

## It's all in that plate of food

*An interview with Carolyn Steel, by Mariana Sanchez Salvador <sup>1</sup>*

Carolyn Steel is a British architect and the author of *Hungry City: How Food Shapes our Lives* (2008) and the newly published *Sitopia: how food can save the world* (2020). She coordinated design studios at Cambridge University and London Metropolitan University and was the inaugural Studio Director of the Cities Programme at London School of Economics. Her lecture series *Food and the City* (2002-2012) is part of the architectural programme at the Cambridge University School of Architecture. From 2010 to 2013, she was a visiting lecturer and researcher at Wageningen University. She has been invited as speaker to numerous international events.

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### Abstract

Although it might seem that the problem of feeding big cities has been solved, it has come at a heavy cost – ecological destruction, climate crisis, resource depletion, record obesity rates and rising hunger – jeopardizing sustainable development. Furthermore, despite interacting with a number of urban systems, food systems have been disregarded by urban planners until recently, while the distance between consumers and producers increases. Food, however, holds great potential to become the medium through which we pursue a better life and more sustainable cities.

In this interview, the British architect Carolyn Steel explores the historical and future connections between humans, cities and food, the current challenges we face in this realm and the possible solutions embedded in her idea of *Sitopia* – from the Greek words for ‘food’ (*sitos*) and ‘place’ (*topos*) – as an approach that could be used to retrofit existing cities, design new ones, and rethink our everyday relationship with the food on our plates.

**Keywords:** Carolyn Steel, *Sitopia*, sustainable urban planning, food systems.

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## Forward

Entering a western fully-stocked supermarket, it might seem that the challenge of feeding big cities has been solved. It might even be considered one of the “greatest miracles of industrialization” (Steel, 2019). However, this belief that “the problem of production has been solved” is “one of the most fateful errors of our age” (Schumacher, 1993: 2), since it has come at a heavy cost: ecological destruction, climate crisis, resource depletion, record obesity rates and, paradoxically, increasing hunger. The “miracle” is, indeed, the result of the systematic externalization of the true costs of food production, and the disregard of the negative corollaries of industrial breakthroughs (Steel, 2019). Current food systems are, therefore, jeopardizing *our common future*, by challenging the very principle defined by the Brundtland Report:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (WCED, 1987: 37)

Food systems also expose the rural-urban divide that characterizes today’s urbanization, placing a physical and mental distance between consumers and producers, through *food miles* and complex supply networks (Parham, 2015: 82; Paxton, 2011). Despite the fact that food systems cross, derive and impact urban systems – housing, transportation, health, land use, economy – they have persistently been disregarded by urban planners (Morgan, 2009: 341; Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999: 213). A significant change occurred, however, when the *New Urban Agenda* (Habitat III, 2016: 17) explicitly brought food systems to the urban planning realm, in all its dimensions, stages (from food production to waste management) and interactions with those urban systems.

Despite the complexity of the challenges in place, the British architect and author Carolyn Steel finds in food “the most powerful medium available to us for thinking and acting together to change the world for the better” (Steel quoted by Kissane, 2020), and a practical tool to design an ideal world and live a good life (Goldapple, 2019). In that sense, urban planning is one of the most urgent steps to “to replace the wild sprawl of megacities with more considered urban forms that rethink how we can create socially and environmentally sustainable cities” (Steel quoted by Kissane, 2020).

Drawing on architecture, philosophy, literature, history, politics and science, Carolyn Steel synthesizes these principles in the idea of *Sitopia* – from the Greek words for ‘food’ (*sitos*) and ‘place’ (*topos*) – an approach that could be used to retrofit existing cities and design new ones, taking food as a lens. Unlike Utopia, it’s not an ideal unattainable model, but a reality we already live in. However, the more we value food, the more we transform the world for the better, and the closer we get to an ideal setting. More than a physical plan, *Sitopia* is an approach that can be explored at any scale, from the house to the planet. It’s a “bottom-up, deliberative process, using food as a planning tool to decide how cities should be sustainably designed and arranged” (Ecologist, 2009). The role of architects is key. Passionate about buildings and how we live them from a young age, Carolyn Steel believes architects are especially comfortable with big and complex problems, having a mental structure that allows them to see how everything connects – what she deems “helicopter vision” (Steel quoted by Costigan, 2020: 26).

In this interview, Carolyn Steel describes the connections between city and food, and their potential for a more sustainable world. Carolyn Steel is the author of *Hungry City* (2008) and the newly published *Sitopia* (2020). She coordinated design studios at Cambridge University and London Metropolitan University and was the inaugural Studio Director of the Cities Programme at London School of Economics. Her lecture series *Food and the City* (2002-2012) is part of the architectural programme at the Cambridge University School of Architecture. From 2010 to 2013, she was a visiting lecturer and researcher at Wageningen University. She has been invited as speaker to numerous international events.

