

# Between the Experience and the Image of the City: ‘New Babylon’ and ‘Learning from Las Vegas’ as Paradigmatic Cases



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**Abstract** This chapter analyzes the existing tension between the experience of the city and the image of it, arguing that the designer is a creative agent that acts as a mediator between both poles. Although the growing primacy of the visual has marked the notion of cities throughout the twentieth century, this investigation presents two paradigmatic cases to illustrate the opposite: The idea that the conception of the city can—and probably should—start from experience, not so much from its image. These cases are the vision of Las Vegas that, as a manifesto, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown, and Steven Izenour provide in 1972; and New Babylon that Constant Nieuwenhuys devised between the 1950s and 1960s. In the light of these cases, the text concludes by prompting—or rather by asking—what is the role of the contemporary designer in the city now that we are fully immersed in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords** Experience · Image · City · Las Vegas · New Babylon · Design · Venturi · Scott-Brown · Izenour · Constant Nieuwenhuys

The experience of the city and the image citizens perceive of it are not the same thing. Quite the contrary, there is a powerful tension between experience and image when we face the question of the city, its life, and its design. The present text, therefore, intends to analyze that tension, arguing that the designer is a creative agent that acts as a mediator between both poles. This duality between image and experience, or between the visual and the haptic, or ultimately between the object and the subject, emerges in the theoretical debates on art and aesthetics in the XIXth century. The text, therefore, begins its narrative thread by briefly illustrating those ideas, to then

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reflect their translation towards other creative fields, that takes place in the spring of the XXth century. Among them is, logically, the design of the city.

Thus, although the growing primacy of the visual, that has dominated architecture and design in the twentieth century, directly marks the conception of cities, this chapter presents two paradigmatic cases to illustrate quite the opposite. The idea that the conception of the city can—and probably should—start from experience, not so much from its image. These cases are the vision of Las Vegas that, as a manifesto, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour provide in 1972; and the New Babylon that Constant devised between the 1950s and 1960s. In the light of these cases, the text concludes by prompting—or rather by asking—what is the role of the contemporary designer in the city, now well into the twenty-first century.

## 1 Object Versus Subject, Optical Versus Tactile: XIX Century Theories of Perception<sup>1</sup>

The lens through which a space is perceived determines how it engages. This phenomenological understanding holds that our awareness of the objective and subjective stimuli in our environment determines how we interpret our experiences. The idea of tactility has typically been linked to the immediacy of daily experience, while opticality is often associated with a more distant form of perception. The opposing viewpoint between “the near” and “the far” apprehension of the environment is nothing new. This conflict played a major role in aesthetic discourse in the late XIXth century (Vischer, “Optical sense,” 91). Particularly at the turn of the XIXth century, German aesthetic discourse offers us a variety of experiential categories, such as the close view versus the distant view, the tactile versus the optical, and distraction versus attention. Various thinkers, including Hildebrand, Wölfflin, Riegl, and Benjamin, played a role in creating, defining, redefining, reversing, and even challenging the range of perceptual categories. These theorists studied the modes of artistic perception.

Wölfflin believed that the interpretation of a building’s form and character was not solely a function of the eye, but rather a result of a principle of bodily empathy: “So here, too, we must say: Physical forms possess a character only because we ourselves possess a body. If we were purely visual beings, we would always be denied an aesthetic judgment of the physical world” (Wölfflin, “Prolegomena”, 151). In essence, he defined perception as a type of empathetic physical interaction with our environment. His argument was that our bodies provide us with insights into

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<sup>1</sup> Pieces of this section and the one about Constant’s New Babylon were part of a major investigation undertaken in the University of Columbia at the Masters in Critical, Curatorial and Conceptual Practices in Architecture and partially published in Antón, J., Lauter, M., & Reina, T. (2021). “Interference Patterns. Optical vs Tactile Experiments in Spatial Immersion, from Psychogeography to Holograms” in *Espacio Tiempo y Forma. Serie VII, Historia Del Arte*, (9), 211–236. <https://doi.org/10.5944/etfvii.9.2021.30488>.

the nature of gravity, strength, and contraction, and that this experiential knowledge allows us to identify other forms.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Hildebrand focused on the optical realm when discussing perceptual categories. He introduced the concepts of the "near view" and the "distant view", which would later be expanded upon by Riegl and Benjamin. According to Hildebrand, there exists a correlation between the tridimensional structure of an object and how it appears as a visual perception (Hildebrand, *The Problem of Form*, 16). This implies that a single object can generate multiple visual appearances depending on the viewing angle or the circumstances under which it is observed. The perception of an object's spatial attributes is crucial for our orientation in the outer world. Hildebrand believed that our comprehension of the reality of things is primarily dependent on our general spatial concepts and the way we perceive spatial structure.

