



THE ARTS



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ARTS GATEWAY MK

This month I look at a project that we're currently developing. It may not come off, but it gives readers in Northampton or Milton Keynes an idea of the alchemy we aim for. There's a very unusual vacant building in a prominent position in Central MK and its owners have asked for ideas. We have a few of those and I'm going to run through them to give you a flavour. This is our take on what sort of activities can give a town a cultural edge. In a couple of months we'll know if we've hit the target.

**The former Milton Keynes Central Bus Station**

Here's how very unusual it is. Designed and built by the MK Development Corporation in 1983 it was intended to serve two purposes: downstairs were facilities for travellers needing somewhere to get a cup of coffee while they waited for their bus; upstairs were facilities for the United Counties Bus Company, with space for drivers to report in or rest and staff to run the services.

Outside is a massive overhanging canopy with bays for buses to come and go as they dropped and collected passengers. The building is so special that it's one of only two buildings of Milton Keynes' New Town era to be given Listed Building status. That's no small accolade, and it brings a duty to put the now vacant building to an appropriate use. The July 2014 listing citation links the building firmly and uniquely to the city: "The design of the bus station with its projecting canopy, exposed steel girders and lightweight supporting steel columns, draws on influential buildings by the acclaimed modernist architect Mies van der Rohe, whose ideology inspired the new town plan and its buildings."

**A chequered history**

After only 15 years in the use for which it was designed, bus operations changed, the buses

were deregulated and use of the CMK bus station declined. From 1989 Milton Keynes was to be mainly served by the Coachway just off the Motorway, rebuilt in 2010 and now the second busiest bus interchange in the country. So, since 1997 the CMK building has struggled to find the right use: for years it housed a nightclub; then part of the area under the canopy was developed into an award-winning skateboard park, The Buszy, designed by the skateboarders themselves. For several more years until the end of last year it was run as a youth facility. Since then it has lain empty apart from occasional lettings. The owners, part of MK Council, want it used, so do the community and so do we.

**Amazing goings-on in a 'siren building'**

Our overall objective will be to capture people's attention and imagination with the building, and demonstrate to the world that MK means cultural business. But exactly how...?

First of all it's such an important and prominent building that we want people to notice it from the outset and be curious to see what it is. Station Square is quite cluttered at present, a little hard to navigate and you hardly notice the former bus station. The building should help guide people to the commercial and retail centre – though not before

they've visited the building. We'll illuminate it with several striking light art projects, around the roof and under the canopy. This baby will be noticed!

Approaching the building, you'll notice activity going on and be drawn to one cool cultural café inside: Art and objects everywhere; a cultural showcase of the best up-coming local talent; very affordable food and drink from local suppliers; the very opposite of national chain coffee houses. Arts is what we do best.

Just off the cultural café there's a permanent space for changing displays of ideas that will fuel the next 20 years. The Ideas Box will show in turn what MK neighbourhoods will look like; how transport and traffic will work; what smart buildings in smart cities will feel like; how communities are evolving and diversifying; what an amazing cultural journey MK is following if as intended we bid to be European Capital of Culture 2023, and so on. Before that we have our big 50th birthday celebrations all through 2017. No-one else has done quite the same and as yet there's no guidebook.

So much going on that we're calling it 'Omnibus' at the former bus station. Neat, eh!

**Disrupting conventional technology**

Successful places need not only ideas, but people to take them and turn them into reality.



*Idiosyncratic café seating, for creatives, ctsy JB*



*Huge potential under the overhanging roof, ctsy JB*





Amazing creative programming at IFMK 2016, ctsy JB



Instant place from demountable buildings, ctsy JB

Entrepreneurs with ideas need somewhere they can bounce their creativity off others with different approaches, and where they can get the full range of practical support, from lawyers and accountants, to designers and makers, to bankers and angel investors. Upstairs we'll be providing all of that, with our hallmark 'diverse creative hub', set in a community of cultural expression and innovative ideas. We expect to be home to 60 digital creatives, picking up where we left off when a year ago we moved out of nearby Station House. The new digital community will have their own events programme, designed to draw interest from London and Birmingham as well as locally.

