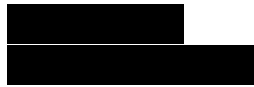


A Century of Cinema Exhibition: From Silent Screen to Digital Screen

The Point: Birth of the Multiplex - Stuart Hanson

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On 29 November 1985 The Point, Britain's first multiplex, opened in the Buckinghamshire new town of Milton Keynes. It was proposed just at the moment when the audience for cinemagoing in Britain reached an all-time low of 54 million visits per year (down from 1.6 billion in 1946). This paper examines why Milton Keynes was selected and what economic and cultural conditions allowed for the development of this new form of cinema precisely at the point at which audiences reached their nadir. It is not a glamorous story but one which involves US capital, a building plot opposite a shopping centre, planning regulations and Margaret Thatcher – well, indirectly!

In 1982 Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) published a report entitled *Milton Keynes City Centre Entertainment: A Development Activity*,¹ in which it set out to market a prime city centre site for a leisure and entertainment complex and invited proposals from interested developers and operators. For some time the city had been considering what it called the 'future need for recreation facilities'² and utilising feedback surveys of residents concluded that the city lacked 'conventional entertainment (e.g. cinema, bingo etc)' (p.12) even though cinema was acknowledged as being in decline nationally. MKDC referred to these entertainments as "bright lights city centre

entertainments³. The proposals would have to include facilities for cinemas, bingo and a nightclub/discotheque and would be invited from those developers and operators who had already expressed an interest in Milton Keynes. An outline development brief would be required and in return MKDC would provide car parking to the periphery of the site and, importantly, use its powers under the New Towns Act 1981 to authorise the development. This meant that any developer would not need to apply to the local authority other than for advertising and signage. The site specifically chosen was on Midsummer Boulevard, opposite the main shopping centre and in an area with a significant movement of pedestrians.

SLIDE NO. 2

Milton Keynes had been the subject of an earlier unsuccessful proposal by British leisure company Granada for an £1 million entertainment complex in 1979, to be located at Saxon Gate West, near the shopping centre. In this plan the largest space was allocated to a bingo hall, seating 1,200 to 1,400 people, with a three-screen, 600-seat cinema, pub, "fun palace" and several shops⁴. However, Granada executives under pressure from MKDC were unable to translate their plan into a firm proposal.

American Multi Cinema's opportunity came with the rejection of Granada's bid and the success of Bass Leisure's, which felt that the central attraction of their leisure complex should be a multiplex cinema. Since no British-based exhibitor had any experience in this area they invited AMC to build the cinema, which was at that time the third-largest cinema chain in the USA and the pioneer of the multiplex. AMC had begun to research the British exhibition market in 1979, five years before they committed funds for the development of The Point. The research involved a market survey of a variety of localities. The deal with Bass was mutually beneficial since AMC would manage the cinema and Bass the rest of the complex.

The Point, which cost £7.7 million, had two 156-seat auditoriums, two with 169 seats, four with 220 seats and two with 248 seats. In addition to its 10-screens, The Point had a restaurant, bar and social club, and was described by one commentator as a 'one-stop entertainment centre'.⁵ Taking into account the 2,026 cinema seats the complex could entertain up to 6,000 people.

However, given the state of the industry in the early 80s The Point was a considerable gamble. By the early 1980s Britain was viewed as a market in which the domestic exhibition sector was in terminal decline, whilst at the same time being a market in which films from the United States were both popular and dominant. By 1984, in the face of steadily falling audience numbers many Hollywood distributors were on the verge of pulling out of Britain altogether.⁶ An integral part of the plan to build multiplexes in Britain was an agreement with distributors, some of them part owners of the new cinemas that patterns of distribution would have to be radically changed.

