

*Revisiting Constant's New
Babylon: City Surfaces
and Saturation* **Mallorie Chase**

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Abstract | Citizens in post-industrial societies are divided into art makers and art owners, reified by certain mechanisms, specifically, the capitalist co-optation of visual culture, which tacitly reminds us of the goods we have yet to consume or the ideals we do not reflect. City surfaces are saturated with images that conflate the spatial and temporal dimensions of consumption. Such a class fracture between makers and owners reveals itself in language and in space; the way we describe “decoration” as an additive gesture, or refer to craft projects as “hobbies” and the way we schedule time to “visit art” at museums. Under what conditions could art and life absolutely coalesce? How could citizens generate and own all visual culture? By revisiting Constant Nieuwenhuys’s New Babylon project, this paper will address the city as a frame for creative adaptation over time. Saturation can actually serve as a radical architectural tool to repair dissociated citizenship. New Babylon envisioned uninterrupted but ornate processes of urban drift that were closely linked with Guy Debord and L’Internationale Situationniste. This demands we ask questions about superficiality as well as the responsibilities for architecture in future societies and to interpret the surface as a crucial site for revolution.

Keywords | surface architecture, the ephemeral, utopian urbanism, Constant Nieuwenhuys, Situationist International

Given the fleeting literary life of the *Internationale Situationniste* journal and the volatile nature of its leading figure, Guy Debord, the short but intense bond between Debord and the Dutch-born painter and architect, Constant Nieuwenhuys, should not surprise us. Their professional relationship was not uniquely explosive nor was it strained at all times, but in 1960, it did meet a blunt end. It was not uncommon that aesthetes in the Situationist International (SI) either defected or were excluded, yet what makes Constant's exit worth our attention is what he took with him: New Babylon. As a template for a future urbanism, the New Babylon project included architectural maquettes created by Constant when he was a leading member of the SI as well as drawings and more maquettes that came later. It proposed that truly free citizenship was practiced inside infrastructural skeletons, which would be activated by changeable colored planes and the filtering of light, among other effects, for massive graphic saturation. The project is especially worth revisiting today for its suggestion that only through ephemerality can citizens exercise agency, or adjust their surroundings to combat the presumed compartmentalization of art, by melding visual pleasure and artistic production with everyday life. New Babylon asserted that highly expressive surfaces confuse and distract the capitalist claims to accumulation. It is from this starting point that I want to reevaluate the New Babylon project and point to its relevancy as a model today as a critical approach to take back the city.

To revisit Constant's New Babylon project is to recognize how clandestine street art, and not only property ownership or state planning mechanisms, must be considered alongside the many desires that compete in the public realm (owners, tenants, squatters, travelers and temporary occupants) because together they contribute to any place. The problematic of city planning is still a prescient issue around the adaptation of space and the cultural production of citizenship, but the utopian urban scheme from Constant and Guy Debord helps us recognize alternative visions on this problem.

From 1956 to 1960, the years of their mutual contact, Constant and Debord each supported the creation of new forms of architecture and together they believed that people, activities and ambiances should coalesce into one liberated urban life. It has been noted (Wigley, 1998) that Debord ushered in to the Situationist International a view on architecture as a parallel for the construction of situations. This was recognized as an equivalence across the design process and Debord noted that "the process of designing, the design itself, and the life that goes on inside must be the same thing" (Wigley, 1998: 17-18). Similarly, Constant (1958) wrote that the machine was an indispensable tool for everyone, including artists, because he saw industry as the best

means to satisfy the aesthetic needs of humanity on a worldwide scale. As Situationists, both men privileged the *dérive*, yet the year 1960 proved to be a pivotal marker for both figures: following a few key incidents, Debord's attitude toward architecture shifted. What was it about New Babylon that threatened the SI credo? Should the city stimulate or become art?

