

‘Entering the age of the hypermarket cinema’: the first five years of the multiplex in the United Kingdom.

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Abstract:

During the first five years of its development from the opening of The Point in Milton Keynes in 1985 the multiplex cinema radically changed the previous exhibition landscape, modernising the business of cinema exhibition, and shifting the site of film consumption to new, out-of-town shopping and leisure centres. This article considers some key developments in the first five years of the multiplex cinema’s introduction in the UK, with particular emphasis on three aspects of multiplex diffusion: the importance of regeneration and enterprise; the multiplex’s role in stimulating associated leisure and commercial developments; and out-of-town and regional shopping developments. In order to illustrate these themes, the article will consider the opening of four complexes: The Cannon in Salford Quays, and the AMC multiplexes in Telford in Shropshire, Sheffield and Dudley Merry Hill, in the West Midlands.

(136 words)

Introduction

It appears to us that the record of the cinema industry in the United States has been better than that of the British industry...in attracting the public into its cinemas. (Monopolies and Mergers Commission, 1983, para.8.8).

At the Cinema Exhibitors Association annual conference in 1986 there was a degree of consternation at several multiplex cinemas that had recently opened or were about to open, with one delegate arguing that Britain was ‘entering the age of the hypermarket cinema’; whilst another observed pointedly that the ‘industry was being hijacked by the American companies’ (*Screen International*, 524, November 23, 1986: 16). Despite some reassuring words from Stan Fishman, a representative of British exhibitor Rank (owner of the Odeon chain), about the strength of the domestic sector, he went on to argue that the priority for Rank in terms of investment was their city centre sites. Some months earlier Jim Higgins, managing director of distributor UIP, commenting on the imminent opening by American Multi-Cinema (AMC) of Britain’s first multiplex in Milton Keynes, had rather presciently summarised the future attraction of the multiplex when he opined that AMC had ‘identified and made us all aware of the need for cinemas to be well-situated, to provide for the car owning, highly mobile population of today’ (*Screen International*, 554, 28 June 1985: 86).

The Point, which was opened in December 1985 by AMC, was a pioneer having been built in a new town, adjacent to a shopping centre on a plot designated for the purpose by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation, and was, under the New Towns Act 1981, subject to a relaxed planning regime and a series of financial incentives (see Hanson, 2013a). This established a trend which was followed by multiplexes in: the redeveloped Salford Quays area of Greater

Manchester; a retail park adjacent to the M40 in High Wycombe; an out-of-town development in Slough; the Metro Centre shopping and leisure complex in Gateshead; followed by a succession of new builds in out-of-town shopping complexes in places like Warrington, Sheffield, Glasgow Clydebank, Nottingham, Peterborough, Telford and Dudley Merry Hill in the West Midlands. By the early 1990s Britain had become the most developed multiplex market in Europe, with 41 new sites in the five years after The Point opened (see Table 1) with a total of 387 screens; a growth that might be reasonably called a boom, particularly in the last two years of the decade.

Table 1: Growth in UK multiplex sites

Year	Sites	Screens	% of UK screens
1985	1	10	1
1986	2	18	2
1987	5	44	4
1988	14	137	10
1989	29	285	19
1990	41	387	24

(Source: *Screen Digest*, July 1991)

This article will argue that the development of the multiplex cinema in the UK, particularly in the first five years, needs to be seen in the context of economic determinants, urban planning and the discourse of “enterprise” in the 1980s. This is best expressed in the debates around urban regeneration and the role multiplexes came to play in the burgeoning leisure-based economy, in turn a consequence of the laissez-faire, economic policies of successive Conservative governments under Margaret Thatcher. Therefore, the key to understanding the evolution of the multiplex cinema is to pay particular attention to urban planning as fundamentally ideological, fluctuating in line with broader political, economic

and social considerations. So, the result of relaxed planning restrictions in the 1980s was the development of large out-of-town shopping centres on the edge of many of Britain's conurbations (see Griffiths, 1986), for which there existed, from the outset, a synergistic relationship with the multiplex, which were important in the spread of these new cinemas in the UK.

This article then, illustrates these broader debates with reference to some key developments in the first five years of the multiplex cinema's introduction in the UK, with particular emphasis on three aspects of multiplex diffusion: the importance of regeneration and enterprise; the multiplex's role in stimulating associated leisure and commercial developments; and out-of-town and regional shopping developments. It builds upon previous work (Hanson, 2000, 2007 and 2013b) and situates the development of the multiplex in the UK in the context of those in the USA from the 1960s, and the importance of the shopping mall and the suburb as the main focus for this new form of cinema (see Smith, 2005). In order to illustrate these themes, the article will consider the opening of four complexes: the Cannon in Salford Quays, and the AMC multiplexes in Telford in Shropshire, Sheffield and Dudley Merry Hill. All in various ways highlight a range of issues and concerns that help account for the rapid diffusion of multiplexes in subsequent years and thus we need to consider not only what sites were chosen, but how and why they were chosen.

