The angst of backwardness and its consequences: Reflecting on the huge changes that have occurred in London over his long career, Leon Krier argues in this essay that it is traditional urbanism – not dense Modernism – that offers the solutions to the planet’s ecological problems.

For the publication of their centennial anniversary celebration book, the Royal Town Planning Institute had
invited me to write about the events that followed the Prince of Wales’ famous Hampton Court ‘carbuncle’ speech in 1984 and culminated in his Mansion House ‘Luftwaffe’ speech in 1987. A lot of repositioning in the Modernism versus tradition controversy happened between those two royal pronouncements, not only within professional and academic circles, but within the body politic itself. The divisions are felt to this day. Even though Prince Charles is the Patron of the RTPI, the centennial book editorial board would only consent to publish the article they commissioned in a severely censored form. Ironically this rather un-civil about-face is a flagrant display of the special form of intellectual corruption that this article attempts to describe. Very few people who are now firmly opposed to Prince Charles’ architectural and urban agenda are willing to remember how strong and generally favourable reactions to his RIBA speech had been in 1984, particularly among architects. In its wake, Foster Associates announced that their company would move away from the industrial aesthetics towards a more civic architecture. In his submission for the Covent Garden Opera extension competition, Richard Rogers proposed to reconstruct Inigo Jones’ famous Piazza, facade, arcade and interiors. Denys Lasdun made self-critical reflections in private circles. Only when Prince Charles expanded beyond his criticism to articulate a ‘Vision of Britain’ in 1989, with a programmatic exhibition at the V&A, did the fronts become clearly drawn. Modernists, with broad media support, re-established their ideological dominance. The non-aligned were blackballed and deprived the ‘oxygen of publicity’ (the term Foster employed about the necessity to silence Prince Charles).
Krier’s vision of The True City
In the limbo before that fatal secession there existed a period of ideological fluctuation and soul-searching during which I was appointed by Jacob Rothschild to draft a masterplan for the extension of the National Gallery and the pedestrianisation of Trafalgar Square. After my presentation to the trustees, Stuart Lipton asked me ‘Leon, what would you ideally like to design for London?’ ‘Plan a new urban quarter,’ I responded, ‘with mixed use, a three-to-five floors height limit, a central piazza and a public building on it.’ He and Simon Sainsbury helped carry my boards to a taxi. ‘I will be back to you within a year with just that brief,’ Stuart said as I was driven away. Exactly 12 months later Lipton asked me to draft a masterplan for the Spitalfields Markets to compete with the project by London and Edinburgh. My plan was based on the prescribed density and mixed-use brief while the competing MacCormac Jamieson megastructure exceeded the permissible floor area by some 200 per cent. The chief planning officer of Tower Hamlets, looking at my drawings with unconcealed lack of interest, stated to my surprise that not the adherence to the brief, but architectural quality would be the deciding factor between the two competing masterplans. To my question whether the competitors were summoned to comply to the official brief, the good officer repeated with a slight irritation: ‘Architectural quality will outweigh all other considerations.’ From then on Stuart Lipton chauffeured consultants almost daily to my place in Belsize Park, leaning on me to up the density. ‘Rather stay friends,’ I told Stuart after a few sessions of this; ‘ask Quinlan Terry to do the job.’ He had no objection to go up to seven floors.

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That far I had had rave reviews from the daily press and wide support from local associations. A month later, Lipton and his partner entreated me to attend Terry’s press conference and presentation, ‘in order to show solidarity and continuity’. When I arrived, late, to an overcrowded pressroom, I was ushered towards the conference table and indicated a seat right in the centre, countless eyes fixed on me. To my ‘What’s this ...?’ Stuart whispered in a staged embarrassment, ‘So sorry Leon, Quin is unfortunately not able to attend, would you please present the new masterplan.’ I was publically cornered. The first and hopefully last time in my life I could not but play the disgusting comedy of defending a development brief I expressly rejected as a matter of principle. I had had my full measure with City Planning Politics and Hypocrisy. (Much worse than either the Terry or MacCormac colossi were soon to mutilate Spitalfields.) I met The Prince of Wales when he inaugurated John Simpson’s Real Architecture exhibition at the Building Centre in March 1987. On that occasion I didn’t need, as protocol dictated, to explain my Spitalfields scheme; HRH knew all about it and asked me to become his personal consultant. My first task was to investigate what was wrong with the Paternoster competition and draft an alternative masterplan. With the Spitalfield fiasco Stuart Lipton had lost affinity with traditional architecture and urbanism. He was the client for the Paternoster Redevelopment Competition. The architects he had invited were all dyed-in-the-wool Modernists and as I discovered to my astonishment, the competition brief prescribed a 190 per cent increase above the City of London plot ratio of 5:1. This was clearly an important reason why all the schemes seemed so out of place next to one of the great monuments of world architecture.
Two of Krier’s pithy polemical illustrations

Conservation versus Over-Development
THE PEDESTRIAN CITY
HORIZONTALLY
VERTICALLY
10 MINUTES
THE STANDARD MEASURE
WALKING

THE MOTORIZED SPRAWL
HORIZONTALLY
VERTICALLY
X HOURS
NO MEASURE
COMPULSIVE COMMUTING

MAX. 100 STEPS 3-5 FLOORS
NO MUSCULAR LIMIT
In March 1988, the magazine *Modern Painters* published my research as the article ‘God Save The Prince’. The piece substantiated the sound reason for The Prince of Wales’ criticism; however, while working *en charrette* in a hotel in Puerto Rico, I was awoken in the middle of the night by a call from a City lawyer who said that I had no clue how to calculate City plot ratios, and if the publication weren’t stopped, I would be in deep legal trouble. I got seriously worried when the magazine’s director, Peter Fuller, told me the publication had already been distributed. However, back in London, I rushed to the RIBA library only to discover that not only had I made no mistake, but that, moreover, the governing plot ratio calculations had been specifically designed to eliminate ambiguities which had for years let through pumped-up densities. Instead of the threatened legal proceedings, the published article was followed by a graveyard silence.

