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Interviewed by: Nathan Lindsell

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How did you get involved with Milton Keynes Council and architecture in general?

Well, I've been...I started work for an architects' when I was sixteen and didn't go to university until I was twenty-two. Worked in various places and then decided on a career in the public sector and in 1997, when Milton Keynes became a unitary authority, they wanted to set up a new architects department and I got the job to do that and then...and that's on a purely commercial basis – so, we ran as a company within the local authority – and after five years I was given a lot of other things to do. Not a promotion, I have to say, just a change of title and seven other things to do, most of which I wasn't interested in...*[laughs]*...but it included development and design and so I got involved in what was happening in the centre of the city and the new master plan for the centre of the city. And so that's how I got...well, I became responsible for things happening in the middle of the city, in terms of design and infrastructure.

Were there any particular influences or ideas that came to mind when designing the architecture of Milton Keynes? Was there any point of reference, or..?

Well, most of what I did was, you know, after a lot of the original infrastructure was already built and I kind of filled in the gaps, in a way, and did mostly education buildings and community buildings and stuff like that, so not an awful lot in the city centre. But what I did do in the city centre was a lot of master-planning, along with English Partnerships, on a lot of the areas that were left over. And part of that master plan was a new plan for the whole of the centre, from the station to the canal at the bottom of Campbell Park, four hundred hectare master plan, which was published, I think, in 1999, most of which, as with many master

plans, remains unimplemented...*[laughs]*...and will probably never be implemented.

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And it's in the course of that that, you know, actually reviewing a city centre which was only...then, only...well really, thirty years old when we started doing it, it's difficult to sort of appreciate that you're dealing with a piece of history, you know, an important piece of history, because it's so recent. And, for instance, nothing was listed, nothing was protected in the city centre at that time and there was nothing stopping it from all being swept away and a whole new city centre being done, really. And a lot of the changes that were being thought about at that time were to do with infrastructure, like what to do with the parking, for instance, how to make the city centre more interesting – because, for many people, you know, all that happened in the city centre was working and shopping. Nine o'clock at night: nothing; eleven o'clock, in certain areas where the clubs were, you know, a little bit of activity; but mostly not a city centre that operated sixteen hours, let alone twenty-four hours.

So part of what we began to do with that was to actually propose some changes in the city centre and the major one was actually moving the car parks to the edge of the city centre, building multi-storeys on the grid roads and using the space vacated by surface parking for other things, like a new public square and new civic offices...well, commune...civic hub and stuff like that. And the idea was that people would have to walk through from the car parks into the city centre and that gave routes that you could put a lot of, what's called, secondary and tertiary uses on – so, the things that Milton Keynes doesn't have 'cause it's all primary space: so, expensive, multi-national shops and things. And the idea was it would be like, if you like, like a version of Stony Stratford: when you walk through from the car parks you've got all those little shops and little businesses and stuff, so giving it a lot more vibrancy.

Course, none of this happened...*[laughs]*...but that's the kind of background and that's...that was...you know, what we were looking at was trying to protect the beauty and the value of what was there but actually move it on, you know. A 1967... – well, even before that – a 1963 master plan and forty...thirty-five, forty years on is a very different world, you know, from what Britain was like in the 1960s to what Britain was like approaching the millennium. And so loads of things were changing and you can't set things in aspic. You know, any kind of city in the world changes and *should* change, you know, because, if you try and preserve something, all you do is you preserve this kind of historic conceit, in a way. And so the idea was that we recognise that things were changing and that, you know, because Milton

Keynes became so reliant on the car – which, of course, was never the intention, you know, everyone says Milton Keynes was built for the car but it wasn't, it was built for multi-modal traffic. And things changed in the original master plan because it was supposed to have streets with traffic lights not roundabouts, originally, but that was a big change, which was an engineering change, 'cause roundabouts were cheaper than traffic lights. And, with the traffic lights, they would have slowed the grid roads down and the idea was that the local centres were actually on the grid roads and the housing was behind, so all of the...and the greenery was in the middle of the grid squares. That was the original master plan and that kind of engineering change actually gave us Milton Keynes that we have today. And that's an interesting...I mean, you know, that is a fact, a recorded fact, but most people don't know that or don't actually believe it and for a, you know, very modern city Milton Keynes is...has an awful lot of creation myths about it. And so that was my job, really, was to try and take something which was so recent and hadn't really been recognised for the quality that it had and bring it up to date, if you like. And most of that work is, you know, not really going to be implemented in that way anymore.

