INDETERMINACY IN SOCIAL LIFE

From *Homo Ludens* to *New Babylon*

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Abstract

In *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga elucidates that play takes an essential role in human society. Constant further explores the possibility of a future world inhabited by *homo ludens*. The *New Babylon* project envisions a revolutionary life style fuelled by creativity and the living environment accordingly meets the new demands. Unlike the proliferation of science which relies on its precise legibility and distinguishing between functions, the practice of everyday life is open to contingency and unknown. Such subversive resistance against the reigning structures of power probably drives us to reflect on the precise meanings of various disciplines, also the discourse of flexibility or mobility in contemporary contexts. Instead of single narrative, spatial elements allow multiple ways of use can be elucidated from a sociocultural perspective on affordances. With the transformative notion of time and space nowadays, it is necessary to reflect on the unknown, ephemerality and indeterminacy in everyday life. Indeed, the multiplicity of public condenser lies in the tension between play and everyday life, between determinacy and indeterminacy.

Introduction

Architecture constitutes not only an element of space, but also a field of social relation. The social life leaves traces in the built environment and change the physical space whereas the physical space shape and limit the social relations. My objective is to position my design within the determinacy and indeterminacy. To what extent the architect is able to determine or intervene the social life? Will fixed planned space dismiss the possibility of unprecedented events? What are the preconditions for aleatory occurrence of social interaction? Can unexpected public activities be catalysed by specific spatial characteristic?

This article is intended to elaborate the indeterminacy of social life in three parts. First, as Johan Huizinga addressed in the book *Homo Ludens* (1944), play element is the significant source of civilized life in law, war, science, poetry, philosophy and art. Play as an independent phenomenon with its own organizational forces, purposes as well as space and time, shapes our culture and society. The practice of everyday life is never narrated in functionalist rationality, but inventiveness engendered by "art of doing" such as walking, talking, cooking and shopping[1] Not only kids enjoy the unexpected playfulness, heuristic encounter in social life and built environment is the necessity for the whole society. Secondly, to provide an overview of *New Babylon*, a worldwide nomadic city network constructed by Constant Nieuwenhuys in 1956-1974. It offers only minimal conditions for a behaviour that should remain as free as possible. The legacy of *New Babylon* stimulates our imagination of a new society energized by creativity embedded in everyday life. Thirdly, to explore the way transposing the indeterminacy in social life into spatial quality by further unearthing the philosophy of indeterminacy as well as referring to different approaches applied by architects.

Play and Everyday Life

> "God is worthy of a complete, blessed seriousness, but that what is human … has been devised as a certain plaything of god, and that this is really the best thing about it. Every man and woman should spend life in this way, playing the noblest possible games, and thinking about them…"[2]

In *The Laws*, Plato claimed the above in the mouth of the Athenian. Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga discusses the element of play in culture in his book *Homo Ludens* (man the player) in 1938. As important as reasoning (*Homo Sapiens*) and making (*Homo Faber*), Playing, applicable to both human and animal life, deserves a place in the development of our civilization.[3] Huizinga describes play as a free activity consciously distinct from "ordinary" life both as to locality and duration. Orders are created in play, which demand supreme and absolute among players. The nature of play involves with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it. Meanwhile it fosters the formation of social groupings that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.[4]

According to Huizinga's concept, play proceeds in a quite separate sphere to the everyday with specific boundaries of time and space. Similar characteristic of isolation appears in Foucault's elaboration for *heterotopia*, the other place mirroring or yet upsetting what is outside. Heterotopias are often linked to slices in time, and have a system of how one enters and exits the space, both isolating the heterotopia and making it penetrable.[5] For instance, a sauna is defined as a heterotopia requires a literal "purification" ritual, namely the act of

showering before entering. The static and absolute notion of time and space is replaced by the concept of occasion and place, which 'means more' because it includes the scope of individual.

