

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in The Senses and Society on 16 June 2017, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17458927.2017.1310487>

“You've never seen anything like it”: Multiplexes, Shopping Malls and Sensory Overwhelm in Milton Keynes, 1979-1986

Lauren Pikó

Lauren Pikó is a PhD candidate in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne. She researches the cultural politics of postwar British landscapes.

Abstract

From 1979, the new town of Milton Keynes embraced a new marketing approach which emphasised its capacity to elicit wondrous, uplifting, and desirable bodily sensations. This coincided with the transformation of the town's central landscape, with Britain's largest mall, The Shopping Building opening in 1979, followed in 1985 by Britain's first multiplex cinema, The Point. This new direction in Milton Keynes' marketing rejected national media narratives of the town's sterility, while reorienting its administration away from the now-toxic political legacy of Keynesianism and towards consumer capitalism. This presented the Shopping Building, The Point and Milton Keynes as a whole, as containing forces that intensified and proliferated potential sensory experiences which resisted quantification and could only be understood fully through immediate presence. This deliberate non-specificity equated the undifferentiated general ideal of sensation with the liberatory capacities of consumer choice, while concealing the encroaching constraints on human possibility arising from commodification of sensations and public space. While critical accounts identified this new determinism as a damaging force, Milton Keynes was nonetheless able to redefine its public image during the early years of the Thatcher government by association with private consumption and private sensation.

Keywords: Milton Keynes, mall, multiplex, new towns, sensation

The decision by Historic England to grant a Grade II heritage listing to Milton Keynes’ Shopping Building in 2010 did not pass without public comment. Opened on 25 September 1979, the Shopping Building was constructed to provide an economic and social center for Milton Keynes, which had been designated in 1967 as the largest town in Britain’s postwar new town programme. It was also Britain’s first Gruen-style shopping building, and was long its largest, as well as the largest in Europe (Walker 1982, Jewell 2011, p. 321). Much of the objection to heritage listing came from owners and investors in the site; critical media commentary, however, also used the occasion to reiterate now-common readings of Milton Keynes, and also of shopping centers, as sterile, artificial, sensorily-deadening spaces opposed to the ideals of heritage, and therefore not worthy of preservation (Daily Mail 2010, BBC 2010, Turner 2010, Bingham 2010). Despite these objections, the Shopping Building was successfully listed, primarily for its architectural and aesthetic merits, but also reflecting its unique historical position “as the purpose-built centerpiece of Britain's last, largest, and in planning terms most innovative new town, which created a retail space realised on a civic scale” (Historic England 2010).

Located across the road from the Shopping Building, Milton Keynes would also become home to Britain’s first cinema multiplex in 1985. The Point multiplex housed ten cinema screens, a bar and restaurant in a silver-mirrored, neon-lit ziggurat pyramid structure, transforming cinema attendance into a multisensory experience. Despite several public campaigns to preserve it, The Point has not received heritage listing and at the time of writing awaits demolition (Historic England 2013, Milton Keynes Citizen 2014, BBC 2015). Yet alongside their formal architectural innovations, the Shopping Building and The Point played crucial historic roles in transforming Milton Keynes into a site of unique consumer experiences which drove its significant economic growth during the 1980s, while also acting as central symbolic landmarks in the reimagining of Milton Keynes’ marketing and public image during the potentially hostile early years of the Thatcher governments.

This was no insignificant feat; indeed, from Milton Keynes’ designation in 1967, the perception of the new town as aberrant, dysfunctional, and typical of an inherently socialist planning failure, fed widespread negative national representations in national media. From 1979, however, the opening of the Shopping Building and later The Point allowed Milton Keynes’ administration to radically reimagine the town’s marketing and political image,

presenting the town as a uniquely pleasurable sensory landscape that privileged individual consumer experience. This article traces the history of Milton Keynes' reinvention of its marketing rhetoric through close readings of national print media alongside official marketing materials and archival records. By examining changing representations of Milton Keynes and its sensory effects, the post-1979 marketing of Central Milton Keynes can be seen encoding an ideological tension between the imagined bodily pleasures of consumption and the perceived intellectual tyranny of rational socialist technocracy. By embracing the celebration of individualist consumerism as providing indescribably valuable embodied pleasures, these sites helped provide the impetus for new narratives of Milton Keynes' meaning that centered on the embodied pleasures of consumer capitalism.

Much existing historical literature on Milton Keynes acknowledges that the town has been frequently represented negatively in British media and popular culture since its designation; it also tends to dismiss this negative reception a set of "myths" which need to be dispelled by a more factual narrative, usually in which the town is celebrated as an unmitigated "success" (Bendixson and Platt 1992, Finnegan 1998, Clapson 1998, 2004). This approach, while providing a useful counterpoint to the pervasive neoliberal rejection of postwar urban planning, has meant that the cultural history of new towns' reception and meanings have received little substantial historical research (Vaughan *et al.* 2009). Similarly, study of the town's Shopping Building and The Point multiplex have tended towards essentialist focus on architectural form, viewing these buildings in isolation from the town as a whole (Jewell 2001, p. 321-322, Phillips 2010, Hubbard 2003a, p. 54-58, Lowe 2000, Degen and Basdas 2010, Degen and Rose 2012). Approaching Milton Keynes and its unique consumer landscape through sensory history, however, helps locate it within specific political and cultural environments in which the town has been "made sense of" and rendered meaningful (Rodaway 1994, p. 5, Smith 2007, p. 3-4). Specifically, exploring the cultural history of sensation as a politicised textual representational tool during the late 1970s and early 1980s focuses attention on Central Milton Keynes as a site of meaning production, during a time period where the politics of bodily consumption and production were under significant contestation and political reimagining. This history of marketing The Shopping Building, The Point and Milton Keynes more broadly is also, then, a case study in the cultural politics of sensation during the early years of the Thatcher government.

