



Marco Mareto

LONDON SQUARES

A study in landscape

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READING AND DESIGN

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In what is now the vast field of architectural publishing, this new series of books intends to carve out an its own space by offering readers essays, research and observations on architectural topics related to the study of the built environment and the design instruments that derive from its interpretation. Today, architecture is a universe on the move that contains many different interpretations of the term 'design'. Much of it (what occupies the most column inches in field literature) seems to have gradually distanced itself from the more urgent issues to do with the construction of real cities, in order to investigate problems associated with the visual arts and communication, the market for image and its consumption. After all, in the climate that this condition fosters, in the need of being seen as different, modern-day designs almost always end up, in fact, resembling each other without a common principle justifying transformations, like a revolution that, in worrying about the change it provokes, has forgotten the reasons behind its goals. By avoiding the overwhelming wake of an individualistic interpretation of architectural expression, this series intends to put forward studies that have concentrated on tackling the problem of the tangible relationship with the existing world: with the changes that modern cities have undergone, with consolidated urban fabric studied in terms of its evolutionary processes, with the territory interpreted, despite many contradictions, as a collective and fundamentally architectural manifestation. It intends to present, in short, studies on architecture considered in its civil aspects. A second feature identified by the books in this series will be their relationship with the current conditions of crisis in cities and territories. Few periods in the history of architecture have featured such an acritical acceptance of the conditions that determine the construction of architecture. The problem also affects obvious issues to do with language: we are moving towards the use of a metahistoric, locationless, simplified, 'hollow' language, a process that is largely due to the enormous squandering of resources typical of Western society, the exemption from the elementary needs that bind things together. This condition has ended up making it impossible to interpret the real differences, the relationships of consistency between the elements that make up a building, an aggregate, a city or a territory. It is for this reason that the series will also include research on the proper use of resources, on the essential role played by the right proportion between means used and goals to be achieved. And also research on architectural and urban organisms formed by processes of continuous improvements and upgrading that prove how the wise and balanced use of resources leads to true innovation, as well as beauty.

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*To my grandparents
Cesare and Tiziana*

Acknowledgments

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Presentation

Attilio Petruccioli

The news of the removal of the rubble of Amatrice that has shaved the urban fabric of the city of Angevin foundation, leaving isolated the poor remains of churches and a stump of the bell tower, leads us to reflect on the weak resilience of a territory that has produced a fall in social identity and the amnesia of history. At the same time, the memory of the philological and loving reconstructions of Venzone after 1976 in Friuli led to bitter considerations on the current state of the urban sciences, which are responsible for the revitalization of the ancient centers. *'When a duke or a count put the properties to good use'* Eilel Rasmussen in Unique London wrote an unsurpassed essay on urban history *'in 1934, they wanted to establish the type of neighbors (...)* The great landowners and speculators on the areas met and founded the London square with its unitary character, surrounded as it is by houses full of dignity, all the same. Unlike the neoclassical Paris squares composed in axis with a monument expression of authority. The English squares were simply a place where many people of the same social class had their houses, so it is perfectly consistent that they had the shape of the cloister'.

On a page the well-known Danish urban planner captures the basic

characteristics of the London urban model: the social cohesion of the inhabitants which is summarized in a strong unitary form and an identity spirit of adherence to the place by a bourgeois society, which has remained unchanged spite of the Goering bombs and the pressures of real estate operating in an ever more predatory global capitalism. With due differences of time and place Marco Maretto's huge book discusses a model of urban fabric that at the same time is a brilliant example of real estate speculation, an effective model of social-construction neighborhood, a place where, for almost four hundred years the London civitas is mirrored, even through its radical changes. The essay supported by a proven scientific method of the Italian school of morphology is based on a reading of the urban landscape that assumes the principle of scaling the elements as axiom, in a network of structural relationships, which is realized by progressive complexity: starting from the type shared building of the terrace house, a synthesis of a vision of a sober and comfortable life at the same time. The building type thanks to its serial aggregation favors a synthesis in an organism on a higher scale, which finds in the rhythm of the facades and in the repetition of identical modules an effect of quiet monumentality and in the garden enclosed at the center the superior unitary order. At the city scale the single urban unit is replicated by simple juxtaposition creating a continuous fabric of formally autonomous regular spaces, but integrated into the city. Like the medieval Italian city, the London square demonstrates how everything is architecture or how the urban organism bases its self-regulation on the interdependence between architecture, building aggregate and urban structure, integrated and part of the same evolutionary process. Marco Maretto's essay also suggests two important reasons for reflection for the city's designers. When the dominant themes of architecture are sustainability and resilience, it means that these values rooted in place, which in traditional societies were implicit, are in our time under pressure or extinct. For the Adam brothers who dominated the London scene in the eighteenth century, sustainability was an a priori value, an integral part of the project, under penalty of financial bankruptcy, and not an a posteriori intervention in the form of costly technological application. The evolutionary resilience that should combine socio-economic and ecological systems, through the notions of transition and adaptation cycles is admirably evident in the synthesis of nature and architecture of the square. The fabric has been replaced, transformed, demolished, its inhabitants have changed radically several times, from the great nobility of the early eighteenth century to the rich and middle-class bour-

