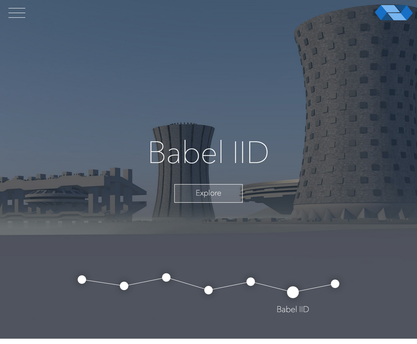


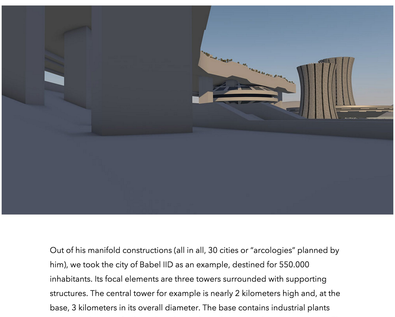
Babel IID

Is a really utopian construction. From its overall appearance and style, it could be even placed out of this earth, on any planet anywhere. It originated in the 1960s, the same era when Motopia and other technical cities were designed. Essentially, it was dedicated to the same goals: to overcome human misery in the contemporaneous metropolitan areas. The very aim of future city construction, Babel's creator Paolo Soleri says, must be to relieve man from such misery and constraints. In his constructions (of which Babel IID is only one), "the best hopes for contemporary man have been fulfilled and the urban medium has been cleared of slums and cleansed of ills and grievances."

The recent urban contexts, he says, can be represented in a map – a map of despair, as he coins it. He quotes the catholic philosopher Teilhard de Chardin, a man coming from the domain of the cathedrals but concerned with evolution: Man can be understood only by ascending from physics, chemistry, biology, and geography. Man is, first of all, a cosmic problem. And in this respect, Soleri states, we cannot remain inside the frames and terms of understanding: that megalopolis and suburbia are the only tenets, because next to the concrete misery they generated, they are utopian by their inner contradictions and their detachment from life.
He refers to Doxiadis' vision of a world as a network and says: this is a frightening world map because the natural, although still existent, has been confined to holes in the mesh of cities, or, more precisely, of that mega-organism that formerly consisted of cities. Those holes are large but, nevertheless, they remain holes; such a world becomes nothing but a human backyard, he says. With a look at todays' conditio humana, which is that, for the first time in history, more people are living in cities than on the countryside, this proved to be a prophetic saying. "The teeming human ants are everywhere, and everywhere are human ants. Nor will the holes be spared. They will not be pockets of farmland or wilderness. They will be dotted by sub-colonies and will be invaded weekly by waves of schizophrenic vacationers and seasonally flooded by a tide of discouraged suburbanites given to temporary nomadism." Modularization and fragmentation will supersede any attempt to bring relief to such a world within its own terms of meaning, he continues, and with its own instruments and principles. "The Athens and the Florence of the Golden Ages will be stamped out in thousands of copies – ten thousand of them for a mass of one billion, one hundred thousand for a mass of ten billion, and so on." It was a particular trait of a general human condition which, inter alias, was responsible for such a utopian concept in the bad sense, one that generated a ubiquitous loss of place, as well as for the present day situation of Soleri's time: the erroneous assumption that humans were beings of the surface, of merely covering the earth. Now, we have flooded it.

