

## Recalling Milton Keynes: visions of suburbia

David Prichard interviewed by Dhruv Sookhoo



1 David Prichard, 2017.

David Prichard reflects on his experience of changing suburban development and housing innovation under the patronage of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation during the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1972, David Prichard joined Richard MacCormac and Peter Jamieson to form the architectural practice of MacCormac Jamieson Prichard [1]. He has contributed to the design and delivery of residential masterplans and developments across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, including in the New Towns of Milton Keynes, Cwmbrân, Warrington, Basildon and the London Docklands, and leading the Ballymun Regeneration Masterplan. Here, he reflects on his experience of changing suburban planning, development, and tender

processes that operated under the direction of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation (MKDC) during the 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>1</sup> His experience captured the transition from the shared certainties of public commissioning through ‘housing cost yardstick’ and mandatory Parker Morris Space Standards, to dwindling public sector funding for mainstream housing for social rent, a commitment to value for money understood economically, and a new emphasis on the promotion of low-cost home ownership such as shared ownership. As such, he worked with the MKDC as a specialist housing architect during both ‘standard-led’ and ‘value-led’ commissioning regimes, and worked effectively with speculative housebuilders to manage issues of design quality as ‘develop and construct’ contracts were introduced,<sup>2</sup> being forerunners to contemporary design and build contracts. Prichard’s approach to practice anticipates the challenges facing contemporary practitioners attempting to maintain professional autonomy and realise design quality following planning permission.<sup>3</sup>

**Dhruv Sookhoo (DS):** Suburbia means different things to different people. What does the word mean to you?

**David Prichard (DP):** I was very lucky. My childhood during the 1950s was spent in a green suburb with a river, a park, a common, and a garden to roam around. All suburbs should offer that open environment for young families, and other generations too.

**DS:** Does Milton Keynes provide that suburban character?



2 Chapter House, Coffee Hall, 1974–7.

**DP:** Yes, Milton Keynes learnt the lessons from earlier New Towns in postwar Britain. Its location is ideal to support a thriving economy, being blessed with excellent transport and landscape infrastructure. Thanks to a talented design team, it planned for expansion with facilities for leisure and small retail in each neighbourhood.

**DS:** Suburbia is often identified with family living, and frequently sameness. But you were involved in the development of suburban housing for younger people.

**DP:** Yes, suburbia should not *only* be for families, it should be welcoming for younger people too. At Chapter House, Coffee Hall (1974–7), we were commissioned to create a pleasant environment for single people and young couples coming to live in Milton Keynes for the first time [2]. We were asked to design conventional flats on the ground floor with access to communal courts for established couples, and provide clusters of bedsits for young, mobile keyworkers above. Separating out the two social categories over two storeys may be problematic. But the client did attempt to address younger people's needs by providing a common room at the heart of the project, offering a laundry room to help save money, and creating plenty of

opportunities for socialising in collegiate courtyards. That's quite a contrast to today where younger people are left to fend for themselves, often sharing houses with little privacy.

I hadn't been back to Chapter House until yesterday. The whole thing has changed. Lots of the bedsits have been joined together, apartments knocked through to make bigger homes, you can't get into any of the courtyards, and the car park and planted perimeter are not very well maintained. It's such a shame. When the scheme was complete, the Queen flew in on a helicopter to see how young people, leaving home and coming to Milton Keynes, were being looked after by being given appropriate accommodation. Giving young people an opportunity to live and benefit from a suburban environment whether they rent or own their home should still be a priority.

**DS:** What did you mean when you said MKDC provided a clear vision that supported your work as a housing architect?

**DP:** MKDC's bold vision reflected the optimism of the 1960s, and the love of the new. In the early 1970s there was still sufficient confidence to make good on compulsory purchase orders to assemble land, and then finance and deliver all the infrastructure upfront to make

new housing schemes as pleasant and convenient places to live as possible. That's virtually unheard of today.

As an organisation, MKDC was a well-oiled machine capable of leading each aspect of the development process from planning and design, to costing and construction, and eventually place management. In the beginning, resourcing within the organisation matched the scale of Milton Keynes, which necessitated a collaboratively minded, multidisciplinary team. The MKDC invested in design expertise and I think it's fair to say that planning and development decisions were informed by in-house architects, landscape architects, and other advisers. Access to this expertise undoubtedly improved the consistency of decision-making and outcomes in terms of design quality.

