

Lucien Steil

Résistance Anti-Industrielle: *Counterprojects*

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Abstract | Resumen | **Resumo**

This article discusses the role of “counterprojects” in architecture and urbanism as critiques of the industrialization and speculative development of urban spaces, particularly in the Brussels of the sixties and seventies. It highlights the contributions of Maurice Culot and Léon Krier, opposing the destructive modernization that was wiping out historic urban fabrics and displacing local communities. Their counterprojects aimed to revive traditional urbanism, emphasizing local craftsmanship, natural materials, and mixed-use neighborhoods and countering the sterile, high-rise developments that had come to dominate European cities. Some of these counterprojects exemplified this other vision, advocating for cities that prioritize human scale, social justice, and environmental sustainability. The author calls for the integration of these values into contemporary urban planning.

El artículo analiza el papel de los contraproyectos en arquitectura como una forma de crítica contra la industrialización y el desarrollo especulativo de los espacios urbanos, especialmente en Bruselas durante las décadas de 1960 y 1970. En él se destaca el trabajo de Maurice Culot y Léon Krier, quienes se opusieron a una “modernización” destructiva que hacía desaparecer los tejidos urbanos históricos y desplazaba a las comunidades locales. Sus proyectos buscaban revitalizar el urbanismo tradicional mediante la artesanía local, el uso de materiales naturales y la creación de barrios de uso mixto, en contraposición a los desarrollos estériles y de gran altura que predominaban en las ciudades europeas. Algunos de estos contraproyectos ejemplifican esta visión alternativa, que defiende las ciudades que priorizan la escala humana, la justicia social y la sostenibilidad. El texto insta a renovar los esfuerzos realizados para integrar estos valores en la planificación urbana contemporánea.

O artigo discute o papel dos contraprojetos na arquitetura como forma de crítica contra a industrialização e o desenvolvimento especulativo dos espaços urbanos, particularmente em Bruxelas durante as décadas de 1960 e 70. Destaca o trabalho de Maurice Culot e Léon Krier, que se opuseram à “modernização” destrutiva que apagou os tecidos urbanos históricos e deslocou as comunidades locais. Os seus projetos visavam reavivar o urbanismo tradicional, dando ênfase ao artesanato local, aos materiais naturais e aos bairros de utilização mista, contrariando os empreendimentos estéreis e de grande altura que dominavam as cidades europeias. Alguns destes contraprojetos exemplificaram esta visão alternativa, promovendo cidades que dão prioridade à escala humana, à justiça social e à sustentabilidade ecológica. O texto apela a esforços renovados para integrar estes valores no planeamento urbano contemporâneo.

The best form of criticism is a project.

Léon Krier

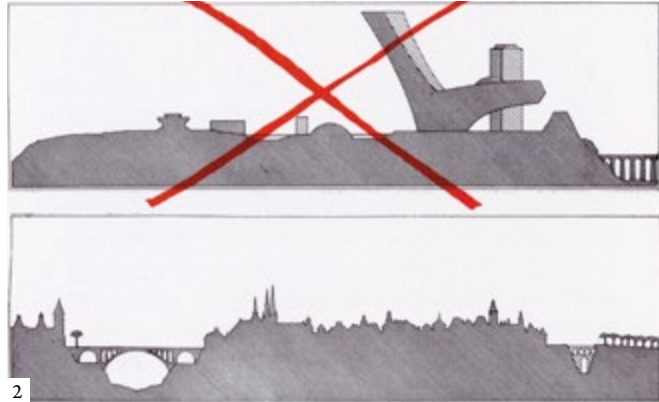
Since its creation in 1968, the Archives d'Architecture Moderne have drawn up at no charge more than a hundred counter-projects at the request of local neighborhood committees in Brussels, in active opposition against private and public speculation. Two major concerns stand out in these counter-projects: the first being the desire to counter the structure of industrial production in building, and the second to reconstruct the philosophical means of architecture.

Maurice Culot

In the late sixties, when the 1968 student uprising in Paris was followed by massive, rebellious student strikes and demonstrations throughout Europe and the US, the issues were not only about rigid and authoritarian educational models and outdated government hierarchies. May '68 was a revolt against post-war, post-colonial, industrial capitalism and its systemic inequality, social injustice, exploitation, and indifference to the natural environment and to most people's quality of life. Students were regarded a priori as rioters, parasitic bohemians, a threat to the status quo of Western social elites and bourgeoisies. And the repression of the student movements in France was as brutal as the violence of the insurgents. In Paris I found myself surrounded several times by the notorious CRS police, who would lie in wait for hours in their blue vans before beating up whoever they could corner in the narrow streets and alleys of the Latin Quarter. The months of strikes, demonstrations, forceful declarations and pamphlets, etc., did overturn many of the existing academic structures and change much cultural rhetoric and ideology, but did not manage to offer viable alternatives for a more convivial post-industrial society. Though a refreshing breeze of romanticism and idealism came from the Flower Power movement in the US and new thinking on political philosophy, sociology, ecology, education, and conviviality (such as that of Ivan Illich), what remained was a sense of defeat and



Reconstruction design for Les Briggittines, Quartier des Marolles, Brussels (Gilbert Busiau, *Archives d'Architecture Moderne*)



