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# TimeOut

## Square Dealing

The Greening of Tolmers Square' says the optimistic slogan in neat typescript lettering across the wall. In front of it, the greening itself - a few trees, seats and a swing to replace the demolished Tolmers cinema - is looking distinctly

brown in the harsh summer sun. The oval backcloth of houses appears as decaying and crumbled as it has for years. Property developer Joseph Levy may have been replaced by Camden Council as the major local

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landowner, but to the residents of Tolmers Square it seems as though they've just swapped one capitalist millstone for another.

The sad fact is that three years after a deal with Levy's Stock Conversion property company was crushed by public pressure, the council intends to build more offices than even the arch-developer himself. In figures, where Levy had wanted to build 250,000 square feet of offices (another Centre Point to make his venture profitable, Council says that 300,000 square feet may not be enough. Local people are angry that what was once 'totally unacceptable' in Levy's hands is now being served up with the seal of public approval.

So what went wrong? In the autumn of 1974, with Levy scurrying into the shadows, a compromise solution for the area (10 acres stretching north from Euston Road) was agreed, and even the locally based Tolmers Village Association reluctantly concurred. This envisaged a buffer of office development along the main roads, with housing on top, the restoration of many other buildings, and the injection of various community facilities, including a sports centre, a supermarket and a cinema. In true compromise style, half of Tolmers Square itself would come down, the other half stay up.

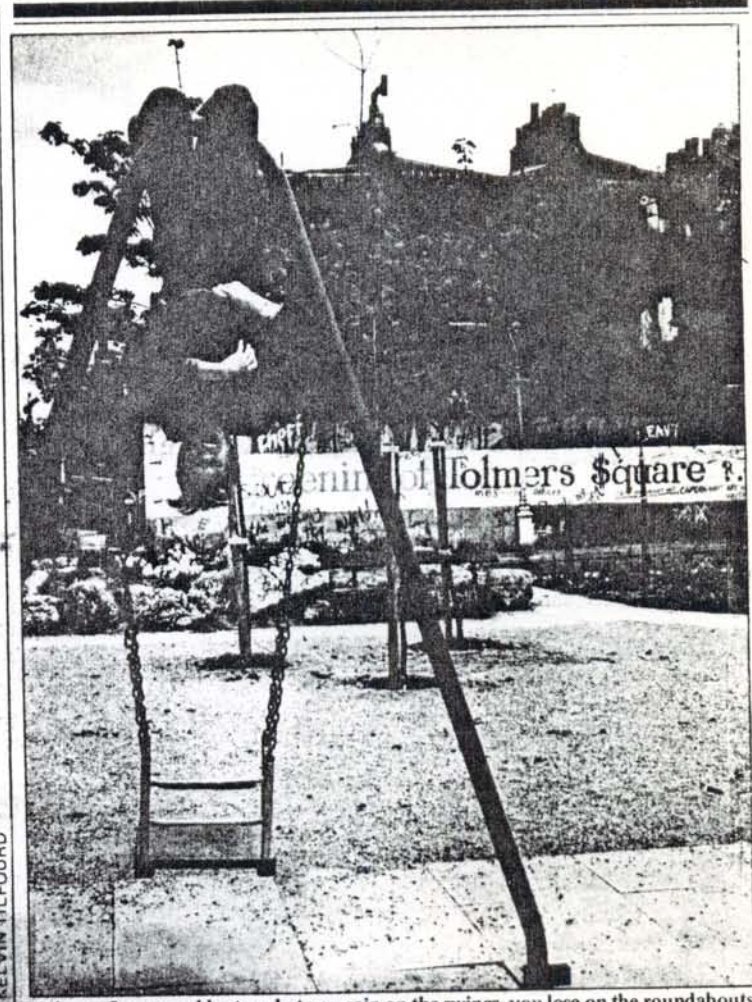
Those ideas are now referred to quaintly by Camden Council as their architects' 'Brown Book', a clearly faded dream. The 1976 austerity version is not only top heavy with offices: much of the area will now be bulldozed, including all of Tolmers

Square. The promise of a regenerated population in new housing is gradually receding and the fringe community benefits are scarcely mentioned any more.

The council's own explanation of the change is that it has been caught out by the crash in the property market. Having agreed to pay £4 million to buy out Levy's ownership, it is now constantly digging into its coffers to pay the interest, a tidy £500,000 every year. Some of the land is in fact being kept in trust for the council by merchant bankers Morgan Grenfell, whilst other individual sites have still to be bought. The only way the council can afford those interest payments is to reap some income from building offices. As the expected rents on offices come down, so the amount of office space it's necessary to construct goes up. Q.E.D.

After a period of stagnation, the Tolmers community is beginning to stir itself once more against the new spectre of council-sponsored property development. Roughly 400 people live there, half of whom are squatting. Many of the tenants are elderly, live in badly sub-standard housing, and have seen little change in their conditions under council control.

The Tolmers Village Association, dormant for a while, is starting to hold meetings again. Its chairman, John Stansfield, is irritated that the council has encouraged the formation of a separate tenants association, though he accepts the TVA has not exactly been over-active. 'Tolmers Square has become part of the sociology syllabus in one



KELVIN TILFOURD

Tolmers Square residents: what you gain on the swings, you lose on the roundabouts.

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South London school,' he explains, 'Unfortunately it's called "The Decline of the Inner City". I would like to see it as a renaissance.'

One development over the past two years is the number of radical organisations to move into empty property round the Square. Drummond Street, whose most obvious feature is its Bengali shops and businesses, now houses the Wages for Housework Campaign, Rising Free bookshop and Peoples' News Service as well as the TVA. A poster workshop also operates locally, whilst a former bank is a base for Chilean exiles. The only 'alternative' group to be granted a formal licence to occupy, however, is the Community Wholesale food shop, which takes up the ground floor of a warehouse building in the Square.

Confrontation currently centres on the council's plans to rehabilitate several blocks of isolated housing in the area, a policy based as much on the fact that the government has just given it a large sum of money for this purpose as on a feeling that something, at least, should be done. Though the principle is laudable, many residents argue that nothing should happen until the whole plan has been thrashed out. It doesn't help

that the list of evictions necessary for some of this work to take place is in effect a catalogue of the area's political groups, starting with the TVA office.

Camden Council itself is in no mood to argue about its broken promises. 'The financial climate has changed completely,' says John Mills, chairman of the Community Planning Committee. 'We have to have the offices or the loss we would make would be enormous. My attitude on this scheme is to get something half-decent that satisfies at least some of the people, rather than wait any longer. The scope for making radical changes is minimal.'

Tolmers residents, meanwhile, hope to enlist the support of borough-wide groups to ensure that the Square isn't just forgotten as last year's cause. This week they were on the steps of Camden Town Hall alongside building workers from the borough's 'direct labour' force. The building workers were protesting at the use of lump labour, but they realise only too well that if offices take precedence over housing they are less likely to get the work. As one Tolmers squatter put it: 'Whatever happens in Tolmers Square depends more on what the Camden labour movement does than on 200 squatters.'