4. Utopian Interiors: The Art of Situationist Urbanism from Reification to Play

Tyrus Miller

In this essay I discuss the urbanistic thinking and practice of two artists closely associated with the founding of the Situationist International (SI): the Danish painter Asger Jorn and the Dutch painter, sculptor, and architect Constant Nieuwenhuys. Both helped establish the SI and subsequently, long after their official separation from the group, Jorn remained a friend and financial backer of the group, while Constant was politically affiliated with, and an inspiration for, the radical Provos anarchist movement in Amsterdam. In particular, I will pay close attention to the special graphic practices of these two artists—various practices of modelling, drawing, collaging, and so on—which they used to explore the possibility of a new, utopian relation between creatively designed spaces and new forms of self-hood beyond the individualist self characteristically reproduced by modern capitalism and its built environments. These practices were intended to ‘mobilize’—render more fluid and flexible—the built environment of the cities, helping to disclose the social encounters and social action that ultimately, in their view, structured it, whether in the form of dynamically perceptible, playful human activity or in the static forms of accumulated, reified, alienated labour. They also suggestively ‘modelled’ (in both the conceptual and architectural sense) a new collective mode of production of space intended to overcome the reified abstractions of capitalist, modernist urbanism. Participating in the broad twentieth-century and avant-garde questioning of the status of artistic work (as specialized activity) and works (as specialized objects), Jorn and Constant offered artistic analogons of social spaces that would no longer be structured by capitalist work, understood as a modality of alienated labour, but rather by an autonomous free play of encounters and situations.

I concentrate here especially on Situationist views on the construction of designed spaces and décor, and the relationship of interiors to psychic and emotional states of subjective experience—an area of Situationist thought and practice to which artistic participants such as Jorn and Constant made especially important contributions. This focus is somewhat unusual for a
couple of reasons. First, the discussion of the Situationists has, until recently, strongly centred on the figure of Guy Debord and his political critique of *The Society of the Spectacle*, with the practices of appropriated images and the politics of occupation taking centre stage. To the extent that Debord increasingly steered the Situationist International towards a highly factional, sectarian political grouplet, this has tended to marginalize the seminal role of artists in the original Situationist movement, who resigned from the group or were systematically purged. However, it is becoming increasingly clear in hindsight that the associated artists made crucial contributions to the founding matrix of Situationist ideas. But second, even when these artists are brought back into the conversation, Situationist urbanism has nevertheless tended to be strongly associated with exterior spaces—with streets, maps, city networks, and buildings—rather than the design and experience of interiors.

If, however, we consider more carefully key motifs of Situationist urban thought, we find not a favouring of exterior space over interiors, but rather a critique of the abstract opposition between exterior and interior space, as reified manifestations of a capitalist production of space. The Situationists may be understood to have taken to a new degree of consistency, an aim first set out in André Breton’s writings in the 1920s and 1930s: the projection of an artistically-modelled practice of everyday life that would overcome the capitalist division of labour and radically displace the category of work (as labour process) and works (as products of labour) in favour of play, friendship, eroticism, intoxication, investigation, and eventually, political action. ‘The leading surrealists’, Henri Lefebvre would note in his 1974 book *The Production of Space*,

sought to decode inner space and illuminate the nature of the transition from this subjective space to the material realm of the body and the outside world and thence to social life. Consequently surrealism has a theoretical import which was not originally recognized. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 18)

Developing this theoretical motif in Surrealism but going back deeper into the history of Paris, Walter Benjamin also emphasized a reversibility and communicability between interior and exterior spaces, and between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ qualities of those spaces, which he saw exemplified by the ambiguous street-house constellations of the iron and glass arcades that emerged in the early decades of the nineteenth century.
In *Communicating Vessels*, a work that anticipates later ‘critiques of everyday life’ such as those of Henri Lefebvre, who claimed to have directly influenced the founding of the COBRA artist group that included Jorn and Constant (Lefebvre, 2002, p. 269), Breton would write that ‘Surrealism [...] should not be considered extant except in the a priori non-specialization of its effort’ (Breton, 1990, p. 86). Underpinning Breton’s notion of ‘a priori non-specialization’ is both a psychic and a social theory of which his conception of Surrealism was said to partake. Psychically, he was seeking to recast the structure of subjective perceptual experience and cognition in terms of Freudian conceptions of the unconscious, particularly the dream. The underlying idea of ‘communicating vessels’ is that the basic schemata of experience, which Kant conceived in fixed, rational terms, are in fact thoroughly permeated by mobile desires, irrational drives, and overdetermined fantasies. It is the pre-differentiated ‘poetic’ matrix of the dream that for Breton constitutes the ‘a priori’ of psychic experience, not the rational structuring forms of categories. Socially, the psychic indifferentiation of the unconscious provides a pivot for a social critique. If it is not the rational mind that ultimately supports the lines and borders that divide our integral experience as both individuals and collectives, but rather the rhetorical performances of unconscious psychic faculties, then these ‘productions’ must be socially constrained and filtered, especially through the repressive organization of labour and the state-sanctioned class violence that allows it to persist. In turn, the structures of experience—the apparently aprioristic boundaries that channel it in socially authorized ways—may be contested through individual and, especially, collective revolt.

