

# THE CONTINUING COVENT GARDEN RENAISSANCE

## Environmental Study of Central Covent Garden Audit Update

June 2008 FINAL REPORT



**ATKINS**





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This report was prepared at the invitation of the Covent Garden Area Trust, letter dated 7th December 2006. Site audits were carried out by Atkins during April, May, June & August 2007.

This document should be read in conjunction with the *1997 Environmental Study of Central Covent Garden*, undertaken by Civic Design Partnership, the *Audit Report* produced in June 2000 and the revised *Caring for Covent Garden- A Conservation Management Guide 2004*.

*Inside front cover: This view shows a major improvement since the last audit (2000) affecting virtually all the recommended actions for the arcade of Bedford Chambers on the north-west side of the Piazza. Pigeons have been deterred, the vaulting, lighting and shopfronts have been restored and redecorated and the expansive Brassiere outdoor seating area and associated clutter has been removed, pending new tenants. This has freed up views to the ornate end doorway.*



# 1 CHAIRMAN'S INTRODUCTION

## The Continuing Covent Garden Renaissance – The Story So Far ...

The Trust was established in 1988 with specific powers over any physical changes to buildings in and around The Piazza, and powers over the specialist user clauses of the various leases which created the specialist shopping centre. The Trust's wider brief is to ensure that the area's historic fabric is maintained and that The Market retains its wide mix of specialist shops, differentiating it from the UK-wide brands found elsewhere in the West End.

We published our first *Environmental Study of Central Covent Garden* in 1997, undertaken by a multi-disciplinary team headed by Peter Heath, then of Civic Design Partnership. The Study contained over 500 recommendations and we were pleased that the first audit undertaken in 2000 demonstrated that over 300 had been implemented. A revised shorter Study, *Caring for Covent Garden – A Conservation and Management Guide*, was published in 2004 and both volumes have been used as a material consideration by Westminster City Council for planning purposes and in drawing up proposals relating to The Piazza and surrounds.

Both volumes were drawn up in partnership with English Heritage, the City Council and the main freeholders and are intended (and indeed have been) action plans set out in sufficient detail to enable their implementation.

*Opposite page: The west Piazza still comprises the only licensed and popular external street entertainment area. Elsewhere enforcement action from time to time is taken against other unauthorised street performers, when they create a nuisance. The last report recommendation for further licensed entertainment pitches has not been pursued.*

As with the companion project, *The Seven Dials Renaissance Study – Looking After an Historic Area* (Seven Dials Trust 1997 [www.sevendials.com](http://www.sevendials.com)) they deal with the totality of the built heritage – the buildings and the spaces between and, in the case of our studies, related management issues.

Few of the millions who visit The Piazza will be aware of the unusual freehold arrangements with the City Council owning the outer curtilage of The Piazza, and Capital & Counties (Covent Garden London, known as CGL), the central area and the Market buildings (plus other buildings such as the Transport Museum and Bedford Chambers), and with another freeholder owning some of the properties in James Street (all defined as the "Protected Lands").

This very thorough Audit of the recommendations in both Studies is intended to enable all the various stakeholders to maintain and enhance the built heritage and public realm, and to thus play a part in making sure that this key conservation area is attractive for visitors, workers and residents alike. Covent Garden needs to stand comparison with the Places des Vosges in Paris or St. Mark's in Venice as London's oldest and premiere square.

This work should assist as both a complement to and informative for the four area Action Plans being prepared by the City Council and for Covent Garden London's (CGL) masterplan.

### David Bieda

Chairs the Trust's Environment sub-committee, was a founder Trustee, led one of the main objections at the 1971 Covent Garden Public Inquiry and chairs the Seven Dials Trust.



