

Welcome to the city... of the bus

ONE OF the ways in which those who dominate the planning, delivery and conceptualisation of the expansion of Milton Keynes justify their half-baked plans is by constantly referring to it as "The City of the Car" and of course, they add, we must all be forced out of our cars because they're going to destroy the planet, aren't they?

Actually, they're totally wrong. They certainly should know that already. Milton Keynes was *never designed* to be "The City of the Car".

I quote from The Plan for Milton Keynes Volume 2, dated March 1970, Chapter 15 - Transport. The section on Goals includes the following:

- ◆ Freedom of choice between public and private methods of transport;
- ◆ A high-quality public transport system *from the beginning of the development* (my emphasis), not only for those who need it but also for those who might choose to use it instead of private transport;
- ◆ Provision for use of the car unrestrained by congestion. (*I think this is interesting as it is so very different from the statement that the Milton Keynes' road system was designed for the car.*);
- ◆ Flexibility in the transport system to allow for *expansion and change* (again, my emphasis);
- ◆ A safe and environmentally attractive transport system: one which minimises nuisance from noise and pollution.

Out of all of these intended-from-the-start features, which ones do you think are being destroyed by the plans promulgated by English Partnerships, its bully-boy enforcers Milton Keynes Partnership and a supine council?

The answer might surprise you; it's all of them.

So from the top down, here's their roll call of ignominy.

◆ MKP wishes to remove our choice between 'public and private methods of transport' by denying us the right to park, even outside our own homes, by building homes with inadequate parking spaces or, incredibly, even just a single secure bike rack per house.

◆ But that doesn't mean it's done anything to introduce or maintain "a high quality public transport system". Oh no. This city was designed to take a tram, monorail or even underground rail system. Did you know that most of the grid roads, all of which were built between 100 and 80 metres wide, had specific 'rapid transit reserves' at the sides?

So have you seen those trams whizzing by in their high-tech splendour, smelling of ozone and promise, attracting one and all?

No, I thought not.

Failing adequate and determined investment in a monorail, tram or underground rail system, Milton Keynes was alternatively designed to be flexible enough to take a comfortable, reasonably-priced express bus system running on the grid roads. Does even that happen? Well no, not really.

And, by the way, that is the reason all the housing grid squares are exactly one kilometre square, so that no one would ever be more than a 500 metre stroll from a grid-side bus stop.

Today, in many cases, access to the grid-side bus stops is impeded by poor maintenance and buses have been forced under council and other pressures to enter the grid squares where they spend

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hours tortuously circumnavigating estate roads blocked by the abandoned cars caused by MKP trying to force people out of them.

Few use the buses because they're too slow to match the needs of any but the retired and their failure breeds further failure.

It is what is known as a lose-lose situation.

◆ What about congestion? Why, given the many needs to reduce it - including greenhouse gas emissions - has MKP in

its nod-it-all-through partnership with the council narrowed the boulevards in Central Milton Keynes, filled in underpasses forcing pedestrians over busy roads, sold off parking lots and access/service roads for development, refused to join new grid roads to the 'stubs' left for just that purpose at the ends of the existing grid in the expansion areas and added bus lanes and traffic lights that only slow the traffic further?

MKP's new chair Ann Limb is claiming that some of the grid roads are being extended. Unfortunately this is simply insulting nonsense, as several members of Urban Eden have taken the trouble to point out. What is actually happening is not serious town planning: it's an on-going hate campaign against both private and public transport users.

◆ What of expansion and change, provisions for which were all carefully built into the original city? We've already looked at the expansion areas but what of the original grid roads which were designed initially to alternate between a dual and single carriageway? The answer to expansion is already there.

The single carriageways, such as the H4 Danstead Way, were always provided with extremely wide 'linear parks' so that as the city expands they could easily and relatively cheaply become dualled. Did you know that many red-way, road, rail, canal and river bridges and underpasses are already built wide enough to accommodate this?

Once again, I am in awe of the long-term thinking of the original master planners. What a shame that their successors are too concerned with muddled ideologies to see these glorious roads-in-waiting and release them from the

ground where they sleep like Mickey Finn-ed dreams of progress.

◆ What of noise and pollution? The original planners had answers for that too. The busy, fast grid roads had (and many still, thankfully, have) wide tree-lined borders to absorb noise and pollution. The speed, efficiency and redundancy (meaning if one road was blocked the next could take the strain) of the grid also meant cars spent little or no time idling and putting out noxious fumes.