As with later ‘Great Refusals’ such as that proposed by Herbert Marcuse in the 1960s, Surrealism’s first gesture was to refuse *to work*, permanently ‘going on strike’ in favour of an all-sided, non-specialized group activity that adumbrated new forms of life beyond the capitalist division of labour. Tellingly, one of the iconic images of Situationism, often reiterated and discussed in their publications and films, was a 1953 photograph of a graffitied slogan, reportedly inscribed by Debord himself on the wall of the Rue de Seine in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, which read *Ne Travaillez Jamais!* (Never Work!). Accordingly too—the Situationists intuited—our received notions of exterior and interior space and their continuous reproduction in everyday lived experience derive from complementary modalities of abstract labour time we call ‘work’ and ‘leisure’, and the cyclical movements of things and bodies that connect them. Shattering the opposition between exterior and interior and dismantling the system of alienated labour that structure urban time and space around the work/divide through the planning ideologies...
and architectural forms of modernist urbanism appeared to them corollary
tasks requiring revolutionary social change.

A theoretical legacy shared by Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, and
the Situationists is their indebtedness to the activist Marxism of the early
Georg Lukács, in particular his analysis of reification in *History and Class
Consciousness*, which suggested how Marx's idea of commodity fetishism
might offer a rigorous way to formulate the dialectical reversibility of
subjectivity and objectivity. Lukács's concept of reification may be seen as
the initiator of a lineage of innovations in the Marxist notion of ideology
that also includes Walter Benjamin's investigations of cities as collective
dream-structures; the notion in Theodor Adorno that the culture industry
translates commodity-structure into cognitive and affective schemata that
preform contemporary experience; Guy Debord's idea of the society of the
spectacle in which social relations have been transformed into images; and
even Louis Althusser's formulation of ideology as the normal unthematized
background of lived relations to the social order, the 'imaginary relation of
individuals to their real conditions of existence'.

Lukács, Benjamin, Lefebvre, and Debord each derived the theoretically
fruitful inspiration of seeing that the commodity-object already held within
it a kind of immanent false consciousness 'out there' in space, ready to be
activated by its experiential intercourse with human agents. Correlatively,
the apparent spontaneity of human consciousness, the very movements of
thought, were seen to be already constrained, not by a Kantian transcen-
dental a priori, but by the historically contingent yet powerfully determi-
ing structures of capitalism, such that reified thought-forms necessarily
reflected the epistemically false appearances of objects as they moved
through their systemic circuits of production, exchange, and consumption.
Where they innovate beyond Lukács is in applying this reversible subject-
object of reification not just to commodities as such, nor to the critique of
philosophical and literary texts that reflect the constraints of reification,
but to the holistic framework of lived experience in cities, where spaces,
consumable objects, fashions, and social types can all be seen as aspects of
an integral 'cosmos' organized by capitalist reification. Metropolitan spaces
themselves, Benjamin and subsequently the Situationists suggest, can be
understood as materialized nodes of ideology. Benjamin came to call these,
within his neo-Bergsonian conceptual universe, 'images', while Debord's
notion of 'spectacle' includes the terminology of 'images', though he clarifies
that the spectacle is a social relation of lived abstraction and separation
mediated by images. Debord suggests that the spectacle concentrates in
peripheral nodes the activity of consciousness, imposing a spurious, reified
unity on the world’s appearance; this unity, in turn, though apparently spontaneous, has a language-like constellation of imposed meanings, acting as ‘the official language of generalized separation’. As a corollary to this critical orientation, both Benjamin and Debord were theoretically sensitive to artistic and architectural attempts—from Paul Klee, Picasso, and the Surrealists early in the twentieth century to the New Babylon of Constant during the 1960s and 1970s—to imagine the transformation of these spaces, making visible the spatialized structure of ideology and revealing cracks in it that might be widened by a revolutionary spatial practice.

The procedure of the dérive—a kind of playful drifting around the streets or programmatic wandering—was intended as such a spatial practice, extending artistic logics that originated in the twentieth-century avant-gardes to extra-artistic domains of experience. The practice of dérive was central to early Situationist concerns with urbanism and urban experience, but in Constant’s work it also becomes a practice related to the interior spaces of his labyrinthine city, the New Babylon. Its programmatic status was signalled by Guy Debord’s dedication of a text to its ‘theory’ (Theorie de la dérive). Already anticipated in key respects by the Surrealists’ collective wandering through the nighttime landscape of the Parc des Buttes Chaumont in Louis Aragon’s Paris Peasant and, via Benjamin’s historical telescoping of Surrealist concerns, by the flâneur of Baudelaire’s Paris, the Situationists’ dérive involved a kind of free exploration of certain areas of or itineraries through urban space, with both intentional planning to facilitate the emergence of new observations and experiences and subsequent recounting to record and detail the experiences undergone during the dérive. The dérive was intended not only to elicit new physical and social details of urban sites, but also to ‘map’ their psychological and affective dimensions, which Debord took to be an ‘objective’ aspect of the interactions of urban dwellers with the specific atmospheres, shadows, spaces, pathways, and buildings that constitute the physical city. He thus wrote of an ‘objective terrain of the passions’ (terrain passionnel objectif) and ‘a psychogeographical relief of the city’ that have their own determinism according to the social and physical morphology of urban space (Debord, 1956, p. 6).

