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By Andi Schmied on Cargocollective.com/urbanschizophrenia, 2012

My essay is about the new paradigms of the 21st century and especially about how the logic of virtuality affects our lives and how at the same time it should shape our physical space. I compare this world with Constant Nieuwenhuys's utopian city proposal first exhibited in 1974, the New Babylon, because of the similarities in the way they work and the way they makes us function. At the same time the virtual world does not yet exists on a material level, and New Babylon does not exist on a virtual space.

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In the past several decades our relationship with our physicality has changed radically because of the technological and social paradigms of the 21st century. While human communication used to be a concept related to corporeality and materiality, it turned into something that can be purely virtual. It is not needed anymore to be physically somewhere in order to be able to interact with others - a fact that questions the very notion of space. Can we still think about distances in an era when we are actually not detached to our physicality in our mental functions?

In my essay I will relate the new paradigms of the 21st century that we are facing in the age of the information society with the ideas of the International Situationists, and specifically with Constant Nieuwenhuys's utopian world-wide city proposal, the New Babylon, because of their similarities in terms of their dynamism both in rapid changes, physical appearance, and their apparent absence of hierarchy. I especially find interesting New Babylon because it shows a deep understanding of the world being a network, that, since 1974, (the competition of the design) got to have more relevance, even though not on such a physical level as Constant imagined it.

First of all, I would like to provide a general analysis of what New Babylon is both on a philosophical and on a material level. Secondly, I would like to analyze what are the new social paradigms, how do they relate to our physical space, with a focus on our urban reality. And at the same time of doing both analyses I would refer to one from the other and vice versa.

At the end of the essay I would like to make future estimations as to what virtuality would mean as a transformation generator and propose strategies about how our urban environment could be readjusted to the new paradigms.

NEW BABYLON

New Babylon, Constant Nieuwenhuys's utopian anti-capitalist city proposal was designed in

1959-1974, but it is not that obvious just what his aim was. Is it a Social Utopia? Is it a plan of urban design? Does it attempt to be a cultural revolution or an artistic statement? Is it a new technological form? Or is it just a simple practical solution for problems in the industrial era?

In a certain sense it is neither an urban plan nor a utopian project. New Babylon represents both a change of a social paradigm, a radical change in the way of thinking of the people, and a physical design, meanwhile being self-conscious of its impossibilities and its fictionality.

One of the basic concepts that Constant uses in constructing his utopian city is the concept of homo ludens, of the man who's identity is constituted through ludic practices. Constant's main concern is that we are living in a utilitarian society that by definition is chasing our productivity, our "utility" and on the way we cannot develop our creativity. The main idea behind it was the destruction of the society of spectacle, the society with all the mental limitations of the routines of the getting-up, going to work, going home, awaiting the weekend and then repeating the process.

All the cities and all our physical space is built upon this idea, these principles. This means that space is organized by the principle of orientation. Otherwise, the space could not work as a space of work, because we would lose time. The value of the space became the value of how fast you can get from one place to one other without any distraction of the utility. In a utilitarian society one cannot waste time. That is why all of the urban design proposals until New Babylon were based on orientation and function.

On the contrary, as in New Babylon the homo ludens would not have to work, they do not need any point of orientation. In New Babylon the principle is to waste the time that is why also the construction of it is a Labyrinth space where we could not know where we are we going to and what are we going to find. Constant states that if we could be free of our "useful" and repetitive habits we would get back a never-used energy that could be used for other activities.

If we would destruct work and daily routines, the creativity that is in all of us could come out and we could devote our playful lives to the experimentation and joy -- returning to a modern kind of Eden. The game itself would be the play with our physical environment that in New Babylon is a three-layered structure, always changing and dynamic network-like cityscape. One can configure his or her own space and be connected with others, which is really similar to a spatialization of the virtual world, as we know it today; a platform where you can move quickly, meet others, interact with them and just fade away as if you would never have been there.

However naïve the homo ludens society might sound, the Situationists pronounced a radical critique against the post-war consumer society, its necessity to be entertained constantly by external inputs, its need of its industrial, cultural production and proposed a dynamic concept of life instead.

