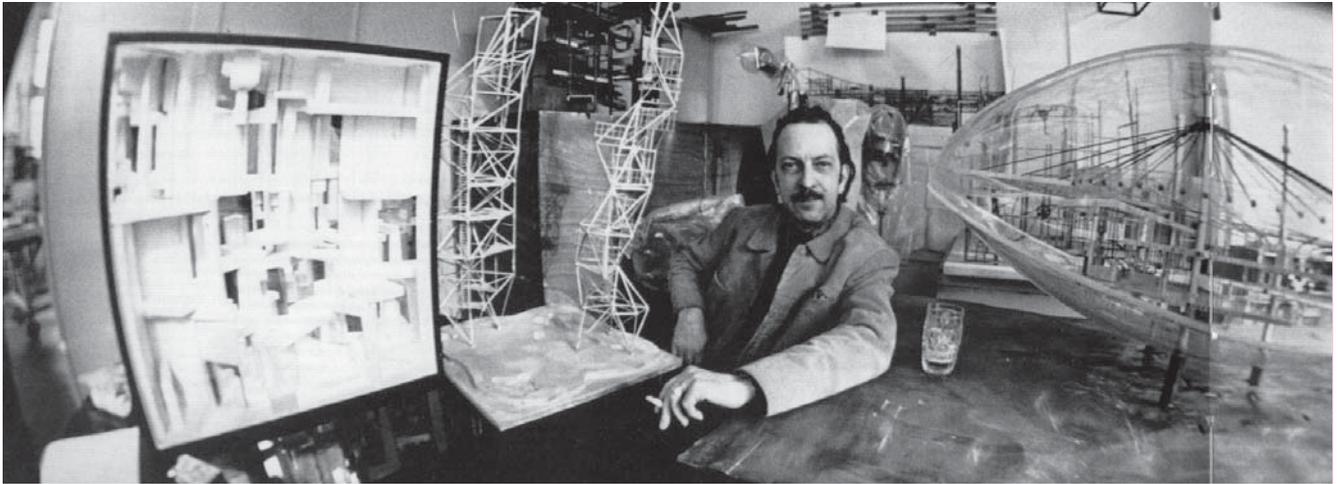


constant nieuwenhuis
new babylon



Constant in his studio in Amsterdam
Nico Koster, 1966.

NEW BABYLON / CONSTANT

a paper by
johannes dumpe, peter minnema

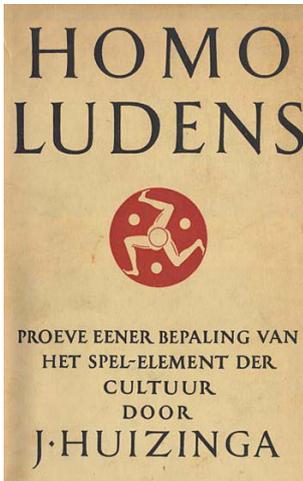
1// Constant

The co-founding artist of Cobra, Constant Nieuwenhuis, devoted most of his life to the New Babylon project. A project in which the 'playful man' was the central element and the proposed structures would facilitate man to live a nomadic life.

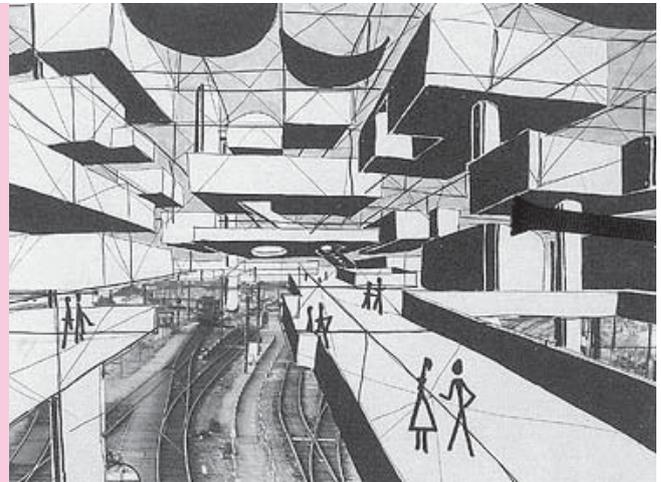
The stated hypothesis of Constant is that man in the future is free from physical labour and could be totally devoted to 'playing' and creativity. This idea is known as 'Homo Ludens' and is first stated by Johan Huizinga in 1938 in a book with the same name.

