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### **Different by Design: Milton Keynes and New Town Epistemologies**

In the leadup to the 2019 General Election, *The Guardian* published an article by John Harris using the town of Milton Keynes as a lens through which to view Britain's political culture.<sup>1</sup> Its opening followed an established journalistic formula, assuming familiarity with negative judgements that Milton Keynes "sits in the English imagination as a byword for modernist architecture, endless roundabouts, and the fact that many of us still think that anything remotely futuristic is best sniggered at." Despite this, Harris intended to use the town to "get a sense of where the country has arrived" in its Brexit trajectory. While describing the town's demography, electoral and referendum results as consistent with national trends, Harris conceded that it lacked the typical "weight of history" characterising other British landscapes, in particular "the ghosts of a lost industrial past" which elsewhere "are impossible to escape". Instead, Harris saw a "new country" characterised by "private housing" and "distribution centres", similar to that which "rings most towns and cities".

These notions of "new" landscapes as light, unburdened places, lacking the ballast weight of generational change, traumatic economic transitions, and the legitimating patina of a long-established social order, is not unique to Harris' writing. Indeed, identifying newness as potentially alien or distinctive, irreconcilable to a national whole suffocating under the weight of its own historical past, has been a dominant theme in British urban journalism, especially in twentieth century works which use specific towns or cities as metonyms through which to interpret a wider national "crisis", or the trajectory of its alleged "decline."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Harris, "Britain Is Less Polarised than the Media Would Have Us Believe," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/07/britain-less-polarised-media-milton-keynes-brexite-culture-war>

<sup>2</sup> J. B. Priestley, *English Journey* (London: William Heinemann, Victor Gollancz, 1934); George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: V. Gollancz Ltd, 1937).

In describing Milton Keynes' as representing an emergent "new country", Harris invokes established journalistic tropes to posit British identity as anchored within the historically venerated urban landscape forms, given profundity and weight through their ability to testify to the past. Yet Milton Keynes was not necessarily new in temporal or chronological terms by the time of Harris' 2019 visit, having celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2017. Milton Keynes' capacity to represent new private-sector landscapes is also complicated; the town's reputation as the largest state-sponsored experiment in urban planning in British history precedes it. It is for this very reason that it lacks industrial-era "ghosts"; designated in 1967, Milton Keynes was intended to learn from the perceived mistakes of earlier postwar urban planning, which in turn had sought to correct the failings of unregulated industrial urbanisation. Milton Keynes was therefore initially designed to improve upon, rather than defer to, existing urban models, enshrining a commitment to newness which is epistemological rather than strictly temporal. In this sense, while new towns are undoubtedly sites of rich history, this history was founded on departures from, and even repudiations of tradition; in a British culture where culturally conservative definitions of historical value remain dominant, where deference to ideal tradition is emphasised as central to national identity, the idea of a new town as a site of historical value is a contradiction in terms. This is especially so for Milton Keynes, as an experiment departing from earlier new town forms. For such a site to be recognised as capable of retaining historical value, the very idea of British history as it appears in mainstream political and cultural discourse must be redefined in more radically open terms to accept breaks with tradition, and challenges to it, as potentially containing and generating historical value in themselves.

This chapter seeks to contribute to a growing scholarship contextualising British new towns within cultural and intellectual histories of Britain as a post-imperial power. Despite the scale of Britain's postwar urban planning experimentation, early historiographies of British new towns were largely discrete planning and local social literatures, with new towns and urban modern redevelopments often little more than mentioned in histories with a wider focus.<sup>3</sup> Increasingly over the past two decades, a range of urban cultural history research has aimed to further consider the debates around ideal landscapes in Britain which have taken

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Towns: Social Change and Urban Dispersal in Post-War England* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1998); Anthony Alexander, *Britain's New Towns: Garden Cities to Sustainable Communities* (London, New York: Routledge, 2009); Mark Clapson, *A Social History of Milton Keynes: Middle England/Edge City* (London: Frank Cass, 2004); Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design since 1880*, 4th ed. (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

place through and about the transformations of the nation's cities after the Second World War, including by historicising attitudes to these new landscapes.<sup>4</sup> In tracing these attitudes, this work has increasingly intersected with scholarship on Britain's failed reckoning with its imperial history, identifying the shared focus of these anxieties regarding aesthetics, demography and social order reflected in the British landscape.<sup>5</sup>

Much of this work has drawn on the work of Paul Gilroy, who has theorised the cultural pattern of anxiety regarding cultural change as emerging from "postcolonial melancholia", a cultural phenomenon characterised by "an inability even to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound change in circumstances and moods that followed the end of the empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige."<sup>6</sup> This manifests in anxieties about national identity which centre ideals of status, continuity and tradition, and which frequently interpret deviations, challenges or changes to those imagined traditions as hostile betrayals. In Gilroy's reading, anxieties about the upending of imperial geographies and worldviews link antipathies to a wide range of cultural changes to a singular perception of "a treasure trove of Englishness" under threat from change which is viewed as a deviation from a great, imperial-era norm. Within this rhetoric, scholars working in a range of disciplines, from discourse analysis to migration studies, have concurred with Gilroy's view that "the power of the landscape emerges as the dominant element" in national identity debates and cultural

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<sup>4</sup> Owen Hatherley, *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain* (London, New York: Verso, 2010); Sam Wetherell, "Pilot Zones: The New Urban Environment of Twentieth Century Britain" (PhD. Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2016); James Greenhalgh, *Reconstructing Modernity: Space, Power and Governance in Mid-Twentieth Century British Cities* (Manchester University Press, 2018); Otto Saumarez Smith, *Boom Cities: Architect Planners and the Politics of Radical Urban Renewal in 1960s Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2019); Guy Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); David Fee, Bob Colenutt, and Sabine Coady Schäbitz, "Lessons from British and French New Towns: Paradise Lost?," in *Lessons from British and French New Towns: Paradise Lost?*, ed. David Fée et al. (Bingley, Emerald, 2020), 1–15.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Hall, "Whose Heritage? Un-Settling 'the Heritage', Re-Imagining the Post-Nation," in *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of "Race,"* ed. Jo Littler & Rishi Naidoo (London: Routledge, 2005), 21–31; Georgie Wemyss, *The Invisible Empire: White Discourse, Tolerance and Belonging* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Libby Porter, *Unlearning the Colonial Cultures of Planning* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2010); Stephen V. Ward, "Transnational planners in a postcolonial world," in *Crossing borders: International exchange and planning practices*, ed. Patsy Healey & Robert Upton (London: Routledge, 2010), 47–72; Ruth Craggs & Hannah Neate, "Post-Colonial Careering and Urban Policy Mobility: Between Britain and Nigeria, 1945-1990," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42, 1 (2017): 44–57; Jesse Meredith, "Decolonizing the New Town: Roy Gazzard and the Making of Killingworth Township," *Journal of British Studies* 57, 2 (2018): 333–62; Lauren Pikó, *Milton Keynes in British Culture: Imagining England* (London: Routledge, 2019); Nadine El-Enany, *(B)Ordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire* (Manchester University Press, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 90.

conflicts, with idealised visions of aesthetics and demography of British landscapes functioning as key symbols of a wider spatial order.<sup>7</sup>

While recent work has explored how attitudes to postwar modernist urban planning fit within this wider pattern of cultural anxiety regarding an inverted, contracting imperial geography, there remains further scope for investigation of how these cultural associations have developed and functioned. This is especially the case given how misrepresentations and mythologies of Britain's postwar history have been deployed both for and against the service of Brexit, and used to justify the further ascendancy of exclusionary nationalism.<sup>8</sup> Recent Conservative government attempts to discredit and restrict historical research which challenges a fixed, celebratory traditionalist imperial narrative indicates that these political conflicts around the memory of empire are likely to persist in influence.<sup>9</sup> Accounting more fully for the epistemological dimension of these conflicts between fixed, closed historical narratives, and narratives open to newness and radical action, requires a continuing reckoning with the "power of the landscape" as the symbolic lens through which moral and political orders are debated in British culture.

