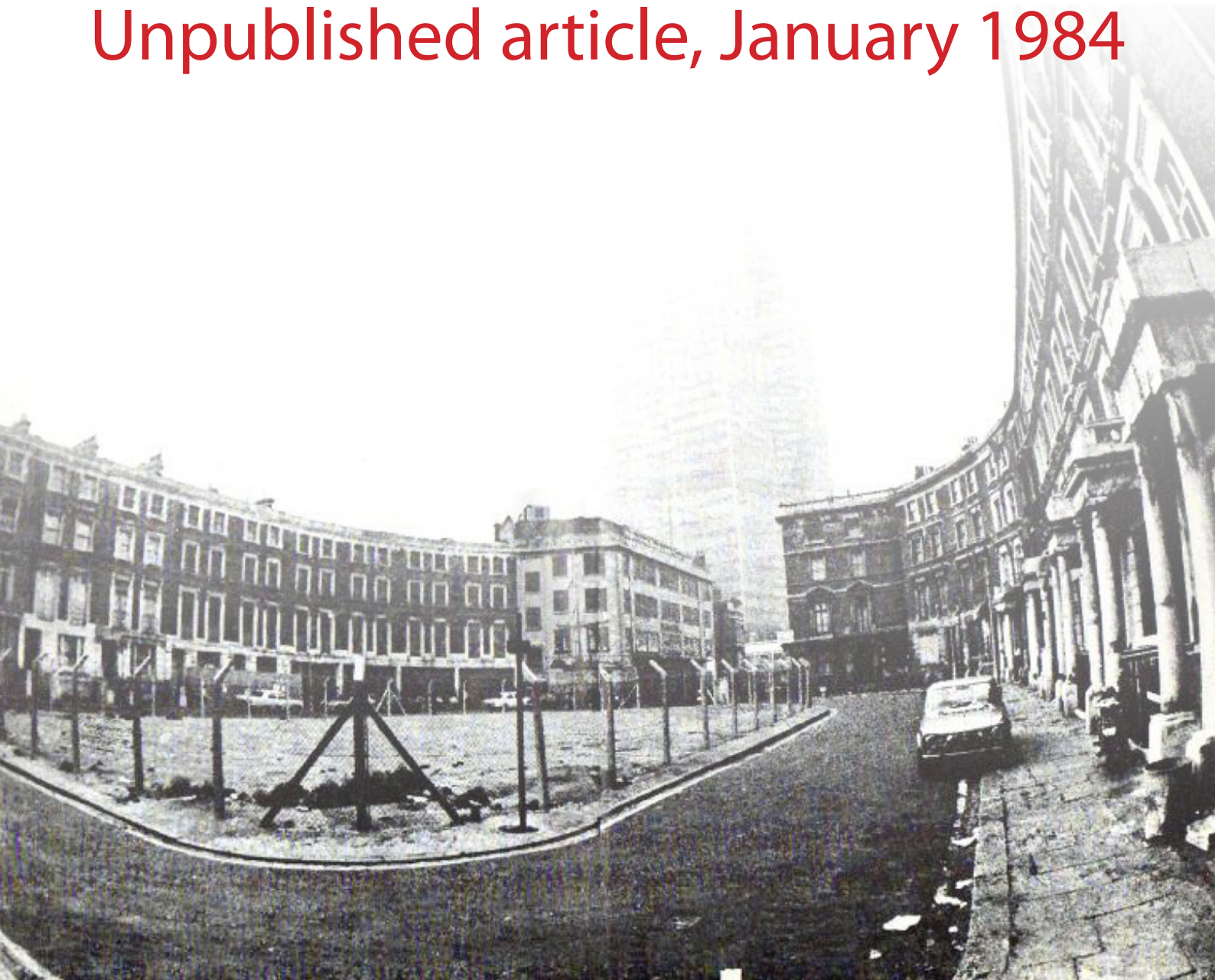


# The Tolmers Tale End

**By Nick Wates**

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At the end of 1982 one of the countries most fought over developments was officially opened - Tolmers Square near Euston Station in central London.