Constant was also inspired by Yona Friedman who experimented with ideas about mobile architecture in projects like Ville Spatiale. The proposed megastructures seem quite similar to the structures proposed in New Babylon. However, Constant translated the ideas in a more artistic way rather than an architectural one.

Constant put a lot of effort in communicating his ideas in the form of models from Plexiglas, iron wire and wood. These models stretch on maps of the size of the Netherlands. Constant didn't see New Babylon as a city, but rather as a 'design of a new culture'. To finance this project Constant sold his collection of Cobra-paintings. He worked almost 20 years on the project.



Book 'Homo Ludens'
Johan Huizinga, 1938



Ville Spatiale
Yona Friedman, 1957.

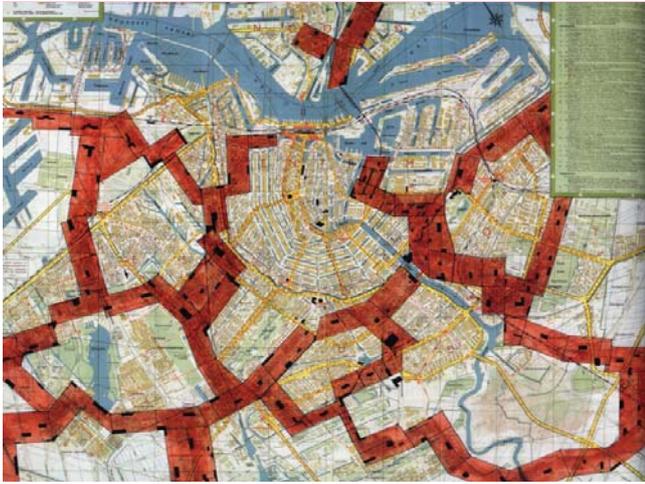
Utopias background

The architectural utopias course concentrated on the hardly to define concept of an utopia. The word was first used in the book Utopia by Sir Thomas More. The term is derived from Greek and means 'not'-place as well as 'good/happy'-place, a double meaning which was probably intended (Kumar 1987). In present-day philosophy the term is usually translated as an 'unrealistic ideal', which spawned other concepts, most prominently 'dystopia'.

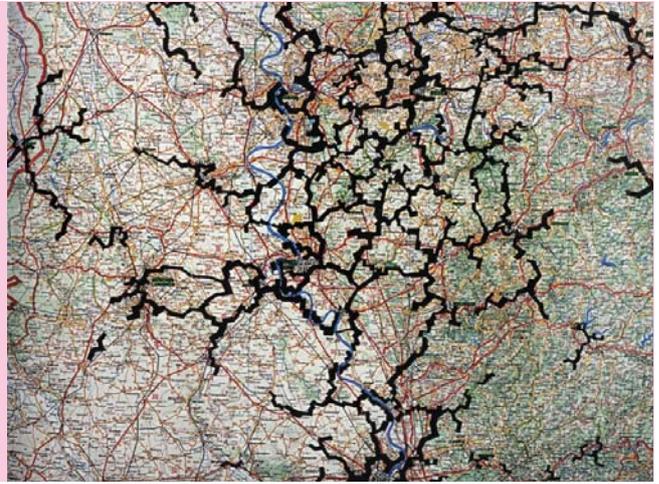
Constant's hypothesis was based on current technological developments such as mechanized farming, which he saw developing into fully automated farming. He also based his ideas on the concept of Homo Ludens by John Huizinga. This discusses the importance of the play element in culture and society. Huizinga suggests that play is primary to and a necessary, though not sufficient, condition of the generation of culture. An interesting phrase from the book is: "Let my playing be my learning and my learning be my playing".

He was also influenced by the French-Hungarian chaotic Yona Friedman, who was critical towards the CIAM statements and founded the GIAM instead. He rejected the uniform designs of the CIAM and came with projects in which the individual expression was leading. He also rejected the 'building of society', a common idea that architecture could shape society. In Ville Spatiale he proposed his idea a 'mobile architecture'.

