



LOCAL councils have been taking a cautious taste of the wonderful medicine prescribed for many planning ills: public participation.

The magic elixir looks good and tastes good but does it do the trick? Participation is turning out to be more difficult than people thought.

Camden's experiences so far suggest that a new formula may be needed and the council have been getting together with the borough's amenity groups to discuss the problem.

Alderman Alan Greengross, chairman of Camden's Planning and Communications Committee, had two meetings with them last week at Holborn town hall.

And he stressed that vital points that needed settling were what was meant by public participation, how far it had succeeded and how it could be improved.

Mr Greengross said the meetings were the first of a series and that he would report back on councillors' views in the second round of talks.

The eight organisations taking part in the talks are the Bloomsbury Conservation Area Camden Society of Architects, Hampstead Conservation Area Advisory Committee, Hampstead Motorway Action Group, Heath and Old Hampstead Society, Highgate Society, Holborn Society, and St Pancras Civic Society.

The rape of a road

FOR CENTURIES the journey from London to Hampstead was neither quick nor easy and only with the building of the Northern line did it become so. Not much more than a century ago the road connecting the two was a link between separate villages and until very recent years much of the original link survived.

The only piece which reminds us by name of those far-off days is Hampstead Road, confined now to the section between Euston Road and Mornington Crescent. Only 10 short years ago, in spite of the invasion of railway and industry, it retained much of interest and charm. Strolling from one end of it to the other the eye was constantly busy and entertained, observing the variety of buildings and people, neither very smart, but both full of character and purpose.

The Black Cat Factory, built in 1926 on the semi-circular garden of Mornington Crescent which was immortalised by Sickert and Spencer Gore, undoubtedly gave a downward thrust to the gracious terraces of the surrounding neighbourhood, but even in multi-occupation and neglect they retained a good deal of their quality and dignity.

Facing the Crescent, and acting as a foil to it, the houses of Harrington Square lay behind their communal garden, and an older terrace immediately to the south stood back from the road and terminated at the railway cutting. Opposite there was a set piece of five houses with a pedimented centre, one of them forming the corner of Mornington Crescent. The set piece has now been reduced to three, and the severed pediment offers its brutal mutilation to the sky.

TREES SURVIVE

South of the railway cutting on the east side stood a fine detached house of about 1870, with semi-circular bays. It was used as a day nursery until the railway took it over for offices, and it was sad to see it deteriorating in their unloving hands. The widening of the railway bridge engulfed its pleasant garden, and finally it disappeared.

The house had been at the entrance to Amphill Square, which was set at a tangent to the main road and bisected by the railway, but with beautiful houses at both ends. The northern half had a central garden full of trees, which have been retained, and now struggle gamely to soften the bald back-sides of the lower blocks of flats in the Amphill redevelopment.

Did the designer not bother to think how hideous they would look from the Hampstead Road? The three tall towers which have replaced the south side of Harrington Square dominate the view from north and south and destroy

THIS IS THE STORY of a road that 10 years ago had charm, interest and life. "Now it is vile," say Diana Gurney, Jenny Marriott and Tammo de Jongh, of the St Pancras Civic Society. In this article the Society ask: "What street can we expect to be the next victim?"

the scale of everything else in their neighbourhood, including the trees, which are reduced to scraps of parsley.

An industrial building with a filling station at one end has taken the place of houses and shops, and behind this again one can see the blue brick hulk of a new railway building. These are not bad of their kind, but cannot be a very stimulating view for the people living in the large new council estate on the other side. The few remaining trees which flanked the road here have recently been cut down, and heaven knows what horrors are hatching behind the palisades.

Cardington Street was a serpentine curve of modest terrace houses ten years ago. First the northern side was pulled down, and replaced by a patch of rubbish-strewn grass—and now the south side has more to be replaced by an extension of the Kennedy Hotel. But one dare not hope that the curve will be repaired, because nobody thinks in terms of curves any more.

CURVED PROW

Then the Temperance Hospital, not a beautiful building but a "table leader" that is, as not interesting and character. Until last year it had an 18th century clock in its grounds which, ever since the war, bore a notice saying "Destructious Keep Out." Apparently nobody thought it worth restoring, so now it has gone and the space filled up with cars.

Next we come to the top end of Gower Street, with the handsome red brick house on the left and the charming curved prow of the building which forms the street divider. This has been empty for a long time now, as have a lot of the buildings to the south of it. An ugly filling station cuts

right through both streets and exposes blinder parts which were never intended to be seen. South again we suddenly come upon the entrance to the surprising and once delightful Tolmer Square, with its brash cinema announcements of lurid adventure.

Ten years ago you could still see from the eastern end that this was once a church, but now the disguise has been extended, and a newcomer to these parts must wonder what possessed anybody to build such an odd shaped cinema. If Tolmer Square had been in Paris rather than London, it would be lived in by artists and intellectuals, poor but learned, who would value the proximity of the British Museum and the university, and would live there an industrious life of modest tranquillity. And the church would still be a church. And there would be some trees. And because it is in London it is going to be knocked down.

GOOD HOUSES

The other side of the road, from the housing estate southward, is intersected by streets which are all condemned to be redeveloped, and which contain some very good terrace houses such as people fight for in Hampstead or Chelsea and which modernise very easily. Soon all such variety will have disappeared from this area, along with the social mixture which makes for a richer kind of life.

Less than 10 years ago there was a lively market here, always full of people from the surrounding streets and from the other side of the Euston Road. Now it has gone, swept away in the commercial development which stretches from Hampstead Road to Great Portland Street. You can't get across the Euston Road any more between these two extremities; the underpass and the centre barrier see to that. The road "improvement" designers of course did not take thought for the mere pedestrians who might want to get across in the middle, as they always could before.

Finally, at the corner of Hampstead Road, stands the tower calling itself the Euston Centre, a monument to greed, which extracts the maximum value out of the minimum amount of land. The view of the Post Office Tower which used to compensate for some of the devastation in the Hampstead Road is blotted out by it and its enormous size ensures that views all over London are blotted by its ugliness.

This is the account of one road, which 10 years ago possessed charm, interest and life. Now it is vile. What can we expect to be the next victim? Is this what planning officers, and if so, who? Who could have prevented it, and why didn't they? Are we to blame? If so, what action can we take to ensure that it doesn't happen again? If there is no action we can take, what is democracy? Is everybody in this country blind, deaf and dumb? Or just mad?