Exclusive: a retail expansion compromise

AS READERS of this column will be aware, thecentre:mk owner Hermes Prudential, managing as PruPIM, have in recent times attempted to ride roughshod over the people of Milton Keynes and beyond. What they have failed to recognise is that their building is a unique British shopping environment.

thecentre:mk is not only our high street: it is also a regional shopping centre, like Bluewater or Brent Cross. As such it has to fulfil the needs of Milton Keynes for a high street and provide that which attracts shoppers to regional shopping centres.

Despite its current success, its owners seem to blindly ignore both sets of needs: the first by attempting to destroy a vital part of our grid system, namely Secklow Gate bridge, thus creating an almost 1km-long 'iron curtain' barrier across our city: the second by removing almost all free parking, therefore no longer competing on even terms with its competitors.

Its latest plan, roundly slammed by many, is to demolish Secklow Gate Bridge on the southern side, infill the gap in the building occupied by the independently owned market site and

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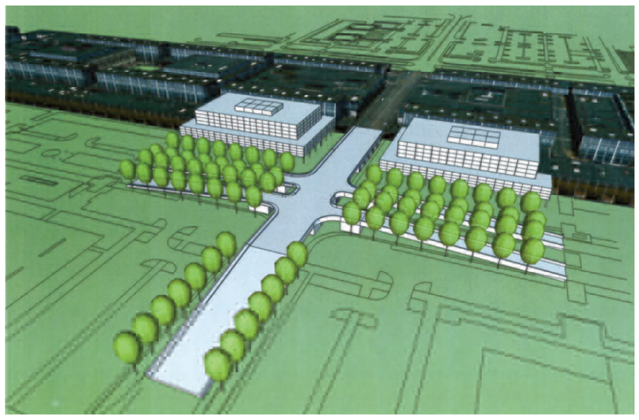
build a four-storey Primark on the rest comprising 8,850 sq metres of retail, storage and office space.

The infill of thecentre:mk where the bridge rises to meet its roof would provide an additional 2,325 sq metres of retail. This makes a total of 11,175 sq metres of new retail. They plan to move the market from its current independently owned location to a



pitch controlled by them. One might predict a slow death of the market's ability to compete via ever increasing rents.

In order to curry favour, PruPIM recently conducted a survey following a brief exhibition in Middleton Hall. This was their second attempt to schmooze the public, as the first was very badly received. They must be pleased that 62 per cent of respondents support Primark coming to Central Milton Keynes but of course those questioned may well be suffering from that medical condition *hypoprimarkia* (a chronic lack of Primark) and that will soon be cured by 'Doctor' Winkelman opening his Primark at the MK1 centre in November.

Wiping the rictus grin off faces at PruPIM are the 81.4pc who do not agree with its "ambitions to regenerate the area" and the 92pc who voted against the removal of Secklow Gate bridge.

Despite what some may think, we here at Urban Eden are not just about criticising for the sake of it. We like to spread the love and try, wherever possible, to be collaborative and conciliatory. So, in this world exclusive, we hereby present a solution that we are confident will appeal to PruPIM, the market stall holders, Milton Keynes Council, Central Milton Keynes Town Council and the people of Milton Keynes.

It has been conceived by renowned architect, member of the original Central Milton Keynes design team and Urban Edenite Ken Baker. So here is one way that two large retail spaces could be integrated into the aesthetic of the shopping centre while satisfying all of the issues that have arisen from the current proposal.

The inspiration for this is the manner in which fashion retailer Next has been extended on the north side of thecentre:mk. It showed how it is possible to create a non-disruptive and generally well-liked increase in floor space and proves that PruPIM can get it right. It sets the precedent for how growth in retail space can be achieved with minimal disruption to the circulation of the shoppers in the arcades and without sinning against the grade II listing that Urban Eden worked so hard to achieve.

Most importantly, this new exclusive plan - revealed here for the first time - avoids the disruption and tremendously high cost of removing the elevated Secklow Gate bridge structure, which at the time of its construction was Europe's largest concrete pour.

It saves more than 60 mature trees that would otherwise be chainsawed and chipped. It avoids relocating the market as this will largely remain under the bridge with a new extension on the food court side of Midsummer Boulevard.

Thus the extended market will tie together thecentre:mk and the food centre: a win-win for PruPIM, which owns both. This proposal also respects the car parks, albeit there is some parking loss, and it maintains and improves upon the safe broad walkways across Midsummer Boulevard.

