

## Looking for Milton Keynes

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**Presenter:** Gareth Jones

### **Gareth Jones:**

I'm cycling along the country road that used to cross Bradwell Common in North Buckinghamshire connecting the villages of Loughton and Willen. It's now a footpath in the heart of Central Milton Keynes, the city where I grew up. Milton Keynes remains the most ambitious social project of its kind in the UK, the last of the post-war new towns and the only one that had the chutzpah to call itself a city. The original plan was to create nothing less than an ideal living environment for 250,000 people, a place where cars could drive and people could walk, and the state would rent you an airy modern home if you needed one. In the early years of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation under the influence of Derek Walker, the city's chief architect and planner, only the best would do, and when it came to making drawings to show how the future would look I think the best was Helmut Jacoby.

Jacoby was a German architectural renderer active from the 1960s through to the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He could take the bare outlines of a plan and envisage it as a fully realised cityscape, always in finely detailed ink drawings. Many of the projects that Jacoby drew for Milton Keynes were never actually built, and so I'm going to go in search of a number of these sites. In the garden behind the church are some archaeological fragments of the original modernist visions that informed the new city. Three wonderful sculptures by Bernard Schottlander from the late sixties are exercises in pure form. Nearby, some characteristically orthogonal architecture creates a hall of mirrors and porte cochère lead the pedestrian across the spacious boulevards.

However, it should have been so much more for this was earmarked to be the site of the city club. The plan was for a vast entertainment and leisure facility that went through many permutations. It finally fell victim to the changing political climate of the late 1970s. Jacoby shows us a fabulous wave pool where a gentleman can smoke his pipe with impunity and lush vegetation curls incongruously around high-tech girders. Meanwhile, in a nearby arcade Hendrix and the moon landings are still contemporary and people dance, shop or eat according to preference. The complex was intended to be a novel combination between physical recreation and entertainment, modelled on the Real Madrid Club in Spain. According to an early brochure for the city it would be a place where someone can "have a hard game of football, relax in a sauna bath, buy a book, meet friends for a drink in the bar, look at an exhibition and eat in restaurants without leaving the club". Numerous models and plans, subsequently destroyed, are lovingly detailed essays in future leisure.

Doctor Freud tells us there is no such thing as an accident. My bicycle is yellow, and yellow was an important colour in the early years of Milton Keynes. It's still the colour of the posts that mark the start of the famous network of redways, the cycle routes that weave their way through the city. In the 1970s yellow was the colour of whole buildings, such as the Wolverton Sports Club, or interiors, such as the architects' department at the Milton Keynes Development Corporation.

The city then was like a giant playground and I have used my memory of it as the basis for a new installation at MK Gallery. This features the original publicity photographs commissioned by the Development Corporation of the visionary architecture and the new

communities taking shape amid the mud. Whereas many of the projects drawn by Jacoby remain unbuilt, a number of the places included in this work have already been demolished. The history of Milton Keynes is a record of the troubled relationship that the British have with the modern and the new. I'm now at the Belvedere looking out across Campbell Park, named after Lord Campbell of Eskan, the first Chairman of the Development Corporation. Jock Campbell is revered by those involved in the early days of MK. He was a socialist millionaire with a reforming zeal who, I suspect, wanted everyone to live as well as he did. Perhaps he made Milton Keynes to prove that was possible. The Park today represents a fine tribute to him but it is only a small part of what was planned in the 1970s.

Jacoby's drawings show a sequence of modernist monuments that might leave Étienne-Louis Boullée fumbling for words. From a large tor-like cone showing a hint of Glastonbury with possible Aztec influences, the Sunday stroller moves down a sequence of ramps and steps. Arriving at a water carpet, dare to linger a while, he moves on across a vertiginous glass bridge to further follies. I have no idea what a water carpet is but I know I want to walk across one. Buried somewhere within all this is a yoga centre.

Milton Keynes represents a unique moment in recent history, the point at which the social revolutions of 1945 and 1968 collide. Clement Atlee's welfare state taking a ride in a Yellow Submarine. A good portion of those involved in its planning were beautiful freaks inspired by the hippie movement to explore a pastoral iconography in a modernist context.

Midsummer Boulevard, the main thoroughfare at the city centre is cosmically aligned with sunrise on the summer solstice. A drawing of the boating pool sees Jacoby emerge as a hallucinatory landscapist; nothing is real. Meanwhile, over on the other side there was a proposal for an international sculpture park. Interconnected galleries, courtyards and glades were to lead off from a central ramp that follow the slope of the site. Henry Moore was its President Elect and promised a generous selection of sculptures on permanent loan. He encouraged several of his contemporaries to follow suit. When the political climate shifted to the right, the sculpture park failed to materialise along with the other wonders. It was twenty years ahead of its time.

I cycle down through the park to Willen Lake. It's one of a number of balancing lakes created to take the water that would have nowhere to run once buildings began to cover the fields. They've all been developed with great care into leisure amenities, some for water skiing, others for fishing or bird watching. But at Willen this falls a little short of what had been planned. A discotheque built into the promontory allows Jacoby a moment of unalloyed seventies glamour. Couples drink or dance in the midst of a giant aquarium. Tropical fish go about their business undistracted. A sailing school and yacht club wears its nautical references with pride. While a planned office development blurs the divide between leisure and commerce. Note the early computer with its funny binary language. In the midst of this development is a water organ illuminated by coloured lights playing a music we can only imagine. This unrealised design was created by John Sharkey who did get to make the Milton Keynes Bowl, now an enduringly popular venue for the bohemos of rock and pop.

A short cycle ride from Willen promontory is the finest historic building in the city, Robert Hooke's 17<sup>th</sup> century church at Willen village. Hooke came into his own as an architect after the Great Fire of London and produced a new plan for the city based on a grid with boulevards. It was never built. But what London resisted, Milton Keynes embraced three hundred years later. Hooke's church now sits within one of the city's famous grid squares, elegant witness to an extraordinary environment.

The working title for my project was "Looking for Milton Keynes". I called it that because wherever I go I'm looking for Milton Keynes, the people and places that populated my childhood and which continue to haunt my work. With Helmut Jacoby's drawings I need to look no further. In 2003 I had the privilege to make an exhibition of his work in London. Helmut, by then rather frail, came over from Germany and entertained us with a certain violence of opinion. "After The Beatles," he declared "there is no pop music!" And who are we to disagree? He died in 2005 aged 79.

Even though it was famously designed with the car in mind, the best way to see Milton Keynes remains by bicycle, and to cycle along the redways is to experience a form of time travel. One moment you'll find yourself in a social democrat utopia, the next a Thatcherite boom town, finishing up in a New Labour technocracy. Our current period is unnamed and ill-conceived but it will certainly take on some sort of shape in Milton Keynes. This city was originally formed by politics, the politics of improving people's lives, and every political era eventually finds its expression here.