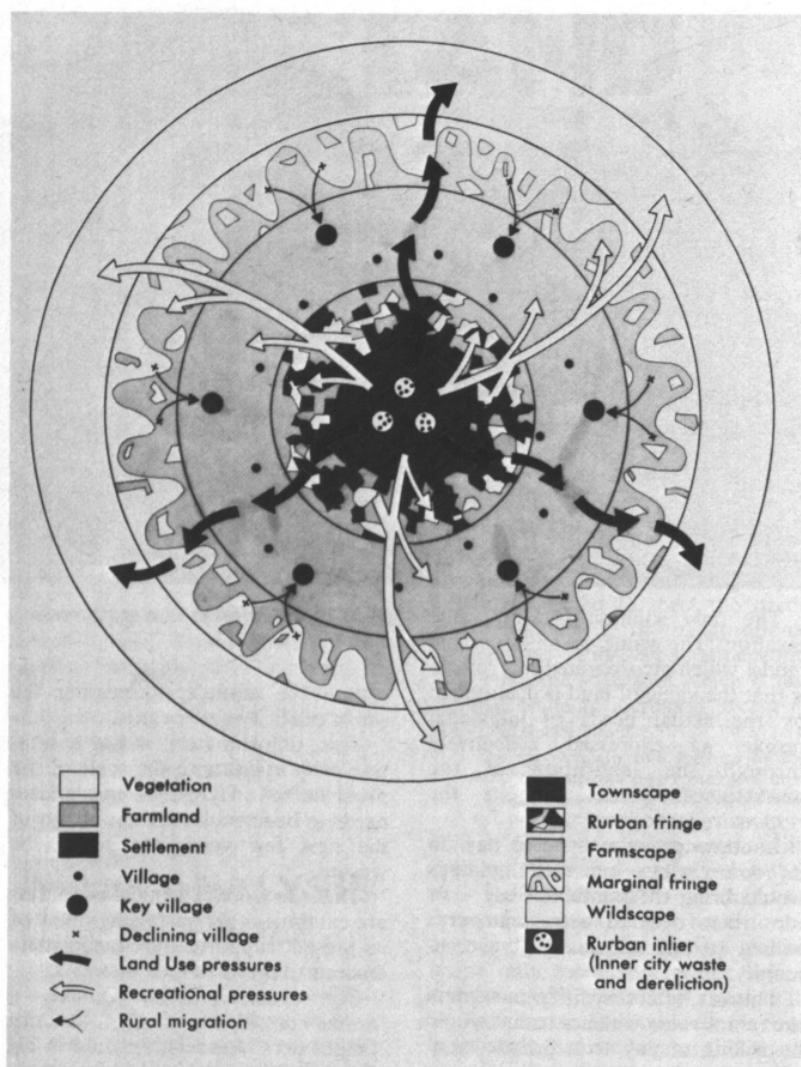


# BRITAIN'S BIGGEST GROWTH INDUSTRY: CREATING DERELICT LAND!

BY ALICE  
COLEMAN



**B**ETWEEN THE First Land Utilisation Survey of Britain in the 1930s and the Second Survey in the 1960s we lost nearly 1.25m. acres of improved farmland. Some of it went to swell our stock of derelict land, which is a well-known problem, to the forefront of our consciousness, but even more degenerated into weed-infested waste land in and around our towns (Fig. I). This larger problem went virtually unrecognised; it almost seemed to be invisible, so that a correspondence in *The Times* was able to deplore the lack of urban building land and demand the release of further farmland for development. Shortly after this the results of the Second Land Utilisation Survey showed that rough waste land was nearly three times as extensive as derelict land, and this triggered off a wave of vacant land surveys. Huge acreages of unused urban sites were officially identified, and some of them are now built on. This demonstrates the value of having 'the facts on the map' for identifying problems, measuring their magnitude and paving the way to their solution.

Fig. I also shows other problems associated with unused land. There was over half a million acres of poisonous bracken, which is lethal to farm stock, too toxic to support wildlife, and strongly implicated as a cause of human stomach cancer. Bracken can be shaded out by trees, and if all this land were afforested, we should be losing problems, gaining production and also creating new

wildlife habitats. We also have nearly half a million acres of mat grass, which is so fibrous and lacking in nutrients that it cannot provide even as many calories as animals would need to digest it. Here, too, the land could be enhanced by afforestation.

