

# Milton Keynes and the Liquid Landscape, 1967-1978

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Language describing urban planning is often reliant on organic imagery, from the 'flow' of traffic, bodily metaphors of cohesion and health, to the 'monstrosity' of unwanted or questionable urban developments. This paper explores metaphors of liquidity, flow and submergence, as used to express ideas of 'good' and 'bad' urban environments in debates around the growth of the large-scale, low-density, explicitly post-industrial planned city of Milton Keynes. Developed in the context of the postwar language of 'overspill', Milton Keynes' reception in print and popular culture suggests tendencies to understand urban landscapes as receptacles for an inert population which would adopt any containing shape imposed by the urban structure. Unlike many earlier planned developments in postwar Britain, Milton Keynes' plan was intended as less an imposition of form on its future inhabitants, than a flexible structure which would facilitate greater agency on individual, community and market-force levels. Through examining the tension between flow and containment, responses to Milton Keynes' early development suggest some preconceptions regarding the role of cities in determining the industrial and social form of its inhabitants' lives, while planned cities proposing to embrace rather than to restrict flow are viewed with suspicion. Over the course of the 1970s, the tone of this language shifted, becoming increasingly fearful of deterministic space and viewing the containment provided by Milton Keynes as a social evil rather than a positive construct protecting the British landscape. Investigating the symbolic language applied to urban planning offers a valuable perspective on the anxieties which can surround planned developments and their perceived sterility, while foregrounding the cultural definitions of landscape which inform the meanings given to new urban environments.

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Designated in 1967, Milton Keynes was an attempt to improve upon the perceived failings of British urban planning since the Second World War. Its revisionist plan sought to 'learn from' both tower-

block high-density development, and the perceived mono-cultural atomisation of the first wave of post-war new towns. Despite this, Milton Keynes has been widely reviled in British popular culture since its designation. This negativity is often framed in essentialist language, with the implication that Milton Keynes in particular, and by association new towns in general, are awful because they are planned. Such critiques tend to use metaphorical language to describe human interactions with landscape, with common themes including the city as organic, living entity, or through language of liquidity and flow.

This paper seeks to historicise the reception of Milton Keynes by exploring the metaphorical language used to describe it in British print media and popular culture from 1967 to 1978. In particular, I will examine metaphors of liquidity and flow in relation to containment. Responses to Milton Keynes' plan and to its early stages of development used these metaphors to express not only criticism of Milton Keynes specifically but also ideals of how cities should function in relation to populations and landscape, the role of plans and their determination of agency. This metaphorical framework became less subtle over the course of the 1970s, and by the late 1970s Milton Keynes was increasingly being described as a deterministic, rigidly planned landscape inconsistent with the prized ideals of flow, despite concerted efforts made by its planners to reject this type of planning. From 1979 onwards, however, as Milton Keynes opened its revolutionary Shopping Building, and the Thatcher government came to power, the rhetorical framework shifted away from this strict dichotomy. Through close study of these fluid metaphors, the idealised Other to Milton Keynes is also suggested, a landscape whereby individuals slowly form the functions and aesthetics of their built environment to their purposes over generations.

### **Milton Keynes in context**

Following the Second World War, the British Government inaugurated a state-run new town building programme under the New Town Acts of 1946 and later of 1964. Many of the first wave of new towns were designated in South East England, along radial roads leading to London. The intention was to provide newer, better-quality housing stock for London's working-class population, many of whom were living in overcrowded Victorian terraces, or in pre-fabricated temporary structures thrown up in response to the Blitz. (Clapson 1998.) These acts designated largely greenfield sites as the locations for new, self-contained conurbations, where housing in a lower-density style could be provided alongside jobs and other infrastructure. A related Government Act formalised the green belt around London, an area of largely agricultural land encircling the city, as both an outer limit to sprawl and to ensure that green spaces remained accessible to the inhabitants of the city. (Hall 1973.) This green belt also separated the new towns in the South East area from London, helping them to retain that sense of separateness which was intended to facilitate both the containment of London and the distinctiveness of the new towns themselves.

