

The City That Never Existed

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"(...) The series *les cités obscures* have become a milestone (...) Due to the density of their atmospheres, their meticulous setting (...) And, in short, because of their seductive power, that manages to take us to highly suggesting and evocative environments. (In them) we can behold the voluptuous and arabic art nouveau architectures, loaded with decorative taste and ecological sensitivity (...) Or tightly rationalist constructions. We are presented with mixtures of styles where the sewing line that would make their design incoherent can scarcely be appreciated; and an endless series of leaps into the void of a delirious utopian construction."

Francisco Soler. Schuiten and Peeters. Building Utopia¹

Born in Brussels, in a family of architects, comics-artist François Schuiten grew up fascinated by the Art Nouveau architecture with which Victor Horta, Antoine Pompe, Paul Cauchie or Henri van de Velde had created a characteristic urban scene. Introduced into art by his father, architect and painter Robert Schuiten, François decided to channel his interests on architecture, drawing, and the aesthetics of the XIX Century into the realms of graphic narrative. As early as 1977, François and his brother, architect Luc Schuiten, collaborated on the first short stories that would evolve into the very architectural series *Les Terres Creuses*², where the preference for a decimononic refinement in the graphic style, as well as for a vegetal stylization of the shapes and a concern with ecology combined with a critique of alienation in modern society. These aspects would be further developed in the parallel careers of the Schuiten brothers in the fields of architecture (Luc), and graphic narrative and scenographic design (François). In both cases, the vegetal impulse of Art Nouveau would have a major presence, being elevated to an urban scale.

In the subsequent series *Les Cités Obscures*, created along with *nouveau-roman* writer Benoît Peeters in 1983, Schuiten depicted an eclectic world made up by carefully designed cities that combined his multiple architectural references with inputs from magic realism. Due to their decimononic filiation, the cities created by Schuiten/Peeters departed from the contemporary science fiction imaginary to join the tradition of those designers (architects, draughtsmen, artists and illustrators) of speculative cityscapes that had recreated the *turn-of-the-century Utopia* in the first decades of the XX Century. However, in cities such as Brüssel, Calvani, Alaxis or Alta-Plana Schuiten shows both the fascination for and the critique of this *Old City of the Future* that we also find in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. In fact, the relevance of François Schuiten's work goes further than just recovering for today a past architectural imaginary, but rather develops and reinvents it, showing a continuous effort to find cohesiveness in fragmentation. This disciplinary work is especially visible in cities such as *Xhystos* or *Blossfeldtstad*, where an expanded *Art Nouveau* became the tool to mask the eclecticism inherent to the dense accumulation of the multi-layered metropolis designed by H. Wiley Corbett, R. Rummel or Moses King³. In these cities, François developed Horta's and Guimard's decorative style beyond a merely epidermic use, offering a Ferris-ean depiction of the XX century *that could have been*, in a world where the modernist revolution had not taken place.

I. FROM THE XIX CENTURY TO THE ART NOUVEAU UTOPIA

The referents for Schuiten and Peeters's work are, however, as heterogeneous as those showed by

the City of the Future whose final image was epitomized by *Metropolis*⁴. As Carol Willis observes⁵, the construction of the image of the city of the future from the 1900s to the end of the 1920s was carried not only by the work of architects, but also by the illustrations of newspaper artists, cartoonists or publicists. Under cities like *Brüssel*, we can identify both features of Brussels or Paris, and the influence of Hugh Ferriss (*The Metropolis of Tomorrow*), R. Rummel (*Our New York of the future*, 1911), H. Wiley Corbett (*Drawings for the Future New York*, 1913), Auguste Perret (*The Avenue of High-Rises*, 1922⁶), Francisco Mújica, Raymond Hood or E. Maxwell Fry. However, like in Hunte, Volkbrecht and Kettelhut's designs for *Metropolis*, we should also (maybe above all) acknowledge the works of popular-culture illustrators such as Moses King or William R. Leigh. The City of the Future Past was an agglutinating entity that favoured density, aggregation, superposition and interconnection of multiple of autonomous elements of diverse origins. The eclectic impulse, the *grandeur* of the schemes, and the fondness of bigness, also appear in Schuiten's work. However, the feature that distinguishes the cities discussed in this essay is their positioning towards the problem of *style*.

The "future city" that the preceding "utopists" had produced was also a *eulogy of stylistic superimposition*, where the purest Beaux-Art adjoined the verticality of the Chicago School or the refined Neogothic of the *Woolworth Building*. Schuiten's analytical approach to the study of the architectural imaginary, however complex and heterodox this may be, locates reveals him in a nineteenth century scientific tradition. His method of design, both analytic and prospective, reminds of the hyperbolic Gothic of Viollet-le-Duc. Like him, Schuiten understands style as an organic system in which, from one single element, we can reconstruct the whole. In this context, it is no surprise that both the Schuitens, and Peeters, all brought up in the city of Brussels, found in Art Nouveau a natural tool for their prospective purposes. In the work of Luc Schuiten, the vegetal nature of *Jugendstil* works as a formal continuity between environment and dwelling, and as an expression of the sustainability of the very architectural envelope. In his projects, the vegetal logics set not only the rules of the overall scheme, but also provide with an organically developed ornament, that

overcomes the artificial ascetism of modernist architecture. In the case of François, the choice of Art Nouveau is both a natural origin and consequence to his fetishist relationship with the XIX Century.