Hildebrand's viewpoint regarding the concept of a three-dimensional object was that it is partially formed through stereoscopic vision, which creates the impression that certain parts are closer than others: "an idea, namely, that certain parts are nearer than others" (Riegl, *Late Roman Art*, 22). Nonetheless, when an object is observed at close proximity, its perception is governed by two-dimensional factors such as color variations, light and shadow, and size. Consequently, as one approaches an object, there is a threshold where it becomes challenging to appreciate the object's entirety without continually scanning its surface. Hildebrand recognizes that there is no inherent link between the two-dimensional images we perceive and the three-dimensional objects that we imagine or reconstruct mentally. He, therefore, places more emphasis on the "distant view" as opposed to the "near view." To bridge this gap between perception and mental construction, Hildebrand suggests that artists operate between these two points, not only creating artistic objects but also teaching us how to observe the world itself. This dichotomy between the near and the distant view, the subject and the object, or the experience and the image is also present in Riegl and Benjamin's theories of tactility. Both associate tactile perception with the near view and visual perception with the distant view. This dichotomy can also be compared to the ones used in this chapter to define the perception of the city: the experience versus the image of it (Fig. 1).

Alois Riegl utilized and expanded upon Hildebrand's ideas of perception by incorporating the concepts of tactility and opticality (Riegl, 22). In 1901, he introduced the contrast between these two terms to describe a departure from traditional canons of form, which led to the emergence of the modern spatial concept. Riegl's theory of perception links "subjectivity" with opticality, and "objectivity" with tangibility (Riegl, 22). The perception description is reversed from Hildebrand's:

"The particular sense organ, which we use the most for the perception of external objects, is the eye. Yet this organ shows us the objects only as colored planes and by no means as impenetrable material individuals; this optical perception especially makes the objects of the external world appear to us in a chaotic mixture. [...] Definite knowledge about the enclosed individual unity of single objects we obtain only with our sense of touch. It alone procures us knowledge about the impenetrability of the borders, which enclose the material individual. These borders are the tactile surfaces of the objects". (Riegl, *Late Roman Art*, 22).

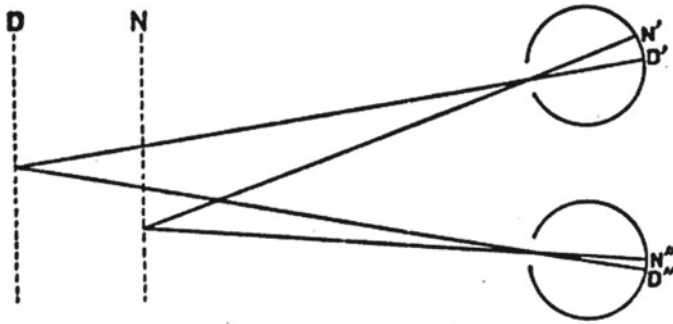


FIG. 3. STEREOSCOPIC VISION.

HOW LIGHT COMING FROM A DISTANT AND A NEAR POINT IS PROJECTED UPON THE RETINA. D' AND N' ARE FARTHER APART THAN D'' AND N''. THE FOLLOWING FIGURE SHOWS HOW THIS RELATIVE DISPLACEMENT APPEARS TO OUR CONSCIOUSNESS AS A VISUAL IMPRESSION.

Fig. 1 Near and Distant view (Hildebrand, 22)

Walter Benjamin presents a distinctive perspective on the connection between architecture and tactility in one of his writings (Benjamin, *Technological Reproducibility*, 238). The advancements in technology alter how perception works, and as a result, they reorganize both the production and the reception of art. Riegl believed that Hildebrand's notions of "the near and distant" views altered the significance of these categories. In contrast, Benjamin acknowledged the division but reversed its implications. Benjamin put forward a compelling alternative to Riegl's idea of tactility as materiality. He argued that new artforms, such as Dadaism, possessed a tactile quality that hit the viewer like a bullet, resulting in a demand for film. This artform also had a predominantly tactile component based on changes of location and focus that periodically overwhelmed the viewer (Benjamin, 238). Benjamin's concept of tactility is dynamic and relates to movement and distraction. He views the near view positively, unlike Hildebrand who denigrated it. Benjamin sees tactility as connected to use and opticality as connected to perception, positioning the two in opposition to each other.

The way buildings are received can be seen from two perspectives: use and perception, or in other words, tactility and opticality. This type of reception cannot be compared to the focused attention of a traveler standing in front of a well-known building. Tactile reception differs from contemplation in optical reception. It is not achieved through concentrated attention, but rather through habit. This habit significantly impacts the optical reception of architecture, which typically occurs through casual noticing rather than careful observation. (Benjamin, 268).

In his book, *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin extends his thoughts on perception and tactility to the city, arguing that the city is not actually homogeneous, as even its name sounds different in different districts. He suggests that the experience of boundaries is most apparent in cities, more so than anywhere else except for perhaps in dreams (Benjamin, *Arcades*, 88).

By adopting this perspective, Benjamin challenges Hildebrand's notion of the 'near view', and redefines Riegl's steady concept of tactility as materiality, turning it into a more fluid concept of tactility as movement. He is not referring to a close and deliberate perception of materials, but rather an unconscious and intimate perception of the environment that can be seen as a dynamic and distracting form of perception.

