

MILTON KEYNES:

**MAKING A  
GREAT CITY  
GREATER**

Commission Working Paper 13

**MK: The Cultured and Creative City,  
Building a Tradition of Innovation**

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Milton Keynes Futures 2050 Commission



# **MK: The Cultured and Creative City, Building a Tradition of Innovation**

## **A Discussion Paper on Harnessing the Culture, Character and Identity of Milton Keynes**

*“As a complete new city, MK made its own rules. This gives it a tradition of innovation and a character of clarity and single minded vision...”* Thomas Heatherwick, 2001

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### **1. Introduction and summary**

- 1.1. MK is at a critical moment of cultural transition. It is moving from adolescence to adulthood, but risks embalming itself through fear of change, swapping a spirit of innovation for one of convention. This is happening whilst cultural production and consumption is itself changing radically, partly through globalisation and digitisation. Increasingly, local culture, identity and quality of life are globally decisive success factors for cities in attracting and retaining talent and business. MK's future depends on its people and a culture of experimentation and creativity, its wider cultural offer. It will take time to unfold in its fullness but a paced and purposeful approach can begin to set a new trajectory in motion.
- 1.2. This paper is a first step in describing how the culture, character and identity of MK can be developed and harnessed to deliver its preferred 2050 Futures vision. Describing broad themes the paper uses examples but does not jump to concrete conclusions. Rather it points toward a number of routes that might achieve similar aims. It does not represent a comprehensive cultural audit of MK, but is based on desk research, interviews, surveying and public engagement workshops with MK residents, the latter containing a first for MK, the 'City Personality Test'. It takes as read that existing organisations will be supported and MK wants a strong cultural offer, looking at what MK might additionally do in the run up to MK's 50<sup>th</sup> and beyond.

### **2. International cultural trends**

- 2.1. Global city to city competition for highly skilled and mobile knowledge workers and wealth producers will intensify. Locational decisions are strongly influenced by the character, identity and culture of places. Openness, tolerance and a vibrant cultural offer are key determinants of success.
- 2.2. The need for inter-cultural understanding and cooperation will increase. Culture, in its broadest sense, is the platform on which that will stand or fall.
- 2.3. Changing work patterns may create more leisure time, and even if they do not, the rising desire for life-work balance will drive cultural engagement, which is increasingly self-determined and bespoke.

- 2.4. A different relationship to consumerism may occur, due to economic fragility, resource scarcity and climate change, leading people to seek alternatives to traditional consumer choices, including new forms of cultural engagement.
- 2.5. Digitisation and globalisation will drive unpredictable shifts in culture. Instead of creating more homogeneous cultures as some originally thought, globalisation has driven a rise in cultural distinctiveness and the need to stand out from the crowd.
- 2.6. Greater democratic empowerment of cities and a rise in civil society and participation will drive the need for more collective cultural experiences. As our futures become ever more complex, a continued search for meaning and fulfilment will overlay some of these experiences.
- 2.7. The use of culture as an integrated tool within value chains rather than single experiences will grow, linking for example to health, well-being and jobs.
- 2.8. The line between forms of culture, audience, participant and artist will blur, particularly through new technology. Audiences and their needs will also shift as demographic changes like ageing take place.

### **3. The MK Culture: strengths and weaknesses**

- 3.1. Milton Keynes has done an amazing job of building a unique and strong identity for the city over the last 50 years. This was no accident. From the first its founders understood the importance of a strong cultural sector and offer, building this in to their plans, investing heavily and strategically in arts, sports, community development and participation, which has continued as a principle of the Council.
- 3.2. This culture now has a life of its own - 'MK has its own kids now' as one resident put it - and so the challenge ahead is different. The future culture of MK cannot be shaped in such a direct way, it must build on what is there. MK's evolving culture – which has distinct strengths and weaknesses - must therefore be understood before it can be properly supported.
- 3.3. MK's culture has evident strengths and assets. It is a uniquely created cultural artefact in its own right. Despite national challenges with public finances, it has a thriving cultural sector. The Stadium, MK Dons; Xscape; MK Symphony Orchestra; Bucks Dance; The Arts and Heritage Alliance; Arts Central; MK Arts Centre and its art workshops; Inter-ActionMK; Living Archive; the Theatre and MKGallery; The Stables; the Parks Trust and its landscapes; the Bowl; Westbury Studios; well-known local artists like Boyd and Evans. The international Festival and a tradition of smaller community celebrations. A diverse population, including an Islamic Arts, Heritage and Culture organisation. A growing informal culture including the fastest growing LGBT venue in the country.
- 3.4. MK has a rich heritage including thriving market towns and medieval villages. The area has been continually inhabited for more than 12,000 years and has a significant archaeological collection. Its heritage sector is vibrant and active, relying largely on volunteers, including: MK Museum; Bletchley Park; Bradwell Windmill; a large canal network; City Discovery Centre. There is a treasure chest of artefacts, activity and information.
- 3.5. MK has a high density of listed buildings, particularly grade 2, traditional orchards, country parks and heritage woodlands. Participation in the arts is high at 65% also in museums at 52%. Participation in parks and gardens is high at 44%, and volunteering in heritage and countryside is high. MK is a highly diverse city with 25% BME community (approx. 14% UK average). 109 languages are spoken, 10.6% of households have one person who's first language is not English (to state the obvious, not all members of BME communities

are poor, and although they may face issues of integration, these figures require a more nuanced break down). The voluntary and third sector seen as a whole is very active.