Milton Keynes: "The Facts"

“You’ve never seen anything like it”

By the late 1960s, Britain’s postwar state-sponsored urban planning programmes, from slum clearances to high-density infill and new town construction, were subject to significant political and cultural criticism for their inflexible forms and paternalist administration. The ambitious scale of many postwar state-sponsored planned spaces was often matched by a tendency towards “tight” master-planning which made it difficult to add or change plans, or to allow them to evolve over time, rendering them unable to be easily adapted or changed (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994, p. 307, Hall 2014, p. 390). The “third wave” of new towns designated under the second New Town Act of 1965 were intended to learn from these criticisms by modelling newly flexible, non-deterministic forms of urban planning. Milton Keynes was designated under this Act in 1967, over a 22,000 acre site in North Buckinghamshire, intended as a low-rise, low-density new town with a population target of 250,000 (Clapson 2014). The combination of low density and low rise were intended to help create a more flexible plan, by leaving “blank spaces” and multiple-use sites that were designed to evolve over time to fit residents’ needs (MKDC 1970, p. 12).

In order to draw the population and investment which were necessary to sustain such a large-scale development, marketing was a central focus of Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) activity from 1967 onwards. Early campaigns used an educational approach, providing facts, maps, statistics and planning information, intended to differentiate Milton Keynes from other earlier state-sponsored planned sites. Examples of this can be seen in advertising from 1972 and 1973, which presented Milton Keynes as allowing residents’ “voices to be heard” and as being inherently opposed to totalising high rise developments, as “no building [will be] taller than the tallest tree” (Financial Times 1972, Times 1973). These campaigns were successful in attracting significant residential and private sector growth during the early to mid-1970s, but despite this, were not wholly successful in shaping representations of the town in national print media and popular culture. Particularly from 1976 onwards, hostile media coverage of Milton Keynes became increasingly common, with the town largely being represented not as an experiment in flexible urban planning, but conversely, as representing the allegedly totalising and overtly determining powers of reconstructionist welfare state ideologies.

The development of this association formed part of a wider ideological shift, whereby the three-day-week of 1974 and the IMF crisis in 1976 were primarily interpreted as being caused by a “systemic failure” of the postwar state (Burk and Cairncross 1992, Hay 2010, p. 449, Clift and Tomlinson 2012). While many long-range economic state investments were cancelled or substantially cut from 1976 onwards, Milton Keynes was officially considered to

require ongoing investment to “make sense of what was already on the ground” (Booth 1976, p. 67-69, Lewis 1977, p. 5b). This left Milton Keynes as a conspicuous example of ongoing large-scale publically funded investment, testament to a political belief in the necessity of massive-scale state urban and economic planning which was no longer interpreted by mainstream political parties nor by much of the national media as being desirable or sustainable. (Moran 2007, p. 404, 414, Hall 1979, p. 14-20, see analysis in Pikó 2015).

MKDC’s response to this increasingly critical climate was initially to redouble its focus on educational marketing. A typical example of this was the 1976 campaign which took the direct and blunt approach of asserting the “The Facts” about the town (Evening Standard 1976, Guardian 1976, Hamilton 1984, p. 20). These campaigns sought to present Milton Keynes as desirable based on ostensibly incontestable truths about the town’s amenities and policies. These “facts” were largely statistics which the readers were implored to “judge [for] yourself”; “700 homes built... 14,000 Londoners now have new homes 17,000 new jobs... Over 364,000 trees have been planted.” This rational language constructed an intellectually-based argument where statistics stood in for ideological arguments; by placing the “Facts” in implicit opposition to emotive “myths”, the advertisement posited its readership as rational, logical consumers interpreting data in an imagined space outside of ideology where Milton Keynes’ growth was sufficient to prove its value.

Unfortunately for MKDC, however, many journalists who were “judging for themselves” at this time did not arrive at the same conclusions. Following the IMF crisis in 1976, the tone of mainstream political discourse in British media became increasingly apocalyptic, especially in the leadup to 1978-1979’s “winter of discontent” (Baws 1976, Young 1976, Hay 1996, Hall 1979). 1978 saw high levels of criticism of Milton Keynes published in national print media, which explicitly invoked the town as symbolising the worst failings of a rigid and inflexible, even totalitarian, interventionist state (Booker 1978, Seabrook 1978, p. 235-40, Tracy 1978). Later in 1978, this negative media attention focused further on the symbolism of new public artworks unveiled at Milton Keynes: these “Concrete Cow” sculptures by Liz Leyh were widely ridiculed as a “joke” that represented the fundamental inability of state-socialist policies to engender productive, desirable, and functional outcomes (Ryan 1978, Daily Mail 1978a, 1978b, Daily Mirror 1978). Milton Keynes’ national media representation by 1978 therefore not only rejected “The Facts” as given by MKDC, but posited that the town was irrevocably tainted by association with the political system that had generated it.

