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idea journal

**fictions, fantasies, and fabulations:
imagining other interior worlds**

vol. 19, no. 01

2022

**the journal of IDEA: the interior design +
interior architecture educators association**



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design + production

Dr Ir Renske Maria van Dam

correspondence

Correspondence regarding this publication should be addressed to:

Dr Chris Cottrell

Chair IDEA

chris.cottrell@monash.edu

this issue's provocation

While the world reels, reconfigures, and recovers from the drama and trauma of 2020, wishing to thwart the effects of grief and comprehend what was once incomprehensible, there is all good reason to turn our imagination to 'what ifs', dreams, and other speculations as an antidote to hopelessness. This issue, *Fictions, Fantasies, and Fabulations*, calls for contributions that consider the unlikely, improbable, or downright impossible in spatial design. In recent history, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations have offered productive opposition to the rampant instrumentality of pragmatism and functional planning. Their impact has instilled optimism, sparked alternative visions, and been sites of countless critiques of conformity and the status quo. Loosely defined impulses towards the unrealisable and the most illogical of things approached in the most logical of ways have led to unparalleled episodes of creativity in drawings, poems, and material production. From Piranesi, Peter Greenaway, Kurt Schwitters, Dora Maar, Hans Op de Beeck, Ursula Le Guinn, John Hejduk, to Daniel Libeskind, explorations of the impossible have led to new interpretative frontiers that move the limits of interiority and spatial practices. Lest we forget or become complacent with the contributory and often unrecognised impact of contemporary social media, advertisement, and technological surveillance that continues to shape interior worlds, experiences, and values. In many ways, there is as much focus on unpacking, making sense of, and disproving the dangerous impacts of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations as there is on setting the scene for dreams and magical realities.

This issue recognises the complex story of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial design, not as counter-productive forces, but as the necessary counter-balances that offer liberty from convention, propriety, and rational assumptions about behaviour, space, time, and material — the core elements of interior worlds. Far from retreating into solipsistic escapism, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations serve as crucial sites for speculative invention, futuring, and critical reflection. Resistant to the reductive inertia of pragmatism, these generative properties reign in that mercurial shadow world of meaning and value not directly associated with cause and effect.

This call for papers and projects is intended to frame an open examination and exploration of the fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial and interior practices. It prompts us to draw, write, perform, and record the critical edge of the unrealisable in an era that has literally experienced the limits of reason. As described by poet Franny Choi, there is no more time for poetry without stakes because 'people are literally dying'. There is no more time for creative practices that don't ask questions that we 'truly don't know the answer to'.⁰¹ Choi's sentiments air a sense of urgency for relevance as much as they point to the value and agency of poetic meaning and making in artistic, spatial, and interior practices.

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01 https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLYUdgQtOLXlc7HWIc3nBH7VNNvt5hDTA&v=iwoS--CB7k8&ab_channel=PBSNewsHour

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william heath robinson and k. r. g. browne: literature contraptions as inspiration for facing spatial issues

Sofía Quiroga Fernández

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool
University

[0000-0003-1261-3632](tel:0000-0003-1261-3632)

Guillermo Sánchez Sotés

Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool
University

[0000-0001-8829-8232](tel:0000-0001-8829-8232)

abstract

When living in tiny apartments without proper ventilation, sunlight, contact with nature, or the possibility of social interaction, people tend to generate creative and flexible design strategies to overcome these difficulties. Private and public spaces can be reconfigured into multifunctional areas by using simple but effective means to create links between home and nature.

This text-based essay identifies existing and historical architectural discourse that addresses social, cultural, and perceptual issues as a means to locate conceptual solutions suitable for buildings and flats. An inquiry into William Heath Robinson's (1872–1944) drawings indicates that these images, while satiric, were inspired by complex issues that crossed disciplinary boundaries, taking architectural narrative into the political, cultural, economic, aesthetic, and social discourse. The satirical engines created by Robinson constitute a socio-political critique through the representation of biting solutions to the difficulties found in new settlements in the post-industrial city. During this period, many people living in the United Kingdom (UK) moved from the countryside to the cities, and consistently found themselves living in small apartments. The difficulties arising from the lack of space were addressed by Robinson's unbalanced and hypothetical design solutions that included proposing indoor space fabulations that would extend traditional forms of users' occupation. Though an engineer who identified problems and then invented solutions, his creative work was a strange contraption rooted in impossible ideas. He illustrated the possibilities of bringing life to the common areas of shared housing by transforming tiny apartments by adding mobile solutions with the aim to improve the lives of inhabitants. The concepts behind these creative solutions traced back one century ago can be seen as a counterpart to contemporary transformative interior design strategies.

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william heath robinson: contraptions, irony, and absurdity

William Heath Robinson (1872–1944) was an English cartoonist and illustrator who portrayed and represented outlandish inventions based on daily activities as a social and cultural critic.⁰¹ Robinson illustrated and wrote several books in collaboration with Kenneth Robert Gordon Browne (1895–1940), which addressed different aspects of UK social and urban development during the interwar period. This period was marked by a hesitant modernisation in planning, usually frustrated by administrative incoherence, failure of political will, and financial constraints, which were reflected in urban planning.⁰² Over time, the rapid urban growth forced by the market generated overcrowded neighbourhoods that did not comply with living space requirements related to users' needs. Blocks of housing flats proliferated indiscriminately in cities and suburbs, generating cramped accommodation rented and managed by opportunist landlords. The cost of building increased rapidly, making the price of flats similar to or even more expensive than a self-contained house with similar accommodation.⁰³ The rapid expansion of UK cities and housing construction and management during the interwar period provided Robinson with substantial opportunity for satire and the creation of fictional narratives and fabulations linked to urban interior dwelling.

