

## 2. Understanding CMK

### A city that will last through all horizons of history.<sup>3</sup>

- 2.1 In the long sweep of the history of human civilisation, cities developed by accident or design in places of strategic importance: locations were mostly strategic places of connection and market places on trade routes, or were chosen to suit the politics of oppression (to control a local population) or defence (to protect a local population).
- 2.2 Our own city of Milton Keynes occupies an unusual place in history. One consequence of the Second World War (1939 -1945) was the creation of an opportunity for radical changes to come about. People felt they deserved better homes and a better life after what they had been through together.
- 2.3 Following the first General Election after the War, a welfare system introduced unemployment pay, help for those in need, and a contributory State pension for all; in addition, the right to develop land was nationalised.

- 2.4 This last point is really important with regard to the story of Milton Keynes. The Town and Country Planning Act 1947 gave every town hall the responsibility to make plans for their area, including making Green Belts around the major cities to stop them sprawling into the countryside.
- 2.5 Buckinghamshire County Council was particularly aware of these pressures. Under the guidance of the County Planning Officer, Fred Pooley, in 1964 Buckinghamshire County Council decided that the best defence against the pressures for development in the south of the County was to create a new town in the north, in the vicinity of the existing towns of Bletchley, Stony Stratford and Wolverton (see Figure 3).
- 2.6 The Government was impressed by the suggestion from Buckinghamshire County Council, and took up the idea. Much to the dismay of the County, however, the Government appointed a New Town Development Corporation to create the new city, and that organisation decided to commission a fresh master plan<sup>4</sup>.

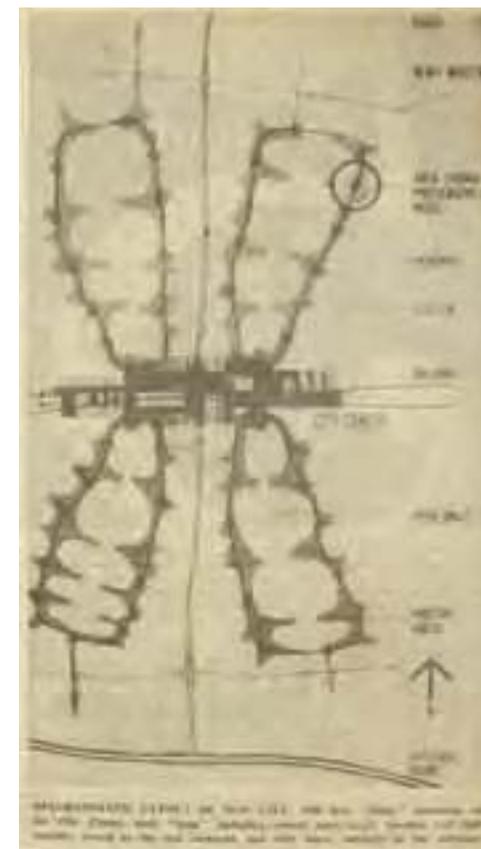


Figure 3: Pooleyville Plan, 1964

<sup>3</sup> Lord Campbell of Eskan, 1973

<sup>4</sup> the consultants were Llewellyn Davies Forestier Walker Weeks and Bor

- 2.7 The master plan, approved in 1967, provided for a city of 250,000 people with employment to serve a wider population drawn from the surrounding countryside. It proposed a great grid of city streets which gently followed the landscape and created pockets of development land roughly 1km by 1km in size (see Figure 4).
- 2.8 The founding principles were beautifully simple and brief:
- » Opportunity and freedom of choice;
  - » Easy movement and access, and good communications;
  - » Balance and variety;
  - » An attractive city;
  - » Public awareness and participation; and
  - » Efficient and imaginative use of resources.

## CMK Master Plan

- 2.9 The master plan for CMK, like the rest of the city (see Figure 4), was for low density, mixed development with generous landscaping.
- 2.10 Safe, convenient access was vital and engineers and architects worked closely together to create a robust infrastructure. Unusually, the infrastructure was more important than the buildings, which they expected would come and go over time. The infrastructure was to be the eternal skeleton, muscles, arteries and nervous system of the entire urban body, bringing it to life.
- 2.11 The plan created an exceptionally safe, spacious, flexible and relaxed way to keep goods, people and services flowing, as the centre grew.
- 2.12 Parking and pedestrian movement was at ground level. CMK was one of the first city centres designed for the needs of parents with prams, the elderly and disabled, providing 'barrier-free' access for all, using underpasses

and kerbs at a level with pavements in parking areas and along slow streets. Even the cross-city grid roads sink, as they pass the city centre, to create continuous ground level footpaths connecting surrounding estates.

- 2.13 Delivery trucks had separate service bays, away from the main roads, and pedestrians were carefully segregated from traffic. They used a network of safe, shallow underpasses, and numerous covered walkways or 'porte cocheres' which flagged up safe places to cross the tree-lined Boulevards.
- 2.14 Milton Keynes, with a planned population of 250,000 or thereabouts, was always envisaged to have a 'sub-regional' function within the South East Region.
- 2.15 From the beginning, CMK was designed to fulfil four roles simultaneously, as a:
- » Local centre;
  - » District centre;
  - » City centre; and
  - » Sub-regional / Regional centre.