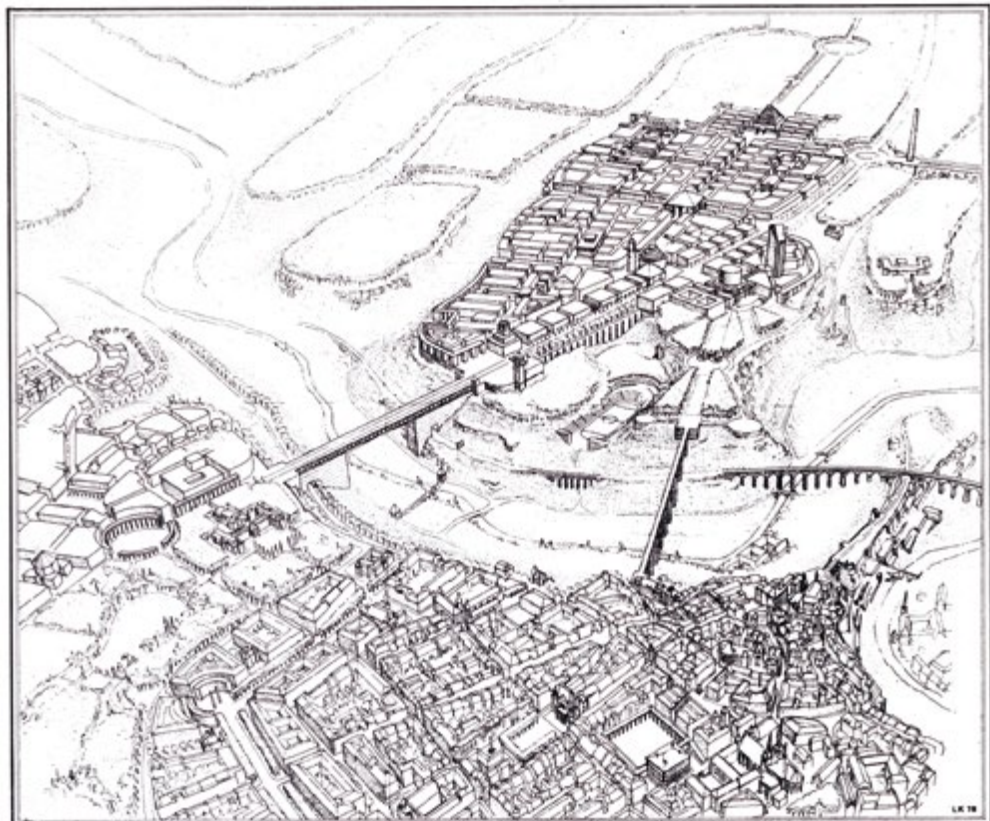
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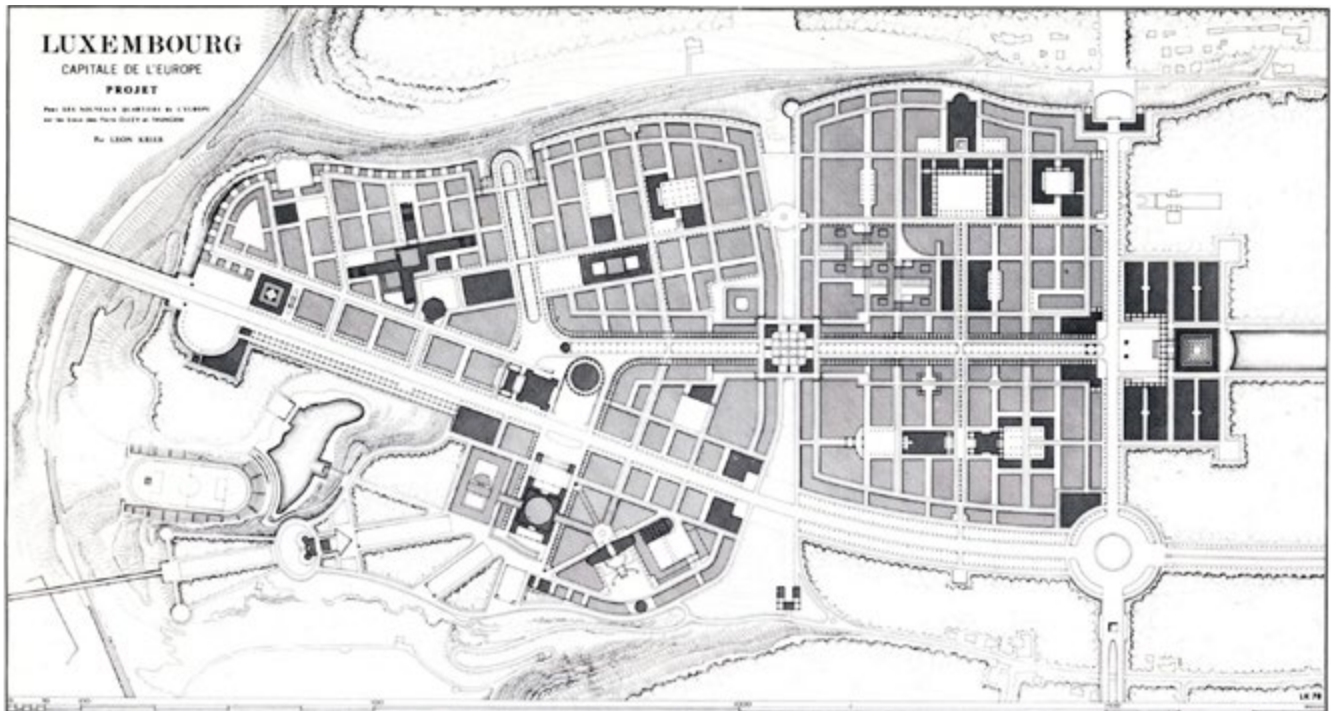
1: Counterprojects offered alternatives to the Modernist monstrosities proliferating through the city (Culot 1980)

2: The skyline of the historic center of Luxembourg City contrasted with that envisaged in the proposal for a European Parliament building by Roger Taillibert. This was nicknamed "De Kueb" (The Crow) and fiercely opposed by Luxembourgers, prompting Léon Krier to design a comprehensive masterplan and architectural vision for Luxembourg's New European Quarters (Culot and Krier 1980)

disillusion. During my 6-year studies in Paris, the École des Beaux-Arts was in a state of confusion and desolation: the *ateliers* were closed, the masters or *barons* had escaped, been fired, or retired, and the young avant-garde professors (who had often started their career on the May '68 barricades) were unimpressive, full of themselves and without pedagogical vision. I was drifting in Paris and spent most of my days in long and inspiring *flâneries*, pondering whether to continue or give up my architectural studies. It even seemed paradoxically that the May '68 revolt had unchained the rage of Modernism, helping it cast off the inhibitions of the *Vieille France* and the era of Charles de Gaulle, still marked by traditional values and attachment to regional and provincial cultural practices and ideals of France as a bastion of *bon goût*, *élégance*, *raffinement*, and *esprit*. During the presidency of Georges Pompidou (1969-1974), France threw itself into the embrace of Modernism, striving to catch up with the *esprit du temps*: many towns and cities then got their "Pompidou skyline" with hastily conceived *tours* and *barres*, i.e. towers and long housing blocks overpowering the still intact profiles of traditional urban settings, along with museums of modern art, modern sculptures, and other such features necessary to status. In Paris, particularly in the *Quartier d'Italie*, whole neighborhoods were demolished to make way for mediocre high-rise structures damaging to both the social and the urban fabric.