**Nowadays, a big focus is being placed on sustainable development, rooted in three dimensions – environment, society, and economy. It seems, however, that in food, environment and society oppose economy, in order to fight a strictly finance-based [food supply] model and ‘cheap’ solutions. Do you think this has to be the case?**

It’s very interesting that the basis for our word “economy” is the Greek word *oikonomia* (...), which Plato writes about, and Xenophon, one of his pupils, and Aristotle, very notably in his *Politics*. Which is the idea that the state, or *polis*, should be self-sufficient. Because if it’s not, it can’t have political autonomy (...). His idea was (...) that every citizen – and, of course, a citizen has to be male, and etc., and not a slave of which there are about 7 to each citizen – has a house in the town and a farm in the country (...). And the farm feeds the house. This is *oikonomia*, “household management” from *oikos* and *nomos*, the “home” and “management”. [Thus] if everyone’s got a house, and everyone’s got a farm, and everyone is self-sufficient, then the state is self-sufficient. So, the state is based on (...) “e-c-o-nomia” – obviously, *economy*. (...) And, interestingly, what Aristotle explicitly says is that we have to guard against a horrible word called *krematistike* – a word (...) which surprisingly has not found its way to modern language – which is the making of money for its own sake. So, Aristotle, writing 2500 years ago, is saying the important thing is to have a localized circular economy. The problem comes when people start just making money for its own sake, because there can be no end to this. As a philosophical idea, you can have enough food, but you can never have enough money. He recognizes that danger. (...) I have tried to trace how we evolved as humans through the sharing of food, and how that then became sharing through money. Of course, the change begins with farming (...). It’s the moment when life gets too complicated to exchange things through bartering. Up until then, all societies were based on direct trade, or gift exchange (...). [But then] you get this thing called *money*, which to begin with is just a clay tablet. Basically, you’re a barley farmer and I’m a herdsman, and we would like to do a swap. But I’ve got my cows right here and now, and your barley is only going to be ready in 5 months’ time. So, I say “Look, I’ll give you the cow now, because you’re here, I’m here, and the cow is over there. You give me an IOU, telling me that you will give me a cow’s worth of barley in 5 months’ time”. So, I have this clay tablet saying... blah, blah, blah. And that is *money* – it’s the beginnings of money. What happens, over time, is the person who gives me the barley doesn’t have to be you anymore, and it doesn’t have to be in 5 months’ time, it can be at any time. This piece of clay is now worth a cow’s worth of barley to anybody, any time. (...) It’s really odd to me, because money does have its origins in real stuff. But, as it gets progressively more sophisticated – because then we get the invention of capitalism and (...) loaning out at interest, which in fact comes in with another phase of, if you like, food evolution – sea voyages. (...) So, you get the evolution of these superstructures of money [such as loaners and banks]. The thing is – to get back to your original question, which is a very interesting question – I think the slippage comes when money starts to be *the point*. It really gets completely deracinated from anything real. The building of railways is the next really big step, because so much money was needed and it was seen as something that was in the national interest. Britain, in fact, who built the first railways, brought in these laws (...) [that opened way for] the deregulation of corporations. And that’s when it goes seriously pear-shaped, because it means that corporations have the same rights as citizens, but none of their responsibilities – they have limited liability. You then see this absolute explosion in railway-building, but also all sorts of industrial enterprises where, if people go bust, they don’t have to pay anything – which we still see all the time now. (...) A great book is *The Great Transformation* by Karl Polanyi, which explains why the creation of the *market economy* was necessary in order for the industrial revolution to happen. (...) Up until this point, people had lent one another money; they did deals, but it was all bound up in social society. Their motive was not money. Their motive was to gain social status; to get in with the right people. I’m not saying that it was ideal, but the motive was not just to get rich. It was actually to gain social standing. What Polanyi says, interestingly, is that for industrialization to work, (...) [industrialists] needed raw materials and labour – and labour is human beings – and they also needed a guaranteed market for their products. So, he talks about the *commodification of man and nature into labour and rent*. Basically, you’re commodifying humans. You turn them into something that you can buy and sell at will, and if the price goes up you get rid of them, if the price goes down, you get more of them, etc. This is shocking, because it’s monetizing human beings. That is the *Great Transformation*. It’s the commodification of man and nature. And that turns society and transactions that take place within it into the market economy. Everything is subservient

to financial logic at this point. (...) [And then there's] the whole question of what those raw materials are. Nature was recognized by Adam Smith as the source of all wealth, but because there was only a few million people knocking around the planet in 1750, the idea that we could possibly run out this stuff was inconceivable. So, he says "even though it's the source of all wealth, it also comes for free". That's the big thing that has changed now: [nature] can't be free because it's the most valuable resource we have. And, in fact, E. F. Schumacher (...) begins his book saying that one of the greatest mistakes that we've made in the modern age is to assume the problem of production has been solved. It has not been solved, because we're actually using up resources that are non-renewable. And he says that, contrary to being considered free, nature should be considered sacred, and, therefore, above price and above cost. (...) It's priceless because it's irreplaceable, and without it we wouldn't exist. There would be no planet. (...) It's a very interesting trajectory to follow, the question of the degree to which people recognise nature as the ultimate source of wealth, but then decide whether or not we need to pay for it... [laughter] I think you can almost say that the dilemma we are facing, in the modern age, is that we have inherited a financial system that assumes that nature is free. And now we have to turn that on its head.

