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TOPIC: GROWTH AREAS

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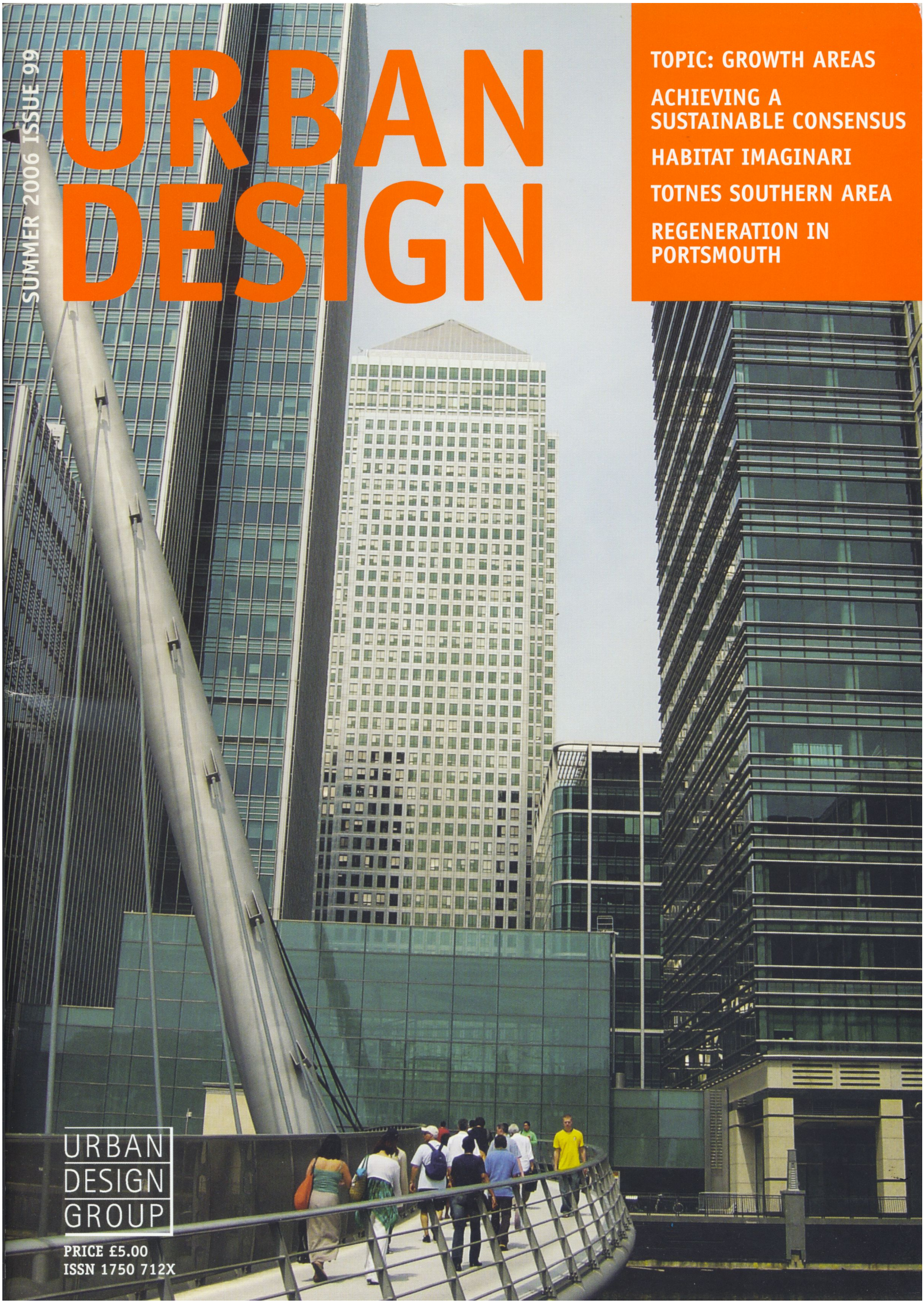
HABITAT IMAGINARI