'Taking Britain back to the movies!': the multiplex as a US form

In general, one of the major points of divergence between traditional cinema and multiplexes had been their relative geographical siting. This tension between the

town/city centre, as the primary site of cinema exhibition, dominated as it was by the exhibitor duopoly of the Rank (Odeon) and Thorn-EMI (ABC), and the emergence of the multiplexes, which were being built out-of-town on greenfield sites would characterise much of the first decade of this new form of cinema exhibition (see Hubbard, 2002 and 2003). Central to the debate about the diffusion of the multiplex was that there existed a potential for new cinemas beyond the city centre, which major UK exhibitors, like Rank, were unable, or unwilling, to recognise. In 1979 Laurie Marsh (1979: 98), President-elect of the Cinema Exhibitors Association and head of the Classic Cinema chain, observed that ‘in the past 20 years, there have been virtually no new cinemas in positions where there were none before’; whilst much of the blame lay, he argued, with the abuse of their dominant position by Rank and Thorn-EMI. In 1983, two months before the initial proposals by Bass/AMC for the development of The Point in Milton Keynes were announced publically (see Hanson, 2013a), the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) had examined the concerns of critics like Marsh about the state of the domestic exhibition sector, and in particular the power exercised by the Rank/Thorn-EMI duopoly. Concluding that exhibition was largely a declining industry, the MMC rejected as impractical the call for the creation of an effective competitor to Rank and Thorn-EMI, because ‘there is no present prospect of another exhibitor establishing himself as an equal competitor’ (Monopolies and Mergers Commission, 1983, para.8.18).

The UK was a market, according to many US investors, that was nonetheless ready for the multiplex; a ‘fertile marketplace’ according to United Artists’ vice president Mal Birnbaum in which ‘somebody with some understanding of multiplexing in the suburbs could come in they could make a splash’ (*Screen*

International, 617, September 12, 1987: 16). For AMC's Chuck Wesoky this 'fertile marketplace' was based in large part on a lack of good cinemas and poor service:

We were here to invest in the U.K. to gain new cinema attendances, which were down to 54 percent. We're going after a declining generation of the moviegoing public by offering a service they haven't had before. These are people in the 20-40 age bracket. We talked to these people about their moviegoing habits. People who'd never taken their kids to the movies, who hadn't seen a film themselves since *The Sound of Music*' (*The Film Journal*, 95, 1 July 1992: 20).

The steady decline in admissions in Britain throughout the post-war period and the 1960s and 70s in particular, was not unique in the industrialised world. In the USA cinema audiences fell correspondingly; however, the strategies employed by the exhibition industry to alleviate it were different. US exhibition companies adopted a new-build, suburban-orientated policy of cinema construction; building a new generation of purpose-built, multi-screen cinemas as part of the burgeoning shopping malls (see Paul, 1994 and Edgerton, 2002). In the USA in the 1950s the development of the mall was linked inextricably to the development of the new highways being built across the country as a result of the 1956 Federal-Aid Highways Act. As beneficiaries of the *Paramount decree*, in which the major studios were forced to divest themselves of their cinemas, companies like AMC chose to ignore the city centres and focus on the suburbs, in which the motor car became a prime consideration. The term "multiplex" was coined and trademarked

in 1973 by Sumner Redstone head of US exhibitor National Amusements, though the significant moment was ten years earlier in 1963 when Durwood Theaters opened the Parkway Twin in the Ward Parkway Center, a mall in Kansas City. As the first designated two-screen cinema in a shopping complex it aroused much industry attention. In 1966 Durwood opened the Metro Plaza, a four-screen or 'quadriplex' cinema, in Kansas City followed by a 'six-plex' in Omaha, Nebraska in 1969; the year the company changed its name to American Multi-Cinema (see Durwood, 1975). In 1972 company owner Stanley Durwood outlined his rationale for the new multiplex concept, stating that the provision of four screens and later six 'enable us to provide a variety of entertainment in one location. We can present films for children, general audience, and adults, all at the same time' (*Boxoffice*, 18 September 1972: E-9). By the mid-1970s AMC had opened, or were in the process of opening, some 457 cinemas in 68 cities in 25 states of the USA (*Independent Film Journal*, 24 December 1976: 16).

Ten years later AMC would be the first of several US companies to look at the UK's moribund exhibition sector and see the same potential realised in US suburbs and the edges of cities. These first multiplex developments coincided with a relaxed planning environment, in which the town centre was seen as less attractive to investors and developers than the area around the urban core. Moreover, these US investors would be attracted by a new enterprise and deregulatory culture increasingly espoused by the neo-liberal government of Margaret Thatcher.

