



ARCHITECTURE+ COMICS

CANADIAN CARTOONISTS AND THE CITY

CURATORS

Mariana Muñoz Gomez
(MA in Cultural Studies, University of Winnipeg)

Candida Rifkind (Associate Professor,
Department of English, University of Winnipeg)

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OPENING

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VISIT

Winnipeg Architecture Foundation
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COVER IMAGE CREDIT

Shoplifter by Michael Cho

WITH SUPPORT FROM



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ABOUT THE EXHIBIT

In 1895, New York cartoonist Richard F. Outcault added word balloons to his immigrant tenement cartoon strip, *Hogan's Alley* (1895–1898), launching modern comics as we know them today. Streetscapes and skyscrapers, apartments and houses have been crucial to North American comics ever since, from the Art Nouveau skyscrapers of Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905–1913) to the early New York setting of George Herriman's surreal *Krazy Kat* (1913–1944) before it moved to the Arizona desert. The Golden Age of comics (1930s to 1950s) saw Superman flying between tall buildings, Batman fighting villains in Gotham City, and Canadian superhero Nelvana of the Northern Lights visiting the futuristic frozen world of Glacia.

In many ways, comics emerged from the modern city and have defined how we imagine it.

There is also a deeper connection between architecture and comics embedded in the language of the art: cartoonists *build* the story, they *construct* the script, they *design* the storyworld, and they draw the *layouts*; ultimately, they are architects of the page who create spaces for characters' narratives. The traditional comics grid even resembles a modern building, as each panel offers a window into a moment in the characters' lives.

Cartoonists and graphic novelists working outside the superhero idiom also pay attention to built space and architectural forms. Often, they focus on interior spaces as well as cityscapes, and the idea of 'home' is a common theme in today's alternative comics. This exhibit showcases how contemporary Canadian cartoonists are drawing cities, streets, and buildings, from Toronto to Yellowknife to Winnipeg, exploring architecture as the spaces we inhabit and the spaces that inhabit us.

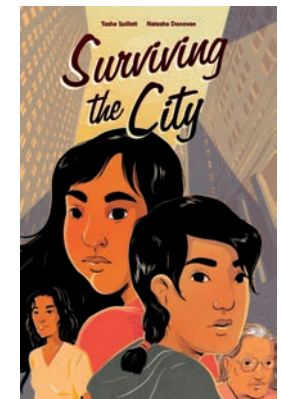
ARTIST STATEMENTS

NATASHA DONOVAN

on *Surviving the City*



"I wanted to depict Winnipeg as both a mirror reflecting Dez and Miikwan's inner lives, and as a separate and dynamic character itself with whom the girls interacted; sometimes bleak and menacing, sometimes warm and caring. As much as possible, I tried to use colour palette and perspective to reflect the changing mood—in particular, I wanted to represent the monolithic quality that buildings can take on when one is feeling alone and scared. As an outsider from the Pacific Northwest, Google Street View was crucial to my process—using Tasha Spillett's script as a guide, I spent many hours following the girls through the city on my laptop, compiling screenshots of scenes that felt appropriate to the story."



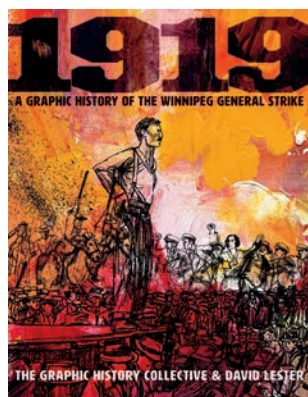
DAVID LESTER

on *1919: a Graphic History of the Winnipeg General Strike*



"A pivotal moment in the Winnipeg General Strike was when scabs drove a streetcar to Portage and Main on the afternoon of 21 June 1919, sparking the events of Bloody Saturday. Using historical photographs for reference, I drew the streetcar as it approached the crowd, followed by the strikers' determination to stop it. The streetcar was tipped and set on fire, possibly by scabs, possibly by strikers. On that day, the Royal North-West Mounted Police and private "specials" used the tipping of the streetcar as pretext to viciously attack strikers and their supporters in downtown Winnipeg, killing two and wounding dozens more, in an effort to break the strike. It is at this point in 1919 that the city's architecture disappears, as I drew the battle between police and strikers. The elimination of the streets and buildings

of Winnipeg altogether is a metaphor for the universality of class conflict. This could be anytime, anywhere and everywhere. This was done also to suggest continuity between the state's use of violence in the city of Winnipeg and similar kinds of state violence used in other settings, including the state's violence against



Indigenous peoples in the North-West only thirty years earlier. I drew the Bloody Saturday sequence in a rough manner as if I was a war artist on the streets of Winnipeg, sketching as history unfolded."