This is the point where Soleri's concept settles upon. We have to reconfigure ourselves, he says, and to abandon such an assumption – also in quite concrete terms since, finally, it is about concrete belongings related to humans as concrete beings who have to live in concrete entities, namely cities. Until now, he says, man has generated a technosphere; but what would be needed for the future is a homosphere, a sphere of living really adapted to, and suited to, a human condition that is sustainable. And in these regards, miniaturization became the "conditio sine qua non for the development of the social, collective animal contained in the towns and cities of the world." Therefore, the maxim must be "miniaturize or die". Man has to concentrate in order not to vanish; as in case of the cathedral, to focus on one spot again, one relevant place or topos.
In terms of Soleri, he has to miniaturize.
This has to be reached by the general approach of arcology (the word a mixture of "architecture" and "ecology"), an ecological architecture that is, at the same time, multi-levelled and topographically concentrated. It is an architecture that builds one-structure systems (in his words), condensed and large but not sprawling over the earth's surface, opposed to the constructs of a recent modern urbanity. The aim of his new architecture is to retain an unspoiled countryside and, therefore, to attain a maximum population density.
How to achieve this? Summarized, and in the case we want to present here, by a new Babylonian tower. This, too, has a Christian root. The tower of Babel, epitomized sum of the sin on this earth in its metropolitan struggle and symbol for the hubris of man, was juxtaposed to the other city, that of final redemption, the Heavenly Jerusalem. And in its original version, the Babylonian tower, too, was a symbol for the cosmos, in mythological translation, for an ordered world directed by laws. A myth, Blumenberg says, can never be brought to its end as long as it is believed in. Myths are tales with a high degree of durability and a very limited capability of variation as regards their narrative core, he says. Both these features make myths suited for tradition: their durability elicits the stimulus to be recognized in terms of images and rituals, and their adaptability continuously elicits new attempts to probe them by new and own means.

Soleri's construction appears as a somewhat strange mixture between both these mythical spaces, a Babylonian tower and a Heavenly City. It will be a focal structure, in his words, the unmistakable expression of man the maker and man the creator. And it would be surrounded by nature, "an uncluttered and open landscape". In symbolic terms and for a homo faber molding his own environments, it is a new Babylonian tower, and a new cathedral at the same time – secularized but mighty, reconciling nature with culture as well as reconciling the old contradiction between Babylon and the City of God. In a way, it resembles the idea of a machina mundi, a world machine. This is an idea which explicitly came up in the times of the cathedrals and which can be refined now. In the words of Soleri, his construction equals a large-dimensioned sheltering device that contains all the elements which make physical city life possible, by fractioning three-dimensional space into large and small subspaces, a construction which makes its own weather and its own cityscape – a technical second paradise posed in the midst of natural surroundings.
Soleri believes that a societal pattern is influenced, perhaps even dictated, by the material pattern in which it is situated. And it is interesting to see what he thinks about a genuine human condition in these regards. For human beings, he says, the natural landscape is not an appropriate space for the complex life inside a society. Translated into mythological terms this means that humans, at least civilized human beings, are not an appropriate part of nature. Instead, so Soleri, people must design the cityscape in their own image, namely as a physically compact, dense, three-dimensional package, not as a thin layer of organic matter. To refer to to above said, not in that erroneous assumption about humans: that they are just beings of the surface of the earth, allowed to spread out everywhere.



Out of his manifold constructions (all in all, 30 cities or "arcologies" planned by him), we took the city of Babel IID as an example, destined for 550.000 inhabitants. Its focal elements are three towers surrounded with supporting structures. The central tower for example is nearly 2 kilometers high and, at the base, 3 kilometers in its overall diameter. The base contains industrial plants and central service facilities, but also parks and promenades at its outer rim. The central cone of the tower measures 1 kilometer in diameter and consists of housings and other facilities. Its construction is based on modules which can be varied, depending on different functional and spatial conditions. It is built up following the concept of an organism whose skin is a mosaic of thousands of minds, embodied in specific and different persons, as Soleri says. The homes of the inhabitants are open to both nature and culture. "The home is then positioned as connector between two environments, as participant to both – the outer a vast sweep of the land, the inner circumscribing the neighborhood."

The inhabitants may gaze at the landscape, at the natural surroundings outside their mighty cityscape. But according to his own words about a human condition this remains to be just a view, and nothing more; because the inhabitants are not a genuine part of nature. The connection between the two environments he intends is not a real one, in other words, nothing but a gaze at the outside, that other domain of the world which is not human. In symbolic terms, the Tower of Babel – or the new Cathedral – looks at its surroundings.

It seems to embody an ultimate structure. In the original meaning of nature as physis, that what grows out of itself by own powers, the alternative to such a mighty world mountain would only be unregulated growth, disorder in wider sense, the chaos of the unplanned. This is represented, both as a reality and as a symbol, in our last world to come. Although even here, something other is beginning to emerge. We will see.