

tales from the river bank

On the banks of the Thames in Wandsworth, occupants of the Guinness site earmarked for development are jubilant about their success so far, but know it can't last. Members of the Pure Genius community hope their peaceful action has at least raised people's awareness. Jessica Cargill Thompson reports.

► says a spokesman for the contractor. Radical protesters also claim responsibility for a dozen cases of theft or damage to computers at the offices of road contractors between February 1995 and April 1996. The Berkshire Wood Elves' leaflet advises protesters to "rip out the hard disks", or wipe strong magnets over the disk boxes to corrupt the data.

Apart from making staff nervous, protests cost contractors dear. David Weeks, public affairs manager of aggregates producer ARC, which has had demonstrations at its Frome office and at quarries in Somerset and Sussex, says bills can run to hundreds of thousands of pounds a year to cover extra security, replacing damaged equipment and lost production. There are also hidden costs, such as lost time if staff have to testify against protesters in court. "These protests are damaging construction," says Weeks. "Roadbuilding has become a dirty word. We have to defend ourselves and explain what we are doing, but many people are just too frightened to stand up and say something."

Risk analysis

Confronted by protesters, contractors should first commission a security consultant to carry out a risk analysis, advises pressure group expert Chris Ledger. "They need to know who the protesters are, what parts of the business they might target, and what form the protest might take. They must have policies to tackle a crisis, and have someone internally to deal with it. It's a security problem, it's a public relations problem and it's a management problem."

Security advisers say the biggest mistake contractors make is to smear protesters with lies. "Don't call them terrorists or dole scroungers. They're not. Instead, expose them as hypocrites. A lot of the anti-road protesters at Newbury travelled there by car."

As the level of road construction dwindles, most contractors hope the protesters will vanish too. No chance. Dozens of Earth First! activists are joining the Oxford-based The Land is Ours movement, formed in December 1994. These protesters argue that schemes such as superstores are either environmentally unsustainable because they encourage car use, or are not in the public interest. "People don't want luxury housing estates with £250 000 homes," says Monbiot, "they want £40 000 homes for pensioners and their children."

In York, The Land is Ours is campaigning to prevent two former NHS hospitals being turned into a shopping centre and offices. Spokesman Jim Thomas says: "I'm a direct-action environmentalist. I was involved in direct action on the M11, M65 and Newbury, and there are a lot of us in York who have been involved in protests before. We will definitely take direct action if it's necessary to stop these developments."

DEEP IN SOUTH LONDON, sandwiched between the Wandsworth bridge flyover and a largely unlet block of luxury riverside apartments, lies a 5.2 ha strip of barren land that has lain neglected and forgotten behind high brick walls for the past seven years.

Forgotten, that is, until 5 May this year, when hundreds of activists from all over the country moved on to the site to protest against proposals by the site's owner, Guinness, to build a mixed-use development. The protesters wanted affordable housing and as much green public space as possible. The developer wanted a Safeway supermarket, a new access road and a modicum of housing. The council wanted business and employment opportunities and a more imaginative use of the river frontage.

Two months on, the crowds have dwindled to about 40 stalwarts who have set up home in a variety of makeshift structures, defying the eviction order that was served at the end of May. Meanwhile, Guinness awaits the verdict of a public inquiry into its scheme, held at the beginning of June.

Open invitation

The site is easy to spot from the busy main road. Brightly coloured, hand-painted banners proclaim "Land for the people", "homes for all" and "people not profit". What was once a forbidding iron gate has been thrown open, inviting local residents and passers-by to wander in.

Beyond the gates, the barren landscape of the former gin distillery land is dotted with assorted wooden structures, some inhabited, others the abandoned skeletal forms of half-built Mongolian-style yurts and geodesic domes. A larger building or roundhouse made from plywood and plastic sheeting serves as a community space where open workshops are held on topics such as "fruitarianism", "healing herbs", and "strategy and solidarity".

To give the settlement a sense of permanence, footpaths have been quaintly marked out with small stones, and communal gardens created for growing herbs, irrigated by an ingenious arrangement of plastic pipes and bottles.

Although the occupation was originally organised by George Monbiot's The Land is Ours campaign as a temporary protest, it has evolved into something more permanent. Sympathetic groups such as the Rainbow Tribe have added their weight and the whole community now bands together under the name Pure Genius.

Community members come from a range of backgrounds. A few have been involved in other ecological protests such as Newbury or the Pollock Free State in Scotland. Some are travellers passing through, others are officially homeless and would otherwise be living rough on London streets. Many are professionals who just want to make a stand.

Harsh reality

"Many people who come here ask if this isn't just a return to the 1960s," says John Pendragon (far right) of the Rainbow Tribe. "Although there may be some basis for that, this is not a dream, it's a reality. Homelessness is a reality, poverty is a reality."

Pure Genius has even submitted its own planning application to Wandsworth council detailing the minimum number of low-cost, low-impact housing units, number of trees, types of industries and crafts, and the community facilities they would like to see on the site. "They're all achievable. And they comply with all aspects of Agenda 21 [the ecology agreement signed by the UK at the Rio Earth summit]," says Charlotte (top, centre), a former magazine editor.

The village has also attracted construction professionals who care about what they build. Bill is a consultant structural engineer who worked on many big office developments during the 1980s, but who has since become disillusioned. A member of Architects and Engineers with Social Responsibility, he has lent his construction skills to the project, advising on the building of the roundhouse.

"I'm very interested in professional ethics and the duty of engineers to build things that are relevant to public needs. I was really pissed off with how greedy these people are and how little thought



DANIEL THISTLETHWAITE

behind the relaxed lifestyle and unflagging community spirit is resignation to the fact that they will eventually have to move on

they put to the uses of the buildings they want to build.

"I believe that experts with skills in this field should use them to the benefit of the community, not just for making money."

Michael (left), a qualified builder and plasterer, has constructed his own bijou waterside residence on the northern edge of the site using MDF boards salvaged from skips. Two storeys high and painted turquoise and rose, it cocks a snook at the neighbouring luxury flats and Chelsea Harbour across the river.

At first-floor level is the bedroom/living space, complete with river overhang for sanitary operations, with its own river view. Tucked underneath is the kitchen, and a picnic table constructed from discarded palettes provides the alfresco dining area.

Michael is currently building a pedalo from wood and oil drums which will be moored outside his home.

Some 20 yards away, Brendan is building his house (bottom, centre), which is based on North American roundhouse designs. A decorator by profession and unable to claim social security in the UK thanks to his Australian passport, Brendan had been living in Hackney, north-east London, when he got involved with the occupation.

"Everything went so well and we got so much local support that we thought we'd got a good chance of making this into a community project. So I thought I'd stick it out."

Ingenious design solutions

Progress on his house has been slow, relying on skips and donations for materials and an old trolley for transport. But he has come up with some ingenious design solutions, such as using a glazed door as a skylight.

So far, Pure Genius has attracted a lot

of support. Local residents, who have already voiced their objections to using the land for yet another supermarket, have been very positive about the occupation, taking advantage of the community activities it offers. Its fame has spread even further afield, with visitors coming from squatters' camps in Copenhagen and Rio de Janeiro.

But behind the relaxed lifestyle and unflagging community spirit is resignation to the fact that they will eventually have to move on.

"It will be sad, but at least we will have made people aware," says Brendan. "We will have got our message out to a wider audience that there is a simple solution to the homelessness crisis in Britain."

When the bailiffs eventually come, he plans to make one last stand. "I have built a platform over in those trees. I'll go up there and read my book. They'll have to get a cherry-picker to get me down."