

# A SHORT (ARCHITECTURAL) HISTORY OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Review, Celebration and Tribute 40 Years Since  
“A Short History<sup>TH</sup> of America” by Robert Crumb

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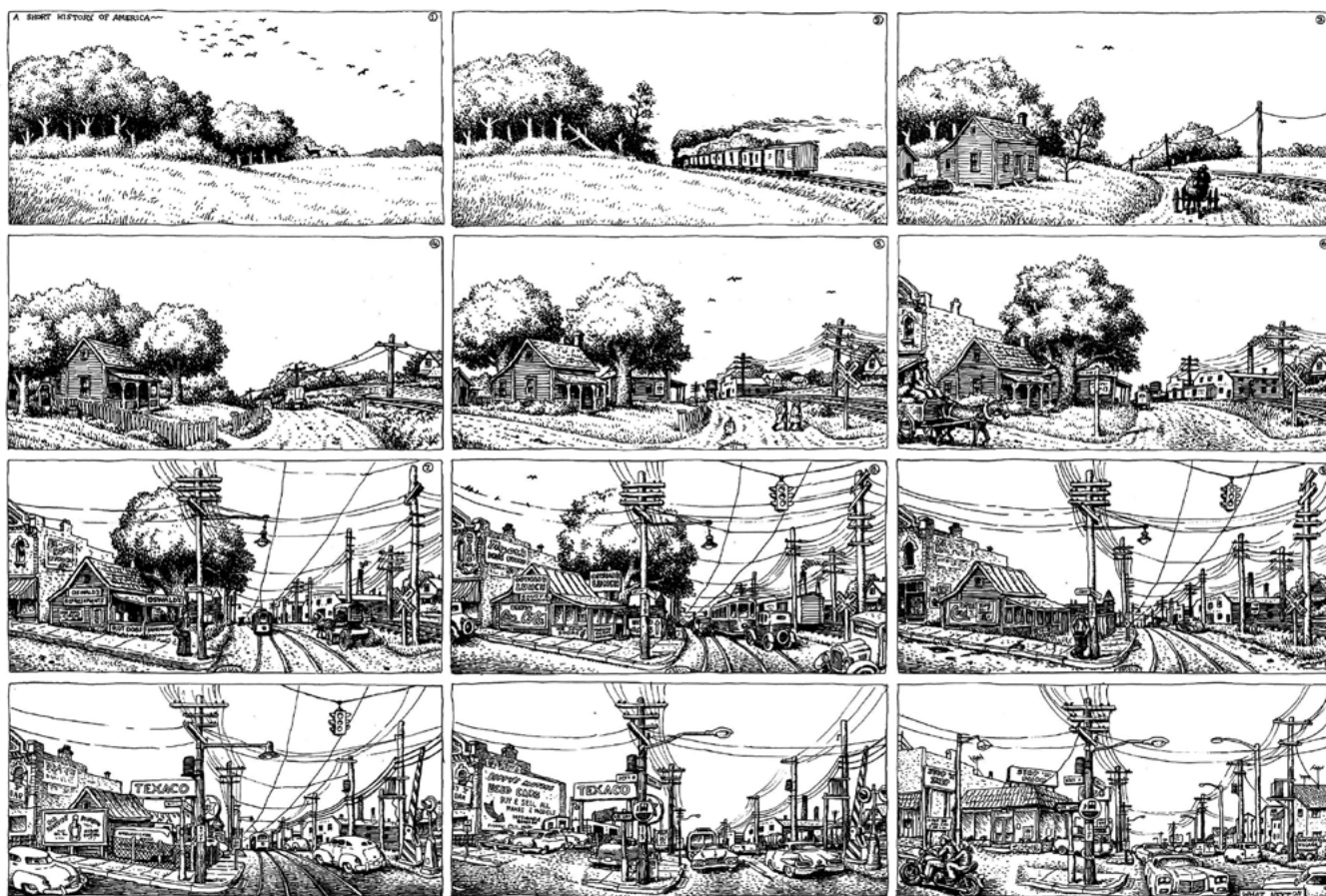
## Keywords

Ecology  
Comix  
Landscape  
Drawing  
Essay

The last centuries have meant an unprecedented development for humanity. But, at the same time, they have brought a change in the landscapes of the planet, which have gone from natural to man-made. This history, told by the eloquence of a Robert Crumb comic, makes this transformation clear and helps us question our own intervention on the planet.

Obviously I'm prone to hyperbole, but "A Short History of America" has to be one of the best comic strips ever drawn. [...] Chris Ware. (Hignite, 2006:259)

In 1979, Robert Crumb published in the autumn issue of *CoEvolution Quarterly* magazine what would become one of his most unusual and most celebrated works outside the underground scene. "A Short History of America" (FIG. 1) moved away from Crumb's usual themes and crudeness, to show in twelve frames the silent evolution of a generic place in the United States, from a state of virgin landscape to its transformation in an anonymous corner that could be located somewhere in the Midwest or, particularly, on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Here, the characteristic style of the father and main exponent of underground comix, of sexual recitals, violence and trips of LSD – present since *Fritz the Cat* – was put aside. There is nothing of the voluptuous feminine forms that plagued the sadomasochistic misadventures of *Zap Comix* or *Weirdo* in the deserted postcards of 'Short History.' To this calmness contributed its silent-sequence nature, unusual



feature when compared with the wordy reflections and dialogues that filled the already motley pages of Crumb.