It was the era of real town planning, not just the reactive development control that characterises much planning practice today. Unlike some other new towns, the sheer pace, ambition, and intelligence of development processes at Milton Keynes attracted international visitors, who came to see how our planners and wider public sector realised change.

**DS:** How did this approach to planning attempt to integrate

existing and new communities? I have read heroic accounts of delivering a modern vision for Milton Keynes, but it must have been challenging to realise integration without imposing a modern vision on existing villages?

**DP:** Three of the ten schemes we built in Milton Keynes were village extensions, but our land parcels came forward some years after their designation. We hoped that, by virtue of their design, the existing communities who were experiencing change saw benefits. Milton Keynes was conceived on a kilometre square grid: a soft web that draped over the undulating countryside, embracing numerous villages and towns, and the existing populations of Bletchley, New Bradwell, Stony Stratford, and Wolverton. The grid square aimed to defend these villages from through-traffic and fairly distribute schools, surgeries, shops, public transport, and recreation facilities to support the enlarged population. I may be wrong, but I don't think the existing strong communities displayed strong NIMBY attitudes, potentially because planned investment in new facilities paid dividends for existing residents as well as new ones.

**DS:** The idea of the infrastructure as a 'soft web' is evocative. What is surprising for me, about *The Plan for Milton Keynes*, was its consideration of green space against topography.<sup>4</sup> Their idea is communicated in the planning document by superimposing colour and annotation over an image of a physical model [3]. The graphics describing the distribution of land use are vibrant and striking, and the same codified language runs through the whole document [4-6]. The document is restrained, but it communicates its spatial vision in a graphically coherent way.

What do you remember of how the vision for Milton Keynes was communicated to you as an architect?

**DP:** There was so much green proposed, and a huge amount was delivered up front. It was an integral part of MKDC's vision for their new town. New housing estates in those days were often very raw, treeless places. Whereas MKDC appreciated the need to make land parcels look attractive to investors, and for the trees to be better than pipe cleaners at handover.

What this meant was that, to satisfy MKDC, you had to consider

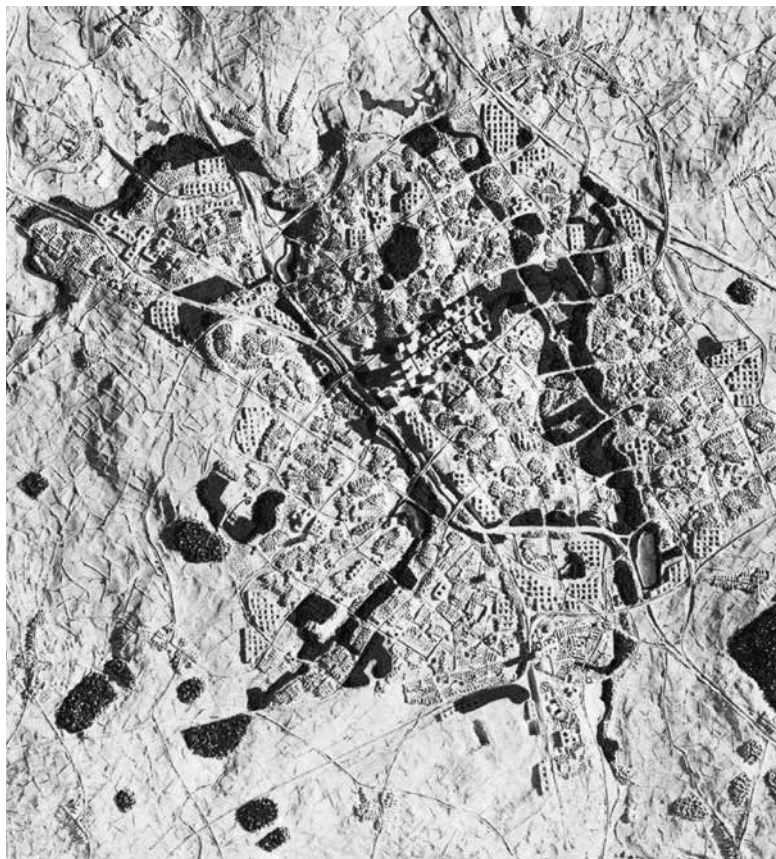
landscape and topographic context from the outset, as infrastructure. As parcel architects, we were expected to dress each street, coordinate with neighbouring land parcels, and work with MKDC's landscape architects on our grid square to ensure the planned green spaces added up to a coherent, distinctive collection of quality places.

