

Architecture, Violence and Sensation: A Visitor's Guide to Mega City One

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Introduction

Mega-City One is the setting for the comic strip *Judge Dredd*, which has appeared in every edition of the weekly British science fiction comic *2000AD* from 1977 to the present, with the exception of the very first issue - or rather, as the comic refers to itself, prog. The character of Dredd became 'the most popular and most recognizable icon of British comics for the next thirty years' (Ireland 2009: 501). Yet Dredd himself is not a character that is easy to empathise with. He maintains order in a dystopia, through the use of violence and the inflexible application of the law. Most of his face is covered by a helmet. What is revealed, a stern expression composed of prominent chin and downturned mouth, rarely shifts into any other arrangement. He is a clone, bred and raised for a single purpose. There is little sense of a distinct personal life, of traits that would make him more human. Dredd is his job. These qualities have the potential to make readers uncomfortable, as Brian Ireland argues:

Dredd fans were both attracted to and repulsed by his fascist tendencies. Given that Dredd was created, in part, as a response to some of the more reactionary aspects of American culture – to hold Dredd's fascist tendencies up to ridicule, for example – Dredd is, in fact, a polysemic figure who can be viewed variously as a figure of fear and loathing, as an antihero, or as a hero/superhero (2009: 534).

I would like to suggest that this fascination and engagement has been sustained through the building of a vast city and its surrounding world:

Week after week for 35 years, often in pithy six-page strips, contemporary issues are amplified and explored in a vast conurbation of 800 million inhabitants that stretches across America's eastern seaboard. Often Dredd is a

bystander in the story, as the writer and artist highlight the vast urban playground instead (Olcayto 2012: 26).

Mega-City One offers a sustained and detailed envisioning of a future city. This fictional world is more than a representation. It is charged space, generating temporal and sensational shock productive forces that disrupt perceptions of the present. This is a city of critical engagements, not passive spectatorship. This future city, which occupies the entire East Coast of North America, is not a static space. It continues to change and has diversified into a detailed expanded universe. This article will explore some architectural and social aspects of Mega-City 1, suggesting relationships between the medium of comics, violence and sensation are articulated within the city, generating a critical potential in acts of reading. The city is approached as a complex and visually extraordinary critical dystopia (Moylan 2000) that was invented for a readership of children, and that has continued to age with its audience. This city is an independent state, one of a number of vast walled urban states across the atomic wasteland that is the surface of the Earth:

This is a city without democracy, where the Statue of Liberty is dwarfed by the Statue of Judgement. Where employment is just 13 per cent. Where reinforced structures house two-ton 'fatties' gorging on synthetic foods and the 'smokatorium' is the only place left where smokers can light up. Where Resyk, a huge coffin-shaped building, processes a thousand dead bodies an hour, extracting useful parts to be used again. Where cleaning robots malfunction to become rebellious graffiti artists. Batman's Gotham City and Superman's Metropolis seem like one-note wonders in comparison; their townscapes little more than simple reflections of the essence of the superheroes who inhabit them. [...] 18 million people live in mobile homes, never stopping, refuelling on the move. A mile-high concrete wall lines its western flank, closing the city off from the irradiated heartland of old America and the mutated humans who live there. And, when manufactured weather systems fail, entire 'sectors' with populations numbering in the millions are plagued by wild storms. Sectors

contain kilometre-high blocks that house up to 60,000 people. Most residents spend their entire lives without leaving them (Olcayto 2012: 26).

New *Judge Dredd* stories have appeared in print every week since 1977 and continue today. The launch of the ongoing monthly *Judge Dredd Magazine* in October 1990 offered a further space not only for stories involving Dredd himself, but the creation of new characters in other parts of his world, while original material, mostly drawn by Ron Smith was published in every issue of *The Daily Star* newspaper between 1981 and 1998. The scale of the city rendered in these thousands of pages makes only the most cursory of impressions possible here. In order to introduce the city and attempt a critical engagement, this paper will focus on moments of the formative period of the city's creation in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Foundations

Science fiction opens up onto territories that might be barred to other narrative forms. This was certainly the case with *2000AD*. Although the readership has aged over time, this was a children's comic, taking young readers into some very dark and morally ambivalent landscapes during a time of great sensitivity and censorial intervention from both within and without of the institutions of publishing. In this light, *2000AD* can be situated in a tradition of science fiction demarcated by Tom Moylan as a fictive practice with the formal potential to re-vision the world in ways that generate pleasurable, probing, and potentially subversive responses in its readers" (2000: 4). These stories offered entertainment that sold well to young readers, while generating a forceful potential for subversive responses. This potential within science fiction must be measured, according to Moylan, against the glut of mediocrity generated by commercial impulses and culture industry that dominate much of the mainstream output of the genre. Moylan also posits the centrality of the ability to go to these places, to re-vision the world, as the re-creation of the readers' own world,

and of course that of the creator, as 'an elsewhere, an alternative spacetime that is the empirical moment but not that moment as it is ideologically produced by way of everyday common sense' (2000: 6). For Moylan, this is one of the pleasures of science fiction, and one of the motivations to return, a motivation which of course reveals a more effective form of market strategy. The success of *2000AD* was that these subversive worlds drew readers in, and made them want to return every week, while at the same time mapping the territory of fantasy as a means of illuminating dim actuality. *Judge Dredd* predated and prefigured the current fashion for young adult fiction and the accompanying taste for dark dystopian futures as found, for example, in the novels of Scott Westerfeld, Patrick Ness and Suzanne Collins. Roberta Trite suggests that Young Adult Dystopian Fiction gathered momentum in 1993, with the publication of *The Giver* by Lois Lowry (2000: 121). In contrast, *2000AD* emerged in the late 1970s during the last period of mass readership of comics by children in the UK.

