Yiou Wang
Department of Architecture, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, Cambridge MA, USA

Form Follows Fiction: Narrative Drawings of Pictorial Profusion

Introduction

Architectural drawings that emanate from practice are reductive in order to be reliable (Chard, 2016), often omitting rich details and sensations, because the interpretation of drawing in a commercial world is clearly legislated in correspondence to what will happen in the reality. Architects' resources are not fully deployed in the conventional architectural drawing – the capacity for imagination. Freed from the dictation of the displine's norms, a kind of "novelty drawings" [1] emerges, characterized by a profusion of sensational details to uncover indeterminate present, document non-architect-centric past, and propose speculative futures.

Drawings of pictorial profusion do not communicate designs that will be built or are buildable, but enact and express a restructured, partially hypothetical reality. Their multiplicities manifest in their possession of two sets of paradoxical characteristics – both referential and reflexive, both descriptive and narrative. "Form follows fiction" in pictorial profusion because whenever architecture involves fiction, it is narrated through images. This research proposes pictorial profusion as an interstitial architectural drawing that deploys architects' imaginative and speculative resources, and analyzes its two sets of paradoxes in four dimensions: viewpoint multiplicities, temporal multiplicities, assemblage, and figuration.

Narrative vs. Representation

Architecture is by convention a craft of argumentation, forwarding spatial propositions visualized into 2-D images. The prefix "re-" in representation already implies a misconceived secondhand-ness, as though a cause-and-effect relationship existed between architecture as *a priori* entity and image as post-production. But it is far from the case. The image has historically shaped

---

[1] "Novelty drawings," along with "AutoCAD-esque drawings" and "avant-garde drawings," are three types of drawings posited by Faisal U-K in his webstreamed 'Live Architecture Q&A – with Instagram Creatives.' Interview with Faisal UK et al. Interviewed by Hamza Shaikh for *Two Worlds Podcast*, 22 April 2020.

people's perception of architecture, urban environment, and the physical reality with strong agency. Japanese anime sci-fi movie *Paprika* (Satoshi Kon, 2006) shot many iconic scenes that find subsequent twins in imagery of modern film productions. The 18th-century notion of the picturesque in Europe profoundly shaped the quotidian view of nature, enabling people to see and to appreciate only parts of nature that resembled paintings. In the digital present with technological versatility and media dissemination, image often precedes the physical reality in shaping people's perception and cognition. In conventional architecture, the 3-D architecture in conception is the primary work of design to which its 2-D image is secondary, whereas in the pictorial profusion fashion, the 2-D image is the primary work of design. The postmodern drawing is transitioning from a tool for argumentation to a vehicle of storytelling.

A Novel Type of Drawing

s

Fig.1 (left). Eric Wong, *Swan Settlement, Cohesion.*

Pictorial profusion is a novel genre of graphic narratives when we understand its misfit in the historical inventory of architectural drawing. According to Fraser's comprehensive analysis[2], in the dimension of projection method, architectural drawings can be categorized as orthographic, axonometric, and perspective; in the dimension of application, drawing types encompass referential drawings, diagrams, design drawings, presentation drawings, and visionary drawings. First, conventional types orthographic, axonometric and perspective are each distinguished from the others in evident terms – orthographic drawings eliminate one dimension from the three-dimensional buildings; in axonometry, lines that are parallel in real space stay parallel on the drawing; in perspective, lines that are parallel in real space converge to the vanishing point depending on the point of view. But images of pictorial profusion disregard the projection-based categorization by transgressing their boundaries. In Eric Wong's *Swan Settlements* (2016) (fig.1), for instance, an aerial perspective overlays an elevation (fig.2); in Drawing Architecture Studio's *Samsara of Building No. 42* (2008-2017) (fig.3-6), a Choisy of interior oblique is interwoven with an elevation, superimposed on a plan of a plane receding far into the background. It is not by accident – every one of these drawings contains more than one methods of projection or orientations. The richness of projections

---

[2] Iain Fraser catalogues types of drawing based on two categorization metrics, the method of projection, and application. Fraser, I. (1994). *Envisioning Architecture: An Analysis of Drawing.* New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

questions the projection-based categorization of architectural drawings. The will of expression supersedes the idea of typology.