Early new towns were generally more successful in attracting skilled manual workers and lower middle class people than other groups, a trend which led to criticism of these towns as monocultural. The balance of housing provision with social amenities such as pubs, clubs and community centres, however, was often not maintained, with many of the first wave of new towns suffering from inadequate shopping and leisure facilities. (Clapson 1998.) The housing style was deliberately unlike the crowded terraces of inner London, in suburban style of lower-density, semi-detached or terraced housing with gardens. In addition, the vast majority of the population of new

towns were new to the area, moving in with perhaps a job arranged but without other social ties and without being familiar with the towns themselves, which had been newly constructed. The combination of these factors - of social atomisation, more individuated housing and living styles, and low levels of social amenity provision - helped to give early new towns the reputation for causing a form of depressive neurosis termed 'new town blues'. (Craigie 1968.) Sociologists Michael Willmott and Paul Young published comparative studies of inner London with dormitory suburbs and new estates *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957) and *Family and Class in a London Suburb* (1960). These works ultimately favoured the historically bound close kinship structures of Bethnal Green over the increased individualisation of suburban lifestyles, and advocated housing solutions which did not rely on demolition and rebuilding, or indeed on the constructions of new estates or towns. These highly influential studies set the tone for much criticism of urban planning throughout the 1960s and beyond, adopting the opposition between the organic, almost pre-modern working class urban communities with the isolating consumerism of the estate.

Despite the criticisms of early new towns, the Labour Government's 1964 South East Strategy claimed that London's continuing population boom necessitated more new town programmes to move excess population out of the capital. (Ministry of Housing and Local Government 1964). These assessments of population growth were later found to be inaccurate, and during the 1960s in part due to the success of new towns, London was losing population at a substantial rate, a population decline discovered in the mid-1970s. (Department of the Environment 1978). By the second new town act of 1965, planners of new towns and of expanded town programmes were looking to address these earlier criticisms.

Milton Keynes was designated, or formally established as a new town, in North Buckinghamshire in 1967, and from the outset was intended to be distinctly different from earlier new town developments. The chosen site was located halfway between Birmingham and London along the newly constructed M1, subsuming the existing towns of Wolverton, Stony Stratford, and Bletchley. Bletchley had constructed overspill estates to take London population during the late 1950s and early 1960s, and in the early 1960s its council had already proposed the redevelopment of Bletchley as a new town in its own right, with a proposed plan notable for its high density waterfront aesthetic and fully subsidised monorail. (Bendixson and Platt, 1992.) However the late 1960s saw a backlash against high-density infill building and tower blocks throughout print media, popular culture, sociology and increasingly from planners themselves. (Cherry 1979.) The idea of an experimental new town in North Buckinghamshire persevered, with the added twist of low-density; in 1967 Milton Keynes was designated over a larger area and with a lower proposed density than many previous new towns. ('New town' 1967.)

Milton Keynes Development Corporation's (henceforward MKDC) board and planning department were heavily drawn from the Centre for Environmental Studies (henceforward CES), a research centre at University College London, founded in part to facilitate greater dialogue between urban planning and social scientific research. The revisionism in Milton Keynes' plan, and its heavy emphasis on monitoring and feedback mechanisms, reflects their a desire to better incorporate sociological thinking into urban planning. (Clapson 2012). The Plan for Milton Keynes, published in 1970, explicitly positions itself as flexible and non-deterministic. Its first goal was to provide "opportunity and freedom of choice", a goal which informed its architectural design, distribution of

facilities, and range of housing densities. (MKDC 1970.) Its intentions were to allow residents, both those moving in during the 1970s and the residents of future generations, to choose from a wide range of housing sizes, densities and architectural styles, from places to shop and spend leisure time, and where to work and send their children to school.<sup>1</sup> Lord Llewelyn-Davies, chief planning consultant to the MKDC, summed up the attitude of the plan as follows:

The future is rather indeterminate. Of course it's easy to look back at somebody's work 25 years ago and criticize it, but 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. ('Instant City', 1970.)