As Harris' 2019 article reflects, Milton Keynes' legacy encompasses both sides of a debate between conflicting forms of cultural value. On the one hand, the openness to "the present and the future" which Harris described in Milton Keynes; on the other, the "weight of history" and "ghosts of a lost industrial past" which afflict the rest of the nation, and which Harris notices via their absence. Harris' approach to Milton Keynes highlights this central tension in the political memory of Britain's recent past, and the role of new towns within those debates. Beyond simply lacking industrial "ghosts", Milton Keynes' founding ideologies challenge the primacy of "tradition" in ways which oppose contemporary political

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<sup>7</sup> Much of this builds on the works on literary cultural heritage in Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton University Press, 1999); Krishan Kumar, "Negotiating English Identity: Englishness, Britishness and the Future of the United Kingdom" *Nations and Nationalism* 16, 3 (2010): 469–87; Michael Gardiner, *The Return of England in English Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Gurinder K. Bhambra, "Brexit, Trump, and 'Methodological Whiteness': On the Misrecognition of Race and Class," *British Journal of Sociology* 68 (2017): S214–32; Tony Ballantyne, "Entanglements and Disentanglements: Thinking Historiographically About Britain, Empire, and Europe in the Context of Brexit: Entanglements and Disentanglements," *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 64, 3 (2018): 378–90; Jonathan Moss et al, "Brexit and the Everyday Politics of Emotion: Methodological Lessons from History," *Political Studies* 68, 4(2020): 837-856; Robert Saunders, "Brexit and Empire: 'Global Britain' and the Myth of Imperial Nostalgia," *Journal of Imperial & Commonwealth History* 48, 6 (2020): 1140–74.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/architecture/heritage-summit-will-british-cultures-last-stand-against-woke/>

orthodoxies.<sup>10</sup> The town's capacity to be read as "new", even as it ages beyond its half-centennial, indicates that within these political debates, newness is more than a temporal status or chronological age; it can be a philosophical orientation to the relative cultural authority of tradition and precedent. Openness to new forms of value was central to Milton Keynes' founding philosophy, which makes it an important case study in the challenges which new towns can continue to pose in twenty-first century political contexts.

### **Postwar urban planning and Milton Keynes**

Drawing on the expertise of the newly formulated discipline of town and country planning, and the centralisation of academic and professional expertise within government during the Second World War, the Attlee Government elected in 1945 pursued reconstructionist policies which aimed beyond recreating the prewar landscape.<sup>11</sup> The New Town Act of 1946 and Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 enshrined a vision drawing from garden city principles, protecting rural landscapes through increased regulation, and proactively building new towns to alleviate overcrowding and infrastructural pressure in existing cities. Lewis Silkin described purpose-built new towns, applying the best practice principles of urban planning, as carrying the potential for a kind of incremental "Utopia" capable of "creating a new kind of citizen".<sup>12</sup>

This vision was therefore explicitly transformative, predicated on the ideal of remaking the nation anew, and transcending the bounds of existing patterns and orientations. It was corrective, in that it assessed the aesthetics, organisational capacity, and functioning of the British landscape as being suboptimal, and in need of deliberate intervention in order to enhance its social as well as economic capacity.<sup>13</sup> This intervention necessitated expert planning, specifically oriented towards deliberate change which would guide and structure the development of the British postwar economy. While associated with Labour, some

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<sup>10</sup> The approach to hauntology here is informed by Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero, 2014); Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, (London: Reaktion, 2005), 15.

<sup>12</sup> HC Deb 08 May 1946 vol 422 cc1072–184. "It is a long cry from More's "Utopia," to the New Towns Bill, but it is not unreasonable to expect that that "Utopia" of 1515 should be translated into practical reality in 1946.... I believe that if all these conditions are satisfied, we may well produce in the new towns a new type of citizen, a healthy, self-respecting, dignified person with a sense of beauty, culture and civic pride."  
<https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1946/may/08/new-towns-bill>

<sup>13</sup> David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 65; Pikó, *Milton Keynes in British Culture*, 25.

elements of this orientation were shared by the Conservative Party, particularly regarding incentivising inner-urban tower block construction, and urban sprawl regulation.<sup>14</sup> In practice, the culture of state-sponsored urban planning during this period tended to reflect a view that good outcomes required implementing existing best practice, which would not need substantial revision, alteration or change.<sup>15</sup> The first wave of British new towns including Harlow, Crawley and Basildon, were developed according to tightly implemented plans, which posed difficulties when revisions, through rezoning or reorganisation of infrastructure, were required after initial construction.<sup>16</sup>

This paternalistic approach fed political and media criticisms of the changes wrought by new town planning, urban reconstruction and redevelopment during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>17</sup> Not all of these were opposed to change itself; sociological criticism in particular focused on the specific approaches taken to urban transformations, advocating for increased consideration of social and cultural planning within urban planning practice.<sup>18</sup> This spurred the establishment of research centres focused on integrating spatial and social planning, such as The Institute for Community Studies (1955) and the Centre for Environmental Studies (1965).<sup>19</sup> Even these more nuanced academic critiques, however, took place within a wider media culture wherein urban change was responded to not only critically, but even mournfully, as an absolute principle. Scholars of postwar Britain have noted in a range of domains that the rapid social, economic and political changes in the decades following 1945 were primarily experienced as crises of national identity, and of Britain's place in the world.<sup>20</sup> During the 1950s in particular, many media and popular cultural criticisms of cultural change increasingly appealed against the idea of change itself, interpreting it as a rupture with the

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<sup>14</sup> Smith, *Boom Cities*, 15–20; Peter Scott, “Friends in High Places: Government-Industry Relations in Public Sector House-Building during Britain’s Tower Block Era,” *Business History* 62, 4 (2020): 545–65.

<sup>15</sup> M. Batty, “Progress, Success, and Failure in Urban Modelling,” *Environment and Planning A: Economy & Space* 11, 8 (1979).

<sup>16</sup> Alexander, *Garden Cities to Sustainable Communities*, 61, 74; Ortolano, *Thatcher’s Progress*, 90–94.

<sup>17</sup> Lauren Pikó, “‘We’re Full’: Capacity, Finitude, and British Landscapes, 1945-1979,” *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 64, 3 (2018): 450–63.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Ruth Glass, “Urban Sociology in Great Britain: A Trend Report,” *Current Sociology* 4, 4 (1955): 5–19; J. B. Cullingworth, *New Towns for Old: The Problem of Urban Renewal* (London: Fabian Society, 1962).

<sup>19</sup> Mark Clapson, *Anglo-American Crossroads: Urban Planning and Research in Britain, 1940-2010* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 35–42.