Historically, literature and art are linked to daily life; both reflect pressing political, social, and economic issues.⁰⁴ Professor Erik Nakjavani suggests that literature creates a world of fiction that multiplies our sense of reality and possibilities.⁰⁵ Additionally, academic Leila Claire states that through the inhabitation of a fictional universe, both the writer and the reader can explore personally uncharted avenues of absurd reality through the fictional narrative created.⁰⁶ Through representing absurd situations, literature paradoxically allows readers to arrive at a clearer understanding of the designed fiction. The fiction created in Robinson's books and publications demonstrates his particular revolt against the political, cultural, economic, aesthetic, and social conditions; they did so through illustrations of absurd artefacts that could facilitate divergent thinking by proactively exploring new design strategies that may improve living conditions. In their collaboration as illustrator and writer, Robinson and Browne bring to readers the idea of a personal world that otherwise would be impossible to imagine. The interpreted meaning of the words, alongside drawings, must be decoded to understand the critical reflection behind them. The stereotypes adopted in the drawings and their transformation help the reader to decode the critical issues addressed. At the same time, the text acts as a second mirror reading to reproduce the meaning of the drawings. The interdependent correspondence between representation and text reinforces

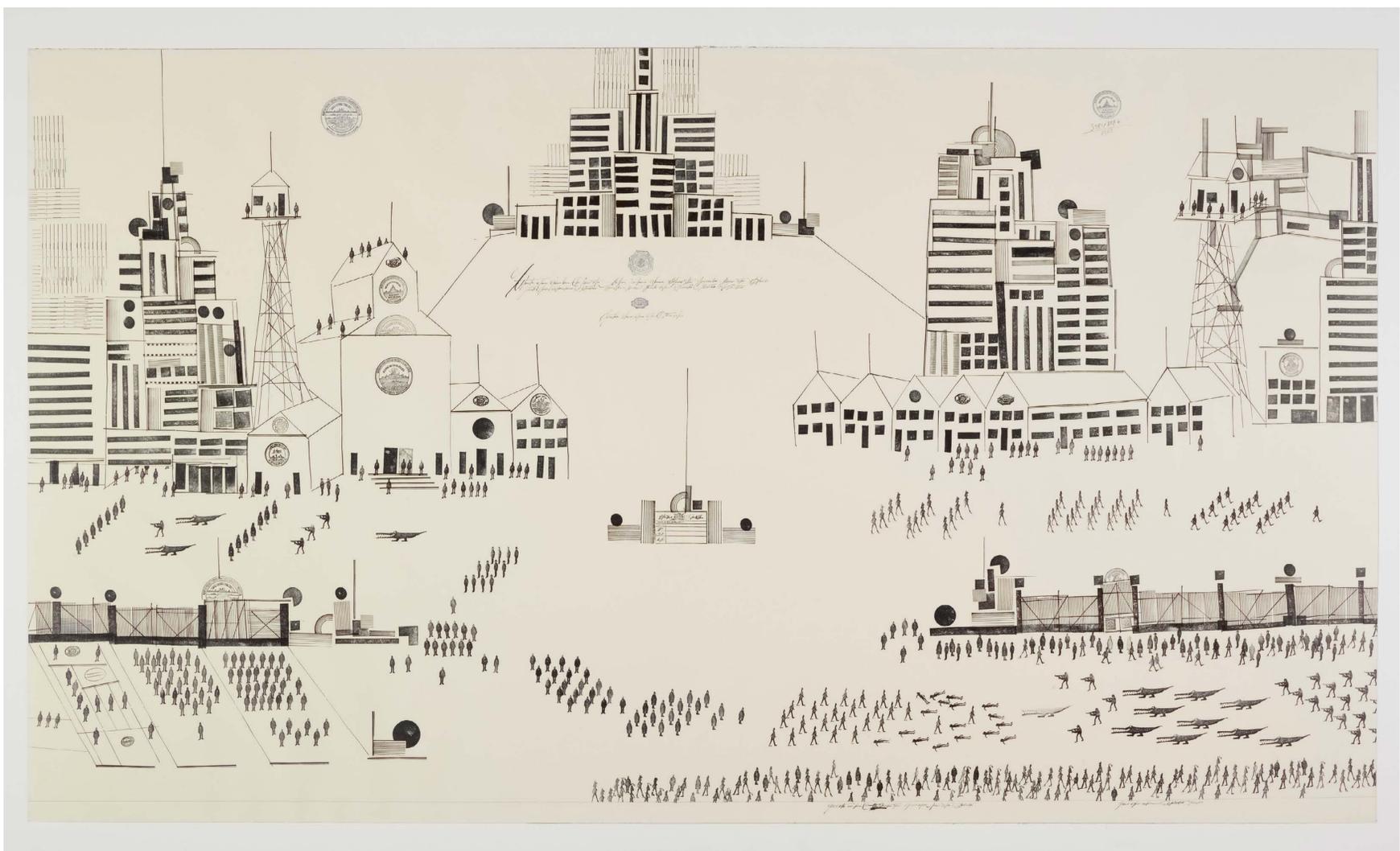
the significance of establishing a coherent and argumentative critique. Robinson's critical approach can be considered as a graphic narrative that explores the conflicted boundaries of what can be said and what can be shown at the intersection of collective histories and life stories.⁰⁷ Irony and the representation of absurdity are graphically used to propose an alternative description of space and activities.