Lord Llewelyn-Davies' statement about the role of planning is a historically interesting one. Previous generations of planners and developers - from those constructing interwar overspill estates for the London County Council, to new towns built under the 1946 act, to high-density urban infill developments - had seen the role of planning as explicitly totalising. To use Lord Llewelyn-Davies' fabric metaphor, the texture of these places was tightly woven not only in density, but also in determining the lifestyles of the inhabitants. (Institution of Structural Engineers, 1974; Taylor 1973.) With limited ranges of housing styles, densities, or configurations on offer, and limited ranges of facilities on offer from shopping to schools and leisure facilities, the types of lifestyle choices encouraged by these landscapes was often proscribed. For Llewelyn-Davies to argue that "in planning it is futile to make guesses", and to call for "looseness of texture", indicates a shift away from intentions of determinism, towards a plan which defines itself as facilitating choice rather than closing it off. This draws on the research undertaken at the CES in the 1960s around the perceived need for planned spaces to offer visible opportunities for human intervention. (Clapson 2012). Indeed, the Plan for Milton Keynes explicitly rejects the "technological determinism" of attempting to plan for future needs that are yet unknown, and in attempting to encapsulate "any fixed conception of how people ought to live." (MKDC 1970, p. 23.) Moreover, in a departure from earlier new town administration, Milton Keynes instituted a complex Monitoring and Evaluation Programme to measure feedback from residents, through traditional questionnaires and statistical methods alongside less conventional measures as encouraging the establishment of grass-roots newspapers to communicate residents' criticisms. The consistent message from Milton Keynes' planners and architects was that Milton Keynes was learning from older new towns, and from inner-city developments, creating a new type of new town that allowed a greater degree of agency to its inhabitants.

### **"Overspill": Early coverage of Milton Keynes**

Milton Keynes' designation and early development was widely covered by national print media, and was quickly assimilated into existing frameworks of discussion of new towns and planning development. Responses to Milton Keynes in national print media and book-length journalism from 1967 to 1978 tended to share conceptual languages, using the same metaphorical framework to describe the planning and building process. In early reports, Milton Keynes was frequently described in terms of its Americanness (especially as resembling the sprawl of Los Angeles), and in terms of its "monstrous" size and the potential for the proposed Cublington airport to "deform" its vision. ('Los Angeles, Bucks' 1970; "'Mongrel city' fear' 1970; b'Arr, 'Quasi-country?' 1970.) Alongside these

tendencies, analogies of liquidity and flow were particularly dominant and allowed reporters to succinctly explore the tensions between determinism and agency in urban planning.

The most obvious entry point to these metaphors is the term 'overspill'. From the time of its designation, Milton Keynes was frequently reported on as an overspill town, or as a receptacle for overspill from London. (Gardiner 1970; Silver 1970.) The term 'overspill' had historically been used to describe peripheral estates, in particular those established at the periphery of the Greater London metropolitan area under London council schemes, and was at times used to describe the movement of population to first-generation new towns. In geographical terms, overspill towns essentially functioned as urban sprawl or fringe developments with a derivative relationship to the central already-existing city. (Vaughan et al, 2009.) Like the term 'suburb', 'overspill' implies a teleology whereby the new estate is legitimated by the already-existing metropolis.

In terms of Milton Keynes, overspill was not used strictly as a noun with a specific correlate meaning. Rather, the notion of overspill was one aspect of a wider language of fluidity and flow which described population movement over an inert landscape, and designated very specific functionalities to cities and towns. Even after a substantial programme of new town development and population dispersal, London was described as a full container, as a city with a finite capacity that when reached would spill its contents out over an inert countryside, with the resulting flow of population submerging the landscape under a sprawl that obeyed similar rules to those of fluid dynamics. Population was conceived of as a singular entity that would take the shape of any container placed around it. ('Planning the South East' 1967; Craigie 1968; 'England's Green and Pleasant Land' 1970; 'City of the future' 1972; Willmott 1974.) The countryside, chiefly the agricultural land ringing the green belt, was conceived of in this framework as uncontained space which would be "submerged" by movements of people breaching or "flooding" over the green belt to saturate and subdue the countryside under new, undesirable urban-sprawl suburban formations. (Hall 1970; Best 1970.) While Milton Keynes was described as a necessary new container into which London population might be 'decanted', to detractors its large-scale low density plan framed it as a somewhat inefficient container, which used more landscape to hold less people. As such Milton Keynes was described as "drowning" or "engulfing" the bucolic Buckinghamshire countryside under an imposition of urban sprawl. (Lewthwaite 1967; 'Are these market towns doomed?' 1967; Pahl 1969; Gibbard 1971; Allan 1972.) Moreover, perceiving Milton Keynes as a container for sprawl on the other side of the green belt, and as a derivative city which teleologically related to London, suggested that should the fluid tensions burst with overpopulation, overspill population would flow into the countryside between them.