3.6. MK has a lot to shout about and could shout louder. Any starting point for thinking about cultural development should be a celebration of what is already here, as long as it doesn't stop there. To create a total cultural asset base like that of MK's would be almost unthinkable now. It represents incredible investment. But like any asset base, without continued investment it will deteriorate, and MK faces tough choices about where its future focus should be. The danger therefore is that lists like that above (which inevitably miss people out) are drawn up and promoted, everyone feels included, but the bigger shifts that MK might need to make then don't happen; effort becomes dispersed at a time when patterns of cultural consumption are themselves changing. MK needs to value its local assets, and develop them, audiences and tourism by bringing more talent in.

1.1. The future focus should include an understanding of the broader cultural challenges that MK must confront in order to succeed. For example, health and well-being figures for MK are not as good as other similar areas. There are relatively high levels of obesity, perhaps linked to the overwhelming car culture, which in itself can create isolation and social segregation. Differences in life expectancy between most and least deprived areas are significant, relatively high for the levels of deprivation in MK, which are themselves a challenging cultural feature.

1.2. Suicide rates are similar to the national average, but levels of mental ill-health overall are a challenge for MK. Depression is the most common mental health need amongst older people and the proportion of people with it rises with age, to as high as 40% for people aged 85 years. Older people have very high levels of alcohol use. 65% of all hospital admissions are for people over 65. The level of violent crime, including sexual offences, is higher than the national average. The area of high violent crime in the city centre is linked to the night time economy, and there are issues with levels of substance abuse across generations.

1.3. These issues, and others like educational attainment, are dealt with elsewhere in the Commission papers but are worth mention here, partly because they have a cultural dimension and partly because future cultural programmes can be mobilised to address them. Using culture as a tool to address these issues and embedding it into every aspect of the city and what it does will reap rewards (see the example of Tapiola below).

## 2. The headline issues

2.1. Whatever growth option MK chooses, the nature and perception of its character, identity and culture will be a key determinant of how successful it is, notably in its ability to attract skilled workers and investment in order to compete economically. Ill-informed perceptions of MK need to be reversed.

2.2. **MK is at a critical moment of transition.** It is moving from adolescence to adulthood, but risks embalming itself through fear of change, swapping a spirit of innovation for one of convention, from pioneer to band wagon-jumper. It is precisely because it has been so successful that this anxiety is exceptionally heightened in MK, particularly in relation to the built fabric of the city and its low density. As one workshop participant put it "nowhere else I've ever been goes on about 'the way we did things in past' so much!"

2.3. But the city shows every sign it can recapture the pioneering DNA of its origins to powerfully address present and future challenges. MK was a model for the future, and still can be if it can reinterpret and set out its values for a new age; few other cities have such a close connection to their origin.

- 2.4. MK can appear fragmented: its systems, leadership across sectors, messages. The strategies, organisations and events for culture across MK have genuine strengths to build on, but can feel like they are pulled in too many directions, spreading not concentrating effort.
- 2.5. This can be addressed by thinking clearly in terms of a small number of big themes that are based on the distinctive nature of MK's culture, who MK is and wants to be, orchestrating effort toward common goals.
- 2.6. A new university is critically important for MK and in relation to establishing this, MK should also think of bespoke Centres of Excellence not 'one size fits all' institutions. Cities that do this – whether inside a university or in some related institution - tend to transition well. We suggest some possible themes distinct to MK, but the important thing is relating this to the traditions and culture of MK, not other places, using activity to herald the arrival of a university, to lay the ground work.
- 2.7. Perception of MK internally is exceptionally good. Externally it can be poor, and the connection between its New Town area, its medieval villages and market towns. Although we have seen no evidence that this has yet had an impact on investment, it cannot be assumed that it will never have an impact and should be addressed. Large transformational programmes based on clear "whole city" themes that work across sectors will do more for issues like tourism perception and investor promotion for MK than approaches that see these as separate issues each needing a strategy. The Stadium and MK Dons are examples of what can happen. The Bowl also in its day, although this now feels like an under-utilised asset.
- 2.8. Design quality is critical to the expansion of the city, and should be considered as a golden thread of future development in everything from housing to bus stops, creating excellence in the everyday. This was clearly a founding principle of MK, for example in the Redways, Shopping Centre, its Boulevards and Port Cache, but that has not always been followed through.
- 2.9. Generally, people feel that MK is a great place to live and meets their needs (dependant on economic circumstances), but they are concerned about levels of deprivation and future well-being; some of the health and crime statistics back this up. MK could aim to become a 'well-being capital', for example through a radical programme of culture for health, using the latest ideas and evidence to make sure peoples emotional as well as physical needs are met as the city grows. The physical urban fabric and layout of MK lends itself to it being the platform for this approach. These activities should be visible in the public realm, which is where ideas like the 'boulevard sprint' using the city for a different approach to sports might come in.
- 2.10. The above could be achieved by **creating value chains rather than isolated projects**, connecting disengaged communities to training, start up and employment, supporting health and learning needs and embedding these in MK's cultural programmes. MK Arts for Health began with this principle and many other local organisations already work in this way: Inter-actionMK; MK Arts Centre.
- 2.11. Proximity to London is both a strength and a weakness. Culturally, MK has been too reliant on London and although progress has been made, needs to do more to differentiate and celebrate its cultural offer.
- 2.12. With this in mind, do everything you can to get the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration right. This is your chance to demonstrate what MK can do to the world, and is a precursor to any bid for Capital of Culture, and therefore must build a stronger visitor economy, which will be an important component of a bid.