<sup>20</sup> Jim Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post-War Britain* (Harlow: Longman, 2000); Hall, “Whose Heritage?”; Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939-1965* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Michael Kenny, “The Many Faces of Englishness: Identity, Diversity and Nationhood in England,” *Public Policy Research* 19, 3 (2012): 152–59; Christine Berberich, “Bursting the Bubble: Mythical Englishness, Then and Now,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 51, 2 (2015): 158–69.

past and as a rejection of the authority of tradition.<sup>21</sup> This attitude has been theorised as an ideology of declinism, and as postcolonial melancholia, a barely-sublimated grief at the unfolding loss of empire expressed through preoccupations with other markers of cultural change, and an insistence on defending “tradition” against the “interruption” of postwar transformations.<sup>22</sup>

As Waters has noted, “to enter the later 1940s and 1950s [was] to enter a new world in which the components of national identity that had been manufactured in the 1930s and early 1940s seemed to come unstuck.”<sup>23</sup> This feeling of “unstuckness”, or even of lightness, might be interpreted as the opposite of a grounded, rooted, continuity-bound vision of contiguous identity growth. Journalistic, political and popular cultural critiques of postwar cultural change during the 1950s and 1960s consistently utilised this language of dislocation and rupture to characterise the cumulative effects of disparate phenomena; one crucial way in which this was articulated was through change in the appearance and demography of cities. As Jodi Burkett has noted, journalism and political rhetoric during these years frequently criticised changes to British cities in ways which linked disparate phenomena through “association”, and in presenting wide-ranging criticisms of urban change, frequently linked together anxieties regarding “black immigration ... [with] nostalgia for England’s rural past as well as the nostalgia for imperial Britain”.<sup>24</sup> Within this rhetoric, presence was often interpreted as disorder; the presence of Black migrants in newly-modernised urban spaces interpreted as an upending of imperial geographical organisation, and the replacement of time-venerated urban organisation with newer, rationalised forms interpreted as a disruption and challenge to the authority of a continuous urban past. This pattern of what Stuart Hall and others would call the “mapping together” of disparate cultural phenomena into a narrative of a crisis afflicting the whole of British culture was an ongoing process in media during this period, and though it would not reach its apocalyptic apex until the economic disturbances of

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Miles, “The Riots of 1958: Notes on the Ideological Construction of ‘Race Relations’ as a Political Issue in Britain,” *Immigrants & Minorities* 3, 3 (1984): 252–75; Romain Garbaye, “British Cities and Ethnic Minorities in the Post-War Era: From Xenophobic Agitation to Multi-Ethnic Government,” *Immigrants & Minorities* 22, 2–3 (2003): 298–315.

<sup>22</sup> Tomlinson, *Politics of Decline*; Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*; Lauren Pikó, “Mirroring England? Milton Keynes, Decline and the English Landscape” (PhD. Thesis, University of Melbourne, 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Chris Waters, “‘Dark Strangers’ in Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947–1963” *Journal of British Studies* 36, 2 (1997): 207–38.

<sup>24</sup> Jodi Burkett, *Constructing Post-Imperial Britain: Britishness, “Race” and the Radical Left in the 1960s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 7.

the 1970s, the practice of interpreting postwar cultural, urban and demographic changes as aspects of a singular pattern of cultural decline afflicting the nation was well established.<sup>25</sup>

By the early 1960s, then, critiques of British postwar urban planning were organised along two major themes, though they often shared a language: critique of the specific forms and directions of recent urban change, and a broader antipathy to urban change as an aspect of violation of national tradition. It was this latter thread of critique which would shape Milton Keynes' designation and development, with the town explicitly intended to model a new form of flexible, inclusive and non-deterministic planning practice. In doing so, however, Milton Keynes engendered alarm for those dismayed by the principle of landscape change, and could only compound disruption to an imagined narrative of continuity.

### **Milton Keynes and open futures**

The Labour Government elected in 1964 explicitly championed technological innovation as a policy base, intending to “foster, throughout the nation, a new and more critical spirit” in order that “the drive towards renewal comes from the vitality and self-confidence of the community itself”.<sup>26</sup> Often summarised in Prime Minister Wilson's commitment to re-forge Britain in the “white heat of technology”, this entailed a desire to overcome the perceived failures and limitations of earlier reconstructionist policy through technological innovation.<sup>27</sup> This attitude was therefore not a continuation of earlier postwar reconstructionist planning; it was an attempt to critique and improve on those earlier policies, and therefore to challenge both pre-1945 and post-1945 orthodoxies in urban and social policy. This manifested in a range of policies, including new commitments to participation in planning, and the “mark III” new towns designated under the New Towns Act 1965. These included the “expanded new towns” of Peterborough and Northampton, which used a historic market town as the base for

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<sup>25</sup> Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978); Mark Goldie, “The ancient constitution and the languages of political thought,” *The Historical Journal* 62, 1 (2019): 3–34.

<sup>26</sup> Harold Wilson, *The New Britain: Labour's Plan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964); David Edgerton, “The ‘White Heat’ Revisited: The British Government and Technology in the 1960s,” *Twentieth Century British History* 7, 1 (1996): 53–82.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Jobson, *‘White Heat’ and the Labour Party, 1963–70* (Manchester University Press, 2018)

a state-sponsored expansion, refusing a ‘blank slate’ plan by integrating new and old urban forms together.<sup>28</sup>

Milton Keynes, however, also designated under the 1965 Act, significantly departed from this approach. With a target population of 250,000 people and a designated area of 22,000 acres (89 square kilometres), its density would be far lower than previous new towns. This would be paired with decentralised zoning, distributing resources throughout the entire designated area to allow all residents a choice of nearby schools, parks, leisure facilities, and places of work.<sup>29</sup> The town’s development corporation (MKDC) envisaged a flexible landscape, which would encourage incremental revision, evolution and growth shaped by residents’ needs and choices. Using a wide-cast grid network of through roads, the town planned to grow around existing villages and small towns, retaining their distinctive qualities. This fused openness to historical value, with refusal to defer to it as an absolute authority. Taken together, this was intended to create a diverse, decentralised low-density city built around distinct local neighbourhoods, with evenly distributed facilities and a choice of living environments to ensure a range of residents’ desires and needs could be fulfilled.

This was intended to resist deterministic design, creating participatory structures through which residents could shape their town. This openness to undetermined futures was a frequent touchstone in early marketing; in a 1973 promotional film, MKDC general manager Fred Lloyd Roche described this as the goal of planners “getting themselves out of a job”.<sup>30</sup> This involved actively surveying resident attitudes, and incorporating their responses through feedback mechanisms. In practice, this was a fraught process; during the 1970s, MKDC workers reported struggling with the amount of resident feedback, and levels of expectation.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, MKDC continued their commitment to this process, including publishing findings of wider surveys, as well as funding and subsidising community arts, social support for new arrivals, and an active cultivation of local participatory culture.<sup>32</sup> *The Plan*

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<sup>28</sup> *People and Planning: Report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning (the Skeffington Committee Report)* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Peter Hall & Colin Ward, *Sociable Cities: The 21st-Century Reinvention of the Garden City*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2014), 52–54.

<sup>29</sup> *The Plan for Milton Keynes*, vol. 1 (Bletchley: MKDC, 1970).

<sup>30</sup> “A Village City - BFI Player,” <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-milton-keynes-a-village-city-1973-online>

<sup>31</sup> Ortolano, *Thatcher’s Progress*, 158–62.