“You’ve never seen anything like it”

“You’ve never seen anything like it”: Central Milton Keynes and the Shopping Building

It was into this political context that Milton Keynes’ Shopping Building was opened on 25 September 1979. While *The Plan for Milton Keynes* had explicitly advocated a decentralised layout, by 1972 plans for a central facilities precinct had evolved into the idea of a large central shopping building located at New Bradwell (MKDC 1970, MKDC 1972). While Central Milton Keynes was designed with a variety of land uses, including office space and higher-density housing, the term became increasingly associated with the central Shopping Building planned for its heart (Bendixson and Platt 1992, p. 131-136, Clapson 2012, p. 92). Construction commenced in 1973, with opening initially intended for 1977, however the straitened national economic situation made obtaining private investment more difficult, and the Building would not be officially opened until 25 September 1979 by the newly elected Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Daily Star 1979).

British shopping facilities were, until the mid-1970s, largely characterised by the models of the arcade, the department store, and the high street, with covered shopping areas tending to be variations on these (Jewell 2001, p. 321). Designed by Stuart Moss crop and Derek Walker, The Shopping Building fused these familiar forms with Victor Gruen’s American theories of shopping mall design in a distinctive and innovative architectural style. The building was conceptualised as a “covered street”, utilising natural light and very high ceilings to simulate open space, while streamlining and controlling the environment through modernist-inspired crisp design (Walker 1982). While the plan of the mall was fairly conventional in its adherence to Victor Gruen’s “dumbbell” model, the aesthetic approach differed from earlier British malls in its Mies-influenced use of grand-scale, clean-lined glass halls, and in its expansive single-storey style (Jewell 2001, p. 321). The resulting space used Gruen’s two-magnet approach of locating big-ticket destination retail at each end of the building joined by two mile-long “streets” of retail space, punctuated with public art, fountains and indoor plants, features which were at that time unusual in British enclosed shopping spaces. This design reflected an intent beyond pure shopping provision, which emphasised the aesthetic potential of providing a central urban space that was entirely enclosed, purifying and streamlining the dynamic chaos of the high street or market square by containing it within a single structure.

Marketing the Shopping Building to consumers outside Milton Keynes was crucial to the success of the enterprise; despite the town’s growing population, the sheer scale of the building necessitated drawing substantial numbers of outside visitors. The nature of this marketing, however, reflected drastically different intentions and values to earlier, more educationally focused MKDC campaigns. This is especially striking when contrasting

advertisements from 1978 with those from 1979; MKDC advertisements during this year remained heavily text based, focused on listing rational benefits of the town, including those the new Shopping Building would provide (Sunday Times 1978a, 1978b). By September 1979, however, this logical tone was being replaced by a more assertive representation of Milton Keynes, by association with the Shopping Building, as possessing intangible, almost mystical desirable qualities which could not be fully described in text, but which could only be comprehended through direct bodily experience (Daily Express 1979, Daily Mail 1979). The first main print media advertisement from this period used a redrawn map of south-eastern England with Milton Keynes in the center, marked by the Shopping Building, with all roads leading to it, including from London's anachronistically billowing smokestacks. The large-print slogan advised "A word of advice to people who don't live on this map. Move." Such a direct tone was unusual in MKDC advertising, an assertiveness compounded by the explanatory statement at the bottom of the page that to those who could not visit the newly opened Shopping Building: "we're sincerely sorry if we've spoilt your breakfast." This idea that Milton Keynes was so desirable that to be unable to visit it would cause distress marked a distinct shift from the tallies of statistics that marked much earlier material. Moreover, far from the deferential request that readers "decide for themselves", the text was much more assertive in presenting Milton Keynes as a desirable place to visit.

From this beginning, advertising of the Shopping Building presented the new center as concentrating an unprecedented breadth of desirable potential consumer interactions, understood primarily as potential bodily sensations. This equation is made most strongly in the first television advertisement for the Shopping Building, released with an accompanying radio jingle, repeated the refrain "you've never seen anything like it" over a succession of fragmentary scenes of consumers making purchases and smiling, intercut with wide shots of the center's distinctive interiors (Bendixson and Platt 1992, p. 147, Wakeman 2016, p. 218). The wide range of happy consumer experiences set in the sumptuously shot interior of the Shopping Building, is presented by the jingle as uniquely pleasurable and awe-inspiring in ways that cannot be easily quantified; what specifically about Central Milton Keynes which we've "never seen anything like" remains unexplicated, but the fact of its uniqueness is repeated as the primary motif. Similarly, the closing slogan "shopping as it should be" implies an ideal experience without specifying what this constitutes; the only answer suggested is the succession of happy consumer images, with money exchanging hands for an ever expanding range of goods and services in the quasi-palatial glass and marble-finished Shopping Building. This presents the Shopping Building as a liberatory space, which facilitates non-determined

“You’ve never seen anything like it”

pleasures, and which encourages individual viewers to interpolate their own private desires into the narrative of the advertisement.

This same principle was expressed even more strongly in marketing materials that contrasted the Shopping Building with traditional high street shopping, which was characterised through its uncomfortable, unpleasant sensory dimensions. The clearest expression of this approach was in a monochromatic poster depicting embattled shoppers juggling heavy parcels on rain-soaked, bleak high streets, subtitled “only another 26 rainy, crowded, frustrating, exhausting shopping days to Christmas... unless you’re one of the lucky ones,” with the “lucky ones” being a contrasting set of images of warm, dry shoppers enjoying the Shopping Building (MKDC 1979). The text of the advertisement asserted that Central Milton Keynes’ “space, light and room for you to breathe” would leave shoppers “feeling sane and at one with the world”. Similar campaigns more simply proclaimed “The End” of high street shopping, over an image of a mother struggling to get her children into the car under a stormy sky, while a policeman writes a parking ticket. This same principle would become central to controversial poster advertising campaigns intended for display in London and the Home Counties, which characterised commuter life as through stagnant images of gridlock, pollution and stasis, while Milton Keynes was depicted as both a more peaceful, natural environment full of greenery, and as providing through its Shopping Building a more considered, spacious, and controlled set of urban amenities (Viewpoint 1984, Insider 1992). Even as these contrasts drew on established new town rhetoric of providing the “best of both worlds”, focusing on the subjective kinaesthetic pleasures of planned urban spaces, rather than a rationally expressed or empirically verifiable set of benefits, indicates the appeal to private bodily experience over intellect.

