

Case Name: The Point, Midsummer Boulevard, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire

Case Number: 475407

Background

English Heritage has been asked to consider The Point multiplex leisure complex, Milton Keynes for listing. The building is less than 30 years old.

Asset(s) under Assessment

Facts about the asset(s) can be found in the Annex(es) to this report.

| Annex | List Entry Number | Name | Heritage Category | EH Recommendation |
|-------|-------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | N/A | The Point entertainment complex | Listing | Do not add to List |

Visits

| Date | Visit Type |
|-----------------|--------------------|
| 03 October 2012 | Partial inspection |

Context

It is understood that the building is under threat of redevelopment and although no planning application has yet been submitted, a request for a Formal Screening Opinion submitted by the developers in April 2012 reveals plans to demolish the building and replace it with retail space. Local press and radio have begun a campaign to save the building. It is not within a conservation area.

Assessment

CONSULTATION

The owners, applicant and local planning authority were all consulted.

A report from Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners on behalf of the owners (along with supplementary reports by Richard Coleman and HeritageCollective LLP) raised the following substantive comments:

* the map provided with the Consultation Report was noted to be inaccurate as it included the walkway between the cinema block and multi-storey car park. EH response: this was included because it contains hard landscaping relating to the cinema;

* the date for the start of construction (August 1984) was provided. This has been added to a revised History Section;

* the report contends that the responsibility for the overall design rested largely with Neil Tibbatt rather than Building Design Partnership (BDP) who acted as consultant architects and engineers. An article in Building (16 August 1985, p35) is quoted as saying "That an interior design group [Tibbatt's] should dictate the external shape is not entirely surprising. The joint developers...were keen to get the interior concept right before considering an appropriate building envelope. The Point is therefore one of the few buildings to have been purposely designed inside-out. According to Mr Tibbatt, the list of facilities required and the definitive seating capacities of each area led naturally to a tiered design". The contention that Neil Tibbatt was the principal conceptual designer is accepted and the History Section revised to reflect this;

* an article in Building Services, July 1986 is quoted in the report stating that the ziggurat was originally intended to be air conditioned but due to a 35% cut in budget a forced ventilation system was installed

necessitating the air vents on the terraces. The vents were, therefore, not part of the original design. This has been noted in the revised Details Section;

* the statement in the History Section that the design was influenced by the work of Archigram is contested by the consultant's report. They contend that there is no hard evidence that this is the case since:

1) although Mike Webb, who worked for the architects BDP, was a founder of Archigram, this is seen as a tenuous connection. The overall concept of the design was that of Neil Tibbatt not BDP, who only acted as executive architects, and for whom the lead architect was Alec Stevenson rather than Mike Webb.

2) the original design was for a glazed pyramid bearing no relation to Mike Webb's Sin Centre Entertainment Centre thesis project of 20 years earlier and that any influence it may have had on the design would have been minimal as the building was designed, according to Neil Tibbatt, so as to 'get the interior concept right before considering an appropriate building envelope'. This implies an interior led design not based on the exterior drawings of Archigram.

3) the influence of Archigram on the design is not mentioned in any architectural articles of the time. We accept that the influence of Archigram on the design is unproven and have amended the text accordingly.

* the statement in the Consultation Report that 'The design is also noteworthy as a relatively early use of architectural computer-aided design (CAD)' is challenged on the basis that CAD packages were in use as early as 1963 in other industries. The report, however, accepts that CAD began to be used by British architectural practices in the early 1980s, implying that it is accepted as a relatively early use of the technology for architectural design, but asserts that it is not of special historical interest as overall the technology was not new. A supplementary report by HeritageCollective LLP notes the functional nature of the use of CAD in this period with its use limited to simplifying the process of editing drawings and reducing the need for draftsmen rather than aiding conceptual design as more sophisticated software later allowed. This is accepted but does not alter the fact of CAD's use on the project.

No other substantive comments were received.

DISCUSSION

The Principles of Selection for Listing Buildings (March 2010) states that buildings of less than 30 years old are normally listed only if they are of outstanding quality and are under threat. For all post-war buildings, the bar for designation is high and reflects a high quality of design and use of materials, a degree of innovation in concept or technology and depends on a high level of intactness of fabric, plan and detail. Where the interior plan, fixtures and finishes are an important element of a design, their survival can be critical to designation. The English Heritage Listing Selection Guide for Culture and Entertainment (April 2011) does not specifically deal with multiplex cinemas but notes that post-1945 cinemas are rarely of interest and that most were built as part of office developments and so must be assessed on the architectural interest of the whole building. The Curzon Mayfair Cinema, LB Westminster (1963-6, Grade II) is the only post-war cinema that is currently listed (other than the Renoir Cinema, LB Camden, listed at Grade II as part of the Brunswick Centre), and noted for its impressive interior. Ernö Goldfinger's cinema, designed and built during the second phase of the commercial development (Alexander Fleming House) at Elephant and Castle, LB Southwark in 1963-7, was demolished in 1988.

