This text is the original manuscript of a lecture that Constant gave at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London on November 7, 1963. A much shortened and edited version of the text was published in *Architectural Design* in June of the following year and that publication became the way most international architects learned of the New Babylon project. To preserve the original tone of the lecture, the complete manuscript is presented here without any stylistic corrections.

Lecture given at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London

I have been asked to present here my project, called New-Babylon. You might wonder perhaps, why a painter and sculptor like I am, spends his time in describing and illustrating an imaginary city, and how a free artist gets interested in a discipline like urbanism. To make you understand that New-Babylon is not a town-planning project, but rather a way of thinking, of imagining, of looking on things and on life, I will have to start with explaining to you my conception of art, or rather of the present situation of the artist. For the cultural situation of to-day is the source out of which this New-Babylon plan is born. I almost could put it this way, that my awareness of the desperate situation of modern art hardly left me any other choice. I will try to explain this, starting from the very notion of art itself.

The crisis in the creative behaviour of the artist, his hesitations towards himself, his obvious frustrations and his provocative attitude towards society, cannot be understood well without making clear who the artist really is, at what moment he made his appearance in society, subsequently when we can expect him to disappear. At this very moment already it seems quite a curious fact, that people go on speaking of art and artists, as if these words represent accurate ideas that should be understandable at any moment and by everyone, as if art is just an odd activity and the artist just a different type of man, deviating from what should be the normal type.

Since the beginning of this century there has been much talking about the creative faculties of the human race, and more than one avant-garde movement declared itself in favour of the "poésie faite par tous," a poetry brought forth by the whole of mankind.

The realisation of such a mass-culture does obviously not depend on the intentions of the artist only, and would demand thorough changes in society.

In the society of the past, creativity has never been essential, perhaps hardly important. Essential only is the production of primary consumption-goods. However it is remarkable that, in spite of the fact that nearly all the people that have lived, have sacrificed the whole of their lives to hard production-labour, the history of consumption shows up an everlasting hunger and shortage. During all the history of his existence, man has been obliged to spend nearly his total energy just for the purpose of staying alive.

If there has been any culture at all, this is due to the fact that an extremely small number of people, who owned the land and the other means of production, thus could avoid the necessity of labour. Without the slavery of the big majority, these small upper-classes would not have been able to play their lives, to invent their way of living, to be creative, to establish their cultures. The division of humanity into creative and non-creative individuals, is inherent to the division of society into possessing, not-working classes and the classes of workers, and without this division, we may say, there wouldn't have been any culture at all. But the artist, properly speaking, is not a representative of the ruling class, though he depends on this class. We could say that he is hired by the social élite. The artist, like we still know him in this period of his fall, is a product of the economy of money, of the capitalist economy. He only appears on the historical moment the bourgeoisie comes on the scene. The bourgeoisie never has been a creative class itself, like the nobility originally was, but the rule of money allowed the bourgeois-class to have its dreams realized by employed specialists, by professional artists. The revolutionizing role the artists played through the past centuries was enabled by the individualist ideology the bourgeoisie used as an arm against feudalism.

This having settled, we better can understand now the critical situation the artists have come in since the industrial revolution. Before the machine could take over any human labour, it first had to be produced itself. This extra effort caused an expense of energy that only could be recompensed by cutting down cultural activities, by withdrawing this energy from the creative activities that were tolerated before. The artist has surely understood this, perhaps unconsciously. How to explain otherwise his immediate violent opposition against mechanization—for which in this country William Morris is still a symbol—an opposition that continues until some of the most recent art-movements. But it is only after the first world war that the artists organized into militant "avant-garde" groups, to maintain their opposition against an industrializing society in which, they felt, there wouldn't be any place for them. The bohemian artist of the 19th century and the more recent avant-garde artist are both products of the controversy between mechanization and creativity.

In our time however, we are facing a quite different situation. The effects of machine-production are leading slowly to a limitation of human labour, and we can state already with certainty, that we will enter a new era, in which production-labour will be automatic, and in which man will be freed from labour and from hunger both. For the first time in history, mankind will be able to establish an affluent society in which nobody will have to spill his forces, and in which everybody will be able to use his entire energy for the development of his creative capacities.

We already can say now, that there is no repeatable action, that theoretically couldn't be done by a machine. The only activity that will remain beyond automation is the unique act of imagination, by which a human being is distinguished. The only field of activity inaccessible for the computer is the unforeseeable creativity that makes man change the world and reshape it after his capricious needs.

