

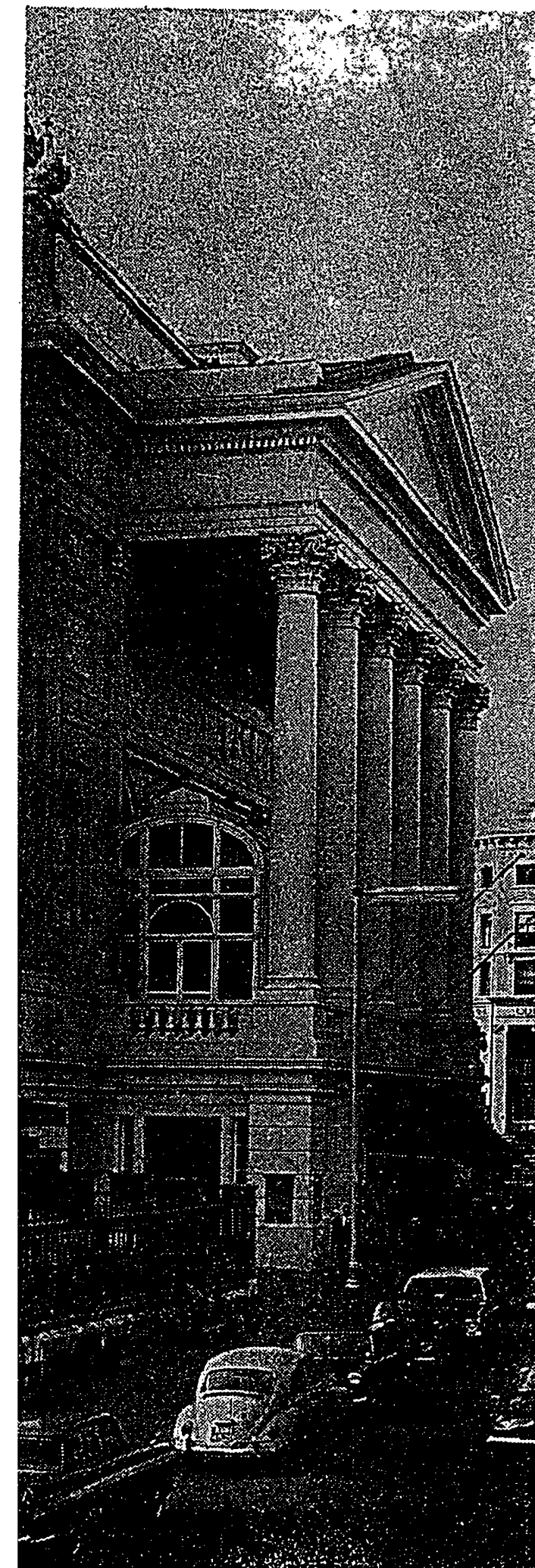
London Studying \$300-Million Renewal of the Covent Garden Area: ...

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLESpecial to The New York Times

