

Danger - planners!

By F. J. Salfeld

The Politics of Planning. By Francis Gladstone. (Temple Smith. £4.50; paperback, £2.)

The Battle for Tolmers Square. By Nick Wates. (Routledge. £2.95.)

EVEN with half an eye, observers of the post-war English urban landscape can see that between them planners and developers have made a pretty comprehensive mess of it. What, despite so many good intentions, has gone wrong?

These two complementary analyses provide much of the explanation—Francis Gladstone's via a critical survey of Sheffield, Teesside, South Hampshire and Liverpool; Nick Wates's by a thorough, well-illustrated study of 12 acres of a London borough.

Two early sentences give the essence of Mr Gladstone's **"The Politics of Planning"**: "There are plenty of plans but no overall view of what planning should represent. The tactics exist, but not the strategy." Groping individuals come up against the planning establishment.

Every 10 years an area the size of Worcestershire is built over. Yet the problem of homelessness remains because vast numbers of blighted dwellings are pulled down which might have been reconditioned. Blight, as Mr Gladstone points out, is one consequence of long-term planning, and its effects are cancerous. And as people flee to the suburbs, the core rots.

Neither Tory nor Labour Governments have faced the fact that, in Mr Gladstone's phrase, planning should be central to politics. And most councillors and officials merely use their city for work; they don't live in it, don't need it. Here is the root of the crisis: those left behind have no political support.

"The Battle for Tolmers Square" is about a district north of Euston Road built a century or so ago chiefly for middle-class occupation and although long since run down still handsome in parts and capable of rehabilitation. Such places abound and the fight for this one, waged for 20 years, raises basic social issues.

From this saga the residents who by vigorous protest foiled the company proposing an enormous office complex emerge with most credit. Capitalism scarcely showed an acceptable face. Houses were left to decay, local government dilly-dallied. In 1965 Camden Council were refused Ministerial leave to buy one building at £400,000-odd an acre which in 1975 cost the borough (i.e. the ratepayers) £1 million an acre.

Nobody asked the residents whether in fact they wanted redevelopment. Nor, according to Mr Wates, who became a squatter in the square, did Camden's architectural consultants make any effort to approach them. Last year the council bought the developers out for £4 million and then produced a scheme reducing by a quarter the amount of housing space the company had conceded and involving the total destruction of Tolmers Square. And British Rail, wreckers of the splendid Euston Arch, were anxious to put a multi-storey car park on a nearby site earmarked for housing.

All this is called planning. Nobody can say they no longer have fun in the flower of cities all.