

Lucien Steil, John Simpson

## *An Alternative Project for the Euston Station Area in London*

*Un proyecto alternativo para la zona de la Estación de Euston en Londres*

*Um projeto alternativo para a área da Estação de Euston, Londres*

### Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

In July 2018 the University of Buckingham School of Architecture and the University of Notre Dame held a joint Architecture and Urban Design Summer Program in Central London: a four-week, full-time series of seminars, lectures, and field studies focusing on the Euston area between King's Cross Station and Regent's Park that will be impacted by the proposed HS2 high-speed railway terminus development. The program explored how a modern transport interchange can be accommodated within a historic city such as London in a manner that may enhance urban connectivity and serve the local community.

En julio de 2018 la Escuela de Arquitectura de la Universidad de Buckingham y la Universidad de Notre Dame desarrollaron un programa conjunto de Arquitectura y Urbanismo en el centro de Londres: una serie de seminarios, conferencias y estudios de campo intensivos de cuatro semanas enfocados en la zona de Euston, entre la Estación de King's Cross y Regent's Park, que va a verse afectada por el proyecto de la estación del tren de alta velocidad HS2. El programa exploró cómo se puede integrar un intercambiador de transporte moderno en una ciudad histórica como Londres de manera que mejore la conectividad urbana y dé servicio a la comunidad local.

Em Julho de 2018, a Escola de Arquitetura da Universidade de Buckingham e a Universidade de Notre Dame organizaram um Programa de Verão conjunto de Arquitetura e Design Urbano, no centro de Londres: uma série de seminários, palestras e estudos de campo, ao longo de quatro semanas e a tempo inteiro, que incidem na área de Euston, entre a Estação de King's Cross e o Regent's Park, que será afetada pelo desenvolvimento previsto do terminal ferroviário de alta velocidade HS2. O programa explorou como um interface de transportes moderno pode ser acomodado dentro de uma cidade histórica como Londres, de uma forma que possa melhorar a conectividade urbana e servir a comunidade local.

Following the proceedings of the 2018 Buckingham University and Notre Dame University Summer School, on August 27, 2018 Clive Aslet wrote in *The Times*<sup>1</sup>:

*There is a visionary alternative for the new Euston station [...]. Rail travelers who have been gnashing their teeth at the closure of Euston station in London this weekend have a bitter consolation. The chaos is as nothing to that which will descend when the station is rebuilt. This is one of the consequences of the HS2 project, the impact of which on its London terminus has been ignored, with few people seeming to know the plans. Hear, then, my warning: many years of misery are coming down the track.*

*The masterplan is now in the public domain but hasn't been widely advertised. It's not a pretty document. The proposal is to enlarge the Network Rail station by adding an HS2 limb to the west. Since Euston is too important a hub to be allowed to close, disruption caused by building works will be huge. The footprint of the station will become enormous.*

(Note: The government is paying for the station and the infrastructure works, with land and air rights being put into the hands of a development company that is making the most of them with plans for massive high-rises – and the resulting profits will not necessarily be returning to the public purse!)

*There is an alternative. It has been proposed by John Simpson, the Dean elect of the School of Architecture at Buckingham University. This summer I lectured on the history of Euston at a summer school organized by the university. Students were busily at work on a revolutionary scheme – revolutionary because it envisages the building of traditional streets, and development in low blocks and terraces rather than tall towers. The key to making this possible is simple: stack the Network Rail and HS2 tracks on top of each other. This double-decker approach is used in many stations around the world and engineers say it's feasible at Euston. It would mean that a completely new station could be built, independent of the old Euston. Once ready, the old station would be closed and services transferred; the site of the old station would then be redeveloped, knitting it back into the urban fabric.*

Euston Station area context in 2018





The Summer School Program started with a study tour of exemplary planned towns including Bath and Poundbury to see original and contemporary examples of traditional architecture and urban planning. The students then explored techniques of urban and building design which are responsive to their setting. The course also offered tours of London streets and buildings, looking at the urban fabric and its history and social make-up. It emphasized both practice and theory in traditional architecture and urban design and explored varying design approaches and techniques in a uniquely intensive environment, showing how design in architecture contributes to our cities' development and their inhabitants' wellbeing. With the support of faculty advisors and external consultants as well as input from John Simpson Architects, the students were able to produce a sophisticated and comprehensive alternative masterplan perfectly responding to the official program requirements, as well as to an extremely complicated technical agenda.