Drawings of pictorial profusion transcend Fraser's categorical borders in application as well. At the first glance, they seem to be visionary drawings which create a "compelling virtual world" (Fraser, 1994, pp.148), but often they are based on hypersensitive observations of the everyday vernaculars, depicting existing buildings with an amused eye. To complete *Samsara of Building No. 42*, Li Han and Hu Yan surveyed and documented each one of the ground floor retail units in a Beijing building and drew them axonometrically to convey objectivity (Li & Hu, 2021); Chris Ware's *Building Stories* is told through the most ordinary and even petty trivia of the everyday life of the residents of an old Chicago apartment building. However, pictorial profusion is neither referential nor design drawings since they restructure reality. Distorted by a dose of imagination, Drawing Architecture Studio's storytelling transforms the objective existence of buildings into autonomous allegories of urban surrealism. Chris Ware fabricates the vernacular building, its residents, its events, and all its banality, so banal that a viewer no longer recognizes its fictionality from the common experience people have. Eric Wong's radical storytelling often starts from a fictional framework[3], but his rich figurative details offer relatability to a real-world context based on a substantial amount of research. These drawings of pictorial profusion break the conventional boundaries of architectural drawing types, but their revolutionary importance lies not in the necessity to invent a new type for them, but rather, in the fact that they are the attestation of architectural drawing liberated from any representational setting.

Unsuitable in any single type, pictorial profusion as an extension to Fraser's inventory (1994) is defined as a drawing that contains more than one ways of projection and more than one application. A drawing of pictorial profusion can be both referential and inventive; it looks as engaging and machined as a presentation drawing but its focus is not a visual interest, but to touch on unpresentable dimensions of architecture; its author executes an abundance of details, angles, and sensatons, but leaves out any indication biased toward one single approach of reading.

---

[3] Wong, E. (2019). "Drawings and Fiction" Interview with Eric Wong. Interviewed by Hamza Shaikh for *Two Worlds Podcast*, Ep 3, 15.09.2019. (Accessed: 02.03.2021)
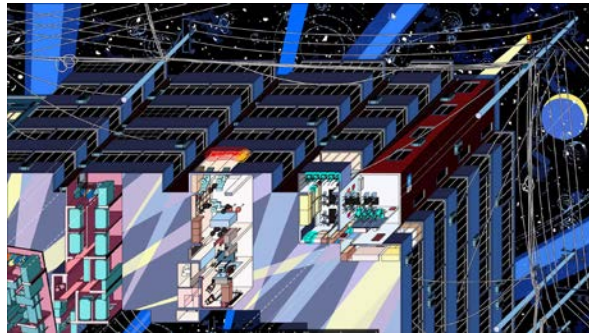
Fig.2 (right). Drawing Architecture Studio, *Samsara of Building No. 42 on Dirty Street,* detail.

Fig.3-6. Drawing Architecture Studio, *Samsara of Building No. 42 on Dirty Street.*

Method of Analysis

The nature of pictorial profusion is pluralistic. A picture can be analyzed on the following dimensions: viewpoint multiplicities, temporal multiplicities, assemblage, and figuration. In a drawing of pictorial profusion, multiplicities exist in each of these dimensions, in the content as well as the methodology. The observed is mingled with the imagined. Reality is interwoven with fiction.

Two Sets of Paradoxes

Narrative drawings discussed in this text for their relevance to pictorial profusion manifest two sets of paradoxes: they are both reflexive and referential, both narrative and descriptive. Reflexivity, a literary and linguistic term in the dialectic of fictionality, describes a theory or method that takes account of itself or "a pronoun that refers back to the subject to which it is used" (Fülöp, 2021, pp.5). Reflexivity goes against referentiality because the latter sets up a relation between a subject of meaning and and object of representation, like a travel sketch, but the former enacts a relation in which the entity is both a subject and its object of representation (*Ibid*, 2021). If we compare 2-D imaging to a literary method, non-fictional drawings are references to existing phenomena or prescriptions of imminent phenomena that are about to happen with direct likeness. Archigram's *Walking City* (1964-69) and François Schuiten's *Obscure*

Cities (1983) are fantasy drawings that picture an imagined parallel reality. Drawings by Chris Ware, Drawing Architecture Studio, and Eric Wong are both referential – they reference actual phenomena, as ways to *see* the reality – and reflexive, as they embody a heterogeneous multiplicity. The drawing engages the viewer in multiple stories simultaneously, and draws the viewer's attention to the way this image is constructed.

