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**A new New Babylon -
Bottom up Urban Planning
and the Situationist utopia**

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Introduction

The Situationist International was arguably one of the latest instances of the modern avant-gardes, even though one of the group's main goals was to demolish the ideological and ethical consensus at the foundation of modernity. Their pamphlets and manifestos expressed a virulent and thorough discomfort against the heritage of the classical European avant-gardes both in art and architecture, a strong opposition that was probably the firestarter of their program. However, many features of the Situationists' agenda can be traced back to customary procedures of groups such as Surrealism, Futurism or Dada: nonnegotiable anti-individualism, contempt for the bourgeois conception of life, the belief in the radical continuity between aesthetics and politics, and the revolutionary aim of redefining the human being and his social contract by demolishing the boundaries between life and art. Struggling against a modernity that they regarded as overpassed and failed, the Situationists were paradoxically taking the modern project further, as one of modernity's key dictates was never-ending self-criticism.

There is nonetheless an undeniable breach between the earlier developments of European Modernity (summarized in the theoretical concerns displayed at the CIAMs), and the ferocious criticism conducted in the post-war period. All across the lengthy existence of the group, the Situationist International took part of a self-reflective intellectual climate where Venturi, Aldo Rossi, the Team X or even late Le Corbusier invoked the revision of the failures of the modern city. Very prolific both in theory and practice, their core ideas about contemporary urban challenges were summarized – aside from magazines, lectures and theoretical discussions – in a design that operated as their manifesto: Constant Nieuwenhys' *New Babylon* city.

New Babylon was not a finished, clear-cut model for a physical city: it was rather a cluster of intentions, ideas and intuitions that were elaborated and amalgamated back and forth between 1956 and 1974. Instead of a defined design ready to be constructed, it was the practical demonstration of what the Situationist called "*Unitary urbanism*", a revolutionary way of conceiving the human environment that mixed art, technique and architecture to subvert the classical parameters of urban planning. It pay little attention to matters of size, construction or feasibility, inasmuch as it aimed to be the diffuse depiction of an ideal new environment for an utopian new way of life: it was imbued with an eminently psychological dimension and rooted in programs of intricate metaphysical and ethical content, and it is thus represented as an abstract layout or design principle. *A method.*

Formally, *New Babylon* was conceived as an enormous urban megastructure, a covered city suspended high above the ground on huge columns, leaving all automobile traffic isolated on the ground plane and displaying a labyrinth of multileveled pedestrian corridors and cabins that hold the daily activities. But the physical traits aren't the most striking feature: its strength relies on the overall conceptual

Frontispiece (Fig. 1) Constant – Model for *New Babylon*. © Fondation Constant.

approach, an extremely ambitious strategy that aims not only to accommodate the contemporary citizen, but rather to reinvent his lifestyle. According to Constant, modern urbanism in the twenties and thirties tried to encompass the formal design of the city with the needs and demands of the emerging society, but the intention resulted in solutions cowardly in accordance with the Fordist economy. Inversely, the Situationist agenda showed more revolutionary aspirations, as the goal of their urbanism was not to boost the effectiveness of the city as a *machine for living*, but to disable the gears of the productivist device transforming *productivity* into *unpredictability*. This endeavor was intended to enable a brand-new social contract for a hypothetical future human being: the classical Marxian “*homo faber*” (a man whose dignity and class consciousness relies eminently on his working conditions) is surpassed by the “*homo ludens*” (a playful citizen that constantly reinvents life by means of creativity, curiosity and hedonism). The factory, the museum, the piazza and the house are dissolved into a continuous, meta-functional urban fabric always subject of transformation and reinvention by the free spirit of a non-individualistic dweller. The city becomes, as in classical modernity, an emancipatory artifact, but more biased towards utopia. Constant insisted however that New Babylon was technically realizable, and rejected the adjective of utopian inasmuch as he envisioned the project as the most accurate habitational solution for an irremediable new society yet to emerge.

