London—A City in Dissolution
by Ronald Pearsall

'It is evident', wrote Thomas Carlyle a century ago, 'that an old order of things is breaking up into fragments; and men watch it, as they watch all wrecks, fearfully'. Nothing could be more apt than this when applied to London today. For we see a city in dissolution, a city that has got out of hand.

The problem is so vast. The idea that the problem is solely one of traffic does not bear a minute's examination; traffic congestion is a convenient scapegoat, an excuse for not doing anything, a reason for doing the barest minimum (the odd traffic roundabout here, the odd fly-over there). These muted attempts to solve traffic congestion savour of a sop to the conscience, just as the cornflake packets posing as architecture are acts of tardy defiance against a chaos that was predicted by Ruskin and Carlyle with ineffable accuracy.

Had there been no war, had the population remained static, then London might have tottered on for a century more or so, with its prisons disguised as Gothic castles and its abatoirs as Venetian palaces, and its churches built for little more than £4,000 (including fittings and furnishings). However, such was not to be. As Matthew Arnold wrote in another context, 'For what wears out the life of mortal men? 'Tis that from change to change their being rolls;'

What has spelled disaster for London is that 'from change to change' is so easily accomplished, whether it was a rain of bombs during the last war or the machinations of today's bulldozers. During the nineteenth century, change was relatively slow; if a project was evidently a mistake, its progress could be slowed down and eventually halted. The master plan conceived by eager men who had a rush of blood to their head could be conveniently sabotaged if the need arose. Often the plans had sense, and were socially understandable – the creation of the Thames Embankment made order out of squalor, though it is typical of the century that it was a considerable time before Fleet Street was joined up with the Embankment by the simple process of extending Bouverie Street.

Had the Victorians possessed the technological know-how of today, it is possible that most of London would have been levelled. Even authorities who should have known better were anxious to rid themselves of what they considered ridiculous atavisms – such as the Nash terraces and St James's Palace; these would be ideally substituted by buildings 'in the style of the Italian Renaissance' or,

later, St. Pancras Gothic. Fortunately those with the most paranoiac urge for change could turn their attention and their incredible energy to the extending suburbs; those with the desire to erect grandiose churches had the blessing of the Church Commissioners, and should this happy providence fail, then there would be industrialists who would be happy to have factories built for them that looked like churches (the concept of the Gothic factory is, in retrospect, astounding).

Perhaps the creation of an unmanageable suburbia is the ultimate legacy of the nineteenth century. In 1821 there were 2,293,000 houses in Great Britain; in 1881, there were 5,475,000. Nearly a million houses were constructed in one decade – 1871–1881, most of them by speculative builders. It was this great forward surge of house-building that has made London the place it is – generally scruffy and amorphous.

'Where, yesterday, a church was only to be noted by its smoke-stained tower, it may today be seen standing out amidst a ragged gap of ruin. Strange revelations of byeways, previously unknown except to the initiated, await us as we hurry along great thorough-fares, and yet, on our return, we find the very paths that led to them barricaded by planks and timber, already papered with gigantic posters and the highly-coloured announcements of advertising tradesmen'.

So wrote a journalist in an issue of *The Graphic* of 1874. But for the general superiority of style, it could form a 'think' piece in any daily newspaper of today.

Some of this building was carried out with the best of intentions – the 'workingmen's city' in Wandsworth of 1872, for example – but much of it was shoddy, and is now reaching a stage when what architectural writers call picturesque decay is passing into revolting squalor. Considering the conditions under which many houses were built, it is surprising that this stage has not been reached before. Observers of the contemporary scene were not slow in realising what was happening. Comparing London 'to a strangely-broidered cloth with a frayed and ragged fringe, shabbier at some of its edges than at others' they watched with unconcealed cynicism the specula-tive builders at work:

'Where are the good old substantial walls within which our fore-fathers could defy wind and weather, and declare without much hyperbole that an Englishman's house was his castle? This miserable slack-baked rough cindery brick-and-a-half of substance will not do duty even for dead Caesar, for its clay neither stops a hole, nor keeps the wind away. . . . Do you see those half-rotten beams? They are a job lot of old timber from a dismantled court in a fever district, and they are to be built into your villa as joists, or supports, or some other kinds of woodwork. . . .'

In theory, there was a Building Act framed to prevent the abuses

of the jerry-builders; in practice, it was ineffective, if only for the extent of the construction work carried out during these expanding decades. Supervision from above was negligible; before the advent of the London County Council, the governing unit of London was an archaic artificial component called a vestry. The vestry, as its name implies, was parochial, it spent its time on trivialities, and it was open to corruption. In the early '70s, at a school on the south side of the river, a little girl was punished by being shut up in a cupboard, where she died. The vestry concerned did its utmost to cover this up, and the incident only reached the outside world by the stubborn refusal of a churchwarden to bow to his superiors and remain quiet. The vestry's interest in the rash of red-brick was rarely other than unenthusiastic.

