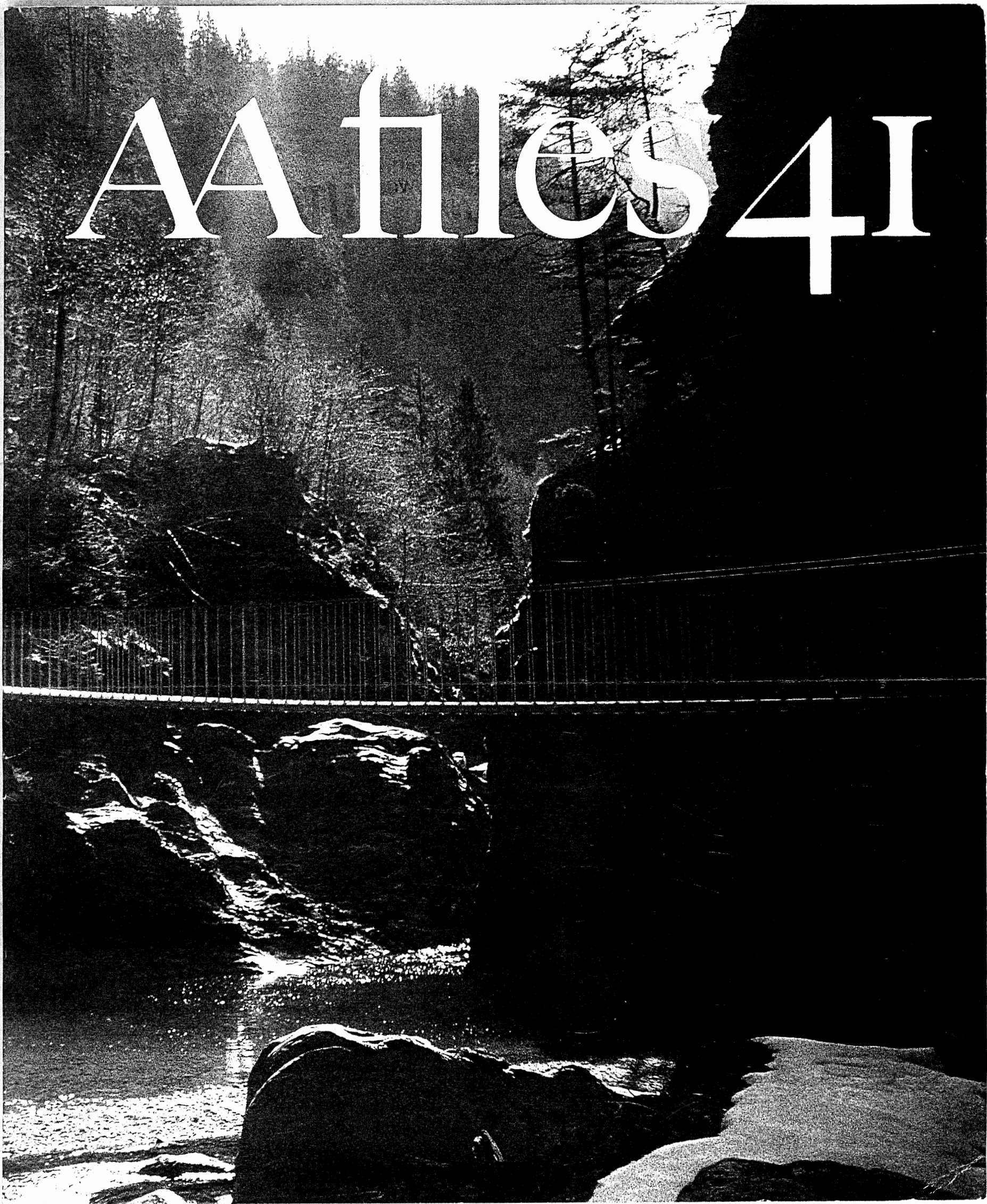


AAfiles 41



Witzare Zomer / herfst
2000

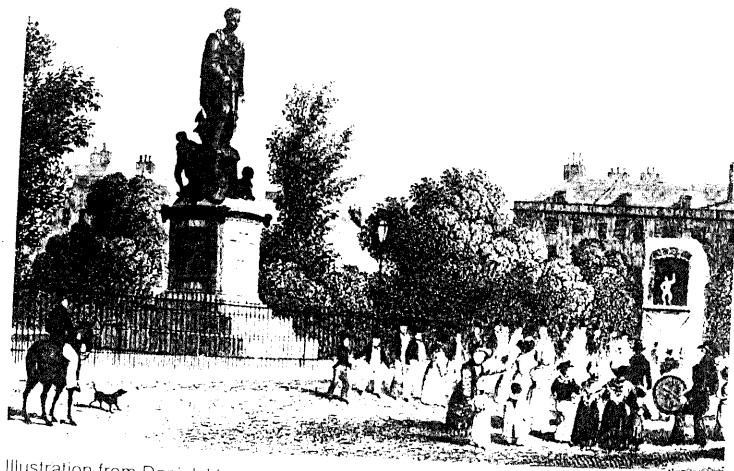


Illustration from Daniels' book showing Russell Square and the Statue of the Duke of Bedford.

be seen from the surrounding houses.

Marshalling an unprecedented amount of archival and contemporary published sources, both written and visual, Daniels leaves insight mostly to the reader and concentrates, with plain language and purpose, on Repton's career and the geography of his time. His account is based around the themes of road travel, county culture, the picturesque landscape, the aristocratic estate and the urban periphery.⁶ The outcome is one of contextual and factual authority and sets new standards of scholarship in landscape and garden history, but information sometimes overwhelms. We are introduced to Repton's early years in Holland, his mission to Ireland, the intricacies of Whig county politics, his family life, his scheme for a reformed postal system (one of several purloined from him), his dealings with the Prince of Wales and the Dukes of Portland and Bedford, a good number of his most important commissions, the iconography of his Essex home in Mare Street, the conception, promotion, outcomes and survival of individual Red Books, polite society in town and country, his repeated and often cruel professional disappointments – and much more. The reading can begin to feel like the relentless jogging which Repton endured on his endless coach travels from country estate to outlying villa. Like Repton, rarely do we dare stop in order to contemplate the view. In turn, Daniels' interpretative diffidence is both an advantage and a shortcoming. On the

one hand, it provides the specialist reader with new material with which to speculate and spares the general reader from internecine academic differences, while on the other it can leave both specialist and general readers perplexed as to the significance of Repton to present-day discussions of landscape values and design.