So what does MKP do? It wants to build on the borders of the grid roads, downgrade some to 'city streets', narrow boulevards from 75 to 40 metres, cut down thousands of trees, slow traffic with ludicrous and inappropriate speed limits, install an endless succession of traffic lights (up to seven sets on the V4) add 24-hour restricted bus lanes and generally frustrate anyone wanting to get anywhere.

If you support public transport in Milton Keynes, don't buy the myths peddled by Milton Keynes Partnership. Attempting to punish car users does not benefit bus users - it simply makes life harder for all of us.

Write to MKP's new chair Ann Limb at AnnLimb@englishpartnerships.co.uk and let her know that you're not going to take this lying down. Oh, and this just in; Sir Bob Kerslake, new chief executive of what is to be the Homes and Communities Agency once English Partnerships and the Housing Corporation have completed their merger - to whom I wrote an open letter in a previous column - has declared in the Planning newspaper: "The time for imposed development agencies is over."

Hooray! Cheerio.

Labour for hire that matters, not land for sale

THESE are worrying times for ambitious cities like Milton Keynes *writes Michael Synnott, of urban strategy consultancy Bigenoughdreams Ltd.*

Carefully crafted strategies and plans are likely to be set back, if not derailed, by grim forecasts of flat-line low growth from the International Monetary Fund and soaring petrol prices.

With an equally disturbing fiscal climate that leaves little scope for tax cuts to help soften the downturn, employers, investors and housebuyers are predictably reviewing and retrenching.

The competition for inward investment and growth just got tougher.

Seasoned observers will point out that a plentiful supply of relatively cheaper land and accommodation and lifestyle advantages have meant that the howling gales of economic stress in Britain have always managed to blow a little more zephyr-like across Milton Keynes.

However, things have changed. It's the quality of our workforce and not the price tag on our office accommodation - even when comes with Milton Keynes

lifestyle advantages - which now matters.

The European Cities Monitor, published annually by Cushman and Wakefield, is a respected indicator of what is shaking the movers in the relocation and lease seeking game. In the latest edition (*October 2007*), 500 major European companies were asked to rank the things they regarded as most essential when making a relocation decision. A total of 12 items were nominated ranging from staffing, telecommunications, local taxation, ease of travel, office availability and environment.

Influence

The availability of qualified staff came out top of the list with 62 per cent of the firms interviewed saying it was very essential in their location decisions. In sharp contrast, just 26pc of those surveyed cited available office space as a major influence when choosing a business base - four places above the bottom placed freedom from pollution but still

in the lowest quarter of the rankings.

The implications of these findings for Milton Keynes are profound. Many of the big eggs in the city's futures basket are marked 'Availability of good-value space'. Posters plastered across London's taxis and underground stations recently proclaimed the same message. Invest Milton Keynes says that it aims to bring forward 140,000 square foot of business space each year until 2026 (*Estates Gazette, 19 January 2008*).

However, in view of the extremely tough competitive conditions that have now arisen, this target will be difficult to achieve unless we can meet the customer priorities identified by the European Cities Monitor survey. This why news of the renewed effort to establish a university for Milton Keynes is welcome.

It will send a clear message to the world that Milton Keynes means business when it comes to workforce development so long as those steering the new project "think big".

The University of Milton Keynes should be a huge symbol of local com-

mitment to innovation, research and the knowledge development of our workforce.

It could serve as a national exemplar and template for the 21st century by linking local business and local higher education so that seminal theory and cutting-edge practice constantly interact. Such a learning partnership would say more about local skills and local business culture than availability of commercial accommodation ever can.

Innovative

Furthermore, Milton Keynes needs to widen its marketing focus beyond decision-makers seeking commercial accommodation. In order to highlight the aspects in which investors are interested, Milton Keynes must highlight the business focus of the new Edge academy, the above-average added-value scores that are being achieved by some local secondary schools and the innovative nature that characterises so much of the Milton Keynes business profile.



◆ Michael Synnott

Speaking about the early development of Milton Keynes, the city's then-publicity manager Sue Simpson told Marketing magazine in 1984: "We tried to sell just the buildings but buildings tend to be the same everywhere and we needed to get over our own special image".

This is still the challenge for 2008.