

Lucien Steil

## *A Proposal for Elephant Square, London*

*Una propuesta para Elephant Square, Londres*

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### Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

The Elephant Square project was carried out in the context of the 2019 University of Buckingham Summer School, chaired by dean John Simpson and director Clive Aslet. The design brief for the project was created by Stephanie Jazmines and Lucien Steil, both tutors at the 2019 University of Buckingham Summer School. Rather than following up on the endless series of post-Covid-19 urban, or “return to nature”, or “health technology” utopias, the Elephant Square project in London simply offers to re-establish the primacy of public space and public life as a main condition to reassess the city of the future. This project supports a vision of the city as a plural and common world, the purpose of which is to enhance public life in its most sophisticated forms.

El proyecto de Elephant Square se llevó a cabo durante la University of Buckingham Summer School de 2019, liderada por su decano, John Simpson, y su director, Clive Aslet. El programa para el proyecto fue creado por Stephanie Jazmines y Lucien Steil, ambos tutores de la University of Buckingham Summer School de 2019. En lugar de seguir con la interminable serie de utopías urbanas post-Covid-19, de “retorno a la naturaleza” o “tecnología de la salud”, el proyecto de Elephant Square, en Londres, simplemente propone restablecer la primacía del espacio y la vida pública como una condición fundamental a reconsiderar en la ciudad del futuro. Este proyecto apoya una visión de la ciudad como un mundo plural y común, cuyo propósito es mejorar la vida pública en sus formas más sofisticadas.

O projecto Elephant Square foi levado a cabo no contexto da Escola de Verão da Universidade de Buckingham de 2019, liderada pelo reitor John Simpson e pelo director Clive Aslet. O dossier de concepção do projecto foi criado por Stephanie Jazmines e Lucien Steil, ambos tutores da Escola de Verão da Universidade de Buckingham de 2019. Em vez de dar seguimento à série interminável de utopias pós-Covid-19 urbanas, de “regresso à natureza”, ou “tecnologia da saúde”, o projecto Elephant Square em Londres propõe simplesmente restabelecer a primazia do espaço público e da vida pública como condição principal para reavaliar a cidade do futuro. Este projecto apoia uma visão da cidade de mundo plural e comum, cujo objectivo é o de melhorar a vida pública nas suas formas mais sofisticadas.

The traditional city, the messy city of quarters, streets, squares, churches, temples, mosques, concert halls, theatres, schools, city halls, market halls and monuments, avenues, boulevards, parks, etc. has survived and reinvented itself many times. It has experienced, resisted, and adjusted to epidemics, pandemics and innumerable difficulties many times. In long periods of suffering and grief it was able to imagine its perfected renaissance. Ultimately it successfully overcame the dangers threatening the wellbeing, health, safety, and survival of its inhabitants, without durably eliminating comfort, beauty and freedom. On the contrary each reconstruction of both *Urbs* and *Civitas* was an opportunity of urban healing, emulation and improvement. The traditional city is not an obsolete relic from Antique times, and also not merely a charming, but burdensome legacy from various Dark Ages. It has proved to be the most efficient and most resilient artifact to inhabit the earth most elegantly, sustainably and humanely.

Both the 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution, and above all the 20<sup>th</sup> century Hygienist and Functionalist Modernism also contributed to an impoverished urban landscape in almost every continent of the world. Ideals of cleanliness, sterility, order, efficiency, traffic zoning, and the segregation of functions and socio-cultural groups have substantially undermined the key components of organic community-based and sustainable urbanism. This is most tragically illustrated by the massive and compulsive retreat into an obsessive privacy and hostile individualism. It also appears dramatically in the destruction of the public realm as encompassed by the “Cité Radieuse”, the Garden-City, Gated Communities, Luxury Resorts, Suburban Sprawl, etc. The paradigms of a fragmented, splintered and minimalist Decorum of late revivalist Modernism have then also been too comfortably embraced in the reorganization of the world by a rogue and cynical Capitalism dedicated to not only consume the last remaining places of beauty and culture, but also the very last sanctuaries of the natural world.

