

Constant: *New Babylon*

Toby Norris

Images of New Babylon are located at:

<http://www.wdw.nl/ENG/text/projects/constant/img/sector.JPG>

(<http://www.wdw.nl/ENG/text/projects/constant/img/sector.JPG>)

http://www.archined.nl/news/9812/Babylon_e.html (http://www.archined.nl/news/9812/Babylon_e.html)

Avant-garde artists and architects have long yearned to reshape the world according to their own, often rather curious, ideas. Many swallowed without reservation the idea advanced in the nineteenth century by French socialist thinkers like Henri de Saint-Simon and Pierre Joseph Proudhon that artists could serve as spiritual -- and even perhaps political -- leaders. The results are frequently alarming. From Frank Lloyd Wright's plans for an ideal community called *Broadacre City*, which was to be governed by the sinister figure of a 'county architect' with virtually unlimited power over people's lives, to the Fritz Lang-esque *Città Nuova* (http://www.futurism.fsnet.co.uk/santelia/elia_frames.htm) designed by the Italian Futurist Antonio Sant'Elia, we can only be grateful that the vast majority of these projects never made it beyond the drawing board.

At first sight, the project called *New Babylon* conceived by the Dutch artist-turned-architect Constant Nieuwenhuys (known simply as Constant) between the late 1940s and 1970 has the benefit of being less authoritarian than many of its avant-garde predecessors. *New Babylon* took shape in the late 1950s, when Constant was part of the group known as the Situationist International, the brainchild of the French writer and film-maker Guy Debord. The Situationists were violently anti-capitalist, but their equally vigorous rejection of all forms of centralized government prevented them from dreaming of a political revolution which would simply replace one form of power with another. Instead they developed a principle they titled Unitary Urbanism, which held that "Architecture is the simplest means of [...] modulating reality, of engendering dreams": by changing the fabric of the city, the Situationists aimed to reinvent the lives of those living within it. Their idea was to take advantage of the increased leisure afforded by the ever-advancing mechanization of labor to reorient the lives of city-dwellers away from work and towards play (the ludic, or playful, was a concept which held a position of tremendous importance in Situationist thinking).

Like his fellow Situationists, Constant was also distressed by the increasing precedence given to the demands of the automobile in urban planning, which he felt signaled the end of the street as a social space. His answer was to float the whole physical structure of *New Babylon* above the surface of the earth on a series of pylons, with all vehicular traffic passing beneath. The spaces of *New Babylon* itself were thus free to become the site of an uninterrupted process of play. The large, open interior spaces would be continually reconfigured by teams of Situationist technicians. The inhabitants of *New Babylon* would rove unconstrained, sleeping in hostels and happening upon the structure's built-in labyrinths and ambience-rooms (the loud room with its bright colors and deafening sounds, the quiet room with its soundproofed walls, the erotic game room, and so on). The whole interior would be climate-controlled, with deliberate variations of temperature, humidity, and light. The overall effect would be of a 'beneficent brainwashing' designed to prevent the inhabitants from falling into a deadening routine.

However, *New Babylon* failed to satisfy the most demanding theorists within the Situationist International. The very concreteness of Constant's proposals seems to have been disturbing to a group which always preferred theory to practice; and his readiness to envision a city of entirely new structures ran counter to Guy Debord's belief that the beauty of any city lay in the process of 'sedimentation' through which traces of its past survived even the most aggressive capitalist redevelopment. Constant's technophilia ultimately set him irretrievably at odds with his fellow

Situationists. He resigned from the group in 1960, and in 1961 was dismissed in its journal as "[...] a cunning soul [...] [who] shamelessly offers himself as a public relations man for integrating the masses into capitalist technical civilization."

From a contemporary perspective, *New Babylon* reads more as a high-tech dystopia than as a valentine to capitalism. Constant's guiding principle of deliberate discombobulation of the inhabitants of his structure, whatever its basis in an idealistic understanding of the benefits of play, smacks of authoritarianism-by-the-back-door. The ecological implications of his project are terrifying, too: "In these vast structures we see the possibility of vanquishing nature and subjecting the climate to our will," he wrote in 1959. We can be grateful that, like so many avant-garde utopias before it, *New Babylon* only ever existed as an ideal.

Literature:

- Chtcheglov, Ivan: Formulary for a New Urbanism (1953). In: Knabb, Ken (Hrsg.): *Situationist International Anthology*. Berkeley 1981.
 - Constant: Une autre ville pour une autre vie. In: *Internationale Situationniste* 3 (1959).
 - Constant: Description de la zone jaune. In: *Internationale Situationniste* 4 (1960).
-

Copyright © 1997-2008 *parapluie* & die Autorinnen und Autoren. Alle Rechte vorbehalten.
ISSN 1439-1163, URL: <http://parapluie.de/archiv/stadt/revision/>