<sup>32</sup> *Four Years on: Milton Keynes Household Survey, 1973: Summary* (Bletchley: MKDC, 1974); *Milton Keynes: Seven Years On* (Milton Keynes: MKDC, 1977).

articulated its overarching philosophy as being to impose “no fixed idea of how people ought to live”.<sup>33</sup>

The Thatcher government’s election in 1979 placed Milton Keynes’ ongoing development at risk.<sup>34</sup> Thatcherite revisionist nationalism was predicated on undoing and “rolling back” the future-focused state planning which had designated Milton Keynes, interpreting the political changes following the Second World War, and the 1970s, as inherent failures, whose violent rupture with Britain’s traditional identity must be healed.<sup>35</sup> Yet Milton Keynes’ openness to a range of futures, and its flexible structure, helped allow it to adapt to this hostile ideological context. This included adapting its administration and planning through privatisation and outsourcing of its administrative functions, and embracing more private development. While Milton Keynes had been planned with a goal of 50-50% public and private home ownership, its early construction had focused on publicly owned housing, design and construction, with the intent that this would transition to a majority of privately constructed owner-occupier homes later in the town’s development.<sup>36</sup> Yet the newly elected Thatcher government not only rejected the state-sponsored futurism which Milton Keynes epitomised; their earliest policies also sought to force British new towns to privatise their assets.<sup>37</sup> Partly due to timing, and partly due to its planned flexibility, Milton Keynes Development Corporation was in somewhat of a better position than many more rigidly designed early new towns to realign itself with the new ideological regime, though cooperation through piecemeal privatisation and ‘streamlining’ was mainly pursued towards the larger goals of preserving as much integrity of the town’s plan as possible, ensuring that its administration was not fully abolished so the plan could be completed.<sup>38</sup>

Outsourcing estate construction to private developers, however, often led to monocultural estates, with a lack of the kind of mixed tenure, size and style of housing which had characterised earlier MKDC constructions. Funding cuts over the 1980s led MKDC to sell much of its commercial landholdings, and to outsource its landlord responsibilities to a temporary holding agency before these were taken on by the Borough Council. Key figures in

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<sup>33</sup> *The Plan for Milton Keynes*.

<sup>34</sup> Lauren Pikó, “‘You’ve Never Seen Anything like It’: Multiplexes, Shopping Malls and Sensory Overwhelm in Milton Keynes, 1979–1986,” *Senses & Society* 12, 2 (2017): 147–61.

<sup>35</sup> Stuart Hall, “Thatcherism — Rolling Back the Welfare State,” *Thesis Eleven* 7, 1 (1983): 6–19; Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1985).

<sup>36</sup> *The Plan for Milton Keynes*, 53.

<sup>37</sup> Ortolano, *Thatcher’s Progress*, 133–39.

<sup>38</sup> Ortolano, *Thatcher’s Progress*, 238.

the town's planning also left MKDC to establish private practices, through which they would continue their association with the overall work of the town as private contractors. This shrinking of MKDC's purview helped meet the economic demands of the Thatcher governments, but also limited the extent to which the town could offer the kinds of revolutionary integrated social support which characterised its early development. The town's marketing also underwent a drastic shift in tone over the early 1980s, moving away from an educational tone focused on Milton Keynes' distinctive identity, towards a more marketised language of Milton Keynes as a landscape of individualised choice, sensory pleasure, and idealised consumer delights.<sup>39</sup>

Milton Keynes was also deliberately planned with a diverse economy incorporating post-industrial industries, including the campus of the Open University; the Shopping Building, then Britain's largest shopping mall; and regional logistics and distribution industries.<sup>40</sup> Taken together, this economic diversity and administrative transformation helped the town to grow even in the context of national recession, while the increasing private sector investment also helped placate some potential governmental antipathy. Drawing on the flexibility of its foundational plan, Milton Keynes' openness to multiple futures therefore helped its development corporation survive to 1992, at which point this formal 'new town' administration was 'wound up'.

### **Documenting the past in the city of the future: MKDC and local heritage**

Milton Keynes was therefore to be doubly detached from historical models, in that it committed to change as a principle, but also as a process without a single fixed goal or imagined outcome. It was designed not only to improve on prewar urban design, but also the new towns which had gone before. This double rejection of precedent, and the epistemological commitment to process rather than fixed or closed identities, goes some way to explaining how Milton Keynes was received in British media and popular culture during the period of its development to 1992, as has been explored in earlier scholarship.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Pikó, *Milton Keynes in British Culture*, 125-43.

<sup>40</sup> Joe Moran, *Reading the Everyday* (London: Routledge, 2005), 111-14; Pete Dorey, "'Well, Harold Insists on Having It!'—The Political Struggle to Establish the Open University, 1965-67," *Contemporary British History* 29, 2 (2015): 242-43.

<sup>41</sup> Lauren Pikó, "Milton Keynes and the Liquid Landscape, 1967-78," *Landscape Review* 16, 1 (2015): 36-45.

Perceptions of Milton Keynes as indeterminate, too inconsistent with historical models, and lacking its own organic connection to the past, continued to shape criticisms of the town after 1992, and these preconceptions have continued to shape the extent to which the town has been interpreted as able to transition beyond its association with newness. Yet even while Milton Keynes was planned to reject the precedent of earlier new town planning, part of the way in which it did so was by closely attending to questions of local heritage; both in terms of engaging with the existing heritage within the town's designated area, and in terms of cultivating an engaged community arts and heritage culture within the town as it grew. Milton Keynes' engagement with past and future as simultaneous dimensions of its heritage culture rejected binaristic frameworks, while presenting interventionism not as a betrayal of value structures, but as capable of generating them.

Milton Keynes' overall planning and construction strategy was developed to build around existing villages and landscape features as much as possible, while maintaining their distinctiveness; this was one of the primary rationales for the use of the grid system to organise the main thoroughfares. This approach was exploited to ensure that archaeological finds were documented and where possible preserved by the Milton Keynes Archaeological Unit, founded by MKDC in 1971; their findings included prehistoric palaeoarchaeology at Caldecotte, and a Roman villa complex at Bancroft, which has been integrated into parkland.<sup>42</sup>

One significant landscape feature which could not be permanently accommodated within Milton Keynes' plan was farming. By the late 1960s, farming in the North Buckinghamshire region primarily consisted of small and medium family-run farms, with roughly half of those as owner-occupiers. MKDC and the Ministry of Environment proposed a phased transition to enable farmers in the designated area time to adjust and move, partly in order to minimise the need for compulsory acquisition, but also appears to have reflected a combined desire to protect the agricultural economy as well as to protect the existing social structure built around agriculture in the designated area.<sup>43</sup> Researchers from the University of Reading were commissioned to undertake a longitudinal study of agriculture in the Milton Keynes area from 1967-1977, documenting the social and economic life of the farming

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<sup>42</sup> *The Plan for Milton Keynes*, 5, 13.

<sup>43</sup> "Correspondence and Papers Relating to Public Inquiry and Final Plan for Milton Keynes," *Milton Keynes Development Corporation Papers* (Aylesbury: Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, 1969); *Milton Keynes Plan: Interim Report* (London: Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker & Bor, 1968).

communities and their experience of the town's development.<sup>44</sup> Researcher Tony Giles noted that despite agriculture "being allowed to cling on" in as-yet undeveloped parts of the town, the overall burden on these communities was significant, with farmers "bear[ing] a disproportionate share of the costs in the wider national interest".<sup>45</sup> MKDC's interest in documenting and researching their experiences, however, nonetheless reflected a perception that these communities had value, and that part of Milton Keynes' story involved recording this "agricultural inventory" rather than seeking to erase it without record.