Léon Krier's design for a reconstructed Luxembourg City, 1978 (Culot and Krier 1980)

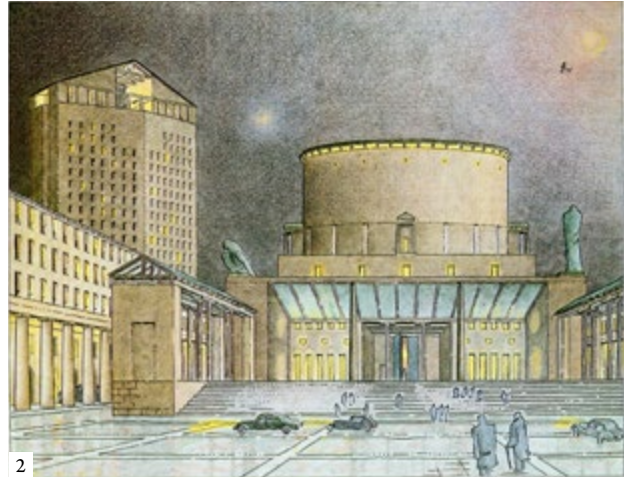


Masterplan for Luxembourg, The New European Quarters (Léon Krier 1978)

Fortunately, the Louvre was still standing and without I.M. Pei's pyramid: I would hang out for hours in its uncrowded galleries or visit the *Musée de l'Homme* or the *Musée Rodin*, etc., as well as strolling around bookshops and galleries. I often visited the Pompidou Center after its opening in 1977 and enjoyed the unchecked access to its book and magazine section, where I chanced upon the Belgian journal *Archives d'Architecture Moderne*, which immediately captivated me. It rekindled my desire to become an architect and a militant for a new kind of architecture and urbanism, rooted in thousands of years of sociocultural history with its immense knowhow in building crafts, accumulated design intelligence embodied in traditional placemaking and building, and expertise in developing and preserving natural and cultural resources. This art of creating places and buildings inspired by the goodness, efficiency, and beauty of age-old ones was rarely mentioned in my education and shockingly is referred to even less in the training of architects, engineers, and builders today. At the Pompidou Center I devoured any issue of the *Archives* I could lay my hands on. I also discovered the early correspondence between Maurice Culot and Léon Krier and delighted in the projects—mostly counterprojects—of the students of Maurice Culot's studio at École de la Cambre in Brussels. These counterprojects often expressed “anti-industrial resistance” and the struggles of *luttres urbaines*, seeking to reinstate “the European city”, “cities of stone”, etc. They were hailed by Culot and his colleagues at École de la Cambre, Robert L. Delevoy, director of the La Cambre School of Architecture, and also the sociologist René Schoonbrodt and other Belgian intellectuals, as well as a growing number of international sympathizers, among which Léon Krier stands out for his radical and profound thinking and the genius of his design work.

During the sixties and seventies Brussels became a sad example of urban destruction and speculative development. Developers would buy properties to demolish them, opening up holes in the otherwise intact adjoining blocks. A class of substantially criminal entrepreneurs with neither empathy nor scruples sacrificed some outstanding urban fabric, often of Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Classical, Neo-Gothic, or Early Modern masterworks.

By breaking the envelope of city blocks, particularly at the corners, they weakened them both structurally and socially. The interiors became exposed and permeable to incursions and the inhabitants felt increasingly vulnerable, particularly the elderly and foreigners. The developers would not hesitate to threaten tenants with expulsion and owners with expropriation, acquiring properties by an incremental destructive process until many helpless residents, without legal or official support, sold up, often at a scandalously low price.



1: View toward Place du Belvédère,
Léon Krier (rendering by Gilbert
Busiau, Porphyrios 1984)

2: Place du Parlement Européen,
Léon Krier (rendering by Patrice
Neirinck, Porphyrios 1984)

Belgian real estate legislation allowed developers to start an expropriation procedure once they had secured a certain percentage of a block. They then demolished the remainder, and these demolished or partially demolished blocks became a feature of a Brussels cityscape subject to a criminal organization of destruction that has been called *Bruxellisation*.

The *résistance anti-industrielle* was a reaction to these transformations, as the centers of power, real estate traders, the luxury industry, financial centers, and big business took over the most desirable downtowns. While locals were being pushed out with rising rents, a lack of affordable housing supply, and the destruction of mixed-use and residential areas, a speculative commodity industry was relocating its production to developing countries while monitoring its often highly polluting and unethical empires from the sterile concrete, glass, and steel fortresses dominating Western cities.

Let us make a brief synthesis of the political factors at the basis of our conviction: financial monopolies need forceful management techniques to respond to the problems posed by the contemporary industrial process, strongly fragmented due to its never-ending search for new ways to reduce production costs: as a corollary, the vast structures of bureaucratic control vital to the functioning of this system on a worldwide scale lodge themselves in the urban milieu in such a way as to profit from free facilities and from the urban milieu itself, which due to its concentration is a place of innovation; thus the city appears indispensable to the functioning of industry, and economic power is thereby reinforced to the detriment of cultural and political power (Culot 1980).

This context of a ruthless, industrial-scale real estate business with its network of political and financial accomplices set the stage for Maurice Culot and the École de la Cambre's strategy of "anti-industrial resistance", with polemics, counterprojects, and lawsuits for architectural preservation, urban healing, and reconstruction. This endeavor was supported by articulate neighborhood organizations and an extraordinary movement called A.R.A.U (Atelier de Recherche et d'Action Urbaines), founded in 1969 by a group of Brussels residents who claimed their right to the city (see Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville / Espace et politique*, 1968) with the belief that city air makes us free.

