

How determined community action brought results in a developer's desert

The plot of land in the adjoining picture, within a stone's throw of Euston Station, does not look like the site of a famous victory, but in a small way it is.

For years it was just a piece of derelict land no larger than a tennis court, a home for rubbish and parked cars. Now it is a garden, with seats, flowers and a lawn at one end, and a children's playground at the other.

It lies in "Tollmers Village", an area of largely blighted land where about 700 people of many races live between the huge Euston Centre office towers to the west and Euston Station to the east. This is the area in which the same interests who developed the Euston Centre, the Stock Conversion Group, have been buying up property for years with a view to a second massive development—now likely to be frustrated by residents and Camden Council.

It is the only public recreation space in an area that has been made a desert by developers, and it is there as a result of determined and fruitful action by the residents through their local community group, the Tollmers Village Association, which succeeded, not without difficulty, in persuading the owners of the site, who have a small factory adjoining, that a garden would be better than a dump.

The owners, not unnaturally from their point of view since they wanted to develop the site, at first strongly resisted attempts by the residents to do anything with it at all. They refused permission for a bonfire last autumn and a playspace in the spring, despite support by the council and the residents' offer to meet all costs, including

insurance. However, comprehensive plans for the area meant that development delays could be interminable, and the residents decided on direct action.

One day in April they moved in in force, clearing away and burning rubbish, and levelling and tidying the site. They put a notice on it saying, "This site has been taken over by the people of Tollmers Village for a garden".

They explained: "We are fed up with a system which allows absent landlords and owners of property to do what they like with their property regardless of the local community. This site has been vacant for years in an area where there is nowhere for kids to play, nowhere for old people to sit, no trees, no gardens, and nowhere for community events."

Presented with a *fait accompli* (and no doubt resigning themselves to the inevitable), the owners relented, and not only let the site to the association for £1 a year (thus preventing the establishment of squatter's rights) but also gave £25 towards a garden.

Other gifts followed. A local businessman gave benches, people gave paint and plants. The council gave topsoil, turf, and gardening tools. One large firm with an office in the neighbourhood gave £1,000.

The garden has flourished. Local teenagers made a wooden fort for the younger ones, who in turn helped to make the garden. They even take their shoes off on the little lawn, which looks fresh and green. About 50 attended regular playgroups there this summer.

It is a notable victory but a tiny one. There remains nowhere for games for older children, though a perfect site

stands near by. This is Tollmers Square itself, the space bounded by two crescents of Victorian housing, occupied until last summer by a cinema. It is owned by Stock Conversion.

It was by all accounts a delightful cinema, one of the "cheapest in the United Kingdom" at 25p a seat and well patronized by local students and pensioners.

Stock Conversion closed it in 1972 and last year, despite a

residents' petition, bulldozed it down. Since then the land has stood idle, protected by barbed wire from attempts to use or enjoy it. Questioned about the barbed wire, Stock Conversion say that to allow this flat piece of cleared land to be used "might create safety problems".

Stock Conversion collected rents of over £5m last year. Net revenue after tax £1.289m.

Michael Baily



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