This anomaly within his work did not prevent it from becoming an iconic image, both of the underground and of Crumb's work. Its timeless theme, as well as its publication outside the alternative scene – although linked to the counterculture – favored its reach to the general public, supported by its transformation into a popular *Kitchen Sink Press* poster in 1981. "A Short History of America" has been reissued numerous times, becoming essential in his monographs:<sup>1</sup> these four pages have come to represent him symbolically. This is how Terry Zwiggoff seemed to understand it when in 1994 he closed his biographical documentary about the author (entitled *Crumb*), with these 12 frames projected in sequence for 51 seconds, to the sound of *A Real Slow Drag*, played on Scott Joplin's piano. An appropriately gloomy and concise ending to the author's difficult life story.<sup>2</sup>

1 Una breve historia de América / A Brief History of America.  
© Robert Crumb.

### **Whole Earth Crumb: the Underground Comix and the Green Counterculture**

Despite its singularity, neither the theme nor the place of publication are so unusual. By the end of the sixties, along with other undergrounders, Crumb had become a flag of the countercultural comic (comix). Crumb's shadow was ever-present on the alternative press of the sixties and seventies, being a regular guest of publications such as *Oz*, *International Times* and *Friends*, in the UK; *Screw*, *Scanlan's*

*Monthly, Stag, The East Village Other, Berkeley Barb, and Los Angeles Free Press* in the United States; or *Actuel, Tout!, Le Fléau Social* and *Action* in France.

And, of course, the turbulent architectural scene was no stranger to the comix. The bustling phenomenon of the small architectural magazines adopted the same omnivorous attitude and guerrilla tactics of appropriation of their counterparts. Thus, Ant Farm's *Inflatocookbook* (1970-71), would include a brief appearance of the well-known Mr. Goodbar in the presentation of his *Truckin' University*<sup>3</sup> and, when *Architecture Association Quarterly* decided to dedicate its autumn number, entitled "Comic Strips," to strips' potentialities, Crumb was chosen to illustrate much of the magazine.

Besides publications focused on free love, psychedelia, and hallucinogenic substances, the emerging environmental scene was one of the usual counterculture places to Crumb. Promoters of the search for alternative technologies and Do-It-Yourself logics, these publications adopted a rudimentary aesthetic, with an abundance of hand-made schemes, cartoons and comic strips. Crumb collaborated with illustrations of a marked environmental character in different alternative newspapers that promoted rural America, such as *Winds of Change*,<sup>4</sup> *Fox River Patriot*,<sup>5</sup> or *The Mendocino Grapevine*. In this context, it seems almost mandatory that *CoEvolution Quarterly* would welcome Crumb regularly in its pages. Before that, Crumb had already been part of the *Whole Earth Catalog* cast. In 1971, Stewart Brand put Paul Krassner – *enfant terrible* of the counterculture – in charge of the edition of one of the supplements, who commissioned the cover to Crumb (Krassner, 1971). When that year the publication closed its doors with the encyclopedic "Last World Earth Catalog," Brand again included Crumb in its last pages, reproducing its already iconic illustration 'Keep on Truckin' (Crumb, 1971:407), announcing its subsequent consolidation in *Point Foundation* publications.

When Brand resumed the *CoEvolution Quarterly* edition after three years, he decided to go for a format closer to a magazine and, thus, comic strips were part of it since the beginning. Crumb was not incorporated until issue 13 (1977), but since then he participated regularly until its transformation into *The Whole Earth Review* when reaching number 44, to which he would continue contributing sporadically.<sup>6</sup> For *CoEvolution*, Crumb drew covers and almost thirty cartoons that oscillated between the militant (*Trash*) and the manners, lowering the usual tone to make it more palatable to a general audience. However, this did not deprive him of expressing his opinions, even when they opposed to what the magazine defended, something evident in the story "Space Day Symposium" that struck against Brand's interest in space exploration, a topical issue that was widely criticized by the *Whole Earth Review* readers.

Crumb, however, also suffered criticism. His acid and nihilistic cartoons, which celebrated the politically incorrect and gloated in the display of bad taste, were the subject of numerous letters to the director. The cover of issue 24 (winter of 1979/80), which showed a worker with

swastikas in the eyes and a nuclear mushroom on the head managed to impact both the readers and the editorial staff, causing many of its collaborators to request not to publish it (Kleiner, 1986). Brand, however, always supported Crumb's creative freedom, providing him with a platform for his stories at a time when he had practically stopped drawing.

### **Crumb's (Not Trump's) America**

The cover of *Zap* number 1 warned: "Only for adult intellectuals!" and was decorated by an urban environment of timeless Americanness, where figures with Kilroy-like noses poked through the sewers on an abstract background of empty streets and a flat, monotonous skyline. (Mareema, 2004)

Dividing the United States between north and south or between Republicans and Democrats makes no sense. Visually the entire country can be divided into two types of urban landscape: that of Will Eisner and that of Robert Crumb. (Sfar, 2012:vi)

If one ignores the provocation, obscenity, and absurdity of Crumb's work, what one finds is an author whose work is a constant commentary on American culture. This critical discourse would become more evident in the 1970s when his "acid-inspired farce were gradually leaving room for relatively sober and introspective dialogues, and to scathing condemnations of American culture" (Hoptman, 2005). An integral part of this portrait would be the American city and its architecture. In a recent conversation, Crumb remembered: "[...] when I was in the high school, I used to draw street scenes set in 1900. Then I would erase everything and drew it again as if it were the 1910s. Then I deleted that and redrew the same scene as if it took place in the 20s" (Wood, 2018). Looking through the numerous notebooks of Crumb, it is usual to find architectural notes and, as one goes back in time, scenes of an American city – sometimes real, sometimes fictitious, sometimes occupied by beautiful Art Deco architectures and sometimes portraying anonymous housing blocks, but always drawn with undeniable interest.