From early in the town's development, similar projects documenting the experiences of local residents, long term or newly arrived, were undertaken by local history groups, including many with MKDC support.<sup>46</sup> Fostering, funding and cultivating local arts, leisure and community groups was a key goal of the town's plan, and since the town's designation MKDC's arts and community programmes funded grassroots and community activities such as local newsletters, performance groups, funding for community journalism and arts programmes, from newsletters to cable television, which focused on giving residents an opportunity to document, share and critique their experiences of living in the developing towns.<sup>47</sup> This cultural pattern was fostered by MKDC even at the earliest stages of the town's development, and operated from the fundamental belief that the new town was capable of having and retaining meaning; that its development would generate cultural value, which would be worthy of documentation and preservation; and that the traces and records of the town's development should be considered as both historically valuable, and as part of its shared cultural heritage.

Milton Keynes' Living Archive was established in 1984, and grew out of the interests of two key cultural workers in Milton Keynes. Roy Nevitt had been Director of Drama at Stantonbury Campus, a comprehensive school whose innovative curriculum had been the cause of some media attention throughout the 1970s, and whose creative approach to arts education was featured in MKDC marketing of the town during this period.<sup>48</sup> Roger Kitchen

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<sup>44</sup> "Milton Keynes: 1967, An Agricultural Inventory" (University of Reading Department of Agriculture, 1968).

<sup>45</sup> Tony Giles, "A New Town and Agriculture-The Milton Keynes Case," *Built Environment* 4, 2 (1978): 137, 41.

<sup>46</sup> "Correspondence and Papers Relating to Writer in Residence at Stacey Hill Farm, Jack Trevor Story," *Milton Keynes Development Corporation Papers* (Aylesbury: Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies, 1976-1977); Elizabeth Leyh, *Concrete Sculpture in the Community* (London: Inter-Action, 1980); Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>47</sup> See examples in Leyh, *Concrete Sculpture in the Community*; Jane Turner & Bob Jardine, *Pioneer Tales: A New Life in Milton Keynes* (Milton Keynes: People's Press of Milton Keynes, 1985).

<sup>48</sup> *New City: Milton Keynes 1974* (Milton Keynes: MKDC, 1974).

had been employed as an arrivals worker by MKDC, focused on helping newly arrived families to Milton Keynes connect to their new communities. As part of this process, Kitchen worked alongside the wider cultural programmes of MKDC, helping collect, collate and facilitate the sharing of community stories through local media and social events. In 1984, Nevitt and Kitchen combined their interests to establish The Living Archive Project, now Living Archive MK, which “sought to explore and promote the artistic expression of documentary primary source material” relevant to Milton Keynes. Their work combined collecting and preserving a “people’s history” through ephemera and oral history recordings, with sponsoring projects to creatively transform and share stories from those source materials, such as plays, school programmes, and publishing.<sup>49</sup> This “documentary arts” approach reflected a wide-ranging and nuanced approach to community engagement, with the documentation of heritage explicitly focused on the living interpretation of sources by the community through creative interventions. This defined local heritage as dynamic, democratic and participatory, inviting active and multiple acts of creative interpretation. Structurally, then, Living Archive’s work has been consistent with MKDC’s formative ethos of committing to generative, future-focused and collective acts of making meaning.<sup>50</sup>

Part of the rationale for this was recognition that especially in the early years of the Archive’s work, the majority of Milton Keynes residents would not have longstanding associations with the new town. Where local residents did have a longer connection, it was often to the existing towns or villages which Milton Keynes would grow around.<sup>51</sup> Having an integrated sense of community within Milton Keynes as a whole was therefore a goal of the Archive, including through seeking to correct or challenge the perceived limitations and inaccuracies reflected in national media and popular cultural representations of the town. One of their main projects in their early years was the book *Dig Where You Stand: A book of ideas*, published in 1989, which documented examples of Living Archive work with schools to research and creatively communicate the histories and local cultures of where they “stood”. This book was widely influential in community arts practice and the idea of “dig where you stand” became associated with the local “documentary arts” approach by the Archive, and which would be adopted as a model by other local history groups. In the leadup to the 1996

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<sup>49</sup> Living Archive Project, *Dig Where You Stand: A Book of Ideas* (Milton Keynes: Living Archive Project, 1989).

<sup>50</sup> Lorraine Sitzia, “Telling People’s Histories: An exploration of Community History-Making from 1970-2000” (PhD thesis, University of Sussex, 2010), 194.

<sup>51</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *Tales of the City: A Study of Narrative and Urban Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

anniversary of the New Towns Act, Living Archive expanded this approach to oversee and support 34 local groups and schools in new towns around the UK in creating exhibitions and plays reflecting their local heritage as part of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the New Towns Act.<sup>52</sup> This expanded approach by Living Archive was consistent with the increasing maturity and complexity of the heritage and community arts sectors in Milton Keynes which developed after the “wind up” of MKDC in 1992.<sup>53</sup>

### **The conflicting narratives of Bletchley Park and Milton Keynes**

This pattern of community-led heritage activism transitioning into a more formal organisation can be seen in the example of Bletchley Park, which during the 1990s transitioned from being a deteriorating, little-known ex-government property, to the site of a museum celebrating British computing innovation and Second World War cryptography. Partly resulting from community successes in preserving Bletchley Park, the site’s increasing prominence in British national heritage narratives also highlights Milton Keynes’ ongoing challenge to norms of historical value in British culture, even as the town itself ages.

Bletchley Park, a large nineteenth-century mansion located outside the market town of Bletchley in North Buckinghamshire, was purchased in 1938 on behalf of the British Secret Intelligence Service, where it was used as a base for decryption of intercepted German, Italian and Japanese signals intelligence.<sup>54</sup> This included the cracking of the Enigma and Lorenz ciphers, efforts primarily associated with Alan Turing.<sup>55</sup> The work at Bletchley Park took place in secret, to the point that the extent of Allied interception and decryption was concealed until the mid-1970s. After this time a slow trickle of published accounts, and incremental declassification of official records, began to elucidate the role of Bletchley Park in the war effort.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Sitzia, “Telling People’s Histories,” 182.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Clapson, “Introduction,” in *The Plan for Milton Keynes* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 14.

<sup>54</sup> Linda Monckton, “Bletchley Park, Buckinghamshire: The Architecture of the Government Code and Cypher School,” *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 40, 2 (2006): 291–300; Christopher Grey & Andrew Sturdy, “A Chaos That Worked: Organizing Bletchley Park,” *Public Policy & Administration* 25, 1 (2010): 47–66; Christopher Grey, “The Making of Bletchley Park and Signals Intelligence 1939–42,” *Intelligence & National Security* 28, 6 (2013): 785–807.

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Smith, “Bletchley Park and the Development of the Rockex Cipher Systems: Building a Technocratic Culture, 1941–1945,” *War in History* 24, 2 (2017): 176–94.

<sup>56</sup> Ladislav Farago, *The Game Of The Foxes: British and German Intelligence Operations*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1972); David Kahn, *The Codebreakers* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974); Frederick William Winterbotham *The Ultra Secret* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974).