Rather than being merely an aesthetic affectation, this symbolic language indicates important preconceptions about the purpose of cities in constraining a fundamentally inert population mass, conceived of less than a mass of individuals with agency than as a natural force greater than the sum of its parts, obeying its own fundamental laws. Moreover, the language of fluidity encompassed a range of emotional responses to Milton Keynes and to population movement in general, ranging from the more benign evocations of the trickle of streams, to the steady outflow of rivers, to the more apocalyptic and violent imagery of the flood. The above examples indicate that immediately following Milton Keynes' designation and early development, the language used to describe its

interaction with the landscape had undertones of violent intervention, evoking submerging, drowning and flooding.

While the explicit content of these articles was more measured in its projections of Milton Keynes' potential effects and even its ultimate success, a significant portion of reporting on the town's early years bear this fearful undertone that frames population movement and city growth as catastrophic. This language carries implications of the need to fortify against a potential threat through the construction of containers; the kind of language which as Peter Hall has noted posits the green belt in negative terms, as a sort of planning no-man's-land which preserves a neutral space around which construction continues apace. (Hall 1973). This notion of preserving the pastoral from the encroachments of modernity has deep historical roots throughout the Victorian period, with notable more recent variants on this theme in the works of Clough Williams-Ellis and Ian Nairn. (Williams-Ellis 1928 [1975]; Nairn 1959). However as Hall noted in 1973, the increased car ownership of Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, along with the development of new towns around the green belt, allowed it to be "leapfrogged" much more easily; as such the green belt could no longer function as a tool to preserve the Home Counties from the encroachment of London. (Hall 1973.) The framing of Milton Keynes as a 'home for Londoners' and as an overspill town therefore defined London's population as making its biggest 'leapfrog' yet, to the very borders of Buckinghamshire, thus creating a new high-water mark for urban sprawl halfway to Birmingham. In this context, the urge to preserve embedded in the language of floods suggests that Milton Keynes was being interpreted as a new outer limit for sprawl that negated earlier efforts to contain, and which further threatened to make the green belt redundant.

The tendency to describe Milton Keynes in this way indicates preconceptions about the function of cities which were very different to those espoused by the Plan for Milton Keynes. In this context of understanding cities as containers, the subtle difference between "tight" and "loose textured" plan as championed by Llewelyn-Davies was not maintained in this language. The low density of Milton Keynes, in keeping with the idea of the city as container, was reported on in terms of emulation of sprawl, as an inefficient use of landscape whereby the new town formed a container stretched too generously over too broad a portion of agricultural land. (Gibbard 1971; 'Giving streets a head' 1976; Ward 1978.) Low density building on a large scale indicates a conceptual comfort with the idea of human occupation of landscape spread more widely than that of a tight containing force bulwarking against the flood. Tentative early positive assessments, while making reference to the ambitious non-determinism of the plan, remained more interested in what was visibly present, rather than the theoretical adaptive capacity of existing design.

From 1972, *The Times*, *The Daily Mail* and the *Guardian* ran periodical special reports on the town, noting the latest housing styles and the attitudes of the new inhabitants. During 1974 and 1975, these reports were cautiously optimistic, largely suspending judgement until more of the plan had been constructed. ('City of the future' 1972; 'Milton Keynes: a special report' 1973; 'Milton Keynes' 1974; 'Guardian special report on Buckinghamshire' 1974; 'Guardian special report' 1975). As the political and economic climate grew grimmer in the later 1970s, what Jim Tomlinson has called the "declinist" tendency to attribute blame for the supposed contemporary "malaise" turned increasingly towards the planning industry. (Tomlinson 2009.) As the British government experienced more economic difficulties, culminating in the 1976 application for an IMF loan to

discharge national debts, the pursuit of expensive infrastructural projects was increasingly seen as an extravagance which had caused the nation to humiliate itself by obtaining a bailout. (Moran 2010; cf. Baws 1976.) In 1976 as part of the wind-down of new town planning, the British government designated a planned new town at Stonehouse, Strathclyde, in 1976, in an attempt to curb expenditure. (Booth 1976.)

While in this context Milton Keynes was occasionally presented as a return to quiet suburban life after the excesses of modernist architecture, the criticisms of perceived financial extravagance during a time of high inflation and growing unemployment placed Milton Keynes under further pressure from critics. From 1976 through to 1978, media, political rhetoric, and popular culture became increasingly focused on the idea of Britain in the throes of an economic crisis which it might not survive. (Turner 2008.) Moreover, the inaccuracy of the 1960s population projections which new town developments were based upon had been discovered in the results of the 1971 census. (Department of the Environment 1978.) London was perceived less as an overflowing container and more as a “hollow” space from which new towns had “siphoned” off too much. (Booth 1976; Hillman 1977.) The absorptive capacity of new towns was now viewed as having created scarcity, having drawn population and investment away from established inner-cities, which had been left to languish. As such new towns in general, and Milton Keynes in particular, were frequently depicted both as having contributed significantly to national decline.

