

Milton Keynes, the English new town that was tailor made for the car, is entering a new era of growth. Adding a further 100,000 to the existing 200,000 inhabitants implies a step change in the approach to new development, and successful implementation of the proposed measures means changing the hearts and minds of the residents and the council. Transforming the way people move around impinges on the very nature of this community. Milton Keynes is about to discover the advantages of propinquity.



Impression of the upgraded shopping centre 'thecentre:mk'.

Reinventing Milton Keynes

Frank van der Hoeven, Delft University of Technology / Urbanism, Lead Partner Connected Cities

photos: Frank van der Hoeven (unless indicated otherwise)

Just after the second world war the general perception was that large metropolises like London, Paris and the Randstad were not the right environment for people to live in. They would be better off in well planned mid-sized towns at a secure distance from the mother city. The new towns (or *villes nouvelles* in France and *groeikernen* in the Netherlands) were based on this notion. Most of these new towns grew to what was considered their optimal size, about 50,000 inhabitants. Thirty or forty years after their conception, a handful of these new towns are now entering a new cycle of growth. They are no longer dependent on their mother city; they have matured and have acquired the potential to become cities in their own right. Milton Keynes in England, Sénart in France and Almere in Holland are good examples of communities set to enter a new phase in their development. Renewed growth does not mean that the planners of these new

towns can proceed as before: the additional urban growth will have an impact on the town centre, the infrastructure, the density and the very identity of the communities involved. It will also make them less dependent on the mother city. This is particularly clear in the case of Milton Keynes in England.

The development of Milton Keynes new town started in the early 1970s. Milton Keynes helped to accommodate the growing population of South East England, and in particular that of London. Located halfway between London and Birmingham, it grew into England's largest new town with well over 200,000 inhabitants. It is known for its system of segregated grid roads and the 130 roundabouts that connect them. The town was designed along the ideas of Melvin M. Webber, a California-based urban designer who introduced the idea of 'community without propinquity'. Webber argued that propinquity (or nearness) was no longer a necessary condition for social and economic networks. Instead of trying to pre-programme such networks by using classic urban forms

and patterns, spatial planners had to provide maximum accessibility that would allow people to develop their own networks. The translation of such ideas into reality led to a different kind of city.

In traditional towns and cities, main roads or boulevards often form the backbone of urban life and are lined with the fronts of major buildings, institutions or prominent residential blocks. In Milton Keynes these things work differently. The town is designed along a system of segregated grid roads that provide a high level of accessibility. There are no buildings located along these grid roads. Drivers move through landscaping and greenery with little that refers to the urban areas and their communities, which are located within the grid blocks. Single and dual carriageways run between the communities rather than through them. The absence of road-fronting buildings, cyclists or pedestrians along the often elevated grid roads allow for maximum speeds up to 100 kilometres or more per hour. Most inhabitants move in this way from the one grid block to the other, all measuring about one square kilometre. →



Milton Keynes from the air. (photo: Milton Keynes Council)

86 per cent of the trips in this town are travelled by car

Cyclists and pedestrians depend on their own infrastructure, the redways, which use underpasses or bridges to cross the roads. Fast and slow traffic are highly segregated and as a result people perceive the overall transport network in Milton Keynes as safe. The Milton Keynes grid clearly favours the car over any other means of transportation. The main public transport service in town is provided by buses. Although ridership has been steadily improving, the overall number of bus journeys is relatively low and the bus service is not generally held in high regard by the community. As a result, the bus serves mainly those without a car. Cyclists constitute a group small, representing only 3 per cent of the trips made in Milton Keynes, and pedestrians are found in large numbers only in or near the town's shopping mall. It is here, in Central Milton Keynes, where the most visible changes are taking place.

SECOND GENERATION OF GROWTH

Milton Keynes and South Midlands are two of the four 'growth areas' designated in the Sustainable Communities Plan published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

in 2003. These growth areas are designed to secure the economic success of London and the South East over the long term. This summer I met with David Hackforth, head of planning and transport Milton Keynes Council and Kevin Whiteside, the council's chief highways and transportation engineer, to discuss what this 'second generation of growth' will mean for urban development and overall mobility in Milton Keynes.