**DS:** You have described the process of delivering the intended design quality for residential schemes as a 'game'. What did you mean?

**DP:** A funding game, yes. Before 1981, most social housing schemes in Milton Keynes were designed in-house, with a few consultant architects thought sufficiently conversant with the housing cost yardstick funding method to be trusted to tackle social housing. The game started with this funding regime, where you needed a smart quantity surveyor to help articulate the effect of abnormal ground conditions, manipulate site areas, calibrate housing mix and densities, consider house frontages, all using what was then the National Building Agency's Metric House Shell plans. Every plan had to be drawn to a 300 mm planning grid, fulfil mandatory Parker Morris Space Standards within a tolerance of 1%, and be illustrated using the prescribed furniture schedule. After much wriggling of the plans to improve funding outcomes, we usually found the Department of the Environment allocated budget was *just enough* to achieve a reasonable quality outcome.

**DS:** How did you play the game to best effect to achieve improved residential design quality?

**DP:** France Furlong, Great Linford (1975-8), is a good example of how we were able to play the game to achieve a sociable quality of place [7-9]. The yardstick and development practice at the time were pushing increased densities in suburban housing, and with it the need to accommodate increasing numbers of cars. John Ellis and Richard MacCormac led the project, and found there was no precedent in the existing village for cars on front drives. So, where do you put the cars? Answer: into recessed car courts accessed between buildings. The idea grew from one of my student schemes,



3 Open space within Milton Keynes, major open spaces shown in a solid tone.

in which I broke up terraces to displace and integrate car parks. Richard was my tutor at the time. Great Linford was the first time that we were able to explore the concept in practice, in relation to real context.

Fragmenting and cranking the houses added character, and because they hugged the pavement, there was money left within the yardstick formula for well-detailed paths that led to a village green behind them. We tried to produce a sense of arrival and structure public space using low-cost screens and pergolas. Often with social housing then, architects couldn't afford back garden fences; you just got post and wire. But we always *scrimped and scrapped* to make sure we offered privacy in the back garden. Where there was a front garden, we managed to give residents a decent wall, railing or hedge. A recurring theme was wrestling with a slim budget to create durable hard landscaping and soft landscaping, in the knowledge that, without ingenuity, the quality of the place would probably deteriorate for lack of maintenance funds.

**DS:** Contemporary practitioners tend to romanticise past



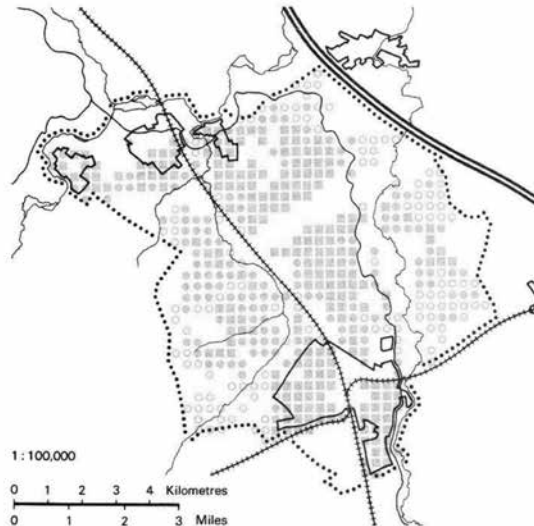
Land Use	Hectares	Acres	%
Gross residential area	4,700	11,570	53.0
Open space	1,160	2,860	13.0
Transport	1,000	2,470	11.3
Employment	800	1,970	9.0
Education	360	890	4.0
Reserve	360	890	4.0
Centres and Health	260	640	3.0
Brickfields	240	590	2.7
<b>Totals</b>	<b>8,880</b>	<b>21,880</b>	<b>100.0</b>

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- Residential areas
- Employment areas
- Centres
- Secondary schools
- Higher education
- Health campus with district general hospital
- Sewage disposal works
- Brickfields
- Open space
- Golf courses
- Reserve
- Main roads
- Motorways
- Railway
- Transport (20% of the land allocation is shown above. The remainder is incorporated as part of the allocation shown for other uses.)

