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Selected Counterprojects in Brussels

Selección de contraproyectos para Bruselas

Seleção de contraprojetos para Bruxelas

Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

This article explores the role of counterprojects as didactic tools for challenging destructive modernist practices and proposing alternative visions rooted in tradition and civic identity. Drawing on the legacy of Léon Krier and Maurice Culot, it criticizes the superficiality of much contemporary “sustainable” architecture and the erosion of the public realm into “anti-space.” It situates the emergence of the growing “Architectural Uprising” within broader cultural, political, and ecological movements, emphasizing grassroots resistance and education for traditional design. Through examples in Brussels such as the Bleton Tower, the Maison du Peuple, and Place de Brouckère, it explores how adaptive reuse, classical language, and urban reconstruction may restore continuity, beauty, and permanence to the Belgian capital’s civic fabric.

Este texto examina el papel de los contraproyectos como herramientas didácticas para cuestionar las prácticas modernas destructivas y proponer visiones alternativas arraigadas en la tradición y la identidad cívica. A partir del legado de Léon Krier y Maurice Culot, el artículo critica la superficialidad de gran parte de la arquitectura “sostenible” contemporánea y la erosión del ámbito público hacia el “anti-espacio”. Sitúa el surgimiento del “Architectural Uprising” (rebelión arquitectónica) dentro de otros movimientos culturales, políticos y ecológicos más amplios, y destaca la resistencia popular y la educación en favor del diseño tradicional. Mediante ejemplos tales como la Bleton Tower, la Maison du Peuple, y la Place de Brouckere, el texto analiza cómo la reutilización adaptativa, el lenguaje clásico y la reconstrucción urbana pueden devolver la continuidad, la belleza y la permanencia al tejido cívico de la capital belga.

O texto explora o papel dos contraprojetos como ferramentas didáticas para desafiar práticas modernistas destrutivas e propor visões alternativas enraizadas na tradição e na identidade cívica. Baseando-se no legado de Léon Krier e Maurice Culot, o artigo critica a superficialidade de grande parte da arquitetura “sustentável” contemporânea e a erosão do domínio público em “anti-espço”. Enquadra o surgimento da “Revolta Arquitetônica” dentro de movimentos culturais, políticos e ecológicos mais amplos, enfatizando a resistência popular e a educação tradicional em design. Através de exemplos como a Torre Bleton, a Maison du Peuple e a Place de Brouckere, o texto mostra como a reutilização adaptativa, a linguagem clássica e a reconstrução urbana podem restaurar a continuidade, a beleza e a permanência do tecido cívico de Bruxelas.

The late Léon Krier said that “the best criticism is a project,” and we have found there to be much truth to this in practice and teaching. Counterprojects are indeed both didactic and poetic tools for thinking “out of the box,” overcoming ideological and administrative hurdles in design, understanding the potential of a place through the design process, and proposing better ways of building on our fragile and threatened planet. Counterprojects educate our memory and imagination and inspire change in keeping with the culture of places and people rather than disrupting the natural metabolism of town and countryside.

On observing the built environment and its often vainglorious pretension to fame, as well as the surfeit of glitzy, award-winning “sustainable” architecture, we should pause and breathe deeply. Though celebrated, this vaunted sustainability is all but a product of the biased algorithms of the industries dominating the building market with their array of unsustainable products and self-serving specifications. The fame of many of these acclaimed “eco-buildings” infringes common sense and good taste.

So, alas, does the failure to maintain or provide decent spaces and buildings in the public realm, symptomatic of the erosion of both life and identity in our city centers. The reality of such centers becoming business or shopping districts, with many buildings occupied at ground-floor level and empty above, is dispiriting. A pervasive décor has trivialized and decomposed the public realm into a landscape of “anti-space,” making any emotional, sensorial, or mnemonic connections between community and place all but impossible.

