

## **MILTON KEYNES PROVIDES CLUES FOR ECO LIFESTYLES**

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Because of its innovative master plan and a development team that shouted about their achievements, Milton Keynes was often talked about as having been an “experiment”. It was actually one of 32 Government new towns using the New Towns Act (1946, but since revised), but it was the last and the largest, and to a great extent it is the sum of the accumulated new towns wealth of experience. Indeed, many of the staff of Milton Keynes Development Corporation had worked on others, such as Runcorn and Irvine.

But the “experiment” soubriquet is probably still deserved. There were pioneering projects in architecture, landscape design, transport planning, social and economic development and marketing, and in long term management arrangements for the parks and community buildings. The city is a living laboratory exhibiting practically all approaches to street design and the layout of development. You can see the early work when young architects filled in the city’s grid squares as if they were cells in a beehive, wilfully contrary to what the master plan advised. There is the joined-up mixed use urbanity of the 1980s, the volume housebuilders’ ordinariness of the 1990s to the cranky design indulgences and crammed corners of recent years. You will find a few piles of flats that cities throughout England were persuaded to accept since 2000. What Milton Keynes has is huge variety and no-one has seriously studied it in any comparative way. It is a thousand Masters’ dissertations waiting to be written.

Today, the wheel has turned and now there is talk of more new towns - Eco-Towns – especially green places to be brought through the planning system by the private sector in partnership with public bodies.

It may have other roots, but the phrase Eco Town has certainly been used in Japan since the late 1990s. Kawasaki, Kitakyushu, Minimata and Naoshima are examples of a drive to include the 3R (Reduce, Reuse and Recycle) concepts. Initially very technical, the Japanese Eco-Town concept has grown to involve “green procurement, green consumerism, industrial ecology, extended producer responsibility, socially responsible investment, integrated waste management, green labelling, global reporting initiative, corporate social responsibility” and more, to be “a defined area, a laboratory, where various different eco-concepts can be developed and implemented”<sup>1</sup>.

How much of this way of thinking will develop here in the UK remains to be seen, but the origins of UK Eco-Towns is the acute shortage of housing and the Government’s wish to see the development of durable communities, not just housing estates. What lessons can Milton Keynes offer the Eco Town designers?

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<sup>1</sup> *Eco-Towns in Japan: Implications and Lessons for Developing Countries and Cities*, Global Environment Research Centre Foundation, 2005.

The Milton Keynes fast cross-city grid, and the alternate slow local grid, provide the most accessible and flexible framework for all types of movement. The grids also provide a framework of exceptional integrity for biodiversity, especially with the linear park system which is essentially a flood water attenuation system laid out for nature and recreation.

MK pioneered innovations in energy conservation through architectural and urban design. The “Energy World” show village in the early 1980s began the development of four grid squares committed to pilot standards promoted by the national Energy Foundation founded for the purpose. The Borough Council is proud of its recycling record, and more exciting visions (e.g. a scheme for plastics recovery and recycling on the site of a waste-to-energy plant) are being planned. For food, the city has made excellent provision for gardens and allotments, but the linear parks yield little and the urban area and its country hinterland do not connect. The danger of too tightly drawn town boundaries may be lesson for Eco-Towns!

The economic development strategies deployed in Milton Keynes, which offered no grant assistance to inward investors, were spectacularly successful. Almost forgotten now, but in need of urgent resurrection, are the social development programmes of Milton Keynes. Resources were committed to providing a welcome for new arrivals, and to achieve social integration and social cohesion. Growing community from a miscellaneous group of incomers is a very serious business, and involves accelerating the rate at which local social institutions and organisations can develop, which in ordinary towns are likely to have taken many decades to evolve.

One of the most obvious features of the elegant Plan for Milton Keynes was the gift of its flexibility – the city structure is a gentle trellis, over and through which successive generations can clamber with their priorities and excitements. Milton Keynes may be just over 40 years old, but it holds clues for design of sustainable lifestyles of the future.

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