2000AD emerged from the landscape of British comics in the 1970s, when 'two companies dominated British comics - Dundee's DC Thomson, and the Youth Group of London publisher IPC' (Bishop, 2009: 8). By 1973, IPC's Youth Group had overtaken DC Thomson in sales, reaching five million comic sales a week. However, there was an increasing recognition that in order to keep up with what children might be exposed to on television and in cinema, the depiction of violence needed to be tackled more directly. *Warlord*, a weekly comic for boys, was launched by DC Thomson in 1974, 'with tougher, grittier stories than had been seen before in a British comic' (Bishop, 2009: 8). This pushed IPC's Youth Group to launch *Battle Picture Weekly* in 1975 (Bishop, 2009: 8). John Sanders, publisher of the Youth Group, and subsequently Assistant Managing Editor, followed up on the success of *Battle* with a comic that he wanted 'to be aggressive and hard-edged like *Battle*, but augmented by contemporary settings and a more realistic edge' (Bishop, 2009: 9). 1976 saw the launch of *Action*, 'a street-wise title aimed at working class kids, brimming with anti-authority attitude. The stories inside were a sampler of popular genres, such as sports, war crime and spies. The cosy middle class values of other

comics were consigned to the dustbin' (Bishop, 2009: 9). Guy Lawley offers a further description of the selling of violence to a young audience: 'Since kids couldn't see X-rated (today's 18 Certificate) films, *Action* offered cut-price, accessible, very violent versions of *Jaws*, *Dirty Harry*, *Death Race 2000* etc' (Lawley, 1999: 109).

During the development of *Action*, ideas for a science fiction comic emerged: "A young IPC staffer called Kevin Gosnell read an article in London's Evening Standard newspaper about a cluster of science-fiction movies coming to cinemas" (Bishop, 2009: 9). Gosnell saw a gap in the market, and the likelihood of a fad for all thing science fiction among the target audience for boys' comics. It did not matter if this was short lived; the life span of a comic was expected to be brief. Editor Pat Mills, who had overseen the creation of *Battle* and *Action*, worked with Gosnell to convince IPC Youth Group that a science fiction title would be profitable. When given the go ahead, the development of this title became Mills's project, one of the challenges of which was an image problem: 'Science-fiction had a bad name before *Star Wars*, particularly in comics. It was seen negatively, not least by kids who regarded science-fiction comics - often quite rightly - as stupid' (Mills cited in Bishop, 2009: 11). To counter this, Mills applied elements that had been proven by the success of *Battle* and *Action*:

Battle showed me stylish action works well in a comic, but *Action* confirmed it. My own negative attitudes towards the establishment struck a chord in the reader and could be repeated. And I had started to get interested in the possibilities of using European-style art. All these factors I was keen to bring into what became *2000AD* (Mills cited in Bishop, 2009: 11).

However, the development of *2000AD* was threatened by a storm of negative publicity around *Action*. Whereas most comics would do well upon their launch, and then see sales decline, *Action*'s sales increased over the Summer following its February launch. As sales increased, *Action*'s editorial team brought in new stories, emphasising sensational and outrageous elements:

The most notorious of these was *Kids Rule OK*, set in a grim and gritty world where most adults are dead, leaving teenagers in charge. The strip was *Lord of the Flies* for the *Scum* generation, the epitome of *Action*'s anarchic, anti-authority ethos. It was also bloody and violent, with no-holds-barred compared to the safe fodder usually dished up in children's comics (Bishop, 2009: 18).

Action was receiving attention for its violent content from within weeks of launching, and by April 'the *Sun* was calling it "The Sevenpenny Nightmare"' (Bishop, 2009: 18). As the violent content of *Action* became more pronounced, the negative publicity escalated: 'High-minded morality groups launched campaigns to have *Action* banned, tabloid newspapers went into a feeding frenzy of righteous indignation, and Sanders got a rough ride when questioned by Frank Bough on the current affairs TV show *Nationwide*' (Bishop, 2009: 19). The threat of an overall loss of sales for IPC Youth Group, and more specifically, of being banned from retail chains, was enough to see *Action* withdrawn from shops by IPC in October 1976, although it returned for a few months in a highly censored form before being shut down completely (see Barker 1990).

This put *2000AD* in the spotlight before it had launched and early issues were subject to an intense scrutiny regarding violent imagery. 'Whole episodes had to be scrapped, scripts thrown out or rewritten from scratch, while artwork was radically altered or abandoned altogether' (Bishop, 2009: 21). Artist Kevin O'Neill, who was working as an assistant to art editor Jan Shepherd, describes the original stories appearing in the earliest issues as 'extremely violent, guys having their heads kicked off, limbs flying about - we had to censor almost every page. I think *Action* being taken off the stands was influenced *2000AD* for the better. It made us concentrate on the science-fiction and fantasy aspect, build up a kind of mythos for the comic' (O'Neill cited in Bishop, 2009: 21). The longevity of the comic is dependent, for O'Neill, on this push towards finding other ways to tell stories without relying exclusively on constant excessive violence. The official target audience when

launched was very specific: “young boys aged seven to eleven” (Bishop, 2009: 28). Creators later became aware that their readership was broader, but it is important to recognise that this was the readership that the publishers had aimed at. One of the areas of extended readership, as Guy Lawley (1999) indicates, was the popular realm of punk culture. Lawley describes *2000AD* as a children’s science fiction comic, a huge success in the post-*Star Wars* market, also with a big adult and student readership (1999: 109). He recognises the attitude of punk in *Action* and *2000AD*, suggesting that they “grew in the same soil as punk - the cynical 70s, the hippy dream in tatters, unemployment rampant” (Lawley, 1999: 109).