As “thinking and building” are now notoriously separated from “dwelling” (Heidegger 1971), city-dwellers, and also to a larger extent designers, craftsmen, and builders of goodwill, are now excluded from participating in the wholesome process of city-building. As a consequence, many (but not all, fortunately) have given up, seeing that political decision-making, city-planning and urban architecture have been usurped by big business, the building industry, and the bureaucratic apparatus set in place to make sure that the *città felice* and “good government” remain excluded from city-building rationale.

This is where the Architectural Uprising or Rebellion grassroots movement, launched in Scandinavia largely over social media, comes in. It spread like wildfire and is now present in almost all European countries as well as the US, India, and Brazil. It aims to resist the “uglification” of the built environment—and there is little need to explain what this means in any language or for research on the subject, as the brutal reality is self-evident in contemporary building culture. The popular verdict is almost unanimous and only well-established entitlement and the backing of financial, political, cultural, and industrial dynasties has saved mainstream architectural modernism from dissolution. Polemics and protests as well as counterprojects and media presence highlighting architectural eyesores or examples of accomplished repair and reconstruction have had notable success in Scandinavia, halting destructive modernism and having it replaced with contemporary traditional work.

A short history of the surprising but also logical emergence of the Architectural Uprising and Rebellion movement suffices to show why it eventually had to happen in Scandinavia and also how it builds largely on a tradition of rebellion and insurgence started by Maurice Culot and Léon Krier in the late seventies and early eighties under the banner of *Résistance Industrielle*. We should also mention the political and intellectual support and cultural inspiration provided by King Charles III (formerly the Prince of Wales), whose insightful *A Vision of Britain* campaign, ecological stewardship, and educational endeavors (the Prince of Wales’s Institute of Architecture, Prince of Wales’s Urban Design Task Force, Prince’s Foundation for the Built Environment, etc.), made a durable impact on contemporary architectural culture and prompted the development of a larger international movement of traditional architects and urbanists. Initially promoted by Gabriele Tagliaventi in Bologna with *A Vision of Europe* and its influential gatherings and conferences, it was later expanded with the creation of INTBAU at the initiative of Robert Adam in the UK, again with generous sponsorship from supporters in Sweden and Norway. INTBAU was a monumental endeavor of developing the emerging traditional architecture and urbanism movement over all five continents under the patronage of the former Prince of Wales. Besides its remarkable success in creating a network across both Western and non-Western countries, offering educational events



1. *Bruxellisation*: Tour Blaton in Brussels (Wikimedia Commons)

2. This early proposal for Sandakerveien 58 B/C in Oslo was rejected by the local authorities in 2014 (MAD Arkitektur)

3. The building design was then revised by the same firm (MAD Arkitektur)

outside institutional and academic confines, INTBAU has also substantially expanded its interests, catering for vernacular cultures, crafts, and natural materials and techniques as well as pressing issues of social, gender, and ethnic equity and the empowerment of marginalized cultures.

Interestingly, the Climate Rebellion and the influence of the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, as well as the seminal pamphlet *Time for Outrage* (*Indignez-vous*, 2010) by the French diplomat, Resistance member, and concentration camp survivor Stéphane Hessel, may all have contributed to the Architectural Uprising. But many other sporadic movements of civil disobedience, and also the rise of populism in today's fragilized political and sociocultural environment, have facilitated the emergence of initiatives such as the Uprising on the margins of established practice and academia. A growing number of summer schools teaching traditional architectural and urbanism have further popularized resistance to the global rage of destructive modernism. Many young professionals and activists have been initiated into classical and traditional architecture and urbanism in these schools, mostly organized through INTBAU chapters, in Sweden (Axel Johnson Foundation), the UK (University of Buckingham, University of Cambridge, King's Foundation), Spain and Portugal (Traditional Building Cultures Foundation), Belgium (La Table Ronde de l'Architecture), etc. Academia and the architectural establishment have yet to engage with the widespread discontent at the desolate architectural output of institutionalized modernism, seeming confident that it is just another trend.

