

Ron Johnston on remembering urbanist Professor Sir Peter Hall

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*Professor Sir Peter Hall died in July 2014. Active as a scholar, policy analyst and future-thinker almost to the end, his most recent book – **Good Cities, Better Lives** – appeared earlier that year, alongside a festschrift edited by his colleagues – **The Planning Imagination**. Here **Ron Johnston** reviews those two books as a contribution to appreciating this amazingly prolific – in every sense – scholar’s contributions to British academic and public life.*

In a career lasting almost sixty years, Peter Hall contributed massively to the study of urbanism in general and the UK in particular. This was achieved through a combination of rigorous academic analysis of both urbanisation trends and the planning policies and mechanisms designed to modify them, plus public commentary on a wide range of related issues containing a continuing flow of ideas of how to plan for more liveable places and better lives, for all.

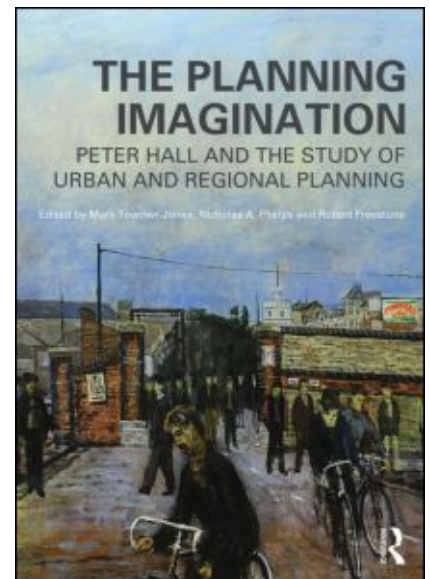
Good Cities, Better Lives: How Europe Discovered the Lost Art of Urbanism brings all of those elements of his career together, in a presentation that is both accessible to a wide range of readers and offers clear blueprints for ways forward. He begins by setting out five challenges currently facing the UK: rebalancing the urban economies – especially north vs south; big cities versus smaller places; building enough new homes, of the right types in the right places; improving transport, especially public transport infrastructure; sustainable development; and ‘fixing broken machinery’ (i.e. the planning system). All have several separate sub-challenges, themselves substantial – Peter is not complacent about where we are compared to where we want/ought to be.

Having identified the challenges, the book’s second half seeks models that can be deployed to tackle them, through a series of European case studies where relevant policies have been successfully introduced. Germany provides examples of how regionally-distributed economic growth has been boosted; the Netherlands is building sustainable, attractive suburbs; France has used transport investment to redevelop cities; Denmark and Sweden show how to conserve resources; and Freiburg is a paradigm of ‘The city that did it all’. These are followed by a long chapter on ‘Learning the lessons’. Answering the ‘what needs to be done?’ questions is relatively straightforward, he claims; implementing the answers will be less easy, but he encapsulates the needed changes in eight points, most of which can be brought together in a single strategy – ‘decentralise (real) power’ to the city regions. And another book in the press – a revised edition of his *Sociable Cities* (the first edition written with Colin Ward) – will set out how this can be done for three of England’s major urban sub-regions: Mercia (focused on Northamptonshire); Anglia (Cambridge to Peterborough); and Kent.



Sir Peter Hall. Credit: [Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

The Planning Imagination: Peter Hall and the Study of Urban and Regional Planning comprises 19 chapters based on presentations at a two-day seminar convened to mark Peter's 80th birthday. After a brief introduction, these are grouped under five headings that encapsulate most of his writing and activity: History of cities and planning; London's growth and development; Spatial planning; Connectivity and mobility; and Globalized urbanization. Some focus on general themes, others on a particular piece of work – such as his magnum opus *Cities in Civilization*. All illustrate the depth as well as breadth of Peter's work, and how he used painstakingly-assembled empirical evidence both to sustain his research conclusions and to underpin many of his prognoses. They also show how far-sighted he was in foretelling the future – he foresaw Skype, the internet, touch screens and iPhones in 1971 (p.253)!



The book's final chapter is Peter's own 'Apologia pro Vita Sua' – much too brief in just 14 pages to more than encapsulate the life of somebody who estimates that he wrote some 2,000 articles (there is a bibliography of his 'formal' academic publications – more than 50 books and 150 chapters/journal articles)



and travelled 70,000 miles a year, but a fascinating insight into what he did and why. He identified early the growing importance of multi-polar metropolises in contemporary urbanisation and established how the failures of British planning policies meant that these places were neither as efficient nor as liveable-in as they could be. He sought lessons on how to improve them from other places – past and present – and sketched out better futures that others could ensure, with the right will and tools.

The urban Britain that Peter encountered as a child and young man was shabby, inefficient and uncoordinated with much of its infrastructure obsolescent. He did much in his career not only to understand why that was – bringing substantial historical depth to his appreciation – but also to change it, through an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the various planning systems implemented since 1945 and his many suggestions – some implemented – for their improvement. He continued pursuing that goal to the end, as illustrated by *Good Cities, Better Lives*. These two books are a superb tribute to an influential life lived in the academic and public policy fast lanes.

Good Cities, Better Lives: How Europe Discovered the Lost Art of Urbanism. Peter Hall, with contributions from Nicholas Falk. Routledge. 2014.

Find this book:  

The Planning Imagination: Peter Hall and the Study of Urban and Regional Planning. Mark Tewdwr Jones, Nicholas A. Phelps and Robert Freestone (editors). Routledge. 2014.

Find this book:  

Ron Johnston is a professor in the School of Geographical Sciences at the University of Bristol; his most recent contributions to electoral studies include (with Charles Pattie) *Money and Electoral Politics* (The Policy Press, Bristol, 2014) and (with David Rossiter and Charles Pattie) *Equality, Community and Continuity: Reviewing the UK Rules for Constituency Distributions* (available at <http://www.mcdougall.org.uk/publications/papers.html>). [Read more reviews by Ron.](#)

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