

# Britain's 'City of Trees' under threat

**Theo Chalmers** argues that action is needed in order to save Milton Keynes' undeveloped land – and its existing trees



THEO CHALMERS, URBAN EDEN

As readers of *Vista* will be aware, Milton Keynes, that 'City of Trees', recently received the Peter Youngman Award for its 'outstanding contribution to landscape architecture during its 40-year existence'. Appropriately, the award from the Landscape Institute is named after Peter Youngman, the landscape architect who, as consultant for the original masterplan for Milton Keynes, created our much-loved town forest as a framework for the housing and recreational areas. What made this award especially sweet is that our trees and green spaces are nevertheless under threat as never before.

The threat comes in the guise of so-called national regeneration agency English Partnerships, which controls most of the undeveloped land in the new city. It was its actions that caused me to found a pressure group called Urban Eden to quieten the chainsaws before Milton Keynes is turned into Luton, Croydon or Crawley.

How can this be happening? The answer is simple: it's a combination of the Exchequer robbing Milton Keynes for all it's worth and its servants' blind adherence to a misguided dogma. The temptation to scrap the original plan is strong: building land in Milton Keynes is fetching almost £2m an acre. If the agencies that control it can create even more for development by taking it away from the uses for which it was planned – i.e. by filling in every acre, narrowing the Boulevards from 75m to 40m, cutting down the lines of trees, even closing the roads themselves – they will. And they've already started.

So desperate are they, however, to persuade us that this isn't happening, that they'll pay thousands for public consultations which simply pay lip service to the community, and thousands more to come up with a sexy strapline promoting themselves as 'thinking differently'. Thinking differently would be having the courage to further develop Milton Keynes along its original lines: wide boulevards, lots of trees and green spaces, decent homes and ease of use.

Urban Eden member John Napleton from 1974 onwards worked on the original masterplan at Milton Keynes Development Corpora-



The original Milton Keynes masterplan included lots of trees and open spaces

tion and was director of the Commission for the New Towns responsible for Milton Keynes from 1992–1998. He says: "It seems that the development is proceeding without a strategy for transportation, linear parks and open spaces or quality of life – all essential features of the original masterplan. The new work is being driven by an unholy alliance of edicts from central government and highly motivated consultants and council officers who are trying to 'normalise' Milton Keynes. Quite why anyone would try to convert our city into a replica of the post-war disaster of urban Britain is beyond me."

So how do Urban Eden's experts interpret the true impact of these plans? For some trees in central areas, it's already too late. According to them, the 'tree death toll', a list of trees already cut down, and now mostly impossible or unlikely to be replaced, is as follows: 305 plane trees and 1,010 trees of other species. Urban Eden has also counted the trees in danger and produced the following 'trees in danger toll':

- Red alert (planning permission to cut down already given): 406 plane trees, 347 other species



- Blue alert (English Partnerships/Milton Keynes Council projects – trees at serious risk): 166 plane trees, 121 other species

- Amber alert (designated development sites – trees at strong potential risk): 1,837 plane trees, 371 other species

Total planes in danger: 2,409. Total other species in danger: 839. Grand total of trees in danger in central Milton Keynes alone: 3,248.

It's not all gloom and doom, however, and support is growing. Even LI president Nigel Thorne seems to support us, if this recent quote is any guide: "It is remarkable that one of the most often repeated criticisms in the early development stages was that there was too much planting, parkland and green space and that it was unsustainable – if only the landscape architect's influence could be criticised similarly today. Sadly there can be no comparison with today's less sympathetic approach to property development..." How very true.

We do thankfully also have the Parks Trust, a charity that (most of the time) protects Milton Keynes' 1,800ha of green space. It was set up in 1992 by those same far-sighted individuals who created the original masterplan in order to help preserve our green environment. While it does not own every green edge of the grid roads and central boulevards, all of which are under threat, it is still a massively welcome ameliorating influence.

Also working in our favour are the recent rises in the cost of money and softening of the housing market. This is apparently affecting the glut of new, Soviet-style 'shiny slums' that have sprung up in our city centre, narrowing the boulevards and darkening our skies. At first, they lured buy-to-let investors to buy 'off plan' at a discount.

## The 'tree death toll' in Milton Keynes stands at 305 plane trees and 1,101 trees of other species

The rumour is that these same entrepreneurs are now hurting badly and dumping them back on the market at a discount, devaluing the private buyers' investments and hopefully discouraging more of the same style of development.

Could the combination of pressure from Urban Eden, the credit crunch, softening home prices and the welcome adoption by English Partnerships of larger room sizes (beyond Parker Morris standards) mean the end of some of the more horrendous building projects in Milton Keynes and yet save a few more trees? We can but hope.

Common sense also tells us that all development must now be revised in terms of funding. I cannot believe that the much lauded (by them, that is) English Partnerships roof tariff will now work.

Under this system, some 10 per cent of the per-unit contribution will be effectively 'front-loaded' and paid by developers once they obtain reserved matters approval, with a further 15 per cent paid once development starts. The remaining 75 per cent will be due on completion/occupation of each consented phase of development.

At the current rates of borrowing, that first 25 per cent will prove costly at the start. But what happens if the completion/occupation cannot take place? Will the city become a mud-bath of half completed, tree-raised, lifeless, bankrupt sites like some Northern hemisphere Matto Grosso? And if 10,000 housing units have been given outline planning this year and only 3,330 are affordable, that makes almost 7,000 'unaffordable' units. Who will be buying these? Not the buy-to-let market, which has been so badly burned.

If developers only pay up at the detailed planning stage, then I presume there's a vast number of those 10,000 new homes that are still waiting for approval of reserved matters – and therefore tariff contributions. By English Partnerships' own admission, there have only been 2,373 housing starts.

Most of the money Milton Keynes Partnership keeps announcing is, so far as I can see, merely underwriting for the tariff, so I wonder to what extent this will continue now. It is suddenly beginning to go our way. Love Milton Keynes, Love Urban Eden.

*Theo Chalmers is managing director of Verve Public Relations and chair of Urban Eden (www.urbaneden.org), t.chalmers@vervepr.co.uk*