

The General Manager`s Tale

Fred Lloyd Roche

Fred was the Development Corporation`s chief executive officer for the first ten years, during which time the physical pattern of the city was established. At the time of his appointment he was the youngest general manager of a new town and the first with architectural background. He left because "it was becoming somewhat bureaucratic towards the end". He is now deputy Chairman and Managing Director of the Conran Roche Ltd, a firm of architects, planners and development consultants based in the city centre.

I was invited by Lord Campbell, the Chairman of the Development Corporation, to come to Milton Keynes in 1970. We had a series of meetings and I was offered the job of Director of Design and Production. In 1971 the Chief Executive left and the board asked me to succeed him. I left the Development Corporation in 1980.

The quality of what you build is dictated by economic, social and political considerations – made in central government and at Board level. Designers are often left with the problems after decisions are made without the full implications having been realised. If you can influence the decision making you can affect policies and resources, which enables you to provide a higher quality of environment.

The way the organisation works is with a non-executive Board of which Lord Campbell was Chairman. The Board decides strategy and policy and those decisions are carried out by the Executive Management Committee. The EMC is comprised of the directors of each activity – architecture, planning, estate management, housing, finance and social development.

Under the New Towns Act, the Corporation is given powers to negotiate for land at certain pre-determined rates and in the last resort it has the power of compulsory purchase. In the event, I don`t think compulsory purchase was used at all, the land was all acquired by negotiation, although the powers were always there in the background.

In 1970-73 there was quite a large amount of public capital investment available from central government. With a project as large as Milton Keynes, there will be phases when there will be money shortages and others when there is going to be money available. One key to success is to do as much as possible when and how you can. In the early years we stretched infrastructure very well. We built a lot of infrastructure, and when the lean times came, having opened up that land we developed it for a few years until we could get some more money for infrastructure. The whole process has been called one of sophisticated chaos.

A Thousand Houses per Annum

In 1971-72 we became successful in attracting industry into the area but because of labour and material shortages we couldn`t get the houses built quick enough. We were summoned to the Minister of Housing and told that we would have to provide

pre-fabs. We refused to do that and introduced industrialised building instead. If you look at Netherfield, Coffee Hall and Beanhill, They were built at a time when you couldn't get bricks or tiles in the quantity we needed because there was a building boom on at that time. Don't forget we were trying to build a thousand houses per annum and the materials and labour just weren't available. So it was either a matter of saying to firms: "No you can't come", which would have been a tragedy as they are the firms which now form the economic base of the city, of putting up prefabs which would have remained permanently, or building those houses.

If you look at the quality of houses from 1975 onwards when the situation became more easier, On the whole we've achieved a quality of housing as good as, if not better than any other community throughout the world in the last thirty years. But then I am a bit biased.

For the first five years – and we always recognised that was going to happen – it was absolute purgatory, because this part of the country was very rural. This monstrous new city came along, churned up the countryside. There was mud all over the roads and we were never able to achieve perfect phasing with other facilities – public transport, adequate shopping provision and health care. I said sophisticated chaos earlier, and it really was. You have a plan but there are so many external pressures – building strikes, changes in government, cutbacks, changes in health authority, a thousand and one factors. And trying to make all these things work in programming is immensely complex.

The most important factor in the success of Milton Keynes is that in ten years of relative national economic recession thirty thousand jobs have been brought into the city. To create a new urban community with the sound economic base for the future is the major task. One talks about the unemployment levels in Milton Keynes but if you take the number of new people in the city and compare that figure with the number of new jobs and imagine you could build a brick wall around Milton Keynes, you could see that there is full employment in the city. What's happened is that Milton Keynes has become a regional draw which means understandably, the unemployed from Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard and the rest of the Region came into the city to work which leaves fewer jobs for the residents of Milton Keynes.

In terms of the original vision a lot has been achieved. Employment continues to grow, the city centre is an immense success. I wish there were more commercial recreation facilities particularly for youngsters, but that was a matter of the pressures of the market place which was not ready to provide it.

I have always believed that the quality of environment does affect a community's attitudes and behaviour. If you look at Central Milton Keynes, the quality of the place and its management has meant that there is virtually no vandalism and the degree of vandalism in the city as a whole is very low. I believe a major factor is because the people have responded to the quality of the environment. It's a very high ideal but in trying to provide standards of excellence in all aspects of the city, the hope is that one would affect people's attitude and make the place a more caring one. There are indications of this but it is not as manifest as one would have hoped and is very elusive quality to define. There are still a lot of old people in the city who feel

neglected. There are still deprived kids. So it is not as caring a place as one would have liked to see but I suspect that applies to the society as a whole in the seventies and eighties.