For the Situationists active around 1960s, play and the everyday would move from one to the other in such a way that the separateness finally disappear in a rich and poetic stream.[6] The instinct desires of each individual flow spontaneously to eradicate the rupture of play and non-play in the practice of everyday life. In the Amsterdam Declaration published in 1958, Constant and G.E. Debord claim that the solution to problems of housing, traffic, recreation, can only be envisaged in relation to social, psychological and artistic perspectives which combine in one synthetic hypothesis at the level of daily life.[7] The Situationists stressed that *unitary urbanism* is the indispensable basis for the construction of situations, in both play and seriousness, in a freer society.[8] It aims to transform the experimental nature of modern life, from one of boredom to one of play; and to restructure modern aesthetic experience by rejecting functionalism for forms favouring complexity and ambiguity. They believe there lies revolutionary potential to resist the infantile subservience created by capitalism in the dynamic and variable ambiences in daily life.[9]

As de Certeau suggests, the tactics in the practice of everyday life (reading, talking, walking, shopping, cooking, etc.) inherent in its slowness and repetitiveness, or in its purposelessness and lack of efficiency, naturally recalcitrate against the ineluctable speed and rationality of modernization.[10] Bricolage articulating these very tensions through assemblage, process, and the concrete, acts as a seismograph registering the forces that have been shaping art and society since the second half of the twentieth century.[11]

Constant's New Babylon

Back in Amsterdam after his stay in London, Constant abandoned painting to work solely on his New Babylon project from 1956 to 1974. He started exploring the potential creative integration of art and daily life. Influenced by Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and a series of post-war critique and reflection, Constant envisioned a future society where people are free to engage in creative work, shaping the environment in accordance with their desires. In New Babylon, the life style and range of *homo ludens* is not bound by traditional routine of labour. Rather, people could invest all their energy in a playful experience and creative daily practice.

The radically transformative social relation requires radically different architecture. In utilitarian society, our built environment such is often rendered in functionalist rather than societal and behavioural perspective. As a result it is a common image of modern city that clear functional zoning, optimized traffic network, manageable material and information flows, rules and laws dominate. Then how the living environment for the *homo ludens* is possibly like? The project of New Babylon only intends to provide the minimum conditions to facilitate adventurous circumstances that stimulate life-activity.

> "Any restriction of the freedom of movement, any limitation with regard to the creation of mood and atmosphere, has to be avoided. Everything has to remain possible, all is to happen, the environment has to be created by the activity of life, not inversely."[12]

In order to assure the changeable character there is no sense for any logical division of inner space. Inhabitants circulating in this extensive playground-like social space are expected to

give the space ever-changing shape, to divide it, to vary it, to create its always different atmosphere, and to play their lives in the variety of these surroundings.[13] A rather chaotic spatial quality is to be achieved by means of standardized mobile construction elements, like walls, floors and staircases.[14] Conditions like light, temperature, colour, texture, acoustics, etc. are manipulated as artistic medium to create heterogeneous ambience supported by computerized-technology.[15]