The Greater London Council has inherited the dire results of the vestries' unconcern. Had the *status quo* been preserved, had there been no war, had the population been kept stable, then the problem might have proved soluble. The decaying late-Victorian villas and terrace houses could be systematically replaced by modern dwellings – few would willingly live in these abysmally uncomfortable and undesigned houses from choice. However, it was not to be. Houses that in an altogether rational society would be expunged from the face of London were divided into 'self-contained flats' and 'apartments', landlords proliferated, and speculators who got in early (say the late '40s) could buy two old houses for £500 each knowing that this would set them up in luxury for the rest of their life.

The fact that London is still basically a Victorian-looking city is one that must be accepted. One can roam through Camden Town, Finsbury Park, and Peckham without seeing a building out of context. Only the motor-car and the occasional modernistic school give the game away. It is all a planner's nightmare, with overlapping authorities and divided loyalties, redistributed by changing the London County Council to the Greater London Council but hardly disturbed.

When efforts have been made to 'bring London up to date' then the results are hardly encouraging. Shaftesbury Avenue and Coventry Street are beginning to resemble American sub-culture to a frightening degree, and the Barbican redevelopment plan increasingly looks like the set for a remake of H. G. Wells' film 'Shape of Things to Come'.

The poetic answer to the problem of London would surely be to abandon it, like Old Sarum, or gradually desert it, like Winchester, though the fact that living in London still has a sort of cachet will prevent such an agreeable circumstance. If London could be made to appear unfashionable, then the mere chance that it is the 'most swinging switched-on' city in Europe might well work to its disadvantage, though one feels that the structure of London has become so disassociated that any appeal to the conventions that governed

civilized life up till the present century will meet with a tardy
response.

A city in physical decline is mirrored by the decline in its services.
The public services of London are, of course, notorious; the transport
services in particular are run for the benefit of the staff, as any
conductor or conductress will tell one without much prompting; the
telephone service is a farce, and although it is still safer to journey
from the City to Marble Arch than it was two hundred years ago,
one wonders how long this happy state of affairs will last.

It could be that all ultra-large cities have in them the seeds of
their destruction. It is to the credit of London that it has no public
park so notorious as Central Park, New York, and that any gang
warfare it has is restricted to the occasional public house; it is the
wonder of London that the climate of permissiveness has not made
crime the major industry of the capital; it is the tragedy of London
that the nineteenth century exponents of *laissez faire* were able to
do so much without being stopped, and that no one has done very
much this century to curb the city growth other than goggle and
make plans of almost inane insularity.

Speculations have been made lately about the future of London,
the most fruitful of which might well be that dealing with the removal
of the seat of government from London. Increased aid to industry
moving away might well accelerate the exodus, not of the industry
but the people working in that industry – people and not things is the
problem of London. An appeal to industrialists to move out on the
grounds that it is the right thing to do for the benefit of the future
might have an effect if put in a persuasive way. It is often overlooked
by professional organizers that everything need not have a price tag.

Above all, the magnitude of the problem must be brought home
to the people who might be able, conceivably, to do something about
it. In the hermetically-sealed villages-in-the-city such as Highgate
and Chelsea it is easy to forget the sprawl of Balham, Tooting and
Morden, easy to forget that the Green Belt is a sad area of pylons
and car-dumps constantly being nibbled at by the speculators, easy
to forget that although the affluent society has televisions, washing
machines, hi-fi, and tape recorders it also has an increasingly
ravenous slum-mentality, self-indulgent and egocentric.

The problem admitting of no solution is distasteful to everyone,
though many admit tacitly that there is no solution to the London
problem, short of razing the city to the ground and trying elsewhere.
The overall culture of London has been constantly downgraded
over recent decades; the indigenous culture of the Cockney is almost
dead, remaining in isolated pockets, in East End public houses where
they have a sing-song, in the somewhat affected pearly-kings and
pearly-queens. The marathon council estates have little of this
culture, insulated and isolated as they are.

If the dissolution of London is to be halted, then its dimensions

must be finally fixed. The speculators in land must be brought to heel, the functions of London must be re-thought out, and the permissive society must be urged to be less permissive. The wish to make money without regard for (a) its effect on the environment (b) its effect on society must no longer be a sacred right. Admittedly it is difficult to break a tradition – a tradition that London is the ideal town to make a fortune in, though the facilities available throughout the country have made nonsense of this myth. The forces that have made London such a mess have been financial rather than social or political, but it needs more than money to make sense out of the city that has careered out of control across the estuary of a not very useful river. It needs moral courage, a less lax climate of opinion, a tightening of the function of local government, and something rather less self-indulgent than the present-day concept of the welfare state. Could one call this discipline?

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Perhaps the most terrifying creation of the scientist – more sinister in its implications than any drug or weapon – is the mechanical brain. This book is an attempt to assess in human terms the true extent of these implications. Its author was a pioneer of the theory of the artificial brain and he here warns of the many possible hazards attendant on man's increasing willingness to delegate his decisions to machines.   18s

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