MKDC’s most famous television advertisement “Red Balloons”, which ran in heavy rotation from 1983 on the newly launched Channel 4, expanded this logic from the site of the Shopping Building to the whole of Milton Keynes, by following the journey of a small boy running through the varied landscapes of the town, accompanied by stirring string music, which culminates in his joining a neighbourhood party who joyfully release red balloons into the air (Red Balloons 1983). The boy’s journey begins in the Shopping Building, which is shot from below to emphasise its soaring glass walls and spacious halls, filled not only with shoppers but with sports groups and families.

Not only does Red Balloons depict a journey that begins in the Shopping Building, it also represents a broadening of its advertising to represent Milton Keynes as a whole. The sole words spoken at the end of the advertisement are typically vague about Milton Keynes’ specific

benefits, while suggesting they need to be experienced to be comprehended: “wouldn’t it be nice if every town was like Milton Keynes.” As with “you’ve never seen anything like it,” the specific desirable qualities that Milton Keynes apparently self-evidently possesses remain unspoken, and are only captured through the free joyful movement of the boy’s seamless journey from sunlit shopping mall through quasi-rural village life and back to the collective joy of a street party. As with the Shopping Building itself, Red Balloons builds on the idea that Milton Keynes’ urban value derives from the concentration of extremely diverse potential experiences, all of which are best perceived subjectively through bodily presence, rather than externalised into a communicable verbal logic.

This refusal of specificity would become an established motif in MKDC marketing during the early 1980s, particularly through the juxtaposition of vague descriptions of the town’s value, with highly-saturated long-angle photography of significant sites in Milton Keynes. Slogans such as “there’s an air of confidence about the place; “there’s something about Milton Keynes;” “you can’t put a price on that kind of thing;” and “businessmen should just come and see for themselves”[sic] were frequently juxtaposed with grandiose depictions of the Shopping Building or Central Milton Keynes glittering in sunlight or lit up at night, emphasising the building’s experiential rather than rational value (Financial Times 1981a, 1981b, 1981c, Economist 1982a, 1982b, 1982c). This call for individuals to “see for themselves”, without specifying what will be seen, prioritises subjective, private bodily perception as the most effective communicator of urban value, while also relying on imagery of private sector expansion and economic consumption to signify a landscape of potential pleasures.

The Point

This association of Milton Keynes with a unique sensory landscape was compounded by the opening of Britain’s first multiplex cinema across the road from the Shopping Building in 1985. This in itself reflected ideological change at MKDC; while the Shopping Building had been designed and constructed with public funding, The Point was a purely private enterprise developed by American media conglomerate American Multi Cinema (AMC), who were seeking to expand into the British market (Hanson 2013, p. 270). Multiplex cinemas, able to screen a range of films simultaneously in purpose-built surroundings, were common in the United States by 1983 when AMC announced their plans for the Milton Keynes site. By contrast, in 1983 most British cinemas were small single or double screen facilities in adapted theatre or hall structures, using similar projection and sound technologies as had been used

“You’ve never seen anything like it”

throughout the postwar era (Hubbard 2003a, p. 55-56). While planning laws restricted the construction of new cinemas in proximity to existing cinemas, Milton Keynes’ greenfield plan gave AMC a unique opportunity to locate a multiplex in a town center, while taking advantage of association with the large destination Shopping Building also on Midsummer Boulevard.

The Point opened in 1985, becoming host venue for British film premieres as well as a popular and novel visitor destination. It held ten screens with independently programmable projection technology, allowing for a range of films to be shown at staggered timings. Alongside the cinemas, the Point complex was designed to hold other complementary consumer spaces; a bingo hall, a nightclub, and bars were part of the plan for the complex, all facilities which aimed to provide night-time leisure activities which Milton Keynes lacked at this time (Economist 1986). From larger, more luxurious seats than were then standard in British cinemas, to the provision of Dolby surround sound, The Point was deliberately designed to broaden the experience of cinema-going by expanding its sensory appeal (Hanson 2013).

Despite being a privately instigated enterprise, The Point became an important symbol in MKDC promotions. In a press release entitled “a glittering landmark for a 21st century entertainment center in Central Milton Keynes,” The Point was marketed by MKDC in language which evoked the building’s sensory potential (Hubbard 2003b, Hanson 2013, p. 270, AMC 1985). The addition of The Point to Central Milton Keynes not only increased the concentration of historically new consumer landscapes on Midsummer Boulevard, but helped reinforce the idea that the sensory pleasures of the town’s center were contained and concentrated by the town as a whole. The idea of The Point as a private space was integral to this symbolism. The Point was repeatedly featured in MKDC promotional literature and advertising as a landmark; the distinctive architecture of the main complex in a silver-mirrored multi-storey pyramid, supported by exposed red steel and highlighted by neon tubes, was lit up at night and was visible for long distances over Milton Keynes’ lowrise skyline. (MKDC 1986, 1988, 1990). The juxtaposition of The Point’s form with commentary about Milton Keynes’ pleasurable uniqueness allowed MKDC literature to associate its private sector development with the liberating potential of choice; the freedom of Milton Keynes in this logic would be the freedom to exert individual economic agency whether as a consumer or an investor.

