

Name: Tim Skelton
Date of Birth: 1954
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Interviewed by: Mel Jeavons and Roger Kitchen
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(00:00:05) *So, today's date is the 25th of March 2021. My name is Mel Jeavons and I'm interviewing for the Homeworld project. Can I ask you name and the year you were born please?*

Timothy John Skelton. I was born in 1954.

And what was your job at the Development Corporation before Homeworld was announced?

I joined in April 1979 as a Negotiation Surveyor in the Private Housing Unit.

And what did that involve?

Basically, the PHU was a multidisciplinary team charged with delivering private housing within the Development Corporation, and so we had architects, engineers and surveyors working alongside each other and negotiating with developers and their architects too. They get schemes designed and built.

And how did you get involved in the Homeworld project?

One of my responsibilities became individual self-build housing plots and my involvement with Homeworld was, as much as anything, was, well Homeworld was seen as an opportunity for the Corporation to sell self-build plots to people and I was kind of linked in with that because Homeworld was going to be the opportunity for people to come to Milton Keynes, see it and potentially buy houses they'd seen at Homeworld, the kit houses, and erect them on their own plots.

And why did the MKDC invest so much in Homeworld?

Good question! I think it was, well, if you go back a little bit, the shopping building had opened in 1979 and I think that changed the perception that people had generally of Milton Keynes, and

we had ceased to become a collection of funny houses and it made people start taking the city more seriously and it wanting to be an attractive place to live and private housing was a key part of that!

And what was your initial thoughts about the idea?

To be honest, I don't remember! I just...I had come, as I said, in 1979 and so I was twenty-four at the time, attracted by Milton Keynes would be an exciting place! It was kind of just one of those things you, it just didn't seem unusual really! It was just part of the Milton Keynes experience.

And why was Bradwell Common chosen as the site for Homeworld?

Why was Bradwell Common chosen? I don't know! I would guess because it was service land that was available and it was quite structured, so it was quite a neat set-up and it worked for giving access for visitor car parking and everything like that, I think.

And so, what preparations were made prior to the call out of house builders on the site?

What sort of preparations were there? I don't know, I think it was just advertising and a press conference, just putting the whole idea in front of housing developers and spreading the word around and speaking to the existing developers with whom we were dealing at the time.

And it was originally billed as 'Homeworld 80', what was the delay?

Why was there a delay? I don't know because I wasn't involved in that, but I guess because we didn't have enough people coming forward. Probably we tried to do it the Milton Keynes way, quickly! And we didn't quite have enough time, I think, was why.

I mean, how easy was it to attract home builders? Were they given incentives? Talk us through that.

I don't think there were any incentives. The thing that's fascinated me, because I was involved in Energy World as well, more closely involved in Energy World, and you tend to get different types of people wanting to take part. There were the people who had something to sell, people had the kit houses and there were developers who were already in Milton Keynes, such as Welmar particularly, who thought they ought to be in because they were already in. There were developers I think

that wanted to get into Milton Keynes and there were entrepreneurs like Roger Walker from New Zealand, who just saw it as, I think, a bit of fun and to market themselves or an idea that they had.

(00:05:00)

And how did you cope with the fact that not all of the fifty plots were taken up?

Well, that was my responsibility then was to sell the balance of what we had, which was fine! We...it took a little time but in amongst all the plots we were selling at the time, I don't think it took necessarily any longer than anywhere else. But, in some cases we negotiated on with people who had been involved with the exhibition but in other cases, it was just a collection of private individuals. Some built exhibition houses, I think, a couple of Swedish timber-framed houses and there were a couple of terraces of houses that were built by a contractor who had become a developer in the course of Homeworld, not as compact in terms of time. The time he was involved with Homeworld. He built them as houses to sell.

And what oversight of the building did you have while it was all going on?

In terms of oversight, I think the Corporation must have had a Clerk of Works on site, I would guess, just controlling everything. It is a bit like the Chelsea Flower Show, although not as congested, not as compact in terms of time scale but just co-ordination. But I don't know, I would guess there were all sorts of arguments as to people straying over boundaries or something like that when they were building. But the general impression I got, certainly being involved in Energy World, was that it was just good will all the way round. So, everybody, was focused on being a part of an exciting exhibition!

