

The derelict buildings of central Belfast



One of the bomb-damaged blocks.

BY OUR LOCAL GOVERNMENT CORRESPONDENT

A FALL OFF in investment is keeping dozens of derelict buildings in central Belfast — victims of bombs and arson — from being redeveloped, according to Government planners and local estate agents.

In Royal Avenue alone, several buildings still lie empty and unsightly — over a year after being attacked. Other sites in central Belfast where buildings have been demolished have become unofficial car parks and squats for mobile foodbars and bric-a-brac stalls.

The Department of the Environment, despite its wide powers for planning, admit they can do little to reinstate the former shops and office blocks that now lie empty and decaying.

"We can only order their demolition if they are dangerous," said a departmental spokesman. "As the planning authority we cannot force people to build. It is entirely up to the commercial market.

"The centre of the city won't improve until the entrepreneurs start building again."

And, say commercial property agents, this is not happening.

Mr James Smyth, chairman of the Incorporated Society of Valuers and Auctioneers, said:

"There is a lot of office accommodation to let in the new multi-storey buildings at the moment, so it would take great courage for someone to put another building on a site."

"There is just no market for developing these sites and their owners can't do anything but wait until there is a demand again. Some of the derelict buildings are in areas where it is not commercially viable to spend money on them."

Compensation, he added, was paid at the value of the building before it was destroyed — and not at replacement value. "Costs are high and so there is little commercial redevelopment taking place," he added.

Mr Gordon Mawhinney, of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, said there was a demand for more shops — but with high prices for land a developer would only put these up if he could also build offices above them. "And there is a lack of demand for offices at the moment."

Senior planners admit there is little they can do, although they are now at the outline design stage for major city centre developments at May's Market and Smithfield, in which Government offices will eventually go up and they hope private investors will join them in joint ventures for shops and offices.

Mr. Neville Hawker, Belfast's planning officer, said: "Many applications have been approved, but they will just lie about until the market forces are more favourable."

Planners' maps show significant gaps in business life in the city's heart.

The major shops and offices are concentrated in the Donegall Place area — and other points around the City Hall.

One planner said: "The focus for shopping is in Donegall Place and around the pedestrianised area near Arthur Square. Royal Avenue is almost dying now."

However, one major department store is now considering expanding its premises into Royal Avenue, and city planners say if this takes place it is likely to encourage smaller firms to set up alongside it.

"This should attract business life back again and then the derelict buildings would be replaced," said one planner.

One scheme the Government has is comprehensive development for the Smithfield area, which could result in shopping and small industry being set up in a wide area from Royal Avenue to the present Ulsterbus depot.

The Post Office, having already moved their sorting office to Tomb Street, intend redeveloping their site behind Royal Avenue and Ulsterbus may be closing down their Smithfield depot and moving to Great Victoria Street.

Outline plans are now being prepared for this area — and could include development of the former Grand Central Hotel, now an Army base, as well as up-grading of the fire-razed Smithfield market.

The plans for May's Market — beside Central Station and the Maysfield Leisure Centre — are also being drafted in Department of the Environment offices.

The city council is considering developing the former electricity building beside the market into a multi-purpose conference centre, and the Government plans to erect some offices for civil servants in the area.

Other plans are for car parking in the area now that most of the market traders have moved to new premises at Boucher Road. Sites for shops and offices are also being zoned — provided investment comes along too.

A Department of Environment spokesman said an announcement about the May's Market and Smithfield schemes should come in the next few months, but there are doubts about when work on rebuilding the areas will begin.

Some development could start fairly quickly, but it could be ten years before everything is finalised," he added.