

**Good Cities, Better Lives: How Europe Discovered the Lost Art of Urbanism**, Peter Hall  
(with contributions from Nicholas Falk) Routledge, 2013. 356 pages, ISBN: 978-0-415-84022-4, £34.99 (Paperback).

The central premise of Sir Peter Hall's new book is that, '...British planners have lost the art of urbanism' (p.306); whereas once the UK led the world in urban design and creative approaches to planning, more recently the UK has gone backwards and the current generation of planners do not possess the breadth of knowledge and skill to develop innovative world-leading places.

*Good cities, Better Lives: How Europe Discovered the Lost Art of Urbanism* should be of interest to all those involved in planning, human geography and urban studies, whether academics or practitioners. It is a blueprint for the next generation of planners and urbanists, illustrating what can be done with vision, tenacity, financial support and technical skills to creatively develop vibrant and sustainable places. The book has a crisp and logical structure. Part One outlines five societal challenges that the UK faces: Spatial economic inequality between (and within) regions; stuttering housing delivery and poor quality new developments; dated and poorly connected public transport; a mediocre record on environmental sustainability; a fiscal and governance structure which is not fit for purpose. Hall leaves the reader in no doubt that the UK, could and *should* be doing significantly better, if it is to '...create better cities and towns in which to live work and play?' (p.4).

Part Two embarks on a continental tour, drawing on the author's wealth of knowledge of innovative best-practice case studies in urban sustainability. It begins in Germany with the enviable German record on economic resilience, competitiveness and innovation, before moving on to the Netherlands' spectacularly successful VINEX programme of centrally planned and locally delivered new housing. Next is the French approach of connecting key cities via major investment in high-speed rail infrastructure, then a tour of Scandinavia to showcase outstanding approaches to energy efficient and living within finite resources, and finally back to Germany, to Freiburg – to the city that tackled all five of the societal challenges that the UK is facing and appears to have succeeded in mastering them all.

In the final section of the book, Hall draws together the analysis of the previous chapters and asks what the UK can learn from the success of our European neighbours. The overriding theme of Hall's analysis is that there is no panacea or 'quick win' strategy to emulate this success. The roots of success elsewhere in Europe have been systematically planned, developed and generously funded for at least a decade. Indeed to achieve a commensurate quality of development and infrastructure, the UK requires a radical new interventionist approach, including significant changes in governance to truly empower city-regions, real devolution of the control of financial levers and a central state which prioritises investment in infrastructure *throughout* the country.

Hall allows himself to indulge in sketching out a 'big picture' normative vision of the well-connected, successful city with plentiful and rewarding employment, outstanding public transport, high quality energy-efficient homes in sustainable natural settings and a vibrant urban life. This vision should be read alongside a complimentary text like Adams and Tiesdall (2013) *Shaping Places: Urban Planning, Design and Development* which fills in some of the finer grain, nitty-gritty, detail of how to create successful and sustainable places.

The narrative is rich with historical and cultural context mined from the wealth of Hall's previous texts (i.e. Hall (2008) *Cities in Civilization: Culture, Technology and Urban Order*); perhaps in part, the level of contextual detail is simply overwhelming and will defeat the casual reader. This is a shame as Hall outlines a clear and persuasive analysis of the causes of the malaise that the UK finds itself in and he offers a much needed source of inspirational alternative approaches. The book effectively outlines the parameters of a critical debate that the UK must conduct within the next 3-5 years, if it wants to remain amongst the most developed countries in the world. The UK's infrastructure is visibly creaking, housing markets are spiralling out of control with a relative dearth of affordable homes, the vast majority of employment opportunities are clustered in one region, fundamentally, '...existing mechanisms are not working well, or in some cases are hardly working at all' (p.74).

The two most striking themes which recur throughout the book (and Hall's previous work) are persistent regional imbalances, in terms of economic competitiveness across the UK and the need to give cities more autonomy from the 'dead hand of Whitehall'. Hall advocates that old industrial cities in the UK should emulate the German model, citing the example of Kessel, where the renaissance of an old industrial city has been led by a partnership between the public sector and the local university to strategically develop scientific knowledge into spin out industries and high skilled jobs. To some extent, Hall then goes on to immediately undermine his prescription by describing how Newcastle has tried to follow a similar approach to Kessel, by developing a Life Science Campus in the heart of the city. The stuttering development of Newcastle's Science Central has suffered multiple setbacks through its gestation, setbacks which have largely been *directly* due to the decisions of central government. Much of Hall's normative prescription for the renaissance of former industrial areas appears doomed in the current pragmatic environment where successive UK governments continue to 'pick winners' and concentrate higher education research funding in a tightly defined 'golden triangle'.

Hall also goes on to state that a key part of the solution to the shrinking industrial cities in the UK is the '...creation of strong dedicated agencies to carry forward the planning and development process' (p.296). In England, the Coalition government has progressively dismantled existing regional development agency structures and via unprecedented budgets reductions has emasculated the strategic planning function at the local level. The hastily assembled and poorly resourced Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) do not appear equipped to carry out the crucial function that Hall outlines in developing long term, spatial connected strategies for the renaissance of major English cities

In conclusion, despite a slight tendency for excessive contextual detail in some chapters, Hall has produced an extremely well-written, rigorous and thought-provoking book, which is undeniably accurate in its central theme that UK cities can and *must* do better in terms of long term spatial planning and urban design. The book excels in outlining a sobering reminder of the challenges that the UK faces but is perhaps overly optimistic in its normative prescriptions for extricating the struggling parts of the country from their economic predicament; unless we have a truly radical interventionist government, which seems highly unlikely in the 'timid' neo-liberal austerity era.

In this book Peter Hall has distilled the wisdom of an illustrious academic career into an ambitious blueprint for future successful, sustainable, resilient and equitable places. In writing this normative vision Hall has passed on the baton and set down the challenge for the next generation of academics

and practitioners, to attempt to surmount the governance and financial obstacles, and realise the vision of *Good Cities, Better Lives*. This text will sit alongside an array of seminal planning texts written by Peter Hall as lasting testament to a fine, enquiring mind that was constantly seeking to gather knowledge about places and distil it into real world solutions to facilitate the development of more sustainable and equitable places; sadly Peter Hall passed away on the 30th July 2014.

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### References

Adams, D. and S, Tiesdall (2013) *Shaping Places: Urban Planning, Design and Development*,

Hall, P. (1998) *Cities in Civilization: Culture, Technology, and Urban Order*, London: Weidenfeld& Nicolson