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Place Debate: Milton Keynes
Passing in the Night:

Public and Professional Views of Milton Keynes

Jeff Bishop

Introduction

Although the earlier British New Towns are perhaps the best known abroad, a brash newcomer, Milton Keynes, has been gaining visibility in the last few years partly through the actual substance of what its guiding spirits have been attempting to achieve and partly because of its own aggressive self-advertisement. It seems strange to describe Milton Keynes as a newcomer because it is already more than 12 years old, but it is only in the last few years that enough substance has surfaced to permit some sort of sensible comment on the place both now and in its ultimate form. Comment is, indeed, beginning to appear in a variety of settings, much of it very critical and all of it based upon professional (using that term broadly) judgments of success and failure. In the midst of this, The Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) has been living up to some of the original aims by undertaking many forms of evaluation and monitoring—some focused not upon professional reactions but upon the reactions, attitudes, and aspirations of the residents.[1] What is more, already some examples of policy and practice are changing as a result of the outcomes from this evaluative research. This article describes (almost in story form as the dynamic of the work was very important) one of the pieces of monitoring work that has *altered* policy and also has some fundamental implications for research and for planning and design theories generally.

The last comments above are extremely important because the work to be described was *not* an academic project, although it must also be judged by these standards if some of its implications are to be accepted. The project was, in fact, conducted for *and* with the MKDC by the School for Advanced Urban Studies at Bristol University, and this author in particular. The genesis of the project came with a realization by several members of the MKDC Planning Directorate (set up more as a policy unit than for physical planning) that there was a major mismatch between the form of the New Town as proposed in the Master Plan of 1970[2] and the current (1979) layout. This mismatch was assumed to be the reason for several problems circulating around the various implementation groups in the Corporation—especially planners and architects. The Corporation wanted to check these assumptions but it did not want to undertake the work alone. The Corporation felt the need for some sort of outside consultative link to a group who might bring in some fresh and challenging ideas. The brief can, hence, be seen to be impossible: to produce direct practical outcomes to feed into future planning but also to generate some more basic, one might almost say theoretical, criticism. Because the School for Advanced Urban Studies makes great claims for its abilities to make such links, it was approached for the work.

Setting the Scene

At the outset the substantive research brief was very mixed, apparently very random and apparently not tied to obvious implementation changes. After some questioning it appeared that the issues were merely hunches in the minds of very many people and yet they could be grouped together into two broad sections—one on aspects of overall urban form (later called city structure) and one on housing estate layout and house design (later called house form and layout). The latter will not be covered here except inasmuch as the overlaps beyond the crude labels are obvious. The early assumption was that the research would focus on residents' views and that some form of interviewing would be appropriate. The more important decisions about method came, however, during discussions about the balance of the team and the ways in which results were to be fed back into practice. The team ended up well-balanced between Milton Keynes and Bristol, with one architect, three planners (of differing backgrounds), and other staff with relevant nonprofessional training. An early decision was to avoid the conventional research process in which the team goes away, does the fieldwork, presents a weighty tome of results, and departs with the fee. Several tactics were devised to improve the final effect of results on practice: in general, to overlap fieldwork with dissemination and transfer "ownership" of any results to the practitioners. The major vehicle for this was a very successful steering committee of people from many implementation departments who did not just stay in touch but affected content, came to interviews, helped to change tack when necessary, and gradually took the emerging conclusions on board and back to their staff in a way that would have been impossible for any outsider to achieve through a conventional "Report of Findings." (In one case some results were even incorporated into proposals before the final conclusions had been written—a worrying prospect for the purist but a sign of success for the team.) Other more basic policy changes did occur and will be described later.

The final choice of methods was, superficially, quite ordinary. No completely new techniques were introduced, although the use of housing estate modeling in the other main section was rather unusual. The main approach could best be described as *corroborative*. This approach emerged from several concerns: first with the range of issues to be tackled, second with the theoretical susceptibilities of almost all standard methods in perception research, and third with a

need to sustain interest with a wide variety of people during, what were certain to be, lengthy interviews. In the city structure section we, therefore, did the following:

- Map drawing of Milton Keynes as a whole
- Showing, on blank paper, the "area in which you live"
- Delimiting neighborhood on a prepared map
- Recognition of photographs taken at various locations in Milton Keynes
- Description of instructions for a visitor arriving in Milton Keynes to one's own house
- Verbal description of the pattern of usage of facilities
- Verbal description of patterns of friendships
- Description of a route from home to shops (or other location)
- Verbal comment on previous environments
- Verbal comment on overall feelings, reasons for moving, aspirations, etc.
- Comments on Milton Keynes as a whole (this question is described more fully later).

The interviews were undertaken with 210 people in 150 households from 10 estates scattered around Milton Keynes. Most household types were covered, around 50 percent of the sample were in private houses and 50 percent in public. A special group of newcomers was selected to follow the settling-in process; this group (who soon ceased to be dealt with specially) eventually comprised one-third of the sample. The car ownership rate was slightly above the average in Milton Keynes.

Before moving on to the results it is essential to set the scene in terms of Milton Keynes as a place, and (for the benefit of readers unfamiliar with British New Towns) the development of New Towns in general. By the time of the Milton Keynes plan, there was considerable emphasis on social and economic planning, but a physical plan was also essential. This mixture of objectives—both physical and social—has been at the heart of debate about ideal cities and new towns for centuries, even if memory causes us to focus in too strongly on formal images. It still surprises many Britons to discover that one of the founding fathers of the British New Towns movement, Ebenezer Howard,[3] actually concerned himself far more with social, political, and, especially, economic issues than with physical form.

Milton Keynes is, in fact, almost the last of a line (given current government attitudes) for Great Britain where, since 1946, 28 major New Towns have been started and, in many cases, finished. Earlier initiatives such as Letchworth are important, but the main thrust came after 1945, building very strongly on ideas of tackling urban decay, removing social problems, offering air and space to city dwellers, and, generally, avoiding the often iniquitous effects of laissez-faire city development (such as proximity to heavy industry, poor transport, and lack of public open space). The powers that go along with New Towns are considerable and should not be underestimated. Power over land is an essential key and *all* land in any designated area can, if necessary, pass through the hands of the controlling body, the Development Corporation, thus offering the chance to dictate every single land use and its relation to others. Also of central importance is the status of Development Corporations. They are not elected bodies and are nominated by central government. Hence, they are not accountable to the local community and can exercise the considerable control necessary to implement any Master Plan over a period of some 20 years.

Not surprisingly, since 1946 there have been phases and fashions in New Town planning. It is valuable to see the way in which some ideas are now bouncing back into currency after being dropped at one time or another. It is conventional[4] to divide the progress into three waves: Mark I New Towns, Mark II, and Mark III. However, some boundaries between them are rather blurred. In the early years with Mark I Towns such as Harlow and Stevenage, the overall pattern was clear and simple: clusters of housing were arranged in neighborhoods around centers, with one major town center (in the center), radial roads, and mostly peripheral industrial estates. This was a period of very low car ownership, especially among public housing renters to whom the New Towns catered primarily. In this period and in the time of Mark II (Towns such as Cumbernauld), one other emphasis was on forced self-containment, although in the second wave, as car ownership increased a much greater emphasis was placed on roads and transport systems. While the rigid neighborhood concept began to be overlaid with principles of wider use of facilities and improved access, local centers, relatively high density, and walking routes retained their significance. The greater emphasis on the car led to complex systems such as underpasses and level-segregated shopping centers, and on often totally separate systems for public transport.

Although by the time of Milton Keynes it had become difficult to detect common trends, Milton Keynes is a Mark III New Town. The thrust for changes, however, came from commonly perceived problems: an increase in private home ownership, car ownership, mobility, and pressure for choice, flexibility, and adaptability over time were all themes in the 1960s. Industry had also become less intrusive and,

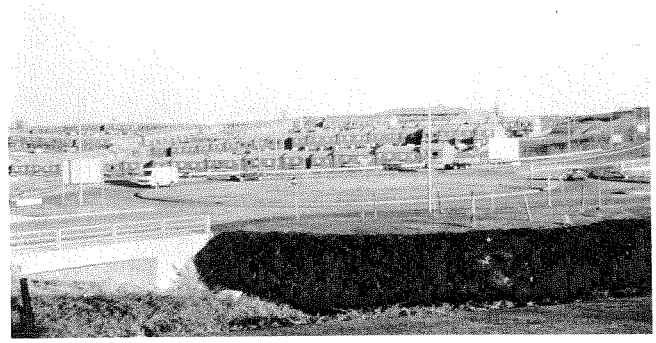
so, the careful arguments for zoning had begun to erode in favor of adaptations of basic grid systems that could be infilled in a variety of ways, none of them deemed as restrictive and determining as the old "neighborhoods." To some extent architectural fashion had changed away from the rather cozy style of the early New Towns (inherited from the Garden Suburbs movement) towards an approach that emphasized both "extremes" of truly rural design (Milton Keynes was to be a "Green City") and truly urban (high density and unambiguously modern).

Thus, the scene was set for something that would undoubtedly seem very different from the early days of Basildon and even the middle years of Runcorn, although, as I have suggested, some themes such as "neighborhood" were found to be very resilient. Milton Keynes found itself a niche and picked up some of these themes in particular ways, as follows:

1 The Plan emerged from a critical 1960s revaluation of the (assumed) determining and inhibiting effects of the "Neighborhood" concept. Led directly by the ideas of Melvin Webber[5]—personal mobility, "community without propinquity," and so forth—the plan proposed several ways of encouraging these and avoiding neighborhoods. These included a grid-road system with a spread of major facilities, local facilities along grid squares to encourage road crossing, overlapping catchment areas, and the careful construction and naming of estates to avoid links with road patterns.

2 There was an attempt to break the traditional stranglehold (in Britain at least) of high-density, built-form dominated urban design approaches[6] by producing a primarily "green" city. *But* the emphasis was still to be on overall form and coherence at the "city" scale, with a final population that at one time was to be 250,000. (At the time of the research, the population was around 80,000.)

At the time of the research the first diagram would still be relevant at one level, but the second had been replaced by a very practical procedure of building each separate grid square on its own to the design of a distinct team. The changes to the Master Plan were either purely pragmatic or had happened by default, but they were significant enough to suggest that perhaps the original plan should be reestablished. The basic arguments for this, which also formed the research brief, were that the *separate* development of *individualistic* grid squares had produced a problem of *divisiveness* and *isolation* for the residents, that the city as a whole lacked any *overall*



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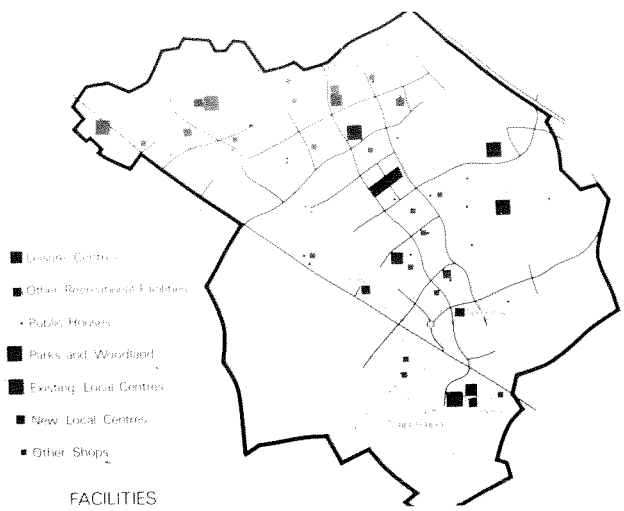

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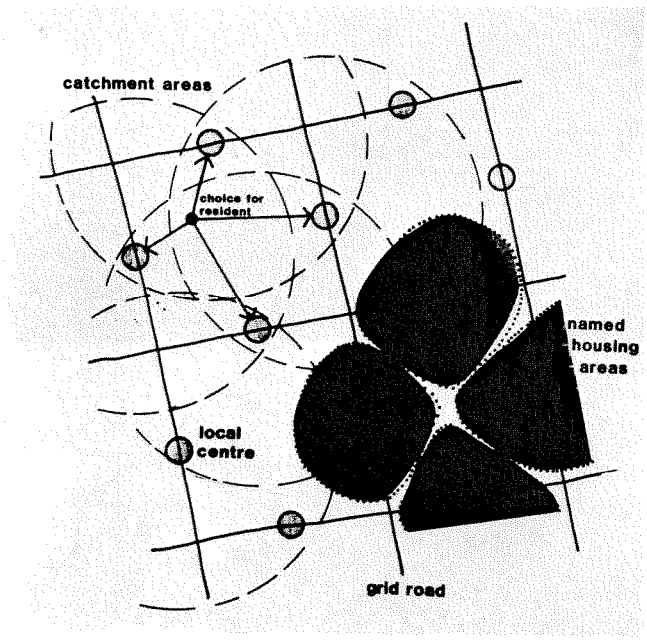
1 A typical view of a housing area.

2 Diagram of overall plan



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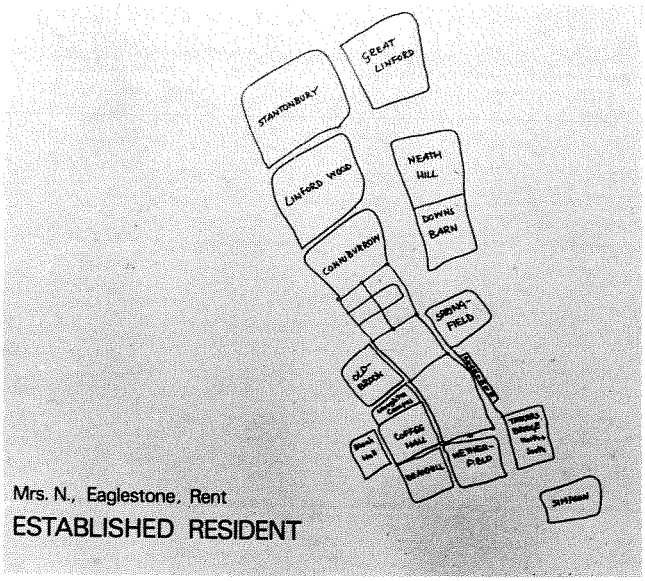

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3 Diagram showing overlapping catchment area

4 Freehand map of Milton Keynes

coherence, and that it was difficult to *find one's way around*.[7] One commentator summed up these feelings by describing Milton Keynes in 1979 as an "enormous patchwork."[8]

The team was perhaps aware of these ideas—and knowledge of the literature, especially that on the image of cities, navigation, urban knowledge, social patterns, neighborhoods, and so forth[9] all supported the feeling that something had gone wrong and required remedial action. The research was designed to confirm these hypotheses before finalizing actions; some, such as infill housing and more landmarks, had *already* been sketched out. It is not giving away the punchline too soon to say that something almost the opposite was found, which makes the fact that this alternative became policy all the more remarkable.

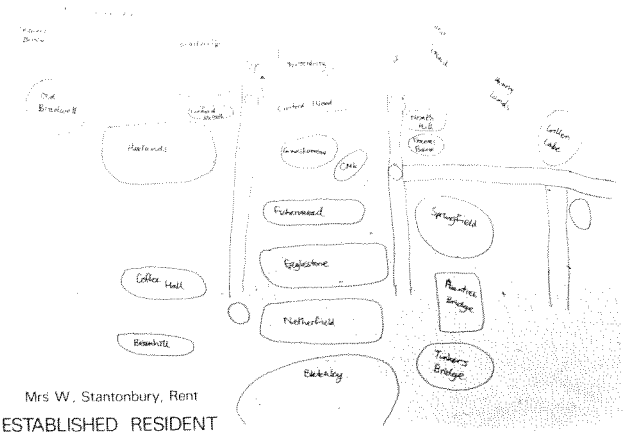
Emerging Results

The story could well have been very different because the early results appeared to confirm some of the hypotheses about lack of coherence and divisiveness. A glance at a fairly typical freehand map of Milton Keynes as a whole would certainly seem to suggest that there is little overall image and that the basic perception is indeed one of a "patchwork." No traditional landmarks are shown (there are not any!) and each grid-square is detached from its neighbor. Such maps would be categorized in other studies as "unaccomplished."[10] At the same time, public conceptions of neighborhood and patterns of friendships also showed a very heavy reliance on the single grid-square. Some cautions were also apparent. Despite what one might be tempted to call "poor" maps, people were recognizing a large number of photographs (mainly views along major roads), there were no scare stories about navigational problems, and the patterns of usage of facilities were extremely diverse and clearly not limited by grid-square boundaries. Making sense of such results—especially because the questions offer mainly indirect indicators of attitude, perception, and behavior—has typically been an issue for the professional judgment of the researchers. *We* decide that maps are poor, and *we* decide that people are cut off from each other, by inference. Only occasionally is an alternative model, which can reconcile the apparent conflicts resulting from the application of the reseacher's model, sought. This could have been the case in Milton Keynes except that one very important question was included. For reasons that are now rather obscure, the public was asked:

Do you think you are living in a city?
(If No) Does this matter to you?
Is it anything if it is not a city?

The large majority of people did *not* feel as though they lived in a city, were *not* bothered because they did *not* wish to live in one, and characterized the existing arrangement as something akin to a series of *villages*. In later questions they expressed strong feelings *against* proposals to make it more like a city, to *add* more landmarks, and to *blur* grid-squares together. Far from feeling cut off by grid-roads, they argued that this pattern creates a *positive* sense of "identity" and did not in any way inhibit their use of facilities outside their own personal "square." Far from wanting all the gaps between estates filled in, they *valued* them as the "countryside" in which their village was located. Rather humorously, when asked about the "city" they would reply *only* about what the planners consider the city center (downtown), construing this as the place they go to for special trips—and yet it is *only* two miles down the road from their village.

With these thoughts in mind one can now look at all the relevant results, I hope, with a different perspective. Starting with the freehand maps one must immediately drop the use of terms such as "poor" or "unaccomplished" because the maps are in fact excellent expressions of a series of villages in a landscape. The structure is also very easy to grasp as can be shown from the *lack* of difference between maps drawn by an established resident and by a newcomer. To assess such maps one searches the literature in vain for a study of mapping in a more rural area;[11] the urban bias of most researchers affects even the choice of subject. A minor rectification of this came with this author's attempt to find a parallel by studying a small group in rural Gloucestershire. There were more points in common between the Gloucester maps and those from Milton Keynes than between those from Milton Keynes and anything else in the literature. The same applies to finding one's way around in Milton Keynes. Interviewees were asked to offer a set of directions to their house for visiting friends. Many were verbal but all used the basic vocabulary: roundabouts, signs, and long-distance landmarks. Resisting the temptation to describe this as evidence of an impoverished environment one can add that this result also came from a second part of the study in Gloucestershire; residents there use the same exact structuring elements. Adding to this the very many *ad hoc* comments punctuating the interviews, one is left with an image of a landscape dotted with loosely related settlements, each one quite distinct and clustered around a "city." No overall coherent image exists or *is required*. Within the grid-square, two results—quite similar in some ways—demonstrate the next stage of the argument. The good old standard "draw



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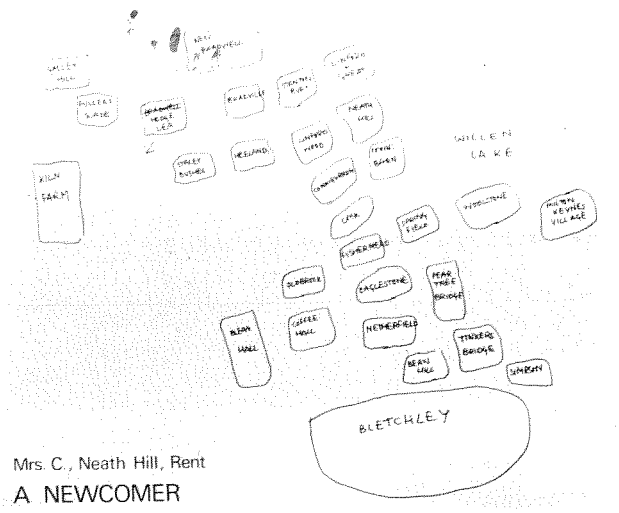

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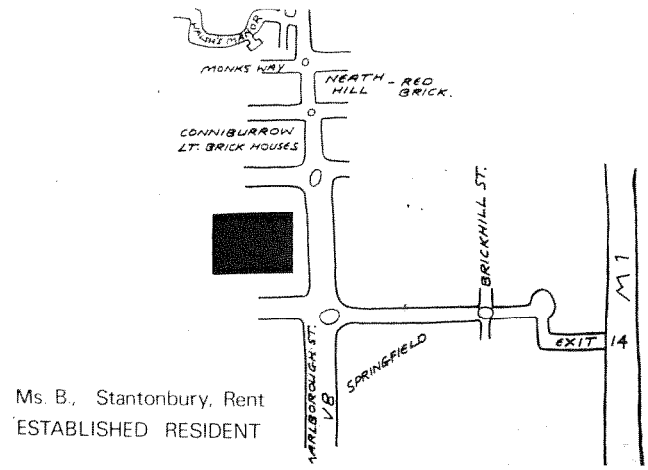
5 Freehand map by established resident

6 Freehand map by newcomer



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7 Directions for visiting friends

7b The center—a major landmark

a line around your neighborhood" question was used, along with another requesting people to draw what they could of the area in which they live. The former question was interpreted (as was discovered by asking *respondents*) as related to social aspects of a local area—i.e., where friendships and social contacts are made. Not surprisingly, given the village notion, this was fairly strongly bounded by the grid-square. However, the latter question produced "maps" that were very rarely bounded by the grid-square, largely because respondents interpreted the question as being about the more functional aspects of life such as shopping and sports facilities. It began to seem that, although residents had an *image* of Milton Keynes as a series of villages, they were *using* it as a city, in a very mobile and pragmatic way. So, having lost the neat notion of a city in image terms, the team found itself left with another apparent inconsistency between image and use.

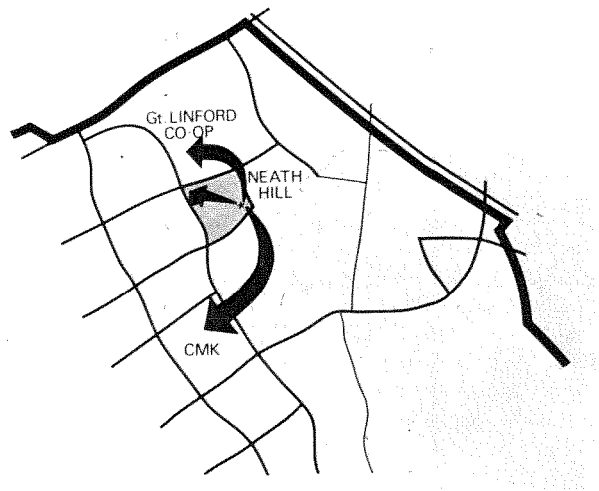
Here again was a direct challenge to many urban theories, in particular to the concept of *congruence*, i.e., that people need to conceive of a place as a city in order to use it as such. The residents appeared not to have any problems, were extremely happy with Milton Keynes as it was, wanted it to stay that way, and, generally, coped very well with the theoretical anomalies. This prompted the team to ask themselves who was right: the residents or the theorists? Certainly the residents' notions appeared quite consistent and operable. Could one find a model to explain this? The answer, which did not take long, emerged again from reference to current ideas on rural planning in Great Britain. One shibboleth of planning and design theories is the idea of contrast between the tidy, neat, self-contained, small village in a landscape and the large, functionally interdependent, complex city.[12] (Suburbs are, of course, to be decried because they offer the worst of both worlds.) In real life, however, this tidy notion of the village is long dead (if it ever was alive), replaced by a pattern quite similar to that demonstrated in Milton Keynes. As the economics of shopping have changed, so butchers, bakers, and other small shops have closed in many villages; development has coalesced settlements into a (sometimes) almost continuous belt; and personal mobility has lessened dependence upon the small village. At the same time (in Britain at least), the "Save our Village" movement has grown, determined to hold on to and sustain the traditional image of the self-contained unit—in *image* terms. In reality, therefore, in a large swath of Great Britain the model of separating image from use is already the norm—and a highly attractive one at that. To close

the circle finally, one can even lay the ghost of the size notion for cities to rest because the research team managed (with no problem at all) to locate an area of Great Britain immediately south of Bristol where a population equivalent to that of Milton Keynes lives in a physical area identical to that of the New Town, with several villages, one small town, and a fringe of a larger urban area similar to Bletchley near Milton Keynes.

The Link to Policy—and to Theory

With these results and concepts in mind, the team had to persuade the Steering Committee first and the policymakers second. The first was quite easy—the Committee was very excited about "their" idea—and one crucial gambit, more than any substantive argument, persuaded the policymakers. In one sense Milton Keynes has *succeeded* for its residents but *despite*, not because of, the planners and designers. The policymakers could, therefore, build publicly on the success while privately coping with the 180 degree change in planning emphasis—away from coherence and towards pluralism. Although this appears to play down the power of the results themselves it is realistic. However, it can be argued that the whole process with the Steering Committee and elsewhere had paid off so well that its effects were barely noticeable. In the end a policy change stated that future developments should seek to retain those qualities currently admired by *the residents*, to enhance them, and to add other elements when they do not detract from existing features. Little detailed guidance was given except to re-emphasize the ways—such as gaps between estates—in which the admired features could be achieved. The team wished to avoid a precise design-guide because, as residents themselves argued, there were many ways of achieving certain effects. Indeed, one current benefit of Milton Keynes is its diversity.

This brings the story up to date, except to add—as was the case from 1976 to 1980—that a policy is not necessarily a guarantee of an outcome. What actually appears on the ground will be very interesting to see. Incidentally, an opportunity was created to feed the research results back to the residents who not only contributed to them but to whom they truly belong. The reaction was very positive, although there was some scepticism about the idea that the Development Corporation would take notice. The implications for theory and practice should now be obvious. The residents have demonstrated that there can be consistent and operable models that confound some of the more simplistic ideas of mainstream academics and practitioners. In parti-



TYPICAL NEATH HILL RESIDENT'S USE OF SHOPS

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8 Typical resident's use of shops

9 Diagram showing resident's home

cular, the traditional ideas about overall coherence, tight-knit form, landmarks, and interconnectedness begin to seem irrelevant. Perhaps only visiting architects got lost in Milton Keynes and only their own planners searched for a single overall form. The word "simplistic" was used deliberately because two recent developments—one in theory and one in practice—offer more considered views of "urban" form. The first is the revaluation that is going on within parts of British rural planning—away from the traditional model known as "Key Settlement Policy" in which facilities are concentrated in *one* town in an area. While this development has been gaining importance for almost 30 years, several county planning groups have recently moved more toward what is sometimes called a "cluster" principle which, at some levels, is strikingly similar to the pattern found in the Milton Keynes Plan (by default of course).[13] The theoretical advance comes from the person most often quoted in all the work on urban form: Kevin Lynch. His latest book *A Theory of Good City Form*[14] finishes with a glimpse of Lynch's personal "utopia" derived from the theories in the main part of the book. There are striking parallels between this utopia and Milton Keynes—that is, the Milton Keynes that the residents inhabit and that I hope will now be fostered and enhanced.

1 Milton Keynes Development Corporation, *Residential Design Feedback* (Milton Keynes, England: Development Corporation, 1975).

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6 Gordon Cullen, *Townscape* (London, England: Architectural Press, 1961).

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10 Donald Appleyard, *op. cit.*

11 Brian Goodey, *Perception of the Environment*, Occasional Paper 17 (Birmingham, England: Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, 1971).

12 Essex County Council, *Design Guide for Residential Areas* (Essex County Council, 1974).

13 Paul Cloke, *Key Settlements in Rural Areas* (London, England: Methuen, 1979).

14 Kevin Lynch, *A Theory of Good City Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).