Graphic fiction is subject to an alternative logic; it is a compelling tool that reveals links between communication, space, criticism, and movement in which readers can identify themselves.⁰⁸ Drawing itself is a place for experimenting, exploring, and reinventing

actions and spaces, contributing to the production of new realities and possibilities. Artist Saul Steinberg defined drawing as a way of 'reasoning on paper.'⁰⁹ In 'Graph Paper Architecture' (1950–1954) he uses graphic representation to criticise International Style modernism in architecture as well as American post-war urban development.¹⁰ Steinberg's diagrammatic drawings (Figure 01) show a special ability to evoke new worlds, allowing viewers to discover the different layers of meaning that resonate with the visual conventions of architectural modernism and with popular experience of the modernist city.¹¹

Figure 01.

Saul Steinberg, 'The Administration Building', 1969 © Yale University Art Library.



Humour has the ability to replace reality with fantasy.¹² As a form of social communication, it is extraordinarily effective in reappropriating and questioning architectural and urban culture.¹³ Humour allows us to enforce norms delicately by levelling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification with the audience.¹⁴ It appeals to issues that are very familiar to the audience, placing the target of it in a position of sharing meaning or perspective on the represented issue.¹⁵ As a powerful tool of architectural criticism and protest, humour offers a vision of the fallibilities of life. Humorous drawings such as cartoons are particularly compelling instruments of the architectural critic.¹⁶ Cartoons reflect critical social events and

popular cultural components.¹⁷ As a medium of conceptual narrative, cartoons offer a space of freedom and experimentation, which have been used to express inherent aspects of space and architecture in terms of dystopia and modernity. For instance, Archigram used the graphic codes from comics to describe and represent projects as well as a provocative and experimental medium that reflected a popular social climate interpreted through the lens of architectural education.¹⁸ The use of such unusual languages inspired by sci-fi novels and comics (Figure 02) facilitates communication, contributes to understanding space without knowing technical language, and activates the participation of the reader.¹⁹



Figure 02.
'Instant City Strikes Again',
Archigram Magazine, 9 (p. 5)
© Archigram 1970.

The visual narrative intends to engage with the audience by revealing information in order to produce a response in the viewers. The graphic representation contains the idea that it prefigures and offers a particular notion of its potential as catalyst for creativity and imagination, offering a medium to create new meanings.²⁰ As Professor of Architecture Paul Emmons acknowledges, drawings could be considered a tool to provide the viewer with an imagined spatial experience through its representation.²¹ Similarly, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu states that drawings offer a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions that make possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks.²² Robinson's drawings centred on domestic life (Figures 03 and 04) address these points as the transforming activity of turning space and behaviour into parody.²³ The illustrations portray both inner and outdoor areas of buildings, employing the idea of an imaginative and hilarious inhabitation that ironically reflects the Victorian age of the machine and the rise of modernism. The depicted illustrations portray basic principles of behaviour, visually describing alternative conduct in public and private areas (Figure 05). Mediated by humour, these activities relate to a habitation in which daily tasks are assisted by diverse contraptions that mould the imagined interior space. The illustrations offer a deconstructed visual representation of events and situations to become a graphic mechanism of criticism mediated by humour, irony, and absurdity.²⁴

Irony is usually defined as a 'figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used.'²⁵ According to various authors, there have been several attempts to reconcile irony as a worldview and formal method of literary discourse.²⁶ To Professor and newspaper columnist Leon Satterfield, literary irony is a 'discourse that appears to be moving in one direction while really moving in another.'²⁷ Usually used for humorous effect, it is open to subversive interpretations.²⁸ Irony depends on the notion of intended meaning, which is a usual target of criticism. By using irony, theorists and artists identify relations of power and question epistemologies that inform histories of morality, expressing the realities of social behaviour.²⁹ Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and philosopher Richard Rorty assume irony to be a social construction inherently resistant to a moral and political convention.³⁰ Providing reliable rhetoric for locating abuses of power, identifying injustice, and shaping public or private sensibilities, it is becoming a tool to generate social discourses that act as cultural satire.³¹ While Rorty believes irony encourages private sensibilities, Niebuhr leans towards public justice. Irony multiplies meanings by establishing a distortion of the real situation, in which the criticised action, activity, object, or idea could be displaced, reinforced, or repositioned in the desired direction.³² Authors such as Professor Ross Murfin describe the term as a contradiction

or incongruity between appearance or expectations and reality, which could be applied to a variety of events, situations, and structural elements.³³ Even when designed with an intended aim, the idea of an object, machine, or space is open to ambiguity and interpretation; the viewer must recognise the discrepancy in order to achieve its effect as socio-political criticism.

Robinson's fabulations publicly exposed different social, economic, and political features by conveying social meaning through concepts of parody such as humour and irony. The semantics of the parody reproduce a social situation, amplifying conventions and manners; readers can identify themselves within these narratives. This approach established a form of criticism that expressed uncertainty and proposed new systems and solutions based on ironic thoughts and newly constructed realities that offer other viewpoints placed between the sphere of reality and fantasy. The contraption appears as a critic that responds to the incompatibility observed between the traditional spatial layout of dwellings, the lack of space, and the new users' needs (Figures 03 and 04); that is, the new middle class living in flats and serviced apartments without enough money to employ attendants. The daily activities such as doing exercise (Figure 05), having dinner with friends (Figure 03), resting (Figure 04), or sleeping (Figure 03) depicted in Robinson's drawings offer unexpected uses and arrangements creating new spatial realities activated by users.