However, the land-use problems of the '60s pale into insignificance beside those of the '70s. Our first evidence of this came from a 1972 survey of the Thames Estuary area from Bexley and Newham to Southend and the mouth of the Medway. This permitted the study of land-use trends over the preceding decade. During this time there was a gain of 18.5 Km<sup>2</sup> of new residential land, which was not surprising in view of the new towns at Basildon and Thamesmead, and highly desirable in a time of housing shortage. But there was also a loss of 18 Km<sup>2</sup> of housing demolished and not replaced. This means 35.6 Km<sup>2</sup> of housing effort for a net gain of 0.5 Km<sup>2</sup> — a ratio of 73:1. There were 73 units of expenditure, of land-use dislocation, of community disturbance, for a single unit of achievement. Nor is this the total. Somewhere else farmland has been torn up for the gravel and other building materials needed, and more farmland has been sterilised beneath dumps of demolition rubble. The cost, in terms of renewable resource land sacrificed, has been immense.

It would be easier to accept these sweeping land-use changes if they had increased the housing stock to create a

balance between supply and demand, and to keep prices reasonable. But this is not the case; prices have escalated. It would also be easier to accept if it meant better homes and more satisfied inhabitants, but this is not the case either. There have been many enforced evictions from homes designated as slums and left to rot, and mass transfers to council flats which the tenants do not regard as the improvement that they seem in the eyes of the housing authorities.

For a long time tenants' complaints were ignored, but they have proved to be justified. It has been scientifically proved by Oscar Newman in New York, and confirmed by a Home Office Study in London, that certain kinds of housing design and estate layout are selectively likely to breed vandalism and crime. High rise, slab blocks and faceless deck access – just the very designs that have been systematically promoted – are now proved to be sociologically inferior to houses with gardens – just what has been systematically destroyed.

A doctor from Bethnal Green Medical Mission reports a steady stream of requests from flat dwellers for medical certificates for rehousing, while no such pressures come from the occupants of old terraced streets. During my 1977 survey of Tower Hamlets, I heard a number of flat dwellers express the wish to be back in their old 19th century houses with their own little backyards, instead of all the windswept acres of shared council grass.

**O**PEN SPACE is another land use where the best of intentions has gone sour in practice. The private open space of house gardens has been destroyed and replaced with shared open space. In the Thames Estuary area the net growth of public open space was found to be fifteen times as great as the net growth of housing, and even this was an underestimate, as some of the housing land was shared council grass. Is this the right order of priority as between living space and playing space?

Tower Hamlets has increased its open space to a proportion of all settlement uses which is 50% above the national average, and there still remains an implacable determination to increase it more and more. We need to ask whether so much open space is an absolute good; have the inner cities really benefited so greatly from its expansion?

Jane Jacobs showed, nearly twenty years ago, that too much open space is conducive to crime, and that tiny, active parks are more valuable to a community than over-large and underused expanses. A splendid example has been a little park in Covent Garden created spade-ful by the efforts of the local community in the basement of a demolition site. It included diverse activities for every age group, and its continued tending and enhancement was a live focus for community spirit. If one was attracted down into it, someone was sure to welcome the stranger and explain with pride how the park was made. It had clearly infused a healthy, co-operative attitude, but now, alas, it is being built over.

The chief value of job creation projects for open spaces is reported as being in the work of creating them. As play spaces, once created, they often lie unused and neglected. The Covent Garden example shows that we need self-tending spaces, whether in house gardens or in spontaneous community parks.

The lavish amount of open space in inner city areas has proved to be a problem in financial terms also. When a Thameside factory was demolished to make room for a riverside walk it meant a loss of employment and rates income in exchange for a charge on borough finances. We

are asked to pity the plight of inner cities and to contribute millions of pounds to their aid, but it would be more sensible to take a long cool look at their land-use policies and see what is really wrong. It has already cost vast sums in comprehensive renewal to bring them to their present state of decay, and it is pointless to throw good money after bad.

