

MEMORY AND ABSENCE

THE FAMILY
HOUSE IN TWO
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
GRAPHIC NOVELS

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GRAPHIC NOVEL
COMIC BOOKS AND ARCHITECTURE
SEQUENTIAL DRAWING
ALISON BECHDEL
PACO ROCA

In this contribution, which starts with an analysis of the already consolidated relationship between architecture and comics, then tries to look deeper into the role of the family home within two graphic novels. Based on some theories, the comic book itself is a suitable medium for investigating stories related to buildings because the comic book pages recall the sections and shapes of the buildings. Looking instead into the merits of the two stories analyzed, beyond the obvious similarities and the inevitable differences be-

tween them, what emerges strongly is that the houses around which the stories rotate provide the opportunity to reflect profoundly on memory and absence. The accuracy of the details with which the two cartoonists manage to characterize their respective houses represents a refined exercise of memory and results in the houses themselves becoming protagonists of these stories, in which their respective fathers are absent, and whose lives have been spent in a large part in building those houses.

INTRODUCTION

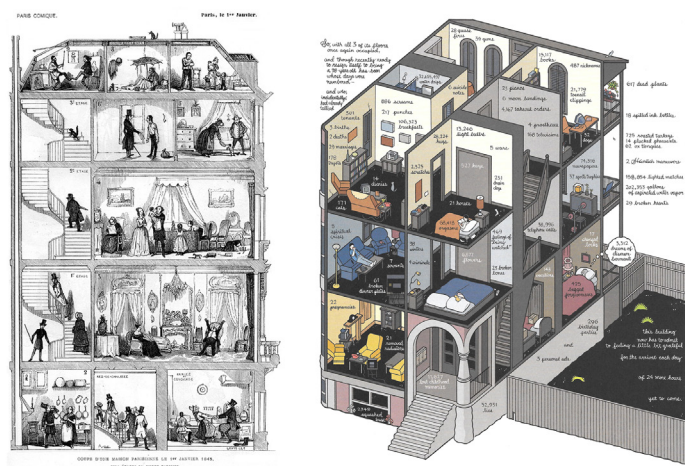
The great interest of the world of culture in comics has roots far back in time and, although initially comics were considered an artistic expression dedicated mainly to childhood, throughout the last century this graphic language has evolved and has been definitively entrenched during the cultural ferment of the Sixties. Thanks to cultural contributions such as that of Umberto Eco with his book *Apocalittici e integrati* (Eco, 1964), this artistic language was raised to an instrument of mass literature, making it thereafter a category subject of academic study and forever changing the perception of audiences and critics who initially denied it the intellectual legitimacy that was intended for other equally popular media (Lus Arana, 2013b).

And today, without necessarily going deeper into scientific studies that place strips, comic books and graphic novels within the category of narrative iconic texts (Romero-Jódar, 2013), we can say that after several years of controversy and intense intellectual work, the comic book in its most general sense has finally reached the status of art. Indeed, if we compare it to a rather recent past, and probably due to the profound publishing crisis, comic books are increasingly becoming a niche cultural product (Cassarà & D'Urso, 2013). Despite this evident fact, we are still witnessing debates related to the legitimacy of the literary genre of graphic novels compared to comic books (Priarone, 2019).

The scope of this contribution focuses exclusively on the hypothesis that the graphic novel is nothing more than a moment of re-appropriation by comic books of a narrative and literary prerogative that it naturally deserved (Brandigi, 2013). Furthermore, the awareness that ante litteram authors of comic books such as Töpffer spoke naturally of drawn literature even before the comic book itself existed, effectively eliminating the problem of genres and the hierarchy between comic books and graphic novels and between words and images (Brandigi, 2013).

Similarly, as happened with other art forms, the continuous exchanges and relationships between comic books and architecture are not recent phenomena. Indeed, the architectural publications of the last thirty years demonstrate a constant production of articles and an increasing number of exhibitions which confirm the numerous overlaps between architecture and graphic narrative (Lus Arana, 2013a). Beyond its essential aspect, comics have always fascinated architects with their unique ability to bring together communication, space and movement (Lus Arana, 2013a). Indeed, the architects' current interest in comic books can be traced back to 1925, with the storyboard by Le Corbusier in the *Lettre à Madame Meyer*, in which the Swiss architect illustrated to a client his design concepts for the never built Ville Meyer through a series of sequential panoramas of the house (Lus Arana, 2013a). The sequential drawing finds its natural application in the representation of architecture, demonstrating its effectiveness in the conceptualization and development design phases as well as in the communication phases of the project (Bagnolo & Lusso 2019). In this sense, the contribution of Ingels with his archicomix *Yes is more* (Ingels, 2011) is emblematic. In fact, in this book the architect is simultaneously narrator and main character in a kind of conversation in graphic form in which

Fig. 1 Comparison between Bertall's illustrated table and one of Chris Ware's tables in *Building Stories*. On the left: retrieved April 23, 2020 from <https://philippewillems.wordpress.com/purely-panoramic/>; on the right: Ware, 2012.