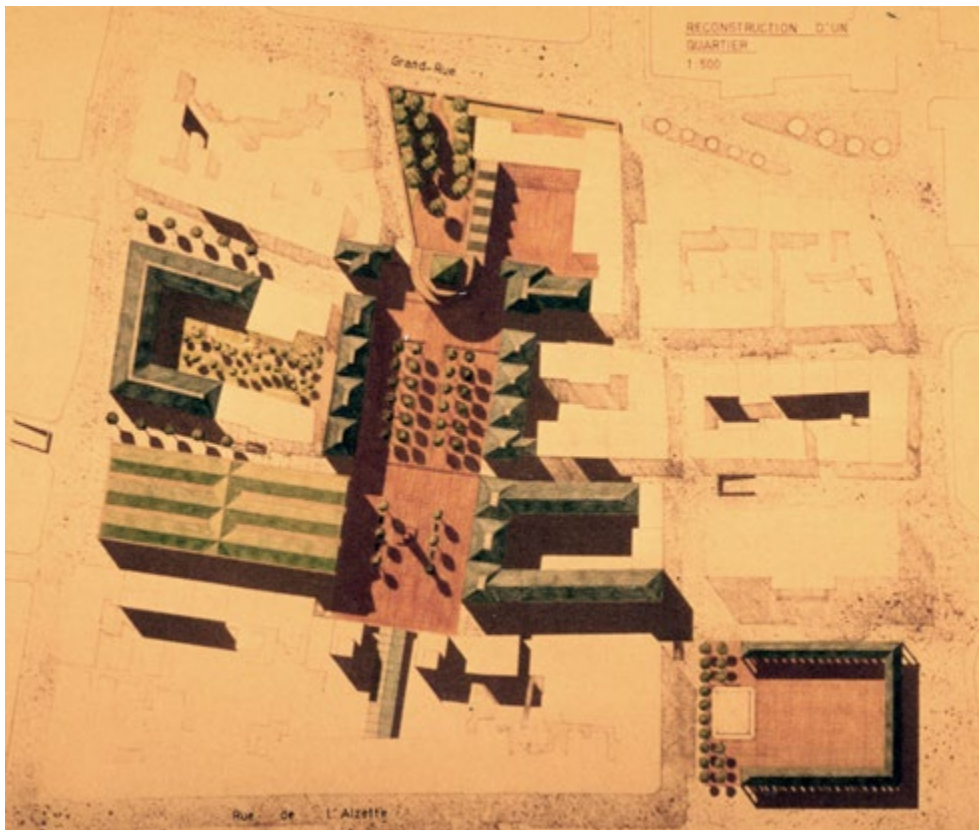
For ten years, residents of the Quartier des Marolles have been fighting to have their neighborhood reconstructed in accordance with the historic principles of its streets, squares and mixed activities. To continue to live and work in their own area is what they want, and they reject compulsory mobility. Inhabitants of working-class neighborhoods detest modernist architecture as they, more than most, are in a position to judge its alienating characteristics, its inability to resolve complex urban problems, and its power to destroy local craftsmanship and popular culture (Culot 1980).

Contreprojets—Controprogetti—Counterprojects

As I eagerly researched the projects and counterprojects of Maurice Culot and his students as well as those of Léon Krier, and avidly studied the magnificent work done in Italy, Spain, and Switzerland under the banners of *Razionalismo* or *Tendenza* (the name Massimo Scolari gave to this effervescent movement inspired by Aldo Rossi, Arduino Cantafora, Gianni Braghieri, Giorgio Grassi, etc. in Italy, José Ignacio Linazasoro, Alberto Ustarroz, Miguel Garay, etc. in Spain, and Fabio Reinhart and Bruno Reichlin in Switzerland), I finally got the chance to hear a lecture by Léon Krier in Paris in 1978. Shortly afterwards in Luxembourg I attended his presentation of “Luxembourg, a City Under Threat,” a comprehensive counterproject for the New Urban Quarters on the Kirchberg Plateau, then still seen as a potential site for the European Parliament. This for me was a life-changing moment, an experience of awakening. Giving up architecture was out of the question now; I finally saw how I could make a difference as an architect, by making a career in *counterprojects*. Instead of becoming a grumpy critic or submitting to a routine of mediocre and frustrating practice, I envisioned a didactic commitment to creative endeavors not only to resist the destruction of the traditional city and its vernacular building culture but above all to conceive of solid counterprojects, projects of reconstruction, and visions of the *città felice* encompassing *il buon governo* and fostering a “good life.”

The fundamental purpose in Leon Krier's project is based on a concept of the area characterized by a precise social and physical dimension and great complexity of function, in contrast with the monotonous zoning imposed by modern urbanism, as symbolized by the new buildings on the Plateau du Kirchberg.

To present his project to the Luxembourg inhabitants, Leon Krier resorted to the use of parallels to emphasize the imperative need for verification of any new architectural and urban program as compared with an absolute system of measures, dimensions and proportions known and lived: streets, squares, neighborhoods. This technique transcends the limits of the scientific languages which have served to impose the worst monstrosities upon the inhabitants against their will (Porphyrios 1984).



Masterplan for a reconstruction of Al-Esch, 1979

Shortly after the acclaimed public presentation by Krier of his New European Quarters proposals, I started corresponding with him and had the privilege of his agreeing to be an advisor on my thesis project: a counterproject to the official *tabula rasa* plan proposed by the authorities of my hometown of Esch-sur-Alzette. This was the beginning of an enduring friendship and professional complicity. After some unsuccessful drafts, I was offered a simple and radical design parti which I keenly endeavored to develop.

