Utopian
Transfiguration:
The Other Spaces of New Babylon

David Pinder explores the unique poignancy of Constant's vision of New Babylon, with its dynamic and disconcerting spaces. This is at a time when the idealism of other earlier utopian fantasies tends to elude us.
New Babylon Today
What is to be made of the utopianism of Constant’s New Babylon today? How to approach his visions of 'another city and another urban life' as evoked in the array of models, maps, plans, paintings, drawings, writings, lectures and visual presentations that occupied the artist for around 20 years? How to do so, more specifically, at a time when many critics have been content to announce the 'end of utopia', to wave goodbye to dreams of radically transforming the spaces and societies within which we live?

Yet it is not nostalgia for a more optimistic age that draws one back to these projects; nor is it the prospect of consolation, the chance to revive spirits wearied by contemporary political cynicism by dipping into warming streams of earlier visionary proposals now safely ensconced in museums. New Babylon’s dreams of the liberation of humanity and the continual free creation of space, enabled by the automation of productive labour and the collective socialisation of land, certainly need to be understood in their historical context. This includes not only the architectural and design debates that have commanded the attention of much of the recent literature on the subject, but also other strands of utopian thinking and activism that, during the 1960s, looked towards the possibilities of a creative society of abundance. Most particularly, these involved critical theorists and radical leftists who sought to realise a revolutionary transformation of society through a transition from what Marx called the ‘realm of necessity’ to the ‘realm of freedom’. However, what is striking about the utopian spaces of New Babylon some three decades on is their provocative power, their disruptive edge and the critical challenge they pose to imagining the city otherwise. In returning to them today, one is confronted by still urgent questions about how to think about and encourage the creation of another space, an emancipatory geography, through radical social and spatial change.

Paradise on Earth
Utopian visions of the city are traditionally based on ordered spatial forms. These provide the settings for ordered, harmonious societies in which the ills of the present day are banished to another space or time. Issues of space are frequently privileged, on the assumption that if these are sorted out, social matters will follow. New Babylon sits critically within such a utopian tradition. Constant certainly referenced other classic utopian visions of cities, and kept in his archive depictions of Campanella’s ’city of the sun’, Victor Considérant’s drawing of Fourier’s phalanstery and Ebenezer Howard’s diagrams of the garden city among other images. He also at times toyed with strategies familiar from utopian literature, such as constructing an ‘atlas’ of New Babylon, and at one stage proposed a tour guide that would lead readers on an imaginative journey through different sectors of his schemes. But he subverts many aspects of the lineage of which the earlier utopias are part.

The name ‘New Babylon’ itself carries a sense of challenging conventional expectations. The title came out of discussions with the situationist Guy Debord in 1959, when Constant was a member of the Situationist International. In dialogue with the poet Simon Vinkenoog for a programme on Dutch television, Constant commented on some of the complex associations of the title. In particular he referred to Babylon’s reputation as ‘the city of sin’, compared to Zion as ‘the city of God’ where ‘prayer and work’ are the highest goals. He discussed how Babylon has traditionally been depicted as encircled by a snake, which appears to offer it as a forbidden fruit. But he argued that history reveals it to have been a cultural centre, a cosmopolitan city of freedom where the first civil law was written, as well as a place famous for its terraces and hanging gardens. He asserted that the possibilities of the present era provide an opportunity to reclaim the name of Babylon as an image of freedom and luxury. Now, 2,500 years later, ‘we can play with a thought of a paradise on earth, a new Babylon, the city of the automated age.’

Constant was in fact uneasy with the description of New Babylon as ‘utopian’. He stressed that the changes he was envisaging were within reach, that they were based on possibilities being opened up by new technical, economic and social conditions. While acknowledging its utopian aspects, he therefore at times preferred to call it a ‘realistic project’. In part, this was to be deliberately provocative as he sought to shake up current approaches to urbanism. But it also reflected important facets of the situationists’ early discussions of ‘unitary urbanism’ from which New Babylon initially emerged.

For the situationists, the aim of unitary urbanism was not to build fantastic dream worlds discarded
from reality. Rather, it was to change reality and to intervene in the production of space through the conscious and collective creation of an environment based on the possibilities inherent within the present. Unitary urbanism was meant to be visionary, in that it "envisages a terrain of experience for the social space of the cities of the future"; but it was also bound up with current experimentation and political struggle, directed towards developing a ludic and agonistic engagement with existing cities in the belief that it "has already begun the moment it appears as a programme of research and development."

Although Constant resigned from the Situationist International a year after this collective statement on unitary urbanism was published, an avant-garde commitment to bringing together artistic and political practices to transform everyday space remained important to his work on New Babylon.

Critical Provocations
Alongside the images of utopian cities in Constant’s archives can be found other photographs that are indicative of his critical intentions. A mass of cars is seen from the air, sprawling across an unidentified area of land. A magazine cutting shows a baseball stadium in Milwaukee, again viewed from the air. The stadium is packed with thousands of spectators, who are in turn surrounded by their cars. The image was reproduced in the situationists’ journal with the caption: ‘Social space of leisure consumption’. A further aerial perspective shows the centre of Amsterdam, in a photograph that had featured in the previous issue of the journal with the caption ‘Experimental zone for the dérive’. Instead of being given over to the circulation of traffic or to commercialised leisure activities, urban space is here invested with the contrasting promise of future games and wanderings, in which the city’s potential will be explored critically, and its terrain approached in terms of play, desire and collective creativity.