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STREET WC2  
CITY OF WESTMINSTER

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## 2 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The full scheduled audit that supports this review comprises over 600 individual items of street furniture, and reviews in excess of 260 individual actions from the original study and subsequent audit. The growing photographic record has also been updated to further document the changes that have been seen in the Central Covent Garden area. (See the Trust's website:

<http://www.cgareatrust.org.uk/environ.html> to download the original Study where there are illustrations of each individual façade and also building frontage website: [http://www.streetsensation.co.uk/covent/cg\\_intro.htm](http://www.streetsensation.co.uk/covent/cg_intro.htm))

This Audit has again found that the *Environmental Study of Central Covent Garden* has continued to be successful when judged by its original terms of reference, with a large proportion of the recommended changes for physical improvements implemented. However, as the area has undergone many changes in the past 10 years, we have added to the recommendations list so in some streets there are gains but also further work to be done, including ensuring ease of movement for disability groups (see Chapter 4).

*Opposite page: The Royal Opera House redevelopment was completing at the time of the last audit in 2000. In general the quality standards of design and management of the Piazza arcades have been sustained, with minor modifications.*

As a tool for CGAT, the documents provide a basis for its routine work assessing changes to the "Protected Lands" and a means of contributing reference material to the wider Covent Garden area and, once on the web, an easy reference source for all stakeholders.

This updated Audit will also work alongside the master-plans currently being produced for both CGL, Freeholder of the Central Market and adjacent properties, and City of Westminster ([www.westminster.gov.uk](http://www.westminster.gov.uk)) which will address many of the issues raised by the Audit. Further details of these are contained in Chapter 4.

The Audit takes the same form as in 2000 – we have looked in detail at each street and each façade and made proposals for maintenance and enhancement. We are particularly concerned to remove street clutter and to ensure that detail is dealt with.



*Above : External tables and chairs areas on the north side of the Central Market Buildings have followed the guidance for slated wooden chairs and appropriate tables. The areas are well managed but they have expanded against the recommendations of the last study and still include large umbrellas, external heaters, menu boards, bollards and ropes and serveries.*



BEDFORD

CHAMBERS

COVENT GARDEN WC2

MARKET STREET WC2

ROCK GARDEN

# 3 PARALLEL STUDIES

Since purchasing the Freehold in August 2006, CGL have commissioned a master-plan study of the whole area, aimed at identifying how improvements can be made to the estate, both the buildings and public realm, to enhance further its commercial value and historic character. This study is ongoing, and is likely to highlight many of the issues raised in this document and its predecessors.

Along with their continuing support for the work of the Trust, Westminster City Council has also published a range of its own documents that govern and regulate the street scene in the area. In particular there are three documents that provide current guidance:

- **Central Covent Garden Management Guidelines** (March 2006)
- **Guidelines for the placement of tables and chairs in Covent Garden Piazza** (March 2005)
- **Covent Garden Action Plan** (2004)

The first two documents find their origins in the work of the Trust, and both the *Environmental Study and Conservation and Management Guide* that the Trust has produced previously.

In 2004 the City of Westminster produced an Area Action Plan for Covent Garden, as part of its continuing programme of Civic Renewal

*Opposite page: Improvements at the end of James Street south and the Piazza since the last audit have included the replacement of the wooden posts and rails with canon style bollards in accordance with the Study recommendations. However, the number of bollards does add to the clutter and congestion of James Street at peak times.*

across Westminster. This document was aimed at understanding the needs of the area, and identifying a series of actions that could be implemented to improve the environment in the short, medium and long terms. The Action Plan itself divided the area into four sub-areas, each of which has its own details plan. Area 1 shares a very similar boundary to the Central Area that the Trust has looked at in this and its preceding studies.

The Area 3 study is complete, and the Area 1 study is currently under way. The brief for the work is comprehensive, and will cover highway alignments, footway widths, street furniture, surfaces, parking and movement throughout the area. In many of these areas, the study will reinforce the recommendations of this Audit, in removing unnecessary street clutter and improving the overall physical environment of the area. In some respects it will go much further than the remit of this document, as it will be able to address issues such as highway / footway imbalance and disability issues which have been largely beyond the scope of this document, but will contribute to the overall improvement of Central Covent Garden.