A second crucial aspect of the dérive, as a quasi-artistic practice spanning writing and performance, was its ephemerality, anti-monumentality, and intransitivity—in short, its ‘situational’ character. As Henri Lefebvre explained in a 1983 interview, the Situationists took the increasing fragmentation of the city as an occasion to reassemble it anew, bringing about novel ‘situations’, occasions for fresh experiences, as a performative result of their activity:
[W]e thought that the practice of the dérive revealed the idea of the fragmented city. But it was mostly done in Amsterdam. [...] The experiment consisted of rendering different aspects or fragments of the city simultaneous, fragments that can only be seen successively, in the same way that there exist people who have never seen certain parts of the city. (Lefebvre, 2002, p. 280)

An unattributed article in the December 1959 issue of Internationale Situationniste, ‘Unitary Urbanism at the End of the 1950s’, formulated this facet of the dérive explicitly, the temporary, ‘situational’ nature of the constellations it elicits from an urban space undergoing rapid change:

In fact, beyond its essential lessons, the dérive furnishes only knowledge that is very precisely dated. In a few years, the construction or demolition of houses, the relocation of micro-societies and of fashions, will suffice to change a city’s network of superficial attractions—a very encouraging phenomenon for the moment when we will come to establish an active link between the dérive and Situationist urban construction. Until then, the urban milieu will certainly change on its own, anarchically, ultimately rendering obsolete the dérives whose conclusions could not be translated into conscious transformations of this milieu. But the first lesson of the dérive is its own status in play. (Internationale Situationniste, 1997, p. 83)

In Paris Peasant, Aragon had emphasized the intimate relation between his own urban ‘psychogeography’ and the destructive forces of urban planning and capitalist speculation in urban property. The Passage de l’Opera, where the first part of the book takes place, was destined for destruction according to a very belated, very decadent, and corrupt stage of the Hausmannization of Paris that began in the 1850s. By the time Aragon’s book appeared, it was already a kind of an epitaph inscribed for a space that no longer existed: an architectural remnant of an earlier moment of urban modernity now being swept away by a successive wave of capitalist modernization. So too, in his Arcades Project, Benjamin saw in Baudelaire an allegorical practice of poetry related to the experience of ever-accelerated change in the urban fabric, which, as Baudelaire’s poem ‘The Swan’ points out, ‘changes, alas, more quickly than the human heart’. If Baudelaire (via Benjamin) and Aragon stand in a context set out by the opening and closing of the historical project of Hausmannization, urbanism in the age of ‘high capitalism’, Debord and Constant attempt to come
to terms with a new, more totalized urbanism in the epoch of post-war planned neo-capitalism. In connecting the ephemeral, game-like activity of the dérive to Situationist construction, the ‘Unitary Urbanism’ essay signals an attempt to link up two domains of Situationist urban activity, each with a leading figure temporarily aligned: Debord’s elegiaca-ally-tinged exploration of the dérive and the psychogeographical landscape of the city of earlier modernity, disappearing at the hand of modernist urbanism; and Constant, already by the late 1950s at work on plotting out and modelling a new utopian counter-modernist city of situations that came to be know as ‘New Babylon’.

Yet as the ‘Unitary Urbanism’ text goes on to suggest, there is a third aspect to the dérive that is autobiographical and subjective-existential, as much an ethical question of ‘a life’ and its destinies as an issue directly pertaining to architecture or urban design. ‘All the stories that we live’, the text reads, ‘the dérive of our life, are characterized by the search for—or the lack of—an overarching construction. The transformation of the environment calls forth new emotional states that are first experienced passively and then, with heightened consciousness, give way to constructive reactions’ (Internationale Situationniste, 1997, p. 83). In an essay entitled ‘Architecture and Play’, published in the 30 May 1955 issue of Potlatch, Debord had similarly argued that ‘games’ such as the dérive were important explorations of experiences that could, systematically pursued and instituted, open up new modes of individual and collective comportment, indeed, a new morality: ‘It is a matter now of making the transition from arbitrary rules of play to a moral foundation’ (Debord, 1996, p. 158). So, too, Constant would emphasize the socially and morally transformational aspect of play, the anthropological transmutation of situational game-playing into a general redefinition of humanity as Homo ludens (man the player). Constant emphasizes in this painting more of the child-like and intimate side of the life of Homo ludens, however, even while elsewhere he would take up its political, even revolutionary dimension. In each case, however, we can understand them as an attempt to counter the homogenizing of experience that was the lived correlate of abstract space—that modality of space in which, as Lefebvre argues, an integral system of violence, control, expropriation, and hierarchy is instituted by capitalism in ambient form (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 285–291).

