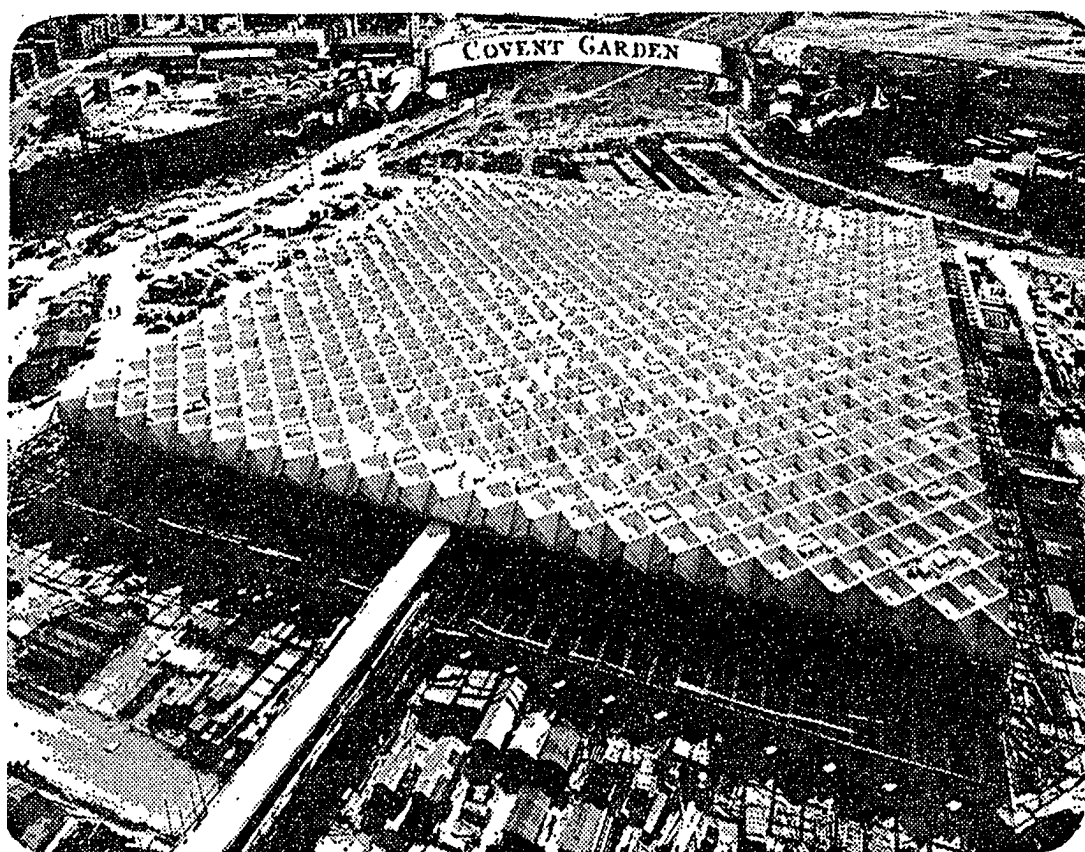


ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

The Ludicrous Relocation Of Covent Garden Market



The new market: a case study of how rational planning resulted in absurdity.

If everyone will hold on for a fast ride on the environmental roller coaster, we will examine some of the cumulative ironies and inconsistencies of which the plans of men and the world they live in are made. The point to remember is that each step seems reasoned and logical, but the ultimate result is absurdity. This might be called the First Planning Law.

A prime example is the relocation of Covent Garden Market in London, a process that was masterminded by professionals in a city of notably rational men. (That means the British sit still for an awful lot.) In a planning decision that goes back to 1957, with a study of all of London's food markets and a recommendation for their coordination, it was decided that Covent Garden Market should be moved. In its crowded, picturesque, traffic-jammed, chaotic setting in London's heart at the portal of St. Paul's and the Opera, it had served Londoners from Inigo Jones to Eliza Doolittle with fruits, vegetables and flowers. After the appropriate number of feasibility studies and reports, a new market site was selected in 1964 at Nine Elms, a short distance across and down the Thames.

