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Retail centres must adapt to changing times

I HAVE said it before and I will say it again. The world is changing and so fast that things we take for granted are disappearing or being changed forever in a blink of an eye.

For instance, I have received a copy of the latest Yellow Pages. After I finished laughing, I realised that what was once one of the most profitable and successful advertising media in the world has been reduced to an anorexic shadow of its former self.

The 2017/18 edition weighs in at 130g compared to last year's 220g and 2011/12's 525g. Each of these is a cut down page size too, not the A4 size of earlier monolithic editions. I remember marketing gurus here in Milton Keynes giving expensive seminars on how to make money from Yellow Pages.

The same rapid changes are being seen in retail shopping centres. The professionals who run them cannot be blind to

these changes, although I suspect that they are still pretending all is well. Nevertheless the long-term survival of them can never be certain.

Let's look at The Point. It is now just over three years since Hammersons applied successfully to demolish The Point and replace it with a new shopping centre. Has anything happened since then? No, not a thing.

Three years and nothing. And I think I know why. Retail therapy has changed so rapidly that demand for floor space is falling off a cliff. There are empty spaces in both intu and thecentre:mk and these are both tier one retail destinations.

Yes, people are still buying stuff but more and more they are using high-street shops as product showrooms not as places to buy. They 'audition' products, as they still like to feel the quality or lack of it. If they



intu's plans to expand in Milton Keynes received planning permission in late 2015.

like it, they will scan the barcode with their smartphone - risibly often going online using the store's own wi-fi - and then buy the item from some warehouse in a much cheaper location and/or using a cashback app.

Retail therapy is now no longer a frustrating trip circling thecentre:mk to find an expensive parking space which will get you an even more expensive fine if you are ten minutes late back. Now it is a leisurely sit on the sofa scrolling through websites on your phone,

tablet or laptop.

This cannot go on. And you may have noticed what shopping centre operators like Hermes, intu and perhaps eventually The Point's Hammersons are doing about it. One ploy they are, er, employing is for more and more of their retail spaces to become restaurants or other 'entertainments' like the Laser Planet shoot 'em up that has just moved into a long empty nightclub in The Food Centre.

This trend is very evident in thecentre:mk itself and in intu's disputed plans for the area over

Midsummer Boulevard which show far more restaurants and cinema screens than shops.

Shops themselves are changing too and the evidence is there if we care to look. Since the 2008 recession, Woolworth's, BHS, Tandy, Blockbuster, Borders, Jaeger, Zaavi, Comet, Oddbins, Focus, Jane Norman, T.J. Hughes, JJB Sports, Phones 4U, Aquascutum, USC, Tie Rack, Barratt and Past Times have all gone, almost gone or are now online shadows of their former selves.

Other mainstream retailers surviving financial troubles since the recession include Austin Reed, Hawkins Bazaar, Jessops and HMV, which has just moved from a two-floor megastore in thecentre:mk to what is effectively a large cupboard. If the dog Nipper was really listening to His Master's Voice he would hear it say: 'Get your ball, we're going home'.

So what can we learn from

these radical changes? In many ways Milton Keynes is unique; its 'high street' is a regional shopping centre but unlike all regional shopping centres it no longer has free parking.

Does this mean it is even more doomed than other regional shopping centres? Perhaps not. It needs to continue adapting to a rapidly changing retail environment. This includes luring in newcomers like Primark which will, it is rumoured and as previously exclusively revealed in this column, be taking over the former BHS store.

It also needs to develop its restaurant and entertainment offer as fast as possible. Then, maybe, thecentre:mk and intu can be saved. As for the site of The Point, in my opinion it would make a better hotel and conference centre, gifted as it is with its own multi-storey car park. But we shall no doubt see. Cheerio.

Full fibre is set to fuel the future of Milton Keynes

'SMART cities' and 'towns of the future' are two of the latest hot media topics, attracting regular column inches from commentators predicting how these concepts could impact on our daily lives.

Today, our cities are constantly plugged in and linked up to the digital world, just as we as individuals have become more connected than ever before, thanks to the likes of smart phones and wearable tech.

Cities are now evolving very differently as designers and planners adopt new concepts and technology to create environments that are not only fit for function and aesthetically pleasing, but future-proofed for a changing society and agile enough to adopt innovation.

Recognised as the newest city in the UK, Milton Keynes sits at the forefront of the UK's digital revolution. Over the past five decades it has expanded rapidly to become one of the fastest growing cities in the UK with massive

economic potential. What's more, it has been identified by the National Infrastructure Commission as the ideal future home of the UK's Silicon Valley.

Designed in response to the housing shortage in overcrowded London, Milton Keynes has flourished and developed itself as a real business hub underpinned by digital innovation. Almost half of businesses in Milton Keynes operate in the information technology sector and this figure is set to increase further over the coming years.

Having celebrated 50 years of success, the city is now looking ahead to what the future holds for its businesses and communities.



With the arrival of CityFibre's Gigabit network last year, the alternative infrastructure provider is building on Milton Keynes' tech credentials by delivering ultra-fast connectivity through a full fibre communications network.

The benefits of full fibre Gigabit City infrastructure are clear. With access to internet speeds up to 100 times faster than the UK

average and download and upload speeds of up to 1 Gigabit per second, businesses in Milton Keynes can truly embrace the new generation of cloud and online communications services over a high capacity and more resilient network.

Full fibre infrastructure is also advantageous to the public sector. City councils can update and

transform the provision of public services by bringing more and more online. Smart streetlight systems and connected CCTV systems help improve the safety and efficiency of an area. Towns and cities will be able to offer ultra-fast city-wide wi-fi and the likes of smart bins will monitor waste levels and optimise collection routes.

As our reliance on mobile devices continues to grow, access to fast wireless connectivity becomes more important. With full fibre Gigabit City infrastructure connecting mobile masts, cities are prepared for 4G and even 5G services and can support the exponential rise in mobile data usage.

Ultimately future-proofed digital infrastructure will build on Milton Keynes' existing proposition helping to provide significant economic benefit by driving the competitiveness, productivity and efficiency of those who use it.

CityFibre is working in partnership with local service provider dbfb to offer full-fibre connectivity across Milton Keynes. For more information about gigabit internet speeds and to connect your business, visit cityfibre.com/connect