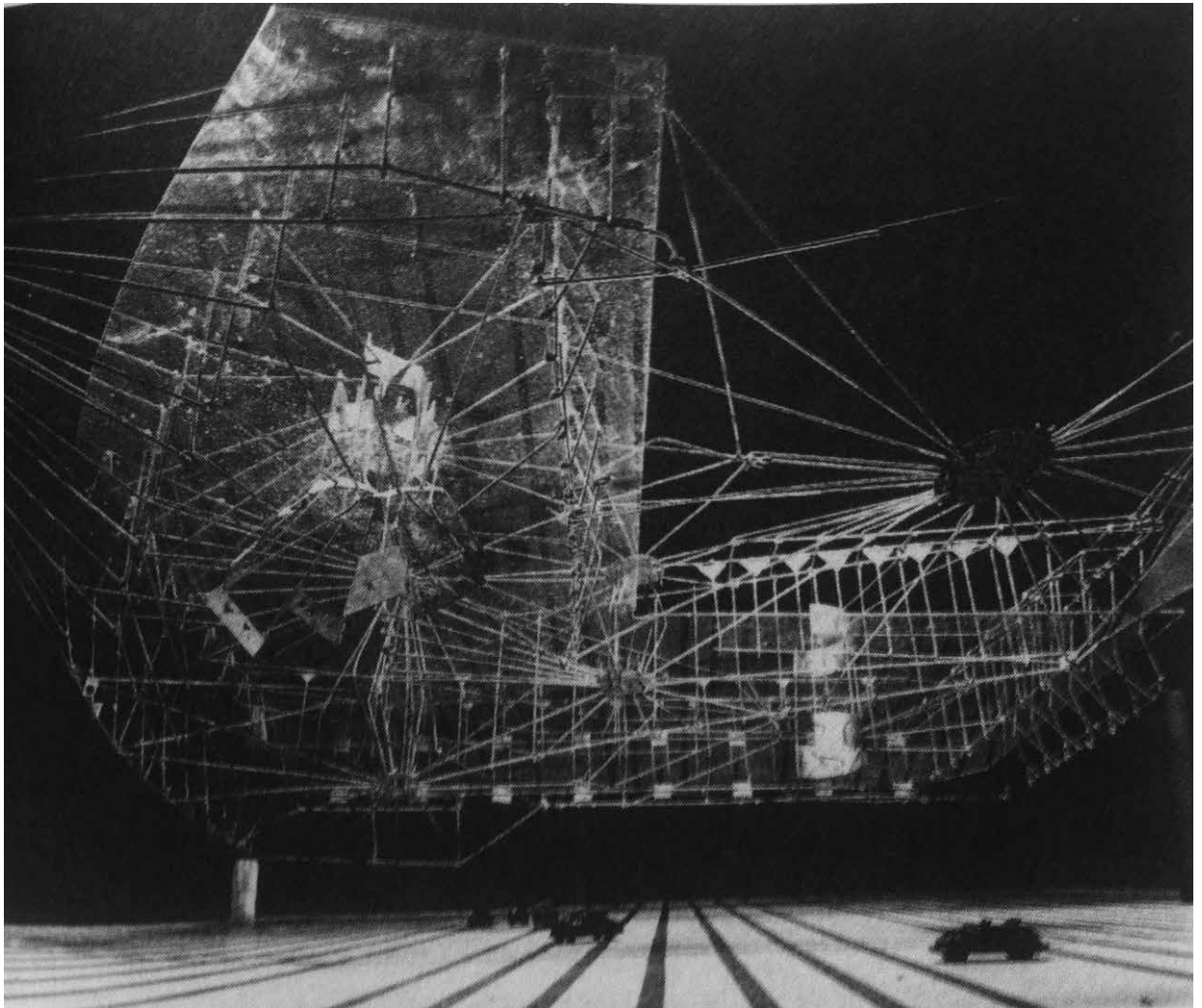
Utopian or not, recent social, political and urban events have proven many of Constant’s intuitions right, and the New Babylon project has succeeded at inspiring some audacious and forward-thinking cultural developments in novel city-making. The 2008 global economical crisis and the subsequent halt in urban investments triggered an intense debate among architects and planners to discuss the ethical foundations and operative possibilities of urban design and management amidst the new scenario of severe austerity. The heyday of the so-called “*Participatory turn*” and *bottom-up urbanism* blossomed in a new intellectual climate that reconsiders through and through the way we design, inhabit and manage the city, and the relations between the different agents -institutions, private sector, civil society- that partake in urban decision-making. This cultural turmoil has reinvigorated the interest in the ideas of widely differing authors like Jane Jacobs, Lewis Mumford, Henri Lefebvre or Constant, all of whom had nonetheless in common the endeavor of imagining a genuine human space in times of ecological meltdown, hectic technological expansion and social unsteadiness.