After exploring these various critical perspectives on perception and the role of the artist in mediating it, we can extend our understanding of this mediator to encompass a broader sense. What the artist was for these aesthetic theorists, could be perfectly applied to the designer at the beginning of the XXth century. The designer, as was the artist, is also a mediator between those two realities, the tactile and the optical, operating in various new fields like industry, architecture, the city, advertisement, etc. Perhaps this is precisely one of the greatest contributions of the Bauhaus: the gathering of all these creative disciplines as the modern concept of this kind of mediator.

If that mediator is now, in a way, the designer, when we talk about the city, the tactile and the optical, could be translated into its perception as experience or as image. In effect, the designer creates the object (the building, the city, the machine, etc.) that brings with it a new way of living-modern life, that has a specific image and that produces certain experiences. It is in this duality, according to which the subject perceives the object from the tension between its image and its experience, that the modern designer consciously operates.

## 2 Image Versus Experience: The City in the XXth Century

Undoubtedly, the duality between image and experience, and the idea that the designer operates as a mediator between the two, is perfectly applicable to the design of the city throughout the twentieth century. Although the object-subject or image-experience tension was established in the fields of art and thought already in the XIXth century, it would soon infiltrate other disciplines where creativity plays a fundamental role. In this sense, as has been pointed out above, the experiences of the Bauhaus were capital for discovering that, in fields such as industry, architecture, fabric design, theater or the city, a new professional role was necessary. In accordance with the modern Bauhaus approach: the designer is a creative professional that operates between the subject and the object. Consequently, between the object and its image and the experience that the object produces in the subject. Modern Design is precisely born as a discipline that bridges those two poles.

Thus, on occasions, the designer—whether it was the architect, the product designer, the urban planner, etc.—would concentrate on configuring the experience more than the visual issues when facing a design; and on other occasions—the majority of them—the accent would fall on the visual field rather than on the real user experience. In fact, the growing primacy that has been given to the field of image in almost all disciplines during the XXth century is not alien to the world of design. One of the biggest problems of the creative disciplines, not in vain, has been

the forgetting of the experiential facet and the linked to the subject. Understanding in those cases—wrongly it seems—that success lies in the image of the designed object, be it an industrial product, a building, a work of art or an urban operation.

“The ocular bias has never been more apparent in art of architecture than in the past 30 years, as a type of architecture, aimed at a striking and memorable visual image, has predominated. Instead of an existentially grounded plastic and spatial experience, architecture has adopted the psychological strategy of advertising and instant persuasion; buildings have turned into image products detached from existential depth and sincerity (...). As a consequence of the current deluge of images, architecture of our time often appears as mere retinal art of the eye” ([1], 20)

The city, then, is part of this general drift of the creative world. Since Modernity also imbued the design of cities—it is worth remembering experiences such as Hilberseimer’s vertical cities, Le Corbusier’s ville radieuse, JJP Oud’s urban settlements, Bruno Taut’s proposals, and many others—the architect, from his drawing board, would play again this conscious role of mediator between the experience and the image of the city. Moreover, through the image of the city, the architect would configure the experience of the inhabitant. Through the design of its shapes, dimensions, aesthetics, organization, orientations, materials, lighting, uses, etc., the modern urban designer would be able to modulate and calibrate the experiences of future citizens. The experience and the image of the city are not then, separate, and stagnant realities; but rather two connected poles of the creative work.

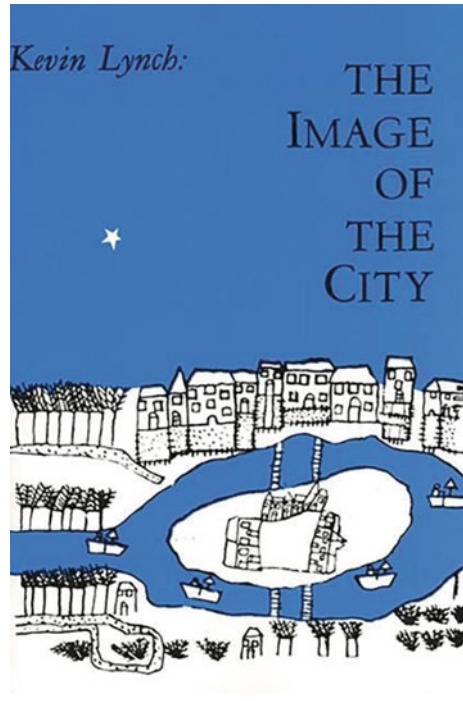
Kevin Lynch, in his influential text of 1960, “The image of the city” would address, precisely, this tension between the image and the experience of the city. Through the idea of “legibility”, Lynch explains the way in which the inhabitant builds his subjective perception of the city and ultimately his experience of it. Despite the title of the text, Lynch’s vision focuses on the citizen and advocates a lived city whose design should make it easier for the inhabitant—or the visitor—to understand its basic structure and its references. A “readable” and “understandable” city is a more lived-in and safer city [2].

Through the design of the image, the experience of the city is configured; but also by working on the experience, the designer operates on the image that is being designed. Lynch’s text was, perhaps, one of the first steps to understand this bidirectionality of creative work in urban planning and design. Thus, his theories and writings were essential to understand that the design of cities could start from the perception and experience of the future inhabitants and not only from the ideal vision of the designer or architect (Fig. 2).