And what about the opening ceremony, what were the issues around finishing it in time?

I don't know because I wasn't actually at the ceremony. I do vaguely recall that one or two of the houses weren't complete and I think the Roger Walker's Vintage House wasn't complete. I know there was a lot of last-minute landscaping put in to make the site look better but in terms of the opening ceremony, I know it was disrupted by protestors who were using the opportunity and the fact that we had John Stanley, the Housing Minister coming to open it, and they were protesting about housing problems within Milton Keynes and the rented housing stock, various problems there were. And that kind of overshadowed, I think a little bit, the opening ceremony.

I mean, what do you remember about the public reaction to the houses?

The public reaction I think was just fantastic; people loved it! We had...was it 140,000 visitors. I was at the MKDC's exhibition tent for many of the days, not the whole day, but visited on most days and people just loved it; it was just an exciting exhibition to come to and have a day out in Milton Keynes.

And what was your proudest moment, personally, in relation to Homeworld?

I don't know! If...this is a very esoteric thing connected with the whole development, and this is a very personal thing...is that, in selling the plots afterwards we had redesigned our marketing brochure and we wanted a house to put on the brochure. There was a house that had been designed for a plot in Neath Hill that never got built, by an architect called Trevor Denton, who worked at the Corporation, who had left since when I knew him. It was a lovely house and I thought it was a shame that it never got built and I asked Trevor if we could put a little graphic of it on our plots brochure, which we did...not the Homeworld plots, it was plots afterwards, but somebody saw it, a builder and bought two of the Homeworld plots and built this house on it. So, this is nothing to do with the exhibition and it is incredibly personal, and I am probably the only person...apart from probably Trevor and probably the only one, who remembers but it was just a lovely, lovely little thing. And the thing is, that the builder who built it, built this house and next door, a block for studio flats and he then went on using the same architects to build in Energy World; actually, as an exhibitor and then he went on to Future World as an exhibitor, doing a similar sort of thing.

So, he is the only person that was involved in all of our three housing exhibitions, which was a lovely little thread, and it wasn't just through purely me choosing this drawing but the fact that this little drawing ended up in a house that got built! That's the sort of most personal thing, I think.

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And the other thing I remember is that a lot of time I spent in the exhibition tent, the Corporation tent and we'd, I think we had just commissioned a new marketing video that was played on a relatively constant loop and it featured some photos of the police performing at the Bowl, which was, was it 1980, the previous performing at the Bowl, which was 1980, the previous year and year and there were just these little clips of the police singing 'Walking on the Moon' and I just...every time I hear Walking on the Moon my mind goes back to being in the tent and Homeworld! Those are the two very personal memories.

And how successful do you think Homeworld was?

I don't know! I think it must have been successful. Well, 150,000 people came, so it makes it very successful. Forty years later we are still wanting to commemorate it and also, it went to Energy World and without Homeworld there wouldn't have been an Energy World. And Energy World was very important too, not necessarily in the city but energy conservation in general.

Yes, that's leading on to the next question really, is how important was Homeworld in terms of Energy World and Future World?

I think Homeworld gave the Corporation the confidence to do a second exhibition, and that was, whether we would have done it without Homeworld, I don't know. Because if you actually look and compare the two, I think there was only about 70,000 visitors to Energy World. So, it wasn't as commercially successful, but it led to improvement in the energy standards.

But also, one of the effects of Homeworld is that I was looking at a book about Thomas Heatherwick, the designer who designed the Olympic flame, and in it he talks about coming to an international housing exhibition in Milton Keynes with his dad, as a teenager and so from the Olympic flame back to Homeworld there is a connection. And his dad saw it as somewhere exciting. He brought his son to inspire him, who knows!

Is there anything else that you think we've missed that you would like to tell us?

I don't know! It was a fascinating experience, and it was just, as someone who worked at the Corporation, it was just kind of part of life. It didn't seem exceptional really that you just got used to doing these different things. It's good that it survived intact, largely, none of the houses have been demolished; none particularly altered, which is good. And I just think it is a fascinating part of the Milton Keynes story and our architectural history.

