London's Second 'Blitz'
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Architecture

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

LONDON.

I'M NOT so sure about London's cleaned - up buildings. The process made Paris a milk and honey beauty, but it hasn't worked that way here.

Trafalgar Square, for example, has lost the dramatic contrasts of black and white stone that were as much a tradition as London fog. Both came from the burning of soft coal, now outlawed. Surprising that pollution should have had such extraordinary esthetic effects.

In Trafalgar Square all accent and chiaroscuro, all soot and chalky splendor are gone. The buildings are uniformly middlin' cream, flattened out, almost two - dimensional. Without those sweeping sooty strokes and gleaming white highlights emphasizing almost uncannily the architect's intention and the city's *grisaille*, you somehow notice that the National Gallery is not the greatest of buildings, that its colonnades are weak and its domes hat-like and slightly foolish, as if they'd been bought at Herbert Johnson's up the street.

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Next to the National Gallery, James Gibbs's laundered St. Martin - in - the - Fields is still splendid, but naked after the bath. In contrast, Gibbs's St. Mary - le - Strand, farther on, as uncommon a little jewel as ever stood on a traffic island, has its exquisite tempieto portico and delicately curved steps still brushed with the light and dark strokes of a painterly patina that's just right. I dread the day they clean it. Still farther east, St Paul's is scrubbed, but unspoilable.

Trafalgar Square attracts people like Piccadilly. Its bowl-like center, surveyed by Nelson at the elevated level of St. Simeon Stylites, its fountains and magnificently absurd, overscaled lions always with a complement of youngsters astride them, are a focus for Londoners and tourists. It is quite clear that all grand-scale plazas and grand-scale plaza life are not in Rome or points south. Trafalgar Square has a broad, epic sweep of the human panorama.

All of this activity is girdled by one of the most persistent loop traffic jams in the world. For some reason clear to the traffic people and the Greater London Council planners, you can't get anywhere in the East End without going through here first. It is London's biggest traffic circle. Maybe the taxis are programed that way. Congeries of tourist buses disgorging at the National Gallery ensure chaos.

But this great space has all the urban vitality and social interchange that planners admire so in theory and always want to order and regulate and clean up in practice. British planners are possessed with ordering and regulating and cleaning up. They are intensely well-meaning, rational and cerebral. Where they have ordered, etc., as in the replanned precincts of St. Paul's or the ambitious, multi-level Barbican area, the principles are orthodox and the results are lifeless. Surely there are some lessons to be learned?

One lesson that should have been learned by now is that London's planners' theories about what to do with tall buildings haven't worked at all. Again, the theory made lovely exposition: spot the towers across the long, low horizon that is the historic London skyline, as vertical accents for the city's wide-skied horizontality.

They stick up, not to coin an expression, like sore thumbs. They are destructive and offensive not just because they are there, but because most of them are bad buildings.

And still the planners and the Royal Fine Art Commission worry about "outlines" and "vistas," as if everyone were viewing the city from surrounding hills. What one actually sees, and what is totally destructive of the substantial excellence that is the city's real hallmark, is at eye level: atrociously ordinary building, appallingly detailed. The concepts of grandeur, style and substance, the strength and finesse that have been characteristic of the English architectural mind through all past periods have been replaced by the speculative mentality with buildings to match. This is how the real damage is being done.

The public debate—and it comes with every new tall building—seems to miss this point. It is always in terms of height, with proponents of the new structure forced to sacrifice a few top stories as ritual service to St. Paul's and the past. New Zealand House, for example, one of the earlier and better post-war "skyscrapers" just off Trafalgar Square, should have been higher; the drama would have been well placed. It was amputated to ambiguity by esthetic edict.

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Towers are best massed as in Manhattan; they are most effective planned in groups. In London, a lone, lousy tower is an architectural and urban obscenity. A Mies masterpiece could backdrop even St. Paul's. No one debates the real issue—the quality of design.

