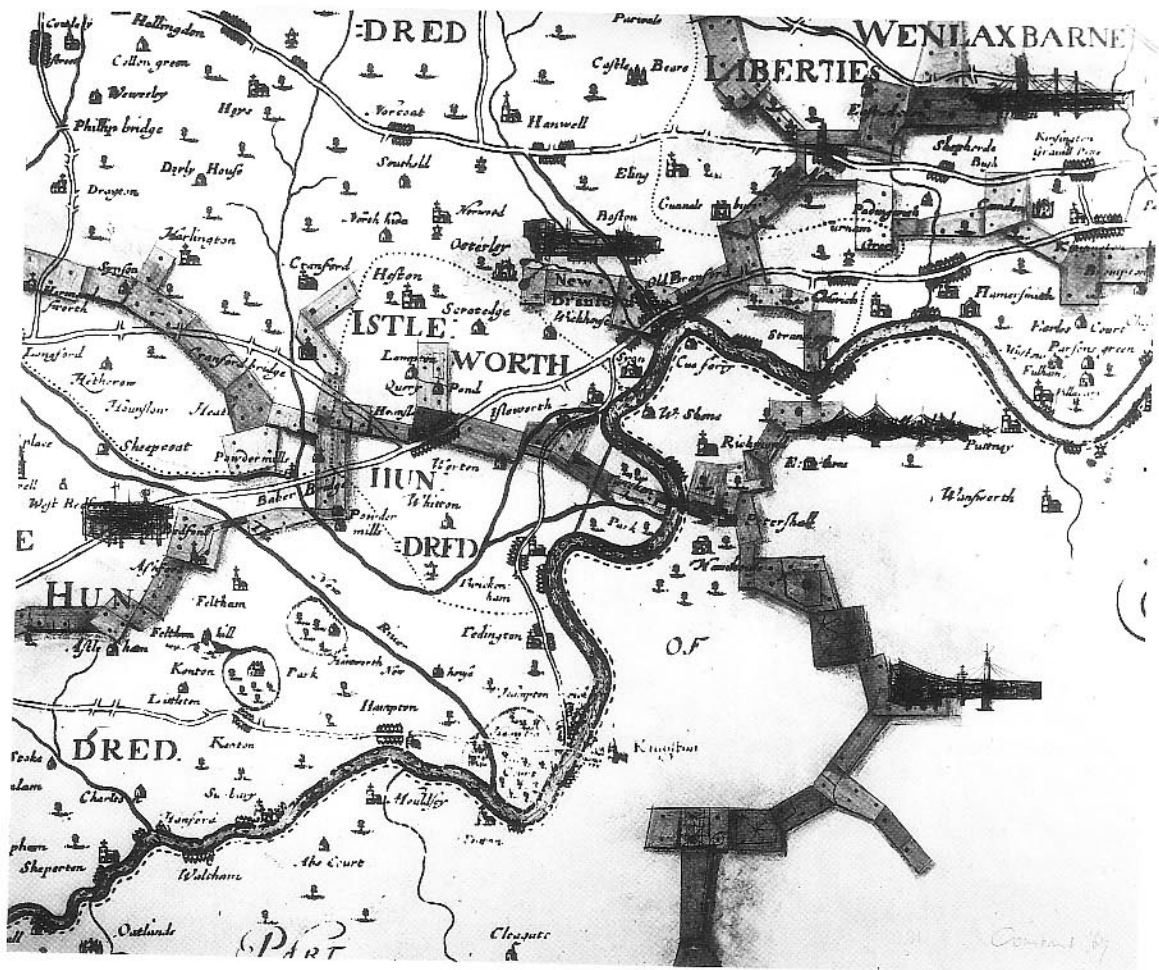


The Activist Drawing
Retracing Situationist Architectures from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond

edited by Catherine de Zegher and Mark Wigley

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New Babylon op historische kaart van Middlesex (New Babylon on a historical map of Middlesex), 1966-1967
 Watercolor on photograph, 31 7/8 x 39 in. (81 x 99 cm), Gemeentemuseum, The Hague

