

WATCH THIS SPACE

A number of new projects seek to bring density to Milton Keynes, creating new zones of development in Modernism's Garden City. *Richard Vaughan* investigates

The walk from Milton Keynes train station to the 'Centre', the Buckinghamshire new town's enclosed shopping centre, is the same distance as from London's Marble Arch to Tottenham Court Road. The difference between these two ambles is people: the latter has more than 10,000 per square kilometre, the former has just 728.

It may seem rather trite to compare London with Milton Keynes; however, it is

simple but integral things like lack of human interaction that is forcing Milton Keynes, now entering its fourth decade, to change.

In 1967, Milton Keynes was designated under the New Towns Act of 1946. Two years later, Llewellyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker and Bor drew up a masterplan that amalgamated three towns and 13 villages to form a city of 250,000 people. In keeping with the New Towns Act, densities were strictly regulated and encouraged a maximum residential density of 17 dwellings per hectare.

Perhaps this goal was too successful – statistics from the 2001 Census show that central Milton Keynes has a staggeringly low

residential density of 5.3 people per hectare, due to its predominantly commercial tenants. It's so desolate that, in 2003, then deputy prime minister John Prescott designated the town as a target growth area as part of his Sustainable Communities Plan.

Three years later, in 2006, English Partnerships employed masterplanner EDAW to draw up Vision 2031, which set out proposals to increase the population of the town from its current 224,000 to 380,000 by 2031 by increasing density and expanding east and west. As a resident for the last 13 years Andrew Jones, EDAW director of operations, knows all too well how revered and iconic >>





Right Numerous new projects are under construction across Milton Keynes, from the centre out into the east and west expansion areas

Milton Keynes and its grid system are. But in his eyes, too much commitment to that ideal is strangling growth.

'We tried to strike the right balance in keeping points of the original plan while making it more sustainable,' he says. 'One of the key changes is making it easier for people to use public transport. We want to connect the isolated estates with transportation systems, and provide self-sustainable larger estates with their own shops, cafés and bars.'

Other local agencies support this plan. Architecture MK (AMK), founded by Milton Keynes Council to oversee the design and implementation of proposed buildings, backs EDAW. AMK head Andrew Armes adds:

'We are trying to get people into the middle of the city – at the moment trying to build at higher densities in the suburbs is heresy.'

'Developments like Glenn Howells Architects' Hub well exceed the town's five-storey height limit but will introduce more bars and cafés. At the moment, after 9.30pm when the shops shut, there's nothing there.'

The Hub is a mixed-use residential scheme with restaurants and bars at ground level. Developed by Crest Nicholson, it will provide 500 one- and two-bedroom flats over a 0.4ha site. The 14-storey project well exceeds the town's former five-storey limit.

The Hub will be followed by even denser projects such as the 650-unit West End One

– designed by Rick Mather Architects with Alison Brookes Architects and HTA, for registered social landlord Places for People. The scheme, which entered planning this month, will front on to Witan Gate, adjacent to Howells' development. The 3ha site will also provide a new public realm, shared surface streets and even a new school.

'The grid system lends itself perfectly to higher densities, and Milton Keynes could look like a mini-Manhattan,' says Howells. 'Right now it isn't edgy enough, but by creating Manhattan-style density with bars and cafés you can stimulate this.'

'We looked at the environment thinking, "The higher the better". The vertical scale of



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the buildings acts as an antidote to the yawning horizontal.'

But this attitude is not shared by all – pressure groups like Urban Eden have an agenda to 'promote the sustainable extension of the original masterplan for Milton Keynes', according to their mission statement. Urban Eden's goals include the extension of the grid street pattern and the conservation of boulevards.

Urban Eden director Ken Baker, who works for local practice David Lock Associates, is adamant these new developments will fail. 'There is a consensus at the moment that if you question change then you are against it. We just want people to be >>>



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1 EDAW's Vision 2031 masterplan for Milton Keynes was originally designed in 2003 and mainly addresses the central area of the city

2 West End One, by Rick Mather Architects with Alison Brookes Architects and HTA. Completing in 2010; 650 homes, mixed-use with a school

3 The Hub, by Glenn Howells Architects for Crest Nicholson. Completing in February 2008; five buildings, 408 flats and 5,400m² retail

4 Campbell Park (phase 1), by HTA and Maccreevor Lavington Architects for Taylor Wimpey. Completing in 2010; 280 flats and townhouses, plus retail space



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5 Renny Lodge, by Sheppard Robson for Crest Nicholson. Completing in April 2008; 68 homes in the eastern expansion area, part of English Partnerships' Design for Manufacture programme

6 Wolverton Park, by HTA for Places for People. Completing in 2009; 223 flats in a regeneration area located north-west of the city centre



aware of the dangers of change and what it means for the future,' he says.

'There is a new urban agenda at the moment, about increasing density and doing away with openness. The Hub is a perfect example - it will be singularly unsuccessful.'

This is a sentiment echoed by Derek Walker, chief architect and planner of the city in 1969. He says: 'The legislation to increase density in Milton Keynes doesn't sit well with me at all - we designed Milton Keynes for 250,000 people at low density. When you try and increase that density you have to mess around with the infrastructure.'