The basics of the New Babylon utopia are automated farming, collective ownership and no fixed times and labor. The project is based on the assumption that every human being is creative, and that aggression derives from not being able to express this creativity.



New Babylon/Amsterdam
ink on map



New Babylon/Ruhrgebiet
ink on map

Focus on spatial reality

This paper reviews the research about New Babylon, considering the different elements and the relation with the spatial, architectural, form. New Babylon has a social component which interests and grasps the minds of thinkers. But the exiting part of Constant's work is translating this social idea into spatial reality. He devoted his entire life on this translation: communicating this utopia in drawings and (multimedia) models.

The focus is on the elements of spatial construction, the quality of space and the elements which influence the perception of space. With drawings and descriptions we try to zoom into spatial reality.

The principles of New Babylon are also discussed, which are the relation creativity/aggression, nomadic life/labyrinth and the automation of work/freedom. These are the basic assumptions on which the plan is based and give an insight in the vision Constant had on the future. It also shows the ideas in the time of Constant, the beginning of the sixties.

At the end of this paper there is a reflection on New Babylon in the light of the lecture series Architectural Utopias. And the link with other utopian projects in the lecture series is made. It also relates to our present time and the value of New Babylon in our field of work.



Gezicht op New Babylonische sectoren (View of New Babylonian Sectors)
watercolor and pencil on photomontage
photo: Victor E. Nieuwenhuys

2// New Babylon

As visionary as New Babylon is, Constant had lots of precise ideas, how this network for the “changed human beings” will look like.

Here we can categorize in three different Groups, that defines the qualities of New Babylon.

- Elements of spatial construction
- Elements defining the quality of space
- Elements which influence the perception of space

It is important to see, that every aspect of his thoughts follows the same aim:

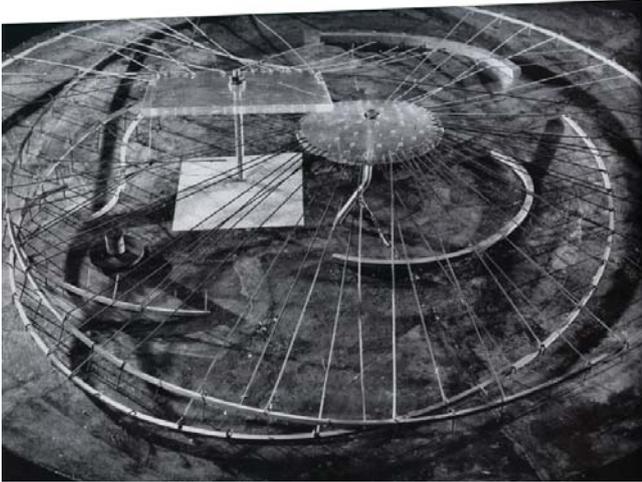
“When struggle for existence is no more than a memory, the man will be able, for the first time in history, in complete freedom, to give his existence the form of his desires.”

To help the mankind breaking free.

A. Elements of spatial construction

Building materials, their color, the form and dimension of space etc.

The basic structure should be as neutral as possible, to allow all kinds of frequent transformation of the interior. For that, Constant developed a mainly horizontal skeleton, which is build mostly of steel and concrete. This is placed on huge columns fifteen – twenty meters over the ground and with a total height between thirty – sixty meters and covers ten – twenty hectares. This basic structure is divided in sectors. The sector is the smallest element, the basic unit of the Babylonian network. The scale depends on the system and social relation, also on the landscape / city, he is build above. Every sector consists some basic elements inside. There is a technical centre, also a hotel reception with individual rooms, sanitary, teaching facilities as well as libraries, scientific research centers, etc..



Ontwerp voor zigeunerkamp (Design for a Gypsy Camp)
stainless steel, aluminium, plexiglass, oil on wood
photo: Victor E. Nieuwenhuys



Spatiovore (Space Eater)
metal, ink on plexiglass, paint on wood
photo: Victor E. Nieuwenhuys

For the inside everything should be as flexible as possible. Most parts of every “building” should be moveable systems, which are easy to mount or dismount. Walls, floors, bridges as well as lights and supply units.