Diagrams of Utopia

Anthony Vidler

Registering the extraordinary historical and polemical effect of this unique collection of drawings, what first strikes me is the unaccountable *veracity* of Constant's project for the New Babylon—its sense of potential realizability, or even its sense of having already been constructed. We soar above its new urban/rural landscape, stroll through its spaces, inhabit its psychological aura, manipulate its partitions to our advantage, compare its quarters to those of other imaginary habitats we have entered with similar unquestioning faith—the starship *Enterprise*, for example. This is no doubt the result of Constant's clever use of already-known architectural parts in order to fabricate a new unknown—we recognize the "détourned" elements of the Ville Radieuse, of Chernikov's or Leonidov's constructivist ideal cities, of Merzbau, and of more down-to-earth propositions from Team 10's own rewriting of CIAM—the mats, nets, and megastructures of van Eyck, Bakema, Woods, and even the megastructures of Yona Friedman. All utopias have done this to a degree, of course, from the Renaissance to the present—no place could be understood as a potential good place if we did not in some way find our own place in its habitat. All visual realizations of the future are constrained to put to use the existing languages of their present—and Constant's imaginary city is no exception.

If we were not directed to the question of intelligible speech by its title, then, this "new" Babylon would naturally give rise to speculation as to the languages it itself deploys by which to describe the indescribable, to plot the spatial and the social in their yet unformed state in a form that provides some sense of solidity, of potentiality, to this return of the mythical tower. This is of course accomplished in part by the incessant, twenty-year-long production of drawings and models, each lending veracity to the next, allowing us to see tangible structure grow and change, develop almost organically in the artist's mind; the depiction of inhabitable spaces allowing us to project ourselves into its infinite perspectives, to imagine the realization of the plans. These seem, that is, to make up the concrete specifications for the construction of utopia in the present.

But the special force of modern urban utopia stems not only from its century-long tradition of architectural elements turned from their commercial and technological use to social ends—the transparent glass and iron arcade architecture recognized by Benjamin as the emblem and fabric of modernity's pre-history and given special idealizing force by the avant-gardes of the twenties—but from something else

that I would like to call the *representation effect*. For it is also true that the more convincing of Constant's representations, those that give us a sense of the unbounded possibilities inherent in the New Babylon, are necessarily those that "look like" architectural plans, sections, models—not those that seem for all the world as if they are about to be presented to the developer/client, but rather those that in their schematic form leave questions unanswered, at the same time leaving no doubt as to the intended spatial and social relations they describe. Not perspectives, that is, nor sketches, structural, site, or massing models, but rather what I would call *diagrams*; depictions, whether drawn or modeled, that look precise and at the same time imprecise, that look tectonic but harbor no tectonics, at least in the traditional sense.

I want to address here the question of the "diagram," one that has become of some active interest in architectural circles over the last ten years, from Japanese architects like Toyo Ito and Kazuyo Sejima, to what one can now call the new Netherlandish school (Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos et al.), to Peter Eisenman, whose recent *Diagram Diaries* recasts his entire career as that of a "diagram architect." The question of the diagram might well be of equal interest to a "Drawing Center," and especially so in the context of this exhibition of work that raises so many immediate questions about the status of drawing in architecture, and more particularly in what we might call architectural utopia. I want, that is, to speak about the architectural *diagram*: not the sketch, the parti, the geometrical projection, or the various kinds of drawing toward, about, and of architecture, but the diagram.

At first sight, the diagram has little place in architectural practice—indeed, words like "diagrammatic" have taken on negative connotations with respect to late examples of modernism and postmodernism—for it is the drawing and its evocative first step, the sketch, that have been the fetish of architects since the Renaissance. *Disegno*, after Brunelleschi and Alberti, has been the watchword of architectural talent at least until relatively recently. What I mean by the diagram will, I hope, become clear during this talk; certainly it embraces all the conventional connotations of the word: I select freely from its multiple definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

[from Old French *diagramme*, from Greek διαγραμματα *dia* across/through, *gramma* something written, letter of the alphabet, that which is marked out by lines, a geometrical figure, written list, register, the gamut or scale in music [from διαγραφειν to mark out by lines, draw, draw out, write in a register]] (Geom.) A figure composed of lines, serving to illustrate a definition or statement, or to aid in the proof of a proposition. An illustrative figure, which, without representing the exact appearance of an object, gives an outline or general scheme of it, so as to exhibit the shape and relations of its various parts. A set of lines, marks, or tracings which represent symbolically the course or results of any action or process, or the variations which characterize it. A delineation used to symbolize related abstract propositions or mental processes.¹

Reformulated in architectural terms, such definitions would immediately take the diagram out of the domain of the drawing: many architects, in fact would not want to consider the diagram at all, save, perhaps for that moment when a client wants to be reassured that all functions are being taken care of and related in proper ways. Hence the "bubble diagram" developed in the 1950s as a corrective to modernist universalism, and expanded in its role by Christopher Alexander in his early attempts to develop a design method authorized and driven by cybernetic logic. But, for the rest, a diagram is not a sketch (therefore it evokes nothing, points to nothing), and a diagram is not a plan (therefore it cannot be built). It is a kind of neither/nor of delineation, a neutral zone, where certain relations are mapped precisely but without aura, with no qualitative information; there is, one might say, nothing superfluous in the diagram.