The program was directed by Professor John Simpson, Dean Elect of the University of Buckingham, and the faculty were Professor Samir Younés, of the University of Notre Dame, and Lucien Steil, of the University of Buckingham. Participants were Sophie Bakkali, William Hedley, Yanjia Jin, Michail Sarafidis, Alexander Athenson, Ellen Chen, Anthony Fitheoglou, Pusan Lee, Hallie Swenson and Lauren Sommerville. Amanda Potts was in charge of the planning and coordination and Digby Ogston was the event manager.



1: A modernist Euston Station reconstruction proposal (*The Times*, November 2016, Sydney and London)

2: HS2 Euston Station concept design – exterior (Grimshaw Architects)

Aerial view showing the scale of the new HS2 station in the existing Euston Station area (mediacentre.hs2.org.uk\_HS2-VL-28447)

Urban impact of a proposed modernist project for Euston Station seen from Drummond Street (Perspective drawing and rendering by Yanjia Jin)



There follows an interview conducted by Lucien Steil with John Simpson, who initiated and directed the 2018 University of Buckingham Summer School.

**Lucien Steil:** When you organized your first University of Buckingham Summer School in Traditional Architecture and Urbanism in Summer 2018 you suggested the program be dedicated to an alternative design for the reconstruction of Euston Station. There were already massive demolition works underway, and the building project had already been allocated to Grimshaw Architects. It seemed a rather desperate situation and by then it also seemed clear that the major public and private stakeholders were not going to bow to pressure from preservation, environmental, and citizen groups. What led you to go ahead with the Euston Station counter-project in such a dire context?

**John Simpson:** Summer 2018 was a crucial time in the development of the HS2 Station at Euston. As you can imagine, HS2 is a long-term, difficult project, with complexities both technical and political. It started life with a parliamentary bill being deposited in November 2013, which gained Royal Assent in 2017, and the HS2 Station Design was to take place during 2017 and 2018, with time allocated for community engagement in 2018. Grimshaw Architects had only been commissioned at the time to put forward a feasibility study and the work of the Summer School was designed to contribute to the public engagement. Although local groups had been fighting the proposals and had put a lot of energy into trying to influence the direction of the project with alternative designs for the station, no one had produced anything to demonstrate the potential this had in improving the surrounding urban context of the whole Euston area. This was the right time to be doing a counter-project to add to a powerful argument for improvements to the proposed scheme. It would show what a lost opportunity this would be to this part of London and provide a vision for what could be possible.

This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to dramatically improve a significant area of central London which was being missed by the proposals for the new station. Historically, before the arrival of the railway in 1837, the character of this area was predominantly residential and determined by John Nash's plans for Regent's Park and the introduction of the New Canal in 1812, which initially served three market squares which were quickly adopted as residential squares of small houses.

The opening of Euston Station with its cuttings and railway tracks changed the area irrevocably. It introduced an unbreachable barrier between the more affluent Regent's Park residences and the areas



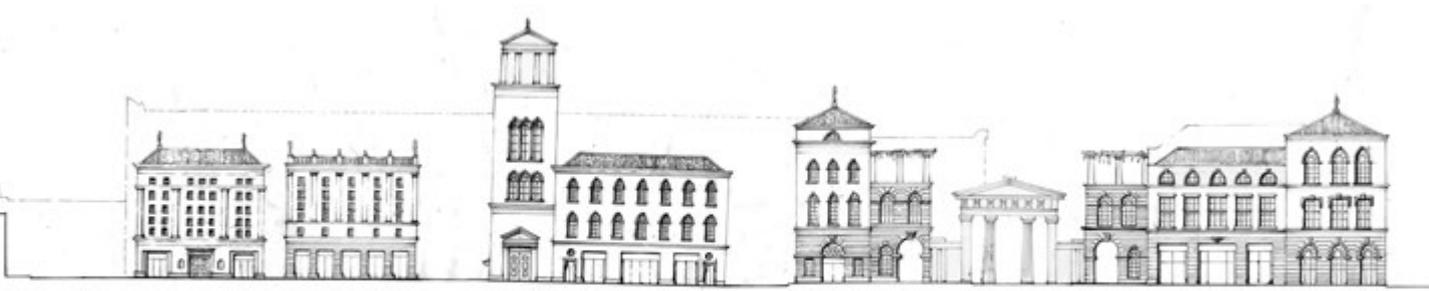
Urban impact of the alternative 2018 Summer School Project seen from Drummond Street (Perspective drawing and rendering by Yanjia Jin)

to the east. This, combined with the heavy wartime damage and a hasty post-war reconstruction providing social housing estates in the form of blocks and towers, resulted in the degradation of this part of the city. Our feeling was that the unprecedented investment which comes with the HS2 project should be used to remedy this. Instead, the proposed scheme, as configured, only compounded the problem. Rather than increasing permeability through the site it did quite the opposite by doubling the area given over to the combined railway stations, which was completely unnecessary. Camden, the local authority, was very disappointed, as before Grimshaw Architects were appointed to do the feasibility study they had been proposing that the station should be used as the opportunity to do just that, and improve the urban character of the area.

