London: A Design That Soured

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

"It is not merely the destruction of the old, it is the bankruptcy of the new. Replacements are failures. Only as planners dreams emerge do Londoners learn what they have lost."

They're still very polite in London. When Lady Dartmouth, chairman of the Covent Garden Joint Development Committee, explained to the press last month what the Greater London Council proposed in its revised Covent Garden Plan, she was not booed off the platform. After an elegant exposition notable for impeccable historical allusions and rich in the unconscious humor of patronizing assurances of what *we* think is best for *you*, no one laughed. Or cried.

The questions from the floor were bitter-edged, but mannerly. Planning in London, to state a truism that defines and separates two societies, is not like planning in New York.

In New York, there would have been protests and placards. A community group would have charged down the aisle carrying Jane Jacobs on its shoulders.

There was one Covent Garden community representative present, sporting rather more hair than anyone else. He wore a velvet jacket and a button that read "Stuff the GLC [Greater London Council] Covent Garden Plan." Lady Dartmouth refused to let him speak. Her firmness was iron. He acceded, politely.

But in Covent Garden, the buildings slated for the official bulldozer are wearing broadsides. Small notices, in good taste, have been pasted on the doomed structures. They bear the clear language of protest. They are against the plan, against demolition, and for the wishes of the people. And they are signs of the times.

In London, times are changing. The grass roots are stirring. Until recently, planning has been a supreme British act of faith. It is a part of the national character to believe that all problems are susceptible to sense, prescience and professional competence.

And now, with decentralization of large British cities a fact, with new towns all over the map and southward migration slowed, with many problems that plague American cities avoided or delayed, with multiple indications that British planners have successfully played god in the dispersal of population and industry, the provision of homes and the creation of a way of life, disenchantment has set in.

Opposition to planning is becoming noticeable. The British willingness to accept planning decisions from above, the civilized "dialogue" between the public sector and professional observers, is suffering severe strains. Critics are caustic.

There are sharp questions in London about the "democratic" planning processes of the Greater London Council. The community and interested citizens are invited to send in constructive postcard comments to the GLC following a public exhibition of an official plan that has been devised after GLC "consultation" with residents. There is no plan-bashing. And there is no active community participation in the planning process.

To a New Yorker accustomed to the spirited chaos of community participation, this looks suspiciously like paternalism. The English are beginning to think so, too. To the argument that community involvement stops plans cold when the status quo cries for action, the answer in both London and New York is that many plans deserve to be stopped. Stopping them, it turns out, can even be a kind of salvation.

And so no plan is published now in London without an immediate outcry. There were community rumblings as long as five years ago in Barnsbury, west Islington, where the residents

