The curse of the living planners

Theo Chalmers

Theo Chalmers is managing director of Verve Public Relations and chair of Urban Eden.

Western and Eastern Expansion Areas, built the much-hated 'city streets' in their place and introduced plans to build over the green borders of our existing grid roads. Proof positive of their 'we really don't care what you want' attitude is not hard to find. One example came when they commissioned the infilling of underpasses, installation of traffic-lit pedestrian crossings, narrowing of boulevard building lines and erection of Milton Keynes’ most execrable development, ThéHub.

In recent years the chair of MKP has been local resident Dr Ann Limb - that very honourable lady, with her honorary doctorate, honorary fellowship, honorary professorship... and a BA 'The MK planning sub-committee still stalks the meeting rooms of CMK like some money-lusting zombie' (Hons) in French she actually earned. The truly amazing part of this story is yet to come, however.

Milton Keynes Partnership was officially disbanded following its final meeting in March 2011. So everything is OK, now, right? No, far from it, actually. Astonishingly despite it no longer existing, the MKP planning sub-committee still stalks the meeting rooms of CMK like some hand-outstretched, money-lusting, blank-eyed zombie.

The sub-committee is chaired, you will not be surprised to learn, by the 'Multi Honorary Doc' herself: Ann Limb.

Now for those reading this who think I must be unfairly characterising Ann Limb - that very honourable lady - and that I am a tasteless bully attacking a defenceless public servant, cast your eye over her resume, posted online. I quote: “Ann worked with the current Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg when he was an MEP, (was) an independent member of the Education Committee of David Cameron’s Public Services Improvement Policy Group and a member of Tony Blair’s Digital Inclusion Panel.”

You may conclude that it reads like a modern version of the Vicar of Bray, a poem about a man who despite constant changes of monarch and state religion always kept to his one principle, to live and die as the Vicar of Bray. It has been suggested that the reason for the continuing presence of a compliant MKP is to allow all the grid road destruction and high density housing to be agreed by them and then blame the previous government, leaving us to live with the consequences. So I imagine you might be asking whether there is still hope for Milton Keynes.

Thankfully there is. Our current council has been in difficult negotiation with the HCA for some months to acquire the remaining commercial elements of MKP land - the non-commercial elements having already gone to Milton Keynes Parks Trust, about which I wrote recently. Obviously this land will not be cheap and the council is not exactly flush with cash although, judging by the amount questionably poured down the maw of its business services provider Mouchel, you might reasonably think otherwise.

Nevertheless it seems that a deal has now been done and by the time this column is printed it may well have been announced. If it has, it seems likely that the land comes under council control on December 1 this year.

This, of course, is very good news. However financial pressure will now be on the council to create further Hubs in areas such as B44 opposite Vizion. When that pressure starts - and sadly it will - we will help the council to gird its loins, steel its nerves and fight it.

As for Ann Limb, please do not worry about her. She will be around for some time to come. She has collected an OBE, been appointed Chair of the South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership and become Deputy Lieutenant of the county of Buckinghamshire. SEMLEP, incidentally, is one of 39 private-sector led economic development partnerships set up by the Coalition Government to ‘stimulate innovation, inward investment, economic growth and job creation’. More jobs for the girls, I expect. Hey ho... and cheerio.