We felt this was too important an issue to be ignored, and having the Summer School students tackle a real and relevant problem like this was also the perfect tool for educational purposes. It would give the students an insight into a real-life project and had the potential to show just how a modern transport interchange of this scale could be accommodated within the urban fabric of a historic city like London.

**L.S.:** Can you explain what differentiated your alternative design concepts from the official project?

**J.S.:** The most significant difference was the strategy adopted from the outset, which assumed that restoring the urban fabric and coherence of the Euston area must be a priority, not an afterthought. To achieve this we pursued a strategy of reducing the amount of land taken up by the station and reorientated the station building so that it ran east-west. This increased permeability through the site. Rather than placing the new high-speed train platforms next to the existing railway ones, we proposed to stack them up, reducing the footprint considerably. This was an adaptation of proposals already put together by the local pressure groups. Both our and the official proposals assumed that the new tracks and platforms will be located underground, but by reducing the width of the station we were able to introduce gentle slopes which meant that the street network could go across the tracks uninterrupted, allowing eastern parts of the quarter to be once again connected with areas leading toward Regent's Park and beyond. Well-defined streets, squares, and parks were created to make this part of town welcoming to pedestrians, residents and visitors alike, a place where communities and business can thrive, in contrast to the emerging official scheme where the station itself once again would overwhelm the neighborhood, ignoring the impact it will have on the local community.



Sectional-Elevational Study (1:312.5 at A0)



Elevational studies of the southern part of the alternative proposal for the Euston Station area (Puisan Lee and Anthony Fitheoglou)

**L.S.:** Traditional projects are often reproached for being naïve and idealistic, focusing more on image than on content and taking program requirements too lightly. This project encompasses a very large building envelope with an extremely complex functional program and an extraordinarily complicated technical agenda. Not only did you have to consider restructuring a vast urban area, adding tracks for high-speed rail, expanding and improving service and commercial facilities, offices, and retail, as well as housing, etc., but you also needed to allow for Euston Station and the surrounding urban area to continue operating without too much disruption. How did your Summer School handle all of these monumental challenges in a single month of design work?

**J.S.:** To make the best of the time available to the students during the four-week Summer School a lot of preparatory work was done by John Simpson Architects in advance. We collated and analyzed the historical and planning context of the scheme and studied emerging proposals to ensure that what is put forward as the alternative meets the same commercial objectives in terms of floor plates and saleable areas.

Southern part of the alternative proposal for the Euston Station area with a processional entrance from Euston Road (Puisan Lee and Anthony Fitheoglou)



Aerial view of general area



Nolli Plan Showing Site And Context



Perspective of Arcade to Bus Station



Sectional-elevational study (1:312.5 at A0)



We also benefited from the work done by other interested parties and pressure groups who wanted to influence the outcome of the HS2 project. For example the technical details of the railway solution were developed in advance by Jeff Travers, an architect/engineer with experience designing stations across the country. He had been campaigning to improve the HS2 proposals over the preceding years and already had the technical information from the relevant authorities and had worked on the technical proposals. He in effect did all the engineering technical work for the station design before the Summer School started. He happily got involved with the School, contributing to the teaching and the liaison with the local community.

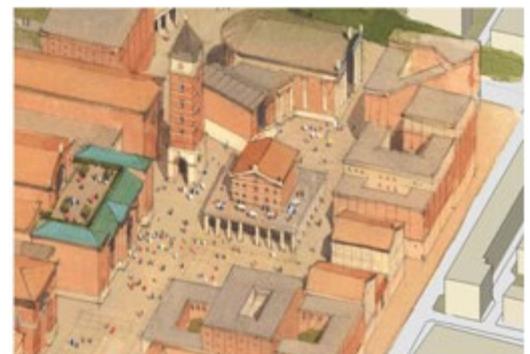
We also got our network of professional advisers who had relevant experience involved and had their advice from an early stage, and they too eventually interacted with the students, helping them with the project. They included David Taylor, a highly respected and experienced highways engineer, as well as David Stillman, an equally distinguished services engineer. An outline strategy for the engineering was therefore prepared and handed over to the students at the outset, giving them and their tutors a firm engineering foundation from which to develop the design.

**L.S.:** As you mentioned, the Summer School participants were a mix of undergraduate and graduate students as well as one high-school student: probably none of them had ever worked at such a large scale and within such a level of urban and technical complexity. Can you explain how the School handled both the pedagogical challenges and the productive objectives, namely to deliver a believably professional project?