Crumb would never stop drawing urban prints and historical architectures. But from the 70s, the artist of ugliness and sordidness would feel the need to look at that other landscape that the consumer society had created. Crumb says:

In my work I had to always be drawing urban backgrounds and I realized that my memory was stuck in a kind of cartoon landscape of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s [...]. The modern world did not look like that anymore. The trash cans and traffic lights, and all these signs and things were different than when I was a small child. I didn't want stereotyped backgrounds that looked like taken out of a "Mutt and Jeff" strip. [...] People don't draw it, all this crap. People do not focus on that because it is ugly, it is bleak, it is depressing. [...] But this is the world we live in; I wanted my work to reflect that, the underlying reality of urban life. (Reznik, 2013)

In the 70s, it is easy to identify this growing interest in the landscapes of the Los Angeles sprawl, with its anonymous shops, electricity poles and illuminated signs, in stories that do not hide the author's position: "America the Ugly!" reads a box of text in the 1975 story "Let's Talk Sense about This Here Modern America."

### **A Short History of America**

Being a child who grew up in the 1950s, I was intensely aware of the changes that were taking place in American culture [...] I witnessed the degradation of architecture and I didn't like it too much. (Crumb, 2005:23)

All this is the breeding ground in which "A Short History of America" is brewing. Of course, Crumb's 'short history' refers only to North America and, more specifically, to the history of the colonization of the territory of the current United States. It is difficult to establish an exact chronology of this 'short history.' There are those who have wanted to see a chronicle in it, decade to decade, from 1850 to 1960, when Crumb began his career.

Composed of frames of the same size that always reproduce the same composition, "A Short History of America" does not seem to depend on the structure of its pages for correct reading – as it happens in most comics – being understood as a sequence of isolated images that lends itself particularly well to being reproduced in other formats, whose opposing manifestations would be, on one side, the simultaneity of the poster published by *Kitchen Sink Press* in 1981, which showed the complete sequence in a unique and overwhelming hypertrophic page and, in the other, the film sequence that closed Zwigoff's documentary. However, the story, as published, does present a structure, in which the last frame on each page introduced a crucial element for the later development of the story. The first two pages, which in the previous chronology concluded with the turn of the century, portrayed the emergence of urban life: the first ended with the construction of the first farm in the previously virgin territory and, the second, transformed it into a small construction located on a tiny corner plot, which marked a turning point in history: the next two pages, even with their continuous changes from decade to decade, already portrayed the world we know.

Thus, the first landscape picture without human intervention, would belong to 1850 (or, strictly speaking, to any previous time), placing the appearance of the railroad in the second frame in 1860, and that of the telegraph line, along with a settler's farm, and a primitive dirt road, in 1870. The 1880s, which would begin in the fourth frame, would see the appearance of the first neighbors, who in the following two decades would give way to a whole rural population: the original path would be progressively widened, and the foreground of the drawing would become an intersection. By 1910, the power line has multiplied and has taken over the streets,

which will remain even after the introduction of the telephone lines. On the other hand, the evolution of transport will be, until the end, a fundamental element in the characterization of urban space: by 1920, it is the tram, already in trolley size, what will coexist with the car, until its final disappearance in 1950, replaced by the bus. In the last five frames, what the era reports is the changing design of cars. As would be its disappearance, in the deserted streets of frame 9, which seems to confirm that this takes place during the Great Depression, an aspect underlined by the closed commercial premises and the lack of smoke in the factories' chimneys. Along with these many other details coexist: traffic lights that appear and disappear, urban lighting increasingly modern and abundant, electrical boxes attached to the poles. The original crossing signal at the railroad level is replaced by one crossing light in 1940 – two, in the following decade – that, together with its corresponding barrier, and varied signs and signage, evolve and are replaced over time.

Paradoxically, a superficial look at this second half seems to illustrate, in contrast to the previous one, the development stagnation with the arrival of a 20<sup>th</sup> century historically associated with the dramatic acceleration of progress. This feeling is not casual. Regarding the retrospective that *Whitechapel Gallery* dedicated to him in 2005, Crumb recalled the depersonalization that the town of California – where his family established – suffered during the 50s and early 60s:

I watched the demolition of the old center of Oceanside before the war and the construction of an inferior modern architecture. Even as a child I thought all this was wrong. The old cinemas, the shops' facades, the beautiful and stylized Art Deco buildings of the 1920s and 1930s were replaced by square stucco boxes without any character (Crumb, 2005).

However, despite this lack of character, Crumb made the "A Short History of America" architectures perfectly characterized, each evidencing, in turn, the temporal moment they belonged to. Crumb's taste for a style bordering on ugliness can avoid, in the eyes of the casual spectator, the overwhelming technical expertise in all areas – composition, handling of the human figure, shading, typography – of an author that Robert Hughes, *Time's* famous critic, would describe as "the Brueghel of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps Hughes could have qualified him as the William Hogarth of his time, due to Crumb's keen eye and his ability to analyze and capture reality by looking at the details.

A particularly significant moment in this half of the story is the disappearance of the only element that is not man-made. At the back of the original farm, where until recently there were small agricultural buildings, a brick building stands with its party wall bordering the wooden building. Of the original forest, only one tree remains. In his autobiographical text *Poor Clod*, Crumb remembered how his parents

[...] bought a house in a new suburban neighborhood, one among hundreds of houses that followed and followed. They were boxes without taste and without trees [...]. I went back in the 90s to take a look and they had customized the houses, but the trees never arrived (Crumb, 2005).

If the story began with the vision of a forest with visible silhouettes of some animals in the background, the end of the first page showed the appearance of the first built structure and the dramatic reduction of the forested area. The second page would deepen both processes, with new buildings and fewer trees, until in its last frame only that one tree from the farm would remain. After resisting two decades, it would finally disappear in the last frame on page 3. The following frames would see the disappearance of the elements that characterized the scene in its beginning. The farm, which was then a simple house and then a commercial premise, would be cornered and buried before vanishing, opening the way to a parking lot and, finally, to a *Stop'n Shop* service station.