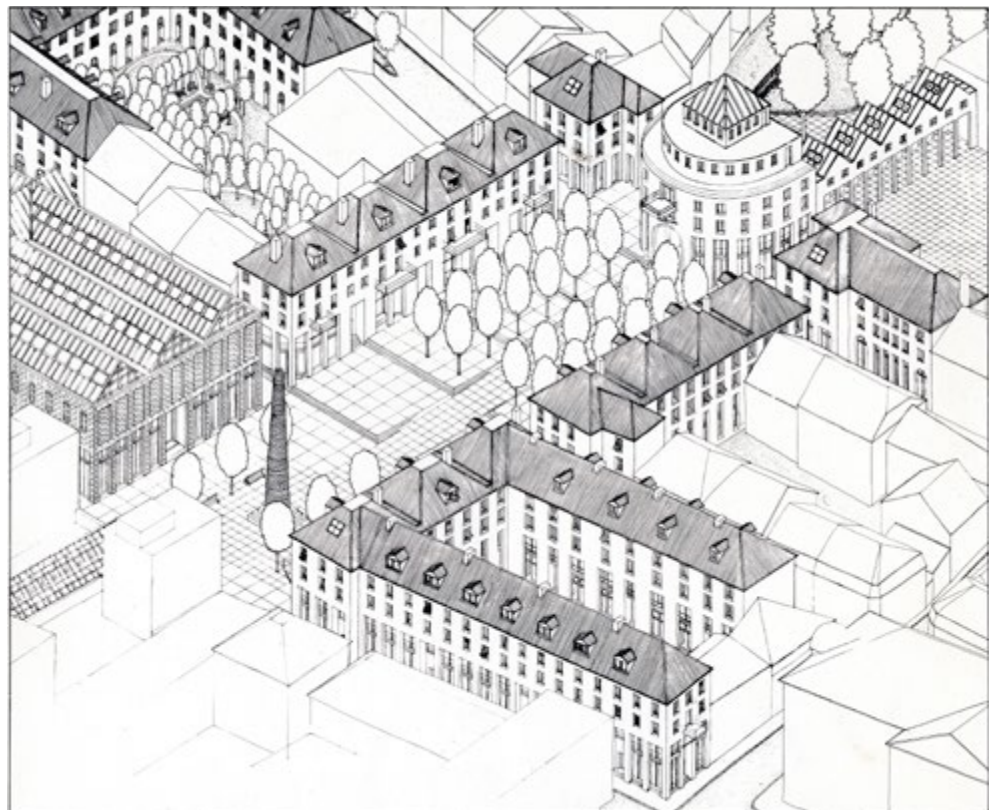
Counterproject for the Reconstruction of Al-Esch

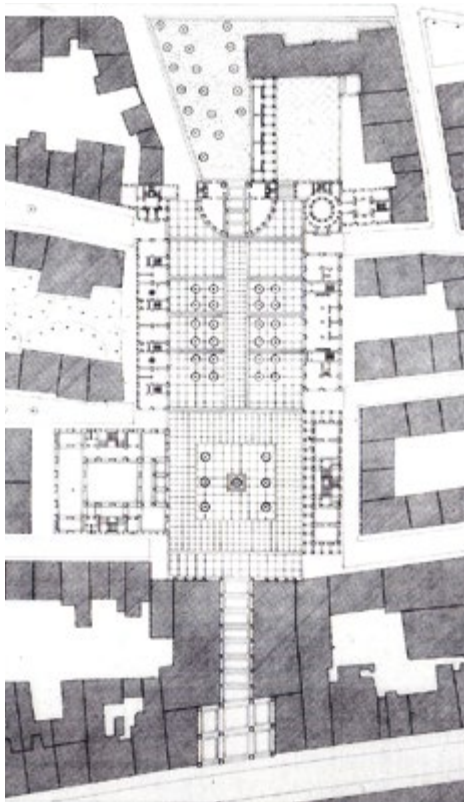
In its plan for urban renewal, the authorities had decided to wipe out the heart of the historic center, a working-class neighborhood that retained a village character, and to relocate its inhabitants, mostly elderly or immigrants. I opposed this social and architectural *tabula rasa* and the official plans giving most of the area over to a supermarket and car parking. I proposed instead an “analogue” reconstruction inspired by traditional urbanism and also by the iconic contemporary projects of Aldo Rossi, Léon and Rob Krier, etc., as well as Maurice Culot’s strategy of combative but articulate and rational counterprojects. This seemed better suited to conserving collective memory and striking a creative balance between permanence and change, tradition and modernity, *genius loci* and *Zeitgeist*.

My scheme was centered around a new piazza, the symbolic *caput mundi* of the whole. The plan provided for a simple rectangular space of 100 x 40 m bordered by mixed-use buildings, an art museum (rather than the proposed big-box supermarket), a shopping arcade at the south end (linked to the main shopping street, Rue de l’Alzette), and a neighborhood club attached to an existing school at the north end. The piazza was probably inspired by the *Città Ideale* attributed to Luciano Laurana, a painting that fascinated me, as well as De Chirico’s *Piazza d’Italia* and many other archetypical squares, built, planned, or painted. I saw that the primary identity of urban communities and places is embodied in this sense of centrality, enclosure, and void that is conveyed by successful urban spaces. The final design itself, though, owed much to my mentor, Léon Krier, who reviewed and corrected my efforts with admirable clarity and taught me a methodology and the architectural and urbanistic principles that I have followed ever since.

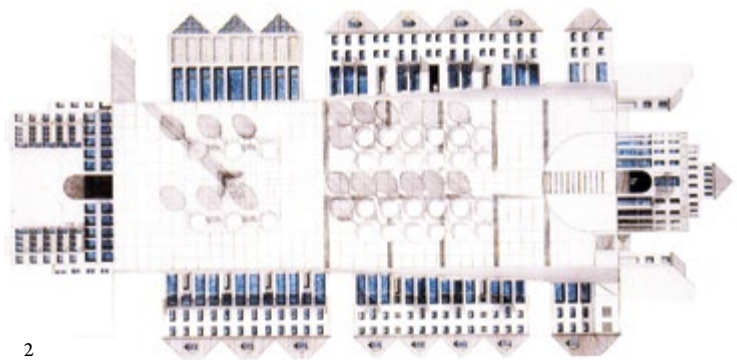
1: Axonometric view of the first Al-Esch counterproject, 1979

2: Perspective sketch of an Al-Esch piazza maggiore

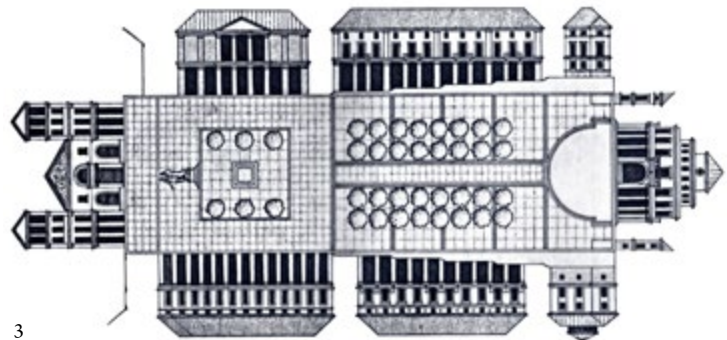




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1: Plan view of the Al-Esch counterproject, 1982