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But the single...you know, world-class building that we do have is the shopping centre of course – and that *is* now listed – and that building is the kind of starting point of what the city centre should be like in a way, you know, everything should respect that building. But we should endeavour to provide some proper public space, you know, we have no proper public space in Milton Keynes. Originally the shopping building, of course, was *the* public space: belonged to the city; belonged to the people; go in there day and night; do whatever you liked in there. And then, you know, it changed to private hands and had the doors put on. So Milton Keynes public space was lost and we still don't have that public space back so...and, you know, that's...

So was there, from the start, it was intended to be a sort of, like you say, a multi-transport city, to be a lot more greener?

...and cycling, it sort of makes it more of a...

Yeah, it does and obviously it wasn't designed for skateboarding.

No, I know it wasn't.

But the interesting thing is, is that, of course, because of its modernist infrastructure – because of all of the blocks and the rails and the, you know, basically the highway and the public realm infrastructure – it became an absolutely great place for

street skating and for urban skating and that was obviously a by-product of what was actually designed here and the kind of model for Milton Keynes, if you like, the aesthetic model, was based on the work of an architect called Mies van der Rohe, who was German or Dutch...*[laughs]* – it's gone. I think he was Dutch originally.

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Yeah, well of course the skateboarding wasn't in anybody's mind when the city was originally designed but it was...the kind of static ideas for Milton Keynes were based largely on an architect called Mies van der Rohe, who was German or Dutch, and went to America just before the war after a brief stint in Britain, and built a lot of stuff around Chicago, so the kind of...the great American office building style and apartment style and so on and pavilion kind of style architecture was largely the work of...the influence of Mies van der Rohe. And the original architects of Milton Keynes were all kind of trained in the fifties and sixties, early sixties, when that kind of architecture was very much in the mind of architecture schools and so on. And so the infrastructure, this clipped, modernist infrastructure, was virtually made for street skating, for urban skating, and all of the big granite blocks and the rails and steps and so on, you know, became a paradise really and I think Iain Borden, from UCL, said, you know, it was up there in the top five spots in the world, in terms of where people wanted to come and skate, because of the infrastructure. And of course the two hundred and fifty kilometres of redways was an ideal way of getting around on a bike or on a skateboard. So...and, of course, none of it intentional but, you know, that's the great thing about...well, about anything, about a building, about a piece of infrastructure, is it should be capable of taking what was unintended as well as what was intended. And nothing makes me happier than actually doing a building, seeing it a few years later where people are using it in an entirely different way, or using a room for something else, because it's about inhabiting a building or inhabiting space and that's what skateboarders do: inhabit the space created in Central Milton Keynes.

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How did you get involved with the Skate MK project with Milton Keynes Council?

Well, when the...when we were working on the master plan – the 1999 master plan – it became apparent that there was a lot of friction being caused in the public realm by people wanting to use it in different ways, really – you know, people wanting to cross the road, so you have friction between pedestrian and cars; people wanting to use the pavement: you have friction between pedestrians, people in cars and skateboards. And so

you have this kind of...and, again, you know, a good public realm is all about managing conflict because conflict happens in the city all the time. And conflict may be too strong a word but, you know, competing priorities in space. And the way that we got involved is, there was a city centre management team who were looking at the city centre as part of the master-planning exercise and I represented the council on that, and there was a situation which arose where the businesses in Milton Keynes had put pressure on the police to do something about skateboarding and so the police actually started to arrest skateboarders for criminal damage. But it transpired pretty quickly that that was not...that they couldn't charge skateboarders with criminal damage because that requires intent and it wasn't the intent of any skateboarder to actually damage what they were skating because, obviously, you couldn't skate it anymore if it was being damaged. People were also scared of being run over by skateboarders and so on, you know, it's conflict in the public realm, and so there was clearly a big kind of tension there between people who wanted to skate and do anything they wanted anywhere and people who didn't want them doing it at all and so the...Richard and I – and Richard used to work...he was...worked in the landscape team that was one of my responsibilities – and we thought there might be an opportunity to try and build some kind of consensus on it, because we recognised the benefits of skating. I mean, I...personally, I had a friend called Philip Boyle whose son was Bod Boyle, who was a European champion, skateboard champion, for two years and so I'd already had a little background with, you know, having a friend who was very much in different kind of skating but...and so we can see the value of it, because it was, you know, good, clean, harmless fun...[laughs]...if you like and got people out of the house...

