Millennial Cities

BY **ALEC APPELBAUM**

Sir Peter Hall's trajectory as a planner encompasses university teaching and research stints at Berkeley, Reading, and University College, London; prolific authorship, including a standard history of the 20th-century city; and prominent consulting roles with governments and other prime movers of urban change. Besides earning him a knighthood, this brilliant career uniquely qualifies him to comment on the issues confronting 21st-century cities. Reaching him in London, we asked him a few questions.

This article appeared originally in *Dialogue* 14.©2007.
Please see the current issue at dialogue.gensler.com.

Are the world's cities in competition?
Peter Hall: There's a winner-takes-most principle at work—London and New York are prime examples—but there are still roles for other cities. In the U.K., there are eight or ten provincial "core cities" that have replaced manufacturing with new-economy and service industries, and their success has widened the gap with the many other one or two industry towns in the North of England that have failed to do so.

Great cities have a mystique that insulates them. Yet even at the top, there's the reality that there's top-top and not-quite-top-top. A good example is London versus Frankfurt. At the time that the U.K. decided not to join the Euro zone, many wondered if this would mean the end of London as a financial center. Yet London has pulled ahead of Frankfurt, even in the business of trading euros. This suggests that what really matters is a massive concentration of high-skilled expertise. Those people are highly mobile—they go where the money is, especially in finance and high-value services. Both these cities attract them, but Frankfurt doesn't have the buzz. Those who live and work there describe it as a "boring banking city," so it doesn't attract talent the way London does.

Are new models of city form emerging?
PH: Yes, but they're not fully developed yet, and there's a lot of debate about how they'll work out. The interest in climate change, exemplified in the U.K. by the Stern Report, is spurring a lot of thought about city form. Many planners argue that cities should be compact, but how compact is a big question. If there's a shift to eco-cars that don't cause pollution or global warming effects, will that lead to more car-based sprawl? There are other reasons to avoid sprawl, but this would change the nature of

the debate. Another remarkable phenomenon is the rise of desert cities. Phoenix could be larger than New York City in population by 2030, with Las Vegas right behind it. The growth of Dubai and the coastal resorts of southern Spain is similar, a migration to the sun. It's a city form that depends on massive concentrations of water and air-conditioning, so currently there's a real disjuncture in terms of the demands it will make on limited natural resources.

How will transit figure in the 21st-century city?

PH: A lot depends on a city's inheritance. Cities that developed intensively before World War I acquired an array of transit infrastructure—like subways and commuter rail. Those that have developed more recently are now racing to catch up. The Danes, Dutch, and Germans are very good at ensuring that more of the street is given over to public transit, bikes, and pedestrians than to cars. City streets aren't always wide enough, though, to allow new transit routes. As they grow, 21st-century cities will need nonradial transit, with an orbital or crisscross pattern that's costly to develop if it isn't already there. Paris has started one, the Orbitale—a network of buses and streetcars.

How cities connect up their nodes of activity is another big question. Does the pattern always have to be radial? Boston-New York-Washington—what French geographer Jean Gottmann called the megalopolis—is a polycentric network that's tied together by relatively high-speed rail and air. The area 100 miles around London is similar. What seems to cause these polycentric regions to grow is that they consist of a host of cities of different sizes, along with one that tends to dominate. Smaller cities grow at a more rapid rate, although central cities have shown a remarkable resurgence in the last 20 years.

How can cities grow without losing their identity?

PH: There's an old *New Yorker* cartoon that shows a guy waking up in an anonymous hotel room and calling room service to ask, "Bring me some breakfast and a newspaper, and by the way, what city is this?" Singapore is the best example of a city that woke up to this challenge. They were ready to tear down the old chophouses until someone mentioned the tourists. In most cities today, people can decide on a Friday afternoon to jet to another city and spend the weekend there—at a ludicrously low cost. That puts pressure on the destinations. To preserve their traditional centers, these cities typically shunt development to the periphery. An example is La Défense, which began as a speculative project just west of Paris. In the sixties, the advent of the RER, a regional express train, turned La Défense, remarkably, into a true central business district. That's protected the historic center of Paris from large-scale redevelopment.

Something similar happened in Amsterdam. In the nineties, the city had the idea of redeveloping the docklands as its commercial core. Developers said no, there was no demand, so the city's planners ended up agreeing to some very attractive residential projects along the waterfront. The reason why the developers said no was because there was a new ring road and high-speed rail line that runs along the south side of the city, serving the airport and linking, with faster trains, to Brussels and Paris. New commercial development has located along this corridor, and that's taken the pressure off Amsterdam's historic core, so the tourists can still have their pretty city.

Can the historic centers of cities also be reinvented?

PH: Yes, but 80 percent of that reinvention is informal. Smart halal butchers in London will find rundown premises and open them up. Immigrants' demands tend to be spatially different from the local norm because they're less mobile and may need to shop close to where they live. As the next generation goes middle class, it can lose cultural adherence and get absorbed into the city's broader fabric. That's fine, and if some neighborhoods maintain a distinct identity, that's fine, too.

What can cities do about gentrification?

PH: As an area comes up, the artists and young people who flock there soon make it smart and fashionable, and that attracts the higher and better land uses that drive them away. Planners can try to observe this process and put a brake on subsequent change, but it's hellishly difficult, as SoHo and TriBeCa in Manhattan and Hoxton in London attest. Covent Garden in London is a classic case. It was saved from renewal in the seventies by a planning decision that preserved dozens of buildings, but the subsequent success of the area brought big capital in. What's on offer there today is what's on offer anywhere. The best that planners can do is to channel the big physical changes to their cities where they really want them—around transit stations, for example. Then they can set a much more conservative policy for the rest, giving the most vulnerable areas protected status. These constraints on physical change don't constrain the activities of the city—on the contrary.

Sir Peter Hall is the Bartlett Professor of Planning and Regeneration at University College, London. An advisor to the U.K. and German governments on strategic planning and urban economics, he is the author of *Cities of Tomorrow* and other books on the 20th- and 21st-century city.

Alec Appelbaum writes on architecture and urbanism for *New York*, *The New Republic*, *Metropolis*, *The Architect's Newspaper*, and other magazines.