Constant's design is basically a three-dimensional paper its inhabitants are supposed to fill in, draw on and redraw. He finds it really important that the container and the structure of the built New Babylon should be as neutral as possible, which gives more courage to make constant changes. He designed a world without details, a carefully designed freedom, just like the blank paper, or the virtual world, that everyone can use the way his imagination dictates. By constantly representing that freedom he would actually impose his singular vision; by definition it cannot be represented. In this sense exactly this lack of complete image is what empowers new Babylon's inhabitants.

Even though there are hundreds of representations with an impressive amount of representation techniques of the project, in the sense how we use the term design, New Babylon cannot be defined. His models, photos, drawings, lithographies, etc., are never really getting inside to show what is going on. In this way, the audience of his works, "the future inhabitants" are already challenged to create inner images, new and individual imaginaries of the way New Babylon would possibly work and look like.

As Constant stated, "With these slides I only want to give you a suggestion like the painter and the poet used to suggest a world superior to the world they had to live in. I certainly did not want to predict how the world of the future will look like. I want to challenge the imagination of those who will have to prepare the construction of the future world when labor will be abolished."

An other important point to make is that Constant does not speak at any time of a tabula rasa, neither at the start of New Babylon, nor at the time of its fluid existence. He imagines New Babylon to be built up on the existing world as a second layer of the urban reality. New Babylon would progressively replace the existing urban forms, but leaving them on the ground level. The way people would loose the necessity to work they would move to the upper sectors and New Babylon would be growing until it reaches the whole world, the whole earth on its entire surface. The structure of New Babylon would stand on columns covering the existing urban areas, resting on the ground surface.

The same way New Babylon builds up on an existing world, the virtual world gets its imagination and inspirations from the real world, creating mixed realities, where real objects can appear in a virtual form. Its "pillars," in the same way as New Babylon's structure, rest on the ground level, the virtual world also has to be supported by a physical system that supports its existence. Also the virtual world that we are using in the 21st century is as much a second layer of our urban form, as New Babylon would have been. Meanwhile, our urban spaces are still in use. We have constructed an other world upon it that connects us to the rest of the world. The online network is also a growing system that in its final stage would be accessible for all the people around the globe, and make them capable of jumping through it to other parts -- virtually.

On the one hand, Constant says that he just puts the question on the table, and that the way New Babylon would evolve is up to its inhabitants. But at some other points he is writing about centers in it, of theme parks and theme rooms, where there would be “brain wash” (his words) used on the people that would have habits, or that would have habits about to emerge. Already putting in question that in that world there would be people who might develop some habits within the framework, is a denial of its main principles. Also when he states that New Babylon would evolve in a natural way, but having situationist technicians in the background who are responsible for its world to function in the way it was developed, he gets to a point when his argument is not coherent.

NO ARTISTS!

Situationists have no respect for remains of the past as something that should be conserved without touching it, they see it as materials to work with in the present and to get them to the future as “canvas.”

As Guy Debord also states in the Society of Spectacle(2) the world became reversed, which means that the truth would be an absolutely fake moment and for them the symbol of these fake, isolated moments are all the passive activities we do in life. The Situationists do not believe in tourism in its passive form, or in museums, zoos, etc., that are places of observation without being able to interact with the artifacts, with the spectacle itself. As they state, “Museums should be abolished and their masterpieces distributed to bars. All monuments, the ugliness of which cannot be put to any use, should make way for other constructions. All remaining statues whose significance has become outmoded should be removed.”

These concepts stay alive in New Babylon with not giving any space of any form of art in the way we know and use the concept art today. One of the main points of New Babylon is a rejection of the division between the functional architecture and the “divinity” of individual art, how in popular culture it was seen as something disconnected from our everyday life. That’s how creativity –unlike Marx states – is not a state of mind but a way of living.

The meaning of the word art in New Babylon is just a historical way of living and understanding the creativity, the form of it of the utilitarian society, where the art is also mainly understood as a function. Almost all of the members of the utilitarian society are living and producing to survive, and it is the condition of these people that lets the creative individual to be relatively different.

According to Constant, we all have the same creative potential, just our thoughts became limited by the education we get on the way of growing up. If one day all of us could live our creativity the meaning of art in the sense as we use it today would be different. In New Babylon the culture would be collective without any kind of individual differentiation, which

also would mean that art would not represent an isolated action but be the result of human interaction.