**And, in food, cost, price, and value – even though they seem to relate all to the same thing – actually mean very different things.**

Yeah. And we've constructed a system that is predicated on cheap food. And, of course, that doesn't exist. How could it? Food is living things that we've killed in order to live... To call it cheap is actually to explicitly warp our entire value system. I think one of the most valuable things we could do – and you could say the most straightforward thing we could do – is to internalize the true cost of food. (...) Food is the one thing we have to consume every day and, if we're trying to work out how we can balance our needs to consume with nature, then the most obvious way of doing it is through food, because food is the most direct, obvious, powerful – extractive, at the moment – relationship that we have with nature. (...) [if we] eat in a way that [is] regenerative (...) we would live in balance with nature. Everything else changes, because that would require that we live differently, that we think differently, that we behave differently, and that we value differently. For example, you wouldn't build megacities and assume that their food will be flown in from 5000 miles away, nor would you dehumanize the food system on the basis that humans cost too much. You would actually re-humanize the food system, because (...) if you're going to farm in a way that is regenerative, you need lots of people doing it. They can have technology to help them, but you can't turn it into a monocultural-machine-like corporation that runs itself. It's the opposite kind of relationship. So, everything changes, if you value food, which is, if you like, a big step towards valuing nature.

**There have been news about (...) how Brexit might affect food supply. (...) Do you think that, even though no big city has ever been self-sufficient, it should be a goal for the future? To guide actions for a more sustainable future?**

Yeah, it's a very interesting question. Of course, total self-sufficiency would be crazy, but (...) going back to *oikonomia* (...), for Plato and Aristotle this was a question of political independence, and that model keeps recurring in Utopian thought. So, Thomas Moore replicates it, Ebenezer Howard replicates it... And what they're trying to do is create a local-steady-state economy, which mirrors my favourite image of all time, Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegory of the Effects of Good Government* (...). It's an ideal vision of what the relationship between the city and country should be. And it has very rarely existed in history. In its pure form, it's the city-state, where the urban and the rural are considered equally important (...). Certainly, if you look at the way most small-market towns fed themselves in the past, it would have been something not dissimilar. If the city is quite small, then most of its food, historically, would have come from its local hinterland. (...) It's when cities got bigger that, geometrically, that could no longer be the case. And most cities that got beyond a certain size were trading cities. They weren't all maritime. Sometimes, it could just be that they were on a very good strategic route. But, clearly, it's based on trade. (...) One very interesting example, from my point of view, is Ebenezer Howard's *Garden City*. Ebenezer Howard (...) worked in the law courts (...) as a notary. But he went to America in the 1880's and tried to be a farmer (...). He was a useless farmer, interestingly. He gave up and went to Chicago for four years and experienced it right in the peak of its boom. Then, he came back and found Britain in the middle of an agricultural slump, with huge

rural poverty and urban migration. Caused by what? Imports of cheap grain from Chicago! So, he put it together: “We can’t have free trade, because local economies suffer”. [Thus] the *Garden City* was actually a way of trying to resist the forces of capitalism, by establishing a community that could be largely resilient, although not totally (...). It’s a deeply food-based vision. Now, when people talk about the *Garden City*, all they think about [are] cute-looking bucolic little cottages, because the big idea got lost in the wash, but it was essentially to establish a network of semi-independent city-states. What’s really interesting now is that a lot of the conversation around how can we revolutionise the food system is very much about relocalisation. More local, more seasonal, reducing food miles. Although local and seasonal for this country would mean you would only eat tomatoes 3 months a year. And we’re used to eating tomatoes 12 months a year. So, there’s an adjustment that has to be made there. (...) These things are all very complex and doing the maths is very difficult. But it seems a no-brainer that... to borrow Dan Barber’s idea of the *Third Plate* (...) instead of saying “I want to cook steak, who can give me steak?”, you go to the landscape and ask “what does the landscape want to grow?” and eat that. It’s that kind of mindset, which is another turning on its head of our current way of doing things. [Another example is] Julie Brown (...), who has an organic box scheme called *Growing Communities* in Hackney, in East London. She was struggling with her customers, because she wanted them to eat local and seasonal, and they kept asking “Can’t we have pineapples?”. (...) So, she started putting fact sheets in her boxes, saying this is what these apples cost to get here, and this is what the pineapple costs, etc. And when she saw me lecture about Von Thünen, she (...) thought that we need a [new] model, so she created her *Food Zones*. It’s a series of concentric rings with London in the middle. And, basically, you say “At the moment, 0.5% of London’s food is grown in London. And this amount is grown in the periphery, and this amount is grown in the Southeast, and this amount in the rest of the UK, and this in Europe, blah, blah, blah” and so it goes further and further out. And then she says “How much could be grown here?”. That’s the *aspirational diagram*. The job is to move from what is now grown to what could be grown, by educating people, and by putting more productivity in the city and in the city surroundings, and in the region. (...) It’s a really interesting model, because it’s progressive, it’s visually very easy to understand... I think that’s basically what we need to do. It’s relocalising. (...) And I think, actually, that our bodies are attuned to be seasonal. It’s another thing we’re suppressing by having what Joanna Blythman famously called “eternal global summertime”. (...) One of the reasons that supermarkets only stock certain varieties of apple, for example, is because they can flourish in the northern and southern hemispheres. (...) So, you’ve got to have year-round Braeburns, and the only way you can do that is by having them coming in from New Zealand half the year... This is just ridiculous.