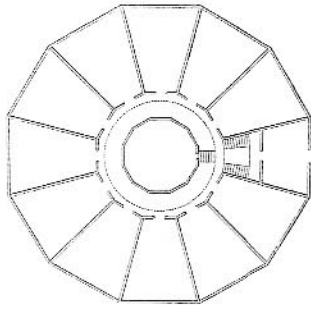
What then does a diagram do? If there is no empathy in the diagram, might there be at least a performative definition? Charles Sanders Peirce, the doyen of semiotics, defined it as representing a kind of reasoning and placed it among the kinds of signs he called icons: "A Diagram is mainly an Icon, and an icon of intelligible relations in the constitution of its Object."² A diagram would incorporate the practices of graphic abstractions (geometry, syllogistics) and possess what for Peirce was the crucial indexical function of "pointing." Unlike the drawing, however, it does not provide depth of meaning beyond its surface—what Gilles Deleuze calls "insight" into its object. Rather, as in itself displaying the formal features of its object, it substitutes for and takes the place of its object.

It is for this reason that Peirce sees the diagram as eliding "the distinction between the real and the copy," a distinction which, Peirce claims, disappears entirely in the diagram. Here it is that the diagram reveals its fundamental link to utopia. The question it raises—is it a real object or is it a copy of a real object?—makes it an instrument of suspended reality. As Peirce concludes: "It is, for the moment, a pure dream."³

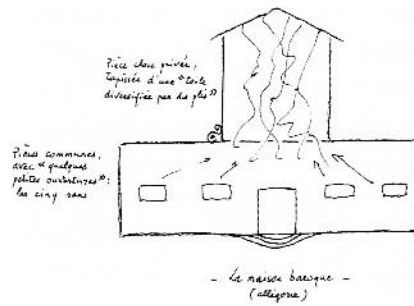
Indeed it would be a truism to say that all utopias are, of necessity, diagrammatic. The various spatial relations that embody the ideal society have often been literally described in this way: the "plan" of Sforzinda is less a plan, in the sense of an ideal city plan, than a diagram. Similarly the ideal realms depicted in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* also take on diagrammatic form. And, as the late Louis Marin has demonstrated, the complex organization of Thomas More's *Utopia* is revealed most clearly in the diagram, as if it was initially conceived as such.

But these are diagrams that describe the *symbolic* relationship of forms to their roles in society: they do not constitute, literally, the spatial form itself—they are more symbols than icons, in Peirce's terms. There is a sense that the ideal, embodied in the symbolic form, will always haunt the real but will never, itself, be realized. Thus one might be able to diagram the system of Platonic ideals, but never the ideal forms themselves. Here we have not so much the fusion of real and copy as the total separation of the two, the symbol as preservation of the ideal. The diagram proper, as Peirce defines it—the iconic form—is a more modern product, a schematic instrument utilized by an age that believed in the realization of utopia, in the construction of the "good place" rather than the imagination of the "no place." In this sense it is a product of the Enlightenment, a vehicle of Turgot's philosophy of progress, a device contemporary with the invention of the axonometric, the development of the metric system, the refinement of geological survey techniques. It was in this form a design technique for the invention of what the eighteenth century was pleased to call spatial "machines": "machines for curing," or hospitals; "machines" for punishment or reform, or prisons or schools; "engines" of community, or communes, and so on. Diagrams were essential in this process; at once the determined spatial relations of new functional needs and the calculated specifications of the new building machines, they could be, and more often than not were, invented not by architects but by the host of new professionals—doctors drew diagrams of hospitals, legal philosophers of prisons (Bentham), social "scientists" of communities. Architect-teachers, under the supervision of geometers, even diagrammed architecture itself (Durand).