David explained that Milton Keynes is built on the principle that people are free to do what they want. That includes driving. The grid roads with their speeds up to about 100 kilometres per hour support that, together with the

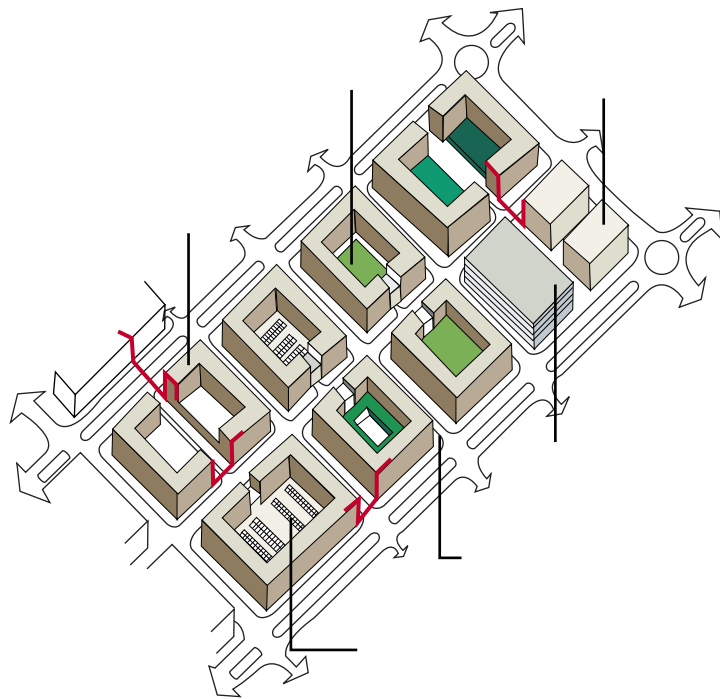
24,000 surface car parking spaces in Central Milton Keynes. Initially, parking was even free in the town centre. 'We've got a city population that expects to drive. So, don't be surprised that most people do drive: 86 per cent of the trips in this town are travelled by car. Right now we are planning a next generation of growth. In the next thirty years Milton Keynes will build 70,000 homes and accommodate 70,000 jobs. The first phase of this growth includes the western and eastern expansion areas with 6500 and 4000 new homes. It also includes Central Milton Keynes, with its 6500 new apartments and town houses, an additional 400,000 square metres of office space, 60,000 extra square metres of retail, and other cultural and leisure facilities.'

CENTRAL MILTON KEYNES

Many of the changes will take place in Central Milton Keynes (CMK), which has been very successful from the outset. As in other new towns, the centre was little more than an office park with a large shopping mall. CMK is still dominated by what is now called 'thecentre:mk'. With a glass construction almost a kilometre in length, thecentre:mk is one of the longest covered shopping areas in Europe. It offers high street stores and smaller, specialist shops, and attracts nearly thirty million visits a year.



Pedestrians are a rare breed outside the shopping centre.



Densification plan for Central Milton Keynes. (illustration: Karin Dekker, Amsterdam)

‘Recent development in CMK has been more balanced, continues David. ‘Leisure, culture, apartments and town houses are coming in. First, the Xscape was built, Europe’s largest indoor ‘real snow’ ski slope. It also houses, under the ski slope, an indoor rock climbing wall, a 16-screen multiplex cinema and a family entertainment centre. The Xscape was attracted by the site that was available in the centre and by the fact that half the population of England lives about two hours drive away. This attraction, coupled with the new theatre district, has created a growing demand for visitor accommodation. Two commercially driven hotels are also now being built, but there is clearly a growing need for a cheaper hotel.