Art in the terms we use it today does not have to confront with the collective's opinion, just at the point when it is ready, when it has been consumed. In New Babylon the act of the making becomes a social act at the same time. The habitants of New Babylon would play all day with the architecture itself in its unlimited options, experimenting.

For the homo ludens the fetish of creative play returns as a basic principle of a new kind of urbanism. They would live a nomadic life – Constant got inspired by gypsy communities of Alba – displacing themselves and optionally changing their close physical environment, creating a world-wide network without end or centers.

This sense of the ludic life and the play of our own environment is really close to what performance art or happenings are today. But just because even those forms of art are merely watched from the outside and the audience would not interact unless they are told to do so, does not put them on the same level. Gordon Matta Clark's building cuts, for example, are a play with the architecture itself, but just in the opposite way we are used to see architectural transformation on the street; he plays with existing borders of interior spaces, changing them and giving different new configurations to the space itself, playing with the boundaries of the interior and the exterior. Also, he is not just thinking of the results of his actions but the process itself. He makes the cuts on buildings on the street, with no previous announcement, which makes his audience to be incidental as well. As he states, he sees his work as a special stage in a perpetual metamorphosis, as a call for peoples' constant action on space. Also, he observes how people are always contemplating the construction sites on the street; which can stand as a metaphor for people's need for changes in their environments, but at the same time they live in their own spaces with a temerity of these very same changes.

As Matta Clark states "Home owners generally do little more than maintain their property. It's baffling how rarely the people get involved in fundamentally changing their place by simply undoing it."

These theories of art – both Constant's and Matta Clark's and of people being part of the creative process at all times – stand for not being a passive part of society, but being its constructor, and feeling the power that one has upon his own individual environment and on others. At this point, there is an important similarity with the way how virtual world works, which is all about our options in an unreal world. Both on the Internet and generally in imagined, unexpected environments the base is a blank paper, which we can fill in the way we like, and we can jump from one place to another the way it is convenient at any moment. On the world-wide web all users are possibly becoming part of the creative process, and even the ones who are actively not creating new virtual environments are able to experience the constant change that the other users are creating.

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In 1975, when Constant wrote his texts on New Babylon, the world-wide web was not even a dream, but being on a physical level his proposal worked in many ways similarly. One of the most important ideas is the constant flux of information – people – movement of interconnected sectors that both worlds experience. This is a perfect description for the virtual logic, of the logic of our century and to the act of surfing on the Internet as well. Both “spaces” experience the restless mobility without any center, but an important infrastructure, which also means without any hierarchy.

In New Babylon, spaces are interlinked in a labyrinth network that is spread around the whole universe as “one immense building” – an infinite playground.

You cannot find any randomness on the models that Constant has constructed, its structure is an extremely sophisticated architectural statement, such as the way the virtuality works and how its inner structure and informatics system has been built.

Though in New Babylon the movements are still physical, on the level of ideas it works as if it wouldn't have this material level. The difference is that since the virtual space by definition is not material, these very same movements are instant. It means that we can be at the same time in different places and to get from one place to the other is instant although the actual distance is big. This fact questions the notion of space in the virtual era. And as the notion of space is directly related to the notion of velocity – that is directly related to the forms of transportation systems in each historical period – it is very important to say that in the virtual era our information transport works according to the speed of light. Meanwhile, in the Middle Ages the velocity was the pigeon, and the carriage; in the colonial era the maritime velocity; and in the post-war period the aeronautic velocity. Today, these movements are instant. In this sense each period is defined by the speed of how information is moving in space.

Due to the fact that nowadays our communication is at the speed of the light, it is unnecessary to speak about spatial limits (within the globe, of course), which makes the notions of space and velocity inseparable; we cannot talk about one without mentioning the other. In other words, as the velocity grows, the space decreases and in the case of the speed of light the distances do not exist anymore, which leads us to an era without geopolitics.

According to the logic of the virtual era it does not make sense to talk about local communities anymore, but of a global one. Meanwhile, in the industrial societies the kind of relationships that we established were always related to some kind of activity, or place, such as the school, the work, the family, political reunions, etc. As much in New Babylon as in the virtual world, our relations are more driven by randomness, meetings are more fortuitous as a result of rapid jumps, changes of place in space. The difference between Constant's fluctuant society and the net at this point is the fact that since New Babylon is still working on a physical level, displacements are also physical, so when he speaks about moving and leaving someone behind in a labyrinth system, you probably are not going to see that person anymore. Meanwhile, on the virtual platform you can easily get back to places and people you have been to already.