Yet, as design source book, treatise, picture book, biography and socio-political history, this book succeeds. Daniels' lucid reportage on the quarrel between Repton, Payne Knight and Uvedale Price over the qualities and politics of the picturesque dispenses with speculation and at last sets the record straight as to who thought what, who did what to whom, and why they did it. The virtual professional annihilation of Repton by Nash is detailed in accounts of such projects as the Brighton Pavilion and Regent's Park. Perhaps what does most to bring Repton's work into the realm of contemporary discussion is the fact that the book elucidates and illustrates proposals for, and work on, landscapes that remain objects of intense personal attachment – for this reviewer, Russell Square and Kenwood House in London – allowing a new understanding of everyday experience. With respect to this, one hopes that the publishers will, at some point, publish the book in a more portable format.

Notes

1. Jellicoe, Geoffrey *Journal of the Institute of Landscape Architects* no. 45, February 1959, pp. 14–15.
2. Matless, David *Landscape and Englishness*, (London, 1998), p. 213.
3. Crowe, Sylvia *The Landscape of Power*, (London, 1958), p. 81.
4. See for example, Williamson, Tom *Polite Landscapes: Gardens and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, (Baltimore, 1995), and Everett, Nigel *The Tory View of Landscape*, (New Haven and London, 1994).
5. These include *Sketches and Hints of Landscape Gardening* (1795), *Observations*

on the Theory of Landscape Gardening (1803), *An Enquiry into the Changes of Taste in Landscape Gardening* (1807) and *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1816).