Participatory, bottom-up urbanism cannot be reduced to a unitary and coherent doctrine: it is rather a heterogeneous and plural multiplicity of urban interventions that have in common the interest in highlighting a socially conscious conception of urbanity, and the subversion of classical masterplanning bureaucracy, often recalling preexisting experiences in horizontal democracy and politics of the

commons. But perhaps, underneath those scattered practices, hides a shared utopia that we shall call *New New Babylon* for its debt with Constant's intuitions.

Aiming to track the influence of Constant's oeuvre upon this plural, global trend, in this paper we shall enumerate four pairs of reciprocal critical concepts that best define the coincidences and divergences between *New Babylon*'s core ideas and some exemplary cases of participatory urbanism.

Fig. 2 Constant – Model of *New Babylon*.
© Fondation Constant.



1. THE HISTORICAL / THE EXTEMPORANEOUS

In spite of the vagueness and openness of its design, New Babylon was envisioned as a new built metropolis: it had no relation with any existing city, so the management of historical settlements wasn't a pivotal concern. In the tradition of the Ville Radieuse and the most radical and extemporaneous visions from early modern urbanism, its flaw was perhaps such an inattentive disinterest in memory, an attitude that may be in contradiction with the overall ethical principle that ruled the design: if New Babylon should first and foremost allow for the expression of desire and affection, it could have taken into account the affective bonds that tie a community with its local, historical dwelling place.

In this regard, the Situationist International probably inherited the Futurist's inalienable confidence in despising any cultural bond with history as a means to prioritize the pure potentials of the present, anticipating what would later be called "the end of history". Such attitude had a huge impact upon early modern urbanism, but soon became one of the most controversial issues of twentieth century urban planning. The critical literature of the fifties and sixties – especially Henri Lefebvre's *The right to the city*, was earnestly skeptical of this conception of time, that led to alienation and lack of identity in most urban developments during the European post-war period: for Marc Augé, *non-placeness* is subsequent to forgetfulness.

Many bottom-up urbanism proposals recover the powers of local history as a fundamental means to empower community identities. This idea has often been invoked to struggle against the rise of gentrification and to stop the aggressive, ahistorical Neoliberal interventionism. But the concept of "history" doesn't only refer to a picturesque and monumentalized ancient past, but to recent urban areas that have matured enough momentum as to foster a solid sense of local identity that ties the community together. Against the backdrop of triumphant real estate developments for high-class new dwellers, activists defend the consolidation of the existing neighborhoods by virtue of the spatial relations that have been enabled and consolidated in the near history.

Constant claimed that the gypsies' nomadism was one of the initial inspirations for his oeuvre, but in many cases the opposite is fundamental in participatory urbanism: local, bottom up activist groups call for the right *not* to move away, resisting the glamour of nomadic life imposed by globalist capitalism. In London, the feminine group of activists Focus E15 have been fighting back the gentrification of their district, as the housing market has become stark forcing the locals to relocate further away in the London periphery. History is here the key argument for families to claim their "right to the city", as an affective community with specific behaviors has flourished in the neighborhood boosting a sense of belonging to the place.

The "*Derive*" is arguably one of the most popular and replicated Situationist strategies of subversion. It consists, as Debord put it, in "a

mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances” (Debord, 1967): a psychogeographical practice that enables unexpected and revealing experiences across the urban fabric, uncovering invisible phenomena and transforming the act of strolling into a political and artistic epiphany. Combined with the “*Detournement*” (the subversion of Capitalist symbolic tokens converting their original meaning into revolutionary agitprop) it inspires a number of young architects, planners and activists to take hold of the ordinary act of touring the city as a tool to propitiate emerging narratives about the urban history, and an unorthodox mode of propaganda. An exemplary case of this subversive use of the derive has been “Gentricatour”, a series of *derives* across Madrid conducted by the Spanish architectural collective *Todo por la Praxis*: turning upside down the customary preconceptions about tourist trips, they guide people through neighborhoods that have been subjected to frantic processes of gentrification, manifesting how international investors have aggressively transformed the local social fabric with pecuniary purposes only. During the tour, local dwellers participate as first-hand narrators, giving an alternative and legitimate voice that questions the explanations spread by the mainstream media. These practices aim to raise a cultural atmosphere that could eventually modulate ulterior interventions upon the city: in the Situationist manner, agitprop is thus a precondition for planning or constructing.

