

Tolmers—the council's ploy

The struggle for Tolmers Square, in north London, seems to have been resolved with all sides—except one—being the winners. The solitary loser, significantly, is the firm which at present owns about a third (4.6 acres) of the 11.4 acre site—the Stock Conversion Development Company.

A year ago it seemed that nothing could stop Camden Council from entering into a deal with Stock Conversion in which Camden would have given it permission to build 250 000 sq ft of offices in exchange for the cheap purchase of most of Stock Conversion's 4.6 acres for housing (see AJ 26.9.73 p711). But now, due to the opposition of both the public and the Camden Labour party and proposed changes in planning law, the council has changed its stance and seems all set to make history. It is hoping to be the first local authority to use the legislation contained in the government white paper on land (see AJ 18.9.74 p658) when it becomes law. (Camden hope that will be soon after Christmas.) This Act would nationalise development land so that Camden would be able to compulsorily purchase Stock Conversion's 4.6 acres at 'current use' value. And, since most of the 4.6 acres contains properties which are empty and decaying (ironically kept empty by Stock Conversion to improve its own chance of redeveloping) Camden will pay a lot less than the £680 000 an acre estimated last year.

New legislation

If Camden does use the proposed legislation, Tolmers Square will form a fine test case to define the exact meaning of 'development land'. Little of the 4.6 acres is vacant land, and most of the existing buildings would be retained so that, as far as Camden is concerned, rehabilitation counts as development. Also, Camden will argue that the two forms of land exempted from the legislation—land in the hands of builders, and land with planning permission—are not applicable here. Stock Conversion is not, says Camden, a builder in any sense.

So, by using the new legislation, Camden and its architects—the Renton Howard Wood Levin Partnership—will be creating in this long blighted area an opportunity for the existing community to not only stay, but grow. And, judging by Camden's declarations about maintaining the existing uses and social mix (plus adding a new cinema, café and restaurant) and the architects' sensitive approach to preserving and infilling the existing buildings and streets, the actual building of the new Tolmers Square area promises to be just as far sighted as its acquisition.

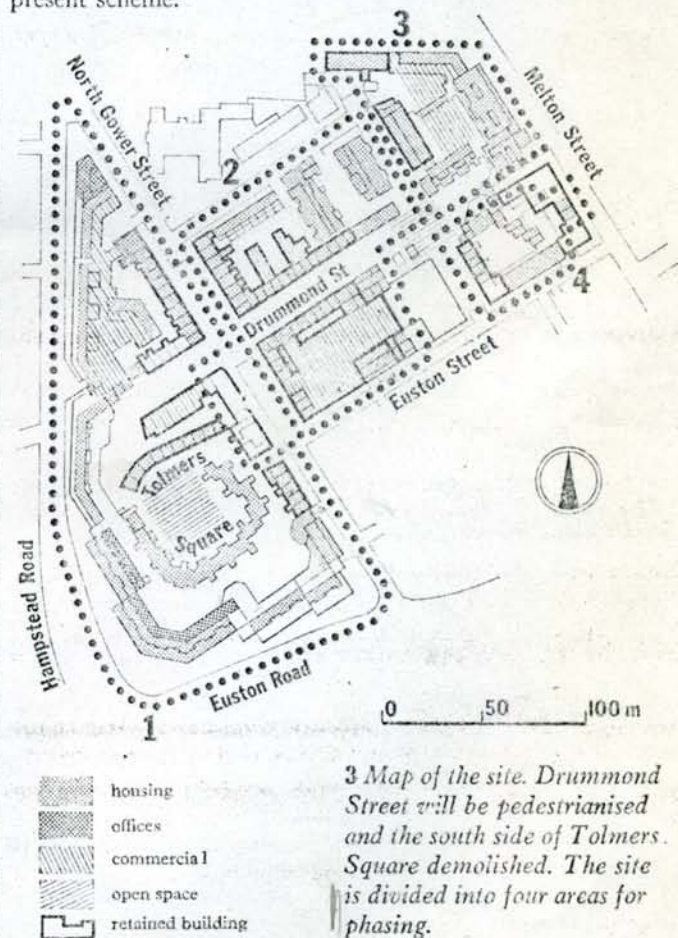
The architects have recognised the economic necessity of retaining and adapting the existing housing stock (in Tolmers Square there is also an historic necessity to retain them since most are listed grade II) and, according to the architects' estimate, the rehabilitated homes will be about two-thirds of the cost per person of the new housing which will be built to the cost yardstick. Of the 1707 people who will eventually be housed in the 11.4 acre area (116 ppa), 607 will be in the 64 rehabilitated houses.

The buildings which form the south and west edges of the

site have been designed to both enclose and shield the centre. It is in these taller buildings that the commercial content of the development will be housed. Camden, if it can get permission from the Government, will be raising money—from such sources as pension funds—to build the scheme. But, having borrowed, it will have to pay back, so Camden has to have some money-spinning offices in the scheme. In fact, there will be 132 300 sq ft of offices and public spaces along the south and west edges while, on the northern edge, British Rail will develop 10 000 sq ft of offices.

The RHWL scheme was approved by Camden Planning committee on 25 September 1974 and its implementation now depends on the 'Land' white paper becoming law, the CPOs being granted, and Camden's ability to rehouse the existing tenants (most of whom will be allowed back) during work. The whole thing could be delayed if a public inquiry is held (if Stock Conversion objects to the CPOs this could happen) and such a delay could be fatal.

The present economic viability of this socially and architecturally sensitive scheme is very delicately balanced and could be overturned if work does not begin soon. For, as the old houses, long kept empty by Stock Conversion, continue to deteriorate, rehabilitation becomes more expensive. If this happens another rethink may become necessary. But the results are unlikely to be better—socially or architecturally—than the present scheme.



1 Section through Tolmers Square proposal. Centre is new housing, the building behind is the shielding block containing housing and offices.

2 East/west section through site. In left is block of offices and housing. Rehabilitated houses remain in North Gower Street. Infill forms the Cobourg Street corner.