- 2.13. The Birthday celebration and bid should exploit MK's unique cultural strength: that it is a 'created cultural artefact' in its own right. **Be aware though that even world class programming of cultural events is different to articulating an overarching narrative distinct to MK.** Cities with the best events get that right first.
- 2.14. The twin principles of 'Tradition' and 'Innovation' may begin to shape that narrative. MK might ask of future strategy: 'on what local tradition or strength does that build, how is it innovative?' Is it the MK way of doing things? Or put another way 'what is the innovative manifestation of a given tradition?'
- 2.15. MK has a strong culture of participation, rooted in community development, but also in business engagement. Innovating on this tradition, MK could seek to harness the energies of a broader constituency of supporters, locally, nationally and internationally, (including through digital media) to create not just a stronger culture of ownership and shared leadership for its future, but also draw in resources and capacity for its cultural programmes. MK has a tradition of innovative financing - the Parks Trust, the MK Tariff - that can be reinvented to support this. MK could lead the way to a new model for financing culture.

### 3. Two things MK should not do

- 3.1. Do not throw money at promotional campaigns that look defensive or inauthentic. MK has challenges in the way it is perceived and can lack confidence in the face of criticism, but should be bigger than its critics. The last thing we feel you need right now is a big branding exercise. Decide on bold programmes and themes and let these speak for the city. Publicity and authentic branding will follow.
- 3.2. Don't do anything that feels imported, grafted or stuck on. Instead build a culture of innovation within the city upon its already strong cultural assets and networks, but also explore your weaknesses creatively, which may lead to surprising and positive results.

### 4. The Milton Keynes Personality Test

- 4.1. Prior to two workshops that we ran with about 30 MK residents, we asked them each to take a 'personality test' for the city. This is based on a well-known test called 'Myers Briggs'. We rewrote each question from a person to a city. For example: 'I like social occasions where I dress up, particularly fancy dress' became 'MK is a city that likes festivals, carnivals, and gets dressed up for big events'.
- 4.2. People used the questions to send us their online results. We then assembled a 'personality type' for MK by compiling different traits, weighting them according to the numbers of personalities that were the same. For example, more people thought MK had a 'Campaigner' personality, so we used more of that.
- 4.3. The test is not pretending to be scientific, or anything other than a different way into a conversation about a place. But the results were interesting. Almost half the results said MK was either a Campaigner or Protagonist, two similar personalities, when we had expected a more even spread.
- 4.4. People in the workshops reacted positively to the result when it was read out, and it was a great way to start a dialogue about how MK looks, feels and is perceived. They wanted it to be put online. The overall result is as follows. Just to underline, we are not saying this is MK; this is what the results told us.

#### 4.5. Headline test results

*MK is a unique and free spirited place, with a charm all of its own that makes it stand out from the crowd. It has a lot of emotional as well as intellectual energy which it uses to search for its place in the world, and has an underlying sense of spirituality.*

*MK is a particularly passionate city with a strong sense of its own authenticity, that it represents 'an idea bigger than itself' and tries to fulfill this in an altruistic way. It is not afraid to speak its mind and is always genuine in what it says. It believes in helping build a brighter future for the many, is a place of imagination, of families, and sees its residents also as a family.*

*MK believes in the need for volunteering and community and charitable support, as well as education and lifelong learning. It can tend to underplay its strengths, which has the effect of knocking its confidence when they are not noticed. It can be perfectionist, with a tendency to procrastination, but you can rely on MK to get things done in the end.*

*MK is guided by its principles, sometimes at the expense of logic. It has a high regard for a sense of aesthetics and beauty. It is a highly idealistic place to live. Yet it also has a colder, rational side, able to project its leadership and take charge of a situation, although this can make it appear a bit unemotional to people that do not know the place.*