### **Milton Keynes and determinism, 1976-1978**

In this context, the language of flow and containment persisted in assessments of Milton Keynes, while becoming increasingly polarised. Reportage on Milton Keynes began to focus on polls depicting low resident satisfaction, and those residents who chose to leave the new town in a “steady trickle”. (Adamson 1977; Hillman 1977). The use of roundabouts instead of traffic lights in the city’s major thoroughfares came in for ridicule, as a planning device intended to facilitate traffic flow was considered a “bewildering maze” that made the town un navigable. (‘Giving streets a head’, 1976; Wainwright 1977; Karpf 1977.) Even those reports on Milton Keynes which gave positive assessments of the town noted the “indeterminate general air” of the town, describing it in terms of a lack of clarity about its role as a city, town, suburb or overspill estate. (Young 1976; Ward 1978.)

As such, the balance between structure and freedom was seen to be consistently out of alignment, with infrastructure designed to create flexible and fluid relationships between people and the town either experienced as too constraining or as insufficient. These tendencies towards diagnosing national decline and criticism of Milton Keynes coalesced in the 1976 and 1978 writings of Christopher Booker and Jeremy Seabrook. These two writers analysed Milton Keynes through the tension between flow and containment, ultimately depicting the town as a deterministic space unlike the image promoted by Milton Keynes Development Corporation.

Christopher Booker helped found the satirical magazine *Private Eye* in 1961, transitioning his career over the course of the 1960s from satirical journalism to more serious and conservative political journalism. His 1969 book *The Neophiliacs* was a wide-ranging attack on the alleged cult of “newness” in British culture, which he saw as a decadent retreat from willingness to make tough decisions at the expense of national stability and prestige. During the 1970s Booker went on to develop this argument, identifying tower blocks as a particular symbol of a quick-fix attitude that

betrayed historical traditions and living patterns, ignored the desires and aspirations of their inhabitants, and which formed an aesthetic blight on the urban landscape. (Booker 1976 – Booker 1980.) His assessments of Milton Keynes, published in *The Telegraph*, *The Spectator* and later in his book *The Seventies* replicate many of these criticisms. His 1978 feature “Urban Rides” described a tour of Britain’s “major provincial cities” to describe the effects of recent redevelopments. Explicitly invoking the tradition of internal travelogues stretching from William Cobbett to J.B. Priestley, Booker sought to present “the very worst of the horrors”, starting at Glasgow and culminating in Milton Keynes.

While Booker objects to the aesthetic of Milton Keynes, in particular those earlier steel-and-concrete developments constructed during the national brick shortage, he ascribes the planned landscape of Milton Keynes with a deterministic intention, where the very fact that it is a planned space is problematic. (Booker 1978b.) Emphasising those more “futuristic” elements of the town’s design - from the grid square to the numbering of main streets, to the emphasis on increased car use - Booker argued that Milton Keynes as an urban planning project shared the same fraught conceptual basis as tower blocks and urban regeneration programmes in existing cities. Milton Keynes’ grid system, as a non-organic geometric “grid iron” form, was singled out for especial criticism as a form not legitimated by historical forms. This critique is not entirely true, considering that the whole grid was aligned with the Roman road Watling St and that the shopping centre on Midsummer Boulevard was aligned with the rising and setting of the midsummer sun. (‘Solstice sun on the supermarkets’, 1979.)

In these works Booker presents urban planning as a top-down imposition on British people, whose lives are best lived in urban and rural settings which they themselves shape, and which bear the markings and forms of historical living patterns. This is framed as more democratic, as a more meaningful relationship between people and places where the shape of cities and housing is seen to reflect the unencumbered choices made by generations of inhabitants. Urban planning, particularly that of the public sector, is defined in opposition to this as an imposition, an encumbrance; an attempt to counteract the natural unencumbered flow of human movement with an alternative flow of propaganda “pouring” from institutions like the Milton Keynes Development Corporation. Even “cosy sprawl” is presented as a more positive alternative, suggesting that rather than density, the interventionist act of planning is the greater evil. Booker places this in an explicit contemporary political framework, arguing that the postwar decay of the nation both morally and economically has been manifest through the “unimaginative authoritarianism” of socialist development programmes such as new towns. As such Booker’s laissez-faire critique of planning melds nostalgic pastoralism and an equation of market forces with democratic choice, in a way which revolves around fluid metaphors, exploring the movement of people through space and time with reference to fluid dynamics, encumbrance and flow. For Booker, the idea of a loose-textured new town is a utopian farce born of the kind of utopian neophilia he so derided in the late 1960s. Any urban planning, for Booker, was the imposition of too tight a determinism on both a landscape and a population which demanded greater freedom.

