Architecture

Revolt in London

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE latest planning controversy of major magnitude in London is focused on Piccadilly Circus. It is of interest, not just for the future of Piccadilly, which occupies a curious place in the affection or disaffection of natives and visitors, but as confirmation of a significant change in British attitudes toward planning.

The battle comes hard on the heels of the Convent Garden fight, a plan that attracted international attention for its proposed changes in another famous part of London. This plan was judged not so loverly by press and public. After a good deal of protest and the resignation of Lady Dartmouth, who headed and then repudiated much of the official proposal, the Covent Garden scheme has been considerably modified.

The less-than-polite switch

Continued on Page 23

In London, the Mood Is Revolt

Continued from Page 21

from planning paternalism to public protest is a relatively new and radical development in London—almost an act of heresy in proper, hierarchical British society. Both the Piccadilly and Covent Garden plans mark the emergence of neighborhood groups battling government policies and the Establishment.

Environmental cognoscenti here and abroad are now sporting "Save Piccadilly" buttons with Eros rampant. An American involved in the London theater, Ed Berman, and an English businessman, Peter Boizot, chairman and co-chairman of the "Save Piccadilly" grass-roots movement, visited New York last winter to enlist American support, and will be back this spring. They are fighting London's official planners and private property developers, as well as an American who would like to take part of Piccadilly to Arizona to join London Bridge. Their rallying cry: "Don't let it go to Lake Havasu City!"

The group has set up a U.S. outpost, "The American Campaign to Save Piccadilly," under the direction of Peter Alis, with New York headquarters at Clark, Nelson, Ltd., the public relations firm that handles Sotheby Parke Bernet. It is now looking for sponsorship and funding.

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The Piccadilly fight spotlights more than that remarkable, tawdry jumble of sentiment, statuary and neon that has become an international landmark. The fact to be noted is that the British public is now rejecting what everyone else has so extravagantly admired—the orderly, far-sighted, public-spirited, over-all development plans that have set a standard for the rest of the world since World War II. The mood is revolt. Savvy Londoners do not trust the planners any more.

They have seen the sterile debacle of the St. Paul's redevelopment, and been disillusioned by the desolate, rain-swept pedestrian overpasses that were so convincingly plotted and partly built in postwar redevelopment schemes. They have become wise about human scale, architectural style and neighborhood character and increasingly skeptical of planners' neat abstractions.

London's planners have been trying to revamp Piccadilly for 15 years. Bernard Levin, the acerbic London columnist, says that his own collection contains over 50 examples, including "some early Holfords in a remarkably fine state of preservation." The fact is that from the days of the London County Council to the present proposals of the Westminster City Council, there have been at least seven schemes and false starts for Piccadilly. The reasons are compelling: increasing deterioration and incredible traffic congestion.

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To any London-lover, domestic or foreign, Piccadilly Circus is a wonderful and awful place. A hodgepodge of facades of mixed and considerable architectural interest house motley activities from supersquare Lillywhite's to porn shops. The dignity of Swan and Edgar's coexists with a honky-tonk of restaurants and stores on a descending scale.

What should be torn down and what should remain has become the subject of heated debate, with the planners more inclined toward clean-sweep renewal and the public wanting to keep rather than to destroy existing buildings. Landmarks such as Scott's restaurant, with its damask-covered counter and warm brass footrail, Dover sole and hock and thin, buttered Hovis, moved to Mayfair some years ago. In its place are the new fast food places which seem more appallingly bad in London than anywhere else, relying heavily on short order plastic and red glass décor.

Eros stands on a railed-off traffic island, so enclosed by hideous iron barriers that the space is impenetrable and impassable, a condition created by some of the most formidable traffic in the world. So long has the specter of redevelopment hung over the area that much has slid into semi-slum.

Last May, the Westminster City Council put forth what it called "last chance" plans for a rehabilitated Circus. This included substantial demolition of old structures for new, tall office building blocks, and elevated pedestrian decks.

In London, official redevelopment plans are exhibited for public response, and the response to this one was a violent thumbs down. In the questionnaire thoughtfully provided by officials, 65 per cent who answered were opposed to all or part of the plan; only 30 per cent were in favor of it. Five per cent evidently didn't care. The Westminster City Council killed the scheme and in December of last year came up with a new one, considerably scaled down.

The new proposal, called the Piccadilly "Green Paper" and significantly subtitled a "Public Consultation Paper," presents four redevelopment options. They range from very limited clearance, with retention of much of the existing fabric, to more ambitious development, including a large underground concourse. All stress holding the height of new buildings to existing scale, and keeping pedestrians firmly on the ground.

The Save Piccadilly group favors option one, which makes the fewest changes. It has backed its stand against comprehensive redevelopment with studies that have been praised for their professionalism. Planning officials favor option three, with the underground concourse and more rebuilding. A January public hearing rejected all four schemes. No official action has been taken.

An organization called the 2000 Group endorses classical solutions, and has exhumed old plans by Lutyens and Scott. The British professional magazine, The Architectural Review, has offered another proposal in Kenneth Browne's "Townscape" study which suggests moving Eros slightly and connecting the statue to the north side of the Circus and Regent Street. This would make a pedestrian precinct, rather than the present off-limits traffic island. The proposal is coupled with an underground concourse and street closings.

The whole subject of redesign seems to hang on the question of traffic. Until recently, planners insisted on allowing for 50 per cent more traffic which sacrificed almost everything to vehicle flow. Today's thinking favors barring or reducing traffic for greater pedestrian use. Some sites have stood derelict for two decades, as potential large profits have dwindled with succeeding proposals.

Such diverse commentators as Bernard Levin and the editors of the Architectural Review agree on one thing: that London should get on with it. In any scheme adopted, The Financial Times has warned, "the strength of popular feeling against future large-scale redevelopment of London" must be reckoned with.

It is not an uncommon belief among observers on both sides of the ocean, however, that London will never get on with it. The magazine Building Design suggests that this may be the first recorded death of a planning debate from senility. Or as The Times of London has observed editorially, Piccadilly is "the longest running planning show in town."

Kurt Severin from Black Star

Piccadilly Circus, the subject of renewal plans for the past 15 years

From paternalism to public protest