New Babylon envisioned uninterrupted processes of creation and appropriation that fit nicely with the Situationists' concepts of drift and chance. Also, the walls of the city — the infill of the skeletal structure of New Babylon that was lifted over former European cities — were planned to become highly-saturated arenas outfitted with color panels, filtered with light, textures and text media all based on the personal desires of individuals as they walked through the city. The spaces of the city would never be “zoned” but were always in-flux and bound to personal life experience. This meant that Space was not owned but constantly negotiated and occupied. Furthermore, the plans for New Babylon privileged the transient nature of roaming or squatting above ownership and branding, difference over sameness.

The New Babylon project was part political experiment and part architectural theory. Its first unveiling took place at the Stedelijk Museum in May 1959 where Constant exhibited a few elaborate maquettes. The first published images of and writing on the then-unnamed project appeared in the July issue of the SI journal, *Potlatch*, where Constant called the design an “ambience-city” and labeled it “pre-situationniste.” Debord was actually the person who named it New Babylon months later, and he reviewed the show in the same issue of *Potlatch*:

This exhibition could mark the turning point, in the modern world of art production, between self-sufficient merchandise-objects, meant solely to be looked at, and project-objects, whose more complex appreciation calls for some sort of action, an action on a higher level having to do with the totality of life (Wigley, 1998: 15).

Just as Debord saw the first exhibition of the project as a turning point, it was also a turning point within the collective. The exhibition was approved by the Situationist International because the maquettes only stated the problems of unitary urbanism, and thus symbolized the necessity for more radical critiques of art to lead to action. But in witnessing the models in a gallery setting, they likely became de-familiarized, they looked strange and appeared too representative of abstract sculpture. Within six months of the exhibition opening, Constant left the SI. When he returned to the Stedelijk to give a lecture on the show, he only loosely spoke about the concepts of

unitary urbanism and psychogeography, and never again made any explicit mention of the SI as the bastion that crafted the very questions which New Babylon set to answer (Wigley, 1998: 16).

Constant suggested that “automatic production” would underlay all physical infrastructure of the indeterminate future and people would not be controlled by their separate zones for working versus living since all New Babylonians would be non-workers. Perhaps derived in part from the surrealists’ model of automatic drawing, the automatic production of future citizens and workers should be understood as the social counterpart of the project’s artistic aim: to distinguish any differences between art and life, workers and artists, citizens and wanderers. The issue of work is one point where Debord and Constant separated. As noted by Kofman and Lebas (2000: 84), Debord took issue with Constant’s opinions that New Babylonians did not yet exist, the masses were not ready for revolution and his project could exist only in the future.

While Constant called for a gradual evolution to break the capitalist engine, Debord, on the contrary, believed that the proper conditions for revolution were already present by 1960 (Jappe, 1999: 67). For Constant, architecture could provoke future political action but for Debord, it should only frame existing political behavior. The Debord scholar, Anselm Jappe, described this point of view by referring to Debord’s interest in the theatre. He admired Paul Gondi, Cardinal of Retz (1613-79) who embodied a baroque conception of the world as a theatre where individuals always play a role, they awaken the imaginations of others and create dramatic effects (Jappe, 1999: 113). Thus, it was more important for Debord that a future city focus on the actors, and not the stage set and we might make the parallel that a stage set equals architecture in general and New Babylon in particular. Even as ambiance was a shared goal, Debord disagreed with Constant’s architecture for the way that specific project performed. New Babylon did not persuade some Situationists for it relied on a kind of utopian escape. Furthermore, by lifting off the ground, the project tacitly invited a measure of surveillance by an unknown future state by demanding full automation (Foster et al., 2004: 395).

A fitting theoretical framework in which to interpret New Babylon can follow the philosopher Henri Lefebvre. Beyond a presumed apolitical or utopian positioning of New Babylon in the discipline of architecture, it is also quite useful to consider the way the aesthetic apparatus of the project always emphasized the individual user in the social production of space. It demonstrated Lefebvre’s notion of “representational spaces” which he defined as “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of the ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (Lefebvre, 1992: 39). This

empowerment of the individual receiver emerged from the Enlightenment-fueled modernist tenets of rationality and anonymity plus the avant-garde aims to bridge art and life, which mirrored other debates in western society in the late 1960s. Therefore, Lefebvre helps us to revisit New Babylon as a set of spaces that were always in various processes of creation, where meaning was not only contested between individuals' desires but also produced on and between surfaces, in pure visual spaces.