Philosopher Henri Bergson suggested that any arrangement of acts and events could be comical as they present the illusion of life and the impression of a recognisable mechanical arrangement.³⁴ Additionally, the human behaviour — or, as Bergson defines it, the ceremonial side of social life — represented in drawings (attitudes, movements, character) is what diverges from normal behaviour and provokes laughter, which makes us aware of the criticism, the irony, and the represented absurdity.³⁵

Philosopher Albert Camus considered that absurdity emerges as a human need to understand the world, arising as a confrontation with or opposition to ideals emerging from misplaced disappointments.³⁶ He also suggested that the realisation of senselessness occurs all around us constantly.³⁷ In the same line of thought, Leila Clare El-Qawas considers that the use of absurdity is an acknowledgement of the universal futility of life and work; she chooses to exult in both.³⁸ Philosopher Bob Plant states that absurdity emerges into the human experience.³⁹ Equally so, philosopher Thomas Nagel specifies that the experience of absurdity is relational; it arises in ordinary situations and distorts the nature of reality.⁴⁰ The human experience is the basis of Robinson's work; his drawings analyse daily life critically, reconstructing a new fiction through experimental contraptions linked to the UK's specific urban context.⁴¹

In Robinson's illustrations, the built environment is reinvented through the action of appropriation, creating new affordances that revise the idea of inside–outside, public and private, or leisure, game, and work. According to psychologist James Gibson, affordances are possibilities for action offered by the environment.⁴² Additionally, historians Erik and Ronald Rietveld established that affordances depend not only on the way in which our environment is designed but also on people's abilities, sociocultural practices, and activity patterns.⁴³ In other words, new designs can create new affordances that are potentially able to transform patterns of activity and even change sociocultural practices. Professors of Mechanical Engineering Maier and Fadel suggest that affordances must first exist before the behaviour afforded can ever be exhibited.⁴⁴ It follows that new affordances imply new behaviours based on one's mental interpretation of new conditions that are formed on the basis of one's knowledge and experience, and then applied to our perception of the environment. Robinson illustrates how buildings are not designed to afford the desired uses for their occupants. Consequently, he transforms them through different contraptions and obtains spatial reconfigurations, working as a biting political and social critic of inefficient designs and urban planning. Through these contraptions, he explores imaginative and novel affordances that are ignored simply because they do not fit with normative use or social patterns. The correlation between space, user, and activity

are crucial in order to understand Robinson's contraptions, in which affordances pertain to what the environment means for the actor.⁴⁵ All of the above informs our analysis of Robinson's new, ironic, nonsensical social critique.

w. h. robinson's operations

Due to the UK's accelerated modernisation and change in modes of living in the interwar period, conventional flats were converted into a number of smaller flats; the new layouts allowed five families to live where previously only one family lived.⁴⁶ Robinson and Browne stated that 'converted houses were never intended to be flats', a comparison between the large blocks of flats and 'utopian prisons or Armenian glue factories' fitted with every mechanical device possible to address the limited space available.⁴⁷ These flats were generally full of drawbacks, which, according to Robinson and Browne, 'were calculated to fray the tenants' nerves and make veins stand out on their foreheads.'⁴⁸

Robinson's appreciation of the mental health of tenants, related to the new urbanism, its layouts, and its effect on the wellbeing of users, was also recorded by the Women House Managers Committee in official documents presented to the London Unhealthy Areas Committee in 1920.⁴⁹ The report reflected the system of large blocks of flats as depressing; they aggravated the lives of tenants, and were a source of difficulties in housing management. The report linked spatial issues

concerning the design of the new urbanism and these flats with a mental health concern.⁵⁰ Robinson's contraptions work as space-economising mechanical device solutions that respond to living conditions by multiplying the possibilities of space. The mechanical devices were meant to create new realities and actions through the combination and transformation of daily elements. Because spatial domesticity is socially and culturally classed, the contraptions created architectural paradoxes with the conventional model of living; each designed element communicated absurdity through its opposition to a regular spatial, cultural, and social experience (Figure 03). Robinson applied changes to the general layout, producing major modifications in people's behaviour. The illustrations included in the series 'Heath Robinson Patents for Doing Away with Servants' published in *The Sketch* magazine (1921) presented a range of contraptions to replace domestic servants in different rooms: the kitchen, the dining room, the drawing-room, and the bedroom.⁵¹ Robinson reflected the political and economic issues that affected society while considering the concerns of the public and the design demands of the private realm.

The architectonic incongruity we can perceive in the drawings appears as a result of an unusual composition of semantic units used in architecture. It opens up the possibility of a new, creative understanding of space and uses, replacing the 'reality' with hilarious and, at some point, impractical solutions that

reorganise the established and normative design. New, unusual objects and contraptions are used to generate new domesticities (Figures 03 and 04) in order to generate new spatial experiences that can be understood as an analogy of what architects do. In the book *How to Live in a Flat*, Robinson focused on parodies that took on conventions of popular domestic narratives as their targets. He contemplated the nature of reality and created a new method of solving an existing condition, sometimes breaking a rule by using a conventional or unconventional paradox in an attempt to create a solution through augmentation of the existing issue to make it more visible (Figure 04) — sometimes inventing unexpected uses based on conventional elements (Figure 03). The use of ironic images and terms draws attention to territory, history, language, materiality, and architectural issues. Robinson was capable of analysing the comic situations of daily life activities, as well as the historical transformation of society as a whole. The ironic text developed by Browne describes the events that usually occur in a non-conventional flat, illustrated by Robinson as a critic, as can be found in the book *How to Live in a Flat*. The text, together with the figures, can be seen as ironic symbols revealing the supposed benefits of the new minimal flats and way of living. However, they refer to just the opposite — the lack of space and the difficulties found there — which indicates the contradictions of the represented situation. The illustrations pay

attention to the lived experience by focusing on the inhabitants' actions to suggest new and unusual spatial possibilities comically. The performative solutions offer a narrative related to interiority spatial configurations with regard to adaptability and their capacity to accommodate users' changing and combining spatial needs (Figures 03 and 04). The illustrations exemplify satirical insights to overcome the challenges of modern life in which contraptions might be used to reorganise space.