Bletchley Park itself continued to be used by government departments until 1987, though it was not until 1992 that British Telecom ceased using the site.<sup>57</sup> By the late 1980s, the area around Bletchley had been well incorporated into Milton Keynes' wider plan, which led to concern that the site might be sold and redeveloped. Due to advocacy by local history groups and the newly established Bletchley Park Trust, Milton Keynes Council established a conservation area to protect the site, and throughout the 1990s, the Trust maintained and operated a minimal, largely volunteer-run museum with piecemeal funding. During the late 1990s, however, several popular histories were published emphasising the centrality of Bletchley Park, and individuals such as Alan Turing, to Allied success in the Second World War.<sup>58</sup> As popular media and historical focus shifted towards the stories of Bletchley Park employees, local heritage groups raised awareness of the Park's financial precarity, and through combinations of public and private funding, and increased museum revenue, the site has since become relatively more stable.<sup>59</sup>

Bletchley Park's relationship to the new town which grew up around it has been complex. By the time that news of activities at Bletchley Park were declassified in their broader terms, cultural narratives around the British national character as being crystallised in its wartime experiences were well entrenched.<sup>60</sup> The broad outlines of a story of Bletchley Park cryptographers quietly subverting the Third Reich through technological innovation resonated with existing exceptionalist stories of the Blitz and Dunkirk, and the wider myth of Britain Alone as having achieved victory. In a 2011 visit to the site, Queen Elizabeth II characterised Bletchley Park's "legacy" as being the computing innovation of Colossus, but also its ability to testify to the "natural aptitude" of Britain as "a nation of problem solvers".<sup>61</sup> This symbolic testimonial function, where Bletchley Park's successes were understood as reflective of a unique national character, would be echoed in media coverage of subsequent royal visits, and in the renewed media interest in the site following the 2015 release of the

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<sup>57</sup> G. Dunlop, "Gateways to Bletchley," *Cultural Politics* 10, 2 (2014): 152.

<sup>58</sup> David Kahn, *Seizing the Enigma: The race to break the German U-boat codes, 1939-1943*, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1991); F. H. Hinsley, & Alan Stripp, *The inside Story of Bletchley Park* (Oxford University Press, 1993); Michael Smith, *Station X: The Codebreakers of Bletchley Park* (Channel 4, 1998).

<sup>59</sup> Asa Briggs, *Secret Days: Code-Breaking in Bletchley Park* (London: Frontline, 2011); Sinclair McKay, *The Lost World of Bletchley Park: The Illustrated History of the Wartime Codebreaking Centre* (London: Aurum, 2013); Sue Black & Stevyn Colgan, *Saving Bletchley Park: How #socialmedia Saved the Home of the WWII Codebreakers* (London: Unbound, 2016).

<sup>60</sup> David Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine: Weapons, Resources, and Experts in the Second World War* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>61</sup> "A Speech by The Queen at Bletchley Park," <https://www.royal.uk/queens-speech-bletchley-park-15-july-2011>.

film *The Imitation Game*.<sup>62</sup> This ideal narrative connection between Bletchley Park and the best of the nation has been maintained even through awareness of Turing's prosecution by the British state for homosexuality, followed by his suicide. Following the 2009 official apology for Turing's treatment, and his formal pardon in 2014, Turing's story has been assimilated into a progressivist narrative, where Turing's government persecution is eclipsed by his posthumous elevation to hero status.<sup>63</sup>

The narrative association between Bletchley Park and national wartime histories is not surprising. That this should take precedence over associations with its geographical surroundings partly reflects the way in which Bletchley Park's cryptographic history predated Milton Keynes' existence as a new town, while the revelations of the site's importance largely postdated Milton Keynes' development as a new town. The significance of Bletchley Park is legible on Milton Keynes' landscape, such as in road signs, and in official marketing representations including the high profile 2016-17 "Unexpected MK" national marketing campaign.<sup>64</sup> Yet while Milton Keynes' public-facing narrative comfortably encompasses Bletchley Park, the history of the site itself largely elides the development of the new town which grew up around it. Its use predating the new town, and its notoriety largely arising after the new town had been formally completed, Bletchley Park's wartime role has led it to fit comfortably into exceptionalist wartime cultural narratives, including the mythology of Britain Alone, which inaccurately presents Allied victory as solely achieved by an embattled and isolated underdog Britain, whose victory is attributable to some intrinsic national character.<sup>65</sup> Bletchley Park's resonances with this narrative have recontextualised it within this nationalist canon, and away from its physical location amidst a later postwar new town experiment.<sup>66</sup>

The absence of Milton Keynes in the Bletchley Park story is therefore consistent with the absence of Milton Keynes, and the state planned system which created it, within dominant

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<sup>62</sup> Hannah Furness, "Kate Meets the Codebreakers: Duchess of Cambridge Tells of Her Sadness over Her Grandmother's Secret Bletchley Park Life," *The Telegraph*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/royal-family/2019/05/14/kate-meets-codebreakers-proud-duchess-cambridge-tells-sadness/>; "Bletchley Memorial to Duchess 'Granny,'" *BBC News*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-48272002>.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew Robinson, "'Mother Says I'm Just an Odd Duck': Alan Turing, *The Imitation Game* and the 'Gay Boffin,'" *Journal of Science & Popular Culture* 2, 1 (2019): 21–36. Cf. <http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/news/2019/july/50-pound-banknote-character-announcement>.

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.aboutmiltonkeynes.co.uk/time-discover-unexpected-mk/> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLA2GQSPNF8>

<sup>65</sup> Robinson, "'Mother Says I'm Just an Odd Duck.'"

<sup>66</sup> Ankhi Mukherjee, *What Is a Classic?: Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon* (Stanford University Press, 2013), 10.

nationalist narratives of greatness and distinctiveness which remain tied to wartime ideals. The ghosts of Bletchley Park are heavy, and the site is understood as commemorating precedent, tradition and national continuities; yet into the silences of its story stepped an unhaunted new town, predicated on refusing absolute deference to canon, and on democratic openness to its local heritage alongside a range of possible futures. The sharp contrast between Bletchley Park's incorporation within conventional national identity narratives, and the ongoing derision of Milton Keynes, illustrates the epistemological challenge the town poses to ideals of historical value.

### **Milton Keynes as a cultural destination**

As has been argued elsewhere, this reputational challenge which Milton Keynes has consistently faced has been rooted in ideological debates around the role of the state, and in competing definitions of how British landscapes should testify to the ideals of tradition and continuity, rather than specific traits or features of the fabric of Milton Keynes itself.<sup>67</sup> This was recognised by MKDC early in the town's development, and a consistent part of the town's marketing was focused on correcting perceived misrepresentations of the town, or on encouraging people and business representatives to "see for themselves" rather than relying on mediated caricatures of a sterile "concrete jungle".<sup>68</sup> Despite extensive corrective advertising campaigns undertaken throughout the 1980s which sought to disprove "myths" about the town, Milton Keynes remained widely criticised for its very new town origins, interpreted as conferring an innate lack of authenticity, an exceptionalism which associates the town more with "alien" and colonised landscapes rather than a traditional British identity.<sup>69</sup>

These trends in national media representation continued beyond 1992, and posed particular challenges for the town's local heritage sector, which had grown throughout this decade into an increasingly formalised museum, archive and educational organisations. The Milton Keynes Heritage Association formed in 1994 to bring together a network of local

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<sup>67</sup> Pikó, *Milton Keynes in British Culture*, 126–43.