As the first example of a multiplex cinema in Britain, notwithstanding that it was one of a number planned for opening around this time, The Point has some claims to historic interest. The introduction of the multiplex cinema has been credited with revitalising cinema attendance which had been in a steady decline since the introduction of television and this fact is of note in terms of the social history of the country, despite the concept having been imported from the United States. However, in terms of the history of cinemas as a distinct building type, it can be argued that the multiplex was merely a natural development of existing cinema design, the template for which was established between the early 1900s and the 1930s. In essence this comprised a windowless auditorium and, increasingly, an elaborate entrance foyer. The design of multiplex cinemas merely substitutes multiple auditoria. The provision of multiple screens was not in itself a new concept since the division of existing cinemas to provide multiple screens had been taking place since the 1970s. Multiplexes, therefore, represent a development of the cinema-going experience, with an emphasis on generating greater custom through a larger choice of films on offer and extensive front of house food and beverages stands, rather than a fundamental change in either cinema design or use. In so far as multiplex designs do depart from traditional cinema design it is through their more usual location as part of office developments or shopping malls as opposed to forming a prominent element in the streetscape of the High Street. The Point is atypical of this being a stand-alone cinema with an added entertainment complex. The unproven influence of the architectural concepts of Archigram and early use of CAD are lesser considerations in terms of historical interest.

Neither its status as the first British multiplex, nor its concept as an integrated entertainment complex is of such historical interest that it warrants designation for these reasons alone. While certainly of note for its place within the development of Milton Keynes as a new town, this factor does not confer special interest.

In terms of architectural interest, this resides principally in the post-modernist ziggurat of the entertainment element of the complex, since the cinema itself comprises a simple metal-clad box whose exterior form reveals little of its function. Regarding the cinema block, any ornament was concentrated on the interior, specifically the foyer, which originally had marbled columns. This, however, has been greatly altered through subsequent re-branding. Even as built, it lacked a visual coherence and cannot be regarded as ever having had the high architectural interest inherent in the spatial design and quality of finishes of a cinema such as the Curzon Mayfair or a number of post-war theatres which offer another comparison. The latter, in contrast, were built to innovative designs of high architectural merit, reflecting changes in theatre production, and as a genre are increasingly widely recognised by designation.

As was intended, the ziggurat element of the design, beneath its red steel frame, provides an eye-catching focus to the complex, although its effect as a landmark has been somewhat reduced by subsequent nearby development. Leaving aside arguments around the architectural legitimacy of its largely non-structural pyramidal steel frame, the design has a notable commercial boldness, the form of the ziggurat reflecting the function within. The use of reflective glass, here on the core of the ziggurat, was adopted in larger buildings in the new town as elsewhere in the country at that date, to diffuse the effect of large surfaces. Although effective, it is not innovative. The ziggurat as an architectural form had been previously explored in such buildings as the accommodation blocks at the University of East Anglia (Denys Lasdun 1964-8 - listed Grade II*), the Brunswick Centre, LB Camden (Patrick Hodgkinson, 1967-72 - listed Grade II) and the Alexandra Road Estate, LB Camden (Neave Brown, 1968-78 - listed Grade II*). Another similarly conceived building to the Point, the brown Perspex pyramid at the nearby Bletchley Leisure Centre (1970-73, now demolished), was turned down for listing in 2008.

Beyond this, however, the use of materials, the quality of the detail and the quality of the surviving interiors fall short of the high standards necessary for listing post-war buildings, particularly the higher standard applied to those less than 30 years old. The use of high quality materials, a key factor of the listed Central Milton Keynes Shopping Building (Grade II), is largely absent here while the detailing of the external freestanding steel frame is somewhat crude. In addition, the building has suffered notable alterations. From the outset the design was altered from its intended glazed pyramid for budgetary reasons and during construction the rather unsightly glass-fibre ventilation ducts were added in lieu of the intended air conditioning. Externally, the building remains largely as built, on its terraced podium, but the main entrance and secondary entrance to the bingo hall have been altered and the neon lighting to the metal frame has been removed. This last, although minor in terms of actual fabric has had a major effect on the essentially night-time character of the building. The interiors, other than the bingo hall, have been radically altered in terms of usage, layout and decorative schemes. The original open plan character of the ground floor with its various restaurants and bars flanking the thoroughfare to the link building and cinema has been lost, and access to the cinema closed off by the current arrangement of office accommodation.

