

Review Article

## Automation and the City: Constant's New Babylon (1959–1974)

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For an extended period of fifteen years, from 1959 to 1974, Dutch artist and founding member of the revolutionary group *Situationist International* (SI), Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys, known simply as Constant, developed New Babylon, a speculative city for a future society in which automation would free human life to dedicate itself to creativity, collectivity and play.<sup>1</sup> Emblematic of the mega-structural experiments that dominate the architectural imaginaries of the 1960s, New Babylon has been analysed in great length and from various perspectives. Yet little attention has been paid within the existing scholarship to the subject of automation and its manifold implications for the project. This essay argues that automation was a structural aspect of Constant's thinking about the city. More than a technical and economic prerequisite, automation described a creative condition of future urban environments. As such it required a re-conceptualisation of the collective habitat. New Babylon should be understood as the architectural articulation of this imminent condition.

### A new urban imaginary

In December 1959, Constant's article 'Another City for Another Life' was published in the third issue of *International Situationist*, the official bulletin of the SI.<sup>2</sup> There, Constant offered 'the first rough description of New Babylon'.<sup>3</sup> The article was accompanied by a series of drawings of a 'traditional town', a 'green city', as well as Constant's spatial plan of a 'covered city'. Constant proposed the latter as an alternative to the modern green city that emerged

from the so-called garden-city movement propagated around 1900 by the English town planner Ebenezer Howard as an urban and environmental strategy that could mitigate the urban congestion brought about by the growing processes of industrialisation.

Against the modernist 'idealisation of utilitarian life', Constant's new urban imaginary was envisioned as ever-variable, 'flexible enough to respond to a dynamic conception of life, which means creating our own surroundings in direct relation to continually changing modes of behaviour'.<sup>4</sup> Future cities like New Babylon, which was yet to be named as such, would offer 'a wholly new variability of sensations' and 'unforeseen games' would become possible 'through the inventive use of material conditions, such as the modification of air, sound and light'.<sup>5</sup> These environments, or 'ambiances' in the Situationist lexicon, would be 'regularly and consciously changed, using all technical means, by teams of specialised creators, who would thus be "professional situationists"'.<sup>6</sup> Far from a nostalgic return to nature or a profitable union between the city and the countryside, Constant's new urban imaginary promised 'the possibility of overcoming nature and of regulating the climate, light and sounds in these different spaces to our desires'.<sup>7</sup> In Constant's view, automation marked the prospect of erasing any difference between the artificial and the natural environments. The city would no longer be a counterpart of the countryside in an antagonistic relationship but rather part of one extended symbiotic ecology that included both the natural and

the artificial, while being subject to human creative control and inventive manipulation.

A year later, in June 1960, the name New Babylon appeared for the first time in the editorial notes of another article by Constant entitled 'Description of the Yellow Sector'.<sup>8</sup> In this article and for the first time, Constant cautiously introduced his new urban imaginary in the form of a precise architectural proposal. Despite the fact that the 'Description of the Yellow Sector' lacked any explicit reference to automation, which in the previous article was described as a precondition of life in the future, it marked Constant's effort to materialise his new urban vision in architectural terms. The Yellow Sector provided a general framework of the arrangement that favoured the permanent variation of the environment. Sheet-aluminium, titanium, nylon, glass and large optical lenses were the cutting-edge materials that Constant used for his framework. As in the previous article, Constant alluded again to the ever-variable artificial conditions of the environment that would be regulated by situationist teams in conjunction with the technical services supported by the technological sector.

If the model of the garden cities was conceived by Howard as a response to the industrial machines of the age of standardisation, one can argue that Constant's new model sought to answer to the new intelligent machines of the age of automation. Automation, for Constant, was the inevitable, if not desired, economic condition that would result in the reduction of the work necessary for production and could eventually lead to the realisation of the 'Marxist kingdom of freedom'.<sup>9</sup> Yet most importantly, Constant's writings suggest that automation also described a creative condition which had to be deployed in the realm of city and for the purposes of unitary urbanism, 'an urbanism designed for pleasure'.<sup>10</sup>

### **Automation and the city**

In a lecture presented at the Faculty of Architecture at the Technical University of Delft in 1980, ten

years after a self-imposed hiatus from the project, Constant offered a critical re-examination of New Babylon.<sup>11</sup> There, he acknowledged the two aforementioned essays as the starting points of the project. Nevertheless, this beginning also made his 'break with the Situationist International inevitable'.<sup>12</sup> In December 1960, just months after the publication of Yellow Sector, 'this break was announced in the journal with the sour remark' that Constant 'had given priority to the structural problems of urbanism while the others wanted to stress the content, the play, the "free creation of everyday life"'.<sup>13</sup>

