ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Cities Within the City of London

To visit London a dozen different times is to see a dozen different cities, as if a spotlight were being moved from place to period. It is a city so infinitely rich in so many kinds of architecture that the eye cannot encompass them all. And so one sees the city selectively, with a constantly shifting perception.

But what one sees is focused through specific expectations, and those expectations conform to a prevailing taste. There are changes in the fashion of seeing — and looking at architecture is shaped as much by fashion as any other human endeavor.

On my first trip to London I found the city of Christopher Wren a black-and-white landscape of Portland stone anchored by Wren's elegant churches. On other visits I discovered a planner's world of serene green squares, or a Piranesian world of alleys and viaducts in which accident had triumphed over art. The pursuit of Hawksmoor led to a powerful, perversely baroque London that I had not known before.

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There is a London of High Victorian streets in endless rows of gabled and orieled red brick, and another London of turn-of-the-century banks and business buildings trimmed with classical colonnades and boxes of exquisitely blooming flowers, where the world of affairs has tailored its impressive image to an elegant, eclectic cut.

We see, in fact, the thing that it is popular to see at the moment, the style and the image that are currently in favor with those who deal in scholarship and taste. This year it is the Edwardian city, aided by Gavin Stamp's "London 1900" show put on by the Royal Institute of British Architects. And for a small group of serious revivalists, it is the country and city buildings of Sir Edwin Lutyens, through the period of the 1920's.

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The landmarks remain, but the city's centers of gravity shift. Neighborhoods go through adjustments in function and character, or their style is dramatically altered by the juxtaposition of new and old. The removal of the Covent Garden Market from the West End has created an area in transition where shabbiness is gradually being replaced by costly chic. Some of London's best mixed uses in these modern 18th- and 19th-century streets are now being transformed into expensive, homogenized bars and boutiques.

That most volatile center of fashion, the business of fashion itself, has moved relentlessly — from Carnaby Street, where it once swung, to Kings Road, where it was mod, and now to South Moulton Street, a trendy stretch of shops on a pedestrianized block that is disappointingly small-town in both size and standards. Many of the better Bond Street stores have moved, in turn, to Sloane Street in Knightsbridge, which has the air of a moneyed provincial town.

The best London style is still it's architectural style. In the city, streets with names like Milk and Poultry, Cornhill and Threadneedle, hold an ever-denser nexus of prestige headquarters and status corporations in which every other building seems to be a bank. Structures of solid stone and marble with superb detailing and solemn sculpture have created a style to parallel the institutional grandeur or the British Empire at its prime. From the old Leadenhall Market, with its vibrant food, sights, sounds and colors under a glass-roofed street, it is a short distance to London's newest and biggest skyscraper, the 600-foot tower for the National Westminster Bank by Richard Seifert, now approaching completion.

This is a building that is not turning out to be as bad as almost everyone feared. St. Paul's remains undaunted by the height and bulk of the tower's clustered vertical shaft, and its impact is considerably ameliorated by the fact that there are more tall buildings in London than there were a decade ago, with a consequent equalizing of the skyline.

Unlike Paris, which has pushed most of its new construction to the city's periphery, London has had a policy of "clusters" of tall buildings across its center that has worked out far better than it ever had a right to — in part because of London's strong stylistic variety as opposed to Paris's more delicate and vulnerable uniformity. But there have been sinfull losses through demolition, and to succeed, the balance between new and old must be heavily weighted on the side of history and art.

The buildings being put up now are better in some ways, and worse in others than the earlier work. The Banque Belge in the Gracechurch area, for example, is a sleek skin building of standard corporate sophistication, with neither the dreadful tackiness nor the bottom-line ordinariness that has been consistently inflicted on London by its builders. Still, an English architect of international stature like James Stirling has no London showpiece, although he is copied around the world, and the better young firms, such as Foster Associates or the Farrell, Grimshaw Partnership, build stunning and innovative structures for industrial and private clients that intrigue the profession more than the business community.

But it is the kind, even more than the degree, of damage being done in London by the new construction that should be of the greatest concern. Large office blocks are dropped down without any thought of context; the same pre-packaged clichés are delivered to any city in the world. Inevitably, they include the standard bare, bland plaza; there may be some impersonal, token art that does nothing to lessen the brutalization of the existing urban fabric.

Whole blocks of the old city are being breached and ruptured in this fashion by these sterile symbols of corporate style. They leave churches with exposed flanks as if they were caught undressed in a public place. They break open handsome "street walls" of buildings that offer a splendid ensemble of facades. And they ignore the lessons of the passages and inner courts that thread the area for the change of pace and scale that is such a specific contribution to London's amenity.