**When we think about the globalization of food, it’s always McDonald’s and burgers, but actually they’re mostly things we don’t even consider as being globalized: orange juice, coffee... (...) That’s, I think, the challenge of having a more local food supply: understanding you cannot have avocados every time you want.**

Imagine the shock! What are the millennials going to spread on their toast?! [laughter] That’s another really big problem. We now have a completely unhinged food culture, particularly in Britain and in the United States, where [if] some celebrity chef says “This is a super food” or “I always eat this for breakfast”, suddenly ten million people want it. (...) Avocado production in Peru is completely corrupt now (...). It’s ruining the country. And Peruvians can’t get a hold of avocados, because we’re eating them all. It’s thoughtless, isn’t it? It’s this consumer mindset that, if I want it, I have to be able to have it. Our entire society is based around turning citizens into consumers. Again, E. F. Schumacher (...) says what capitalism does (...) is that it treats man-the-producer and man-the-consumer as if they were two different people. So, man-the-producer has to be paid as low wages as possible, and he can’t have any kind of benefits, because we want to minimize the cost of production. On the other hand, man-the-consumer has to have cheap as possible, etc... But they’re the same person! (...) Because most of us are producers, and we’re all consumers. (...) We hit this with Brexit, the whole time... “Oh, it would be really good if we abandoned all the food safety regulations (...) That would be good for the consumer”. Yeah, it’s going to absolutely shaft any decent food producer in this country. And, frankly, I care about that more! (...)

**You've lectured in several cities across the world, since you published your book [*Hungry City*], and I wonder if you see food as an actual common link between cities? Do you feel like the cities you visit face the same type of challenges?**

Yeah, absolutely. I think all cities are on a trajectory in time... Industrialization happened in Britain, [and] has since spread globally, progressively. And, for various reasons, because we did it first, and did it very brutally, and radically, (...) we lost our food culture early on. If you move everybody off the land, and you move them into cities, and turn them into factory workers, and start feeding them on tinned stuff, you've industrialized the food culture of that place. Which is one of the reasons why the food in this country, inherently, is really, really bad. (...) And the obesity tables – we're on top of all these tables in Europe, for a reason. So, when I go to a city like Lisbon, (...) I see a much more intact food culture. I see much better-quality food in the shops, I see markets that are still thriving, I see people who still go shopping really carefully and squeeze the oranges to see which ones are best, and talk to the person selling them, and all of that stuff which has to do with traditional food culture. Which, even though industrialization is clearly spreading like a viral disease, globally, other cultures did not – so Portugal, Spain and France did not, Germany did a little bit – go through this brutal, radical transformation in the middle of the eighteenth century, when all the peasants were swept off the land, and replaced by commodity farmers. So, there's a much more intact food culture in these countries. There's resistance to these forces, and that's what it is: it's a battle, and it's an aggressive battle. (...) I travel mostly in Europe, [and] I tell people that they really need to understand the value of what they still have, because they will lose it if they don't protect it, and don't value it. Then I tell them what it's like in Britain and they don't believe me. (...) After a while, they're a bit shocked. And then, hopefully, they will realise “Actually, if we don't shop in food markets, they will disappear”, or “If we don't teach our kids what good food is, or cook at home for them, they will just eat chips, and go blind”. (...) Yes, it's a global battle. And some nations are more set up to withstand it than others. You do then come out the other side, so there's a good reason why, for example, the US and the UK are the two leading nations in terms of, shall we say, “Plan-B-type projects” – community-supported agriculture, organic boxing schemes, etc. Because we went down the industrial road more radically, and earlier, than other nations. So, that's part of the trajectory: you get the kick-back. You get the counter-revolution. Ideally, you wouldn't want to get to a position where things are so bad you need to do the desperate stuff. (...)

**[In *Hungry City*] you described grain as being the food of ancient cities, and meat as being the one of urbanisation and industrialisation. (...) What do you believe is going to be the food of future cities?**

Well, insects and algae, obviously! It's such an interesting question. I mean, I can't get through a dinner party without talking about lab-grown meat, because it's just happening. Interestingly, I don't think lab-grown meat is the answer. In fact, I just think it's ridiculous, and really scary. All the big meat companies are getting into this stuff. (...) It's better than industrial livestock production. So, if that's the choice, then yes, lab meat, thank you very much. But I don't think that's the choice. We have to get rid of industrial livestock, but then what's wrong with eating lots of vegetables? We [do] need meat in the food system. It's of very high nutritional value, but, also, it's essential in an organic system. I do still eat meat and dairy, but I pay as much for it as I possibly can. I only buy organic and eat a lot less of it. I started treating it as a luxury, which is how I grew up. (...) And you eat much more of the animal (...). I'm not against these vegetable-based alternatives to meat. They're (...) kind of delicious. But you look at the list of ingredients and think “Well, I wouldn't want to eat that too often”. They're not the answer.