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- 25 dwellings per hectare (10 dwellings per acre)
- 20 dwellings per hectare (8 dwellings per acre)
- 15 dwellings per hectare (6 dwellings per acre)

6

4-6 Land Use Budget, Strategic Plan, and Residential Densities planned for Milton Keynes.



mandatory housing standards and the public bureaucratic processes that administered them. Is there potential to overlook the contributions to the public good by private sector practitioners? Did you feel a sense that the public and private sector worked to a shared vision?

**DP:** It's important to understand that the yardstick funding regime was not set up to deliver a fancy vision. It was administered by quantity surveyors to squeeze more homes out of the same pot of money. Overall, it was the vision, rather than bureaucratic control that inspired talented private and public architects to rub halfpennies together to make better homes and neighbourhoods, rather than just play a numbers game.

I felt that there was a good camaraderie between MKDC in-house teams and private consultants. The in-house teams found the different perspectives of consultant architects valuable, and I think they found us supportive. We worked closely with them, and came to appreciate the pressures they were under. Importantly, the MKDC team selected private practices that they wanted to work with, and who had a reputation that could enhance the bigger picture and share in their social vision. It's fair to say that the private practices working for MKDC did as much to shape and realise the vision for Milton Keynes as the public sector planners and architects employed there directly.

Initially, MKDC offered most consultant services. That changed in the 1980s with the Thatcherite shift away from state-funded social housing. The challenge for MKDC was to be inventive and harness developers' appetite by pioneering new models of land sale, shared ownership, and bespoke versions

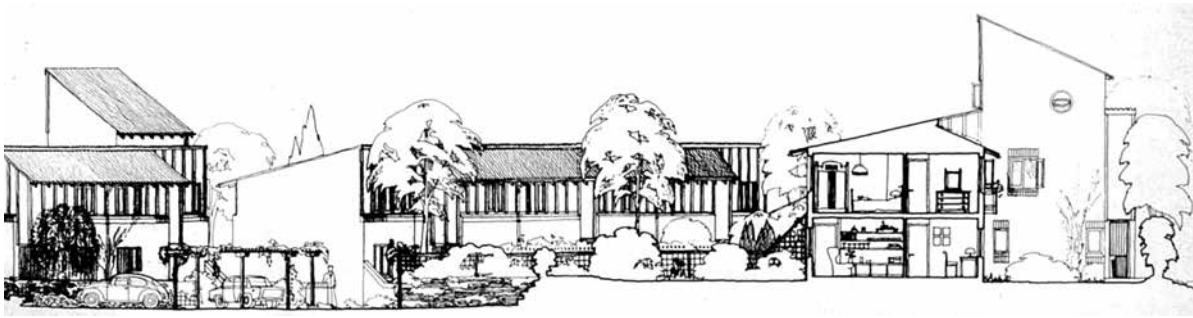


7–9 France Furlong, Great Linford, 1975–8.

of 'develop and construct' contracts. Where private practice architects were employed, these changes meant they were more influential in defining and delivering better quality housing. We were on the frontline with developers, always working in a very time precious way.

**DS:** You continued to undertake housing commissions in Milton Keynes as the priority shifted from publicly funded housing for local authority rent, to low-cost home ownership and private sale. How did this alter the way you worked for quality?





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10–12 Tranlands Brigg, Heelands, 1980–2.

**DP:** Parker Morris went along with the housing cost yardstick. There was a greater focus on cost, valuation, and what would sell. MKDC's develop and construct contract allowed contractors to use different construction methods when competing for MKDC-owned sites. The contract was a forerunner

to design and build (D&B) contracts and common development culture today. Architects working in Milton Keynes were conscious that something had changed professionally in terms of our ability to define quality through the project. But we probably didn't realise at the time the extent to

which D&B would become the norm.