But perhaps the most powerful use of the diagram in early modernism is that deployed by nonarchitects—lawyers, philosophers, and social theorists—to describe different forms of organization according to spatial relations that would of themselves, it was thought, support if not give rise to the social orders imagined. Thus Bentham's Panopticon, well known since Foucault as an early architectural example of surveillance culture. Foucault himself uses this pattern as an exemplary instance of the performative diagram, a "functioning abstracted from every obstacle or friction . . . and that should be detached from



JEREMY BENTHAM, *Panopticon Plan*, 1792



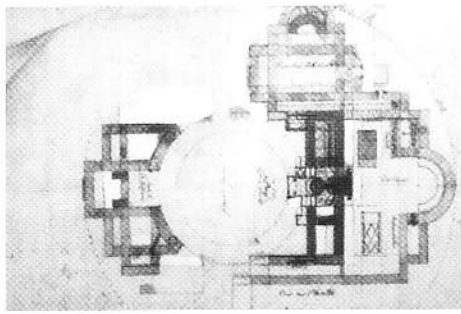
La maison Baroque, from GILLES DELEUZE, *The Fold* (1993)

any specific use."¹ It is a representation at once of a "thing" with specific content (the prisoner) and of a "function" with generalized scope over society as a whole. The diagram, then, is both specific, in that it precisely maps the space of individual confinement, and universal, in that it (imprecisely) refers to an entire social regime. It is as if the diagram of the feudal estate, castle at the center, cultivated strips and peasant huts around the periphery, had been mapped on the organizing system of feudalism as a whole.

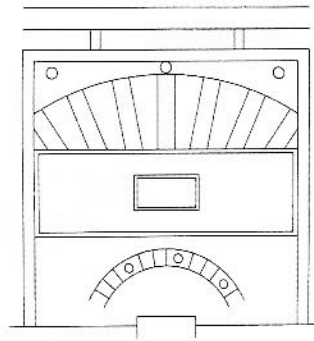
Here I am following the evocative argument of Gilles Deleuze in his study of Foucault, where the diagram becomes a central phenomenon not only in the mapping of Foucault's thought, as well as Foucault himself, but also in the understanding of modern social organization in toto. For Deleuze the importance of the diagram is that it "specifies" in a particular way the relations between unformed/unorganized matter and unformalized/unfinalized functions; that is, that it joins the two powerful regimes of space (the visible) and language (the invisible but ubiquitous system). The *diagram*, then, in Deleuze's terms is a kind of map/machine—a spatiotemporal abstraction that "refuses every formal distinction between a content and an expression, between a discursive and a nondiscursive formation." It is, he writes, "an almost silent/dumb and blind machine, even though it is that which causes sight and speech":

If there are many diagrammatic functions and even materials, it is because every diagram is a spatiotemporal multiplicity. But it is also because there are as many diagrams as there are social fields in history. When Foucault invokes the notion of the diagram, it is in relation to our modern disciplinary societies, where power divides up the entire field in a grid: if there is a model for this, it is the model of the *plague* that sections off the ill city and extends into the smallest detail. There are accordingly diagrams for all social orders—for factories, theaters, monarchies, imperial regimes. What is more, these diagrams are all interrelated—they interpenetrate each other. This is because the diagram is profoundly unstable or fluid, never ceasing to churn up matter and functions in such a way as to constitute mutations. Finally, every diagram is intersocial and in a state of becoming. It never functions to represent a preexisting world; it produces a new type of reality, a new model of truth. It is not subject to history, nor does it hang over history. It creates history by unmaking preceding realities and significations, setting up so many points of emergence or creativity, of unexpected conjunctures, of improbable continuums. It doubles history with a becoming [*avec un devenir*].³

It is this potential of mutation, of endless transformation and becoming, that makes the diagram for Deleuze, as for Guattari, an especially transgressive device. As Gary Genosko has recently noted, the diagram organizes an escape from pure linguistics into a deterritorialized spatial zone: "Diagrammatic machines of signs elude the territorializing systems of symbolic and signifying semiologies by displaying a kind of reserve in relation to their referents, forgoing polysemy and eschewing lateral signifying effects."⁶ Diagrams then are ill-behaved, they "do not behave like well-formed signs in a universal sys-