**J.S.:** The in-depth preparatory work I have just described was just one part of the approach we adopted. The other was a range of tours and exercises which took place at the outset of the Summer School. They included a study tour of exemplary towns including Bath and Poundbury to see original and contemporary examples of traditional architecture and urban planning. The students had a chance to explore techniques of urban design and methods of designing buildings that respond effectively to their urban setting. I thought you and Samir as tutors used this effectively, exploring the urban fabric, its history and social make-up, to emphasize the importance of both practice and theory in traditional architecture and urban design. By doing this you gave the students a solid understanding and grounding as to the context within which the main design was set and explained the means by which they might put right any deficiencies. The students could not have had better tutors to lead them and take them through a project like this. In addition, the involvement of experienced practicing architects and engineers such as Craig Hamilton, Robert Adam, Alan Baxter, Richard Economakis, Demetri Porphyrios, Alireza Sagharchi, Samina Shahzady, David Taylor, Francis Terry, David Stillman, and others who incidentally volunteered to come and tutor the students without any payment, ensured that a theoretical, academic approach was always balanced by practical considerations which are a necessity for a design in the real world and give the proposed solutions the necessary credibility that you describe.

Most importantly, however, by leading a group of students of mixed ability all working together you managed to replicate the situation in a real-life professional office where you and Samir had the students learning both from you and from their peers. This is very much building on the *atelier* system used in the past at the *Beaux Arts*.

Main eastern entrance to the new Euston Station and adjacent public realm (Ellen Chen and Yanjia Jin)



Perspective sketch of the Euston Station area from the south with a rebuilt Euston Arch (Drawing and rendering by Ellen Chen)



Perspective drawing of the main Euston Station east entrance square (Drawing and rendering by Ellen Chen)



**L.S.:** Not all the ten participants had a classical background and design experience in traditional architecture and urbanism. How were you able to teach principles of traditional design and at the same time resolve major design challenges? What type of training and support were the participants given from your own architectural firm, external consultants, and engineers, as well as neighborhood associations and preservation activists?

**J.S.:** An accompanying series of lectures by prominent theorists, academics, and historians including Léon Krier, Samir Younes, Mark Wilson Jones, Frank Salmon, and Clive Aslet provided the necessary stimulus and academic input. Furthermore it was important that the Summer School design studio was run, as I mentioned, in the way an architectural office would work, where people of varying experience come to work together to develop a scheme. Everyone's unique strengths can be recognized and employed in the realization of a common goal, where the students are learning by doing. It's through this that they learn how to interact with others, build teamwork, and gain the knowledge and confidence they need to design. As you know, I as well as Joanna Wachowiak and Tiffany Abernathy, who work for the practice, took a very hands-on approach to helping the students with their tasks and education. From the preparation of the initial outline masterplan and background project information all the way to regular visits in the studio which was located just around the corner from our office, and being at hand to respond to any specific queries or design



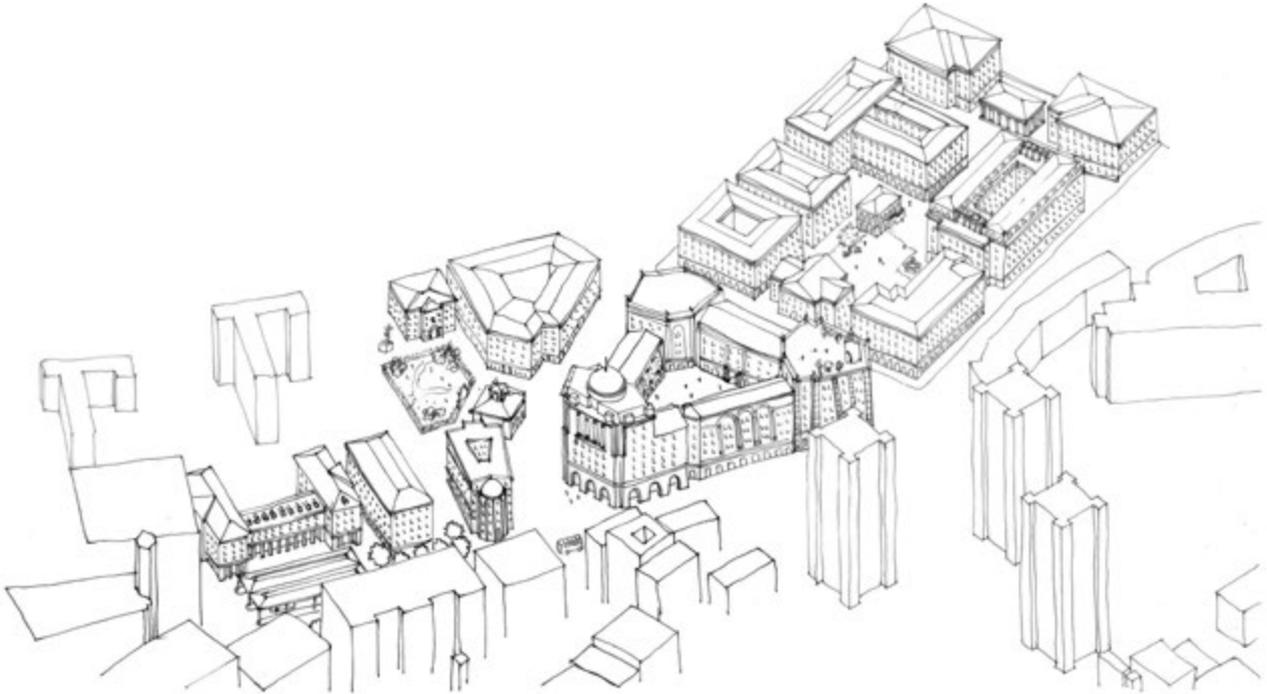
Hampstead Road elevation study  
(Sophie Baccali and William Hedley)

