



LEE GARLAND

BEVERLEY HILLS

01908

Since the Government released plans to tackle obesity, the environment and the housing crisis through 'Fit Towns' – it is worth taking a look back at the most successful of the UK's 'new towns', built by Lancashire-born architect Derek Walker.

A reactionary society that gorges on heritage and history was never going to embrace with open arms the idea of 'new towns'. The very notion that an entire town could be created from scratch as opposed to evolving over hundreds of years is, to many, heinous. That said, were The Daily Mail to ask its readers to rank the various post-war British new towns in order of those most likely to send them into a sweaty rant, Milton Keynes would most likely come a respectable last.

A team of gifted young architects led by the charismatic Derek Walker, born in Lancashire and brought up in Yorkshire, took to the Buckinghamshire countryside and began to construct a little piece of Los Angeles. The founding father of Milton Keynes was Melvin M Webber, and in partnership with Richard Llewelyn-Davies they drew up the founding principles upon which the town's continued success is built.

Webber argued that planners and architects mistakenly continued to build urban structures that were based on the industrial and societal structures of a bygone age. Since the early 1960s Webber had foreseen that modern communications and mass car ownership would drastically alter the way we lived. In stark contrast to his contemporary critics, when Webber looked at the phenomenon scornfully referred to as 'urban sprawl' or 'scatterisation' he found that in contrast to the critical perception, people actually liked life in the 'sprawl'. To Webber it seemed perfectly logical to give people exactly what they wanted; a house in the suburbs with the freedom to drive themselves to all the amenities the modern city had to offer; a 'community without propinquity'.

To this day the downfall of the vast majority of town plans has been to formulate an idealised vision of the future – a new way of living – into which the general populace must then assimilate. Indeed, it could easily have been very different; a rival plan for Milton Keynes high-rise living linked by a free monorail. The Milton Keynes Development Corporation's masterstroke however, was to follow Webber's lead and aim to provide nothing more than the framework into which the town would grow. What resulted therefore was a strikingly realistic plan which gave people the house they wanted, in green surroundings, linked to all the services they required by fast roads.

Precisely because it is so unique in Britain, there are two versions of Milton Keynes in the public consciousness. The Milton Keynes seen from the outside is a place almost impossible to conceptualise since there is no point of comparison in the rest of the UK. As a result the town has come under some spectacularly adverse criticism, and it is easy to understand why. Visiting Milton Keynes entails leaving the familiar British road network and entering into an Americanised grid network of dual carriageways connected by roundabouts. There are precious few landmarks to navigate by, owing to the fact that no building was permitted to be higher than the trees. MK residents meanwhile emerge from apparently non-existent houses and drive to the shops at a confident 70mph, sweeping the hopelessly lost visitor along on fast, endless and identical roads.

On the other hand, ask the residents of Milton Keynes themselves, and they are staunchly proud of their town. For a town that subsumed Bletchley Park, one could allege it is proud that outsiders have so far failed to crack their peculiar code of living. The fact that visitors might spend

Driving across Milton Keynes is akin to taking a Sunday afternoon drive through one of Prince Charles' nightmares.

hours circulating around V8 and H9 is the cause of mild amusement. Despite the car being king in this town, the town could almost claim, with a straight face, to be greener than the surrounding countryside on account of some 40 million trees. It enjoys air pollution far lower than it deserves for its size. Like the Barbican in London, Milton Keynes scores incredibly high on that enviable and possibly only true measure of success: its people love it.

As Alan Johnson signals his desire for (new) new towns, it is his intention that they should not only provide places for people to live happily, but they should also tackle climate change and obesity. In government jargon, they will be 'Fit Towns'. With heavily idealised (old) new towns such as the almost universally loathed Cumbernauld, proving that what planners want is not always what they get, Johnson may like to take some lessons from Milton Keynes. On the one hand driving across it might be akin to taking a Sunday afternoon drive through one of Prince Charles' nightmares. On the other, whilst it is difficult to see a US-style car town ever being given the green light again with the environment so high on the political agenda, it does bring in to sharp focus the current clash between the way we ought to live, and the way we nevertheless like to.

In terms of the future for Milton Keynes itself, central government has imposed a raft of changes upon the town centred around 'densification'. As far from the town's founding principles as it is possible to be – measures such as lifting the ban on building above the treetops has opened the doors to cash-hungry developers. Amongst the strikingly futuristic Central Railway Station, the gracious Miesian Shopping and the Food Courts that resemble the Barcelona Pavilion, now stands an island of predictable high-rise apartments.

The self-styled 'suburb city' had allowed for jam-free traffic movement from its birth to the present day. Whether the stately boulevards can cope with high-density living at its core remains to be seen. There are threats on the horizon to further redevelop the central shopping centre – arguably the most beautiful of its kind in the country and undoubtedly the jewel in MK's crown. There is an argument that Milton Keynes was purpose-built to be a framework for future development, whatever course that may take. That growth however, was intended to be endogenous – driven by the desires of its populace – rather than imposition from above.

With a suburban periphery and an increasingly high-density core, Milton Keynes will put on a much more familiar face to the outsider. It may even attract some more positive criticism from those looking in. Perhaps Webber will be proved wrong; the Government might know what the people need better than themselves. We can but wait and see. In the meantime residents now driving down Midsummer Boulevard (designed so as on midsummer's day the sun rises at one end, and sets on the other) will be left to question whether the sun is setting on their own Buckinghamshire Beverley Hills. What the new dawn in town planning will bring under fresh government initiatives remains to be seen. ■