In 'An Ideal Home Number V: The Spare Room' (Figure 03) the designed contraptions portray the use of adaptable and mechanical furniture to increase the use of the micro-apartment ironically.⁵² The movement of ceilings (Figure 03) and partitions reveals several arrangements that are adaptable to the changing life requirements of adequate housing, such as gathering, dancing, sleeping, and reading, among other usual and unusual activities, confronting the distance between desire and disparity. The assemblage of the elements that create the contraptions exaggerates certain spatial qualities, intensifying the estrangement of lifestyle scenarios and capturing the playfulness of the inventions. The complicated contraptions are created to address simple tasks carried out by different participants in the scenes depicted in the illustrations (Figure 03). The users of the contraptions draw attention to the ambiguity of the strange actions and experiences that determine the traces and signs of their personal social status and lifestyle.

The graphical representation establishes evidence for the necessity of a contraption operator who alters the patterns of recurrent behaviour in relation to the specific social and domestic spatial settings where life takes place. The contraption mediates with others in the interaction, transforming the collective experience of space and expanding forms of spatial occupation. The occupants become a spatial catalyst, able to conceive new creative and imaginative ways of living that respond ironically to the specific spatial, urban, social, and cultural challenges of their time.

The complexity of impressions and the imperfection become signs of life, transforming the living space into an alternative reality able to locate the experience differently, changing concepts such as privacy and habitation through interventions and contraptions that illustrate how design embodies the new technological world. In 'The Fresh Air Parlour' (Figure 04), the extension made using materials not commonly used, like chromium-steel tubing, renders an imaginative space for action. A settled micro-apartment is transformed into a metamorphic apartment able to create new situations feigning the provision of more privacy and the illusion of comfort. The represented environments capture the simultaneity of social experiences, in which architecture acts as a stage. The depicted events portray different ways of experiencing urban life, presenting radical and alternative proposals where place and space are formed through social actions and relations.

Heath Robinson's interior fabulation depicted in 'An Ideal Home Number V: The Spare Room' (Figure 03) published in *The Sketch* (1933) portrays life linked to interiority and adaptability concepts. By including specific contraptions and mechanisms, Robinson offers a solution to solve the lack of interior space when a spare room is needed.

The illustration shows how servants are replaced by hydraulic mechanisms and contraptions, revealing economic and social issues experienced by the new medium class users. The irony of such economic and social connotations is immersed in the representation of this performative spatial interior by the representation of owners doing activities usually performed by servants.

Two plywood boards, in the form of movable structural floors, hang from the wall until the moment the spare room is needed. They configure the floor of the temporary spare room. The telescopic manual blower system uploads the boards enclosing the new room. The spare room is spatially organised through its furniture that is pulled up by a connected system of pulleys and ropes operated manually from wheels located symmetrically on the walls. The rope, looped over wheels, transmits movement and motion easily. Four wheels on each side are used to lift the bed together with the guest, reducing the force exerted to lift it. The action sets the new space configuration. Robinson included two system operators, a man and a woman, showing how easily the system performs when used by either gender. The room's

furniture is completed by a nightstand (with a bottle of water and a glass), operated by a smaller system of pulleys from the wall on the back, and a chest of drawers and an alarm clock hanging from the ceiling permanently. Hanging from tubular horizontal rods, a curtain appears; the role of the curtain as a partition element creates different temporary settings within the same interior space. Its ephemeral character manipulates the domestic interior and provides temporary arrangements and privacy. Curtains in this case take over the role of walls, creating a fictional intimate environment for guests. The solution is described as a brilliant idea that renders the possibility of entertaining in the smallest flat without the slightest difficulty.⁵³ The image ironically indicates different modes of shaping the space that suggest different patterns of use and privacy.

