

Delight in Architecture

by [James Stevens Curl](#) (August 2023)



Piazza Proposal, Lucien Steil, 1995

The trouble with abstraction is that if one abstracts too much there's not much left for mere humans. And that has been the problem: allied with Relativism, brainwashing, adherence to a quasi-religious self-referential fundamentalist cult (worshipping false deities with not only feet, but everything else of clay), absence of humour and beauty, inversion of values, elevation of ugliness and cacophony to the status of desirability, the embrace of obfuscation and meaningless

jargon (to impress fools into imagining something is profound when it is empty), Modernism in architecture has ruined countless towns and cities and blighted lives as well. It has contributed to widespread desensitisation, so that human beings, bullied into fraudulent admiration and acceptance of the unworthy and contemptible messes made by Uglifiers, no longer see with their eyes, but look with their ears, perceiving only what they are commanded to see.

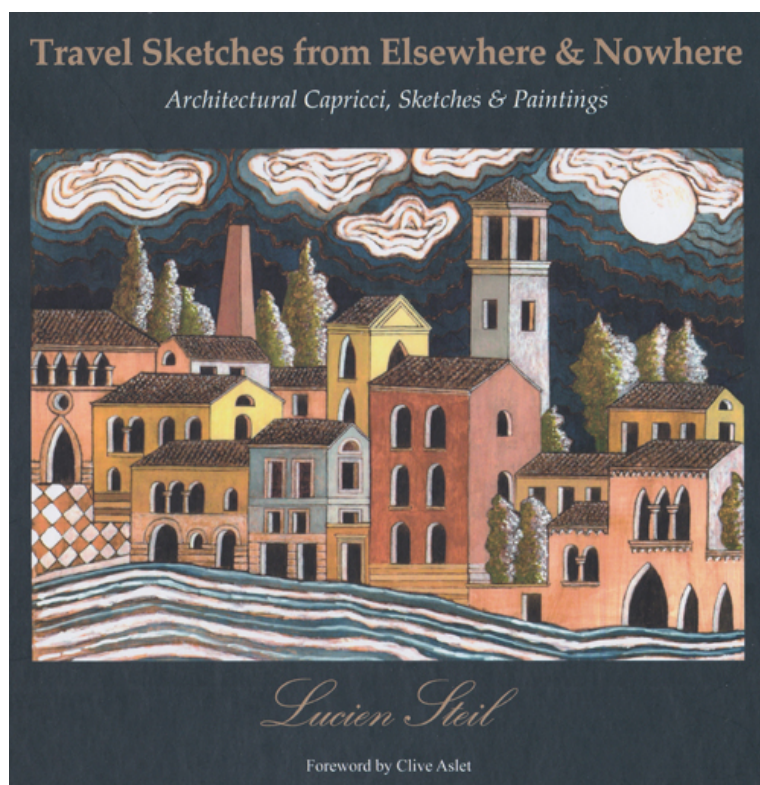


Fig. 1

So it is a wonderful relief to turn to a beautiful book by Lucien Steil entitled *Travel Sketches from Elsewhere & Nowhere: Architectural Capricci, Sketches & Paintings*, with a Foreword by Clive Aslet and contributions from several others (Madrid: Ediciones Asimétricas, 2022, ISBN: 987-84-19050-37-3), which reminds us of what cities no longer are, but really ought to be, 'of what human economies no longer pursue, but must deliver again, namely shelters for the good life and the common good, objects of beauty and dreams', as Léon Krier puts it so eloquently in a quotation printed at the start of this tome (Fig. 1).

For Steil, a man of refined sensibility, great talent, and acute perception, surviving traditional cities and architecture have always offered ideals in harmony and beauty in an increasingly destabilised, disrupted world: they remain desirable models of cultural identity and civilised living, in contrast to the dystopian hells deliberately foisted on us all by ruthless, totalitarian, greedy, Modernist barbarians. Steil has maintained that contemporary traditional architects and urbanists offer an alternative to the opportunistic architectural and planning establishment still clinging to the vacuous old paradigms of cut-throat Capitalism and inhumane Modernism which have manifestly failed in every respect. Yet that same establishment still insists on indoctrinating and bullying students in 'schools of architecture' to accept the tenets of a ferociously destructive, humourless, insane cult which has created deserts devoid of comfort, security, harmony, enlightenment, or pleasure. As my late, great friend, Roderick Gradidge, once observed, 'Modernism never sold a pint of Bitter', which sums up very succinctly the utter incapacity of Modernism to make places that can accommodate human beings in comfort and give pleasure. Essentially, it is very unfunny, extremely grim, and catatonically boring in its nihilism and spiritual emptiness.