Similarly, the Situationist notion of détournement has been considered largely from the point of view of media critique: turning to parodic or critical purposes of the commercial and media products of the spectacle. The term détournement itself refers to the Situationists’ method of
appropriating—‘detournring’—existing texts, images, or film sequences, modified through recaptioning or other means and placed in new contexts, which alter their meaning and function while continuing to index their original sources. Yet détournement became an important tool in the repertoire of the Situationists not only for negative purposes, for critical parody and exposure of hidden ideological aspects of cultural and commercial goods, but also for positive constructions of new meanings and experiences—including quite personal and subjective ones. As recent editions of Debord's work have revealed, his application of the technique of détournement was pervasive and enduring, including both ‘artistic’ works such as his collaborations with Asger Jorn Fin de Copenhague (1957) and Mémoires (1959: an autobiography including only appropriated sentences) as well as ‘theoretical’ works such as The Society of the Spectacle (1967) and films such as The Society of the Spectacle (1973) and In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni (1978). For my purposes, I would like to dwell briefly on the collaborations with Jorn, because they suggest that détournement establishes a kind of ambiguous intermediate space between externality and inner experience, between the spaces of the city and the spaces of
the self, as a way of creating a passage *through* reified commodity-images, from advertisement and print journalism, discourses directly under the sway of the capitalist market, back towards an intensive, often passionate experience of lived time as qualitative duration (Figure 4.1).

In their collaborative work *Fin de Copenhague* (1957), for example, Jorn and Debord assembled a haphazard collage of images and newsprint, followed by Jorn’s dropping ink from a ladder onto zinc plates that were etched and used for printing. They evoke the boozy mood of their brief interval of time together between causal spatters of ink and scattered images of beer, cigarettes, and idealized faces and bodies of human figures from advertisements. More artistically consequential, from both sides, is their next collaboration two years later, *Mémoires* (1959). This text is, ostensibly, an autobiographical text by Debord, constructed completely out of quotations from other texts, held together by Jorn’s so-called ‘*structures portantes*’—frame-like coloured ink lines, which carry, bear the weight of, or suspend the montaged images or quotations. Debord and Jorn create a poignant metaphor, both verbal and visual, of a nexus between a wandering body, a web of city-spaces, and the places of memory, both external and inner. On one page, for instance, Jorn creates a body-like ideogram from these lines; while in another he suggests the radial paths that Debord, pictured toppled upside-down on the left side of the page, has taken through the streets of Paris in his inebriated *dérives*. Jorn’s ‘*structures portantes*’ are the lines of movement that define the labyrinth of memory—which in turn are traces of the body’s activity as it interacts with interior and external spaces of a rapidly changing city, and which may presently exist nowhere except in memory and in the graphic spaces of the collaborative book *Mémoires*.

Both Jorn and Constant were founding members of the COBRA group in the late 1940s—COBRA being an acronym for Copenhagen, represented by Asger Jorn; Brussels, represented by Corneille and Christian Dotremont; and Amsterdam, represented by Constant and Karel Appel. COBRA was typified by a sort of neo-primitivist amalgamation of Surrealism, Paul Klee-like elemental forms, and children’s art, coupled with a strong socialist-leaning politics.

In Jorn’s case, his production for COBRA already carried a precedent engagement with the relation of art and architecture. In 1937, he had assisted with Le Corbusier’s Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux at the world exhibition in Paris, where he transferred children’s drawings into wall decorations amidst slogans from the Popular Front. Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, as Ruth Baumeister’s research has recently demonstrated, Jorn wrote consistently on architecture, developing a critique of functionalism and
arguing for an imaginative synthesis of the arts towards a transformation of lived space. Thus, for example, in an essay from 1944 entitled ‘Face to Face’, Jorn expressed his preference for what he called ‘a surrealist vision of space and our surroundings’ over what Henri Lefebvre called the ‘technicist, scientific and intellectualized representation of space’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 43) by Le Corbusier, with whom Jorn had collaborated:

In the same period as Le Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, the Surrealists in Paris were creating interiors that offered a completely different perspective with regard to spatial development. Where architects were calling for light, they pronounced murk and gloom; where open space was proclaimed, they answered with labyrinths, impenetrability, hollows. Where planning was proposed they answered with the hazardous. If utilization was praised, they defended the useless. (Jorn, 2011, p. 77)

We can also see Jorn’s humanistic concern with the wartime destruction of cities, treated in an expressionistic vein in his early work, in his graphic work such as The Burning City, from 1950. In recent articles, both Hal Foster and Karen Kurczynski have also discussed Jorn’s massive painting Stalinograd, which Jorn worked on between 1957 and 1972, and about which he recounted: ‘In the mid-fifties I was haunted by the stories told to me about the Battle of Stalingrad. [...] I always wanted to make a painting that would be an action rather than portraying an action, [in] contrast with Guernica. [...] Guernica still exists whereas Stalingrad was completely wiped off the map. It became a ‘non-lieu’, a ‘non-place’. [...] [M]y picture is an inner record of a historical event’ (quoted in Kurczynski, 2012, p. 29; emphasis added).

Even, then, in the case of an external event, the destruction of the city of Stalingrad during World War II, Jorn insists on a double interiority of his artistic treatment of it: it is something based on narration, some heard; and in turn, it is a ‘inner record’ of the event in its unspeakability. We might say, following Walter Benjamin’s ‘Storyteller’ essay (Benjamin, 1968, pp. 83–110), that Jorn’s painting is less the representation of an experience of wartime destruction as a registration of the impoverishment of communicable experience that a human catastrophe like Stalingrad entailed, a kind of descent into nameless inner suffering. Jorn indicated as much when he noted, ‘The name ‘Stalingrad’ is, in a way, immaterial. It stands for an anonymous battlefield with snow’ (quoted in Kurczynski, 2012, p. 29).

