

WUJIAI

28 July

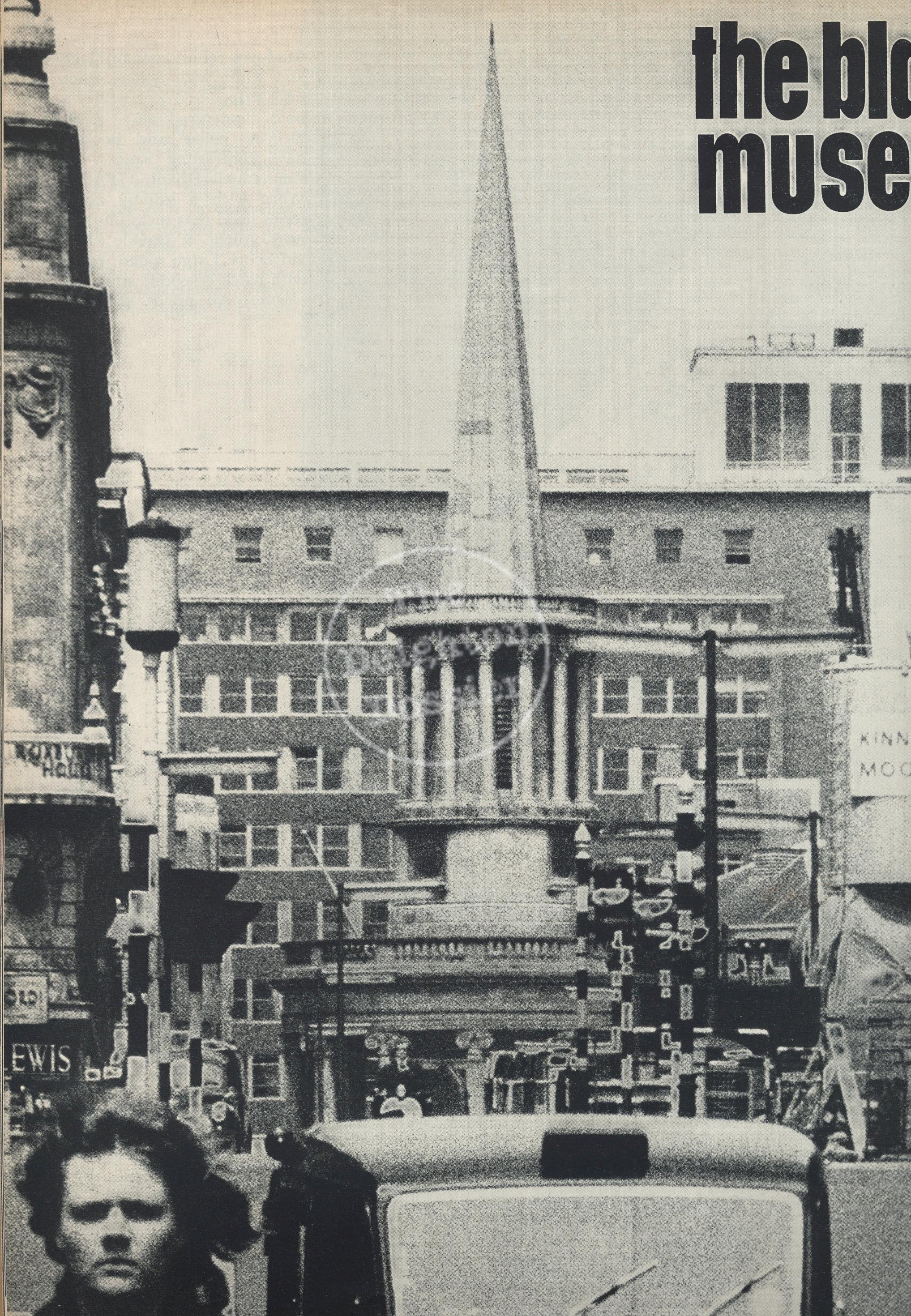
Fortnightly 3s 6d

PARIS
COLLECTIONS
PRÊT A PORTER



The
Deighton
Dossier

the blo muse

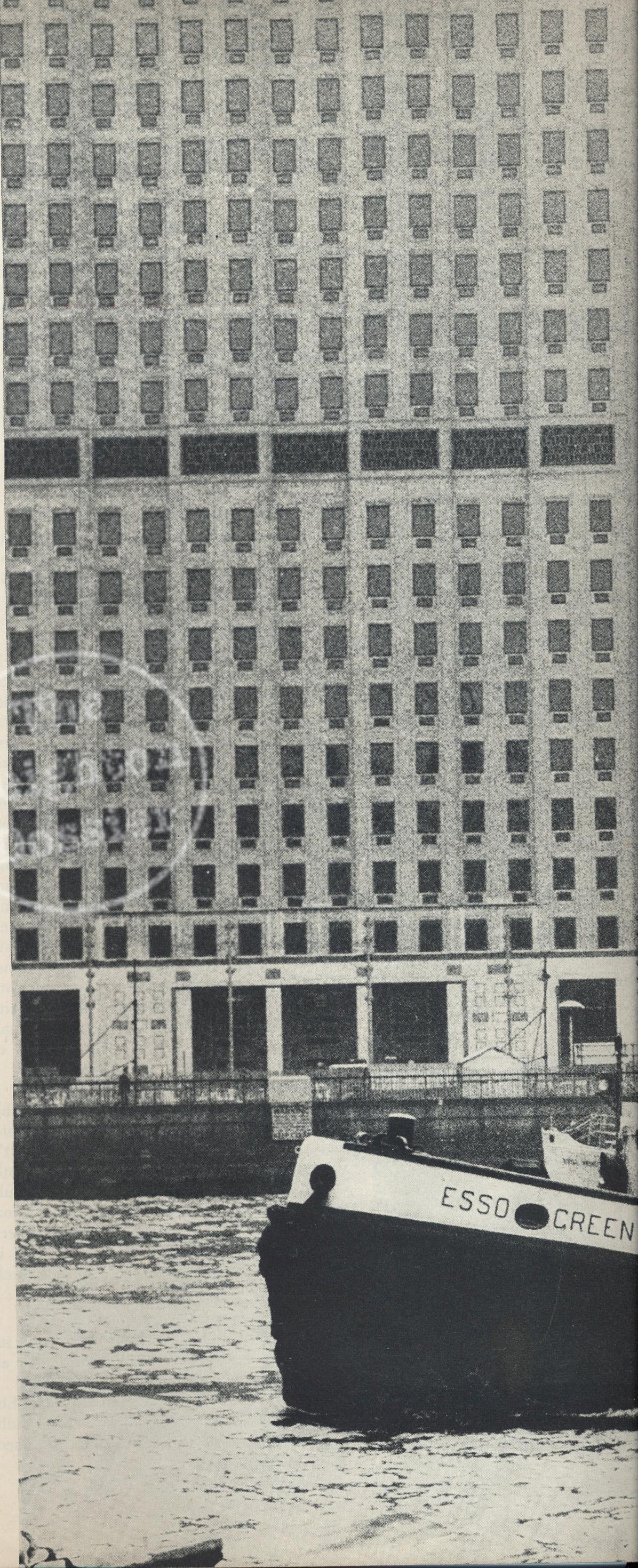


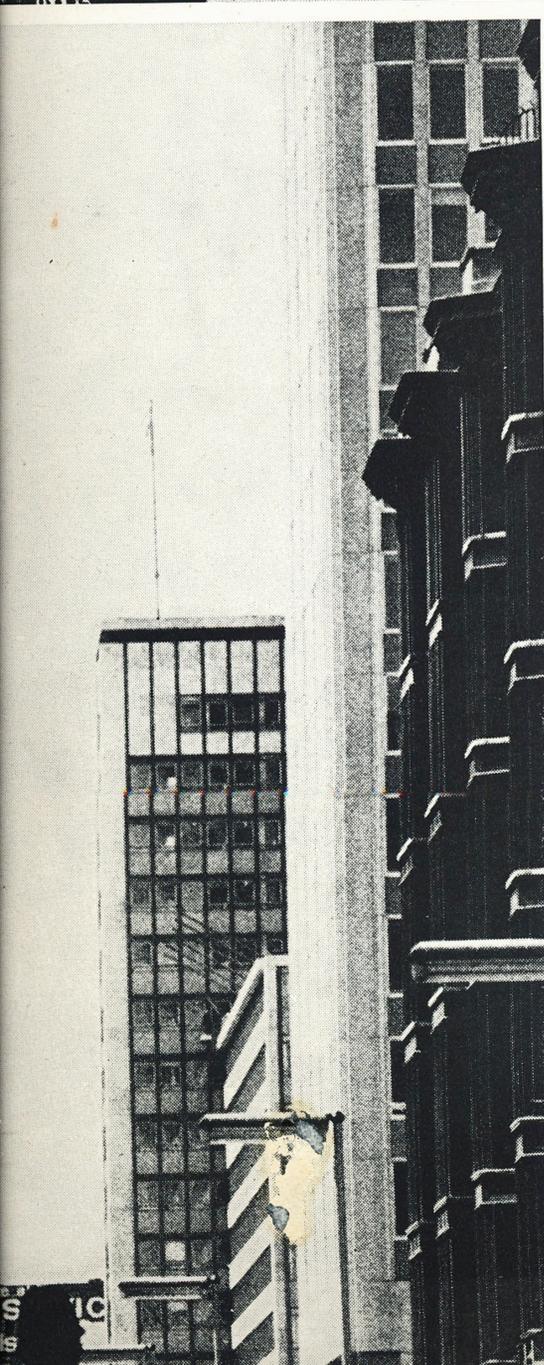
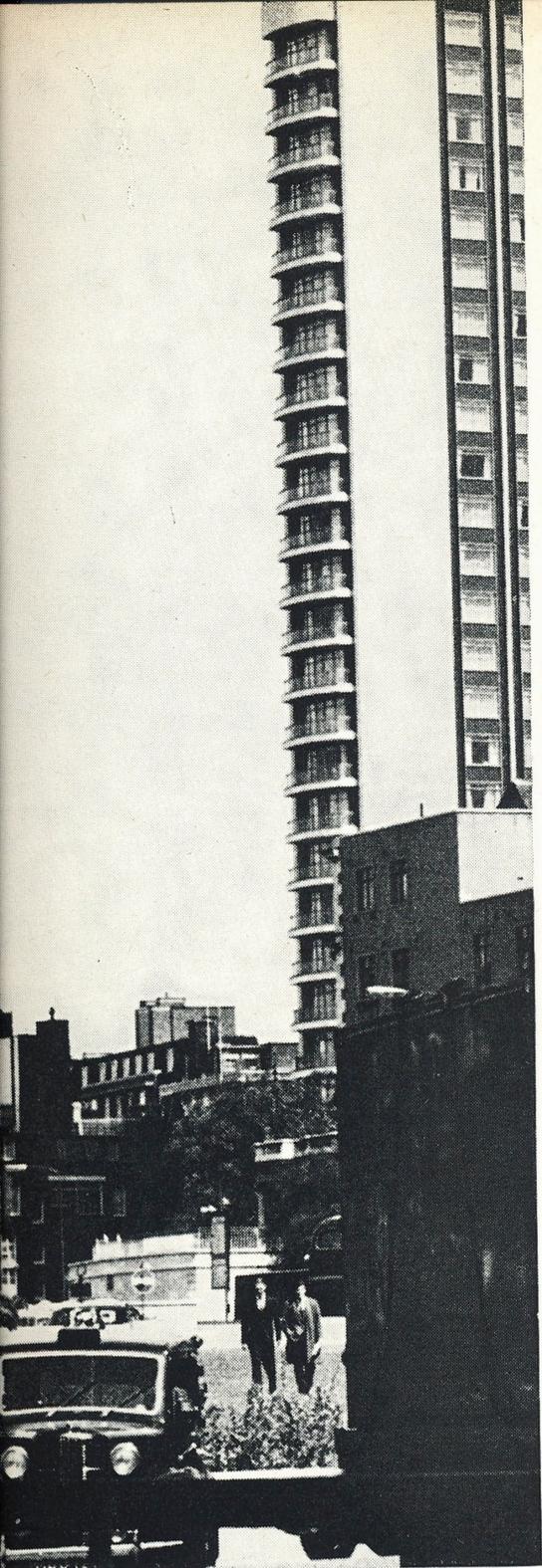
Face it we must: London in the next ten years will change as drastically as it did after the Great Fire. The present Edwardian, middle height buildings that still make up the majority of the centre of the town will vanish completely under tower blocks. Already with only a handful of towers some famous views are unrecognisable; streets you thought you knew have become unfamiliar, either narrower than you remembered or mysteriously shrunk to half their length. Hyde Park, that once seemed infinite, is now clearly bounded on all four sides. All this is inevitable, the city must grow and it must grow upwards, and if you build higher you change the whole scale. With the promise of this new environment we should all feel a sense of excitement and expectation, but somehow we don't. Alarm and apprehension would be nearer to it. For what is disturbing is the number of inexcusable mistakes and unfulfilled promises that have happened so early on in the metamorphosis. If it carries on as it has begun we shall undoubtedly have the ugliest capital in the world.