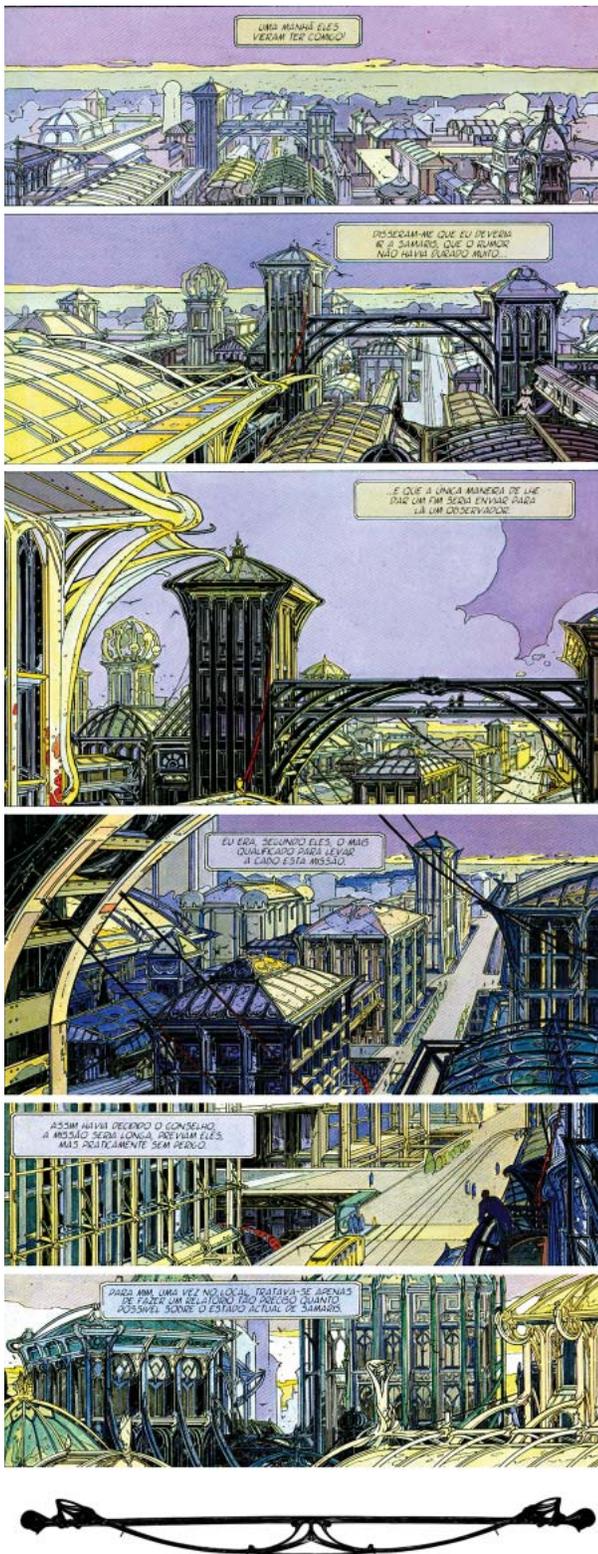
The 1800s witnessed the architects' ceaseless struggle to find a style of their time that overcame the decontextualized classicism of the *Ecole-des-Beaux-Arts*. In a way, Art Nouveau succeeded where Viollet-le-Duc's Neo-gothic, Heinrich Hübsch's *roudbogenstijl*⁷ or Schinkel's Neo-Greek failed: in being more suggestive than its theoretical basis. Art Nouveau embodied both a rupture and a synthesis of tradition, and some authors argue that it embodied the organic development of style that Viollet-le-Duc searched for in neo-Gothic. It is this premise that Schuiten and Peeters follow. In their work, they use Art Nouveau to design not only buildings, but also cities, vehicles, machines, and, finally, human societies, in a *baroquising* exercise that, in spite of its delirious nature, reveals undeniably cohesive. In the cities of Xhystos, and Blossfeldtstad, Schuiten and Peeters portray a certain completion of Art Nouveau evolution, with its upheaval to the integral design of cities. Also, the new recreation of the City of Skyscrapers continues the popular-culture design of the *City of Tomorrow* where *Metropolis* had left it. However, this fascinating depiction contains also both a critique of the limitations of style but also a reflection on the possibilities (and responsibilities) of a style that evolves from the forms of nature.

II. TALE OF TWO CITIES: FROM ARCHITECTURE TO ART-CHITECTURE

II.1. Re-reading architecture: Horta, Guimard and Xhystos.

*Our infatuation with Victor Horta and his work goes as far back at least as the Cities of the Fantastic (Les Cités Obscures). Our first joint comic book, The Great Walls of Samaris (Les Murailles de Samaris) begins in the town of Xhystos, whose architecture is Art Nouveau through and through.*⁸

"In (the design of) Xhystos, Art Nouveau imposed almost instantaneously. Not the real Art Nouveau, that which Victor Horta and some others invented at the end of the XIXth Century; that style did not have enough time to develop; it could barely give birth to some isolated constructions, lost in



Above: Approaching Xhystos in the opening sequence of *Les Murailles de Samaris*. Bottom: design in Iron by Guimard.

urban tissues with no link to them. The Art Nouveau where Xhystos would breed would have the opportunity to impose itself, to extend to a whole city its arabesques and arrebides. Starting with some of the buildings we knew, but also with plans of future cities designed by the architects of 1900; we tried to conceive Xhystos up to its most insignificant details, imagining what a Brussels entirely reinvented by Victor Horta could have turned into.(...) Immediately this style appeared to us as adequate to conceive a whole city(...). The architects of that age became passionate for all the objects they were offered. They designed furniture, clothes, invented plates or wallpaper. Rapidly, we were able to imagine the political system of the city, its weather, the way of life of its inhabitants.”⁹

Knowing Schuiten and Peeters’s engagement with the city of Brussels and with the architecture and figure of Victor Horta¹⁰, it is no surprise that their first approach to the world of the *Obscure Cities* was the design of a city in the style of the buildings of the Belgian architect. Created for *Les Murailles de Samaris* (1983), Xhystos embodies, to a certain extent, the architect’s dream to build a city from scratch, creating the “total artwork” that Henri van de Velde preached, and that Loos satirized¹¹. Xhystos portrays the image of an artificially founded city “*a la européenne*”, and shows the limitations of an urban shape created by a single mind.

Stylistically, Xhystos brings to life Viollet-le-Duc’s aim at creating a new language for the new building materials: iron and glass, gathering together the *Gothic cathedral* structuralism and the true expression of organically developed iron architecture. In its architectures we feel the atmosphere of the early technogothic *Oxford University Natural History Museum* (Woodward and Deane, 1858), or the *bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève* (Henri Labrouste, 1851), which seems to take into account Horta’s self-admitted his debt with Viollet-le-Duc and with Neo-Gothic style. As a consequence, Schuiten’s designs seem rather to come from the works on iron into which Hector Guimard translated the vegetal ornamentations Horta developed in wood. The metal filigrees Guimard used in furniture and hand railings evolve in the *Cité Obscure* into biomorphic structural and superstructural elements that take to the limit the *motifs* designed for the *Salle Humbert de Romans* (Paris, 1900).