Further to the revolt of citizens of all ages, albeit energized by the young, converging and flourishing on social media, the well-established pedagogy of the School of Architecture at the University of Notre Dame has since 1980 been offering a paradigm of faith and hope and also solid didactic content and methodological intelligence to these various endeavors. The remarkable institutional apparatus of INTBAU, but also the expertise created by CNU (the Congress for the New Urbanism) and ICAA (the Institute of Classical Architecture and Art) in the US, have helped disseminate traditional know-how as well as a growing body of academic expertise. This has empowered the Architectural Uprising and facilitated the evolution of indignation into a dynamic of positive change. The plethora of extraordinary student work and exemplary professional output of contemporary traditional architecture demonstrate the validity and efficiency of the methods and pedagogy embraced by a growing number of practitioners, academics, and patrons. We seem to be ready for an era of urgent counterprojects, and we are certainly eager for action. Rather than being disillusioned bystanders, we aim to proactively design impactful projects against uglification.

There follow a few examples of counterprojects designed in *charrette* mode during the 2021 La Table Ronde Summer School in Brussels.

Tour Blaton: Call for Counterprojects for the Blaton Tower

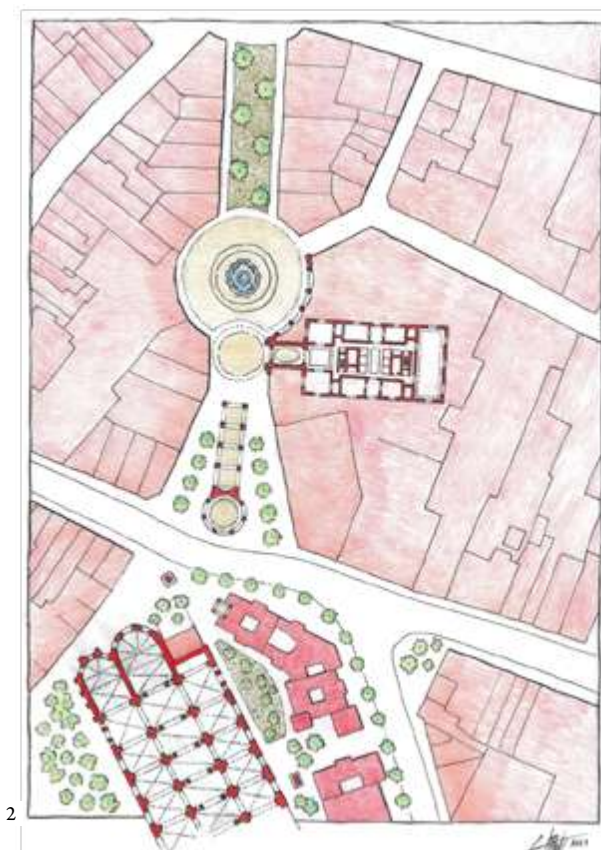
La Table Ronde de l'Architecture, with the support of Maurice Culot, requests proposals for a counterproject to rethink and transform the Blaton Tower, Brussels, built in 1968 in place of Victor Horta's masterly House of the People. This 26-story, 86-meter-high eyesore is emblematic of Bruxellisation: a methodical destruction of heritage for replacement with overwhelming modernist buildings. Today, a parenthesis—that of modernism—is coming to a close. Demolition is inviable, financially and environmentally, so we ask the Brussels city authorities to consider transforming and embellishing this tower that disfigures the Sablon townscape.

Our counterprojects opt for an adaptive reuse strategy: a transformative rehabilitation of the existing structure. Victoria Schulz-Daubas proposes a rather refined embellishment with few structural

1. Tour Blaton in the historic center of Brussels (La Table Ronde de l'Architecture)

2. Nolli plan of the repurposed Tour Blaton with masterplanning suggestions: a new monumental fountain in a circular square, a public loggia, student housing, etc.

3. Tour Blaton counterproject (acrylic and colored pencil on photo print)



changes, whereas Lucien Steil prefers more radical alterations: cutting out every other floor to accommodate higher ceilings and vertical windows, and giving the tower an elaborate “crown.”