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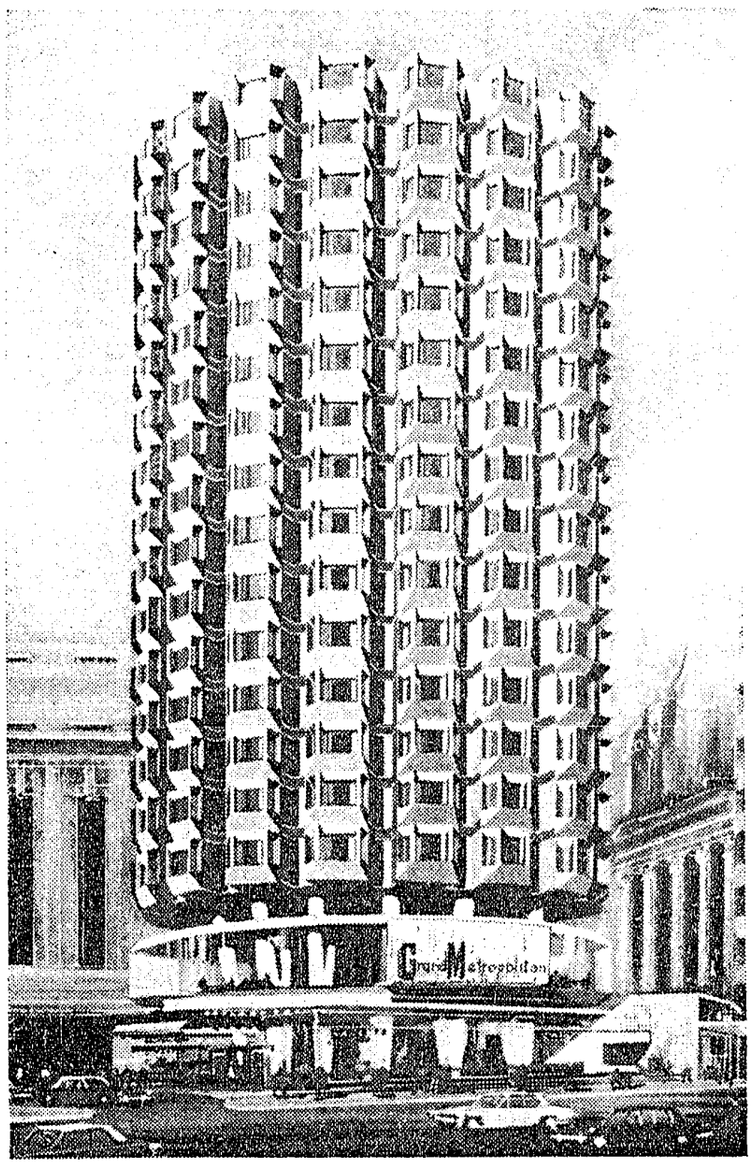