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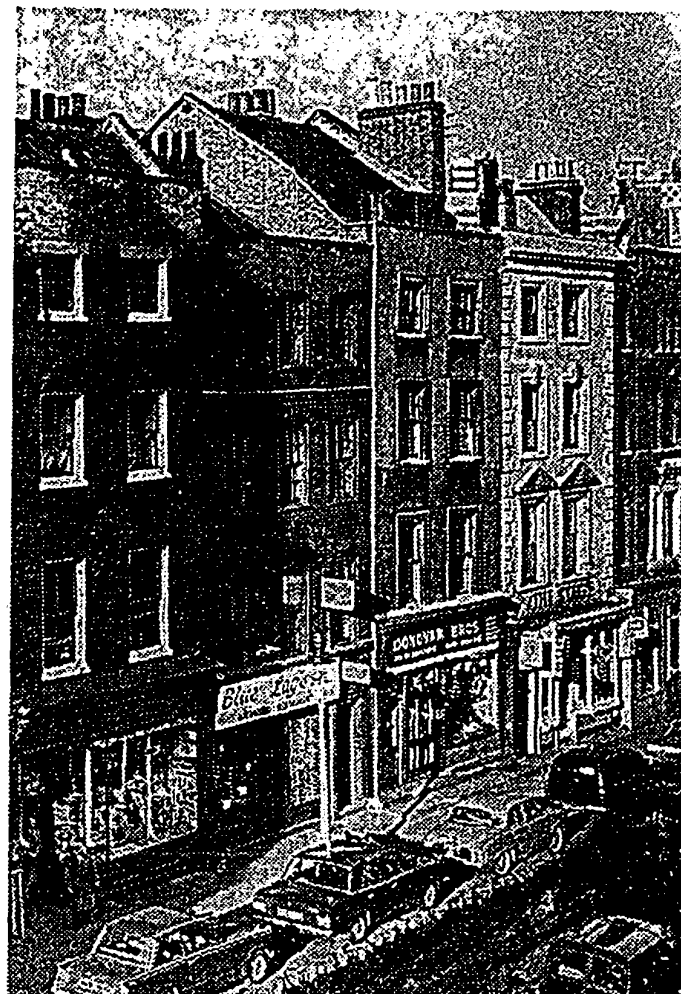
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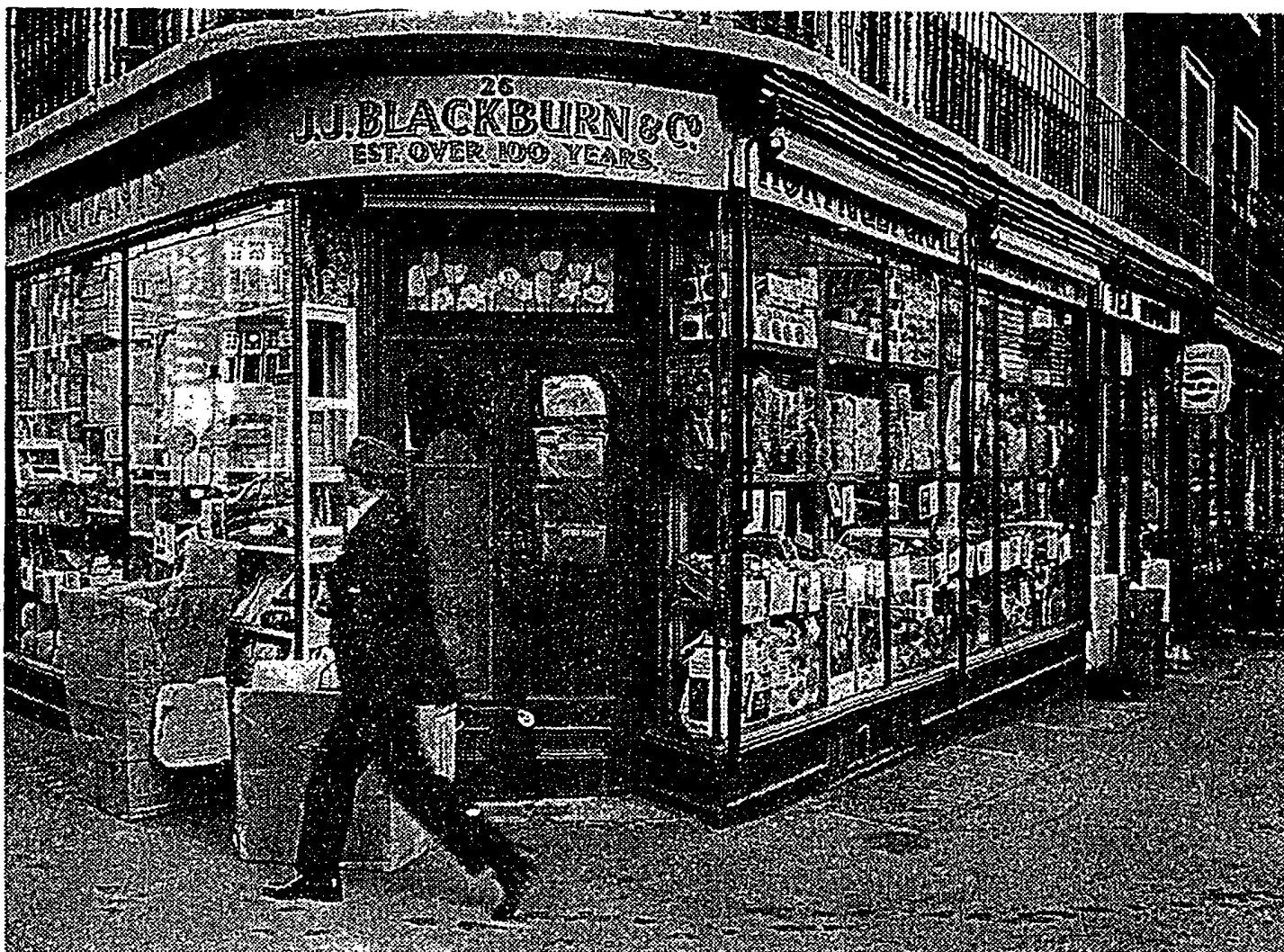


Marvin Lichtner for The New York Times

The Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. Theater, third on the site, was opened in 1858. Plans are to expand it.