geois eight-twentieth century, the society has changed inexorably, the scientific-technical progress has redefined the same idea of city, yet, the London garden squares have maintained, despite everything, their social and spatial integrity, their urban role, so much so that they became one of the places where London's identity manifests itself with greater force and evidence, a true settlement model for the sustainable city of the 21st century. It is no coincidence that, Allies and Morrison in the project of new neighborhoods for the huge area of the Lower Lea Valley, the so-called Queen Elisabeth Olympic Park, designed for the Olympic Games in London 2012, explicitly refer precisely to the London squares, as a new sustainable settlement model. The extravagance of architecture, the dimensional hyperbole, the rhetorical use of technology, filtered through the lyricisms of an individualist and hedonist designer and the total insensitivity to the previous city are not the hallmark of contemporaneity, but rather the negative consequence of the break social relationships and the commercialization of architecture and the city. On the contrary a careful discipline of the project with a cautious and calibrated technological innovation, that find the constitutive principles and finally the language distilling it from the structure of the urban palimpsest is the suggestion that comes from the best examples of History.

Introduction

'The Measure of any great civilization is in its towns and cities and the measure of a city's greatness is to be found in the quality of its public spaces, its parks and squares.'

John Ruskin

It was a June day many years ago, I was in London studying English, like many other peers of mine, when I was struck by a beautiful girl with green eyes. She was sitting on a bench under an imposing centuries-old plane tree in a beautiful walled garden looking at an equestrian statue in the center. I wanted to meet her but she got up from the bench and went out through a small gate that closed carefully behind her and then entered one of the houses that surrounded that strange square. I did not see her anymore. I found out later that the garden was nothing more than St. Jame's Square and that the statue inside was the bronze statue of William III. It was then, I believe, that my love for the English capital and its garden squares was born.

Why write a book about London squares today? The answer is complex, brings together life experiences, fragments of researches and interests built up over time, a long connection with the English capital and a research path around the themes of the city, its 'fabrics', its public spaces and its architecture now started for almost twenty years. A journey that finds a great moment of synthesis in this incredible fragment of urban landscape. What is a square then? It is a large public



John Soane Key (of Lincoln's Inn Fields)

space, a huge collective space, a refined garden, a piece of urban fabric, which right around it finds its identity, a brilliant example of Real Estate speculation, an effective socio-building neighborhood model, a place in which, for almost four hundred years, the London *civitas* has been mirrored despite its radical changes: *Here children could safely play and be watched from the windows of the house. Elderly people could sit in peace. And the householder was relieved of the cares of garden upkeep, for he paid a subscription into a common fund and the garden was run by a residents committee*.¹

London Square is all these things together, but above all, perhaps, it is what the London Society describes in 1927 as *'the pride of London Planning'*²

¹ Scott-James, A., Lancaster, O., *The Pleasure Garden*, London, J. Murray, 1977 (repr. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979), 88.

² *London Squares and How to Save them*, London, London Society, 1927, 7.

or 'as the special strain of civilization which Britain has been to the world'.³ Indeed, what is striking when studying the square theme is its resilience value.



