

Londoners' gardens

Tim Richardson is gladdened by a book that tells the stories of the capital's much-loved squares of green

Gardening/history

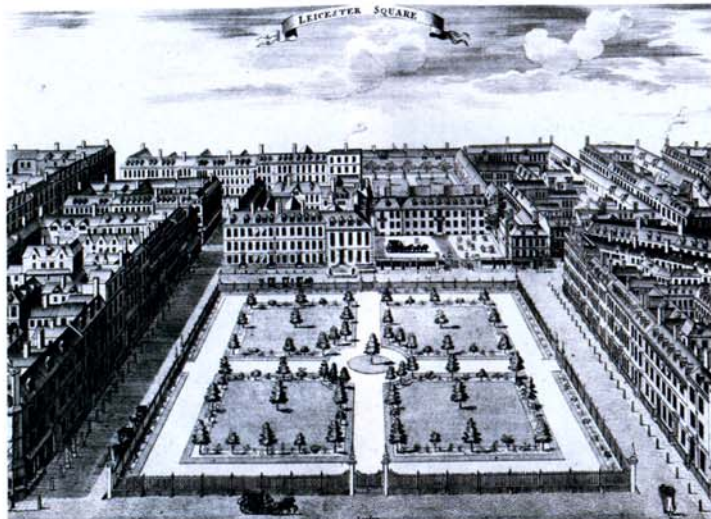
The London Square

Todd Longstaffe-Gowan (Yale, £30, *£27)

LONDON'S parks are its crowning glory, but its squares, taken as a whole, are arguably of equal importance in the fabric of the city. The likes of The Shard may draw the headlines, but London's squares quietly assert themselves to greater long-term effect. For the pedestrian, the horizontal must surely always trounce the vertical. Often exclusive but always semi-public, and each with their own distinct character, the capital's squares have long drawn envious regard from foreign visitors, at the same time as remaining the epitome of stylish living for the inhabitants of the burgeoning metropolis. There is still something special about a square.

Now, the subject has the book-length, sumptuously illustrated treatment it deserves. Todd Longstaffe-Gowan has already made the history of urban gardens in London his own, and this magnificently illustrated chronological history gives us a warts-and-all exploration of a typology that began in the mid 17th century as a straight copy of the Italian *piazza* model before mutating by the 18th century into a peculiarly British phenomenon. The author shows how an architectural model developed into an arboricultural and horticultural genre: London's squares, he implies, are gardens in all but name.

With a climate (and—arguably—national temperament) unsuited to the likes of the Italian *passaggiata*, or communal evening stroll, the British developed the London square into the embodiment of the *rus in urbe* ideal. A square in Belgravia or Bloomsbury—and later in



An engraving of Leicester Square, by Sutton Nicholls in 1731

“There is still something special about a square”

Islington and Chelsea—was to be a little piece of countryside.

But this is not just a story of improvement. The author is particularly good on reversals in the fortunes of squares, a phenomenon played out spectacularly (even now) at Leicester Square, a once-fashionable address that was dilapidated and closed off by the mid 19th century. Dickens wrote: “There were strange rumours... People spoke of a dragon, a ghoul, a geni, who watched over the square, and for some fell purpose kept it desolate.”

Sexual shenanigans in the shrubberies are also a theme the author doesn't shy away from, and even appears to endorse in some cases. The removal of iron railings from so many squares in the Second World War is attributed not to misplaced patriotic zeal, but to the fear of a ‘them and us’ mentality developing on the home front: the railings were

seen as symbol of class division. After them came open-air nurseries, symbolic market gardens and events such as the War Fair held in Russell Square in 1943.

The story of London's squares from the later 20th century to the present day is unexpectedly absorbing. But who on earth thought it was a good idea to remove all the plane trees from Golden Square in the 1950s or build a giant car park beneath Bloomsbury Square in the 1960s?

The book closes in radical fashion, with an attack on the emergence of squares that are the sterile centrepieces of almost-gated-communities (Phillimore and Wycombe Squares are singled out), and the author is sceptical about new-square developments in Chelsea. His beef is that they don't encourage social interaction with the ‘host community’ or other squares, lacking “the effects of surprise, intricacy, and seeming impropriety”—characteristics that Pevsner once admired in the squares of Regency London and Bath’.

This may not be quite the social history of London's squares the author claims, but as a balanced general history, it arguably suits its purpose even better.

Todd Longstaffe-Gowan