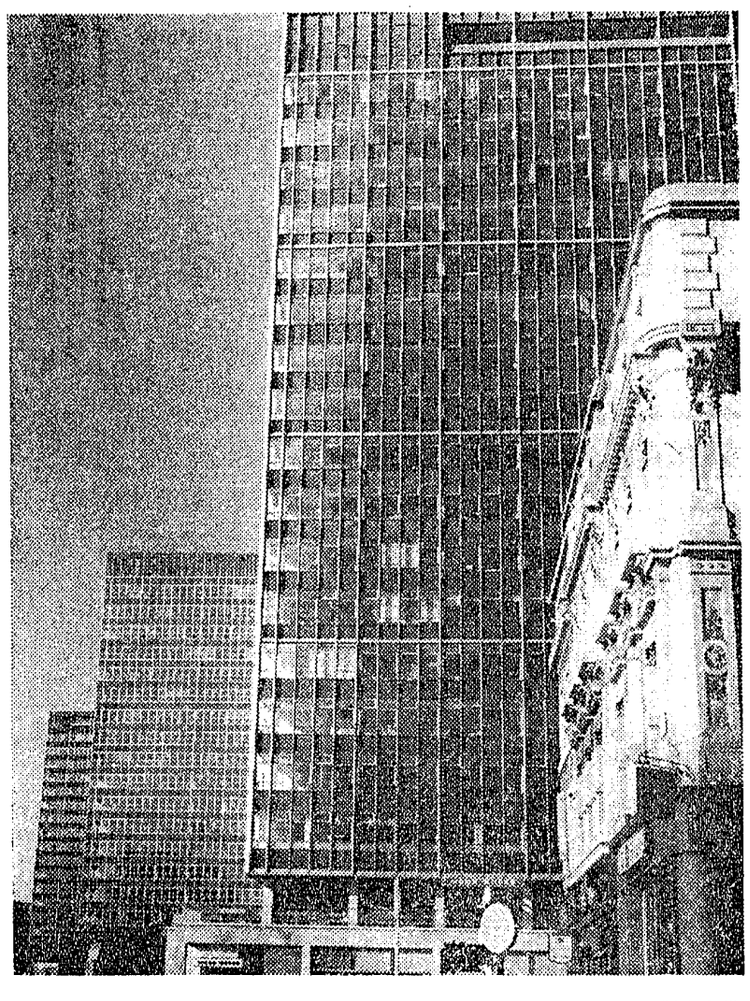
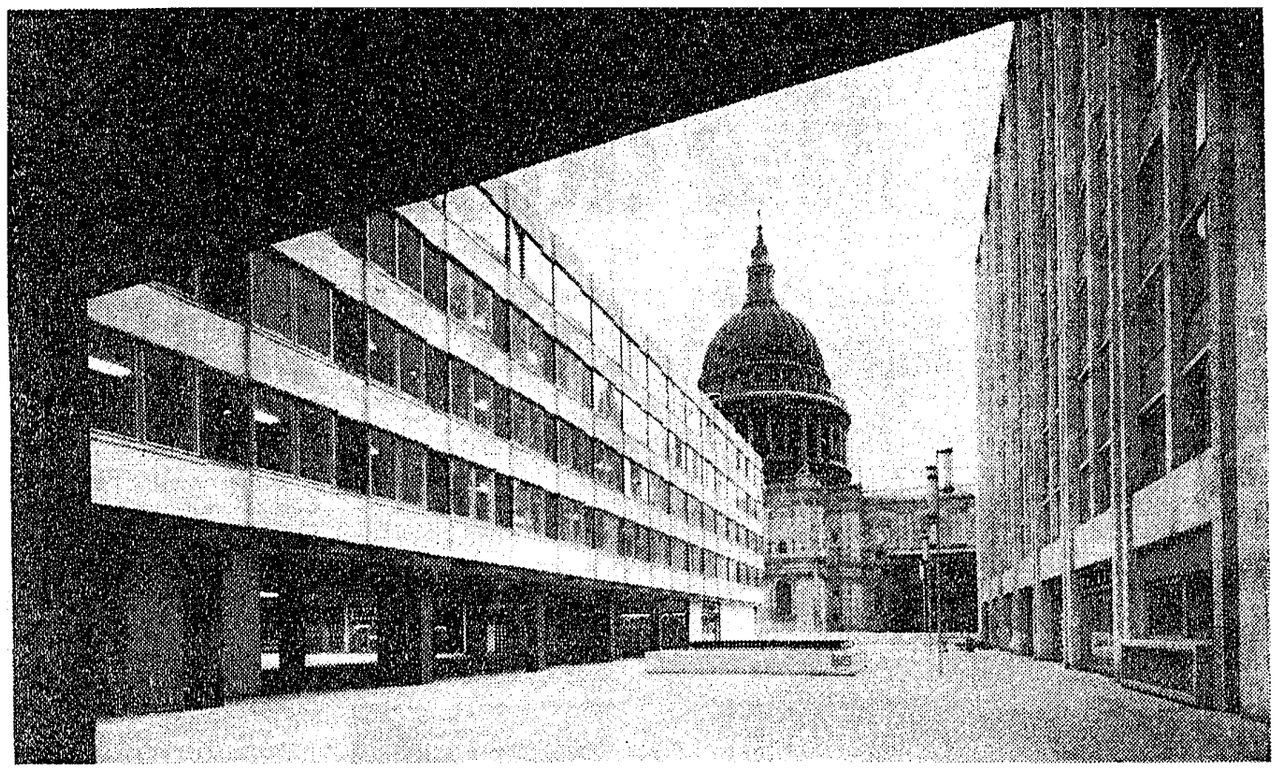