The local paper - the *New Camden Journal* - devoted six pages to it, one of which was a whole page ad taken out by Camden Council, part of which reads: 'The council would like to take this opportunity to thank the many local people and organizations who have contributed towards its success in a number of different ways'. Behind that bland but unusual statement lies a great deal, because what now stands on this 12 acre site next to Euston station in central London is the outcome of over 20 years of embittered and often dramatic struggle between developers, politicians, local residents, journalists, squatters and architects.

If it had not been for the campaigning, the office block would have been almost 3 times as large, there would have been far less and/or lower quality housing, many of the small streets with a wide range of thriving businesses would have been completely flattened and replaced with slabs of housing. Instead, the development is a blend of old and new and of housing, commerce, leisure and offices knitted together. Inevitably it is a compromise. None of the parties got all they wanted. Depending on ones viewpoint there are too many offices, too few offices, too much public housing, too little conservation, too much conversion and so on. In physical planning terms it is probably the nearest thing to the diverse inner city environment advocated by Jane Jacobs among others to have emerged from a major and eventually predominantly public sector development in the 1970's.

Unfortunately however, the relative success of the scheme only serves to highlight the lack of effective mechanisms for monitoring and upgrading complex inner urban areas. Without an abnormal amount of political campaigning, the Tolmers development would have been a disaster. With it, the results are better but no more than mediocre.

By examining the successes and failures of the completed development in the light of the area's volatile history, this article pinpoints some of the barriers to effective inner city management.

### **Homes not offices – people before profit**

The most publicised debate fought out at Tolmers Square was about the encroachment of office development in mixed inner city areas a theme once more catching the imagination of the media after a decade of indifference. Such encroachment it was, and still is, argued has several bad side effects: It leads to a decline in manufacturing industry, a decrease in land available for housing, an increase in congestion and almost invariably much suffering for the residents and businesses – mostly at the poorer end of the social spectrum – displaced. What makes it more abhorrent is that it is mostly carried out by remote private developers who invariably make vast profits and seem unconcerned about the effect their operations have on the neighbourhoods affected.

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The Tolmers area after the war was a classic example – a mixed inner city area with industry, commerce and private rented housing in varying states of repair. The first planning application for offices was filed in 1959 for a 22-storey block. This was refused but during the sixties one developer, Stock Conversion and Investment Trust, stealthily bought up much of the land, left property empty and allowed it to decay, and then proposed obtaining planning permission for offices in exchange for selling the council some land cheaply for housing. The council, if it wanted to see the area improved, had little option but to enter into some form of deal: the government had refused it permission to compulsorily purchase the land because of high land values which, in anticipation of office permission being granted, had doubled in less than 10 years.

A deal would almost certainly have been struck in the late sixties had Tolmers Square not become a focus for campaigners against office development. An extraordinary coalition of Labour councillors, journalists, squatters and community activists succeeded in stalling a deal for many years. Eventually, frustrated by the delay and a temporary downfall in the office market, Stock Conversion decided to pull out and in 1975 sold all its land to the council.

Contrary to the hopes of the most idealistic campaigners, bringing the land into public ownership did not mean the end of office plans since the council had to recoup the £4 million it had paid Stock Conversion as the then current market value of the land.

To do this, the council held a limited competition and then formed a partnership with Greycoat Estates with architects Renton Howard Wood Levin. Their initial proposal was for almost as many offices as Stock Conversion and it took a further campaign within the Camden Labour Movement before the final compromise was reached.

The office block finally built contains 200,000 sq feet. This is substantially less than the 500,000 sq feet proposed in the late sixties by Stock Conversion, the 250,000 sq feet with 120,000 commercial proposed by the Council and Stock Conversion before the borough wide campaign in the early seventies and 300,000 sq feet initially proposed by Greycoats and the council, before the final campaign in 1977.