The architectural avant-garde of the 1960s is one of the most potent fields to explore the connections between political rebellion and urban form. Architects and planners across Europe were attempting to rebuild after the destructions of war, but envisaging a future urbanism proved difficult. Architecture as a social practice exploded with radical forms and exploited new global conditions; these global conditions whereby technology, visual culture and information flow rapidly across borders and disseminate superficial features much faster than an intellectual body could be codified, were a kind of guiding principle for Constant's New Babylon. Even as the project tried to escape the clutches of capitalist consumer culture and authoritarian government, it used their models of rapid exchange to impart a new urban vision.

The historian and critic Michel Ragon actually consolidated an array of practices when he founded Groupe International d'Architecture Prospective (GIAP) in 1965, as there was no unified "school" of avant-garde urban spatialists in France before this year despite the rise in urban architectural experiments. GIAP did not grow without precedent. Its membership and theories overlapped those of the earlier Groupe d'études de Architecture Mobile (GEAM), which ran from 1958-62 under the leadership of Budapest-born, Tel Aviv-educated Yona Friedman, who remained the popular leader amongst the spatialists. Members of both groups rejected the *Congrès international d'architecture moderne* (CIAM) and they countered with an array of techno-utopian cities, mega structures and floating architectural forms not seen before.

Le Corbusier served as the leader of CIAM in its second stage from 1933-47 and in this period the Congress shifted focus toward urban planning as presented in the Athens Charter. His leadership and the codification of orthodox modernism via the five points of architecture (free plan, free façade, ribbon windows, roof garden and pilotis) were perceived as an architecture of the ruling class and alienation. The French spatialists and many others in the younger generation of architects rebelled against this order of modernism. Le Corbusier also angered non-architects like political theorist and founding member of the Situationist International, Ivan Chtcheglov. In one of the earliest texts "Formulary for a New Urbanism", Chtcheglov echoed the group's charge against Le Corbusier's "cretinizing influence" and he accused the International Style

brand of modernism with destroying joy, love, passion and freedom (Chtcheglov, 1953: 2) Le Corbusier was also an essential foil for the Situationist method of unitary urbanism, which was anchored by the *dérive* and psychogeography, but also required a new conception of space, time and human behaviors (Chtcheglov, 1953: 3). In opposition to their own goals of authentic truth, the SI perceived the work of Le Corbusier as enslaved by orthodoxy and therefore reflected a false disguise of modernity.

Constant worked inside this charged moment of post-war European urbanism, and the climate was especially combustible in France. The spatialists universally supported the themes of mobility and adaptability and the architects were fundamentally opposed to functionalism. They held particular disdain for CIAM since its founding in 1928. The architectural historian and critic Kenneth Frampton described the criticisms for CIAM because it systematically normalized the modern building industry and championed the concepts behind an international functionalism rather than the variety of diverse, local skills, materials or regional traditions (Frampton, 1992: 270-71). They critiqued the Athens Charter that was published in 1943 in part because it segregated four basic urban functions — housing, work, recreation and traffic — by zoning various cultural and industrial activities. The published Charter text exclaimed “the home is the initial nucleus of town planning. It protects man’s growth, shelters the joys and sorrows of his daily life” (Conrads, 1971: 143). In their own projects, the spatialists demanded the functions of housing, work, recreation and traffic be fully integrated in order to express their alternate views of the city. In addition to Constant’s saturated skins that fluctuated around a supra-infrastructure, Yona Friedman’s “spatial cities” reshuffled the four static functions by stacking them vertically and Nicolas Schoffer’s work on the “spatiodynamic city” prioritized the qualities of empty space over all physical matter, and these are just two among many other examples. Their projects used new engineering models and technical details and they shared stylistic affinities for structures that were suspended above the ground and expansive “allover” footprints, which broadcast a notion that infrastructure was simultaneously everywhere and nowhere (Busbea, 2007: 34, 45-51).

