

Rebuilding London

By Lancaster M. Greene

The current discussion of plans for rebuilding London, devastated by Nazi bombs, recalls that other time when a similar opportunity to do an outstanding and permanent job was passed up by that city.

After the great fire of 1666, a plan was formulated by Christopher Wren that even by today's standards was impressive and far-reaching. The fire had destroyed all of sixteen wards and parts of eight more; it had raged for five days, and 13,200 buildings and 89 churches were burned down—as large an area comparatively as must now be rebuilt.

Wren's plan consisted of a double system of radiating streets, with St. Paul's and the Exchange as centers, anticipating by more than a hundred years what Baron Haussmann did for Paris. But then, before they would sell, the people who owned the land to be used for widening and straightening streets demanded prices capitalizing the new values which they felt would result if Wren's plan were put into effect.

The cost of land acquisition was shocking to the city fathers. To get reasonable land prices looked like such a long process that they threw up their hands. As a result, the city was reconstructed on the lines of the old winding and narrow streets, beautiful enough to evoke Ohs and Ahs from tourists, but pitifully inadequate for handling increasing traffic problems.

The London County Council has recognized the collection of site rents by the city as the basic necessity for a more beautiful city and one more efficient for handling

modern business. They have pointed out to Parliament that this is the only way to make urban land cheap.

The House of Lords proved an effective block to land value taxation, until public opinion forced the House to give up its right to veto tax measures.

Since that time, Parliament has so far refused the permission requested by the London County Council, and the problem of land cost for reconstructing London is becoming more critical daily, as the end of the war approaches. London may be forced to rebuild the city as an antiquarian's dream, rather than follow the Wren plan for a modern city-beautiful.

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