The period from 1985 has been one of strong growth in new cinema building; however, it took a US company (AMC) to introduce the multiplex concept to Britain. Prior to the development of The Point the duopoly enjoyed by Rank and ABC (whose parent company was Thorn-EMI) with respect to cinema exhibition in Britain stifled new developments, as the two companies failed to invest substantially in new cinemas. Both, however as a condition of British Film Year in 1985, had committed to spending £1 million a month on replacement and refurbishment of cinemas. Despite the evidence from the suburban United States where the multiplex had bolstered admissions, Rank, increasingly saw rationalisation and the redevelopment of its traditional city centre sites as the only solution to falling profits. Thorn-EMI had begun, albeit reluctantly, to acknowledge that the practice of converting cinemas, many of which were constructed in the pre-war, was outmoded.⁷

Of course, Valenti had good reasons for wanting to stimulate cinemagoing in Britain (and Europe); Hollywood dominated cinema screens and he wished that to continue. One industry executive observed that this dominance would lead to a 'soft revolution' in which cinema-goers would be won over by better concessions (drinks and food), better seating, and better auditoria.⁸ The introduction of multiplexes in Britain and other parts of the world by exhibitors closely tied to the major studios has been part of a concerted effort to maintain the hegemony of Hollywood. With the arrival of multiplexes the distributors were persuaded to close up release patterns with the United States. As the number of multiplexes grew this delay decreased further as distributors were offered more than one exhibition chain for their releases.⁹

One of the attractions of Milton Keynes was the lack of any competition and the absence of any baring. The nearest first-run cinema was some eight miles away in Bletchley. Moreover, Bass/AMC felt that Milton Keynes was ideal for this new form of entertainment complex. Bass Leisure's Peter Sherlock calculated that three-quarters of the population was under 45 and affluent.¹⁰ The Point aimed to draw from a catchment area within a fifteen mile radius inhabited by approximately 1.5 million people, all within a forty five minute car drive of the town centre. Though MK was a region with an extensive cable TV infrastructure Bass/AMC believed that such a complex would be very attractive to young people. Research suggested that 40% of the population of MK was under 25 years old, with 27% over 45. Since the cinemagoing audience was dominated by under 25s MK seemed the perfect location.

The main selling feature of the multiplex cinema was 'choice' with two or more showings of individual films per evening, at least one screen showing a U certificate film and the promise of a 'flexible' screening programme, which might include foreign-language films. The timing of films was characterised by what was called "spill and fill", supported by

a dramatic technological feature, which was the capacity to show one print on up to four screens.

SLIDE NO. 3

AMC made great play of the importation of successful elements of the American formula such as computerised ticket sales, new kinds of concessions and a no-smoking policy throughout. Of course the design of the cinema meant easier access for disabled audience members, including disabled toilets. Answering the question 'But why this development in Milton Keynes?' AMC's UK Managing Director Charles Wesoky argued that the decline in cinemagoing in Britain was because cinemas were badly operated, too expensive and there was inadequate travel facilities.¹¹ Wesoky argued that AMC would reverse this with an accent on customer service. The Point was designed and built with the benefit of the experience of twenty years of evolution in cinema-going in The United States and Canada, an evolution which had culminated in the development of the multiplex cinema in suburban and out-of-town centres (see Chapter 6).

Multiplex corporations did one important thing that the British film industry in particular, did not do: recognise that film's mode of consumption had shifted decisively under contemporary capitalism into a commodity that had its emphasis in home-based technological forms and entertainment. Film viewing as a popular cultural activity was very much alive: it was cinema-going that was not. Therefore, the multiplex companies set about marketing the cinema as not only the best place to see a film but as a place to which people would want to go.

The relaxed planning conditions of the site adjacent to the shopping centre meant that any developer would enjoy considerable architectural freedom since the only conditions were that the building would be subject to a height limit of three to four storeys, to accord with the character of the surroundings, and all elevations of the building would be

designated as public frontage. The only clarification with regard to design was that it should 'achieve an acceptable all round appearance'¹². The building itself was a complex one, which had undergone some key design changes from that initially envisaged.

SLIDE NO. 4

The initial proposal designed by Birmingham-based Neil Tibbatts along with architect Alex Stevenson from Building Design Partnership; was for an 80 feet crystal pyramid of mirrored glass with the windowless silver block at the back, which was the 10-screen cinema. The interior was to have an atrium with landscaping and vegetation.

SLIDE NO. 5

However, citing 'technical problems' largely based on the need to keep the budget to beneath £10m, Bass/AMC revised the design. Instead the new 70 feet structure would resemble a Mesopotamian Ziggurat, with three-level terraces, whilst the cinema block was to stay the same, drab windowless box.