The reduced size of the office block proved crucial in preventing the new housing to the North from being unbearably overshadowed by the offices. This was, of course, partly fortuitous because the final size of the block was determined by the current state of the fluctuating office market as by the aggressiveness of the campaigning. What the campaigning achieved however was that the minimum size of block was built within the constraints of economic viability. While Greycoats and Camden claim to be satisfied with the outcome, neither made the superprofits so often attained by office developers as for instance with the adjacent Euston Tower where Stock Conversion made £64 million.

That this was possible is largely due to the fact that Camden Council owned the land and was thus able to curb the developers' quest for maximum profits – a point reinforced by Greycoats Director Stuart Lipton. "Owning land is a weight around your neck", he says,

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“You become emotional about it and there’s a pressure to increase plot ratio. We were prepared to do a deal on a much smaller profit margin.”

The actual profit margins are difficult to assess since they are related to fluctuating future office rentals. For the first time in a major development the developers, Greycotts, put no capital in. This was done by a financial institution, Legal and General, who take a 6% return on their investment of £22.5 million. Surplus profit is then split 50/50 by Camden and Greycotts. Whatever the eventual financial outcome, the arrangement has an air of justice so transparently missing from normal deals between developers and councils.

The nature of the partnership with Greycotts also had profound implications for the form of the development. Greycotts are leaders of a new breed of developers, which claims to have learnt from the negative and much publicised battles with communities. Their first act on obtaining the Tolmers contract was to arrange a meeting with the vociferous Tolmers Village Action Group to exchange views – in marked contrast with Stock Conversion who avoided any contact with community groups for the whole of their decade of involvement with the area.

More important, Greycotts place a strong emphasis on “quality construction and creating value from architecture” according to Lipton. “We’ve always found that architecture makes money.”

“Tolmers was quite a good attempt at getting it right”, he says. In a smart move, Greycotts teamed up with Renton Howard Wood Levin (RHWL) who were already consultant architects to Camden for the rest of the Tolmers development. This enabled them to benefit from RHWL’s long involvement with the area and integrate the offices into the urban structure to an extent unparalleled in recent office development. The aim was to create a “unified square” says Lipton. “The mix creates life, there can’t be many schemes where the design was so co-ordinated.”

RHWL, according to a retrospective prepared statement, saw the ‘challenge’ as ‘combining a major office development in close proximity with new and rehabilitated housing and public open space within the context of a politically highly sensitive area’. Principle design aims were:

1. Maintain and enhance the existing character of the area;
2. Recreate the character of the old Tolmers Square with a new urban space;
3. Spatially organise an interface between offices and housing;
4. Create an acceptable housing environment by shielding the inner site from the traffic noise of surrounding major roads;
5. Maintain and encourage pedestrian routes;
6. Encourage a mix of activities associated with the surrounding community.

Now that almost all the premises are completed and fully let and the new inhabitants have had time to settle down, it is becoming evident that despite some blunders, the architects have succeeded to a remarkable degree on all counts.

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Conceived as a ‘sculptured “cut glass” object standing as a foil to the adjacent Euston Tower’ the prominent south elevation of the office block appears to do just that – visually at least livening up one of London’s bleakest major road intersections as much as could be hoped.

The other side of the block steps down to form the southern side of the new Tolmers Square – the mirror glass lessening the impact of the office block. The north and east sides of the square are formed by new terraces of four storey housing and, beyond a new Mews to the West, is a housing block for old people – a total of 71 residential units in all.

Key to the diversity are the nature and location of communal and commercial elements, which comprise the following:

1. A pub and stylish restaurant/coffee house entered from the square on the ground floor of the offices
2. A gymnasium and squash courts in the office block, not yet completed but intended for use by both office workers and residents
3. A row of shops on Hampstead Road under the old people’s flats including a cut price newsagents/tobacconist which also has an entrance onto the square.