The town that speaks for itself

This emphasis on a generalised ideal of bodily sensation which resists specification or quantification was a deliberately calculated approach in MKDC advertising. The thought process behind this was made public in interviews with Bob Hill, head of advertising at MKDC,

published in 1984 (Hamilton 1984, p. 20, Hill 1988, Insider 1992). Hill characterised early advertising of Milton Keynes as having “failed” due to its emphasis on the objective benefits the town possessed. Hill argued that this cold representation of statistics was inadequate to convey the experience of living in Milton Keynes, and that the new style of advertising should emphasise the need to visit the town, which would then “speak for itself” (Hamilton 1984, Hill 1988). At the same time, Hill advocated the representation of Milton Keynes as a framework or process, rather than a determining environment, which would allow individuals and businesses to achieve their own distinct successes without feeling that these were conditioned or constrained by the intentions of MKDC. For Hill, this not only marked a change in content, but also in the role of MKDC; rather than providing a finite, determined factual image of Milton Keynes, MKDC advertising now depicted the town as a site of innumerable, vaguely described possibilities. By emphasising the concentration, depth, and range of sensory pleasures located at Central Milton Keynes, but refusing to quantify them, this also allowed MKDC advertising to undermine the claims of the critical readings of Milton Keynes which had become common during the 1970s; if the meanings of Milton Keynes could not be fully captured in text, then these critiques were necessarily inadequate.

Hill’s insistence that Milton Keynes’ meanings and value were only legible through individual sensation and presence was specifically attuned to the political context of the early years of the first Thatcher government. It rejected the underlying principle of its own rationally-focused early advertising, but also that which underpinned critical media accounts; if Milton Keynes could not be fully represented textually then critical representations were necessarily inadequate. It also allowed MKDC to emphasise its association with the “private”; both in terms of individuals’ internal perceptions or experiences, and with the private sector. Focusing on the proliferation of consumerist pleasures in its central landscape therefore helped reject the technocratic language of its earlier marketing, with its focus on empirically verifiable data that could be collectively shared.

Rhetorically, then, the change in MKDC approach reflects the privatisation of the criteria of urban value as much as marking the quasi-privatisation of the town’s urban space. Not only did Central Milton Keynes rely on the enclosure of a town center and the substitution of giant consumer sites for less regulated urban public space, but also relied on selling the idea that collectively shared ‘factual’ knowledge was inferior to the private sensations of the individual. Recasting the pleasures of Milton Keynes as only perceptible through the body, and mediated by consumerism, therefore reflects an ideological repositioning, where the origins of

“You’ve never seen anything like it”

urban value are redefined away from verifiable “Facts” of empirically provable technocratic achievement, and towards the individualistic commodification of sensory pleasure.

The marketing of Central Milton Keynes therefore encodes the wider ideological processes through which MKDC were able to reject historic ideals of public space, whether the petit-bourgeois symbolism of the historic market square or even the high street, and instead enclose and privatise the urban commons within a single palatial consumer-capitalist structure. This bold redefinition of the city center as a purely consumptive, leisurized and post-industrial structure necessitated a new representational language which emphasised the bodies of consumers over the rights of citizens, and which a newly individualized focus on private bodily sensation would help facilitate. This allowed the political changes encoded at Central Milton Keynes to be literally sold through advertising like any other product, and to be represented as one which would liberate and democratize through its rejection of a commons citizenship rhetoric in favour of the market. By framing the Shopping Building and The Point as contained precincts of sensory pleasure, private control and consumer transactions were therefore represented as necessary conditions for concentrating sensory choice and heightening freedom.

Central Milton Keynes in national media and popular culture

The change in tone in MKDC marketing was not entirely successful, however, in supplanting existing critical responses to the town. Reading across print media and popular cultural representations of Central Milton Keynes from the early to mid 1980s, it can be seen that while the narrative of Milton Keynes as an exceptional sensory landscape was widespread, that opinions regarding the effects of its sensory excess were strongly divided. One of the most outright celebrations of the Shopping Building as a desirable, innovative center of novel sensory experiences appeared in the film clip of Cliff Richard’s 1981 single *Wired for Sound* (Richard 1981a, 1981b). This dynamically shot clip showed Richard roller-skating around the interior of the Shopping Building, wearing a newly-released Walkman, while singing of the virtues of being “wired for sound.” *Wired for Sound* was not only successful in marketing Richard to a new, younger audience, primarily by associating Richard with a more contemporary pop sound, but also through associating Richard with technological novelty and dynamic sensations, from Sony Walkmans to roller skates, and indeed, the novel and innovative surroundings of the Shopping Building. *Wired for Sound*’s narrative of positive sensory excess both resonated with and capitalised on the MKDC narrative of the Shopping Building as a novel and sensorily unique location.

