

Design Train Congress: Designing Design Education / Trailer 2
European League Of Institutes of The Arts, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 5-7 June 2008

**SKETCHING LESSONS FROM UTOPIAS:
TRANSFORMING A BUILDING SITE
TO A RECREATIONAL SITE**

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ABSTRACT

As far as architecture education is considered, the actions of “designing” and “playing” may become interchangeable; they may become intertwined:

Playing/Designing: “To engage in an activity with the aim of materializing or conjuring up something, or simply passing time, enjoying oneself, getting distracted, and so on..”

Without doubt, the most exciting thing for any student introduced to the wonderland of architecture is to discover ways of design unique to herself and design things never before designed by others. This search for “uniqueness” is the basic characteristic that makes the game enjoyable: A design process of continually searching for new designs, questioning, doubting, pursuing the “other”.

In today’s architecture education, there is a potential danger in the search for “uniqueness”: A decrease in the design tools and processes based on the student’s imagination, and an increase in educational models focusing on the end result by taking “shortcuts”.

At this point, samples of utopian architecture – the most playful, childlike, naughty vein of the field – may inspire new models in architecture education. The present study is an imaginative experiment on how architectural utopia sketches may form the base for various methods, particularly for students in the early stages of their architecture education: A search for clues of an education independent of prescriptions; far from the “real”, “limitations” and “what is to be built”; and close to “fantasies”, “games” and “sketches”. The basic questions that nurture this search may be listed as follows:

- Considering that each utopia produces creative design criteria, processes and presentations different from others, is it possible to make students seek “independent” ways with their own creativity and excitement (before having adopted and memorized a (few) design methods)? Is it possible to

develop original design methods and tools, and to place these exercises at the very heart of designs?

- Can it be argued that social, literary and architectural utopias have been designed in an amateur (even “childish”) way that is easy to understand and would appeal to everybody, but also that this amateur attitude is a conscious choice? Is there a possibility for a search for bold, alternative and experimental attitudes far from professional and memorized methods?
- In the rapid process of change seen in architecture where the “creative” is continually emphasized, can the boundaries of architecture be extended to the land of dreams? Is it sometimes possible for dreams to encompass words to be said about the way daily life goes?

Keywords: *Architecture education, utopian architecture, imaginary, design, play*

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Architecture education itself can be taken as a design problem and focus continuously on how we can reach the better, the different, the more correct. Changing conditions, different approaches, new needs or alternative thoughts can be accepted as basic design criteria for this design education (or educational design). The journey may start from these criteria, it may encompass the excitement of reaching the unique, and terminate in alternative education/design methods. Or may be not: The design journey is actually this process of seeking. A search for the alternative, the route of this journey may be decided with the help of design studios: Considering that any design-related information is turned into projects by students and that these projects directly make up students' design resource, it is obvious that these studios are the most open areas to transformation, thus allowing for different ways of design.

The biggest joy of this study is the search for an uncommon area of "excitement" in-between "design", "games" and "a world of imagination": "Messing with" the settings of the existing architecture education system with a "childish" enthusiasm, looking from a different perspective to the common implementation of education in the uncharted territory created by completely "imaginary" architectural projects. At the starting point there is acceptance:

As far as architecture education is considered, the actions of "designing" and "playing" may become interchangeable; they may become intertwined:

Playing/Designing: "To engage in an activity with the aim of materializing or conjuring up something, or simply passing time, enjoying oneself, getting distracted, and so on.."

Emphasizing the relationship of games and design, Kojin Karatani defines design with Wittgenstein's concept of "the game whose rules change as it is played". According to Karatani, after each step in the architectural design, the process becomes enriched with new rules and decisions. This turns design into a lively area of sharing and interaction peculiar to games (Karatani, 1995).

Without doubt, the most exciting thing for any student introduced to the wonderland of architecture is to discover ways of design unique to herself and design things never before designed by others. This search for “uniqueness” is the basic characteristic that makes the game enjoyable: A design process of continually searching for new designs, questioning, doubting, pursuing the “other”.

At this point, such “unique”, “other” and “gamelike” searches of the architecture student appears in the most imaginative vein of architectural design: Utopian architecture. Samples of utopian architecture – the most playful, childlike, naughty vein of the field – may inspire new models in architecture education.

