

Our Ambition Lies in Ambiance, c. 1958-1959

This is the most far-reaching of Constant's writings about urban design as an art form. There is a crisis at hand in urbanism: old neighbourhoods have become commercialized districts, new-build developments are sterile and offer no opportunities for creative, playful human beings. As a response to this crisis, Constant proposes a 'unitary urbanism', an adventurous architecture, constructed for the purpose of fun. In the cities of the future, 'disruptive' factors like nature, climate, light and sound will be regulated in inventive ways in the form of a covered city. This will achieve the maximum social space for *homo ludens* to move about in. The text shows the influence of developments in space travel and increased technological possibilities.

Our Ambition Lies in Ambiance

The crisis of urbanism is getting worse. There is an obvious discrepancy between the new modes of living we are aiming for, established modes of living, and the construction of old and new housing estates (note: the result is a dead and sterile ambiance in our surroundings). In the old districts, streets have degenerated into *autostrade*, leisure venues have been commercialized and deformed by tourism (note: social cohesion is declining). New large housing estates present only two themes, which predominate: automobile traffic and comfort in the home. They are but the meagre expression of bourgeois happiness, and they lack any possibility of fun and play.

The response to the need to rapidly build entire cities is to construct cemeteries of reinforced concrete in which great masses of the populace are condemned to be bored to death. What use are the amazing engineering inventions the world now has at its disposal, if the conditions for taking advantage of them are lacking, if they don't offer opportunities for recreation, if imagination fails?

We are looking for adventure. No longer finding it on earth, some are going to look for it on the moon. We, however, still aim for change here on earth.

We endeavour to create new and unprecedented situations. We intend to break the laws that impede the development of effective activities within culture. We are at the dawn of a new era, and we are attempting, already, to sketch the picture of a happier life and of a unitary urbanism, made to be enjoyed.

Our domain is therefore the urban network, the natural expression of a collective creativity, able to conceive the creative forces that are liberated by the decline of the traditional arts, of a culture based on individualism.

We believe that the existing arts will not be able to play any role in the creation of the new and joyous ambiance in which we wish to live.

We are in the process of creating new techniques; we are examining the possibilities presented by existing cities; we build models and plans for future cities.

We are aware that we need to make use of every technological invention and we know that future constructions will need to be flexible enough to respond to a dynamic conception of life, which will create our environment in direct relation to constantly changing modes of behaviour.

Our concept of urbanism is therefore primarily social. We oppose the concept of a green city, where widely spaced and isolated skyscrapers necessarily limit direct contact between people and their daily interaction. In order for a close relationship between the environment and behaviour to come about, agglomeration is indispensable. Those who think that the speed of our travels and the possibility of telecommunication are going to dissolve the shared life in agglomerations are not well versed in the true needs of man.

Against the idea of a green city we propose the image of the covered city, where differentiation among buildings makes way for a seamless construction, which will contain groupings of dwellings as well as public spaces (allowing for changes in purpose according to the needs of the moment). Far from a return to nature, from the idea of living in a park, like the secluded aristocrats of yesteryear, we foresee within such immense constructions the opportunity to conquer nature and to make the climate, the noise, the lighting of these agglomerations submit to our will. Do we mean by this a new functionalism that will emphasize idealized utilitarian living even more? Although such a functionalism is the basis of any social and cultural upheaval, one must not forget that once functions are established, what follows is play. Architecture long ago became a game with space and ambiance.

The future cities we envision offer an unprecedented variability of sensations in this area, and unexpected games will be made possible by the inventive use of material conditions, such as air conditioning, sound and lighting. Urban designers are already studying the possibilities of harmonizing the cacophony that reigns in current cities; it will not be long before this becomes a new creative field, as in many others that will emerge. The voyages into outer space that are being predicted may well influence this development, since the bases that will be established on other planets will immediately pose the problem of enclosed cities, which will serve as a model for our study of future urbanism. In the meantime, the reduction in labour required for production brought about by advancing automation will generate a lot of free time.

Our idea of a covered city is based on the concept of a collective habitat with maximum social space, in contrast to the idea of a green city where social space is limited to a minimum.

The future city must be conceived as a permanent structure, or else an extended system of different structures on structures, within which are rooms for housing, entertainment, etc., as well as rooms designed for production and distribution, keeping the ground free for traffic and public gatherings.

The use of ultra-light and insulating materials, as are being experimented with today, will allow the construction of light structures, free-standing areas and supporting structures. In this way we will be able to construct a city in several layers: basement, ground floor, storeys, terraces, in sizes varying from that of a current neighbourhood to that of a metropolis. The terraces form an open-air area extending across the entire surface of the city and provide accommodation for playing sports, taking a stroll, platforms for airports, cultivating greenery; they will be accessible everywhere by stairs and lifts. The various storeys will be divided into adjoining and communicating spaces, with artificial

heating and air conditioning in order to offer the option of creating an infinite variety of ambiances, allowing inhabitants a constant *dérive* as well as an increase in fortuitous encounters.

An in-depth study of the means for creating ambiances and of their psychological impact is one of the tasks currently undertaken by the Situationists.

Studies concerning the technical production of constructed structures and of their aesthetics are the specific task of plastic artists and of engineers.

The input of the latter, especially, is urgently needed in order to make progress in the preliminary work in which we are engaged.

Because there is a risk that the project we have just outlined in broad strokes, might be considered as the dream of fantasists, we insist upon the fact that it is achievable in technical terms, that it is desirable in human terms, that it is essential in social terms.

The growing dissatisfaction that dominates humanity will reach a point at which we will be forced to implement the projects for which we have the means and which will be able to contribute to bringing about a richer and more accomplished life.

Therefore, in such a city, the built surface area will be 100% and the open area 200% (ground floor and terrace), whereas in traditional cities these figures are something like 80% and 20%, and in a green city this ratio may, at best, be inverted.

‘Notre ambition est dans l’ambiance’, unpublished text, c. 1958-1959.

The typed manuscript is in the Constant archive at the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD).

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