CHARLES FOURIER, *Diagram of the Phalanstery*, c. 1820



MARQUIS DE SADE, *Diagram of an Asylum of Lubricity*, c. 1801

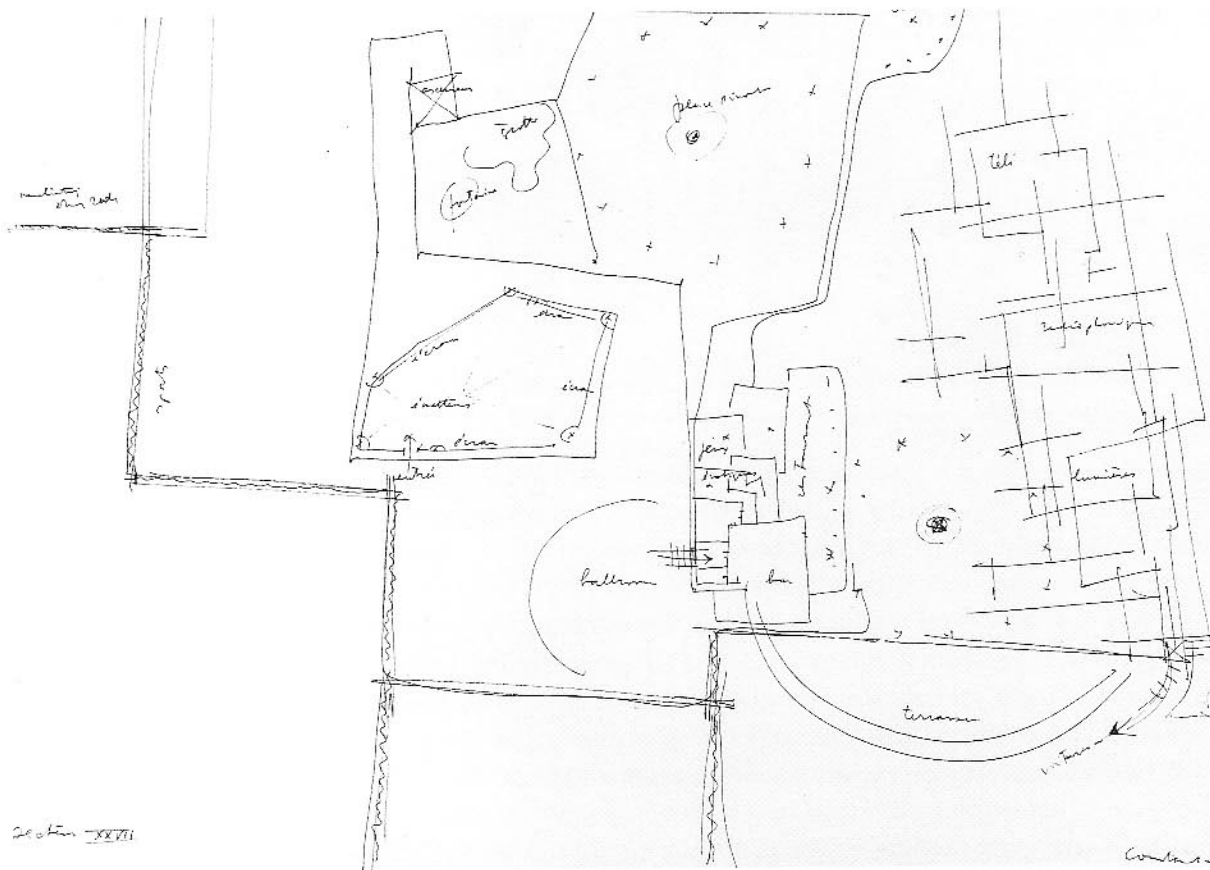
tem of signification and fail to pass smoothly through the simulacral dialogism of ideal models of communication."⁷ In this way, what might seem to be "an arid algebra of language" in diagram form actively serves Guattari's "pragmatics of the unconscious" and thence his insurgent social practice: the diagram, in this sense, is utopian by definition.⁸

In this context we might point to one of the more badly behaved of early modern diagrams, sketched by the Marquis de Sade as a kind of counter-panopticon—the House of Lubricity. This is, so to speak, the institutional form of the endless pornographic narratives of the *120 Days of Sodom*, themselves given theatrical staging in a "scene" that, as Roland Barthes noted, was a veritable diagram of language itself. Here de Sade's negative references to existing institutions—theaters, hospitals, and prisons—are evidently the formal basis of new, purportedly utopian, institutions; and it is here that we can see the intimate relation of a utopian diagram to its predecessors: it gains its iconic significance, that is, by referring to what it is definitely not at the same time as it shapes its own diagram with reference to a mutation of its anti-model.