And I noticed it more with Energy World because I knew I was more involved but just the bonhomie of being part of a team with all different people from architects to site workers to developers, all working together for a common cause and that sort of thing is a kind of minor reflection really of working for the Development Corporation and working on Milton Keynes; this fascination that you are involved in a collective project with lots of other people who have all their different opinions and different views but will see the whole as being more important than the individual experiences.

But yeah, I mean, other reflections; we sold one of the plots to a chap called Harold Else, who was one of our planners and he

did the admin side of planners, and he wanted, he was a single chap and he just wanted a small bungalow and he came to us and said, "Well, I don't want a whole plot, I just want part of a plot!" and so, we said, "Well, you can't!" but we agreed in the end, as he said, "You know, you're marketing the housing exhibition, the housing site for individuals. This is what I as an individual want to do!". And so, we did agree to sell him part only of this plot.

Another thing is, we sold another plot to somebody who ran out of money, so he built a bungalow instead of a house, which was quite good! Sold one plot to a Development Corporation architect, Neil Johnson, so that was one.

(00:15:04)

Another thing which taught me something from the exhibition, well, this was afterwards, that we had an issue with a developer building his house because he had damaged a lot of paving slabs and they were all cracked and we said to him, "Look, you've damaged these! Your house is now finished, and you have got replace them all!" And he said, "Well, I didn't damage them!" and we knew he did but what we knew was somebody living across the road, when they started work they had record ...they recorded about the same time they recorded the condition of all the paving slabs in case he damaged any. So, he knew what was damaged the other side of the road and we did, and it kind of taught me a lesson, because if we had rung the developer up and said, "We think you're lying!", then it would have caused some friction. So, what we said, "Well, OK. We note what you're saying. We have actually got a record of all the damaged slabs and will be making an inspection in three days' time!" to see whether that actually matches what is there on site!" We went there three days later, and all the paving slabs were replaced.

And that was a, kind of like the Japanese thing, I think a Japanese thing of, I don't know quite what it is but I think it is basically not calling a person a liar, but it is letting them save face, I think! So, it is quite an amusing story.

Have we missed anything? I think what is disappointing is the way when you look round the site now the landscaping is not well maintained and it is showing it's age a little bit that way, but that's kind of a general problem, I think, with maintenance generally and the cost of it but, I just see it as a great thing!

Roger Kitchen:

You were involved weren't you, in the decision about building the disability bungalow or whatever it's called, 'Mobility Bungalow.' Weren't you involved in that?

The 'Mobility Bungalow', my recollection, and others may alter this, is that the Corporation was concerned about the number of

plots that were empty and that people weren't coming forward to develop them, because we had obviously, I think, marketed fifty plots and we only ended up with about thirty houses. So, there was this whole thing then about how do you make the exhibition look decent; you fill it up with various trade stands and things. And we decided, I think, to fill up one of the plots as the Corporation and we designed a bungalow for the disabled, designed by another architect, Mike Dawson, no longer with us, sadly. And we got a tame developer, Greenwoods, who were building two other houses on the site, to make it appear that it is 'badged' by them when you look at the exhibition brochures. But I suspect we did a deal with them whereby we underwrote costs or, ensured they didn't run it at a loss.

And I was speaking a few months ago to Sabina Dawson, Mike's widow, about if she'd got any recollections and she said that she remembers them sort of sitting down in rooms in their own house, looking out of windows, trying to get the windowsill levels right and things like that, so that people would, so it would be a good bungalow for the disabled to live in.

Roger Kitchen: The other thing is that you were in the private housing community which was all about getting private developers to build houses, yet this was led, wasn't it, by David Crewe, which was a kind of like, information, he was information wasn't he? Or was he...?

I think it was led by David Crewe because it was seen as being a marketing exercise. But then underneath that, the day-to-day project management of it, getting all the developers in, getting all the houses built, etc., was then handled by, the project manager was Giles Charrington, who was my immediate boss.

(00:20:00) So, that was how that was handled. But I would guess because it was a marketing exercise for the city, so I guess that was why that was like that.