These participatory actions about memory and identity deploy however a particular notion of cosmopolitanism: the final goal is not to create enclosed and reactionary communities that are reluctant to newcomers, but rather inclusive social structures where migrants, different cultures and lifestyles are welcome and harmonically integrated into the existing neighborhoods. The problem of intercontinental migrations and subsequent cultural frictions that have arisen in Europe has become one of the most critical topics in contemporary sociopolitics, and the participatory urbanism activists have long fought for a peaceful, rightful and equitable resolution of the situation: in their defense of the subaltern classes, they depict a socially-conscious mode of cosmopolitanism that goes hand in hand with the geographical category of the *glocal*, the plexus between global urges and local potentials – and vice versa. Constant’s New Babylon updated classical Marxist internationalism, and was in essence an extremely cosmopolitan artifact, as it strived for a kind of dweller that wasn’t at all determined by his innate social preconditions. The New New Babylon intuited by the bottom-up practitioners renovates cosmopolitanism for an era when large-scale population movements, the struggle for local identity and the collision of diverging creeds threaten urban peacefulness.



Fig. 3 Constant – Collage for *New Babylon* over The Hague. © Fondation Constant.

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2. FORMAL PLANNING/ INFORMAL CITY

One of the inviolable bases of the New Babylon project was its indefiniteness: it was conceived as a diagrammatic layout where only the fundamental strategy and overall organizational structure are punctiliously defined, safeguarding the city's potential for perennial transformation and reinvention. The act of dwelling is no longer a passive activity that cloisters the citizens' capacity to define their spatial habits, but an active opportunity for an unbridled, incessant rearrangement of everyday life. If the city mutates on a daily basis following the dwellers' will and desires, the classical Urban Planning documents and regulations become obsolete and counterproductive. Urbanity is reinvented constantly and no final, prospective model is capable of accommodating all the unpredictable potentials that this palpitating lifestyle brings about.

Besides, urban zoning is deemed as a weapon for social segregation and alienation that entombs the working class in a monotonous existence of pure production and consumption. Unitary Urbanism endeavored to overcome the planning apparatus by stimulating the informal and unpredictable uses of space, reinforcing offhand communal processes that elude the coercive institutional control. At the core of Situationism lies suspicion and contempt against the omnipotence of the bourgeois state, and spontaneous, informal urban developments counteract to illustrate people's imaginativeness. Instead of a ready made *object* conceived from scratch, the city should be a process of pure becoming. Rigid zoning is substituted by viral and punctual interventions upon the urban fabric; strategic decisions are surrogated by pure tactics.

This operational principle has been broadly adopted by bottom-up urbanism, a canon that often tends to pay more attention to the transformation and rehabilitation of existing settlements than to the design of totally new developments. Coined by Manuel de Sola-Morales, the notion of *Urban Acupuncture* has been very fertile in Latin America, Asia and Europe, inspiring architects to dialogue with the communities to evaluate what kind of pinpointed interventions are most convenient in their localities, and then elaborate inclusive, participatory action plans. Jaime Lerner, former mayor of Brazilian city Curitiba, has advocated for urban acupuncture as a fundamental tool to reinvigorate areas in decline: Lerner's work has been exemplary of how public policies and micro scale programs can dynamically integrate the potentials of the public and private sectors diminishing social inequality.

