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# URBIS SPECTACLE

MANCHESTER'S URBIS AND CONSTANT'S NEW BABYLON.  
MARK RAPPOLO ON TWO VISIONS OF URBAN LIFE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

IN 1969, the writer Georges Perec set out to capture something of the essence of Paris. He would achieve this through the rigorous documentation of twelve city sites, down to their most ordinary detail, every year for twelve years. It was not long, however, before Perec was writing that one of these sites, rue de l'Assomption, 'bores me shitless'. Given such obstacles, it is no surprise that the project was abandoned having just about sputtered to the halfway point. Indeed, by 1973, Perec was cautioning his readers against being too hasty in trying to find a definition of a town: 'it's far too big and there's every chance of getting it wrong'.

Never one to shy away from a challenge, Perec was not only one of the last century's great men of letters, but also renowned for the extreme dedication of his work. He set some of the most terrifying crossword puzzles of the day and wrote a lipogrammatic novel that omitted the most frequently used vowel in the French language. That such a man should find the description of a city so difficult a task is worthy of note, particularly at a time when 'the urban' is at the centre of nearly every discussion of art and architecture. But while architects struggle to keep up with accelerated urban growth in an age in which politics and economics seem far bigger factors in the development of our cities than architecture and design [see Irénée

provides the first hint at the celebration of voyeurism and surveillance that takes place inside.

The Urbis 'experience' begins with a funicular ride to the fourth floor accompanied by a pre-recorded soundtrack of mobile phone conversations to set the urban mood. From there, the visitor embarks on an archaeology of the modern city that leads back down to street level, the most primitive instance of urban life. This voyage of discovery incorporates a plethora of notes, quotes, anecdotes and statistics animated through interactive exhibits and audio-visual displays. An exhibition of street furniture from around the world includes a newspaper stand and bus stop complete with real 'rain', while Batman's cape, Sherlock Holmes's deerstalker and a gangster's fedora introduce the seedy world of urban crime and ill-lit streets as an even more sinister mixture of fantasy and reality. In the 'Control Zone' you can explore an exhibition of CCTV and marvel at a wall of ID cards. You are even invited to print your own ID, which you may take home as a souvenir or add to the wall should you wish, in some way, never to leave.

In addition to all this, you can tour around Manchester's 'hotspots' without leaving the building. The organisers of Urbis promise to bring 'alive' the gospel churches of Moss Side and the gay village around

in art galleries, where the only scale of interest today is one that goes from big to bigger, the city represents the most gargantuan peg on which to hang a show

Scalbert's discussion of 'Architecture at the End of History', February issue], curators are drawn towards the city like moths to a flame. In art galleries, where the only scale of interest today is one that goes from big to bigger, the city represents the most gargantuan peg on which to hang a show. In recent years, London has hosted *Cities on the Move*, *Century City* and *Paris: Capital of the Arts*. This summer, Manchester and Kassel get in on the act to offer two visions of urban life.

Manchester has undergone something of a renaissance since its centre was torn apart by an IRA bomb in 1996. It is now home to a refurbished and expanded City Art Gallery (which opened on 25 May) and Daniel Libeskind's Imperial War Museum North. In June, it will complete its rebirth with the opening of Urbis, a new museum of the modern city. That there is an immediate disjunction between the proposed modernity of this museum's content and the ancient origins of its name reflects something of the nature of cities today. At the crudest level, the modern city is all too often simply whatever remains after the opposing forces of conservation and development have clashed. One of the essential problems of urban architecture is that the city is, while its architecture was or will be.

Urbis is, as one might expect, housed in a big building. Its glazed walls reflect the city around it in a literal expression of its function, while also permitting a titillating exchange of gazes between the visitors inside and the citizens without. In this way, the exterior also

Canal Street. And if this is starting to suggest that the truth of the modern city is that there is no point in travel because you are always already there, then the fact that Urbis pursues the spectacle of urbanism on a global scale will only serve to ram the point home. Urbisville, the biggest exhibit in the museum, will allow the visitor to experience 'life' in six cities: Manchester, São Paulo, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Singapore and Paris.

