Restoration of St. Paul's Area Nears Finish: Project in London Is Viewed as Failure to 'Think Big'
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLESpecial to The New York Times
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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
Special to The New York Times

LONDON—The rebuilding of the bombed-out Paternoster area around St. Paul's Cathedral, one of the most historic and badly war-damaged sites in London, is finally reaching completion after 20 years as the city's most widely publicized and passionately debated hole in the ground.

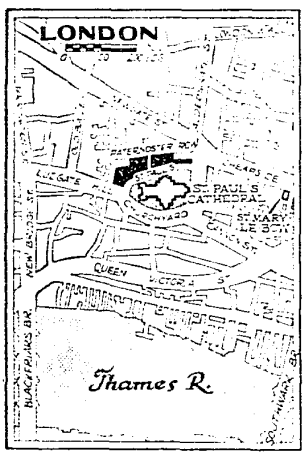
The new buildings are the outcome of two decades of professional studies and careful civic controls, accompanied by a running public battle on questions of historic preservation, investment economics and appropriate urban design. In spite of good intentions and good plans, the results are a genteel disaster.

An Appraisal

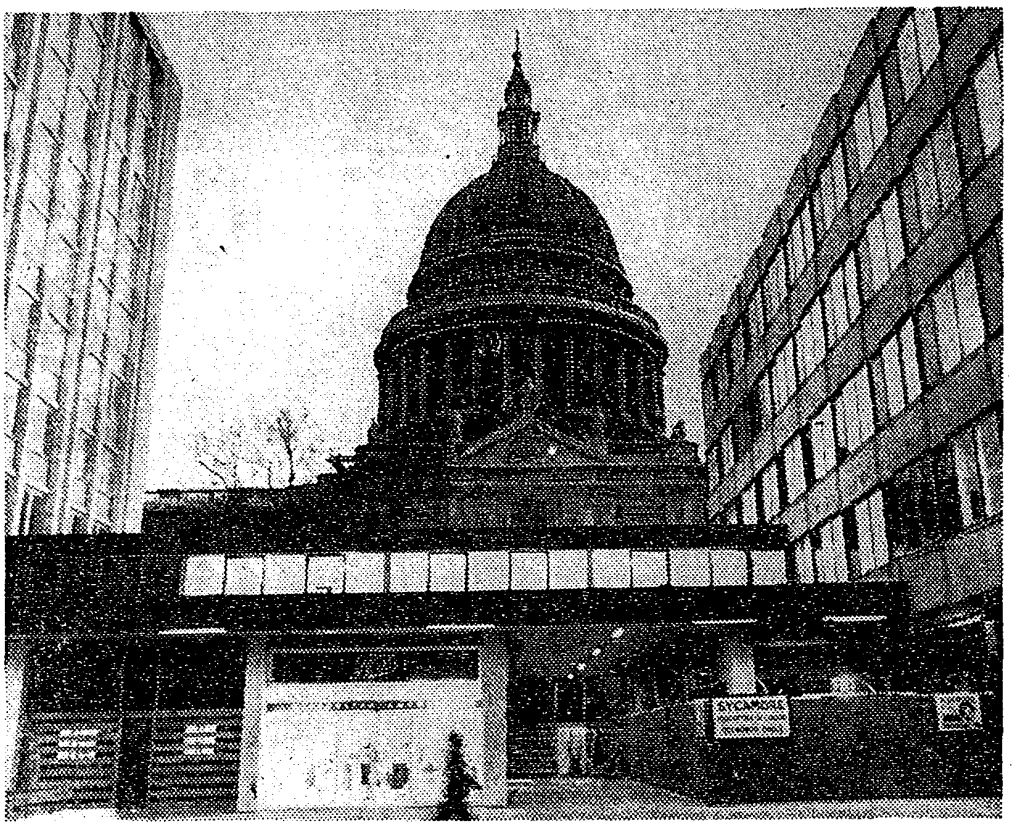
The St. Paul's precinct is London's reconstruction "showpiece," both as a pivotal landmark area and as an important complex of new commercial construction. It focuses on one of the most magnificent structures in the world, Sir Christopher Wren's 17th-century cathedral, now repaired and cleaned to an unexpected glowing golden-cream after centuries of sooty English splendor.

In a curious parallel of destruction and regeneration, St. Paul's was a focal point of the rebuilding of London after the great fire of 1666. The reconstruction after the great bombing of World War II has produced work of considerably less majesty. The intentions were bold, but the buildings are feeble. The Paternoster project is a major disappointment, one of the great muffed opportunities of modern urban design.

It has been muffed with discreet English understatement, however, not with a vulgar American-style bang. A process of gradual architectural attrition began with one of the ironic gestures of war when the bombings cleared out the surrounding maze of old structures and made the cathedral fully visible for the first time since it was completed in 1710.



The New York Times Nov. 15, 1965
A 20-year reconstruction program in the Paternoster area of London (black) is finally nearing completion.



Associated Press
A view of Paternoster district of London during construction of new buildings, which has been going on for two decades. St. Paul's Cathedral, background, has been cleaned.

For 10 years an international stream of sightseers made its way steadily to the rubble to marvel at the imposing revelation. The only official action was the unanimous agreement that it was necessary to create a "worthy setting" for the great London landmark.

In 1955 the solution was advanced in one of those lucid, comprehensive studies that are a British specialty. The English reason and write with style and grace, if they build less well.

"The Report to the Court of *Common Council of the Corporation* of the City of London on the Precincts of St. Paul's" set forth a detailed reconstruction plan. It had been commissioned by the City of London, as client, from the architect William Holford, later Sir William for his efforts, and currently Lord Holford.

The report balanced the arguments for formal and informal design, for a monumental approach against the accidental and picturesque effects that had existed previously, and for traditional versus avant-garde architecture.

New and Old Contrasted

Sir William and the city came out squarely for a contemporary solution. The plan emphasized judicious contrasts of new and old, with modern buildings for historic continuity and to set off the baroque centerpiece. An irregular arrangement of related structures and open spaces was called for to provide a varied skyline and moving viewpoints of St. Paul's, based on the fact that the church is not set axially to its surroundings at any point.

The plan also provided for new central city offices, improved traffic circulation, underground parking and increased public and pedestrian areas. It offered sophisticated opportunities for rich urban experiences through planned sequences of controlled building masses and calculated openings with dramatic views of St. Paul's from sleek contemporary plazas and walkways.

The plan was accepted and the city of London set about assembling the land. A willing sponsor for the rebuilding was found in the Church Commissioners, who already owned part of the area. The rest was put together and sold to them after some intricate trading and dealing.

The commissioners were bound by the Holford plan, but free to select an architect to carry it out. They chose a firm known for efficient commercial construction, Trehearne and Norman Preston and Partners.

Ten years later, it is clear that it is a long way from Sir Christopher to Sir William and from the assertive grandeur of St. Paul's to the bland mediocrity of the new buildings.

Somewhere along the way the British have lost the knack, architecturally, of thinking big. With a few notable exceptions, they think small, in endless fussy details. Petty breakups of component elements, surface treatment and proportions frequently border on polite hysteria.