



## NEW BABYLON AND BARCELONA

Between 1962 and 1963, Constant imagined how *New Babylon* could be developed across several European cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Brussels, Paris, Munich, Seville...) and drew up plans showing these urban superimpositions. He also made others in which he projected *New Babylon* over entire territories such as the Netherlands and the Ruhr region.

One of the plans he also created in 1963 is of Barcelona. Based on a tourist map of the city, it shows several superstructures (or sectors, as he called them) of *New Babylon* covering certain districts and extending beyond the built-up area. The *New Babylon* network overlaps almost the entire Eixample and Poblenou districts and splits into three 'vertical' branches around the axes of Entença + Major de

Sarrià, Passeig de Sant Joan + Torrent de les Flors and Bilbau + Navas + Passeig de Maragall. This chaining together of sectors suggests an extension to connect with the rest of the world through the two natural exits from the Barcelona plain: the Llobregat and Besòs valleys. Finally, repeating the same strategy proposed for other cities, the superstructures avoid both the historic centre (Ciutat Vella), with its labyrinthine urban fabric much appreciated by the Situationists, as well as the city's parks and hills, green spaces for leisure and recreation. On the other hand, one sector seems to approach Montjuïc and even partially overlap it, whilst another approaches the area of Collserola, as if leaning on each other to bring *Homo Ludens* closer to the hills.

# THE TIME OF UTOPIAS IS BEHIND US. NEW BABYLON IS THE IDEA OF A POSSIBLE WORLD, A WORLD OF THE HUMAN BEING OF THE PRESENT AND FUTURE



Constant Nieuwenhuys, July 1966  
Noord-Hollands Archief / Fotoburo de Boer

## BARCELONA, THE 1960s

After the Second World War, whilst democratic freedom, the welfare state and relentless progress allowed people in the West to imagine ideal futures, the situation was very different in Spain, which was reeling under Franco's dictatorship. Struggles and hopes were focused on improving living conditions and regaining lost freedoms and rights.

By the end of the 1950s, Barcelona had around 20,000 shacks, home to almost 100,000 people (close to 7% of the city's population) in districts where the precarious state of the buildings was compounded by a lack of basic services (sewerage, water, electricity, etc.).

The National Economic Stabilisation Plan was passed in 1959, marking the end of the country's autarkic isolationism and its opening up to the free market of the West. The economy was transformed and industry diversified, requiring more labour.

As a result, during the 1960s Barcelona received new immigrants, mainly from the south and west of Spain, increasing the city's total population from 1,560,000 inhabitants in 1960 to 1,750,000 in 1970. However, although the Social Emergency Plan was passed in 1958, whose aim was to promote the construction of large public housing estates in the suburbs, this measure was not enough; in 1974 there were still almost 1,500 shacks in shanty towns in Barcelona and many newly built districts continued to suffer from significant shortages of public facilities and services.

At the same time as this social and housing crisis, the turn of the decade between the 1950s and 1960s saw the emergence of important movements and initiatives which, from different spheres (workers, students, local and cultural), demanded better living conditions, expressed their opposition to Francoism, and fought to recover democracy, freedoms and rights, as well as Catalan culture. Examples include the first student protests (1957); the emergence of the Nova Cançó movement (1959); the creation of the Adrià Gual School of Dramatic Art (1960); the birth of the magazines *Serra d'Or* (1959) and *Cavall Fort* (1961), the publishing houses Club Editor (1959) and Edicions 62 (1962), and the record labels Edigsa (1961) and Concèntric (1964); the founding of Òmnium Cultural (1961) and the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art (1960) and the Elisava design school (1961).

This energy and vitality continued and diversified in the mid-1960s: the Associació de Mestres Rosa Sensat (1965) was founded; the Sindicato Democrático de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Barcelona (1966) was created, leading to the Caputxinada and La Mesa Redonda; La Cova del Drac (1965) and Bocaccio (1967) opened (a regular haunt for the *Gauche Divine*); the Grup de Folk (1967) appeared and the Eina School (1967) was set up.