**Also, they are processed...**

They're super processed, they're corporately owned, and they're stuffed full of things like coconut oil, which is really high in saturated fat... It's just mad! (...) It's not the answer, and (...) these things are being presented as a silver bullet, and, as usual, there isn't a silver bullet. (...) All these things are linked with this idea of the citizen as a consumer. Citizens have responsibility and they have to act for the good of society and give, as well as take. Consumers are just take, take, take, and they always have to be right. We have to get out of this mindset, and the thing is that it's the capitalist offer (...). The offer is: you work hard, and

play hard, and provided you're a good worker, you get everything you want, that you can afford, at the end of it. And that just isn't a deal. It can't be the case. So, we have to totally rethink our idea of what a good life is. (...) And the deep irony is, if you go to an amazing vegetarian restaurant, or to somebody's house who's a vegetarian and a good cook, you realize [that] vegetables are way more delicious than meat. They're just so delicious! (...) I think we need to re-educate people. In this country, vegetarianism it's a bit like the gay movement, which had to invent a different name for itself. (...) I almost feel we need to do that with vegetarianism, because there's such a long history of vegetarianism being about deprivation. (...) It needs rebranding, and rethinking, and repackaging, as just a totally different thing. It's a process of re-education. So, the food of the future, I think vegetables is the obvious one; I think insects – there's a huge amount of potential there; and, seriously, algae as well. They're all superfoods in the sense that they're very easy to produce and they're very nutritious. Of course, 2 billion people in the world eat insects already. (...) By the way, I've eaten insects. (...) And I had this bizarre sensation, because, if I can get my brain to stop being revolted, it was, objectively, absolutely delicious. They're umami, and they're a bit meaty, and a bit fishy, and a bit crunchy... (...) It's a really, really fascinating thing. (...) I mean, feed them to kids and get them used to it! I think there're many options, but grains, vegetables and pulses are clearly the way forward, with meat and dairy as a treat – high-quality, organically raised meat and dairy, which we need in the organic system anyway. And then, yeah, algae and insects on the side. (...) Another thing it's important to say about the food of future is that, if we look at nature-friendly farming systems, they're much more mixed-use. We need to incorporate more wildness in the way we eat, as well. There are interesting models like the forest garden (...). That would indicate also moving away from so much grain to more nuts and berries, if we're going to farm in this way, which makes a lot of sense, because it actually allows, as I say, nature just to do its thing. (...)

**Do you believe that industrialised countries have a special responsibility in leading the way towards this shift?**

CS: Yeah, yeah. I really do. (...) We are the furthest ahead in this trajectory, which is unfolding over time and has these logical steps. It's quite interesting that China, which has gone through the equivalent of the industrial revolution over the space of less than 40 years (...) [is] ahead of us in many ways. They're looking at sustainable food systems... (...) they're already recognising that just moving people into cities and pulling up the drawbridge isn't necessarily a good idea... But I do think we have a responsibility and we're in (...) the perfect position to do it, because we have to rethink our food and farming systems anyway. We [Britain] are an island, so, we can do what we want on that level. And we have a highly productive landscape. So, it would be so powerful, if a nation like Britain actually said "We're not going to do that anymore; we're going down this road instead". We are doing it, to a certain extent, with renewable energy. (...) It would be amazing if we did it with food, and yes, I do absolutely think we bear responsibility. Not just to show what the way ahead might be, but also to do reparations. Our industrial revolution was predicated on cheap Indian cotton, so we enslaved India to get rich, basically. There are reparations to be made. And they're not the only people we enslaved either, of course. So, yes! I do.

**In every answer to my questions you always incorporate history. Do you believe that an historical approach is important to understand the city through food?**

For me, it's very important. That's partly because (...) the only way I can ever feel I understand anything is to go right back to the beginning of it (...). Because the world we live in now is so complex and so confusing, and a lot of things we do are actually bonkers, and you can't really begin to address what those things are, until you understand why they happened. And I just find that all the answers we need are there, in history books. Particularly in the sense that we're finally realizing that the planet is finite, and we, therefore, have to go back to thinking about city-state economies, conserving resources, and not wasting (...). They're all models that are *there*, because that's how people lived until the railways came, basically. It was only in the last 200 years that we've been losing the plot. And we can do that with technology. It doesn't have to be either/or. (...) When you look at [historical examples], what makes them so powerful is that the whole story is complete, from beginning to end, so you can see how the whole thing developed, how people felt about it at the time, and how it ended. We can see into the future, because Rome ate itself to death, Madrid totally