6. Dorothy Stroud's biography is hardly comparable, while the great number of interpretative texts on the picturesque are historically inaccurate in so far as Repton's role in the debate is concerned. See Stroud, Dorothy, *Humphrey Repton* (London, 1962).

Yona Friedman: Structures Servicing the Unpredictable

edited by Sabine Lebesque & Helene Fentener van Vlissingen
Netherlands Architecture Institute,
Rotterdam, 1999
131 pp., £21.50
90-5662-108-4

New Babylon: Constant, art et utopie

edited by Jean-Clarence Lambert
Éditions Cercle d'Art, Paris, 1997
159pp., £49.95
2-7022-0465-1

Constant's New Babylon, The Hyper-Architecture of Desire

by Mark Wigley
010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1998
252 pp., £35
90-6450-343-5

Simon Sadler

Three more books (and they are only part of the current round of publishing and conferencing on the subject) have been added to the literature on the architecture of the avant-garde during the 1950s and 1960s. It may be said that these events are just approaching drinking-up time (having 'matured' into history), but why all this interest now? One answer might be that the events have a nice edgy feel to them –

the majority of their protagonists still working, so the historians can answer back – yet even antagonists seem startled by the searchlights of critical attention that are trained on them and their work.

Whilst the work may seem those who made it, publication as those reviewed here are p circulation a wealth of material makes the post-war avant-garde accessible. Jean-Clarence Lambert's *New Babylon: Constant, art et utopie* is a selection of Constant's texts (these were written between 1950 and 1960 in support of both his work on 'New Babylon' – a city of endless play – and the Situationist International, of which he belonged). Mark Wigley's *Constant's New Babylon, The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* includes translations of such as Guy Debord's 'Conspectus of the Path of Unitary Urbanism' and Constant's 'On Travelling' for the opening of the new Airport buildings in 1966).

Above all, the books alter our conceptions of these exotic architects through the quality of their illustrations. And in many ways this is appropriate. Experimental architecture (unbuilt) necessarily depended upon potential persuasiveness and the creation of the image for its potentiation. The photographing of the models was an integral part of Constant's *New Babylon*. The illustration of *New Babylon* book is nothing short of luxurious while the design of Wigley's book gives the work a fresh complexity which more later).

The output of Yona Friedman is similarly shown off in a new book entitled *Structures Servicing the Unpredictable* (published to accompany the Netherlands Architecture Institute exhibition of 1999). The result is that Friedman emerges as a bewitching and interesting designer well beyond

Landscape Gardening into the Changes of Gardening (1807) and Theory and Practice of (1816). Biography is hardly the great number of on the picturesque accurate in so far as the debate is concerned, Dorothy, Humphrey (1962).

Structures Unpredictable Lebesgue & Helene Ingen Architecture Institute,

Constant, Clarence Lambert L'Art, Paris, 1997

New Babylon, The Architecture of Desire Rotterdam, 1998

books (and they are only recent round of publishing on the subject) have on the literature on the of the avant-garde during d 1960s. It may be said ents are just approaching time (having 'matured' but why all this interest nswer might be that the a nice edgy feel to them --

the majority of their protagonists are still working, so the historical subject can answer back – yet even these protagonists seem startled by the glaring searchlights of critical and historical attention that are trained upon them and their work.