Defining the unreal but imagined in the most intense and direct way, utopias multiply with a glittering and playful structure in the darkest and most tumultuous ages of humanity (as if to spite these times). This multiplication may be seen as a sign of new ages to start in the history of humanity.

Born during the darkest time of the 20th century, the post-World War II sketches of utopias each led to heated debates (as most projects of this age were far from the closed, incomplete, imposing, tidy and static structure of utopias, these imaginary projects should best be called “sketches of utopia”). They can be accepted as games represented by the concepts of the time.

According to Guy Debord, the 1960’s were the years when utopias and games came closest to each other. Debord believes that the new urban approach of this era which he calls a new “game area” is closely related to the changes caused by industrialization: In this “game area”, new urban designs can be created “with the differentiation in freely established game rules” (Debord, 1995). The hopeful and optimistic atmosphere of the era lies beneath this popularity of the concepts of games and utopias in the 1960’s: On the top of the list of most debated topics were the dreams about how people would spend their free time in the near future. Games and artistic activities were the first to come to mind for these leisure times.

On the other hand, Bernard Suits directs our attention to the similarity between “playing” and “utopic existence”: According to him, utopias involve an imaginary world torn away from the reality such as in games, and this imaginary world helps interpret the reality in a different way (Suits, 2005).

At this stage, it may be good to stop the “game” for a while and visit the “design class”. However hard it may attempt to be efficient and successful, the design education offered at architecture schools have two main problems.

The first one may be summarized as “a decrease in the design tools and processes based on the student’s imagination”. Drawing/presentation based computer programs may tear a new student apart from the context and story of the design from a “shortcut” and drift him to far away places. Such programs which tend to present the designed and almost finished (and which currently have the function of being a presentation tool, rather than a design tool) take the candidate architect on a journey around the common rather than new searches. These programs, which are far away (currently) from the hazy, turbulent, blurred, tense, complicated, unknown, nerve-wrecking, challenging, efficient wonderland needed by the nature of the design process (inadvertently) keep students from unique and creative game areas.

The second problem is the “pressure that the professional work life puts on education models”. The demands made by students’ future workplaces from architecture schools always intersect at the same points: Quick, practical, down-to-earth designers who can use advanced computer aided design programs and can complete projects in the shortest time possible parallel to the demands of the market. Such demands naturally affect education models and therefore bring “market conditions” into design studios: General expectations built on end results and application may result in a “shortcut” connection between education and the current operations of professional applications.

Instead of judging or bedaubing the steps taken with good faith, which aim to prepare the students to the situations that they will encounter after graduation, an alternative space may be obtained with this question: “Is it possible to find any other way to raise efficiency of the education process?” After this main question, other questions may be multiplied, retaining the dreamlands of the students, to enhance various alternatives for the current education systems: How can the “unique” “quite different” and “playful” creative researchs and flame of enthusiasms of the architecture student, at the beginning architectural adventure, be kept fresh? Considering that each utopia produces creative design criteria, processes and presentations different from others, is it possible to make students seek “independent” ways with their own creativity

and excitement (before having adopted and memorized a (few) design methods)? Is it possible to develop original design methods and tools, and to place these exercises at the very heart of designs? Can it be argued that social, literary and architectural utopias have been designed in an amateur (even “childish”) way that is easy to understand and would appeal to everybody, but also that this amateur attitude is a conscious choice? Is there a possibility for a search for bold, alternative and experimental attitudes far from professional and memorized methods? In the rapid process of change seen in architecture where the “creative” is continually emphasized, can the boundaries of architecture be extended to the land of dreams? Is it sometimes possible for dreams to encompass words to be said about the way daily life goes?

All these questions form the basis for different and experimental designs for a design-oriented process: A search for clues of an education independent of prescriptions; far from the “real”, “limitations” and “what is to be built”; and close to “fantasies”, “games” and “sketches”

The history of architecture may be read alternatively with the help of imagined but not yet materialized designs: The history of architectural utopias has a different wealth with all the colors of imagination. The designs that constitute this wealth make up a long list of project characteristics: The dilemmas they try to solve, concepts that belong to the era they were designed in, events they were inspired by, living area preferences, the way they treat the historical texture, the way they interpret the nature, their evaluations of city life, elements of excitement and joy, the preferred building materials, the conditions of the era they belong to, ways of representation, the lifestyles they offer, situations they resist, sources of inspiration.

