

The Architect`s Tale

DEREK WALKER

Derek Walker was chief architect/planner for the Development Corporation from 1970- 76. He applied for the job because he felt that Milton Keynes was, at that time, "the most glamorous project in Europe". Now back in his private practice, he works and lives in Great Linford {though he also teaches in America, principally in Los Angeles}. One of his current projects is the design of Wonder World, a theme park at Corby.

Milton Keynes was designed in the late sixties and the master plan approved shortly before I arrived as Chief Architect and Planner in 1970. The pressure on the Development Corporation to get things built after the lengthy planning process and enquiry was intense.

The most telling contribution I made to the New City was the recruitment of a superb professional team of architects, planners, landscape architects, interior designers, technicians, modelmakers and quantity surveyors. The economy was buoyant and consequently we had a multi-national team in the early days, as to many designers Milton Keynes promised to be a world design show case. The climate we created was immensely stimulating and we had tremendous fun. In the early years forty or fifty of us worked sixteen hours a day and the lights of the Development Corporation rarely went off. People were working until eleven at night and would be back again at seven in the morning.

The First Priority

The process of design and building is a lengthy one and much of the city you see now was conceived in the early years. The first priority was with design policies as opposed to individual schemes – the existing settlements, the villages, the landscape policy, attitudes to parkland systems and infrastructure. The pattern of the city today is about these decisions.

Milton Keynes was going to be the largest, in terms of growth, of any of the New Towns built in the United Kingdom, but there were only about six hundred people in the building trades in the designated area in 1970 and we estimated that the need was 8,000 to meet the original programme. An early problem was convincing contractors that there would be work here for the next twenty years and therefore it was going to be worth their while to move here, but to begin with, most of them would `bus their workers in from as far as Stevenage, and that was very costly to contracts not overblest with generous budgets.

At that time we built to a cost yardstick. A specific allocation of money for each public housing unit. The allocation goes down as the density goes down and as our mandate was to build a low density city {we were as one in the condemnation of the still fashionable high rise density solutions for family living} so we bit the bullet and by ingenuity and a little rule bending tried to produce the best possible housing with

lower cost allocations. In the early years this meant disappointments – light weight systems and traditional contractors on the same bidding lists, which led to some strange compromises . . . It seems extraordinary to think, looking back, that Netherfield was designed in brick.

Politically there was a swing away from the New Towns Movement in 1973-4 and life got increasingly tough over the next few years. The Labour Government started putting more money into the inner cities and when the Conservatives came to power they backed privatisation as a solution for the New City. This meant little or no more public housing and that is a tragedy for any new town, because good public housing must be the backbone whether built for rent or subsequent purchase. The quality of private housing in the City is a great disappointment to me – it is not of a high enough standard. It is good to mediocre when it should be good to excellent. In space standards, landscape and layout it lags far behind the public housing unless it is in the higher price bracket.

We tried to make sure that in a hundred years` time certain characteristics of the city would be memorable. One hopes it is going to be exquisitely landscaped. It will have beautiful parks, it will have a very handsome city centre because the quality of design between the buildings {forget the buildings themselves because they will change over the years} is delightfully urban. The plane trees in the boulevards will be eventually seventy feet high. In twenty years` time the varying quality of individual buildings is going to be less conspicuous because the real quality of the centre is going to be the landscaping and infrastructure which binds it together. The design team worked hard to ensure that the one thing which would always survive in the Centre and Central Area Housing was the quality of the infrastructure and the space between the buildings.

My real frustration is that we have lost a whole series of projects that would have helped mature and beautify the city in a very positive sense. In the City Centre we have lost, with the demise of the City Club, the chance to look at leisure in a much more interesting and original way. Discos, a bingo club and a cinema complex is not what I would call leisure for a place like Milton Keynes. For its size there is not enough of regional significance for people to do yet, and despite the Community Workshops, localised activity in the schools and local centres, there is still a massive need for a central centre for arts and leisure activity.

The great problem in England is that the leisure is in the hands of unbelievably uncreative and ill-sorted bedfellows, impoverished members of the aristocracy, brewers, ex-professional boxers and bookies, and the new diet for Milton Keynes is far from stimulating as yet, The lack of leisure facilities in Milton Keynes has made it something of a pioneer town. It is those cultural overlays that I feel is essentially missing. An awful lot of people in the community are doing a fabulous job. There is no shortage of characters living in the city but I wish we had a Paul Getty to underwrite galleries and permanent collections ...The patronage that our Victorian forebears offered their home towns with that mixture of charity and guilty conscience that gave us so many fine churches, museums, galleries, parks and follies, is no longer available. Life and business, alas, is in the hands of accountants and

bureaucrats. The sky has become very grey and we tend to get gruel now instead of apple pie.

The Patina of Age

Even what we have could be better. I would like to see a much more volatile management in the shopping building and more late night activity areas. I long for the second generation of kooky shops which extend the range of possibilities from the diet of Boots and Woolworths. This is the great problem of City building. Only the patina of age and change brings the balance and variety the population deserves. I suppose one continues to be guilty that with the greatest will in the world a Development Corporation cannot underwrite instant maturity and balanced facilities.

Many of us who worked on Milton Keynes and trained in America as well as England and one of the fashionable academics in the sixties was Mel Webber – he was patron of personal mobility; the mobility brought about by universal car ownership. The oil crisis in 1973 and the depression of the eighties places that dream into perspective. Though the city was designed to have a comprehensive Red way pedestrian system away from the grid roads, it was recognised even with our visions of personal mobility that the public transportation had to be comprehensive and inexpensive – this to me is an area of primary failure. The electrically operated buses which would have linked Central Area Housing and the City Centre, subsidised by the City's profit levels has not happened. Dial-a-Bus withers and dies and the total concept for the City's major bus system is less than adequate for the dispersed city as we now have it. We have got the worst of both worlds now. We have not got the adequate bus service that was envisaged and we certainly have not got the personal mobility because people cannot afford it. Good transport should be a principal priority in any developing city – it cannot be seen as a luxury.

It is difficult to isolate one's most satisfactory collaborations architecturally. It is easier to be more satisfied with overall concepts, but two of my favourites in which I have had a hand were the Sewage Works and the Shopping Building in Central Milton Keynes. The first because it was retrieved from a fate worse than death – scheduled as an engineering nightmare, we made architecture out of its seductive geometry – and the Shopping Centre because it provides the centre of the city with an environmental quality which I hope is contagious.

Of what has been built I think the local centres are not interesting enough or creative enough in small business opportunities. Politically the marriage between Central Government, Local Authority, Development Corporation and County tends, like most committees to water down the gravy. Compromise is not really a word that should describe the design and construction of a new city..... but in the end that unfortunately is what it is about.