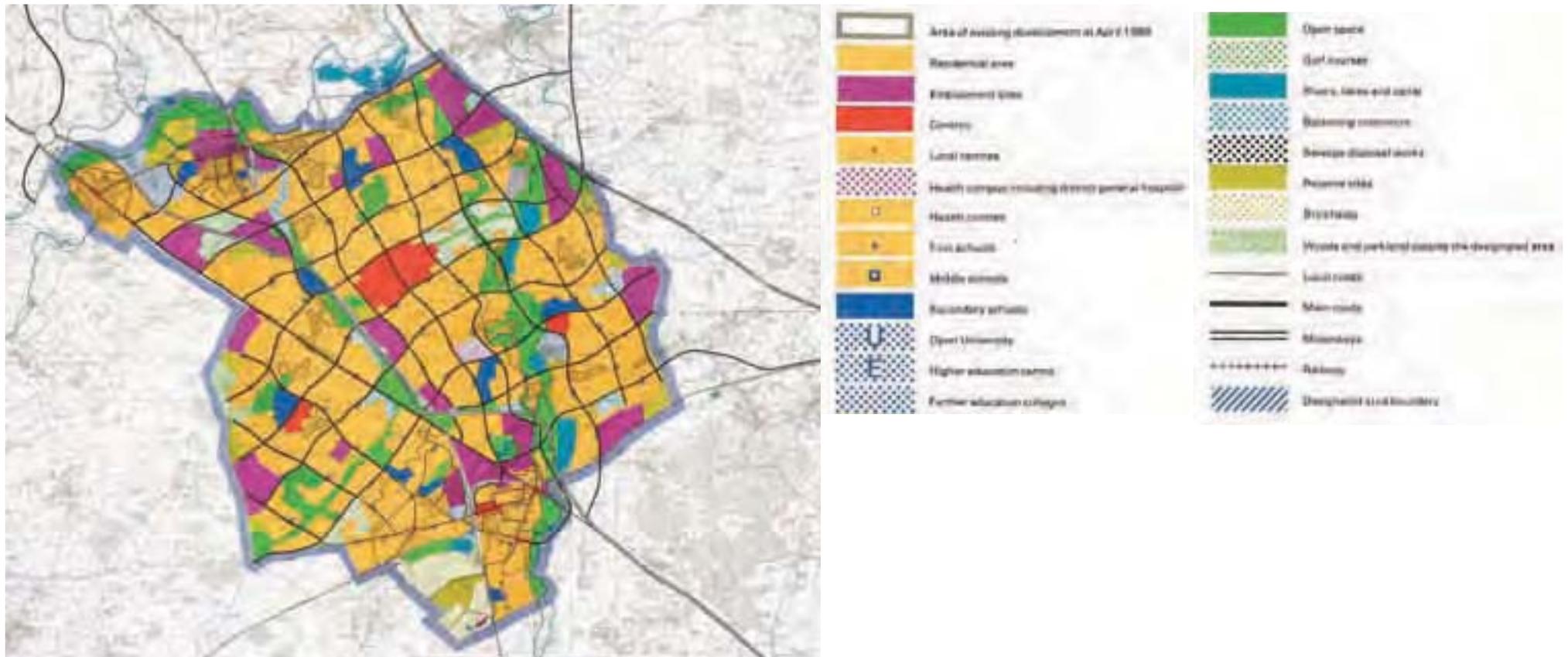


Figure 4: Master plan for Milton Keynes, 1967

## CMK as a Local Centre

- 2.16 The residents of CMK, just as in any neighbourhood, need a number of facilities within easy walking distance of their home, such as local shops, local services, a local health centre, pubs and places to eat. Only primary schools were proposed for CMK, but none have been built due to its low population of children and spare capacity in schools surrounding CMK.

## CMK as a District Centre

- 2.17 While 'Central Area Housing' and the CMK Blocks between them were planned to provide for local needs, taken together the population would be able to support some activities on the scale of District Centres in Milton Keynes: major supermarket shopping, recreation facilities such as swimming pools and sports halls, places of worship, large health centres, garages and petrol filling stations, and larger restaurants.

## CMK as a City Centre

- 2.18 It was always understood that the new city would need a central place for city-scale institutions, major social and civic gatherings, and for the highest possible level of shopping which would meet the needs of people from all over MK and its hinterland. This was the place for the traditional attractions and functions of town and city centres to be accommodated - the central place.
- 2.19 As the centre for the whole city, this was obviously the place for the town hall, major civic institutions such as the Library, the city church Christ the Cornerstone, the main railway station, law courts, major government offices, the Milton Keynes Theatre and Gallery, and the central park (Campbell Park). It was also the appropriate place for concentrations of bars and nightclubs, restaurants and all types of spaces and places for social gathering, and for the major city open air market.
- 2.20 For office developments, CMK provides a more urban choice than is available in the wide variety of employment areas around the city. The proximity of Milton Keynes Central Station remains an advantage.