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And so, you know, we can see that it had great benefits for young people because it got them out of the house, it was athletic, it was an activity, it was very skilful, it had all sorts of spinoffs, like taking photographs and filming and things, and we thought it was something that should be nurtured, encouraged really. But because of the conflicts it had to be managed and so we decided that we would start a consensus-building exercise and, by that time, we'd kind of got the police a bit on board and got the city centre management team on board – the actual shopping centre itself – and so we had this meeting in a room at Xscape, where we had a professional consensus...professional consensus-builder and we eventually, after probably about a three-hour meeting... – were any of you at that meeting?

The one in 2003 I think. Was it..?

It was in Xscape, upstairs room at Xscape, where we had...

That's where I mentioned that Dogtown video at the cinema. Is it that..?

I think it...yeah.

I do remember it vaguely.

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And yeah, so we had this consensus-building exercise with a professional consensus-builder and probably about...I think there were up to sixty people in that room and of course, you know, we had the full spectrum: some people who didn't want it to happen at all, some people who wanted to do it anywhere. And over the course of that time we managed to identify five strands that we could take forward and one of them was where it could be, another one was how it might be funded, another one was branding...*[laughs]*...and...I can't remember what the other two were but I'll think about it. But these five strands were then made into five groups of people to take it forward, each one actually headed up by a young skateboarder, you know, in charge of the group but involved people, you know, from the police, from this business community, from this and that. And so this group had to go away, meet on its own and come back to a later meeting with ideas about funding, ideas about locations, ideas about branding, etc. etc. And surprisingly, you know, that worked really well. I mean, it took three years and a lot of crisps and a lot of cans of drink and stuff and it had to be managed very carefully from kind of my perspective because I can't say that the councillors were actually mad keen on skateboarding. I think most of them were pretty much in the camp of the businesses, you know, which saw it as a liability. And the issues – I mean, you know where the issues were – I mean, one of the biggest issues of course was noise, you know, particularly in places like Sovereign Court, you know, where there were a lot of skateboarders and a lot of people, you know, working around it. And, of course, you know, the fear of being knocked down, so...you know, so very real concerns and, with most of the council members, they were their primary concerns.

And so we moved it forward sort of pretty slowly really and managed to, you know, build a good idea about what we were going to do and that was basically to develop a series of routes and honeypots and of course the first honeypot became the Buszy and...and again, you know, this was working with the group as a whole, so that wasn't me and Richard, as relative outsiders, if you like – you know, neither of us being skaters – working with people who, you know, did understand it – you lot and people like Rob Selley of course, you know, he was absolutely instrumental to all of this 'cause, I daresay, without Rob we wouldn't have the facility that we have – and...but then

recognising that, if we created a honeypot, a major honeypot, which was where people went anyway and where people had gone for years... – so it was kind of building on a patterning approach, if you like, you know, people...we knew people congregated there. At the time the building was disused, the area was disused, there wasn't anything apart from Subway...*[laughs]* – actually, there wasn't a Subway then I don't think – and so there was no real conflict down there. And so the idea of creating the Buszy – which was specifically designed with you lot and by Rob Sully, you know, who knew something about what was required – and the whole idea of recreating some of the best spots in Milton Keynes, like the Beige, and taking some spots from around the world, like a bit of the Embarcadero in San Francisco and stuff, and putting them in that place, you know, did create something that was pretty unique and at one time, you know, regarded...in fact, I can't...I think it was 360 Magazine said, you know, the only world class thing that's happened in Milton Keynes in twenty years. And, you know, for some time it was, you know, a real world class thing 'cause that was the first urban skate plaza ever constructed. And obviously, you know, it needs something...well, it needs to change for a number of reasons but... And it was incredibly cheap, I mean, it cost a hundred and thirty-three thousand pounds, which the council eventually gave the money to. And I don't know if...were any of you at the council meeting where they approved that? 'Cause they thought that was wonderful because, you know, after being in the closet for three years, me and Richard eventually had to come out and tell the council what we were doing and it was just picking the right time. And because you lot turned up – you know, seventy young people in the council chamber – when they were discussing whether to give the money or not they all thought that was democracy in action, you know, they thought it was bloody wonderful and so you got the money.