issues. The same can be said of the engineers and other consultants, including particularly David Taylor and David Stillman, while the involvement of Jeff Travers was invaluable both from an engineering point of view regarding the station but also for his local knowledge, which gave the students a unique insight into the community concerns. This is so often overlooked in teaching when it comes to large urban design and infrastructure projects.

All in all, a relaxed, informal atmosphere combined with an ambitious approach to the task at hand, underpinned by continuous support from the tutors and professionals, allowed all the students to blossom. In addition the students were given a unique opportunity to learn from the many practitioners who generously contributed their time, participating in student critiques, city walks, and lectures.

New square at the west entrance to  
Euston Station (Sophie Baccali and  
William Hedley)





**L.S.:** How did yourself and your staff interact with the faculty and participants of the summer school?

**J.S.:** The daily interaction was the norm both with students and the faculty for whom our office became a bit of the base. There, over an evening, as the official work business came to a close, we could sit around the conference room table and discuss issues that arose that day and strategize how to overcome any difficulties or build on the opportunities presenting themselves. Several informal evening events like, for example, an opera outing where students and tutors and the office staff could get to know each other on a more personal level meant that communications were always easy and relaxed.

Northern part of the alternative Euston Station area proposal (Hallie Swenson and Michail Sarafidis)



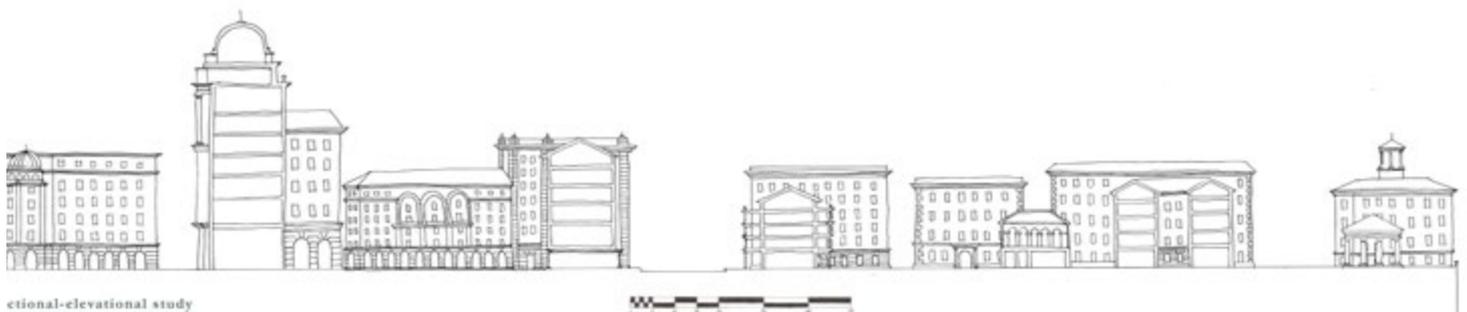
View north-west from residential park



Areal view of general area



View north-east along Hampstead Road



Architectural elevation study



Elevational study vignettes

Elevational study vignettes

Elevational study vignettes

Elevational studies in the northern part of the alternative Euston Station area proposal (Hallie Swenson and Michail Sarafidis)

**L.S.:** What was your expectation when you decided to have your first University of Buckingham Summer School tackle such an extraordinary and ambitious project?