*MK has a strong sense of fun and entertainment value. It's a city with a big personality, and although it is a sensitive place, it's not afraid to 'strut its stuff' in front of others, and has a sense of pride in itself.*

## **5. What people told us in interviews and workshops**

- 5.1. We recognise MK from the personality test, but it needs to be explored through other eyes, e.g. young people and those doing less well.
- 5.2. There is part of MK that does not feel well cared for or looked after properly. Some of its qualities and founding principles are no longer visible.
- 5.3. MK's principles are progressive, only now coming into their own. But the pioneering dynamic has collapsed in on itself and become conservative - 'pioneers become pickled' with founding fathers and mothers still looking on, fear of ruining the good becoming the enemy of excellence.
- 5.4. MK is in danger of becoming staid, needs to rekindle its original spirit. A popular rave venue is now an IKEA. That seems symbolic.
- 5.5. Leadership is inconsistent and not embedded or networked across governance, business or community. A bigger vision has to be shared. We could reimagine our democratic process through social media.
- 5.6. The story of MK is complex, it is not just one place. MK has a better reputation overseas than it does in the UK. People don't know what we've got, like two thirds rural and a strong artists community.
- 5.7. Housing and density is a strength and weakness. There's some great stuff and some bad stuff, and prices are sky-rocketing. But we can't just knock people's houses down and have to respect the identity of estates. Bus regulation (or other public transport solutions) are needed.
- 5.8. Proximity to London is a strength and weakness. MK has become too culturally reliant on London existing in its vortex and must differentiate, not replicate. We have our own, job-driven economy now.
- 5.9. MK doesn't feel spontaneous. There's a corporate city perception and people do not know it is more multi-layered and not just modern. We would like to see more pop-ups and independent traders, somewhere with a Bohemian feel.

- 5.10. There's a big problem with deprivation. The centre is surrounded by a box of deprivation. We don't make enough of our diversity, 25% BME communities. But they are not so segregated here, and not all are poor.
- 5.11. Nowhere else I've ever been goes' on about 'the way we did things in past' so much. The city now has its own kids and they have to be empowered. City meets needs of middle class, but not always others.
- 5.12. People feel satisfied (98% in some surveys), but can become complacent. MK needs a 'try and test' approach within an experimental culture. Not afraid to fail. Be much more subversive. World has moved on, we haven't moved with it.
- 5.13. Got it almost right, but need a different approach now. Things feel fragmented and short term. But MK has a strong culture of participation, volunteering and democracy. It is fully Parish.
- 5.14. Physical fabric offers opportunities, emptiness can be filled in a rich way. Adaptiveness e.g. for disability is built in. It's a very flexible place and can feel seamless in the way it operates physically.

## **6. Key attributes cities have used to succeed**

- 6.1. Below we briefly set out some principles MK should think about in relation to developing its identity, character and culture. We go on to use examples of other cities we think are relevant to the circumstances of MK, and that it should consider investigating further. We can offer contacts.
- 6.2. Start the next phase of the city's growth not with big projects, buildings or even ideas, but with your values, based on those that founded you. Agree these, set them out and be guided by them.
- 6.3. Trust your youth; MK has a real strength in this respect.
- 6.4. Recognise the global shifts that are going to really matter for MK and plan to take action, whether that's climate change, shifts in culture, technology or entertainment and leisure.
- 6.5. Communicate with simplicity. Be authentic. Iconic projects can follow later. Go with the grain of local culture as it is evolving in MK, express passion and love for the city, seeing it as an emotional not a management project.
- 6.6. Attributes that made MK succeed in the past may make it fail in the future, so building on strengths is not enough. Understanding the cultural weaknesses of MK in more detail is important.
- 6.7. Be honest as a city and overcome the power of denial about your own circumstances and weaknesses. Engage with criticism and listen to all your constituencies. Only then can you work together to address challenges.
- 6.8. Strong and charismatic leadership can get a place so far, but a more dispersed, shared and networked leadership across sectors, institutions and layers of the city will get you a lot further.
- 6.9. Challenge the accepted wisdom. Reassess tried and tested methods – including your own – for the new context.
- 6.10. Identify meaningful catalysts for change and orchestrate assets and resources in their pursuit.

6.11. Create a strong evidence base for where you are now and what you want to do.

## 7. Examples: Cities MK might look at

**Rotterdam.** Has an international architectural festival that started small. They temporarily remove planning restrictions (as long as buildings are safe). The Rotterdam market place, a really iconic and popular building, is one result of years of building up an appetite for great architecture in the city.

**Bilbao.** The city went with the grain of local culture, but also sought out the best internationally, - connecting with Philadelphia, Germany, others – treated skilled people generously, gave them an honorarium to come and live there. When the Guggenheim appeared, Bilbao was ready to make that leap without hesitation. It was a culmination not a beginning. Their slogan was ‘be international as a minimum, world class as the norm’. The result is that the high quality of design imbues the city from the airport, to the metro, the street systems and the strategic use of globally renowned architects.