Quality is London's basic style and continuity. Every time this quality is ruptured by some massive mediocrity it is like planting insults to Wren, Gibbs, Jones, Nash & Co. in the streets. This time, London is being rebuilt by greed and underachievers.

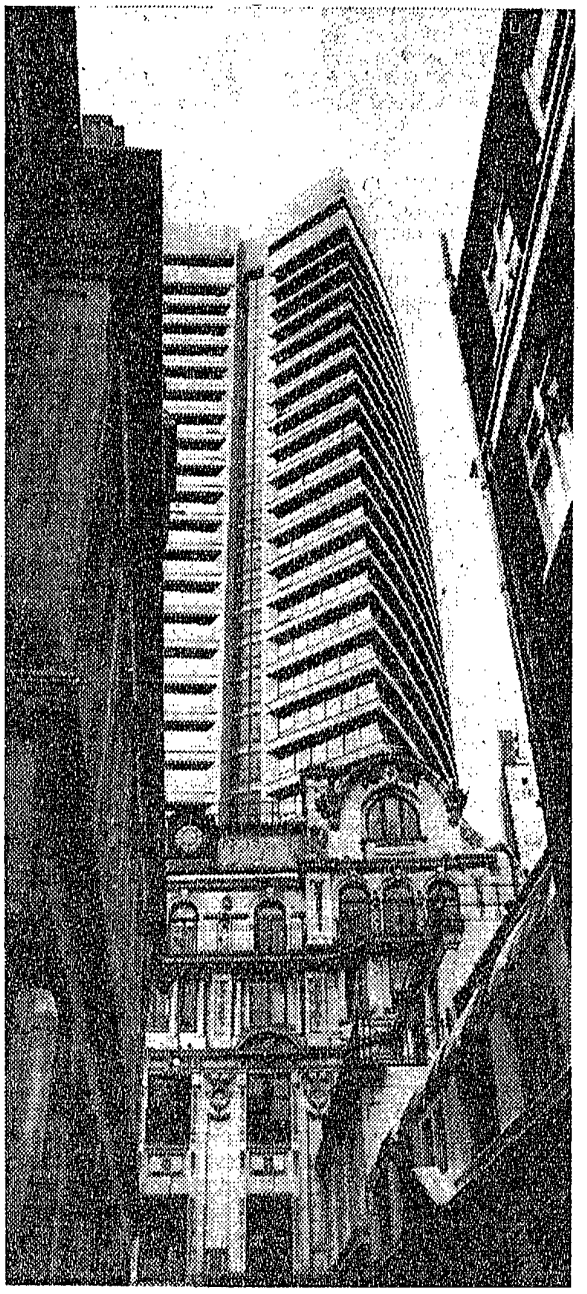
In exasperation, one wonders if the Royal Fine Art Commission has the taste or conviction to turn down a building on design grounds, instead of just viewing from afar. It has accepted the city's tallest building, the National Westminster Bank now in construction, after niggling about height—a design that I wager would have been laughed out of the planners' councils in New York. Gentlemen, it is time to stop being gentlemen.

Gresham's law is in high gear; the bad is driving out the good. As new construction proceeds, the past is being irrevocably eroded. There is an explosion of preservationist protest at every announced new project now, but Bridget Cherry, an architectural historian who is revising Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's superb "Buildings of England" series, offers proof that more of central London is being destroyed by developers than the blitz ever touched.

In a melancholy report in the Sunday Observer of May 30, she lists facts and figures for the new edition of "The Cities of London and Westminster." In Mayfair, more than 100 Georgian terrace houses cited in the book have been demolished. Carlton Mews are gone and Bunning's Coal Exchange on Lower Thames Street has been bulldozed with other handsome examples of British Victoriana. (After all, they invented it.)

"I started counting," Mrs. Cherry is quoted as saying, "when I noticed that I was having to knock out one or two buildings listed in almost every street. . . . You lose enough to change the character from basically 18th century to basically nondescript."

Sic transit London.



Garth Huxtable

New and old in central London
Rebuilding by underachievers