There can be no doubt about the progressing of mankind towards this perspective. No force on earth can possibly prevent humanity from seizing the affluence of automatic production that will enable man to live a creative life instead of being nothing but an instrument of production. Soon man will no longer have to sell his life-time and to lose his creative forces, even before having been able to use them for the realisation of a real human existence. The affluence of automatic production itself will be the instrument by which the now working people will forge their future freedom. And, at last, labour itself will disappear totally and the only production-force that will remain will be the machine.

The question is now how the free man of this future will use his unbound forces, in which way he will realize his freedom, what his life will be like. I hope it will be clear that no comparison can be made with the artist of the past or of the present. The *homo ludens* of the past, like Johan Huizinga described him, was a man in an exceptional situation, a man who escaped reality in suggesting another dreamed "reality" that should help him to forget the

unsatisfying circumstances of his actual life. No real contact was possible between him and the others who could not follow him into his substitute reality, being captured themselves in their utilitarian lives. His thoughts and his morals had to be different from the normal, and even when society recognized him, he remained a lonely man, sometimes an outcast.

The new *homo ludens* of the future, on the contrary, will rather be the normal type of man. His life consists in constructing the reality he wants, in creating the world he conceives freely, no longer bothered by the struggle for life. We will see that this means a complete revolution in the field of social behaviour. If man is no longer bound to production-labour, he also will no longer be forced to stick to a fixed place, to settle down. He will be able to circulate, to change his environment, to enlarge his area. His relationship to space will become as free as his relationship to time is already becoming now. I think we are getting to the point now.

If man is supposed to obtain complete freedom, to be master of time and space, can we expect that he will use his freedom in a creative way, that he won't spoil his life in idleness and boredom, like moralists are constantly telling us? Does it make sense to change society, and to reconstruct our environment, if we cannot expect that the needs of man will develop to a higher level, if we don't expect the birth of the new human type that I called the *homo ludens*?

Answering these questions, I will repeat that the artist is only socially an exception, that everybody is creative, at least potentially, and to a certain extent, and that the unsatisfaction of the average welfare-state citizen of today has more to do with the world he lives in than with his own capacities.

The artist has always tried to represent the image of the world, but more important is to change the world itself and make it more livable.

The specific task of the creative men of this actual period is to prepare a new exciting reality, instead of depicting and expressing the unsatisfying reality that is about to be liquidated.

But this new reality must cover the social space we are really living in. The *homo ludens* of the future society will not have to make art, for he can be creative in the practice of his daily life. He will be able to create life itself and to shape it in correspondence with the still unknown needs that will emerge only after he has obtained complete freedom, after he can develop into a new *homo ludens*. At present any activity in the field of art that is not concerned with the *homo ludens* could already be called backward, and that is the reason I have concentrated my activity on this New-Babylon plan.

New-Babylon represents the environment the *homo ludens* is supposed to live in. For it should be clear that the functional cities, that have been erected during the long period of history in which the human lives were consecrated to utility, would by no means suit the totally different needs of the creative race of the *homo ludens*.

The environment of the *homo ludens* has, first of all, to be flexible, changeable, assuring any movement, any change of place or change of mood, any way to behave. The spaces the *homo ludens* will live in cannot be determined, and neither can be the use that will be made of them. Not the home can be the main element of this environment, but only the extensive social space people move around in, on search for adventurous circumstances that must stimulate their life-activity, the social space where people will meet, will influence each other, and where they actually will realize their lives.

It follows that New-Babylon could impossibly be a determined urbanist plan, that provides everything town-planners think that people need. On the contrary, every element is left undetermined, all has to be mobile and flexible, in order to make any kind of use that will be made of it possible. For the people, circulating in this enormous social space, are expected to give this space its ever-changing shape, to divide it, to vary it, to create its always different atmosphere, and to play their lives in the variety of these surroundings.

The project of New-Babylon only intends to give the minimum conditions for a behaviour that must remain as free as possible. Any restriction of the freedom of movement, any limitation with regard to the creation of mood and atmosphere, has to be avoided. Everything has to remain possible, all is to happen, the environment has to be created by the activity of life, and not inversely.

Now we will have to consider the conditions that have led to the formal characteristics of New-Babylon. There are two connected circumstances that have caused, especially in the past ten years, a critical situation in the highly industrialized countries. The first and most important is the increase of populations, that is leading to an almost complete urbanization of the landscape, destroying the land that originally was used in common. The other circumstance, related to this, is the growing importance of mechanical traffic, that enlarges enormously the living-space of each individual. It makes no sense to discuss these developments, that represent a new social situation no one can deny. The facts are simply there as a reality, and we have to deal with them. But we cannot allow traffic to destroy the social space of the cities, like it is doing now, and we can not let the population-growth be responsible for changing all landscape into one uninterrupted townscape, boring and dead, without any possibility for creating a more interesting way of living.