2, 3: Proposed elevations: 1979 version (2), 1982 version (3)

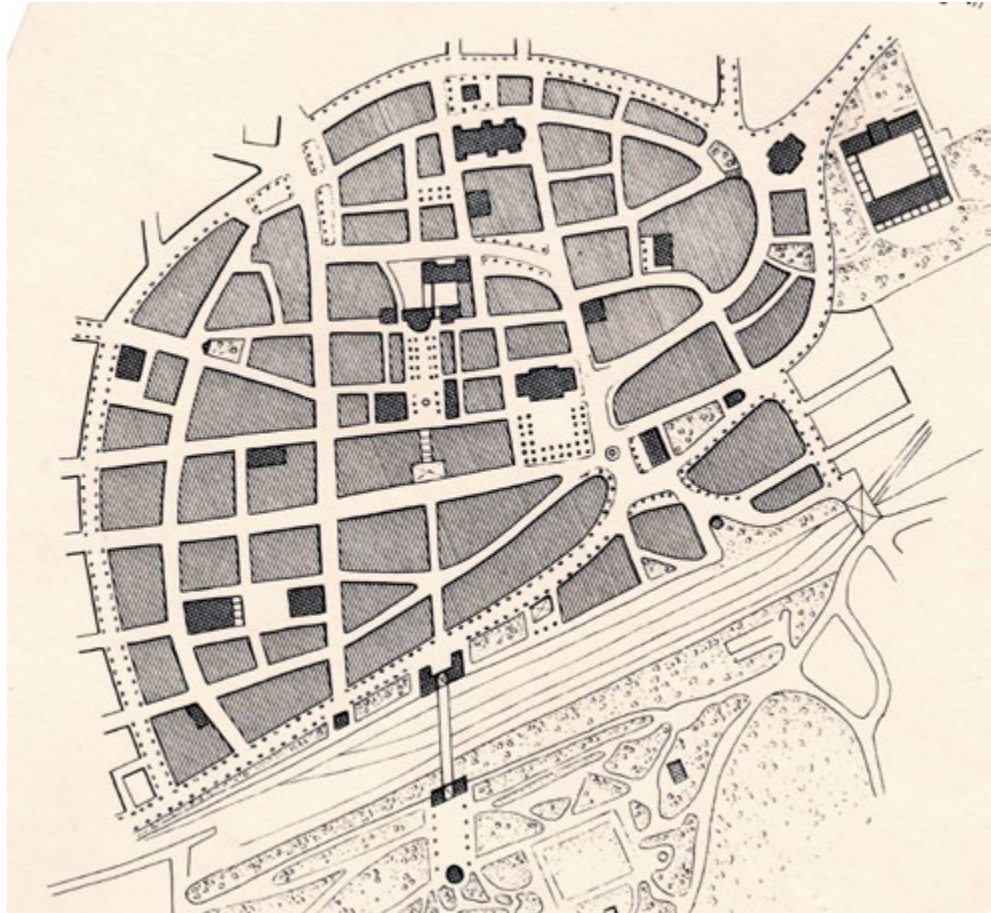
By giving the plans geometrical precision, deep shadows, simple, crisp ink lines, and a metaphysical air, I hoped to communicate the delight I felt on re-envisioning the center of my hometown as a clearly delineated void. I identified strongly with this contained, tense, and mysterious urban space, its radical and precise geometry, its solemnity, and its character both poetic and melancholic as well as its references to local identity and urban and industrial mythology, and, indeed, its modernity.

Following up later on my Al-Esch counterproject with a comprehensive masterplan for the whole historic center of Esch-sur-Alzette, I endeavoured demonstrating the relevance of the proposed strategy for reframing and revitalising my hometown's *res publica*, and ultimately restoring its urbanity.

Quartier Kaltreis Counterproject, Luxembourg

A lot of 21.5 ha (52.1 acres) at the edge of Luxembourg-South, between the districts of Bonnevoie and Howald: the council proposed a low-density residential project designed by the municipal planning department. Reserved for individual houses, it made poor use of this large unbuilt area at the city's southern boundary. Given a chronic lack of affordable housing, Luxembourg City's buildable perimeter greatly expanded in the post-war area with building codes encouraging "anti-urbanism" and suburban sprawl across the metropolitan area. My Kaltreis counterproject proposes traditional, walkable, and mixed-use urbanism.

This is an alternative to the official suburban, monofunctional proposal, offering a dense, walkable, and desirable townscape, "cities within the city", as Léon Krier says, as a rational alternative to environmentally deficient low-density, suburban, high-carbon emission monofunctional and single-family housing concepts. It is inspired by Luxembourg's urban tradition characterized by buildings of materials such as local sandstone, timber, lime mortar and plaster, brickwork, etc., pitched roofs tiled with locally sourced slate, classical proportions, limited building heights (no more than four or five floors), and loose stylistic variety with often refined ornamentation and sculptural features.



Masterplan for the Al-Esch historic center, 1980

A city can only be reconstructed in the form of streets, squares and urban quarters.

These quarters must integrate all functions of urban life, with areas not to exceed 35 ha and 15,000 inhabitants.

The streets and squares must present a familiar character.

Their dimensions and proportions must be those of the best and most beautiful pre-industrial cities.