In this sense, Xhystos represents, rather than a reflection on the qualities of urban shape, a state-

ment on the ability of style to mask divergences and visually unify eclectic compositions. Under its vegetal clothing, Xhystos consists of a grid of parallelepipedic buildings of varying dimensions (from towers to flat buildings) linked by multi-level roads, pathways and bridges that translate into the language of Paris's *Metro* elevated stations the public space organization that we find in Ferris's drawings. This linear vegetal superstructure that delineates the underlying spatial structure renders real Viollet-le-Duc's theory of structural ornament. Like fibres, the metal threads interweave to create buttresses, railings, the profiles for the glass or even the furniture and the lamps. Also, in the omnipresent domes of Xhystos we find the ultimate development of the glass ceilings that Horta –again referring to Viollet¹²– used in his famous *Aubecq House* (Brussels, 1899) or in the *Magasines Waucquez* (Brussels, 1906), a building often rendered by Schuiten. From Franz's window, we behold the landscape that this Art Nouveau could have produced: a European city of oriental echoes where iron reaches a style of his own, autonomous both from the medieval and classical traditions¹³, but also from the urban shape that it covers.

THE BEAUTIFUL DYSTOPIA

"Peut-être à cause du petit nombre d'images d'Horta dont disposaient les bâtisseurs, l'architecture de Xhystos est, passé le premier émerveillement, d'une extrême monotonie. Des quartiers complets se reproduisent plusieurs fois, jusque dans les plus petits détails. C'est sans doute ce qui conduit régulièrement des habitants à ne plus pouvoir retrouver le chemin de leur propre habitation et à errer sans fin à travers les rues. 'Perte des repères spatiaux en même temps que crise d'identité' (...)." ¹⁴

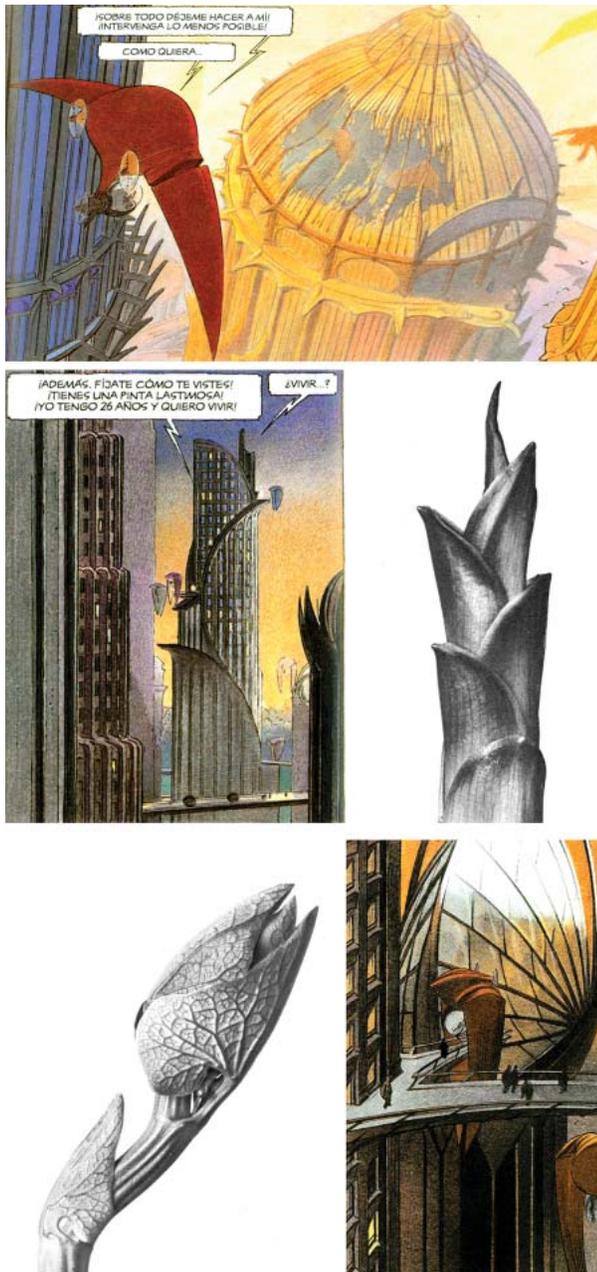
Indeed, Schuiten and Peeters develop here a critique of the limits of style, and of the excesses of architects' masturbatory aim at a "total design of reality". Horta explained that his houses aimed at being "portraits" of their owners, and so they had to be designed down to the smallest detail. However, Art Nouveau turns in Xhystos from *reflection* to *paradigm*, being architecture the one that shapes society in its own image. In Xhystos architecture becomes, finally, autonomous. As a consequence, its inhabitants soon become affected by the "Xhystos disease": When even the smallest element is designed "ad nauseam", the whole starts to look disturbingly homogene-

ous, and the citizens find themselves wandering through a built architectural jungle, looking for a way back home that they are unable to find. In the end, Xhystos reveals uninhabitable; unbearable in its static perfection and suffocating overdetailing. Barely 25 years after being created, Horta's style was already obsolete, and even he admitted himself the inability of Art Nouveau to adapt to a city, Brussels, that, impoverished by the war, evolved in some other direction. On the contrary, Xhystos remains as an eternal monument to a past time, a hypertrophied golden cage. The fate of the capricious "vegetalism" of Art Nouveau is to become a true *nature morte*, according to Schuiten and Peeters. However, the lifelessness of the European Art Nouveau of the architects contrasts with the liveliness the authors portray when the American Skyscraper City meets the Art Nouveau of nature itself in Blossfeldtstad.

II.II. Back to the Origins: Blossfeldtstad and the Art of Nature.

"C'est en 697, peu après les travaux d'embellissement de Pâhry et de Xhystos, que les autorités de Brentano décidèrent de "mettre fin au provincialisme" et de frapper un grand coup. Là où Xhystos s'était contenté d'imposer que l'ornementation s'inspire du livre *Urformen der Kunst*, les dirigeants de la ville voulurent aller beaucoup plus loin. Toutes les habitations anciennes furent éliminées en l'espace de trois ans et de nouveaux immeubles furent édifiés à l'image des photographies de Karl Blossfeldt. Pour bien montrer l'ampleur de ce projet, Brentano fut même rebaptisé, prenant le nom de Blossfeldtstad. Après une période d'enthousiasme unanime pour le style Blossfeldt, les critiques commençaient à se faire entendre. Il est vrai que les meilleures pages d'*Urformen der Kunst* avaient été employées par les premiers bâtisseurs et que le choix devenait chaque année plus difficile." "From Brentano to Blossfeldtstad". Abstract from *Le guide des Cités*¹⁵

In the years that followed *Las Murailles de Samaris*, Schuiten and Peeters continued creating *Obscure Cities* that reflected and distorted already existing architectures, be those built, designed, drawn, or even written (such as those described by Borges or Italo Calvino). After Horta's Art Nouveau in Xhystos, the series recreated Sant'Ellia's *Città Nuova* (Urbicande, 1985), Piranesi's *Carceri* (*La Tour*, 1987), or XIXth century Brussels (Brüssel, 1993). Also, they developed a progressively more explicit (and darker) critique towards the megalom-