Following the period of artistic activity with COBRA, Constant left behind avant-garde painting in favour of architectural practice as a protégé of the Dutch modernist Aldo Van Eyck by the early 1950s. In his own architectural
practice and theoretical writing, Van Eyck sought to open up a new dialogue between interior and exterior spaces, in both a psychological-existential and a physical, designed sense. In a 1956 article, Van Eyck wrote:

We are not only breathing in, nor are we exclusively breathing out. This is why it would be so be so beneficial if the relation of interior space and exterior space, between individual and common space inside and outside [...] could be the built mirror of human nature. [...] The dwelling and its extension into the exterior, the city and its extension into the interior, that’s what we have to achieve! (Quoted in Jaschke, 2001, p. 176)

In short, as Karin Jaschke has put it, ‘There is a suggestion here that urban space should be conceived in terms of domestic space, or even that the urban should be thought of as externalized domesticity and the domestic as internalized urbanity’ (p. 181).

Concretely, this involved careful thinking about passages, networks of transitional spaces, courtyards, stairways, and—with children’s play explicitly in mind—playgrounds and other play spaces (Van Eyck would design over 700 Amsterdam playgrounds between 1947 and 1978). These transitional elements and play spaces will be, as we will see, also the basic components that Constant would weave together to construct the infinitely changeable inner labyrinths of his networked global city, the New Babylon (Figures 4.2 and 4.3).

Figure 4.2. Constant Nieuwenhuys, New Babylon. Still from DVD [capture from Maarten Schmidt and Thomas Doebele, Constant, Avant le Départ, 2006].
Around 1955, Constant began to explore Van Eyck-influenced ideas about ‘art and habitat’ that would crystallize into the New Babylon project and take further impetus, through his association with Guy Debord, from proto-Situationist themes of psychogeography, urban dérive, constructed situations, the détournement of architecture, and unitary urbanism. In 1957, in Alba, he would be inspired by a Roma encampment on the property of the painter Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio to design one of the first installations of what would proliferate into New Babylon, his ‘Design for a Gypsy Camp’, which would provide a flexible structure for mobile décor and movement of people within the structure, a key concept that would be expanded to the scale of an entire city and eventually to a total global network. We can see also already Constant’s deconstruction of the difference between indoor and outdoor spaces, with the open webbed structure inspired by the mobile camps of the nomadic Roma people he encountered on Pinot-Gallizio’s property. There is at once covering and opening, and an internal complexity that allows an indefinite, open-ended set of appropriations and uses: as it were, an image of architectural reification in the midst of a process of dissolving back into mobile social space.

From 1957 to the early 1970s, when he ceased any further elaboration of the project, Constant tirelessly designed, modelled, theoretically articulated, and publicized his idea of New Babylon, an elevated, networked city where nomadic city-dwellers would move through a climate-controlled inner labyrinth of changeable décor, experiencing a myriad of unrepeatable

Figure 4.3. Constant Nieuwenhuys, New Babylon. Still from DVD [capture from Maarten Schmidt and Thomas Doebele, Constant, Avant le Départ, 2006].
encounters and realizing an anarchic society based no longer on labour but on play. New Babylon was intended to overcome modernist (rationalist) urbanism à la Corbusier, which was organized around places of labour and spaces of dwelling and the problems of circulating people and material between them; but also it sought to overturn the very anthropological foundation of modernist urbanism in *Homo faber*, in a labouring humankind, in favour of a new anthropological horizon of free time and play realizing *Homo ludens* on a universal scale. Analogously, Jorn argued dialectically for automation in his essay, ‘The Situationists and Automation’, published in the first number of *Internationale Situationniste* in 1958: ‘Automation can develop rapidly only once it has established as a goal a perspective contrary to its own establishment, and only if it is known how to realize such a general perspective in the process of the development of automation’ (Jorn, 2011, p. 302). In other words, only if automation is used to realize the goals of heightened creativity, playfulness, and subjective experience, rather than the perfection of production and labour, will modern technology be able to realize its full human potential. Like other thinkers of the 1960s such as Herbert Marcuse, Jorn and Constant saw a potential in the social surplus made possible by technology—but also sought to safeguard against the perversion of that potential for destructive, rather than creative ends.

In his essay ‘A Different City for a Different Life’, published in *Internationale Situationniste* in December 1959, Constant laid out his basic architectonic vision of New Babylon:

The city of the future must be conceived as a continuous construction on pillars. [...] The different levels will be divided into neighbouring and communicating spaces, climate-controlled, which will make it possible to create an infinite variety of environments, facilitating the casual movements of the inhabitants and their frequent encounters. (Constant, in McDonough, 2002, pp. 99, 101)

Beneath the elevated city where living and mobile dwelling take place, fully automated production takes place underground, while traffic and agriculture can take place on the surface. ‘The plan of New Babylon’, Constant writes in a 1960 lecture in Amsterdam on unitary urbanism,

reveals a decentralized, reticular structure consisting of an irregular stringing together of numerous sectors, each covering an area of 5 to 10 hectares, which stretches for hundred of kilometres in every direction and in which a population of on average 10 million people reside. [...] In
view of their huge size, the levels are largely inaccessible to sunlight, so the interior of the city is artificially lit, ventilated, and airconditioned. (Constant, in Wigley, 1998, p. 134)

