RE-IMAGINING THE AVANT-GARDE

Re-imagining
the Avant-Garde:
Revisiting the
Architecture of the
1960s and 1970s
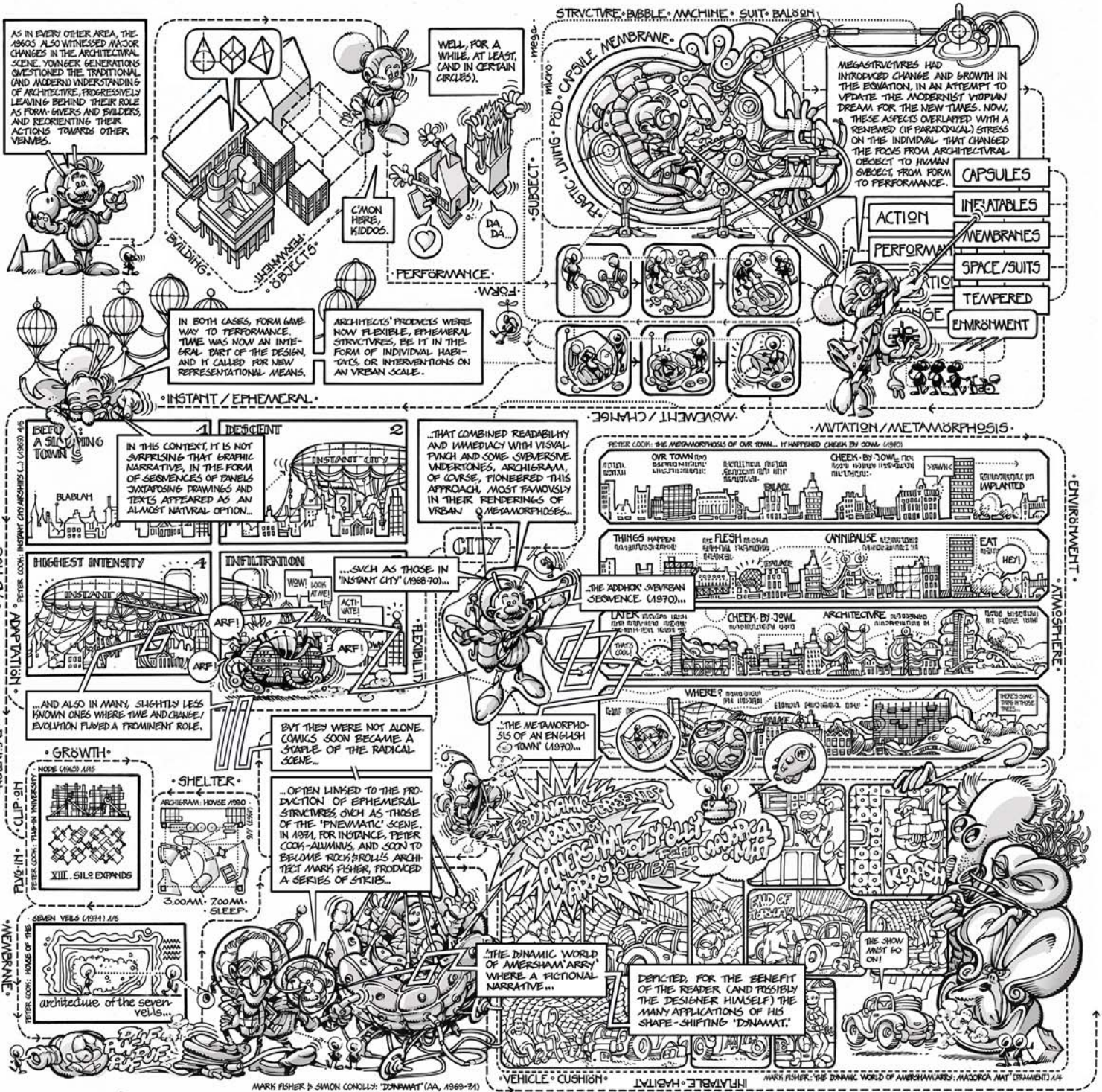
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Architecture Between the Panels.