Whilst the work may seem distant to those who made it, publications such as those reviewed here are putting into circulation a wealth of material that makes the post-war avant-garde accessible. Jean-Clarence Lambert's *New Babylon: Constant, art et utopie* reprints a selection of Constant's texts on urbanism (these were written between 1958 and 1960 in support of both his own work on 'New Babylon' – an endless city of endless play – and that of the Situationist International, to which he belonged). Mark Wigley's *Constant's New Babylon, The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* includes translations of rare texts such as Guy Debord's 'Constant and the Path of Unitary Urbanism' (1959) and Constant's 'On Travelling' (written for the opening of the new Schipol Airport buildings in 1966).

Above all, the books alter our perceptions of these exotic architectures through the quality of their illustration. And in many ways this is appropriate. Experimental architecture (usually unbuilt) necessarily depended upon the potential persuasiveness and circulation of the image for its potency – the photographing of the models was an integral part of Constant's *New Babylon*. The illustration of Lambert's book is nothing short of luxurious, while the design of Wigley's volume gives the work a fresh complexion (of which more later).

The output of Yona Friedman is similarly shown off in a new survey entitled *Structures Servicing the Unpredictable* (published to accompany the Netherlands Architecture Institute exhibition of 1999). The result is that Friedman emerges as a bewitchingly interesting designer well beyond his

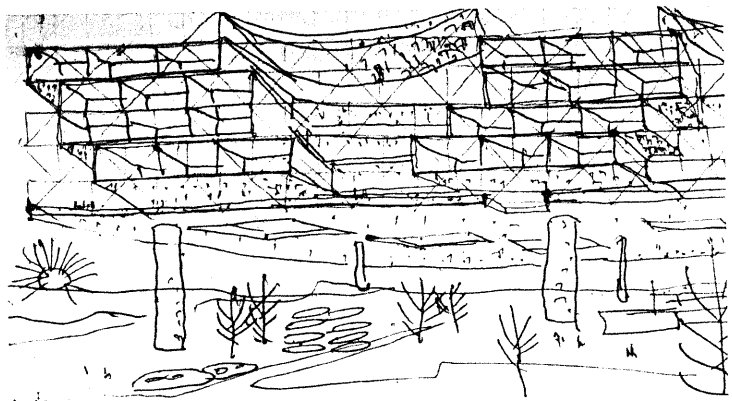
advocacy, in the 1950s and 1960s, of a 'spatial urbanism' – an extension of the city suspended in frames in the air. This publication, like those on Constant, recovers an important body of work and fine tunes its reputation. The catalogue does this by bringing to light Friedman's built and nearly-built projects – the participant-planned, indeterminate structures for the Centre Administratif de la compagnie CDC Dubonnet Byrrh, Ivry (1974) and the Lycée David d'Angers, Angers (1978).

Somewhat less objective, however, is the treatment of Friedman's 'Paris Spatial' collages. These were enormously impressive in the 1950s and 1960s, but they also caused anxiety – was not the casting of enormous shadows upon the buildings beneath a terrible imposition in the name of freedom? The editors of *Servicing the Unpredictable* accompany the illustrations with a reassuring note: 'Friedman made these images to illustrate the scale of La Ville Spatiale compared to that of the existing city. He obviously never proposed building such structures above sites like this (the Champs-Élysées, the Seine and market-places). Yet in the absence of corroborative evidence the reader cannot be certain of Friedman's original intentions.'

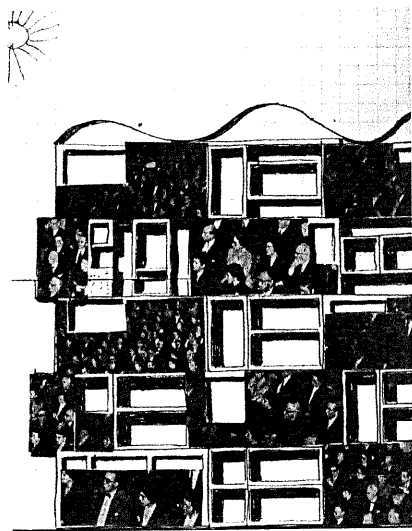
The catalogue gives us a sense of Friedman as one of the profession's great lateral thinkers – 'I am not interested in getting big jobs, in making a business out of it. I am interested in the problem areas I have discovered within architecture.' In this there is something to remind us of Cedric Price and indeed, throughout this book other equally recommendatory comparisons come to mind. Like Buckminster Fuller, Friedman has an unfettered, scientific and optimistic turn of mind (witness his 1963 vision of 'Seven Bridge Towns to Link Four Continents'). There is also the Christopher Alexanderesque interest in mathematics and sociology of Friedman's