The square itself contains hard and soft landscaping and play equipment for toddlers. Vehicles are only allowed in for access. There are four exits to the square linking to the surrounding streets.

The mix of uses, combined with the location of the square on several natural pedestrian routes ensures that while relatively peaceful, it is truly urban in character – like the former square – with constant movement day and night of residents, workers or passers by.

Reactions of residents and workers alike are relatively positive. Caretaker of the housing, Michael Curty, claims that it is the best estate he has ever worked on and the envy of other Camden caretakers. They are amazed he says that there has been hardly any vandalism, no break-ins and little racialism despite an extremely cosmopolitan population. He thinks the architecture has something to do with it. “It’s the way it’s laid out. It’s like the terraced housing, it’s got that feeling. People can look out onto the square, that’s why no-one’s got broken into.” He tells how when a window broke recently, within seconds everyone was looking out of their windows. “Usually people just shut their window” he says.

The other side of the coin is that residents are disturbed by the noise of the window cleaning equipment on the mirror glass office block. Indeed Curtis argues that it is on the level of detail that the design breaks down. For instance, whereas the old entrance to the square from North Gower Street used to be a broad and easy slope, the new one is a forbidding dog leg – “inviting everyone to dump their crap”. The council has had to erect an officious sign reading ‘No dumping of rubbish’.

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For those who remember the old Victorian Tolmers Square, the blocked up alley is a painful reminder of its senseless demolition. The new square has a craggy character of its own but has nothing of the majestic quality or clarity of its predecessor. Even tenants of the new square who are over the moon with their new homes remember the old square with nostalgia.

Gerald Levin (of RHWL) now argues that demolition was necessary in order to “restructure the space”, but the practicality and potential for renovation was even recognized by Stock Conversion who belatedly announced the intention of restoring the ‘very beautiful square’ to its former glory in 1974. Sold on the open market the houses would undoubtedly have fetched a packet.

The saddest aspect of this part of the development is the atrium. Costing £250,000 it was intended by the developers and architects to be a public link with restaurants and shopping from the Hampstead Road/Euston Road intersection to the square. Brave ideals but it has not worked out. Camden failed to secure a legal public access arrangement and Davey International, a mechanical engineering firm who rent the block are obsessively sensitive about security and prevent the public from entering. The root cause is simply that the atrium was not designed properly as a public link. Instead of making it a straight line, Renton Howard Wood Levin insisted on incorporating a dog leg – seemingly the firms trademark for public spaces. As Lipton comments, “the trouble is it simply doesn’t go anywhere.”

While it would be extremely costly to realign the atrium properly, every effort should be made by RHWL, Greycoats, Camden and the tenants association to get it open to the public. Until that happens the Tolmers development cannot be said to be completed.

### **Human scale diversity**

The real triumph of the Tolmers development is to be found in the small streets and mews to the north of the main square and office block. The old street network remains. Several handsome Georgian terraces have been renovated. Here and there a building or two has been replaced with something new but in keeping even if undistinguished architecturally. Duck through an arch and one finds oneself in a small mews of workshops. Through the next arch one finds oneself in a new mews leading to a new courtyard housing scheme. Most of the traders and restaurants remain. Others have moved to new premises within the area. A rich mixture of land uses and activities ensures that there are people on the streets at all times of day and night. Apart from an appallingly bland elevation to Hampstead Road, the streets are interesting and safe places to walk. The scale is human.

The creation of human scale, diverse inner city development was the second battle to be played out at Tolmers Square and the successes on this front are in many ways more significant than those on the more publicised issues of homes versus offices. In 1965 the whole 12-acre site, apart from one or two post war buildings, was to be flattened. It was known (though not formally designated) as the Tolmers Square Comprehensive Development Area and Camden’s planners drew up a scheme with one 13-storey tower

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block and six 7-storey balcony access blocks in the north and light industry and commerce to the South, all with a segregated system of vehicular and pedestrian access.

