

## Is New Babylon Here?

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The first time I met Constant was in January 2000 in his Amsterdam studio. We talked about New Babylon *ville nomade*, of his relationship with the *gitans* (we spoke in French) and of the *terrain vague* as a New Babylonian space.<sup>1</sup> He simply pointed at a large blocked window and told me that ten years before out there used to be a *terrain vague*, where a group of Sinti had their camp, lit fires, held parties and played music, and he would go and visit them every now and then. He had made friends with some *gitan* musicians and had performed with them and played at friends' parties. When the Sinti had to leave to make way for a new development, Constant decided to cover the window with cardboard as there was nothing interesting to be seen anymore. New Babylon was no longer there, it had moved to some other *terrain vague* of the Earth. Since then I have wondered whether the *terrain vague* must be the only available place for the Roma<sup>2</sup> to live, or if it is not possible to envisage places where a New Babylon can be experimented more permanently; if the Roma people really carry with them the seeds of New Babylon, and if in their camps there is really a New Babylon in a nutshell. Above all I wonder whether it is possible to start working with them to build a New Babylon which would be neither a rat-infested shantytown nor a hypertechnological megastructure.

Constant died in August 2005. I still regret not having been able to organise a trip for him to Rome to visit Stalker that, in those years, was working at the Campo Boario together with many foreign communities, among which the Kalderasha Roma. A few days after the sad news I decided to go and make a pilgrimage to Alba to look for the camp of the Piedmont Sinti, where it had all begun. With Armin Linke and Luca Vitone we went first to Turin to meet his daughter Marta who showed us the family pictures, and then to Alba to see if the Sinti that Constant had met in the Autumn of 1956, encamped on Pinot Gallizio's land, still existed.<sup>3</sup> We found them still there, on the banks of the Tanaro river; they no longer have the carts and horses of the black and white photos, but small brick homes with porches and canopies for the caravans: a small district of houses with garden, built without authorisation, under the constant threat of being flooded or evacuated by the law. It was for them that Constant had drawn up his first architectural design, the Camp of the Alba Gypsies, which was the beginning of that *concrete utopia* developed in the following twenty years as New Babylon: the nomad city which, after the Situationist revolution, would have abolished work and the need for a stable residence and that would have inhabited a land without borders, by ramifying itself out in a *continuous flux*, creating a new itinerant multicultural mankind - the wandering New Babylonians. After leaving the Alba camp I started to think that the Situationists hadn't really fully exploited the opportunity that had arisen before them. Instead of tackling the actual needs of the Sinti camp, they

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<sup>1</sup> The episode is mentioned in Francesco Careri, *Constant. New Babylon, una città nomade* (Turin, Testo & Immagine, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Only for brevity hereafter I will use only the term "Roma", though I am aware of the fact that, in order to express the cultural variety of the European people who speak languages deriving from Romani root, it would be more correct to always write "Roma, Sinti, Kale, Manush e Romanichal".

<sup>3</sup> Francesco Careri, Armin Linke and Luca Vitone, *Pellegrinaggio ad Alba. Constant e le radici di New Babylon* (Domus" n 885/2005, 100-113).

had taken refuge in theory, politics and architectural utopia.<sup>4</sup> The Sinti camp could have been a common ground for putting their creative and relational skills into practice, on which to experiment the self-building of a multicultural city to be planned and carried out in a playful, interdisciplinary and participative form; in other words a place where they could verify the new aesthetic and political discipline of transforming the space the Situationists had called *unitary urbanism*.

In Alba I did not see the nomad New Babylon I had idealised, but a more stable lifestyle, and I understood as well that the so-called “nomads” know, if left in peace, how to give a stable form to their housing desires. The Alba Sinti will be moved to a *nomad camp* placed between the dog pound and the prison where, like all the other nomads in this country, they will no longer be free to build their houses and their habitat. They too will be subjected to that *town planning of contempt* which confines them to the dumps and moves them again and again when the land value rises.<sup>5</sup> There is no New Babylon in their future.

After visiting Alba I realised that it is necessary to go to where the Situationists had stopped: into the merciless materiality of the nomad camps, and I also understood just how much idealising nomadism only increases our distance and ignorance of the Roma world. Perhaps it is necessary to understand which element of New Babylon can be used in order to look for an alternative and concrete option to nomad camps. Maybe we must find together with them a common ground on which to experiment Unitary Urbanism in our historical conditions, without the abolition of work and without the realization of the Situationist Revolution. Since 2006 with Stalker we have plunged body and soul into the many forms of forced dwellings of the nomad universe.<sup>6</sup> We have visited scores of dwellings, shantytowns, houses made of metal, cardboard and bricks, tents, occupied rural houses, villages in disused factories, transit areas, fields authorised to become shantytowns without any water, electricity or sewers, overcrowded container camps where entire generations grow up without documents or identity; and in the end we saw the most technically advanced solution planned by the institutions to tackle the “nomad emergency”: the infamous “solidarity villages”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It stands as an exception to this criticism the civil and political involvement of Pinot Gallizio, who had defended the Sinti many times in the town council assemblies, covered the walls of Alba with pro-gitan posters, and in the end had donated a patch of land to the Sinti so that they could build their city there.

