



## Cities in civilization

Michael Batty

To cite this article: Michael Batty (2017): Cities in civilization, *Regional Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/00343404.2017.1301109](https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2017.1301109)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2017.1301109>



Published online: 27 Mar 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 23



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## 50TH ANNIVERSARY BOOK REVIEW COLLECTION

**Cities in civilization**, Peter Hall, Pantheon, New York, 1998. xi + 1169 pp. ISBN 0-88064-250-5 (pbk)

Many great commentators on the urban condition have speculated that despite the obvious logic of cities as being enclaves of social conviviality, innovation and economic progress, they will eventually destroy themselves as the forces that generate their agglomeration eventually implode. Lewis Mumford, whose book *The City in History* (1961) represents one of the most insightful and erudite of urban chronologies, ended up arguing in somewhat melodramatic fashion that evolution and growth from polis to megalopolis in past civilizations always generated necropolis – the city of the dead. More recently, George Gilder in his commentaries on the evolution of technology into a post-industrial society through his books such as *Telecosm* (1998) suggested that:

Big cities are the leftover baggage from the industrial era ... largely due to the fact that new information technologies are continually breaking down ... cities and all other concentrations of power ... implying ... that small, cheap, distributed organizations and technologies will prevail.

(Gilder, quoted in Karlgaard & Malone, 1995, p. 57)

In short, both Gilder and Mumford in their different ways argue that technologies invented in cities contain the seeds of their undoing.

Peter Hall's fundamental contribution to this debate published in 1998 is almost diametrically opposed to the idea that the city is a force for destruction. His *Cities in Civilization* (1998) is a wonderful and vibrant celebration of the view that cities represent the essential force for cultural and technological evolution, that they provide the 'innovative milieu' for all the attributes we recognize as features of a civilized society. Written over a 10-year period nearly 40 years after Mumford's history but contemporaneous with Gilder, this book in many ways is his *magnum opus*, notwithstanding that during his lifetime he wrote or edited some 50 books on cities and their planning. Hall was first and foremost, in my view, an urban historian. His writings from his painstaking and detailed work on 19th-century industries in the port of London – his PhD thesis – to his concern for long waves and creative destruction in the evolution of new information technologies, all set within the wider history of how planning systems in Britain, Europe and America embraced these times of change, were moulded by a concern for history. This in turn represented his search for an explanation of why cities grow to the size they do and why cities contain the kind of diversity that we all recognize as being key to the opportunities they afford to those who live within. His book is a great work of scholarship, and it is complementary to many of those more popular celebrations of urbanity from Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) to Ed Glaeser's *Triumph of the City* (2011).

The book is organized in five parts, the first four of which are in roughly chronological order and deal with individual cities at various points in their history when they reached their zenith of creativity. The distinctive parts of the book reflect cities that were characterized by artistic and intellectual accomplishments, then innovation largely in terms of

industrial and information technologies, followed by those that integrated art and technology in popular music and the cinema, and finally the quest for organization in ever larger, more complex cities. A final part articulates cities as being dominated by new information technologies, particularly the convergence of computers and communications combined with new organizational infrastructures. Surprisingly for a book that uses individual examples of cities as the hallmarks of civilization, all these examples are taken from Western cultures, perhaps with the exception of Tokyo. China is strangely missing. Perhaps this is as much a reflection of the fact that the book ends its history just as China began to rise, in the late 1980s/early 1990s. In this sense, too, the last 20 years have seen the establishment of a sea change in how we view cities as being part of a networked but highly polarized global economy where we have the potential to interact with anyone, anywhere, at any time. The selection of cities to reflect these themes of culture and technology mean that many are left out. By selecting the most obvious examples, there is an historical sense of arbitrariness for again there is no mention here of Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai or Beijing; or even Melbourne, Delhi, Moscow, and so the list goes on. Hall is well aware of this and the way he planned, researched and wrote the book inevitably leads to cruel choices to illustrate his various perspectives. His writing is full of detail and as such it is a wonderful resource about the individual city histories that he recounts. The work is brilliantly written and a joy to read, notwithstanding that many have remarked that the sheer physical size of the book – nearly 1200 pages – presents difficulties for the reader, especially older ones, with the obvious refrain that the book should have been carved up into two or three volumes. Nevertheless, he cannot be faulted for producing some extremely readable histories which are focused on the major themes that cities are the crucibles of creativity, innovation, social organization and economic progress.