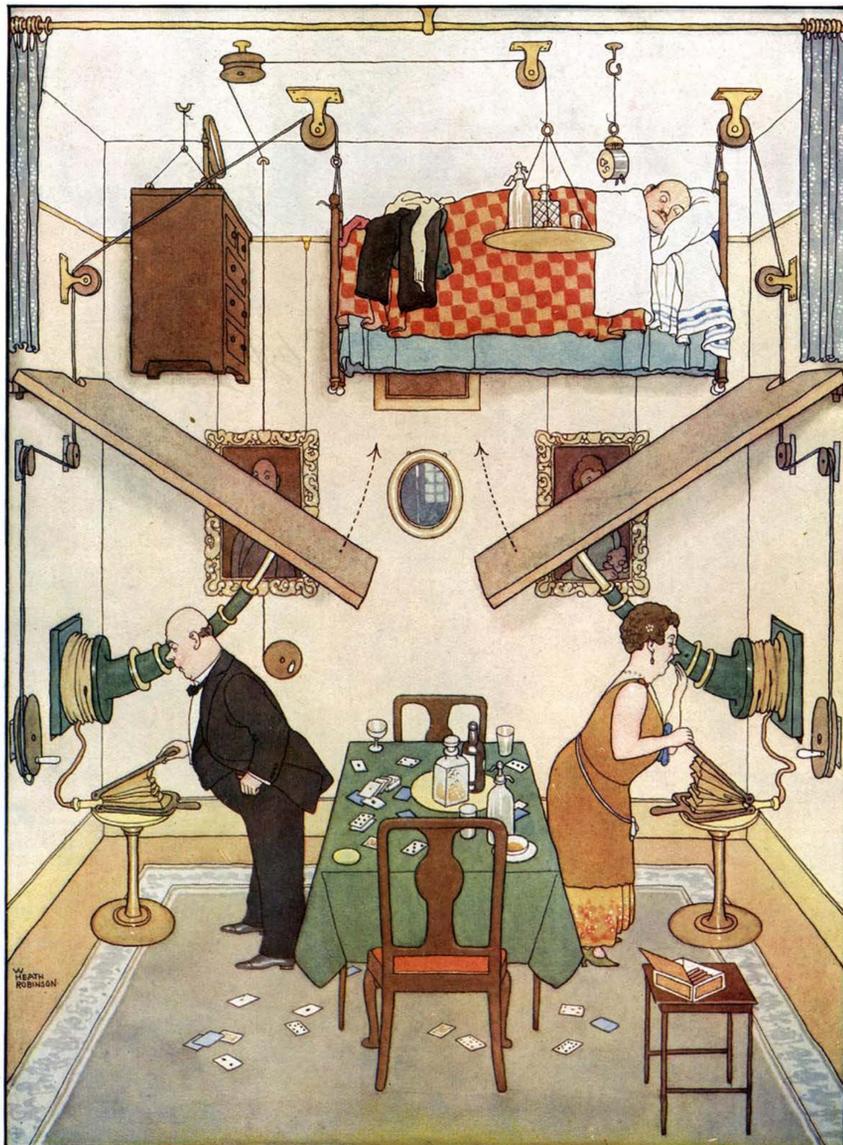


Figure 02.
Heath Robinson. 'An Ideal Home
Number V: The Spare Room'.
Published by *The Sketch*, London,
26 April 1933, 16. Photo ©
The Heath Robinson Museum,
Pinner, UK.

In several illustrations included in the book *How to Live in a Flat*, Robinson depicts structural systems that create an outdoor extension of the apartments. The fictional extension palliates the high density of the new constructions and the residents' feeling of being constrained within their apartments. Areas of diverse use, such as leisure, greenery/gardens, pet houses, or children's rooms, are represented in these extensions.⁵⁴ In 'The Fresh Air Parlour' (1936) illustration (Figure 04), the interior atmosphere is recreated by the arrangement of objects and the users's performance. The creation of this new fictional interior space into the outdoor environment maximises the limited space available. 'The Fresh Air Parlour' fabulation is defined by a framed tubular structure projected from the wall that virtually encloses the new open room. The room acts as a mediator between enclosure and freedom. The decorative and domestic elements suspended from or strapped to poles, such as the small coffee table, a chair, the pictures and a clock, and the hanging window and the entrance door located on the building wall, immerse the user into the spatial fiction. The interpenetration of spatial structures in such images establishes a new relationship between the house and its exterior space, blurring the boundaries between indoor and outdoor, domesticity and privacy, leisure, pet playground, farming, and other unexpected activities. Robinson emphasises the idea of alternative accommodation arranged outside. The descriptive text that follows the image ironically mentions that:

[...] pets and babies could be suspended in cages and cradles from stanchions attached to the exterior wall of the building; It keeps them out of sight when irascible old relatives drop in and encourage[s] balmy zephyrs to play on them in a very healing way.⁵⁵

This idea of alternative accommodation that modifies the performance of users is also reflected in the illustration series 'An Ideal Home' Designs, which was published in 1933

in *The Sketch*. In this series, Robinson states that the alternative accommodation was designed for the supposed benefit of the readers.⁵⁶ The illustrations include ironic sketches 'showing folding gardens for flat dwellers with a love of open-air life, with the intention to appeal to all householders who like to enjoy rustic amenities in an urban setting.'⁵⁷ The sketches present a critique of the absence of green areas and leisure spaces in new constructions, revealing its inconvenience for occupants.