In the field of architecture, some young architects designed clearly innovative proposals which, through collective housing projects, proposed new ways of living and cohabiting in intentionally diverse communities.

The **Casa Fullà** (Gènova, 27/1966-1970), by Lluís Clotet and Òscar Tusquets, proposes a wide variety of apartments (consisting of one to four storeys) and communal spaces linked to the entrance and accesses to the dwellings.

On a much larger scale, **Walden 7** (Sant Just Desvern/1970-1975), by the Taller de Arquitectura studio, incorporates 446 dwellings, communal spaces, shops, terraces and swimming pools within a three-dimensional labyrinthine complex arranged around five large interconnected interior courtyards. The complex is as varied and full of surprises as a medieval town or Arab kasbah, at the same time being designed as an isolated city-come-building in the style of Le Corbusier's *unités d'habitation*, two aspects that link it directly to Constant's *New Babylon*.

Finally, according to architect Esteve Bonell, the aim of the **Frègoli** building (Madrazo, 54-56/1970-1975) is to offer 'unconventional housing for unconventional people' by means of two-storey apartments rich in visual relationships between spaces that also challenge the standards of the time. At the end of the Franco era, these three projects became symbols of modernity and counterculture, involving various artists, architects and intellectuals.

Consequently, 1960s Barcelona was experiencing both political, social and (counter)cultural fervour, also in the world of architecture, as well as rampant urban *developmentalism*, two factors that would transform it forever.

## THE NEW BABYLON IN THE WORDS OF CONSTANT

«Is it a social utopia? An urban architectural design? An artistic vision? A cultural revolution? A technological conquest? A solution of the practical problems of the industrial age? Each of these questions touches an aspect of *New Babylon*»

«*New Babylon* is not a utopia. Utopias are always the idealisation of an existing society. A utopia expresses the human being's lack of hope of improving his condition and fulfilling his desires»  
»Utopias are always static and immutable; utopias are always dictatorships in which any idea of freedom becomes a threat»  
»Utopia is essentially the enemy of culture, which is playing with reality and its constant transformation, whereas there's no room for play in a static ideal state»

«The real choice is between the complete abandon[ment] of all creative activity and the preparation of a future culture, desirable, [...] to choose the latter position, one has to believe in the success of the revolution»

«To change society one needs, above all, 'imagination'»

«The opposite of a utilitarian society is ludic society, where the human being, freed by automation from productive work, is at least in a position to develop his creativity»

«If the enormous creative potential of the masses were one day to be aroused and put into action, today's so-called 'art' would lose all meaning»

«Can one conceive of an education aiming at the development of creativity? It is permissible to doubt it and to ask oneself if all education, or what is designated by that term, is not extremely limited, if its principal function is not to restrain freedom»

«*Homo ludens* dispenses with education. He learns by playing»

«A ludic society can only be a classless society»

«In a society that no longer knows the struggle for subsistence, competition disappears at both the individual and group level. Barriers and frontiers also disappear»

«*New Babylon* ends nowhere (since the Earth is round)»

«The modern nomadism of weekend getaways and holiday tourism is a clear symptom of the revival of a repressed urge to wander»

«There will no longer be any chance of getting off track in the sense of getting lost, but rather in the more positive sense of discovering previously unknown paths»

