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The Graphic Architect

By Edward Lifson

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BOOK

Citizens of No Place:

An Architectural Graphic Novel

by Jimenez Lai

Princeton Architectural Press

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Chicago

To house his four-year-old Chicago-based firm, Bureau Spectacular (known to friends as B.S.), Jimenez Lai chose a large loft in an industrial neighborhood where the old buildings, like all good stories, have beginnings, middles, and ends. To get to the fifth-floor studio, visitors climb into an old rusty metal cage that began life as a freight elevator. It rises slowly, and at the other end are the 33-year-old Lai and his staff: one full-time architect, and a few others, some of whom are recent graduates of the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Architecture, where Lai is an assistant professor. "Chicago's conservative, but I like it," Lai says. "I'm one of only four interesting architects here," he adds, and laughs. Lai likes to laugh at his own humor. But his work is serious enough that it won this year's Architectural League Prize for young architects.

Inspired by previous "paper architects," who explored far-out ideas by drawing their theories instead of blueprints, Jimenez Lai produces comics. His *Citizens of No Place: An Architectural Graphic Novel*, recently published by Princeton Architectural Press, follows in the tradition of Rem Koolhaas's *Content*, but makes the page come alive for a generation raised on radio shows like *This American Life* (which Lai listens to) and manga (Lai's favorite is *Doraemon: Gadget Cat from the Future*). When he talks about the irony of *This American Life*, or the fact that cats are indispensable, Lai's speech recalls Koolhaas, for whom he worked in 2007. Small bunches of big words cascade nonstop, and he swallows the ends of sentences, his mind already on the next idea.

Citizens of No Place collects ten of Lai's intensely beautiful, whimsical, and profound graphic stories on architecture and urbanism. It's as if the Little Prince grew up to become an architect. In these fables, Lai explores a series of hypotheses: What kinds of buildings should it be legal to fornicate with? How can dance generate shapes that can be abstracted into a skyline of buildings? What will happen if, in the year 2200, New York extrudes Central Park into a 12-kilometer-high tower scraping the stratosphere? The comics speak of politics, justice, economics, and even whether a young architect, obsessed with building, can find love. These are the inquiries of a seriously talented designer itching to build. Like all good storytellers, Jimenez Lai likes to embellish. "I don't necessarily believe in honesty," he says. "I

believe in my imagination.” Bureau Spectacular’s strategy is to make “absurd stories about fake realities to invite enticing possibilities.”

He draws the comics to storyboard ideas that can be developed into architecture. In one of the stories, a man goes up into outer space, realizes he doesn’t need much to live, comes back and chooses a small, simple space to sleep in. Lai built such a space and put it in his studio. The Briefcase House is just a series of compartments defined by plywood planes. It’s a great hiding place for the office cat, Helvetica, and Lai sleeps in it when the lights are out in Bureau Spectacular.

Tensions between dualities often inform his exploration of spaces: grounded work versus speculation, solid versus empty, the profound against the silly. And hard versus soft, as in the other installation in his studio, White Elephant (Privately Soft)—rigid polycarbonate geometry on the outside, cowhide on the inside, “and story possibilities,” Lai says.

Last April, Bureau Spectacular put the proposal for its latest project, Three Little Worlds, on the Web site Kickstarter, seeking \$20,000 for fabrication costs. Lai achieved his goal, but “the likelihood of me using Kickstarter again is very low,” he says with a laugh. “I felt like I was walking around with an unbearable stench of shamelessness.”

Three Little Worlds was designed for the Project Space of the Architecture Foundation of London, inspired by the publisher Hugh Hefner and the artist Joseph Beuys, both of whom were exhibitionists. The installation’s cutouts framed visitors, as in the panels of a comic strip, so anyone who stepped inside became a character in a story. Lai lived in this installation during the London Festival of Architecture last June. Like Hefner in his mansion and Beuys in his art, he was surrounded by and became his work. Adding to graphic artist, architect, and teacher, Lai has made “performance artist” part of his story.

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