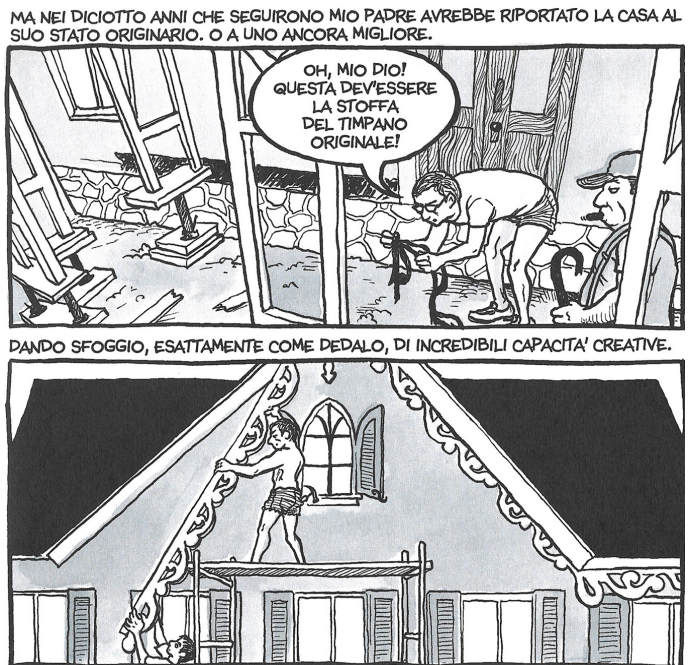


he addresses the reader directly explaining the details of his projects through four hundred pages of photographs, diagrams, renderings and other images enclosed in panels and dressed with captions and balloons (Lus Arana, 2013a). Furthermore, the communication strategy used by Ingels is not so dissimilar from that used by Le Corbusier with his client. In this specific case we can conclude that the comic book has been adapted in order to serve the architect's objectives and this justifies the reason why the author uses the term archicomix to differentiate his book from conventional comic books (Pascoal, 2015).

BUILDINGS AND COMIC BOOKS: REFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

Many scholars, in particular younger ones, have analysed the relationship between architecture and comic books. Among the most interesting works, often born as degree thesis or

Fig. 2 One of the pages of *Fun Home* that portrays Bruce Bechdel intent on renovating the family home (Bechdel, 2007, p. 13).



doctoral thesis in the faculties of architecture, outstanding are those of Andrea Alberghini (2006), that of James Benedict Brown (2007) and, among the most recent, the works of Michela De Domenico (2013) and the Spanish Lus Arana (2013a, 2013b, 2019). However, most of these studies focused mainly on a particular aspect of the relationship between the two disciplines: that related to the representation of urban environments in comic books. The relationship between cities and comic books is full of meanings, lending itself to multiple readings and is constantly enhanced by the incessant production of themed comic books, inaugurated in 1982 with the series *Les Cités Obscures* by François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters. The main theme of this work is the critique of utopia carried out through imaginary fantasy cities originating from their real twins, while there are more recent and realistic examples such as the tributes to Venice of Taniguchi (2017) and Fior (2019, 2020) or for example the countless portraits of Berlin by Alberto Madrigal (Trizio, 2020).

Fig. 3 One of the pages of *Fun Home* that shows the relationship of Bruce Bechdel with his three children (Bechdel, 2007, p. 17).



A probably more marginal aspect of the relationship between the two disciplines, though it seems equally interesting, is that which develops at the level of the single individual building. And in fact, according to Benoît Peeters himself (2013) in their formal setting, comic books offer small worlds made on a pleasant scale, images located in a familiar space, which can be kept under control and dominated. For Peeters the same space on the page in a comic book is, in turn, analogous to the space of the building with its floors, its corridors, its stairs (Peeters, 2013). Even for the scholar

Fig. 4 One page of *Fun Home* in which Alison Bechdel expresses all the contradictions of her family and, in particular, of the father figure (Bechdel, 2007, p. 21).



Chaterine Labio there is an architectural unconsciousness in the organization of the comic book page that significantly increases their reading skills, emotional power and popularity of the genre. For Labio, the page formats, different in different countries, correspond to the basic shapes and fronts of residential buildings in their places of origin and therefore the page always automatically evokes the meme of the house and it is always familiar to the reader (Labio, 2015).