This adaptive transformation also involves adding fine pilasters, string courses, ornamental reliefs, and a monumental cornice to give the tower hierarchy, legibility, elegance, massing, and texture. The inside walls are reinforced with pilasters and consolidated with a skin of Porothersm bricks. A double layer of cork sheeting enhances thermal wellbeing and acoustic quality and makes for a warm and breathable wall structure. Tour Blaton will be repurposed as the new headquarters of the École de la Reconstruction de la Ville Européenne (School for the Reconstruction of European Cities), devoted to the study and teaching of contemporary traditional crafts, architecture, and urbanism across Europe. The tower will become a landmark in a renaissance of good urban architecture, gracing the European capital and standing as a beacon of the resilience of historic European culture and the art of building.

Maison du Peuple: *Entrée Libre*

Victoria’s proposal embodies the ethos of achieving maximum impact through minimal intervention. Rather than altering the tower’s structure, this design works with existing features and adds subtle enhancements, minimizing resource consumption and waste generation.



Maison du Peuple, *Entrée Libre*

The approach is twofold: visually integrating the building with its traditional surroundings by incorporating ornamental elements and enhancing its appeal to the public by reimagining the ground floor with arched openings, niches, and light.

Classical architectural elements such as skirtings, friezes, parapets, and figurines are strategically introduced to accentuate the base and crown. While most of the tower's facade remains unchanged, a layer of blue paint on the top row of windows pays homage to the blue triglyphs of ancient Rome. This counterproject aims to transform the tower into a welcoming landmark, leveraging its height to benefit the entire city, indeed inviting everyone in, while minimizing environmental footprint.

The Making of a Square: Place de Brouckère, Brussels

Place de Brouckère is a large public space in the center of Brussels enclosed by well-proportioned, ornate, mixed-use buildings of five or six floors, of which many are vacant or undergoing thorough (or brutal) renovation. The north end is elegantly occupied by a fine landmark building, a former hotel, and the historic fountain which had been in front of it has been removed and replaced with



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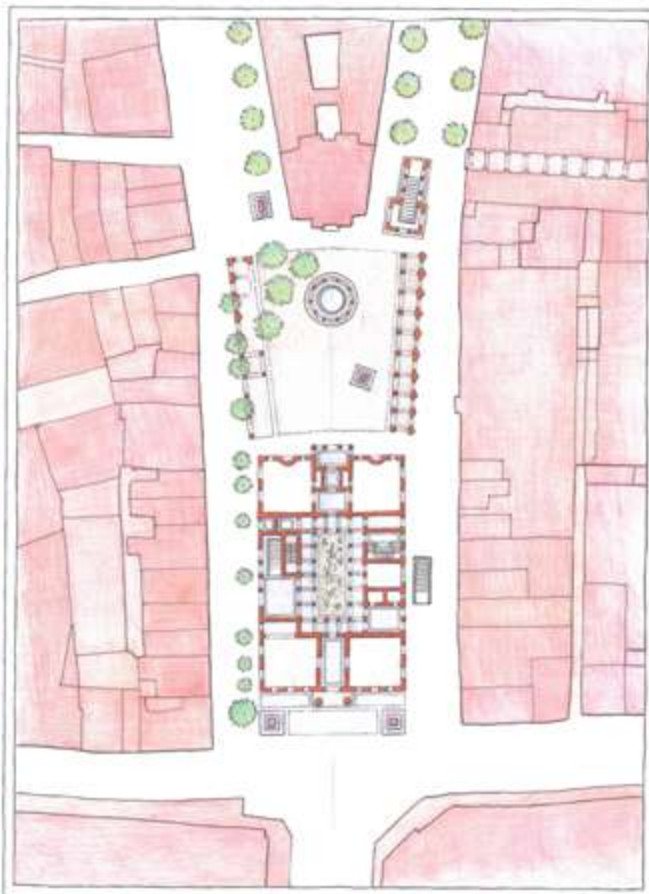
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1. Place de Brouckère, Brussels, 2021