Teddy Cruz's interventions in the Mexican border takes advantage of the potentials of informal settlements, even in situations of severe scarcity: in his projects he monitors how poverty has forced people to invent creative, innovative housing and infrastructural solutions for their needs by using mainly the waste and reclaimed materials at their disposal. As a technical mediator, advisor and designer, Cruz's

proposals are scrupulously respectful with the symbolic and cultural preferences expressed by the locals – in terms of colors, materials, iconicity, etc., safeguarding the organic spatial richness of the informal dwellings. Most of his interventions don't even aim for a unitary design, opting for patchwork setups at ease with the multiplicity of preexisting architectures, profiting from local craftsmen's construction skills as a recognition of the community's dignity.

But Constant's subversive and incendiary legacy is most remarkably present in the work of Spanish architect Santiago Cirugeda and the collective Recetas Urbanas. Working hand in hand with local associations, they scrutinize the urban regulations looking for flaws or undefined epigraphs that leave open the opportunity to foster unruly actions. In one of their projects, they take advantage of the particular regulations on scaffolding to build an ephemeral living room in the auxiliary platforms of a construction site. In other cases they profited from urban voids as potential playgrounds within downgraded areas, using reclaimed materials and the sole workforce of locals. Cirugeda plays on the boundary between the legal and the illegal, subverting regulatory gaps as instruments of insurgent urban pragmatism. Temporary houses at rooftops, recreation parks at construction bins, urban facilities built from trash or exhibition pavilions in cargo containers rank among the most influential projects by the Recetas Urbanas lineup, following the Situationist dictum "*architecture must be appropriated in seemingly illegitimate ways and twisted to other ends*" (Wigley, 1998).



Fig. 4 Teddy Cruz – *Manufactured Site* (emergency housing). © Studio Teddy Cruz.



Fig. 5 Recetas Urbanas – *"Spider" building in Sevilla*. © Recetas Urbanas.

3. NATURE / TECHNOLOGY

“Far from a return to nature, to the idea of living in a park as individual aristocrats once did, we see in such immense constructions the possibility of overcoming nature and of submitting the climate, lighting and sounds in these different spaces to our control” (Constant, 1959).

“The world has acquired a new dimension; nature’s role is played out; nature now is simply raw material, controlled by human beings and used in accordance with their needs. And these needs can no longer be met by nature alone; technology already furnishes us with material conditions that are far superior to natural conditions; we are already completely dependent on technology for the bare necessities. (...) Technology replaces nature, technology becomes nature, becomes the medium, the sense by which we interpret nature. (...) Faced with the certainty that nature cannot remain inviolate, we must use the means at our disposal not simply to replace nature, but to surpass her.” (Constant, 1960).

These quotations display one of the most controversial and outdated theoretical standpoints in Constant’s formulation of Unitary Urbanism: the emancipatory role attributed to technology as the salvation from human’s former obedience to nature. New Babylon’s layout relies on the intricate technological devices that allow for its complex spatial diagram: in this imaginary future, mechanization of labor has freed humanity from working; hidden automated factories would solve any quartermaster needs, electrical escalators supersede stairs and ramps and, more controversially, technological gears replace natural climate control. This uncritical confidence in technology was symptomatic of the intellectual milieu of his time: at the peak of the Fordist productivism, the thriving mechanization of work hints a hypothetical future where machines would become universal problem-solvers. Constant had been highly critical with any form of Garden City, as it derived from outmoded pastoral visions from the bourgeois romanticism that mask a devious formulation of utilitarianism.

Contrariwise, participatory urbanism is often environmentally conscious and the respect for nature is an unalienable principle. Seizing on scarcity as a potential for inventing urban solutions, acute low tech design with ecological technologies has become a customary token in bottom-up experiences, which have often involved bioconstruction, urban farming and permaculture as practical allies. A flagship of this approach is the Vauban neighborhood in Freiburg, constructed in an old military site under strict sustainable and participatory parameters: the masterplan was set up by the community in collaboration with the local council after years of legal conflicts, and includes self-built co-housing developments; omnipresent car-free public areas – the district has been designed for cycling and walking as the customary means

of transport; specific facilities for children, disabled or elder people; shared premises managed by participatory assemblies; and all sort of eco-efficient devices for water supply, energy consumption or reduced emissions. Further examples of similar nature have flourished worldwide, sometimes resulting in discourses that unconsciously -but perilously- glamorize poverty on the basis of its pretending moral superiority.