SLIDE NO. 6

Historically, the cinema has been as an integral part of the urban landscape and the established geography of the city or town. When the new town of Milton Keynes was selected for The Point, to be followed by green field, suburban and new town sites around the country, the mould was cast for the development of the new cinema experience. It would be one orientated towards the cinemagoer that was prepared to travel. This appeal to the mobile traveller was wholly in keeping with contemporary developments in shopping and leisure, and the main appeal was made to the motorist.

The climate in Britain for speculative foreign investment was highly favourable, with Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in the process of restructuring Britain's

economy. On the eve of the first multiplex development in Britain the economy was gearing up for a consumer boom fuelled by tax cuts and falling interest rates. The Conservative government was concerned to stimulate confidence in Britain on the part of domestic and overseas business. In order to encourage inward investment it was prepared to provide assistance with a slew of financial inducements and a relaxed regulatory culture.¹³

More importantly, the Conservative government signalled its intentions almost from the outset. During its first year in office it introduced the *Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980*. The 1980 Act covered the setting up of Urban Development Corporations and Enterprise Zones, but more importantly I think it sought to speed up the planning process.¹⁴ During the 1980s planning authorities were instructed to be less rigid when considering applications for planning consent, in line with the government's free enterprise philosophy.

Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this relaxed regulatory environment was the rapid development of out-of-town shopping complexes around many of Britain's major conurbations. One result of this was that from 1981 to 1988 retail sales increased at an average annual rate of 4.8% compared with only 1% between 1971 and 1980.¹⁵

The steady increase in car ownership throughout the 1980s and the move by many people to housing developments on the urban fringe, led to greater demands for out-of-town shopping facilities. Moreover, many retailers and particularly the large chains sought to reduce rents and combat the threat to business from city centre congestion by moving outwards. The most common developments were indoor shopping centres and retail warehouses, often called retail parks.¹⁶ They included restaurants and leisure activities such as swimming pools, bowling alleys, bingo halls and, of course, multiplex cinemas.

The provision of new shopping facilities was a key element in the proposed regeneration of regional economies, in particular older industrial areas that had effectively

become de-industrialised. The government proposed that the regeneration of these areas would come as a result of providing new jobs and better living conditions. This would not be achieved solely by direct government investment but would require private capital. Amongst a variety of regeneration schemes pursued to this aim the most significant for the development of multiplex cinemas was the Enterprise Zone. This was, according to Secretary of State for the Environment Michael Heseltine, 'a new approach to encouraging the regeneration and expansion of industry and commerce in our urban areas.'¹⁷

The first eleven Enterprise Zones were instigated in 1981, and granted existing businesses and prospective developers financial incentives. These included 100 per cent relief from local taxes for ten years and substantial relief against national taxation, a simplified planning policy, streamlined administration, and a reduction in local and central government 'red tape'. There was also no obligation on the part of developers of Enterprise Zones to take into account local plans.¹⁸

In line with the Government's policy of promoting enterprise, further initiatives were implemented to stimulate commercial and industrial developments in other areas, for example Urban Development Corporations (UDCs). These were charged with the role of 'enabler', 'smoothing the path' for private sector development by re-claiming blighted sites, improving the infrastructure and arranging business grants and loans.¹⁹ UDCs had substantial powers to by-pass formal planning procedures and could compulsorily acquire sites for development. Notable UDCs were those of Tyne and Wear, London Docklands, Heartlands in Birmingham, the old dock area around Trafford Park in Manchester and the Don Valley in Sheffield, now home of the Meadowhall shopping Centre. The imperative was to stimulate the local economy and provide employment. For many of the developers this inevitably meant development of the service sector in the form of retailing and leisure-based industries. US cinema companies saw the parallel between these developments and

those that had been so successful in the United States, especially since many catered for the motorcar.

Although the changes in planning regulations provided for in the 1980 Act helped the development of many shopping and mixed-use developments, planning regulations were still perceived as hindering business. In 1984 Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher explicitly identified 'over-regulation', amongst other things, as an obstacle to job creation.²⁰ The resulting White Paper entitled *Lifting the Burden* (1985) covered a variety of proposals across all areas of government designed to make wealth creation easier and stimulate entrepreneurialism.²¹ The key ideological plank for planning, according to Thornley, was that 'there should be a presumption towards allowing development unless a good reason can be presented to oppose it.'²² In other words the onus was placed upon planning authorities to show why a proposed development should be *refused* (for example on environmental grounds).