One peculiar element, the *piloti*, was utilized by Le Corbusier as well as his detractors. Whether at a residential tower on massive columns, like the Unité d’Habitation in Marseilles or a single-family house, like the Villa Savoy in Poissy, France, Le Corbusier’s heavily cited and renowned modernist vocabulary certainly occupied the collective architectural memory of later generations. By lifting everything on *pilotis*, the ground below could be used as an open lawn, but in practice, it was

primarily a pedestrian social space. Although not explicitly discussed by Le Corbusier, we might infer the potential for urban wandering unobstructed by façades and other surface boundaries. But it was the presence of those very surfaces, saturated with images that changed all the time, which defined much of New Babylon. Yona Friedman, Constant and many other post-war modernists elaborated the concept of pilotis through the use of a thin column or infrastructure that operated just like pilotis, in order to lift their architecture off the ground. By layering over the existing ground their projects adapted the *piloti* and their architecture formally rejected the ground below — ground that was loaded with the signs of history and trauma, traditional structure and authority.

If one problematic after the War was how radical architecture would not engage with the former ground of history and tradition, then the obvious answer was that it must hover in order to elicit more mobile experiences and deny the institutions that suffocate freedom such as banks, the State and marriage. And in all of their work, the spatialists paid more attention to the connective tissue between units or homes to challenge the Athens Charter by turning their backs to the home and embracing the street.

New Babylon acted as a city forever in process because new paths could be added without limitations and connections would be reconfigured at will. In many ways this evolved Le Corbusier's concept of architectural promenade; the sectors and nodes of the project unfolded over time but instead of framed views orchestrated by one lead architect, the aesthetic encounters would be unpredictable and pluralistic. Furthermore, New Babylon also shows many similarities to Le Corbusier's exemplary planned city, Ville Radieuse, which had embedded in its form the rules for its infinite expansion. Ville Radieuse proclaimed to be a model for a classless society and it was organized by building program bands that ran in parallel. However, the characteristics of its programmatic bands that of distinct functions still reflected a capitalist conditioning of urban experience; the residential zone, light industrial zone, business zone, etc., all cooperated in the larger scheme to compartmentalize daily activities and therefore enforce totalitarian control. The concept of New Babylon required an end to zoning. Life would become an uninterrupted process of spatial activation, creation and recreation, without any rules dictating proximity or typology.

Constant convened with many members of GIAP and GEAM, and his own work mirrored the issues noted above; he elevated his architecture off the ground but also embedded within it a rubric for expansion. Yet Constant's work focused on three other points: nomadism, play and ambiance.

Firstly, nomadism was treated as an ideal quality for the future residents of New Babylon, not a disparaged state of life. Constant first conceived of what became the New Babylon project in Italy in 1956, and for the opening of the exhibit at the Haags Gemeetenmuseum in The Hague in 1974, he described the experience, which is worth quoting in full:

For many a year the gypsies who stopped awhile in the little Piedmontese town of Alba were in the habit of camping beneath the roof that, once a week, on Saturday, housed the livestock market. There they lit their fires, hung their tents from the pillars to protect or isolate themselves, improvised shelters with the aid of boxes and planks left behind by the traders. The need to clean up the market place every time the Zingari passed through had led the town council to forbid them access. In compensation, they were assigned a bit of grassland on the banks of the Tamaro, the little river that goes through the town: the most miserable of patches! It's there that in December 1956 I went to see them in the company of the painter Pinot Gallizio, the owner of this uneven, muddy, desolate terrain, who'd given it to them. They'd closed off the space between some caravans with planks and petrol cans, they'd made an enclosure, a 'Gypsy Town.' That was the day I conceived the scheme for a permanent encampment for the gypsies of Alba and that project is the origin of the series of maquettes of New Babylon. Of a New Babylon where, under one roof, with the aid of moveable elements, a shared residence is built; a temporary, constantly remodeled living area; a camp for nomads on a planetary scale (Constant, 1974).