The Point is a building of strong local interest as the outcome of public consultation by MKDC on the new town's requirements for an entertainment centre, resulting in a mixed-use venue incorporating the country's first multiplex cinema. However, this significance is not sufficient to warrant listing on historical interest alone. Because of the limits imposed on the original design and the subsequent degree of alteration, it lacks the special architectural interest to merit listing, and in particular falls short of the higher standards required to list buildings of this recent date.

CONCLUSION

The Point, built in 1984-5 to provide a mixed-use leisure centre for the new town of Milton Keynes and including the first example of a multiplex cinema to open in Britain, does not meet the criteria for listing.

REASONS FOR DESIGNATION DECISION

The Point, built in 1984-5 to provide a mixed-use leisure centre for the new town of Milton Keynes and including the first example of a multiplex cinema to open in Britain, is not recommended for designation for the following principal reasons:

* Historic interest: as the first purpose-built multiplex cinema to open in Britain, The Point has some claim to historic interest since the importation of this marketing strategy from America, with its choice of films under one roof and enhanced refreshment facilities, is credited with the revival in fortune of cinema attendance after its post-war decline. However, in terms of the history of cinema, the development of the multiplex represents a relatively late stage in its evolution and marks only a minor development in cinema design;

* Architectural interest: a single leisure facility, comprising two separate buildings linked by a covered walkway, of which the cinema element consists of a metal clad box lacking special interest in either its interior design or exterior form. The ziggurat pyramid, originally housing the other leisure facilities, has some claim to

architectural interest for its eye-catching, commercially-orientated, function-driven design, but because of budget constraints was not built to a consistently high standard nor with high quality materials and detailing;

* Alteration: the building, apart from the basement bingo hall, has suffered from continual refurbishment and, in the case of the ziggurat, change of use. Consequently, little survives of the original interior features or layout, while additional minor alterations to the exterior have eroded its character further.

Countersigning comments:

Agreed. We have carefully considered this building, bearing in mind its historic significance and position within Milton Keynes. Whilst certainly architecturally striking, and a challenge to convention, it is not built with a consistently high standard of materials or of detail, traits that mark the Shopping Building. Nor can it claim to be an innovative High Tech structure. Above all it is considerably altered internally, losing the plan and circulation that determined its external form, and fixtures and fittings that are characteristic of entertainment buildings. Whilst certainly of local interest, it falls below the threshold for listing post-war buildings. [REDACTED]
3.12.12

Second Countersigning comments:

Agreed also. While of local interest, The Point does not possess the special architectural or historic interest to merit listing.
[REDACTED], 14th January 2013

Annex 1

Factual Details

Name: The Point entertainment complex

Location: Gala Clubs, The Point, 602 Midsummer Boulevard, Milton Keynes, MK9 3NB

| County | District | District Type | Parish |
|--------|---------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| | Milton Keynes | Unitary Authority | Central Milton Keynes |

History

In 1982 the Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) published a report entitled 'Milton Keynes City Centre Entertainment: A Development Activity'. This followed public consultation which had revealed that inhabitants of the New Town felt that it lacked 'conventional entertainment (e.g. cinema, bingo etc)'. The report set out the requirement for a leisure and entertainment complex on a city centre site and invited proposals from interested developers. A joint proposal from Bass Leisure and the US company American Multi-Cinema (AMC) for a leisure complex boasting a multiplex cinema with bingo hall, restaurants and a night club was accepted for a site next to the shopping centre on Midsummer Boulevard. AMC saw this as an ideal initial venture to import the multiplex concept that had been developed in the suburbs of American cities and which they had been interested in introducing to Britain since 1979. This presented something of a risk since British cinema attendance had reached an all time low in the early 1980s but Milton Keynes with its estimated catchment area of 1.5 million people and car friendly environment was seen as a perfect location for the introduction of the multiplex with its key attributes of customer choice, ease of access and glamorous surroundings.

The concept and design of the building was largely the work of interior designer Neil Tibbatts of Tibbatts and Company who specialised in nightclub, restaurant and pub designs and included Bass as clients. Building Design Partnership (BDP) were employed as consultant architects and engineers. Alec Stevenson of the Manchester branch of BDP was the lead architect on the project. The original concept was for an 80 foot pyramid of mirrored glass with a windowless silver block at the rear containing the cinema. This was modified under budgetary pressures to a 70 foot ziggurat structure (while retaining the pyramid concept in the use of a framing pyramidal steel structure, partly since this reflected the red triangle logo of Bass) with three terraces containing the two restaurants, bingo hall and night club (managed by Bass) and retaining the windowless rear cinema block. This included ten cinema screens with a total seating capacity of 2,026. It is asserted that the design was influenced by the work of Archigram, a 1960s avant-garde architectural group emanating from the Architectural Association who produced futuristic, high-tech, theoretical projects which were influential in some architectural circles. In particular, the final design for The Point is somewhat redolent of Mike Webb's thesis project at the Regent Street Polytechnic from 1959-62 called the Sin Centre Entertainment Centre for Leicester Square. However, any influence from Archigram was not mentioned in any articles in the building press at the time and is perhaps largely circumstantial, based on Mike Webb's involvement with BDP: the influence of Archigram must be regarded as unproven. The design is also of interest as a relatively early use of architectural computer-aided design (CAD).