Every plan for the future, may it be as free as the New Babylon plan tends to be, has to solve the problems that are posed by these circumstances, and any failure in solving them may be considered as an attack against the freedom of life. The elementary characteristics of New-Babylon that I will mention are therefore purely practical: severe separation of fast traffic and social living-space on the one hand, and on the other hand the severe separation of the constructed artificial living-space and the free untouched nature. With these conditions the basic construction of New-Babylon is given. The urbanisation consists of a coherent system of covered unities that I call sectors, and in between remain extensive open spaces where nobody lives and where no buildings are to be found—nature parks, agricultural land and gardens. This network-like system is unlimited, and could theoretically cover the entire surface of the earth. Because of the intensified use that is made of space, this means that the field of activity of each individual has practically no limits.

The sector itself—the dimensions of which are much bigger than those of any present building—is a spatial system of high-placed levels, that leave the ground-level free for an intensive fast traffic. On top of it there may be airports or heliports, to assure the quick passage to sector-groups in other parts of the world.

The sector-floors are primarily empty. They represent a sort of extension of the earth-surface, a new skin that covers the earth and multiplies its living-space. They will have to be divided and developed into a more complicated pattern of smaller spaces.

The unfunctional character of this playground-like construction makes any logical division of the inner spaces senseless. We rather should think of a quite chaotic arrangement of smaller and bigger spaces that constantly are mounted and dismounted by means of standardized mobile construction-elements, like walls, floors and staircases. Thus the social space can be adapted to the ever-fluctuating needs of an ever-changing

population that is passing the sector-system.

Life in New-Babylon is inapt for the forming of habits. Every situation is different and should differently be faced. There could be no question of any fixed life-pattern, for life itself is to be handled as a creative material. For the same reason it would be wrong to speak of the inhabitants of New-Babylon. The unfunctional and fantastic way of living requires the rapid passage from one place to the other, from one sector to the other sector, and we could call life in New-Babylon in a way nomadic. People are constantly moving around and travelling, and there is no need for them to come back to the same place, which would soon have been changed anyhow. Therefore each sector contains a centre with private rooms—we could compare that with a hotel—where passing visitors can rest awhile, can pass the night, can make love, relax or recover when they feel sick. But they will seldom stay for a long time in such centres, for moving on is easy and anyhow makes life more interesting and intensive.

Every moment of life in New-Babylon can have the quality of a brainwashing in so far that the intensity of each moment destroys the memory that normally paralyses the creative imagination.

To make the character of the inner spaces as varied as possible, the interior of the sectors is air-conditioned in a way to create artificially any wanted climate. Passing from one space into another, one can meet the most contrasting climatological conditions. The scale the sectors are built in, and the fact they comprise more than one living-level, makes it impossible to depend on natural light, which could only penetrate into some of the outer spaces. The use of artificial light not only enlarges enormously the number of lighting-possibilities but also makes human life still more independent from sunlight than it already is now. So the technical means for the construction of atmosphere—means for the management of light, temperature, moisture, and other atmospherical conditions—are used in a creative way, as artistic mediums. There can never be a question of the imitation of natural circumstances, but there should be taken advantage of the much greater variety the artificial climatization allows, in order to make the passage through the world of sectors as adventurous as possible.

So the *homo ludens* of New-Babylon incessantly travels through the world he creates and recreates at any instant, and we could say that staying in New-Babylon for 24 hours may offer more experiences and more sensations than a long journey in any former period of history. Every square mile of New-Babylon's surface represents an unexhaustible field of new and unknown situations, because nothing will remain and everything is constantly changing. The mobile construction-elements and the technical equipment for climate and light manipulation, guarantee the constant variation of the entire living-space.

After this basic information, I will show you a number of slides that show details of the models I made to illustrate my conception. I hope they will help you to get an idea in which way an unfunctional city for not-working people may differ from the kind of cities that are built until now for working people. With these slides I only want to give you a suggestion like the painter or the poet used to suggest a world different from the utilitarian world he tried to escape from. I certainly don't want to predict how the world of the future will look like in any detail, for that would be impossible. I just will try to give you—and myself—an idea of how the world might look like when labour will be abolished. So I beg you to look on these slides as if you were visiting a new and unknown city and to undergo its specific atmosphere. A sound-tape that I will let you hear at the same time, is mentioned to suggest the presence of life, and the rest now is left to your own imagination.