As these images suggest, Constant’s work on New Babylon involved criticism of present urban spaces, and especially of the reconstitution of cities in postwar Europe according to the interests of capital and bureaucratic states. Like his situationist associates, he attacked the ‘dismal and sterile ambience in our surroundings’ that prevented the kind of creative urban behaviour and encounters they were seeking. He compared the new towns under construction in many European countries to ‘cemeteries of reinforced concrete ... in which the great masses of the population are condemned to die of boredom.’ He was also sharply critical of modernist planning schemes influenced by earlier utopian proposals such as those of Ebenezer Howard or the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne ( CIAM), and especially the work of Le Corbusier, blaming them for carving up social space in the city. Unitary urbanism was conceived as an attempt to reclaim social space, to construct cities for pleasure, adventure and a creative unfolding of life.

When reproductions of Constant’s initial models first appeared in situationist publications they were presented with this critical and interventionist spirit in mind. A short unsigned article in Potlatch, which featured a photograph of Constant’s ‘Ambiance of a future city’, and which referred to an exhibition he held at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in May 1959, argued that his models went beyond ‘merchandise-objects’, whose role was to be only looked at, and instead were ‘project-objects, whose complex appreciation calls for some sort of action, an action on a higher level having to do with the totality of life.’ As the models and materials for New Babylon expanded dramatically over subsequent years, their collective manifestation as a project – and especially one aimed at provocation – developed.

New Babylon was never meant to be an urban plan or a formal vision of built form. Instead, it was a means of instigating a new understanding of urban space and of encouraging, as well as imagining, a medium for a new approach to urban living. Constant described it as an ‘experimental thought and play model for the establishment of principles for a new and different culture.’ His artworks and presentations serve to unsettle, disturb and disorient assumptions about urban life and form. From the radicalism of his theoretical pronouncements to the clashing and swirling lines of his drawings, the creative energy and festivity of some of his paintings and the labyrinthine structures and sector models shown in slides and films during lectures accompanied by soundtracks (as is so vividly described by Mark Wigley in this volume) – his emphasis is on provoking responses, on challenging imaginations. The passivity associated with the urban spectacle, with its basis in the principle of nonintervention, is to be undermined and the dormant
powers of creativity awakened. Meanwhile a realm that is necessarily unknown is to be approached.

Constant seeks to open ways of envisaging the 'other city' and 'other life' of New Babylon through evoking alternative atmospheres and realities. Openness, flexibility and indeterminacy are therefore key themes in his works. The process has to be experimental and vague, for the needs and desires that would give shape to the city cannot be known in advance of the qualititative break or emancipation that allows them to emerge, that transfiguration that is characteristic of the utopian moment of critique. At the same time, however, this is a source of tension, apparent in Constant's outlines for New Babylon. He provides images and representations as part of a 'play model'.

Utopian dreams about cities are often dismissed as irrelevant fantasies or compensatory distractions, or for being necessarily authoritarian with their fixed plans and proposals for spatial forms.

materialising understandings of space and engaging with an imaginary environment. But he also recognises the difficulties of doing so from within the restrictive conditions of the present, as well as the constraining implications of fixing depictions of a supposedly dynamic space in this way. Hence the manner in which he undercuts stasis, shifts perspectives, emphasises change and movement while all the same working with particular spatialisations. Hence, too, his ultimate and oft-repeated reminder: that the production of the spaces of New Babylon will be the work of the New Babylonians themselves.

Spaces of Desire

The utopianism of New Babylon is therefore not directed towards presenting an ordered vision of the city. It does not present a formal plan or blueprint to be realised in the future, nor a vision based on a harmonious arrangement of space and society. As a utopian space, it can be understood as a repository of desire for a different and better future. But far from being a vision that could be construed as consoling or compensatory, it seeks to disturb, to displace assumptions and to open up perspectives on how other spaces and other modes of living might be produced. The emphasis is on the possible, on what could be, and on realising desires through processes of social and spatial change. The sense of dissonance, conflict and contradiction that remains within it is an intrinsic part of the project, a mark of more general tensions within utopian imaginations that seek to take the transformation of society and space seriously.

If this suggests a notion of utopianism that is at odds with those often associated with currents of utopian urbanism, with their ordered and harmonious arrangements of space, then it connects with the approaches adopted by a number of critics who have rethought the place of utopia within critical thought. A notable example is the Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who often visited Constant in Amsterdam during the 1960s and spoke favourably of the latter's work on New Babylon, seeing it as connecting with his own developing concerns with spatial politics and asserting the 'right to the city'. For both of them, space is understood in social and political terms, as something that is produced and contested. Utopian spaces are themselves thought of as social; not as fixed goals or containers for society but as dynamic and continually in process through the struggle for change.

It is valuable to remember such perspectives in the present period when there is so much talk of the end of utopia. Utopian dreams about cities are often dismissed as irrelevant fantasies or compensatory distractions, or for being necessarily authoritarian with their fixed plans and proposals for spatial forms. But it is important to assert that utopianism need not be about proposing static solutions or blueprints for the future, that it can be open, dynamic and provocative. There is indeed a need for projects that seek to prise open understandings of the present, that offer glimpses of other possibilities and that maintain a creative game with current conditions in order to figure alternatives. New Babylon is imbued with a sense of what the philosopher Ernst Bloch called the 'not yet'. It insists on what is missing, absent, still not in the present, and at the same time it looks towards what is a real possibility, what is 'not yet' in the sense of 'still to come'. This double consciousness needs to be at the heart of contemporary attempts to build on New Babylon's radical legacy.

David Pinder lectures in human geography. The themes of this essay are developed in his Visions of the City: Utopianism, Power and Politics in Twentieth-Century Urbanism, Edinburgh University Press (Edinburgh), forthcoming.