<sup>5</sup> Piero Brunello (care of), *L'urbanistica del disprezzo. Campi rom e società italiana* (Rome, manifestolibri, 1996); Leonardo Piasere, *I Popoli delle discariche* (Roma, Cisu, 1991); Krzysztof Wiernicki, *Nomadi per forza. Storia degli zingari* (Milan, Rusconi, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Stalker, together with The Department of Urban Studies of Roma TRE University and other foreign universities, published about this experience a set of logbooks called Roma Time, in .pdf format downloadable from [http://parking900.blogspot.com/2010/02/download\\_01.html](http://parking900.blogspot.com/2010/02/download_01.html).

<sup>7</sup> Contrary to what one might think, the “Solidarity Villages” were an invention of the centre-left Prodi government, through the Internal Affairs Minister Giuliano Amato, and were endorsed by Lord Mayor Veltroni together with Prefect Serra (elected as Senator in the Partito Democratico but already passed over to the Unione di Centro). The new Mayor, Alemanno, has appreciated the model and only wants to improve it.

These are the new “towns for the nomads” that will be exported to the rest of Italy and perhaps to Europe, their “separate city”, their apartheid: segregating states of exclusion, illegal because built under emergency laws, in derogation of housing standards and regulations, distant and invisible from the city, designed as narrow rows of overcrowded containers, surrounded by metal fences, CCTV, entrance watched 24 hours a day and entry prohibited even to the next of kin. The inhabitants of these modern concentration camps don’t have a number tattooed on their arm, but, after having been photographed and filed, are given a DAST<sup>8</sup>, a document that is needed to enter and exit the camp at fixed times: not after ten o’clock at night, nor before six o’clock in the morning. Whoever refuses the camps or eludes the filing by seeking an alternative path becomes forever a “clandestine” and can be locked up – without trial and innocent of any crime – in a CIE (Centro di Identificazione ed Espulsione – Centre for Identification and Expulsion) and might be repatriated to a country he has never known (the majority of them were born and raised in Italy). On entering this world I understand how equivocal words like *camp* and *nomads* are. They are an alibi to block in *halting sites* the ones who would like to remain nomad or seminomad like the Sinti and the Kalderacha Roma, and to force into a constantly precarious nomadic life the ones who had houses and had never been nomads, like many refugees from the Balkan wars, to whom the right to a home will be forever refused.

Needless to say that New Babylon isn’t in any of these places.

As an alternative to the container camps of the solidarity apartheid, in July 2008 we built, together with the Roma of the Casilino 900, Savorengo Ker<sup>9</sup>, that in Romani language means “the house of all”. It was a small wooden house that cost one third of a container and was conceived, designed and built directly by those who would have lived in it. A manifesto house signifying that the Roma are no longer nomads, that they want a house, that they can get organised and work together to build it. A house not only for the Roma, but for all those people who actually are in a housing emergency and are denied the opportunity to have a land on which to build a stable life. The building of the house was one of the best moments for sharing our cultures, an occasion for merrymaking, play and participation; it was a month of collective utopia deeply felt and lived by all. The most important thing we all learnt is that the space of integration is produced through an act of collective creation on the building site, by building together one’s own house, eating round the fire in the evening,

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<sup>8</sup> The DAST (Documento di Autorizzazione allo Stanziamento Temporaneo – Document of Authorisation to Temporary Settlement) is a card similar to a driving licence with a number, name, surname, photograph, period of validity, name of the camp and a bar code with further useful information like the number of children and their schooling. It has no juridical value, while the Roma are induced to believe that it is a real identity document. It is the ploy behind the Rome Nomad Plan.

<sup>9</sup> *Savorengo Ker /the house of all* was a house experimentally built by the Roma of the Casilino 900 camp, Stalker, The Department of Urban Studies of Roma TRE University and students from other universities by using departmental funds for the research “*Nomadism and the city. Informal dwelling, Roma camps and occasional shelters, interpreted through the practices and experiences of public art*”, with the support of the Milan Triennale and of the Venice Biennale and the sponsorship of Rome’s 7<sup>th</sup> Municipality. Overseer: Francesco Careri, Co-ordinators: Ilaria Vasdeki and Azzurra Muzzonigro, Site Managers: Mirsad Sedjovic, Hakja Husovic, Bayram Hasimi, Nenad Sedjovic, Klej Salkanovic, Najo Adzovic. The house was inaugurated on June 28; it was burned down by unknown people on December 11 (<http://www.wikirom.org> e <http://casilino900.blogspot.com/>).

discussing together about what to build the following day and by pooling competencies and aspirations. We experimented and demonstrated with facts that good relationships in the neighbourhood, condominium and district can be built by working side by side and that the city can be built by passing each other a hammer and some nails. New Babylon can be achieved by collectively nailing the planks of a roof.

