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BOOKS
Reviews

The rectangular aspect of London

A history of the city's squares

Elias Martin, *View of Hanover Square*, 1769 (above); Sutton Nicholls, *Sohoe or King's Square*, around 1720-28

Anyone who has attempted recently to walk through Hanover Square realises what is at stake when a London square comes under attack, in this case simultaneously from the Crossrail project and property developers. Ivy-clad hoarding and "Considerate Contractor" notices cannot disguise the destruction of that symbiotic relationship between buildings and open space which nurtures a sense of protective enclosure. The chequered fortunes of the London

> *Locked gates could serve as provocation to a disorderly mob*

square are explored with deep historical understanding by Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, the landscape architect and president of the London Parks and Gardens Trust, in ***The London Square: Gardens in the Midst of Town***. From the front cover – Elias Martin's painting of Hanover Square in its heyday in 1769 – onwards, his comprehensive study is a delight both to behold and to read.

He starts in the early 17th century when pressure to enclose London's open spaces was paralleled by a new drive to develop its estates into prestigious residential quarters along smart continental lines. Moreover, instead of confining himself to the familiar parade of squares marching ever westwards, he includes those in and around the City, as well as much rarer examples south of the river. The text is further enlivened with snippets from the minute books of Lincoln's Inn Fields' trustees who, armed from 1734 with legal power to "enclose, clean and adorn" them, installed a beadle and watchmen to enforce bans on horses, wheels, clogs, skates, unsupervised children, bats, balls and all sports, livestock, rubbish, disorderly persons and beggars.

While a real sense of *rus in urbe* was enjoyed by early residents, with views not only of their little enclaves but also to the hills of Hampstead beyond, John Gwynn's utopian proposals of 1766 sought to impose a formal grid of streets, squares, crescents, circuses and polygons. Londoners were innately suspicious of such grandiose architectural schemes, especially those centred on monuments to rulers for whom they had little will or wherewithal to commemorate. Instead, by the end of the 18th century the effects of picturesque theory were increasingly apparent in naturalistic layouts featuring clumps of trees and shrubberies.

Nor does he neglect the role played by London horticulturalists in improving "bald and characterless" enclosures. As early as 1722, Shoreditch nurseryman Thomas Fairchild was recommending use of smoke-tolerant plants which he helpfully listed in *The City Gardener*. *Platanus x acerifolia*, the resilient London plane tree, is thought to have made its debut on the Bedford Estate in Bloomsbury.

Despite these success stories, the dominant theme to emerge is a recurring tension between public and private realms exacerbated, as ever in Britain, by class. Iron railings and locked gates increased security but could serve as provocation to a disorderly mob. Longstaffe-Gowan makes excellent use of Horace Mayhew's satirical description of "Our Square" in the *Lady's Newspaper* of 1842 and the pages of *Punch* to illustrate the pretensions, irritations and fears of respectable middle-class square dwellers – although the work of its leading cartoonists George du Maurier, Charles Keene and Bernard Partridge should have been credited and an illustration is by Richard Doyle, not his father.

Possibly the author's greatest achievement is to marshal into coherent order the concerned residents, philanthropists, enlightened estate owners, amenity societies and sympathetic local government officials who, from the Kensington Improvement Act of 1851 to the London Square Preservation Act of 1931, managed to endow London squares with the statutory protection they deserved. At the same time, as the public health benefits were recognised of fresh air and recreation in the sooty heart of the capital, a spotlight was turned on the scandalous under-use of private squares by residents who left town every summer.

The cost of square management was a core issue, with public bodies reluctant to take on responsibility to restore damage caused by decades of neglect and intensified through two world wars. A combination of conservation legislation and gentrification saved the squares from the worst excesses of post-Second World War redevelopment, although pressure from the motor lobby succeeded in introducing some underground carparks and London University does not emerge in a shining light.

The epilogue charts a surge of interest over the past 20 years, encouraged by conferences and open garden squares weekends. Thanks not least to grants from English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund, London squares are probably in better shape today than at any time since the early 19th century. Yet while the glorious illustrations capture them in all their moods through the seasons and the years, the moral of the text is not to take them for granted. The price for continuing to enjoy such pleasures is unending spadework and eternal vigilance.

Celina Fox

The London Square: Gardens in the Midst of Town
Todd Longstaffe-Gowan
Paul Mellon Centre for British Art in association with Yale University Press, 304pp, £30 (hb)