TOTNES SOUTHERN AREA

REGENERATION IN PORTSMOUTH



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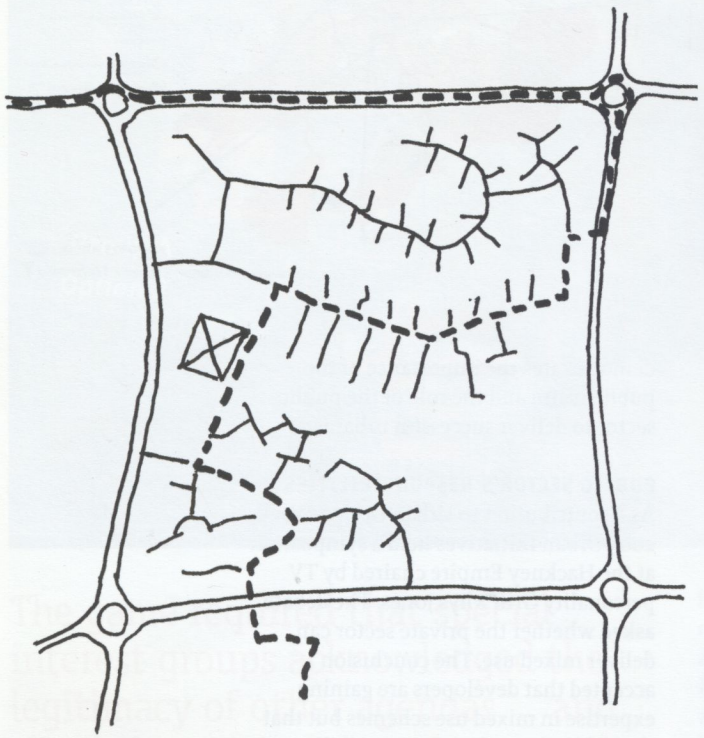
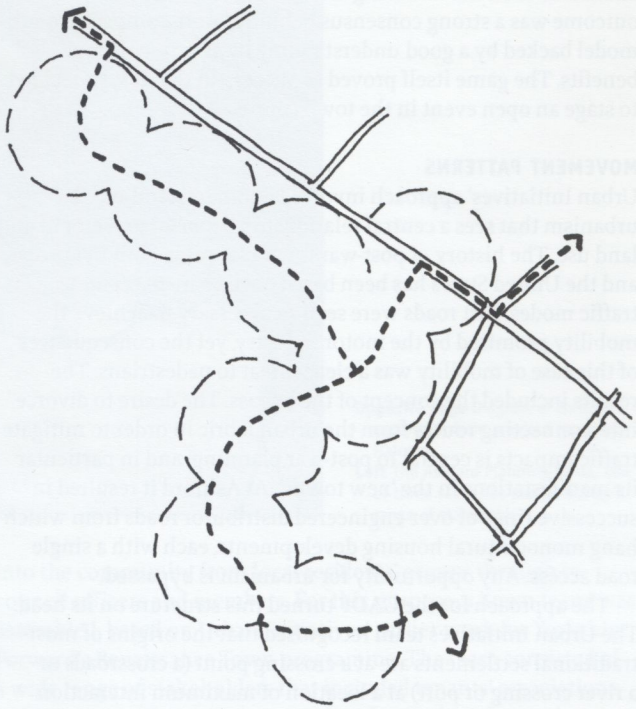
CARS: THE MODE OF CHOICE IN THE GROWTH AREAS

Tim Pharoah deplores the continuing dominance of the car in the growth areas





When it comes to sustainable transport, Britain probably has the best policies and the worst practice in northern Europe. Endless 'best practice' guides advocate shaping new development to reduce dependence on the car and to promote more use of the 'sustainable' modes. But there is little evidence that the trend towards car dependence will be reversed in the South East growth areas. Here are ten reasons why the car will be the mode of first choice in the new areas.

1. New housing includes more parking than the older housing, enabling car ownership to increase, thereby increasing the proportion of trips by car.
2. Leisure, shopping, employment, hospitals, education and other facilities continue to be built away from town centres, making them harder to reach except by car.
3. While town centres continue to be served by public transport, they account for a declining proportion of destinations, thus making bus services less relevant to people's trips. The widespread decline in bus patronage is therefore unsurprising.
4. Policies to reduce car use mostly target only commuting to work (to reduce peak hour congestion). This means that more cars are available during the day for other trips, which outnumber work trips by four to one.
5. A key aim in the growth areas, especially the Thames Gateway, is to attract a wider range of social groups (for which read 'more middle class families'). If this aim is not realised, the Gateway will be a social disaster; if it is a success it will mean very much higher levels of car ownership and use than at present.
6. Walking, cycling and public transport are only chosen in preference to the car when there is a strong disincentive to drive: when a car is not available; when there is no cheap parking at the destination; or when congested roads tip the balance of choice in favour of the train.
7. And this is where urban design comes in. Most new development is designed with little regard to any of the above.
8. Those who are planning or building new development cannot determine where or how buses should run.
9. Planners and urban designers tend not to have experience of planning public transport routes.
10. In growth areas that so far have developed as heavily car dependent, political support for development oriented to public transport is rare.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STRUCTURE: A LESSON FROM MILTON KEYNES

Milton Keynes teaches us an important lesson in urban design, namely that if the basic form and layout is not right, then the resulting problems will be with us forever. The town was designed according a big design idea, which was to cater for free traffic movement.