In the standard narratology of fiction, description is premised on the absence of narrative, and vice versa[4]. But this divide appears problematic in drawings of pictorial profusion where the plethora of content provide multiple micro-narratives and rich, detailed description. Pictorial profusion indulges the viewer in both the sensations enjoyed from eyes exploring a drawing, and the multiple synchronous visual intrigues with the same resolution from eyes looking for plot and information. Paradoxes in literature and narratology coexist in these narrative drawings through the 2-D medium: information is visual, specific, granular, and presented in synchrony. Apart from the visual medium, there is more subtle reason why the two sets of paradoxes coexist in pictorial profusion: they are not exactly fictions or facts in a linear sense, but interstitial drawings incorporating reference, fiction, and the relationships between them.

Viewpoint Multiplicities

Fig.7. Zhang Zeduan, *Along the River During the Qingming Festival.* Digital reproduction. Image courtesy: Palace Museum, Beijing. (cropped in length by author)

A single point of view denotes a single frame in space and time. The perspective drawing describes the three-dimensional spatial reality, but in premodern paintings in East Asia, it is not uncommon to portray several consecutive scenes in one pictorial frame, such as in early Buddhist illustrations (Murray, 2001) and long scroll *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* (fig.7), a precursor to modern pictorial profusion. Axonometry as a system of urbanistic drawing is continued to many contemporary architects and artists, capturing a scrutiny of everyday activities and their participants. The images that span across large urban scales are paradoxically executed at a high granularity –

---

[4] The account of the opposition between narrative and description comes from Lev Manovich's refutation against it. Manovich, L. (2001) "Navigable Space: Doom and Myst." In *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, MA: MIT, pp.245–88.

all details are exhaustively depicted with attention to the social and material worlds existing within the physical vessel. A birds-eye view of the city of Bianjing, the viewpoint of *Along the River* exemplifies the removal of hierarchy in which every object depicted remains proportionately equidistant to the viewer regardless of the viewer's position. This technique, called a "panoramic moving scattering perspective" (Yan, 2004, pp.204), positions the viewer on a very distant higher ground and obtains an omniscient clairvoyance, not a typical accessible viewpoint for anyone. It makes the painting encyclopedic.

Fig.8. Drawing Architecture Studio, *Diamond Village*, 2019, detail. Image Source: d-a-s.cn

Fig.9. Drawing Architecture Studio, *Samsara of Building No.42 on Dirty Street.* in comparison to a typical Tibetan Mandala.

Drawings of pictorial profusion always look surreal because of its juxtaposition of different orientations and viewpoints. Drawing Architecture Studio always uses axonometry to depict urban ecologies where high-resolution details of every corner of the urban blocks appear simultaneously on their digital canvas, available for zooming in for a better appreciation. Their drawings are even more encyclopedic than Chinese long scrolls, since digitalized production facilitates zooming in and out, providing the viewer with more agency in the choice of focus and the amount of information extracted from the drawing. Just as a typical Tibetan mandala can be viewed from two to three orientations, Drawing Architecture Studio's work can be viewed from different angles that tell different micro-narratives, which is especially pronounced in the *Diamond Village* series (2019) (fig.8) and the last panel of *Samsara of Building No. 42* (2017) (fig.9). The word samsara means the Buddhist concept of the Wheel of

Life, which already implies a cyclic, multiplistic quality in negation of duality, where reflexivity manifests in that the technique of imaging (rotate and shear) produces the graphic language that literally translates the content of the image.

Eric Wong overlays multiple perspectives in superposition, just as M.C. Escher did in his multi-oriented prints. The cognitive aspect of narrative is evoked when the viewer changes position on one drawing – for a moment standing on the ground of a foreshortening street, for another moment finding oneself on an elevation in the far background, for instance. It is certain that in the realm of pictorial profusion, the philosophy of reductionism prevailing in architecture does not fit. The reductionist approach dominates diagrams, plans, sections, and renders in architecture as they ought to effectively deliver only the information needed for the specific purpose that drawing serves, no matter for construction, client approval, or solution. The purpose of communication or argumentation assume a stable position for the designated viewer, no matter as the construction engineer, the client, or the consultant. In an image of plural viewpoints – multi-perspectives, axonometry, or sequential frames – the viewer does not assume any fixed position and has access to spatial and temporal multiplicities.

Temporal Multiplicities

Pictorial profusion challenges the architectural graphic consensus that a picture represents a particular selected moment. Perec-like temporality of pictorial profusion is narrated through the nonlinear timeline manipulation of a single subject. Chris Ware demonstrates how experimental comic narrative can be temporally multiplistic. Contrary to the early Buddhist illustrations where the same subject is depicted sequentially as in most modern comics, Ware's comics contain fragmented timelines arranged or misplaced according to different logics. *Building Stories* (fig.10) is a physical box of comics printed on posters, cards, folios, etc., fragments with no preset order, and the implication is for the reader to get involved in making up the narrative both spatially and temporally.

Even within one page of comics, Ware's geometric layout indicates clear ways of proceeding with the story like a user manual of a machine assembled out of logic, not time. By using non-linear consecutive geometric frames and regulating lines in between, Ware pushes the medium of drawing to express what language cannot, which is to visualize with precision and clarity the relationships between fragments of the story that are more complex than merely a linear progression of time, references, explanations, deductions, insertions, junctions/choices, revelations, and juxtapositions, to name a few. He smartly

retains the rectangular box as visual cues for separate frames, consistent with the reader's habit formed from the history of comics; on the other hand, the regulating lines and marks he uses to indicate the various relationships between fragments resemble the techniques used by architects in diagrams. The new way of narrating urban stories is significant in two folds. First, it maximizes the unique advantage of the medium, drawing, by narrating stories in ways that only drawing allows, not permitted in modeling, writing, film, or more rarely, building itself. Second, its habituates the reader to new ways of reading images, such as rotating the picture. The reader must be more experimental and active rather than a passive recipient of information.

Fig.10. Chris Ware, *Building Stories.*

Assemblage

Decentralized composition and multiple viewpoints, two interrelated features, define the character of pictorial profusion. Then how to stitch together different angles and orientations of viewpoint becomes a central issue. Li Han (2021) reveals that the most difficult part of Drawing Architecture Studio's work is to combine the different orientations into one coherent unity. Because the drawing process is constructive, total intentionality is what differentiates pictorial profusion artists like Drawing Architecture Studio, Eric Wong and Chris Ware from collage artists, whose assemblage relies on serendipitous connection among existing imagery.

Usually, pictorial profusion authors use three organizational logics to assemble their graphics: axonometry based on an orthographic drawing arrange different elements according to their relative positions on the orthographic drawing, which is relatively rare among this type of drawing, such as Drawing Architecture Studio's Micro-yuan'r; arrange according to the non-linear temporal sequence; and arrange to combine the existing and the fictional elements. In *Samsara of Building No. 42,* by Drawing Architecture Studio, it is architecturally an axonometric projection, without any obvious center or focus.

Analogous to *Along the River*, this drawing employs extremely localized points of view stitched together, as shown in the different orientations of the people and other objects that serves as indicators of fiction. Despite the disorientation and decentralization, the walkways set the rhythm of the drawing. In axonometric narratives of profusion, paths usually serve as the skeleton of the image in regard to composition. Chris Ware's narrative is organizationally fragmented. Typical of pictorial profusion, Ware's use of frames is multifunctional and intentionally ambiguous. In Fig. 11, Ware's rectangular boxes are sometimes sequential frames as in traditional comics, sometimes partition frames that slice through a continuous scene, such as the light beam. In Fig. 12, the rectangles act as dividers to a full-page isometric view of a house, with one panel showing the structures underneath the roof. The composition is geometrically elegant.

Fig.11-12. Chris Ware, *Jimmy Corrigan: the Smartest Kid on Earth*. Photographs of book pages.