**J.S.:** I wanted the school to make a difference, for the students in particular. Design is not an academic subject you can learn from a book. There is nothing like a real-life project to teach students what it's all about. It's not just the project itself that they have to learn how to interact with. They need to learn how to interact with each other, with the technical data from the engineers, with the authorities, with the community, and with all the other stakeholders involved. They must understand how decisions are made and that it is a multidimensional matrix that requires many skills and sometimes a good deal of diplomacy and foresight.

North-east perspective view along Hampstead Road with the new bus station (Hallie Swenson and Michail Sarafidis)





Intermediate review of the alternative proposal for the Euston Station area

In addition, at the time there was a very good chance to influence the direction in which the HS2 Euston Station design was being taken. This however was seen as a bonus if it worked. The primary objective was to set the scene and the background for the project for the students, which this project did perfectly, down to the reception we received from the local community, from the local authority, and even the local member of parliament for the area, who all got involved.

**L.S.:** Were your expectations rewarded? What would you highlight as the achievements of the Summer School?

**J.S.:** I believe so. I thought Samir and you together with the students produced a very convincing result which was professionally executed and presented. The School ended with an exhibition of all the students' work, and it was well attended and received with great interest and expressions of support. I am sure you found the comments of the local community members as well as the local planners, as I did, especially heartening. I certainly know the students found it so. The scheme was presented to the local MP Kier Starmer, who has since become leader of the Labour Party, and I have no doubt that the students learned a great deal as to the complex issues that surround such projects and felt rewarded by the praise they got for their hard work. I certainly feel you, Samir, and the students should be proud of what you achieved in terms of good design in such a short time... and moreover to do so in a real-life situation where you are having to convince the stakeholders. This was backed up by the *London Evening Standard*, if you remember, and they ran a piece on the counter-project with pictures of the students' work that coincided with the final days of the Summer School.

**L.S.:** How would you assess the pedagogical achievements? Would you confirm that you can teach by design, and that the dynamic of studio pedagogy is able to achieve both design excellence and technical efficiency?

**J.S.:** In my opinion, as you and Samir proved on this project, the best way to teach architecture and design is through experience. This is how it has always been done in the past and it was done that way for a very good reason! It's only in the twentieth century that this ceased to be the case in the UK, and you only have to look around you to see where that has got us. This Summer School more than any other was so directly involved with the local community and even the local authority participated, giving it this particularly real dimension. I also thought the ten students were especially suited to the project, and the involvement of the engineers and Jeff Travers, together with all the tutors we had,

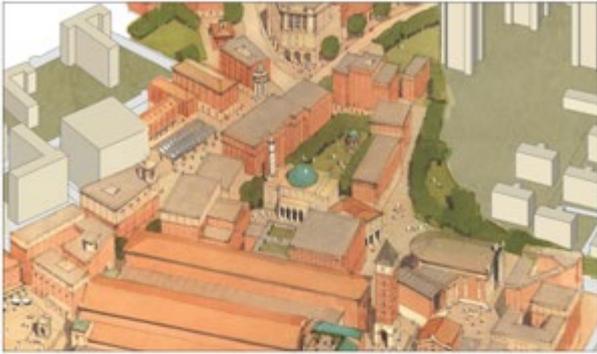


Final masterplan by the 2018 London Summer School team (John Simpson Architects and consultants Jeff Travers, David Taylor, and David Stillman)

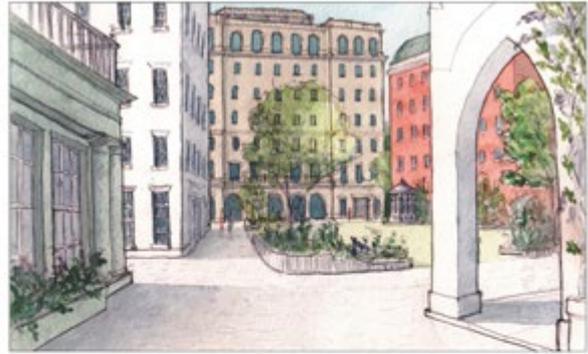
contributed to the intensity of the project, which added to the flavor of reality that surrounded the studio. In addition, the studio was led by two of the most inspiring tutors I can think of, which at the end is perhaps the most significant thing about the program.

**L.S.:** How was the Euston Project received by the public and the authorities? Was there any significant feedback? How did the press follow it up?

**J.S.:** There is no doubt that the public was fully supportive of the proposals which emerged from the Summer School. These were presented to the local community, the local authority, and, as it has been mentioned, the Member of Parliament for the area.