On the other end of the political spectrum, the widely published journalist, activist and historian Jeremy Seabrook campaigned against slum clearances in Northampton throughout the 1970s, objecting specifically to the psychological effect of removing people from houses, neighbourhoods

and livelihoods that they had worked for and in over generations. (Seabrook 1967; Seabrook 1971; Seabrook 1974.) His early books take a similar approach to that of Willmott and Young, while adding a more visceral focus on the psychological distress caused to individuals by forcibly changing the setting of their lives. As such he had argued consistently that urban planning interventions were determining lifestyles not relevant to the ways that working class people had sought to make their lives meaningful, and that “under a guise of altruism” the needs of local communities were subsumed under the drive to accommodate London overspill. (Seabrook 1974, p. 231.) In the late 1970s and particularly in the articles forming his 1978 book *What Went Wrong?*, Seabrook developed his criticism of urban planning’s intervention on working class life by defining authentic lifestyles as unbound by deterministic spaces. Utilising the same dichotomies of flow and containment, and of determinism as opposed to agency, Seabrook inflects his criticisms of urban planning in general with a notion of authenticity which is in opposition to falsity and simulation.

Seabrook acknowledges the slick advertising image of Milton Keynes as providing greater choice and flexibility for its residents, recognising that its feedback mechanisms and dedicated arrivals staff to assist new residents were designed to address the perceived failings of earlier new towns and ward off “new town blues.” (Seabrook 1978, p. 234-240.) Seabrook argues, however, that these features promote the idea of a “loose textured town” where the reality is as deterministic as ever; where the choices are not open-ended decisions to be made about how post-industrial Britons should live, but are predetermined in advance. The choice of one suburb over another, two bedrooms or three, this shopping centre or that one, are not in Seabrook’s eyes adequate for the people of Milton Keynes to express their agency in this new landscape. Rather, they are funnelled into predetermined possibilities in the same manner as older new towns, with the added twist of being told that they are experiencing more freedom. Seabrook presents anecdotes from Milton Keynes residents, describing themselves as embattled, trapped, with nowhere to turn; rather like, as Llewelyn-Davies had warned, they are “tied up in knots” by the prescriptive nature of their lifestyles. The intentions of the planners to create feedback mechanisms and offer choice were depicted as sinister, further deterministic interventions on the inhabitants’ lives which only served to disguise the limiting structure inherent to the planned city. Significantly, any loose-textured planning could not disguise the city’s newness and the fact that its forms, from streets to shopping centres, were imposed upon its inhabitants arbitrarily, rather than to testifying to the osmosis-like actions of previous generations. The idea of planning for freedom is presented as an oxymoron, an impossible dream, and attempting to do so is described increasingly over the course of the 1970s as inherently deceitful, a way of repackaging determinism for those attempting to resist it.

Seabrook sees this in explicitly political terms, as providing a “carceral” space whereby working class Londoners can be “remodelled and perfected” in the consumerist aesthetic of the suburbs, while the old inner-urban fabric with its traces of industrial capitalism can be redeveloped into more palatable forms. (Seabrook 1978, p.235-36.) He argues that Milton Keynes’ lack of “secret places” and unplanned areas creates a landscape of excessive containment, and that this “paradoxically” presented as giving greater freedom to the town’s inhabitants. (Seabrook 1978, p.239.) This dishonesty is for Seabrook a “charade of dehumanized authenticity”, a place where agency is proscribed by an urban landscape that celebrates the expansion of suburban living to the working classes, where choices are offered from a predetermined consumerist agenda. (Seabrook 1978, p.240.) The main problem then for Seabrook is that Milton Keynes simulates a fluid dynamic which it

does not provide. Like Booker, he ultimately cannot reconcile the “loose textured” intentions of Milton Keynes to the act of urban planning, with the new town creating lifestyles and aesthetics which lack the kind of innate meaning which only historical roots, can provide. As such his image of Milton Keynes is apocalyptic not in that it represents the flooding of Buckinghamshire with unfettered human interaction, but rather that it inevitably exerts too great a restriction on the lives of its inhabitants. For Seabrook Milton Keynes therefore represents not too much flow, but too little.

