

legislation.

In the 1980's the differences and controls between the use classes were substantially relaxed. Mr Ridley, Mrs Thatcher's Secretary of State for the Environment, changed the rules whereby a tailor's premises became the same as offices, and a restaurant was considered the same as a night time bar. Overnight as Covent Garden residents and businesses know to their cost, quiet streets like Maiden Lane were transformed into extensions of Leicester Square and rents shot through the roof so much so that the majority of all the specialist traders and industries have now been pushed out. Only ten years ago Covent Garden boasted a fabulous mix of activities that was the major reason for the area's vitality and attraction; brass instrument makers, street music and jazz shops, bookbinders, paper manufacturers, specialist theatrical manufacturers, theatrical costumiers even two local public libraries: all now gone and replaced by the tedium of the standard homogenised High Street retail chains.

Changes are proposed by the Government for yet further relaxations to the use class orders; proposals include lumping a Bank and Building Society into the same category as a retail shop.

Increasingly planning control is becoming less and less to do with protecting uses and neighbourhoods and communities, and more and more to do with ensuring the property market can charge higher and higher rents. There is a complete imbalance between



Mercers "Block C" – Mercer Street, threatened with demolition

legislation that sets out to protect what buildings look like (which is very subjective) but less and less control of what goes on inside the buildings. Protecting and enhancing a neighbourhood and effectively ensuring sustainable development is only a meaningful term if the uses to which buildings are put are protected as much as what buildings look like. A special place is made special by both what goes on there as well as how the area looks.

The CGCA submitted detailed comments on the proposed changes to the Government. In a way the most depressing aspect of the whole process is that the decision of what changes are to occur to the Use Class Order, is taken by one man – Lord Falconer; there will be no debate in Parliament, no public enquiry, not even a select committee analysis. It has taken 24 years since the Use Class Orders were last altered. The decision by Lord Falconer will have

enormous effect on our cities and there is little likelihood that the issue will be revised for another 20/30 years. Every indication is that controls will be further relaxed and rents will be given another upward hike.

Jim Monahan

The Mercers Company: Huge Redevelopment Plans

Thirty years ago the highly destructive redevelopment proposals for Covent Garden were thwarted largely as a consequence of the area's vociferous protest. The wheel has turned and large scale redevelopment plans are threatening the area again. The Mercers Company (a charity