Comics, cartoons, and graphic narrative in the (New) Neo-Avant-garde, 1960-2018.

The 1960s, better represented in the collective imagination by the events that surrounded the May 1968 civil unrest in France, witnessed a general shake-up of established structures. Always vindictive and eager to abolish the established borders between 'hi' and 'lo', popular and official, 'light' and mature, the younger generations embraced the colourful products of culture's lower strata. The 1960s were also a time where comics entered academia – through the works of filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard and Alain Resnais, and intellectuals such as Umberto Eco, or, slightly less enthusiastically, Marshall

McLuhan – and simultaneously went underground. Comic books explored anti-establishment niches and re-conquered the mainstream, through both Marvel Comics and new superheroes whose cosmic adventures entered colleges populated by a generation experimenting with mind-expanding drugs. Comics were everywhere, aided by an emerging independent publishing scene that made extensive use of them, as the embodiment of the spirit of an age characterised by a mixture of provocation and ingenuity, neo-Marxism and stark individualism, hedonistic *laissez-faire* and political activism.

Unsurprisingly, the proliferating architectural 'little magazines' of the 1960s and early 1970s, which embraced the same guerrilla tactics of
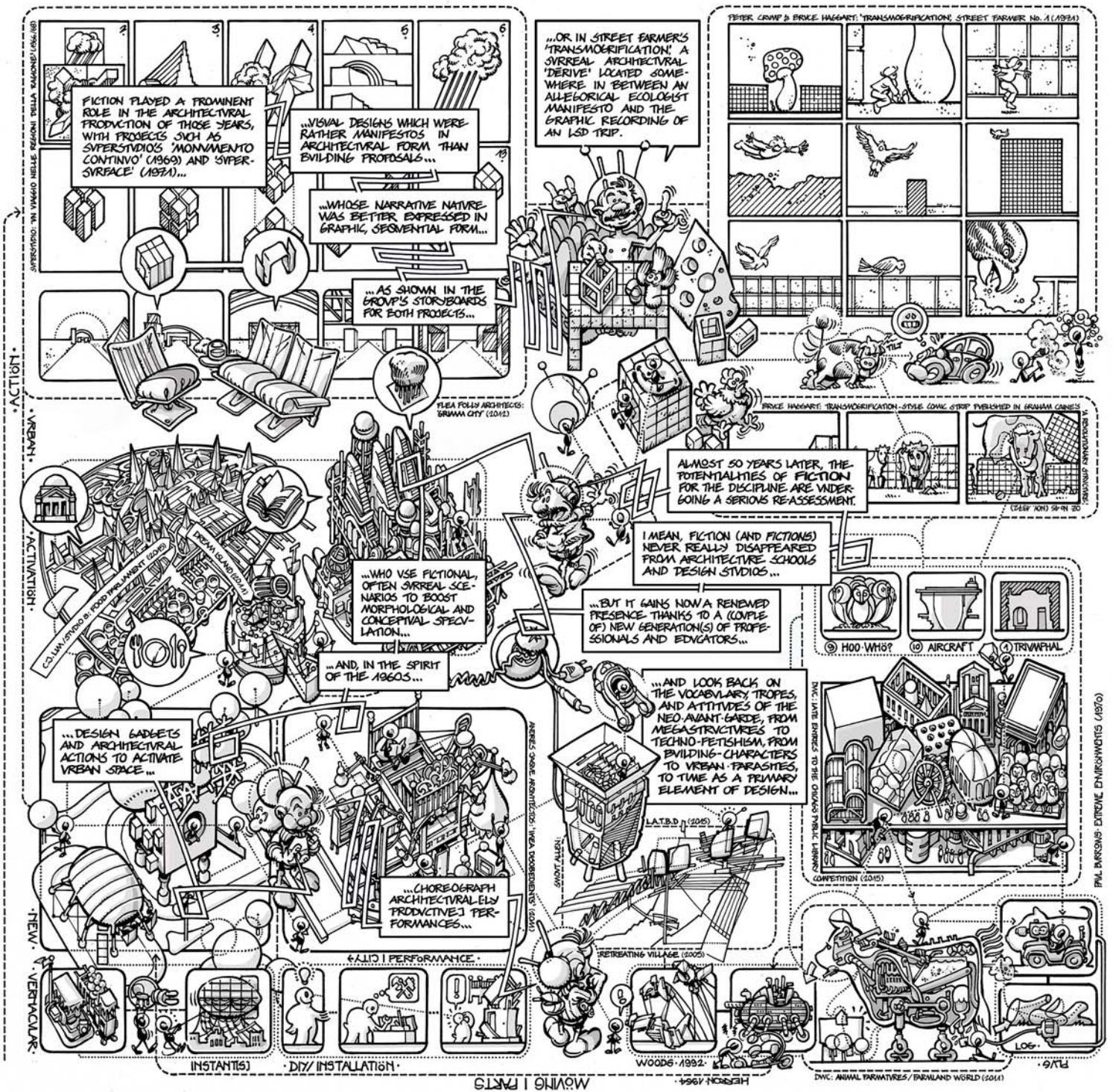
appropriation of the goodies of popular culture, also featured comics prominently. This was for their subversive value, their ability for image-shaping, their advantages for communication, or a combination of all of these.