The analogy between the formal structure of the building and the comic book page was probably sensed by the Frenchman Bertall as early as 1845. In fact, he organizes a panel in vignettes that coincides with the structural section of a Parisian building, in whose rooms it is possible to view scenes of the life of numerous characters (De Domenico, 2016). Being a precursor of the comic book, this work does not use the sequential reading of the images that will be acquired only later, but the idea is very good, and is in fact picked up and enhanced upon by Chris Ware in his *Building Stories* (Ware, 2012). Like Bertall, Ware pictures an old Chicago building in which the multiple events of its characters take place within its individual apartments (Figure 1). Ware uses architectural representation techniques and intersects axonometries, sections, elevations, technical details with the classic composition of the comic book (De Domenico, 2016).

The experimental format chosen by Chris Ware for his work, a box-of-comics within which there are 14 serial fragments of different formats, works as an archive that collects elements previously disseminated in different formats in various places and platforms, putting in place the archival aspect of the operation, in which the collection becomes an act of collaborative reading (Crucifix, 2018). In general, therefore, in its most obvious form, the conventional structure of the comic book page, with the overlapping stripes, brings to mind both the cross sections and the facades of multi-storey buildings and therefore not only the page retains traces of its architectural archetype, but it favors the work of the memory. In fact, these images generally remind us of the

primordial nature of our relationship with buildings, generally the familiar ones that are linked to our current self and to our childhood that generated it. The recurring search for the childhood home, be it real or imaginary, is a feature of the memory work done by comic books that justifies a large amount of autobiographical works produced by cartoonists in recent decades (Labio, 2015).

And precisely this last aspect, related to the search of the memory to which the comic books seem particularly suitable, is what we intend to examine in this contribution. In the next paragraphs, in fact, two autobiographical graphic novels will be analyzed in which the role of memory in the graphic story of the family home is central and for which the void left in both by the disappearance of the father figure is equally central, compensated by the material aspects of the building itself, the house, which spontaneously becomes the star of the story.

ALISON BECHDEL'S *FUN HOME*

In 2006 the autobiographical graphic novel by Alison Bechdel entitled *Fun Home. A family tragicomedy* (Bechdel, 2007), was published. This volume in 2007 won the Eisner prize for best work based on real facts and is probably the most widely discussed graphic novel since Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (Kashtan, 2013). The *Fun Home* of the title refers, using an ironic play on words, not so much to the fun family home as to the contraction of the words that compose the term funeral-home, the activity that the author's father, an English teacher in high school, carried out on a part time basis.

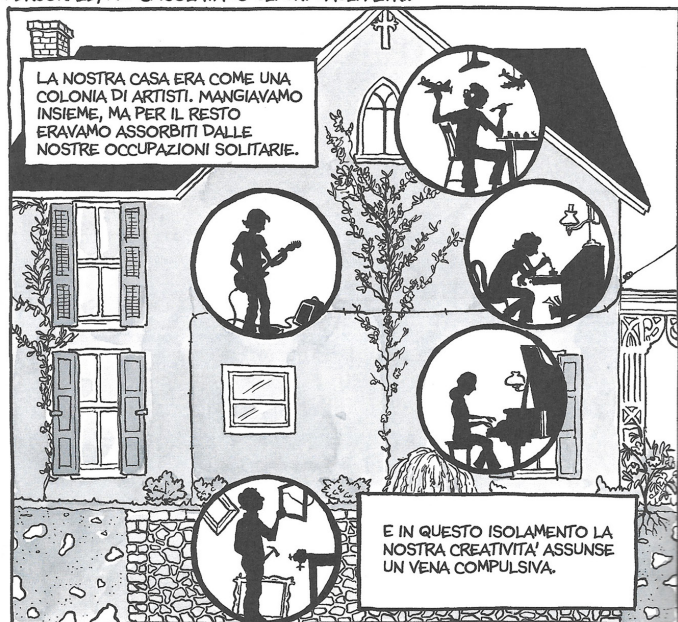
The absolute protagonist of this graphic novel is evidently the home of the Bechdel family: the large Victorian building that the author's father obsessively restores with constancy and dedication for about eighteen years is polysemic and above all represents the meeting point between memory and identity. In fact, through the act of voluntary memory that the author performs through the creation of

Fun Home, all the poetic and creative character of the house emerges (Labio, 2015) which played a fundamental role in the construction of the individual the author became. The obsessive restoration work carried out by Bruce Bechdel, a latent gay man who loved architecture in style and interior design (Figure 2), clearly betrays his firm obstinacy of denial and repressing his homosexuality and willingness to work constantly not only to the construction of the house, but also to that of the perfect family image. *Fun Home* shows Bruce Bechdel intent on relentless renovation of his home in the

Fig. 5 Composition of two stripes of *Fun Home* in which the house, seen from the outside, represents the element that unites all members of the family who are, in reality, emotionally alienated from each other (Bechdel, 2007, pp. 138, 143).



