

NOV 1973
BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Dobson's choice

Mike Franks writes: The saga of Tolmers Square has moved on again. At a full meeting of Camden Council on 10 October, following skilful use of the mass media by the sponsors of the Claudius package and an 8000 signature petition to "stop the Levy deal" by the Tolmers Square Village Association, Frank Dobson, leader of the council, successfully put forward a compromise formula. This shelved the proposed deal with Levy's Stock Conversion, sent a deputation of two local MPs to discuss the whole matter with Geoffrey Rippon and proposed a conference with the GLC and other inner London boroughs to look into local authority/developer relationships. Had it been left to him, Dobson would have taken the devil he knew because of the urgency of dealing with Camden's 11 000 housing list, but he was outgunned by public opinion and outvoted by members of his own party.

Whether the resultant delays will be to the benefit of the existing 700 residents in the area—and the numerous small traders—remains to be seen, but there are now bound to be delays whatever implementation option is chosen. Joe Levy is a hard man to fight but so are community activists when they get the bit between their teeth, particularly when they are being led by two articulate and intelligent journalists-cum-entrepreneurs who are able to spend hundreds of pounds on expert advice. So the situation now for the Camden Council is very much one of Hobson's choice. If this is going to be a trial of strength it would be better for a politically radical council and a radical community association to join forces to take on a reactionary developer and a right wing Minister.

The 10½ acre Tolmers Square site has had a chequered history which stretches back to the early days of the 1957 Housing Act and the first stage representation of unfit dwellings by the Chief Public Health Inspector. Camden has suffered from three-yearly swings of political power; in 1968 and 1971 there were landslides for Conservative and Labour respectively which has meant a distinct lack of policy continuity.

On land that is a mere hundred yards from Euston Station the question of commercial floorspace content in addition to much needed housing was bound to be considered. Mixed development schemes are

B.F. Nov 73

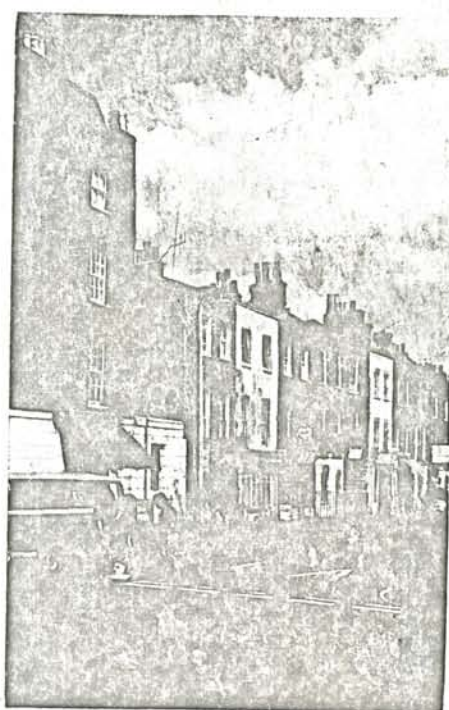
The Month

invariably far more complex than single-use ones, not least because of the problems of getting concerted effort from several different departments at central and local government level. The long-winded often inadequate process of turning a patchy group of unfit dwellings into a rationalised CPO area to allow for comprehensive treatment, is a legacy of the 1947 Act which has left whole areas of Britain's inner cities in hopeless limbo waiting for the injection of capital and other scarce resources.

Tolmers Square itself was once a very attractive 19th century square which now looks like a graveyard. The land assembly that Levy undertook to put together the infamous Euston Road development included the Square itself. His management policies for old property have been appalling, with the usual lack of maintenance and its resultant multiple occupancy problems. In mid October of this year two of the houses in the area just literally fell down and a "dangerous structures" notice has been put on a third. Almost certainly Camden could use both the Housing and Public Health Acts right now to enforce some improvements of conditions, but then this is true of many other areas in Camden and priorities in such situations are hideously difficult to determine. Nevertheless the current reappraisal of the situation must include interim policies for management, limited life improvement, rehabilitation and a carefully worked out phasing programme to allow for decanting of residents and businesses within the area. From all accounts this is what is now being contemplated.

Partly for the wrong reasons Camden is presented with a real opportunity to produce an up-to-date well reasoned plan for the area in which the traditionally weakest aspects of planning—those of phasing and implementation—play a major part. If the current climate is receptive to the concept of local authority implementation of central area schemes—and it certainly appears as a possibility—why should not Camden go it alone or at least set out their planning criteria for the area and go for a financial competition using potential powers of CPO as their strongest weapon? Maybe on this basis Levy will still come out best on revised terms but if an impasse has been reached, why not challenge accepted orthodoxy and have a go at taking Stock Conversion's holdings from them—for the good of the community of course, not simply to accommodate Claudius's co-directors.