This break seems rather surprising if one considers the appraisal of New Babylon by Guy Debord himself in his essay 'Constant and the Path of Unitary Urbanism' written in 1959.<sup>14</sup> It is even more unexpected given the fact that the project did not appear to contradict the idea of 'unitary urbanism' as delineated in 'The Amsterdam Declaration', a text co-written by Constant and Debord and published in 1958 in the second issue of *International Situationist*.<sup>15</sup> According to this declaration, 'unitary urbanism' was defined as the 'complex, ongoing activity that consciously recreates man's environment according to the most advanced conceptions in every domain'.<sup>16</sup> In this process, 'all means are usable, on condition that they serve in a unitary action. The coordination of artistic and scientific means must lead to their total fusion'.<sup>17</sup> If New Babylon was a practical response to this call, what were those 'structural problems of urbanism' that Constant prioritised, and that resulted in his divorce from the SI?

In recounting the period after his withdrawal, Constant remarks: 'In the meantime, and scarcely noted at first, a development was taking place in society that was to give New Babylon an important boost: the second industrial revolution based on automation'.<sup>18</sup> Constant points out the 'enormous topicality' that New Babylon acquired during the 1960s and especially within the debate around the pros and cons of automation. He further contends:

Since Norbert Wiener, the pioneer of automation,

wrote his first study of its possible social consequences, whole libraries have been filled with works on the subject. The problem still seems to be the difficulty the human mind has in picturing the (as yet) non-existent, in freeing itself from the familiar pictures lodged in its consciousness. Visualising the unseen is a typical task for the visual arts. The author who attempts to write about the automated society almost inevitably falls into the yawning gap between that society and the known.<sup>19</sup>

This was not the first time that Constant alluded to mathematician Norbert Wiener, the father of cybernetics, who in 1948 coined the term to describe the scientific study of control and communication in the animal and the machine. In his book *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire*, architectural historian Mark Wigley affirms that since the beginning of New Babylon, 'Constant closely followed the arguments of Wiener, the leading theorist of cybernetics, repeatedly citing texts like *The Human Use of Human Beings* to the effect that the computer will allow work to be automated'.<sup>20</sup> Yet more than these direct allusions to Wiener, Constant's texts abound in references to the development of the robot, the continued mechanisation of life and the possibilities offered by the emerging computational and digital technologies.

These remarks confirm the necessity of positioning New Babylon within the debates about the implications of automation which took place during the early 1960s. These debates reflected the high hopes and deep fears that people projected onto the idea of automation. They extended beyond automation's immediate consequences in production processes and the subsequent pre-eminence of leisure over work, to automation's potentially liberating or detrimental outcomes for society as a whole.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore it is possible that the 'structural problems of urbanism' that Constant focused on and that resulted in his break from the SI were related precisely to his fundamental preoccupation with the

question of automation. Constant argues that New Babylon 'developed from hypothesis to conceptual model', the hypothesis being that of an automated society.<sup>22</sup> The question that now presents itself is what purpose that model served. According to Constant, it could be used

for thinking about a social structure that is so different from the existing one that it can safely be called its antithesis words and terms are inadequate tools. Since what we are considering here is no abstraction but a material world, as in physics, it seems almost logical to resort to visual tools; in other words, a model. The construction of this model should be based on the material conditions that can be inferred from automation and that are decisive for the material shape of the world.<sup>23</sup>

New Babylon thus was a tool. Its purpose was 'picturing the (as yet) non-existent', the pressing task of the age of automation that the situationists had already identified in the very first issue of the SI bulletin. This inaugural issue featured, amid the founding definitions of the situationist practices, an article by artist Asger Jorn entitled 'Automation and the Situationists'.<sup>24</sup> Although in his essay Jorn appears more sceptical than Constant regarding the capacity of automation to liberate subjects from the drudgery of work, he shared Constant's belief that the problem lies in 'the dialectical role of the spirit' in steering 'the possible towards desirable forms'.<sup>25</sup> Like Constant, Jorn too held that 'experimental activity in culture' was an 'incomparable field of play' and the only force that could 'supersede the negative consequences of automation and elevate human energy towards a higher plane'.<sup>26</sup> Media and cultural theorist MacKenzie Wark summarises New Babylon's dialectical purpose and creative impetus as follows: 'New Babylon is, among other things, a spatial solution to a conceptual problem. It is philosophy made abstract.'<sup>27</sup>

### The new New Babylon

The philosophy put forth by New Babylon suggests that the 'ultimate implications' of automation, that Jorn sought to grasp early in the SI history, do not lie in its immediate technical and economic consequences which could 'render man master and not slave of automation', as much as in the new social, creative, and urban possibilities that automation opened up.<sup>28</sup> Within these possibilities and in Constant's imaginary, the city emerges as a 'complete environment', part of an extended ecology and dynamic activity.