As an artist, Constant illustrated his ideal toward a new world through a variety of experimental mediums, among which the most significant one is physical model. It is difficult to define exterior or interior as many of them appear labyrinthine assemblage by various materials. We can notice the application of plexiglass in many cases. Unlike the obsession of transparency of modernism, the plexiglass represents abstract volumn glowing with indeterminate life, a kind of amorphous sense of interaction between life-styles that are too complex and transitory to be simply exposed. [16] Planned as a global network of mega-structures, divided into sectors, every square mile of New Babylon's surface represents an unexhaustible field of new and unknown situations.[17] As Wigley emphasizes, the architecture of hospitality is never simply static: it is a relentless labour of deconstruction. It tries to undo its own authority, removing as many as constraints as possible in order to offer the widest and deepest welcome but wants to be undone again and again by the people, actions and ideas that it hosts.[18]
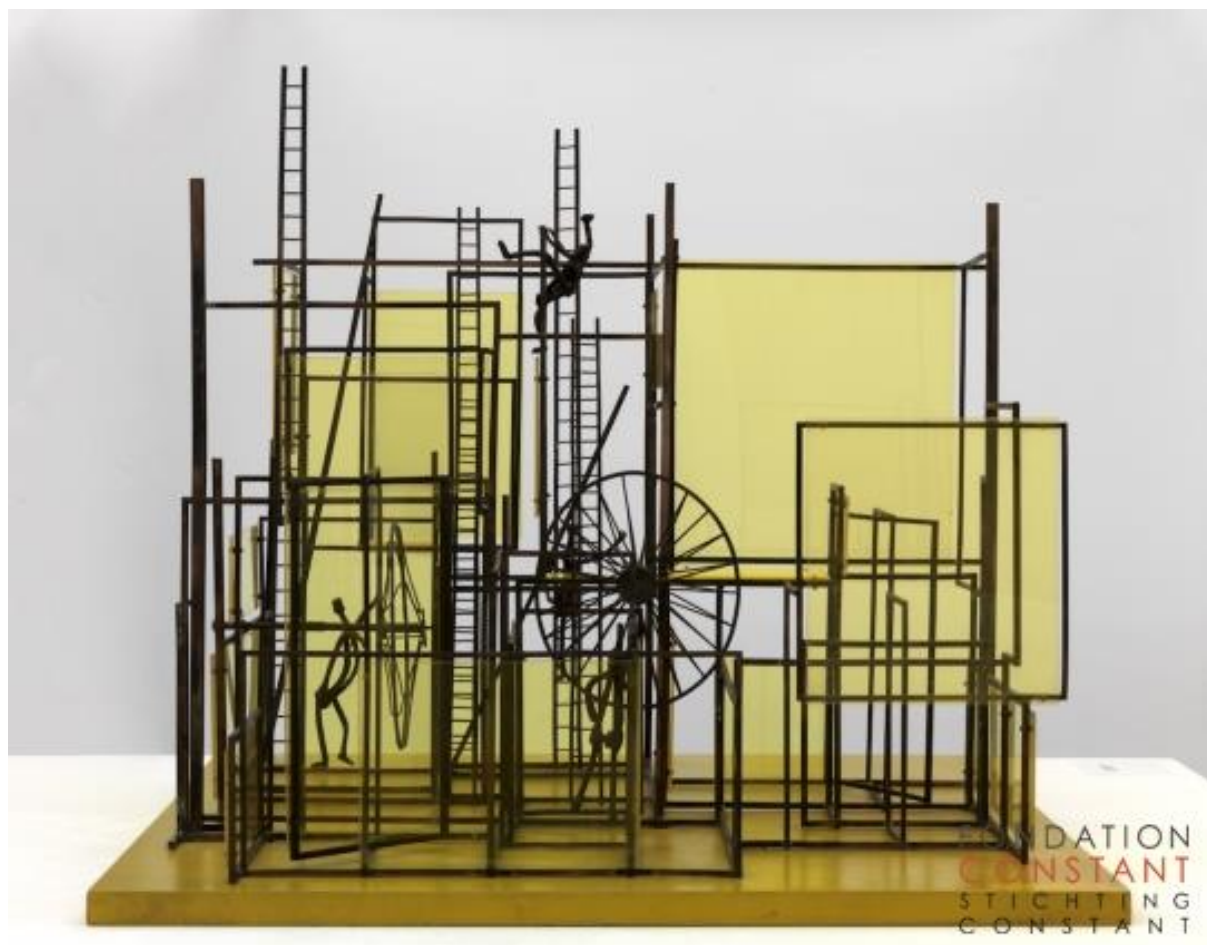

Figure 1 Constant Nieuwenhuys, Ladder labyrinth, 1967

Although lots of comments consider it a radical provocation, Constant refused the term 'utopia' for his New Babylon project.[19] It is not utopian imagination but an assertion of plausible reality. From the stains on the drawings, Constant implies that the world of New Babylon is never a perfect paradise. There exist violence, conflicts and numerous unsafe trivial factors hidden against the immaculacy of technology. The part of realism reminds us a network architecture without walls or limitation perhaps turns out to be as dangerous as the walled architecture of authority. If we examine the post-Marxist dream behind such hyper-architecture of desire half century ago with today's reality, a lot of paradoxes related to hyper-connectivity, cyber age, social segregation are explicit as haunting warning for contemporary world.

