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A. GOODMAN & SON

Tel: 01908 373187 / 377318 Fax: 01908 372709

e-mail: goodmans.metal@aol.com www.agoodmanandson.co.uk

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Theo Chalmers

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



www.urbaneden.org www.vervepr.co.uk
e: t.chalmers@vervepr.co.uk
Tel: 01908 275271

MK:U design must deliver 'wow' factor

ON THE penultimate day of January I was among the guests at an event in business adviser Grant Thornton's offices in Avebury Boulevard, attended by the great and the good. It just might herald the most important thing to happen in Milton Keynes since its founding.

It was the launch, by Milton Keynes Council and Cranfield University, of the MK:U international architectural design competition and where we heard about the vision for the new university. If this unique opportunity is grabbed with both hands it may well not only transform this new city architecturally, socially and environmentally but also will allow it to hold its head up proudly on the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge Arc - CaMKox - educationally, too.

MK:U is billed as a 'new model university' in the heart of Milton Keynes, expected to open in 2023 and eventually preparing 15,000 undergraduate students for high-technology, cutting-edge careers.

The international design competition, which I understand has already received interest from leading architectural firms from the UK, India, Brazil, Japan, Germany, Indonesia, Australia and basically everywhere else, is organised by Malcolm Reading Consultants which claims to be 'the leading organiser of international design competitions'.

The chosen site for the planned MK:U, which will feature student accommodation cheek by jowl with academic facilities, is the last great empty plot in Central Milton Keynes, between Sainsbury's and Milton Keynes Central rail station. Its undergraduate intake will specialise in 21st- even, arguably, 22nd-century subjects including entrepreneurship, robotics, artificial intelligence, cyber and analytics.

After the initial stage closes on March 6, a shortlist of five teams will be selected to move to stage two and be invited to Milton Keynes. They will each receive a £30,000 bursary to grease the wheels and then each will produce outline design concepts for the overall MK:U masterplan and the phase one buildings. These have a con-

struction budget of approximately £188 million, will cover 61,120 sq metres - circa 40 per cent of the total site - and are due to open in 2023.

The jury which will select the winning entry is chaired by Sir Peter Gregson, vice-chancellor and chief executive of Cranfield University who was chair of the MK Futures 2050 Commission written about in previous columns, generally favourably, in columns *passim*. Also on the still largely secret jury is Sir Peter Bazalgette, president of the Royal Television Society and deputy chairman of the National Film School, former chair of Arts Council England and English National Opera and executive chairman of ITV. He was also creator of the concept of the 'celebrity chef'. I won't hold that against him, although those like the sadly recently departed Paul Bocuse, who were famous chefs when God was a boy, may well disagree.

Of far more importance to me is that Sir Peter is the great-great-grandson of Victorian civil engineer Sir Joseph Bazalgette who literally changed the world as much as, or arguably more than, any other when he designed, engineered and built the London sewers and waste treatment works. They were the first in the world, which allowed London and all subsequent cities with modern enclosed sewers to expand, exist and have good health. In my opinion, he was nothing less than the father of civilisation.

I encouraged Sir Peter, when I learned of his place on the jury, to vote for any design that, once erected, causes those who view it to exclaim: "Oh, wow, look at that amazing building". The identities of the remaining members of the jury are currently a secret as is the process by which they have been selected despite several requests for clarity. Let's hope that whoever is responsible for selecting them has the sense to select those who can think creatively. Nothing less will do, in my opinion.

Despite my misgivings on so much currently going on in this city that we all love, these are indeed exciting times again for Milton Keynes. Cheerio.



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