This was a reality that the eye was not trained to record: a reality for which the material "is not created to be visually pleasing and you are not able to remember exactly what it looks like." In 2004, in an article for *Time*, Crumb explained how in the 80s he convinced a photographer friend of his, to "use the camera methodically to capture what our increasingly inattentive eyes have been trained to ignore." The article maintained that these photographs would be indispensable in Crumb's later work, and that their details would end up impregnating his work in *Weirdo*. Together with a series of Sacramento corner snapshots, taken around 1988, the article showed the cover of *Weirdo* No. 12 (Winter 1985), which reproduces a night view very similar to those and to the end of "A Short History of America."<sup>8</sup> The article concludes by emphasizing that "what his dedication to these unsightly minutiae suggests in this anthology is that, as extravagant, strident or otherworldly that Crumb comics would become, the endurance of their effect comes from how firmly entrenched they always are to the banal referents of our real world" (Reznik, 2013). A counter-Venturian of unhealthy fascination, but without an apex of romanticism. **ARQ**

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Architect (2001) and Doctor en Arquitectura (2013) from the Universidad de Navarra. Master in Design Studies, with a specialty in Theory and History from the Graduate School of Design of Harvard University (2008). His research focuses on the interactions between architecture, visual arts and mass media, mainly cinema, comic and photography, as well as the history of visionary architecture and urbanism. His research has been published in magazines such as *Architectural Design*, *Project*, *Progress*, *Architecture*, *E&A*, or *RA Architecture Magazine*, among others. His graphic work and his critical texts, published under the pen name of 'Klaus', have appeared in media such as *Arquine*, *Architectural Review*, *A10*, *Harvard Architectural Design*, or *Uncube*, and has been exhibited in the Art Institute of Chicago, the CCE of Mexico City, or Harvard GSD. Since 2012 he is Professor of Architectural Composition in the Departamento de Arquitectura of the Universidad de Zaragoza.