Both Booker and Seabrook therefore build on the early symbolism of fluidity metaphors, updating the dichotomy between flow and containment for the new polemical framework of late 1970s Britain. In doing so they draw on the implicit tendencies of early reportage of Milton Keynes, where the language of overspill betrayed concerns with the catastrophic gushing of population across Buckinghamshire. As such, they retain the tone of urgency, while shifting the focus towards determinism not as a bulwark against a flood of human movement, but as a social evil with psychological mal-effects. As such while the focus of earlier journalism was on the potential for too much flow, Booker and Seabrook diagnose too little. Transposing this sense of catastrophe to the evils of too much containment indicates that the attempts of the CES and the MKDC to create a non-deterministic plan were seen to have failed. The revisionist idea of “loose textured” planning ultimately could not be reconciled to an interpretive framework which saw all planning as equivalent to containment, and which fetishized organic relationships both in language and concept.

In this sense, many 1970s media critiques of Milton Keynes posit it in opposition to an archetypal “authentic” city, governed by referential systems of heritage and generations-old social structures which, albeit problematically, permit individuals to govern their lives according to a sense that its meanings are derived organically from “reality”. (Sampson 1971; West 1973; Lewis 1977; Booker 1976; Boston 1977; Booker 1980.) Milton Keynes, as a planned space, does not conform to this image, and the notion of a less-deterministic “loose-textured plan” was ultimately seen as a paradox. These narratives celebrate problems, inadequacies, illogical and imperfectly functional design elements in urban landscapes, which are defined as providing testimony to the lived past of British people, creating a landscape where meaning is laid down like the sediment at the bottom of a river, in the steady accumulation of patterns and forms by osmosis. The arbitrariness associated with planning in these critiques was described as inherently totalitarian and potentially psychologically damaging.

By contrast, integral to the idea of a healthy space was one whose inconveniences and inefficiencies had been formed by erosion and deposit, under the stream-like steady flow of generations of people. (‘City of the future’ 1972, Allan 1972, Barker 1975; ‘Giving streets a head’ 1976; Booker 1978.) This idea of heritage as a legitimiser for space was presented as a form of historical testimony by osmosis, where the action of the individual human was less important than the faceless perception of “generations” which were assumed to have shaped the landscape into a form that honestly reflected their needs and desires. (‘Special Report’ 1972; Taylor 1973; Seabrook 1978; Booker 1980.) This relationship is cyclical, with humans shaping landscape, and landscape shaping humans; the disruption of this relationship through the act of urban planning is to break this perception of mutual influence through continuity. This shifts the flow language from its function in the earlier 1970s to describe “overspill” and the impact of population in the present, to positing a historical flow, whereby the actions of people in the present was seen to need to be legitimated by

the actions of those in the past. This conception of flow moves beyond the image of a container overflowing its contents to posit valuable human intervention on the landscape as the course of a river, determined incrementally over time by habit, repetition and tradition.

Milton Keynes' revisionist attempt to create a non-deterministic plan was eclipsed by the escalating backlash against the abstract notion of planning, which in 1970s political culture was scapegoated as a social evil, and potential cause of Britain's supposed social and moral decline. Milton Keynes struggled to fit into the existing discursive patterns about space, which expressed planning's tension between determinism and agency through a language of liquidity that ultimately favoured the historic rather than the new. Constructed during a backlash against urban planning, Milton Keynes has had limited opportunity to escape the negative image that has consistently been attached to it. Examining the conceptual content of Milton Keynes' bad press during the 1970s, however, allows us to locate this negativity within broader cultural debates around what makes a good city, and about British national identity and decline. This opens the opportunity to tell new stories of Milton Keynes less reliant on assessments of value and establishing its success or failure, while interrogating the rise and fall of new town planning in light of broader cultural trends. Engaging with the cultural responses to planning facilitates a more integrated approach to the problems cities pose more broadly to the countries and cultures that surround them.

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<sup>1</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss The Plan for Milton Keynes and the early social history of the town's residents in detail, considerable work in this field has been undertaken by Mark Clapson. See Clapson (1998), (2004), (2012).

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