Print media coverage of the Shopping Building, and later, of the Point, tended to be less effusive regarding the sensory pleasures of Central Milton Keynes. This ambivalence can be seen most clearly in travelogue-style writing which reviewed the new sites through journalists' personal narratives, several of which formed part of commemorative reenactments of J.B. Priestley's *English Journey*. While some, like Ray Gosling of *The Listener* largely accepted the idea that the Shopping Building provided a beneficial, desirable concentration of new bodily sensations, others remained more sceptical about the effects of this deliberate sensory excess (Gosling 1983, Priestley 1934). One of the more extreme condemnations of sensory overstimulation appeared in novelist Beryl Bainbridge's BBC TV series and book re-enacting Priestley's *English Journey*, which was even subtitled *The Road to Milton Keynes* (Bainbridge 1984, p. 155-156, Clapson 2004, p. 6-7). This trip culminated in a visit to the Shopping Building, which Bainbridge saw as dehumanising and sensorily dulling its visitors through an oppressive rejection of more "human" scale architecture and design. Rather than ascribing joy and possibility to its sensory overwhelm, Bainbridge expressed "hatred" for Milton Keynes' unabashed rejection of earlier models of urban living (Bainbridge 1984, p. 155-156, Priestley 1934, Clapson 2004, p. 6-7).

The risk of overstimulation became more prominent in media coverage of Central Milton Keynes with the opening of the Point, with particular anxieties around the effect of excessive sensory consumption on young people's bodies. The idea of the multiplex as providing too much sensory input, thereby resulting in a kind of hypnosis, de-sensitisation or affective deadening appeared in a number of initial reviews of The Point, with particular emphasis on the power of many large screens to engender an undesirable level of proprioceptual and visual overwhelm (Guardian 1985, Kretzmer 1985, Freedman 1986, Times 1987). Two early reviews visualised the multiplex as broadcasting ten screens at once to a single audience, as if in a *Clockwork Orange*- style visual barrage; the audience of young people in these depictions sit hypnotised, passively consuming, physically overwhelmed by vision and sound (Freedman 1986, Economist 1986).

Interpreting high levels of sensory input as potentially hypnotic, and thus having a deadening, dulling overall effect on the senses, was central to political critiques of Milton Keynes' administration during this period. These tended to contrast MKDC's rhetoric of sensory pleasure with various realities of residents' suffering and discomfort, including those due to the lack of a local hospital which did not open until 1985 (Guardian 1978, Gibson 1979, Lyte 1986). Alongside this, despite significant growth in retail, managerial and information technology sectors, MKDC's pursuit of private sector investment was not resulting in lower-

“You’ve never seen anything like it”

skilled job provision, while new-build housing in the town was almost entirely being built by the private sector targeting the town’s influx of new middle-class residents. This contrast between lower-income resident experience and the content of MKDC advertising was the subject of a Channel 4 documentary “Bursting the Red Balloon” which explicitly accused current MKDC administration of abandoning the town’s founding goals in pursuit of profit (Bursting the Red Balloon 1986). Framing its account through the ‘bursting’ of advertising myths, this documentary claimed that MKDC advertising was deceptive, emphasising the town’s center as a landscape of sensory pleasure while lower-income residents struggled to meet their basic needs.

Still more extreme was The Style Council’s 1985 single *Come to Milton Keynes*, whose lyrics suggested that the consumerist liberation promised by Milton Keynes’ advertising was so false and misleading that it would engender suicidal despair (Style Council 1985). Paul Weller would later say that the song was not so much about Milton Keynes specifically, but was rather describing the impact of wider political trends, from specific Thatcherite economic policies of ‘rolling back the state’ to the encroachment of private sector influence and consumerism over individual’s lives (Weller 2013). Despite these claims, the lyrics make specific reference to the failure of advertising to live up to reality, even evoking the content of the Red Balloons advertisement in doing so; the choice of Milton Keynes as a site is interwoven into the song’s depiction of isolation and despair.

Commodifying sensation and public space

Weller’s association of Milton Keynes with the epitome of Thatcherite economic policy was by no means typical of national media representations of Milton Keynes during the mid-1980s. Nonetheless, considering the extremity of the anti-socialist critiques of Milton Keynes published only seven years earlier, it is significant to note the ease with which the town’s advertising, with its emphasis on private experience in all forms, could be interpreted as symbolic of Thatcherism more broadly. The radical change in the ascribed ideological causes of these criticisms is profound, and should not be dismissed as automatically deriving from the opening of The Shopping Building and The Point themselves. Rather, this ideological reframing was deliberately and consciously pursued through MKDC marketing campaigns. Selling Milton Keynes’ public space as a place of private, even unknowable bodily pleasures, achieved a significant reconfiguration of the town’s image in a potentially hostile political climate, at a time when the town’s founding political associations had become a liability.

Somewhat paradoxically, the town's potential to radically change and reimagine itself had been enshrined in its founding goals, with the ideal of 'flexibility' seen as crucial at every stage in *The Plan for Milton Keynes*. This elastic notion of identity ultimately granted MKDC the flexibility to redefine and radically reimagine the town's meanings away from a collectivist rhetoric and towards individualism as the political climate required. The abstract principle of the sensing, feeling body, as opposed to the rational, empirically verifiable intellect, was more than a marketing trope but was central to this act of political reimagining. Milton Keynes' reconceptualisation of public space as private space was therefore interwoven with a political redefinition of urban value, which derived its authority from the ideal of the citizen's privately sensing and consuming body. Far from being sites without history, then, The Shopping Building and The Point are not only crucial sites of Milton Keynes architectural history, but also have been crucial symbols around which the town's meanings have been negotiated and understood.