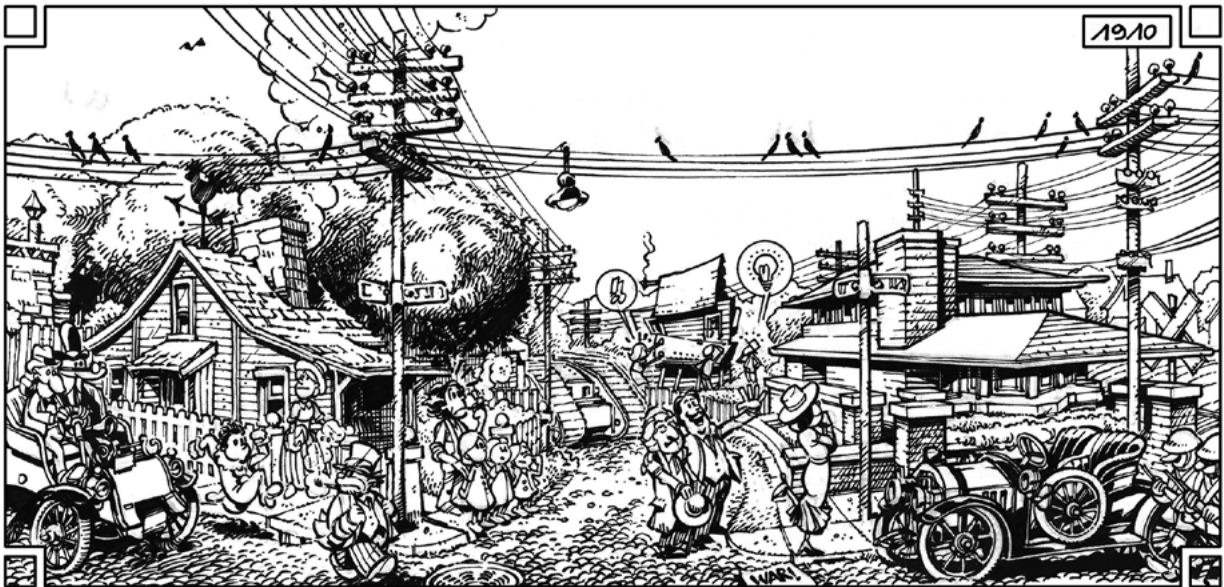
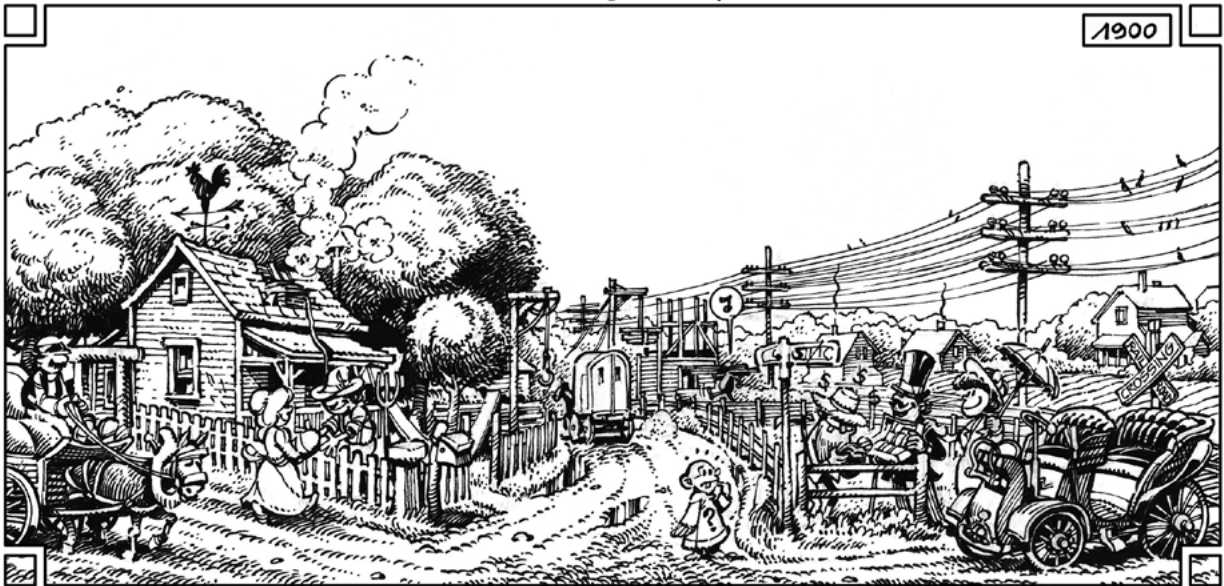
- 1 Among others, the story appeared shortly after the publication of its epilogue in *Snooid Comics* (Kitchen Sink Press, 1980), *Heavy Metal Magazine* (HM Communications Inc, June 1982, Vol. 6, No. 3), and has been invariably collected in all the retrospectives that have been made about them.
- 2 I use here the words of Jackson Arn in "Crumb Unrefined." *Reverse Shot* [online], November 10, 2017. In: [http://www.reverseshot.org/symposiums/entry/2387/crumb\\_take\\_six](http://www.reverseshot.org/symposiums/entry/2387/crumb_take_six)
- 3 In *Inflatocookbook*. Andy Shapiro, Kelly Gloger, Fred Unterseher, Hudson Marque, Chip Lord, Dough Hurr, Michael Wright, Curtis Schreier, Joe Hall and Dough Michels, eds.). San Francisco: Ant Farm, January 1971, 37. The frame, in full Situationist tradition, had been modified so that it read "Mr Goodbar sez (he's not shittin 'around): Get a Good American Education." The original, published in *Zap Comix* (San Francisco: The Print Mint Inc, 1969) No. 3, exhorted the reader with a much less edifying "Go fuck yourself. Do it today!"
- 4 *Winds of Change* (1981 – October 1984) was an alternative newspaper published in Davis (Yolo County, California) and created by Martin Barnes and Robert Crumb. In it, Crumb made covers, interior illustrations and the "Everyday Funnies" strip, made in collaboration with his wife Aline Kominsky, between 1979 and 1982.
- 5 Free weekly alternative rural-themed magazine published by Denis Kitchen See: *Fox River Patriot* (Princeton, Wisconsin: Kitchen Sink Press, August 24 – September 13, 1977) No. 19. The cover, with the legend "Woodman, spare that tree!" – title of a well-known poem by George Pope Morris – showed a bulldozer about to tear down a tree, while a girl perched on it tried to prevent it (the apocryphal legend says this is one of the origins of the term 'tree hugger'). On the vehicle, a sign read "Wheels of Progress Development Corp. Inc."
- 6 *Whole Earth Review* would broaden the focus to other illustrious undergrounders, such as Jim Woodring, and where Larry Gonick would deliver his 'Cartoon History of the United States.'
- 7 Hughes would frequently pronounce this quoted phrase in *Crumb*, the documentary by Zwigoff. However, as Nicola Glaubitz recalls, this comparison must come before Hughes' statement, since Crumb had referred to it in a notebook dated 1975 (Glaubitz, 2009).
- 8 When recounting his conversation with Crumb about 'A Short History', Alexander Wood notes, however, the following: "While talking on the phone with RC [Robert Crumb], I pointed to one of the details in the picture and said, 'I often wonder if you took this image from several historical photographs or if you took it out of your imagination. This detail is so realistic [that] I have to think you found some photographs and based these cartoons on them.' Crumb replied: 'I drew that image using only my imagination. I wish I had found some pictures. It would have been more accurate. For example, a mistake I made was with the railroad crossing signs. The actual signals have 'crossing' on a board, and the rail and road separately on the back sign. By mistake, I turned them over and broke the word crossing'" (Wood, 2018).

