

## **THE CITY OF LONDON SINCE 1986: AN ARCHITECTURAL OVERVIEW**

### **THE CITY REBUILT**

The City of London has reinvented and rebuilt itself many times in its long history. There is probably no equivalent in the world of real estate with so many layers of successive development, not even the nine cities of Troy.

The first settlement, Roman Londinium, was rebuilt in the aftermath of its sacking in AD 60 by Boudicca's Iceni hordes and again in 120 after a catastrophic fire, leaving thin layers of ash for archaeologists to find centuries later.

King Alfred resettled the abandoned Roman London in the ninth century, reusing the surviving materials but establishing a new, more organic street plan.

During the Middle-Ages timber structures came and went, while more prestigious buildings, such as churches and guildhalls, used local brick or expensive imported stone.

After the Great Fire of 1666, when two-thirds of the City's area and nine-tenths of the buildings within the original perimeter walls were destroyed, reconstruction was remarkably quick.

Pressure from landowners, displaced residents and businesses did not allow Christopher Wren's ambitious plans for a reordered street layout to have any realistic chance of adoption.

The City was rebuilt almost entirely on its medieval street plan, plot by plot, although new building regulations required better fireproofing, with brick, tile and stone replacing external timber, lath and thatch.

The 13,000 houses destroyed by the fire were replaced by only 4000 within the City boundaries, marking a significant shift towards predominantly commercial buildings.

In the following centuries the City continued to renew and replace its built fabric.

During the eighteenth century, when British naval and military power supported a colossal increase in colonial trade, fostering and sustaining London's growth as the largest city and commercial port in the world, most of the City's post-Fire buildings were replaced.

Similarly, during the selfconfident period of Queen Victoria's reign, new offices, banks, warehouses, markets and exchanges were needed, together with larger and more luxurious premises for the livery companies.

All these, coupled with such ambitious infrastructure projects as over- and underground railways, new sewers and road widening for trams and to ease traffic congestion, resulted in the destruction of most of the Georgian City.

Between 1850 and 1900, some 80% of the buildings were replaced.

A consequence of the boom in commercial activity combined with better public transport was that the City's once sizeable resident population was substantially reduced, from 150,000 in 1851 to 25,000 in 1901.

The brokers, bankers and clerks in the counting houses and ledger halls now lived in burgeoning London suburbs and commuted every day by train or tram, or on foot.

In the golden age of Edwardian opulence and during the recovery after the First World War, the City was the financial capital of a British empire that covered a quarter of the globe.

Many Victorian buildings were replaced by palatial, splendid new headquarters, usually faced with Portland stone, fitted with ornate interiors and panelled boardrooms, and designed by the leading architects of the day: Edwin Lutyens, Ernest George, Aston Webb, Edwin Cooper and Herbert Baker.

This period fostered and entrenched the hierarchical, person-toperson, 'my word is my bond' work practices for which the City became renowned.

By 1939 the residential population had shrunk to a few thousands, mainly publicans and caretakers.

During the Second World War one-third of the City was destroyed by incendiary and high-explosive bombs, and areas around St Paul's, Holborn, the Barbican and the riverside were almost totally devastated.

After 1945 there was little debate over the necessity and urgency of renewing the fabric.

Any idea that the City, the ancient core of London, might somehow be set aside, preserved and rebuilt in replica as a monument to London's medieval past, was barely considered.

On the contrary, the bomb sites were seen as an opportunity to create a new forward-looking City, a 'brave new' post-war world.

Many damaged (and indeed undamaged) buildings that might in today's conservation-minded climate have been kept and repaired were demolished to produce larger or easier sites for redevelopment.

As for the City's medieval past, it seemed that hardly enough was left from before the war to justify rebuilding along the lines of such war-torn Continental cities as Warsaw or Nuremberg.

Only the damaged Wren churches, the Guildhall and the livery halls were prioritized for repair.

The post-war plans for the City were bold indeed: a ring of dual-carriageway motorways (London Wall to the north and Upper and Lower Thames streets to the south), a raised platform deck across the whole of the City to segregate pedestrians from vehicles below, clusters of Corbusian office slabs and podium blocks arranged rationally and methodically, and a new residential quarter at the Barbican.

These schemes, including offices at Paternoster Square and Bucklersbury, were conceived and built with the intention of extending the format throughout the Square Mile. Medieval lanes, courts and alleys were extinguished where they were in the way.

It could be a City fit for the second half of the twentieth century, or so it was thought; with post-war budget constraints, the results were often bland and nondescript.

From the late 1980s the buildings of this post-war redevelopment became increasingly unfit for purpose.

The comprehensive and radical reconstruction of the City that has taken place since then therefore comes as no surprise, but is nevertheless remarkable because it has happened so fast, and (IRA bombs excepted) has not been caused by any major conflagration.

Nowhere else in Britain has the place of change been so manifest.

More than three-quarters of the City has been rebuilt in that time, and an even higher percentage of the actual floor space.

Furthermore, some districts have seen almost complete renewal even since the turn of the millennium. For people who used to know the City but have not been back for a while, it can be an unrecognizable place.

For better or worse (usually better), most of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s buildings have gone. Only a few of the original blocks remain along London Wall in the ordered echelon formation so admired by Nikolaus Pevsner in the original edition of *The Buildings of England* (1957).

Now building from 1980s, notably at Broadgate and Bishopsgate and in Monument Street, are being replaced. Twentieth-century sections of the 1997 edition of *The Buildings of England* are alarmingly out of date.

The new Ropemaker Place, completed in 2007, is the third development on its site since the war; this will give future archaeologists something to unravel.

That is the enduring and endearing dichotomy of the City: it is the oldest part of London - where Roman masonry, medieval streets, livery halls and baroque churches survive - and simultaneously boasts a spectacular palimpsest of new buildings.