Figure 2 Constant Nieuwenhuys, Ingang van het Labyrinth, 1972

The polemical Indeterminacy

Indeterminacy is the key term for us to understand the emergence, heterogeneity, the decentred and the ephemeral in nonetheless ordered social life. First of all, it's necessary to examine the etymological origin of the word "indeterminacy". "Determinare" means "to limit", "to set limits". "de" means "from" and "terminare" means "to limit" (derived from "terminus": "limit", "boundary").[20] Thus "Indeterminacy" could be understood as a state of suspension within the precise meaning of the object, a consequence of the redefining of the limits in which the latter is inscribed.[21]

Indeterminacy, as non-positional, *becomes* determinate in fixing it in opposition to determinate being.[22] Nietzsche dedicated to reviving indeterminate *becoming* from the clutches of *being* or *being* in the form of conceptual determination. " 'immediate certainty', as well as 'absolute knowledge' and the 'thing in itself,' involve a *Contradictio In Adjecto*."[23]

He argued against Kant's noumenon to free ourselves from the misleading significance of words. Long before Nietzsche's revival of indeterminacy, it has been a significant Chinese aesthetic philosophy that the determinate and indeterminate complement each other ("虚实相生"). The indeterminacy, usually in form of illusionary words in poetry or emptiness in painting, leaves space for imagination and individual interpretation. When defined or described in certainty, the art work will definitely lose its underlying openness for multiplicity. In music composition, John Cage's graphic scores organize the disposition of events in space, in their concentration or dispersion, their rhythm, timbre, form, volume, etc.[24] Cage takes different occasional moments under consideration to develop the "indeterminate music".

Strategy is always linked with determinacy. Determinacy is a subfield of set theory, a branch of mathematics, that examines the conditions under which one or the other player of a game has a winning strategy, and the consequences of the existence of such strategies.[25] Generally speaking, scientific methods try to eliminate all the indeterminate factors since any indeterminate element is unquantifiable and untestable. Russell Hardin asserts, "Indeterminacy in contexts of strategic interaction… is an issue that is constantly swept under the rug because it is often disruptive to pristine social theory. But the theory is fake: the indeterminacy is real." [26] Even though the uncertainty raises criticism in terms of epistemological method, the indeterminacy derived from everyday praxis questions the "absolute" disciplinary limits and open up abundance of opportunities depending on the situations. For example, Venturi in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* concentrates on situations of paradoxical contrast, differing and normally contradictory fixed meaning which are articulated by means of the conjunctions "or" plus question mark ("the Villa Savoye: is it a square ground plan or not?") or with an "even though" ("Le Corbusier's Shodan house is closed even though it is open").[27] There is no denying that the idea of indeterminacy occupies a crucial position in pedagogy as well as professional praxis.

Aldo van Eyck recognizes the great importance of the "in-between" as an interstitial realm that distinguished "place" from ordinary space. His architecture aimed at creating places that fostered dialog and stimulated community life in which both children and adults take part. Such "places" would find their way into the Amsterdam orphanage design in a variety of forms, such as alcoves, niches, compartments, sitting walls, thresholds, and, most significantly, interior streets.[28] The concept is also realized in his playground design where the play elements are mostly geometrical, giving them an aesthetical appeal. According to Gibson's ecological psychological theory, affordances exist by virtue of a relationship between the properties of the environment and the action capabilities of the animal.[29] Compared with a slide or a swing with particular configuration, the abstract geometrical shapes of van Eyck's objects enable an "open function" that stimulates the children's creativity. [30] From a sociocultural perspective on affordances, the simpler configuration implies less instruction for the user, therefore leads to diverse interpretation and multiple usage. However, it is argued that the standardization tends to characterize van Eyck' play equipment has negative effects on the playability.[31]

Ground floor
Departments:
1 Boys 14-18
2 Girls 14-18
3 Boys 10-14
4 Girls 10-14
5 Children 6-10
6 Children 4-6
7 Children 2-4
8 Babies
9 Infirmary
10 Festive hall

11 Theatre and gymnasium
12 Trustees, psychologist,
   team leader and staff
13 Administration and archive
14 Staffroom and library
15 Maintenance/service room
16 Garage
17 Main linen room
18 Main kitchen, director's
   residence
19 Team leader's residence
20 Entrance to cycle shed