PERO' ERA UN CIRCOLO VIZIOSO. PIU' ERAVAMO GRATIFICATI DAL NOSTRO GENIO PERSONALE, PIU' CI ISOLAVAMO GLI UNI DAGLI ALTRI.



same way he tries to repress the ghosts of his desires. The relationship between the desire for order and cleanliness and the containment of private desires and fears is still very present in contemporary popular culture. In fact, the phenomenon on the basis of which more and more television programs are being broadcasted in which homes are being renovated is a broad demonstration of this, which indicates how the metamorphosis of the house still represents, for our society, the miraculous transformation of disorder in order and clarity (Lydenberg, 2012). The need to transform disorder

Fig. 6 A page of *Fun Home* that represents the library of Bruce Bechdel, the real center of the house (Bechdel, 2007, p. 64).



into order is equally evident in *Fun Home*: the heterosexuality that Bruce Bechdel tries to manifest through the obsessive care of appearances is intertwined with an idealized model of class identity to which he ardently aspires, and both are incarnated with his own home (Lydenberg, 2012). As a parent, Bruce Bechdel is equally incapable: he is unable to establish an emotional and physical relationship with his children and he is completely paralyzed by the fear of showing his sexual orientations which he tries instead to dissimulate through his continuous work (Figure 3). He is at the same time the victim and architect of his deception staging (Gennero, 2009) which will end with his untimely death which will take place a few weeks after his daughter's coming out.

Through a memory work as meticulous as that of her father in the restoration of their house, the author in the reconstruction of their relationship manages to highlight how all the scenic apparatus built by the father is part of an overall strategy of concealment and removal (Gennero, 2009). In the story narrated by Alison Bechdel, fiction and reality are constantly mixed and the established Catholic family lined up in the front row at Sunday mass does not really exist (Figure 4), and is very far from that portrayed in the vintage photo showing the original inhabitants outside their new home in neo-Gothic style that simultaneously reflects their class position and the traditional family nucleus (Lydenberg, 2012). The family photos staged by Bruce Bechdel are instead carefully constructed to suggest family unity and an equally uniform normality but not very close to reality. And in fact, Bruce Bechdel is portrayed by his daughter always active, wearing shorts, but the image of masculinity he portrays is actually very far from that of the stereotype represented by his neighbors, and by the rough hunters who populate the provincial town. In practice, Bruce and the Bechdel are at the same time imposters and a real family (Gennero, 2009) and the thread that unites them and simultaneously divides them is precisely the house that they live in. Among the continuous contradictions highlighted within this graphic

novel is the very strong presence of the father who with his complex personality crushes those of the other inhabitants, a presence that is amplified because of the evident absence of the maternal figure, completely canceled by the pater familias. Despite his presence, his daughter feels he has always been absent, concentrated in his efforts, to hide his true nature, to renovate the house, which effectively alienate him from his family. This constant confusion of presence and absence occurs in the visual representations of the domestic space, where the family members are often shown in

Fig. 7 A page of *Fun Home* that portrays father and daughter together in the library which, seen from the outside, seems to be two separate rooms (Bechdel, 2007, p. 90).

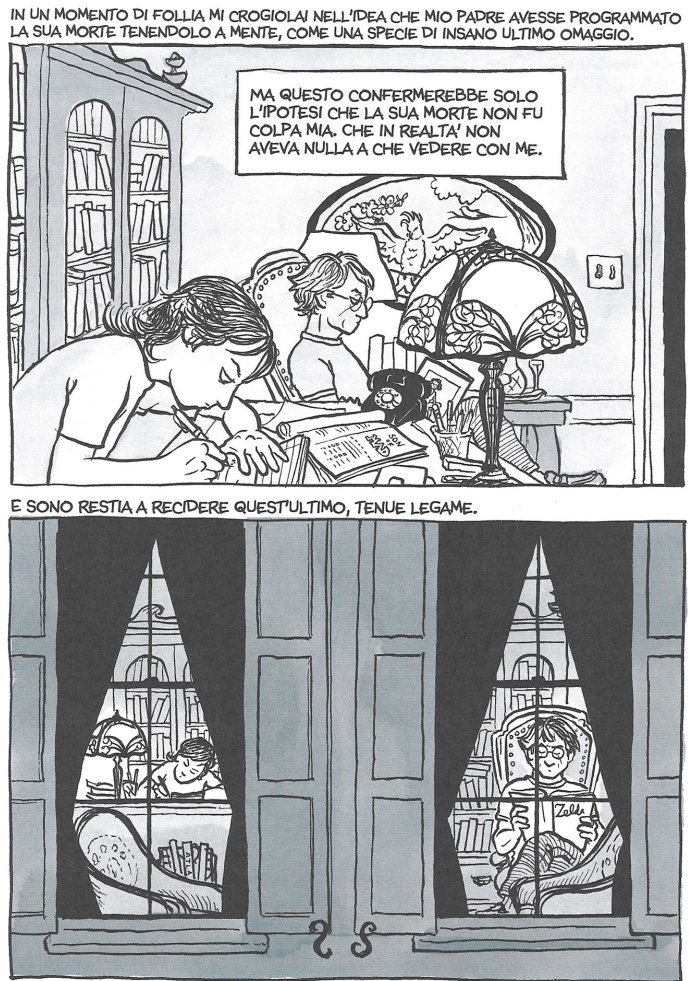




Fig. 8 The final strip of *Fun Home* that portrays Alison as a child in the act of diving confidently into her father's arms (Bechdel, 2007, p. 236).