References

- AMC, 1985. Press kit: The Point. American Multi Cinema: 1985. BO60:79. Held at Milton Keynes City Discovery Centre Archive, Milton Keynes.
- Bainbridge, B., 1984. *English Journey, or, the Road to Milton Keynes*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.
- Baws, M., 1976. Milton Keynes' commercial beacon. *Guardian*, 30 December, p. 11.
- BBC.co.uk, 2010. *Milton Keynes Shopping Building now listed building*. BBC News Online. 16 July.
Available from:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/threecounties/hi/bbc_local_home/newsid_8829000/8829719.stm
- BBC.co.uk, 2015. Milton Keynes The Point multiplex cinema shows last movie. BBC News Online. 26 February.
Available from:
<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-31653145>
- Bendixson, T. and Platt, J., 1992. *Milton Keynes, Image and Reality*. Cambridge: Granta.
- Bingham, J., 2010. Milton Keynes centre may become architectural 'treasure'. *Daily Telegraph*, 17 July.

Available from:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/3331284/Milton-Keynes-centre-may-become-architectural-treasure.html>

- Booker, C., 1978. Urban Rides – 2. *Spectator*, May 12, p. 12.
- Booth, S., 1976. An image tarnished: the new towns now. *New Society*. 14 October, p. 67-69.
- Burk, K. and Cairncross, A.K., 1992. *Goodbye, Great Britain: the 1976 IMF crisis*. Yale University Press: New Haven.
- Bursting the Red Balloon*, 1986. Diverse Productions. TV, Channel 4. Oct 8.
- Clift, B. and Tomlinson, J., 2012. When Rules Started to Rule: The IMF, Neo-Liberal Economic Ideas and Economic Policy Change in Britain. *Review of International Political Economy*, 19 (3), 477-500.
- Clapson, M., 1998. *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Towns: Social Change and Urban Dispersal in Post-War England*. New York: Manchester University Press.
- Clapson, M., 2004. *A Social History of Milton Keynes: Middle England/Edge City*. London: Frank Cass.
- Clapson, M., 2012. *Anglo-American Crossroads: Urban Planning and Research in Britain, 1940-2010*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Clapson, M., 2014. Introduction. In: *The Plan for Milton Keynes*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Daily Express, 1979. A word of advice to people who don’t live on this map. *Daily Express*, 26 September, p. 16.
- Daily Mail, 1978. Whale of an idea from the concrete cow men. *Daily Mail*, 17 November, p. 3.
- Daily Mail, 1978b. Boom, boom-it's only Toad getting out of a hole, children. *Daily Mail*, 18 November, p. 6-7.
- Daily Mail, 1979. A word of advice to people who don’t live on this map. *Daily Mail*, 28 September, p. 35.
- Daily Mail, 2010. Milton Keynes shopping centre controversially given Grade II heritage status. *Daily Mail*, 17 July.

Available from:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1295356/Milton-Keynes-shopping-centre-controversially-given-Grade-II-heritage-status.html>

- Daily Mirror, 1978. £20,000 Up the Spout. *Daily Mirror*, 17 November 1978, p. 3.
- Daily Star, 1979. Mob fury as Maggie hits out at strikes. *Daily Star*, 26 September, p. 5.

- Degen, M., 2008. Experiencing Visualities in Designed Urban Environments, Learning from Milton Keynes. *Environment and Planning*, 40, 1901-1920.
- Degen, M. and B. Basdas, 2010. Bodies and Everyday Practices in Designed Urban Environments. *Science Studies*, 23 (2), 60-76.
- Degen, M. and G. Rose, 2012. The Sensory Experiencing of Urban Design, The Role of Walking and Perceptual Memory. *Urban Studies* 49 (15), 3271-3287.
- Economist, 1982a. Milton Keynes. *Economist*, 17 April, p. 2.
- Economist, 1982b. Milton Keynes. *Economist*, 8 May, p. 2.
- Economist, 1982c. Milton Keynes. *Economist*, 5 June, p. 2.
- Economist, 1986. The big screens make a comeback. *Economist*, 25 October, p. 34.
- Evening Standard, 1976. The Facts. *Evening Standard*, 25 June, p. 20.
- Financial Times, 1972. That's no way to build a new city. *Financial Times*, 15 November, p. 35.
- Financial Times, 1981a. There's an Air of Confidence about the Place. *Financial Times*, 10 June, p. 13; 9 July, p. 13; 30 September, p. 13.
- Financial Times, 1981b. I Think More Businessmen Should Just Come and See for Themselves. *Financial Times*, 18 June, p. 1.
- Finnegan, R. 1998. *Tales of the City: A Study of Narrative and Urban Life*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Freedman, P., 1986. Citizen Keynes' finger-lickin', Coke-swiggin', eye-poppin' day at the movies. *The Guardian*, 18 August, p. 11.
- Gibson, R., 1979. Don't fall ill in this brave new world. *Daily Star*, 25 September.
- Glendinning, M. and Muthesius, S., 1994. *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gosling, R., 1983. Not exactly in Priestley's footsteps. *Listener*, 30 October, p. 11.
- Guardian, 1976. The Facts. *Guardian*, 5 June, p. 5.
- Guardian, 1978. Build our hospital or else... *Guardian*, 8 July, p. 3.
- Guardian, 1985. Space age cinema with the strength of 10. *Guardian*, 12 April, p. 6.
- Hall, P., 2014. *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design since 1880*. 4th ed. Chichester: Wiley.
- Hall, S., 1979. The Great Moving Right Show. *Marxism Today*, January 1979, p. 14-20.
- Hamilton, A., 1984. The joke that the big firms come to enjoy. *Times*, 29 October, p. 20.