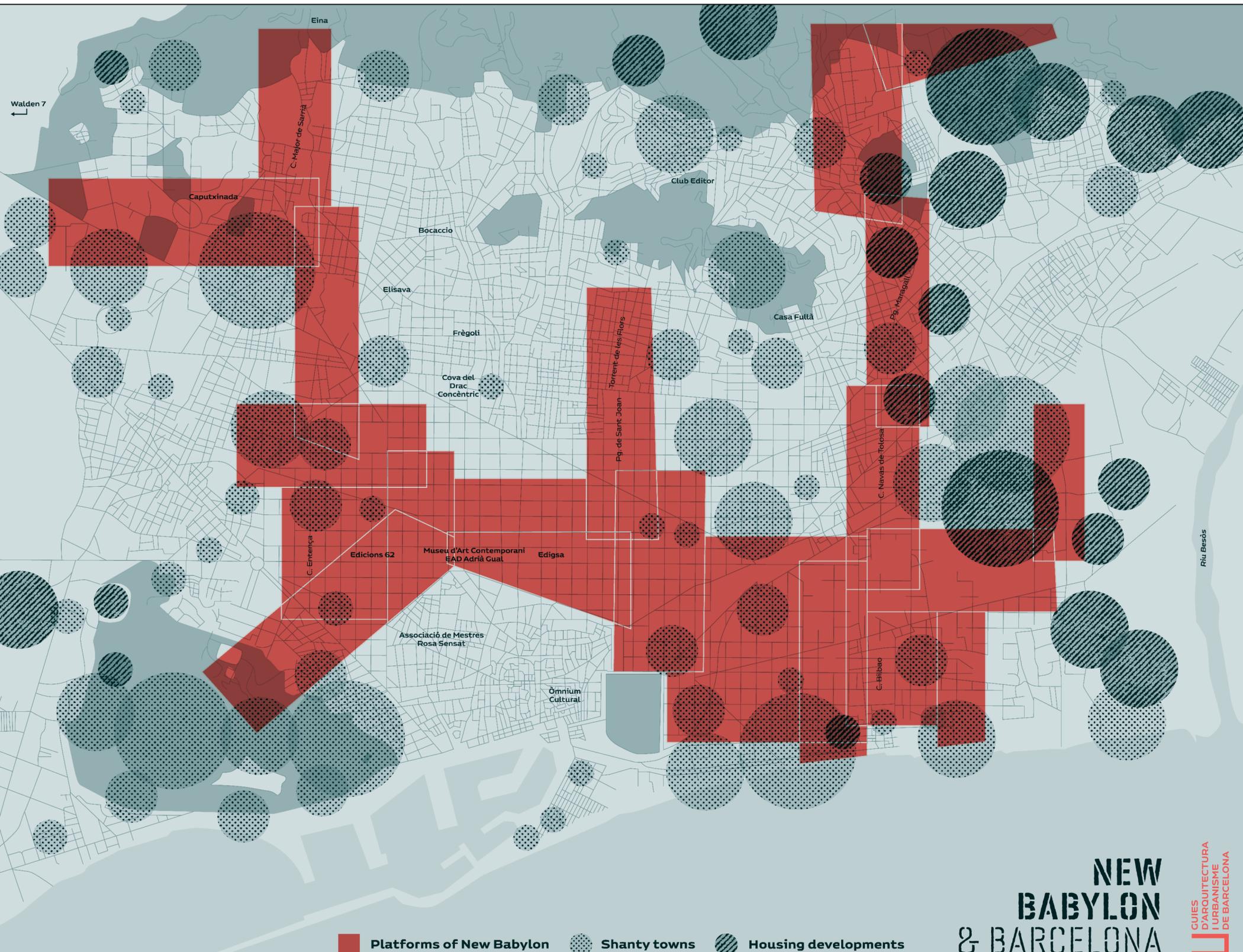
«The sector is the smallest element, the basic unit of the *New Babylon* network, one of the links in the chains that make it up»

«A sector [...] is mainly a horizontal skeleton extending over an area of 10 to 20 hectares, about 15 to 20 metres above the ground. Its total height is between 30 and 60 metres. Inside, one or more fixed nuclei contain a technical centre and a service centre that is also a hotel reception centre»

«In its simplest form, the sector incorporates a number of superimposed horizontal spaces linked to each other and to the ground by vertical elements, and one or more fixed nuclei for services»

«Fear of technology is reactionary. [...] Without automation of production, the masses' creative potential remains an illusion. Technology is a necessary condition for *New Babylon*»

«To seek to dominate nature without the help of technique is pure fiction. As is collective creation without the appropriate means of communication»



■ Platforms of New Babylon    ● Shanty towns    ● Housing developments

NEW  
BABYLON  
& BARCELONA

GUIES D'ARQUITECTURA URBANISME DE BARCELONA