‘The construction of 1,900 apartments has also begun at the flagship West End development, the first project of its kind in Central Milton Keynes. The council was nervous about whether there would be a demand for this type of housing because Milton Keynes has always been a single family home community. The first projects are now nearing completion. All the apartments have been sold and the nervousness has evaporated. It is now clear there is a ready and buoyant market. The prospects for housing next to Campbell Park look good. The new

development comes in higher densities, with building heights between six and twenty stories – whatever the market will bear. To make way for such developments parking is increasingly being provided in multi-story car parks. The time of unlimited surface parking is over.’

The Council has produced a vision for the central part of Central Milton Keynes, Central CMK. ‘It recognises what this part of town means for Milton Keynes, for its citizens and for the region. It also outlines the opportunities for contemporary urban living there. The vision comes with a long list of objectives. These follow a wide-ranging public consultation programme. I think that most of us will agree with these,’ David concludes.

TRADITIONAL CITY CENTRE

‘It is a recipe that turns Milton Keynes into a traditional city,’ comments Kevin Whiteside, the Council’s Chief Highways and Transportation Engineer. Kevin recently moved into Milton Keynes. He used to work for the Audit Commission, an independent public body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively. He was one the Commission’s inspectors and performed an audit on the Milton Keynes council.

OBJECTIVES FOR CENTRAL MILTON KEYNES (CMK)

- To create an environment to attract quality employment opportunities and spread economic employment benefits to Milton Keynes as whole.
- To be the focus for major retail, leisure, entertainment, civic and cultural uses.
- To remain as the ‘heart’ for the local community, supporting the needs and requirements of all residents of Milton Keynes, including their social and cultural needs.
- To cater for the needs of local businesses, and contribute to the success of the local economy.
- To provide new city centre living, adding to the culture, vitality, vibrancy and sense of community within the centre.
- To become a mature, vibrant and truly mixed-use centre that is accessible to all.
- To remain a comfortable and safe place to visit, to ensure people will visit time and again.
- To deliver useable sustainable forms of transport and encourage walking, cycling and bus usage.
- To become a more pedestrian friendly area with a high quality public realm.
- To deliver the highest quality design.

‘Central CMK will develop into a traditional centre, although I don’t know whether everybody would agree. I expect only five per cent of the people understand the implications of their own wishes. This isn’t about small changes. We are dealing with fundamental change. One of the principles is getting more activity on the street. To do so, we will add more and diverse functions to the centre and we will narrow most of the grid roads in Central CMK. We are also moving away from the underpasses and implementing signal crossings. Believe me, these are controversial and expensive issues. The segregated road system is generally perceived as safe. When it comes to pedestrians this is indeed the case. Things are a bit different with cars. When we speak with people about moving away from





- Legend
- Existing development
 - Expansion areas
 - City Centre (CMK)
 - Existing landscape areas and woodland
 - Parkland and connection to rural surroundings
 - Strategic reserves sites
 - Lakes
 - Strategic extensions to linear park structure
 - Potential new growth areas
 - Town Centre
 - M1 Junction improvements
 - Neighbourhood Centre
 - Grand Union Canal
 - Rivers
 - A roads
 - Motorway
 - Existing East-West Rail
 - New East-West Rail spur to CMK
 - New Highways and public transport connections to Growth Areas
 - A421 Improvements
 - Strategic City Roads
 - Core public transport route
 - West Coast Mainline (strategic rail corridor)
 - Existing railway stations
 - Possible new railway stations
 - Potential new platform at CMK station
 - Key project areas and destinations
 - Potential park and ride

The New Plan for Milton Keynes. New connections according to 'A Strategy for Growth to 2031'. (source: municipality of Milton Keynes)

What worked until now will not work in the next thirty years

the segregated road system their reaction is generally that what we are actually proposing will make Milton Keynes less safe.

'People see in all of this the first sign of a decline of the segregation. We face an

emotional and political difficulty at that point. It's about changing the hearts and minds of the people and the council. The confidence in the grid road system verges on an article of faith. Changing it seems to be almost a form of heresy.'