In any case, the danger posed by the pre-eminence of the image over other parameters of design clearly existed before Lynch, and it exists after. In fact, it is a growing danger despite the contributions of Lynch and many other great theorists who have worked in similar directions; like Jane Jacobs, Jan Gehl, and many others. Unfortunately, the unstoppable development of technology seems to reinforce the exclusively visual sphere of objects and cities.

Thus, the problem lies at the point where the image acquires such primacy in the design process that it ceases to be understood as a means to configure the experience of the inhabitant, and begins to be conceived as the essential goal. In other words, it

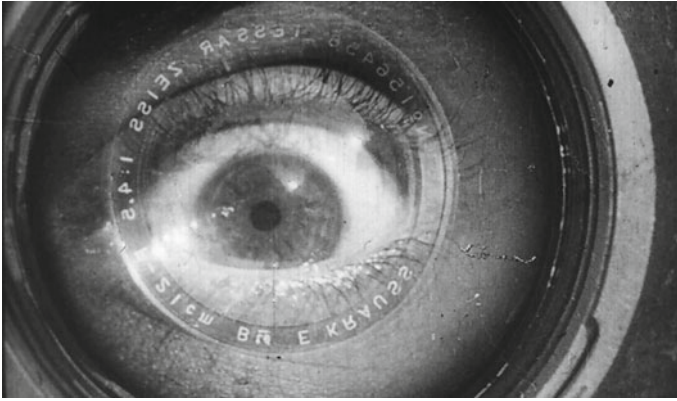
**Fig. 2** Cover of "The image of the City" by Kevin Lynch. First edition



is actually understood as an almost personal imposition of the designer, who forgets that the city is always designed to be lived in. Hence, the importance of the experience through the senses that are not sight is annulled or relegated; relations or sensations are forgotten as purposes of design. Once again Pallasmaa perfectly illustrates, in a claiming tone, to what extent the city is lived and experienced:

“I confront the city with my body; my legs measure the length of the arcade and the width of the square; my gaze unconsciously projects my body onto the facade of the cathedral, where it roams over the mouldings and contours, sensing the size of recesses and projections; my body weight meets the mass of the cathedral door, and my hand grasps the door pull as I enter the dark void behind. I experience myself in the city, and the city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me”. ([1], 40)

It is not the object of this article to break down the different theories on urban design that have prevailed throughout the last century; this would be an almost incomprehensible task. Nor is it the intention of the article to account for the most important city experiences or designs [3], much less to account for which fell into the dark limits of visual primacy and which, instead, prioritized the realm of experience in their design process. The text aims to account for two unique cases that took place in the 1960s: the first is the Las Vegas study that Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour carried out; and the second deals with the vision of Paris



**Fig. 3** Dziga Vertov, 1929. *Source* Final shot of the film “Man with a Movie Camera”

provided by the so-called Situationists. Valuing these two visions perhaps reinforces the aforementioned idea that the city, above all, is lived and experienced (Fig. 3).

### **3 Learning from Las Vegas; Communication and Symbolism in the City**

In 1972 Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour and Denise Scott Brown published a book that was highly influential in the world of architecture: *Learning from Las Vegas*. The book, which is a kind of manifesto, would change the way of understanding the role of buildings in the urban landscape and would even open new ways of understanding many phenomena related to the conception of cities: the influence of commercial fervor on the cities, the city lived at night, the city lived from the car, the realm of the artificial and fictitious, etc.

The text, in fact, is the result of a study that the aforementioned architects carried out in the fall of 1968 with their students at the Yale School of Art and Architecture [4]. In addition to the usual research work in classrooms and in the university library, that academic work was based on a stay of 4 days in Los Angeles and 10 days in Las Vegas. In other words, the analysis they carried out was largely founded on an experience of the city itself. The book, then, has a first part where the results of the research are presented, using numerous and interesting graphics, drawings, and photographs made by the students. And it also has a second, more relevant section, where the aforementioned manifesto is produced. A proposal that is based, logically, on the urban reality of the then already fervent Las Vegas (Fig. 4).

The entire book distills a certain taste, sometimes exaggerated, for the Pop aesthetics of the moment: elements such as posters, advertisements, signs, lighting and other devices that come from popular culture are highlighted and emphasized; the purely commercial and even deliberately capitalist side of the city is highlighted.





**Fig. 4** Denise Scott Brown in Las Vegas. 1966. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates. *Source* University of Pennsylvania Architectural Archives Camera”

And the authors consciously try to build a particular aesthetic out of all this: in their own words, they defend “an architecture of the ugly and the ordinary” [5]. But, behind this reading of the book and the work, perhaps superficial, there is a powerful message—the manifesto—that has two very clear objectives: the first objective might be to subvert the already old idea of “form follows function” inherited from modern architecture and modern design, and emphasize the symbolic role of architecture in the city. The second objective, more pertinent to this article, is none other than, once again, to underline the role of the designer as a mediator between the experience and the image of the city. For Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, such mediation takes place essentially through the symbolism of architectural form. Not surprisingly, the subtitle of the book is “the forgotten symbolism of architectural form”.

