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Gotham City: an introduction to a city planning

by Lorenza Pittaluga

Tutor: Alfredo Ronchetta

Co-tutor: Elisabetta Forni

We should not forget, when it comes to cities, that in urbanism history, beside cases such as Athens, Rome, Paris and New York, has always existed another kind of urban area: Atlantis, El Dorado, Camelot, the garden city and the industry city are just some of the more or less scientific utopias that helped to create the city, both in its social and physical aspects.

At the same time, while thinkers, philosophers and architects have dreamed a city full of positive values, which could be used as base to mould concrete planning, reality itself has projected its worse sides through many abstractions.

In particular, writers, filmmakers and cartoonists of the twentieth century tell the metropolitan nightmares often set in a future time, which seems to make it easier to portray the contemporary anguish.

Since the birth of metropolis, the representations of the city-dystopia have increased, like the London of Orwell's 1984, Lang's Metropolis or the extensive and multi-ethnic city of Blade Runner.

Or as the Gotham City of Batman.

The choice of exploring Gotham City comes right from the attempt to understand a metropolitan nightmare that has lasted for over seventy years and is now embedded in our culture.

Its history, its geography, its economy and, also, its simple but well-defined social apparatus have made Gotham, along with its particular appearance, a prime case of investigation, albeit based on unusual sources such as comics, film, cartoons.

The principal fact that emerges from Gotham's geography analysis is its being Western. This trait becomes indisputable when you look at the position in the DC Comics atlas or the representation given, in the long saga "No Man's Land", of the site plan, which is not questioned even by the critic Gianni Canova. He considers Gotham City a city-world, embodying other places and, at the same time, he captures the deep ties it has got with the western architecture and perspective, as the strong verticality of the buildings symbol of social differences. Differences belonging also to the schematic description of the city economy: tycoons, with their eager or paternalistic spirit, prevail over a shapeless mass and come together on the base of interests in the underworld.



Parallel between the architecture of Hugh Ferriss architecture of Gotham

On the aesthetic side, the emerging references, of the city of the Batman, appear increasingly confined to the reality of American architecture and urbanism with their tendency to choose styles defined for specific functions: Gothic Revival for residential building, Art Déco for skyscrapers, the White City for public buildings and banks. There are not only references to real architecture, some of the comic vignettes seem to trace the designs outlined by Hugh Ferriss, while the movies scenes take up the atmospheres from the first photographs at the turn of nineteenth century and the effects of light of Albert Speer.



Effects of light created by lights from flak: between Albert Speer and the skies of Gotham

On all references overlaps the typical footprint of Batman, who prefers to show some places than others, such as deteriorated streets and roads that he represent with an erratic movement that enhances the verticality and, with it, the inequality. Gotham City and Batman are privileged fields of investigation into what kind of urban vision continues to haunt our culture. Two elements stand out in this vision: first topic is security, "solved" with the presence of a vigilante, last but not least is the psychological topic, from which emerges that the contemporary city is a carrier of insanity, which is the only attitude that can survive the current urban context. Batman is not a solution for his city: he is protecting a status quo that is the cause of degradation and social injustice, a source of insecurity.



The places of The Bat, between verticality and darkness, through alleys and skyscrapers

For further information, e-mail:
Lorenza Pittaluga: lorenza.pittaluga@gmail.com