"An invasion of new hotels . . . is taking place . . . The corn will be as high as an elephant's eye."



Edwin Smith

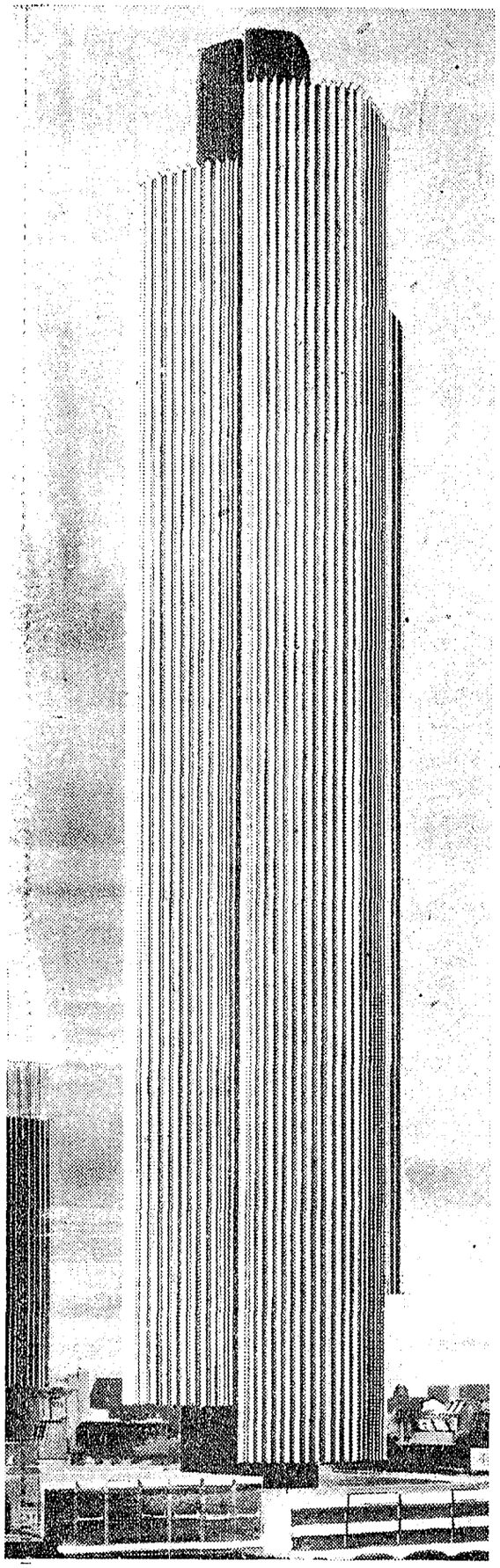
"Barbican was hailed as London's great step into the 20th century . . . Another theory bites the dust."



Charles Wormald

"Vistas of St. Paul's framed by undistinguished buildings which add nothing to the view."

The London Design Turned From Dream to Nightmare



The 600-foot National Westminster Bank Building now under construction will be London's tallest skyscraper.

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opposed a GLC plan that meant the loss of their homes.

The community produced a plan of its own. (Shades of New York's Cooper Square.) After a promise by the GLC that the Barnsbury Association would be consulted, nothing happened until the official plan was issued. It was full of blunders that could have been avoided, said the Association. And the condemnation process rolled on.

The current Covent Garden controversy was preceded by an outburst against plans for Whitehall last December.

In this case, the GLC found itself fighting the plan of the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works for a new Home Office. The scheme would destroy "listed" or protected monuments — the Georgian Richmond Terrace and Norman Shaw's Scotland Yard North—for a monumentally ordinary office building.

The magazine "Architectural Design" called the plan "stupidity on stilts" and an exercise in "architectural imperialism." Sir Nikolaus Pevsner and Lord (Kenneth) Clark testified against it.

"It is very important," argued the Ministry, "that there should be as much concentration as possible of civil servants who have to work in London and Westminster." "A civil service graveyard," said critic Ian Nairn.

"We could, of course, leave it alone," said The Daily Telegraph editorially. The heresy is heard now with increasing frequency.

But it is not merely the destruction of the old—landmarks or existing housing—that has Londoners exercised; it is the bankruptcy of the new. The planned replacements are almost universal failures. Only as the dreams of the planners take form do Londoners learn what they have lost.

Two great planning dreams have been carried out in London since the war—the rebuilding of the precincts of St. Paul's and the Barbican district—both with consummately dreary results.