**DS:** How did this new procurement process impact on design development?

**DP:** Tranlands Brigg, Heelands (1980–2), was a guinea pig scheme.

It was built in Frameform timber kit system. We were using orientation and working with topography to optimise solar gain to reduce energy consumption, and we were challenging the established suburban form. The scheme used paired pavilions formed from clusters of houses to act as gateways and give presence in between the main terraces that hugged the hillside contours. These 'frogs' eyes' housed a bedroom on the second floor [10–12]. The project was converted late in the design process to be one of the first design and build schemes.

On shared ownership schemes, such as Great Holm, Willen Park and Bradwell Common, an incredibly fast pace was set. You got one month for the architects within MKDC to approve and tick-off from a budget point of view. You were given another month to tidy it all up, sort out stray elevations and submit it to planning. Planning permission was more or less automatic, with much of the detail going through on reserved matters. Tender followed a month later. So, within a three-month period you had to come up with the idea, get it costed and get it out to tender. Then you were involved in the project as contract administrator. MKDC would continue to refine this approach further.

**DS:** Did this have implications for how you managed design quality?

**DP:** Yes, what we had learnt from working at Heelands and hearing from other people was: if you didn't draw it, you were just never going to get it. There was huge pressure on the team to draw everything you cared about. You drew all the elevations, all the hard landscape, all the soft landscape, all the fences including the detail at 1:20, just to make sure the money was there and the contractor could not say he didn't understand and he was going to do it his way.

**DS:** Some perceived the housing yardstick and mandatory design standards as being too restrictive and distorting design outcomes. Did working with developers on shared ownership schemes offer greater opportunities for innovation?

**DP:** The new approval processes for shared ownership compared market value with construction costs.

Everyone was concerned with estimated valuation produced by the surveyor and whether they felt it would sell. At Heelands, the developer was concerned that houses in the pavilions would not sell. But what we found on completion was the scheme was popular with young families. The pavilions were by far the most popular. Children loved the pop-up bedroom, because it offered views across the landscape. Similarly, at Willen Park (1984–5), we put living rooms on the first floor to capture views of the canal. The sales team voiced concern. But when buyers walked into the property, they understood our thinking. So, innovation was possible, but there was resistance and risk where the valuation couldn't capture economically the value of a design decision.

**DS:** Did valuation methods struggle to assess unconventional forms of suburban development?

**DP:** Yes, and it largely still does. Market valuation favours the known: the relative economic value of semis and other standard house types set out in familiar residential layouts.

**DS:** Do you think the perspective that suburban development is staid, has a fixed spatial formula and is produced through apparently unchanging development practices, prevents demand for new forms of suburban innovation?

**DP:** I don't think anyone is put off by suburbia. On the contrary, the ideal of merging town and country is still very appealing. Architects are depressed by a lot of suburbia, because of its poor planning, banal design and inferior built quality. Developers always say that the current suburban model it is what the customer wants. But we all know, often the customer has little choice!

Innovation of the suburban form is urgently needed, particularly to meet current and emerging social issues, such as promoting active aging and helping young people find somewhere affordable to live. There is potential to increase the density of some suburban areas in high demand. This intensification would make more sustainable use of land, increase housing affordability, use existing transport infrastructure and make

communities more viable to service. But it takes ingenuity, thoughtfulness, civic leadership, and time to realise these solutions. Nationally, the reigns of our Housing Ministers, and their housing policy, is short-lived. The current one [at the time of interview], Brokenshire, recently announced a policy to extend Permitted Development to allow two extra storeys.<sup>5</sup> That seems to be the most crude and destructive proposition for suburban intensification. If rolled out, the unintended consequences will be appalling for neighbours and anyone with a flicker of visual awareness.

**DS:** Your professional education seems to have primed you for work on large-scale residential projects with a social agenda, where suburban development was perceived as part of the solution?

**DP:** In my student days, housing was thought to be too complex for students to tackle. It is complex but, to counter that, the sooner you start to engage critically with housing the better. As a postgraduate I did two self-defined housing projects: one on communal living, and another a national housing competition. I met visiting critics who were pioneers in the field of housing, who later employed me. For me, university was a route into the real world of housing design. As a newly qualified architect, the social housing movement fitted my ambition to be socially useful and help build a better, less divided society. I understood suburbs of the 1930s were often made of cheap materials, were places of monotony, and ultimately built for profit. But I also understood that there was no need for suburbs to be that way, and the challenge for us as architects was to do our best for people to build better quality, sociable suburban places. Universities, practices, and students should do their best to continue to forge these connections to empower future architects to engage not only with best practice, but future practice, while they are students.