Including the main components of imaginary projects, this list may be read in several different ways and thus become diverse, different or longer. Based on an almost century long history, the history of utopias may be treated differently by each interpreter.

At this point we may start disassembling the sketches of utopia into their parts and evaluate these parts with reference to the list mentioned above: By quickly playing with these imaginary projects, deforming and distorting them, replacing them, aligning them with one another, we can try to draw a general framework and then launch a different design/game model within this framework to use in architecture education.

The dilemmas they try to solve:

The problems identified by these completely imaginary projects related to the era they were designed in and the solutions they propose to these vary: While the name father of the concept “utopia”, Thomas More, developed in his work *Utopia*¹, solutions to the main problems of particularly European cities in the Middle Ages (More, 1834), Robert Owen designed *New Harmony (Indiana)*² due to the negative effects of industrialization on cities in the 19th century (Owen, 1948).

Concepts that belong to the era they were designed in:

The spirit of the era directly penetrates into the structure of the work created: While Le Corbusier turned his own idea of “plug-in” in the early 20th century into *Contemporary City (Ville Contemporaine)*³, with the basic concepts of modernism which was adopted passionately at the time (Corbusier, 1986), forty years later Archigram took Le Corbusier’s “Plug-in” to design *Plug-in City*⁴ which ended up as a different ideal city created by using a different and critical interpretation of modernism (Cook, 1967), (Cook, 1972).

Events they were inspired by:

Inventions, discoveries and successes of an earth-shattering caliber open new horizons in the imagination of designers: while the debates caused by space trip and space dwellings led to the innovative design of *Sketches for a Space City*⁵ (Gaillard, 1964), (Maymont, 1972), the DNA spiral discovered in 1953 inspired the *Town plan for Tokyo*⁶ (Kurokawa, 1962), (Kurokawa, 1972).

Living area preferences:

In the search for an ideal life style, the yearning for unique architectural designs result in different approaches to living area preferences: While *Unabara (Floating Industrial City)*⁷, an example of the commonly seen living areas over seas, offers a life independent of land and away from cities (Kikutake, 1972), *Space City*⁸ chooses the cities we live in as its living area and includes units to be located in certain areas of these cities (Isozaki, 1965), (Isozaki A., 1972).

The way they treat the historical texture:

Different views exist about the use of areas with historical value as design input in utopic projects: While *Crater City*⁹ designs the new city around the old one which has a historical texture (Chanéac, 1964), (Chanéac, 1972), the project known as *Paris Spatial*¹⁰ is based on the idea of leaving the city intact but adding a new layer to it (Friedman: 1962), (Friedman: 1972).

The way they interpret the nature:

The relationships these projects establish with the nature show that they have different sensitivities: Based on the design idea that there should be minimal contact with the land so as not to damage the nature and therefore using big legs to elevate the entire city, *Mobile City*¹¹ is engaged in a large-scale search (Friedman, 1960-61), (Friedman, 1972), whereas *Living Pod*¹² offers a smaller-scale housing alternative in order to minimize the damage that dwellings in an ideal city give to the nature (Greene, 1972).

Their evaluations of city life:

The cities we live in and different readings of the lives we live in these cities present different solutions for ideal dwellings: While *Intrapolis (Funnel Town)*¹³, designed with the idea that the untidy structure of existing cities affect people's psychological health negatively, claims to offer a city model appropriate for urban people (Jonas, 1972), *Arctic Town*¹⁴ chooses an area of no urbanization far from existing cities and offers cities in the poles (Otto, Bubner & Tange, 1972).

Elements of excitement and joy:

A common design method is to start from different excitements and joys to create brand new living areas: *Project for the Auroville City*¹⁵, which has the excitement of turning the views of a philosopher called Sri Aurobindo into a city design (Anger, Braslavsky, Heymann, 1965), and *Trigonic Spatial Cells*¹⁶, which is based on the idea that people should live hanging in the air (Dahinden, 1972), are just two examples of the diversity of the excitement and joy seen in utopias.