Why this book is different from others that have attempted to interpret the history of cities is due to the way Hall explains evolution and change in cities in terms of various theories which have dominated our thinking in the last century. Location theory, which began with von Thunen some two centuries ago and flourished in Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, provides a foundation for explaining why cities grew where they did and why agglomeration economies are so important to their growth into the megacities that now dominate our planet. Marxist theory took an even grander perspective in developing ideas about segregation, polarization and capital accumulation, and how the structure of society determines the kind of cities that evolve and emerge. Hall's own insights into the kinds of creativity and innovative milieux that have dominated the golden ages of the cities that he reviews focus on the role of outsiders as forcing change, while the role of geography and geometry in the location of cities, he argues, is key to why particular cities develop in particular ways at certain times. His notion that it is outsiders, the borderlands and the boundaries of cities that continually reassert themselves in determining what and where a city develops an innovative milieu, permeates these

pages, along with the notion that the bigger the city, the more open it is to new ideas and new peoples. But throughout, he continually asks the question as to why a particular culture or milieu dominated a particular city at a particular place in a particular time. In general terms, he fails to find an answer. All one can say is that a combination of historical accident and the more general social and technological ethos of the age determine a good part of any such answer.

In fact, there are probably no answers or at least no definitive conclusions as to why Athens in the age of Pericles or London in the age of Dickens were so vibrant and resourceful. The reason is that the cities he identifies are only snapshots or samples from a world of cities where each and everyone has some remarkable characteristic. To understand his choice of cities, we must list those that he makes his exemplars so that we can contrast these with other equally worthy examples. In part 1, he deals with art, music, theatre and related cultures in classical Athens, Renaissance Florence, Elizabethan London, musical Vienna, modernism in Paris and the literary culture of Weimer Berlin. In part 2, he deals with industrial and post-industrial innovation beginning with the Industrial Revolution. Manchester and cotton, Glasgow and steam, Berlin and electrical power, Detroit and Motown, Silicon Valley, the transistor and the microprocessor, and Tokyo's focus on quality mass-produced electronics are the case studies. It is here that one begins to think – why no Chicago, why no Sheffield, why no Dusseldorf, why no Hong Kong?, and the list becomes endless. But the path Hall has chosen to weave and the kind of detail he introduces makes anything but a snapshot of these archetypical examples impossible. This is portrayed in stark contrast in part 3 where he combines technology and art in describing Los Angeles in the 1920s' cinema age and Memphis, the home of the blues and rock and roll, in the mid-20th century. Why no Liverpool one asks, why no New York and Tin Pan Alley? In part 4, he comes to organization – to soft infrastructure and the role of cities in such development. Public works in ancient Rome, local government and utilities in 19th-century London, public works in Baron Haussmann's Paris, the ethnic melting pot of New York in the late 19th century, Los Angeles and the automobile, the social welfare of post-war Stockholm, and the late 20th-century version of rampant capitalism in Thatcher's London: these form the focus of yet more case studies in urban innovation.

By the time one reaches this point in the book and part 4 is by far the biggest section taking up nearly one-third of his commentary, the range of cities and the way they illustrate creativity in civilizations is writ large on the reader's imagination. Nowhere else can one find such erudite, readable and focused discussion of the role of great cities, not even in Mumford with whom this book is the obvious comparator. His last section in part 5 represents a grand synthesis of art, technology and organization all coming together in the kind of cities that he imagines will dominate the 21st century: this he argues will be the age of the fifth Kondratieff where new information technologies and a new kind of automation will dominate the city. But his book was written and finished some 20 years ago and Hall himself was thinking about it as far back as the late 1960s when the journal in which this review is published was founded, and he was its editor. One can but speculate on what he would have included had he finished the book much later, and I am guessing that it would then have cast a very different light on cities in civilization. Nothing that he wrote about would change very much in detail, but the big picture would be different. We are now in a global world of

extreme inequality reflected in the fact that most of us can access anyone, at any time, in any place using smart technologies. But are we the better for this technology when it looks as though the future will be dominated by large, powerful corporations that no longer owe any allegiance to the city or even the nation that produced their genesis?