Aerial Perspective



Hampstead Green Perspective



Hampstead Road Elevation



North part of the alternative Euston Station area proposal with the new Mosque and Hampstead Square (Lauren Sommerville and Alex Athenson)

Following the exhibition, at the end of July, the *London Evening Standard* published an article entitled: “Students go full steam ahead with their own plan for a new-look Euston Station”, by Ross Lydall, which was extremely complimentary about their work and published several drawings by the students.

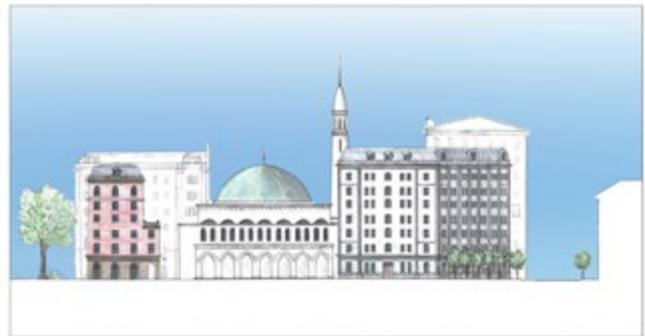
**L.S.:** Can you tell us what happened with Euston Station? What is the status of the official project?

North part of the alternative Euston Station area proposal with the new Mosque and Hampstead Square (Lauren Sommerville and Alex Athenson)

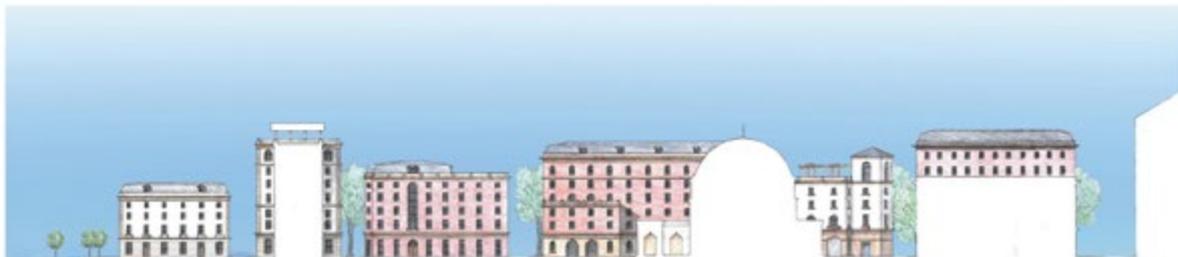
**J.S.:** After the feasibility scheme done by Grimshaw Architects, Arup were commissioned to take the project further. Following that, Grimshaw Architects were asked to come up with a concept design but for the station only. On March 9th, 2022 two images of the station were released with an