The preferred building materials:

A design approach that has been tried before is to imagine the use of new and unused structural materials in building new and

unique living areas: The use of brand new structural materials is the common point of *Chemical Architecture*¹⁷, which is based on the idea that living areas should be built easily, changes should be possible later depending on need, and eliminated easily afterwards (Katavolos, 1962), (Katavolos, 1971), and *Pneumatic Residential Cells*¹⁸ which was planned as inflated units with the help of new construction technologies (Jungmann, 1972).

The conditions of the era they belong to:

Even though they may not be looking for direct solutions to the issues of daily life, utopias embody the conditions of the era they are designed in: *Instant City (Une imagerie de vie urbaine a la campagne)*¹⁹ contains many details specific to the '68 era (Archigram, 1969), (Drew, 1972), while *Manifestation Plastique (Sculptured urban landscape)*²⁰ clearly displays concerns about emerging traffic problems in cities at the time (Lefebvre, Karczewski & Zandfos, 1972), (Valadares & Benoit, 1968).

Ways of representation:

The representation of the projects forming the history of utopias are as diverse as their contents: Designed 3D from all perspectives, *Archology (Architecture + Ecology)*²¹ has its entire details shown in technical drawings (Soleri, 1968), (Soleri, 1972), the representation technique used in *Project for Tel Aviv*²² is a giant urban model (Lubicz-Nicz & Pelliccia, 1964), (Lubicz-Nicz & Pelliccia, 1972).

The lifestyles they offer:

The suggestions put forward by these sketches as alternatives to existing lifestyles assume important roles in the shaping of designs: While the lifestyle advocated by *Bus City (Cité Autobus)*²³ is based on the idea of continuous travel (Rottier, 1966), the life offered by *Mesa City" Ideal City Project*²⁴ is based on continuous education (Soleri, 1968).

Situations they resist:

Another area to examine these projects is the situations they resist: While *Slum-clearance Scheme for Harlem, New York City*²⁵ developed an urban project by resisting the slums in cities and emphasizing the need for clarification in these areas (Fuller & Sadao, 1972), the main concern of *Urban Residences and their*

*Connective Systems*²⁶ is to reestablish family ties which have begun to fade (Akiyama, 1972).

Sources of inspiration:

One of the most commonly wondered aspects of these sketches of utopia based on the idea of designing an ideal living space from scratch is their sources of inspiration: while *Ideas Circus*²⁷ uses its source of inspiration, circuses, to offer a lively and fickle lifestyle similar to that of a circus (Cook, 1968), *New Babylon*²⁸ offers a city hanging in webs in the air referring to its source of inspiration, spiders (Constant, 1962), (Constant, 1971).

This list, which was prepared only to draw a general framework and give general information about the background of the game/education model to be designed and the width of the game area, was based on a few projects from the history of architectural utopias. These examples may help us glance at different parts of the utopian culture or assume another function: Just like in the popular children's game, the dots that are connected with lines may shock us by yielding a drawing that is impossible to guess beforehand. New dots may be added to these every time and a more playful design process may be obtained.

A game/design attempt:

“Feeling the Blanks” / “Feel in the Blanks”

Starting from the milestones of the utopian design culture, we may produce the sketch of an educational model to be used in enriching the imagination of design students and architectural design processes. With randomly selected combinations of different design criteria, experimental models with blanks may be formed. Due to the nature of design which proceeds in limitations, the characteristics shaping the imaginary projects – some of which have been listed above to give an idea – may be taken as the first limitations to be used in the design process. The game/design may be enriched with the help of new and flexible design input – which will encourage students to pour their personal resources into the design – such as student perceptions of today's architecture, their thoughts on urban culture, their evaluations of people's changing lifestyles, their understanding of the newly defined human-nature relationships, and how their imagination is affected by the developing technology.

Or instead of starting a game from scratch based on these imaginary projects, the offers for ideal living spaces may be included in the designs made in project studios: They may find a place for themselves in a gap or “blank” that has not been filled in a design and thus become a source of inspiration for a solution.

The most important characteristic of utopias is that they wet one’s appetite. Voicing potential future situations that may await humanity creates new areas in minds that can only extend through imagination. Utopias make people yearn for the future and thus shape the unknown future. At the heart of design is thinking for the future. In the design process that continuously searches for what has not been imagined before, “excess imagination” does not exist. Even if these projects, which at their worst may be a cause for spending extra time in an imaginary world, may not be of direct use in design studios, they may still help us see what the design should not be and eliminate certain question marks. The elimination of such doubts is the biggest step for designers in reaching solutions during the design process which is naturally hazy.

