



PEKING Urban clearance

SKY-ROCKETTING rents have stimulated an extensive urban renewal programme in the centre of the Chinese capital. With land prices reaching £360 a square foot, the *hutongs* - mazes of narrow lanes and walled courtyard houses - are being levelled to make way for skyscraper office blocks.

Residents are reluctant to move, but they have no choice: they have no title to the sites they occupy. The bulldozers are bringing charges of "cultural assassination". But the prosperity brought by the economic reforms of 15 years ago transformed the value of inner-city land. So cultural heritage has been sacrificed in favour of property developers.

• Beijing was the world's most horizontal city: buildings could never be higher than the emperor's throne.

EDINBURGH Rural clearance

IN RURAL Perthshire, a 20,000-acre estate owned by an arab oil sheikh is lapsing into disuse, according to local critics who object to the way in which 20 estate farmhouses have decayed for want of inhabitants. Scottish Nationalist MP Roseanna Cunningham helped to symbolically restore one of the buildings, to highlight a general problem - absentee landlords in Scotland are gradually clearing estates of tenant farmers and receiving thousands of pounds in subsidies in the process. She says:

"The fact that this has been allowed to happen to vast tracts of land such as this, which until recently was sustaining population and productive farming activity, reinforces our claim that land reform in Scotland is long overdue."

• A private builder has made a £3m profit from taxpayers on a smart land deal. The Scottish Office may build a privately-

financed bridge over the River Forth. It decided to buy some land from Cala, an Edinburgh firm, for £6.64m. Cala bought the land - for £3.8m. - just a few weeks before closing the deal.

RIO DE JANEIRO "Land-theft" claim

A NEW decree which governs the demarcation of land occupied by Indians will legitimise land-theft, according to the UK-based Oxfam charity. For the decree may strengthen the power of mining and logging corporations which regard indigenous communities as obstacles to their quest for profits. The decree has encouraged the illegal occupation of land in the belief that the land-invaders will be able to secure the support of the state. The demarcation process is supported by funds supplied by the German government. "It appears that 307 indigenous territories, more than half the total, will be vulnerable to review and possible shrinkage," claimed an Oxfam spokesman.

LONDON Empty spaces

ONE OF the prime sites in the centre of London has been unused for 10 years. The building on it was the County Hall of the Greater London Council until Mrs Thatcher dismantled the authority. The building was bought by Japanese corporation in 1992 for £60m, and they retained the building in an idle state. Last December it was announced that the ten year vacancy would come to an end because the building, on the south side of the Thames opposite Parliament, would be converted into two hotels.

But it is not only the prime sites that are kept vacant. In the inner city borough of Hackney, the council is supporting 3,707 households in temporary accommodation. The council owns 3,894 houses which are vacant.

BUCHAREST Private plots

ROMANIA'S privatisation programme outlaws the ownership of more than 10 hectares by any one farmer. The redistribution of land has caused the average plot size to fall to less than two hectares of arable land and three hectares in total (compared to the 14 hectares average for the 12 members of the European Union).

OXFORD A rich attitude

BRITAIN'S landed aristocracy no longer fears a Labour government, according to soundings at a conference at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire, attended by owners of some of the largest baronial homes. Said one of them: "I do not think they have got the 'soak the rich, introduce a wealth tax' attitude of previous Labour governments". During the post-war years, successive Labour governments tried to tax away large parts of the unearned income from land. Each law was subsequently abolished by Conservative governments.

KUALA LUMPA City land

MALAYSIA'S plan for a new city has provided rich pickings for the shrewd operators. To be built on a 27,000-acre site in the southern state of Johor, close to Singapore, much of the land was bought by Renong, a conglomerate which paid less than M\$1 a square foot. A few months later some of the land was resold to developers at M\$17 a square foot. The city, to be called Nusa Jaya, is expected to attract entrepreneurs from Singapore, where prices are around M\$700 a square foot.

But Renong's good fortune is not viewed with pleasure by some of the local people who say they were forced to sell their land cheaply: they are taking court action.

STAFFORDSHIRE

British Waterways is demanding rent from a Staffordshire man for land on which he has created a mini village for his garden gnomes.

NEW YORK Habitat II

The UN sponsored Habitat II global conference in Istanbul will be urged to endorse a proposal that society should capture the rent of land for community purposes.

The draft Agenda for Action was reviewed at a conference in New York in February and produced a draft with a section called "ensuring access to land". This stated that access was a "pre-condition for breaking the vicious circle of poverty. Governments at all appropriate levels, including local authorities should strive to overcome all possible obstacles which may hamper equitable access to land"

In its action proposals, the document says that to ensure an adequate supply of serviceable land, governments should "take advantage of innovative instruments which capture land value gains and recover public investments".

LONDON Lots of Learning

(1) Following the heavy losses through land speculation suffered by the Church of England, one of the largest and oldest Anglican theological libraries is to be sold. Over 100,000 books are to be sold thanks to the £800m lost by the church in the late 1980s.

(2) The Central Statistical Office reports (*Economic Accounts* No.12/DSS) that income classified as unearned (rents, dividends and net interest: £73 bn) exceeded self-employed income (£63.6 bn), and was four times greater than the cost of the unemployed (£17.2 bn).