Equally, and closer to the spirit of Constant's New Babylon, Charles Fourier diagrammed his ideal of community by adopting the model of the palace (Versailles to be precise). In these sketches, between 1808 and 1825, Fourier constitutes his commune in diagram form—that is, as he himself admitted, and as Godin and later Le Corbusier were to demonstrate, the "palace" is a spatial type to which the phalanstery ought to be compared, not a model to emulate. Painstakingly he worked out the mathematical and spatial details of sociability and pleasure, sexual freedom and individual liberty in community. Taking the passage and the palace as his "negative" models, so to speak, he transformed them into engines for machining social intercourse, on every level and in every sense of the word. Writing of this machine in 1971, while providing his own diagram of Fourier's diagram, Barthes characterized the phalanstery in similar terms to that of Foucault's "panopticon":

The topography of the phalanstery traces an original place, which is in sum that of palaces, monasteries, manor houses, and "grands ensembles" in which an organization of the building and an organization of the territory are brought together [*se confondent*] in such a way that (an entirely modern view) architecture and urbanism both withdraw in favor of a general science of human place, the primary character of which is no longer protection but circulation: the phalanstery is a seclusion/confinement at the interior of which one circulates (there exist nevertheless trips outside the phalanstery: these are the great voyages of "hordes," the moving "party"). This space is evidently functionalized, as the following reconstitution shows (very approximate, since the Fourierist discourse, like all writing, is *irreducible*).⁹

In the same way, Stendhal, a contemporary of Fourier, illustrated his autobiographical *Life of Henri Brulard* with spatial diagrams that at once mapped his living spaces and acted as icons of his states of



Plan of Sector 27, 1959, ink on paper, 19 11/16 x 25 5/8 in. (50 x 65 cm), Gemeentemuseum, The Hague

mind and social and sexual relations. More recent examples of the "Fourier" diagram, and contemporary with Constant's New Babylon, would be those of Georges Perec, who insistently mapped every aspect of his and his neighbors' everyday life in one kind of diagram after another. These form a kind of dreamwork version of what sociologists like Chombart de Lauwe, whose diagrams were used in turn by Debord and his friends, were undertaking with scientific interest for the inhabitants of Paris.

Perhaps here, in Perec and Chombart, Foucault and Barthes, all characterizations of the utopian diagram roughly contemporary to the beginnings of the New Babylon, we might identify a potential way of thinking through the dilemma characterized by Hilde Heynen with respect to Constant's utopia. For her, what she calls the "real problem" of the New Babylon is synonymous with that of utopia: as she puts it, "the tension between the larger structures that are fixed and the smaller-scale interior structures that are flexible and labyrinthine is not always fully worked out."¹⁰ This would then be the tension identified by Adorno in all modern utopian thought—that between the desire of art to be utopian in the face of an obstructive social reality, and the demand that art should precisely not be seen as utopian, so as "not to be found guilty of administering comfort and illusion."¹¹ Thus, Heynen concludes, Constant's New Babylon is a project that strives "to be an embodiment of the utopian end situation of history, it is based on the negation of all that is false and fraudulent in the present societal condition," but "its truth lies in its very negativity and in the dissonances that pervade the images of harmony."¹²

88 But if we see Constant's utopian machine as a complex, three-dimensional diagram, these "contradictions" are once more placed in flux and interdependence rather than opposition. Constant himself, writing