Messrs. Booker and Gray have put their finger on a key issue by offering their £100 company's services, but it is a bit naughty of them to make such inflated claims for what is essentially a variation on a basic theme. The harnessing of private finance for public benefit was spelt out clearly in Planning Bulletin number 1—*Town Centres, Approach to Renewal*—as far back as 1962. All we see now is the growth of a new entrepreneurial skill based on professional expertise—and as if to emphasise this point a new group called Logos, with a similar marketing package to Claudius, have just announced their services to the new local authorities that will become operational in 1974. Logos have gone one further and offered the services of a PR con-



Camden intended to rehabilitate this part of the Tolmers Square area

sultant to help the local authorities' image—where will it all end? Claudius, Logos or what have you, the concept of the developer lives on, only now it looks as if the local authorities are going to have a bigger stake in future developments. But it remains a sophisticated planning game that only a few can play, because most of this brief and other such planning work is likely to be thrashed out long before the general public even comes to debate its content.

Making towns better?

John Yarwood writes: Optimists (such as I) usually look forward eagerly to major government reports—particularly those with portentous titles and exciting terms of reference. The three urban guidelines studies of Rotherham, Oldham and Sunderland have just been published under the title *Making Towns Better*. (Surely this time the cautious evasions of the past will be cast aside?) One is of course, usually disappointed. Are these three studies narrow or evasive? If they are narrow, do they penetrate deeply? The Rotherham study is both narrow and superficial. (Also, its style is boring and in places a little sucrose. The layout is much inferior to that of the Sunderland study.) The Oldham study pays more attention than the other two to practical advice for the DOE. Of the three, the Sunderland study is certainly the best, and I firmly recommend everyone to read it. Nevertheless, even the Sunderland study hardly exploits the breadth and potential profundity of the terms of reference. These are identical for all three studies and call for a "total approach" to the environmental functions of local authorities seen in the context of the needs and desires of the inhabitants, of the relationships to other public policies, to the allocation of resources and to the quality of urban life in general. Local government reform hovers in the

background as an opportunity to take the reports' advice to heart.

The underlying thesis boils down to the environment seen as a complex system which can be adequately understood only if seen as part of a wider complex system. If the analysis and control method is not congruent to the system itself, then highly inefficient results will be obtained. Therefore the sub-thesis is that local authority organisation must comprehend the structure of the whole system. Centralised parallel hierarchies (rigidly articulated and weakly coordinated) are criticised. A fluid, decentralised, task-oriented organisation is preferred. In other words, Weber is out, Bennis is in.

The Sunderland study proposes an inter-departmental team to carry out an annual "community review"—which seems essentially similar to a corporate operational plan. In addition "temporary multi-disciplinary officer teams" will develop specific aspects of the "community review". They would include officers of different grades (working as equals!!) and devoted full-time to specific tasks. The Oldham study proposes a "central policy planning unit" along similar, but less radical lines. Finally, attempts are made to define responsibilities of each officer, presumably in order to prevent widespread sleeping on the job.

These suggestions are significant in one major respect. They involve a substantial organisation (unit or department) for corporate planning, whereas the actual re-organisation proposals (of which I am aware) involve one unserved part-time working-party. Surely the latter will lack a corporate identity? If "temporary multi-disciplinary teams" are not to be killed stone-dead or neutralised by feudal chief-officers, then a good deal of power and capability must lie with the corporate planners, and the rigidity of departmental hierarchies must be broken. The Sunderland report recognises this last point by advocating promotion between departments.

So much for the thesis. Now, one often hears local politicians express fears about corporate management. They acknowledge their own ignorance and unpreparedness, and sometimes feel that their power is best preserved if they hold the balance between rival bureaucratic factions. Furthermore, a corporate approach might lead to overcentralisation, and hence not only to remoteness from the people but also to a more general inefficiency in Marschak-type information-processing. Finally, a bland corporate mini-state may (as we know only too well) demoralise certain individuals working within it. There are thus certain antithetical goals, which must be pursued if corporate management is not to risk undesirable side-effects. For instance, both Sunderland and Oldham studies propose an independent secretariat to brief and service elected members. Other interesting suggestions abound in both reports.

How far do the reports involve themselves in central government policy issues? The Sunderland study half-advocates "positive discrimination" . . . to benefit those in greatest need". It also argues for the cultivation of local talents in order to wrest the