FIGURE 1: Klaus, The Comics of the Avant-Garde (I): Space, Time, Anarchitecture, 2018. The introduction of evolution, change, flexibility, ephemerality and, ultimately, time as an element of design prompted the use of graphic narrative in its different forms, either to explain the way projects work, or, eventually, to provide it with a fictional background. On this page, some of Archigram's forays into 'sequential narrative' (Instant City Airship Sequence, 1970; The Metamorphosis of Our Town, 1973; Plug-In University Node, 1965; House 1990, 1965; House of the Seven Veils, 1974), and one page of Mark Fisher's The Adventures of Amersham 'Arry (1970–71), a series of fictional stories that presented the many uses of his Dynamat project.

The London-based group Archigram championed this trend in *Archigram 4* (1964), a manifesto on the ability of science fiction to prefigure the shape of a new architecture which, in full Situationist fashion, was profusely illustrated with space comics.[1] Soon this use of comics by appropriation became a staple of the period's avant-garde: San Francisco collective Ant Farm's DIY guide *INFLATOCOOKBOOK* (1971),[2] early issues (1967–9) of the eponymous journal of the Paris-based Utopie group and their related publications such as *Urbaniser la lutte de classe* (1969),[3] and even Paul Krassner and Ken Kesey's *Last Supplement* to American writer Stewart Brand's ecologist *Whole Earth Catalog* (1971), together with an endless array of student journals, give a good account of this.

However, appropriation and insertion for caustic effect was not the only way in which comics made it into the architectural avant-garde. The 1960s were also a period where megastructures finally disintegrated in a nebula of capsules, cells, mobile units and inflatable structures. Objects gave way to architectural actions, form to performance, and in this new context of 'architecture without architecture', graphic narrative revealed a powerful representation tool. Archigram used it profusely in many projects where time was an inherent component of the design, such as *Instant City* (1968–70) and *Metamorphosis of an English Town* (1970), and it became even more relevant when architecture was the result of a process of unpredictable form, as in Rudolf Doernach's biotectural *Provolution* (1966),[4] an 'architectural *dérive*' akin to an LSD trip, as in Street Farm's

different 'transmogrifications' (1971),[5] or simply a political statement, as in Superstudio's various storyboards (1966–9).

Five decades later, the changes faced by the profession, paired with the shift of cultural paradigm brought about by the digital revolution, are fostering a paradoxical comeback, with renewed strength and augmented potentialities, of the old school, low tech *art povera* of comics. Fiction, an ineludible component of architectural design that gave us some excellent of architectural comics by the likes of Mark Fisher, Stuart Lever, and Philip Wagner during Peter Cook's tenure as 5th year studio instructor at the AA[6], reenters the schools, often paired with comics, as a pedagogical tool. Even more significantly, fiction today re-enters the architectural office by hand of younger practices - *Flea Folly* in London, *Design With Company* in Chicago, *We Are An Event* in Mexico City, or *Office For Political Innovation* in Madrid, to name just a few- which, free from the building anxiety of the millennium bubble, reconnect with the spirit of the '60s' neo-avant-garde, producing theoretical designs, performances, and installations which retake their strategies, shticks, general *styleme*, graphic philosophies, and sometimes, their representation means.