B. Elements defining the quality of space

Temperature, humidity, atmosphere...

As a basic part of New Babylon, at any place and any moment, every inhabitant should be able to adjust light, sound, temperature or atmosphere.

Climatic conditions will be no longer important. Everybody will create his or her own climate. Not the ideal climate, but to vary ambience to the greatest possible degree. And this will create different zones of attraction.

There will be very few daylight in the enormous sectors of New Babylon. Constant wanted the people breaking free more and more, and following no longer the rhythm of nature.

He wanted them to find their own rhythm. A normal day as we know, properly would no longer exist in New Babylon. There will be no daily routine like today. We will not get up in the morning, go to bed in the evening, or having meal at the regular times.

In New Babylon you will hardly be able to say, if it is day or night.

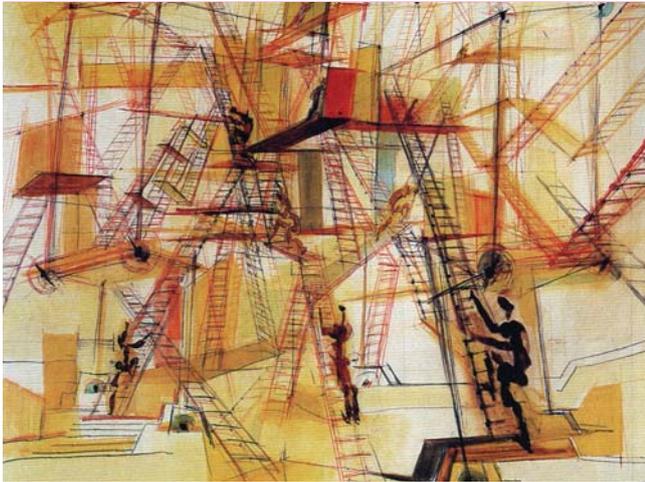
This huge system will cost lost of energy, which Constant wants to safe by doing today's work more efficient. Almost every work which is today done by man should be replaced by machines. That will also gives more free time for the human being.

C. Elements which influence the perception of space

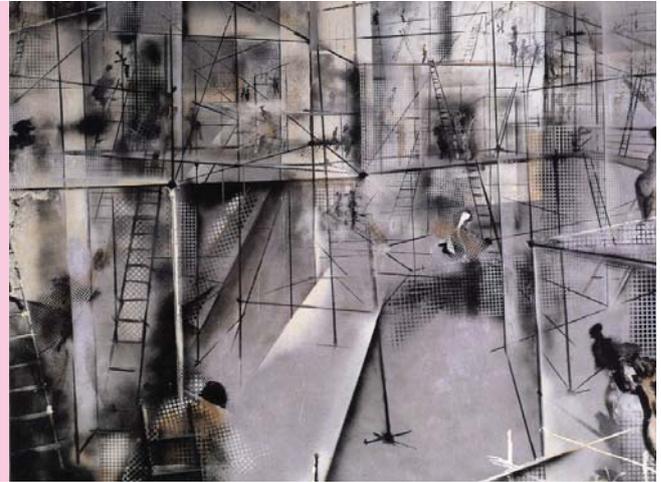
Movement, eating, drinking, use of verbal or other communications

In New Babylon, every edge of the city can be accessed by air, car or underground train. Also, beneath the structure there are freeways crossing in all directions. There will be no moving

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architectural utopias



Mobiel Ladderlabyrinth (Mobile Ladderlabyrinth)
pencil and watercolor on paper



Ode à l'Odéon (Tribute to Odeon)
oil and aluminium paint on canvas

barriers for anybody. Also, every inhabitant has free access to every form of communication as well as newest technical equipment. And because of the collective ownership of land and that all production work is done by machines, all food supplies will be assured.

Nowadays, life is related to the work we have. We have to stay close to our jobs. But in the weekend or holidays, we are getting out of our places. In New Babylon we will no longer stay at one place, because there will be no fixed places to work. We will have a kind of adventurous, nomadic way of life, in which you never know what will happen. Here again the labyrinthal form of New Babylon is getting important.