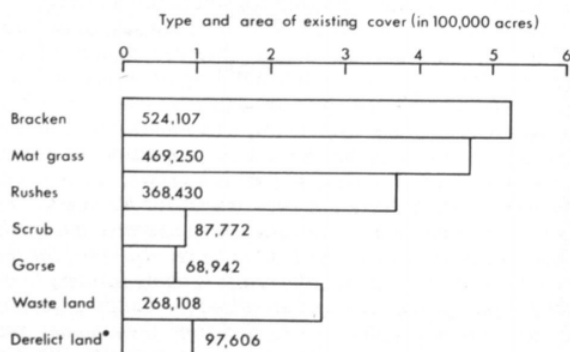
Inner city areas have systematically reduced every kind of land use that generated employment and rates income. They have also systematically increased every kind of use that requires public spending and subsidy, and as a result their financial imbalance has reached crisis level. This imposes heavy rates burdens upon the firms that remain, so that some of these also choose to leave. This creates a vicious circle of fewer firms, heavier rates, and still fewer firms, with resulting spirals of unemployment and loss of public income.

In Tower Hamlets in 1964, no less than 3% of the borough was waste land and derelict land. The recipe for curing its problems was comprehensive redevelopment, with such extensive demolition that by 1977 14.6% of the borough was dead or disturbed space of some kind. The death of the inner city is often blamed on old age, but the dead sites did not fall down of old age. Someone decided to pull them down. The blight and decay are the outcome of conscious policy.

Demolition costs money, and extravagant demolition absorbs funds that could have been used to rebuild or to rehabilitate. Riverside factories have been destroyed unnecessarily because there is no money to create the proposed riverside walk. Some of the demolition sites have been left derelict for fifteen years, but money is still being spent on further demolition, even in 1979.

It costs money even to let the land lie derelict. In Tower Hamlets there are 45 Km of corrugated iron hoardings around disused sites, which must have cost a third of a million pounds to buy, and more to install. The cost of purchasing the land was vastly greater, involving loans which eat up interest charges year after year. The amount of public money invested in these sites is phenomenal – and it is assumed to be their land value. Consequently they have become too highly priced to be used for the housing that is so badly needed, and if they are to be paying propositions they must attract rich industrialists. This creates a state of impasse, as the industrialists prefer cheaper greenfield sites, and so we fail to conserve our renewable resource land. What we *do* conserve, at great expense, is the waste land and derelict land in the inner city.

**FIGURE I**



● Excluding inner city dereliction



**L**AND DECADE recognises viable urban land-use patterns which are termed *townscape*. A view of townscape from, say, the top of London's Post Office Tower reveals a well-functioning built environment punctuated by parks. In 1964 3% of Tower Hamlets failed to satisfy the strict definitions of the townscape pattern. By 1977 no less than 37% failed to satisfy it. Instead, there were lonely remnants of built environment surrounded by dereliction and decay, with weed-covered waste land going back to nature in what is called a *urban inlier* pattern. This pattern, which is independently defined from the basic assemblage of land uses, is repeatedly found in blighted inner city areas. In the 1960s there was one urban inlier in Liverpool and one in Birkenhead, but by 1976 there were 23. In that year Merseyside planning authority was sufficiently enlightened to commission a new land-use map and a new scape and fringe map, and there is a new constructive, redemptive attitude, which is reversing outmoded land-use policies.

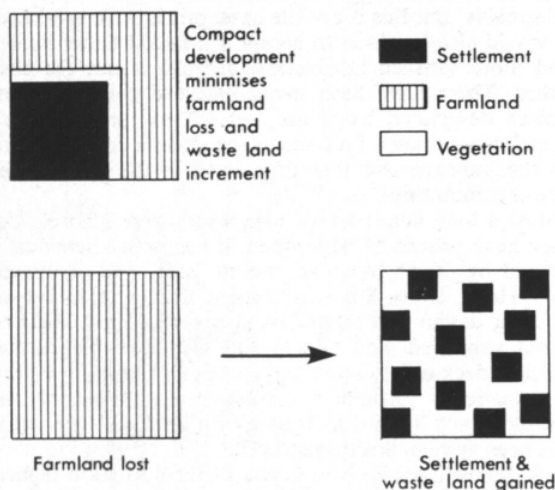
Inner city populations have been forced out, leaving only one third or one quarter of the people behind. It was planned to decant a million people from London; over a million and a half have gone, mostly to greenfield developments on former *farmscape*.

Farmscape is renewable-resource land that is very vulnerable to intrusive uses. It functions best when over 90% of its area is in crops and grass. Wildlife habitats can form a minority land use, in hedgerows and copses, but if they occupy too big a proportion they unleash too many pests and predators, and the land becomes *marginal fringe*. Similarly, settlement can form a minority use, as farmhouses, roads and traditional rural settlement, but if it occupies too big a proportion it unleashes too many trespassers and vandals, and the land becomes *urban fringe*.