Because of implementation difficulties this scheme fortunately stayed on the drawing board until 1973 when the council commissioned Architects RHWL to prepare a scheme. Their solution, while giving the illusion of being softer and more humane, still involved comprehensive redevelopment, apart from the retention of two L-shaped terraces. The street pattern was to go, as were 23 shops, 6 restaurants, 1 cafe, 2 pubs, 17 light industrial and commercial firms, 12 offices, 3 social clubs and hundreds of homes.

Typically, neither the architects nor the council were aware of these figures, since neither had bothered to undertake a land use study.

It was left to students from the Bartlett School of Architecture (then more sensibly named the School of Environmental Studies) to record that the area in reality housed a rich mixture of diverse activities, many of which would be completely crushed by redevelopment, and to argue for a more sensitive combination of rehabilitation and new development.

A community association then sprang up, significantly named the Tolmers Village Association (TVA), one of whose aims was 'to keep the village atmosphere of houses, shops and streets'. Alternative proposals were drawn up with help from the Bartlett architecture students (who then lived in the area as squatters) and widely publicised. It was pressure from the TVA, along with the determination of one or two landowners and leaseholders, the wisdom of a government inspector who refused to allow Camden to compulsory purchase a number of buildings, and perhaps genuine change in heart on the part of RHWL which has determined that the scheme finally built is very different to that envisaged in 1973.

The most important breakthrough was in the acceptance in a council development of the continuation of mixed uses. The industries in Charles Place have been allowed to remain despite being surrounded by housing. Simmonds Second hand furniture warehouse has been allowed to remain despite the temptation to demolish it to provide gardens for surrounding housing or more profitable uses. Small new shops with housing above have been built in Drummond Street, a concept almost unthinkable only a few years ago

Drummond Street has therefore not only been preserved as a lively mixed shopping street but has even been extended. The street pattern has remained in tact (apart from the sensible closure of the north end of North Gower Street to stop rat-running traffic) and the mews pattern has been strengthened and extended.

The benefits of mixed use are readily apparent. The new office workers welcome the shops in Drummond Street which enable them to do their household shopping at lunchtime. At the same time, their trade enables the small shops to survive for the benefit of residents.

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As interesting as what has been built or renovated by the council is what has happened to those left untouched. With the years of blight lifted and derelict sites developed, most of the private property in the area has now been improved and upgraded. The pubs have all been revamped, selling meals at lunchtime and wine in the evenings. The one time threatened Diwana vegetarian Indian restaurant has opened another branch across the road and is still packed out.

Instead of being almost totally destroyed, the core of the area has therefore been allowed and helped to evolve. This has led to a sense of continuity of the community, both in terms of the physical environment and, more important, the personalities in it. It has also been beneficial for business enterprises, many of which would undoubtedly have gone to the wall or suffered major setbacks had they been forced to move. Over half of the business enterprises in the Tolmers area ten years ago still operate from the same premises, while a handful of others have moved to new premises within the area. Indeed, in contrast with the normal procedure of issuing notices to quit and leaving businesses to make their own arrangements to find alternative accommodation, the council spent considerable effort to relocate some traders whose premises were demolished.

Significantly, the weakest part of the northern sector of the development is the new block bordering Hampstead Road, the only site for which RHWL's original megalithic philosophy prevailed. At a cost of over 1.5 million, a terrace of Georgian houses with a wide mix of housing, shops, restaurants with light industry in a clutter of buildings behind was swept away and replaced with a 'barrier' block of 66 housing units. The ghastly bland elevation to Hampstead Road has destroyed forever the possibility of that street becoming a civilised urban street while the internal court is a dismally lifeless public open space. With no activities in it (not even a bench), solely housing around it, and with no purpose other than access for the housing and not being on any pedestrian routes, it is not surprising that the caretaker claims it to be a "muggers paradise". One must be thankful for the stubborn owner of Lawrence Corner who refused to sell out to the council. Otherwise the monstrous block would have been continued across Drummond Street to link up with the new development around Tolmers Square.

