

Pay As You Build

Leading Article in *Building Design*, 16 October, 1970

(Reprinted with kind permission)

IT IS SAID that certain enterprising developers have their eyes on land alongside the M5/M6 interchange at Filton, Gloucestershire. Prior to the arrival of the motorways this land was only good for farming—now, with exceptional communications provided by a beneficial Government, it is ripe for a sophisticated and intensive build-up of shops, offices, and factories.

Only one thing stands between the developers and making a fortune from speculation—the constraints of planning legislation. This situation brings into question once again the way in which the representatives of the people in such organisations as the British Transport Commission, British Rail, or the Ministry of Transport make use of *our* money.

An outstanding case was the lack of initiative by British Rail in failing to develop air space over the new Euston terminal station. Canadian architect Roderick Robbie worked for BR in the 50s (interviewed in *Building Design* 17.4.70) and told *Building Design* that in those days plans were put forward for development of Euston and other railway sites which would have attracted sufficient income to pay for the whole electrification scheme for the eastern region of BR—thus saving the taxpayer considerable sums of money.

Instead, the opportunity at Euston was missed (partly due to the lack of co-operation in the GLC planning department.)

Meanwhile developers D. E. and J. Levy went ahead and built at the "Euston Centre" office complex a few hundred yards up the road.

Now it is Mr. Levy who is reaping the rewards and not the suffering taxpayer (ironically enough, as announced by Scorpio last week, the tower block of offices is to be occupied by a *Government* department).

What is not sufficiently realised in all this is that the provision of lines of communication in the form of motorways, railways, and airways has a dramatic effect on the value of land around the access point, station, or airport. If the system of communication is paid for by the public at large it seems reasonable that the public should reap some of the benefits from rocketing land values.

How is this to be done? Basically, a much more wide-awake and commercially-conscious attitude on the part of top civil servants would help. In the case of the motorway example—why shouldn't the lines of future motorways be considered in relation to nodes of development?

Thus the MoT would not only buy the necessary land for roadworks but also, in co-operation with the planners, invest in a few thousand acres at nodal points for de-

velopment of the kind mentioned above. From then on by all means leave it to private enterprise—the leasing of such land for development would no doubt pay for a few miles of motorway.

A more far-reaching and effective course of action, as previously advocated by this paper (*Building Design*) would of course, be to institute a form of land-value taxation.

Joe Thompson

ON SEPTEMBER 17, Joseph S. Thompson of San Francisco died. Born on June 16th 1878, the eldest of a family of seven of whom the well known novelist Kathleen Norris was one, he started work at the age of fifteen and without the benefit of a college and university education, succeeded in establishing a highly successful electrical business and becoming a life fellow of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers. And yet, as he put it, he was "not regarded in my family as a good business man."

His successful business career, however, is but a part of his very full life. Joseph Thompson was a man of great compassion who did more than just commiserate with the unfortunates of this world. He belonged to many societies which strove to help those who were handicapped in some way, either specifically by some personal disability or generally because of adverse social conditions and poverty. He himself lost an arm in an accident in 1906 when he tried to board a moving train, but this did not stop him from learning to cope with most of the usual "two-handed" jobs, and it certainly did not stop him from writing many books and pamphlets on the causes and effects of poverty. He was a fervent supporter of the philosophy and economic teachings of Henry George and was convinced of the efficacy of the remedy George propounded. He became President of the Henry George Schools in New York, and San Francisco and served as President (later, President Emeritus) of the International Union for Land-Value Taxation and Free Trade.

His interests also included music and public speaking—at which he excelled having a good sense of humour, easy style and keen wit. At the Bohemian Club, of which he was at one time President (as his father had been before him) he was regarded as one of their most brilliant speakers.

His zeal for life stayed with him right to the end despite failing health in the last two years as evidenced by his writing of "The Pre-Posthumous Papers of Thompson—a Partly Truthful Biography." This catalogued his wide and varied interests which encompassed business, the arts, civic works, politics, and—in the largest measure—the humanities.

He is survived by his widow, Germaine, to whom we extend our sincere condolences.