The importance of regeneration and enterprise culture

Throughout the 1980s Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government sought to stimulate confidence in Britain and encourage inward investment by providing assistance to business with a series of financial inducements and a relaxed regulatory culture. During its first year in office it introduced the *Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980* ('the 1980 Act'). The 1980 Act covered the setting up of Urban Development Corporations and Enterprise Zones, and sought to speed up the planning process (see Deakin and Edwards, 1993; Taylor, 1981 and Thornley, 1993). The provision of new shopping and leisure facilities was a key element in the projected regeneration of older industrial areas. The government proposed that such regeneration 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. The Enterprise Zones were, 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.' (Rodrigues and Bruinvels, 1982: 7).

The first eleven Enterprise Zones were instigated in 1981, each with an initial ten-year life. They granted existing businesses and prospective developers a range of financial incentives: they would be exempt from business rates and Development Land Tax; developers would enjoy 100 per cent capital allowances on industrial and commercial construction; and building development would be subject to simplified planning procedures and controls (see Wainwright, 2012). There was also no obligation on the part of developers in Enterprise Zones to take into account local plans (Ward, 1993). The most famous Enterprise Zone was perhaps the Isle of Dogs, better known as London Docklands (designated in April

1982); others included Glasgow Clydebank (August 1981), Tyneside Gateshead (August 1981), Salford/Trafford (August 1981) and Dudley in the West Midlands (July 1981). The first eleven Enterprise Zones were followed by thirteen more in 1983–84, and included Telford (January 1984).

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 (Harvey, 1996: 328). UDCs had substantial powers to by-pass formal planning procedures and could compulsorily acquire sites for development, (see Oatley, 1989). Notable UDCs were those of Tyne and Wear, London Docklands, the old dock area around Trafford Park in Manchester and the Don Valley in Sheffield, now home of the Meadowhall shopping Centre. Some of these had Enterprise Zones within their areas of remit, such as Docklands, Tyne and Wear and Trafford Park (Salford Quays).

Salford Quays, which had been the Manchester docks, opened in 1894 at the terminus of the ship canal. Once the third busiest port in Britain, it had declined in the 1970s and was closed in 1982. Acquired a year later by Salford City Council, the area was subject to redevelopment for housing, offices and leisure as part of the *Salford Quays Development Plan*, published in 1985 (Salford City Council, 1985). The prospects for regeneration implicit in the development plan, had been bolstered by the area's inclusion by the government in the Salford/Trafford Enterprise Zone in 1981 (see Henderson, *et al* (2007). Enterprise Zones would

benefit from a rolling programme for land reclamation which in 1986 totalled some £3.5 million in Salford (*Guardian*, 16 May 1986). This was seen as preparing the ground for more substantial private investment. Some of the first developments were undertaken at Dock 6 where private investment totalling more than £20 million saw the opening of a new hotel, private housing, offices and Britain's second multiplex cinema, opened by Cannon Cinemas in December 1986 (see Turner 1997).

The multiplex at Salford Quays had been planned by Thorn-EMI Screen Entertainment (TESE) and its Head Gary Dartnall, whose ambitions for TESE had been bold, seeing as he did the potential of new-build, multi-screen cinemas. Upon the announcement of the new multiplex in Salford Quays, Dartnall observed that the company had:

opened our first new cinema 40 years ago. It's a neglected industry which has failed to follow the audience from inner cities out to the suburbs. Modern cinema-goers want somewhere to park, somewhere to eat and pleasant surroundings, which we intend to give them in Salford...We are doing what the Americans did as long ago as the 1960s – making cinemagoing an event – and look how healthy audiences are over there (*Guardian*, 24 July 1985)

The eight-screen, 1,850-seat multiplex at Salford Quays cost £3.5 million and included a restaurant, along with parking for 500 cars. TESE invested some £1.9 million, with the balance being committed by the site's developer. As the second planned multiplex in the UK, Salford Quay's developers adjudged the site to be economically viable since the local population (within a five-mile radius) was

700,000 in 260,000 homes. More, significantly perhaps were the half a million 15-14 year olds (the cinema's core audience) who lived within a 15-mile radius; 100,000 of whom were students (*Screen International*, 506, 27 July 1985: 25). In December 1986, the Salford Quays multiplex opened though by that time TESE had sold its screen entertainment division and its cinemas had been purchased by the Cannon group in May for £175 million.