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And so, again, that's a, you know, process of managing; with you lot coming to that, you know, that kind of secured that. If we'd have taken a dry report to the council three years before and said, you know, this is what we should have...should be doing, I doubt if we would have done any of this. And then, of course, when it was opened there were six out of the seven cabinet members standing there on this big skateboard thing, you know, believing it was their idea, you know, which is great...*[laughs]*... 'cause I'm a great believer in that you can get anything done that you want as long as you don't mind who takes the credit. And that really worked there.

I mean, in all the things I've done this is definitely one of my, if not *the*, you know, one of my biggest things, I consider to be my biggest success, in a way, because it does deal with...you know, it deals with a difficult issue and it comes up with a really useful

solution that's actually what people want – not what me, as a designer wants because if it was me as a designer you would have had, you know, a nice series of Dog Bowls and things, you know, a really sculptural thing. And that's...and when I originally got this I thought, 'God, it's going to be great, we're going to have this lovely sculptural thing in Station Square.' But clearly, you know, that's not what urban skating was about so...and that's...

I think that's probably about it really and I think I...I mean, you know, just talking about the future, because I think, you know, the fact that we're doing this is a huge boost to securing street sports in Milton Keynes for the future 'cause, as you know, the Buszy's under threat, there's already things been done there – the barriers and so on put up – that means it can't be used like it used to be used and...but the idea of the Buszy was that it would never be a permanent structure, you know, we knew that – it was scheduled for demolition at one time – and so we knew that would only be there for a certain period of time but the idea was that we would have moved it somewhere else, and that's the thing we need to focus on with the Buszy and that, you know, it's probably served its day, you know, slipped down the rankings in the world as a facility, and it would be great to do a new one somewhere else. And I hope that, you know, this exercise actually makes the council or Milton Keynes development people actually recognise that this is something that still needs to happen and there is a...and it is a very valid thing to happen in Milton Keynes. So yeah, that's it really.

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How much damage do skateboarders do to the granite and the architecture in Milton Keynes?

Well, it does damage it...

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Yeah, yes that's right and yeah, of course, there is some damage to the infrastructure caused by skateboarding but, you know, none of it's intentional because skateboarders want to use it, so... One of the things we actually did at the Buszy, and one of the justifications for getting the money for the Buszy, was that we would make blocks and edges out of different materials so they could be tested, including bevelling the edges which made it less likely to be damaged, so I have to say that I don't think much of that was followed through with other things happening, although there were one or two blocks made since – and Richard could talk more about that – and it's...you know,

and if we did put in new infrastructure for future routes and things and honeypots, the...what we've learnt from taking the Buszy apart, if you like, could be used for that, make things more robust.

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You said the city's always changing and it's always meant to. The master plan's never going to stay the same, it's always going to...

Well, the 1999 master plan, which I spent quite a lot of time on...*[laughs]*...you know, very little of that was implemented. And where the university is going, that was supposed to be the sustainable residential quarter which was, you know, three and a half thousand people living in the middle of the city, and a really good scheme – going to be built by Places for People, so a social developer – and the recession killed that and I spent three years on working on that and, you know, it's great it's going to be used for the university but that's not what was intended. But again, you know, the life of cities is so long that you have to...you know, you have to accept that things change and sometimes things change between being a drawing and being another drawing. And so a lot of urban design, you know, doesn't happen. That's why I prefer doing architecture, you know, it's more immediate. Graphics is very immediate, of course...*[laughs]*...but urban design, you know, a lot of master planning is the kiss of death; just doesn't happen.