Encouraging people to think about the place in which they live is without doubt a good thing, and Urbis certainly does that. But for all the technology that will be deployed to make the exhibits real, the most real reflection of the modern city at Urbis is the fact that you have to pay to get in. If Urbis tells us anything, it is that the experience of the city has nothing to do with architecture or indeed with the physical trace of the city itself. Instead, the urban experience lies in image and representation, in the sort of things you can find in galleries or museums, in the reflection of buildings on a glass wall. If you stand on a street corner you will be bored shitless; go to an exhibition and real life becomes an entertainment. That, after all, can be the only reason why anyone could expect you to pay to experience the modern city in the middle of a modern city.

While Urbis sets out many of the factors that make the city a problematic space for architects to work with, *New Babylon*, a project by the Dutch artist Constant that will be exhibited at Documenta 11, offers potential solutions. Constant concluded his work on *New*



CONSTANT, *Der Blaue Draufgänger*, 1969, oil on canvas, 190 x 200 cm. National Collection, The Hague. Photo: Tom Haartsen. Courtesy: the artist

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*Babylon* in 1974, and during its heyday it was a source of inspiration for everyone from Archigram (who, in the spirit of belated appreciation, were this year awarded the prestigious RIBA Gold Medal) to OMA. Since then, while the enduring reputations of those he inspired were made, Constant's project has undergone one of those remarkable voyages from celebrity to obscurity and then back again that only the selective amnesia of art history can provide. Over the last five years, the growing interest in this project has manifested itself in a flurry of lectures, conferences, exhibitions and publications that is rapidly starting to take on the proportions of a small industry.

One of the factors that has contributed to the prominence of *New Babylon* today can be found in the way in which the glimpse of contemporary city life presented at *Urbis*

appears so completely to parallel Guy Debord's famous declaration that 'all that was once directly lived has become mere spectacle'. (Indeed, had they more wit, those promoting *Urbis* might simply have issued *The Society of the Spectacle* as its press release.) *New Babylon* began as a visualisation of the theories of urbanism that Constant developed in conjunction with Debord during the two-year period (1958-60) in which the artist was a member of Debord's Situationist International. 'The crisis in urbanism is worsening,' wrote Constant in the third issue of the Situationist journal, 'the construction of neighbourhoods, ancient and modern, is in obvious disagreement with established forms of behaviour'. His response: *New Babylon*, 'another city for another life'. And as this description suggests, at the core of the

project is a desire to harmonise the space of the city with the space of lived experience.

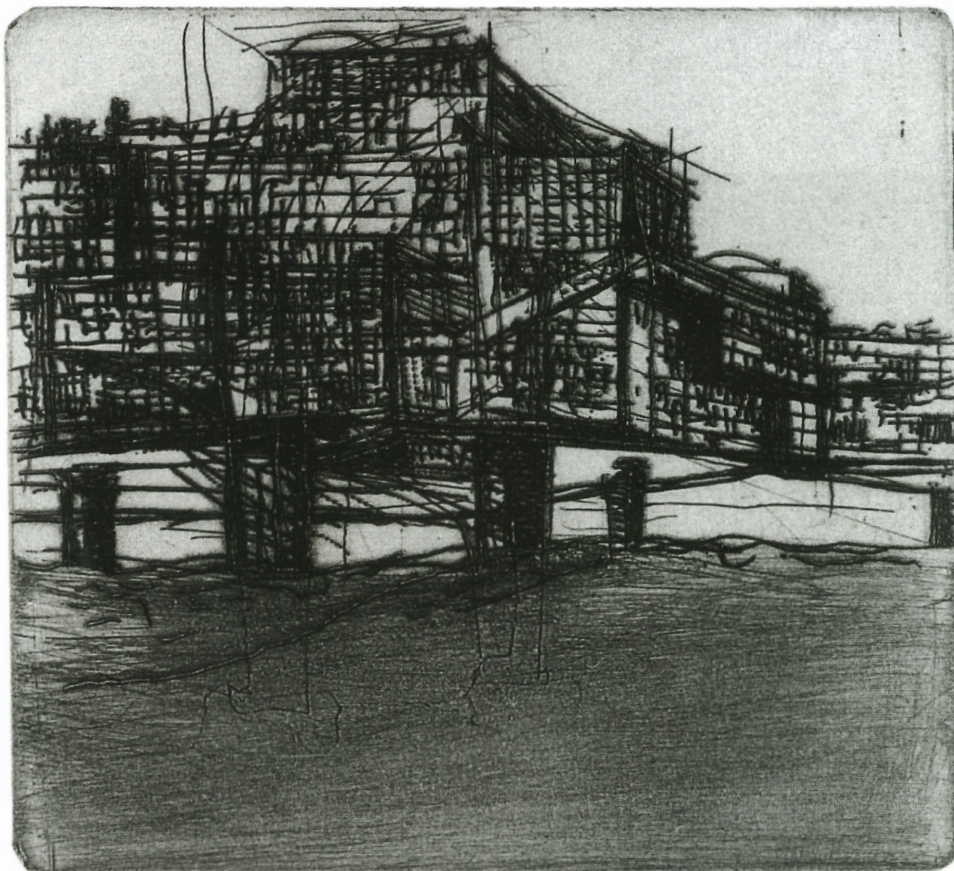
*New Babylon* is a vast collection of models, photographs, paintings, prints, collages and texts. The models suggest an endless city made up of a network of large sectors that might potentially span the globe. As a means of furthering this proposition Constant took maps of a number of European cities and districts (among them Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Cologne, Munich, Barcelona and Middlesex), and, using collage and watercolour, painted the snaking domino-like network of *New Babylon* over them. The sectors are raised above the ground on pillars, allowing them to pass over any existing urban areas and ensuring that 'functional traffic' remains on the ground, disengaged from the space of the city proper. *New Babylon* is also a city of play; in the greatest imaginative leap of the project, technological advance has meant that all production is automated and concealed beneath the ground. As a result, New Babylonians are free to explore unemployment as a positive way of life; they have the time and the will to engage with the city because that is all there is.