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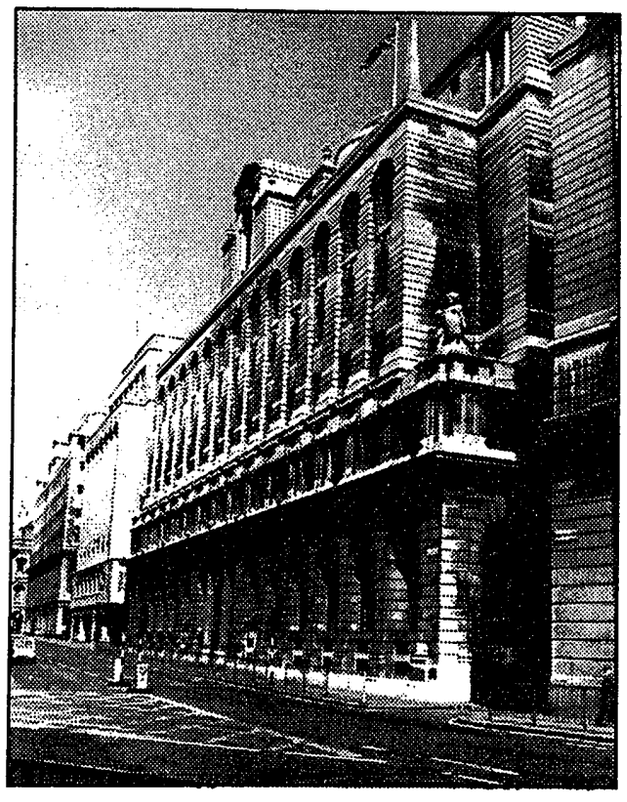
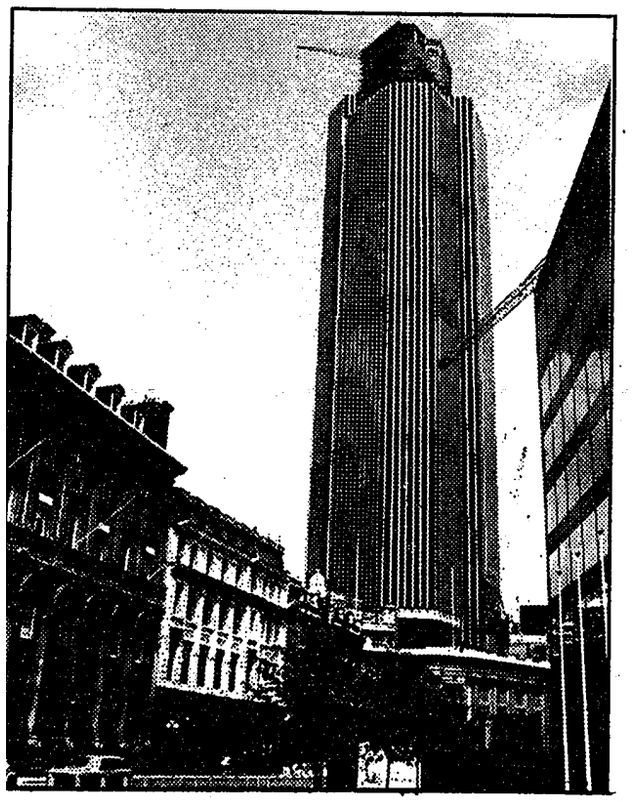
It is just half a century from Lutyens to Seifert, and it gets easier all the time to love the design assurance and respect for tradition of Lutyens's 20th-century Georgian buildings. There is a consensus now that he did not, after all, betray architecture when he went with revivalism rather than with modernism and the International Style. The talent with which he combined whatever technology he wanted with whatever form of classical vocabulary he fancied, for the orderly, rational solution and ingenious, erudite devices with which he manipulated plan and space, is being increasingly recognized.

His buildings have exemplary urbanity. The Midland Bank headquarters on Poultry Street, carried out in three stages from 1924 to 1937, in association with other architects, is frankly a monument, "far more splendid than it needed to be." These are also buildings with a great deal of snob appeal — then and now. Lutyens's evolutionary traditional style ruffled no conservative or aristocratic sensibilities; it only offended the modernists, which is no longer a sin.

Through Lutyens, a circuitous line leads back to Wren again, and splendor is the constant theme. ■



The Midland Bank on Poultry Street



The new Westminster Bank Tower

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Photographs by Garth Huxtable

Finsbury Circus business building