If the city or town centre was considered as the primary site for traditional, prestige cinemas, then this was not the case for multiplexes; indeed, city centres were considered secondary sites. If primary sites, like that of Salford Quays, were considered to be defined by criteria like ample population, accessibility by car, parking facilities, nearby leisure or shopping complex, infrastructure and lack of nearby multiplex competition, then these were more often than not in outlying areas, the edge of cities or suburbs. One of the prime motivations for this position apart from the perceived advantages of space and accessibility was that land was considerably cheaper than in the town or city centre. Secondary sites were often perceived as not only those in which compromises had to be made in terms of the criteria outlined above, but in cost terms. City centre sites for multiplexes were rare in the first five years since the real estate and development costs outweighed potential profits. Multiplex developments in Central London were exclusively linked to retail complexes, and had been the result of building conversions rather than new builds. This can be seen at the UCI at Whiteleys in Bayswater, opened in 1989.

Nevertheless, costs were a significant preoccupation, so one of the key trends in the first wave of multiplex developments was for operators to mitigate the risk involved in spending sums of up to £4 million per site by selling the buildings to

developers and subsequently leasing them back. This is exactly what AMC did in order to fund its rapid expansion in the UK. Leasing meant that capital was not tied up in property and in the event of business failure the operator was not liable for the disposing of property assets (*AIP & Co*, 78, October 1986: 30). Moreover, many multiplex operators looked for building designs that could enable a change of use in the event of disposal, such as construction on one level.

The multiplex's role in stimulating associated leisure and commercial developments

The ten-screen multiplex in the new town of Telford was the eleventh to be built in Britain and was opened by AMC in November 1988, though subsequently taken over by UCI in 1989 when AMC pulled out of the UK market (see Hanson, 2013a). Its conception is interesting since a desire for a cinema originated with Telford Development Corporation (TDC) who were developing the town centre. Unlike the traditional notion of a town centre as resulting from what Comedia (1991: 5) called 'different historical and cultural trajectories', Telford's had been planned and developed in a relatively short period, being as it was a greenfield site in the early 1970s.

Telford in Shropshire was designated as a new town in 1967 as part of a long-standing plan by the Labour governments of both Clement Atlee (1945-51) and Harold Wilson (1964-70), to tackle the shortage of housing. One solution to this acute crisis, caused in part by war damage, was the *New Towns Act 1946*, which provided for the designation of areas in which new towns could be planned and

built. Twelve sites had been designated in England and Wales by the end of 1950, in order to relieve the populations of existing conurbations. Telford's conception was as a direct result of the second *New Towns Act*, passed in 1965, which enabled a second group of new towns including Milton Keynes (see Osborn and Whittick, 1977).

Like Milton Keynes (the site of the UK's first multiplex cinema) Telford was to be substantially bigger than the preceding new towns, with a projected population of some 220,000 people by the late 1980s. As a rather disparate combination of three pre-existing towns, TDC recognised the importance early on of a town centre, with shopping facilities including a large hypermarket. In 1973 the first phase of Telford town centre was completed which, according to the general manager, would 'provide a visual and social focus to the town' (quoted in de Soissons, 1991: 94). Historically, TDC wished to develop the town centre zone beyond its limited role as a shopping mall. The rationale was to create a town centre which could support a range of activities beyond that of simply shopping. It was envisaged that in addition to more shops, a series of offices, hotels and leisure sites such as a skating rink, library and cinema would be built. As the growing shopping facilities reached the perimeter of the site, which was the ring road, development would spread out beyond.

With this in mind, building was encouraged by designating much of the area as an Enterprise Zone in 1984. This had the effect of stimulating commercial premises like office blocks and two large hotels, as well as a series of large retail superstores. However, TDC's planning department were keen to encourage the development of a cinema on the basis that it was identified strongly with a particular conception of what a "town centre" should include. It was clear at the

time that the focus on office space and retailing would not promote a more varied use of the town centre.

This notion led TDC to ask for tenders for the construction of a new purpose-built multiplex cinema on a site close to the central park around the period of 1985/6. Two American companies – National Amusements (Showcase) and AMC – investigated the site but gauged the area to be unsuitable at that time. Subsequently, the prospective site for the cinema was moved to one that was in the designated Enterprise Zone and tenders sought again. This time both companies submitted plans which differed very little (Showcase's was eight-screen whilst AMC's was ten) apart from two key aspects; which was that Showcase's unsuccessful plan envisaged the cinema's orientation as facing the road and away from the area under development, with a separate restaurant and with the car park at the side. Planners felt that they wanted the cinema to be seen as part of this area under development and with integral restaurant and bar facilities. For the TDC board securing one of the new generation of multiplexes was the acid-test of Telford town centre's potential for growth as a leisure destination.