But cities do need to change and that's the thing, you know, that I was promoting with the 1999 master plan. There's a lot that's right about Milton Keynes but there's a lot that's wrong: you know, the fact that we don't have any smaller shops and stuff, any real kind of community funky stuff; you know, like the reason Wolverton works well, reason Stony Stratford works well, is it has all these little connections and little spaces and little leftover bits that the city centre doesn't. And that's what we were trying to do, was create those bits, and are still...you know, in the future it doesn't look as though it's going to happen. I had a walkabout on...looking at the...some of the master-planning things that are going...well, I don't think...master plan is the wrong word because there's no real master plan now, you know, they're going to shove sixteen storeys on the food court, of housing, which was never intended to have a tall building there. The tall buildings were only ever supposed to be... (What's the word? To navigate by?). Landmarks! Landmarks. You're useless. *[Laughter]*

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Well, I was going to say really about the, like you say, cities evolving and that. I was saying a lot of people give Milton Keynes stick, that it's this dull, lifeless, just grey, dystopian town

– the city that nothing ever happens in, like you were saying about the culture and the shops. A lot of places...people criticise Milton Keynes that it's got no central meeting place, it's got no independent shops. I was going to say, how do you think skateboarding fits into that, like looking..?

Well, it fits in...you know, it fits in really well but...

I mean, skateboarding fits in really well to the idea of having an infrastructure which promotes an alternative culture, in a way, and...you know, so things like smaller shops, things like clubs, things like, you know, outdoor cafés and food trucks and stuff like this and that is what's lacking in Central Milton Keynes. I mean, it is why people, you know, describe it as a bit of a dull place because it doesn't actually have a twenty-four hour life, it doesn't have the opportunities of the space that we have at the moment for these things to grow up in. I mean, there are some things like the Box... (What's the thing in Croydon called? Box...?)

Box Park.

Box Park, you know, which are a load of containers right near the station on a bit of land, you know, temporary use. That provides a hell of a lot of life in the city. There's another one in York that I went to. You know, that would be great to have something like that in Milton Keynes, you know, so much bloody land just sitting around. You just occupy it, inhabit it, you know, for a short space of time, in the expectation that you move on and...you know, and I think one of the things that we do wrong with cities, in a way, is that we build permanent stuff and...but I think, actually, just taking space and using space, in the short term, you know, creates life, creates vibrancy, creates opportunities because it's cheap; that land is just sitting there. I mean, we've got so much bloody land just sitting there that doing something like that would be great. I mean, like Station Square, you know, a huge, Stalinist space, nothing happening in it, to a few times a year, you know, just create a little festival, an ad hoc festival, just containers and food trucks and skate stuff and, you know, bands and whatever would be great; just animate the space. And that's what we don't have. And I think, in reality, you know, it's a big ask to see the...that we'll have lots of little Stony Stratford and Wolverton-type shops and little factories and stuff like that in the middle of the city but it's not a big ask to actually inhabit space for short periods of time and move around the city. We've got a lot of land so that's what I'd like to see for the future really. Yeah, less permanence, more kind of initiative, in a way, yeah.

Are there any areas you think would be a good place to do a skateboarding development now? Or do a temporary space?

Well, you know, again, there's Station Square and it's huge and of course there is a consultation going on in Station Square at the moment about what to do with it – for God knows how many times it's happened before – and there's so much space there that to actually have a replacement for the Buszy there would be, you know, it's definitely possible. Whether it would be roofed I think is an issue and I think it would be nice...you know, one of the great things about the Buszy is it does have a roof and it does have lights and it kind of defines the space a bit more than just having some blocks but...but even to, you know, just replace it in Station Square I think would be...would be a good thing to do and I think it's the best kind of space to do it because, if it's good, you're going to have people coming from all over the place to use it again and the fact that the Buszy was near the station has always been a good thing for that, so... And, I mean, I don't know about where else is just...yeah, I think...I suppose the thing that we never managed to do was this idea of a route and there's so much land to the back adjacent to the grid roads again, you know, you could actually make complete routes up from Station Square up to Campbell Park or somewhere, so...yeah.

Anyone have anything else? I think we're quite happy with that.
Good, thanks.

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END OF INTERVIEW