close physical proximity but emotionally estranged. Bechdel ingeniously uses the architecture of the family house, seen from the outside (Figure 5), to strengthen the isolation that characterized life in the family home (Lydenberg, 2012). Furthermore, if the family home is a fundamental character in this memoir, Bruce's library is the heart of this character (Figure 6) and, in the midst of a tense domestic life, the passion for books offers the family members moments of truce. Furthermore, the shared love of books also allows father and daughter to share moments of connection.

The house in general and the library in particular bind them together and the fragile and twofold nature of their relationship finds a meeting point in their respective homosexuality. In a memorable scene of the book father and daughter are portrayed together in the library, but through a graphic artifice it is the structure of the house itself that separates them and in fact the daughter is seen through a window writing or drawing while the father (Figure 7) is shown through another intent on reading (Labio, 2016). The library contents themselves have played a fundamental role in generating the author's conscience, and in the design of this book, in particular works such as Proust's *Recherche*, and in fact the house and books represent, respectively, for the author and his father, the key to remember and to create (Labio, 2015). And if the father is trapped inside the building that he has painstakingly built in his image and likeness, without ever truly accepting himself, Alison finally gets rid of the house through *Fun Home*. The tragedy of Bruce Bechdel, whose death will never be known if by accident or suicide, represents a tribute by the author to the sacrifice of many men and women crushed by the weight of homophobia. At the same time, it represents an inspiration for his daughter to remain true to herself and her desires which her father had tried desperately and in vain to remove (Gennero, 2009).

The final scene of the book thus takes us outside the physical and emotional boundaries of the house that for Alison as a child represented a dangerous labyrinth, in an outdoor

swimming pool where the adult woman, now free and self-confident, makes the girl complete, confident, a dip in the arms of her father (Figure 8), at the same time making a leap of confidence beyond the security of things and rigidly constructed identities (Lydenberg, 2012) finally giving way also to the nostalgia that absence generates.

PACO ROCA'S HOUSE

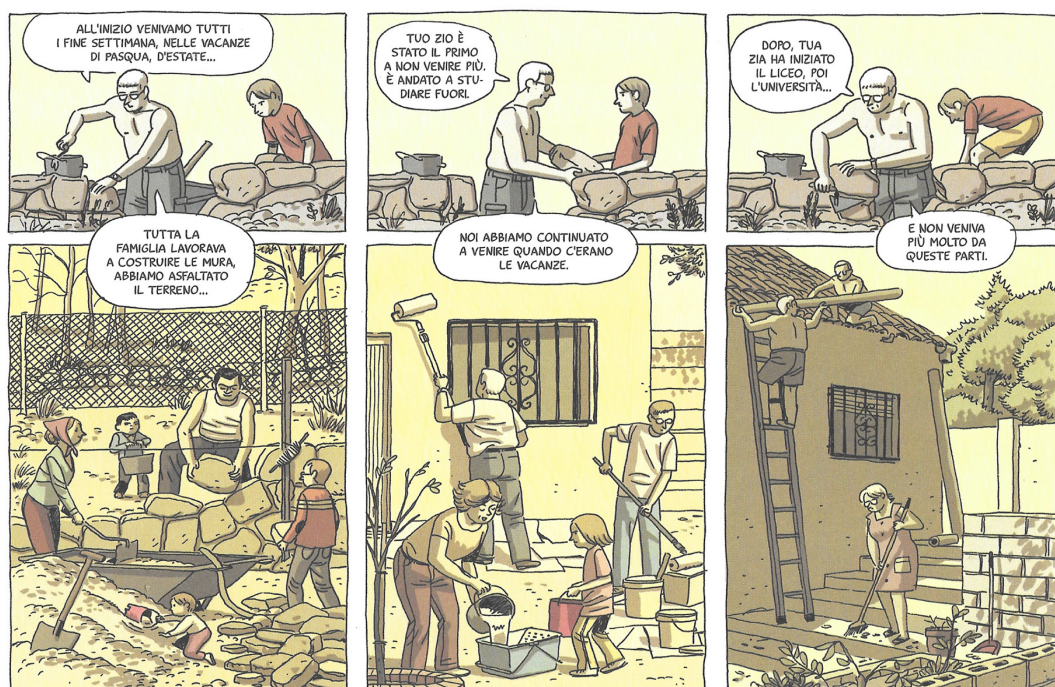
About ten years after the publication of *Fun Home*, *La casa* was published in Italy, by the Spaniard Paco Roca (2016). Like the previous one, this too is an autobiographical graphic novel with a strongly Proustian flavor, but the emotional, social and cultural context between the two works is completely different. In *La casa* we are no longer in the American province of the seventies but in the Spain of the post Franco

Fig. 9 The initial page of Paco Roca's graphic novel with the departure of the father (Roca, 2016, p. 3).



