

DEBUNKING RICHARD FLORIDA'S 'CREATIVE CITY': CONSTANT NIEUWENHUY'S NEW BABYLON

An architectural vision that never went beyond the prototype stage, Constant Nieuwenhuys's New Babylon (figure 1 and 2) was designed to establish a modern, permanent and most importantly, all-encompassing creative way of living for its inhabitants. A Dutch avant-garde painter, 'paper-architect' – in that his designs were never concretised into a built form - and founding member of the Situationists International (figure 3), Constant developed his magnum opus over twenty years during the 1950s, 60s and 70s (Wigley 1998). With its emphasis on the importance of creativity, although for different means, the New Babylon can be seen as the precursor to the more contemporary 'Creative City' model propounded by so-called 'idea gurus' such as Richard Florida. However, whereas the modern Creative City now features prominently in cultural regeneration policies, creating a generic and innocuous version of 'creativity', Constant's version, although never realisable, offers a refreshing critique in comparison.

Constant's New Babylon debunks key notions of Florida's Creative City rhetoric. Firstly, whereas Florida intimately links creativity with economic growth, Constant establishes that absolute creativity is only possible if society is separated from the demands of the economy. Separation from economic production means a society free from work, and therefore where 'the minority ceases to exercise control over the majority ... in other words the Marxist kingdom of freedom is realisable' (Constant 1974 cited in Wigley 1998). This freedom allows for the 'optimum development of the creative faculties of every human being ...[as] there cannot be true freedom without creativity' (ibid.). Removing the whole of society from the shackles of labour, and debasing any class distinctions, highlights Constant's inclusive approach. The removal of work creates a classless society, a necessary requirement for creative expression. There is no elite 'creative class': Florida's convenient label for everyone but the working class where creativity is valued through an individual's economic productive importance.

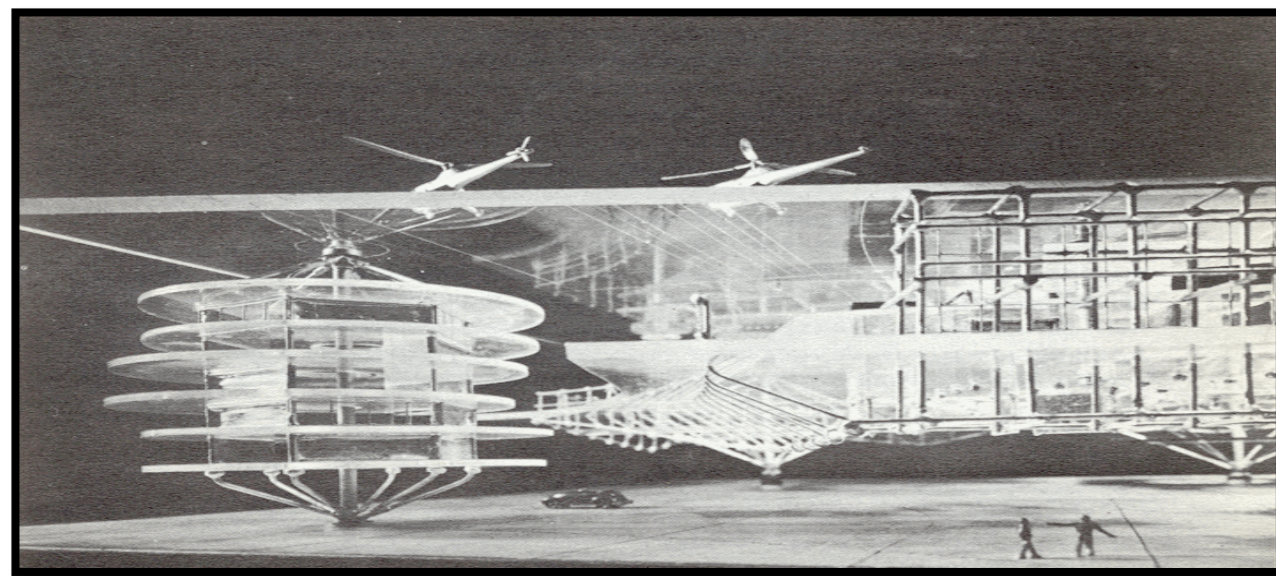


Figure 1: A model version of the New Babylon



Figure 2: Painting of the New Babylon (Constant 1971)



Figure 3: Constant on the left with the Situationists International



Figure 4: New Babylonians at play (Constant 1962)



Figure 5: Labyrinthine interior of New Babylon

Secondly, in a similar vein to Florida, Constant highlights how technological innovation plays an important role in fostering creativity. However, whereas for Florida high-tech industries act as magnets for attracting the creative class (Florida 2003), in the New Babylon, mechanisation and automation provide the means for separating the economic from the creative sphere. Technology replaces the role of humans producing the necessary economic outputs required for existence. This leads to the transformation of the Homo Fabien, the working man or woman, to the Homo Luden, the creative man or woman. The Homo Luden leads a nomadic life of play, adventure and exploration (figure 4) in the New Babylon's labyrinthine structure (figure 5) (Constant 1974 cited in Wigley 1998). Constant believed that children, yet to be tarnished by utilitarian aspects of the economy unlike adults, led the most authentic creative existence and hankered for a return to this: the New Babylon was to become a playground for the Homo Luden. Everyone is creative, displacing the elitism of the traditional arts, meaning that 'life will reside in poetry' (Constant 1956 cited in Wigley 1998).

A life of play, free from economic oppression, may be unrealistic within today's global neoliberal agenda, but Constant's vision did highlight an inclusive model, where all creative expression is valued. Creativity becomes democratised. Policy-makers should bear this mind when they next liberally implement Florida's elitist and exclusionary 'Creative City' model.

References: Wigley, M. (1998) *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire*, Rotterdam: Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art
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 Constant (1962) *Labyrismen* series of 11 lithographs.
 Constant (1971) *Gezicht op New Babylonische sectoren* Watercolour and pencil on photo-montage, Collection of the Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag.