

Milton Keynes and the Liquid Landscape, 1967–78

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Language describing planned landscapes has often relied on organic imagery; however, it is less common to analyse the political functioning of such symbolism. This paper analyses metaphors of flow, liquidity and drought used to describe idealised landscape forms in early national print media responses to Milton Keynes. Designated in 1967, this large-scale, low-density, explicitly post-industrial city sought to improve on previous models of urban development by actively pursuing a non-deterministic plan. In these early responses to the town, drawing on the longer context of post-war discussions of ‘overspill’, urban landscapes were interpreted as determining receptacles for an inert population mass that, when left unbounded, would flood and subsume the surrounding countryside. By 1978, however, informed by escalating national political crises, these preoccupations had evolved into an indictment of the town as overtly deterministic, interpreting its newness as a rejection of historically legitimated landscape forms. Even as the specific values associated with these metaphors shifted under changing political circumstances, definitions of ‘good landscapes’ consistently used fluid metaphors that opposed the nourishing capacity of water with the potential catastrophes of flood and drought. Tracing the evolving politics of metaphorical representations of ideal landscapes in British print media helps challenge essentialist readings of Milton Keynes while locating them within the chaotic ideological context of 1970s British politics.

The British new town of Milton Keynes was designed to respond to the growing backlash against post-war urban planning. Its revisionist plan was presented as ‘learning from’ late 1960s concerns about the perceived overt determinism of tower blocks and early new towns. Despite these corrective intentions, Milton Keynes has been widely reviled in British media and popular culture. Negative responses to the town have often been presented as deriving from its essential features, with the implication that Milton Keynes’ failings are caused by and inherent in its master-planned origins. Milton Keynes’ early development, however, occurred in the context of national political and economic crises, and escalating criticisms of urban planning as a form of ‘socialist’ public policy. Such essentialism has detracted from study of the town’s changing meanings within this wider cultural context.

Much historical discussion of Milton Keynes has assessed the town’s ‘success’ or ‘failure’ against the initial goals of its plan (for example, Bendixson and Platt, 1992; Clapson, 1998, 2004; Finnegan, 1998). While this approach is valuable given the ambitious nature of the plan, its dominance has replicated the limitations of early media coverage of the town by debating its single essential meaning. As such, this approach limits the potential scope for considering Milton Keynes’

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KEY WORDS

*Milton Keynes
New towns
Metaphor
Media history
Overspill*

REFLECTION

changing cultural meanings, and to account for its often-negative reputation (compare Vaughan et al, 2009, p 485). Examining early print media responses to Milton Keynes helps escape the limitations of essentialism, while allowing a closer focus on the changing meanings of planned space that have constituted the backlash against urban planning in Britain.

In response, this article uses close and sometimes resistant reading of metaphors that appeared in national print media coverage of Milton Keynes from 1967 to 1978, while relating these metaphors to the wider political and economic environment of 1970s Britain.¹ This is motivated by the Gramscian approach to cultural history where the ‘spontaneous philosophy’ of everyday utterances is seen as encoding and reinforcing political beliefs, framing them as organic forms of ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 1972, p 323; S Hall et al, 2013 [1978], pp 152–153). In this way, this paper locates Milton Keynes’ history within broader national narratives, by indicating that these metaphors reflect wider cultural anxieties about the relative value of tradition and innovation, especially in the context of economic crisis and the rise of neoliberal politics (compare Baucom, 1999; M Gardiner, 2013). While a full exploration of these influences on attitudes to Milton Keynes is beyond the scope of any single paper, focusing on this aspect of its metaphorical representation helps foreground the political contestation of landscape meanings within ideological and national identity debates.

*Designation and *The Plan for Milton Keynes**

The New Town Act of 1946 was part of a suite of post-war reforms intended to improve the amount and quality of state housing stock while preserving desirable land-use patterns. Drawing on the pre-war garden city tradition at Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City, state-planned new towns were intended to be self-contained, constrained from sprawl by green belts, and to provide the ideal combination of urban and rural amenities (P Hall and Tewdwr-Jones, 2011, p 68). Early post-war new towns such as Crawley and Basildon aimed to cater to a mix of social classes; however, the employment opportunities they provided largely targeted the skilled working class, leading to criticisms of monoculturalism (Clapson, 1998, p 29). Generally, low provision of leisure and social amenities in new towns, along with the social disjuncture created by large-scale population movement, engendered criticisms that their forms causally generated social atomisation and psychological malaise. This idea of ‘new town blues’ linked urban forms with collective psychological health and featured heavily in national print media accounts of new towns through the 1950s and 1960s (compare Clapson, 1998, p 66; P Hall, 1966). These criticisms were compounded by high-profile arguments against population dispersal. For example, the influential sociological studies by Michael Willmott and Paul Young (1957; 1960) suggested that emphasis on dispersal destroyed valuable existing community bonds.

Despite these concerns, during the late 1960s, state-sponsored urban planning remained politically ascendant. On Labour’s return to power in 1964, the new town programme was expanded with the second New Town Act of 1965, which in part responded to substantial population increases anticipated in London (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 1964).

Milton Keynes was designated on 1 January 1967 on a 21,880-acre site halfway between London and Birmingham, with a projected population of 250,000. This drastic increase in scale immediately suggested a rejection of the kind of revisionism modelled by Cumbernauld's high-density, low-rise modernism, and indicated the influence of the Centre for Environmental Studies (CES) think-tank based at University College London. While local councils had long been agitating for a new town to be established in North Buckinghamshire, their proposed plan conformed to the kind of classical modernist high-rise, high-density model that the Ministry of the Environment was increasingly keen to distance itself from, in recognition of the extensive criticisms of the overt determinism in early post-war planning (Ortolano, 2011, p 480). Conversely, the CES aimed to integrate sociological research with urban planning practice through lower-density, 'flexible' planning, which would facilitate greater resident agency and greater capacity for formal adaptation, intervention and change over time (Clapson, 2012, p 44). The firm Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker and Bor, closely connected to CES and with experience in planning Washington new town and developing the unsuccessful plan for Hook in Hampshire, was selected as planning consultants to the Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) board.

Published in 1970, *The Plan for Milton Keynes* aimed to provide 'opportunity and freedom of choice' to residents through decentralised planning that dispersed a range of architectural styles, housing densities and industrial, social and commercial facilities throughout the designated area (MKDC, 1970, p 12). Chief planner Lord Llewelyn-Davies summed up this approach as follows:

The future is rather indeterminate ... in planning of this sort it's futile to make guesses. You have to design a city with as much freedom and looseness of texture as possible. Don't tie people up in knots (*Illustrated London News*, 1970).

This statement frames human agency as opposed to planning, while implying that ideal landscapes are defined by lack of constraint. This echoes *The Plan for Milton Keynes*, which explicitly rejected enforcing 'any fixed conception of how people ought to live' (MKDC, 1970, p 23). This focus positioned Milton Keynes as unambiguously revisionist, seeking to correct and transcend the failings of earlier planned landscapes.

Overspill: 1967–73

Milton Keynes' designation and early development attracted widespread media coverage. Much of this discussion drew on existing metaphorical frameworks for interpreting cities, including organic metaphors of birth and deformity (b'Arr, 1970; *The Times*, 1970b). Among these approaches, metaphors of liquidity and flow, particularly those that drew on the associations of the term 'overspill', were widely used to describe Milton Keynes. Overspill had been used historically to describe planned population movement from established conurbations to peripheral, newly constructed estates, especially in the Greater London area (Clapson, 2005, p 60). It was also used more loosely to describe any planned population movement, including to new towns. Consistently, however, overspill represented a teleological relationship between a new planned development and an existing city, and the deliberate act of moving population through government

mechanisms. Overspill was thereby opposed to unplanned urban sprawl; like sprawl, however, it implied that the ideal city rigidly contained a finite capacity, which risked breaching its borders without ongoing maintenance through urban planning intervention (compare Best, 1970; P Hall, 1970; P Hall et al, 1973).

Print media coverage of Milton Keynes from 1967 to 1973 frequently described it as an ‘overspill town’ or as a receptacle for London’s ‘overspilling’ population, alongside associated imagery of decanting, flooding, pouring and submerging. This conceptualised the town as a determining container whose construction would avert a population ‘flood’ from eradicating the inert rural landscape under indiscriminate urban sprawl (Craigie, 1968; *The Times*, 1972; Willmott, 1974). In such coverage, the act of populating Milton Keynes was to be achieved through ‘decanting’ and ‘dispersal’, emphasising the need for expert intervention in ‘filling’ the new container (*The Times*, 1967a; 1967b; compare *New Society*, 1970). Some accounts, however, questioned Milton Keynes’ ability to perform effectively as a container due to its planned high population and low density. The ‘looseness of texture’ Llewelyn-Davies championed relied on filling unplanned ‘empty’ spaces and adapting them to the as-yet-unknown needs of future residents, while also allowing generous space for private gardens and communal public spaces. More critical accounts interpreted this approach as too closely resembling the thin population dispersal of unplanned sprawl (Allan, 1972; Gibbard, 1971; Pahl, 1969). In such accounts, Milton Keynes was described as ‘drowning’, ‘engulfing’ or ‘flooding’ the Buckinghamshire greenfield ‘countryside’ through extravagant use of space (*Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, 1967; Lewthwaite, 1967).

This concern intersected with fears about the ‘American’ form of Milton Keynes, with its car-friendly gridded plan and suburban-style housing, a fear that drew on broader anxieties about the increasing American cultural and political influence in the post-war period (Weight, 2004). Indeed, while it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the implications of metaphors of foreignness in Milton Keynes’ reception, it is significant to note that they formed another major body of response to the town, framing its experimental form as fundamentally irreconcilable with implied national norms. Significantly, these ‘American’ design features attempted to generate ‘flow’, in the sense of alleviating traffic congestion; yet this was represented as rejecting the forms of unplanned, historic cities established before the advent of the car (Lewthwaite, 1967; *The Times*, 1970a). Car-friendly flow, associated with sprawling unplanned suburbia, was frequently represented as too great, evoking imagery of a flood attributed to insufficient regulation and the encroachment of American cultural influence (Gibbard, 1971; *Guardian*, 1976; Ward, 1978).

This metaphorical language positions relationships between humans and landscape as potentially catastrophic and in need of expert control (Hall, 1973). By conceptualising Britain’s population in terms of fluid dynamics, ‘overspill’ metaphors depersonalised subjects of planning policy, while constructing elite containment as a social good. While *The Plan for Milton Keynes* sought to address criticisms that urban planning was too deterministic, the media’s use of overspill metaphors in its early reception continued to reflect faith in the necessity of spatial determinism.

Crisis and decline: 1974–78

This framework for understanding the role of cities, however, came increasingly under challenge as Britain's long-precarious economic situation worsened substantially under Edward Heath's Conservative government, with cycles of rising inflation and industrial action leading to the 'three-day-week' during the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil crisis (Turner, 2008, p 21). The Labour government from 1974 only temporarily stabilised this situation, and in 1976 the declining pound was stabilised through an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan. The 'IMF crisis' was widely interpreted as a form of national humiliation and proof of Britain's decline in national status (Moran, 2010, p 177). The loan was followed by substantial funding cuts and the abandonment of the goal of full employment; yet this policy shift away from Keynesianism was insufficient to navigate resurging inflation and the impact of the second oil crisis on costs of living. The ensuing 1978–79 strikes featured widespread and highly visible interruptions to civic function and significantly damaged the reputation of the Labour Party, which was replaced as government in May 1979 by the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher.

This narrative of recurrent crisis is highly significant in considering the focus of British journalism from 1974 onwards. The late 1970s saw a resurgence in political journalism that attempted to diagnose the cause of current crises relative to a longer projected history of national decline (Glendinning and Muthesius, 1994, p 310; Tomlinson, 2000). Part of a wider trend of post-war British cultural anxiety about post-imperial national status, theorised as declinism, such journalism identified specific targets as metonymically reflective of a declining national state and as having caused or substantially contributed to it (Edgerton, 2004, p 5). This process helped construct the economic and political challenges of 1970s Britain as crises of national legitimacy and survival (S Hall et al, 2013 [1978]; Moran, 2010). Among the 'usual suspects', such as trade unions, which were singled out for especial blame, a significant minority of journalists linked post-war decline to post-war, state-sponsored urban planning (Tomlinson, 2009, p 246). Through its state-interventionist origins, post-war urban planning was a highly visible, tangible symbol of expensive reformist investments that were now, in the context of crisis, seen to have failed.

The marked polarisation of reportage on Milton Keynes from 1974 onwards, peaking in 1978, reflected and helped perpetuate this diagnostic media culture. Along with other major state investment programmes, the new town programme underwent drastic funding cuts in 1976 and 1977, under a Labour government keen to alleviate the pressures of IMF loan conditions (Booth, 1976). Milton Keynes was considered by the Callaghan government to have developed too far to be cancelled; while its population targets were cut, it therefore continued to receive lower levels of state funding, which nonetheless attracted criticism (Ardill, 1976; Baws, 1976). Moreover, the 1964 population projections justifying Milton Keynes' designation had proved inaccurate, with London now losing population at a significant rate, partly through the success of planned dispersal particularly among London's white working-class population (Department of the Environment, 1978). In light of these statistics, London was no longer depicted as

an overspilling container but as rendered 'hollow' by over-absorptive new towns, which had 'siphoned' population too effectively (Adamson, 1977; Booth, 1976; Hillman, 1977).²

'What went wrong?'

This political context shifted the values attributed to flow and containment, with determinism increasingly seen as intrinsic to state-interventionist policies, while 'flow' became associated with the idea of Britain's long history shaping its landscape and culture incrementally by osmosis. From 1976, in particular, this attitude came to dominate even positive assessments of Milton Keynes, with its planning innovations increasingly presented as opposed to 'authentic' historical landscapes that had slowly developed over time (*Guardian*, 1976; Karpf, 1977; Lewis, 1977; Wainwright, 1977). Despite encompassing market and railway towns and Roman archaeological sites, Milton Keynes had a 'new town' identity and swift development that could not be reconciled with this notion of historically venerated flow (Ward, 1978; Young, 1976). This disjuncture implied a perception that visible historical continuity was psychologically beneficial to urban residents, with archaic forms providing a sense of meaningful connection with history, which also gave a sense of identity and comfort (*Guardian*, 1976; compare Gardiner, 2012, pp 3–4). While this idea of tradition and archaism as psychologically beneficial was far from new, this time of perceived crisis and lapse in historical prestige was accompanied by more vocal criticisms of urban forms that were seen to reject historical legitimation (Baucom, 1999, p 21; Glendinning and Muthesius, 1994, pp 307–310).

This perception of imminent crisis and the privileging of historical 'flow' coalesced with extreme criticism of Milton Keynes by Christopher Booker and Jeremy Seabrook. These two journalists interpreted Milton Keynes as overtly deterministic, causing psychological malaise to its inhabitants while reflecting a wider culture of decay. For Christopher Booker, founder and former editor of *Private Eye*, post-war urban planning was both inherently deterministic and inherently socialist, a form of totalitarian imposition that inhibited personal and collective freedom. Booker returned repeatedly to Milton Keynes as a pivotal example of state betrayal of a purportedly historical British identity. This argument was most extensive in his 1978 'Urban Rides' series for the *Spectator*, which emulated domestic travelogues by Priestley and Nairn through assessing the 'state of the nation' as expressed by the state of British cities (Booker, 1978a, 1978b).

Throughout 'Urban Rides', Booker presents urban planning as a fundamental imposition on British people, who benefit only from landscapes that bear evidence of historical living patterns (Booker 1978b). This is framed as both more democratic and as generating more meaningful and 'authentic' lifestyles. Booker sees Milton Keynes as the site of an 'unimaginative authoritarianism', which is both aesthetically displeasing and a 'cruel ... planner's fantasy' imposed onto unwitting residents 'lured' to the town under false pretences. He argues that the revisionist rhetoric of the town is mere 'propaganda', which facilitates the kind of intense social control he interprets as fundamentally 'totalitarian' and innate to 'socialist' public policy. Combining laissez-faire celebration of market-driven, long-term historical 'flow' with nostalgia for 'traditional' landscape

forms, Booker's ideal city is fundamentally opposed to Llewelyn-Davies' notion of a loose-textured, freeing planned town. Booker argues Milton Keynes is best understood as 'a last fitting memorial to the past thirty years of British planning', whose innately oppressive forms represent the last throes of an 'authoritarian' and interventionist state.

This interpretation of Milton Keynes as overtly deterministic was not unique to proto-neoliberal critics, but was shared by vocal left-wing critic of new town planning, Jeremy Seabrook. Seabrook published extensively throughout the late 1960s and 1970s on the individual and collective effects of slum clearances and new town developments (Seabrook, 1967; 1971; 1974). Seabrook visited Milton Keynes in 1978 for a feature for the *Observer Magazine* entitled 'Milton Keynes: A Mirror of England' (Seabrook, 1978a), which was later expanded into a chapter of his 1978 book *What Went Wrong? Working People and the Ideals of the Labour Movement* (Seabrook, 1978b). In the *Observer*, Seabrook's criticisms of the town were moderate and qualified heavily by claims that British society as a whole was similarly flawed. While he interpreted MKDC control as 'benevolent', he also argued Milton Keynes was 'deeply imprisoning' and caused 'pain and bewilderment' to residents. Nonetheless, he suggested the new town was a 'success', despite urging further improvement.