decimated its local hinterland, French kings got their heads chopped off... and it's interesting that London never had its comeuppance, I wonder why that is! [laughter] Well, if you like, it had its comeuppance in the fact that the British Empire was based on slavery and, eventually, we realized that we couldn't carry on doing that anymore... The social results of that enslavement are still with us today. So, imagine being the country that comes up with the model for how to live a good life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and actually puts it into practice! I mean, that would be an incredible legacy. I'm not saying that the industrial legacy is all bad. But I think the bad needs to be acknowledged, as much as the good. And I think another really important thing is that we've forgotten (...) a whole load of things that used to be very happiness-making. One obvious example is our relationship with nature. There's a huge number of studies that show we need nature and that we're happier when we have access to it. And, of course, we've cut ourselves from it, to a large extent. So, a lifestyle where people have much more contact with it... In my head I'm thinking forest gardens in the city. Imagine if this street was full of apple trees. That would be incredible. And then you think "Oh, but you read William Morris from 100 years ago, and that's exactly what he's saying!". In *News from Nowhere*, he actually imagines London ruralised. The other thing about history is that you have these ideas and [then] you realize you're not alone. Because people have been thinking for a long time, and they've been writing stuff down. And their ideas are as relevant today as they were when they had them. So, Aristotle talks about the ultimate aim of politics being happiness, for everyone, and you think "Well, I can't come up with a better formulation than that!". Ok, he lived in a slave economy – and he did dodge the slave question – but you can only see from the perspective of your own time. But the basic idea of politics being to achieve the greatest possible happiness – that's a 2500-year-old idea. (...) *Oikonomia* is a 2500-year-old idea and it's what we need now. (...) All the ideas are there! So, it matters, both from the perspective of understanding how we got here – and, frankly, just trying to understand where we are – and to understand the underlying questions that we need to be asking. Also, to have this incredible repository of amazing ideas. I mean, there's nothing without history. We are history. (...)

**You talked about the (dis)connection to nature (...) and I was thinking that that extends pretty much to the whole food culture. We are losing contact with nature, we're losing contact with markets, losing the skills to cook. (...) And, at the same time, these activities seem to be right at the root of what being human is.**

That's exactly what I'm saying about the way industrialization doesn't change us – it obscures what we really are. (...) One of the things I feel very strongly we need to do is to construct conditions in which people can reconnect with those... I call them "primary pleasures". So, eating is the most obvious primary pleasure in life, and there are many philosophers who have written about this, from Epicurus onwards. Being outside and smelling grass or trees, or hearing the rustling of the leaves, is a primary pleasure. Conversation with other people is a primary pleasure, particularly across the table, particularly with good food on it. And doing crafts is a primary pleasure. Making stuff with care. Beautifully. It's a primary pleasure. These are all things we are doing less of, because we're doing some mechanical thing instead. So, we don't make, we just buy. We don't mend, we just throw away. We don't cook, we just phone up Deliveroo. We don't talk, because we're on our phones. We don't go outside, because we're on our phones. Or, if we are outside, we are on our phones, outside! They're all very easy to undo, but it's like the breaking of an addiction, or the breaking of a mindset. And the most obvious way of doing it is total immersion; it's like learning a new language. So, if I had my way, the most obvious way to do this is through school, because you can't trust parents, sadly. (...) School is a place where you can have a policy. (...) We need to absolutely re-immers children – because, let's face it, you can still get them when they're kids – in the direct pleasures of life. And then, over a generation, we'll get it. And that will be amazing. (...) This happens at every scale and at every level. So, if you're designing a new piece of city, design it with productive spaces in it. Design housing around communal kitchens, or communal workshops. I'm a bit of an anarchist. Well, it's the anarchist vision, actually. (...) There were two key influences on Ebenezer Howard's *Garden City*. One was Henry George, an American economist, who came up with the idea of the land value tax. (...) And the other was Peter Kropotkin, a Russian landowner, aristocrat, and polymath. And he wrote a series of books, one of which is called *Fields, Factories, and Workshops*. He was an anti-capitalist – he had many problems with capitalism, as many people indeed had over the years. And it's a brilliant critique, because he basically says that the



problem with capitalism is [that it's] based on the division of labour. Of course, that was Adam Smith's big idea – that you're more efficient if you just put the head on the pin. You don't try to make the whole pin. Peter Kropotkin says "Well, that might generate wealth for somebody, but it's pretty lousy for the guy who's just putting heads on pins the whole day". (...) So, his vision of society is the anti-division of labour. In other words, everybody does everything. You might make a piece of furniture in the morning and grow potatoes in the afternoon. Now, if you're going to design a society like that, clearly the landscape has to be configured differently, hence *Fields, Factories, and Workshops*. (...) Instead of everyone being in a city, sitting in an office, and then farmers somewhere in the countryside, a couple of hundred miles away, it's all there, in the same village and community. And you just wander from one place to another. It's a radically different vision, which I really like. Of course, I'm not proposing that we go completely there (...) – we will still need cities, as well as countryside. Anarchism is a form of corrective. In its pure form can't exist, because it's insanely utopian, but I think many ideas are really, really relevant now.