The nomad and the post-revolutionary, future New Babylonian would not be tied to the ground through work or other responsibilities, but every space belongs to everyone and every place is a home.

Secondly, Constant's emphasis on play manifested in New Babylon as an infrastructure for human relationships and not only an infrastructure of physical spaces. Because play held an essential social function, the *Homo Luden* (man as player) was put forth as a third alternative to *Homo Faber* (man as maker) and *Homo Sapien* (man as thinker) by the cultural historian Johan Huizinga in 1938. Huizinga noted: "Play is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner" (Huizinga, 1970: 32). Therefore, play is not unruly or unregulated; it is the latent underside of all social structures and not at all antithetical to consumerism or technology. In this area, Constant and his contemporary spatialist, Yona Friedman, diverged; while Constant was interested in play as a conception of behavior in future society, Friedman showed more interest in the physical spaces where play occurs, evidenced by his focus on mobile architecture, modular construction and

pre-fabrication (Busbea, 2007: 73). New Babylon was a place that existed in the minds of *Homo Luden*, and though it was not a planned town, it was a set of planned ideas.

By focusing on nomadism and play, Constant tried to accommodate what he saw as the forthcoming alternatives to normalized behaviors. In addition, by anticipating personal feelings but ignoring characteristic like jealousy, competition and hate, he assigned all responsibility for those negative aspects to capitalist culture that ruled the ground below, but which New Babylonians would eschew and lift above with their new framework. The project certainly used infrastructure as a driving framework where automation and adaptability rule and personal freedom and play are at their height, yet we must also take to task his emphasis on ambiance.

The third aspect that divided Constant from the rest of the pack, both the French urban spatialists and the SI, is also the most important. Ambiance in this context refers to the pleasure that comes from architectonic forms and bodily encounters that can occur alongside, through and around those forms. This brings us to a proper starting point for my alternate reading of New Babylon: because phenomenal effects amounted to such an integral part of the project, New Babylon represents in fact a very early example of “performative architecture”. The architectural theorist Jeffrey Kipnis (2013) contextualized the emergence of this type of architecture:

With the collapse of modern architecture’s coup d’établissement, new generations of architects still committed to defying collaboration had to become more cunning. Unable simply to divorce the establishment, they explored means to cheat on it. One tactic that has proven fruitful is subtly to dissolve the means by which architecture sustains one mode of authority without installing another, shifting architecture’s goal from installing ideas of democracy to increasing sensations of freedom (Kipnis, 2013: 207-8).

This is an architecture of enlightened optimism but also a cynical superficiality; its forms express beauty, freedom and the transformative power of art and its goals of revolution have not been attained because there is no longer an authentic art or unconditioned public, only a roiling market. New Babylon resonates still today for its assertion that all citizens constantly make and remake the images that saturate cities. The oppressive language of advertising cannot be destroyed or ignored, but if the rest of the city surfaces were constantly performing by being aggressively papered over, colored, lighted-up, elaborated and decorated, the new structure of the city would be the surfaces that enable personal freedom.

The materialization of the project came in the form of the hundreds of maquettes, which present how the new city surfaces would perform. The modeling materials were

narrow in type but wide in terms of the impact those materials affected. Made almost entirely of metal mesh, copper, Plexiglas and other fibers, the maquettes represented infrastructure but they also modeled the way surfaces would infill the frame and take the visual ensemble to another level. The SI notion of the *situation* found a visual parallel in New Babylon: if creating situations was the ultimate artistic act (and an act that melded art with life in the city) then the spaces conjured by the project were ideal for executing future never-ending situations. The surfaces lacked clear boundaries, beginnings or endings, and Constant put primary attention on the phenomenal effects emitted through those surfaces: color, light and personal experiences were treated alongside new high-tech materials and structural connections as part of the overall infrastructure. A staple of the megastructures is that designers did not actually know how they would work, yet, or the exact mechanisms of the necessary public utilities. Those variables were simply subsumed within the pervasive but not unproblematic trust in technology.