Prince's Square, 2017

The fabric has been replaced, transformed, demolished, its inhabitants have changed radically several times, from the great nobility of the early eighteenth century to the rich and middle-class eight-twentieth century bourgeois, society has changed inexorably, while the scientific-technical progress has redefined the idea of the city, yet, London garden squares have maintained, despite everything, their social and spatial integrity, their urban role, so much so as to become one of the places where London's identity manifests itself with greater strength and evidence, a real settlement model for the sustainable city of the 21st century. Numerous written records have treated London squares from a variety of points of view. The Scottish barrister and journalist William Weir was among the first to compile a socio-geographical study of the subject, which he published in *The Squares of London* (1844); this was followed by Beresford Chancellor's *The History of the Squares of London: Topographical and Historical* (1907), which remains the most detailed social history of the squares. But the writings of S.E. Rasmussen and latterly Sir John Summerson had probably the lasting

³ Ibidem.



Russel Square, 2017

impact on our appreciation of the square. Rasmussen's *London: The Unique City* (1937) laid the foundations for the scholarly study of the subject. Like a number of foreign topographers of London before him, the Danish architect and town planner recognised the importance of the residential garden square in this great 'scattered city', and dedicated a chapter of his architectural and planning treatise to it.⁴ Rasmussen's research, in turn, informed Summerson's own architectural histories, which were first published in *Georgian London* (1945) and latterly in his book *Architecture in Britain, 1530 to 1830* (1977).⁵

Summerson's pioneering work on the great London estates supplies us with the first original and informed view of how squares, originally hard paved and later with planted gardens, became the 'principal features of attraction' of new residential development. These studies have been supplemented by examinations of squares in terms of their contribution to the building process, including Donald Olsen's *Town Planning in London: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (1964), *Rural Change*

⁴ Rasmussen, S. E., *London: The Unique City*, London, J. Cape, 1937 (repr. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1961), 167-8.

⁵ See McKellar, E., *The Birth of Modern London*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999, XI-XII, and Rosso, M., Georgian London Revisited, *London Journal* 26, no. 2, 2001, 45-6, for detailed analysis of the origins of Summerson's Georgian London, and a comparison of his objectives with those of Rasmussen.



Tavistock Square, 2017

and Urban Growth, 1500-1800, by C. W Chalklin and M. A. Havinden (1974), Dan Cruickshank and Neil Burton's *Life in the Georgian City* (1990), and Elain Harwood and Andrew Saint's essay 'Squares' (in their *London*, 1991). Jules Lubbock has also re-examined the early origins of the square in *The Tyranny of Taste: The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain, 1550-1960* (1995). Countless new histories of individual or groups of squares have also been published over the past few decades, which have made a great contribution to our understanding of the subject, including Mary Cosh's *The Squares of Islington* (2 vols, 1990, 1993) and the many volumes of the *Survey of London*. Further, Peter Borsay in *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (1989), Mark Girouard in *The English Town* (1990) and Elizabeth McKellar in *The Birth of Modern London: The Development and Design of the City, 1660-1720* (1999) examines early squares within the context of the development of other forms of urban open space, and charts the social and spatial evolution of the metropolis's early modern squares.⁶ Henry W. Lawrence, too, addresses the evolving social and aesthetic functions of the London square's central garden, and discusses its 'pivotal role' in the introduction of nature into the urban fabric. In *The*

⁶ Borsay, P., *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660-1770*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, 74.

Greening of the Squares of London: Transformation of Urban Landscapes and Ideals (1993), he affirms that ‘the residential squares in London developed in the seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries into a unique urban landscape form that introduced rural landscape values into the urban fabric in ways that continue to shape urban landscape ideals today’⁷ and takes the viewpoint of a cultural geographer by looking at physical and social landscapes as cultural processes: the gardens in squares are, in his view, ‘symbolic statements expressing social values in a critical period in the history of European cities, as property and social relations were in transition from late feudal to early capitalist modes’. Squares, he continues, ‘not only introduced nature into the



Craven Hill Garden, 2017

town, but their deployment and elaboration reflected the evolving social values of the aristocracy and the gentry and their efforts to negotiate a new form of social relationship in the context of the city’.⁷ Finally, how do not remember the huge work of Todd Londstaffe-Gowan and his *The London Square: Gardens in the midst of town* (2012) and John Coulter's *Squares of London* (2016).

The quantity of written records is therefore so extensive as to make its discussion rather complex. Important historiographical texts, scientific essays, botanical reports, newspaper articles, Public Acts (from

⁷ Lawrence, H. W., The Greening of the Squares of London: Transformation of Urban Landscapes and Ideals, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 83, no.1, 1993, 90-118.