Particularly in today’s architecture environment, which stands closer to answers than question marks, what could be more useful for an alternative educational model than a dreamy and excited question mark “?”

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ENDNOTES:

¹ *Utopia*: Consists of 54 cities in the island, all large and well-built: the manners, customs, and laws of which are the same, and they are all contrived as near in the same manner as the ground on which they stand will allow. The nearest lie at least 24 miles distance from one another, and the most remote are not so far distant, but that a man can go on foot in one day from it, to that which lies next it. (*Designed by*: Thomas More / 1516)

² *New Harmony*: When Harmony the society decided to move back to Pennsylvania around 1824, they sold the 30,000 acres (121 km²) of land and buildings to Robert Owen, the Welsh utopian thinker and social reformer, and to William Maclure. Owen recruited residents to his model community, but a number of factors led to an early breakup of the communitarian experiment. (*Designed by*: Robert Owen / 1824)

³ *Contemporary City (Ville Contemporaine)*: An unrealised project to house three million inhabitants. The centerpiece of this plan was the group of enormous sixty-story cruciform skyscrapers built on steel frames and encased in huge curtain walls of glass. (*Designed by*: Le Corbusier / 1922)

⁴ *Plug-in City*: A re-arrangeable urban project located in prefabricated units with a predetermined lifespan and in a cage system forming the backbone of the project. (*Designed by*: Archigram (Peter Cook) / 1964)

⁵ *Sketches for a Space City*: A space city project which is developed on the idea that life in space will be possible in the future and which offers a model for non-gravitational places. (*Designed by*: Paul Maymont and Renée Sarger / 1962)

⁶ *Town plan for Tokyo*: Suggesting a new development plan for Tokyo, this project and its three different structures offer a type of frame system and establish an infrastructure for particularly the units within this frame. (*Designed by*: Noriaki Kurokawa / 1961)

⁷ *Unabara (Floating Industrial City)*: Planned as an industrial floating city for a population of 500,000, the city consists of two rings, namely, the inner ring for housing space and the outer ring for

production. The two rings are inter-connected by an administrative block. (*Designed by: Kiyonori Kikutake / 1960*)

⁸ *Space City*: The project presupposes a vertical service core built inside existing city centers with joists stuck into them and units attached to these joints. Other major concepts of the project were flexibility, openness, transformation, and multiplication. (*Designed by: Arata Isozaki / 1962*)

⁹ *Crater City*: Initiated in 1963 as a research project and finalized in 1968, this project suggests a three-dimensional frame system around the old/existing city and offers to patch this system with different space alternatives which can be produced quickly “like cars”. (*Designed by: Chanéac / 1963-68*)

¹⁰ *Paris Spatial*: Designed to prevent the destruction of Paris city center to meet new needs, the project uses giant feet to enable elevated layers and thus create the spaces that the city needs. (*Designed by: Yona Friedman / 1962*)

¹¹ *Mobile City*: A spatial structure raised up on piles which contains inhabited volumes, fitted inside some of the "voids", alternating with other unused volumes. This structure may span certain unavailable sites, and areas where building is not possible or permitted (expanses of water, marshland), or areas that have already been built upon (an existing city). (*Designed by: Yona Friedman / 1956-1960*)

¹² *Living Pod*: Self-sufficient in terms of energy and capable of processing its own waste, this cell-like project is made of mobile units in which different functions can be performed with different machines. (*Designed by: Archigram (David Greene) / 1966*)

¹³ *Intrapolis*: The project is envisioned to be built on the outskirts of the city and offer necessary functions. According to Jonas, a city can only have a balanced nature if it has “introverted” buildings, away from traffic, in touch with the sky and its neighbors. In this new design, transportation problems have been solved and public places are of paramount importance. (*Designed by: Walter Jonas / 1960*)

¹⁴ *Arctic Town*: This polar city project to be constructed in 3 square km transparent domes aims to serve 15.000 to 30.000 people. (*Designed by: Warmbronn Studio (Frei Otto and Ewald Bubner) / 1971*)

¹⁵ *Project for the Auroville City*: A partially materialized project designed for people following Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy and

living in a commune a few kilometres north of Pondicherry in India for their spiritual development. (*Designed by:* Roger Anger, Pierre Braslavky, Mario Heymann / 1968 -)

