

Why Deakin won't go back to the drawing board

NEXT TO the deterrent price of land, builders identify planning procedures as the major obstacle to their business.

The British planning system is coming under heavy pressure from critics like Dr. Alice Coleman, of King's College, London, who is Director of the Second Land Utilisation Survey of Britain.

She says emphatically: "To emerge from under the yoke of planning would be closely comparable to emerging from the feudal system. The feudal system prescribed the management of the farmscape as minutely and often as arbitrarily as the planning system has prescribed the management of settlement."

Complaints about "bureaucratic interference" make good slogans, but they conceal the measurable extent of the problems which they create. Which is why the case of Betton Deakin is worth examining, for it illustrates the frustrations faced by developers.

Deakin owns three-quarters of an acre in the small town of Church Stretton, which nestles in the hills of South Shropshire. Earlier this year he submitted plans to the district council for approval. They were turned down. He went back to the drawing board, but his second proposal was also returned as unsatisfactory. So he has now abandoned his plans to develop the land.

"I wanted to build 13 low-cost houses but the council wanted 12 houses. I think it's bloody disgraceful the way the bureaucrats interfere.

"I wanted to build at my own expense and sell to young people who can't afford the current price of houses. I would have made a

bob or two out of it—yes, I'd have got my pound of flesh. But I reckoned I was doing something for the community as well. But I've had enough. I'm not going to have a third try. I've pulled out of the scheme."

Now there is the possibility of the council compulsorily buying the land, and that suits Deakin. "I bought the land 15 or 20 years ago for £1,750," he says, "and I reckon it's worth £50-60,000 now. They can put a CPO on the land: it would suit me, but the community would have to pay."

SO THE detailed control exercised by the planning authority has deterred a much-needed developing in the low-cost bracket.

Now, either the land will remain vacant, while building continues to sprawl into valuable agricultural land on the outskirts of Church Stretton.

Or the council will involve itself (and the taxpayers' money) in a publicly-sponsored development. This public involvement, which found favour in the 1960s when town centre renewal became fashionable, is the cause of much dissatisfaction.

It is a considerable advance on the "negative planning" originated by a Labour Government in 1947, which was designed to give public authorities the power to restrain development of an obviously anti-social kind (such as erecting a factory in a residential area).

"What has proved an almost total disaster has been the unprecedented effort by public authorities to intervene 'positively' in the planning process on a large scale, and to initiate developments themselves, whether in the shape of

major housing schemes, or of commercial 'joint-developments' with private developers," concludes Chris Booker, an authoritative observer of the property market who is writing a book on post-war planning. "This has been a catastrophe socially, financially and environmentally, from which our cities will take decades at least to recover."

THERE ARE signs that the government is aware of the barriers to development erected by the planners. Peter Shore, the Environment Minister, told the British Property Federation that they tried to relax the rules for certain minor developments, but Parliament failed to give its approval.

He said they were clarifying the functions of district and county councils, and he added: "I suggest that we are more likely to achieve success if we look for ways to get the planning machine operating effectively, rather than attempt to devise further systems to get round alleged defects."

That the Minister would only concede that the defects were "alleged" does not augur well for his department's efforts. It is true that adding new layers of power and responsibility to deal with problems is not the answer. But it is doubtful whether Whitehall and the town halls will agree to relinquish much of the procedural red tape which constitutes their power to control the autonomous actions of citizens.

1. *Architects' Journal*, 19.1.77.
2. *Physical Planning: Another Illusion Shattered*, in *Nat. West. Bank Quarterly Rev.*, Feb. 1977.
3. *The Times*, 10.5.78.

SPOTLIGHT

ON THE PLANNING SYSTEM