Hampstead Square Perspective

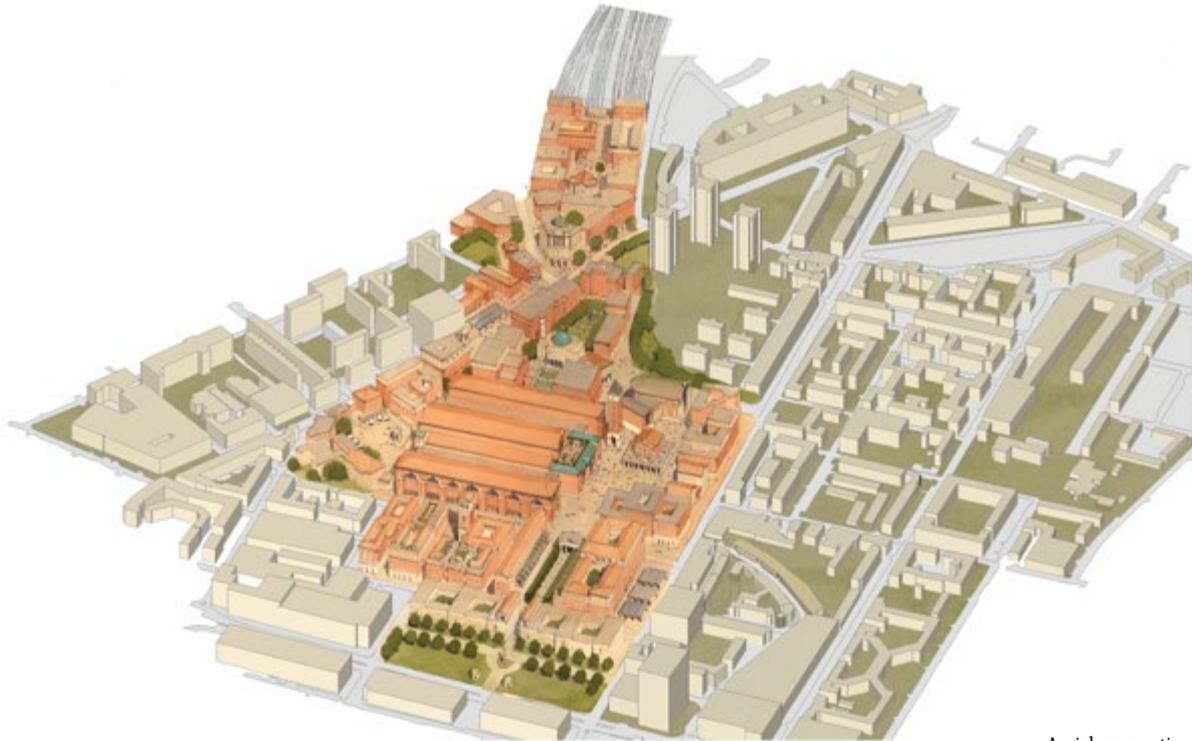


Transverse Section



Longitudinal Section





Aerial perspective of the alternative proposal for the Euston Station area in the context of the HS2 development program (Watercolor rendering by Chris Draper)

announcement that HS2 has a new updated scheme for the high-speed railway terminus . This is the first update since the scheme was published in 2015 and no plans are available. We are told that the station has been reduced in size to ten platforms and that “The station will feature a bold geometric roof design to allow natural light to flood into the station concourse. The roof is an identifying feature of the station and emphasizes its north-south alignment, and its role as a regional gateway. The ground-level concourse will be 300 m long and will allow free movement for both passengers and visitors through the station and will open out onto new public spaces at the north and south. The station hall – 20% larger than Trafalgar Square – will become the largest station concourse in the UK. Retail and station facilities will be available on the ground and first floor, underneath the dramatic top-lit station roof.”

Exhibition of the final project for an alternative proposal for the Euston Station area



Since the Summer School, HS2 has been plagued by major overruns with cost, a section of the planned route was axed as a result, and there has been great pressure to keep costs contained, hence the reduction in the number of platforms. It's also a major infrastructure project with its own bill in parliament, which means that as a project it's not subject to the usual planning process, making it more difficult for Camden as the local authority to influence the project directly as it normally would.

Based on the description and the two CGI images released, it's difficult to see whether the solution as currently proposed has been improved with respect to the surrounding area. Although the project continues to march on this concept design, drawn up by a consortium made up of Arup, WSP, and Grimshaw Architects, it's now subject to further public engagement which is just beginning. Perhaps it's time to resurrect the good work that you, Samir, and the students did then, to republish and continue the good fight. The scheme after all still needs to get planning consent from the London Borough of Camden.

### Acknowledgements

Direction: Professor John Simpson, Dean Elect, University of Buckingham

Faculty: Professor Samir Younés, University of Notre Dame, and Lucien Steil, University of Buckingham

Participants: Sophie Bakkali, William Hedley, Yanjia Jin, Michail Sarafidis, Alexander Athenson, Ellen Chen, Anthony Fitheoglou, Pusan Lee, Hallie Swenson, Lauren Sommerville

Planning and Coordination: Amanda Potts; Event Manager: Digby Ogston

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<sup>1</sup> Aslet, Clive. 2018. There is a visionary alternative for the new Euston station. The Times, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/there-is-a-visionary-alternative-for-the-new-euston-station-gphg6tv63> (consulted on 15/03/2022)

### Biographies | Biografías | Biografias

#### Lucien Steil

Lucien 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 (*Diplômé par le gouvernement*). 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 Oregon School of Design (Portland, 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".

#### John Simpson

John is principal of John Simpson Architects. He is a leading proponent of New Classicism and believes Architecture, as a public art, must draw on our collective experience and traditions as a society. His work came to prominence in the 1990s with his masterplan for Paternoster Square by St Paul's Cathedral in London. He pioneered mixed-use urban planning long before it was adopted as government policy. Through his work he has had considerable influence in bringing the Classical tradition to the fore with works which include the Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, buildings at Poundbury for the Duchy of Cornwall, Kensington Palace for the Queen's Jubilee, and the DMRC rehabilitation facility for injured service personnel near Loughborough. Within academia his work includes Gonville & Caius College and Peterhouse at Cambridge, Lady Margaret Hall at Oxford, McCrum Yard quadrangle at Eton, the music rooms at RCM, London, and the School of Architecture at Notre Dame, Indiana. John has taught at the Prince's Foundation and lectured at Notre Dame University and is a professor at Buckingham University. In 2021 he was appointed professor at Cambridge University, and he is a Fellow at Gonville & Caius College.