<sup>68</sup> E.g. "The Facts", *Guardian* June 5, 1976; *Evening Standard* June 25, 1976; "Confidential: The future direction of the development and marketing of Milton Keynes", Waterman papers; *Milton Keynes Development Corporation papers* (Milton Keynes City Discovery Centre, November 1983).

<sup>69</sup> Davinia Gregory, "Britain's Perpetual Other: Milton Keynes," in *The Understanding Britain Reader 1*, ed. Phillip Drummond (London: London Symposium, 2012), 2–12.

heritage interest groups into formal dialogue with larger organisations such as the Milton Keynes Museum, which locates the new town's history within the longer history of the local area.<sup>70</sup> This spectrum of connection between formal heritage organisations and local groups reflected the wider pattern of Milton Keynes' heritage culture, in that many of these groups had interwoven memberships and shared trustee and board members.<sup>71</sup> Many larger Milton Keynes heritage institutions which by the early 1990s had formally incorporated as companies or which had developed more formal administrative and board structures had begun as smaller volunteer-led groups.<sup>72</sup>

Milton Keynes' increasing recognition by the formal heritage profession during the 1990s and 2000s explicated these conflicts between competing understandings of value. English Heritage, then the organisation responsible for architectural heritage listings, most frequently applied the requirement of 30 years elapsing since a building's construction before formal listing could be considered. Many structures within Milton Keynes which predated the town's construction had received formal listing prior to this time, including a wide range of sites from ancient scheduled monuments to modern architecture.<sup>73</sup> As Milton Keynes' major civic architecture crossed the thirty year threshold, much of has been considered for listing; the Shopping Building was given a Grade II listing in 2010, which received some national media criticism.<sup>74</sup> To less media attention, the former bus station was given grade II status in 2014, and the Central Library followed in 2015, though Britain's first multiplex cinema The Point, a 1986 silver stepped pyramid rimmed in neon-lit red steel, was rejected in 2013, and the site now awaits demolition.<sup>75</sup> MKDC-commissioned public sculptures by Bernard Schottlander and Wendy Taylor received Grade II status in 2016, though the wide range of concrete public sculptures throughout Milton Keynes, including Liz Leyh's Concrete Cows, have not yet received this status.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> <http://www.mkheritage.org.uk/members/>

<sup>71</sup> Sitzia, "Telling People's Histories," 178.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1007939>

<sup>74</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1393882>;

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/jul/16/milton-keynes-shopping-centre-grade-listed>;

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1082263/English-Heritage-backs-grade-II-listed-status--Milton-Keynes-shopping-centre.html>

<sup>75</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1416117>;

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1424282>

<sup>76</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1431445> <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1432576>

At the same time as this increasing formal recognition of specific sites, Milton Keynes' Council and local heritage organisations pursued broader goals of increasing the town's recognition as a site of cultural value outside of the formal grammars of heritage preservation. Heritage MK was established in 2011 as a consortium to coordinate activities of the "big 5 heritage organisations" in Milton Keynes: Bletchley Park, Milton Keynes City Discovery Centre, the Cowper and Newton Museum, Living Archive Milton Keynes, and Milton Keynes Museum.<sup>77</sup> This increasingly structured local heritage culture, with professionalised larger organisations working in tandem with grassroots local interest groups, helped form the foundations for planning Milton Keynes' 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in 2017. These celebrations included local-facing and outward-facing dimensions, with a year-long programme of festivals and events in Milton Keynes accompanied by a large-scale national media campaign including a BBC documentary, invited media coverage, and national advertising including physical billboards, poster campaigns, and video. This campaign replicated one of MKDC's most prominent national advertising campaigns from the late 1980s, which ironically juxtaposed idyllic photography of Milton Keynes' landscape against slogans describing typical criticisms of the town, such as "Concrete Jungle".<sup>78</sup>

In adopting the style of previous advertising, it reflected a desire to draw on those longer-term cultural associations of a prominent poster campaign, and can be read as a tribute to the town's advertising history. Yet by reiterating these thirty-year old attempts to correct misrepresentation, the Unexpected MK campaign highlighted the stubborn persistence of Milton Keynes' negative national reputation as ahistorical, sterile, and unable to retain or generate culture. This resistance to correction indicates that rather than being strictly factual errors, these criticisms reflect an epistemological antipathy towards future-focused landscapes, and the persistence of earlier postwar critiques of urban change, which interpreted interventionism and openness to new future value as a betrayal of a narrowly imagined, closed national tradition.<sup>79</sup>

This philosophical conflict was directly acknowledged in another aspect of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations: Milton Keynes' bid to be named 2023 European City of Culture. This European Union (EU) sponsored competition awards funding, investment and promotional opportunities to winning cities, and in late 2016, Milton Keynes was announced

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<sup>77</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pg/HeritageMK/about/>

<sup>78</sup> <https://westfourstreet.com/unexpectedmk-launched/>

<sup>79</sup> Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-10; Mukherjee, *What Is a Classic?*, 10.

alongside Dundee, Leeds, Nottingham and a joint Belfast-Derry bid, as the official British entrants for the scheme.<sup>80</sup> Milton Keynes' bid, entitled "Different by Design", explicitly celebrated the town's potential to challenge national heritage narratives, proposing "a different story to tell about British culture. Not one steeped in Victoriana, ancient monuments, high art and tradition. But one about Britain when it thinks about the future."<sup>81</sup> This presented Milton Keynes as unbound by the weight of limiting histories, and challenged the primacy of "tradition" itself as a value. It presented the town's distinctiveness not only as a "design" feature but as providing a new perspective, facilitating a wholesale reinterpretation of British culture.

This shared some themes with Milton Keynes' representation in the 2014 Venice Biennale pavilion *A Clockwork Jerusalem*, which drew its name from William Blake's concept of the New Jerusalem (itself used by Labour to describe their postwar reconstructionist goals) and the title of Anthony Burgess' novel *A Clockwork Orange*, later a film by Stanley Kubrick which drew heavily on London's concrete modernist Thamesmead estate for its dystopian aesthetic.<sup>82</sup> The curators of *A Clockwork Jerusalem* aimed to challenge dominant interpretations of postwar architecture and urban planning as drab, sterile, and even as dangerous, instead "examin[ing] how traditions of the romantic, sublime and pastoral, as well as interests in technology and science fiction, were absorbed to create a specifically British form of modernism." Locating British architectural modernism within a celebratory narrative of "electro-pastoralism", the exhibition argued that Britain's urban modernism formed part of a national tradition of technological large-scale landscape interventions, reaching back to Stonehenge. This exhibition used Liz Leyh's Concrete Cow sculptures, often derided in national media as symbols of Milton Keynes' sterility and dystopian rejection of nature, as centrepieces of their historical counter-narrative.<sup>83</sup> The pavilion's goal was to challenge established British attitudes to modern urban planning as a "failure", by recontextualising it within a celebratory story running "from Stonehenge to council estates, from Ebenezer Howard to Cliff Richard, from ruins and destruction to rural

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<sup>80</sup> "Milton Keynes Council Welcomes Official Launch of European Capital of Culture 2023," <https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/pressreleases/2016/dec/milton-keynes-council-welcomes-official-launch-of-european-capital-of-culture-2023/>; "UK Competition Launched to Find 2023 European Capital of Culture," <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-competition-launched-to-find-2023-european-capital-of-culture>.