In this regard, history has proven Constant wrong: ecological concerns have overtaken the urban debates as the planet is seemingly suffering the dramatic consequences of our long-term dismissal of nature. Science, sociology and urbanism are now debating more sustainable modes of occupying the earth's surface and decrease our ecological footprint, an endeavor that goes hand in hand with social equity issues. The fully automated habitat of New Babylon is unconceivable in the present day, as the resilience of living ecosystems has proven more fruitful for urban studies than the technophile paradigms. Even the Smart City practitioners assume that nature isn't something we can simply "leave behind" as in Constant's conjecture. The classical dichotomic scission between *the natural* and *the artificial* is bracketed by contemporary studies on *natural technologies*.

4. CONCLUSION: HOMO LUDEMS / HOMO FABER

The paramount challenge faced by the Situationist International may still be applicable today: they aimed at formulating a consistent solution for the post-industrial ways of life and the impact of urban outsourcing upon the ontological essence of the city. If, as they believed, the mechanization of work would render human labor obsolete, what shall we do with our life? What shall we spend our time in? How do we envision our social contact? How should a non-utilitarian city be? Debord and his allies stated that the answer proposed by Capitalism was the instauration of the spectacle as the structural ruler of social relations. In their literature "spectacle" is a concept of deep ontological and political concern, which goes way beyond pure entertainment or aesthetical delight and becomes an apparatus for alienation, segregation and domination. Capitalism neutralizes media technologies' transformative powers into the ultimate control device: the whole social fabric is now subsumed to spectacle as a devious form of relation, that keeps people enslaved by the futile, Sisyphean chain of production and consumption even when it's no longer necessary.

Situationism found an alternative solution in Johan Huizinga's concept of the "*homo ludens*", as opposed to the classical functionalist figure of the "*homo faber*". In Huizinga's thesis, playing is an essential formative activity in the development of any culture, and the implications of inventive gaming supersede pure hedonism: it's a form of personal and social growth, discovery and unbound creativity, that history had replaced with the *fetishization of labor* during the industrial era. If technology has freed humanity from restless work, Constant observed, there comes a time when cities should catalyze our primal

ludic nature, and become a revolutionary space for emancipatory hedonism, endless leisure, rest and play. All across the New Babylon descriptions Constant insists in the ultimately ludic nature of his imaginary city, a radical alternative to both functionalism and spectacle. The city is an ethical project, where unbound Desire is the metaphysical, unalienable precondition for dignity.

This fundament has had an enormous impact upon bottom-up urbanism, especially in Europe, as the mechanization of labor and the rise of the “precariat” calls for a new conception of our use of the city. Against the backdrop of real-estate speculation, the proliferation of humdrum shopping malls and corporative premises, activists defend a more joyful and healthy way of living, recovering citizenship as a fundamentally pleasant condition. Unproductive classes like children, retired or unemployed people have often been the main addressees of projects that prioritize playgrounds, free open-air spaces and recreation facilities for cultural exchange. Psychogeographic practices – touring and mapping the city following affective impulses – are incorporated into urban planning by efforts like participatory “maps of desires”, where citizens express their visceral appreciations on the habitat, often obviated in classical masterplanning.

Urban gardening and farming, self-build sport arenas in abandoned plots or multifunctional pavilions are created with intentions that supersede pure functionality: the final goal is reinforcing the integrity of the community by eliciting playful actions that highlight the social and celebrative dimension of public space. Designing, constructing, managing and experiencing the city are no longer conceived as successive moments in the sequence of city-making, but coalesced into one single activity. The city is reassessed as a perpetually unfinished project that evolves parallel to the citizens’ creativity and will: the pertinence of this practical standpoint is thus ethical, and acquires anthropological dimensions. Bottom-up and participatory urbanism inherit Constant’s concerns about the correlation between space and daily life, but try to surpass the utopian limits of his project: the New New Babylon is not a traceable city, but a fragmentary set of urban experiences that flourish scattered worldwide, adopting the peculiarities of every location, and delivering specific solutions to the demands of each community at stake.

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Fig. 6 Facultad de Arquitectura y Arte de la Universidad de Desarrollo – Okuplaza San Diego, Santiago de Chile. © Ciudad Emergente.

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