All in all, there are several issues that are very much linked together.

- Every human being is creative
- Relationship between aggression and creativity
- Nomadic way of life
- free travelling without borders
- Principle of disorientation / Labyrinth
- Control of surroundings and climate
- Collective ownership of land and all produced goods

More than in most other Utopian Ideas, Constant has always tried to keep a direct relationship between the single human being and the "city". That's why it's so easy to get access to Constant ideas and thoughts. Everything which is build follows the basic needs of a single person. In order to this, everybody will be able to find a place in New Babylon.

To make sure, that his project will be suitable for everyone, he focuses on some common points:



La révolte (The Uprising)
oil on canvas



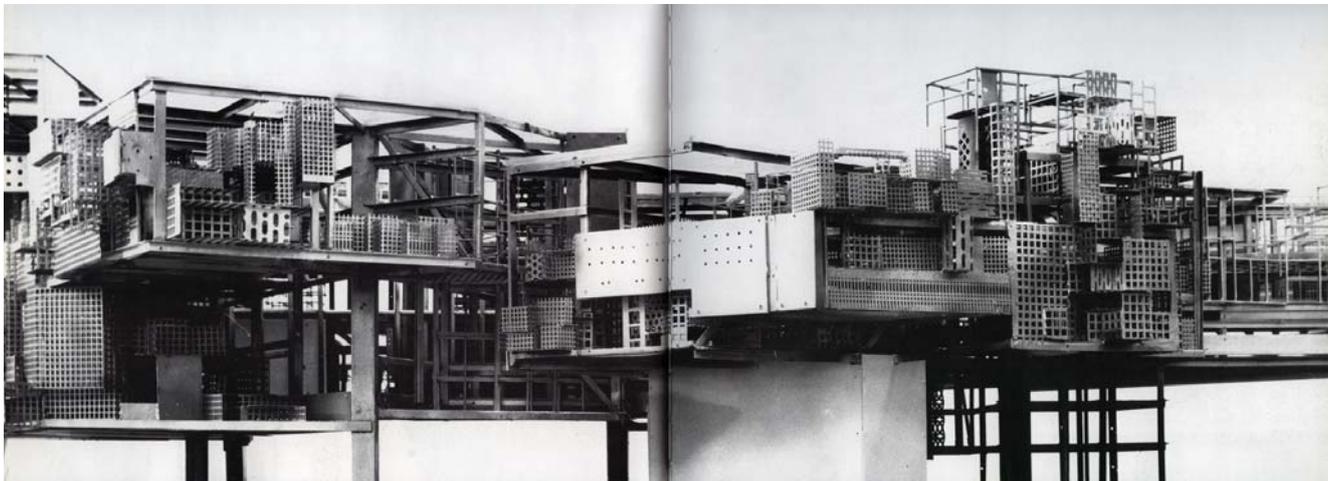
Le massacre
litograph

Creativity - Aggression

For Constant there is a direct relationship between aggression and creativity. He says: “as long as mankind is denied the possibility to be creative, this creativity will express itself through aggression”. For him, creativity has always been frustrated.

The struggle for survival, the need to provide food, drink and clothing is omnipresent and this has forced people into utilitarian activities. For him it is clear, that if we are able to satisfy the basic needs of everybody, there will be no more reason to live a life of production and timekeeping. And then, every human being can follow his basic instinct: to play.

Constant don't wanted to install a superior instance that arrange and control everyday life. Today we can hardly imagine, but in Constants vision, there would be no aggressions. In situations of conflict, it would be a creative challenge to work out solutions.