Construction on the scheme, costing £9 million, started in August 1984 and it opened in November 1985 when it was described by the owners as the first multiplex cinema in Britain and Europe's first fully-integrated entertainment centre. A year after opening the operator changed to United Cinemas International (UCI). After initial commercial success, there followed a steady decline in attendance from the early 1990s. Following subsequent competition from Cineworld's larger Xcape complex which opened in 2002, in 2003 UCI sold its interest in the cinema to the easyGroup who operated the cinema on the budget principles of its airline. The interior of the foyer was stripped out in line with the budget concept which, however, proved unsuccessful and in 2006 operation of the cinema was taken over by Odeon Cinemas who refurbished the building.

Details

The Point entertainment complex consists of two separate buildings linked by a short glazed walkway. To the north-west is a three-storey, steel-framed, glazed ziggurat set on a paved terrace and fore-court over a basement. The building originally contained a bar and restaurant area on the ground floor, a bingo hall in the basement and night club on the upper storey, with its lighting rig housed in the uppermost block. In 1995 the

night club was converted to a health club and subsequently a community centre while the ground floor now contains a restaurant and office space. To the south-east and at a lower level is the multiplex cinema.

The ziggurat is framed by a pyramidal, red-painted, steel frame consisting of square section trusses (originally lit with red neon lights at night but the lights have been removed) with ball feet, adjoining the top corners of the glass boxes and extending horizontally and vertically to provide a decorative framework to the ziggurat. The frame also extends to provide an entrance canopy with a billboard over it. Some of the vertical elements of the steel frame terminate in small metal spheres set just off the ground. Structurally, the ziggurat is a separate steel-framed building, independent of the outer decorative steel structure, and clad in reflective glass panels set in metal frames with rubber fillets. Mounted in pairs on the terraces on the side elevations of the ziggurat and surrounding paved lower terrace are angular ventilation ducts with fibre-glass cladding. These were a late addition to the design when, due to budgetary cuts, the intended air-conditioning was replaced by a forced ventilation system. The main entrance, on the north-western elevation, is set into a glazed recess. The entrances themselves, including the door furniture and the surrounding glazed panels, are replacements. On the south-east side of the building are a pair of steel spiral stair cases, accessed via walkways, which link the terrace on the first glazed level to the ground floor. Access to the basement bingo hall was via two external stairs set into the paved fore-court in front of the ziggurat, flanking the entrance. These have wedge-shaped glazed canopies over the stairways. The current entrance (eastern of the two) is marked by a steel arch with a corrugated steel hood supported by plain tubular steel columns, whereas the other has ceased to function as an entrance and has had a newspaper kiosk inserted within it. The rear of the basement area, facing the cinema has louvred steel cladding.

The interior of the ziggurat has been remodelled several times and its original layout has been largely lost. Few elements of the original fittings appear to survive other than the steel-framed staircase up to the first-floor nightclub and metal spiral stair to its original lighting gallery. The layout of the bingo hall presumably remains largely as designed but the survival of original fittings is unclear.

The multiplex cinema comprises a windowless, steel-framed, flat-roofed rectangular 'box'. The glazed foyer with a sloping glazed roof was originally connected to the ziggurat via a steel-framed glazed canopy with a pitched roof but this has been closed off. The building is clad with smooth metal panels, although some of these appear to have been replaced with Perspex or glass.

The interior of the cinema was not inspected but is understood to have been altered by successive operators. The spacious full-height foyer, viewed from outside, has been remodelled round the original steel columns which have marbled bases and splayed circular capitals.

Selected Sources

Pevsner, N and Williamson, E, *The Buildings of England: Buckinghamshire*, 1994, 495

Richard Coleman Consultancy, *The Point, Milton Keynes - Analysis of Architectural Quality and Potential for Listing Report*, Consultants Report, August 2006, The Richard Coleman Consultancy

Stuart Hanson, *The Point: Birth of the Multiplex*, Unpublished lecture, Stuart Hanson, DeMontfort University, Leicester, LE1 9BH

The Guardian - Phil Hoad, *How Multiplex cinemas saved the British Film Industry 25 years ago*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/nov/11/multiplex-cinemas-the-point-milton-keynes>, 26 July 2012

Map

National Grid Reference: SP8546538835



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