One of the rare responses came from Charles Jencks who, at a press conference on the subject, commented that my accusations were not founded, and that, in any case, it didn’t matter because what I had been describing had been going on for 60 years. If that were so, I replied, if density and height limitations were irrelevant, then why have a policy at all? Why have commissions, enquiries, reports, consultations, negotiations, if there is no worthwhile principle or code to defend? The debate never went public; a conspiracy of silence over the subject continues to this day. And, if anything, the situation has worsened since 1988 and spread across London. The Prince of Wales was and is right indeed. The City of London has been far more destroyed by architects than by the Luftwaffe. One of the finest pieces of urbanism and architecture in the world is morphing as if by an implacable fate into a dysfunctional, tormented and tormenting monster. The smartest city wizards fled the City long ago and moved to headquarters in St James’s and Mayfair.
The failure of the globalised city

The postwar redevelopment of the City of London is part of a worldwide phenomenon that is not mastered: an urban growth run amok, result of arcane negotiations between public administrators and private interest agents, having no care nor interest in the long-term future of the built or natural environment. The catastrophe in the making in the City of London is a graphic demonstration that the lack of strict urban planning principles and form-based codes cannot be replaced by open-ended political negotiations between partial interests. The dominant Modernist building typologies and sub-urbanism (the skyscraper, the landscraper, the suburban home and their massive and metastatic proliferation in geographically segregated mono-functional zones) can only be sustained and serviced in conditions of cheap fossil energies. Very little legacy of that collective malpractice will survive the inevitable global consequences of peak-oil. The fact that unintelligent futureless development and building forms are pursued and desired by so many smart people is a striking demonstration of how partial human intelligence is, how shortsighted and irresponsible otherwise perfectly wise and gifted individuals can be.
Architectural language sprouts from empirical practice or proceeds from intentional design,’ says Krier of this drawing. ‘It cannot develop in functionally zoned territories nor flourish in excessive urban concentrations or suburban dilutions’

The tidal wave of ecological concern, of calls for sustainability, is merely the corollary of the subject having been ignored for too long. In terms of ecology and civilisation, ‘sustainability’ is itself a misnomer. As the mathematician Georgescu-Roegen pointed out more than 40 years ago, the more population the planet has to nourish now, the less it will be able to nourish in the future. In my opinion, the authentic traditional city is the only relatively sustainable settlement model. The real ecological challenge resides in the territorial reorganisation of daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, once in a life-time activities. We need a global environmental project to respond to global ecological problems. The
proliferation of so-called ‘sustainable’ green-suburbs, green-skyscrapers, green-transport, green-food, green-fuel and green-everything are distracting ploys that will postpone peak-oil by a mere few days. For the time being, the daily abuse of the terms erodes their social and political potential and postpones the advent of eventual solutions. What needs to be grasped is that building typology and building styles, urban densities and mixed uses are issues not of artistic, political or transcendental beliefs, but of ecology and technology.

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Traditional architectures are part and parcel of building technology. To condemn them as historical and dead languages amounts to an ideological brainwashing, to a technological dis-education, to the loss of millennial technical experience and knowledge. While the knowledge of handling synthetic building materials has progressed in the past century, the know-how and capacity to handle natural building materials has catastrophically regressed. Experience is by definition a matter of the past. The ‘fear of backwardness’ holds control of a vast and worldwide fraternity, a global brotherhood, believing in the sanctity and exclusive legitimacy of Modernism, a theory that has been brain-dead for half a century, yet keeps dominating positions in academia and its dependent culture industry. This theory, at first fired by fossil fuel energies combined with an atavistic belief in infinite progress, is now held alive by fear of regression. The angst of backwardness is what blinds its victims to the technological treasure house of traditional architecture and urbanism. The resulting technological and artistic amnesia is responsible for the cataclysmic worldwide degradation of the built
This Pall Mall perspective shows the aluminium portico and entablature sheltering the vast perron of the proposed Sainsbury Wing. In this sketch of the pedestrianised National Gallery Esplanade, plane trees screen William Wilkins’ meagre wings.

Traditional architecture and urbanism is a body of technical knowledge: it is definitely not a theology nor a transcendental theory, but the technology for settling the planet in ecological, aesthetic and ethical ways. The return to traditional architecture and settlement patterns will – contrary to what I have previously argued – not come about by democratic choice, but by fate and by overwhelming necessity. Geography, climate and ecology will eventually define again their forms and materials, their number, location, size and scale. My proposal is simple: given the present evolutionary stage of the human species: • Even if the demographic explosion were uncurbed; • Even if there existed no limits to the environment.
provision of fossil and other energy resources; • Even if there were no limits to the mechanisation of transport and expansion of electronic communication; • Even if there existed no limit to the provision of ever more performing and healthier synthetic building materials; and • Even if there were no limit to globalisation and technological innovation. We should nonetheless return to traditional settlement, architecture and construction models. The humaneness of building scales, of settlement patterns and densities, of building techniques and methods, of building styles, of design and of planning methods is dependent on this premise.

FOOTNOTES

1 zakuski.utsa.edu/krier/godsave.html