- Hanson, S., 2013. A ‘Glittering Landmark for a 21st Century Entertainment Centre’, The History of the Point Multiplex Cinema in Milton Keynes. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 33 (2), 270-88.
- Hay, C., 1996. Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the 'Winter of Discontent'. *Sociology*, 30 (2), 253-77.
- Hay, C., 2010. Chronicles of a Death Foretold: The Winter of Discontent and Construction of the Crisis of British Keynesianism. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 63 (3), 446-70.
- Hill, B., 1988. Marketing and Selling Milton Keynes. In: Town and Country Planning Association, *Economic Development, The Milton Keynes Experience*. 1988.
- Historic England, 2010. List Entry Summary: Shopping Building. 16 July.
Available from:
<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1393882>
- Historic England, 2013. List Entry Summary: The Point entertainment complex. 20 March.
Available from:
<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1414420>
- Hubbard, P., 2003a. Fear and Loathing at the Multiplex: Everyday Anxiety in the Post-Industrial City. *Capital & Class*, 27 (80), 51-75.
- Hubbard, P., 2003b. A Good Night Out? Multiplex Cinemas as Sites of Embodied Leisure. *Leisure Studies*, 22 (3), 255-72.
- Insider, 1992. Milton Who? Well now just about everyone knows about MK. *Insider*, 26 March, p. 4-5.
- Jewell, N., 2001. The Fall and Rise of the British Mall. *The Journal of Architecture*, 6 (4), 317-78.
- Kretzmer, H., 1985. Super kids, dunno about the language. *Daily Mail*, 11 October, p. 27.
- Lewis, J., 1977. ‘Shore’s pledge on new towns’. *The Guardian*, 19 March, p. 5B.
- Lyte, C., 1986. Milton Keynes: The home of broken dreams. *Daily Mirror*, 5 June, p. 6.
- Milton Keynes Citizen, 2014. MK could soon become Point-less. 25 February.
Available from:
<http://www.miltonkeynes.co.uk/news/local/mk-could-soon-become-point-less-1-5900402>
- MKDC, 1970. *The Plan for Milton Keynes*. Bletchley: Milton Keynes Development Corporation.
- MKDC, 1972. *Milton Keynes: A New City Comes to Life*. Milton Keynes: Milton Keynes Development Corporation.

Lauren Pikó

- MKDC, 1979. Poster series: “Christmas shopping as it should be”, “Only another 26 rainy crowded frustrating exhausting shopping days to Christmas” “Unless You’re One of the Lucky Ones”, “How soon before you are shopping at Central Milton Keynes?”, and “The End”. 1979. Held at Milton Keynes City Discovery Centre Archive, Milton Keynes.
- MKDC, 1985. All About Milton Keynes. Milton Keynes: Milton Keynes Development Corporation.
- MKDC, 1988. Milton Keynes. Milton Keynes: Milton Keynes Development Corporation.
- MKDC, 1990. Milton Keynes. Milton Keynes: Milton Keynes Development Corporation.
- Moran, J., 2007. 'Subtopias of Good Intentions': Everyday Landscapes in Postwar Britain. *Cultural and Social History*, 4 (3), 401-21.
- Phillips, M., 2010. From the Waste Land to Past-Present Fuchsia: The Re-Development of the Broadmead Shopping Centre. *Culture & Organization*, 16 (3), 259-82.
- Pikó, L., 2015. Milton Keynes and the Liquid Landscape, 1967-1978. *Landscape Review*, 16 (1), 36-45.
- Priestley, J.B., 1934. *English Journey*. London: William Heinemann, Victor Gollancz.
- Richard, C., 1981. Wired for Sound [sound recording.] EMI: 5221. Side A.
- Richard, C., 1981b. Wired for Sound – Official Video. 2010.
- Available from:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sn9mLnKmPco>. [Accessed 28 March 2016.]
- Rodaway, P., 1994. *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense, and Place*. London: Routledge.
- Seabrook, J., 1978. *What Went Wrong? Working People and the Ideals of the Labour Movement*. London: V. Gollancz.
- Ryan, J., 1978. Now pull the udder one! *Daily Mail*, 31 August, p. 16-17.
- Smith, M., 2007. *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Style Council, 1985. Come to Milton Keynes. Polydor: TSC 10.
- Sunday Times, 1978a. Milton Keynes. *Sunday Times*, 5 March, p. 54[S]-55[S].
- Sunday Times, 1978b. Milton Keynes. *Sunday Times*, 12 November, p. 14[S].
- Times, 1973. Would your voice be heard against it? *Times*, 17 May, p. 3.
- Times, 1987. Delights on the Doorstep. *Times*, 16 November, p. 33.
- Tracy, H., 1978. The swinging pendulum. *Daily Telegraph*, 2 September, p. 8.
- Turner, L., 2010. Milton Keynes mall is listed. *Independent*, 17 July.

Available from:

“You’ve never seen anything like it”

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/architecture/milton-keynes-mall-is-listed-2028683.html>

- Vaughan, L., *et al.*, 2009. "Do the Suburbs Exist? Discovering Complexity and Specificity in Suburban Built Form." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 34 (4), 475-88.
- Viewpoint, 1984. Marketing Special: Case Studies from Channel Four Advertisers. ITV Companies: 2.
- Wakeman, R., 2016. *Practicing Utopia: An Intellectual History of the New Town Movement*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Walker, D., 1982. *The Architecture and Planning of Milton Keynes*. London: Architectural Press.
- Weller, P., 2013. The Style Council. Official web page archived at <http://archive.is/95rEZ>. [Accessed 26 March 2016].
- Young, J., 1976. Milton Keynes fights the doubters of London. *Times*, 23 October, p. 3.