urban studies. And then there is an Eamesian quality to the work – the prettiness of the cartwheeling grass sunshades on bamboo ribs at Friedman's Museum of Simple Technology (1982) in Madras, India. Like the Eameses, Friedman and his wife, Denise Charvein, earned a living as filmmakers, animating Friedman's wonderful pictographic drawing style.

Alertness to such homologies between designers helps to map out the avant-garde. Mark Wigley's essay in particular provides a snapshot of an interconnected post-war avant-garde culture following the disintegration of the CIAM. Constant's Utopianism can then be better seen in relationship to actual practice (particularly in Holland) and crossovers – extending from the continental Spatiodynamic artists that surrounded Nicholas Schöffer to the British Constructionists – can become apparent. Constant joined Friedman's GEAM (Groupe d'Études d'Architecture Mobile) and it is entertaining, when reviewing these books alongside one another, to read recollections of the encounter. Wigley reproduces a letter sent by Friedman to Constant in 1961: 'I believe that your mistake is to try to force people into a "collective creativity"; where I believe mobility permits them this creativity, in whichever way they like.' In a recent interview for the new catalogue, Friedman shows an instant recollection of the circumstances: 'Constant and I were friends. But... I don't think that people should play. I think people should be able to play if that is what they want. And a work of art? Yes, the city can become a work of art. If people want it, why not! I am trying to impose only the minimum.' Friedman was essentially a rationalist with soul – 1975 saw the outright festivity of his street-art projects – while Constant was a cultural revolutionary. In other words, Friedman's ideology was Utopian in spirit but none the less very



Yona Friedman, *La Ville Spatiale* (1958/1962) – any imaginable configuration of future occupants can find its spatial expression in this multilevel grid ten metres above the ground. From *Structures Servicing the Unpredictable*.



Yona Friedman, *Stacked Concrete Boxes* (1958) – an idea for housing from *Structures Servicing the Unpredictable*.

different from the leftism of Constant. Friedman's promotion of intermediate technology rather than high-tech plenty was self-help rather than revolution. And this was not limited to the 'developing world' – in 1986 he wished to build a permanent exhibition of self-help ideas as an Extension to the Bronx Museum in New York. One can well imagine the scorn that Guy Debord would have poured over such a proposal.

The books on Constant provide a

new clarification of the internal history of the Situationist International (SI).¹ Classically the history of the early SI has culminated in the expulsion and marginalization of artists (and Constant has been seen as a casualty of that process). Far from it, according to essays by Lambert and Wigley in which both state that Debord recognized Constant's architectural project as a cornerstone of early situationism, choosing the name New Babylon (in preference to Constant's 'Dériville') and commissioning the photography of the work. More surprisingly, it transpires that one reason for the antagonism between Constant and his Paris-based Situationist colleagues was his frustration that the group's anti-art stance was inadequately enforced. Lambert quite properly positions New Babylon within the history of Marxism and Utopianism, as an exploration of the possible and impossible.