**Eindhoven.** It was seen as just another ‘corporate city’ run by Phillips, but went on to invent the notion of the Triple and Quadruple Helix innovation processes and ‘Brainport’ an innovative high tech region. Eindhoven has reinvented itself as a major knowledge intensive city. Light innovations continue to drive the city’s economy and they have utilised culture as part of this in a light festival called ‘Glow’. Everything they do in that festival is relevant to who they are. Daan Roosegard, for instance a light artist, has used sensorized light systems for way finding where roundabouts and pathways become cultural objects. Per capita this is the most innovative city in the world.

**Mannheim** This is the city, where Carl Benz invented the car and it lies in a wider agglomeration that includes Heidelberg the ‘romantic capital’ of Germany. Largely industrial the city became type-cast and limited, with large pockets of unseen deprivation. Mannheim 10 years ago identified its strength in all forms of contemporary music from jazz to pop and techno. The US army presence has helped develop this tradition. They created a Pop Academy, the first in Europe with university accreditation. It is run by a drummer and the ex-head of Sony Germany and unsurprisingly the arts/business connection means the vast majority of graduates immediately get jobs. It was deliberately located in a very deprived part of town Jungbusch which has completely regenerated itself including also a music enterprise park and a series of incubator buildings adjacent to student housing. It used its assets to create a continuous and virtuous value chain from community engagement, to education, to start-ups and employment. Mannheim’s strong reputation for music made it possible for them to become a UNESCO City of Music within its Creative Cities Network. Mannheim, whilst still suffering from outdated images has a strong positive reputation amongst the young in Germany.

Separately in order to better its image the city is trying to attract high level expertise and talent to live in the city rather than to move to nearby Heidelberg, Mannheim is using the vacated US army barracks to build very high quality housing in the hope of attracting more company directors and knowledge workers.

**Antwerp.** Now a global fashion capital, this success was founded on the creation of Polimoda, a fashion school within the Fine Arts Academy 50 years ago, which Linda Loppa, an extremely talented CEO was appointed to run. This built on an established garment making and trading industry. After a few years of building an elite world class institution, the ‘Antwerp 6’ took London by storm. One of them was Dries van Noten. Polimoda takes on small numbers of elite students and aims to be best in class, but its success cascades across the city’s economy and reputation. Anne de Demeulemeester one of the six and still based in the city employs 600 people directly and indirectly. Linked to the school a whole series of connected institutions have been created, such as the Flemish Fashion Institute.

**Adelaide.** Created as a ‘model city’ in the 1840’s by free settlers Adelaide is a good example for MK to assess how a ‘model city’ grows older. The city was regarded as dull but good to bring up a family, the city had little for young people. It leaked talent and was on a downward spiral. It developed a high quality Fringe Festival in the 1960s which began to reverse this reputation, largely based on performance art and linked to local institutions. It is now

one of the premier festivals in the world and has attracted a string of other large festivals such as Womadelaide. Adelaide also had run down estates for artists to colonise, with some support, similar to the way in which Brit Art developed in Deptford around Goldsmiths College. It has built on its artistic strengths who have begun to trigger a start-up economy in the city based on the cultural industries.

**Tapiola** is a major part of Espoo and part of the Greater Helsinki agglomeration. This Finnish post-war model new town has experienced similar growing pains to MK in that as Espoo grew Tapiola has begun to show its age. The major advantage is that Espoo has good universities and highly developed new economy driven start-up culture fed by Aalto University, which is largely based there. This is unique in that merged the arts and design university with the technical one and social and business university. The major policy of the city is to embed a culturally driven perspective into everything it does. This is anchored around its 'garden of innovation' concept that connects the arts, technology and business. Espoo has now established itself as an important and vibrant city through a culturally-led programme, including the Espoo Cultural Centre, library and a contemporary gallery linked to a University campus. It also has a particular focus on the links between the urban and nature, and was founded on the principles of Ebenezer Howard. There are many parallels with MK.

**Shenzhen** adjacent to Hong Kong is the city that exploded from a village to a 13million-person city in 35 years. It was able to become a UNESCO Creative City of Design since it was able to project itself as a newly designed vast artefact. This is something MK could emulate. The concept of modern Chinese design was invented here, linked to a thriving film and digital sector. Within the UNESCO network there are now 15 other design cities including Montreal, Helsinki, Dundee, St. Etienne and they all offer lessons for MK in seeking to do something similar, and links – if not already present – might be built with this city in preparation for a bid.