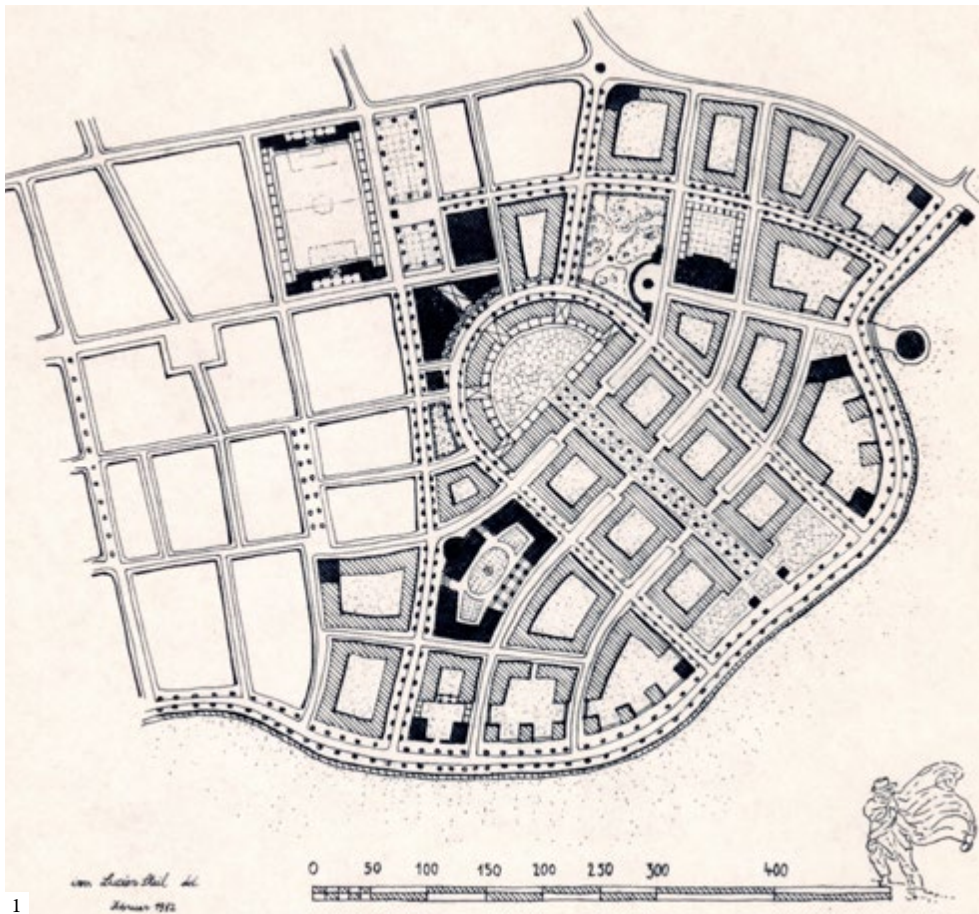
Simplicity must be the goal of urban topography, however complex.

The city must be articulated into public and domestic spaces, monuments and urban fabric, squares and streets, classical architecture and vernacular building, and in that hierarchy (Krier 1980).

The Kaltreis counterproject proposes a neighborhood of blocks, streets, and squares, public and private buildings, gardens and parks, etc., laid out on a walkable scale and suited to the local context and topography.

The street pattern responds to slight contour shifts and a large public park serves the purpose of harmoniously defining the boundary between the new quarter and the adjoining countryside. “Memory is redundant; it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist,” said Italo Calvino.

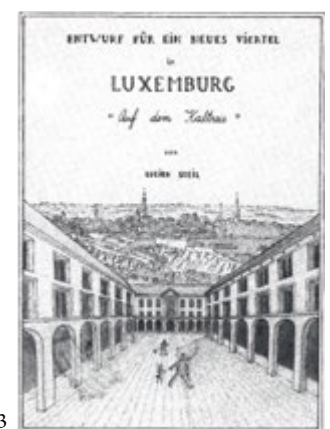
The first draft of the Quartier Kaltreis counterproject is organized around a central pedestrian *rambla* avenue, with shops at ground level and flats above. The avenue ends at a semi-circular piazza surrounded by a colonnade or arcade and opening up through public passageways to the surrounding streets (like the Plaza Mayor in Madrid). Further to the variety of neighborhood shops, the piazza is linked to a shopping *galleria* or covered market. There is underground parking accessible by ramps



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on the little streets perpendicular to the main avenue. The new Quartier Kaltreis is delimited to the south by a tree-lined boulevard with urban *villetes* echoing the former building types along the Boulevard Royal or Avenue Grande-Duchesse Charlotte. A number of public buildings infuse the new *quartier* with vitality: schools, a community center, a daycare facility, a refurbished soccer field with new amenities and a fitness center, etc. A monumental water tower on the periphery is connected axially with a semi-circular *piazzetta* and a small park. Offices are permitted on mezzanine levels or second floors, but generally no more than one floor may be used as office space. The building height is typically limited to four or five floors, with an additional mansarde or attic floor allowed in relevant areas.

1: New Quartier Kaltreis counterproject

2: Existing Kaltreis site

3: Original Kaltreis counterproject masterplan

The Need to Restore the Moral Foundations of Architecture

I look back to this period of counterproject activism with nostalgia, though I am aware of the need to update the narrative and objectives of *résistance anti-industrielle*, acknowledging climate change and new global industrial and post-industrial dynamics.

Now, it is true and truly sad that despite intelligent calls for more connectedness to nature, ecological stewardship, social equity and global justice, peace, etc. since the appearance of Rachel Carson's acclaimed *Silent Spring* (1962), the 1968 Paris student uprising, the Woodstock Festival (1969), the 1969 People's Park protest and "Bloody Thursday" at Berkeley, the Vietnam War protests (and the 1973 Peace Accords), the fall of the Greek military dictatorship (1974), the end of Franco's regime in Spain (1975), and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster (1986), and more recently, proxy wars, civil, religious, and ethnic wars, apartheid and genocide, etc., little progress has been made by the major powers in offering what is needed for a more sustainable and harmonious world. A renewed and refreshed wave of counterprojects in the context of global resistance to destructive uglification and ugly policies of exploitation and alienation is of utmost urgency! The movement for "Architectural

Uprising” and “Rebellion” is challenging the conformism, greed, and opportunism at the root of contemporary compromise and surrender in both practice and academy.

