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# An architectural opportunity lost

WHEN the competition to identify the best architectural practice to design the new £188 million university for Milton Keynes MK:U was launched earlier this year, I was excited.

How full of hope was I that this might herald the most important thing to happen in Milton Keynes since its founding. The competition was run by Malcolm Reading Consultants, whose work included competitions for University College Dublin and the Royal College of Art.

At the launch, MK:U was being billed as a 'new model university', expected to open in 2023 and eventually preparing 15,000 undergraduates for high-technology, cutting-edge careers. I and others were sincerely hoping that it may not only transform the city educationally, socially and environmentally but would also allow it to hold its head up proudly and architecturally on the Oxford-MK-Cambridge Arc too.

The site covers 61,120 sq metres in that last great empty rectangle between Sainsbury's and Milton Keynes Central rail station. Around 40 per cent of the total site would be built on initially.

After the first stage closed in

March, a shortlist of five architectural teams was chosen by the committee. The competition's jury features several international names including Santander UK plc chief executive Nathan Bostock, ITV's non-executive chairman Sir Peter Bazalgette and Professor Dame Madeleine Atkins, president of Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge. It is chaired by Sir Peter Gregson, chief executive and vice-chancellor of Cranfield University.

Each of the architectural companies shortlisted went initially in search of UK-based partners to move to stage two. They each received a £30,000 bursary to produce outline design concepts for the MK:U masterplan and phase one buildings. The outline plans from all five have now been released and have been on public display in Middleton Hall in centre:mk during the MK2050 exhibition.

With bated breath, I attended this informal launch. Oh dear, they are all absolutely terrible.

I was not alone in being bitterly disappointed. Instead of the anticipated expressions in glass, stone and steel of the soaring imaginations, artistic musings and creative powers of some of the world's greatest

architects, we have five examples of lowest common denominator everyday blocks with scarcely a redeeming feature among them.

So let's identify the guilty parties shall we? First up is Co:MK:U which out of all five is the least terrible in my opinion. Still boring as hell, but least terrible. The other four are Hawkins/Brown; Hopkins Architects; Lifschutz Davidson Sandilands and OMA whose plan appears to comprise one single low-rise building enclosing the entire site, somewhat like a dumped, dead, snake. Make your own mind up - see the proposals at <https://competitions.malcolmreading.com/mku/shortlist>

I understand that the jury has already reached a unanimous decision. I also understand that the entry which might well make it to selection is one which includes glass frontages echoing to some extent the once-bold and influential design of centre:mk. This might be a moderately worthwhile concept despite the covered walkways apparently not being designed to keep out rain - similar to those other useless ones at

the MK1 retail park next to Stadium MK. Sadly, however, simply referring to the past in a (somewhat literally) watered-down way does not great architecture make.

MK:U was an opportunity with the most exciting potential, a series of interesting, iconic buildings to set the worlds of both architecture and learning on fire. Instead we have five sets of mind-numbing uninspired, uninspiring blocks. Those responsible appear to have had all the sense of fun sucked out of them. This is a shocking display of total anonymity. The plans need scrapping and MK:U needs to go back to the drawing board.

The exhibition in Middleton Hall included two school-created designs; one from St Paul's Catholic School and one from Denbigh School. Both were far more imaginative and exciting. How is it that children can readily express what surely we'd all like to see built better than these so-called top architects?

If at first you aim for the stars you might at least make it halfway. If you aim for the gutter, that's where you'll stay. Cheerio.

## MK:U committee draws up design shortlist

THE five shortlisted designs for a proposed new university quarter in Milton Keynes have been unveiled as part of an international design competition.

The competition, run by Malcolm Reading Consultants for Milton Keynes Council, will now move to the judging stage before the winning design is announced later this month.

The council is MK:U's project sponsor. It and lead higher education institution Cranfield University are inviting public comments on the designs to help in the decision about the new university quarter, to be built on land between Witan Gate and V6 Grafton Street.

MK:U aims to offer education focused on new technologies and digital skills including AI, robotics and cyber security. It will offer undergraduate degrees in business and entrepreneurship, as well as courses in design thinking and professional and commercial skills when it opens in 2023. Business partners include Microsoft and Santander, which has pledged £30 million to the project.

Council leader Pete Marland, said "The University Quarter is the last major undeveloped site in our city centre and an opportunity to create new energy in our public spaces through exceptional design. It is now our task to pick the right team to work with."

MK:U chief executive Professor Lynette Ryals said: "MK:U is going to be an economic asset to the whole UK, not just Milton Keynes."

The designs are online at [competitions.malcolmreading.com/mku](https://competitions.malcolmreading.com/mku)

## Networking is booming as members look to talk

### PAUL GRIFFITHS

Chief Executive  
Milton Keynes Chamber of Commerce

WE ARE delighted to announce that more than two thirds of our member organisations have attended at least one of our Chamber events during the past year. This is a fantastic achievement for the Chamber as it shows a very high level of engagement with our members who are our lifeblood.

Our events are hugely popular in the Milton Keynes business community, with a 20 per cent increase in the number of delegates attending Chamber events in the last 12 months, many selling out weeks in advance.

We offer a diverse calendar of events for both members and non-members. Our member networking events include breakfasts and



Paul Griffiths

lunches, both boasting a popular table change format at a range of venues across the borough. Attendees exchange business cards and are sent a delegate list in advance so that

you can be aware of the companies you wish to engage with beforehand. Not only that but you also get the chance to speak to the room if your name is chosen in the business card draw.

We also have Meet The Neighbours speed networking with neighbouring counties, giving delegates the chance to introduce themselves to as many businesses as possible during a two-hour time slot. Our Maximise Your Membership event allows members to network while getting a refresher of Chamber services and talking to Chamber staff.

Are you not a member yet? You don't have to miss out. Our Business After Hours is designed to give local business people an opportunity to meet informally after work for networking, drinks and a buffet, bringing networking to a raft of entrepreneurs and business leaders who are unable to leave the

office during normal daytime hours.

And our bi-annual Business Exhibition brings businesses together to enable them to forge new contacts, share expert knowledge and showcase the wealth of products and services available across Milton Keynes and the surrounding area.

Networking allows you to speak to large numbers of useful people in one place. Meet potential and existing customers face to face, improve and extend your business contacts and increase awareness of your brand.

It also creates new opportunities and best practice sharing as well as helps you to develop and improve your skill set and stay abreast of industry trends.

Relationships built through networking can improve mentoring and career development. What are you waiting for?

For more about Milton Keynes Chamber networking opportunities visit [www.chambermk.co.uk/events](http://www.chambermk.co.uk/events)



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