As geopolitics are gradually disappearing, we are facing more and more the era of chronopolitics, since the borders of the physical spaces, countries are less and less relevant, just as in Constant's New Babylon, where there, as he says, "as the world is round, New Babylon does not stop anywhere. It doesn't know borders, since the national economies do not exist anymore, and all the humanity is fluctuating. All of the places are accessible for all and each of the human beings."(1)

When virtually we are in Japan in less than a second and physically in about 14 hours, our spatial limits are minimized and the world becomes a really tiny place. In other eras the space was immeasurably huge and movements were limited. This world of chronopolitics works according to a universal time, instead of the local times, which again gets us back to Constant's idea of not taking in account the matters of time and natural light, but to create a world where we are no longer dependent on the monotonous alternation of day and night, by being able to choose in each and every moment – with the help of a huge structure of artificial lights – the kind of environment we would like to be in. In New Babylon the natural light penetrates just in some meters, which means that the interior is always illuminated by artificial lights. This fact at the same time of making the homo ludens more independent of the factor time, make him more dependent of the technology and the structure itself.

In a certain sense the combination of the possibilities we have in time and space (because speed is space; without speed we could not get so far) is freedom, because we have more alternatives. On the other hand, this freedom becomes asphyxia due to the fact that we reached our spatial limits (again; thanks to the speed of light). (5)At the same time these movements in the space are virtual; the representation of our urge to leave our material and physical boundaries to create or imagine different spatially unlimited spaces. In this sense going to the outer space is a virtual act, such as contacting the world-wide web, such as out unlimited movements on the labyrinth structure of New Babylon. It shows us how velocity is not a phenomenon itself, but a relation in between other phenomena.

Meanwhile, in New Babylon we are still moving physically in the virtual world, our presence is our mental function, just as the technological inventions that have changed. The ones in previous periods were an extension of our physical function – to hit harder, to go farther, etc. – but the ones of the 21st century are an extension of our mental being, a fact that brings up the question of how much corporality is equal to the notion of being. In the virtual era due to the fact of all the possible and immediate jumps in space we lost the sense of the concept "here" (*bic et nunc seta in situ* – "to be is to be here and now"), and there is just the concept of "now" left which questions the very notion of being. For the Neo-Platonists, the less corporeal you are, the less you are attached to the factor time and space, the more you are "being." In this sense the virtual world and the hybrid mixed reality worlds are more pure real human existence than our physical being.

What comes to mind here is Jean Baudrillard's theories of how virtuality is actually a hyperreality, "merely a hyperbolic instance of this tendency to pass from symbolic to the real." As he says, virtual reality "because it is more complete, non-contradictory, verifiable

and perfect, it is more real than what we have established as simulacrum,” than what we have established as our physical world.

An other idea that is related to the telepresence is the fact of being or not being online. When one is online (or in New Babylon one is actively changing the environment), one IS THERE. But when one disconnects and goes back to his corporeal being, he still continues being in the virtual space but on a standby mode, where others still can interact with the state how the virtual self have been left there. In the same way in New Babylon you can interact with the leftovers on the way of other people's interventions. It means that in the virtual space, and in New Babylon we are somehow immortals and we will continue to exist, though in a passive way.

DIVINITY

Since homo ludens is free of work, the spatial dependence of a physical space where it has to go day by day is eliminated. This fact causes the incrementation of mobility in space, the independence of the habitat, or of any kind of residence. As Constant asks in a self-interview how can we expect of all human beings to be able to live without stableness, he answers that this question can just arise until we are living in a utilitarian society. Once we left our utilitarian education and need to the production, we would not need any space that makes us feel identified, or makes us feel that we are on the right track. In a certain sense browsing on the web, disconnecting from our real, physical world leads us to a similar feeling. When we are in a virtual world we feel ourselves more free to move, we have nothing to lose, we can just keep on jumping, browsing, without any center, without any hierarchy.