Individually, these studies are each significant for possible changes to the physical environment of the area. Combined, these stakeholder studies have the potential to bring about real beneficial changes to the Central Covent Garden area in the coming few years.

# 4 ACHIEVEMENTS

Privately-funded achievements are hard to quantify, but there has clearly been some visible improvements to the area – Bedford Chambers and 42 King Street have both been improved, as has the London Transport Museum, and there have been improvements to various façades.

The original Study has met the major policy aim, and been adopted as a “material consideration” for planning matters, and the aim is to continue seeking this strong relationship with the City Planners, as they work through the preparation of their Local Development Framework, and in particular the Public Realm Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) that will cover many of the topics considered by this study.



*The sub-areas of the Covent Garden Area Action Plan, Produced by the City of Westminster.*

In reviewing the number of actions from the original Study and subsequent Audit that have been completed, many new issues and problems have appeared, in many cases due to events or processes that could not have been anticipated by the original Study.

Much of the advice on building treatments and frontage design has now been incorporated into the 2004 *Conservation and Management Guide*, which has in turn been used by Westminster City Council.

A particular area of success has been the gradual implementation of the “family” of tables and chairs proposed by the Trust in close co-operation with the restaurateurs’ association and which has greatly improved the overall visual appearance of The Piazza. As a whole, the amount of parking-related street furniture is reducing as Westminster has introduced pay-by-phone systems to replace traditional meters and pay-and-display.

The recommendations on the spaces between buildings have been harder to maintain. For example, on Southampton Street, the original Study identified 41 actions in the spaces between buildings, of which 23 have been completed, but 61 new actions have been identified by this Audit, so whilst there has been an overall 58% success rate in the whole area, this is lost, with 58% of the current issues being new since the original Study. This is a trend that is replicated across the entire Central Covent Garden area.

This Study and Audit is coterminous with Area 1 of the Covent Garden Action Plan which should be taking on board the recommendations which we make (see map on page 21). In Area 3, a major investment by Shaftesbury PLC and the Mercers’ Company will see Long Acre transformed with parallel improvements at St Martin’s Cross (the junction of Long Acre and St Martin’s Lane) thus improving the link between Leicester Square and Covent Garden. In the other three areas, detailed enhancement plans are nearing completion.

The improvements in Area 3 will include Langley and Mercer Street (S) and Shelton Street on the borough border with Camden. These will in turn link up with the current programme of improvements at Seven Dials, for example by using the same materials and via the Seven Dials façade lighting scheme which will encompass both areas.



*An example of the ongoing repairs to the setts in the Central Piazza.*



# 5 NEW ISSUES

The major new issues since the last Audit are:

1. The consequences of the smoking ban with increased outside drinking, litter and noise nuisance and pressure for outdoor canopies affixed to façades and similar;
2. The pressure for increased “al fresco” dining within the relatively small area of The Piazza which already has a far greater number of chairs & tables than the much larger Place des Vosges or St. Mark’s Square;
3. The increase in items we have added to the Audit in various streets which comprise either increased clutter or lack of maintenance;
4. The provision of a charging point for electric vehicles, though mitigated by the reduction in on-street parking furniture;
5. Possible changes to planning legislation which may reduce the powers of local authorities in relation to shop fronts, ventilation installations etc as part of the government’s obsession with de-regulation.



*An example of the ongoing issue of waste management and refuse collection.*

*Opposite page: 1990s improvements to Russell Street and the junction with the east Piazza did not include the full recommendations of the Study and were in planning stages at the time of the last audit. Revised plans including an option which would meet the full scope of the recommendations of the Study are at consultation stage at the time of writing.*



*Advertising boards are an ongoing issue in the public realm around Covent Garden.*



*Bicycles are chained to trees, whilst cycle facilities are being misused by street performers, amongst others.*

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With outdoor events, the need to accommodate extra people within the confines of an already busy Piazza is compounded by the licensing and safety requirements necessary to facilitate a successful event. This includes having areas of dedicated seating, fencing to prevent overcrowding problems, access for emergency vehicles, and maintaining general circulation, for example, for those not watching a screened performance. All of this puts additional pressure on the already over-crowded public realm.

