

Graphic Satire and the Public Perception of Architecture. A Missing Genre

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Spring 2022

Among the many documents usually employed to study the history of architecture, one entire “genre” has been too often undervalued in the panoply of architectural commentary and criticism. As recent studies testify, since the 17th century there has been an endless flow of pictures commenting upon the profound impact of architecture, urbanism and design on society, using the register and means of satire, irony, parody, humor, wit, ridicule, and the comical.

Large-scale urban renewal and projects, the creation of public monuments and buildings, the 20th century revolution in housing models, and the flamboyant personas of the architects, have pushed many artists to sharpen both their wit and pencils to shine the satirical spotlight on the many contradictions, oddities and even crimes committed in the name of architecture. Among the artists who have been most attentive to these issues we find Honoré Daumier, George Cruikshank, Thomas Theodor Heine, Osbert Lancaster, William Heath Robinson, Mino Maccari, Saul Steinberg, George Molnar, Gustav Peichl, Louis Hellman, and many others.

These documents constitute an extraordinary media vehicle which creates opinions and stereotypes related to the architectural world – thus directing attention to the user and public opinion – that is parallel and often contrasts with other channels of criticism such as architectural exhibitions and the specialized press. From this perspective, they act as powerful images capable of influencing people’s response to an Architectural Modernity that hangs in the balance between being promising and menacing. As I will try to demonstrate, the collection and analysis of these caricatures, illustrations, cartoons and other printed pictures - to which, more recently, other media have been added - can reveal an extraordinary depth of themes and references, sometimes conflicting with the most ossified historiographical interpretations.

These pictures, as a whole, could be regarded as a sort of “counter-history” of architecture, referring, with some freedom, to the oppositional character attributed by Werner Hofmann to the caricature in his well-known essay “Die Karikatur - eine Gegenkunst”. This interpretation sheds light on the parallel narrative that graphic satire has been playing with regards to the official architectural practice and historiography, especially in the 20th century. While having nothing of the objective (the caricature by definition transforms, exasperates and exaggerates real facts), such a counter-history would inform an alternative perspective, sometimes able to challenge the myths floated by official historiography, and to alert about the distortion of architecture’s image.

Given this framework, my research strives to analyze architectural graphic satire (and bordering categories) in New York and the US during the 20th century, with specific focus on some major journals, themes, buildings, architects and cartoonists such as Alan Dunn, Saul Steinberg, Peter Arno, Reginald Marsh, Rea Irvin, Robert J. Day, Mary Petty, etc. Thanks to its architectural, cultural, publishing and artistic scenes, which prospered along with a strong satirical tradition – from the work of Thomas Nast (1840-1902) in the 19th century, to the large number of newspapers and magazines hosting cartoons related to architecture in the 20th century – New York stands out as one of the epicenters of this particular kind of architectural criticism and chronicle. Many questions arise. What are the main themes addressed

by these cartoons in New York in the 20th century? What was their role in the wider process of defining the image of New York City? What are the iconographic relationships and mutual contaminations between this kind of urban representation and other media, such as photography, urban illustration, cinema or advertising? What is the relationship between architectural cartoons and more traditional – or “serious” – forms of architectural criticism? What is the aim of these cartoons? How can these cartoons influence or support other forms of criticism? What was the role of cartoons in the critical debate on 20th century architecture and urban transformation in New York and the US?

Within this broad context, I consider the work of the great cartoonist Alan Dunn (1900-1974) as a major case study, for his interest in architecture and his role in the 20th century American architectural scene. In 1926 he began contributing to *The New Yorker*, becoming one of its most prolific cartoonists; in 1936, he also started a long-lasting collaboration with *The Architectural Record*. Thanks to his cartoons, also published as independent volumes and exhibited in museums and galleries, in 1973 he was even awarded the Architectural Critics Citation by the American Institute of Architects.