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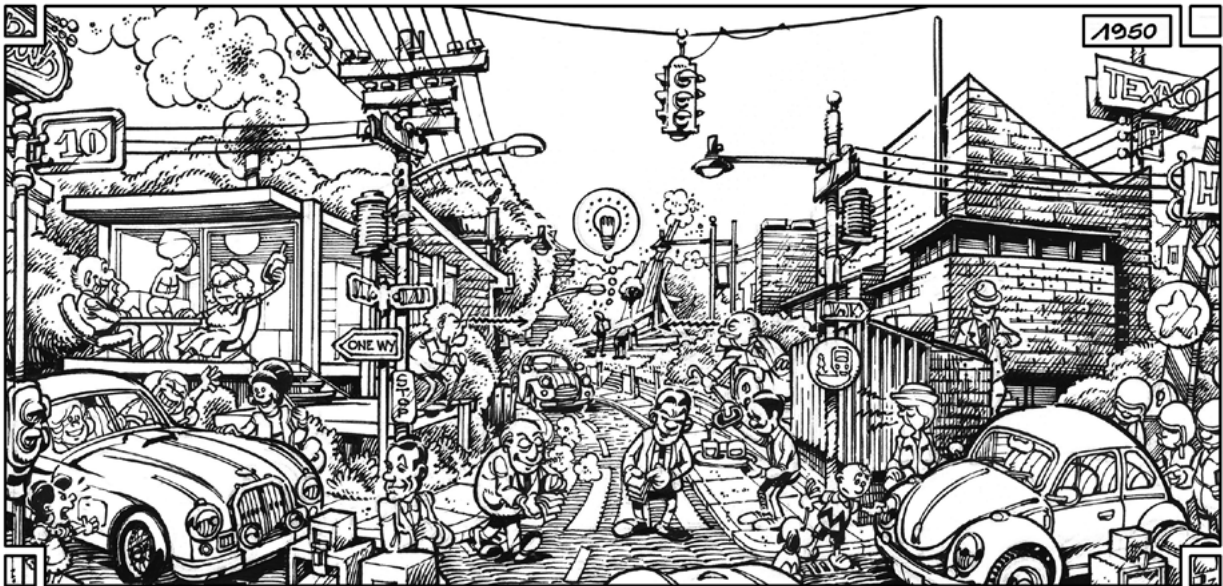
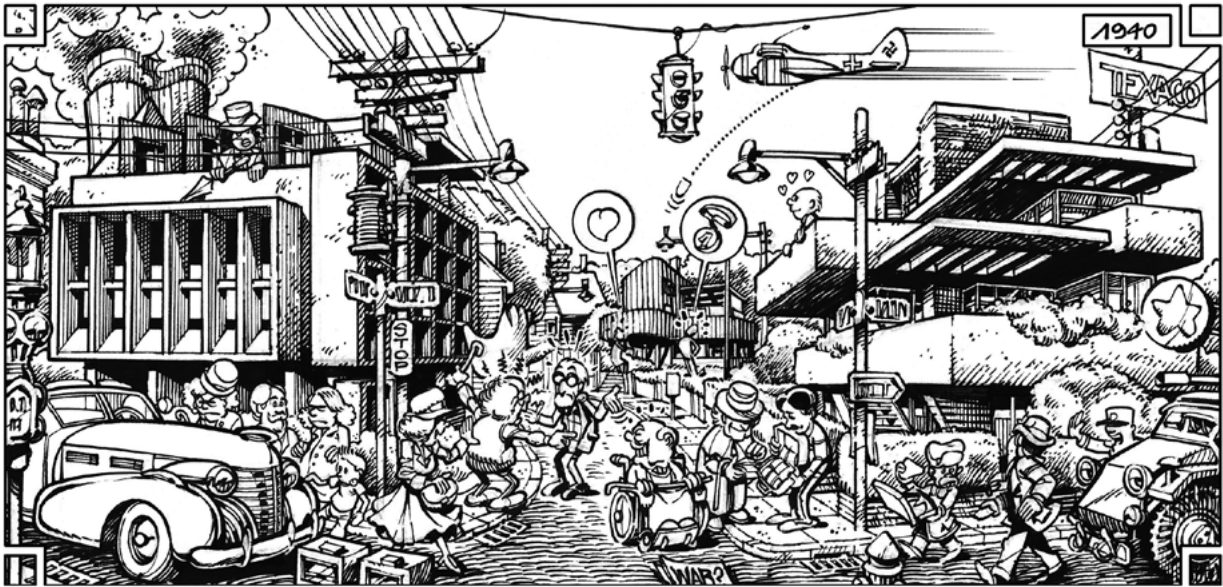


