Kids do read comics, but not as much as they used to'. See Pennefather, 'The Amazing Adventures of Metro Detroit's Comic Industry'.

⁵ Mattieu, 'Is The Current Comic Book Audience Too Old for Superhero Comics?'

⁶ Tyler Sticka notes that 'as comics have grown and matured, new and innovative compositions have been invented', sometimes resulting in pages that are 'foreign and mind-numbingly confusing'. Sticka, 'Comics' Lost Audience'.

⁷ Vaneta Rogers suggests that this audience is not only relatively sophisticated, but also likely to grow. She points out that 'comic book fans tend to be early samplers of new technology' and that while there may be 'only a few hundred thousand loyal readers who buy comics' right now, the intersection of the comic book and the tablet commuter may well result in what one of her sources, Stephen Christy of Archaia Comics, calls a 'direct market' with 'millions of people to distribute to'. See Rogers, 'Could Apple's iSlate' be a Digital Comics Game-Changer?'

⁸ Ellis, 'Forward', 12.

⁹ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 1, no. 1.

¹⁰ Motter, *Mister X Condemned*.

¹¹ See Tschumi, *Advertisements for Architecture*.

¹² These are included in the collection by Tschumi, *The Manhattan Transcripts*.

¹³ Libeskind, *Chamber Works*.

¹⁴ Photos and a discussion of these can be found in Woods, 'Libeskind's Machines'.

¹⁵ During the last quarter of the twentieth century, these two academic journals were arguably the most influential architecture theory periodicals published in English. Based in New York and produced by Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, *Oppositions* ran from 1976 to 1984, while MIT Press's *Assemblage* ran from 1986 to 2000.

¹⁶ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 1, no. 3, 9.

¹⁷ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 1, no. 3, 9. (Emphasis in original).

¹⁸ Perhaps the best sustained discussions of architecture's utopianism remain Tafuri's two classics in this area, *Architecture and Utopia*, and *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*. On the continuity of utopianism into recent work, see the final two essays in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, "L'architecture dans le boudoir", 267-290, and 'The ashes of Jefferson', 291-303.

¹⁹ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 1, no. 3, 2.

²⁰ In fact, he has at least eleven identities. Speaking to Mister X, former classmate Blitzstein notes: 'You've made quite a name for yourself, Anton. Several of them, in fact. My list stops at eleven'. See Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 2, no. 1, no page number, fourth page of standard comic format.

²¹ The production of comics often involves significant collaboration, and over the years a number of hands have been at work in the *Mister X* serials. Beyond the principal creator, Dean Motter, these include a range of writers and artists variously involved in scripting, penciling, colouring, lettering, and so on. Warren Ellis notes, for example, that '*Mister X* had the great good fortune to snare the Hernandez prodigies – themselves already playing with the possibilities of comics in their now-revered *Love and Rockets*'. He also mentions that *Mister X* saw 'the start of the magnificent cartoonist Seth's career'. See Ellis, 'Forward', 12. The creator of the *Mister X* comics remains, however, Dean Motter, and all the images discussed in this essay are his work, as published in *Mister X Condemned*.

²² The origins of psychetecture are somewhat ambiguous in the series. In the most recent *Mister X* story, the creation of psychetecture is attributed to Eichmann and another architect called Reinhardt. The Meyers and Reinhardt characters share some, but not all, of the characteristics assigned to Meyers in the early volumes. See Motter, *Mister X Condemned*, 80.

²³ Bukatman, 'X-Bodies (the torment of the mutant superhero)'.

²⁴ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 2, no. 1, no page number, seventeenth page of standard comic format.

²⁵ This doubling is made explicit in the most recent story where a key character refers to Mister X as her 'ex'. Motter, *Mister X Condemned*, 98.

²⁶ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 1, no. 3, 15.

²⁷ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 3, no. 2, cover art.

²⁸ Emily Apter briefly discusses this issue, although she is not concerned with the term 'artifact' but rather with tracing the different genealogies of the term 'fetish' through the word *fetisso*. See Apter, 'Specularity and Reproduction: Marx, Freud, Baudrillard', 22.

²⁹ From the Latin *ob*, in the way + *jacere*, to throw.

³⁰ For a treatment of the objective and the objectal in the context of aesthetic works, see Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 10 and passim.

³¹ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 3, no. 1, opening panel, no page number, italics added.

³² Consider notions such as Marie-Joseph Peyre's *caractere* by which a building might create an emotional effect or impression. For a general discussion of this and related Enlightenment concepts, see Krufit, *A History of Architectural Theory from Vitruvius to the Present*, 141-165.

³³ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 3, no. 1, no page number, sixth page of standard comic format.

³⁴ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 3, no. 2, no page number, fifth and sixth pages of standard comic format.

³⁵ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 3, no. 2, no page number, eighteenth page of standard comic format.

³⁶ Kristeva, 'The Ethics of Linguistics', 27-28.