The public controversy generated by *Action* was not replicated with regard to *2000AD*. Lawley offers an explanation: ‘Concerned parents and the media all but ignored it, because it seemed like harmless fantasy. In fact strips like *Judge Dredd*, and later *ABC Warriors* and *Nemesis the Warlock*, were able to question the authority of police, army, state and church on a regular weekly basis’ (Lawley, 1999: 109). *Judge Dredd* was discussed at an early stage in the development of ideas for the new comic in 1976. The first story suggested for the title was *Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future*. This had been the most popular story in the *Eagle*, a successful science fiction comic in the 1950s and 60s. The character was proposed as he would provide a point of recognition for a broad public, encouraging retailers to stock *2000AD*, but would be updated to fit the new tone of gritty violence (Bishop, 2009: 11). John Wagner, a writer who had worked with editor Pat Mills on the creation of *Battle*, and was now assisting in the development of *2000AD*, ‘suggested the comic needed a cop story’ (Bishop, 2009: 12). The idea was for a Clint Eastwood inspired ‘ultra-violent lawman patrolling New York in the near future’ (Bishop, 2009: 12). More specifically, the film *Dirty Harry* (1971) and its sequels *Magnum Force* (1973) and *The Enforcer* (1976) were significant points of reference. Wagner started to write scripts, while Spanish artist Carlos Ezquerra, already working for *Battle* and *Action*, was approached to design the character. However, Wagner was soon to walk away from *2000AD* and *Dredd* after realising that rather than having a stake in the rights and profits of his work for the comic, he would only be entitled to his £10 per page

script writing fee. Mills was persuaded to stay on as editor, with a substantial pay rise (Bishop, 2009: 12) and continued to develop *Judge Dredd*, working with eight different writers, until Wagner returned to *Dredd* in Prog 9. Sometimes working under pseudonyms, such as T.B, Grover, and often collaborating with co-writer Alan Grant, Wagner established himself as the principle, and certainly most prolific, writer of *Judge Dredd*.

The first published appearance of Mega-City One shows the Empire State Building surrounded by a new city.¹ The ruin is placed in the heart of a New York City of the future. In this first appearance, the city is even named as such. The first caption on the left of the page reads as follows: 'New York 2099 AD! Where huge star-scrapers soar miles into the air! Small buildings like the Empire State are in ruins... Hide outs for vicious criminals!' (Wagner 2005a: 1). A trio of criminals, led by a man named Whitey, are hiding in one of the upper levels. Whitey shoots a Judge riding on one of the curving roads that swoop past the building. The buildings that surround and overlook the scene are bulbous. Not based upon the familiar straight lines of modernism, this is a rendering of an architecture of alterity. This is not a magnification of an existing urban space, but a different kind of architectural sensibility that we have yet to comprehend, constructed from materials which have yet to be invented.

The twist in the story comes in the form of an architectural solution to Whitey's defiant claim that no prison can hold him. Dredd takes Whitey away to Devil's Island, a carceral structure in the form of giant traffic island, surrounded by roads above and below. These are highways with a 250 mph speed limit, along which thunder huge, computer controlled juggernauts. Architecture itself is the prison, little more than a platform situated within a nightmarish exaggeration of Spaghetti Junction, no doubt owing more than cursory acknowledgement to Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974). No one escapes from this island, it is a place to maroon violent criminals for life. This was drawn by Mike McMahon, a young and inexperienced artist who was already from this point establishing himself as one of the principle architects of Mega-City

One, and would go on to develop a distinctive approach that made him one of the definitive *Dredd* artists. However, it was Carlos Ezquerra, co-creator of *Dredd*, along with writer John Wagner and then *2000AD* editor Pat Mills, who designed the look of the city as a space distinct from architectures of the present. While the initial idea was for a story set in a near-future New York, Ezquerra's images clearly suggested that there was more temporal distance than had at first been imagined (Bishop 2009: 22). Despite Mills thinking that Ezquerra's initial work for *Judge Dredd* was 'absolute genius' (Mills cited in Bishop 2009: 22), the Spanish artist's work was withheld from publication due to excessive quantities of violence in the story. 'Judge Whitey', not the first *Dredd* episode to be drawn by McMahon, but the first to be printed, had been preceded by an unpublished debut drawn by Ezquerra, who found himself sidelined and replaced on the task of drawing *Dredd*. McMahon's early work was defined by his attempt to stay close to Ezquerra's designs and storytelling. When finally reprinted, the previously unpublished first episode ended with a splash page, which was actually a full page pin-up or poster, commissioned by Mills for the back cover of prog 3. A distant view of *Dredd* riding along a curved road in the air, behind him a vast, narrow, almost organic building seems to sprout upwards, a techno-Art Nouveau of Ezquerra's invention, echoed in the other, equally tall irregular towers that populate the cityscape (Figure 1).

...THE FIRST DREDD...THE



Figure 1 Dredd rides past a vast techno-Art Nouveau building

This initial visualisation was not just a reinvention of an American future through a British lens, but also a European one. As was common practice in British comics in the 1970s, artists were sought from further afield than the UK. Ezquerra was one such artist, initially sending pages from Barcelona, before taking up residency in the UK for over a decade. His is a futuristic city that comes from awareness of European comic traditions, particularly in Spain, Italy, France and Belgium. That the buildings have an organic, almost Art Nouveau feel, certainly corresponds to the vivid science fiction imagery found in European comics in the 1970s, especially within the pages of the French science fiction anthology *Metal Hurlant*.² One particularly important aspect of the European influence is made clear by Abraham Kawa: 'The sentiments of European sf comics were, to a large extent, typical of 1970s and 1980s sf: deep-seated resentment and frustration with corrupt sociopolitical systems, ruthless government policies, and profiteering conglomerates' (2011: 164). Kawa points out that this tendency found a voice in *2000AD* with 'punk irreverence' (ibid). *Judge Dredd* was typical, he says, 'of the magazine's appropriation of American popular culture' (ibid). Dredd himself may be the violent enforcer of authoritarian law, but it was clear that 'the comic itself was, essentially, a satirical, critical and stylized representation of contemporary British and Western society' (ibid).

