

My SOS: Save Our Shopping centre

ON August 27 1998, the management of thecentre:mk pulled off a significant coup. They persuaded the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, which had declared the shopping building worthy of Grade 2 Star listing status, not to protect the building. Instead they put in place a management agreement which was signed by centre owner Britel Fund Trustees, Milton Keynes Council and English Heritage.

Despite the DCMS's stated belief that "although the guidelines have no statutory force, the Department is confident that they have been entered into in good faith by all parties and that the shopping building's owners will abide by its requirements", the centre:mk's management then proceeded with undue haste to drive a coach and horses with motorcycle outriders and carnival floats through all of its protective provisions.

This has resulted in badly damaged artworks, the destruction of once delightful open public spaces such as Queen's Court

with its artworks, sundial and granite fountains (currently being turned into yet another money-generating restaurant centre), the retailing-in of parts of Middleton Hall and attempts - unsuccessful so far - to encroach on to City Square with a deeply unsympathetic 150-seater 'kiosk' with no toilet facilities, among other outrages. This is especially egregious when expansion can easily and sympathetically be achieved by widening the centre either side of John Lewis (which itself operates a very successful listed store in Sloane Square, London) as originally planned.

A recent report by English Heritage on the efficacy or otherwise of the management agreement in protecting this Grade 2 star-worthy building was blunt in the extreme: "Planning Weight of the Agreement: Despite the existence of the Management Agreement, one tenant of thecentre:mk pushed a proposal through to appeal against the wishes of the owners, the council and English Heritage.

"In granting approval, the inspector

opined that, as the MA was voluntary, he could give it little weight and despite the feature being described as characteristic (*my words: i.e. part of the reason it should be listed*) granted approval.

"This undermines the whole principle of the voluntary agreement and therefore, if not underpinned by a statutory designation, consideration of what further weight can be given to any agreement is required."

The current agreement was supposed to be reviewed every two years, the report added. "This just has not happened and there is no tool available to require it to happen."

So, given all of that, you might think that the DCMS would take note of all the renewed calls for listing and grant Grade 2 star status as soon as possible. No: for three long years it has dillied and dallied, dithered and delayed and now, astonishingly, it has allowed thecentre:mk to secretly push through a new management agreement. Apparently if this is signed by the owners (who have approved it

already), English Heritage (which is alleged to have signed it) and Milton Keynes Council (which is also alleged to have signed it), it allows DCMS to once more wash its hands of any responsibility for listing and the building will no doubt continue to be torn asunder.

But hold fast; council leader Sam Crooks tells me that, as a result of the 2000 Local Government Act, it is not enough for the council's development control committee to sign it. It must be signed by the ruling cabinet and they have not even seen it yet. Furthermore it is unlikely to come before them until June, by which time we may well have a different flavour cabinet.

To whoever is in the cabinet come June, my message is: PLEASE SAVE OUR SHOPPING CENTRE from those who operate it. Do not sign the new agreement and kick the whole matter back to DCMS. It is time it did the honourable thing and properly listed the centre. The next generation will thank you, as will I. Cheerio.

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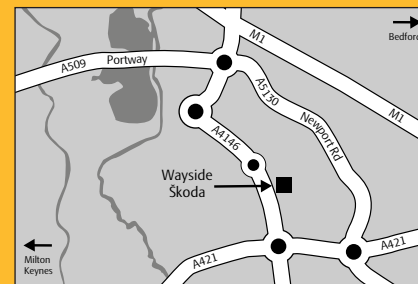
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