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ROBERT LANGTON'S PROPERTY SCENE

Housing: Camden's long wait

SQUATTERS living in near derelict buildings in Tolmers Square, Euston, must face court proceedings later this month when the owners try to evict them.

But unfortunately for the owners, a subsidiary of Mr Joe Levy's Stock Conversion group, Camden Council intend to acquire the property themselves; so until that issue is settled the owners will not be able to undertake any form of redevelopment.

Mr Levy has spent ten years assembling property for the proposed redevelopment and there was to have been a substantial residential element for Camden, but planning delays and rising building costs could well kill the project from Mr Levy's point of view.

Now the scheme for providing much-needed housing for Cam-

den residents is no further forward and if eventually the homes are built they are likely to cost double the original estimates. It will be the taxpayer and ratepayer who foot the bill for the difference if Camden do get confirmation of a compulsory purchase order.

Camden will have to wait many months yet if they wish to purchase the property under the terms of the highly debatable Community Land Bill. It underlines the lack of forethought by the local authority in early stages of this plan.

Politics

Developers have private capital which is no drain on community funds and it would have been possible, if politics had been put on one side, for agreement to have been reached so that commercial interests could have financed a very large housing stock at reasonable prices.

Now there seems little chance of this happening because here, as elsewhere in London, the incentive to redevelop is dead and it is no longer possible for the community to have gain from private development schemes.

Local authorities must realise that community funds, whether they come from central or local government, are not bottomless. Severe cutbacks by the Government in their refurbishing of houses programme is going to cause serious problems in the renovation of London's housing stock.

Camden should also ask itself quite plainly where the original fault lies with that sad saga of Centre Point and the elected representatives who originally gave permission to build the tower and 36 flats.

It should have been possible a decade or more ago for the planners to have allowed the block to be built only on the understanding that the flats were to be for council tenants. The expensive job years later of CPO-ing the block for council tenants would then have been avoided. As it is, the flats have been empty and few have benefited.

The Department of the Environment should now be openly much tougher on London boroughs who want large sums of money to buy property when existing owners are prepared to provide low-cost housing.

Islington Council, for instance, have asked the department for £1,000,000 loan sanction to buy part of the Woodbridge Estate when the tenants of the estate have petitioned the council to leave them alone and let their existing landlord refurbish their homes and continue to charge them low rents.