Into the 80s

According to David Bishop, the 1980s 'began with *2000AD* selling 130,000 copies a week' (2009: 70) and marked what he calls 'a surge in quality' (ibid). By July of the following year, Bishop says that 'the weekly hit a run of progs that many have described as *2000AD*'s golden age" (2009: 81). The mid 80s saw sales slowly decline and readers age. Former editor Steve Macmanus describes this developing age range: 'Traditionally, readers stopped buying at 13, but our readers didn't. The eight-year-old that bought prog 1 in 1977 was still buying the comic as a 16 year old in 1985. The comic was growing up with the readers. New ones kept coming on, extending the age range of the title' (Bishop 2009: 107). This is no longer the initial 7 to 11 target audience, but a recognition that the core audience was now 7 to 16.

Roger Sabin offers the generalized suggestion that during this early 1980s, artists and writers working on *2000AD* generated a potential for reaching an adult audience: 'As a result, *2000AD* never talked down to its readership, and in the process the strips garnered a following aged anywhere between eight years old to the mid-twenties' (1996: 137). The comic changed and matured during the 80s, mirroring a trend for older readers and changing tones of story lines.

Sales did not regularly dip below 100,000 until 1990, by which time comics had serious competition from other media as mainstream entertainment for children (Bishop 2009: 138), although Sabin is wary of blaming the decline in youth comics sales in Britain on a change of culture towards screen based media: 'Of course, the rise of one medium does not automatically spell the wane of another [...] but at the very least it meant that there were more leisure options for people to choose from' (1996: 131). By the late 80s, British comics had established an older readership in the UK, but had lost the mass audience of children that existed at the beginning of the decade. However, during the early 1980s, *2000AD* achieved a balance of complex stories and a mixed readership, with an official target group of younger boys. This is a period of formative development for Mega-City One. Previously, the earliest impressions of the city are just that, impressions. Fragmentary violent sensations conflated with suggestions of space. By Prog 42, Dredd is shipped off for a tour of duty to the frontier city Luna 1, a colony on the Moon. Luna 1 is relatively generic and underdeveloped as a location, but upon Dredd's return we are immediately presented with the architectural elements that McMahon invented as his take on the architectural spaces of Mega-City One. The domes, bulging walls, and extreme curves forming roads and walkways have been formed into a stylistic architectural identity. A panel reveals Dredd looking through the window of a shuttle craft as he returns from Luna 1 (Figure 2), his accompanying thought bubble helping to define both character and city from that point on: 'Mega-City 1... 800 million people and every one of them a potential criminal. The most violent, evil city on Earth... But God help me, I love it' (Wagner 2005a: 274).



Figure 2 Dredd looks at Mega-City One from his shuttle craft

In 1981, the story 'Alone in the Crowd' opened across the centre pages of prog 205, depicting a scene of quotidian crime on a busy pedestrian walkway. A boy, who looks a little older than I would have been when first reading this story, is pointing at a mugging taking place, a look of wonder, fear and surprise on his face. His other hand reaches up to touch his mother's wrist, as she looks down and tries to propel her son away from the scene (Figure 3). Our point of narrative identification here is not the boy. Everyone looks down and away, but for the boy and crucially our point of identification across these two pages. This particular man is in the background, and

stands out from the others in just the direction of his gaze. A thought bubble directed at his head tells us: 'Tap gang working the walkway again! They've got that poor guy!' (Wagner 2006b:: 260). The next panel on the following page shows the victim in close up, reaching out to a woman passing by with her eyes downcast, our protagonist behind her, his own eyes now set slightly away as he thinks 'Hope they don't pick on me next!' (Wagner 2006b: 261). The next panel sees the man walk to the foreground, his eyes closed and his head tilted turned to the right. The victim's scream is represented in the sound effect text 'AAAGHH...' (Ibid). A wide close up of the passing man's eyes shows his fear, beads of sweat pouring down his head as he thinks 'Not me next! Please, not me!' (ibid). A panel along, we see his relief as the muggers attack a man in a hat, who screams for help, and is ignored. Across the two pages, the city is communicated as a place where to act would be not only to risk certain violence at the hands of the muggers, but also in all likelihood to be subject to the brutal justice of authority.



Figure 3 A young boy reacts to a mugging in Mega-City One

The story continues with a change in narrative direction as Dredd arrives on the scene, causing the gang to flee. We see Dredd attend to one of the victims, calling for a medi-squad. The badly battered man in the hat looks up at Dredd: 'A thousand people walkin' by, and it was like I was on my own! Nobody lifted a finger to help me - nobody!' (Wagner 2006b: 262). Dredd tracks down the gang members, who are all killed or violently apprehended. However, on the last page, we see the final remaining gang member, who had so mercilessly beaten his victims, get stuck in a crowd. As Dredd closes in on him, upon his powerful and heavily armed Lawmaster motorbike, a man walks up steps to the level of the walkway, his thought bubble returning us to the opening of the story in a narrative loop. Now the cruelty of the system of government and law is exposed, as the terrified citizen observes the brutal arrest, unable to comment, certainly unable to intervene, powerless within the city state. His thoughts are spread over the final four panels, each of which depicts a view of the man reacting in fear, while trying to appear indifferent to the arrest taking place: "Judge working the sidewalks again!" "He's got that poor guy!" "Don't get involved!" "Nothing you can do!" "Look away!" "For God's sake look, don't attract his attention... It'll only mean trouble!" (Wagner 2006b: 265). The week's episode ends with the image of Dredd as the predator, beating anyone who steps out of line, who falls off the path of the strict legal code of behaviour in this city. This is a world where things are not OK, where the restoring of law and order is the perpetuation of something that is clearly not right. In this environment, everyone seems to be a victim of a system that is wrong, of social injustice as well as crime, a system that is maintained and enforced by the Judges.