There is great potential for conflict between the spaces needed for these temporary events, the space given over to tables and chairs, and the amount of space for general public circulation. Within the limited space of The Piazza in particular the pressure on all open areas is immense.



*The Big Screen Opera events in the Piazza have proved extremely popular but the Study recommendations for a permanent screen installation have not been implemented.*



*Large scale events in Covent Garden require extra organisation and control.*



A Charging Point for electric vehicles has been located in Southampton Street.



Examples of the new furniture that is becoming more commonplace and uncoordinated.



The smoking ban could increase the number of venues wanting outside tables and chairs areas against the Study recommendations.



# 6 PRIORITIES

The achievements of the original *Environmental Study* and the Audit update are even more remarkable when contrasted with the number of new issues that have arisen, and the lack of mechanism to push for the recommendations contained within the document actually to be implemented. As a guidance document, it must rely on those with statutory or ownership powers to bring about change.

Therefore, one of the biggest priorities for the Trust is to continue to work closely with both CGL as freeholder, and the City of Westminster as local authority, to ensure that the recommendations of this audit are delivered through the One City Programme, and as part of planning and development control.

One of the priorities for this document must therefore be to maintain the now up-to-date record of issues, in a format that can be easily searched by all those with an interest in the area, and in a format that is available as a 'live' document on the Trust's website. The Trust therefore welcomes input from any users who might have issues to add to those listed.

With the smoking ban in force, another priority is going to be monitoring how the use of the outdoor spaces changes, and how people utilise the immediate area around their premises. More detailed guidance as an addendum to the *Conservation and Management Guide* might become necessary to deal with the pressure for canopies attached to buildings, outdoor heaters and suchlike.

The main priority is to see the recommendations implemented and to raise awareness of both the earlier Studies' and this Audit's proposals amongst smaller freeholders and related tenants.