# A SHORT HISTORY OF THE 20th CENTURY by KLAUS after R. CRUMB 1979



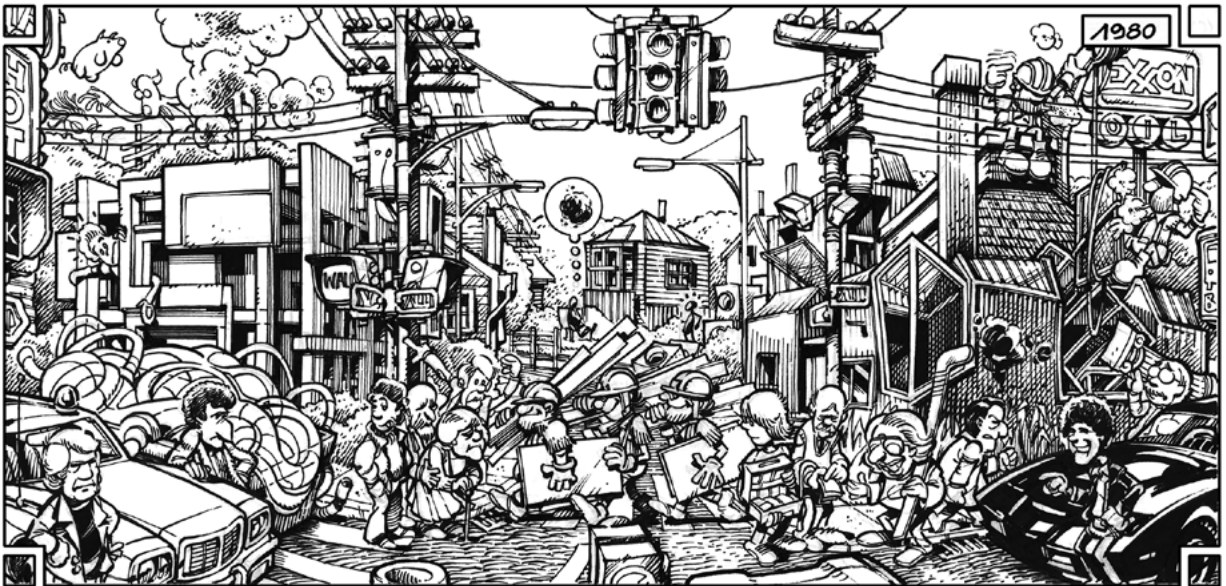
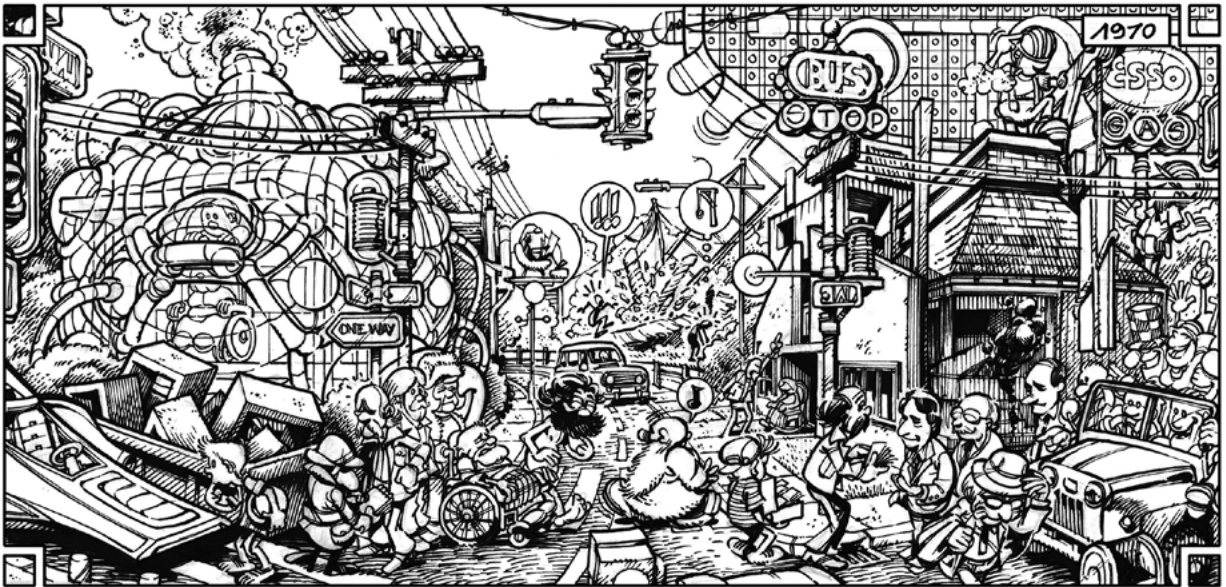
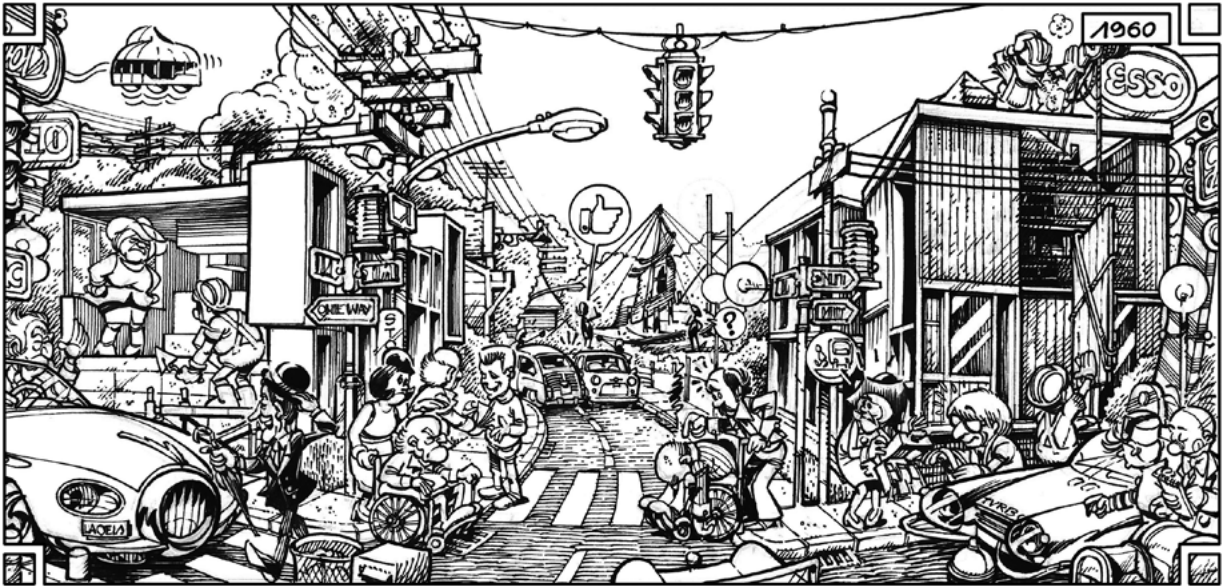
2-5 Actualmente, estamos en el 2019 de Blade Runner (LA, California).  
No hay coches voladores, pero al menos la realidad no es una distopía. /