In the drive to develop the centre at a time of recession, planning was seen as a secondary consideration, which was reflected in the design and construction of the cinema. Aesthetically the exterior of the building was a fusion of coloured brick and tubular steel and glass, single-storied with all the extraction and air-conditioning plant located in full view on the flat roof. The latter was not included in the original plan submitted and subsequently TDC endeavoured to force AMC to put up screening, only to be told that the construction and design would not allow the extra weight. In effect the building was, in the words of a former

employee of the now defunct TDC planning department, 'a cheaply built 25-year design'.²

With a total population at the time of opening of 139,000, Telford was not itself large enough to sustain a ten-screen multiplex, however, it was its geographical position that was attractive to AMC. Telford town centre was located on the M54 motorway which linked it with the West Midlands conurbation, some 15 miles away and with Shrewsbury which was 15 miles in the other direction. Half of Shropshire's population of 398,000 lived in either the Telford or Shrewsbury areas, whilst Wolverhampton was within 25 minutes travelling distance by car. With car ownership in Telford at approximately 68 per cent of the population in 1990 the cinema was clearly orientated toward the car owner in both Telford, and more especially in the surrounding area. Telford Central railway station was nearby as was the bus station, which was served by buses from most areas in the town. However, there were major issues of accessibility with regard to public transport in the Telford area. As a result of deregulation bus services disproportionately favoured certain areas of the town and neglected others; the outlying ones in particular. Fares were high and off-peak journey times were restricted.

With parking immediately outside the cinema for over 1,000 cars, and further space for another 1,000 within five minutes' walk, the motor car was by far the most favoured mode of transport for getting to the cinema. Research carried out at the UCI multiplex in Telford in 1992 (Hanson, 1992)³ found that 84 per cent of respondents had travelled to the cinema by motor car, whilst 12 per cent had used the bus. This reliance on the motor car was borne out by research at Sheffield's UCI Crystal Peaks 10 multiplex, which suggested that some 60 per cent of users

were willing to travel more than ten miles to get to the site (*Screen International*, 817, 26 July–1 Aug 1991: 16).

In selecting predominantly out-of-town sites, multiplex owners were implicitly relying for the most part on the private motorist. This notion of the primacy of the motor car, first developed as a central criterion for planning in the USA, was paramount in the development of Telford, with much of the town centre's infrastructure given over to the motor-car. Greenfield sites gave way to new retail and leisure centres, and at the time the new AMC multiplex cinema opened plans were afoot to develop a new ten-pin bowling and leisure complex near the town centre. In 1973 the *Guardian's* planning correspondent Judy Hillman observed that since Telford's new town centre was 'scarcely within easy walking distance of anywhere, the main problem involves public transport' (*Guardian*, 23 July 1973). AMC's successor UCI (UCI Cinemas, 1991) were very specific about their choice of location, saying that:

UCI bears one factor in mind when choosing a location for its cinema complexes - accessibility. Whether it's a shopping centre or leisure park, or a free-standing unit, the site must be easy to get to by private or public transport. Almost always it's out of the town centre but still at the centre of the community. (in Saarbrücken chapter – delete or reference)

In offering these commitments along with a host of convenience features like all-day showings, advance booking and parking, individual multiplexes were also encouraged to form close identities with their locality through a range of

marketing activities. Telford's UCI took part in local arts festivals, held charity screenings, sponsored fun-days and donated goods to raffles. In its infancy the cinema undertook many promotional campaigns, in common with all new UCI cinemas, like ticket offers in the local press, local radio promotions and cheap seat prices for limited periods. UCI (UCI Cinemas 1991: 1) stated that the company 'is proud of its record of quickly becoming established in the local community and endeavours to appreciate and understand the individual characteristics of that community'. The company then went on to extol the virtues of the multiplex "concept" by saying that no one, 'understands better than UCI the responsibility that goes with the position we occupy in the community, nor the privilege we are accorded by becoming not just its centre, but its heart' (UCI Cinemas, 1991: 1).

The interest in community by Telford's UCI cinema appeared to take place on two levels, that of appealing to a community of interest - the cinema-goer, and indeed specific groups of cinema-goers like children and families - and those who lived in the physical locality. Furthermore, the cinema seemed to be attempting to present itself as a focus for the town as a conscious attempt to construct a new relationship between cinema and locality. The widespread closures of local cinemas in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s had resulted in the loss of cinema-goers who had formed an attachment to that particular site (see Docherty, Morrison and Tracey, 1986 and 1987). In the same way that the cinema of pre-Second World War Britain was seen as an integral part of many people's lives and leisure patterns, so multiplex owners sought to re-establish some form of close identification beyond simply that of a building in which films were shown.

