

THE ARTS

My home Town

This month I want to look at my home town, MK, not as an economic success, though it surely is that. I want to look at it as an artefact, an art object worth noting, visiting and celebrating. And in coming months there will be plenty of opportunities to admire it, influence it and hold parties to uphold it. If there's anyone out there who doesn't hold my view, you can always hold parties to decry it. Just don't ignore it...

JOHN BEST
CHAIR, ARTS GATEWAY MK

Voalá, ctsy IF2016

Making Milton Keynes

Designing and crafting the city was probably the most ambitious, and arguably the most successful place-making adventure of the 20th Century. A young and creative team, appointed to a Development Corporation with political clout and almost unlimited resources, had a mandate to do something that hadn't been done before in the UK. Designing not just a new town, but a self-supporting New City, was probably the best place-making job ever. In town planning and the making of places, distinctiveness is all and MK is surely distinct. In many respects it's like Marmite or that delicacy of the Empire, Gentleman's Relish: people either love it or really don't like it. And rather like Marmite, dieticians are beginning to question just how good it is for you. The Australians have even banned Vegemite on health grounds! MK may need a makeover – or at least a little re-positioning. The design team drew on Ebenezer Howard's concept of Town integrated with Country, and also on urban designer Melvin Webber's ideas of people linked by communities of interest. In later life he came to regret the very car-focused philosophy of

some of his earlier projects. The original master plan was built on freedom of choice, mobility, communications, variety, attractiveness, public involvement and efficient use of resources. The first plans from consultants Llewellyn-Davis built the city around a grid of streets full of activity. The plan finally agreed in 1970 had a grid of streets full of fast-moving cars and more roundabouts than any city had seen before. The city of the car had been launched. It also had great variety in the neighbourhoods defined by the grid, and some stunning examples of the new embracing the old. A dozen charming villages are there to be discovered, including Milton Keynes Village which gave the city its name (not some opportunistic cross-breeding of poet and economist). Each one fit for its own chocolate box. Today Milton Keynes has almost two hundred residential neighbourhoods if you include urban grid-squares and rural villages. It has roundabouts and greenery; grid roads and underpasses; 200 miles of redways; a city centre with boulevards the scale of the Champs Elysées, pocket parks and portes cochere; and a Council team dedicated to naming new streets and neighbourhoods. What could be more creative than the Crownhill street naming plan...? If you're not familiar with that, check it out on Google Earth. It has a very strong cultural link.

The limits to growth

In 1972 international think tank The Club of Rome published a seminal work on resources worldwide, setting in train much of the sustainability debate and politic of the next 45 years, including UN Earth Summits in Rio, Stockholm and elsewhere. MK's

master plan, for all its groundbreaking commitment to efficient use of resources, wasn't quite the paragon of sustainability people hoped. Better than most and greener and more biodiverse than the farmland it replaced, it nonetheless failed some tests.

Much of its poorer population was significantly less healthy than the better-off sections; the road system started to clog up as rush-hour peaks built up at roundabouts designed for lower flows; and it had an unfashionably voracious appetite for green fields. What ticked all the boxes in 1970 ticks rather fewer in 2016. But still she grows!

What happens next

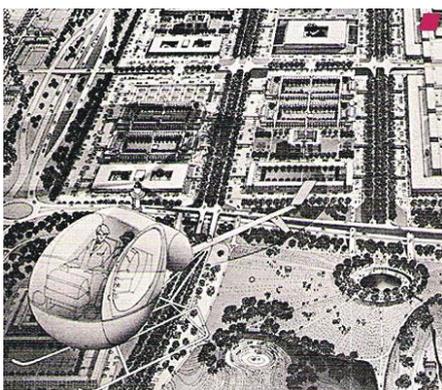
A place that goes on growing needs continual replanning. MK has grown faster than anywhere else, but always broadly to the same original design. Every time the national planning rules change, so MK like everywhere else, must reconfigure its plans. The country needs more houses but, generally, communities don't want them in their patch. MK has been a notable exception to that, at least it has until quite recently.

Plan:MK

If we're to carry on growing – people like access to the newest and best in shopping, leisure, schools and housing – MK needs a plan and every now and again MK Council pushes the planning boat out into the stream. Each new planning initiative carries its unique name: the current one is called Plan:MK. It suggests broad directions for MK to expand into current farmland and, to be fair, includes just one option to grow within existing housing areas over the next 15 years.