The buildings in Dillon's version of the city resemble the curvaceous alterity of McMahon's architectural style. However, this is not the only kind of architecture of Mega-City One. In contrast, tall slab blocks were a favoured building type of artist Brian Bolland, as seen in the form of Billy Carter Block,³ a residential structure that becomes a site of carnage when it is taken over by the four Dark Judges. Named Fear, Mortis, Fire and Death, they are lawmen from a parallel dimension where the

Judges decreed that all crime was committed by the living, therefore life itself is a crime. These paranormal Dark Judges come to Mega-City One to continue their work, as everybody in their own world is already dead. The extreme violence of this 1981 storyline, 'Judge Death Lives', is drawn by Bolland in a style of clean, detailed realism. The precise inked lines are deliberate and neatly placed, a sharp contrast to some of the other Dredd artists, particularly McMahon. Bolland's rendering of the city is consistent with this approach to drawing. It is clean, built from defined straight edges, right angles and grids. Billy Carter Block is drawn as the most reductive idea of a city block, a rectangular tower, clad in opaque glass. Bolland turns this architecture into a corollary of narrative movement: The flat facade offers an opposing surface to the heavily armed Judges who lay siege to the building, but are kept out by an energy shield. The surface is immediately recognisable and identifiable as this particular building, and also as a building type that is familiar to the reader. The gridded structure of the page corresponds to the spaces within the building, as Dredd and the telepathic Judge Anderson fight their way through. 'Judge Death Lives' contains some of the most explicit visualisations of the panel structure of the page and modernist architectural form seen in Dredd, where the frames of the images act as units of an architectural whole (Figure 4). However, this is no less true of the work of McMahon or Ezquerra. Rather, there is a difference in their architectural construction. The creation of both the city and the page are as inseparable, but not defined by variations upon grids. Both artists sought to build the city as something distinct, unrecognisable, and to generate a form of narrative approach that fused the chaos and energy of the city within the placing, arrangement and sequencing of imagery. The inventiveness and alterity of the future city was generated not just by attempting to show what it looked like, but through the creation of an immersive, sensorial environment upon the printed page.

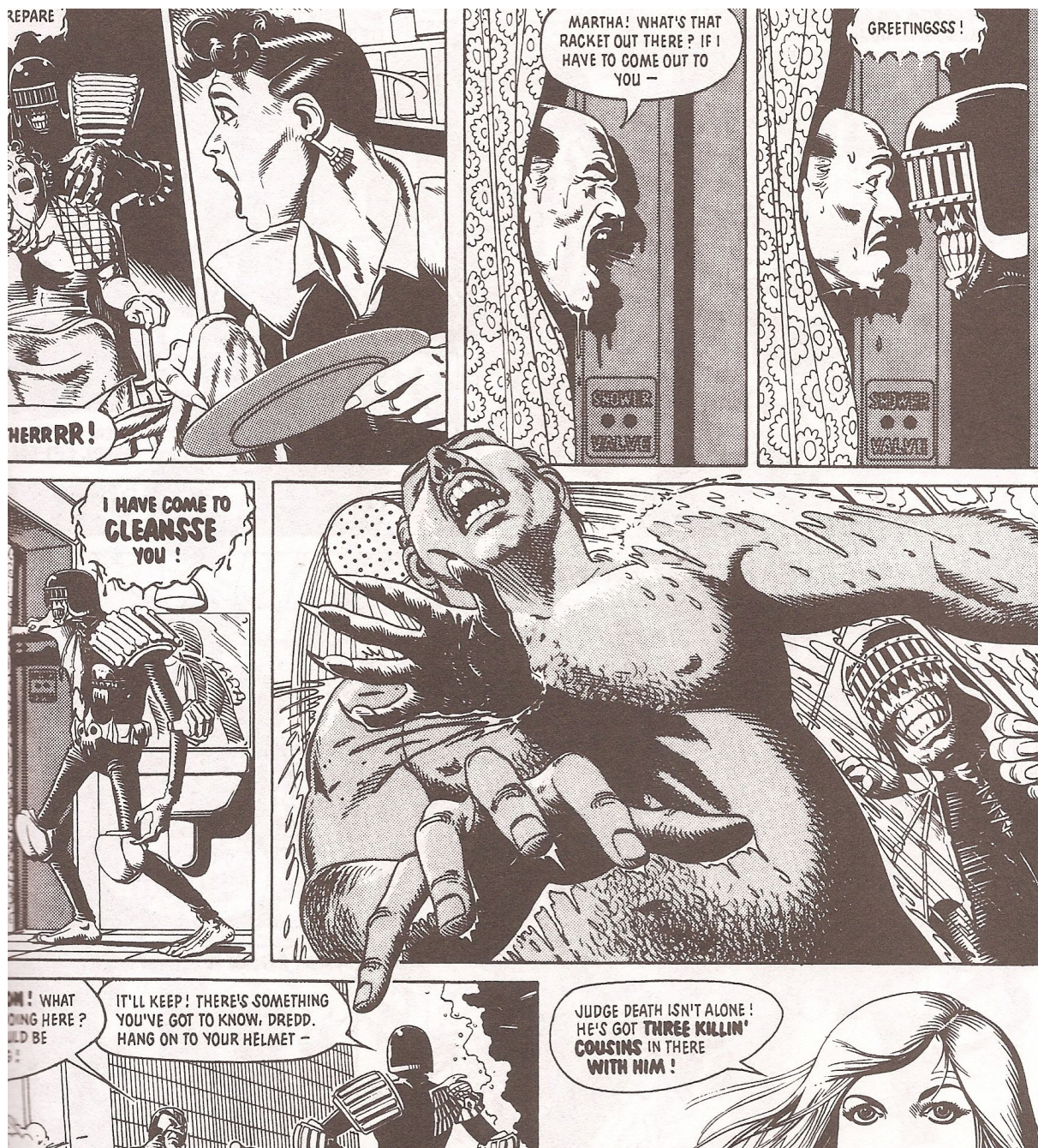


Figure 4 Gridded page structures in Brian Bolland's artwork for 'Judge Death Lives'