**Contemporary urban arts and culture**

The huge canopy around the building is tailor-made for outside events, sheltered from the worst of the British weather. We already propose to base a youth dance company in the dance studio upstairs. And the city is already supporting the art and sport of skateboarding with the existing skateboard park. Into that mix we'll bring street dance, capoeira and parcour, all dance forms with attitude highlighted in the city centre by Mótus dance this July. The potential for cultural events will be increased by

putting on food fairs, arts fairs and craft fairs. The project gets even more ambitious when we look at bringing in demountable and short-term buildings, great for creating an instant 'place', to frame the area for outdoor events. They will constitute a village street of very small independent art, craft and food outlets on the ground floor (think Gabriel's Wharf on London's South Bank, pictured above right). Upstairs they'll provide workspace or artists studios, to complement the young entrepreneurs upstairs in the main building. We're thinking pavilions, shipping containers or even converted double-decker buses. And as circumstances change they can be demounted and moved around, to create a living village.

**How would we deliver this?**

We know we need to give the owners confidence that our ambitious plans can be delivered, and also that what we propose will help to meet the communities' needs as well as the city's ambitious plans. We are, after all a local charity that exists for the benefit of MK. We don't need to make profits for shareholders; our trustees and volunteers all give their time for free. Our costs are low, using repurposed and recycled materials and other

businesses cast-offs, passing the savings on in low costs to our users. We've done all that several times before. The owners have asked the world for ideas for its use, with very little constraint. We'd like to talk to as many potential stakeholders or occupiers as possible and our rainbow coalition now includes over twenty-five key people and organisations. These include the original architect, potential users and community organisations, a group of angel investors for start-up businesses, a variety of specialisms and a great deal of enthusiasm. We need a bigger table.

**Conclusions**

This is a work in progress. We hope by the time we submit our proposal it will have been refined several times, may look very different and will press every possible button with the owners. We'd love it if their creativity and preparedness to take some risks led them into a joint venture with us to deliver something unprecedented, and appropriately innovative to match a very special building. Every city needs occasionally to find a new, and distinctive, way to impress the world. MK has an aspiration to be European Capital of Culture 2023 and we think we can help. ■



**NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL**

By the time *Pulse* hits the streets, Arts Central will have delivered three quarters of the first Milton Keynes Arts Week, which finishes in style on 2nd October. I'm confident it will have gone well, with almost 100 artists included in the



programme; exhibitions at over a dozen premises, and eight performances or workshops across five different venues. We started with the launch, part of our third *Festival of Nations* on 24th September, held at Norfolk House and Clyde House. This was a day-long opportunity for cultural communities to bring and celebrate something from their own culture: there were song,



story, costume, dance, art, poetry, food and film. Almost 30 cultural groups took part this year.

If you read this in time, drop into our body-painting, dance and music event *Bodies as One* on

30th September, starting at 7.30pm; and the *Art in Motion* event where artists paint a 15-minute canvas accompanied by musician and contemporary dancers, and the audience responds.

That, at 7.30pm on 2nd October, follows an exhibition *Private View* at 6.30pm, all at Arts Central, Norfolk House, MK9 2DN.

We didn't raise all the funding we wanted for MK Arts Week, but we're hugely grateful to MK Community Foundation as main funder, and four corporate supporters in Barclays, RSM, Dentons and Geoffrey Leavers. We benefited from support-in-kind from several more including videography from The Video News Factory and from Bullet Limited, to capture some of the magic. That's just the start. We're already planning how to take it forward and further in 2017 and 2018 so it becomes a key part of the region's cultural calendar.

*Norfolk House* now has only desks available, but we have studio space for visual artists at *Clyde House Studios*, CMK and at *Horncastle Barn*, just beyond Newport Pagnell.

**AS ALWAYS...** For those who would like to get involved in any of these projects, either in MK or Northampton, you can sign up on our website at [www.artsgatewaymk.org.uk](http://www.artsgatewaymk.org.uk) email me at [john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk](mailto:john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk) or call the office on **01908 241122**. We'd like to hear from you, wherever you're based.