Later on the Prefecture of Latina invited us to take part in the construction of a camp for travellers using our model of a house. We replied that Savorengo Ker was a symbol that wanted to remove the very idea of a camp; it was the beginning of a process that would transform the Casilino 900 into an intercultural district, and that district into a city. It was not to be a camp made of clones of Savorengo Ker in place of the containers, but different kinds of houses arising from the relationship among the inhabitants, a New Babylon of housing desires that must be brought to light together with the Roma in a process of reciprocal listening and transformation. Savorengo Ker was burned down by unknown people in December 2008; Casilino 900 was cleared in January 2010 and its inhabitants now live in the solidarity villages. However, Savorengo Ker has been an extraordinary New Babylonian adventure.

After the burning down of Savorengo Ker the challenge has been to relaunch it to a greater magnitude: not just one house, but a group of houses, a kind of self-built condominium, with not only the Roma, but also Italians and including other migrants. We need to prove that not only are the Roma capable of organising themselves to work and are skilled builders, but that they can build their house together with other cultures, and that they can be very good neighbours for all. While waiting for this simple concept to be assimilated by the administrations and by the politicians (it is commonly known that any policy in favour of the Roma doesn't create consensus but causes a loss of votes) we have started to work where these things are already happening. About two hundred people coming from Peru, Santo Domingo, Morocco, Tunisia, Eritrea, Sudan, Ukraine, Poland, Romania and Italy live together<sup>10</sup> in the Metropoliz, a disused factory on the Via Prenestina, just inside the Ring Road. Unlike all the other occupations of buildings in Rome, in Metropoliz the Roma have been included. There are one hundred Roma from Romania, who refused the DAST, nomad camps and solidarity villages. An inclusive mestizo space is coming to life in Metropoliz, not an ethnic space only for the Roma but a process of multicultural self building that allows for the interplay of various housing cultures, enhances the competencies and building skills and stimulates the co-existence of the inhabitants. A Peruvian woman told me that when the other occupants heard that there would also be the Roma, they were desperate. They thought they wouldn't have been able to let the children out and that they would have had to stay locked up at home, but after the first weeks of cohabitation they realised that the problem was infinitely smaller than they had imagined; there are still some problems but no more than in any normal condominium relationship. Her husband, also Peruvian, is the co-

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<sup>10</sup> Metropoliz was occupied in March 2009 by the Blocchi Precari Metropolitan (Metropolitan Temporary Blocs) and in November 2009 was expanded by occupying an adjacent factory where the Romanian Roma community and Popica Onlus have settled together. In the flyer of the occupation the programme is clear: "What is being built here is an important challenge to the city: it is a mestizo path to reclaim the right to inhabit, able to imagine and actually build another possible city". About the Metropoliz Roma, Francesco Careri, *Metropoliz. Stazione Rom-A*, "Abitare" n 503, 2010, 94-101.

ordinator of the building team of this permanently changing city. He told me that he, together with the Moroccan electrician, the African bricklayers, the Roma lorry drivers and the Italian plumber and glazier, all speak a language that is a mixture of Arabic, Romanian, Italian and Eritrean, with words which, though badly pronounced or transformed into other words, are by now comprehensible to all. Last week, together with the students, we converted a great hall where meats were cured into a classroom and called it Pidgin Makam.<sup>11</sup>

*Pidgin* is a simplified language that develops as a communication tool between two or more groups of people who have come into contact because of migration or colonisation and who don't have a language in common.<sup>12</sup> The word *Pidgin* derives from the incorrect Chinese pronunciation of the English word "business"; it is a language made of mistaken or badly spelled words that allows for an initial communication among different people.

*Makam* in Arabic means "place" but it has also a musical meaning that indicates a melodic system open to compositions and improvisation, where the rhythmic element is not subjected to any predefined organisation.<sup>13</sup>

*Pidgin Makam* is the space of the reciprocal learning of this new New Babylonian condominium.

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<sup>11</sup> *Pidgin Makam* is a Workshop of Architecture and Society of the Laboratorio di Progettazione Architettónica 1MPU, Roma Tre University Faculty of Architecture, promoted by Stalker in collaboration with the inhabitants of Metropoliz, BPM, Popica Onlus, Laboratorio Tipus, Atelier Danza Montevideo, Cantieri Comuni, Cooperativa Energetica. <http://espaciopidgin.blogspot.com>.

<sup>12</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pidgin>

<sup>13</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic\\_maqam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_maqam)