³⁷ In the comic, the city is understood materially as little more than an assemblage of buildings. Those urban effects with which the comic is concerned transpire largely within and

through the city's buildings. Whatever else this might mean, it serves to reinforce the notion that the burden of the city's success or failure rests at the feet of the architect.

³⁸ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 3, no. 1, no page number, first page of standard comic format.

³⁹ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 3, no. 1, no page number, fourth page of standard comic format.

⁴⁰ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, Livonia, 3, no. 2, no page number, fifth page of standard comic format.

⁴¹ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 2, no. 8, 2-3, passim.

⁴² In this respect, Hays's project fully intersects with Fredric Jameson's program of interrogating aesthetic works for their potential in narrowing the gap between a late capitalist world that seems to be beyond our conception, on the one hand, and some form of representation that would help us begin to grasp it, on the other. When understood in terms of possibilities for struggle and resistance, the political implications of this project are obvious. See Hays, 'Editorial: On Turning Thirty', 6-10.

⁴³ See Hays, 'Reproduction and Negation: The Cognitive Project of the Neue Sachlichkeit', in *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject*.

⁴⁴ An interesting exchange between Michael Hays and Sylvia Lavin lays out the basic issues quite clearly. See Lavin, 'Essay: The uses and abuses of theory', 113-114, 179; and Hays, 'Rebuttal: Theory as mediating practice', 100.

⁴⁵ Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 2, no. 1, no page number, eighth page of standard comic format.

⁴⁶ This is a commonplace most succinctly worded in Le Corbusier's famous slogan "Architecture or revolution", but evident in the writing of architects as diverse as Guiseppe Terrani, Nikolai Ladovsky, Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Neutra, Eliel Saarinen, as well as a host of others in the 1930s and 1940s. For an overview, see Mallgrave, *Modern Architectural Theory*, and Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory from Vitruvius to the Present*.

⁴⁷ For example, see the writings of architects such as Germain Boffrand, Marie-Joseph Peyre, Etienne-Louis Boulee, Claude-Nicholas Ledoux, Francesco Milizia, and Sir Roger Pratt. The central figure in this discussion is perhaps Nicolas le Camus de Meziere. This writing is discussed in detail in Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory from Vitruvius to the Present*, 141-165, 233.

⁴⁸ Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*.

⁴⁹ For example, in his general statement for the "Object of Architecture" session at *The Second Kennon Memorial Symposium: Architecture and Individualism* at Rice University (April 1997), Fares el-Dahdah notes that contemporary writing in architecture has tended to neglect the object in architecture, effectively treating it 'to a point of erasure'.

⁵⁰ Hays, 'Editorial: On Turning Thirty', 6-10.

⁵¹ De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 82. On page 37, de Certeau writes of history that the 'fragile and necessary boundary between a past object and a current praxis begins to waver, as soon as the fictive postulate of a *given* that is to be understood is replaced by the study of an *operation* always affected by determinisms, always having to be taken up, always depending on the place where it occurs in a society, and specified, however, by a problem, methods, and a function which are its own'. (Emphasis in original.)

⁵² In this failure of intentions, as Neil Leach points out, Jurgen Habermas includes even "participatory architecture", in which designers work 'in dialogue with the clients'. For Habermas, even these projects tend to fail because practical regulatory constraints and entrenched media ultimately serve non-client interests to the point that such projects result in "dysfunctional consequences on the lives of those concerned." Clearly, this is despite the best intentions of many of the actors involved in the process. See Habermas, 'Modern and Postmodern Architecture', 235.

⁵³ For a development of this point in the context of an early design project by the architect Samuel Mockbee, see Biln, 'Given Domain'.

⁵⁴ Some of the ideas in this essay, not least the notions of 'hesitation' and 'failure', draw on a 1990 essay by Jacques Derrida, *Memoires d'aveugle*. I make no claims about the faithfulness of the present writing to Derrida's text, but certain of his formulations and structures have been central to its development.

⁵⁵ Manfredo Tafuri is surely the critic of architecture who has made this argument most insistently. His pessimism is not shared by all cultural critics, however. Even as he admires Tafuri's dark rigour, Fredric Jameson holds out hope for some kind of 'Gramscian architecture' that might allow for emancipatory social change. See Fredric Jameson's essay on Tafuri, 'Architecture and the Critique of Ideology'.

⁵⁶ Perhaps the most important of these has been Emmanuel Levinas. For an accessible introduction to his work, see Perperzak, et al (eds.), *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. This is essentially the argument of the entire book. At the outset, Bachelard claims that "the poetic image is a sudden salience on the surface of the psyche" (p.xv) and that "the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being" (p. xxxvii).

⁵⁸ For a sense of the breadth of this critique, see Ghirardo, *Out of Site*.

⁵⁹ This point is made extremely well in Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject*.

⁶⁰ See Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.

⁶¹ On this point, see Tafuri, "'L'architecture dans le boudoir'".

⁶² Motter, et al, *Mister X*, 3, no. 1, opening panel, no page number.

⁶³ See Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 11.

⁶⁴ Proust, *Marcel Proust on Art and Literature*, 99-100.

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