<sup>81</sup> "Our Bid for the European Capital of Culture 2023 - Different by Design," <https://miltonkeynes2023.co.uk/our-bid>.

<sup>82</sup> Stephen Babish, "'A Place in London's Future': A Clockwork Orange, Thamesmead and the Urban Dystopia of the Modernist Large-Scale Plan," *Screen* 59, 2 (2018): 197–212.

<sup>83</sup> Alastair Donald, ed., *A Clockwork Jerusalem* (Vinyl Factory, 2014), 7–14.

fantasies.”<sup>84</sup> While a noteworthy contribution to the Biennale, and while the exhibition appeared around Britain following its display in Venice, *A Clockwork Jerusalem*’s argument for a narrative reimagining of British history was largely an experimental “remix” of cultural narratives, advocating for an alternative perspective, but one which ultimately had limited scope to counter the dominant and entrenched understandings it opposed.

Milton Keynes’ City of Culture bid went further than proposing the town’s place within a counter-tradition. Instead, the bid presented Milton Keynes itself, through its unique position as a revisionist postwar new town open to undetermined and undefined futures, as able to cast a new light on British culture as a whole. This potentially revelatory perspective was because the town’s foundational logic was critical, if not antithetical, to the deeply entrenched cultural value of idealising the principle of tradition itself. By doubly rejecting the absolute authority of historical urban aesthetics, and the earlier models of ‘best practice’ which had shaped earlier British new towns, the City of Culture bid identified Milton Keynes’ potential historical value as specifically arising from its challenge to dominant understandings of how value is defined in British landscapes and British culture more broadly. By rejecting the fetishisation of the kinds of national artistic and cultural symbols most prized and elevated in British culture, and instead centering the value of a new town founded on the principle of “no fixed conception of how people ought to live”, the principle of Different By Design as a bid was to incorporate a more convivial and open definition of British culture, centred around the ideals of rejecting the confines of tradition as the bastion of cultural authority.

The bid’s rejection of imperial fetishism was out of step with wider cultural trends, highlighted by the abrupt end to the bid process. Britain’s bids were formally lodged in October 2017, fifteen months after a British referendum on leaving the European Union (EU) returned a 52% majority. City of Culture status has been awarded outside the EU to countries which are a candidate for EU membership, are within the European Free Trade Association, or the European Economic Area; however Brexit negotiations had made it clear these criteria would not apply to Britain by 2023, and their bids were therefore immediately rejected.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> <https://venicebiennale.britishcouncil.org/history/2010s/2014-clockwork-jerusalem>

<sup>85</sup> “EU Cancels Britain’s Hosting of European Capital of Culture,” *The Independent*, November 23, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-european-capital-of-culture-uk-cancelled-leeds-eu-banned-a8071261.html>; “Brexit ‘bombshell’ for UK’s European Capital of Culture 2023 Plans,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-42097692>.

Given the explicit decision to leave organisations granting eligibility for the City of Culture award, the surprise with which the EU decision was received, both by politicians and in British media, is striking.<sup>86</sup> Yet the conditions which rescinded Britain's eligibility for the scheme, were exactly those which rendered the content of Milton Keynes' bid so provocative. The rhetorical framing of the Brexit referendum had been a logical extension of the neoliberal rejection of postwar reconstructionism, and its framing of the previous decades of state planning as a rejection of the "greatness" of Britain's earlier past.<sup>87</sup> Much as postwar urban planning had been interpreted by Boris Johnson as a signifier of the "bad old days", Britain's 1973 entry into the European Community was cast during the Brexit referendum as a surrender of sovereignty, even as equivalent to the risk of invasion during the Second World War.<sup>88</sup> By presenting the politics of the 1945-75 period as violent ruptures with a continuous tradition, the nationalist rhetoric driving the Brexit referendum venerated exactly the "Victoriana, ancient monuments, high art and tradition" which the Milton Keynes bid sought to decentre.<sup>89</sup>

Significantly, the aspects of Milton Keynes' structural testimonial value highlighted in the bid, do not necessarily translate to the subjective politics of its voting population. Since its electorate was first designated from Buckingham in 1983, Milton Keynes electorates have returned Conservative MPs with slightly greater frequency, and in the 2016 referendum, Milton Keynes North returned a marginal 50.3% result for Remain, and Milton Keynes South returned 53.08% for Leave.<sup>90</sup> This pattern is why Harris read the town as sufficiently typical of national trends in his 2019 article; and yet, the structure of the town, and the fact of its existence, reflects the power of a very different politics to that of the present.

More significant than Milton Keynes' lack of industrial ghosts is its foundational refusal to defer to a narrowly defined nationalism as a source of value. Its radical openness to

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<sup>86</sup> "EU Halts European Capital of Culture Bids from UK Cities Due to Brexit," <https://news.sky.com/story/eu-blocks-uk-cities-from-european-capital-of-culture-bids-after-brexite-11140057>; "UK City Will NOT Be Allowed to Be European Capital of Culture Due to BREXIT," <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/883405/European-Capital-of-Culture-Brexit-news-UK-European-Union>.

<sup>87</sup> Satnam Virdee & Brendan McGeever, "Racism, Crisis, Brexit," *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 41, 10 (2017):1802-1819; Paul Gilroy et al., "A Diagnosis of Contemporary Forms of Racism, Race and Nationalism" *Cultural Studies* 33, 2 (2019): 173-97.

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-35739518>; <https://www.economist.com/britain/2016/03/19/dreaming-of-sovereignty> ; <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/14/boris-johnson-the-eu-wants-a-superstate-just-as-hitler-did/>

<sup>89</sup> Kathryn Cassidy et al, "Brexit and New Autochthonic Politics of Belonging," *Space & Polity*, 22, 2 (2018) 188-204; Sally Brooks, "Brexit and the Politics of the Rural," *Sociologia Ruralis* 60, 4 (2020): 790-809.

<sup>90</sup> <https://democraticdashboard.com/constituency/milton-keynes-north>;  
<https://democraticdashboard.com/constituency/milton-keynes-south>

undetermined futures actively challenged the absolute authority of imagined “great” traditions and pointed to alternatives to it. Postwar reconstructionism in general, and new towns in particular, demonstrate that pastness and historicity need not be absolute determinants of value, and that new forms of value are possible. Milton Keynes went still further than this, embracing the future by refusing to specify it in singular terms; its planners envisaged a town unmoored from design precedent, and a future where its residents would not be “tied in knots” by the choices of the past.<sup>91</sup> This in itself reflects a unique historical moment, one which the town’s local heritage organisations are dedicated to documenting and sharing; and yet their advocacy has had limited wider purchase in a cultural context where new towns are still seen as antithetical to historical value. Milton Keynes therefore highlights the limitations of the cultural grammar which dominates contemporary British politics, which makes it a unique spectre of possibility. It is a paradoxical monument, refusing the authority of canonical monumentality itself; it wears history lightly by refusing its weight, in order that its unknown futures might be unbound by it. Lacking industrial ghosts, it has become a spectre itself, signifying the power of openness to the future at a time that British culture is fixated with reinstating symbols of closed, fixed national narratives. Until such time as this exclusive, deferential grammar of idealised tradition is dismantled, British new towns will therefore read as new, and Milton Keynes chief among them.

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<sup>91</sup> “Instant City-1990”, *Illustrated London News*, May 22, 1970, 22-24.

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