In an age of fast communication and mediated digital imaging, slow-paced, hand-crafted comics reveal a useful tool to communicate designs in an accessible way, and with an added visual punch, but also to develop the designs themselves. The graphic and narrative medium of comics provides a *réalité autre* that helps construct design narratives, and sometimes can even be used as a formalizing device. This is the case with Jimenez Lai /Bureau Spectacular, whose short stories often play with the conflation of time and space, amalgamating panels and page layouts in a sort of automatic shaping process that overlaps with his built work.

FIGURE 3: Klaus, *The Comics of the Avant-Garde (III): Fictions*, 2018. At the top, some examples of architecture (in comic-strip form) as a way to convey a message, either political, as in Superstudio's storyboards for their *Continuous Monument* (1969) project, or in Street Farm's several *Transmogrifications* (1971). At the bottom, some contemporary practices which use fiction as a trigger for designs that end up formally echoing those of the 1960s–70s: Flea Folly Architects, C.J. Lim / Atelier 8, WE ARE AN EVENT, Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation, Smout Allen, Design With Company.
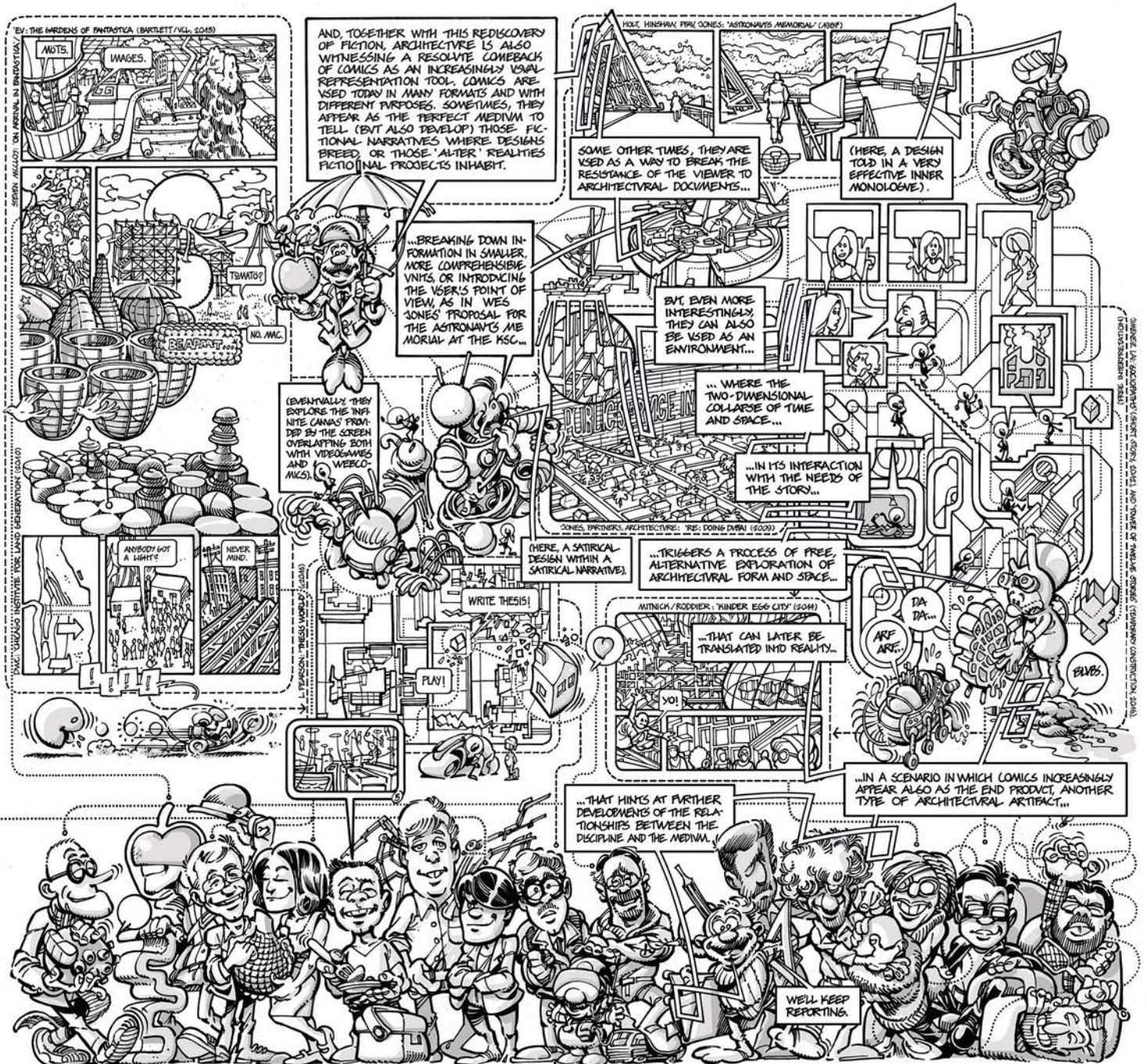
FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: SIR PETER COOK, STEVEN MCCLOY (IN DISGUISE), STEWART HICKS AND ALLISON NEWMEYER (DESIGN WITH COMPANY) C.J. LIM (STUDIO 8), MARK SMOUT, LAURA ALLEN, LUKE PEARSON, WES JONES (JONES, PARTNERS: ARCHITECTURE), KLAUS (KLAUSTOON), LUIS MIGUEL (KOLDO) LUS-ARANA, KEITH MITNICK, MIREILLE RODDIER, JIMENEZ LAI (BUREAU SPECTACULAR), ALEX CULLEN AND DANNY TRAVIS (ARCHITECTURE HERO), PHINEAS THE FLY (BEAUTIFULLY BANAL). [FAMILY PIC WITH SOME OF THE PEOPLE FEATURED THROUGHOUT THE ARTICLE]. FOR A MORE DETAILED RECOUNT OF THE INTERACTIONS OF GRAPHIC NARRATIVE AND CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES, PLEASE REFER TO: 'COMICS AND ARCHITECTURE: A READING GUIDE', CHAPTER 20 IN JONATHAN CHARLEY'S THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION ON ARCHITECTURE, LITERATURE AND THE CITY (ROUTLEDGE, 2018).