Bolland was not alone in tending towards envisioning city blocks as vast rectangles. Ron Smith, a prolific *Dredd* artist, who had already had a long career drawing comics before working on *2000AD*, also preferred clean lines, and rendered the city as something that often leaned towards a futuristic Manhattan. For the the story 'City Block 1' (1979) Smith designs a building exterior that is generic in form, resembling a

modernist tower, with details that created a sense of alterity, and of course an immense scale. In the opening panel, it stands out from the surrounding buildings, smaller and more dome-like. The first caption tells us: 'No inhabitant of today can comprehend the sheer immensity of Mega City 1 in the early 22nd Century. Over 800 million people - the population of a hundred Londons - crammed into vast cityblocks, each housing over 60,000 citizens...' (Wagner 2006a: 8) The caption at the bottom of the panel reads 'Each cityblock was a city within a city. From birth in the cityblock hospital to death in the cityblock crematorium, it was possible for a citizen to spend his entire life without leaving his own block!' (Ibid). The next panel shows us Dredd on patrol in Charlton Heston Block, a scene before him looking something like a shopping mall with indoor parks and small automated cars providing transportation (Figure 5). Dredd's thoughts address the situation before him: 'One spark here and I've got a riot on my hands. Trouble has got to be stamped on instantly - without mercy - for the people's own good' (Ibid). The next page shows a close up of Dredd, witnessing a crime. He pursues the perpetrator, or 'perp', through the block and outside onto the roads where an escalating chase is finally ended in his capture. It turns out that he was about to drop a piece of litter. Small crimes are dealt with as harshly as any others. It is an absurd story, demonstrating the literalness of Dredd's statement, itself a straightforward iteration of state values. The protection of the state and the preservation of total order, comes at a reduction of liberty.

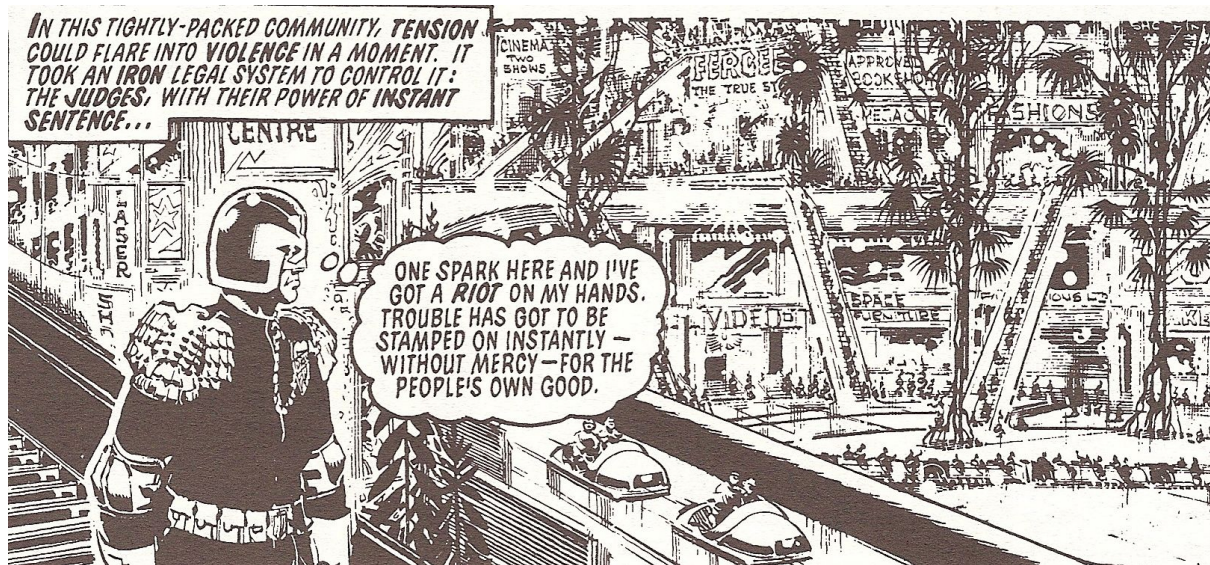


Figure 5 Dredd on patrol in Charlton Heston Block

The city is heterogenous, even within the work of the same artist. 'Cityblock 2', published the following week, introduces us to Harriet Beecher Stowe Block, an elongated Tower of Babel adjoining a swollen metal potato, carved open to reveal a curved wall of glass. Smith has designed a building as different to Charlton Heston Block as could be. 'By the early 22nd Century only 13% of the population of Mega-City One had work. This created severe problems in the vast blocks that housed the city's 800 million people...' (Wagner 2006a: 14). The problem is one of adjusting to an excess of leisure time. We see three men smash a cleaning droid, and take up the duty themselves with antique brooms, buckets and cloths. They are arrested for six months, leading one to say, 'I don't care, it was worth it! I'll do the same thing when I get out! You'll never stop me working!' (Wagner 2006a: 15). This is a situation that is getting worse, with humans being replaced by machines every day. Leisure councillors are employed in every cityblock, but often subject to assault by frustrated citizens. The next page gives us the statistic that 750 crimes a day are committed in a cityblock, and Dredd comments on these conditions as a sad fact. 'But it is not our job to care - only to uphold the law!' (Wagner 2006a: 16). However, Dredd then has to apprehend a former building caretaker, replaced by a robot, who has started shooting at the street below from his apartment window. His wife, watching the scene outside unfold on her TV set, knits away: 'Really Arnold, I do think you're making an