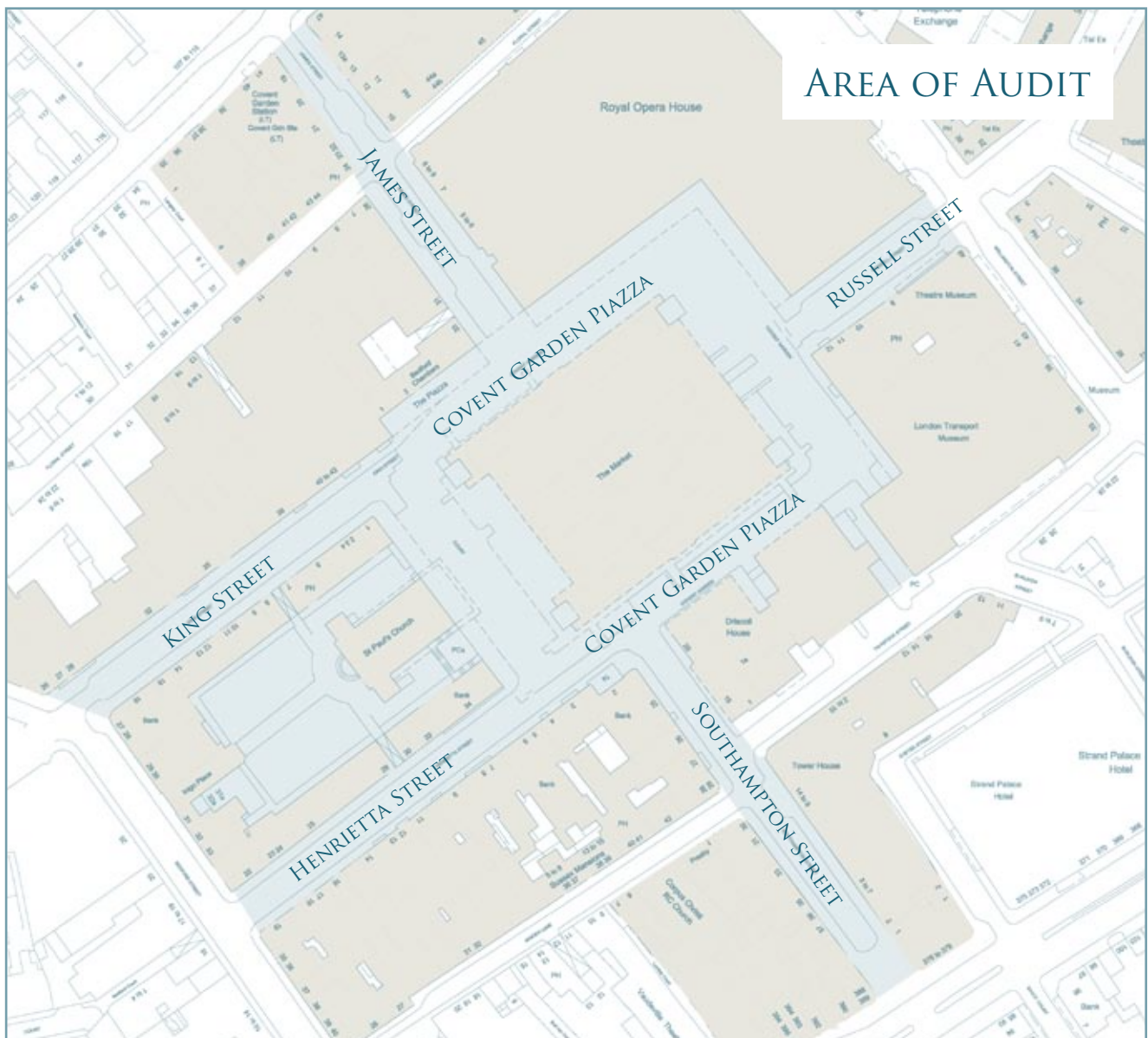
Though the trust produces this document as guidance for all those with an interest in the Central Covent Garden area, the Trust is reliant upon its partners actually to deliver these changes. These organisations are the key stakeholders in the area, who along with the Trust, share the ambition to make the environment of Covent Garden a better place to live, to visit and to do business. In the recent part, one of these partners – the Royal Opera House – has completed a major project that has delivered a number of improvements in the area.

Overall responsibility for the fabric of the area is shared between the Local Authority, Westminster City Council, and Capital and Counties (Covent Garden London) who hold the freehold for much of the Central Covent Garden area.

*Opposite page: Paving under the church portico is still in need of improvement. Restoration of York stone flagstones would be desirable, subject to underground constraints.*



# 7 AUDIT TABLES & MAPS



This section of the Audit focuses upon the specific issues that are affecting the Covent Garden Area. All of the information and maps contained on these pages are also available in electronic format, and can be easily searched and updated, as appropriate.

*Opposite page: St. Paul's Churchyard remains a popular location although some maintenance and restoration is still required.*

The original study looked at three areas:

- Buildings
- Building Façades
- Space between Buildings

The 2004 study focused on the conservation and management of buildings, façades, the public realm and the space between buildings and this Audit review does the same.



*The Trust has argued for high quality events in The Piazza and here we have Lancia in the Piazza 2007 – marking the centenary of the Lancia marque in the UK. This followed a smaller Lancia event in 2003. Both events brought in large numbers of visitors, increasing the spend in the shops and restaurants and providing interest for the many families who attended. The picture shows a performance of Puccini arias from the same car the composer drove in the 1920s, performed for the Lord Mayor of Westminster, Councillor Carolyn Keen, and the Minister Plenipotentiary from the Italian Embassy in London. The event was sponsored by Lancia Turin, Covent Garden London, Westminster City Council and Amato. The Lancia Centenary Committee (chaired by David Bieda) won the Classic & Sports Car award for the best UK car event in 2007.*



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