Steil's dreamlike *Capricci* have a hypnotic quality, presenting townscapes of his imagination, inhabiting a far more beguiling world than could ever be created by any Modernist whose head is addled with the nonsense of Gropius, the stentorian DEMANDS of the bullying Vichy-serving toady 'Le Corbusier', the tediously gnomic utterances of 'Miës van der Rohe', the Derrida virus, and the unquestioning adherence to what ever fashionable 'ism' is currently embraced. The images Steil has painted include towers, arcades, chimneys (a memory of the industrial town in Luxembourg where he grew up), numerous allusions to a great variety of historic buildings and styles, and there are flavours of Moresque, Italian, Spanish, French, and many other architectural exemplars in his work.

I have long ago given up on believing Modernism could ever produce anything but an insensate, hideous, Dystopian environment from which all delight, all pleasure, all beauty, all humanity are absent. I first came across Léon Krier's work when it was being hysterically abused by Modernists, who ever since have been tarnishing his name with obvious falsehoods and libellous misrepresentations, like the good commissars of iconoclastic Puritan Fundamentalism they so clearly are. And before Krier there were others who took the wondrous beauty of old towns and cities seriously, including Clough Williams-Ellis (1883-1978), whose Portmeirion, Merioneth, Wales (begun 1925), is in itself a kind of *Capriccio*, a Picturesque composition of individual buildings incorporating Classical details, salvaged fragments, and vernacular elements, all put together in a seemingly haphazard way that nevertheless all hang together in a most pleasing and coherent manner.

Another was Camillo Sitte (1843-1903), whose book, *Town-Planning according to Artistic Principles*, first published in German in 1889, emphasised the need to design urban fabric with æsthetics and composition in mind, and was one of the first major books to analyse what became known as 'Townscape'. Needless to say, it has counted for nothing among Modernists, with obvious results. And there is a further excellent volume, this time on historic German towns, which I treasure: given to me by my good friend Heiner Hoffmann many years ago when we worked together, it is the beautifully illustrated *Die Gestalt der deutschen Stadt* (The Shape [or Form] of the German Town) by Karl Gruber (1909-95), originally published in 1937, but re-done rather well by Callwey of Munich in 1977, and stuffed with exquisite line-drawings. It is a beautiful vision, largely of exquisite old mediæval German towns like Lübeck, Stralsund (*Fig. 2*), and Tangermünde, all three of which I have visited, so I am painfully aware of how much beautiful urban fabric has been lost.



Fig. 2

I had just returned from Scandinavia, where I had been participating in debates about the appalling damage Modernism has done to old-established towns, to find Steil's fine book waiting for me. On my journeys to and from Oslo, I read the splendid *Architectural Principles in the Age of Fraud: why so many architects pretend to be philosophers and don't care how buildings look* (ORO Editions, 2022, ISBN: 978-1-954081-45-1), by the Serbian-Norwegian intellectual, Professor Branko Mitrović (b.1961), which skewers the Cult's pretensions, its obfuscatory humbug, its essentially reactionary anti-Modernity, its abysmal intellectual and spiritual emptiness, and which ends with a statement that Modernism itself IS the Crisis which wrecks our environment. I entirely agree.

So in timely publications such as those of Steil and Mitrović I detect the stirrings of an uprising against the deliberate destroyers of our human habitat. What we need now is to get politicians to stop conniving at the destruction. For half a century in Britain we have had a Value Added Tax imbalance which favours demolition of any existing buildings and their replacement, because there is a 20% tax rate on the refurbishment of old buildings, but no tax at all on new developments. And the British Government pretends to be in the

forefront of having 'green' credentials in its stated policy towards carbon neutrality, while at the same time ignoring the value of embodied carbon in old buildings and the results of encouraging the erection of energy-guzzling new ones employing Modernist methods of construction (notably carbon-heavy concrete).

It is high time everyone woke up to the destruction obvious all around us, and stopped it by ceasing to employ Modernist architects and refusing to vote for disassembling politicians. We should all strive for a return to standards of civility and beauty in the places in which we have to work, live, and interact, and in order to achieve that the Augean Stables need to have a complete clear-out.

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Professor James Stevens Curl is a Member of the Royal Irish Academy, and in 2017 was the recipient of The President's Medal of The British Academy for his 'outstanding service to the cause of the humanities'. The author of numerous scholarly books on architecture, his *Making Dystopia: The Strange Rise and Survival of Architecture Barbarism* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 2019) has received praise and abuse in almost equal dollops.

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