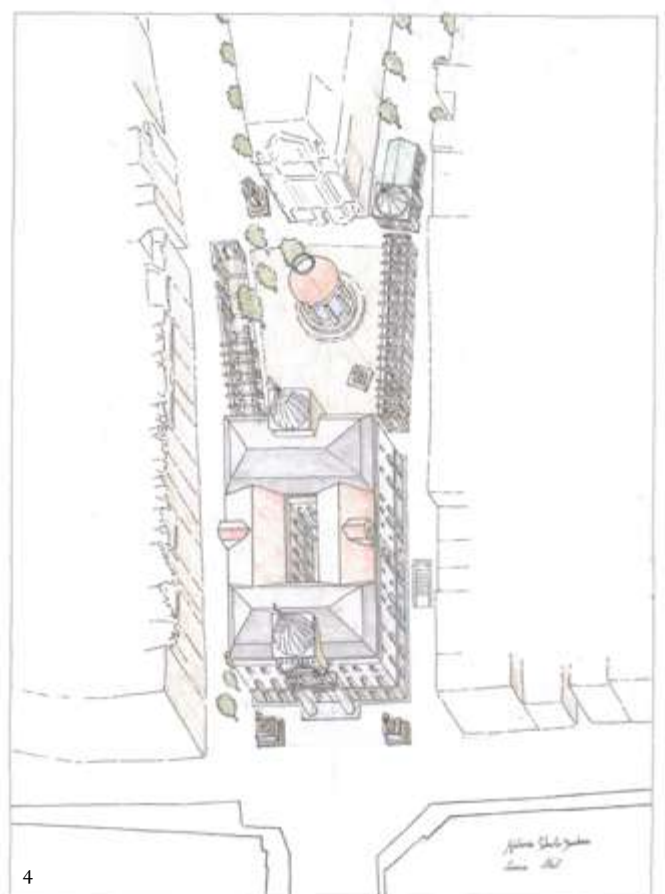
2. Place de Brouckère in 1930
(Wikimedia Commons)

3. Plan of the Place de Brouckère
counterproject

4. Axonometric view of the proposed
reconfiguration of Place de Brouckère



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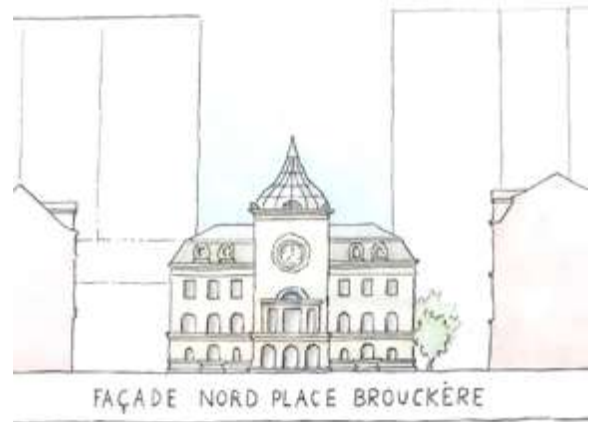
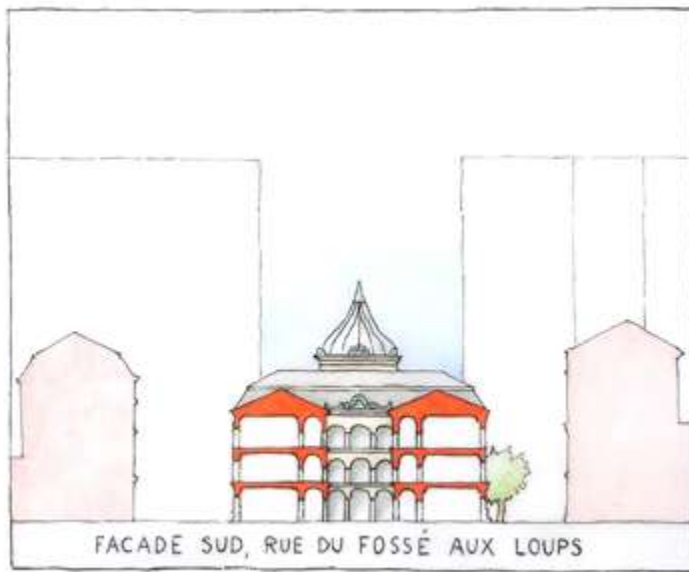


