

What's wrong with urban planning in Britain today

Peter Hall introduces his new book *Good Cities, Better Lives* which argues that since the golden years of the late 1960s, we've progressively lost our ability to plan

Fifty years ago this summer – 1963, the year of miniskirts, the Profumo-Keeler affair and the Beatles' first LP – an angry young man wrote a prophetic book with the title *London 2000*. Published by Faber and Faber, best known for poetry, decorated by a flamboyant dust jacket, it caused a minor sensation, with big reviews in the broadsheets – not the usual reception for an unknown 31-year-old geographer.

I was the author, and I wrote it to challenge the planning orthodoxy of the time. The planners, I argued, had comfortably assumed that they could contain London's endless growth through the green belt and the eight new towns they were building beyond it. Not so, I argued: London and Londoners were flooding out into the Home Counties into ugly, poorly-designed new suburbs.

Instead, I published a manifesto: we must build no less than 28 further new towns, at locations up to 70 miles from the capital. In the final chapter I described the Dumills, an archetypal year 2000 family, who lived in one of them, Hamstreet outside Ashford in Kent. Edward Dumill commuted to his job at the University of South London by a train that had come from Boulogne through the Channel Tunnel. His wife Mary drove up the New Kent Motorway that evening to celebrate their wedding anniversary in one of west London's many new restaurants, taking care to arrive after the end of the London congestion charge.

Half a century on, I reflect that I got some things wrong. There aren't yet any Eurostar commuters from Boulogne; Channel Tunnel tolls make the fares prohibitive. London's South Bank University is at the Elephant and Castle, not Brixton. Mary has to thread her way through dense London traffic because my circular motorway was abandoned in 1973.

Most important, the 28 new towns were never built. Instead, as part of a regional strategy I helped shape in 1967, during Harold Wilson's reforming Labour government, we got big three new cities – at Milton Keynes, Peterborough and Northampton: I had a hand in the first two. Thinking back, Wordsworth seems apposite: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven!"

So the angry young man calmed down – for a while. But now I'm angry again, and I've published a new book to say why. *Good Cities, Better Lives* argues that since those golden years of the late 1960s, we've progressively lost our ability to plan. We've demolished the regional planning structures that formed the base of the system, and have again left it to random private initiatives to shape the places in which we live. And the predictable result, just as half a century ago, is a huge mess. We are experiencing massive regional imbalance, whereby London and its surrounding region is detaching itself from the rest of the UK economy. We are building fewer new homes



than in any peacetime year since the 1920s: just two in five of the new homes we need. And the physical result is dismal. Do you wonder why South East England is full of Nimbys? It's because no sane person would ever want to look out at what is being built. Nor are these homes up to the best environmental standards set by other European nations. And we haven't developed any coherent concept to link transport investments with new urban development, as the Dutch have done so brilliantly: look at HS2, which roars at 250 miles an hour through southern England without a single station.

Meanwhile, our neighbours have overtaken us. The brilliant new developments, visited by admiring tour groups of British planners, are now in Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, France and Germany. In the central part of the new book we go on what a 21st-Century Grand Tour, visiting each of them: Hammarby Sjöstad, a new-town-in-town in the centre of Stockholm; the Western Harbour, a similar redevelopment of an old industrial area in Malmö, facing out to look at the new bridge from Copenhagen; new Dutch suburbs like Almere outside Amsterdam and Ypenburg next to The Hague; developments along new tram lines, as in Montpellier's spectacular new corridor to the Mediterranean; and, saved for the end, Freiburg in south west Germany, the university city that got everything right.

At the end, I produce yet another manifesto for what we need to do to replicate their successes, and how to achieve it. One central recommendation: we should rebuild our planning system so that – as in these model places – it masterplans the new developments before handing them over to private builders or owner-cooperatives to build. Those countries, the classic European social democrat welfare states of the 1950s and 1960s, also moved towards the free market in the 1970s and 1980s. But over the last three decades they have emerged with a very different model of urban development than ours: one where public action and public investment provide the >>>



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infrastructure base and the development planning framework for the private sector, giving it the surety that in reality it craves and to which it enthusiastically responds. This model, in all its variants, is out there waiting to be borrowed, developed and improved.

But, considered in detail, the precise prescription cannot follow simply from European best practice. The reason is that their geographies are different from ours. Save for France, no other EU country is so dominated by a huge capital city. Hardly any other EU member state is showing such demographic vitality as ours: across much of Europe, the challenge is how to handle population decline, not growth. No other capital city is facing a projected one and a half million additional people over the next two decades. Put these differences together, and the neat read-across from Sweden and the Netherlands and Germany doesn't work. They can do urban extensions to their medium-sized cities, served by tramlines; we have massive London and its equally massive green belt, which has been a central feature of our planning strategy since World War Two.

Therefore, the answers have to be subtly different. For six decades, with varied degrees of enthusiasm and competence, we've pursued programmes of long-distance – very long-distance – decentralisation of people and jobs from London into the surrounding Greater South East region. After World War Two, we built eight new towns in the ring between 20 and 35 miles from London – a distance we thought would guarantee they wouldn't become pure dormitory towns. Ray Thomas's work in the 1960s showed that this assumption had held good, but it began to crumble soon afterwards as motorways and rail electrification shrank commute times. At that point – and here London 2000 played a role – we reluctantly accepted that the South East was continuing to grow and that we would have to build a further generation of new and expanded towns, even farther distant: places like Milton Keynes and Northampton and Peterborough and Swindon, 60 to 80 miles away. They too, now, are sending flows of long-distance commuters into London. But, critically important, not so many: in these places,

more than 60 miles from London, a huge majority – 80 per cent and more of the resident population – find jobs locally, with short commutes.

So the answer is clear. We cannot, Canute-like, stop London's continued growth. But we can and we must make redoubled efforts, as we did fifty years ago, to build new homes in places that have good economies to create local jobs, at even greater distances from London than before. Fifteen years ago, in a book with the late Colin Ward, *Sociable Cities*, we spelt out a plan for huge clusters of new towns and town expansions up to 90 miles distant: the City of Kent, stretching from Ebbsfleet in Thames Gateway down to the east Kent coastal resorts and, at their heart, an expanded Ashford; the City of Anglia, a corridor from Cambridge past Huntingdon and north to Peterborough; and the City of Mercia, a horseshoe-shaped chain of towns from Corby, down through Kettering and Wellingborough to Northampton and back up north to Rugby.

Early in 2014, I'll publish an updated edition that takes account of the developments of those intervening years and of the new development prospects – above all, those released by the expansion of the high-speed rail network. This is planned to act as a twin publication to *Good Cities*, seeking to apply its Europe-based conclusions to the very different geography of South East England.

No one should expect that it will be easy. The doubters will always be with us. They were there in 1945, when Frederic Osborn had to use all his powers to persuade Lewis Silkin, who had come from the old London Labour Council to become planning minister in the Attlee government, to accept Patrick Abercrombie's recommendation for eight new towns. They were certainly there in 1963, when London 2000 was received with something like outrage among the planning establishment. They didn't want to hear then; they don't want to hear now. Their strident Nimby voices will rise again. But, for the sake of the millions of people who otherwise will lack adequate homes and decent lives, we need to win this argument all over again. ■

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