The mistakes fall roughly into two categories. There are the buildings that fail individually by reason of their bad design (one has to be philosophical about these: a perfect piece of architecture every time is a little idealistic) and there are those *thoughtless* errors of planning that are just inexcusable. If only someone, somewhere had pondered just a little longer they might never have happened. Heaven knows there are enough planning authorities, Fine Arts Commissions and the like. What can they be doing? Do they *see* the plans, and if so can they read them?

Take the example on the left. John Nash's plan for the Regent's Park to Carlton House Terrace has taken a beating in its time, but basically the original plan of progression still holds good.

One of its crucial pivots is the Church of All Souls, Langham Place, connecting the vista up Regent Street with the wide approach to Regent's Park, via Portland Place. The circular porch and spire are a sort of fulcrum that takes one round the corner. But what happens? The whole scheme, good for over a hundred years, is very nearly laid low by *one* building, cutting right across the line of the spire at exactly the *wrong* height, and at the same time exposing its backside down Regent Street. The incredibly clumsy attempt to hide the water tanks on the roof is so conspicuous that one's eyes leap to it and the vital emphasis of the church spire is killed stone dead. Why didn't someone see this before it was built? It's clear enough now, but far too late. Funnily enough, from the other side (approaching Langham Place from Portland Place) the problem is solved rather well. The new St George's Hotel block forms a backdrop to the church, which is completely silhouetted in front of it. It is a far larger building than the BBC extension but it is far less intrusive. Somebody actually stood in the street, looked at the site of the old Queens Hall, asked themselves what would be the right thing to do, and then did it as best they could. What could be easier?





Another building that brutally ignores its neighbours is the London Hilton. Its low block is too low to match up with the street and its high block too high. Actually this is a very common mistake in London. The upside down T-shaped building became a cliché in the States during the forties. The design always looks imposing on a drawing board but seldom works well in fact. I well remember the rendered drawing on the hoarding outside the Hilton when it was going up. It showed the building alone in what seemed to be a park; Mayfair had been spirited away and the hotel was the sole survivor. I'm afraid this dream world, where their buildings stand in solitary splendour, is rather a common illusion among architects. In defence of their brainchild, the architects of the Hilton actually had the nerve to say, somewhere, that the curved balconies echo the bow fronts of the houses in Park Lane, omitting to mention that they had pulled most of them down to build it.

When I was preparing this article, I asked three people to make a short list of their unfavourite buildings and the Shell building topped the poll. A lot has been written about this monster. If it weren't so large it might almost be pathetic, but unfortunately it is *so* ugly and *so* visible. If only it were lost in the City, instead of centre stage with the whole of the Embankment in the front row of the stalls. And if only it hadn't been designed by a President of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

The latest to join the ranks are still veiled in scaffolding. These promise to be the ugliest buildings in London if not in the world. If you have been anywhere near the Edgware Road recently, you must have noticed these colossal crossword puzzles. They are the first blocks of a large estate euphemistically known as the 'Watergarden' and they are the responsibility of the Church Commissioners who are going into housing in a big way.

Hilton A giant mouth organ stuck on end and sited just where it does the maximum damage to the seclusion of Hyde Park and the scale of Park Lane. Its great bow fronted balconies make a mockery of the delicate bow fronted houses further up Park Lane. Brash, vulgar totem pole to the almighty dollar – commanding perhaps the best site in London and giving US citizens a real, genuine bird's eye view of the inmates of Buckingham Palace.

Victoria Street Apparently designed by a computer, fed on plot ratios and daylighting factors. The awful thing is that this could well be the street of the future. What's wrong with it? What's right with it? Both equally difficult to answer but the result is the awful boredom of an endless repetition of identical window units. Victoria Street was never very distinguished, but at least it had the merit of visual continuity which

Two badly placed towers.

Left: The London Hilton dwarfing its neighbours and laying bare their flanks at the same time.