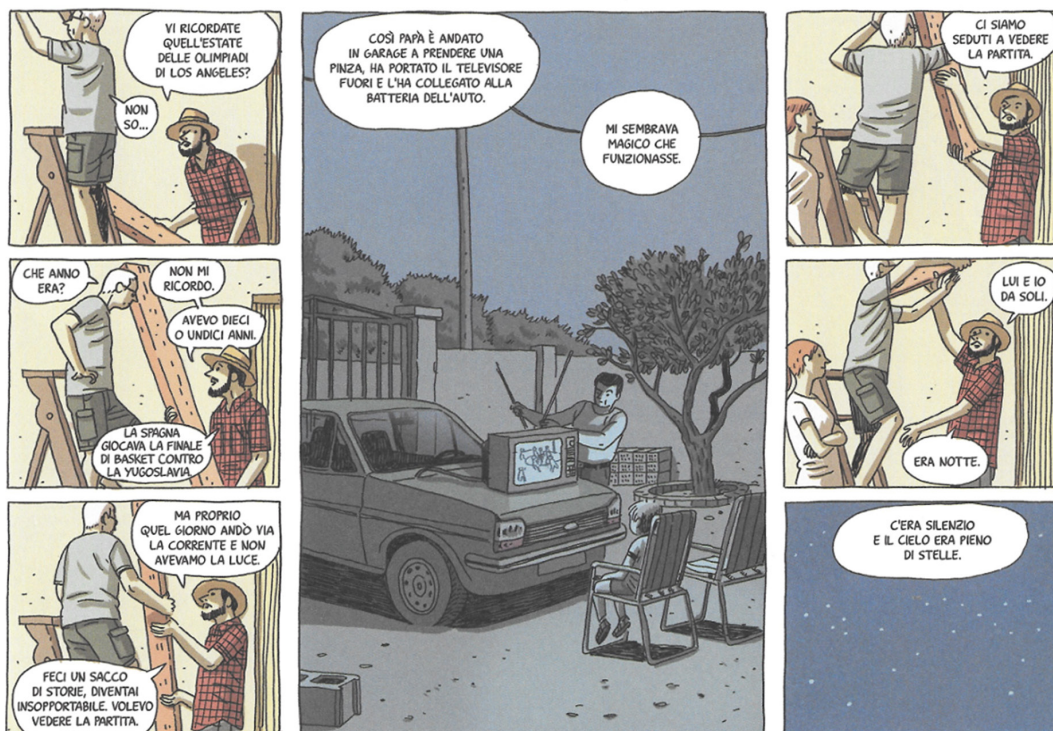
transition and the background of the two families is very different. The difference between the family narrated by Alison Bechdel, of middle class intellectuals and that narrated by Paco Roca, who has working class origins, is substantial and is probably also at the basis of the complicated psychological implications of the first compared to the less knowledgeable and more serene environment of the second. In spite of the obvious differences, both authors entrust to memory the substantial task of understanding one's actual being through the reinterpretation of personal stories trusting on memories. Paco Roca is not new to the use of memory in his comic books, as he brilliantly demonstrated in his previous graphic novel, *Rughe*, which tells us the story of an elderly man with Alzheimer's disease (Roca, 2013) whose memories are desperately kept together with all their strength before the disease takes over by totally wiping out, a piece at a time, his memory (Bellu, 2016).

Fig. 10 A flashback showing the family protagonist of the story involved in the construction of the house (Roca, 2016, p. 74).