What still remains to be written is a scrutiny of Situationist-inspired urban action and critique in the later 1960s. Both of the books on New Babylon remind us about the relationship between Constant and the Dutch Provos. Mark Wigley writes that 'many of the Provos' strategic disruptions of the city became tactics in the 1968 rebellion in Paris', but what exactly these tactics were and how they were applied remains unclear. The gaps will be filled in, one hopes, by Dutch and French historians.²

Mark Wigley's book is a significant addition to the literature. In content, it is the first publication to draw largely upon Constant's archive – now in the Rijksbureau in The Hague. Yet the book is consequential too for what it represents. It was published as the catalogue of the 1998–9 New Babylon exhibition at the Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, and the fame of the author-curator marks a further, perhaps the decisive, step in the canonization of Constant

and New Babylon as part of late twentieth-century art/architectural history. The New Babylonian hacienda was not built. Its direct impact upon conventional architectural practice is not easy to pinpoint. Constant was not even an architect (except by default as an 'ex-artist'). But these anomalies are being ironed out by casting Constant as an honorary architect – a 'hyper-architect' – and angling appreciation of the work towards contemporary practitioners as well as historians and enthusiasts. Whilst this is not immediately apparent in the exhibition essay, which is in a scholarly mode 'very well behaved', as Chris Dercon has put it – it is apparent in the activity around it.

During November and December of 1999, a selection of works from the Rotterdam exhibition was taken to the Drawing Centre in New York, where, for the first time, it was shown on the 'king-making' American East Coast (providing the occasion for Constant's first visit to the USA). In the catalogue that accompanied this show (Drawing Papers 3, *Another City for Another Life: Constant's New Babylon*, New York: Drawing Centre, 1999), Mark Wigley's discussion gravitated towards matters of practice rather than history. The announcement of a symposium and book, *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures from New Babylon to Beyond* (edited by Mark Wigley and Catherine de Zegher) suggested a similar trajectory.

A justification for Constant's inauguration as a 'hyper-architect' is that his work can be used to clarify issues of architectural practice generally. At one level, Constant's deployment of architecture as a tool of social renovation can be read as the fantastical version of a familiar architectural ambition, but this is an aspect that Mark Wigley (in conversation) wishes to disavow. (The Utopian ambition is one with which Wigley personally has no truck – dele-

gates at the New Ba
at the Technical Uni
January 2000 were le
doubt about this.) S
visionary power of th
that should draw
Babylon, what is it
the sheer quality and
work, as art/arch
points out that vis
Babylon exhibitions
dates on drawings
were seemingly cro
prematurely). In
Babylon's disjuncti
explosive, jagged for
the Deconstructivist
ecture a historical
how it is viewed – s
geometrically, in pl
two or three di
Babylon still looks
feels that we have
such architecture (i
any justice in the w
the interest of New

hyper-models ar
that seem so c
compared to the
for assembling arch
The Drawing Ce
preoccupied by th
Babylon as an
architectural repres
ings were often c
models, whose sca
plexity was unprec

So, Constant's w
current architecture
for its stylistic for
vestigation of re
creative processes.
the renaissance of
architecture of vi
spatial complexity
which process and
made manifest? C
architecture in whi
of the drawing –
hesitations, its unc
relationships, its

as part of late
art/architectural
bylonian hacienda
rect impact upon
ctural practice is
Constant was not
cept by default as
ese anomalies are
casting Constant
hitect – a 'hyper-
gling appreciation
ds contemporary
as historians, and
this is not im-
in the exhibition
scholarly mode
as Chris Derom
rent in the activity

r and December of
of works from the
on was taken to the
New York, where,
was shown on the
rican East Coast
sion for Constant's
V). In the catalogue
his show (*Drawing
ity for Another Life:
ylon*, New York,
99), Mark Wigley's
d towards matters
than history. The
a symposium and
*Drawing: Retracing
es from New Babylon*
Mark Wigley and
her) suggested, a

or Constant's in-
er-architect is that
l to clarify issues of
e generally. At the
ployment of archi-
social renovation,
intentional version of
ural ambition, but
at Mark Wigley (in
s to disavow. (There
is one with which
as no truck – de're-