Figure 3 Aldo van Eyck, The Amsterdam Orphanage, 1960

Figure 4 Aldo van Eyck, Playground Nieuwmarkt, 1968

The term indeterminacy has also been used recently by Rem Koolhaas, although without it being precisely defined, and principally referred to the notion of architectural programming.[32] The proposal for Parc de la Villette by OMA is not for a definitive park, but for a method that - combining programmatic instability with architectural specificity - will eventually generate a park.[33]

> "If the essence of *Delirious New York* was the section of the Downtown Athletic Club – a turbulent stacking of metropolitan life in ever-changing configurations; a machine that offered redemption through a surfeit of hedonism; a conventional, even boring, skyscraper; a program as daring as ever imagined in this century - La Villette could be more radical by suppressing the three-dimensional aspect almost completely and proposing pure program instead, unfettered by any containment."[34]
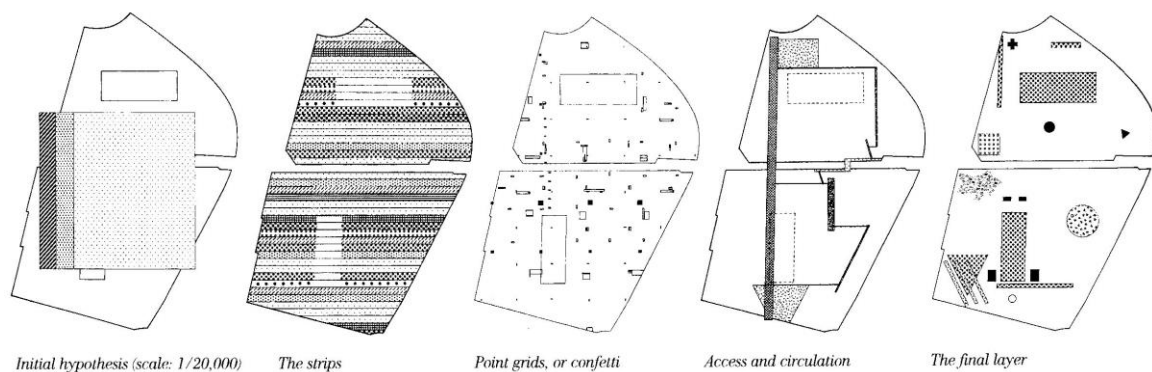

Initial hypothesis (scale: 1/20,000)   The strips   Point grids, or confetti   Access and circulation   The final layer

Figure 5 OMA, Parc de la Villette, 1982

Figure 6 Alex Wall, OMA, Poster based on competition drawings for Parc de la Villette, 1982-83

Conclusion

To sum up, play as the instinct desire of human in search for fun, plays an extraordinary role in the creation of human civilization. The notion of the relationship between play and ordinary everyday life has been developed from a relatively separation to spontaneously merging via integration of art and life. It is the stuff of play, of becoming, of transformation, and it drives the theory of situations, the discovery of the quality of moments.[35]

Constant asserted a revolutionary society where people are free to move, play, and create. Here what is valued shifted from the dignity of workers to the dignity of players. It is a city with overwhelming hospitality that everyone is welcome. Appealing flexibility would be achieved by means of mobile structure and technology. The nomadism of the gypsies inspired the initial formulations of New Babylon project. Nowadays we live in continuation of similar nomadism due to the explosion of technologies and information, which results in a radical transformation in the notion of time and space. As the world becomes more fluid than ever before, the increasing instability and indeterminacy in social life call for new architecture.

By unearthing the philosophical legacy of indeterminacy, I found the answer perhaps underlie in the tension between order and multiplicity, between alienation and redemption, between existing and dissolving. Architecture for a long time represents the eternity of power. The profession therefore sustains, however, at the same time locks itself within the limits set by predetermined teleological visions. Through this article, the power lies in the unknown, the ephemeral moments, the indeterminacy should not be underestimated.

Endnotes

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[5] Michel Foucault, 'Des espaces autres. Une conférence inédite de Michel Foucault', Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité 5 (October 1984), 46-49.

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[12] Constant Nieuwenhuys, Lecture at the ICA (1963), *Constant. New Babylon* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2015), 194-201.

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