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Square-bashing

By Simon Jenkins

NICK WATES:

The Battle for Tolmers Square
232pp. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
Paperback, £2.95.

Cynics might well call this a nostalgic book. If it is read in years to come, it will take us back to the early 1970s, to days when it was hurrah for tenants and squatters and community action and compulsory purchase and boo to speculators and office blocks and private property. They were days when students could comb the more fashionable postal districts for good causes, release the dazed inhabitants from the curse of the black-coated capitalist and guide them towards a glorious future in the public sector.

Just as I'm sure Nick Wates would argue the impossibility of writing a non-political book about Tolmers Square, so it is hard to write a non-political review of his book. But neither book nor (I hope) review need be any the worse for that. For though I found Wates's tunnel vision irritating and his major premise naive, he has produced a rare report from the frontier of urban change—and we should be thankful to him for that.

Tolmers Square is typical of hundreds of city communities left to their fate by the outward flight of residential London and about to be overrun by the following troops of office development. In American terms, it encompasses little more than two city blocks within which was a changing population of old people, immigrants, small businesses and traders. Despite a decaying fabric, the Tolmers Square area still had the sort of vitality any city neighbourhood can muster if left to its own devices.

In the event it was not, and for an incredible seventeen years Tolmers Square suffered death by slow strangulation. First, the London County Council built a massive road underpass lopping off one street. Then in the mid-1960s a property tycoon, Joe Levy of Stock Conversion, built one of the biggest office developments in London—the Euston Centre—overshadowing it. He then started buying up leases round Tolmers Square itself, with the active encouragement of the planning authorities.

In view of what happened elsewhere in London (and indeed all over Britain) it is remarkable that this tiny community bothered to fight back. Businesses had to move

own accord (the occupants narrowly escaping death). From personal experience, I can only say the anguish described here is both convincing and appalling. Whatever economic laws governing urban regeneration might be mustered by Joe Levy and his (Labour) friends at County Hall, Tolmers Square is the worst possible advertisement for them. It was a disgrace. Eventually, a combination of local action, stimulated largely by squatters who moved in after many of the residents left, and a degree of media interest prevailed upon the authorities to stop Levy and search for alternative solutions. The success story, however, is clouded by the fact that Camden, the new controlling interest in the area, appear to have no more idea than Levy as to what to do, and have shown themselves not much more sensitive as landlords while they dither.

Mr Wates, himself one of the squatters, sadly fails to see the inherent contradiction in his loathing of the property men and apparent affection for the doings of Camden Labour Party. (He should realize that council ownership is the Marxist antithesis, not synthesis!) Evidence suggests that it is the impact of comprehensive development as such that kills the intricate life of cities—be it public or private in sponsorship. Identical communities to Tolmers Square have been swatted from the urban map far more effectively by the so-called representatives of the community in Liverpool or Southwark or Birmingham. Indeed I would venture to suggest that Tolmers Square only survived to its present extent through its extreme good fortune in being in an increasingly middle-class borough, Camden, and within walking distance of University College junior common room and the media men ironically housed in Levy's Euston Centre.

Tolmers Square, as the excellent historical section of this book points out, was wholly a creation of the free market in property, its

buildings and inhabitants owing their diversity to successive waves of speculation and enterprise. The multitude of activities Mr Wates so endearingly wants protected would not be there but for these qualities. (They are not noticeable by their presence on council estates.) The villain today is not speculation or private profit as such, but the scale on which they are not just permitted but compelled to operate. It is the scale that blights and kills.

The council which refuses a planning permission to a local firm to expand (as near Tolmers Square), or discourages landlords from improving their property, is just as damaging as the office speculator. What was needed here was simply an awareness on the part of the council that piecemeal renewal was not anathema but essential. The controls were there to keep the community alive; instead they were used to help a developer kill it. This is not merely a small-is-beautiful fantasy. As is haltingly happening in Covent Garden, controls could have deterred or restrained the property men without the alternate curse of compulsory purchase. As it is, poor Mr Wates seems almost upset at finding Camden spoiling the end of his tale by proposing their own office scheme almost as big as Levy's. "Monstrous and hypocritical", he cries. But what on earth did he expect from men to whom bigness is everything?

None the less, I found this a much better book than I expected. It is not all student ranting. The interspersing of copious pictures, quotes and contemporary cuttings in small type with the main text is an effective antidote to the ideological monotony, and it adds immensely to the book's impact. I now feel I know a small slice of London really well and can sympathize with its characters as they go through a nightmare which has afflicted all generations of London's poor since time immemorial.

out, buildings crumbled, repairs were left undone, the Tolmers cinema was demolished one house actually fell down of its