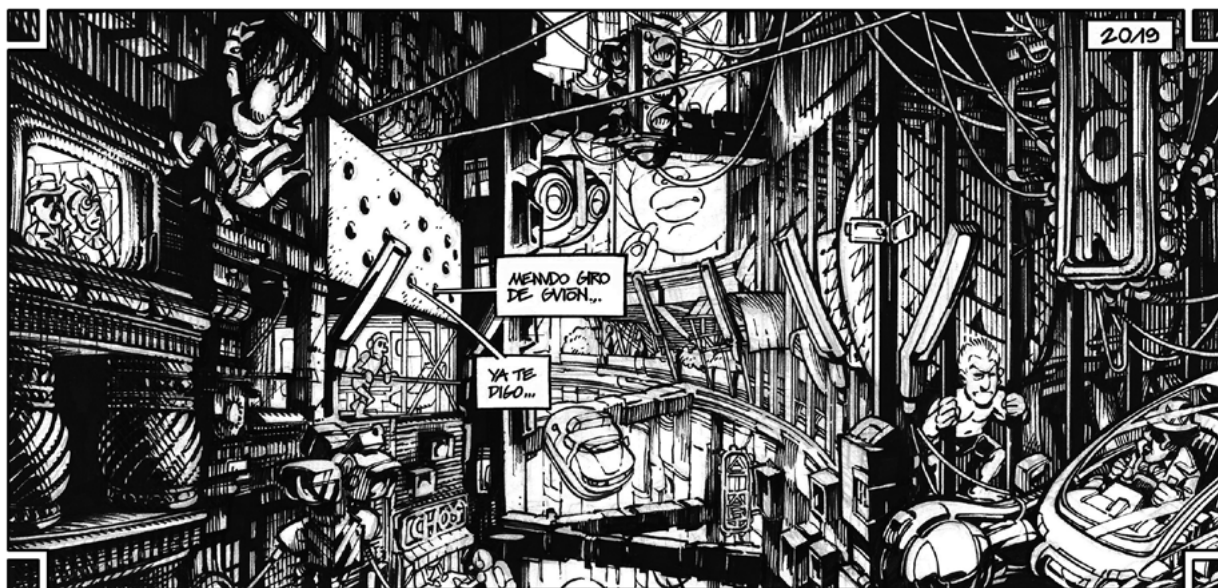
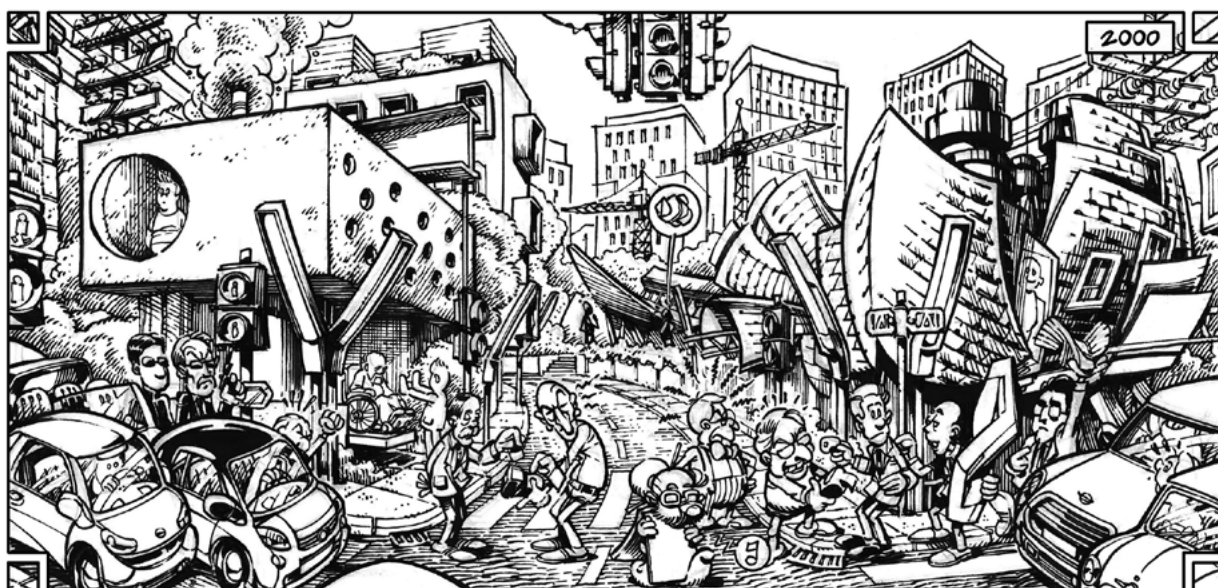
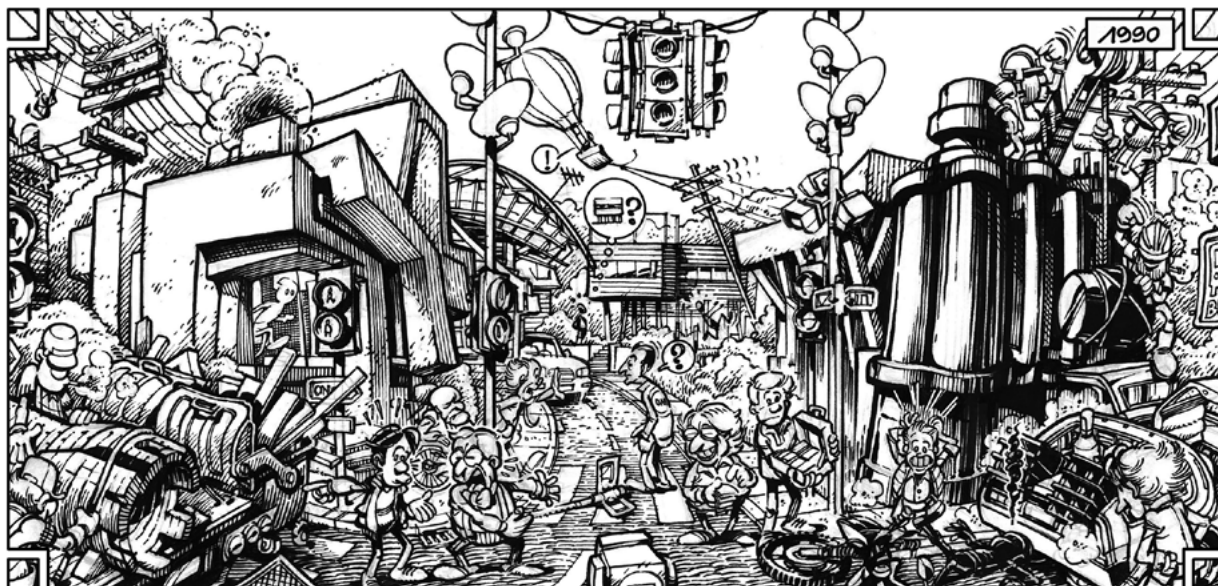
Currently, we are in the 2019 Blade Runner (LA, California).  
There are no flying cars, but at least reality is not a dystopia.



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NEXT, PLEASE!!