## **8. MK: The Cultured and Creative City**

- 8.1. City to city competition is increasing and those that win will have a vibrant cultural base, be perceived as open, tolerant and creative places to be. MK is not always seen as culturally vibrant by outsiders, has an increasingly diverse community that can feel excluded, alongside rising deprivation. Sometimes people feel MK lacks spontaneity and that its cultural offer is fragmented.
- 8.2. The city can meet these challenges and reposition itself by leveraging its cultural assets, people and creativity as a tool for success, building a distinctive new offer, based on what is already here but going much further, recapturing its spirit of invention for a new age: MK The Cultured and Creative City, relevant to residents, a destination of choice and an international cultural hub.
- 8.3. This project will harness the creative energy and motivation of MK's biggest assets, its people, to ensure that by 2050 MK has the vibrant cultural scene and world-class amenities to match their aspirations. It will lead the field in using culture as a tool to address issues of health, social cohesion and inclusive growth. MK will also develop new facilities, like a cultural quarter and cluster of sporting assets that become a magnet for talent, tourism and creative industry.
- 8.4. MK could become a leading member of the UNESCO Creative City Network by pioneering the application of creative processes not only to the arts, but to dealing with planning and policy, addressing urban challenges with its collective imagination. This will fundamentally change the image of MK without spending a penny on promotion, making it the place other cities look to for ideas and where the world finds inspiration. Taking the above into account, the following should be considered. We are not saying 'this is what MK should do'. We are saying 'this is the kind of thinking MK should do' as part of considering its Growth Scenarios. Different issues e.g. diversity, sustainability, technology; and strategies e.g. tourism, promotion, branding, can be built around any of these. The real priority is to take two or three big themes and shape them into a single compelling vision and authentic narrative that fits future growth.

8.5. **An International Festival of Creative Urban Living** should be held in MK addressing critical urban issues through culture and creativity. This will **herald the establishment of an Urban Living Department at MK:IT** which itself could aim to become a **global centre for urban living** with MK reclaiming its place as a bold urban pioneer, showcasing its reinvention, the unique way its urban form incorporates green space, writing excellence into everyday living.

8.6. This project captures a big global theme that is locally relevant. MK could be a world centre for understanding urbanity and urbanism at a critical moment as our species shifts from Homo Sapiens to 'Homo Urbanis'. Not just built forms, but also community, society and culture. A place that explores new ways of living through its very fabric as well as its cultural programmes. Think big but start small. The festival, a conference, an institution later. This work could become the engine that drives the future growth quality of the city, whilst positioning MK at the forefront of global urban thinking again.

*"As human beings, we know much more about what makes for a good habitat for mountain gorillas or lions than we do about what it takes for Homo Sapiens to live well in their own cities."* Jan Gehl, architect

8.7. This alone will not create the buzz that MK needs but it's a start, is authentic to the place, and design, arts, sports and heritage projects can flow from and connect with such a theme. Here are some examples.

8.8. A festival of urban green space, architecture and design curated by an international figure like Thomas Heatherwick, animating the parks and the city, creating temporary structures, housing, street furniture, pop-up independent retail outlets, bars, cafes. Designers like Shigeru Ban who uses sustainable materials in incredible ways, invite open competitions from the innovative Wikihouse partnership.

- Capitalise on MK's sporting assets designating a 'grid square of sport', for example around the MK Bowl, to create critical mass, hosting an 'Urban Games', including digital gaming.
- Arts, music and dance can all explore what living well in a city means and have distinct urban forms. Gilbert and George met the year MK was founded and love the place. Invite them back for their 50th and use it to leverage a world class programme with competitions for young artists.
- Connect to MK's rich 12,000 year heritage placing it front and centre, with trails of artefacts around the city, using local and national heritage organisations to interpret and animate.
- As well as attracting people and attention to MK each spoke of activity should aim to increase the quality of life for local people, improving health, inspiring young people, connecting to older people, helping residents to actively mix between cultures, communities and grid squares. 'Whole-life cultural value chains' rather than single projects. In doing so the city will make more of its exciting diversity, show its young people how valued they really are and engage its high levels of volunteering to help.

8.9. **Centres of Excellence.** We have mentioned one possibility around urbanism that can be heralded through the Festival of Urban Living and built firmly through a new university. But we think MK also needs another high profile centre of excellence drawn from some particular arts, sports or other cultural activity, which will create a sense of buzz and excitement. You should not jump to a conclusion, although some examples from other cities are included above. The choice depends on investigating local traditions more deeply, and deciding in which area the city is most able and willing to innovate. By the way it might not be a local tradition, but it could become one – traditions were invented sometime.