The rich mixture of small enterprises, characteristic of London's Covent Garden, is threatened by new proposals.



By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
Special to The New York Times

LONDON, Nov. 7—A \$300-million proposal to renew a 93-acre section of central London focused on the historic Covent Garden area was announced yesterday by a consortium of Government planning agencies.

English plans, unlike American plans, which tend to remain in the blue-sky category, have a way of becoming reality. They are assisted by strong Government legislation and participation.

The Covent Garden plan, with the famous Covent Garden market at its heart, is considered one of the most important and far-reaching of the proposals for London's future. If it goes ahead, Eliza Doolittle would never recognize her old neighborhood.

Fifteen acres of the center-city site are devoted now to London's colorful fruit, vegetable and flower market. It is in what is left of Inigo Jones's celebrated 17th-century design for the city's first great residential square.

The market is scheduled to leave for a South Bank location in 1972, just over 300 years after the Duke of Bedford obtained the first market charter when produce became more profitable than the handsome houses, since demolished, that he had built. St. Paul's Church, Jones's Tuscan masterpiece,

still stands amid stacks of brussels sprouts at the west end of the square.

The redevelopment program is a multi-use, multi-level scheme to re-use the market buildings and add a new convention center, drama and recreation centers, hotels and commercial buildings, change traffic patterns and double the amount of existing housing.

Financing is to be carried out with public and private funds in a three-phase construction program that could begin immediately and would continue over the next 20 years.

Boundaries of the Area

The renewal area is bounded by the Strand on the south, Charing Cross Road on the west, Shaftesbury Avenue and High Holborn on the north, and a line following Newton, Great Queen, Wild, Kean and Tavistock Streets on the east. This is a substantial section of central London.

The proposal is part of a continuing, official replanning and reconstruction program that is changing the face of this city's most famous sites and squares in the name of modern functional needs and urban problems.

New plans and construction in London include the war-damaged environs of St. Paul's Cathedral and the high-rise Barbican district, both already rebuilt.

There are schemes in the study stage for Piccadilly Cir-

cus and Regent Street, Trafalgar Square, Whitehall and Parliament Square. The South Bank development presents a massive new cultural center. Most of London's historic core is on the boards of the city's planners.

The 93 acres centered on the market form an important "downtown" area where the economic return on old buildings has not kept pace with rising land values. There are almost uniform five-story structures dating from 18th-century Georgian to 19th-century Victorian. The most historic will be preserved.

The land is considered ripe for redevelopment. Prices range from \$50 to \$100 a square foot, close to London's highest. For comparison, the most superinflated prices anywhere, in midtown Manhattan, are \$200 to \$400 a square foot. In the classic pattern of all cities, small enterprises and low-cost housing are threatened. With the removal of the market, speculative opportunities will skyrocket.

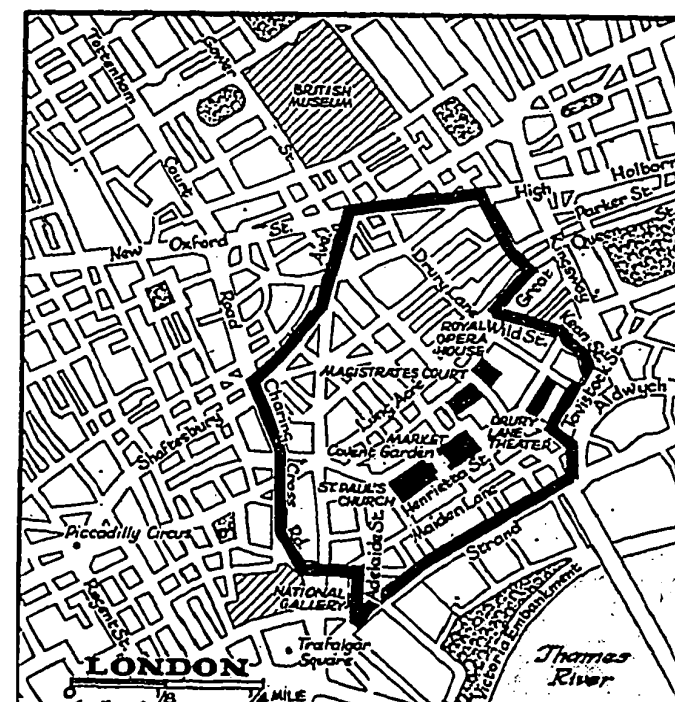
Private development has been deliberately held off by the Government for the last 10 years, pending the completion of a comprehensive Covent Garden area plan. This can be done under the British Planning Act by not issuing development permits to private builders.

The Government agencies

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Traditional variety food store in area. Under new plan, 55 of Covent Garden's 93 acres will be destroyed.