In an essay based on his 1964 lecture at the ICA in London, entitled ‘New Babylon: An Urbanism of the Future’, Constant had further radicalized the creative indeterminacy that New Babylon was intended to house. He writes:

New Babylon could not be structured to a determined plan. On the contrary, every element would be left undetermined, mobile, and flexible. For the people circulating in this enormous social space are expected to give it its ever-changing shape, to divide it, to vary it, to create its different atmospheres and to play out their lives in a variety of surroundings. (constant, in borden and mcreery, p. 14)

He concludes by evoking the architectonic and sensory elements of New Babylon’s interior as a sort of futuristic, post-lettristic alphabet that can be syntactically articulated and rearranged at will by the collective encounters transpiring within it:

The unfunctional character of this playground-like construction makes any logical division of the inner spaces senseless. We should rather think of a quite chaotic arrangement of small and bigger spaces that are constantly assembled and disassembled by means of standardized mobile construction elements like walls, floors, and staircases. (Constant, in Borden and McCreery, p. 14)

And, from the 1960 Amsterdam lecture:

The movable walls are an active element of the psychogeographical game. [...] They are used to construct veritable labyrinths of the most heterogeneous forms in which one finds special halls for radiophonic games, cinematographic games, psychoanalytical games, erotic games, games based on chance and on coincidence. (Constant in Wigley, 1998, p. 135)

Constant’s work, and more generally the activity of various Situationist artists and intellectuals, has received attention especially from the point of view of spatial practices: their affective remapping of cities, their fascination with marginal and fantastic built structures, and their opposition to the homogenizing and reifying tendencies of modernist urbanism in favour of
a utopian ‘unitary urbanism’ in which the construction of situations would be mobilized on a grand scale. Hence, with respect specifically to Constant, some of the best critical discussions have been by architectural historians such as Mark Wigley or Hilde Heynen and urban geographers such as David Pinder. While indebted to their work, however, I seek to unfold an interpretation of Constant, which, in turn, will suggest that this is a pervasive element of Situationist thinking more generally: a complex, differentiated conception of time, liberated from the homogenous clock time of a reified environment of labour, that inflects the meaning of the work or activity at several different levels. To put it in somewhat philosophical terms, if in the post-war city, poised in the midst of its capitalist-urbanist transformation, Debord and his Situationist friends discovered the external, objective form of Situationist experience, then the temporalities nested within that city would be its internal, subjective correlate, waiting to be disclosed and existentially reappropriated. Situationist activity, be it the serious play of Debord’s psychogeographical dérives or Constant’s modelling and drawing of the ever-changing network of New Babylonian space, should be understood as an ensemble of singular operators for connecting the external to the internal in new space-time folds and passages, or translating the intensities of subversive spatial experience into temporal intensities of presence, memory, and desire that had no way to find expression under the weight of abstract labour.

Moreover, this quasi-Kantian association of urban space with temporal experience, mediated through modernistic activity and artefacts, has a pre-Situationist genealogy in the writings of Georg Simmel and later, under the influence of Simmel, the early Georg Lukács and Walter Benjamin. The most explicit development of this reading of Simmel can be found in Massimo Cacciari’s consideration of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century German social thought, in his book Metropolis, where he discusses Simmel’s essayistic deployment of the city itself as the real solution to long-standing Kantian and neo-Kantian antinomies of thought. Cacciari writes: ‘In Simmel, the city is called upon to concretize Kantian teleological judgment. Here, the themes and key problems of neo-Kantian philosophy all reappear’ (1995, p. 88). He goes on to argue:

As long as the value of the city is simply the synthesis of form and function in the original apperception of its totality, the temporal dimension will remain absent. [...] Time, as well, [however], must be reconciled. And for time, there must be a form. Not for Kantian time [...]. But for the time of Erleben [lived inner experience], the time of the actual products of history. And the form of this time must be the city. (P. 89)
Putting this in somewhat more vernacular terms, the city comes to stand as a set of experiential forms—shapes of time, dynamized spaces—that give literally concrete dimension to the articulations of the inner-subjective and outer-objective realms. This is true for the actually-existing capitalist city, in which reification (Lukács) or ‘objective culture’ (Simmel) predominate in both outer and inner experience. Thus, for example, the locational economies of work and leisure zones and the circulation of traffic between them are contingent, but seemingly rigid containers for both individual and collective experiences of space and time; interior-intensive space and exterior-extensive space, as categories of spatial experience, are disconnected phenomenological corollaries of architectural ‘objects’ such as private apartments or offices on the one hand and streets and open zones such as parks on the other; and the potential dissonance between intimate subjective life and regimented or precarious objective life seems impenetrable to the understanding, which founders amidst individual eccentricities and, simultaneously, the arcana of complex, alien, super-individual systems. Yet for the utopian-future city, new experiential forms, new schemata of experience, may reside latently ‘out there’ in its bricks, streets, hoardings, and walls. Lefebvre, indeed, translates this virtuality into a methodological precept to grasp the ‘possible’ dialectical development of ‘the urban’ in the present-day, contradictory, and incomplete dynamics of ‘complete urbanization’ under contemporary capitalism: ‘The urban (an abbreviated form of urban society) can therefore be defined not as an accomplished reality, situated behind the actual in time, but, on the contrary, as a horizon, an illuminating virtuality’ (Lefebvre, 2003, pp. 16–17).