TRANSITION

'One thing is clear to us: what worked until now will not work in the next thirty years. The grid can deal with another 25 per cent increase in traffic. After that we will face increasing gridlock. Overall we expect a

Urban plan form for Central Milton Keynes. Existing buildings are purple, new buildings are orange and red.



60 per cent increase in traffic in the next thirty years. With all the extra workplaces, homes and shops in Central Milton Keynes, getting there will become an issue, especially when the population of the town increases. It will no longer be possible to drive to the centre like people used to do. We have to work on reducing travel demand, on home working, on better public transport and on more walking. Changing the modal split around is technically possible. It is a question of transition.

‘What we are experiencing is the classic curve where the leaders are already over the top but the people are still climbing. We feel the need to engage the community. The people in Milton Keynes are not convinced we have to change when we say there will be a huge problem. People do get around and the overall journey time is low, but they do not understand that gridlock will happen suddenly. In winter with heavy snowfall a ten minute journey can instantly become a three hour trip. Such things will occur increasingly as long as car traffic increases – and it will. Unfortunately we can’t wait until congestion finally affects peoples lives. The measures to reduce or solve congestion take years, if not decades, to implement. At the same time we have a responsibility towards the new inhabitants. We can’t confront them with a growing traffic crisis because we stopped communicating our message to the current population.’

NOT BUILT FOR BUSES

But David emphasises that people do want to see change. People do say they want better public transport. Kevin agrees: ‘Even without the issue of growth, a better bus service is better for all. The grid seems great, but things work less well for those who are marginalised, for those households that have to do without a car, which is about 20 per cent in Milton Keynes and in some wards close to 40 per cent.’ It is not easy to operate public transport in Milton Keynes. Densities are comparative low and workplaces are spread out. There is no real congestion outside the peak. Because of the grid there are only a few main routes with a very frequent service. Buses can run



The new urban image of Central Milton Keynes, the hub:mk.

across the grid roads, but the stops are difficult to access. They are often elevated and located in the middle of the greenery, out of sight of homes and businesses. Directing bus services through the grid does improve ridership, but restricts customers to captives because it makes the services too slow for those with an alternative.

EAST-WEST PUBLIC TRANSPORT SPINE

‘We have a clear plan in place on how to implement a better bus system,’ continues Kevin: ‘a bus rapid transit. We will develop an east-west public transport spine that connects the western and the eastern expansion areas with Central Milton Keynes. It serves the three parts of town where 17,000 new homes have been built, plus the accommodation for extra workplaces, retail, culture and leisure. The Midsummer boulevard in Central CMK will be the public transport hub along that spine, but it won’t be a traditional bus station. We are planning superstops with the quality you normally find at light rail stops, such as better shelters and dynamic travel information. We’ve got the road space for a dedicated fast route into the city centre, but we also need priority at crossroads and additional measures to reduce the ease of taking the car. We have to take out eight roundabouts and replace them with signal crossings. In Central CMK people will pay more for

parking their vehicles. However, as soon as people understand what the necessary measure are about, they object. They don’t see the consequences of what they are asking for. People want incompatible things – they want to have their cake and eat it.’

NEW URBAN FORM

Part of the growth strategy is expanding Milton Keynes to the west and east and transforming Central Milton Keynes. These areas offer a great opportunity to showcase concepts based on a new kind of urban form. The new plan for Central Milton Keynes clearly shows what this will mean for the existing centre. In existing areas the width of the boulevards will be reduced and a fine-grain street pattern introduced. The quality of public space will be improved, surface level parking will be replaced by multi-storey blocks and the bus system upgraded. The new expansion areas will no longer be based entirely on the segregated grid system. ‘From the very beginning we will build dedicated lanes for Bus Rapid Transit and take care of public space. Once we get the quality in we can show that a different urban structure based on a balanced mix of transport modes works better. If it doesn’t work out with these new areas, well... [both men laugh] then we are looking for a new job’.