Citizens of No Place
A new architectural graphic novel by Jimenez Lai is a highly refined, robust blend of design criticism, cutting-edge theory, and masterful representation.
By Matt Shaw
July 6, 2012


They said that there is a "crisis" in criticism. Some decried the artform as too "predictable, cosy, and managed". They said writers have become slack-jawed onlookers to the iconographic boom, seemingly unable to critically engage. Others blame the internet for the "crisis", where everyone is a critic, but noone is accountable. They say critics are uselessly carrying out obscure, niche projects, while bad building goes unnoticed. There was even a roundtable hosted by this very publication entitled "Critical Futures". Everyone has been calling for new modes of critical analysis that bring new life into the profession and go beyond PR hype and celebratory trumpeting of the next meaningless form. This is what they want and this is what they get: An "architectural graphic novel". Jimenez Lai's Citizens of No Place is a highly refined, robust blend of design criticism, cutting-edge theory, and masterful representation. Maybe from now on, they will be careful what they ask for.

In art historical terms, the Baroque is a 17th century movement characterized by extreme detail and exaggerated motion, producing aggrandized, dramatic, and exuberant forms while maintaining a
simplicity and clarity of narrative. As an adjective, "baroque" can be seen as the basis for *Citizens of No Place*, where the exaggerated, dynamic phantasmagoria of Manga is appropriated and manipulated to tell easily digested stories about architecture that are simultaneously realistic and fantastic. "Noah's Ark in Space", a baroque title, creates an unreal scenario where a real person is asked to categorize his life with numbers. He struggles to do so, providing an entertaining commentary while provoking a real issue in architecture: what is the role of designer in the subjective environment?

The baroque comic-book format does not constrain Lai's speculations and criticisms of history, theory, and the design process. In fact, the character-based stories tease out some of the often overlooked elements of architecture. In chapter 4, "Babel", a man is faced with a choice: be exceptional at what he loves, or be with the woman he loves. He chooses the former, spending a year at the highest elevation possible for human habitation. In the sequel (chapter 5, "The Obsession Accelerator") he returns home, after living in the 12,000 metre building with a footprint the size of Central Park, and faces the question again. It is unclear what choice his partner makes when he offers for her to come live in a small "personal" box with him. The baroque tackling of the question "how high can we build" leads us not to technological speculation, but to humanist reflection.
**Conflation** is the act of synthesizing multiple concepts or forms, effectively obscuring the differences. In Chapter 8, "On Types of Seductive Robustness", a man is caught fornicating with "an architectural figural form" and he professes his love for the mishapen building. The police tell him it is illegal to make love to this building because it is not one of the accepted types. The man stands his ground, and convinces the officers that he truly loves the building. They then tag it so that everyone can enjoy it. This amusing story about commodification combines a comically impossible situation of having sex with a building with the very normal impulse to like something outside of the accepted canon of good taste. In this case conflation not only absorbs the impossible into the possible, but also storytelling with theory, comedy with serious criticism. The very kind that criticism-crisis watchers are looking for.

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However, the conflation is also evident in the drawings, which take plans and combine them with sections, buildings and combine them with people, and technical drawings with vibrant personal drama. Even the characters speak in conflated voice. As two characters debate the design of a prototypical dwelling, the skeptic says, "I am just not sure if you should be so objective about some thing so intuitive. We're in space, man. Why don't you just relax and admit that you did it because it entices you?"
These stories are presented as a *baroque conflation* of the real and imagined, the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the emotional and academic. Each combination provides lively discourse made real. Like the best bits of the Simpsons, these scenarios have multiple readings and can be taken many different ways. If it sounds irrational it is because it is. But that is where the genius lies: in the seemingly unrealistic nature of the conflations. It is a baroque attitude towards the act of making. These extreme combinations revive the creative and inventive ingenuity of Stanley Tigerman, Rem Koolhaas, Archigram, and many other radical thinker-cartoonists. If I simply described this book to you, it would sound crazy. If there is a weakness, it is the apparent lack of resolution in each story. But perhaps that is the ultimate conflationary success of the book. The format echoes the message. Each of us becomes conflated with the stories, made into our own citizen of no place, left to define the world around us. Great criticism sometimes lies not in the answers it provides, but in the questions it raises.


http://www.domusweb.it/en/reviews/2012/07/06/citizens-of-no-place.html