Las Vegas is then a city based on the domain of the car. It is a city designed to be lived, at least initially, from the vehicle. Thus, the entire city emerges and is organized around a large central road—not so much a street—called the Strip. The sides of the Strip are gradually being colonized by casinos and hotels whose appearance is configured by a gigantic advertising billboard, normally placed strategically above the body of the building and positioned obliquely towards the road. The mission of the posters is none other than to capture the attention of the visitor—Las Vegas is, above all, a city for visitors. Driving at the speed allowed by the vehicle, the latter has little time to scrutinize the architecture of hotels and casinos, and will probably stop at the one whose sign is more attractive and striking. Once the visitor stops, a second stage of the process will begin, which consists of experiencing an artificial world, which does not distinguish between day and night, and which occurs exclusively inside the casino-hotel. In short, this experience of the citizen, quickly summarized



**Fig. 5** The Las Vegas Strip. 1968. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates. *Source* University of Pennsylvania Architectural Archives

here and perfectly illustrated in the book, would directly condition the formation of the city from the 1960s.

“The sign for the Motel Monticello, a silhouette of an enormous Chippendale highboy, is visible on the highway before the motel itself. This architecture of styles and signs is antispacial; it is an architecture of communication over space; communication dominates spaces as an element in architecture and landscape”, the authors explain. ([5], 8)

From this research Venturi, Izenour and Scott Brown unfold their theoretical contribution. For this, they define a new type of building: The decorated Shed. It is basically a reinterpretation of the casinos and hotels that make up the city. The decorated shed is made up of a simple and prismatic body that contains the entire program and the necessary functions; and on that structure a gigantic poster is placed that contains, instead, the whole layer of meaning and symbolism of the building. It is the sign with its huge inscription that reveals the function of the building, not so much the shape of the building itself. An iconic sketch is born here that, today, is part of the history of recent architecture: “I am a Monument”. Venturi and his companions, ironically, draw a decorated shed whose giant sign says that it is a monument. That is, the building no longer needs to have the visible form of a monument because its sign can announce it (Figs. 5 and 6).

In reality, the authors propose disaggregating two aspects that Modern Architecture<sup>2</sup> had indissolubly united up to now, form and function. For the architects who

<sup>2</sup> Modern Architecture refers to the movement that took place during the 20 s and 30 s in architecture, and whose greatest achievement was the overcoming, or even elimination, of the traditional idea



**Fig. 6** Bid Donut Drive-In. Los Angeles. 1970. Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates. *Source* University of Pennsylvania Architectural Archives

defended Modernity, the form should arise and emanate from the function in such a way that it transmitted or reflected it. This question, in the opinion of Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, made sense in the 1920s and 1930s, when it arose, but by the 1960s it had lost its *raison d'être*. They explain that, given that architectural form has a very relevant symbolic dimension in the city, architects who staunchly defend “form follows function” end up deforming their buildings in an attempt to convey meaning. And as a result, their works are not correctly covering the communicative layer, nor are their functions properly housed. The extreme case, almost in a humorous tone, they explain, would be the “Duck”: a building that, to symbolize that roast duck is sold inside, takes on the literal form of a duck (Fig. 7).

“We shall emphasize image in asserting that architecture depends in its perception and creation on past experience and emotional association and that these symbolic and representational elements may often be contradictory to the form, structure and program with which they combine in the same building—explain Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour—Where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them, this we call the decorated shed”. ([5], 7)

Their proposal then is the opposite: by separating a pavilion from the facade-sign, which contains the signifying layer, said pavilion, already freed from its symbolic

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of ornament and decoration, in favor of architectural forms that were born from the function or the need. Among its champions are names like Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, Bruno Taut, J.J.P. Oud, Mies van der Rohe, etc., etc. Robert Venturi, in his ideas and writings, does not discredit the values of this movement and emphasizes its necessity and logic at the time it emerged. Instead, he is critical of the architects who, 30 years later, were still anchored in the same postulates and, above all, in the aesthetics that derived from that movement.

**Fig.7** “I am a Monument” sketch. Venturi, Scott Brown, and Associates. *Source* University of Pennsylvania Architectural Archives



load, can perfectly resolve its program and its functions. And in parallel, the sign is the perfect device to visually convey a message; Especially at a time when the car is the method of transportation par excellence in North America. The poster is, in short, the device that the architect now must transmit a visual and symbolic meaning to the citizen; and therefore, it is the tool to generate a city.

In the book, after all, there is a very clear call for the architect to reconnect with the citizen’s urban experience and forget about the architectural object as such. Thus, the large billboard, understood as the main façade of the building, is a communication interface between designer and citizen, between architecture and city. Communication, although clearly visual, arises as a mediation between the experience of the citizen (who circulates in this case in his vehicle) and the architectural object. At first glance, it might seem that Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour emphasize a conception of the city centered on the visual realm, through the book’s powerful images and their idea of an illuminated billboard as the building’s façade. But, in reality, a deeper reading reveals that its intention is instead to emphasize the experience of the citizen, who is ultimately the recipient of the visual messages that emanate from the building. The city is not designed from its image, but from visual communication, or—in Lynch’s words—from its legibility.