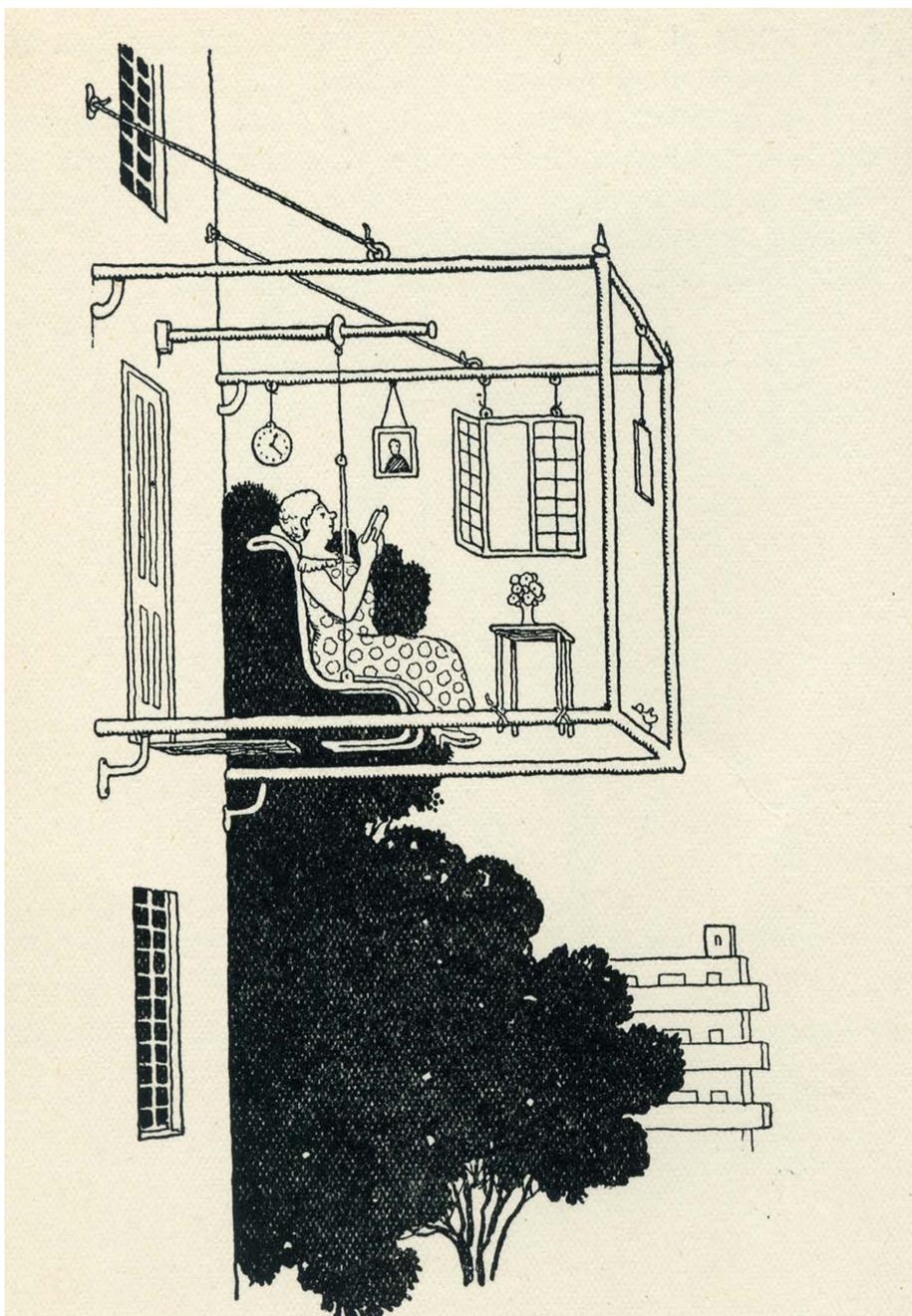


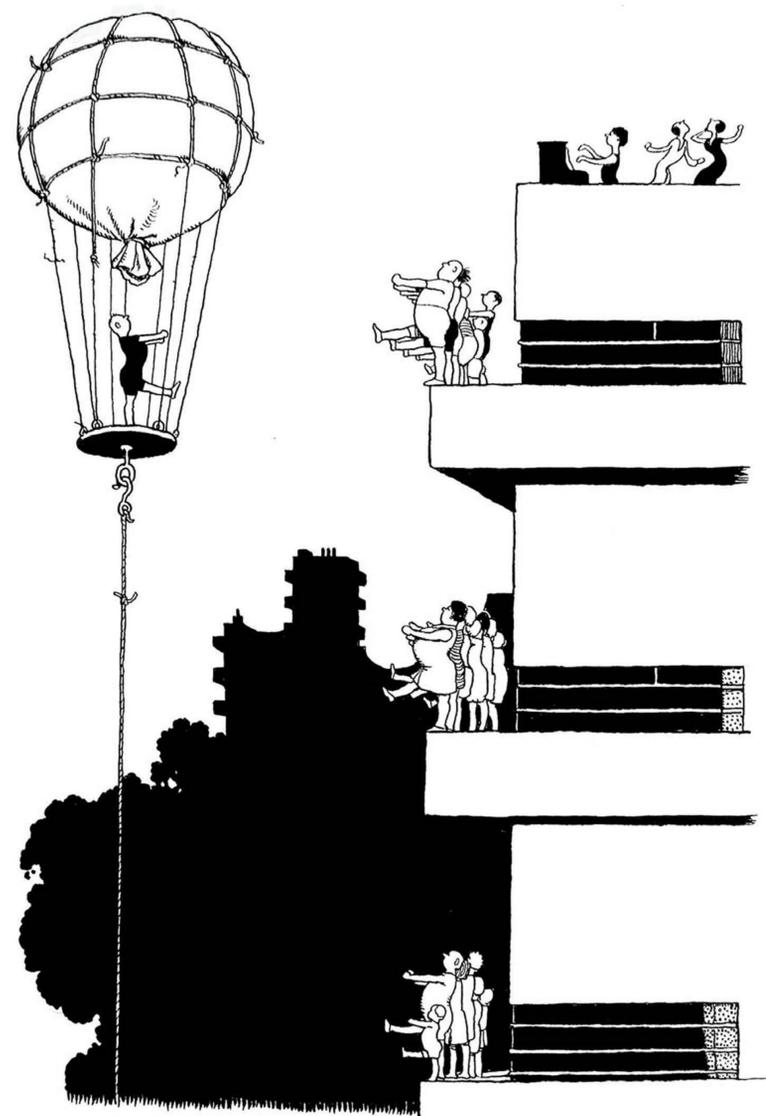
Figure 04.
Heath Robinson. 'The Fresh Air Parlour', 1936. Photo © The Heath Robinson Museum, Pinner, UK.