Milton Keynes' 1 x 1km square grid system was intended to be used by buses at speeds of 30 to 40mph with stops just 500m from each house. However, widespread car ownership meant that highways soon became dominated by high-speed traffic, making buses difficult to operate, and leading to many housing estates becoming isolated cul-de-sacs.

EDAW's Vision 2031 aims to reconnect these housing estates by increasing density and developing housing along the grid roads.

Milton Keynes needs to change, but will do so at the risk of losing its Modernist ideals

'The grid roads work against the growth and evolution of the town. Look at Birmingham - the ring road is strangling the growth of the city, it becomes constrained and overheated. Now they are looking at breaking up the ring road,' says EDAW director of operations Andrew Jones.

But many, including Liberal Democrat council leader Isobel McCall, claim that people love the grid. It's a debate that has taken the battle to intensify Milton Keynes from the centre out into the suburbs of the Garden City. The town is now expanding to the east and west to meet its target of 70,000 new homes by 2031, but the expansion areas do not follow the grid pattern.

'We didn't want Vision 2031 to simply look at the centre. We had to turn our attention to the suburbs,' explains Jones. The expansion areas are particularly controversial for proposing 'city streets' that include bus routes within 400m of every house.

AMK's Andrew Armes says the expansion areas have to be different from other Milton Keynes housing estates if they are to succeed, and that the organic growth of the grid road into the expansion areas will not work.

'We want these areas to operate as separate entities - not just another housing estate,' says Armes. 'The last 15 years have been crap, nothing but developer housing. We want to integrate it with mixed-use developments where houses change over time.'

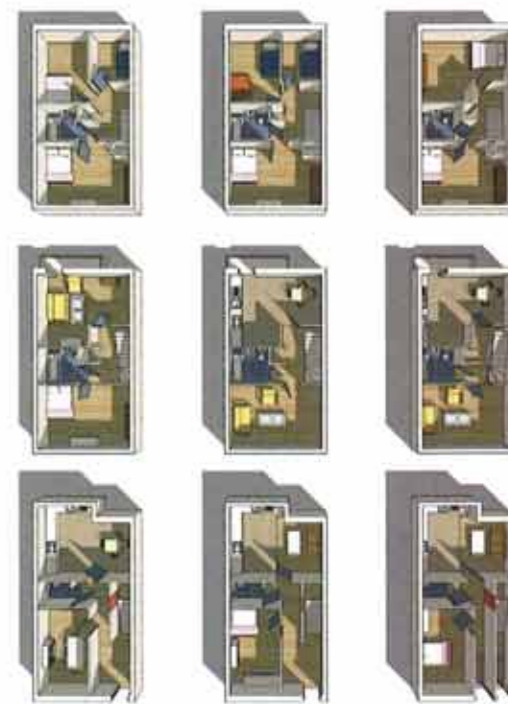
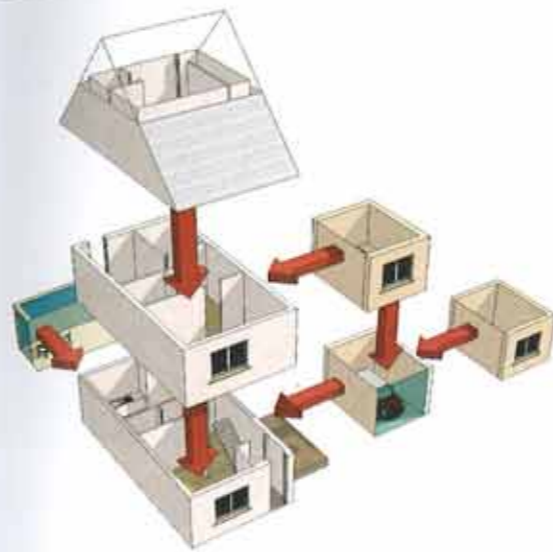
'Look at Camden High Street in London - Victorian houses with front and back gardens, which were amenable to be developed into houses with shops on the front. That's what we want in Milton Keynes.'

But this is the dilemma Milton Keynes faces. It was never meant to be like somewhere else. It was an 'invented' town, and although it needs to change, it runs the risk of losing its Modernist ideals. It may be the butt of many jokes and is often synonymous with its 'concrete cows', but its grid system it is fundamentally different to the rest of the UK.

Ken Baker believes the reaction from the public is, 'Give us our grid roads,' and feels the council has lost its way. 'Milton Keynes is distinctly different, but there is an attitude to make it like everywhere else - that is not what Milton Keynes is about,' he says.

Ben Derbyshire, managing director of HTA, is currently working on the Campbell Park development, part of West End One, as well as the Wolverton regeneration to the north of central Milton Keynes. He believes the town can still keep its identity.

'The centre needs more buildings, and it needs more tall buildings,' he says. 'But we're very keen on Milton Keynes, it offers a great deal of opportunities. And I don't buy into this absurd idea that the grid squares should be made into high streets - Milton Keynes is a town with grid squares; we have to make the most of it.' ■



7 PRP's feasibility studies for Tattenhoe Park; masterplan authored by PRP and Alan Baxter. Estimated completion 2012

8 Oxley Woods, by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners for Taylor Wimpey. Completed in summer 2007 as part of English Partnerships' Design for Manufacture programme; 145 homes over 3ha