Figuration

Figures tend to occupy a self-contradictory place in general architecture drawings: often an add-on, figures are used as fillers in between architecture parts, but on the other hand, they are nontrivial because they usually serve as indicators of scale and program. In drawings of pictorial profusion, figuration is a serious art. Pictorial profusion namely features a profusion of visual elements, details that in conventional architectural drawings are brushed aside as decorative entourage. Figures play a *reflexive* role both as agents of the narrative progression and, collectively, as descriptive elements of the spatial vibe. Images of pictorial profusion are meant to be examined at the local detail, and one feature of digitally produced images is the ability of zooming, which reciprocally influence pictorial profusion toward increased granularity.

As authors of pictorial profusion narratives tend to value personal protocols and idiosyncrasies (Spiller, 2016), they develop their own graphic lexicons of figures. As a result, figures from pictorial profusion are often stylized and heterogeneous, with more agency in themselves. Drawing Architecture Studio's

human figures, which always align with the overall image in their dress and coloration, have a characteristic geometric body of circles and arcs to show their perfectly controlled, machined aesthetics. In Chris Ware's narrative of *Building Stories*, figures used as a "reflexive element" (Dittmer, 2014, pp.478) lead the narrative. Their round, geometric faces and bodies and apathetic expressions evoke a nostalgic, awkward, and alienated feeling. Eric Wong reveals that he drew his figures one by one[5], never repeating any, which suggests long time commitment and full intention with figurating his narratives. In the *Cohesion* series, the drawing is relevant at both the urban scale and the human scale. The set of images are executed at a high granularity – people, flags, clotheslines, streetlights are exhaustively depicted, drawing attention to the social and material world existing in the physical vessel of the provocation.

Restructured Reality of Architectural Narratives

To represent architecture as it is or as it looks? This is the perpetual dilemma. By normalizing the fictive or fictionalizing the normative, drawings of pictorial profusion do not represent, but extract reference from the reality to reconstruct new realities. Rather than being used to describe a drawing between art and architecture (Spiller, 2016), the term *interstitial drawing* refers to a drawing in between a fictive account of an alternative reality and a documentary or projectory account of an existing or a to-be-built reality. Unlike a render image or a photograph, drawings of pictorial profusion are constructive. Their constructive way of birth determines intentionality in every fine grain – every detail must be consciously drawn by the author and assembled brick by brick. If any of these details is not drawn in an attempt to fully replicate the existing condition, a fictive component is in the intention.

Despite sometimes being unconscious about the involvement of fiction, creators of pictorial profusion alter or reinvent the lens through which the subject matter is viewed (Altshuler & Sedlock, 2016). For instance, *Samsara of Building No.42* starts off by a documentary depiction of all the retails in the selected area but blends more and more fictive storytelling into the district as the panels progress forward, culminating in a fantasized version of the district in the fourth and final panel. Although Li and Hu state in both their lecture (2021) and text (2016, ed. Allen, pp.135) that their practice is not based on fiction but on the real world, Drawing Architecture Studio's works often interweave reality and

---

[5] Wong, E. (2019). "Drawings and Fiction" Interview with Eric Wong. Interviewed by Hamza Shaikh for *Two Worlds Podcast*, Ep 3, 15.09.2019. Available at: https://www.youtubeomni.com/watch?v=CwX9etmXAtY (Accessed: 2 March 2021).

fiction, or imagine a fictive world filled with absurdities in realism, such as in *Taobao Village – Smallacre City* (2018) and the *8th Dimensional City* (2020).

The way authors of pictorial profusion express their point of view is the process of restructuring reality, of breaking, extrapolating, abridging, collaging, copying, and arraying the existing reality to present an active narrative instead of a passive acceptance or regurgitation. For instance, *Taobao Village* imagines a non-existent village that may as well be real in a parallel universe, containing symbolic replicas of strange and absurd buildings borrowed from rural China. Its ingenuity lies in the fact that its method of making embodies its main idea about the counterfeit architecture. As a counter-example of the usual reductionism in architecture representations in the pursuit of efficiency, pictorial profusion is a genre of high density in content. Pictorial profusion's consistent density attests to its aim to be more than documentation of buildings or spaces, but capture the pulse and trajectory of buildings and people. In that sense, the narrative links construction, maintenance and deconstruction, where lives in the building with life of the building are interwoven. Unlike the conventional architectural drawing, buildings per se in pictorial profusion are not the focus.