Boulevards and portes cochere, ctsy JB



Helmut Jacoby's celebrated helicopter view of CMK, 1990



Exploring the future, MK-style, ctsy MKCcl



Neil Higson's Cathedral of Trees, 1986



Gravity and Other Myths, ctsy IF2016

Vision 2050

All of that is really only treading water, and offering minor tweaks to the shape and size of MK. The really big design review is in a separate exercise, right at the cutting edge, looking at much more radical dimensions over a much longer timescale. Local politicians are bringing in state-of-the-art experts to think the unthinkable, challenge the easy conventional approaches, and take a 35-year perspective. What future does MK really want? And what will it look like? Oops... you got it. That future could render Plan:MK obsolete before the ink's dry. So Plan:MK in 2016 will be a caretaker plan and the real redesign of the city will necessitate a review of that plan very shortly after.

What can we expect for the artefact that is our city?

MK's future plans will cover our neighbourhoods, landmarks, city centre, protected green space, how we get around with great public transport on both road and rail. It should also embrace what sort of a cultural place the city provides – its people, institutions, facilities, programmes, reputation. And how, not just where it grows. Underlying all of that, MK's pride and joy is its greenery – more of it than any other urban area in the UK – and all designed from the start. The very first element of MK's design was the landscape framework, and its ability to moderate earlier flooding. More biodiverse than what went before; more water's edge than Jersey; more bridges than Venice. The soundbites roll off PR officers'

collective tongues, but they do add up to a very unusual artefact.

Second to its greenery comes its highway infrastructure – and again more of it than anywhere else: Cities find it difficult to stand still – just look at the impact of motorised vehicles on streets designed for horse-drawn traffic; or the impact of clean air legislation on what comes out of chimneys – or even if houses need the chimneys any more; or the impact of the internet on shopping patterns – or even if we'll be needing high street shops much longer. Our large-scale and long-term plans have some big challenges to overcome if they are to reconcile the inevitability of change, with the discomfort of people who may need to see some of the most familiar elements evolve in line with MK's continuing transformation to a much bigger place.

We're having a party

MK has its golden anniversary next year, celebrating exactly 50 years on 23rd January 2017 since it was first designated the biggest and best New Town in the UK's history. The city plans a year of celebrations across every community; MKGallery will open their new space; organisations all over MK will make their own local contribution, and plans are being set already. Watch out for several score of targets to do 50 of something, or involve 50 of something, or even just list 50 of something.

The 50 best free things to do on the canal; 50 heritage buildings to visit; 50 good causes to support; 50 miles to run; I've even heard of 50 miles an hour limit on MK's roads. That one may

not be successful. How well we party during our 50th year, will be an indicator of how well we'll do in our bid to be designated European Capital of Culture 2023, for which bids go in during 2017.

The party starts this year

Meanwhile... along comes not only the biennial International Festival IF2016 in July, but also the MK Festival Fringe. I've not seen the Fringe Programme yet but I have seen some of IF2016's highlights. You can't match great aerialists, and IF will bring Spanish/Argentine company Voalá to delight audiences. They've also announced Australian acrobats Gravity and Other Myths who will doubtless astonish. I've heard of some other amazing international performances but, for now, am sworn to secrecy... Nearer the time I shall write some more.

The city as Art Object

There is no doubt in my mind that Milton Keynes is as fascinating as a made object, an artefact, as it is as a living community, a place. As a growing place it must find a way forward to keep pace with change, with new social and economic realities, and with changes in the technology of our lives. And its mechanism must take the people along with it. The 21st century doesn't bring a Development Corporation, it brings democratic process. And the people, directly or through their representatives, become the artists of the new artefact. Not just by planning bricks and mortar but by making, supporting and nourishing cultural programmes. That's what makes the place and MK will continue finding its own, distinctive way. ■

NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL



While we wait for MK's own Bohemian Quarter, Arts Gateway has been busy opening Clyde House as our newest creative hub. We've started with a Boardroom for meetings of up to 25 people, workshops, presentations, etc. Upstairs we'll have our usual mix of creatives – probably around 15 people. We've already had creatives from MK, Bedford and Northampton interested in taking space. Downstairs we're trying something new: a

space dedicated to visual artists and their particular needs, with a support and event programme tailored to their particular needs. We also want to include a small studio for photographers to use.

Arts Gateway now has confirmed funding for three projects whose influence extends beyond MK: our annual *MK Arts Week* is now firmed-up for September 24th to October 2nd; our Creative Workplace Network project to link with creative hubs similar to us will lead to a sub-regional conference on 28th April in Luton. And we continue to work with *Bedford Creative Arts* to roll out their *Culture Challenge* database for artists working with young people.



And finally... for those who would like to get involved in any of those projects, either in MK or Northampton, you can sign up on www.meetup.com/artscentral, email me at john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk or call the office on **01908 241122**. We'd like to hear from you, wherever you're based.