Above: Vegetal approaches to the design of the skyscrapers in Blossfeldtstad. Center: *Hosta Japonica*. Bottom: *Aristolochia Clematitis*.

mania of architects and other agents of urban development. In 1999, however, Schuiten's engraving technique gave way to a more pictorial style, where outlines became less delineated and lighting more diffuse¹⁶. This graphic shift responded to a parallel change in the parameters of the story, now more focused on the characters, and in the

referents used for their architectural recreations. In *The Shadow of a Man*¹⁷, Schuiten and Peeters set the action in a *Skyscraper City* whose major design source was *Urformen der Kunst*¹⁸, the photography book that had propped Karl Blossfeldt into an early New Objectivity. In Schuiten's hands, the scaled *nature-art* of the German photographer took a further step into architecture, giving shape to the city of *Blossfeldtstad*¹⁹.

METROPOLIS AND THE SKYSCRAPER CITY

In the cityscape of Blossfeldtstad, Schuiten substitutes the stepped profiles of the Empire State or the Woolworth buildings that populated E. Maxwell Fry's drawings, R. Rummel's "New York of the Future" or Ferriss's "Metropolis of Tomorrow" for a naturalistic –biomorphic– approach at the design of the high-rise. However, Blossfeldtstad is far from being monoreferential: the *Assicurazioni Generali* building, one of the iconic images of the album, can be easily traced back to the "open flower" design that Erich Kettelhut used for the "New Tower of Babel" in Lang's *Metropolis*²⁰, and the very concept of the Tower of Babel, a recurring topic in Schuiten's work²¹, makes itself most evident in the design of the *Fouisetum Hotel*, which, partially covered by a stone foliage used as hangers for the parked flying vehicles, looks like a vegetal beehive. In fact, through *Metropolis's Babel*, we can easily trace Blossfeldtstad's urban shape back to Erastus Salisbury Field's *Historical Monument of the American Republic* (1867-1888), whose classical orders are substituted by vegetal shapes and the grid of windows of a circular School of Chicago, and whose thin, weightless topping bridges are scattered in a free network. Furthermore, Blossfeldtstad also shares with Lang's *Metropolis* the aim at the *dissolution of the ground plane*²², portraying a vertical city whose equally vertical urban space is meant to be experienced travelling in the air.

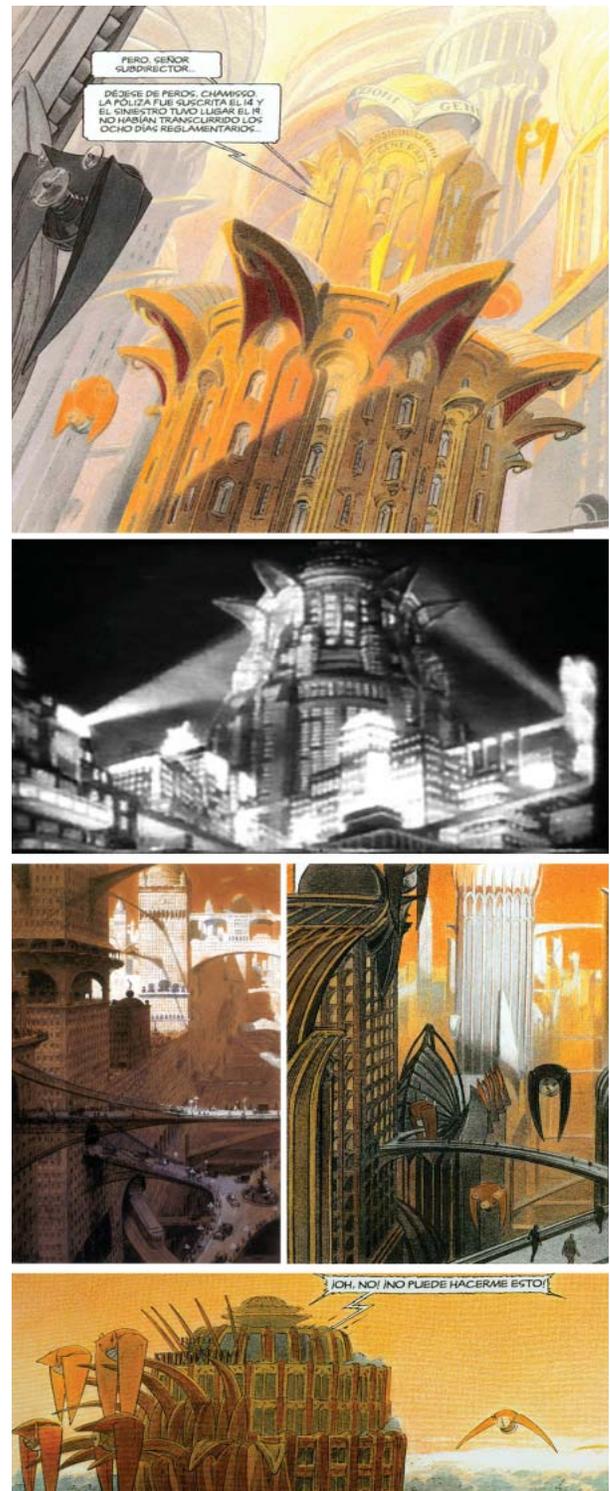
URBAN UR-FORM: THE VOYAGE THROUGH THE CITY OF THE FUTURE

Indeed, Schuiten offers an extreme depiction of Lang's *voyage through the skyscraper city* by eliminating the street. Like in an aerial Venice, the sidewalks are discontinuous, and the "street-walker", the "flâneur" described by Baudelaire, Benjamin and Kracauer makes his way through

the city by crossing bridges that connect the freestanding towers, or the aerial pathways carved in their stems. In fact, even though the canonical view of Metropolis (the main commercial street) has often been explained as a translation of the famous opening plate from King's Views of New York, it seems more accurate to compare it with William R. Leigh's, "Great City of the Future". In this picture, we see for the first time the dissolution of the ground plane that we see in Metropolis, as well as a precedent for its attempt at creating a net of organic aerial pathways. In this sense, Blossfeldtstad simplifies formal problems by making a gentle, organic superimposition that mixes the freestanding nature of the New Tower of Babel with Leigh's net of oblique and curved bridges. Also, the vegetal shapes of the buildings roll up and fall on the sides, shaping also the urban spaces. The decorative vegetal forms used by Bernini and the Spanish baroque artists are echoed to breed a "new" Art Nouveau that brings back to architecture the exuberance of the theatrical sets of the XIXth and early XXth centuries, mixed with some German expressionism taken from *Caligari*.

