



KING'S COLLEGE LONDON (KCL) is a distinguished educational institution and yet its expansion plans always seem to come at a price, paid for in the irrevocable loss of old London. Proposals to erase a section of London's Borough High Street have already commenced on the site of old houses and alleyways, despite opposition (*COUNTRY LIFE*, September 11, 2013). Now, it has its sights on the destruction of a historic section of the Strand.

‘Adding new buildings has always been favoured over mending old ones as it's cheaper, easier and more prestigious for the egos of those involved’

Once again, we are told that redevelopment must take place to replace accommodation that is ‘unsuitable for a world class university’. The Strand is arguably the most significant thoroughfare in London, the ancient route that connects Westminster to the City of London. It's a street characterised by the survival of numerous narrow medieval plots that create an irregular jumble of gables and houses, a type of streetscape that—in the capital at least—increasingly seems to survive only in the imagination.

KCL has historically offended against the Strand once before. In 1966, the college erected a long (and frankly hideous) concrete entrance building. Like a giant and grotesquely over-scaled mouth organ, it leers towards the refined 18th-century church of St Mary Le Strand by James Gibbs (1714–8) that occupies an island site immediately opposite. This building fails to engage in any way with the street and presents a row of windows blinded by posters of past alumni to the passerby.

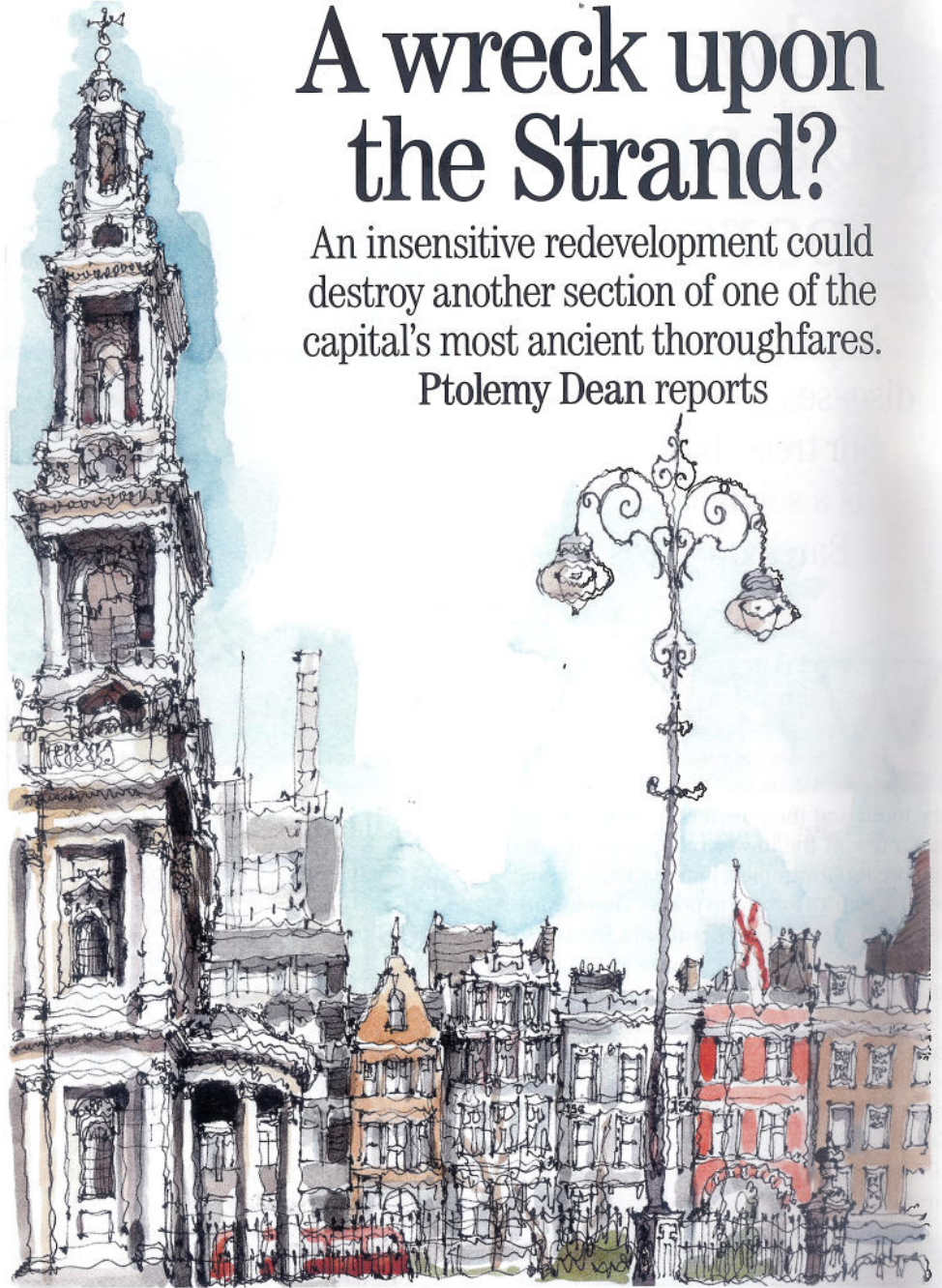
In the creation of this monstrosity, London's last two pre-Fire of London, 17th-century, timber-fronted houses and an original archway to KCL were all destroyed. Nevertheless, some sections of the old street, with its narrow houses, were allowed to survive on either side. The result is this remarkable glimpse of the James Gibbs church tower, attenuated and tall to command the long view down the Strand, with typical old London houses huddled at its base.

These are the houses that KCL now wants to remove, so that its existing 1966

A wreck upon the Strand?

An insensitive redevelopment could destroy another section of one of the capital's most ancient thoroughfares.

Ptolemy Dean reports



King's College London wants to demolish historic buildings opposite Gibbs's St Mary le Strand

building (just visible behind the church portico) can be extended. The old houses once accommodated the Law Faculty, but, as only two of the houses are listed, the rest are now proposed for demolition. Yet if two houses could be saved, then surely all six could be and rebuilt behind their frontages if necessary? But this is not what KCL wants to do, to the detriment of the street and its history.

Although the whole group of buildings is contained within a conservation area, this seemingly counts for little when the planning consultants get going on quantifying ‘historic significance’. And yet it is the scale, variety and colour of the unlisted buildings that give the listed buildings their

context. As a group, these buildings also allow the brilliance of Gibbs to be expressed in a way that a larger and uniform institutional building will stifle.

It is ironic that the legislation that originally created conservation areas was enacted in 1967, a year after the KCL building was completed, and precisely to protect areas such as this. The increasing inability to defend conservation areas as a planning tool is becoming alarming nationwide. Adding new buildings has always been favoured over mending old ones as it's cheaper, easier and more prestigious for the egos of those involved. But if I were an alumnus of KCL, I wouldn't want my money to be spent smashing down old London. 