The concept was a grid road structure that would distribute traffic more evenly than a hub and spoke pattern and hence avoid traffic congestion. In addition, employment locations were distributed around the edges of the town, so most people would be commuting outwards, again reducing traffic congestion. Congestion levels are indeed below those found in other towns of similar size, making journeys by car very quick. Journeys by other modes seem very slow by comparison.

Milton Keynes demonstrates clearly that urban forms designed for the car are fairly hopeless for other modes, certainly walking and public transport:

- The grid roads are spaced at 1km intervals. Thus whether

buses run along the grid roads or within the grid squares a large proportion of the population will be more than 300 metres from the nearest bus stop.

- Within the grid squares the road layouts are mostly designed to prevent through movement, so bus routes using them necessarily twist and turn. This slows journey times and makes it difficult to know where buses go. Pedestrians get similarly disoriented.
- The main grid roads are accompanied by wide landscaped swathes, thus pushing development out of sight and away from bus stops on the grid roads, creating lengthy walking routes that are dangerously isolated.

The original idea of the master planners was that local centres would be located on main roads. The realised plan is very different with local centres mostly tucked away out of sight (and reach) of drivers. The separation of pedestrians and cyclists from other traffic has made the paths deserted places that are perceived by many as dangerous. In any case most destinations are too far to walk to. The lack of cycling, however, is less easily explained, with cultural factors probably being uppermost. The early residents of Milton Keynes were people trying to escape the poverty and privations of inner city living. Having 'made it' to a car and a home of your own, why on earth would you then want to be seen on a bike?

Central Milton Keynes has a strong retail and leisure presence and it accounts for a goodly proportion of employment in the town. This, one would think, would make it well suited to public transport. A recent study[1] proposed that the present rag-taggle bus routes and timetables be replaced with eight high quality and fast routes on regular schedules. These routes would all serve the main central boulevard that connect the centre to the station. A major snag was that the boulevard had a few years earlier been severed by closing a section of it and building a retail canopy over (take a look at Google Earth.) Buses therefore are permanently diverted, removing them from view and slowing journey times.

FUTURE GROWTH

Milton Keynes is expected to grow substantially and major areas for development are identified both to the east and to the west. The big challenge will be to make the switch away from the 1km grid road structure in order to overcome the structural problems just discussed.

Another idea is to convert some of the major grid roads into development spines with public transport and cycle priority and mixed use frontage development. This would enable densities to be beefed up, and also to create more vibrant locations for local shopping and employment. The grid road corridors amazingly are wide enough in many places to accommodate at least a single development block on either side. This would help to boost non-car travel, at least from the 8,000 or more dwellings that could be accommodated in this way.

Even with all the suggested improvements, it is predicted that the town will struggle to get public transport up to 10 per cent of all trips. This is more than double the current percentage but only a modest contribution to reducing the supremacy of the car.

Other growth areas may have the chance to create a more favourable urban structure, but many of the planned schemes are a long way from best practice in other parts of Europe ensuring that cars will be used sparingly by their occupants. So, in conclusion, the trend of increasing car use will continue, with the average figure being pulled higher by the failure to find a different way of doing things in the growth areas. I only wish I were wrong.

Tim Pharoah is a transport and urban planner working independently and for Llewelyn Davies Yeang.

1 *Public Transport Long Term Vision*, for Milton Keynes Council and English Partnerships, Faber Maunsell with Tim Pharoah, 2003

There is little evidence that the trend towards car dependence will be reversed in the South East growth areas

Opposite page left A typical 1km grid square shows a tortuous route (broken line) for bus services and a local centre away from the main road.
Opposite page right A new [redacted] structure designed for reasonable bus catchments (400m radius from stops)
Top New housing with an impermeable layout encourages car use.
Middle Isolated bus stops on landscaped road. The message is clear; go by car.
Above Rieselfeld, Freiburg, Germany. A structure designed for low car use