"Ends and Means"

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The usual arguments about Milton Keynes tend to revolve around the "grid pattern" versus the "neighborhood unit" issue, which has been made to sound more confrontational than it really is. The latter is always painted in too rigid colors, and the former, while being possibly more flexible and realistic, raises difficulties in the building relationship of facilities to major roads, and, at the same time, develops more opportunities for the making of special places.

In fact, the differences between the two approaches have become blurred, and recent surveys seem to indicate that Milton Keynes inhabitants regard themselves as living in a village system set in approximately square kilometer road grids, with the town center a special trip some way off and the workplace a bus ride away—which is what the neighborhood people were talking about in the first place. The only constant in these discussions is the distance children walk to elementary school, and the real planning issue is the density at which everything is put together and in what manner. Evidence suggests that for both economic and practical reasons Milton Keynes' density may be too low.

In discussing this new town one is conscious not so much of arguing about design ends but about design means and the conditions under which design has to be done. Unless these conditions are thoroughly understood they have a habit of distorting or even canceling out design ends. A program for a project of this size defining all the practical and social ends and financial and even the psychological and aesthetic ones can be forced to employ means that make these ends difficult—if not impossible—to attain. There is a point at which a row of houses gets forced by economic emergencies to be too long, where repetition of the same unit for economic reasons becomes inhuman and monotonous, where the assembly of different arrangements of the same plan becomes cute and not interesting, where parallel rows become boring, where strong horizontal window patterns become an assertion of uniformity not individuality, where thinking (almost unconsciously) of housing as a public utility such as water supply breeds a fatal kind of sterility.

Reliance on massive planting (which will take nearly a lifetime to mature and maintain) to combat these difficulties, and visual screening and separation to achieve coherence, is risky and conceivably unnecessary, particularly when one considers that many of the urban or even suburban residential classics, from Italian hill towns, English country towns, and Mediterranean villages are visually satisfying with few trees or occasionally none at all.

Making these design issues more difficult to achieve, of course, is the relentless pressure of costs, approval procedures, and time. When one has to build and design 2,000 to 3,000 dwellings a year together with schools, shops, factories, offices, etc., at minimum cost, the pressure to reduce design and approval time and encourage construction simplicity and repetition is horrendous, and produces bland solutions rather than interesting ones.

Milton Keynes has fought all these difficulties hard and with considerable success. But one cannot escape the feeling that it has also been handicapped by a plan concept, conceived in a period of prosperity and optimism (now nonexistent) but admirable in itself, that has a landscape and engineering infrastructure the continuing cost of which imperils the quality of the buildings—which imposes distances on the inhabitants that lagging car ownership and expensive public transport do not yet alleviate, and which tends to make the whole town a construction camp during its building. The rigidity of the central area particularly when compared with the original master plan seems out of place in the Bucks countryside (Crystal Palace notwithstanding) and the whole question of a Los Angeles type form of development, both practically and aesthetically, seems open to question in the context of a small island country of 50 million people trying to live on 50,000 square miles of land.