ALISON MCCREESH

on *Ramshackle*



"A lot of my work is based on day-to-day life north of the 60th parallel. My primary focus is on how people exist in—and interact with—their environment. I can generally draw people quickly and freely, but I spend hours toiling over drawings of infrastructure. When representing actual locations, I work from photos I have taken, painstakingly ensuring all the details are accurate. The light is important, as are the often overlooked items like the shape of the traffic lights, the width of the roads or the types of siding used on the houses. Though people probably never pay much attention to these mundane things on a daily basis, I feel it is the combination of all these details that make up the unique feel of a place."



EXHIBIT PANELS



Seth's *Clyde Fans*, *Drawn & Quarterly*, 2019.

PANEL 1

CARTOONIST AS GRAND ARCHITECT

SETH AND DOMINION CITY

Guelph-based cartoonist Seth is part of the first wave of Canadian alternative—versus superhero or mass market—cartoonists that came of age in 1990s Toronto and Montreal. Alongside Chester Brown and Julie Doucet, he has become an internationally celebrated illustrator, book designer, and comics advocate. Seth (the pen name of Gregory Gallant) is known for his distinctive 1940s-influenced style of fluid lines and muted colours, attention to early 20th century architectural details, and wry exploration of white masculinity in a changing world.

For the past 20 years, Seth has chronicled the fraught relationship between two very different brothers, Abe and Simon Matchcard, in his series *Clyde Fans*. Infused with melancholy and tenderness, *Clyde Fans* uses silent sequences to pan through the city, slowing down time to insert us into the spaces that have shaped these men's lives.

Most of Seth's "picture novels" are set in the fictional city of Dominion, a mid-sized, mid-century city somewhere in Southwestern Ontario. In the fictional biography *George Sprott (1894–1975)*, Seth uses large scale pages that dramatize its surface beauty.

In this sequence, Seth uses what cartoonist Scott McCloud calls a "polyptych": multiple panels spread across the same background. This creates interesting tension for the reader, as we see the whole page as a single unit at the same time we see it broken down into individual narrative units. Note how the first and final panels repeat the same circle motif, so the left to right, top to bottom direction of Western comics reading is reinforced in the diagonal vectors of the streetscape behind the panel grid.

For the past decade, Seth has constructed an entire cardboard city, based on his comics setting of Dominion, and exhibited it in galleries. He explains how this miniature city relates to his love of mid-century buildings and the passion for collecting he shares with many comics fans:

I have long had a desire to "gather up" everything I like from the past. Obviously I couldn't bring home an old office tower or a deco apartment house. With old buildings, I had to be satisfied with snapping a photo, but now, through some form of sympathetic magic, I could actually take these places home with me. Not that any

of the models are actual recreations of real buildings [. . .] Yet constructing the city and its past seemed to satisfy that longing to possess. I was collecting buildings—putting them in amber—saving them from the wrecking ball. (*Palookaville* 20, 2009, p, 44).

The 2014 film *Seth's Dominion*, directed by Luc Chamberland for the NFB, chronicles Seth's multimedia creation of his imaginary city.

Image Credits:

"Life Is But a Dream" from Seth's *George Sprott (1894–1975)*, Drawn & Quarterly, 2009.

Window panels are from Seth's *Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*, Drawn & Quarterly, 2011.

Seth's *Clyde Fans*, Drawn & Quarterly, 2019.

Photographs of Dominion models are from an exhibit at the Render Art Gallery, University of Waterloo, 2008. Reprinted in *Palookaville* 20, Drawn & Quarterly, 2010.

THE UNSEEN CITY

MICHAEL CHO'S TORONTO

Michael Cho was born in South Korea and moved to Toronto at the age of 6 with his family. He recalls, "In some ways I learned to read English by reading comic books. And of course, I copied all the drawings." A graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD) and an award-winning cartoonist, illustrator, and book designer, Cho is known for his colourful, pop art style and Golden Age comics references. He describes being equally influenced by 1940s comic strip cartoonists Noel Sickles, Roy Crane, and Milt Caniff and fine artists Gerhard Richter, Edward Hopper, and Alex Colville, among many others.

Back Alleys and Urban Landscapes is a book of Cho's sketches of Toronto. He is fascinated by the small, ad hoc details of back alley architecture that make up what he calls "the hidden city." Although these illustrations could depict almost any urban landscape, he told the *National Post*, "As much as the book is Toronto-specific, I think there's certain core, Canadian likenesses here; [my drawings] don't look like South American

cities or European cities. They look like quintessentially Canadian cities."