Any moderation or praise was abandoned in the expanded book form of the article (Seabrook, 1978b, pp 234–240). Additions included more extensive interviews with despairing residents who describe feelings of trapped hopelessness. Seabrook uses these additions to refocus his argument on the determinism belying Milton Keynes' ostensible multiplicity of choice. Choices of suburbs, schools or houses, for Seabrook, push residents into a range of predetermined possibilities that reinforce new structures of post-industrial capitalism, from the marketisation of leisure to increased consumerism. This latter point is central to what has 'gone wrong' in British working-class life in Seabrook's view; Milton Keynes is a 'carceral' site, which illustrates the wider 'remodelling and perfecting' of working-class people towards alienating post-industrial roles. Far from his earlier description of MKDC as 'benevolent', in *What Went Wrong?* Seabrook depicts it as accelerating this 'assimilation' into 'dehumanized inauthenticity [sic]'.

In both accounts, the relative values ascribed to flow and containment have been reversed from their early 1970s associations, with containment now presented as a stultifying, toxic force. The only 'flow' in Seabrook's account is the unbroken 'sterile progression' towards aspirational consumerism; elsewhere the town suffers from a drought of choice and opportunity. This drought is especially ascribed to the town's newness; the lack of visual continuity with the past is understood as an interruption, a break with the flow of history, which renders the town's innovations superficial and insubstantial. This is also true for Booker, who interprets Milton Keynes' futurism as a dystopian aberration, rejecting the proliferation of meanings accumulated by more 'historical' landscapes. Milton Keynes' drought of meaning is presented in both accounts as a deliberate and disastrous interruption of an idealised flow of incremental, osmotic landscape change; in this sense, the town is now seen not as too flowing to perform good urban functions but as too constricted.

The change in values associated with flow and containment is wholly consistent with wider trends in late 1970s politics, especially the ascendance of proto-Thatcherite rhetoric, which constructed the state as being in crisis due to the fundamentally toxic, constraining and unnatural policies undertaken during the 'socialist consensus' (S Hall, 1979, p 16). Such rhetoric allowed the presentation of a political solution in eroding these constraints in order to restore an imagined pre-existing 'flow' of individualistic and free market self-determination. While Seabrook is highly critical of this rhetoric, Booker is distinctly in favour of it; yet both participate in the reattribution of values that reframed containment not as a necessary urban function but as a dangerous interruption of an idealised flow that appealed to a historical narrative of legitimacy. According to such criteria, Milton Keynes could not be interpreted as a valuable urban space, even with its rhetoric of flexibility and not 'tying people up in knots'; the association of the town with state-planning, combined with its newness, rendered it fundamentally irreconcilable to neoliberalised ideals of 'flow' on the one hand and of visible historical continuity on the other. In this way, despite its avowed rhetoric of flexibility and freedom, Milton Keynes was caught up in a diagnostic culture of declinism where post-war planned spaces were increasingly seen as inauthentic, undesirable and toxically deterministic.

Conclusion

The value and perceived necessity of flow shifted over the 1970s, while consistently failing to favour Milton Keynes' combination of master-planned origins and flexible revisionist intentions. Designated early enough to benefit from a faith in the redemptive power of urban planning, Milton Keynes' development was nonetheless late enough that even its revisionism was interpreted as epitomising, rather than correcting, the worst excesses of state-sponsored urban planning. Despite its progressive origins and revisionist positioning, Milton Keynes became caught between cultural shifts around the value of agency and containment, generating a formative and resilient media narrative of a town at odds with ideal British landscapes, which continues to resonate today.

Study of the media response to innovatory urban forms such as Milton Keynes highlights the deeply political process of defining valuable landscapes and, simultaneously, how this political context is encoded at the level of representation through language and metaphor. It foregrounds the radically contingent nature of definitions of landscape value, the political contexts that shape them and the way they are both reflected and constituted through metaphors that often prove unstable. Moreover, the case of Milton Keynes highlights that even a town explicitly planned and marketed as flexible could be understood as the epitome of urban planning determinism, and the potential vulnerability of experimental landscape forms to changes in cultural values. Examining the metaphorical representation of Milton Keynes not only contributes to an emerging cultural history of post-war British landscape but also points to the wider importance of landscape as a symbolic site for wider political debates and as a focal point for anxieties around change, identity, agency and determinism.

NOTES

- 1 The print media material examined here originated from London and southeast England, reflecting the concentration of media industries in this area. These sources, however, largely purported to be of ‘national’ interest, not only to England but also to the rest of Britain. For the purposes of this paper, ‘British’ media will refer to this southeastern English media elite construction of a national audience.
- 2 Race and attitudes to Commonwealth immigration form a crucial aspect of this ‘urban decline’ narrative; however, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this topic in detail. For early to mid-1970s analysis of this trend, see S Hall et al 2013 [1978].

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