In this sense, too, we can understand the continuity of the products of artistic modernism with the broader domain of urban modernity, insofar as both involve the invention and/or reappropriation of cultural forms to project new modes of experience, new ways of configuring the spatial and temporal schema of modern experiential ‘worlds’. As Jon Goodbun has written:

For Simmel […] the metropolis provided the particular conditions in which the ‘space’ of concrete experience (super-individual ‘society’) and the ‘space’ of inner experience (individual subject) are translated (almost in the mathematical sense, that is to say, ‘mapped’) onto each other. And this is one of the senses in which we can begin to understand the object of this other modernist genealogy: as a store of transformation matrices between inner and concrete experience. (Goodbun, 2001, pp. 158–159)
Goodbun's term 'transformation matrices' is a felicitous one in connection to Constant, since we might almost think of the New Babylon as a great, boundless, fluctuating set of montage collisions between experience-constituting elements. As Tom McDonough has argued,

the New Babylon project [...] as less a moment within the history of (the practice or theory of) urban planning than a crucial intervention in a way of thinking and imagining the world of objects and one's interaction with that world (McDonough, 2007, p. 85).

In fact, as the name suggests, Constant's Babylon is associated with the old Babel, with language, with the ancient confusion of tongues. Yet it also projects a futuristic zaum-like or lettristic superlanguage as well, that affirms the language-making capacity of human motility, affectivity, and play: basically any way that materiality can be motivated to take up an articulatory relation in and of time, constitutes another urban idiolect among the cacophony of tongues. New Babylon thus subsumes the old Babylon's derangement of languages into a modern infinity of vibratory translations between inner and outer experience, between global extensiveness and ecstatic intensivity, all projected through Constant's artistic models and graphs onto a superlinguistic and ultrametropolitan scale.

Constant's New Babylon thus represents not only a utopian reorganization of space, but also, and more fundamentally, the institution of a New Babylonian order of time intimately linked to a restructured subjectivity and existential identity. New Babylonians would experience an open temporal horizon in which all fixed points, and hence the experience of repetition, rhythm, and memory, would be undermined by the perpetual flux of the urban environment. Constant carries to the basic impulse of dereification, the social-practical dissolution of objectified activity back into the activity itself, to such an extreme as to approach denying any objectifying role for human activity, a role he consigned completely to machines in his vision of fully automated production. By definition, play is for him not only non-objectifying; it is actively de-objectifying, engaged with dismantling the existing manifestation of reified, accumulated labour in the urban environment. Through the postulated anthropological revolution that full automation would allow—the transition from *Homo faber* to *Homo ludens*—Constant breaks the link between labouring consciousness and collective self-reappropriation that remained integral to Lukács's idea in *History and Class Consciousness* of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history, realized in socialist revolution. There is no collective return
in Constant, because there is no labour, no labouring consciousness, and no
proletarian class to have class consciousness of its historical role ascribed
to it. Spatially, this anthropological abolition of the proletariat expresses
itself in a generalized nomadism facilitated by the structural liquidity of the
infinitely alterable urban landscape. As Constant noted in his ICA lecture:

There would be no question of any fixed life-pattern, for life itself would
be a creative material. The unfunctional and fantastic way of living would
demand rapid passage from place to another, from sector to sector, and
life in New Babylon would be essentially nomadic, people would be
constantly traveling. There would be no need for them to return to their
point of departure and this would in any case be transformed. (Constant,
in Borden and McCreery, p. 14)

The 1960 unitary urbanism lecture, however, had spelled out the subjective
and psychic implications even more provocatively:

New Babylon would surely have the effect of brainwashing, erasing all
routine and custom. There are no customs in New Babylon; it is obvious
that a culture based on a dynamic game with life, that takes this life itself
as its theme, that uses the activities of life as raw material for creativity,
precludes all routine, all custom, all convention. The New Babylonian
culture is based on the ephemeral, on the transience of an experience,
and the contrast between this and new experiences. (Constant, in Wigley,
1998, p. 135)

Despite Constant’s evocation of New Babylon as a world of pure playful ex-
perience, beyond art and even urban design, it remains that his exploration
of the idea took place exclusively in a variety of representational media, as
the flyer for a lithograph portfolio from the project evokes: ‘een groot aantal
maquettes, constructies, plattgronden, afbeeldingen, foto’s, bescrijvingen en
teksten’ (a large number of maquettes, constructions, plans, copies, photos,
and description in texts). These, as Constant insisted, could only offer a
snapshot suggestion of New Babylon, for two reasons. First, the static,
structural elements of New Babylon that could be represented by means
of drawings, models, photomontages, and textual descriptions were only
themselves the thing-like, sedimented shell of a set of activities, enormously
complex and anarchically fluctuating, that were to take place within New
Babylon’s labyrinthine spaces. Like a hyperbolic version of Adolf Loos’s
blank surfaces and hidden, complex interior Raumplan, the mobile decor
and ambiances of encounters within New Babylon could in no way be read off its hardened face (Figure 4.4). Secondly, New Babylon was constantly fluctuating in time, mutating, growing, and hence any given representation could only capture a thin chronological slice of that process. Undoubtedly, this unsurpassable problem of representation, shading into the very reification that Constant sought to overcome, explains his obsessively iterative elaboration of the project, up to his retrospective exhibition in the Hague in 1974, when he arbitrarily declared the project closed.