Just as none of the parts of the structure of New Babylon are above in a hierarchical sense than any other one, none of the parts of the web are on a higher position by definition than the others. (You could argue that places that have been viewed more appear first on Google, but it is as easy to access to any other sites, as to the popular ones). The point of both of the structures is the network itself, and how one of the sites is connected to the others and how all the system is interconnected. Both the virtual world and New Babylon represent a world which is not the result of isolated activities, exceptional situations, but the activity of the entire global community, where all human beings have a dynamic relationship with the medium itself.

The fact that in both worlds the structure, or the medium itself, have such an importance raises another question: Are they really free from hierarchy? Are they really self-organizing?

Velocity is not any more motorized by the individuals like it used to be until now; the ships were conducted by the captain, the planes by the pilot, which produced a certain hierarchy between who provided the velocity (“the workers of velocity” -Paul Virilio (5)), and those who used it (the passengers in this case). Instead, today the speed of light is not driven

physically by any human being, a fact that on the one hand provides a democratization of the power, an equality within the users' society.

On the other hand, there is a certain tyranny imposed on all of us. Even though within each other, as humans we would have democratized relations related to the velocity, the tyranny is coming from the system itself. In both systems automated machines hidden underground or hidden behind numeric codes take care of all work and people spend their whole lives drifting through vast interior spaces suspended high in the air, or in a virtual, imagined space, where they can jump from one place to the other with not even having to move physically.

In both cases the construction of the space itself requires a previous planning, construction and structure within which the homo ludens, or the virtual human, can move. As Constant states: "Technology is an imperative instrument for the realization of the experimental collectivism, and the desire of dominating the nature without the help of technique is pure fiction." This is the same way as a collective creation would be fiction without the appropriate communication mediums. Also, at some point in his theory Constant says that the spaces where the main structure is divided with vertical stairs, the varied ambiances would be modified constantly by situationist teams, together with the technical services. In both cases the technology is a *sin qua non*.

In this sense, the lack of hierarchy is a false statement in both cases, just it has been displaced from the human-human type to a human-superhuman. In this sense both the structure of New Babylon and the virtual world itself fulfill the requirements that once was established by the divinity. It is out of our physical control, it is out of the space-time and it is instant and immediate. So instead of *deus ex machine*, we have the "Machine God."

SO WHAT NOW?

It is an undeniable fact that what happens in our virtual world touches our perception of the real and material in a deep sense, makes our lives different, gets us connected to a global society while on the same level disconnects us from the local.

How can we relate to our physical environment when we spend an important part of our time and our interest on a virtual, electronic, global space – which, as its name also suggests, is a space in itself – that we are challenged by, which transforms into visualized concepts. And, meanwhile, how can we expect from the people constructing a different world to keep as much in touch with their physical world as they used to do? Is it necessary at all?

Certainly, since we have changed in our functions, our ways of operating in life and in the spaces we are using; we also have to adjust our physical environment. What is common in Constant's New Babylon and the virtual world that we are existing in, is that both of them

exist as a second layer of our being. If our built environment would have been built exclusively according to the paradigms of the 21st century, everything would look different, but we have all the history around us, that is going to stay as a base (just as it happens in New Babylon).

What we will have to rethink is how to design and redesign our existing built environment, thinking in the new ways of human existence and communication where physical boundaries are not real boundaries anymore and where the world is becoming somehow more a network-like unified system with the rest of the local cultures and powers.

For this, we should translate our virtual activities to a material level and understanding all the changes that goes through, rethink the kind of new functions and activities for which we need spaces. Until now, we tended to separate functions in the urban area and especially put in a different place the things we did not want to know about, the so- called heterotopias, (psychiatry, jails, etc., – Foucault(10)), but that way of thinking does not fit a reality where we can access all kinds of global and local information from any topographical area. There are no more hidden realities that are separated from us with any borders (at least that is the path we are heading toward). Instead, our “new world” is led by randomness (Baudrillard(3)) that creates a radical uncertainty and a lack of ability of control.

New Babylon is a utopian city proposal for a society that works purely according to the logic of virtuality, randomness. It is material, but the ideology behind it is related to leaving our reality, and though it's a physical proposal is too utopian, it might be the only materialized virtuality on a global level in the history of urbanism so far.

I'm Andi Schmied.

Urban Schizophrenia is my urban laboratory that followed up my design works and my thoughts of the urban reality during my year at the Bartlett, 2012.