Out-of-town and regional shopping developments

Telford's multiplex had a giant steel and glass canopy over the foyer which was lit up with flashing lights, whilst underneath was the large illuminated list of film attractions. Visible for many hundreds of metres, the building could only be viewed as a site of leisure. Such features came to connote pleasure and importantly consumption, in line with other leisure developments, of which the shopping mall was but one. In design and construction, the multiplex resembled many leisure facilities, especially those seen as originating in America. Indeed, many multiplexes were linked to other leisure sites like bowling alleys, sports centres and indoor 'water-worlds' (see Hanson, 2000).

AMC's fifth multiplex was the Crystal Peaks 10, opened on 26 May 1988 as part of a new shopping and leisure complex in Sheffield by the developer Chesterfield Properties plc in conjunction with Sheffield City Council. It cost approximately £3.5 million, could seat 2,360 people and offered free parking for 1,300 cars. AMC referred to their new cinema as a 'total entertainment concept' by virtue of the associated retailing, particularly the Hollywood Express restaurant. AMC 'recognised' they said, 'the return of families going out together for an evening's entertainment, and also the need for a "package" of leisure and entertainment at affordable prices' (AMC Cinemas, 1988). Crystal Peaks opened at a time when the cinema infrastructure in Sheffield had contracted substantially, with only a twin-screen Odeon operating in the city centre. By 1990, some two years after it opened Crystal Peaks was new owner UCI's second most successful complex, with annual admissions of 1.3 – 1.4 million and with more than 2,100 people passing through the doors during one hour at weekends (*Screen International*, 817, 26 July–1 Aug 1991: 16).

In many ways Crystal Peaks, located in the Waterthorpe district of the city, was emblematic of the new multiplex concept in that it was opened in a shopping centre, on the periphery of a city and with a captive audience. The population in the surrounding area was some 55,000. The desire for an out-of-town shopping centre to service the southern side of the city, which had expanded in the 1970s, originated with the city council. Planning permission was granted in December 1982 for a 14-hectare site, with a Waterthorpe Panel overseeing development of what was then called the Waterthorpe Centre. In July 1986, a council delegation visited a range of shopping malls in in Canada; including the Eaton, Sherway and Woodbine Centres in Toronto and the West Edmonton Mall in Edmonton. Ostensibly, they were concerned with assessing the impact of out-of-town centres on cities and their downtown areas, however they noted with interest the value of adding leisure facilities to increase visitor attraction (Sheffield City Council, 1986). In the same year the centre developer, Chesterfield Properties, proposed the building of a new ten-screen multiplex cinema.

The decision to select AMC to build the new cinema was the result of a chance remark by the head of AMC Chuck Wesoky to Peter Wingate, head of Chesterfield Properties. In addition to property development Wingate also ran Curzon Cinemas and Curzon Film Distributors, which was investing in multiplexes via both AMC and the Maybox circuit (*Screen International*, 596, 18 April 1987). As both a property developer and cinema-owner Wingate saw Crystal Peaks as the model for future multiplex developments. The land required for buildings and ancillary facilities such as car parks, meant that economic feasibility depended upon their being ‘bolted on to large suburban or edge-of-town shopping centres’ (*Screen International*, 638, 6 February 1988: 28).

Interviewed in 1992, Chuck Wesoky, former managing Director of AMC, set out the company's philosophy:

We noticed that the new towns, the suburban towns, were served by shopping centers, schools and hospitals, but there was no provision for entertainment. So we combined these good environments with nice venues and an exquisite management style...When we moved in the U.K., 90 percent of the cinemas were located in town centers. We wanted clean environments, free parking, the combination of living and playing in familiar areas. It's the neighbourhood philosophy. (*The Film Journal*, 95, 1 July 1992: 21).

In emphasising the importance of consumption and a wider leisure imperative, in which cinema was seen as but one part, many of the multiplexes opened in the first five years featured bars and restaurants attached to foyers. When The Point opened in Milton Keynes it was no accident that the partnership consisted of a cinema exhibitor and a food-and-drink-based leisure group - Bass. Experience in America had shown that people would utilise both as part of a whole night out. In many subsequent multiplexes these facilities were franchised out, often to large American or British companies. Historically, the cinema had relied financially on the contribution from the sale of confectionery, drinks and food. This was broadly true of the multiplex which used the concession counter and its array of new food lines like nachos, and traditional ones like popcorn, as but another key selling point for the cinema experience. By the end of the 1990s some 30 per cent of cinema revenue derived from concession sales (*Screen International*, 817, 1 August 1991: 12).

All of these considerations were important in assessing not only design and functionalism but the multiplex's general appeal. In research undertaken at Telford's multiplex cinemagoers were asked what they felt were the major differences between it and traditional cinemas. As we can see the main difference identified was that the multiplex offered greater choice of films (see Table 2), which from the outset was the aspect of the multiplex concept that was seen as the single biggest selling factor.