Maison du Peuple, *Entrée libre*: main facade seen from Boulevard Anspach

irrelevant pavement water spouts. Another prominent hotel stands in the eastern flank, and there are subway entrances on either side and at the northeast end. Place de Brouckère is approached from Boulevard Anspach at the open south end between two unattractive high-rise buildings forming an uninviting gateway. The overall impression is of overbearing scale, emptiness, and lack of enclosure and character. There is little sense of place, identity, or grandeur.

Our proposal inserts a large public building on the south side of the square, creating a monumental though welcoming frontage aligned with Boulevard Anspach. Sculptures of dancing figures symmetrically frame the central entrance. The building is organized around a porticoed garden courtyard and has a permeable ground floor with reception, security, shops, subway stairs and elevators, and a variety of premises devoted to cultural activities and associative life. This floor can be crossed in all directions. The upper floors contain ballrooms, yoga and meditation halls, meeting venues, and classrooms. The top floor has apartments for visiting artists and the building manager.

The reconfigured square features a colonnade along the east flank and an arcade with a false ruin on the west side. A circular *tempietto* over a fountain along with sculptures and a new subway pavilion further enhance the square's new identity as well as offering new perspectives and artistic and architectural highlights and references.



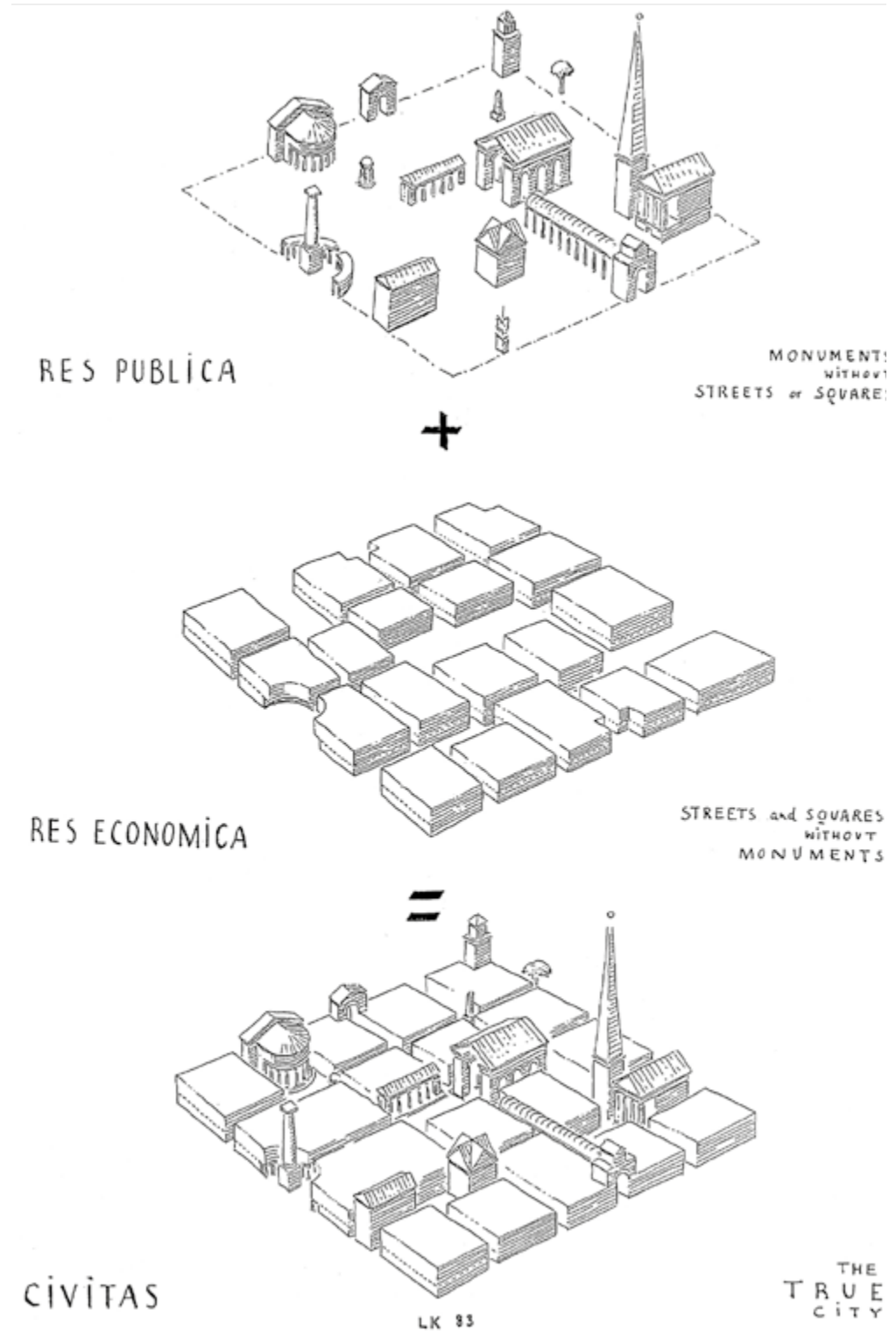
North elevation and east-west cross-section