Separated from the trace of anything functional, from any of the pressures of traffic, economics or politics, the city becomes an enormous social space for an artwork on the biggest of scales: life. In the spirit of total revolution and eternal novelty, citizens roam its infinite spaces, manipulating its flexible walls and floors, as well as light, temperature, and sound to suit their mood. And then, crucially, they move on, get lost in the labyrinth, find a new space, and do it again. The only travel in *New Babylon* is joyriding; the only activity is discovery. If you get bored standing on a street corner you can always change it.

For all this to mean anything, you have, of course, to be convinced by the project. You have to see a city in a model, a world in a map, you have to catch a certain ambience in a strangely lit photograph, and by doing this you are already moving from passive spectator to artist and to architect. The energy Constant devoted to ensuring that this happened is remarkable (and exhaustively documented in Mark Wigley's catalogue, *Constant's New Babylon*). He gave numerous lectures, made soundtracks to represent New Babylonian life, made television and radio programmes, a *New Babylon* newsletter and, with his son Victor,

photographed the models in a variety of landscape settings. Many of these techniques are, of course, very similar to those deployed to animate the interactive experience at Urbis, but what is different in *New Babylon* is that the experience of the city is not in any way distinguishable from the material of the city. You cannot look out of a window and see what *New Babylon* represents; you must already be in *New Babylon* to see *New Babylon*.

Although Constant shied away from giving his project any definitive form (that, he said, would be a matter for the New Babylonians who would one day live in it), he devoted considerable time to researching the materials and techniques that might make his vision a reality. Consequently, *New Babylon* remains a properly utopian project (that is to say permanently just out of reach), not because it is technically unrealisable, but, as Michel Ragon has pointed out, because it is based on an entirely different social order to that which seems possible today. *New Babylon* represents a merging of the utopian and the real, of art and life, to create something different. As soon as anything is asserted it is necessarily denied. It is an entirely unofficial world in which there is no distinction between artist and audience. In its



top: CONSTANT, *New Babylon Sector*, dry point etching, 11.9 x 13 cm. Private collection

below: CONSTANT, *Terrain Vague I*, 1972, oil on canvas, 120 x 130 cm. Private collection. Photo: Tom Haartsen. Courtesy: the artist



sense of total engagement it is everything the city could and should be. Its true legacy, however, is as an artwork that suggests that there is a space, somewhere between the spectacle within the glass walls of Urbis and the real city it reflects, in which urban architecture can survive.

After another attempt to extract the essence of the city in which he lived, Percey finally came to the conclusion that 'I like my town, but I can't say what I like about it. I don't think it's the smell. I'm too accustomed to the monuments to want to look at them. I like certain lights, a few bridges, café terraces. I love passing through a place I haven't seen for a long time.' Perhaps this time he got it exactly right. If you go to Urbis, make sure you go to Manchester, and then to Kassel, to *New Babylon*, and then somewhere else.

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