Table 2: Main differences between the Telford multiplex and traditional cinema

	%
Bigger choice of films	56
UCI is more comfortable	24
UCI is more modern	10
UCI is bigger	8
UCI has an all day film programme	6
Traditional cinemas are old-fashioned	6
No queuing at UCI	4
UCI is cleaner/brighter	4

N = 50

Multiple choice questions = add up to more than 100%

However, the responses also stress the importance of comfort, in terms of seating, environment and space, which was echoed by Hubbard's (2003) subsequent research in Leicester. When multiplex operator CIC was planning the Wycombe 6 which opened in 1987, it undertook a survey in High Wycombe and found that 83 per cent of respondents cited comfort as being a 'high priority' (*Screen International*, 610, 25 July 1987: 16).

Technology, and its attraction was also very important in considering the multiplex. When Docherty, Morrison and Tracey (1987: 17) commissioned their

survey they asked respondents who identified the cinema as their preferred medium what their reasons were. Some 45 per cent said it was the large screen and 24 per cent said it was because of the better sound. This study pre-dates multiplex cinemas but does nonetheless point to the importance of these considerations. For Telford's multiplex cinemagoers, these criteria were no less important (see Table 3).

Table 3: Reason for preference for Telford multiplex

	%
Big screen	68
Atmosphere	48
Going out	36
Better sound	34
Better picture	28
Other	14
Choice of films	10
More comfortable	10
Presence of audience	6

N = 50

Multiple choice questions = add up to more than 100%

AMC opened their seventh multiplex in the UK at the Merry Hill shopping centre near Brierley Hill, Dudley in October 1988. The shopping centre was developed on what had been the former Round Oak steelworks, which had closed in 1982 with the loss of 1,286 jobs. Like Telford and Salford Quays the area covered by the steelworks had been an Enterprise Zone, designated as Dudley (Round Oak) in October 1984. This zone was effectively an extension to the existing Dudley (No. 1) Enterprise Zone, which had been designated in July 1981, partly as a result of the anticipated closure of Round Oak. Merry Hill would be one of the largest of a series of regional shopping centres opened in the 1980s, along with Meadowhall near Sheffield, Lakeside in West Thurrock on the

outskirts of Greater London and Metrocentre near Gateshead/Newcastle (see Lowe, 2000). All of these complexes were in areas designated as Enterprise Zones. Though the primary imperative of Enterprise Zones was to stimulate the local economy and provide employment, ostensibly by the development of industrial units, for many of the developers this inevitably meant stimulating the service sector in the form of retailing and leisure-based industries. For example, the developers of the former Round Oak – the locally-based entrepreneurs Don and Roy Richardson – chose to develop the Merry Hill shopping centre. US cinema companies like AMC saw the parallel between these shopping and leisure developments and those that had been so successful in the USA, especially since many catered for the motor car.

Unlike those in the USA however, many multiplex cinema operators in the UK could take advantage of a slew of financial incentives and strategies on the part of local and central government to regenerate older industrial areas. So, what was interesting about the development of Merry Hill was that in October 1988 it had been the recipient of the first of the government's urban regeneration grants, in this case £3.25 million; which was intended to bolster a £17.5 million plan to redevelop the site of the former steelworks (Lowe, 1991: 36). Nevertheless, many US operators complained about the protracted planning process for new sites that lay outside UDCs and Enterprise Zones. In the 1980s many local councils were resistant to the development of shopping complexes on sites away from the city centres, as it was these areas that they were seeking to regenerate. Robert Webster, Head of Development at exhibitors CIC, observed that: '[i]t does take much longer to get projects into action here than in countries such as Australia...The multiplex concept is already established in Australia and here the

working in of cinemas with shopping developments is much slower' (*Screen International*, 610, 25 July 1987: 16). Moreover, US companies like Warner Bros. suggested that building costs in the UK were '100% higher than in the US', whilst getting planning permission and satisfying local authority regulations was 'a more complicated process here' (Salah Hassanein quoted in *Variety*, 21 June 1989: 11).

Though many developers initially felt that there was an economic disadvantage to a cinema on the site, since they were seen as less profitable per square foot than shops and therefore less able to pay high rents (*AIP & Co*, 78, October 1986), compromise was desirable. This was because Local councils, as we have seen in the case of Telford's town centre, viewed the prospect of a cinema as an important additional attraction to local leisure amenities. The early lesson of Salford Quays was that a trade-off between developer and cinema operator involving a lower rent for the cinema might secure the necessary planning permission. For their part, developers and local authorities also began to see the potential benefits of having a multiplex cinema in a development. It raised the profile of the development and indeed the area in turn attracting other investors (see Hanson, 2007).