Cho's first graphic novel, *Shoplifter*, debuted on the *New York Times* Bestseller List. It tells the story of Corinna Park, a post-university 20-something who dreamed of being a literary writer but now works for an advertising agency in an anonymous office building, contributing to the same consumer culture that surrounds her in the city's mediascape. She shoplifts because she thinks the local store owner doesn't notice, but he has known all along and feels a connection to her. When he tells her, "I don't know your name, but I know you," she begins to realize she is not completely invisible in the city.

Asked about the striking pink-and-black palette of *Shoplifter* by the *Comics Alliance*, Cho said, "My work is usually done with a very limited palette and my focus is often on light and how it conveys atmosphere and mood. With *Shoplifter*, there's only one color throughout and I chose it because I thought it fit the intimate tone of the story."

Commissioned jacket art also reflects Cho's interests in the city, consumerism, and the media landscape.

See more work by Michael Cho at his website, *Michael Cho's Sketchbook*: <http://chodrawings.blogspot.com>

Image Credits:

From Michael Cho's *Back Alleys and Urban Landscapes*, Drawn & Quarterly, 2010.

From Michael Cho's *Shoplifter*, Pantheon, 2014.

Jacket art by Michael Cho for *The Amazing Absorbing Boy* by Rabindranath Maharaj, Knopf Canada, 2010.

Jacket art by Michael Cho for the 25th anniversary edition of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, Penguin Classics, 2009.

PANEL 3

SUBJECTS IN THE CITY

While superheroes need a city to protect, the regular people depicted in Canadian alternative comics engage in familiar urban activities: they walk city streets, ascend office towers, take public transit, hang out in coffee shops, and go to the mall. Because Canadian alternative cartoonists tend to gravitate

towards outsider and marginalized characters, their work often draws individuals alone in the city, struggling to survive individual, corporate, and societal threats to their identity and security.

Born in Toronto, Hartley Lin is a Montreal-based cartoonist whose award-winning serial comic *Pope Hats* contained the seeds for the graphic novel *Young Frances*. It focuses on successful 20-something law clerk Frances Scarland, one of the only decent people in her Toronto Bay Street law firm, and her best friend roommate, an impulsive actress. Lin depicts Frances moving between alienating downtown corporate culture and familiar residential neighbourhoods. He adds surreal touches to this slice-of-life comic by drawing the firm's boss growing bigger and more Hulk-like in every scene, gazing at the streets below his skyscraper office like a superhero villain.

Also set in Toronto, award-winning cartoonist Bryan Lee O'Malley's six-volume *Scott Pilgrim* series uses real Toronto settings for its slacker-turned-hero story. The series has a video game plot structure that follows Scott Pilgrim, who has fallen in love with the roller-blading American Ramona Flowers, as he tries to defeat her "seven evil exes" in order to date her (it turns out he needs her help along the way). O'Malley combines the cartooning style of Japanese manga—big eyes, small mouths, expressive emotion, action mixed with humour—and North American indie comics' attraction to the mundane urban spaces of retail sheds and parking lots.

Comics can also show how larger histories and injustices shape subjects in the city. *Will I See?* Is a collaboration between graphic novelist David A. Robertson (Swampy Cree) and settler artist GMB Chomichuk, based on a song by Iskwé (Cree/Dené). This gothic-style graphic novel follows May, a Cree teenager, as she walks through her city collecting personal items lost by Indigenous women during their violent disappearances. While her specific location is unnamed, Chomichuk uses iconic New York cityscapes to evoke a large North American metropolis, showing how the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit People (MMIWG2S) is part of the Indigenous urban experience across North America. At the end, May's grandmother draws on the Seven Sacred Teachings to help her honour the disappeared women in her medicine bundle.

Image Credits:

From Hartley Lin's *Young Frances*, AdHouse, 2018.

From Bryan Lee O'Malley's *Scott Pilgrim Vol. 4: Scott Pilgrim Gets It Together*, Oni Press, 2013.

From David A. Robertson, GMB Chomichuk, et al.'s *Will I See?*, HighWater Press, 2016.

PANEL 4

ARRIVING IN THE CITY

Comics often use maps and diagrams to show readers the spaces characters inhabit from a bird's eye point of view. On the one hand, this can make the story seem more real by giving readers a seemingly objective spatial orientation for the more subjective, ground-level story. On the other hand, cartoonists can redraw real maps expressionistically to show us how characters have absorbed the city into their feelings and behaviour. For characters arriving in new cities, finding themselves on the map can be both a practical necessity and an emotional struggle.