These schemes were to replace bomb damage with the best of new theory and esthetics. They may be two of the most spectacular planning fiascos of the 20th century.

Time could eventually correct some of the more depressing features, such as the empty stores that are supposed to add life and vitality to both areas that have been so slow to rent for the last seven years. But time will never correct the planners' and architects' well-meant miscalculations.

Lord Holford's concept for the blitzed-out spaces around St. Paul's was a masterpiece of conscientious rationalization. As a document, it still reads beautifully. Office blocks of controlled height and calculated design restraint, connected by steps, walkways and plazas, would provide views of St. Paul's. New public spaces would open the constricted maze of the City.

It's all there now, and it is still a disaster area. The plazas are desolate, the spotty plantings and puny trees in tubs are pathetic, and the open spaces are forbidding and bleak.

The careful vistas of St. Paul's are framed by uniformly undistinguished buildings which add nothing urbanistically or esthetically to the view. The rebuilt area is at its most repellent on a cold, wet, dark day of the kind that London produces with dependable regularity. It is a place to avoid, not a place to congregate.

I suppose you could say that the results prove something—that large, cold, damp plazas with downdrafts are unattractive in northern climates, that characterless design subtracts from rather than adds to a city's livability and interest, and that in an architecturally critical part of a city such schemes are actually destructive.

The ambitious Barbican area was hailed as London's great step into the 20th century. It groups glass tower slabs for offices and apartments and connects them by that beloved planners' device, raised walkways, for the separation of people and cars. This double-decker street system was meant, heaven help us, to be extended through large parts of London.

There are now a few banks and pubs on those lifeless upper decks, but their exposed, sterile stretches put one off. The lesson—people want to be where the action is, not where the planners put them. Another theory bites the dust.

Of course, trees will grow in the precincts of St. Paul's and future congestion may even push people up on those decks. (Although the most recent Greater London Plan predicts falling population.) And it is becoming axiomatic that if, and when, executed plans succeed, it is usually for some reason planners never had in mind at all.

But public confidence in an ordered destiny has not been strengthened by what London planners have done to the city's skyline. Planning is quality control, as well as land use, and the GLC has review powers for major new buildings.

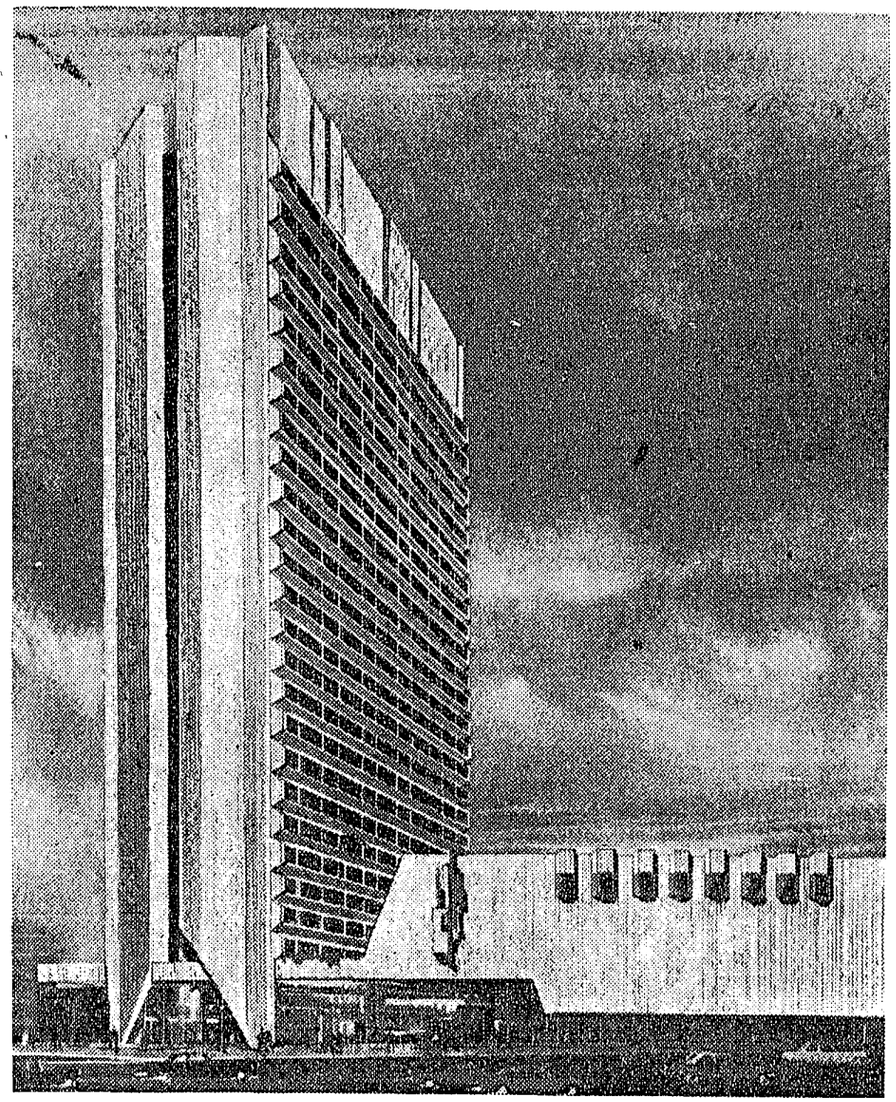
It has abdicated this responsibility with frightening consistency. The planners dictate the siting of new skyscrapers, wrangling over height and outline, while they permit design atrocities to be built.