Relevance of the *Res Publica*

Lewis Mumford exalted the city as a place where “strangers live in peace together,” and Richard Sennett posits the public realm as a stage on which citizens become actors of civility. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt says “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.”

Unfortunately, much of contemporary city-building has disregarded or dispensed with the traditional dialectic between public and private realms. The “art of building cities” has been replaced with a modernist dystopia inspired by functional and social zoning codes, with disruptive policies and practices. Rather than the public realm as an identifiable *caput mundi*, an enclosed civic “void” where the life, memory, and endeavors of urban communities can unfold, evolve, and flourish harmoniously, the *res publica* has been commodified as an arena for either cheap entertainment or plain boredom and suburban melancholy. The diversity, order and disorder, and clear geometric, proportional, and phenomenological experience of public space has shifted into a realm of “anti-space,” with an ephemeral array of gadgets, ridiculous urban furniture, and random installations. So let us conclude by highlighting the key components of the traditional city with the necessary organization of and relationship between the *res publica* and *res economica*, as often pointed out by Léon Krier. His admirable argument states that the “true city” is achieved only once the public and private realms are harmoniously integrated, forming what in antiquity was known as an *urbs* (the physical form of the city), fostering and facilitating *civitas* (its social, political, and economic fabric). The destruction of the public and civic realm wipes out the identity of places and communities—hence the urgency of both counterprojects and projects of reconstruction!

Our Brussels counterprojects thus endeavor to contribute to the making of a more sustainable, beautiful, memorable, and popular city, reclaiming its moral and material completeness.



Léon Krier's iconic drawing illustrating the dialectics of public and private realms (Léon Krier)

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Biographies | Biografias | Biografias

Lucien Steil

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*.

Victoria Schulz-Daubas

Victoria is a PhD candidate and emerging architect whose work bridges philosophy, sustainability, and traditional design. She holds degrees in Architecture from the Technical University of Munich, Queen's University Belfast, and the University for the Creative Arts, UK, and has worked in practice with Apollodorus Architecture in London as well as at *DETAIL Magazine*. Her design approach centers on composition, rhythm, proportion, and the emotional resonance of space. At the King's Foundation, her doctoral research has explored the concept of the sublime in contemporary architecture, resulting in an illustrated *Sublime Design* handbook and interactive website. Alongside her academic work, she pursues design practice, speculative projects, and painting, seeking to connect historical insight with creative vision for contemporary architectural experience.