

New Babylon, the hyper-architecture of desire

By Marina van den Bergen, ArchiNed, December 08 1998

Constant Nieuwenhuis has worked over twenty years on the development of his utopia New Babylon. Constant published the first sketches of what later would become New Babylon as early as 1949. The work was not exhibited for 12 years. The results of Constant's efforts can be seen again in their full glory for the first time since a long while. Until January 11th an impressive number of models, drawings, lithographs, etchings and paintings from and about New Babylon have been brought together in the Rotterdam 'Witte de With'.

The possibility to realise New Babylon is based on two assumptions: the socialisation of the ground and the complete automation of the production. Constant commented on this in the beginning of the 1960's: "The question, how the people would live in a society without hunger, without exploitation, and also without labour. In a society thus in which every person without exception would be able to fully develop their creativity. This important and intriguing question calls forward the image of a material environment that substantially differs from everything that we can, from everything that ever was established in the area of architecture and town-planning." In New Babylon one doesn't have to work, in this new society the inhabitants lead a nomadic existence and one can - in agreement with his desires - be shown to full advantage as a creative being; he becomes a homo ludens.

Constant presents New Babylon as a network. A series of units that mainly can be found 15 to 20 metres above the ground. These basic units, the so-called sectors, are independent from a construction point of view, and will lay on top of the existing city. After a period of time the sectors will gradually grow towards each other making the traditional living areas superfluous. The ground surface mainly consists of uncultivated space, meant for agriculture, nature reserves and for forests and parks but also offers space for throughways, the fully automated production centres and other objects for which is no place within the sectors. Constant gives as examples of these objects: transmitter masts, derricks and historical monuments.

Because a nomadic and creative lifestyle demands an as much as possible independence from material cares, elaborate collective provisions need to be available in the sectors. In a sector they should form about 70% of the living space. Even though the base structure can not easily be changed because of the dimensions and the place within the network, basically everything is possible within a sector, precisely because of the dimensions of the base structure. To allow for the variability, Constant pleads for neutral structures, regulation in measurements and standardisation of production.

It is not surprising that New Babylon could be created and was developed in the 1950's and 60's. It was in these years that a movement grew that turned away from the popular modernistic opinion about architecture and town planning. Some architects, town planners and artists, such as Constant, joined these opinions with outspoken political opinions, which

commonly contained a rejection of the consumption society. An important impulse in this direction was Constant's temporary joining of the Situationistische Internationale (Situationistic International) by Guy Debord.

The above explains (in part) the renewed interest in New Babylon. The discussions that are being held now are aimed at, just like in Constant's time, the dissociation against a certain planning model. The question about the roll of the inhabitant and that of the architect within the building process is raised again. And again one talks about the meaning of the concept social area. Next to that the story of the nomadic homo ludens keeps appealing to ones imagination. But what makes New Babylon so attractive and inspiring, is the political component, the involvement of society. This component seems to be missing often. Only the form language is adopted from the New Babylon concept to be processed further. The exhibition confirms this presumption. The overwhelming amount of material is displayed nicely, but explanation by the material is absent.

This is probably more than made up for in the accompanying book 'New Babylon- the Hyperarchitecture of Desire' that will come out at the same time as the exhibition, edited by Mark Wigley. The book was unfortunately not finished yet at the opening.

Marina van den Bergen

The exposition New Babylon can still be seen until January 11th in [Witte de With](#), Witte de Withstraat 50 in Rotterdam. Tuesday - Sunday 11:00 a.m. - 6 p. m., entrance fl 2,50; CJP, Pas 65+ fl 1,50.

There are a few sites, about the Situationism in general and Constant's New Babylon especially, that are worth a visit:

[Nothingness.org](#), gives a good summary and publishes a number of Situationistic articles. [Not Bored](#), is a superb, very extensive summary site about the Situationism and the Lettrism. It also contains a [list of all members](#) (complete with the moment at which they were excluded from the SI) including the Dutch members. It also has a good collection of texts by [Constant about New Babylon](#).

A publication by Mark Wigley is released at the same time as the exposition titled *New Babylon - the hyperarchitecture of desire*. 010 Publisher, p. 256, fl 95,- .