

The development of Public Art in Milton Keynes, Edna Read

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Edna Read explains the evolution of the city's art collection



The forty year story of Milton Keynes' collection of public art began through the excited early response of individuals wanting to make a contribution from their own experience. In 1964 I had moved to Little Brickhill with a young family and my young husband was newly appointed to set up a Swedish steel stockholding company SKF. The new SKF warehouse and offices opened in Newport Pagnell with facilities for a dozen employees and I wanted to create an environment that would be a model for employee wellbeing. There was a comfortable staff sitting room with an adjoining kitchen and well equipped modern offices, but the real innovation was the quarterly exhibitions of contemporary art works hung on every wall.

By the time that I was aware that a new city was being built nearby, I had considerable experience of what happens when people who had never visited an art gallery, had to spend their working week surrounded by the best artists' work I could find. Sometimes, there were loud protests 'It's not art, it's rubbish, my five year old paints better than that' to which I would respond that the artist was a well known Royal Academician, and please bear with it for three months, when they would be changed. Many times, as I was taking them down, someone would say that the pictures had 'grown on them, they had begun to understand what they were about and did I have any more work by this artist?' The art was non-hierarchical, discussed by the managers, doctors, secretaries, nurses, warehouse men and cleaners. They all had opinions and purchases were made.

The Open University Campus



While at SKF, I worked with an architectural team on a residential training college for the National Marriage Guidance Council (now Relate). When it was completed, I wanted to decorate the walls with good contemporary art but had no money. When I rang organisations in London trying to borrow works, the Royal Academy responded saying that no one before had suggested borrowing the Academicians' Diploma works, and this was the beginning of a long relationship with the Royal Academy's artists; their secretary also found little trust funds to enable small commissions for murals and other decorative features in Milton Keynes.

Sir John Dankworth and Dame Cleo Laine began to bring the best of music, jazz and classics to the old stables by their house, driven by the same desire to do their bit in the new city. For those early 1970s summer music festivals, I would move into their garage with screens and lighting, and their audiences saw and bought the best of British artists and craftspeople. It is interesting that a painting by Mary Feddon RA bought in 1974 for £350 is now valued at £10,000

Campbell Park

At this time the Arts Council had little presence in Milton Keynes, but their Art Officer attended a Stables concert and found our City Gallery, not only in the garage, but showing 'The best exhibition ever seen in Bucks' in an old army marquee. They quickly organised a proper charitable trust so that they could support our enterprise with funding. From this time on, the trust and its passionately committed trustees, advisors and other funding bodies has been the stable organisation which has achieved so much.

We learned that good public art is not just 'sited' works which give a sense of identity to their location, but by using the interiors of the city's buildings as a gallery more fundamental changes can take place. It is a most valuable bridge between the artist and a new audience. For example, one factory sent a couple of young staff to select works for their foyer and they chose huge abstract works, which one might have hesitated to present to their conventional managing director. The Open University began to build a collection by staff selecting work from each of the quarterly exhibitions; this was later rated by the President of the Royal Academy, as one of the best collections of art in the last 25 years.

Colin Figue was the first of now well known British sculptors who are grateful for their first commission or opportunity to display this most difficult and costly of all art forms. Milton Keynes' reputation owes much to our trust's special relationship directly with artists.

There has been only one competition for a public sculpture in MK. The process is often an anathema, costly to the organisers and a waste of time and money for all but one of the sculptors who win. The alternative is an art advisor who is familiar with British sculpture, visits degree shows and can suggest artists whose work might be suitable.

Eventually however the Arts Council reorganisation moved the City Gallery to Oxford for the South East, changing its name to Artpoint. However we have a new Trust - AIM, Arts In Milton Keynes. The most active partnership was with John Napleton, of The Commission for the New Towns. With his support, we animated empty buildings such as the Central Business Exchange (CBX) where the MK Craft Guild, the Silbury Group and AIM occupied three floors, together with invited artists from Japan, Poland, Latvia, and South Africa in the memorable Midsummer

Art Exhibitions.



Top Left - Chain Reaction, Campbell Park

Top Right - Might Art Walk at the Open University, photograph by Liezel Kruger

Bottom - Jackson's Dangerous Liaisons in the Theatre District

In working on a project to integrate art into a building, there can of course be resistance, and the 'brief' would be scrutinised and sometimes criticised and changed. In the Theatre District of CMK, a plinth was planned for sculpture, and yet instead the money was used on a gazebo and works by two sculptors: Philip Jackson's 'Dangerous Liaison', the masked, cloaked figures whose sex is only discernible through their body language and Steven Gregory's 'Paparazzi Cameras' looking for celebrities as they stalk on their long legs along the parapets of the Theatre District.

Before the new Theatre and Gallery were built, the landscape of Campbell Park was recognised as an excellent Sculpture Park, being designed with vistas where sculpture can be sited on high ground with the changing sky behind it, views to the Grand Union Canal and enclosed small spaces for individual sites. It is a disappointment that this unique cultural asset - a jewel in the heart of the city - has not yet been developed into an International Sculpture Park as expected.



Gregory's Paparazzi Cameras

For thirty years, the city's remarkable collection of sculpture grew and in 2002, at the Venice Biennale exhibition by the Guggenheim Foundation with The Goodwood Sculpture Trust entitled 'Thinking Big, New Concepts in British Sculpture' I found that very many of Britain's best sculptors are already 'sited' in MK.

Once our reputation as a city of art was established, The Museums and Galleries Commission, Contemporary Art Society and National Art Collections Fund were discussing the registration of our collection as an Open Air Museum of Sculpture, in the care of the Trust. This involved fulfilling conditions regarding ownership, conservation and presentation to the public and much work was done. Unfortunately subsequent staff did not continue the momentum but it is encouraging that the Council's new Arts Officers are addressing these vital issues once again.

AIM's latest project is the creation of a Sculpture Walk to exhibit the work of émigré artists. This is a partnership with the World War Two Museum at Bletchley Park, West Bletchley Council and The Henry Moore Institute, who are themselves preparing a retrospective of Bernard Schottlander's work whose 8 'Dancers' will inaugurate the Walk.

Thomas Heatherwick is currently attached to the committee planning the next phase of the city's development. There will be sessions in the local schools and sculpture workshops in the holidays. Children are often the best informed about new work, and vandalism is surprisingly rare. There is not only an educated audience for the arts but many have developed their own talents, so that Milton Keynes is full of skilled practitioners in all the arts.

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