

Milton Keynes and the challenge of sustainable suburbia

Milton Keynes has just celebrated the 40th anniversary of its official birth - designation as a New Town in January 1967. Today its population stands at 220,000 and, under the sustainable communities programme, it will expand by some further 150,000 over the next 30 years.

Our negative-oriented media would have adored a story of an economic and social disaster, but inconveniently for them Milton Keynes has turned out a success. The local economy is booming and, on the whole, its residents are pretty happy with the place. There are inevitable downsides and some facilities are lagging behind the growth, but broadly MK has got it right. It is a modern and attractive urban environment and has fulfilled aspirations for good quality suburban living. I moved to live and work in Milton Keynes in 1974, when I took up one of the first PhD studentships at the fledgling Open University. I live and work in MK today and have a great pride in this place and its achievements.

But today, Milton Keynes has some unresolved 40 year old business, which needs dealing with for its success to continue. And this unresolved business is all about transport policy and planning. The design of Milton Keynes was a reaction against the high rise, high density concrete urbanism movement of the 1960s. A guiding principle was that Milton Keynes should flexibly accommodate the massive growth in wealth and consumption expected through to the 21st century. Key to this was an urban structure that could accommodate 'saturation' levels of car use. So, in the 1970 *Plan for Milton Keynes*, consultant Richard Llewelyn-Davies designed a town around the operational requirements of the private car. This consisted of a highly dispersed, low density, land use pattern with an average population density of 27 persons per hectare served by a one-kilometre grid of dual carriageway roads. Llewelyn-Davies referred to it as a '*modified Los Angeles system*' -the design is basically tidied up southern Californian urban sprawl.

The Plan's *Transport Technical Supplement* admitted that Milton Keynes could never support a decent commercial bus service, but this was no problem as we would be so wealthy in the 21st century that there would be plenty of public money around to subsidize innovative bus services appropriate for a low density settlement. For a while the Development Corporation did run the highly-subsidised, and popular, demand responsive 'Dial-a-Bus', but it folded and in the mid 1980s bus privatisation rendered illegal the whole notion of a highly subsidised quality bus service. Today, bus services in Milton Keynes are about the poorest for any town of its size. Milton Keynes' design is inherently hostile to public transport. Furthermore, it is hostile to pedestrians and cyclists as well. Despite the provision of a segregated foot/cycle network, walking trips are pitifully low and even cycling is barely at the national average. The low density and dispersed design makes trips too long to walk and cycle. Hence, overall, Milton Keynes has a level of car use and dependency that is more characteristic of a rural shire than an aspiring city.

A combination of the car-friendly design and the economic success of MK is even starting to overwhelm the grid roads in a casebook SACTRA manner, with traffic queues regularly featuring on the 'uncongestable' network. Transport realities are starting to encroach even upon Milton Keynes. Today the Plan for Milton Keynes would be viewed as environmentally irresponsible, economically extravagant and socially divisive, so proposals for the town's expansion, under the agency of the private/public Milton Keynes Partnership, involve medium-density developments in new areas served not by 70 mph grid roads but 20-30mph 'city streets' with bus priority measures and maximising facilities within walking and cycling distance. This is coupled with densification along key corridors in the existing town, where some grid roads will be reworked as public transport corridors.

These proposals shift well away from the old design principles of Milton Keynes, and have sparked a big local debate. A widespread view is that the MK Partnership will throw away all that has made Milton Keynes good and successful, and many advocate retaining the ethos of a 'city built for the car'. A counter expansion plan has been proposed for a continuation of low density development and grid roads spreading half way to Bedford. There is no way such an unsustainable, green field-hungry, expansion would be approved by any government. A more informed and realistic critique is, however, starting to emerge that recognises the unsustainability of MK's design, but fears the loss of the flexible and adaptive 'liveable suburbia' nature that has made MK successful. There is something in this - a danger of ending up with the worst of both worlds. The densification in the existing areas might just about improve the buses to provide a viable service for those without cars, but will fall massively short of anything capable of attracting car users. You might lose what makes MK work while failing to get far enough towards a sustainable community

So, at the same time as Milton Keynes is celebrating 40 years of success, it raises a transport planning dilemma that is a challenge to transport and planning professionals as a whole. In all but transport sustainability Milton Keynes has got things very right. It is a very liveable and economically successful place. Is there only one way for places like Milton Keynes to move towards transport sustainability? For example, MK could have a decent bus service if, like in similar Canadian and German towns, the existing traditional bus routes were entirely replaced by a semi-scheduled DRT system. Such sorts of service can achieve modal shift in suburban situations, but doing this under our deregulated system is all but impossible. Perhaps the barriers to sustainable suburbia are largely institutional and regulatory rather than about physical urban form? There seems to be a single model for transport sustainability based around high density living and traditional forms of public transport. That model may be appropriate for major cities and the likes of Thames Gateway, but is it viable for the majority of suburban and semi-urban Britain? Pseudo Los Angeles sprawl is out, but for suburbia to attain sustainability might require more emphasis on institutional and 'Smarter' initiatives. So, rather than seeing Milton Keynes as an unsustainable aberration that needs major surgery to conform to our big city model, perhaps we transport professionals need to ask how a sustainable suburbia can be achieved. Milton Keynes may not be an urban design to emulate, but as it hits middle age it continues to raise fundamental and disturbing questions for the transport profession.