The move was full of ineluctable planning logic, even if the first objective of total market coordination had been lost along the way. London's major produce market was therefore replanned without too much consideration of other London markets' placement and practices. (If you embrace the "kiss of death" theory of large-scale plans, this may even have been a good thing.)

The new and greatly enlarged site would provide plenty of room for the mammoth trailer trucks that were turning Covent Garden's historic streets into a nightmare of congestion. The location included both rail and water facilities, which it was believed would reduce truck traffic. The old market area in the center of London would be released for extremely profitable redevelopment. That redevelopment would then pay for the new market. And, of course, there would be the latest facilities: acres of modern sheds, forklift trucks instead of barrows, color-corrected lighting for the flower hall. A neat set of planning syllogisms.

So what happened? Planning logic—as well as the plan—got stood on its head. The market moved, all right; it was recently installed in its new quarters at Nine Elms.

It has parking and 400-yard-long warehouses. It will undoubtedly work as a market because it will have to. But British Rail, beset with economic problems, has refused to date to build the railhead for servicing the market, although the presence of the railroad was one of the prime reasons for site selection, and trains hurtle right through its center without stopping. As a result, the trucks now converge on the populous residential areas of Lambeth and Wandsworth. This is driving the good people of Lambeth and Wandsworth (appropriately) bananas.

The redevelopment plan proposed for the Covent Garden area turned out to be an ambitious casebook of planning horrors. It was recognized as such, not by the planners, but by the people. A rising wave of citizen sophistication and participation aborted the scheme. Enough speculative redevelopment had already taken place in London—often with the planners' conscientiously calculated blessings—to make both the delicate nature of the urban fabric and the destructive results of reordering it ominously clear.

The proposal called for keeping monuments and some historic streets in a really appalling form of tokenism, while the rest was to be bulldozed for a much-argued mix of hotels, convention center, offices and/or what have you. This was all to be serviced by the kind of through roads that planners love to draw on maps. It was a formula guaranteed to eliminate the magic life and quality, human scale and style that had made Covent Garden such a special place for so many centuries.

By pulling out the market, the city of London virtually pulled the plug on the Covent Garden community that had actually been preserved by its messy presence. (Too hard to redevelop.) With the area's less than logical but patently irreplaceable urban values belatedly recognized, and the community protesting, the comprehensive plan was called off. ("Comprehensive" is the key professional word, implying rationally coordinated objectives. Anti-planners react to it with Pavlovian terror.)

This also pulled the plug economically; all the anticipated revenues of land disposition and new building went down the drain. And so did the funds for paying for the new market and the move to Nine Elms. Now the yawning gap left in Covent Garden by the move threatens what was a uniquely creative, colorful and successfully integrated urban entity. The heart is gone. Sterilized museums or artsy craftsy boutiques are depressing prospects.

Why did each logical step lead to an unexpected and ludicrous result? One explanation is that there seems to be some vengeful god with a dark sense of humor watching those who attempt to impose intellectualized order on the complex and subtle accretions of urban civilization. Multiple disasters have become the familiar fallout of assiduous tidying up.

Another explanation, supported by an increasingly sensitive and far less sanguine approach to the difficult business of dealing with the urban organism, is that planning has been through the fire and is in a revisionary phase. Experience and empiricism have been the painful teachers, with a notable assist from such critics as Jane Jacobs and the Venturis. Mistakes are bound to be built into the complexities involved, but planners are humbler and more cautious about monkeying with people, places and profits and centuries of urban culture. They have learned a lot.

Still another point of view would have it that planning at best is a kind of necromancy. The omen of absurdity was there in the Covent Garden affair for anyone with an instinct for clairvoyance. Nine Elms had no elms. What clearer sign and signal to all subsequent absurdities? According to The London Times, the Central Bureau of Fruit and Vegetable Auctions in the Netherlands has donated nine sapling elms to the completed market. According to observers, they look dead. According to the experts, they are fine. But look what the experts did to Covent Garden.