**It even applies to food, because food takes as much time to grow and cook as it always did. But we are leaving the majority of the tasks to a factory, somewhere. And I think that's also why people are also losing the knowledge, and the contact with food.**

Of course, it is. And tactility! Cooking is the main way that I use my hands for something that isn't just brushing my teeth or tapping on a keyboard. And it is very important, because we humans evolved through the use of our hands. In fact, intelligence is directly related to manual dexterity. (...) And it's a great source of pleasure, making things. I love, for example, making pastry. Just the feeling of it. (...) If you cook a pie for somebody, that gives you a kind of level of pleasure that, I don't know, watching *Game of Thrones*, series 3, just can't deliver. *Game of Thrones*, series 3, delivers something. It delivers entertainment, but it's not growing you as a human. (...) Think of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and the goal of self-actualisation. You can't self-actualise watching the *Games of Thrones*, but you can making a pie.

**You're an architect, dealing with food. So, essentially, you're dealing with two of the most basic needs that humans have, but also, the most cultural of them.**

It's a bit greedy, isn't it? Having two subjects like that. [laughter] (...) When I was studying architecture, I just constantly felt like there was something massive missing. Architects just obsess about buildings all day long. And buildings are alright, I like them. (...) It took me decades to work out what the problem was for me, with architecture in general, and it was the fact that it's not really the buildings *per se* that interest me, it's our relationship with the buildings. And food was my way of spanning that gap. As you rightly say, food and architecture together are two essential pillars of dwelling. And they work brilliantly together, because, if you have both, then you're not leaving anything out. Of the two, food is more primary, interestingly, because you can, in fact, live without shelter, but you can't live without food. So, yes, it's an endlessly fascinating juxtaposition. But what's interesting is that I'm fairly convinced that I would have to have been an architect to put those two things together. The reason my head doesn't explode trying to deal with these two enormous subjects, at the same time, is because for me it's a spatial thing. So, if you have the kind of mind that would lead you to be an architect, or indeed, if you are an architect, and have therefore developed this way of thinking, it's very visual and spatial. (...) It's a sort of mindset. Big concepts aren't scary. They're just small concepts scaled up. [laughter] And I don't think all architects are like that, but that is certainly the nature of my brain. I don't retain detail very well, but... big-picture stuff is very intuitively comfortable for me. It's just where I'm drawn to. (...) When I had the idea for *Hungry City*, and certainly in the first year or two of working on it, I didn't find anyone else who was dealing with this, at all. It was slightly odd... Why did I have this idea? (...) I don't really know why. I just love food, and I've been interested in it historically, as well, so I've read food history books... It just came to me. And I've been happy ever since. I just love thinking about this stuff the whole time. (...) It's the way your brain is wired up, and your imagination is wired up. I do think that many architects would be more useful doing something else in society with their architectural brains, in fact, than designing dodgy crazy buildings.

**A lot of them are turning into chefs, interestingly.**

Well, maybe there is a connection between architecture and food, in fact. Who knows? But food does provide the stuffing, the life that buildings are supposedly supplying the setting for. So, they do belong together. Therefore, it's weird that nobody had written *Hungry City* before I did. (...) Anyway, there it is!

**You've mentioned quite a few utopian models – Thomas More, Howard, etc. How is the utopian thinking useful to think the relationship between cities and food? What does it add?**

I came up with the word *Sitopia*, when I was researching *Hungry City* (...). [In each chapter] I always began with a scene from now, and then I did this big historical loop (...). In the last chapter, which was meant to be an all-enveloping chapter, I thought "What's the historical loop?", because I had done the Land, the Road, the Market, the Kitchen, etc. Actually, it was everything! And the history of thinking about the city and its hinterland is, of course, a large part of what utopianism does. I started researching Utopia and very rapidly I realized that Utopians talk about food the whole time. But they don't necessarily realize they're doing it. So, a very common thing would be for them to discuss how you divide labour, how big the city should be, where the city should be, who owns what... absolutely agriculture and communal gardens, and all this kind of stuff. I thought it's really interesting that food exists as a theme in utopianism, but it's never really put centre stage. The other interesting thought... well, it was upsetting, actually. I was reading an introduction to Thomas More's *Utopia* (...) and it said he used this word as a sort of joke, because it can either mean "good place" or "no place". I remember reading that and getting so depressed, because it had brought home to me what is obvious: *Utopia* is about perfection, and therefore we can't have it. And, of course, it's very human to dream of perfection. (...) So, it's an incredibly useful train of thought, but it's also a frustrating one, because you can never get there. And that was when I had the idea of, well, how about taking the food-based stuff out of Utopia and just using that? Because we already live in a world shaped by food. And that was the birth of *Sitopia*. So, *Sitopia* is like a practical, doable Utopia, that we can change through food. The more we value food, the better the *Sitopia*. And if you really value food, you are in Utopia. (...) And, sorry, I have to mention Brexit... It's such a ludicrous distraction from the questions we should be asking. That's maybe what upsets me most about it. Can we please just ask the question of what is a good life going to look like by mid-21<sup>st</sup> century? We will have to absolutely get to a steady-state economy. How does that look? How do we get there? And how do we make people buy into being there? (...) We have to ask these questions. And I don't really see it being asked. I see lots of people talking about "we have to do less of this" and "less of that", "we don't want this", "we don't want that". Well, what do we want? What can we do? So, that's my motivation now, it is to say "We can use food, actually". Not only to ask all those questions, but also to imagine a better way of life. Because food has got to be central to it. To a far greater extent than I could have imagined, in fact. (...) I believe that, if you internalise the true cost of food, and you work out what the real value of food is, and then you treat it as if it were that valuable, everything changes. In a good way. [laughter] So, that's *Sitopia*. And, for me, the most valuable thing that food has given me – apart from life [laughter] – is permission to ask these big questions. (...) Food is what has given me permission to do that in public. I would never have dared to stand up 25 years ago and lecture people about what a good life might be. I wouldn't have the *chutzpah*. I'm not really doing that now. I'm actually saying, "Look, if we use food, and if we think about food, then we can ask all these questions". I'm trying to share food as a way of thinking with people. So, it's not me telling them what a good life is.