The extent to which New Babylon is enmeshed in ideas around automation and cybernetics is open to debate – a debate that is productive, in my opinion, for a rethinking of both the history of New Babylon and the SI, as well as that of the architecture and urbanism of the 1960s. What is undeniable is the broader historical position that such connection reinstates. The fact is that there is no uniform narrative of the widespread processes of cybernetisation that forged the cultural and scientific arenas of the late 1950s and 1960s and whose effects we can still trace today. New Babylon bears witness to the diverse genealogies and theoretical entanglements of these fictions. It showcases the extended ramifications of automation, beyond the technical, computational and digital into the cultural, political and artistic. The original name of New Babylon, *Dériville* or 'drift city', affirms this point. It is the 'drifting' through these histories that opens up the possibilities for a recuperation of New Babylon today.

### Notes

1. The Situationist International was officially founded in 1957 during a conference at Cosio d'Arroscia, Italy and was dissolved in 1972. However, its foundations were laid a year earlier in Alba, Italy, during a symposium organised by Pinot Gallizio on the topic of Industry and the Fine Arts (*Primo congresso mondiale degli artisti liberi*). There, Constant presented a lecture with the title 'Tomorrow Life Will Reside in Poetry' and advocated for a free architecture that would stimulate rather than restrict creativity. During this congress Constant met Guy Dedord, with whom he later co-founded the SI group. For a republication of 'Tomorrow Life Will Reside in Poetry' see: Mark Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1998), 78.
2. Constant, 'Une autre ville pour une autre vie', *Internationale Situationniste* no. 3 (December 1959): 37–40.
3. Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon*, 232. Note that the first image of New Babylon to be published was Jan Versnel's photograph of Constant's model entitled *Ambiance d'une ville future*, published in the Stedelijk Museum catalogue.
4. Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2016), 71.
5. *Ibid.*, 72.
6. *Ibid.*, 73.
7. *Ibid.*, 72.
8. The article was initially entitled 'Description of the Yellow Zone'. Constant, 'Description de la zone jaune', *Internationale Situationniste* no. 4 (June 1960): 23–26. The editorial note reads: 'The yellow zone is the first itinerary of the Promenades in New Babylon, a descriptive guide of the maquette-islets whose assemblage constitutes a reduced model of the "covered city". Constant, in the third number of this bulletin, formulated the basic principles of this particular hypothetical notion of unitary urbanism'; my translation. For an English translation of the article see: Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon*, 122.
9. Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon*, 160.
10. Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, 71.

11. Constant, 'New Babylon – Ten Years On', trans. Robyn de Jong-Dalziel, in Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon*, 232–36.
12. *Ibid.*, 232.
13. *Ibid.*, 232.
14. *Ibid.*, 95–96.
15. Constant and Guy Debord, 'The Amsterdam Declaration', trans. Paul Hammond, in Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon*, 87.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 233.
19. *Ibid.*, 233.
20. *Ibid.*, 63.
21. Such a hypothesis is particularly interesting given the highly critical stance of the SI towards cybernetics. For example, one can recall the 1965 episode with Abraham Moles, a key figure of information theory also known for his professorship at the Ulm School of Design (*Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm*). In an open letter to the SI, dated 16 December 1963, Moles had expressed his interest in the group. However, a few years later, on 17 March 1965, situationists in Strasbourg highjacked a conference that attempted to honour Moles and the cybernetician sculptor Nicolas Schöffer and used the occasion to distribute both their pamphlet 'The Tortoise in the Window: Dialectic of the Robot and the Signal', and a reprinted version of the 'Correspondence with a Cyberneticist', which included Guy Debord's rebuttal of Moles's 1963 letter that opened with the words 'Little head', setting the disparaging tone of his response from the onset. See: 'Correspondance avec un Cýbernetician', *Internationale Situationniste* no. 9 (December 1959): 44–48.
22. Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon*, 233.
23. *Ibid.*, 233.
24. Asger Jorn, 'Les Situationnistes et l' Automation', *Internationale Situationniste* no.1 (June 1958): 22–25.
25. Knab, *Situationist International Anthology*, 55.
26. *Ibid.*, 56.
27. McKenzie Wark and Ali Dur, 'New New Babylon', *Digital Art*, October 138 (2011): 42.
28. Knab, *Situationist International Anthology*, 55.

## Biography

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