Conclusion

The interdependent relationship between retail and multiplex developments in the UK meant that these new cinemas would be susceptible to the vagaries of the market and recession. In 1991 *Variety* (21 January 1991: 62) reported that the 'great multiplex building boom' in the UK was 'tapering off'. In part this was due to coverage around major towns and cities but also because of what the industry called 'overscreening' or 'overbuilding'. For many US operators smaller towns

and city centres were less attractive, not least because the multiplex's fortunes were so tied up with those of shopping centres. As the retail market shrank so did the scope for new developments and though land and building costs had reduced operators like UCI felt that the risk of opening on sites by themselves was too great. Nonetheless, the UK had one multiplex in 1985 and by the end of 1990 it had more than 40. Given that the UK had experienced a boom in multiplex building, especially between 1989–91 when 30 opened (*Screen Finance*, 5 February 1998: 8), it is perhaps no surprise that some circumspection prevailed. In any event, the 'tapering off' was short lived, as the next five years saw the opening of another 41 sites (Dodona, 2001).

Multiplexes sought to present the cinema in a decisively new form in which spacious and bright interior replaced the sombre tone of the traditional cinema. Indeed, the multiplex was closer to the shopping mall or leisure world in its design and execution and this helped associate it with wider leisure patterns and the changes in demographics. This was evidenced in part by their adoption of new techniques of organisation and management (see Hanson 2000), whilst the aesthetics of the multiplex reflected the contemporary importance of consumption as both the prime determinant of the economy but also of personal identity. This found expression in the notion of the "consumer society". Multiplex companies ensured that their cinemas: took account of new trends in retailing and leisure, by locating them amidst other kinds of attractions both before and after the film had been viewed; reflected the lifestyles of consumers, such as multiple show times and new kinds of concessions; had improved sight lines, sound and picture quality; could be booked by credit card on the telephone or later online; and were accessible by car and with lots of free parking.

If one had to point to the most significant impact of the multiplex cinema it would be in the way they located themselves geographically. Historically the cinema had been as an integral part of the urban landscape and the established geography of the city or town. When Milton Keynes was chosen by AMC and Bass Leisure for The Point, to be followed by greenfield, suburban and new town sites around the country the die was cast for the development of a new kind of cinema as one in which the cinemagoer would be prepared to travel, largely by motor car. This appeal to the motorist was wholly in keeping with contemporary developments in shopping and leisure. This mobile population was one that the multiplex was able to attract not just because they were convenient, or near motorways, or had large free car parks, but because many traditional, city centre cinemas had become an unattractive prospect precisely because they could not offer these features. Historically the cinema had been seen as an urban experience: by 1990 with the development of the multiplex, it could have been described more realistically as a “suburban experience”.

This article has suggested that the key to understanding the diffusion of the multiplex from the mid-1980s was to acknowledge a range of economic determinants and some dramatic changes in the transient nature of capitalism, in which the market began to be seen as a way of dealing with complex and seemingly insoluble problems to do with an increasingly post-industrial Britain. This was best expressed in the discussion of urban regeneration and the role multiplexes came to play in the leisure-based economy in a post-industrial context. Key to this argument was the development of out-of-town shopping and the important place of the multiplex in these new initiatives, in turn a consequence of the economic policies pursued by successive Conservative governments

throughout the 1980s. Coupled with the ‘shaking out’ of traditional industries, the emphasis was increasingly placed on the rapid development of out-of-town shopping and leisure complexes across Britain, often on old industrial sites. The extent to which Britain adopted the multiplex cinema from the USA was indicative of the extent to which what Delmestri and Wezel (2011: 831) identified as the ‘cultural template of multiplexes’, was less at odds with the ‘cultural beliefs and practices’ of Britain than it was of other countries in Europe. Implicit in this ‘cultural template’ was an acceptance that these new cinemas would be part of the central attraction of out-of-town leisure and shopping (see Hanson, 2013a). As one of the first countries to import the multiplex from the USA, the UK can be considered a kind of “test bed” for the concept. Here there were explicit parallels between the context for development of the multiplex in the USA – suburbanisation, shopping malls and reliance on the motorcar – and development of new kinds of shopping and leisure complexes in the UK in the 1980s in particular. These were the location for the first round of multiplex developments and set the template for many years to come.

(8161 words incl. notes and bibliography)

Notes

1. Slogan used by AMC in advertisement in *Screen International*, 678, 12 November 1988, p.15
2. Interview with Mr Steven Wilby of the Commission for New Towns conducted 10 January 1992 (tape recorded but no transcript).

3. The discussion of the UCI multiplex in Telford draws upon an unpublished, structured questionnaire survey of 50 cinemagoers (equally split between men and women) carried out in the cinema foyer between December 1991 and February 1992.

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