THE GARDEN OF UTOPIA

As compared to Xhystos, there is a lower density in Blossfeldtstad, both concerning ornamentation and urban space. Here, the long stairways and aerial trams make way for flying vehicles, designed in a "retro" contemporariness that melts perfectly with the floral *jugendstijl* of the city. The overall urban scene evokes the image of Blossfeldt's garden, inhabited by insects and magnified one hundred times. Whilst Xhystos was suffocating in its overdetailing, Blossfeldtstad, coloured in pastels, is calm and evanescent calm. The way in which Schuiten shows the urban space is very symptomatic of the different mood of both cities: *Les Murs de Samaris* begins with an aerial view of Xhystos that shows its inherent orthogonal order. On the contrary, Blossfeldtstad's spaces are always suggested, rather than portrayed, in partial, subjective views. There is a critical position here: The Art Nouveau of Xhystos is a "nightmare of style", a subjugation of nature to architecture (an instrumentalization of natural shapes) bred in an architect's megalomania. Blossfeldtstad, whose hybrid nature comes from art created by nature itself, shows however a natural balance. It is no coincidence that, in contrast with Xhystos, Blossfeldtstad



From Top to Bottom: Assicurazioni Generali building; New Tower of Babel, "Great City of the Future" and frame from "The Shadow of a Man"; Foissetum Hotel.

has natural gardens and biomorphic greenhouses (often topping the exfoliating skyscrapers). The hanging garden that François Schuiten will later develop in his proposal for Tokyo (*Le Jardin des Delices*) in *Les Portes du Possible*²³ clearly shares the aims of Luc Schuiten's *Vertical Gardens*, but even the very concept of Blossfeldtstadt shares links with the Belgian architect's proposals for the *Cités Archiborescentes, habitarbres, Maisons Biosolaires* or the *Cité des Vagues*. Even if in *Xhystos* Art Nouveau had evolved into an organic architectural language, what the Schuitens seem to claim for is an architectural procedure that organically evolves from (and creates a continuity with) nature, rather than just formally imitating it.

III. PRESENT CONTINUOUS: FROM STYLE TO THE GREEN UTOPIA

In their design for *Xhystos*, Schuiten and Peeters made real an Art Nouveau cityscape that recreated the wildest dreams of the late XIX Century. In Blossfeldtstad, they offered a refreshing glance at the Skyscraper City of the 1920s. However, the real value of these proposals is not merely testimonial or recreational. In a world brought up in a metropolis populated by skyscrapers, viaducts and highways, but where modern movement failed in seducing appealing at society, the *Obscure Cities* offer not just an updated, but an *alternative* vision. However "retro" this attitude might seem, the Schuitens' reframing of Art Nouveau as a "nature conscious" way of designing could not be more attached to today's reality.

After the Modern avant-garde lost its validity in the 60s, architecture has been looking for its way in positions that oscillate between a bland functionalism and total autonomy. The "kitsch" decontextualization of an *ad hoc* postmodernism that tried to engage with people's need for representation overlapped with environmental concerns. Nowadays, the mainly formal biomorphism of the nineties is evolving into a renewal of the *old* concept of *structural ornamentation* to start producing (like in Greg Lynn's *Slavin House*) undeniably Art Nouveau shapes that take us from "hyperindexicality" back to nature. It is in an age where architects are becoming more conscious of the need for empathy between technology and ecosystems, and where the human need for ornamentation gains a renewed relevance when, notwithstanding their

limitations, the *uchronic* urban proposals of both Schuiten brothers show a valuable contemporariness.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

François Schuiten

François Schuiten (Brussels, Belgium 1956) is the son of Robert Schuiten and Marie-Madeleine De Maeyer, both architects. Among his five brothers and sisters, both Luc and one of his sisters are architects as well, being Luc co-author (as a writer) of the series *Les Terres Creuses*. Robert Schuiten always took an active part in the artistic education of his children. In « *The Book of Schuiten* », François recalls how his father gathered all his sons and daughters and taught them how to paint. « *He made us draw from memory: he would show us a picture, then turn it over and we'd have to reproduce it. (...)he would produce cut-paper images by Matisse or Picasso, and ask us to work with the same approach.* ». Due to the influence of his brother Luc, he decided very soon that he wanted to go into comics.

During his studies at the Saint-Luc Institute in Brussels (1975-1977), Schuiten met Claude Rénard. Rénard was teaching in the atelier *Bande Dessinée* (Comic book workshop), and after participating in several collective publications, he would make with him his first two albums, '*Aux Médianes de Cymbiola*' (1980), and '*Le Rail*' (1982), published by *Humanoïdes Associés*, and they published a portfolio with some of their works, *Express* (1981). They also did the art direction and costume design for the movie '*Gwendoline*' by director Just Jaeckin in 1983-84. In 1978 he had already published his first short story *Carapaces* in *Métal Hurlant*, in collaboration with his brother Luc. Along with him, François Schuiten created the series « *Les Terres Creuses* » (The Hollow Grounds) that compiled those early works and developed them in three albums: *Carapaces* (1981), *Zara* (1985) and *Nogegon* (1990), all published by *Les Humanoïdes Associés*.

In 1978 he re-established contact with Benoît Peeters, a friend from the school that had returned to Brussels after studying philosophy in Paris. In 1982 they started publishing in *À Suivre* a serial of the story that would later become the series « *Les Cités Obscures* ». The series of « *The Obscure*

Cités » comprises, up to the present date, the following albums : *Les murailles de Samaris*, (1983), *La fièvre d'Urbicande* (1985), *L'archiviste* (1987), *La tour* (1987), *La route d'Armilia*, (1988), *Brüssel* (1992) *L'enfant penchée* (1995), *L'ombre d'un homme* (1999), *La Frontière invisible, tome 1* (2002), *La Frontière invisible, tome 2* (2004) and *La théorie du grain de sable, tome 1* (2007). The series has been completed with the publication, by the same authors, of the following related books, with a mixture of texts and illustrations : *Le mystère d'Urbicande, par Régis de Brok* (1985), *Encyclopédie des transports présents et à venir par Axel Wappendorf* (1988), *Le musée A. Desombres : catalogue raisonné des oeuvres et des biens ayant appartenu à Augustin Desombres* (1990), *L'écho des cités* (1993), *Le guide des Cités obscures* (1996), *Mary la penchée* (2002) and *The Book of Schuiten* (2004). In 2005 they started publishing *Les Portes du Possible* (The Gates of the Possible), a weekly speculative series created for the newspapers *Le Soir* and *De Morgen* in 2005.