¹⁶ *Trigonic Spatial Cells*: A suspended project which envisions steel cables in a valley or between two mountains, and which involves mobile planes on which equilateral triangular cells of 10,35 m sides will be placed. (*Designed by:* Justus Dahinden / 1965)

¹⁷ *Chemical Architecture*: Believing that developments in the field of chemistry can be applied in architecture, this project is based on the idea of using a new chemical construction material which can take any form and be used anywhere (especially on the water). (*Designed by:* William Katavolos / 1960)

¹⁸ *Pneumatic Residential Cells*: Made of an accommodation unit equipped to adapt to various climatic conditions, the project consists of bunches designed to be used on land, hanging in the air, on the water or in space. (*Designed by:* Jean-Paul Jungmann / 1967)

¹⁹ *Instant City (Une imagerie de vie urbaine a la campagne)*: This project bares resemblance to Ideas Circus in both its designers and the suggested lifestyle, and defines itself as a “provocative” structure which will lead to social enlightenment. It has been claimed that the architectural environment created through this project will trigger different knowledge and feelings by emulating a circus and taking marginal city lives to outside of them. (*Designed by:* Archigram (Peter Cook, Ron Herron, Dennis Crompton) / 1968)

²⁰ *Manifestation Plastique (Sculptured urban landscape)*: Consisting of a transportation ring around Vetheuil, a city aside one of the curves of the Seine River, the project envisions new accommodation units in the mountains surrounding the existing city. Leaving the old city center intact and even protecting it, the project offers a transportation system operated with air pressure. (*Designed by:* Equipe MIASTO: Michel Lefebvre, Jan Karczewski and Witold Zandfos, 1970)

²¹ *Archology (Architecture + Ecology)*: The arcology concept proposes a highly integrated and compact three-dimensional urban form that is the opposite of urban sprawl with its inherently wasteful consumption of land, energy and time, tending to isolate people from each other and the community. (*Designed by:* Paolo Soleri / 1960-69)

²² *Project for Tel Aviv*: Inspired by the city’s new traffic arrangements, the project involves an extension and a man-made

island. The island is connected to the land with a direct pedestrian road and a winding highway. The most memorable part of the project is its massive, saddle-shaped structures. (*Designed by: Ja Lubicz-Nicz ve Carlo Pellicia / 1963*)

²³ *Bus City (Cité Autobus)*: Aiming to transport large-scale industrialization to architecture, this project makes a unique suggestion: Using buses like caravans and allowing people to spend their spare times in different ways. (*Designed by: Guy Rottier / 1966*)

²⁴ *“Mesa City” Ideal City Project*: A line-like 10 km wide and 30 km long urban project located on the banks of a river and housing a total of 2 million inhabitants. The project consists of various cities and 34 villages, each of which houses 3,000 people. (*Designed by: Paolo Soleri / 1958 - 1967*)

²⁵ *Slum-clearance Scheme for Harlem, New York City*: A joint project by Richard Buckminster Fuller and Shoji Sadao, aimed to erect giant buildings instead of slums. In order to change the social and architectural identity of Harlem, the plan envisions a giant building in a pre-planned area and people living in this huge structure. Later when abandoned, this area will be transformed into parks or various public areas. (*Designed by: Richard Buckminster Fuller and Shoji Sadao / 1965*)

²⁶ *Urban Residences and their Connective Systems*: Consisting of residential towers, which look more like oil refineries than apartment buildings that are composed of residential sections stacked one above the other, the project is designed by the concept of preventing the loosening of family ties, which has become such a marked feature of the industrial civilization. (*Designed by: Tetsuya Akiyama, Iwao Kawakami, Norio Sato, Yuji Shiraishi and Yoshiaki Koyama / 1966*)

²⁷ *Ideas Circus*: A travelling project which can be installed and dismantled easily. It aims to establish a travelling campus and bring people together with methods which are thought to constitute the education system of the future. (*Designed by: Archigram (Peter Cook) / 1967*)

²⁸ *New Babylon*: The main concern of the project which does not offer enough detail can be summarized as such: A multi-layered suspending platform independent of the earth, and the search for a space where various spatial arrangements will be possible. (*Designed by: Constant / 1960*)