**P**LANNING was originally intended to produce compact, orderly new development for the decanted urban populations, to minimise the land taken from agriculture, and to keep the junction between town and country as a straight urban fence. With skilful planning there need be no proliferation of urban pressure beyond the fence, so that in an area of 42 Km<sup>2</sup> of initial farmscape, 14 Km<sup>2</sup> of new settlement would leave the other 28% as unimpaired farmscape territory (Fig. 2).

Unfortunately, the land-use maps show that this has rarely happened. The 14 Km<sup>2</sup> has been planned as scattered sprawl (Fig 2), each patch with its own aureole of farmland rendered uneconomic to the point of abandonment. The whole 28 Km<sup>2</sup> not taken for building is nevertheless lost from farming, because it degenerates into waste land – with no compensation to the farmer. Patterns of use and disuse which involve settlement sprawl, fragmented farmland and idle land constitute *urban fringe*.

The figures of 14 and 28 Km<sup>2</sup> were not just drawn out of a hat; they are the actual observed figures of the Thames Estuary area. Only small lengths of urban fence have been created, but there are extensive tracts of urban fringe. Basildon new town is more urban fringe than it is townscape; there is an enormous proportion of rough grass and scrub. The western part is a prewar shack town, owners of which have not been traced for 40 years. *The law is so tender-hearted towards these absentee landlords that it does not allow their land to be requisitioned for the new town. Instead it has allowed practising farmers to be evicted and productive land sterilised for building, just as it has allowed people to be evicted from their homes and cared-for property demolished, without a qualm.* What it conserves are the shacks, the weeds and the scrub. Is there a case for changing the law, to make it more sensitive to land and to people, both?



**FIGURE 2**

The resurvey of the Thames area showed that the growth of waste land was a worse shock figure than anything mentioned so far. Its loss was a welcome 15.5 Km<sup>2</sup> but its gain was an incredible 46 Km<sup>2</sup>. Its net gain was 61 times as great as the net gain in housing. And for all forms of land disuse together (waste land, derelict land and scrub), the total net gain is 71 times that of housing. Britain's biggest growth industry seems to be making her land unusable.

And what of the farmland that is being eroded away? We used to talk about nibbling it, but now it is being consumed in such big cities that unless the rate is checked, we stand to lose it all within 200 years – and this is an area that covered two-thirds of England and Wales in 1963.

There is no sign, as yet, that the loss will be checked – quite the reverse. If we are taking land in big cities today, the plans for the '80s can only be described as great gobbling gulps. The structure plans alone aim to transfer 5m. people from one county to another and one district to another. At today's densities and today's urbanisation ratios, this will involve greenfield sites equivalent to the whole of our present townscape area by 1991. And on top of that there will be further transfers to greenfield sites within districts, for which I have no figures.

There are also projects afoot which would take as much farmland in a single gulp as is currently taken for all purposes in a whole year. One of these is the third London airport proposal. Another is the Vale of Belvoir Coalfield. For this project the tips alone would cover over six square kilometres. It is difficult to grasp the immense size involved. If these tips were to be deposited in Central London, they would bury Buckingham Palace and St. Paul's Cathedral and all the land between in a belt two kilometres wide from the Thames Embankment to Russell Square.

It is not only the giant projects that endanger our renewable resource land. There are many smaller threats which individually may seem too trivial to be worth opposing, but which collectively make serious inroads. For example, everyone pays lip service to the conservation of our Grade I land, and every application for taking it is argued as a highly exceptional case. Yet if all these exceptional cases are added together they show that, in proportion to its extent, Grade I is being built on five times as fast as poorer land.

Rich gravel reserves have been depleted, and applications are being made for shallow reserves which will be

very short-lived. In Berkshire, earlier this year, it was proposed to take about 80 acres of Grade I land producing three crops a year, for a two years' supply of gravel, after which the land will be left quite unfarmable, judging by other worked-out sites nearby.

Accompanying these massive reductions of farmland is a national policy of more food from our own resources. Farmers have responded to this by grubbing up hedges to create productive land at the expense of wildlife habitats and landscape attractiveness. They are reclaiming some of their traditional zone of fluctuation, the marginal fringe, which is a patchy mixture of improved farmland and vegetation, and beyond the marginal fringe they are ploughing up parts of the wildscape, such as Exmoor. The wildscape is the area dominated by an uninterrupted expanse of vegetation or other cover types such as rock outcrops or lakes, without the patchy interspersions of improved fields that characterises the marginal fringe.

