



## BOOK REVIEWS

**The robust city** by *Tony Hall*, Routledge, London, UK, 2016, 165 pp. ISBN 978-1-138-63140-3.

This is an important, challenging and fascinating book. In nine chapters spread over 165 pages Tony Hall provides a template for how growing cities could be planned and re-designed in a more effective way than at present. Although the ideas outlined in the book are, in one sense, relatively simple and several are familiar, the author develops a sophisticated argument with impeccable logic in making a persuasive case for change in the philosophical basis of dealing with expanding cities and improving our capacity to deal with such expansion.

Hall's central thesis is that our traditional approach to urban planning has an overemphasis on land-use allocation. In such circumstances, cities are not really designed for future expansion. Or, if they are, it is assumed that this physical growth takes the form of additional, usually discrete, large-scale urban extensions, or sporadic low-density housing at the urban fringe. Both lead to several problems and stem from the initial premise that the primary role of planning is the allocation of land use. Instead, Hall promotes a different approach, one that starts with the view that, in the contemporary world, planning should be 'goal based' and that, in planning the future of urban areas, the two prime drivers should be the pursuit of improvements in the quality of life and the pursuit of sustainability. Furthermore, cities should be designed in such a way that their physical structure can cope with long-term changes. Hall's principal complaint is that contemporary cities are simply not designed for future expansion. When this takes place, costly reconstruction becomes necessary. A 'robust' city would be one where such long-term future impacts had already

been taken into account. Urban morphologists have long observed that, whilst physical structures often persist for relatively long periods, the uses and activities within those physical structures frequently change. Following on from this, Hall points out that if the principle that buildings should be designed in a way that facilitates re-use, adaptation and extension, why not extend that principle to other components of the urban structure, such as street layouts and the design of the whole of an urban area.

The argument develops through initially stressing the persistence of urban physical form, despite the frequent change in activities, recognizing the importance of the private motor vehicle as a key agent of change but then conclusively demonstrating the failure to recognize the full implications of this and incorporate such a recognition within plans for long-term expansion of the city. Recognizing that planning policies are never value free, Hall interrogates which goals and values are most desirable for implementation and based on these, coupled with the desirability of producing a 'robust' urban structure, proceeds to develop a theoretical model for a new city. The basic building blocks for the present and future physical design of cities would be a series of linked *ped-sheds* (acknowledged as a rather ugly term), consisting of settlements linked by high quality public transport routes (beads on a string). Each *ped-shed* would have a maximum radius of 800 metres, based on access by walking to core facilities. These units would have a mixed-use core around a centrally located rail transit system, possess areas of varying residential density and, crucially, green space within and around the *ped-shed*. The latter would consist of private gardens, other planted spaces, parks and playing fields within the 800-metre radius and larger playing fields, urban forests, large areas of parkland and agriculture in the

open space between the *ped-sheds*. Within a large urban system, non-residential *ped-sheds*, accommodating low-intensity commercial, distribution and manufacturing units along with large hospital and educational complexes, could be developed at intervals along the quality public transport links between the residential *ped-sheds*.

Having produced his theoretical city model Hall recognizes that the opportunity to create an entirely new city on the theoretical lines he develops is extremely unlikely, so he then goes on to examine how it could be applied to the extension and intensification of existing cities. The author criticizes the present paradigm for development plans as 'two-dimensional uniform land-use allocations' which are 'an inadequate tool for achieving a more compact, sustainable urban form involving a mix of land uses'. The primary consideration should not be land-use allocation but the outlines of physical form in three dimensions, these in themselves being steered by the desired goals. Land-use allocation should be secondary to the physical guidelines which reflect the more persistent features of urban areas and the ones which are most capable of responding to the desired outcomes of promoting higher quality of life and greater levels of sustainability. The physical structure should be designed in such a way as to cope with social and economic changes rather than subsequently being required to be fundamentally (and expensively) altered to deal with such changes.

A logical consequence of Hall's argument is that key public transport infrastructure should be the essential initial development and all other development should not be allowed if it cannot be reached by a combination of walking and local public transport. This leads to the main criticism of Hall's thesis which is that it simply fails to take into account what has become increasingly evident to this reviewer, namely the selfish frailties of human nature – especially as evidenced in the growth and use (including the way that many people actually drive) of the private motor vehicle. Many people would broadly agree with the desired planning goals of improving the quality of life and increasing levels of sustainability but, equally, many of those same people, despite also recognizing the positives in energy saving and health advantages, would be reluctant to and probably resent the restrictions on traffic speed (to around 50 kph) and the requirements to walk that are essential components of Hall's 'robust' city. In other words, he is absolutely right in theory but, in practice the obstacles to implementation are formidable and would

require an immense amount of political will and public persuasion. Nevertheless, as stated at the outset, this remains an important book and despite this pessimistic comment, one can only admire the optimism that has inspired it. For planning practitioners, and for planning policy makers in particular, it should be required reading.

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**Metropolis Barcelona. Catalogue Vol. 1 – El urbanismo metropolitano hoy / Metropolitan Urban Planning today; Catalogue Vol. 2 – Transformaciones metropolitanas / Metropolitan transformations; Atlas - Cartografías contemporâneas / Contemporary maps** edited by *Carles Crosas*, Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain, 2015. 320 pp. (Vol. 1); 320 pp. (Vol 2); 198 pp. (Atlas). ISBN 978-84-87881-14-5.

This three-volume publication is the general catalogue of an Exhibition supported by the Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona and curated by Joan Busquets, as part of the continuing discussions on, and drafting of, the new *Plan Director Urbanístico Metropolitano* for Barcelona. The exhibition and catalogue outline the evolution of that metropolis during the last 40 years, and point to future planning concerns and challenges. The catalogue, with Catalàn, Spanish and English texts, comprises two printed volumes and a cartographic appendix. Volume 1, *Metropolitan urban planning today*, provides a conceptual and sectorial approach to the main challenges and territorial components, namely: new ways of living and working; the metropolitan form of economic activity; the residential urban fabric; the landscape of the metropolis; ecology, leisure and production; public facilities in the metropolis; the centres of the metropolis; metropolitan mobility; the metropolitan metabolism; Metropolis Barcelona: a capital point in Europe. Volume 2, *Metropolitan transformations*, focuses on the changes experienced by Barcelona since the adoption of the 1976 *Plano Geral Metropolitano* (*Metropolitan Master Plan*), and on the planning