Conclusion

With a total intentionality in the drawing act, pictorial profusion narrates urban and human stories in spatial and temporal multiplicities, rich sensations, heterogeneous figures. Due to its constructive method, every detail of the highly granular picture is a micro-design rather than a spontaneous appropriation or a repetitive affordance. In dimensions of viewpoint multiplicities, temporal multiplicities, assemblage, and figuration, fictive qualities arise from and are generalized in works of Drawing Architecture Studio, Eric Wong, and Chris Ware, in their expressions of pictorial profusion. In absence of a client or a programme, the ways of drawing synthesize a coherent, restructured reality of an interplay between reality and fiction, an iteration of reality. Exceed their artistry, the significance of these drawings, once understood, lies in interstitial narratology of systems of architecture building nonlinear architecture-individual-society relationships, and these systems are either augmented existing systems or hypotheses. In either case, fiction plays an indelible part in the pictorial profusion, which marks the transcendence of architectural drawings from representation of design to expression of vision.

Bibliography

Altshuler, J. and Sedlock, J. (2016). 'Creatures Afield: Drawing the 'dioramic' caricature', in Allen, L., & Pearson, L. (ed.) *Drawing futures : Speculations in contemporary drawing for art and architecture*. London: UCL Press, University College London, pp.162-166.

Chard, N. (2016). 'Paradoxical Sciagraphy', in Allen, L., & Pearson, L. (ed.) *Drawing futures : Speculations in contemporary drawing for art and architecture*. London: UCL Press, University College London, pp.149-154.

Drawing Architetcure Studio. http://www.d-a-s.cn/ (Accessed 02.03.2021).

Drawing Architetcure Studio. (2016). 'Architect as Urban Ghostpainter', in Allen, L., & Pearson, L. (ed.) *Drawing futures : Speculations in contemporary drawing for art and architecture*. London: UCL Press, University College London, pp.135-139.

Dittmer, J. (2014). 'Narrating urban assemblages – Chris Ware and Building Stories.' Social & Cultural Geography, 15(5), pp.477-503

Fraser, I. and Rod. H. (1994). *Envisioning Architecture: An Analysis of Drawing*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Fülöp, E. (2021). *Fictionality, Factuality, and Reflexivity Across Discourses and Media*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter. https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1515/9783110722031

Li, H & Hu, Y. (2021) *Vernacular Narrative* [Presentation]. Syracuse University - Syracuse. 2 March 2021. Available at: https://soa.syr.edu/live/events/883-li-han-and-hu-yan-vernacular-narrative (Accessed: 01.03.2021).

Manovich, L. (2001). "Navigable Space: Doom and Myst." In *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, MA: MIT, pp.245–88.

Murray, J.K. (2001). 'Early Buddhist Narrative Art: Illustrations of the Life of the Buddha from Central Asia to China, Korea and Japan.' *Arts Asiatiques*, 56, pp.168-170.

Spiller, N. (2016). 'Drawing as Communicating Vessels: An Apologia (or Not)', in Allen, L., & Pearson, L. (ed.) *Drawing futures : Speculations in contemporary drawing for art and architecture*. London: UCL Press, University College London, pp.142-148.

Ware, C. (2000). *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Ware, C. (2012). *Building Stories*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Wong, E. (2019). 'Drawings and Fiction' Interview with Eric Wong. Interviewed by Hamza Shaikh for *Two Worlds Podcast*, Ep 3, 15.09.2019. Available at: https://www.youtubeomni.com/watch?v=CwX9etmXAtY (Accessed: 02.03.2021).

Wong, E. *Eric Wong Folio*. Available at: http://www.ericwong.co.uk/ (Accessed: 02.03.2021).

Yan, F. (2012). 'A Multisemiotic Analysis of a Chinese Long Scroll Painting,' in *Multimodal Texts from Around the World,* Wendy L. Bowcher (ed.). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. pp.196-216.