### **Housing for nobody**

The main thrust of public effort at Tolmers has gone into building council housing. The demand for it united Labour councillors and community groups. And after enormous sacrifice and effort, public housing has been built – over £7 million of it; a total of 193 new units and 59 created by rehabilitation, housing some 860 people. This is no mean achievement considering that only 17 years ago the council owned no land whatsoever in the area. The population is now back to its 1950s level of around 1,000 after dropping to well below half during the worst years of blight.

Local MP Frank Dobson has declared that it is 'some of the loveliest housing in London' and it undoubtedly ranks high in the council housing league for a relatively high density. All flats have gardens or balconies (albeit poky) except in the rehabs. Where it has been



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necessary to build high, lifts and balcony access have been provided with window boxes and covered porches. All flats are to Parker Morris standards.

The problem is that like virtually all council housing it has been designed for no-one. Instead of designing homes for real people the architects were provided with the usual list of requirements by the housing department. The result is homes which, while generally unobjectionable, satisfy hardly anyone.

The inflexibility of the brief has had a particularly cruel effect on the converted terraces. Instead of restoring the fine listed Georgian houses in North Gower Street naturally into large family houses, at infinitely greater expense the entire guts of the houses have been ripped out and they have been refashioned with lateral conversions. Despite £67,000 having been spent on each of the old houses, tenants complain of tacky construction and, worst of all, appalling sound insulation. One couple in a basement flat can tell exactly where everyone is in the flat above and the noise keeps their baby awake.

The tragedy is compounded by the allocation system. A high proportion – put at 80% by most people – have been let to Bengali families who prefer to live in large family units and for whom the larger houses would have been better in the first place. But, of course, no-one bothered to ask them beforehand. And no-one, either, asked many of the Bengalis who have ended up with new houses with gardens whether they actually wanted gardens. Had anyone asked they would have discovered that many Bengalis are not particularly interested in gardens, which explains why so many are in a mess – thus fermenting racial antagonism.

Racial tension continues to grow. Jeyant Patel, manager of Diwana restaurant was punched in the face by a gang of young thugs. JD Shah has had to install a wall round the counter of the Tolmers Wine Shop, after being robbed and harassed.

Whether or not 80% of the housing stock in an area should be allocated to one racial group is not at issue. But if 80% of the housing in an area *is* to be allocated to a minority group, it would seem logical that some thought be given to the requirements of their culture. Yet the architects were never told by the housing department who was going to be living in their housing.

And of course it is not only different cultures which should be catered for but individual people. In every flat that one visits in the development people have gripes about little things which could have so easily been better if the architects knew who they were designing for.

The public housing allocation system whereby houses are built first and found tenants afterwards has a lot to answer for. Because of it, any possibility of continuity in the community is lost. In 1974, the Tolmers Village Association succeeded in obtaining a pledge from the council; ‘The council will endeavour to ensure that existing residential and business occupiers are given the option to return after their premises have been rehabilitated or developed’ say the council minutes of 17 July 1974.

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Yet this policy clearly did not get as far as Mr Shewry, the Housing Allocations Officer because he claims never to have heard of it. Allocations were made strictly according to the points system of priority need.

The result is that apart from a handful of resident shopkeepers, not a single person who lived in the area before development started lives there now. The people who lived there before have been scattered throughout the borough and a completely new population has been brought in from all over the borough to start from scratch to build up all the contacts which make inner city living possible.

Ultimately it was also the same pernicious system which made it impossible to renovate the old Tolmers Square itself. The houses were in no worse condition than those renovated in North Gower Street. It was simply impossible to remodel them to suit the housing schedule drawn up by the housing department without a care for the particular nature of the houses in question.

### **Remote Control**

Lack of sensitivity to individual users is, ultimately, the major failing of the completed development and is symptomatic of the inappropriate nature of council mechanisms for developing in general and diverse inner city areas in particular.

