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Milton Keynes— Who Forgot the Urban Design?

Francis Tibbalds

At the age of 13, the new city of Milton Keynes has a lot going for it and, in many ways, the community is a privileged one. In my view, however, it is not the place that it might have been had the broadly based principles and objectives of the original plan been properly interpreted in its detailed implementation.

Central Milton Keynes is bland, rigid, sterile, and totally boring: it was originally conceived as a rich, intricate piece of city center design—its complex organic form integrated into the adjoining residential fabric. In terms of the physical and social environment, the surface of the city was intended to be a continuum stressing linkages, overlapping catchments, redundancy, and complexity. The end product is fragmented; the grid roads divide the city instead of welding it together.

There are many shortcomings. Neat traffic-signalized intersections have become land-consuming roundabouts. Local activity centers have generally been wrongly located in the center of grid squares—creating the very simplistic single-center “neighborhoods” the plan had sought so hard to avoid instead of forming “connectors” between adjoining squares visible to passing drivers on the primary roads. Development has become inward, looking within grid squares instead

of spanning them to form a continuous, rich, urban fabric. Buildings are too far from the primary roads—separated by a landscape desert. Driving along the grid roads is a largely sterile experience—they are too uniform, boring, and uninformative. The “sense of place” and choice of facilities at local activities falls far short of the quality and ease of connection proposed in the plan. Housing density is too uniform and the choice and variety envisaged in the plan has not been achieved. Local routes for pedestrians and vehicles have not been established in a continuous and integrated fashion.

Milton Keynes is not as awful environmentally as this may sound—just disappointing in that it is not as good as it could have been had the spirit of the original plan not been crushed, ignored, suppressed, or misunderstood by those charged with its implementation.

It may not be too late. Development is only partially complete. It is not yet a city or even a coherent town. In the continuing development of the city and filling in of the existing urban fabric over the coming years, the Development Corporation could, if it so chose, do a number of things to safeguard the production of a richer environment that better meets the unchallenged aspirations and acknowledged promise of the original plan:

- . . . the grid road system should be completed and greater visual variety therein encouraged.
- . . . local activity centers should be located at the midpoints between grid squares to connect residential areas.
- . . . housing development areas should be concentrated on local routes and across grid roads.
- . . . local routes should be continuous across grid squares.
- . . . a complex, continuous, fine-grain urban structure must be developed within and overlapping the broad framework of the main road grid, reflecting the plan’s goals of variety, freedom of choice, opportunity, etc.

It is ironic that amid the wealth of professional expertise brought to bear on the planning and design of Milton Keynes a fundamental omission has gone unnoticed. The design process of Milton Keynes progressed from planning directly to architecture and engineering. It missed a vital stage—*that of urban design*. I believe this failing is largely responsible for the gap between the intention and the reality. Because of this, the city may irretrievably have sacrificed the opportunity to become one of the

world’s greatest examples of new place-making, and end up instead as just another collection of good, bad, and indifferent buildings.