Invariably, proposals for major out-of-town shopping centres were approved, usually on the outskirts of major conurbations near to motorway junctions or major orbital roads (such as Lakeside on the M25 in Essex and the MetroCentre in Gateshead). A number of major shopping developments were also completed in new towns such as Telford and in older industrial areas within conurbations such as Merry Hill in Dudley, Meadowhall in Sheffield and Salford Quays in Manchester. These centres were the location for the first round of multiplex developments.

So, in conclusion, I think that the development of the point was significant in that it cemented the dominance of Hollywood not only in terms of 'product' (films) but also in terms of the culture of cinemagoing. Moreover, it is worth remembering that almost the entire first major wave of multiplex developments was dominated by vertically integrated US companies (e.g. CIC which took over AMC in 1989 and owned by Columbia and Universal to form UCI; Warner Bros cinemas UK in 1987, MGM cinemas in 1991).

The emergence of the multiplex as an integral part of the out-of-town shopping and leisure centre changed the urban and suburban landscape in the late 80s and early 90s. It wouldn't be until John Major's Conservative government that efforts were made to roll back the trend for out-of-town developments. In a series of Planning Policy Guidance notes (PPGs), which local planning authorities must take into account in preparing their development plans a new emphasis began to be placed upon regenerating urban centres. In June 1996 *PPG6 Town Centres and Retail Developments* and whilst not outlawing them completely it sought to encourage edge of centre or town centre developments ('town centre' was used generally to cover city, town and suburban district centres). Moreover, *PPG6* was the first to make special mention of multi-screen cinemas.²³

Finally, and ironically, The Point now seems like an example of a bygone age. It's not even the main cinema in MK now – see the Xscape (opened in 2000) and now officially the "ultimate entertainment destination".

SLIDE NO. 7

It's the silver jubilee of the building this year and it's perhaps time to begin talking about preserving it though official listing. Despite its time worn appearance now no other multiplex complex was as adventurous or distinctive as The Point.

SLIDE NO. 8

¹ *Milton Keynes City Centre Entertainment: A Development Activity*, Milton Keynes Development Corporation, 1982

² *A Recreation Strategy for Milton Keynes*, Milton Keynes Development Corporation, February 1982

³ See *Milton Keynes City Centre Entertainment: A Development Activity*, p.14

⁴ *Milton Keynes Express*, 1 June 1979

⁵ N. Floyd, 'View to a screen killing', *Stills* 19 (May 1985), p. 23

⁶ *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 1991, p. S-4

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- ⁷ See *Stills 19* (May 1985), p.23
- ⁸ *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 1991, p. S-3
- ⁹ I. McAsh, 'Take 5: People in Camera', *Films on Screen and Video*, 5:1 (June 1985), pp. 14–15.
- ¹⁰ I. McAsh, 'Take 5: People in Camera', *Films on Screen and Video*, 5:1 (June 1985), pp. 14–15
- ¹¹ *ibid*
- ¹² *Milton Keynes City Centre Entertainment: A Development Activity*, p.18
- ¹³ A. Gamble, *Britain in Decline: Economic Policy, Political Strategy and the British State*, Fourth Edition (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994)
- ¹⁴ See A. Thornley, *Urban Planning under Thatcherism: The challenge of the market*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 1993)
- ¹⁵ J. Harvey, *Urban Land Economics* Fourth Edition (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 207
- ¹⁶ For a brief overview of developments see J. Fernie, 'The coming of the fourth wave: new forms of retail out-of-town development' *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 23:1 (1995) 4–11
- ¹⁷ Forward to D. Rodrigues and P. Bruinvels, *Zoning in on Enterprise: A Businessman's Guide to the Enterprise Zones* (London: Kogan Page, 1982)
- ¹⁸ See S. V. Ward, *Planning and Urban Change* (London: Paul Chapman Publishing, 1994)
- ¹⁹ Harvey, *Urban Land Economics*, p. 328
- ²⁰ See Ward, *Planning and Urban Change*
- ²¹ *Lifting the Burden*, Cmnd 9571, (London: HMSO, 1985)
- ²² Thornley, *Urban Planning under Thatcherism*, p. 137
- ²³ See J. Pal and P. Jones, 'Multiplexes – what's the picture?', *Town and Country Planning*, 65:12 (December 1996), 344–5