François Schuiten has also collaborated in the graphic development of two films : the forementioned «*Gwendoline*» and «*Taxandria*» (Raoul Servais, 1994). He is also co-author of the 3D animation series «*Les Quarxs*» (Maurice Benayoun, 1991), and has developed several scénographies such as «*la ville imaginaire*» (Cités Ciné-Montréal), «*L'évasion*» (Grenoble, Festival du Polar) or «*Le Musée des Ombres*» (presented in Angoulême, Sierre, Bruxelles et Paris). He also intervened in the interior design of the Luxembourg Pavillion in the Universal Exhibition at Seville and designed a temporary decoration for the subway station «*Porte de Hal*» in Bruxelles and the station «*Arts et métiers*» in Paris. In 2000, he designed the scenography for A planet of visions, one of the main pavilions of the Hannover World's Fair. He also created the interior of the Belgian pavillion at the Expo 2005 in Aichi, Japan along with painter Alexandre Obolensky. In 2004-2005 he designed a large exposition, The Gates of Utopia, showing different aspects of his work, that was held in Leuven. Since 1991, François Schuiten has also designed 15 Belgian stamps. Among other works concerning architecture, Schuiten together with Benoît Peeters also helped to save and restore, along with architect Francis Metzger the Maison Autrique, the first Art Nouveau house designed by architect Victor Horta.

Benoît Peeters

Benoît Peeters was born in Paris the 28 of August, 1956, and has lived in Brussels since 1978. At the age of 12 he met François Schuiten in the Sainte-Barbe School at Brussels, where they collaborated in the school journal already with their current labour division, being François Schuiten the designer and Benoît Peeters the scriptwriter. After that, Schuiten would stay to attend the Institut Saint-Luc in Brussels while Peeters moved back to study Philosophy at the *Sorbonne*, in Paris. There, he obtained the *diplôme de l'École pratique des Hautes Etudes* and worked under the direction of Roland Barthes, with whom he developed an analysis of Hergé's work. After that, Peeters would move towards the «*Nouveau Roman*». In 1976 he published his first novel, *Omnibus* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1976). When Peeters and Schuiten met again in the late seventies, again in Brussels, they decided to do a new work together: *Les Murailles de Samaris*. Happy with the result, but feeling that it did not cover the whole idea they wanted to explain, they decided to further develop it in a new album of the same type. While discussing it with the publisher, the latter suggested to gather their creations under a generic title, and so, *The Obscure Cities* were born. From 1982 on, he dedicated exclusively to writing, multiplying his works in the fields of plotting, critique, edition and curating exhibitions.

Since he worked with Roland Barthes, Benoît Peeters has become an specialist in Hergé. He has published *Le monde d'Hergé* (Tournai: Casterman, 1983), *Les Bijoux ravis, une lecture moderne de Tintin* (Brussels: Magic-Strip, 1984), *Hergé: 1922-1932, les débuts d'un illustrateur*, (Benoît Peeters, Tournai: Casterman, 1987), *Hergé, dessinateur: 60 ans d'aventures de Tintin*, (Pierre Sterckx, Benoît Peeters, Tournai: Casterman, 1989), *Au Tibet avec Tintin* (along with Michel Serres, Benoît Peeters, Pierre-Antoine Donnet, Pascale Dollfus & Pierre Sterckx ; Tournai: Casterman, 1994) and a biography developed for the press: *Hergé, fils de Tintin* (Flammarion). As a theoretician and critic, he has produced multiple essays on comics, plot, storyboard, and also about Alfred Hitchcock (*Hitchcock, le travail du film*. Essay, Les Impressions Nouvelles, 1993), Paul Valéry (*Paul Valéry une vie d'écrivain?*. Paris: Les impressions nouvelles, 1989) and Nadar (*Les Métamorphoses de Nadar*, Marot, 1994).

Passionate for all the disciplines related to the visual arts, Benoît Peeters has also collaborated with other designers, such as Alain Goffin (*Le Théorème de Morcom*; Les Humanoïdes Associés, 1992), Anne Baltus (*Dolores* – also in collaboration with François Schuiten- Tournai: Casterman, 1991, Calypso; Tournai: Casterman, 1995), Frédéric Boilet (*Demi-tour*. Dupuis, 1997). Since 1981, he has worked with the photographer Marie-Françoise Plissart, both in the series “Les Cités Obscures” and in several photography books: *Correspondance* (brief texts and photographs; Yellow now, 1981); *Fugues* (1983); *Droit de regards* (1985); *Prague* (1985); *Le mauvais œil* (1986); *Aujourd’hui* (1993); and *Bruxelles, horizon vertical* (1998). He has directed three short films (*Le compte rendu* (1987), *La découverte inattendue* (1992), and *Servaisgraphia* (1992)), several documentaries (and fiction-documentaries) and a long film: *Le Dernier Plan* (Production Les Piérides, 1999). He has written several scripts for film directors Raoul Ruiz or Pierre Drouot, and has also collaborated with musicians such as Didier Denis or Bruno Letort. Along with Schuiten he has conceived several exhibitions, such as *Le Musée des Ombres*; *Hergé dessinateur*; *Au Tibet avec Tintin*; *Architectures rêvées*; *Les Métamorphoses de Nadar*; *Rêves de pierre*; *Le théâtre des images* and *Le Livre voyage*. In 2000 he was the organizer of the Exhibition-show “Tu parles!? le français dans tous ses états”, held in Brussels, Lyon and Dakar.