The balconies and terraces are elements graphically reconceptualised in terms of use and ownership of private areas. A terrace is structurally able to support heavy weights; therefore, it could be transformed into a bathing pool, where the residents can enjoy themselves.⁵⁸ Here, Robinson and Browne posit the importance of sport, social amenities, and relaxation to ensure the wellbeing of dwellers. They note that the man who does not occasionally relax is liable to crack under the strain of modern life, again criticising the new way of living, the lack of leisure and recreation areas around new buildings, and the unplanned urbanism that did not consider people and their wellbeing.⁵⁹ Terraces and roofs could therefore house new activities to palliate these shortcomings. The illustrations show the possibility of reconsidering the use of existing private and public areas and depict the affordance of social interaction. Games, as a social activity that encourages social communication, are adopted to justify the creation of new venues in these existing spaces. This operation offers the possibility of housing sports areas and communal social amenities, creating new ironic ecosystems that would directly affect the wellbeing of users without taking into consideration the safety performance incongruence (Figure 05) (the trainer on a platform held by a balloon and families on the edge of the terrace handrail).⁶⁰ The depiction ironically portrays the phenomenological relation between people and nature taking place in terraces as an extension of the urban

context in which families and neighbours meet to do sports. When human interaction is restricted by urban planning and other socio-political authorities, people create new venues that are able to house those interpersonal relations and interactions, areas that could satisfy some of the requirements that public spaces naturally offer, such as the need for contact, knowledge, play, and stimulation.⁶¹

Figure 05.

Heath Robinson. 'Communal Eurythmics', 1936. Photo © The Heath Robinson Museum, Pinner, UK.



COMMUNAL EURYTHMICS AND PHYSICAL JERKS FOR FLAT DWELLERS ON SATURDAY AFTERNOONS

from contraptions to spatial transformations

Literature and illustration offer a place for imagination and the transformation of conventional living patterns. Humorous parodic narratives, irony, and absurdity provide a playful space to critically reflect on the design practice, exposing the inadequacies of design and offering a space for criticism, creativity, and experimentation. Humour as social critique tool is usually inspired by the gaps between social conventions, codes, and preconceived ideas; its narrative oscillates between the frames of reality and fiction, providing a creative atmosphere and alternative narratives capable of opening up a space for debate, criticism, and reflection. Humour and the representation of absurdity offer designers and architects the opportunity to direct attention to social, economic, and urban issues. Humour, absurdity, and irony could be expanded as critical mechanisms for experimentation to address spatial issues from multiple perspectives without the spatial constraints of conventional approaches.

Through irony, humour, and absurdity, Robinson's book *How to Live in a Flat* (1939) exemplifies the relationship between words and visuals to criticise modernism and the efficiency of the machine. Considering that interior representations are linked to culture, gender, labour, and power, Robinson's spatial explorations offer special visual attention to the issues he wants to highlight

by engaging directly with the reader's imagination. The multiple spatial alternatives proposed in Robinson's depictions exemplify the imaginative use of drawings to inspire contemporary arrangements. Offering access to fictional occurrences and artefacts, the depicted humorous fabulation could be contextually interpreted to solve real situations. The information provided by these illustrations allows us to respond to new arrangements creatively.

The existing housing stock of the time did not meet the criteria of space, wellbeing, functionality, aesthetics, and flexibility required by the new middle class users. Houses could not be reshaped quickly to respect health standards or make it a more pleasant stay at home. The small apartments designed within multi-storey buildings, without spaces for recreation or social life, meant a family spent little time at home. Nowadays, the housing stock is experiencing similar issues. Understanding that the home is the primary space for resting and recreational requirements related to personal/family daily activities such as having lunch or dinner, meeting, and playing, as well as spaces dedicated to work, suggests that new models of action should be based on multifunctional and adaptable spaces, where rooms should be configurable depending on their purposes through using movable components. The dimensions of space and the quality of the dwelling must be questioned, becoming

laboratories for resilience, in which home should be conceived as integrated living, working, and leisure areas related to user needs. As geographer Edward Relph states:

The basic meaning of place, its essence, does not, therefore, come from locations, nor from the trivial functions that places serve, nor from the community that occupies it, nor from superficial or mundane experiences. [...] The essence of a place lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centres of human existence.⁶²

Robinson's creativity, humour, and irony could be used as a conceptual trigger to overcome difficulties related to human behaviour and spatial transformation. The communicative potential of Robinson's fabulations portrays a fiction centred on human experience that demonstrates self-sufficient buildings and new models of action that can be conceptually applied to the existing housing stock. The drawings critically illustrate spatial issues but offer the possibility of considering alternative spaces that escape from the seriousness of the design practice. The illustrations could be read contemporarily, representing key qualities that advocate shaping and rearranging spaces, which multiply interior layout and user expectations, offering new possibilities of habitation.

author biographies

Sofía Quiroga Fernández is a PhD architect and associate professor in the Architecture Department at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU). She holds a PhD in architecture from the Madrid Polytechnic School of Architecture (ETSAM). As a researcher, architect, and writer, she explores the intersection of visual, technological, and cultural innovations in architectural discourse, and how it affects the architectural design experience and its perception. Her research focuses on how immersive spaces were first tested across exhibition layouts, theatres, utopic proposals, and Universal Exposition pavilion projects. As a chartered architect, she has collaborated with prestigious architects such as Juan Navarro Baldeweg. She has worked as a freelance architect since 2001, developing her work in architectural design, interior design, exhibitions, and photography, and has been awarded several prizes. Sofía's work has been presented, published, and exhibited internationally, including *Becoming*, the Spanish Pavilion Exhibition at the XVI Venice Architecture Biennale.

Guillermo Sánchez Sotés is a Madrid-based chartered architect who graduated in 2016 from CEU San Pablo University. Since then, he has obtained multiple scholarships and been granted funds to enrol in research and teaching at different universities while collaborating with various international architectural firms such as Izaskun Chinchilla Architects. He is also the co-founding partner of the design studio Chubby Lab, where he and his team work at the intersection of culture, technology, and research across multiple disciplines. He is currently pursuing his doctoral studies, investigating the interrelationship of natural sciences and architectural theories at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University.

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