The story behind this work by Paco Roca is very simple and begins with the literal departure of Antonio, the man who represents the father of the author, who on the first page leaves the house never to return (Figure 9). A year after the death of this man, his three children, one of whom, José, is the cartoonist's alter ego, return to the house with the intention of putting it back in shape for a future sale. By moving the accumulated objects, exploring the rooms, moving relentlessly between the garden and the garage, the three give the house, but above all to themselves, a new possibility (Corno, 2016). Unlike the Bechdel family, Paco Roca's house is not the family home but is the holiday home, also in this case built by the father piece by piece during the long summers with the help of his three children (Figure 10). For Antonio, the construction of a holiday home, pursued obsessively, above all represented the attempt to approach, at least apparently,

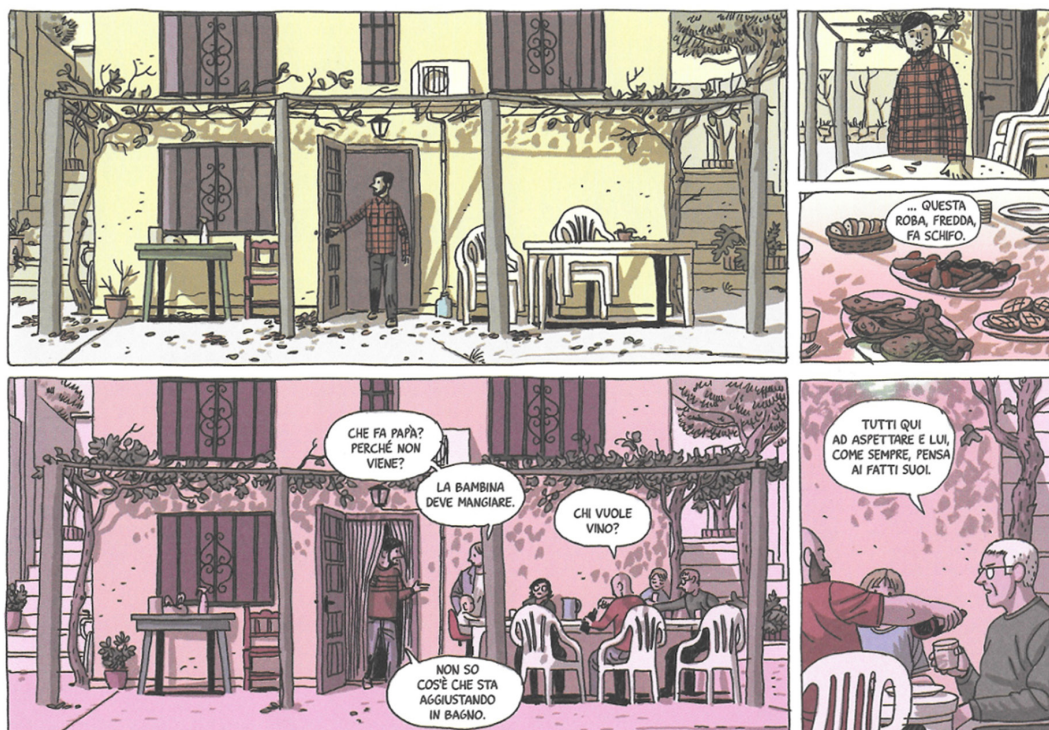
Fig. 11 In the center of the page, in flashback, one of the episodes remembered by Antonio's son (Roca, 2016, p. 101).



a certain social status. And, if for Bruce Bechdel the renovation of the house, for which he claimed the labor of his children, has emotionally strong implications, for Antonio it only represents earning his own space in the world: by putting the children to work Antonio shaped the space around him and dominated it, thus making it part of the family (Corno, 2016).

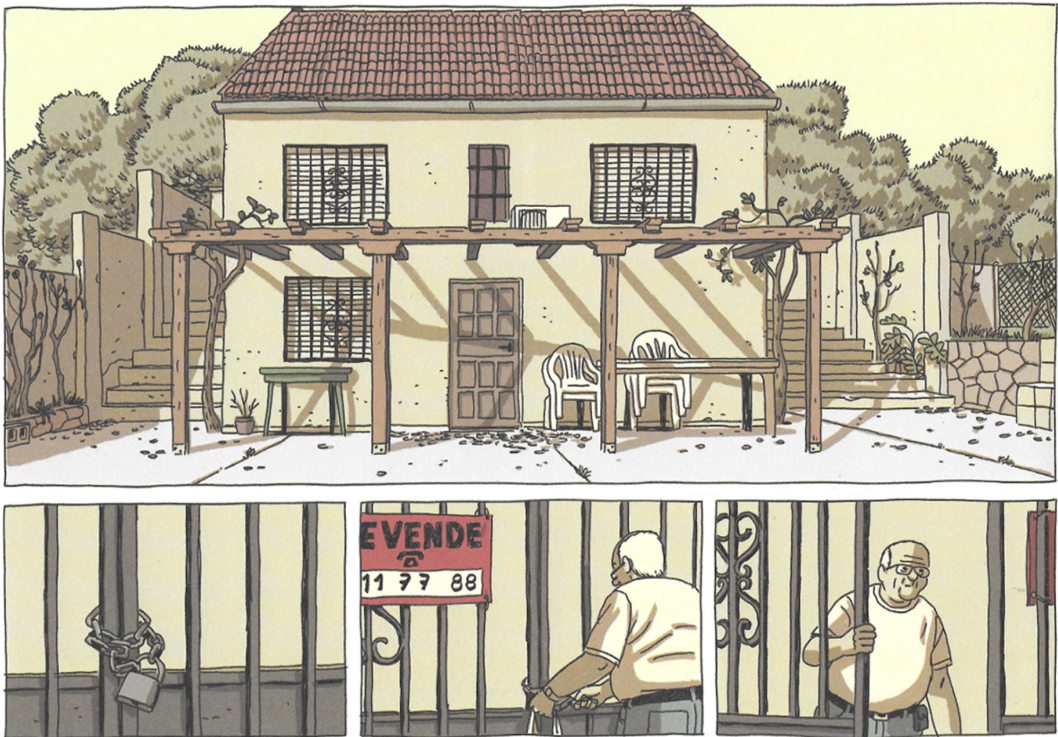
While for the Bechdel family the house represents a formal link between its inhabitants, for the three sons of Antonio the construction that also physically involved them in their childhood, even if imposed by their father, actually created a bond between them, and, on the occasion of the recovery of the building, this bond resurfaces and they find themselves again as a family. The three children will begin the renovation work first individually, then meet and confront each other, highlighting the different characteristics of their personalities and their relationship with the father.