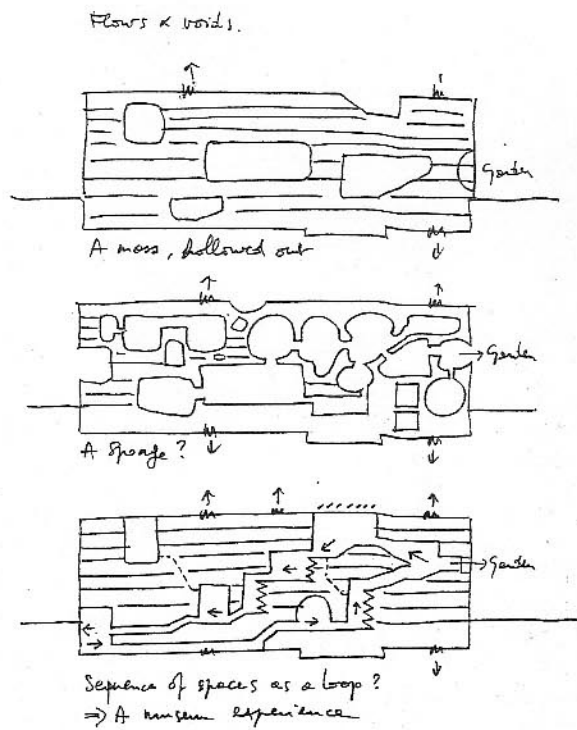
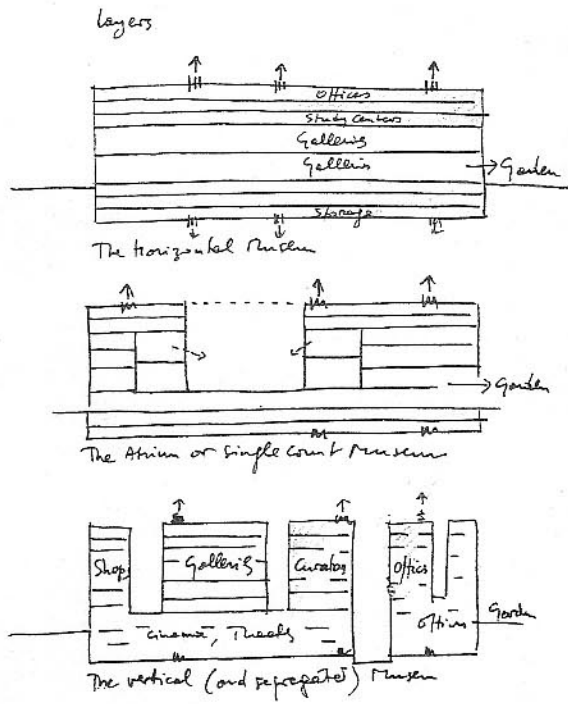
in the *Internationale Situationniste* in 1959, speaks of the early stages of his New Babylon in terms that remind us of Deleuze on Foucault over twenty years later: it is, he says, the construction of "an ambience in space," a junction of the psychological regimes and the spatial. His description equally evokes Fourier:

The future cities we envisage will offer an original variety of sensations in this domain, and unforeseen games will become possible through the inventive use of material conditions, like the conditioning of air, sound, and light. Harmonizing cacophony . . . space voyages . . . reduction of work necessary for production . . . maximum of social space . . . ground free for circulation of traffic . . . accessible terraces . . . infinite variety of ambience, facilitating the *dérive* of the inhabitants and their frequent chance encounters.¹³

In these terms New Babylon follows all the logic of diagrams: as he writes in "New Babylon: Outline of a Culture" from 1960-1965, it is at once a social model (ludic society), a network (freedom for play, adventure, mobility), a topography (of displacement, slow and continuous flux, rapid circulation), a sector (the basic unit), a labyrinth (dynamic), a technology (to alter the ambience), and an intensification of space (lived more intensely—seems to dilate).¹⁴

Recently interest in the idea of the diagram has taken a new turn, which at first sight seems less utopian than the tradition we have been looking at. Toyo Ito, writing in 1996 of the architecture of Kazuyo Sejima, coined the term "diagram architecture." "In other words," he wrote, "you see a building as essentially the equivalent of the kind of spatial diagram used to describe the daily activities for which the building is intended in abstract form. At least it seems as if your objective is to get as close as possible to this condition."¹⁵ For Ito, if not entirely for Sejima, architecture itself becomes joined to its diagram—diagram spatial function transformed transparently into built spatial function with hardly a hiccup. The wall, which technologically takes on all the weight of this translation, thus carries the freight of the line, or I should say "the burden of linearity," to use Catherine Ingraham's term in her book of the same title. Such a materialism of the diagram certainly finds a ready instrument in digital representation, notably in the deterritorializing practices of Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos and other new European regionalist architects, who exploit all the ambiguities of diagrams in their "plans" that at the same time are maps of built forms and economic and demographic plans.

