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Battle of London square

by ANDREW STEPHEN

NEXT Wednesday the Community Planning and Resources Committee of London's Labour-controlled Camden Borough Council will meet to resolve an agonising dilemma: whether to do a deal, giving office-building rights on two acres of land fronting the Euston Road, with Stock Conversion, the giant property company controlled by Mr Joe Levy, or with Claudius Properties, a non-profit-making company set up by two journalists, Mr Christopher Booker and Mr Bennie Gray.

The confrontation concerns Tolmers Square, a 10½-acre site dividing into two sections. The crucial one is two acres on the Euston Road set aside for office and commercial use. The remaining 8½ acres—a mixture of run-down Georgian terraces, Indian restaurants, and workshops—is earmarked for housing. Mr Levy's company owns nearly half the total area, including most of the potential office space.

For almost a decade Camden council has wanted to buy all the 8½ acres to build 450 homes. But in 1970 the then Minister of Housing, Mr Anthony Greenwood, turned down compulsory purchase orders mainly because the cost—then estimated at £300,000 an acre—was considered excessive.

So Camden and Mr Levy agreed on a deal: if he would subsidise the buying of the 8½ acres, leaving it clear for housing, Camden would help him, using compulsory purchase orders, to buy the remainder of the 'office space' acres, and then grant him planning permission for 250,000 square feet of offices and 120,000 square feet of commercial premises.

Booker and Gray stepped in. They formed their own company, Claudius Properties, and put forward almost identical proposals. But profits from the office block development—which they say would approach £20 million—would be ploughed back to Camden Council. Such a deal, they estimated, could represent a saving of £50 for every person living in Camden.

On Monday a special report prepared by Mr George Dobry, QC, arrived on the desk of Camden's Town Clerk, Mr B. H. Wilson.

It said the Department of the Environment 'normally favours partnership schemes with experienced developers . . . we frankly think it inconceivable that the Department would view with favour the replacement of Stock Conversion at this late stage by Claudius Properties.'

Stock Conversion has in effect been granted planning permission. A deal between the council and Claudius might be followed by refusal of compulsory purchase orders. Stock Conversion would probably be able to go ahead with the office development. This would leave the 8½ acres going to waste and 1,500 people unhoused.