Luc Schuiten

Luc Schuiten (Brussels, 1944) remains such an iconoclastic figure in the field of architecture as his brother François does in the comics world. In the *Revue d'architecture Neuf* (September, 1995), Marie-Claire Regniers observed: « *Dans le paysage de l'architecture belge contemporaine, Luc Schuiten est une figure à part. S'affranchissant des lignes rigides ou traditionnelles de la construction, il tente de gérer différemment les matériaux et les techniques, axe sa recherche sur des maisons bioclimatiques, rêve d'habitarbres, ces logements organiques en osmose avec le végétal. Et face aux aires abandonnées, nées de discontinuités urbaines, construit des jardins verticaux issus du même imaginaire poétique. Au fil des années, Luc Schuiten dessine sans jamais se lasser une multitude de projets animés par le souci d'autres choix de vie. Une manière de penser qui a donné*

forme à une nouvelle architecture basée sur une vision poétique où l'invention et la relation avec la nature occupent une place prépondérante. » Sharing both his brother's graphic style and his inclination towards speculative architecture and urbanism, Luc, who graduated in *l'Institut Supérieur d'Architecture Victor Horta* in 1967, has specialised in the integration of housing/city and nature. His collaboration with his brother François, that would ultimately give birth to the series « Les Terres Creuses » (The Hollow Grounds) also included the stories “*La Terre creuse*” (*A suivre* n° 3, April 1978/ n° 11, December 1978), and “*Le Pionnier Filinor Von Katseff*” (*Le 9e rêve*, n° 3, 1979).

In the late seventies, after working with Willy Vandermeeren and Lucien Kroll and spending one year constructing villages in the desert of Morocco, Luc started his series of Maisons Biosolaires. His house and workshop *Maison «Orejona»* (Overijse, Brussels, 1978), that he built himself, was followed by the equally autoconstructed pavillon à 7 côtés (1982), the project for the *Maison Biosolaire de Ville* (1979), the *Maison Camerman* (Rosières, 1981) and the *Maison Dassonville-Monette* (1990). Also in 1977 he developed his first approach to a new use of Art Nouveau in the form of a design for a friend married couple. This design would lead to the subsequent «habitarbre» (*inhabitree*), a tree-shaped individual dwelling that he will continue to study until today. The stories he developed for his brother François became the vehicle for Luc to show his designs for environmentally conscious dwellings, and both the *habitarbre* and the *Maison Biosolaire de Ville* would appear in comics: the former in «*La Terre Creuse*» and the latter in “*Le Tailleur de Brume*”. Some of his more recent designs appeared also in *Le Guide des Cités* (1996).

The *habitarbre* embodies Schuiten's concept of *archiborescence*, that refers to the architecture that uses as its main elements of construction all kind of live organisms (especially vegetal), and that was further explained in the book of the same title (*Archiborescence*, Mardaga, 2006), written along with Pierre Loze. According to the principles of *archiborescence*, Luc Schuiten has developed a substantial amount of projects for utopian (archiborescent) cities, such as “*la cite des habitarbres*”, “*les cités des toits jardins*”, “*la cité des vagues*”, somehow mirroring Janine Benyus's concept of *biomimicry*. In 1995, the *Atelier Schuiten* started

developing a series of utopian projects for “vertical gardens” that introduced vegetation in residual spaces of the city of Brussels, which evolved later into the spiral green follies they proposed for *Neder-Over-Heembeek* (Belgium). Luc Schuiten has also developed theoretical designs for green toll stations and biomorphic skyscrapers.

Among other prizes, Luc Schuiten has received the *Prix Robert Maskens* for Maison “Orejona” (1978); the first prize in the competition “*Pour un habitat de qualité*” organised by the magazine *Architecture Belgium* with *une maison bioclimatique de ville* (1979). His project for the housing building “Oxygène”, his Maison Camerman (Rosières, 1981) and the Maison Dassonville-Monette (category *Maison individuelle neuve*, 1991) were also prized in competitions organized by the *Ministère de la Région Wallonne*. Also, he was one of the Belgian architects mentioned in Marc Dubois’s *Belgio: architettura, gli ultimi vent’anni*. A recent sample of Luc Schuiten’s work on this field has been shown in the exhibition « Archiborescence », held in the *Maison d’Ailleurs* in Yverdon-les-Bains (October 29, 2006 – March 11, 2007). The catalog of the exhibition has been published under the title *Habitatbre* (Sprimont: Mardaga, 2007). Also in 2007 he designed the poster for the Congress Utopiales, which featured an *archiborescent* Nantes in the year 2100.

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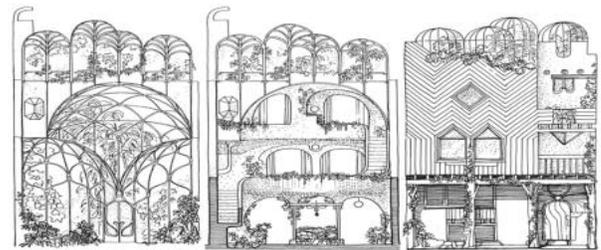
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Above: Art Nouveau and green utopia in “*Le Tailleur de Brume*”.

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ENDNOTES

1. Soler, Francisco. "Schuitem y Peeters: Construyendo la Utopía". In *Krazy Comics* n° 8. Editorial Complot. May 1990.

2. The series « Les Terres Creuses » (The Hollow Grounds) has its origin in the first works that François and Luc Schuitem develop in the late seventies for magazines *Métal Hurlant* or *A Suivre*. Some of these stories were later compiled in the first album of the series, *Carapaces* (1981). Two more albums, made of complete stories, followed this: *Zara* (1985) and *Nogegon* (1990), all published by Les Humanoïdes Associés.

3. KING, Moses. New York: American Lithographic Co. (1905 edition); New York: Moses King, inc. (1915 edition).

4. Other films concerning the *City of the Future* quickly followed *Metropolis*, albeit less successfully. The sci-fi musical "Just imagine" (David Butler, 1930) rendered accurately the works of Corbett and Ferriss, but lacked the evocative power of Lang's landscapes. "High Treason" (Maurice Elvey, 1928) would be the most humble of these approaches.

5. See WILLIS, C., *Skyscraper Utopias: Visionary Urbanism in the 1920s*. In *Imagining tomorrow: history, technology, and the American future*.

6. *The Avenue of High-Rises: An Extraordinary Project to Resolve the Question of Housing in the Paris Region* (1922). Drawings by Jacques Lambert.

7. See Hübsch, Heinrich, "In what Style should we build?" (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 1992). Originally published as "In welchem Style sollen wir bauen?" (1828).

8. François Schuitem and Benoît Peeters, Facilitators for Maison Autrique. "The Maison Autrique: an Adventure" in *Maison Autrique: metamorphosis of an Art nouveau house*. Bruxelles: Les impressions nouvelles, c2004.

9. Benoît Peeters: "Return to Samaris". Text included in the revised edition of *The High Walls of Samaris* (Schuitem, François; Peeters, Benoît. *Les murailles de Samaris*, Casterman, Tournai. 1988). In the same text he adds: "A style like this, which one can easily imagine how inhabitable would be in reality (even Horta abandoned his sublime house few years after building it) would be an especially exciting hypothesis for a story." This engagement gained a new dimension in 1996, when, four years after publishing their manifesto-critique *Brüssel* (1992), they became involved in

the restoration of the Maison Autrique (1893), Victor Horta's first Art Nouveau building.