## 4 New Babylon

The Situationist International (SI), an avant-garde group influenced by Dadaism and Surrealism, explored urban environments through psychogeography and *dérivé* (drift). They subverted conventional urban approaches with the development of the idea of unitary urbanism, thus disabling centralized authority. Cartographic methods were often used to represent situations within the city. The concept of *Dérivé*, which translates as “drift,” referred to an experimental behavior associated with the urban

environment. It involved quickly moving through different surroundings and was linked to the psychological effects of the city's visible layout. The SI coined the concept of psychogeography, or "unitary urbanism," for mapping out the fading delineation of different atmospheres or environments. Psychogeography was defined by their founder, Guy Debord, as the examination of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment on individuals' emotions and behavior. They sought to create a new vision of the future city by changing people's perceptions within the already constructed urban landscape, getting to a tactile experience rather than an optical representation. Through these processes they created maps that were not intended to impose logic on the city but to offer a different mode of mobility and interaction that was closely tied to emotions.

One of the founding members of the SI, Constant Nieuwenhuys, left the group in 1960 due to conflicting ideals about the use of cartography, instead preferring an experience more nomadic and playful of the future city he was envisioning. His vision was concentrated and catalyzed in an all-encompassing city called New Babylon that sought to establish a harmonious relationship between the built environment and the human sensorium. Its design was immense and intended to have freedom at the core of it, with work located underground and play suspended in the air. However, Nieuwenhuys encountered a paradox—while striving to create a utopia of pure perception-, his models of that city eventually turned into "depictions" of the future. He was trapped in a pre-presentation of a non-existing reality. Despite their tactile nature, the outcome of this pre-presentation was a transmission of a view of the city to the mind, resulting in a pure intellect emphasis, rather than interpellant to the entire sensorium. The group he rejected, the SI, on the contrary, was more focused on corporeal perception of existing cities like Paris, and their practices were based on movement and a tactile approach. However, their project was unsuccessful in practice since it was implausible for every person in a city to partake in the time shift of the *dérivé* simultaneously. Conversely, Benjamin connected tactility with movement and distraction, and these concepts can be seen in the development of psychogeographic practices in art and experience architecture.

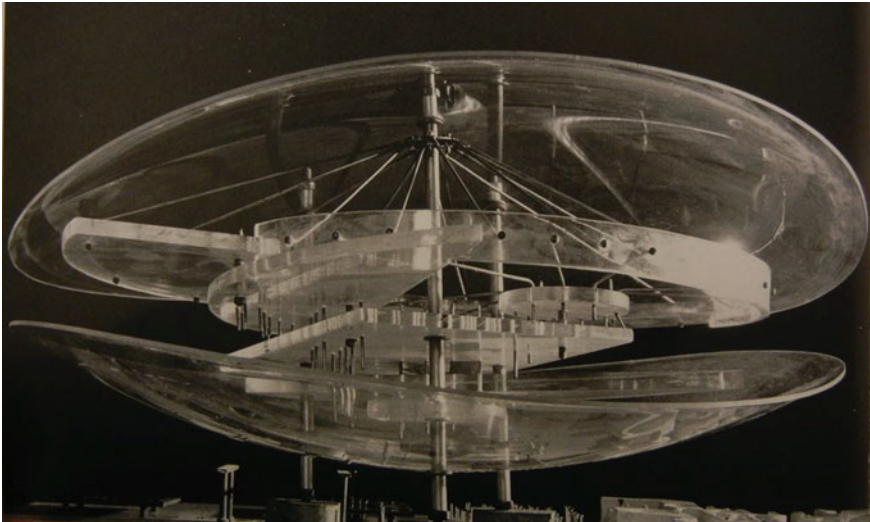
For Constant, the models on New Babylon were intended to establish a new, worldwide, understanding and function as a technique for encountering new urbanism. In 1956, he began working on this ambitious architectural vision of the future that consumed most of his life. For over two decades, he created an extensive collection of scale models, manifestos, pictures, photographs, drawings, essays, conferences, exhibits, and movies related to New Babylon. The project was a sort of provocation as well as a representation for what could be called "the creative city". Constant's idea was to conceive New Babylon as the consequence of the masses' creativity, that had yet to be totally harnessed. Behind its conception remains the idea that creative work would withdraw due to mechanization and automation, thus generating a transformation in thinking and morality, and conducting humans to the beginning of a new society.

Constant's efforts to design for what he considered the "creative man" was somehow based on the notion of *homo ludens*, asserted in 1938 by the writer Johan Huizinga. Huizinga explained the prominence of the element of play in society and