awful fuss. What will the neighbours think?' (Wagner 2006a: 17). He replies 'It's all right for you - you have your knitting! My job meant everything to me – everything' (ibid). He taunts Dredd to come and get him, as without his job he'd rather be dead. He tries to jump from the window when Dredd forces his way in, but Dredd catches him, as there is a danger he might land on someone. Then, unexpectedly, the Judge sentences Arnold Short to the unusual punishment of hard labour for the rest of his life. Short weeps tears of joy, and is led away cheerily, excited by the prospect of work. Dredd's final thought: 'No, it's not our job to care - but sometimes it's hard not to be touched by a special case. Sometimes even a Judge can be merciful' (ibid: 19). A happy ending, of sorts.

Danger and sensation

Life in Mega-City One is constantly dangerous. There is a perpetual state of immanent violence, heightening the intensity of the city as a site of sensorial engagement for readers. This violence is sometimes manifested in the form of a block war. Generally, block wars arise from social tensions created by a combination of the extreme density of population in the city, and boredom. Without nation states, and the city being so large as to lack any unified identity, it is the building in which a citizen lives that offers unity with others, a sense of place and identity. The rivalry has no rational basis in that this is not a contest over resources or territory, but rather is rivalry for its own sake, the identification of self through the arbitrary, and through the extension of the self contained nature of a city block. Block war was first presented in prog 182 (1980) in a story drawn by Brian Bolland. The conflict is staged in the narrow gulf between two identical vertiginous towers - Rita Tushingham Block and Ernest Borgnine Block. The resident antagonists shoot at each other directly across this slim divide across the gulf into the next building. One Judge comments that both blocks are well-off, so asks what leads people to act in this way, but Dredd makes it clear that their business is to put a stop to it, not to understand it. Psychoanalysis, motive and interiority are not the business of Judges, but should be left to the doctors who treat Futsies, those suffering from the condition known as Future Shock, a mental state that results in irrational and violent behaviour (Wagner 2006b).

Late in 1981 the narrative arc 'Block Mania' saw this violence spread as an epidemic across the city. The chaos of 'Block Mania', though is not a sociological problem, but a Sov Blok – the future equivalent of the Soviet Union – plot. A Sov agent contaminated the city's water supply with a drug engineered to make the citizens irrational and violent. A cure is found, but too late. The city is in turmoil and left open to nuclear attack and invasion, beginning the storyline 'The Apocalypse War', an all out nuclear confrontation with East-Meg One, the Russian equivalent of Dredd's city. Nuclear war was a popular and recurring theme in *2000AD* in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a shadow of cold war tension in an age of ICBMs (Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles). War was also a proven seller in the field of boys' comics, and the genre had dominated the market when *2000AD* was launched. Tales of futuristic war had been an element of *2000AD* storytelling in various forms, and was combined in *Dredd* with a playing out of scenes of nuclear annihilation, which would ultimately be survivable for one side of the conflict. Carl Abbott, in his discussion of American imaginings of large scale destruction of American cities, points out that there are structural difficulties that present themselves when constructing narratives which address nuclear warfare, not least of which is the 'basic problem of narrative structure. If nuclear war is likely to destroy cities, it will also destroy any characters living in those cities and thus short-circuit the story' (2006: 177). However, this is not the case with Mega-City One, where the scale of the city means that it can absorb and accommodate a nuclear war. Another factor to contribute to this storyline was that *Dredd* writers Wagner and Grant felt that the city and its population of eight hundred million had grown unwieldy and needed to be made smaller (Bishop 2009: 87). The writers emphasised a desire to alter and adapt the setting, to explore a change in the city, rather than any change within the character of Dredd himself.

The city had however been subject to destructive attacks before 'The Apocalypse War'. In 'Pirates of the Black Atlantic' (1981), nuclear missiles are fired at the city by a band of mutants, a story introduced on the cover of Prog 197 by Brian Bolland, which shows Dredd being blown off his lawmaster by a huge nuclear explosion. In

this story a warhead strikes the aptly named Bob Oppenheimer block, destroying District 403 and killing over four million people. There are descriptions of the destructive impact of the fireball, shockwave and agonizing radiation burns suffered by millions of citizens, but the long term effect of the fallout cloud is moderated and contained by the city's Weather Control systems. The world of *Dredd* therefore, was already post-apocalyptic. Mega-City One was able to accommodate further catastrophes, no matter the scale, going on to face other massively destructive events since, including the recent 'Day of Chaos' (2011-12).

Violence

Violence saturates the pages of *Judge Dredd*, allowing a space of escape from orderly, normative and regulatory structures within and without the walls of Mega-City One. Violence is presented as subject matter, but not limited to thematic content. Rather it is defined by the medium and by possible modes of readership. Jonathan Gaboury (2011) has explored an indivisible connection between violence and comics. The specific connection here is that initially identified and exploited by Frederic Wertham's (1954) book *Seduction of the Innocent*. This took place amongst what Charles Hatfield calls 'a brief torrent of professional writing focused on comic books' putative impact on children's reading habits and reading skills' that exploded between the 40s and mid 50s in the United States (2006: 363). Rather than negate these claims, Gaboury builds upon the presence of violence in comics to explore a specific idea of what is represented when bodies in comics are subjected to wounds. Gaboury explores a hybrid form between wounded bodies and page layouts in the 2004 serial *We3*, written by Grant Morrison and drawn by Frank Quitely, published by the American company Vertigo. The argument is that in *We3*, there is no secret connection between comics and violence, but rather an overt and frenzied externalization of violence. The page layout becomes a rendering of violence as an 'overt and kinetic event' (Gaboury 2011: 29). This overwhelms the fearful element that Wertham describes, the secret, the latent potential and turns it into, I would argue, the sensorial fabric of the medium.

