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## LEISURE/WEEKEND DESK

# ARCHITECTURE REVIEW; Tinkertoy Fantasy for a City of Unquenchable Desire

By HERBERT MUSCHAMP

ANOTHER CITY FOR ANOTHER LIFE: CONSTANT'S NEW BABYLON," a show now on view at the Drawing Center, fills in an important chapter in the history of contemporary architecture. Constant was a painter whose utopian ambitions propelled him into the realm of architecture and urban planning. What he found there was a nightmare surpassed in dreadfulness only by the commercial building types that eventually came to pass: malls, airports, theme parks, convention hotels and other products of the monoculture.

At the same time, Constant's visionary work prefigures projects by Frank O. Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, Philippe Starck, Nigel Coates, Greg Lynn and other architects who have imbued individual buildings with the rich emotional impact of urban experience. And this show proposes that Constant looked even further into the future, toward the cyberspatial network now beginning to encircle the globe.

Organized by Mark Wigley, a professor of architecture at Princeton University, the show has the narrative structure of a horror movie. Buckminster Fuller once observed that all utopias tend to be taken over by thugs. In his designs for the New Babylon, Constant arrives at a similar realization about his own utopian ideas. The New Babylon was Constant's vision of a city given over to the pleasure principle. Dionysian, released from reason, dedicated to spontaneity, change and the realization of all fantasies, the city was a reaction against the rationalist city envisioned by Le Corbusier and other modern architects.

Two decades after embarking on this project, however, Constant had seen the dark side of the id unbound. Still, instead of abandoning the project, Constant determined to probe the shadows of the Babylon he had devised. In a final series of drawings, he sketches an apocalypse in black and red: madness, slavery, dehumanization, the dystopian consequences of unquenchable desire.

Constant Nieuwenhuys, who streamlined his name in keeping with the sheer look of postwar design, was born in Amsterdam in 1920. He was a



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ounding member of the Cobra group. An art movement devoted to hastening the death of art, the group was a late flowering of Surrealism. Unlike the Surrealists, Constant perceived the inherent contradiction between means and ends. (If utopias end up ruled by thugs, anti-art works tend to turn up at Christie's.) In 1953 he gave up painting and joined a new group, the Situationist International. This small posse of artists, writers and social activists became Constant's vehicle for crossing over the border that conventionally separates architecture from art.

Constant has a message for the Situationists: art is dead. The city is where the creative action ought to be. Artists should take up the tools of architecture and try to reconstruct social space. In 1960 he states this position in a polemical speech at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Essentially, Constant recasts in Marxian terms the criticism often made of modern architecture on aesthetic grounds: modernism promotes a mechanistic way of life. Modern architects are stuck in the time warp of the Industrial Revolution. They have ignored the subsequent impact of industrialization on modern life.

Mr. Wigley paraphrases Constant's text: "Their endless garden-city schemes desperately provide token fragments of pseudo-nature to pacify ruthlessly exploited citizens. The modern city is a thinly disguised mechanism for extracting productivity out of its inhabitants, a huge machine that destroys the very life it is meant to foster."

Constant's solution, the New Babylon, resembled a giant Tinkertoy, with square dowels instead of round ones. These connecting pieces, called sectors, would have multiple stories. In models, Constant depicted them with transparent floors. The sectors would be fully enclosed within glass and hover above the ground atop columns of varying design.

The Tinkertoy is also a good metaphor for the New Babylonian way of life. This was to be the ludic city, a globe-size nursery room designed to release the inner maniac. Within the floating glass slabs, the New Babylonians would be free to create and recreate the city as they wished. Design would operate something like store displays at Bloomingdale's.

The show unfolds chronologically, like a series of storyboards, starting with the index-card-size drawing in which Constant sketched his initial vision. A Cartesian grid overlaid with diagonal lines, this concept will strike some viewers as oddly similar to L'Enfant's plan for Washington. The images that follow evoke a capital of Reagan-Clinton Era hedonism, with movable partitions, staircases and other improvisations barely concealing the wanton ways in a city of desire. The regimented work ethos dissolves in an overpowering atmosphere of play.

By the early 1970's Constant had come to recognize that leaving the id to its own devices wouldn't lead to paradise. Mr. Wigley suggests that this revelation was provoked by a car crash in which a friend's son was killed. Playtime was over. His subsequent drawings and paintings could be variations on Goya. The sleep of reason produces monsters: orgies, human sacrifices, oblivion. And Constant himself returns to the metaphoric realm of painting, where desire can be more safely managed.

Constant's was a vision of extremes. He was comfortable on the macrocosmic scale. Babylon was to be a worldwide network that occupied existing urban centers and also forged corridors between them. The map collages depicting this global structure are among the most elegant images in the show. And Constant was equally at home in rendering the microcosm of mental process: New Babylon as the city of altered psychic states.

On the middle ground, the vision went out of focus. Since he celebrated flux, he was reluctant to pin things down. Since buildings tend to operate on the middle ground, this was a problem. He was more successful at evoking interiors. The atmosphere of an interior could be rendered as a vague semiabstraction. Movable panels, which take the place of walls, could enclose blots, wiggles, vapors, signs of a society not yet formed.