Portage in Covent Garden market. If plan goes ahead, Eliza Doolittle would never recognize old neighborhood.



The New York Times
Area of the Covent Garden project is outlined in black
Nov. 8, 1968

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collaborating in the comprehensive proposal are the Greater London Council, the city of Westminster and the London borough of Camden.

The area under study contains the market, 16 of the 33 West End theaters, the Royal Opera House and an assortment of one-man, small-scale businesses and shops of spectacular variety and interest.

It is a literary center, for publishers, printers, engravers and bookstores. The low-rent loft space accommodates art and theater services and its stores range from take-out Chinese food to dealers in antiques, hardware and stamps. Londoners speak warmly of "bananas and ballerinas cheek to jowl." It is one of the most

successful mixed-up neighborhoods in the world.

The Covent Garden Plan is a sophisticated proposal, containing much new theory that has been learned by trial, error and catastrophe in the last 20 years. It claims to recognize the special character of the area and to update it to modern city needs. Whether the two objectives are not mutually exclusive is something the planners have not really faced.

It also raises serious questions about the degree and extent of master planning control that is desirable or necessary for problem solving in a city whose distinctive character and appeal has been created by scattered, organic growth. As the Danish planner Steen Eiler Rasmussen has pointed out,

the best thing that ever happened to London was the city's failure to adopt Christopher Wren's master plan after the fire of 1666.

The Covent Garden scheme is for a continued mixed-use neighborhood, with even greater emphasis on entertainment and tourist attractions. The vacated market hall would become a kind of galleria with shops and commercial enterprises. The square, freed of brussels sprouts, would be an open pedestrian plaza. The Royal Opera would expand to form a new southern boundary.

Between Covent Garden and the Strand would be a "spine" of tall new buildings replacing small, old ones. The chief feature would be a 4,000-seat convention center and one or more 2,000-room hotels.

Another "spine" along the northern edge would be the site of new housing. An open green would be created where commercial buildings now stand just north of the market square.

New traffic and service roads would be below ground, with pedestrian walkways above to separate people and cars. The walkways would be determined in part by present landmarks and small, paved courts that thread the area.

There are no firm designs

yet; the plan is schematic, pending acceptance by the collaborating local and Greater London governments.

There would be massive demolition in the phased stages of construction. Listed landmarks, such as the Royal Opera House, the Theater Royal, Drury Lane and St. Paul's Church, would be kept. So would what is called a "character route" through the center of the site.

But the area is dotted with historic buildings that could not be saved; old streets such as Henrietta Street and Maiden Lane would go, and so would Rule's Restaurant, a London landmark since the 18th century.

The "trade-off," to use a business rather than a planning term, is the picturesque and problematic past for possible solution of the equally problematic demands of the present. Much of the new construction already in the area or in rebuilt precincts such as that of St. Paul's Cathedral is so appallingly characterless that one fears for past and future.

There are questions raised by the plan that its authors have undoubtedly considered carefully, but that will haunt any London-lover.

Is this the place for a convention center at all? Should this ever be the site of concentrated, large-scale building? Does it make sense to remove the market and its trucking congestion to replace it with the congestion of conventions and tourist hotels? At what point does urban sensibility bow to the need for foreign exchange?

Are those "spines" of housing, culture and commerce, and particularly the convention center, not totally destructive of indigenous characteristics? What will happen to the rich mixture of small enterprises and the cohesive community of elderly residents on small incomes when this construction, with its inevitable inflation of land values, moves in? Is this plan not certain doom, rather than salvation, even if it is of the ordered instead of the speculative variety?

Character Will Change

If there is blight here, it is minimal. This is a neighborhood rich in comfortable, historic continuity. It is sociologically and urbanistically sound, in spite of the fact that private bath counts make a negative statistic, and modern traffic, here as everywhere else in London, has paralyzed old streets. Its character is bound to change some when the market goes, but it need not be willfully mutilated.

To all except planners, it is blindingly obvious that as little should be done here as possible beyond the appropriate conversion and re-use of the market buildings. Covent Garden's distinctive kind of urbanity and history is an irreplaceable asset, as cities have learned when they have destroyed such qualities for "improvements."

It is both fashionable and necessary in these days of exploding urban problems to think ahead and to think big. The Covent Garden plan is conscientiously, professionally comprehensive, and that is its danger as well as its value.

As the vision grows large in planners' eyes, existing values and buildings tend to fade and disappear, long before the bulldozer arrives. For that vision, 55 of the 93 acres of the Covent Garden district would be destroyed. Come and get your London while it lasts. Even Christopher Wren could make a mistake.