gates at the New Babylon conference
at the Technical University of Delft in
January 2000 were left in absolutely no
doubt about this.) So if it is not the
visionary power of the hyper-architect
that should draw us in to New
Babylon, what is it? Presumably it is
the sheer quality and innovation of the
work, as art/architecture (Wigley
points out that visitors to the New
Babylon exhibitions double check the
dates on drawings and models that
were seemingly created thirty years
prematurely). In retrospect, New
Babylon's disjunctive geometries, its
explosive, jagged forms, appear to give
the Deconstructivist manner in archi-
tecture a historical depth. No matter
how it is viewed – spatially, materially,
geometrically, in plan, in elevation, in
two or three dimensions – New
Babylon still looks great. Indeed, one
feels that we have not seen the last of
such architecture (if, at least, there is
any justice in the world). There is also
the interest of New Babylon as practice.

hyper-models and hyper-drawings
that seem so extravagant when
compared to the normal procedures
for assembling architectural schemes.
The *Drawing Centre* catalogue is
preoccupied by the value of New
Babylon as an exploration of
architectural representation. The draw-
ings were often executed after the
models, whose scale and visual com-
plexity was unprecedented.

So, Constant's work should interest
current architectural practitioners both
for its stylistic force and for its in-
vestigation of representational and
creative processes. Can we not imagine
the renaissance of a New Babylonian
architecture of vivid disjunction and
spatial complexity, an architecture in
which process and representation are
made manifest? Can we imagine an
architecture in which the initial power
of the drawing – its ambiguities, its
hesitations, its uncertain figure-ground
relationships, its provisionality – is

transcribed into habitable space?

Perhaps I am guessing – Mark
Wigley for one would welcome this.
Whether this is the architecture we
shall see in the future may, however,
depend on the students who are
gravitating so markedly towards the
work of the post-war avant-garde. The
Delft conference, to take one example,
was a remarkable student initiative.
Were those students looking for formal
inspiration? Or were they drawn by
the social activism and transgressivity
in which New Babylon was originally
grounded?

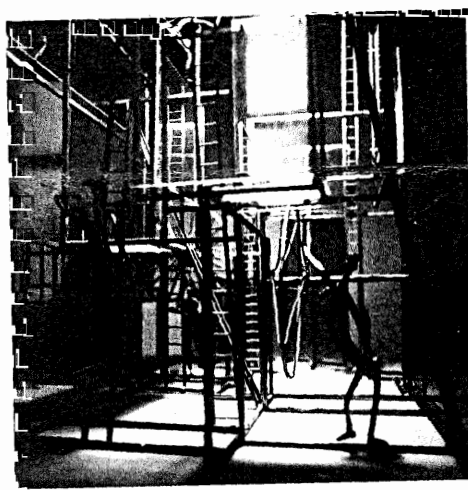
At a time when new sorts of social
space are being glimpsed through web
technology and popular, open-ended
direct action (the festive rioters of the
City of London in June and of Seattle
in November 1999), it would not be so
surprising if the latter aspect of New
Babylon had the greater resonance.
The avant-gardes of the 1960s were
inspired principally by notions of
viscerality, liberation, technology and
drugs – these remain the motors of
new culture today. Constant explained
to his Delft audience that he dis-
continued work on New Babylon in the
early 1970s not through despair, but
simply because he had nothing per-
sonally to add for the time being. He
believed that other New Babylonians
would carry on with the work.

Notes

1. Those seeking an in-depth examination
of Situationist thinking will also want to
avail themselves of the elegantly written
and translated *Guy Debord*, by Anselm
Jappe (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith;
Berkeley, 1999).
2. A promising start has been made with
the appearance of *The Inflatable Moment:
pneumatics and protest in US* (New York,
1999), edited by Marc Dessauce and
including an essay by Jean-Louis
Vieljeux.



New Babylon, vue d'un secteur, 1960. An illustration from *New Babylon: Constant, art et utopie*.



New Babylon, la labyrinthe aux échelles, 1967. From *New Babylon: Constant, art et utopie*.