An aspect that necessarily followed the spatial premise of New Babylon was its eradication of the home: if future urban change was indeed so accelerated, and ephemeral experiences would dictate movement along with pleasure and desire, not work or duty, then home no longer existed as a core element of urban planning. This subverted the CIAM devotion to the dwelling. About life in New Babylon, Constant wrote in 1964 that:

There would be no question of any fixed life pattern since life itself would be as creative material...people would be constantly travelling. There would be no need for them to return to their point of departure as this in any case would be transformed. Therefore each sector would contain private rooms (a hotel) where people would spend the night and rest for a while (quoted in Frampton, 1964: 370).

The material opacity and transparency, as well as the controls that would enable an individual to change the performance of any single surface could stimulate and reflect various ambiances. Mark Wigley has noted that the complex degrees of transparency represented in the Plexiglas models for New Babylon make the project perform like a kind of mirage, where space can only be looked through and not at.

To look at the model is to look at a substitute world. The modern architect's obsession with a radical transparency that exposes all the details of structure and style turns into an amorphous sense of interactions between life-styles too complex and transitory to be simply exposed. Clear shapes behind glass give way

to a mysterious flickering glow. Transparency is put at the service of mystery (Wigley, 1998: 50-51).

This dematerialization of the architectural object was perhaps still too literal for Debord and the SI, but its elaborate surface potential is where we should see that the oversaturation of our city surfaces today not as a capitalist threat to creative culture but as a step in the process toward a robust and popular command of images.

Constant's schemes that linked the ephemeral and mobility with political action and cultural citizenship, should be seen as radical both then and now. His work celebrated the renegade-hero architect but also privileged popular collaborations via saturated skins that fluctuated at all times. It produced effects in the form of personal confrontations with building surfaces as well as disorientating spatial adventures, which all together affect the way we read space and the world around us. Thus, New Babylon provides one path to answer the question: how can we inhabit art?

That Constant lectured for decades, elaborated the project and spread his specific gospel to architecture students in America and Europe, suggests that New Babylon was a major pedagogical tool after it left the purview of the SI. While Constant was involved with Debord and the SI, New Babylon was just the fledgling stage of what Debord hoped would become a radical shift in urban life; the project served as a political experiment in the short time it belonged to the SI, and it excites cultural ambitions to change urban art and occupy the streets, but once in circulation, it was also a metaphor for architectural improbabilities.

Change is one of the obstinate qualities that cuts across all of the issues mentioned in this paper: nomadism, play, ambiance as well as adaptation and transience. New Babylon was an expandable template for how to meld art and life and make the city a site for revolution. Its decorative surfaces became the conceptual pivots for all urban life; the landscape of constant change and movement enabled situations and, as a performative architecture, it saturated the masses with pleasurable effects in hopes to embolden their everyday lives. Take notice that images in cities today—including the more-permanent and physical images of advertising, digital media and signage, in tandem with the more-fleeting and cheaper event bills, chalk drawings, graffiti and even “for lease” and “lost dog” posters—display the same pervasive saturation that Constant's project intimated, which we should insist for future urban architecture. Users should continually change and affect the skins of the city and allow their desires to run across one another; they should conflict with corporate and

governmental interest and empower the ephemeral decorations of the city to rise to the level of structure.

The radicalism of the ephemeral surface as indicated by New Babylon does not reside in a future or ideal city alone. Today, over fifty years on, it no longer belongs to Constant. Rather, New Babylon is a template loaded with potential for individuals to make messy their public art scenes, take back the rights to the city, assert their desires and embrace unruly decoration in the name of urban freedom. The saturation of images in the city, which quickly change and often appear or disappear invisibly in the middle of the night, reflect at some small scale the same radical potential to combat the strictures of capitalism. We must acknowledge the inherent paradox here: some of those images that saturate the visual apparatus of the city are made from capitalist advertising, but this is not a limitation as so much another competing desire. In this way, citizens with agency and bonds to the physical accumulations of capital that define the modern city but also wanderers can generate and own all visual culture.

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