Fragment van een sector (Detail of a Sector)
metal, plexiglass, wood
photo: Victor E. Nieuwenhuys

Nomadic life – labyrinth

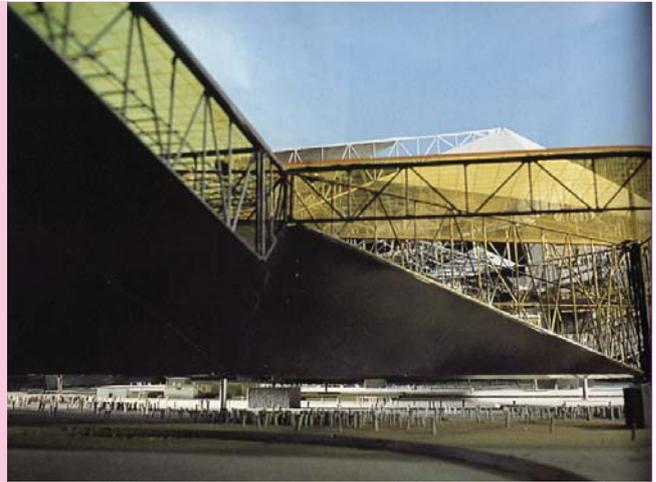
In Constant's idea of New Babylon, everything in the city should be able to be controlled and changed by a single person. To give the most possible freedom of a situation. Therefore, he developed the idea of a labyrinth structure, which is changing constantly. Walls, doors, floors, bridges, ladders, lights, everything should be moveable. This idea follows different reasons:

1. Possibility for everybody to express themselves about their surrounding
2. Constantly changing structure stays interesting
3. think about, how they want to live, every day again
(different rooms for different moods)
4. Use of the surroundings as tools for being creative

Never the less, the Babylonians will also be able to change the atmosphere conditions. They would be able to adjust the color and strength of light, and also would have control about warmth, coldness and humidity in every single moment. This, so thinks Constant, will create different zones of climates and so, different zones of attraction. This would be one of the reasons for people to travel around.



Entrée du Labyrinthe (Entrance of the Labyrinth)
oil on canvas



Grote gele sector (Large Yellow Sector)
metal, plexiglass, oil on wood
photo: Victor E. Nieuwenhuis

Automation of work - freedom

Constant: "All the wars today are battles to control the world markets, to suppressing other countries to remaining customers. The battles will end automatically with the end of industrialization."

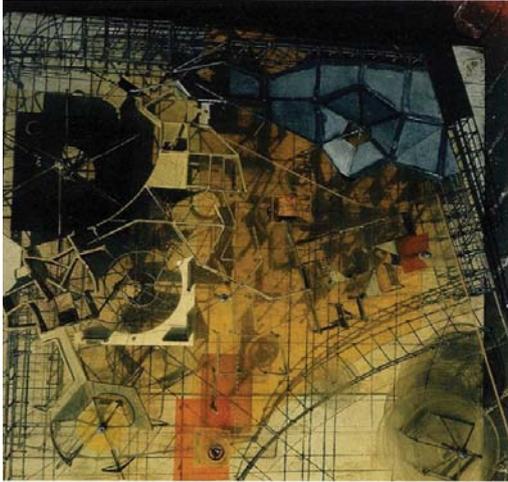
In the 70th the mass layoff in America was a major problem for factory workers. They were frightened of losing their job and their money. For Constant, this was a typical problem of the industrialization. He saw, that the total automation (cybernetics) would come anyway, so man would have to search for new tasks. He saw a lot of potential in replacing human being by machines. To produce more efficient and release the people.

But also, it would be necessary to make sure, that the supply of every single person would be secured. For that, he planned to keep all the ground level free from buildings, and install a huge system of mechanical agriculture.

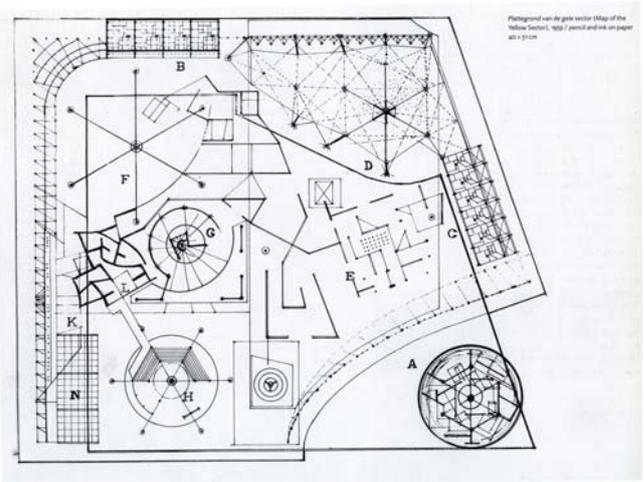
He wanted to compensate the huge effort of energy of New Babylon with the efficiency of machine work. Also people would save energy for their creative work, if they don't have to clean up, typewrite or work in factories anymore.