Nothing in New Babylon would allow one to talk of ‘type’ or ‘function’, which in more conventional architectural discourse and practice would fulfil this representational demand, since these depend on a continuity in time that New Babylon is, above all else, a technology intended to disaggregate and deny. In a sense, Constant’s New Babylon is a practical objectification of Nietzsche’s eternal return, which in Pierre Klossowski’s view can be understood as an intensive passage through all possible identities an infinite number of times, but with the paradoxical implication that this defies any position of fixed identity from which a previous state of being, a ‘repetition’ could be recognized or experienced as such. Massimo Cacciari, again, relates the experience of the eternal return in Nietzsche to the tragic undoing of the syntheses of the city in the radical non-synthesizable infinities of the metropolis: a perception of the antinomy of the desire to understand the built environment of the city as pure dereified becoming and the desire to comprehend the city as a totality. ‘It is essential to understand’, Cacciari (1995) writes, ‘that the idea of the eternal return is the opposite of a synthesizing renewal. It is an absolute affirmation of the breakdown of the pessimistic equilibrium, an affirmation of the meaning of ‘casting beyond’ of contradiction’ (p. 25). Constant, indeed, carries to a new antinomic extreme this overcoming of contradiction in the eternal return that New Babylon implies. Oppositions of movement and stasis, freedom and constraint, anarchy and totalitarian order, construction and deconstruction, mass and individual, play and survival, dialogue and violence, utopia and dystopia are indiscernibly unravelled and reknit in the ever-changing labyrinths of this post-city supermetropolis.

Constant acknowledges this antinomy on the mass scale of the global city when he suggests that total nomadic mobility, no longer fixed by the needs of labour and dwelling, along with the erasure of points of return that organize time in habit and memory, leads to a slowing of urban circulation to a directionless flux. The New Babylon is itself an exasperation of modernity, a hyper-modernist dialectic at a standstill: total mobility infinitely enfolded into itself, thus becoming, at the moment of its global
Figure 4.4. Constant Nieuwenhuys, New Babylon. Cover of *Opus International* 27 (September 1971).
realization, a vibratory, but essentially immobile flux. Towards the end of the project, Constant even began to explore the possibility that the spaces of New Babylon might not only give rise to playful encounters, but also to violence. He noted that the continuation of the Vietnam War and other instances of violence led him to question his original utopian faith in a peaceful *Homo ludens* wandering through the interior playground of the New Babylon, and when he returned to painting, from the mid-1970s to his death in 2005, his work reflected this more soberly pessimistic state of mind.

However, in conclusion, I return for a moment to the problem of the intensive, de-reified interior and suggest that despite this apparent impasse Constant preserves an original relation to the utopian poetics and politics of the pre-World War II avant-garde, in particular in his development of an idea of montage allowed not just the juxtaposition of two separate images or objects, but rather the perception of explosive, transformative tensions within single designed objects, spaces, images, or utterances. Thus, for example, Sergei Eisenstein spoke of the single shot as a ‘montage cell’ in his theory of dialectical montage (Eisenstein, 1949); the Bakhtin circle conceived of the single word as the site of an internal dissension of voices where social struggles were played out in discourse (Volosinov, 1986); and Walter Benjamin conceived of dialectics as a matter of interruption, ambiguity, and the concentration of tensions in images and objects (Benjamin, 1999, p. 10). In a late essay entitled ‘Piranesi, or the Flux of Forms’, written in 1946–1947, and hence almost contemporaneous with the early activity of Jorn and Constant in COBRA, Sergei Eisenstein compared an early version of Piranesi’s *Carceri* with one of his mature etchings. Utilizing a graphic depiction of the early print, Eisenstein proceeds to suggest how one can ‘explode’ the picture, liberating the forces bound up in static forms and leading to an ‘ecstasy’ (Eisenstein’s term) of spatial forms. Eisenstein is not simply arguing that one can treat architectural forms analytically, by decomposing them and projecting their components outwards along the liberated lines of force. He is also suggesting that there are creative, existential, and even spiritual implications in doing so, which for him related to still unrealized possibilities for cinematically-mediated ‘ecstasies’ of time and affectivity.

As even a cursory glance through the works of the New Babylon corpus suggest, Piranesi is also fundamental to Constant’s labyrinthine design of the utopian city’s interior and hence to the lived experiences it provokes in the anarchistic subjects wandering through it. And so, in the end, it is not far-fetched to see in the New Babylon not the critical debunking and self-exasperation of modernist urbanism’s utopia, which took reification
to the end of the night, but rather an ‘explosion’ beyond it from within, in
the very sense that Eisenstein intended: the mobilization of active forces,
trapped in built structures, resources for a new human pathos and ecstasy
in play.

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