In exterior renderings, where he tries to depict actual structures, Constant gets nervous. On some level, he intends New Babylon to be realizable. This calls for structures that can stand up, articulate a distinction between inside and outside, and project a visual image.

From today's perspective, filled as it is with the free-form geometries made possible by the computer, it seems surprising that Constant's structures are so rigidly right-angled. There are none of the fantastic and organic forms that we see in Expressionist architecture of the teens and twenties. Evidently, Constant wanted structure to be as neutral as possible. In the vernacular of the day, this translated into structural engineering.

But even Constant's neutral containers can't disguise the awkward similarity between his vision and the monocultural designs already coming into existence. A rendering of one of New Babylon's sectors presents an image not radically different from Marcel Breuer's Unesco headquarters building in Paris, completed a few years earlier. Shortly, Victor Gruen will be designing enclosed malls for suburban sites all across America. The arc of Wallace K. Harrison's terminal at La Guardia Airport welcomes passengers into the ethereal, curving, nonperspectival space of modern tourism. In less than a decade, ground will be broken on Disney's Epcot Center, a Florida playground in the middle of nowhere. Like Constant, Epcot's designers will collage bits and pieces from historic cities the world over.

You can't hold Constant responsible for the defects of these homogenized wonders. At most, he can be faulted for an unwillingness to recognize that New Babylon had been co-opted by the consumer society before he even dreamed it up. In this sense, he, too, remains trapped in the industrial age as society drifts toward the era of shopping. But his choleric conclusions can stand as a warning to those tempted to overromanticize the liberating potential of cyberspace.

Constant is destined to be thought of as a 60's person. His forays into libidinous fantasy link him to Archigram, Archizoom, Superstudio, Cedric Price, Ettore Sottsass and others who were exploring similar themes at

the same time. It's also natural to link him to architects like his fellow Dutchman Rem Koolhaas, who have followed Constant into the subterranean realms. But the show also makes less predictable connections. Through the Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck, for example, Constant was in touch with the International Conference of Modern Architecture and its younger offshoot, Team X.

These links cast midcentury modernism in a new light. The crude concrete finish of Brutalist architecture, for example, is typically seen as an expression of the welfare state of postwar Britain. But it's possible that it also articulated a latent surrealist impulse toward the raw.

From a New Yorker's perspective, it is illuminating to contrast Constant's ideas with those of Jane Jacobs, whose pioneering book "The Life and Death of Great American Cities" was published in 1961, the same year Constant delivered his manifesto. There are a lot of similarities between the two. Jacobs's book also attacked the standardization of modern planning. Her model city was the bohemian community of Greenwich Village, where she then lived. Her description of bustling Hudson Street is a Puritanized American version of New Babylon. For both, diversity, spontaneity, irregularity and haphazard exchange are qualities architecture should foster.

But Jacobs came on as a pragmatist, not as a Surrealist. An editor at Architectural Forum, she was fluent in the professional language. Her book spoke clearly to architects, planners, students and general readers. It continues to do so. And her direct impact on the city was immense. That impact was negative but not nihilistic. It delivered a knockout punch to city planning as it was then practiced. It was no longer possible for architects to think that the towers-in-a-park model was a socially progressive thing to do. In hindsight, Jacobs emerges as the first postmodernist. The mix, pulse, jazz, density, scale and sensory bombardment of the street: these elements of old cities became a paradigm for envisioning the new.

With Constant, things were not so straightforward. Essentially, Babylon was to be a city of night, a place that recreated the bars, cafes, bookshops, cinemas, streets and signs as they already appeared to eyes blurred by hours of serious drinking. It was to be a place of intoxicated atmospheres. Which meant, in a sense, that it was redundant. Such a Paris already existed: the existential city of Sartre, de Beauvoir, Genet and pastis. You didn't need architecture to create such a city. All you had to do was turn the page and order another round.

Yet Constant produced these great drawings. I leave it to posterity to decide whether they rank with Piranesi's. I find it extraordinary to see Piranesian themes and intensity rendered in an immediate, mid-20th-century idiom. If you lived through the early 1960's, you'll recognize the illustrational style: black lines of India ink, sometimes bold, like action painting, applied with a matchstick; sometimes thin and nervous, made with a pen. The emaciated line is as distinctive as the Piranesian mass. Color takes a more prominent role in the later drawings, panels and washy stains in yellow and red. Here, Holiday magazine meets

circus, a carnival in reverse posing as the circus of life. Here come the world-famous Bluebell Girls, ring-a-ding-ding.

Mr. Wigley has wisely let the drawings speak for themselves. Some contextual material, mostly publications of the era, are tucked discreetly into a narrow gallery near the entrance to the show. The work itself is seen in a muted museum-style installation. This presentation is, of course, a paradoxical outcome for work undertaken in the belief that architecture offered a way to escape the elite confines of fine art. Considering where this belief led him, Constant should relish the contradiction.

"Another City for Another Life: Constant's New Babylon" remains at the Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street, SoHo, (212) 219-2166, through Dec. 30.

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