- 8.10. **MK's 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday.** MK should pick a handful of ideas – like one or two from the above list - and use them for its 50<sup>th</sup>. We cannot stress enough the importance of getting the 50<sup>th</sup> right, and by that we mean doing something distinctive but authentic: tradition, innovation.
- 8.11. This will **set the seal on MK's bid for Capital of Culture**, or any other bid for that matter, e.g. UNESCO City of Design. It must be a convincing platform that provides examples of MK's fresh reinvention. In the eyes of others, this is your draft bid, and to be credible, the visitor economy will need to grow.
- 8.12. Programmed activity is important, and we know that MK can do things well. But the underpinning narrative is even more critical. Getting that right matters.
- 8.13. One rather detailed point is that Gilbert and George, whose exhibition opened the new MKGallery, met at art college the year that MK was founded. They love MK. Use that connection to build something big. 50 works of art for 50 years. One for each year of G&G's careers. 50 other artists. From 50 countries whose people live in MK. And so on.
- 8.14. Link whatever you do to the current and future needs of the city. Its health, levels of deprivation, economic opportunity, start-ups. Create a robust cultural value chain that builds on assets, includes and strengthens local cultural networks and artists.
- 8.15. Use and make meaningful international connections. Seek out the brightest and the best. Get a few brilliant people to speculate on MK, its 50<sup>th</sup> celebration and bid for a day.
- 8.16. **Capital of Culture.** MK should recognise that bidding can be as important as winning, and aim to deliver what it plans regardless. If the programme is to have meaning, it should be written for MK, not a judging panel. As above, a strengthened visitor economy will also need to be demonstrable.
- 8.17. That said, Charles Landry has worked on three successful European Capital of Culture bids and feels proposals that start with values and purpose engage judges much more than those that begin with numbers of projects, assets and facts and figures. Based on that experience and thinking about MK, we would recommend the following in respect of any bid.
- a) **Purpose.** Be clear about the higher purpose behind the bid for the future of MK, reinventing its revolutionary vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
- b) **Anchorage.** Be anchored in place. Speak to the nature of MK in the bid, its values and distinctiveness, a uniquely created cultural artefact with deeper roots, not 'anywheresville'. Promote the MK personality.
- c) **Possibility.** Think through what bigger possibilities the bid unlocks for the future of MK and for other cities (like the Urban Centre of Excellence and new ways of living), not just the events it will put on.
- d) **Connection.** Demonstrate a compelling set of internal and external connections that position the bid as a hub whose spokes radiate out locally, nationally and internationally.
- e) **Self-realisation and growth.** Demonstrate how MK will be different as a result of the programme, how it will transition from adolescence to adulthood, and why culture matters to that.
- f) **Examples.** Back every single point up with examples and evidence (you'd be surprised how many don't), showing that 'MK is big enough to make a difference, small enough to make it happen'.

- g) **London.** Don't ignore London, but this is about bringing things and people out of London if anything.
- h) **Build new traditions of participation.** One assumes every city of substance has a strong cultural programme but that is not enough, it's the minimum. Tap in to the life of communities and engage young people by using what they are curious in, build on the participatory instinct of MK. Create opportunities for joint citizenship and togetherness.

## 9. Financing the Future

- 9.1. As public funding for culture diminishes, MK needs to find new ways to finance cultural activity. It is not alone in this, but has a history of innovative financing models.
- 9.2. Homes on the Blue Bridge Estate had an annual sum written into their deeds, paid to a community centre, which was exceptionally well used as a result. The Parks Trust funding model was originally meant to be applied to cultural organisations as well, endowing them with property and land. This didn't happen but could become a future principle of expansion, strengthening cultural infrastructure as the city grows in a new organisation, or widening the role of existing ones, even the Parks Trust.
- 9.3. Development brings opportunities for financing projects from gain and value capture. There will be many calls on such value, and cultural infrastructure needs a seat at that table. The principles of the MK Tariff might be extended to cultural activity, and MK is already looking at shifting from a % for art to a % for culture. A Business Improvement District Scheme linked to culture and tourism should be considered, or a voluntary levy for hotel rooms, linked to very specific events, which will help get business buy-in.
- 9.4. Here in the UK, when councils spend on culture it creates jobs and growth, but the returns go to Whitehall not City Hall. This is not the same in other countries. Whilst that 'fiscal fracture' may take time to fix, MK could make itself a pilot for innovative financing for culture and possibly attract some national support in doing so. Models worth considering are the US Cultural and Social Bonds, which are 'triple tax free' (the State of New York raised £1.8 billion through a culture bond), and voluntary levies in return for specific benefits which exist in some countries. Like an Enterprise Zone but for culture.
- 9.5. Creating more aligned local financing between the different cultural agencies can bring savings and benefits (Bristol's MOU with funding agencies), and using culture to deliver across other areas of the public sector can unlock significant resources (health, education, social care) whilst addressing cultural weaknesses in MK.
- 9.6. Sponsorship and philanthropic giving are also areas where MK might be able to achieve more. But any of the above depends on having the right ideas in place first. A boldness of ambition, creativity of approach and capacity to deliver. If those things are convincingly in evidence then finance will follow.