The various Modernist alternatives to traditional city-building have been unable to offer any new and better operational paradigm to a globalized world in rapid demographic conflagration and in the wake of a climatic catastrophe. The Covid-19 pandemic crisis has offered yet another opportunity to grab unsuccessful models and failed ventures from the toolkit of Modernism: Disease, Hygiene and Health have been used other times, politically, ideologically and culturally to support reducing or eliminating civil liberties, free movement, enhancing social control, enforcing ethnic, age and social segregation, and fostering survival anxiety, social isolation and rivalry, cultural paranoia, and dissolving the bonds of solidarity and empathy in society.

Rather than following up on the endless series of post-Covid-19 urban, or “return to nature”, or “health technology”, etc. utopias, my little Elephant Square project in London simply offers to re-establish the primacy of public space and public life as a main condition to reassess the city of the future. This project does not pretend to offer a miraculous vaccine-like urban design paradigm, but rather considers the urban project as an organic, complex, slow, and evolutionary process involving many hands and minds over many generations. My focus on the public realm has to be understood in a context of repair and healing; like in Acupuncture one does not disassemble and reconstitute the humane body because of each health issue, but rather put the needles in appropriate and precise points in the lines of energy (meridians) to enhance and stimulate recovery and regeneration.

1: Elephant Square, London  
(Kicsinyul, via Wikimedia Commons)

2: Plan of the existing situation of Elephant Square in London



This project opposes the over-densification and shameless privatization of the urban realm and its skyline. It promotes public life in its most elegant and refined forms of gathering, interacting, and acting in the midst of the city and in between fellow citizens. As the pandemic crisis starts settling in most European countries, it seems now that many have raised the alarm flag so high as to abandon traditional city-building altogether. Some even propose to return to the utopias of loose and vague garden-cities, or hard, white, and sanitized urban sanatoriums where hygienic citizenship and sterile visual environments set the new standards for the revival of an updated Brave New World.

My Elephant Square project supports a vision of the city as a plural and common world, the purpose of which is to enhance public life in its most sophisticated forms.

Lewis Mumford exalted the city as a place where “strangers live in peace together” and Richard Sennett insists on the public realm as a stage where citizens become actors of civility: “To recover that obsolete meaning of civility and relate it to the frame of public life, I would define civility as follows: it is the activity which protects people from each other and yet allows them to enjoy each other’s company” (Sennett 1977: 264).

But it is Hannah Arendt who has most passionately argued for the *Res Publica*, long before Léon Krier made the dialectics between the *Res Publica* and *Res Economica* one of the main keys to his ground-breaking urban design theories and projects: “Only the existence of a public realm and the world’s subsequent transformation into a community of things which gathers men together and relates them to each other depends entirely on permanence. If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men” (Arendt 1998: 55).