Roger Kitchen: Now for me, the final question is, bearing that in mind, you were trying after '79 Mrs. Thatcher said no more rental housing, so there was this drive to involve private developers much more. What effect did Homeworld have in terms of the interest from private developers? Did Homeworld have a direct impact on interest from private developers in building in Milton Keynes?

Did Homeworld have an impact on developers? I am not certain. The view I've had through having been involved with the private housing in it is that actually private developers are quite cynical, you know, in a sort of positive sense of the word; they have a job to do, they have responsibility to shareholders, they would build houses in Milton Keynes if they could sell them. I don't think they would, you know, that they saw Milton Keynes as a

fertile ground. And I know with Energy World I spoke to one of the developers afterwards and asked him was he taking any of the lessons from Energy World to housing schemes elsewhere in the country? No, he wasn't basically! That was the part of the deal from building a house in Milton Keynes, they had to be energy-efficient, but he wasn't going to build energy efficient houses elsewhere, until at least the government told him to do.

There were one or two developers who are, better, this is probably not the right word, who are, I can't quite think of the word, more inspirational and we had two key developers in Milton Keynes at the time, I think, who you see reflected through Homeworld!. One is Greenwood Homes, who built the pyramid and who built a timber-framed house and were the contractors on the mobility bungalow and they had been involved in Milton Keynes for a number of years in Great Linford and they have just started a big scheme in Oldbrook. And they felt it was their place, sort of being involved in Milton Keynes. But also, a company called Welmar who were a very high-quality developer based in Cheshire originally in the North West. They came down to Milton Keynes because again, they saw it as a fertile ground for purchasers. And they did a scheme, they started in Bancroft, not Bancroft, sorry! They started in Two Mile Ash, then into Bancroft but their MD, Tom Baron, saw Homeworld as being a very positive thing to help advertise them and they commissioned the 'House for the Eighties', the Sunday Times House for the Eighties. You know, they saw that as a good thing!

But generally, I think that run-of-the-mill developers might have seen it as their duty to be involved but I don't think they would have done it if they did it just to lose money on it deliberately. I think they saw advantages themselves in doing it. They are not charities; I don't have a problem with that.

Roger Kitchen:

You were, if you like, the Corporation had tried to promote this home for the future, and I have just been editing the stuff to do with the Money Programme and that was very much 60% on the bills and so on. When you were in that tent, seeing the reaction of punters that were going round, how interested do you think people were actually in terms of homes for the future, or was it just a day out! Or do you think, you know, because as you say, the after Energy World. I talked to Paul Ffello and he was working for Broseley Homes and he said, you know, "You know, we had so many different varieties of housing, there was also this thing about people thinking it was all a bit technical, all these things, that actually we are very, very conservative about the kind of housing that we buy in this country!" Did you see that reflect, or do you think people got genuinely excited by that?

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I should think that people like to think...the only reaction I remember is someone coming in and asking to see the...was it £10,000 or £20,000 water bag that was in the Cadillac bungalow. That's the only thing I can remember positively. But the thing about some housing for the future and what have you, one of the things obviously was to market building plots. And if you look at the building plots we did after Homeworld over the years, probably two and a half thousand, they are all fairly conservative. I think they would probably be a lot different if Kevin McCloud and Grand Designs had been around at the time. But I think we are basically a conservative nation with housing, which is disappointing, but I think basically people want a brick box with a pitched roof. You look around Milton Keynes and some of the architect designed houses were slow to sell; Latimer at Calverton End was a classic example but that was wrapped up with building issues as well.

But now the city is of a size, I think, where these sort of niche developments attract people who are looking for something different, you know, [Hamner?] Road in Simpson, early in Simpson and had a lovely scheme of bungalows, well, two schemes of bungalows in Milton Keynes Village. It's an interesting thing, but I think we are a conservative nation.

When you actually looked around there were so...well, you look at the Corporation scheme at Pennyland on, based around passive solar design, it doesn't look any different from anywhere else, it is just cleverly designed so everything faces more or less south, so you get the benefit of the sun. But its, it is quite sad really, but I think we are probably too conservative.

But ... Hey ho! That's the British nature!

Roger Kitchen

Good! Fantastic!

(00:27:18)

[Interview Ends]