**It's food.**

Yes, it's food doing the talking, basically. Exactly right.

**Well, if you were to design a brand new *Sitopia*, how do you imagine it would physically look like?**

Well... I did this drawing (...) [which was where] my book came from (...). You start with a plate of food and you work outwards. (...) I would start from the home, which should be based around the kitchen. I would love to design my own ideal kitchen, and that would be the core of my ideal house. And that would sit in a beautiful garden, where I would be growing lots of things. There would be lots of inside-outsideness. So, the garden would come into the kitchen, and the kitchen would open into the garden. And then, probably, shared spaces. Probably communal making spaces, also with kitchens, but also with workshops

for mending and stuff, so this is getting a bit Kropotkinian. And certainly, there would be a balance between what is local and what is traded. I'm not anti-cities at all, by the way. I'm not saying let's just cover everything in a carpet of little villages, with hobbits living in them – that would be weird. But, let's post-fit. Let's post-fit productivity into the city. And, actually, I still think the *Garden City* is an extremely interesting model. So, let's drop little splotches of urbanity into the countryside that can become the nucleus of a new community... I'm actually very drawn to the city-state model. That strand of utopianism. (...) What we need to do is, first, stop farming with chemicals. So, you're farming with nature, instead of against it. This means that we can approach farmland without being poisoned and so can animals. That's thing one. And thing two is to maximize the interface between the urban and the rural. And that can happen at any scale. It can be at the scale of a megacity, where you have areas of productivity within it. It can be at the scale of a region that's predominantly rural, but you have spots of urbanity in it. And it could just be things like bringing back decent transport links and... post-offices, frankly. You don't need much to keep a rural community going (...). But it works at every scale in between, as well. For example, I've *Sitopianised* my own flat by having a growing space on the roof where I grow my giant Danish-pickling cucumbers. That's a tiny, little scale. So, well, it works at every scale. (...)

**You're almost publishing your new book, entitled *Sitopia*. (...) Can you tell me what the book is about?**

Oh... It was the book that I realized I had to write, having written *Hungry City*. Because (...) I didn't particularly think I'd ever write another book. [laughter] But, unfortunately, 2 or 3 years later, it just became very obvious to me that I was going to have to do that. And the reason is, of course, the thinking continues. Once you've established the fact that food shapes our world, you then think "Yeah, but what are we going to do about it? And how can we use it?". (...) That was around the time I did that drawing from which the book came, in fact. (...) So, I drew a sort of a section line – and that's a very architectural thing to do – through that. And it's in seven chapters. It goes: Food, Body, Home, Society, City and Country, Nature and Time. And, at each scale, I ask the same question, which is "How can we use the lens of food to ask 'what is a good life?'" And stuff came out that I never could have imagined. It's been so interesting. But difficult. This has been a 7-year-long project, as you know. (...)

**Last time, you used a beautiful expression to describe it: a fractal logic.**

This idea of maximizing the urban-rural interface, as I said, works at every scale, and it's always the same thing. So, I now have my cucumbers growing on my roof (...) and that's the scale of 7 metres, or domestic scale. But it also works at the scale of London. We could have an orchard in the street; Hyde Park or Regents Park could become productive spaces. (...) Then at a bigger scale yet, London and its hinterland could have a much stronger connection, which you would do by reinstalling infrastructures that used to be there – the wholesale market, local *abattoirs*, and smaller-scale suppliers. Because if we're going to decentralise food production, we need to revive a much more multi-natural supply system. And, so it goes. Then what is Britain's relationship with Europe? Oops... Brexit again! But at every scale, it's asking how can we maximise the interface between the urban and the rural, i.e., bring them closer together, connect them.

**Yeah. I was thinking about that slide you have in your presentations, about looking at the world through food, with those pineapple glasses!**

Some friends of mine actually made some! (...) [laughter] But I really do see the world through food. That's really odd. You cannot switch it off, once you've started doing it. Because food is everywhere.

*This interview is a section of a larger interview that took place in London (UK), in September 6<sup>th</sup> 2019, as a part of a doctoral research in Urban Studies. It derived from previous contacts with Carolyn Steel, and took the form of a semi-structured interview, combining previously defined questions with new questions motivated by the interviewee's speech. For the interview's recording, transcription, and editing the directions of Bryman (2012) were followed.*

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