The South Bank, under GLC planning control, will be turned into a chunk of Miami Riviera at Southwark between Blackfriars Bridge and the Arts Center. There will be a hotel and apartment development with a tower headquarters for the International Paper Company by Richard Seifert, London's answer to Morris Lapidus.

Seifert and Partners is also the architect for London's tallest new building, the 600-foot National Westminster Bank at Bishopsgate, which looks like a reject from the Futurama. An invasion of new hotels, many of them also Seifert specials, is taking shape through government subsidy.

The corn will be as high as an elephant's eye and the GLC and Royal Fine Art Commission are partners in irresponsibility in delivering these body blows to London's character.

How curious that the real lessons London teaches urbanists, of quality building, of small streets and green squares, of intimate alleys and churchyards, of change and human scale, of character and art, are just the lessons that have been ignored by London's planners. They have succumbed to theoretical international total think.



The Harrow Road Hotel is one of the many projects designed by Richard Seifert, the architect, which are changing the skyline of London and arousing controversy.

And yet, no one has approached planning with more dedication and intelligence than the British. No country has had the idealism, the talent and conviction, and a government willing to pass Town and Country Planning Acts ad infinitum, and most important, put up the cash. No country has carried out its plans with greater professional expertise.

What went wrong? A lot of the theories were wrong, as London has had the dubious distinction of proving. And a planning bureaucracy has been built up that is now virtually impenetrable by any community group — or any idea. It is deadended in operations that go out of date as they go through the machinery.

Eight bodies deal with Inner London: the GLC and the agencies of all the independent boroughs. The GLC has responsibility for special projects such as Covent Garden, Whitehall and the South Bank. Each borough has its own planning department, and each department is subdivided into development, design, and other teams.

"London, the city of villages, has become a happy hunting ground for empire builders, all planning away like mad," says Nairn. Five years ago, he had already defined the trouble as "the complexity of the various planning teams, often in competition with one another, their remoteness from the public and the irrelevance of the present system of local government to what is really happening."

"How on earth," he asks, "can local residents pierce through this labyrinth?"

They're trying. Five years ago, the GLC made the announcement that "planning by referendum is impossible." Today it is on the defensive. Nobody has said power to the people yet, but it's in the air.