**T**HERE IS, in fact, a complete chain-reaction of land-use pressures dislocating all our land uses from the inner city outward. The decanting policy causes a huge area of farmscape to be urbanised, and attempts to make the loss good impinge on wildlife habitats right out to the wildscape.

We deplore the loss of habitats and scenic beauty, but we do not believe the answer lies in setting conservationists against farmers. It would be more constructive for all rural interests to combine to oppose further land take for urban purposes, and to insist that unused city land, or unfarmable land in heavily urbanised areas, should be used instead. Urban interests should stop victimising rural interests, but this does not mean that urban interests would lose out. On the contrary they would benefit from having a more lively townscape, with compact, orderly development in place of blight and decay. More urban housing with gardens would give more people the chance to enjoy the nation's most popular outdoor pastime – gardening – and this could relieve some of the intense recreational pressures upon the countryside, which often spell vandalism for the farmer.

The scape and fringe framework has been used descriptively to outline a pattern of losers. But it can also be used prescriptively to create a pattern of winners. We believe that urban uses can be directed to townscape, or to upgrade rural fringe into townscape, that farmscape can be conserved as a renewable resource, that appropriate wildscape habitats can be conserved for wildlife, and poor ones upgraded to productive forest. There is no space to elaborate the depth and detail of the scape and fringe framework, but it seems to offer a basis for a reasoned land-use strategy – one which the public can understand and co-operate with, instead of working in the dark and wondering whether or not planning permission will be granted.

● *THIS PAPER was one of five presented by members of the L.A.N.D. Council at the launching conference of Land Decade 1980-1990, held on Oct. 25, 1979. It followed an opening statement by the chairman of the Council, Prof. W. G. V. Balchin, who argued – from the growth in world population, the depletion of non-renewable resources, the decline in the number of net food-exporting countries and the rapid shrinkage of world forests – that Britain would have to become more self-sufficient in the future, and that renewable resource land should therefore be stringently conserved.*

## *Denmark devalues – and imposes a land tax*

DENMARK decided to devalue the Krone by 5% early in December: and immediately announced a special agricultural land tax to syphon off gains to farmers. The tax will be payable in 1980 only, and will bring in about £36m. – the estimated gain to farmers net of tax.

Denmark has an honourable tradition of land taxation: this contrasts markedly with Britain, where political action is designed to foster the interests of landowners. Which is why the Country Landowners' Association met little resistance when it lobbied Agriculture Minister Peter Walker (himself a farmer).

The CLA wanted a 5% devaluation of the Green Pound, the artificial exchange rate through which EEC common farm prices are translated into sterling. The devaluation would increase support prices for the agricultural sector and cut subsidies on food imported from the EEC.

The propaganda line was that the income of working farmers would increase. In strict economic terms, the devaluation ends up by increasing the rental value of land – which is tough on tenant farmers!

Within days, at the Cabinet meeting on Dec. 6, Walker had secured approval for the devaluation – despite opposition from the TUC Economics Committee.

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*THE NATIONAL Association of Realtors have bought the \$8m. Wyatt building in the government area of downtown Washington DC – a prestige base from which to protect the interests of America's property industry.*

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THE OWNERS of The Property Letter, a London-based publication which offers tips to speculators and developers, have been singing their own praises in pursuit of new readers. Their promotional literature states:

"There are more millionaires in the property field than in any other business – over 1,000 last count. That's because property, over the long term, is the best wealth creator there is. It's a strong hedge against inflation. It produces both income and substantial capital gain. It confers, in some cases, considerable tax benefits. And it produces, for the successful developer, enormous capital profits for a very small personal outlay."

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*IRELAND'S trade union leaders are keeping up the pressure to reduce income taxes – and shift more of the tax burden onto farmers. Mass protests staged on Dec. 15 were washouts – the rain fell, and people were busy with Christmas shopping. But the unions plan more demonstrations this year. Meanwhile, the new Prime Minister, Charles Haughey – former minister of both finance and agriculture – has not expressed any specific views. But Garret FitzGerald, leader of the main opposition party, the Fine Gael, is courting the farmer vote: in his New Year message, he said they planned to reduce taxes on farmers.*

## **NEWS IN BRIEF**