## 10. Conclusions and next steps This repeats quite a lot from the above – reduce the text by 30%

- 10.1. Internal perception of MK is generally good, externally it can be poor. Although there is no clear evidence it has yet held the city back, MK needs to understand in greater detail the impact of its external perception upon future investor and skilled knowledge worker locational decisions as it grows – that is, upon your economy.
- 10.2. It would be a waste however throw money at big promotional campaigns, branding exercises or 'parachuted' programmes that appear defensive or inauthentic, which would be damaging and play to the

critics. Instead shift perception through a small number of bold transformational programmes based on clear “whole city” themes that work across sectors.

- 10.3. MK should choose themes that play to the character of who it is and wants to be, communicating a simple but powerful story that re-expresses the innovative founding principles of MK for a new age.
- 10.4. That means understanding the broader cultural strengths and weaknesses of MK in more detail, which is beyond the scope of this study. MK might consider a broader and deeper cultural audit, which might be of interest e.g. to urban anthropologists and could attract funding. It could be an interesting component of a Capital of Culture bid.
- 10.5. Think in terms of Centres of Excellence as well as / linked to the new University based on the traditions and strengths of MK. Student numbers are important, but whole-city reputations can be fundamentally shifted on the international stage by relatively small Centres built on local strengths.
- 10.6. A clear emphasis should be placed on the 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday celebrations, within which your strongest ideas should be explored for further development. This is your chance to demonstrate to the world what MK can do. Get your whole cultural sector behind a few powerful themes unique to MK. The status quo however is not enough.
- 10.7. Although we provide some suggestions for activity distinct to MK, your choices should be based on your values and sense of higher purpose for MK first, exciting programmes second. The above suggestions do however contain some potentially low cost high impact options which can be quickly scoped up.
- 10.8. MK has weaknesses in its evolving culture for example in levels of deprivation and well-being. Each cultural programme should seek to create value chains that connect across a variety of multiple issues, for example across health, deprivation, employment, training and business start-up. There are some big possibilities around health, well-being and intercultural activity for MK, which also unlock funding.
- 10.9. Design quality is critical to the expansion of the city. This was clearly a founding principle of MK, for example in the Redways, Shopping Centre, its Boulevards and Port Cache, and should be re-established.
- 10.10. MK would benefit from ‘internationalising’ itself more, making the most of existing connections. Its image abroad can be better than it is in the UK, which should be leveraged to bring ideas, people, links and activity that is internationally significant into MK.
- 10.11. Through its cultural programmes MK could extend its tradition of participation in a different way. MK could seek to harness the energies of a much broader constituency of supporters locally, nationally and internationally, (including through digital media) to create shared ownership and leadership for its future.
- 10.12. There is already a tradition of innovation around financing mechanisms for MK, but which did not quite spread to culture. At a moment when government and its funding agencies are looking for new solutions – and as MK expands – there is an opportunity for MK to place itself front and centre of that debate, leveraging value for culture which will in any case be vital to the future of the city.

## **Annex : Strengths and weaknesses resulting from the MK City Personality Test**

### **Strengths**

*MK is curious, interested in new ideas and understands the relationship between the different parts of its whole. It is an energetic and enthusiastic place to live, which generally communicates well. MK understands work-life balance*

*and quality of leisure time as well as employment opportunity. It's a sociable city that likes a good party and has a very tolerant and diverse outlook on life and on people.*

*MK is a team player. It never wants to let a single person down and strives to be a place you can rely on. It has a strong charm and character, and sense of altruism about the way cities should work, and has the ability to attract and deliver strong leadership. MK has a strong sense of duty to its citizens, it is loyal to them and provokes very strong feelings of loyalty amongst people that live there.*

*It is sensitive to the needs of different groups of people and strives to embrace them; it is a 'live and let live' city, open minded and flexible. It is a highly idealistic city that recognises the need for beauty in its spaces and places. MK is a dedicated, hard-working city that is passionate and creative. It has a sense of purpose, and can be very bold and original.*

### **Weaknesses**

*MK can sometimes struggle to turn ideas into reality, or practically apply its many talents, even though it has strong practical skills. It is a place of ideas and intelligence, but focusing on the right thing and putting the processes in place to make it happen can be challenging: as a city it can tend to over-think problems. Because it wants to take everyone with it and really cares about their views, it can feel as if it is overwhelmed because it can't say yes to everyone. It can feel like a place that needs reassuring about how well it is actually doing.*

*The strong ability of the city to think outside the box is sometimes not well-balanced enough with the ability to step outside its comfort zone, accepting it can't do everything on its own, and building the relationships it needs to make things happen. MK can sometimes be a difficult place to get to know, and can feel a bit cold and unemotional to people that are not familiar with it.*

*Tough decisions might not always be faced up to quickly enough because MK can be conflict-averse. It can be overly-idealistic, and spread its resources too thin by trying to be all things to all people. When decisions are taken in a hurry this can then lead to people wrongly judging the place as a bit ruthless and unemotional. MK can however sometimes be too sensitive to criticism and occasionally lacks confidence in its own abilities.*

**Charles Landry and Chris Murray, 2016**