

AT LEAST 250,000 urban acres lie vacant in Britain. Some have been derelict for decades, and not at the whim of private speculators.

The way in which borough councils have hidden their land mismanagement behind good intentions – such as the wish to build homes – is one of the major scandals of the post-war years.

While land blights the inner cities, people are denied jobs. And capital resources are misallocated by being pushed on to the periphery of the nation's industrial base.

One such example is the four-acre site just south of the Thames in the London borough of Southwark.

The land was bombed in the last world war and has stood derelict ever since. Successive groups of councillors have claimed that they would build houses on the site, near the Elephant & Castle roundabout.

The money was never available. Rather than release the land to the private sector, however, it was allowed to stand idle.

London expanded into the Home Counties, eating up prime agricultural land, while commuters daily drove around the eyesore on their way to work in the City.

It was the routine story: whenever someone challenged the need to retain the land in public ownership, the same excuse was offered.

It was needed for public housing.

Then, in July 1981, lecturers at the South Bank Polytechnic proposed a technopark on the derelict land.

The project director, Mr. Jeffe Jeffers, approached several of the big financial institutions for backing. Each time, he says, he was given "the bums rush."

HIS LUCK turned, however, when he approached the Prudential Assurance Co. They were interested.

The Greater London Council agreed to transfer two acres of the land to Southwark Council, which in turn agreed in principle last December to sell to the Pru. Asking price: about £500,000.

Southwark Council gave informal planning approval last May, as did the GLC and the Department of the Environment. The Pru was all set to sink £4.5m into what was by usual standards a risky venture.

This would have provided new jobs and premises for small firms wanting to make use of the high quality technical facilities that would be available at the Polytechnic, which would adjoin the technopark.

According to Michael Mallinson, one of the Pru's chief surveyors:



● Rubble and weeds – a reflection on waste in Southwark

Scandal of a wasted opportunity

Report by Ian Barron



● Michael Mallinson

"The financial institutions are extensively lobbied by all and sundry to assist in the re-vitalisation of inner city areas and to help combat deep-rooted unemployment. They are asked to be imaginative in their support of new industries and ideas which will carry Great Britain into the next century.

"As far as the Prudential is concerned, their pleas do not fall on deaf ears..."

This was precisely the kind of project that is now being urged on the institutions by Michael Heseltine, the Minister of the Environment.

He was ordered by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to head a programme for regenerating the inner cities after last year's riots in Toxteth, Liverpool.

But last May, a political bomb fell on the Elephant & Castle.

The voters of Southwark elected a group of very left-wing councillors. And the new councillors decided that, to keep faith with their manifesto promises, they would have to block the technopark scheme in its present form.

They had promised that, if elected, they would build more houses. And the site adjoining the Polytechnic appeared to suit their purposes very well.

Mr. Mallinson, not surprisingly, condemned the councillors for what he called a "highly unsatisfactory" turn of events.

SOUTHWARK Council is now proposing that the technopark should be built on an adjoining site.

But the council, which owns about 100 acres of vacant land, has no plans for building houses on their site in the foreseeable future. The excuse, once again, is that the money is not available.

Meanwhile, the technopark project is at risk. It is by no means certain that the Pru will want to redesign its plans to suit left-wing councillors.

There are only two science parks in Britain. A principal reason, according to a recent report, is that land is in shorter supply and more expensive than in the U.S., where they proliferate to the mutual advantage of scientists and industrialists.*

If the Southwark technopark is killed off, Britain will have lost a valuable development. But the homeless families of Southwark will be no nearer to getting roofs of their own over their heads.

*James Williams, 'A Review of Science Parks & High Technology Developments', London: Drivers Jonas, Aug. 1982, p.17.