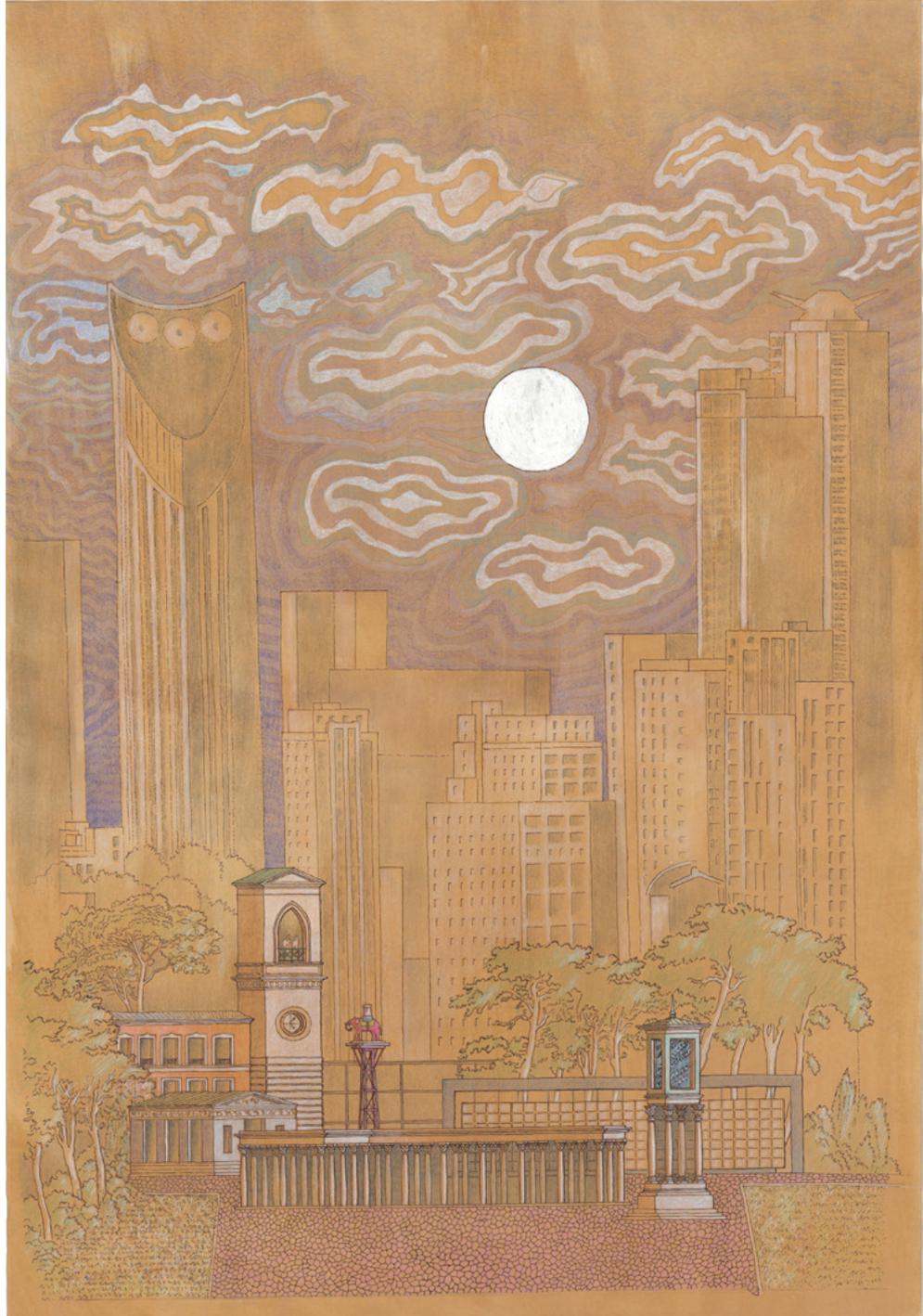
### Bibliography | Bibliografia | Bibliografia

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Sennett, Richard. 1977. *The Fall of Public Man*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Plan of the proposal for Elephant Square: 1) Michael Faraday memorial 2) Neighbourhood club 3) Elephant Castle statue 4) Public loggia 5) Urban folly 6) Fountain of Eternal Youth 7) Clock tower 8) Public loggia 9) Mixed use ensemble with public housing workshops offices and shops on ground-floor 10) Existing underground Stations.





Proposal for Elephant Square

### **Biography | Biografía | Biografia**

#### **Lucien Steil**

He was born in Joao Monlevade (Brazil), and lived and studied in Luxembourg. He studied architecture and urbanism in Paris and Vincennes and graduated as an Architecte DPLG. He has collaborated with Maurice Culot and Léon Krier at the Archives d'Architecture Moderne, in Brussels, and later with Colum Mulhern in Luxembourg. 'Mulhern & Steil' produced a wide range of projects in traditional urbanism and traditional architecture. Lucien Steil has lectured and taught at the Prince of Wales's Urban Design Task Force in Potsdam and Berlin, the College of Design of the University of Oregon, the University of Miami, the Universidad Politécnica de Puerto Rico, the University of Notre Dame in Rome and in Indiana, the Università di Bologna, the Universidade Católica Portuguesa in Viseu, the Prince's Foundation and the University of Buckingham. He has been actively involved in traditional and ecological urbanism and architecture, which have become central to his teaching and design practice. Lucien Steil was the editor of Katarxis and principal of 'Katarxis Urban Workshops ASBL'.