Opposed to this is what one might call the "formal" current of diagramming, to distinguish it from the more "functional" tendency we have been examining. Rob Somol, in his introductory essay to Eisenman's *Diagram Diaries*, claims that the diagram has achieved a peculiarly new status, in a gradual shift accomplished over the last thirty years from drawing to diagram: for the first time in the modern period, indeed, the diagram has become "the matter of architecture" itself, as opposed to its representation. "The diagram," he writes, "has seemingly emerged as the final tool, in both its millennial and desperate guises, for architectural production and discourse." A practice (such as that of Eisenman) that is diagrammatic, Somol claims, stands against a traditional tectonic practice; he speaks, in Deleuzian terms, of "a diagrammatic practice (flowing around obstacles yet resisting nothing)—as opposed to the tectonic vision of architecture as the legible sign of construction."¹⁶ Operating between form and word, space and language, the diagram is both constitutive and projective, performative rather than representational. In this way it is, Somol concludes, a tool of the virtual rather than the real, and a means of building (in both senses of the term) a virtual architecture, of proposing a world other than that which exists. Here we are returned to a less material view of the diagram than Ito's, one that coincides with that of Pierluigi Nicolin, who has recently taken issue with Ito's interpretation of Sejima's translucent and transparent "membranes" as a reflection of the high-speed media metropolis, proposing an alternative reading of deceleration and slowdown,



BERNARD TSCHUMI, *Competition for the New Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1997*

which for Nicolini might represent a shift from "a sociological, or mimetic, phase, related to the world of information processing, to a scientific, philosophical or mystical phase."¹⁷ Here, in the shift from information to what Nicolini sees as a rarefied, esoteric content in the diagrammatic form, we are led back to Charles Sanders Peirce's characterization of the diagram as something beyond the iconic.

Perhaps the most convincing contemporary exemplars of the tradition out of which Constant worked and who themselves work out of the episteme forged by the 1960s critique of CIAM functionalism, a critique that so powerfully welded social utopianism to a renewed vision of modernist form and technology, are architects like Rem Koolhaas and Bernard Tschumi whose diagrams not only prefigure their buildings but incorporate their qualities. Thus in Koolhaas's competition project for the French National Library, the diagram, three-dimensional and evoking a complex 3-D circuit analysis, projects the spatial layering and volumetric suspensions within the cube and acts as the territorial mapping of form and function. Similarly, in the competition project for the Museum of Modern Art extension, Tschumi used a sequence of diagrams to develop a montage narrative of the site, envisaged as a kind of magma as it, so to speak, cooled and hardened into the controlled volumetric system of architecture.

We have briefly traced the fate of the diagram in architecture, from Fourier to Constant and beyond. Perhaps, in conclusion, I would want simply to note that the diagram properly deployed in architecture can be a potent political device, whether internally, acting on the formal and technological devices of architecture itself, or externally, working with the political and psychological program of a new social order. In this sense, the term "utopian" with respect to the work of Constant, and perhaps in later instances, signifies not only a world apart but, more than that, a world to be made by social, political, and intellectual endeavor. The diagram in this context can act to galvanize the discourse only if both political form and architectural form are entered into its equation.

Notes

1. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 714.
2. Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935-1966), 4:531, 3:362; cited in Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Paris: Editions du Minuit, 1984), 86.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 207; cited in Deleuze, *Foucault*, 41.
5. Deleuze, *Foucault*, 43.
6. Gary Genosko, "Guattari's Schizoanalytic Semiotics," in Eleanor Kaufman and Kevin Jon Heller, eds., *Deleuze and Guattari: New Mappings in Politics, Philosophy, and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 175-190.
7. *Ibid.*, 186.
8. *Ibid.*, 175.
9. Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971), 116.
10. Hilde Heynen, "New Babylon: The Antinomies of Utopia," *Assemblage*, no. 29 (April 1996), 30.
11. Theodor Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), trans. as *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 47; cited in Heynen, "New Babylon," 47.
12. Heynen, "New Babylon," 38.
13. Constant, "Une autre ville pour une autre vie," *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 3 (December 1959), 37-40.
14. Constant, "New Babylon" (1960), reprinted in Mark Wigley, *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art/010 Publishers, 1998), 165.
15. Toyo Ito, "Diagram Architecture," *El Croquis*, no. 77 (1996), 18-24.
16. R. E. Somol, "Dummy Text, or the Diagrammatic Basis of Contemporary Architecture," in Peter Eisenman, *Diagram Diaries* (New York: Universe Publishing, 1999), 24.
17. Pierluigi Nicolin, "The Tao of Sejima," *Lotus*, no. 96 (1996), 9.