Below: Victoria Street. A muddle of heights which looks as though they have all been built piecemeal. It was, in point of fact, designed all at the same time.

brought out the curve and a fair relationship of building height to road width. The campanile of Westminster Cathedral, seen over the top of the curving west wall of the street, is good townscape and, even more so, the slit view of the whole height of the tower from Palace Street. Such simple but telling effects will disappear if the west side is developed like the one opposite. The square inside, Stag Place, is really terrifying. This is a mausoleum, not a piazza, with an atrocious piece of sculpture, a 'Monarch of the Glen' dipped in treacle and set in a meaningless area of multicoloured paving, raised up flowerbeds and badly designed fountains. Nowhere to sit but then who would want to? Every architectural student should be forced to tour the site as a form of compulsory inoculation so that the chance of such aberrations being designed in the future will be eliminated. With architecture such as this the only real answer is dynamite. And talking about demonstrations, what happened to all the Anti-Uglies? Do you remember that band of students in deep mourning that paraded outside newly completed monstrosities? It may have been a slight gesture, but think of those embarrassed murmurs high up in the boardroom after their visits. The public at the time were a little mystified, but they would have eventually understood. It is a great pity this little movement stopped, it was in a very worthy cause.

THREE PERSONAL BLACKLISTS

1 Len Deighton, novelist, knows London, and is the thought of person who uses his eyes and has definite opinions.

Speculators have disembowelled the London I knew as a child and have been richly rewarded. Large companies have built shrines to their own business acumen, and planning authorities, in spite of wide power, have for the most part encouraged mediocrity and opposed originality.

Instead of merely urging it, the Government could have given an example of good design and decentralisation.

It could have built fine complexes of landscaped buildings outside the dormitory area so that the transport system could become more efficient. At present the system is crowded inwards, but empty outwards in the morning, and vice versa each evening.

Instead we get the Ministry of Health sited at Elephant and Castle. Other peaks in the tidal wave of speculative granite:

The '4-fingers-down-the-throat' award
Shell Building. Commerce crowds the waterfront like pigs at a trough. Someone told me that Shell themselves don't like it. *They* don't like it! They are inside it. How do they think we feel?

Taxpayers' raspberry

Office block, New Oxford Street. Historically important because, as part of the Leasor Scheme, it showed commerce how horrific buildings could be given Government assistance. Many others part of same scheme. One near Olympia.

The 'no-fingers-needed-down-the-throat' award

So many people have complained about the Hilton that I feel guilty for mentioning it.

The 'Big - building - for - big - business' award

Bowater House. By building so high so near the park it is impossible to get away from it, and it makes the park feel considerably smaller. It's ugly too.

The 'Why - don't - we - all - get - with - it' medal

St Paul's Cathedral for blocking the view of Juxon House.

2 **Sandra Lousada**, photographer, is married to architect, Brian Richards; also uses her eyes and doesn't much like the wasted opportunities she sees.

Shell Building Unspeakably ugly.

Barbican A promising idea that gets bleaker every day. The pedestrians have not been well enough considered, there is lots of space for them on the terraces but it's not clear how to get up there and the pedestrian bridges are not frequent enough over the traffic.

BEA Terminal looks well planned - but actually it isn't. Very elaborate use of changes of level. Probably worked well on the drawing board but in practise it's very confusing. How do pedestrians get in or the traffic get out?

GPO Tower top third is quite exciting but joins the ground badly. Unimaginative detailing. This is also true of the **Centre Point** tower which is a good idea not taken far enough. Original pre-cast concrete slabs with very common or garden steel windows inside them, a little more care would have made it a remarkable building.

Elephant & Castle Depressing mess. Bad planning for pedestrians again, approached by long cavernous tunnels and ramps that are a danger to life and limb. Buildings already looking crummy and not yet even completed.

Hyde Park Corner Apart from the awful Hilton, there is a monumental traffic bungle. The underpass should surely have gone from north to south, not west to east, and spreading out a traffic snarl-up doesn't solve it.

3 **Kenneth Browne**, an architectural journalist, naturally has very strong views about the future of central London.

Shell Building Sad waste of a splendid site - there were high hopes here after the 1951 South Bank Exhibition and several exciting schemes were produced, but look what happened. A design from a child's first box of bricks blown up to monumental size; a crude image of a giant monolithic organisation. The acres of Portland stone are not structural, as they appear to be, but cost the earth, and the steelwork which holds it up cost much more because it carries the extra weight.

Above right: London Airport was started over ten years ago and still it's got the builders in. Compare it with Orly or Rome or Washington or . . .

Centre: The Shell building. Count the windows. Every one is the same.

Below: The predatory monsters, rising from the 'Watergarden', march on Hyde Park.