This energy would have to find new ways to express, which could be found in New Babylon.

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architectural utopias



Gele sector (Yellow Sector)
metal, ink on plexiglass, oil on wood
photo: Bram Wisman



**Plattegrond van de gele sector
(Map of the Yellow Sector), 1959**
pencil and ink on paper

3// Utopias

Level of Detail

It looks like Constant's efforts to make his ideas spatial worked, however there is some criticism. Most plans are kept too vague or 'flexible' in a way in which normal architectural comment is not possible. Only when we see the plan in detail, like the plan for the Yellow Sector, critiques can be given on New Babylon. This is because Constant made a map with a legenda of it, so we can evaluate the function-schemes and ofcourse question them.

Constant and Nature

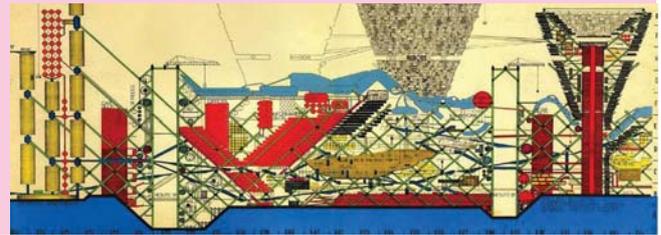
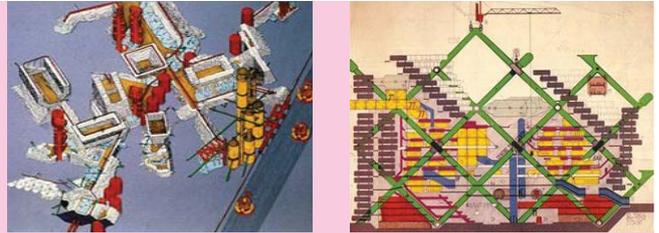
I guess, for most of the people, Constant had a very strange relation to nature. We can see this in different points. First of all, he wanted New Babylon as a closed system. Sunlight, wind, rain. all that should have been artificial. Total control about the atmosphere. As well for the ground floor, which he wanted to be used only for agriculture. (That was one reason, why he built New Babylon that high.) But Constant had a second interest, that was maybe even more important. He felt like he was dominated by nature. Even the rhythm of day and night was a barrier for him. And he wanted to free the people from this. "in the enormous sectors of New Babylon i have eliminated daylight altogether, because people are breaking free more and more anyhow, especially from the rhythms of nature. Man wants to follow his own rhythm." We don't know, what rhythm Constant is talking about, and he never really specified it. Properly a major aspect was productivity and how people go to work day by day.

But also, he thought about replacing the concept of evolution with something else. "When struggle for existence is no more than a memory, the man will be able, for the first time in history, in complete freedom, to give his existence the form of his desires."

constant nieuwwenhuys
new babylon



Sectores in berglandschap (Sectors in Mountainous Landscape)
plexiglass, oil on wood



Plug-In City mixed mediacollage
Peter Cook, 1964.

Who did Constant build for?

Constant wanted to create a new society. Practically starting from zero. But how could that work? Constant saw the most potential in children, because they are not that much affected by time and money. He didn't believe that the mentality of a person above twenty could still be changed much. And he didn't believe in changing the society from inside. But exactly this makes New Babylon so inaccessibly. Constant had a strong believe in the people of New Babylon, but not in his society. Why couldn't his theory of the connection between Aggression and Creativity work for older people as well?