**DS:** Do you think suburbia deserves more attention as a residential form, able to drive innovation?

**DP:** Yes, suburbia is the ideal context for test-bed schemes.

Optimistically, just a few nudges are needed to liberate exciting options for more people to have the security of a dignified home throughout their lives. Suburban development is critical, because I don't believe high-rise is the answer to our housing crisis. Low- and medium-rise is better value and more readily deliverable at scale. New settlements are needed, and their infrastructure requires state funding and new mechanisms to capture and reinvest the increases in land value locally to support developing communities. Poor housing management and poor maintenance is conspicuous. Until this is tackled, we are condemned to an unaffordable cycle of urban renewal.

Innovative designs only see the light of day when supported by pioneering clients, with clever financing devices. The standard housebuilders' development model does not encourage social or design innovation, but favours approaches known to generate necessary profit margins at sale and continue the development cycle. Innovation is needed in the development of finance models better able to broaden home ownership. For example, by transitioning tenancies into ownerships or funding communal living models for extended families and older people.

## Notes

1. Derek Walker, *The Architecture and Planning of Milton Keynes* (London: The Architectural Press Ltd, 1982), p. 108. Walker served as Chief Architect and Planner for Milton Keynes Development Corporation (1970–6), overseeing the 40% of design work undertaken by private practice architects and directly by undertaken within in-house teams. Terence Bendixson and John Platt, *Milton Keynes: Image and Reality* (Cambridge: Granta Editions, 1992) provides useful insight into the concerns of organisational actors within MKDC.
2. Ruth Owens, 'The Estate of the Nation', in *The Architects' Journal* 181, Pt. 16 (17 April 1985), 36–41.
3. David Prichard, and contemporary housing architects, including David Levitt, Bill Thomas and Edward Burd, reflected on their approach to managing design quality through D&B and other non-traditional procurement

- methods when working with housing associations during the 1980s, in: Martin Spring, 'Procuring by numbers', *Building* 255, Pt. 7668 (12 October 1990), 14–22. For insight into the issues confronting contemporary practitioners attempting to realise residential design quality through design and build contracts, see: Sarah Wigglesworth, "'WLTM Caring Contractor": The Dating Game of Design and Build Contracts', *arq: Architecture Research Quarterly*, 6:3 (September 2012), 210–16, and Sarah Wigglesworth, 'The Battle for Quality in Design', *RIBA Journal*, 125:8 (August 2018), 42–54.
4. Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker and Bor, *The Plan for Milton Keynes: Presented by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation to the Minister of Housing and Local Government, Volume One* (Wavendon, Blechley, Buckinghamshire: Milton Keynes Development Corporation, 1970).
  5. Rt Hon. James Brokenshire MP served as Secretary of State for Housing, Communities, and Local Government for less than three months, leaving the Cabinet before this interview was published.

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## Authors' biographies

David Prichard completed his professional training as an architect at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, receiving the Sir Andrew Taylor Prize for a suburban housing competition entry. He joined Richard MacCormac and

Peter Jamieson to form MacCormac Jamieson Prichard in 1972, and founded Metropolitan Workshop with Neil Deely in 2005. In 2013, David was instrumental in the development of the RIBA/Wates Group winning competition entry, with the late Sir Richard MacCormac PPRIBA, which devised new typologies and neighbourhood arrangements able to offer the flexibility needed by those privately renting in suburbia.

Dhruv Adam Sookhoo is Head of Research and Practice Innovation at Metropolitan Workshop, Visiting Fellow at Newcastle University and the newly appointed Chair of the RIBA's national Expert Advisory Group for Housing. He is a chartered architect, chartered town planner, and experienced residential development practitioner.

## Authors' addresses

David Prichard  
[david.prichard@network.co.uk](mailto:david.prichard@network.co.uk)

Dhruv Adam Sookhoo  
[dhruv.sookhoo@network.co.uk](mailto:dhruv.sookhoo@network.co.uk)  
[dhruv.sookhoo@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:dhruv.sookhoo@newcastle.ac.uk)