When this book was first published, Hall was disappointed in the reaction it received, largely because the publishers miscast it in terms of the way it was marketed. I can do no better than quote from his own autobiographical essay. The book, he candidly says:

was always intended as some kind of ultimate synthesis of my thinking about cities: *Cities in Civilization* ... this was to be an extension on to a much larger canvas of the basic ideas that I had been developing in all those books on innovation. Now however the theme was to extend far beyond technical innovation into artistic creativity and also – as a logical continuation from *Cities of Tomorrow* [1988] – urban innovation. ... I was well satisfied with the resulting book, but much less satisfied with its reception. It appeared as what the publishers call a 'trade' book, designed to feature briefly and prominently at the front ends of bookstores before being banished to the remainder section and finally to obscurity. There, it received respectful reviews but was clearly never destined for best-seller status. More bizarrely, it was virtually ignored by academic reviewers, presumably because the publisher never supplied review copies ...

(Hall, 2017)

In fact, the book is a slow burner. It still does not have anything like the citations that Mumford's books on cities have and continue to receive.<sup>1</sup> The book is less popular than it should be, but it is growing in stature as the years roll by. In 50 years' time, I hazard to guess that this will be 'the' book on cities during the industrial age, and anyone seriously studying the history of cities in the 19th and 20th centuries, notwithstanding that its key theme is innovation, will mark the book out from any other. Although Hall was disappointed about its impact and I can vouch for the fact that it did indeed get remaindered rather quickly as no such book should do, the story of this book always continues to surprise. Again, I can do no better than recount Hall's own words:

In 2005, I was working in my study at home when the phone rang and a voice said: 'I am phoning to tell you that you have just won one million Swiss francs, and this is not a hoax'. I was reassured that he did not ask me for my credit card details, and even more so when a letter arrived telling me that I was the recipient of the 2005 Balzan Foundation Prize, for work on the social and cultural history of cities since the sixteenth-century – clearly a belated recognition for the *magnum opus*.<sup>2</sup>

This, of course, is a nice ending. The opportunity did remain for Peter to take the book to another edition, but in some senses, like Mumford before, he did not; the book has a certain place in space and time, and so be it. The fact that it does not deal with anything beyond its publication date at the end of the 20th century and the fact that it is largely about innovation in great cities and civilization marks its place in history. The

book was never reprinted, although the logic for doing so is now unassailable.

### Notes

1. Mumford's *The City in History* has a little fewer than 5000 citations in Google Scholar, while *Cities in Civilization* has a little fewer than 2000.
2. Professor Michael Hebbert, an urban and planning historian in his own right, and one of Peter's PhD students from the University of Reading in the early 1970s, proposed Peter for the Balzan Prize.

### References

- Gilder, G. (1998). *Telecosm: The world after bandwidth abundance*. Glencoe: Free Press.
- Glaeser, E. (2011). *Triumph of the city*. London: Macmillan.
- Hall, P. (1988). *Cities of tomorrow: An intellectual history of urban planning and design in the twentieth century*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hall, P. (1998). *Cities in civilization*. New York: Pantheon.
- Hall, P. (2017). Visions of contemporary planning: Stories and journeys in Britain and America. In B. Haselsberger (Ed.), *Encounters in planning thought: 16 autobiographical essays from key thinkers in spatial planning* (pp. 51–70). London: Routledge.
- Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities*. New York: Random House.
- Karlgaard, R., & Malone, M. (1995, February 27). City vs. country: Tom Peters & George Gilder debate the impact of technology on location. *Forbes ASAP Technology Issue*, pp. 56–61.
- Mumford, L. (1961). *The city in history: Its origins its transformations and its prospects*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Michael Batty

Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis (CASA),  
University College London (UCL), London, UK

✉ m.batty@ucl.ac.uk

© 2017 Michael Batty

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2017.1301109>