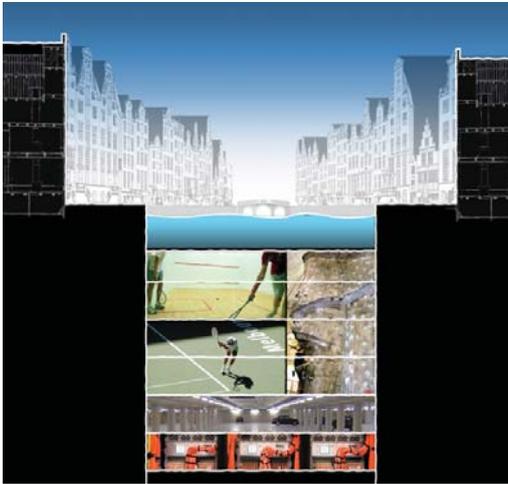
In fact, Constant never really put New Babylon in a context. Indeed, at the first view, the maps of Den Hague, London or Ruhrgebiet seem to show, that he take some attention to existing structures. But we couldn't find relations between the ground floor and New Babylon. And the only Collage that deals with that point, shows never ending wasteland. Just as well, there could have been water. And at this point New Babylon loses the ground and stays an utopia. Even though a very seductive one.

Related projects

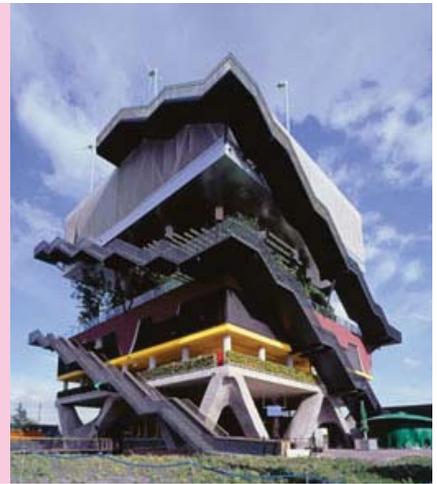
Constant has an obvious relation with Yona Friedman, which was one of his big inspirators. New Babylon and Ville Spatiale look alike, but Constant's proposal is more abstract and extreme. Also the presentation technique is different: where Friedman uses mostly drawings, Constant is focussed on models with sound and films.

The comparison with Plug-in city from the ArchiGram group is interesting. The obvious similarities are that they are both utopias and made in the same time. But where New Babylon is a high-ideal non market conviction, Plug-in city is pragmatic and marked based. And there are more differences. Plug-in city uses clear technical references from Meccano

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Amfora (City under Amsterdam)
Strukton, 2008.



Dutch paviljon Expo Hannover
MVRDV, 2000.

and Lego, but New Babylon never demonstrates the feasibility of its megastructure. But also the experience of space is different. Plug-in city focusses on intensive cell-like privatisation whereas New Babylon proposes a vast public forum. And the representation is different: there are numerous plans/models of New Babylon, but only on famous section of Plug-In city.

New Babylon nowadays

Constant has reflected in a lecture in 1980 on his own work. He gives an overview of New Babylon and criticizes social developments in that time. One of the big questions was if a future like Constant describes was coming closer. He was a bit pessimistic and answered as following: "New Babylon seems a very long way off, especially now that there is a growing need for a different kind of living environment. Twenty years ago, discussions about New Babylon focused on the question of whether automation would indeed be achieved, and if so, whether this would lead to emancipation from work and to the wholesale release of energy that might for instance be converted into creativity. Today these are no longer questions: enormous energy is being withdrawn from the labor process and its finds no other outlet than in aggression prompted by dissatisfaction. This situation can only become increasingly explosive. The relevance of the New Babylon project seems to have disappeared or to have been postponed to some shadowy future."

It seems that he does not see the value of his work in this time, especially when he says in the end: "This was as far as I could go. The project exists. It is safely stored away in a museum, waiting for more favorable times when it will once again arouse interest among future urban designers."

But that was in the 1980's, what is the value nowadays? We see different developments, like the debate about customisation and flexibility. People want more and more an individual, creative approach, so it seems. But is it really getting us closer to the 'homo ludens' or is it just a clever marketing strategy?

constant nieuwenhuys
new babylon



Constant Nieuwenhuys
1920-2005
photo: Peer Veneman

The discussion nowadays is aiming against, just like in Constant's time, central planning. Questions about the roll of the resident and that of the architect/planner within the building process is raised again. Also the meaning of the public space is once again under discussion. And ofcourse the image of 'homo ludens' is still very appealing. But what makes New Babylon so attractive and inspiring, is the political component, the role and involvement of society. This component seems to be often missing in present discussions.

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