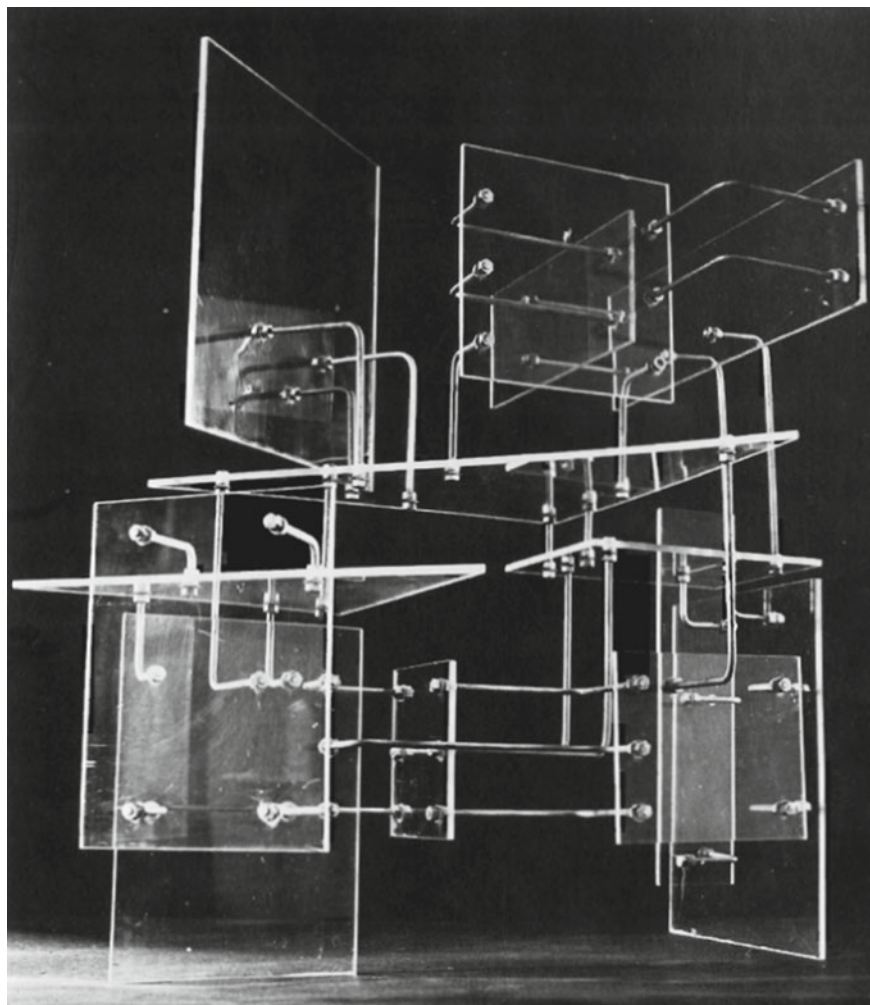
culture, and identified the theoretical space in which it should occur. The writer defends that psychology must address, observe, and describe play; and, at the same time, play is a sort of function that generates culture.

Also, Constant found a source of inspiration in the work of Yona Friedman, a Hungarian architect known for his megastructure conceptions. Friedman's *Ville Spatiale* can be described as a utopian design that reflects his theories in a very accurate way: it is a spatial metal grid of tetrahedral pieces superimposed over a city, which works as a matrix and allocates constructions, volumes, functions... Although Friedman's megastructures seem to be very similar to the ones proposed afterwards by Constant at a first glance, it can be said that Constant's ones are far more architectural in their conception. Friedman published a manifesto called "Mobile Architecture" in 1958, where he described a new mode of mobility, not of the constructions but rather for inhabitants who are given a new freedom; while Constant proposed a more intricate idea of freedom based on the evasion of labor and the fullness of creativity.

Furthermore, Constant's models were not only architectural representations of his utopian city, but also, they were three-dimensional drawings that challenged traditional models and perspectives. They were designed to be perceived as aerial drawings, but when observed from a different angle, they would convert into fully 3D representations. This amalgamation of perspectives was further emphasized by the manner the models were displayed, alternating between vertical and horizontal planes. He created his own cartography by blending "aerial photographs" of his maquettes to form new maps. According to Mark Wigley, Constant's models propose a new way of living that is being drawn in three dimensions through multiple layers of transparency. ([6], 28) (Figs. 8 and 9).

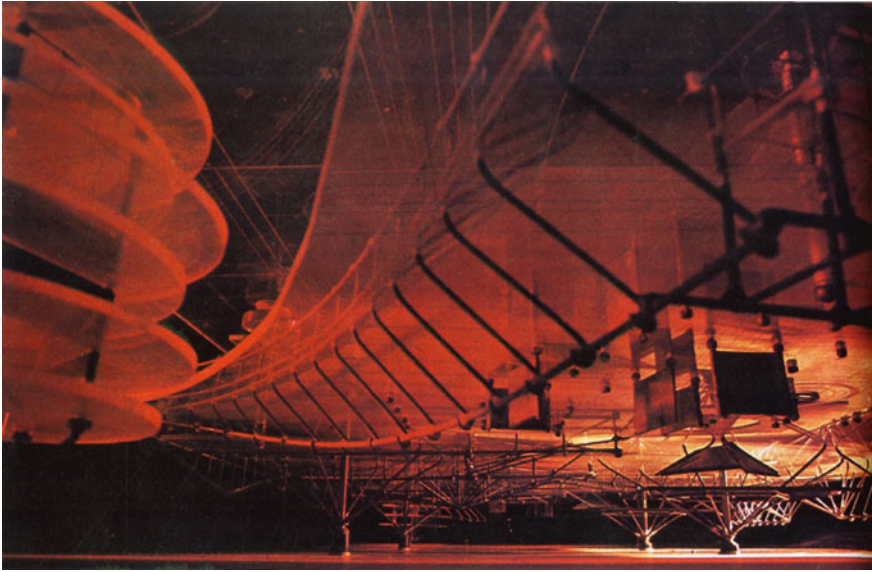


**Fig. 8** Spatiovore, 1960. Metal and Plexiglass, Grondplaat 65 × 65 cm, 90 × 65 cm. Model by Constant Nieuwenhuys



**Fig. 9** Constructie Met Doorraichtige Vlakken, 1954. Aluminum and Plexiglass, 76 × 76 × 50cm. Model by Constant Nieuwenhuys