See Loos, Adolf. "Poor Little Rich Man". First published in 1900.

10. Also in "The Maison Autrique: an Adventure" we read: "Everytime, Horta's architecture struck us by a breadth and intelligence going far beyond the decorative values which have defined it. His work, exact and accessible, has an almost narrative feel: it foresees movements, creates mystery, plans surprises. Like a cartoonist, Horta structures the space, directs the eye, plays on light and colour. His very approach to his projects drew on the art of fiction. A house, according to him, should not only be created 'in the image of its occupiers' life', it should actually be a portrait, in their 'image'".

11. See Loos, Adolf. "Poor Little Rich Man". First published in 1900.

12. An example of this can be found in the comparison between Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's iron ceilings (Plate XXVI of the Atlas accompanying the *Entretiens sur l'Architecture* (Paris: A. Morel et Cie, 1864) and Victor Horta's fan vault of the stairwell in Solvay House, as shown in "Horta and Viollet-le-Duc", in Aubry, Françoise. *Horta: The Ultimate Art Nouveau Architect*. Photographs by Christine Bastin & Jacques Evrard; Ludion. Ghent, 2005.

13. This was an aspiration of Viollet that neither his followers nor the classic historiography seem to have understood. In "Notes on Viollet-le-Duc's Philosophy of History, Dialectics, and Technology," (*Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, December 1989, pp. 327-350), Martin Bressani argues that Viollet's theoretical designs "(...) are almost deliberately awkward; if they had been masterpieces one would have been forced to only admire and copy them". Viollet wants to provide the 'barbarian element, like manure in the soil' to allow for future growth." In this sense, Schuitem's proposals, notwithstanding their nature of drawings, mean a step in the direction longed by Viollet, in a way that Guimard did not (or did not want to) understand when, in his *Ecole du Sacré Cœur* (Paris, 1895), he literally quoted the "Market-Hall with Room above" shown by Viollet in *Lectures on Architecture II* (Plate XXI, 1872).

See Loos, Adolf. "Poor Little Rich Man". First published in 1900.

14. In Schuitem, François; Peeters, Benoît. *Le guide des Cités obscures*. Casterman, Tournai. 1996. p. 146.

15. Schuitem, François; Peeters, Benoît. *Le guide des Cités obscures*. Casterman, Tournai. 1996. p. 95.

16. This was not, however, the first time that François Schuitem used this style, that he has alternated with his engraving technique all along his career. Four years before, he had already used this technique in the tale "Mary la penchée" (Schuitem, François, Peeters, Benoît. Casterman, Tournai, 1995). In fact, his first flirtings with pictorial techniques go back to the stories compiled in the volume *Carapaces* (Schuitem, François; Schuitem, Luc. *Les Terres creuses* (I), Les Humanoïdes Associés, 1981).

17. Schuiten, François; Peeters, Benoît. *L'ombre d'un homme*. Casterman, Tournai. 1999.

18. Blossfeldt, Karl. *Urformen der Kunst. Photographische Pflanzenbilder, von Professor Karl Blossfeldt. Herausgegeben mit einer Einleitung von Karl Nierendorf. 120 Bildtafeln*. Berlin : E. Wasmuth; Berlin, E. Wasmuth, A.G., 1928. New York : E. Weyhe, 1929. His Second Series of Art Forms in Nature were published in *Wundergarten der Natur; neue Bilddokumente Schöner Pflanzenformen*. Berlin, Verlag für Kunstwissenschaft [c1932].

19. Karl Blossfeldt's pictures had already been used in the design of the first *Obscure City*. In the view of the rooftops of Xhystos, page 5, one can see Blossfeldt's *aconitum* transformed into a roof ornament. This three-lobed plant is taken from *Urformen der Kunst*.

20. The resemblance between both structures is reinforced by the composition of the frame, which is similar in the film and in the comic book. In the album's cover we find an aerial view of a similar construction, which reminds of the heliport in the roof of the New Tower of Babel that appears as a more distinctive feature in earlier designs, and that is briefly showed from above in the film. This image was also revisited by Syd Mead in his design for the Police Headquarters in *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982).

21. In *La Tour* (Casterman, Tournai, 1987) , where Schuiten and Peeters paid their personal homage to Giambattista Piranesi, there was also a explicit rendition of Pieter Brueghel's *The Great Tower of Babel* (1563), and *The Small Construction of the Tower of Babel* (1563). In the Pavillion "Planet of Visions" at the Hannover International Exhibition (2000), for which he designed the scenography, Francois Schuiten could finally build his own "little tower of Babel".

22. The many drawings from the production of *Metropolis* that have been preserved are very explicit of this pursue by Lang. In Erich Kettelhut's first sketches, the center of *Metropolis* was a friendlier atmosphere, with ample multi-level streets that allow people to gather away from the traffic. In the subsequent proposals the lively, eclectic European city of the early sketches became a skyscraper city where the ground plane was increasingly more difficult to discern, and the streets, crossed by bridges, became concrete riffs.

23. In 2005, Schuiten and Peeters started to publish a new series in the journals *Le Soir* and *De Morgen* in Belgium and *Courrier international* in France; a series that was framed outside the *Obscure universe*. *Les Portes du Possible* was a collection of one-page fictitious articles set in a not too distant future (ranging from 2011 to 2046). The news of this journal covered different fields: sports, society, politics, arts and entertainment, in a future Europe. In *Une Nouvelle Centralité* (Porte 8), both authors depicted an "inhabitable aqueduct" that mirrored the utopian ideas by Hood that Ferriss had drawn in his "bridge apartment houses". This *inhabited bridge*, that would link *Wattenwil* and *Guggisberg*, represented a proposal to interweave city and landscape, and formalized a return to nature that refers to the works with which Luc Schuiten, through the concept of *Archiborescence* has been proposing an

architecture that evolves from ecology for over thirty years. This link is even more obvious in *"Au Jardin des Délices"* (Porte 18), a park held by an *arborescent* structure that rises over Tokyo's highways and skyscrapers. In its lower side, inverted glass domes overlook the city. In this proposal, we find echoes of *"les jardins verticaux"*, as well as of the *"habitarbres"* or the *"maisons biosolaires"*, but, above all, we find an accurate rendition of a smaller project, the tollgates for the *Autoroute A-29* (1996), developed up to urban scale.