After graduating in 2009 with an Interdisciplinary Degree in Fine Arts from the University of Quebec in Chicoutimi, Alison McCreesh embarked on a road trip around North America. She ended up in Yellowknife, falling in love with what she calls "the quirks, humor and particularities of living North of 60." *Ramshackle: A Yellowknife Story* combines autobiography and local history to chronicle her exploration of Yellowknife's unique urban infrastructure.

Commenting on the selection for this exhibit, McCreesh says:

“A lot of my work is based on day-to-day life north of the 60th parallel. My primary focus is on how people exist in—and interact with—their environment. I can generally draw people quickly and freely, but I spend hours toiling over drawings of infrastructure. When representing actual locations, I work from photos I have taken, painstakingly ensuring all the details are accurate. The light is important, as are the often overlooked items like the shape of the traffic lights, the width of the roads or the types of siding used on the houses. Though people probably never pay much attention to these mundane things on a daily basis, I feel it is the combination of all these details that make up the unique feel of a place.”

Jeff Lemire is an award-winning Canadian cartoonist who works for Marvel, Image Comics, and Valiant and publishes indie comics and graphic novels. *Essex County*, a collection of three stories all set in the same Southwestern Ontario farming community, was a 2011 *CBC Canada Reads* selection. Volume 2 in this trilogy, “Ghost Stories,” is told by the elderly Lou Lebeuf as he recalls leaving the family farm in the 1950s for Toronto, with his brother Vince, to take up professional hockey careers. Lou stayed in the city, becoming a streetcar driver, but always longed to return to the farm.

In these panels, Lemire showcases how comics can juxtapose a continuous, realistic verbal track with a wandering, imaginative visual track that illustrates more than the character can see. The final page here collapses two different spaces, the city and the farm, to show how Lou lives in a different mental space from his physical space.

Image Credits:

From Alison McCreesh’s *Ramshackle: A Yellowknife Story*, Conundrum Press, 2015.

From Jeff Lemire’s *Essex County*, Top Shelf, 2009.

ESCAPING THE CITY

In contemporary Canadian comics, characters who feel overwhelmed, trapped, or threatened in the city often try to escape its crowded spaces for a romantic ideal of the welcoming and restorative country, epitomized by childhood nostalgia for the family cottage. But the country rarely meets these expectations. Whether they relocate to the family farm, forest cabin, or lakefront cottage, characters in Canadian alternative comics inevitably confront the idea that country and city are not as far apart as they seem.

Michel Rabagliati is a well-known Montreal cartoonist whose semi-autobiographical title character, Paul, is known as the “Tintin of Quebec.” Over six books, from *Paul Has a Summer Job* to *Paul Moves Out*, Rabagliati uses a European-influenced clean style associated with Hergé’s *Tintin* to show his protagonist going through life stages in the contexts of Montreal’s unique culture, history, and streetscapes. In the fourth book in the series, *Paul Goes Fishing*, we see Paul’s initial excitement at leaving the city for a rented cottage change to disappointment with the country. First, he recalls with fear the old-timers’

legends about the artificial lake’s origins, and then he is disgusted to learn the fish stocks are carefully managed by the tourism industry.

Julie Delporte is also a contemporary Quebec cartoonist, but her style is the least traditional of the artists represented in this exhibit. Delporte prefers frameless, integrated image-text sequences in which the pencilled handwriting becomes a part of the picture. Somewhere between comics, diary, and sketchbook, this loose form works well for the intimacy of her graphic novel, *Everywhere Antennas*, about an anonymous narrator who develops electromagnetic hypersensitivity (EHS). She becomes seriously ill with a collection of symptoms attributed to the radiation emitted by the televisions, cell phones, and computers that permeate urban life. Retreating to a remote cabin evoking Thoreau’s *Walden*, the narrator realizes that loneliness is not a condition limited to the city. She eventually moves to a farm where she hopes to find a calmer life, one “without waves.”

Image Credits:

From Michel Rabagliati’s *Paul Goes Fishing*,
Translated by Helge Dascher, Drawn & Quarterly, 2007.

From Julie Delporte’s *Everywhere Antennas*,
Translated by Helge Dascher, Drawn & Quarterly, 2014.

WINNIPEG SCENES

Two recent comic books depict Winnipeg streets and buildings as frames for important social justice stories and use the page as a window into past and present struggles.