These New Babylon models were conceived and constructed with different materials, metal wire, transparent plastics, timber, etc. Constant applied these models and designs on the whole Netherlands territory, since he considered them as a design for a new culture. One that was characterized by an extremely creative lifestyle and a nomadic attitude which he emphasized by means of gigantic labyrinths. The form of that utopian megastructure was generated by a horizontal skeleton built basically with steel and concrete. The skeleton, in fact, created a sort of network over the globe in which there were no limits, boundaries, no centrality or impositions of any kind. To reinforce here the concept of mobility, the artist gave extraordinary relevance and



**Fig. 10** Interior Red Sector, RuimteCircus, 1956. Ijzeendraad, Grondplaat 110 × 90 cm., 69 × 59 × 59cm. Model by Constant Nieuwenhuys

a certain omnipresence to programs such as airports, ports, intermodal stations, etc. The general grid was split by sectors, which were the smallest elements, the basic units of this Babylonian arrangement (Fig. 10).

The units in this utopia were devised to have hotels, autonomous rooms, health centers and schools, libraries, and research facilities that could be easily customized to meet the needs of the inhabitants. The movable and adjustable systems allowed for walls, floors, and supplies to be easily mounted or dismounted to create different zones of attraction. Inhabitants could adjust lighting, sound, and temperature at any time, promoting a sensuous and creative way of life. Constant envisioned the New Babylonians as the true builders of this utopia, reinforcing the principle of disorientation with labyrinthian structures and a nomadic way of life without borders. Early exhibitions primarily showcased models, but later photographs and films gained prominence. The films, shot over several years, offer a meandering perspective that blurs the constructions together into a single picture, reinforcing the movement inherent in the intended use of the space.

In his vision, New Babylonians had a variety of technical implements at their disposal to customize and renew their environment without delay. He made them aspire to create a world in which their freedom through play was realized, and it was their responsibility to create it through a continuous process of recreation. And then, New Babylon, was meant to be a product of their culture and served as a model of reflection and play for others. The use of evolving techno-space allowed for free actions that are not hindered by capital or labor. In the end, the legibility of the city was not based on its image but on experience and communication.



## 5 Closing Remarks

This research has sought to highlight the role of the designer as a creative intermediary between the object and the subject, the visual and the haptic, and the image and the experience. Nineteenth century theories allowed us to trace the origin of these dualities, starting from the world of art. And Modernity at the beginning of the XXth century, in a way, translates them for the first time into creative worlds beyond the role of the artist himself: the architect, the urban planner, the engineer who operates for industry, the designer of products and services, etc. However, throughout the century, the polarization between image and experience was exacerbated until the almost total dissociation between the two that we are experiencing today.

Although many designers have prioritized—and still prioritize—image over experience, there are cases that allow us to understand that the scale of values in the design process should be almost the opposite. As Pallasmaa and many other authors have claimed, it is convenient to prioritize experience over image, since the latter could be superficial, fleeting, deceptive, partial and, above all, emerges from the designer and not so much from the subject. The examples of Las Vegas and New Babylon allow us to recover visions of the city where the protagonism returns to the field of experience, play, freedom as exemplified in these two paradigmatic cases.

However, the twenty-first century still demands a step further. It seems that it is not enough for the designer to focus on modulating the citizen's experience by being the sole agent of the creative process. Instead, the complexity of today's world inexorably demands that the designer must rather be a catalyst of a whole participatory process where numerous issues and prior questions come "into play". The current role of design in the city should therefore not focus so much on providing specific solutions that aim to directly improve experiences, but rather to look beforehand at the major complex problems that affect the contemporary city, where the real challenge is to understand better the whole ecosystem as was suggested by Constant.

From the understanding of these problems, the possible and multiple solutions that can be provided will always be more appropriate to intervene, act and improve the urban phenomena of today. We could state with Robert Dilts that "Flexibility comes from having multiple choices, wisdom from having multiple perspectives" ([7], 47).

Thus, designers today are faced with the need to incorporate into the creative processes as many agents as possible of the complex reality or their field of action. In the case of a city the involvement of the citizen is an unnegotiable must. It is not so much a matter of creating "for" the citizen as of creating "with" the citizen, so that their inputs trigger a richer, more intelligent and fruitful creative process. The designer, then, is a sort of facilitator whose know-how orchestrates these complex processes. And in any case, the central position in such processes is always held by people; after all, they are the ones who think, live, experience, and enjoy the city. As Jan Gehl points out "a good city can be compared to a good party—people stay for much longer than really necessary, because they are enjoying themselves". ([8], 117).

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