

New Babylon at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia Madrid

By Anya Lawrence for Disegno. Daily 4 November 2015

In 1974 the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag in the Netherlands hosted a major exhibition of works by Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005). A showcase of Nieuwenhuys' utopian architectural concept New Babylon, the exhibition marked the end of the 18-year-long New Babylon project. After the exhibition closed, Nieuwenhuys began to sell the collection to the museum.

"After the exhibition he said 'I am going to stop working on New Babylon and I will leave this collection at the museum because I want it to all stay together'," says Laura Stamps, a curator at Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, a museum located in The Hague, the Netherlands. "We had the possibility of buying the pieces, but we couldn't pay for them all at once. So up until the 1980s we had an agreement to buy some of the pieces every year." As a result, the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag now owns the world's largest New Babylon collection.

It is this permanent collection that inspired a new exhibition dedicated to the New Babylon project. Hosted at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid, the exhibition has been devised in collaboration with the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag and is co-curated by Stamps and Doede Hardeman, both of whom are curators at the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag. "We get a lot of requests from museums that want to lend pieces from the New Babylon project but they always want just one or two of the pieces," says Stamps. "We wanted to show the full project because we feel that you can only understand it properly if you see a presentation of the whole project."

Nieuwenhuys' New Babylon concept proposes a worldwide network of connected cities in which land is collectively owned and labour is automated. The cities' buildings house connected living spaces that are suspended above the ground on pillars, and which are designed to be flexible in order to accommodate its inhabitants creative needs – walls and stairs can be moved and colours, light, climate and sound changed.

New Babylon was inspired by *Homo Ludens*, a book written in 1938 by Johan Huizinga that discusses the importance of play in culture and society. As a result, Nieuwenhuys based New Babylon on the idea of a fully automated society in which humans are liberated from manual labour and left free to devote themselves to the development of creative ideas.

The exhibition features more than 150 works, which span intricate scale models, paintings, drawings and collages. While the New Babylon project is commonly attributed to the period between 1956 and 1974, the exhibition also showcases a selection of Nieuwenhuys' earlier works, which demonstrate that ideas expressed in the New Babylon project were present in Nieuwenhuys' practice before 1956.

The Reina Sofia exhibition also features a reconstruction of the blue and purple room, a vibrantly painted room that Nieuwenhuys created for the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1952 in collaboration with architect Aldo van Eyck and painter Lucebert. "One year later they wrote a text, *Spatial Colourism*, which is about influencing people's mood by integrating colour in architecture. For me this was a very important step in Constant's development," says Stamps. "He starts to communicate his ideas about the influence of architecture on how people behave to one another."

Much of the exhibition's design is informed by Nieuwenhuys' original design for the 1974 show at Gemeentemuseum Den Haag. Archive documents provided Stamps and Hardeman with designs for tables that

Nieuwenhuys had created to display each of his maquettes. The tables were reproduced for the new exhibition.

“The tables are very slender so they almost look as if they are floating in the air,” says Stamps. “Constant always said that New Babylon is an idea, it is not a strict thing – he wanted to create a proposal and make suggestions. For him it was important that the New Babylonians, the people that were going to live in this new world, make it their own so they are the ones that can design it themselves in the end. For him it was important to communicate this concept and the tables are very important in this.”

During the 1974 exhibition Nieuwenhuys also exhibited several of his works in a dark room with each piece illuminated by a single light; it is something that has been reconstructed for the Madrid exhibition. As a final reference to Nieuwenhuys' original design, the Madrid exhibition also features a reconstruction of a section of a door labyrinth that featured in the original exhibition.

“I found all the plans for this door labyrinth,” recalls Stamps. “For Constant it was very important that there was a labyrinth because he said when people go into a labyrinth they are a bit scared. They're scared that they will get lost, but for New Babylonians a labyrinth is a place where they can find new solutions and be creative. He wanted the public to experience that as well, so that is why he made the door labyrinth. You can go in not to get lost, but to see new possibilities.”

WORDS Anya Lawrence, *Disegno's* editorial assistant

New Babylon is currently on show at Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid. The exhibition will run until 29 February 2016