

WHATEVER may happen to Tolmers Square in the future, the battle for its preservation and the community that surrounds it will go down in history. Tolmers Square personified the struggle against the licence of property developers to make huge profits at the expense of the community; its progress marks a turning point in the history of local politics and planning practice.

Tolmers Square has become synonymous with the victory over wholesale redevelopment of the inner city and the rise of effective community action. Those who fought for Tolmers blazed the trail for rehabilitation, for the right of existing communities to consult with local authorities about plans for their area; they exposed the iniquities of the property developer and in bringing to squatters their brief period of respectability, they demonstrated that homelessness was caused by far more than mere circumstance.

The Battle for Tolmers Square, published this week, examines in detail the invidious processes of property speculation, the apparently powerless reactions of local authorities and the popular campaign that developed to fight both. It is written by Nick Wates, a former student in architecture and planning at University College, who became involved in Tolmers Square through a planning project in his final year. He was a founder member of the Tolmers Village Association; he squatted in the square and became the first full-time coordinator of the association.

Wates takes the Tolmers story from the top. He's frank about the troubles the protestors campaign ran into; straight about the realities of property speculation. The book ends on a polemic note but he has no need for biased rhetoric in the body of the text; the facts speak for themselves.

The background is briefly this: Tolmers Square gives its name to an area of roughly 5 ha along the north side of Euston Road, just east of the Euston Tower. The once-handsome product of the speculative building booms of the late 18th



Part of a larger community.

LEVY'S LAST STAND

Two of inner London's most explicit examples of the thorny and protracted question of rehabilitation and redevelopment are highlighted again this week. Here Stephanie Williams looks at a history of *The Battle For Tolmers Square*, published yesterday. Overleaf: the latest moves in Covent Garden.

and early 19th centuries, like so much of Camden, it ran rapidly downhill with the development of nearby Euston and St Pancras Stations. By the 20th century it was an area of mixed light industrial and commercial uses and cheap privately rented housing. The population was working class and of mixed nationalities.

It is the kind of area on the edge of the heart of London, which has been the object of interest by property developers and local authorities since the war. Interestingly, Tolmers has an early history of community action, based on the Tolmers Square Tenants Association (TSTA) which was formed in 1957 in response to the Rent Act of that year. Wates points out that TSTA was well-established when developers made their first overtures in the square in 1959 and a developer attempted to get permission to build a 24 storey office block on the south side of the square. TSTA mobilised to defeat this proposal and two others in the late 50s. It seemed that a precedent had been established to prevent office development of the square and the residents believed themselves safe in their homes if poorly housed.

In 1952 however, one property developer, J P Levy had been successful in his application to build offices on a 0.4 ha site on the corner of Euston and Hampstead Roads. By the time he had actually purchased the site four years later, the LCC had decided it needed most of it for road widening. In the first of the deals Wates discusses to demonstrate the power developers could wield once they had a successful planning application for the land they owned, Levy was able to do a deal with the LCC. In return for the land they wanted, the LCC gave Levy planning permission to develop a 5.2 ha site along the Euston Road, a site that was to become the Euston Centre.

Because the deal was not published, Levy was able to buy all the land cheaply and demolition started in 1963. The Centre which cost £16 million to build was thought to be worth £80 million. At £64 million, the profits were staggering indeed.

Unknown to the TSTA who had been helping tenants dis-

The arguments for Sintilon are transparently obvious.



Harrassment the subtle way, leave houses to rot.

placed by the Euston Centre, Stock Conversion, who had shared ownership of the company which developed the Euston Centre, were quietly buying up their own houses, aiming to carry out a similar operation in Tolmers Square.

When they had bought the properties, Stock Conversion demolished what they could and allowed the rest to decay. Everyone who worked and lived in the area knew that something was happening in the area, but no one knew what. By 1970 the area was

suffering advanced planning blight. The leading activists in TSTA had been rehoused, and the past enthusiasm of the association dwindled to despair and cynicism. Camden Council, torn between the need to provide housing in the area and the high value of the land was at the mercy of Stock Conversion. Because all the negotiations with Stock Conversion had been carried out in secret and the fact never mentioned except in confidential council reports, few councillors and members of the

general public knew what was happening.

Public exposure of the situation began in mid-1972. What started as an exercise by a few Labour councillors trying to raise the issue publicly succeeded in making Tolmers Square synonymous with all that was worst in property speculation. By the time what had become known as the Levy Deal was in the final stages of agreement in the spring of 1973, opposition was massing, centred on Christopher Booker and Bennie Gray's Claudius Deal, which set out to beat Levy at his own game. By forming a non-profit making property company and offering the same land for housing to Camden as the Levy Deal had done, Booker and Gray meant to turn speculation to the community's advantage by presenting the borough with the profits from the commercial elements in the plan.

But Camden's Community Planning and Resources Committee rejected the Claudius offer — on the grounds that it might fall through and leave the council with no housing land. The issue exploded.

The "Stop the Levy Deal Campaign" which ensued, split the Camden Labour Group and drew a wave of attacks from all directions — the public, the press, senior members of the Labour party, the Labour GLC against the council's position. As a result the Planning and Resources Committee report was withdrawn and alternative approaches to the problem of the Tolmers Square Redevelopment Area would be reviewed instead.

It was with the abandonment of the previous plans that the Tolmers Village Association came into its own, offering to prepare its scheme for the area.

But by now the situation had changed. The bottom of the property market had fallen out and the Government had issued a ban on Office Development Permits. Labour had replaced the Tories in the House and were committed to ending property speculation; their proposals for nationalising development land meant that the TVA decided to direct its activities to persuading Camden to compulsorily purchase the area and to influencing its plans for it as far as possible.

The association survived for a brief two years. Its members met with the architects preparing the plan for the area, but their activity that received most publicity was squatting.

In taking over properties which had been abandoned and lying derelict, repairing and putting them to use again, action had two-fold implications. It confirmed the evil of planning blight in human terms and exposed the many reasons for homelessness in London. It also gained them publicity.

As Wates points out, the effectiveness of community groups largely depends on their ability to maintain a high level of public interest.

After the "Stop the Levy Deal Campaign" interest fell away and it became harder to maintain Tolmers as a live issue. After that point too, the TVA had increasing difficulty remaining democratically representative, vital for its credibility politically. With the disappearance of a common enemy, class interests and conflicts between residents and businesses meant that the TVA never seized any effective power from the Council.

Wates points out that the battle for Tolmers Square is not yet over. The fight against the continual search for profits continues. But the significance of Tolmers is that it happened at all. If it has not yet achieved any significant long term reform, the need for change and its direction are now abundantly clear.

The Battle for Tolmers Square, Nick Wates, Routledge and Kegan Paul, £2.95.



The conditions in 1973 bear witness to Stock Conversion's performance as landlords.



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The arguments for alternatives remain something of a mystery.

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