But, beyond their role as a companion to design, comics have recently started being vindicated as an end themselves. Increasingly, we find architect-produced comics intended solely as 'architecture fiction', as manifestos, as a vehicle for architecture discourses, critique, or satire. If the late 2000s saluted the advent of architecture fiction as a concept, works such as *Design Architecture Studio*'s series of research-turned-books *A Little Bit of Beijing* (2016-18), and *Beautifully Banal* (2016), by Architecture Hero (Danny Travis and Alexander Cullen) rank amongst the first entries of a new genre, the *architectural graphic novel:* comics for architects done by architects that hint, perhaps, at a new practice field for a profession in desperate need for re-invention.

But that's a different story.

[1] Peter Cook (ed.), Archigram nº 4: *Zoom Issue*, May (no 4), 1964.

[2] An analysis of these can be found in: Luis Miguel Lus Arana, *Building a utopie autre [Amazing Archigram! - 50 years of Zoom!/ Zzzzrrtt!/ Thud!/ Blaam!]*, Proyecto, Progreso Arquitectura, (no 11), 2014 , pp 90-103.

[3] Utopie, Urbaniser la Lutte de Classe, Éditions Utopie (Paris), 1969.

[4] Rudolph Doernach, *Provolution,* AD, February (nº 36), 1966, p 96.

[5] See, for instance: Bruce Haggart, *Transmogrification,* Street Farmer, September (no 1), 1971.

[6] Peter Cook, The Electric Decade: An Atmosphere at the AA School, 1963-1973, in James Gowan (dir), *A Continuous Experiment. Learning and Teaching at the Architectural Association*, AA (London), 1975, pp 137-144.

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FIGURE 4: Klaus, *The Comics of the Avant-Garde (IV): The New Neo*, 2018. An overview of the use of graphic narrative by some contemporary practices: Steven McCloy, Design With Company, Jones & Partners, Luke Pearson, Jimenez Lai / Bureau Spectacular, Mitnick - Roddier.