Please look at the drawing and see how Ken has achieved what others may have thought impossible. It adds a further 5,760 sq metres of retail space to some existing shops by increasing their height to three storeys and adding additional footprint outside.

The shops to be extended include WH Smith, 3 Store and Fatface on the east side of the bridge and Accessorize, Monsoon, Wallis, Stephen Conway, Snappy Snaps, Tierack and the empty Barclays on the west.

This makes a combined total 11,520 sq metres The redevelopment can be done in two staggered stages. I commend it to you.

Cheerio.

Letters *to the* Editor

Plans safeguard future of our parks

DAVID FOSTER
Chief Executive,
Milton Keynes Parks Trust
via e-mail

PEOPLE love the parks in Milton Keynes. Market research conducted by The Parks Trust last year showed that nine out of ten people value the parks so it is not surprising that people are concerned about us submitting some sites to the council to consider for future development.

I would like to clarify that the sites we submitted are not parks as most people would know them and they do not constitute a wholesale sell off nor a betrayal of trust as some have suggested. Neither is there a conspiracy theory involving the Homes & Communities Agency to pocket some of the cash - the proceeds from any sale will be retained here in Milton Keynes.

The sites amount to less than one per cent of our total land and include commercial properties that are coming to the end of their useful life, five paddocks with no public access, two unused car parks and other small pieces of land which are not integral parts of the parks. They were selected following a careful review of our land to see what bits did not work particularly well as parkland or were of relatively low value as open space, for wildlife, or visually.

There are a number of reasons we are putting the sites forward. For some sites the main reason is to help us to achieve our goal of making the Trust financially sustainable, at no cost to the tax payer, in perpetuity. Milton Keynes needs a sound and secure Parks Trust - we look after 25pc of the new city area and have to be totally self-financing.

Some sites are proposed so that we can improve the park amenities and attractions in that area, for example at Willen Lake and Furzton Lake. Others are proposed to bring an underused bit of land, left over after the main development, into productive use, such as a strip next to the A5 at Loughton. Some sites are proposed for a combination of these reasons. A list of the sites with location plans can be found on our website www.theparkstrust.com

The clever way in which the Trust was established ensures that the proceeds from any development of our green estate can only be used to further the Trust's objectives. All sites will be considered by the council as part of its long-term development planning for the city. I expect the democratic planning process will mean that some sites will never be developed.

I also wanted to touch on "the Gyosei playing fields scandal" mentioned in last month's Growth Debate article. That was no scandal. The old Japanese School was no longer fit for purpose and the decision had been taken to close it and build what is now the hugely successful ExtraCare Village. The playing fields were therefore no longer needed, had never been part of the parks system and we agreed to release them for development.

● David Foster

The canal green corridor has been safeguarded and a new local park added. The money we received has mostly been invested and has helped to secure our long-term future but some has been spent on significant improvements to Campbell Park such as the fantastic new stage. The funds have also helped us to host major cultural events such as the International Festival which brings thousands of visitors to Milton Keynes and makes a valuable contribution to the local economy.

We know the idea of development on some sites will not be popular in the immediate locality and we have not entered into this lightly. It would be easy for us to simply court popularity and not worry about the long term but we genuinely believe that by putting these sites forward we are acting responsibly and in the best interests of the whole of Milton Keynes.

City bucks the gloom trend

MIKE ROBINSON
Senior Partner, PwC Milton Keynes
via e-mail

I WRITE following news that the Bank of England has cut its UK growth forecast for 2012 to around zero and the only good news seems to be that inflation is under control. This is the latest in a steady stream of gloomy economic data that has persisted through the year. So why is it that local businesses seem to be doing so well?

PwC's Milton Keynes office is celebrating its 25th anniversary, which has given us a good excuse to host events for our employees and for the local business community. With few exceptions, the business people we talk to have been upbeat about their trading performances and their plans for the year ahead. There seems to be a palpable air of confidence, despite the economic gloom.

Among the reasons for Milton Keynes' success in managing the

● Mike Robinson

downturn and preparing for growth is its good track record in attracting inward investment, evidenced by Network Rail's new national centre, creating more than 3,000 jobs. Such investments underline the benefits of locating here - accessibility and proximity to London; a lower cost base and an above average standard of living.

Investment in infrastructure is critical to our economic future and plans to revive the East West rail link can only benefit the local business community further. We must make the most of such investments by communicating them far and wide.

As PwC's anniversary year draws to a close, we are looking forward to working closely with local companies to help them realise their growth plans.