This sensorial fabric is the material from which Mega-City One is constructed. It is, therefore, a quality of the medium, but one that is exploited with focus and intensity in the pages of *Dredd*. Violence can be extended here to be incorporated within a more general field of sensation. As a city rendered through an ongoing and episodic sequential narrative, Mega-City One is experienced as an architecture of shock, of sensation, confusion and stimulation. It brings the rapid and disposable nature of comics into an animated encounter with readers. However, although this is undoubtedly a medium of immediacy and directness, and was intended to be disposable, it rapidly became collectable. Collecting was the primary means of reading older stories, before this material became subject to ever more complete and thorough volumes of reprints. More importantly, comics have a temporal dimension that is multifaceted. Of particular importance is the element of re-reading. A story could be read quickly, but would often be read again, in a different order, with an intensive revisiting of panels and text balloons. Comics thus interrupt the process of consumption, offering a space of agency in navigating the space of the printed page, offering a visceral engagement of image, text, narrative and temporality. They can be skimmed and re-read as well as shared. Sensation can be thought of here in terms of immediacy, but not as forgettable. Not only did *Dredd* provide readers with encounters that were resonant and memorable, but the medium lent itself to extensive returns.

The shock, sensation and immediacy of the comic form is addressed in 'The City as Archive in Jason Lutes's *Berlin*', an essay by Anthony Enns which discusses a specific comic book depiction of a city (2010). Enns finds a correlation between comics and urban space, which he reads in propinquity to Walter Benjamin, pointing out that in the 1934 essay 'The Author as Producer' Benjamin argues for the incorporation of imagery into text, for the writer to eliminate barriers between image and text. Enns finds this connection between Benjamin and the form of comics has already been made by Jared Gardner (2006), who recognises that comics inherently achieve what Benjamin calls for. This releases the potential for a temporal disruption made possible by the medium, the ability to shift relationships between past and

present. However, Enns points out another important facet that Gardner does not. Benjamin's arguments for a new form of text/image configuration can be orientated in relation to the idea of the city and urban experience. Enns focuses on the elements of shock, visual fragmentation and immediacy that characterise the experience of the modern city, a space where comics and urban experience overlap. Enns develops this correlation in terms of memory and archive, but for the purposes of considering Mega City One, we can focus on notions of sensory shock, immediacy and fragmentation.

Mega-City One offers more than an envisioning of a city that appears shocking and immediate. It generates these qualities as productive forces that disrupt perceptions of the present. This is a city of critical engagements, not passive spectatorship. It functions in a counter direction to Georg Simmel's critique of the sensory oversaturation of actual urban experience. 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', written in 1903, is best known for Simmel's negative critique of life in cities, and the notion of a reduction of subjectivity through an excess of speed and sensory overexposure, resulting in the subject becoming blasé (Simmel 1950). The subject becomes desensitized to their environment, their sense of active selfhood threatened. We are not rendered blasé by this fictional city. This, rather, is a sensitizing encounter. At stake for Simmel is the integrity of the subject, the losing struggle of the individual attempting to maintain themselves in the face of an onslaught from urban modernity.

In Mega-City One, citizens have lost in this struggle, and have been defeated by the sovereignty of the state and its metropolitan, technologically urban form. Simmel does argue for an alternative that is a potentially active force within urban experience: a resistance against the sovereign power of state and the maintenance of a living heritage that coexists with the new. History is all but eradicated in Mega-City One. The inhabitants live in a perpetual present, a condition that is subtly presented to the reader as part of the dystopian fabric of the city. It has though, a concrete history for us, activating the positive dimension evoked by Simmel. We are living through an earlier moment of that potential future, are part of the history to be

eradicated. This causality sensitises young readers to the similarities and resonances between these worlds, generating the potential for critical agency, but also allowing for, or rather insisting upon, pleasure in the sensorial engagement with this fictional world. This city trades on sensation and speed, but it operates differently to the actual metropolitan form as described by Simmel. The notion of speed in the city in Simmel's argument is composed of the opposition of the speed of urban modernity with a romantic idea of small town or village life. The city, for Simmel, yielded evidence of positive transformation, found in the site of struggle between these temporalities, a struggle that is enacted on the comic page. *2000AD* may have been marketed as something disposable but the actuality of reading comics offers a control of the speed of reading, and a tendency towards multiple re-readings. The reading of the comic page can be slowed down, reversed and paused in practical ways that may be possible for other visual media, but would not be integral to the viewing experience. There is a potential for slowness within comics which is inherent in the medium. Mega-City One, as a space of reading, reconfigures the temporality of the urban – it retains sensorial shock, but negates the blasé effect. It draws attention to the problem, without perpetuating it, I would argue, through the mobilisation of sensation and the creation of an active engagement within a critical dystopia. The dystopian form is unusual as we are without any sympathetic protagonist through which to view this world. We are left to encounter it through sensorial immersion, not being led by the hand, but pushed headfirst.

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1. The moment recalls the imagery of the films *Planet of the Apes* (1968) and *Logan's Run* (1976) in depicting the future ruins of the present.
2. There might also be some translation of Ezquerro's familiarity with the material environment of Barcelona. It is not hard to see the Casa Mila or Sagrada Familiar in some of the shapes that ascend and bloom in the initial pieces of Mega-City One that Ezquerro builds.
3. Residential blocks are named after seemingly random personalities from the reader's present or recent past.