One might idly ponder the question of whether architecture is politically neutral, but it seems impossible to be neutral when architecture and urbanism are used and abused to express and celebrate power and wealth. If we claim to be contributing to the building of a better world through our architecture and invoke the relationship between the *città felice* and *il buon governo*, understanding politics in its noblest sense as the art of governing the city, then do we not implicitly acknowledge architecture’s political relevance? Knowing also that architecture and urbanism are directly and indirectly responsible for almost three-quarters of all carbon emissions, and so co-responsible for the degradation of our natural and urban habitat, we can hardly deny the responsibility of the building industry in the world’s ecology, climate, and indeed survival as a healthy living environment. Philosophical non-sense, intellectual impostures and professional opportunism have perverted architectural discourse, and hence the urgency for a new culture of counterprojects to reconstruct the “philosophical means of architecture,” and, one might also say, “to restore its moral foundations.”

On the other hand, choices of architectural style, character, and imagery can be put to political purposes by the propaganda machinery of either totalitarian or democratic regimes. So the strategies of *résistance anti-industrielle* involve less a revivalist historic aesthetic than a preference for natural materials, traditional craftsmanship, passive and clean technologies, adaptive reuse, urban and architectural preservation, slow and incremental development, small scales, and low energy use, along with systematic reference to time-tested precedents, materials, and techniques of building more sustainably and more beautifully.

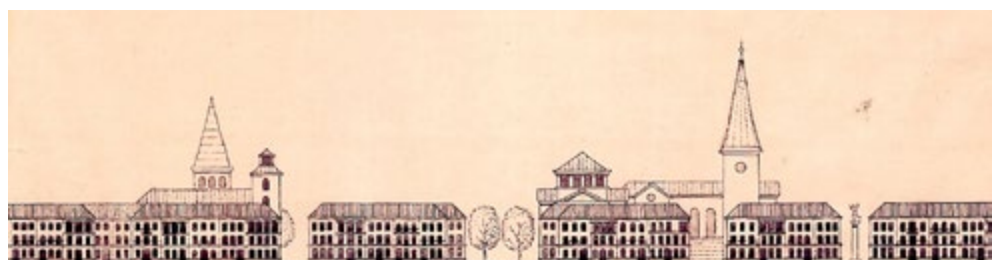
The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle

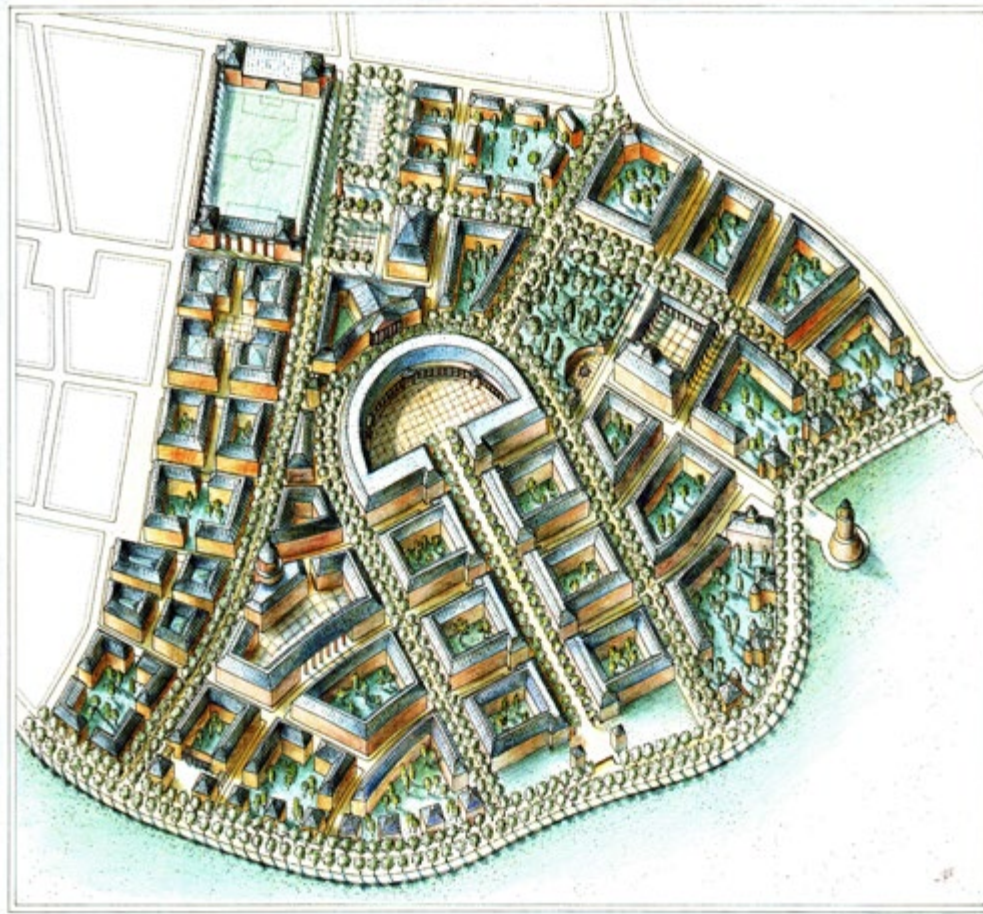
Hannah Arendt

Elevation study with the historic city behind, 1982



Exterior ring boulevard elevation for Kallreus, 1982





Axonometric rendering of Kaltreis counterproject

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Biography | Biografia | Biografia

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Lucien studied architecture in Paris, graduating in 1980. He is the principal of Katarxis Urban Workshops asbl., in Luxembourg and a partner at Heure Bleue Architects, London. He is currently Associate Teaching Professor at the University of Notre Dame. He has practiced in Luxembourg, producing a wide range of traditional designs in collaboration with Colum Mulhern. He has taught and lectured in Europe, the Americas, and Asia, and collaborated with the Prince of Wales's Urban Design Task Force in Potsdam and Berlin, the University of Miami, the Polytechnic University of Puerto Rico, the University of Bologna, and the Portuguese Catholic University in Viseu, and the University of Notre Dame (Rome Studies Program and US Campus, South Bend, Indiana, University of Buckingham, and University of Luxembourg). He is the author, editor, or co-editor of many publications, including *New Palladians*, *Traditional Architecture: Timeless Building for the Twenty-First Century*, *The Architectural Capriccio*, *In the Mood for Architecture* and *Travel Sketches from Elsewhere & Nowhere*.