David Lester is a graphic designer, illustrator, musician, and graphic novelist based in Vancouver. The Graphic History Collective (GHC) is a group of Canadian activists, artists, writers, and researchers who produce alternative histories in the form of comics. Together, they collaborated on the book *1919: A Graphic History of the Winnipeg General Strike*. Lester explains the connections between the story and his drawings of the city, streets, and buildings:

"A pivotal moment in the Winnipeg General Strike was when scabs drove a streetcar to Portage and Main on the afternoon of 21 June 1919, sparking the events of Bloody Saturday. Using historical photographs for reference, I drew the streetcar as it approached the crowd, followed by the strikers' determination to stop it. The streetcar was

tipped and set on fire, possibly by scabs, possibly by strikers. On that day, the Royal North-West Mounted Police and private "specials" used the tipping of the streetcar as pretext to viciously attack strikers and their supporters in downtown Winnipeg, killing two and wounding dozens more, in an effort to break the strike.

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Surviving the City is a graphic novel by Nehiyaw/Trinidadian writer Tasha Spillett and Métis illustrator Natasha Donovan. It tells the story of two high school best friends, Miikwan (Anishinaabe) and Dez (Inniew). When Dez's Kokum (grandmother) becomes ill, the social worker says she

will be moved to a group home that sounds similar to her grandmother's Residential School. Dez runs away, but is befriended by an Indigenous woman who takes her to a safe Indigenous-run community centre. Throughout, the girls walk Winnipeg surrounded by the spirits of disappeared Indigenous women and visit sites of significance to MMIWG2S.

Illustrator Natasha Donovan explains how she drew Winnipeg scenes from her home in the Pacific Northwest:

"I wanted to depict Winnipeg as both a mirror reflecting Dez and Miikwan's inner lives, and as a separate and dynamic character itself with whom the girls interacted; sometimes bleak and menacing, sometimes warm and caring. As much as possible, I tried to use colour palette and perspective to reflect the changing mood—in particular, I wanted to represent the monolithic quality that buildings can take on when one is feeling alone and scared. As an outsider from the Pacific Northwest, Google Street View was crucial to my process—using Tasha Spillett's script as a guide, I spent many hours following the girls through the city on my laptop, compiling screenshots of scenes that felt appropriate to the story."

Image Credits:

From David Lester and the Graphic History Collective's *1919: A Graphic History of the Winnipeg General Strike*, Between the Lines, 2019.

From Tasha Spillett and Natasha Donovan's *Surviving the City*, Portage & Main, 2018.

FURTHER READING

URBAN COMICS BEYOND CANADA

Abirached, Zeina. *I Remember Beirut*. Graphic Universe, 2014.

Aboutet, Margurite & Clement Oubrierie. *Aya of Yop City*. Drawn & Quarterly, 2008.

Chavouet, Florent. *Tokyo on Foot: Travels in the City's Most Colorful Neighborhoods*. Tuttle, 2011.

Fransman, Karrie. *The House That Groaned*. Square Peg, 2012.

Katchor, Ben. *Cheap Novelties: The Pleasures of Urban Decay*. 25th anniversary edition. Drawn & Quarterly, 2016.

Kidd, Chip and Dave Taylor. *Batman: Death By Design*. DC Comics, 2012.

Levie, Nir and Dekel Oved. *Outskirts of Vision*. CreatesSpace, 2015.

Lutes, Jason. *Berlin*. Drawn & Quarterly, 2018.

McGuire, Richard. *Here*. Pantheon, 2014.

Moore, Alan and Eddie Campbell. *From Hell*. Top Shelf, 1999.

Neufeld, Josh. *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*. Pantheon, 2010.

Ware, Chris. *Building Stories*. Pantheon, 2012.

ARCHITECTS & ARCHITECTURE IN COMICS

Chak, Tings. *Undocumented: The Architecture of Migrant Detention*. Ad Astra Comics, 2017.

Christian, Pierre and Olivier Balez. *Robert Moses: The Master Builder of New York City*. Nobrow, 2018.

Hermans, Mike. *The Life of an Architect ... and what he leaves behind*. DOM, 2015.

Ingels, Bjarke. *Yes is More: An Archicomic on Architectural Evolution*. Taschen, 2009.

Jiminz, Lai. *Citizens of No Place: An Architectural Graphic Novel*. Princeton Architectural Press, 2012.

Van Der Hoorn, Melanie. *Bricks & Balloons: Architecture in Comic-Strip Form*. nai010, 2013.

THANK-YOUS

We thank the following for their generosity in supporting this exhibit:

ARTISTS & WRITERS

Seth, Michael Cho, Hartley Lin, David A. Robertson, GMB Chomichuk, Bryan Lee O'Malley, Alison McCreech, Julie Delporte, Jeff Lemire, Michel Rabagliati, David Lester, Tasha Spillett, Natasha Donovan.

PUBLISHERS

Drawn & Quarterly, Ad House, Conundrum, Top Shelf, Graphic History Collective, Portage & Main.

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