Fig. 12 One of the flashbacks of the story described with evident color change on the page (Roca, 2016, p. 8).



Through the memories of the three children, the identity of the father is traced, a simple and shy man, in continuous discovery of himself, of the man and his home, perhaps both to be revalued (Costanzo, 2016) and perhaps known to everyone only superficially. Also in this graphic novel, as in *Fun Home*, that of the restoration of the house is a metaphor that implies constant work on the construction of oneself that the author makes in this journey in memories that is left to flow in its impetuosity, with its small and great tensions, misunderstandings, but also tenderness and light-heartedness (Bellu, 2016). In this comic there are numerous narrative fragments that are remarkable for their emotional strength as well as the flashbacks that melt into various episodes: from that of the Olympics seen with the TV placed on the hood of a car (Figure 11), to the bathroom in a makeshift bin, to a signature on the wall after building it (Bellu, 2016).

Fig. 13 One of the final tables of the history (Roca, 2019, p. 122).



From a purely technical point of view, while *Fun Home* is monochromatic, a choice that highlights the drama of the story, and that allows attention to be focused on the characters, in the Paco Roca comic the role of colors is fundamental. In fact, the time difference between the present and the past, as well as the changes of the seasons or the mood of the characters, is achieved through the evident color changes of the cartoons (Figure 12). Even the format chosen by Paco Roca is not accidental: contrary to all his previous works, this comic has a horizontal development. An aspect that makes the story familiar to the reader because the shape is that of an old family photo album, where the cartoons follow one another like many images that mark the important moments in the life of a group of people united by a blood bond and affection (Giai Via, 2016). The strength of this story, when compared to the complexity of the previous one which is decidedly very subjective, lies in its being a universal story, so realistic as to be real. The house becomes a meeting place for each of us, a testimony of our history, so much so as to merge its foundations with our roots (Costanzo, 2016). And in the end it is not so important for the reader to know if the house will be sold or will remain to the sons in order to keep with it the memory of the father. What is important is to have reestablished the existence of a deep bond by those who shared moments in it and retain their memories (Figure 13).

CONCLUSIONS

According to Sattler, cartoonists are fully aware of how easily comic books can be forgotten, and therefore approach the theme of 'memory' as a central pillar around which to discuss how their medium works, not only on the page but also in the readers' mind (Sattler, 2010). In these two graphic novels, both authors show that they are fully aware of how fundamental this topic is to them. In both *Fun Home* and *La casa*, the theme of memory is central, and revolves around

that of the home, but if for Paco Roca memory is identity, and in particular claiming that it is the form itself through which it is possible to define one's own personal identity (D'angelo et al., 2017), for Alison Bechdel memory creates the possibility of liberation and affirmation of one's identity. Beyond this, what these two works have in common is the characterization that both authors make of the moods of the characters, but also the extreme attention to the details of the furnishings and the appearance of the building itself, details that transform the house into a living being, testimony of joys and sorrows, of anxieties and repressed desires, which bears the signs of the existences that have gone through it (Martinolli, 2016), details that give it a precise identity and make it the protagonist (Costanzo, 2016). The absence of the two paternal figures is therefore compensated by the material presence of the two buildings strongly desired by both, although for different reasons and which, in fact, replace them. Ultimately, the players in these two stories are the fathers, the children and the houses that, with their objects and with their precise and meticulous description that make them the sons, become main characters replacing their own craftsmen, great absentees of these stories. As Roca himself admits, the real protagonist of this story is the house itself, as a container of memories and as a symbol of the father (Canessa, 2016).

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