- 2.21 Expert advice in the early 1970's was that CMK could support about 50,000 square metres of shopping. In an act of bravado - the Development Corporation had the vision of 'city' now firmly in its grip and its aspirations for the new city centre were that it should be a place of national or even international prominence - it was decided to create arcaded streets and squares of high quality shopping of twice the scale recommended by the experts - 100,000 square metres. The Development Corporation built the largest shopping building in Europe at the time, an astonishing building which English Heritage listed in 2010. Envisaged as the 'covered' high street of CMK, the building offered an interesting, idealistic mix of shopping, leisure, internal landscaping and civic space.
- 2.22 The Shopping Centre was critical to MK's success, both at home and abroad. *It was visible proof of commitment. It helped us sell the whole city to big industrialists. We had the prospectus, the plan, and we were delivering it too.*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Bob Hill, Commercial Director, MKDC.

## CMK as a Regional Centre

- 2.23 In 2003 Milton Keynes became one of four strategic growth areas for the South East Region. The same year, the 'Oxford-Cambridge Arc' - with Milton Keynes and Cranfield University at its fulcrum - was promoted as having intellectual and commercial connectivity and productivity of national importance.
- 2.24 It was now officially recognised that Milton Keynes was a place of regional growth potential and national importance. CMK could not be considered as the centre of a self-contained new town, but formed the heart of a project of very great significance.
- 2.25 A Sub-Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) was developed for an area covering (clockwise) Milton Keynes, Aylesbury, Bicester, Brackley, Daventry, Northampton, Kettering, Wellingborough, Corby, Bedford and Luton. As the largest town in the cluster by far, and with the most diverse and strongest economy, and also centrally located and with a positive attitude, MK now had the opportunity to assert itself and grow to be a true regional centre. More intense development was planned for CMK.
- 2.26 These officially planned strategic growth schemes ran into local political difficulties. There was a strong feeling at the time that now that Milton Keynes was emerging as a regional city, its city centre land should not be used up to build blocks of flats that could be more readily accommodated elsewhere in MK. The land in CMK might be needed for regional scale activities, such as major office developments, government administration and local civic buildings, commerce and leisure attractions.
- 2.27 The local political difficulties which stalled the plan for Milton Keynes to grow to the scale of being a regional centre, as envisaged in the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Sub-Regional Spatial Strategy, have been followed by national political difficulties and the economic recession. However it has emerged that all local planning authorities are required to provide not only the homes and jobs that are needed in their area, but also to co-operate with neighbouring councils to provide for growth to aid the national recovery (this is set out in the *National Planning Policy Framework*). In the absence of hard data it seems reasonable to assume that further expansion of Milton Keynes will be planned.
- 2.28 The Regional Spatial Strategy of *The South East Plan*, which was recently revoked on 25 March 2013, identified a number of 'Regional Hubs' of which Milton Keynes was one.

- 2.29 The network of 22 regional hubs varied in precise function and scale but they were intended to be a focus for:
- » investment in multi-modal transport infrastructure both within and between hubs, supported by initiatives to re-balance travel patterns through behavioural change;
  - » other new infrastructure, including health, education, social and green infrastructure, and public services;
  - » new investment in economic activity and regeneration, including skills and training investment;
  - » new market and affordable housing, to support the creation of higher density 'living centres;' and
  - » new major retail and employment development.

- 2.30 Milton Keynes was also one of the 'regional hubs' identified as being capable of stimulating prosperity, with further growth being unlocked through targeted investment in infrastructure. *The South East Plan* summarised its vision for Milton Keynes as being a major administrative and commercial centre. It was considered to have high level of access to strategic rail and road networks, and be a key interchange point between inter-regional, intra-regional and local rail services, with the scope to improve opportunities for public transport through development of the East-West rail corridor.

- 2.31 All this is in addition to what *The South East Plan* had to say about the importance of town centres in general. The priority, which nests inside what is still Government policy expressed in the *NPPF*, is to promote their vitality and viability. This is to be achieved by planning for the growth and development of existing centres through focusing development in the centres and encouraging a wide range of services in a good environment, accessible to all. Development includes business accommodation, residential, leisure, arts, culture, tourism and retail.

## The Future

- 2.32 CMK has largely fulfilled its promise of becoming a local, district and city centre. Over 30,000 people work in CMK and it attracts over 30m visitors a year. The night-time economy has grown markedly over recent years with further development likely. The latest company to relocate its headquarters here is Network Rail, bringing in 3,000 further jobs and creating more via suppliers.
- 2.33 It is certain that in preparing a plan for CMK for the next 15 years or more, CMK will achieve the status in practice and reality of being a regional centre, with all that means in terms of its scale of commercial civic and cultural functions and attractions.

2.34 It is also certain in preparing a plan for CMK, that to be successful in the long-term, 'CMK must remain true to itself.' It is the public space that is the most important 'building' of all in CMK. The public realm of CMK is its greatest achievement, providing a framework in which the buildings and activities of the city centre might come and go over time, with only the best of these given long term protection as heritage assets. It is the quality and extent of the public realm in CMK that asserts its status as a true city centre with great ambitions.



*Aerial View of CMK*