Instead of establishing a local area office for members of the design and project team, the professionals involved all worked from their own offices scattered around the borough and neighbouring boroughs. The project was coordinated by a council officer – Eric Farmery – who was also responsible for several other developments throughout Camden at the same time. Development proposals were never displayed in the area although an exhibition was mounted at the town hall where members of the public could make comments. During the whole redevelopment process – during which time a huge amount of public money was spent – there was no forum for professionals and users to work together. Gerald Levin did hold several meetings with members of the community organization – and for this he was dubbed “Camden’s first community architect” by Camden planner Tony Michael – but this, and discussions with a handful of the most troublesome businesses, was the limit of user involvement.

This was all the more surprising since community organisations in the area consistently requested involvement.

The architects took their instructions from a variety of council departments which in turn were accountable to council committees made up of councillors with little intimate knowledge of the area.

The result was that the wealth of information and knowledge contained in the community was never effectively tapped. Diverse inner city areas are complex organisms. To understand how they operate requires an intimate knowledge of the physical fabric, the activities taking place and above all the people’s needs and ambitions.

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Without such knowledge one can only rely on statistics and averages. The inevitable result being concentration on the physical fabric rather than people and activities, and a tendency towards inappropriate monolithic and costly solutions to relatively minor problems.

The full tragedy of the lack of involvement was driven home by the ‘celebration’ organised by Camden Council to mark the opening of the development. The room was filled with contractors, council officials and architects and developers who were treated to back slapping self congratulatory speeches by a handful of Camden’s Labour dignitaries.

Commenting quite correctly that people had aged prematurely and “virtually died” in the struggle for development at Tolmers Square, local MP Frank Dobson said: “I hope people who live in it love it as much as they ought to.”

Sadly they obviously did not love it enough to attend the ‘celebration’. Despite being personally invited to an event with refreshments specially arranged on a Saturday morning, only half a dozen of the new inhabitants actually turned up. It was clearly not seen as *their* development – they only lived in it.

The council’s attitude was summed up by the comment of McAlpines’ site manager when I was taking photographs. “You can’t take photographs now. You should have come 3 weeks ago.” Why? “Because the tenants have moved in and put up curtains. It’s horrible.” It was a far cry from the opening, a few weeks earlier of a cooperative housing scheme of 61 homes in Liverpool 8 where the inhabitants had been involved in the whole process of designing and building their homes. *Their* celebration lasted until 4 in the morning. *All* the occupants were present – in fact they organised it – along with the architects and builders. The building contractor told me he knew the names of every family in the development.

These shortcomings highlight the single most depressing lesson to emerge from the Tolmers experience – the absence of effective mechanisms for managing and upgrading diverse inner city areas. Had adequate mechanisms existed, the costly and disruptive ‘redevelopment’ of Tolmers Square would not have been necessary. Continuous upgrading would have been far cheaper and less disruptive to residents and businesses alike.

In the end the issue of public versus private ownership and offices versus homes are less important than the development of organisational mechanisms enabling users of the city to monitor and upgrade their environment and have access to the professional skills they need.

Without such mechanisms the Tolmers syndrome with all its misery, wasted energy and ultimate mediocrity will happen again and again.

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## Illustrations

1. 23 years of campaigning – demos, slogans, press cuttings
2. The changing plans:
  - a. Land use 1974 (TBFTS p5)
  - b. RHWL 1973 (TBFTS p136)
  - c. 1984 showing land use (to be done), pedestrian links, houses rehabbed by Camden/RHWL
3. Tolmers Square
  - a. before and after from no.13
  - b. dog leg entrance – before and after
4. Office Block
  - a. atrium
  - b. shot from Warren Street tube
5. Hampstead Road triangle – before and after (TBFTS p3)
6. Hampstead Road elevation– before and after
7. Drummond Street– shot from East showing new infill shops and housing.
8. Mews – industry and housing
9. Private sector refurb and infill.