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Michael Hebbert. *London: More by Fortune than Design.* Chichester and New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998. xv + 237 pp. $70.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-471-98237-1; $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-471-97399-7.

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London: A History of Multiplications and Disconnections

London, as those who have visited or live in the city will appreciate, is notoriously difficult to get to know. A city of some seven million people, widely dispersed over an enormous area with no coherent administrative structure and no unifying geographical features other than the Thames, is a challenge even to those cab drivers for whom an intimate knowledge of the complex street network is a way of life. How much more so for an author whose brief was to present a portrait of the city combining an eclectic mix of approaches that would be equally accessible to experts and serious-minded tourists alike. That this challenge has been so admirably met by Michael Hebbert's beautifully crafted and illuminating book is a testimony not only to his scholarship and understanding of the issues but also to the genuine love and empathy for the city in which he resides. But even this challenge has been surpassed for here we have a book that is much more than just a portrait of a city that Henry James once wrote of as "immeasurable" but is also a manifesto for urban and urbane living.

Michael Hebbert, who is currently professor of town planning at the University of Manchester, knows London by virtue of being a resident as well as an historian and planner. His knowledge of London streets is derived from cycling, his preferred mode of transport through the urban fabric. Accordingly, the book starts in an engagingly simple yet perceptive way by linking the tangled network of streets and local neighbourhoods to the metropolitan characteristics of multiplication and disconnection. Compared to Paris, whose history is one of absorption and integration into an ever greater organic whole, "London's is a history of multiplications" (p. 7), as illustrated here by the existence of a multiplicity of orchestras, football clubs and railway stations. Where Berlin has one symphony orchestra, for example, London has five; where Washington has one central railway station, London has several.

This plurality of effort reflects the fact that London's expansion has been achieved for the most part without the experience of a unifying municipal government or the influence of an interested monarchy, as was the case with many European capitals. Furthermore, where grand designs have been proposed, such as Sir Christopher Wren's suggestions for rebuilding the City after the Great Fire of 1666 or the Greater London Council's scheme for an arterial road network in the 1960s, they have, for one reason or another, been abandoned. London, as the subtitle of the book denotes, has therefore grown "more by fortune than design" and this, according to the author, has allowed the city to develop in a disconnected and heterogeneous manner that fostered local communities and encouraged creativity and civility.

Having established this as the main theme, Michael Hebbert then sketches the growth of London from its Roman origins to the late nineteenth century, paying particular attention to the administrative struggles between the forces of localism versus those of centralisation. By the end of the nineteenth century, suburban expansion had broken free from the bounds of the old city. In the following decades the pace of growth accelerated with the built up area more than doubling in radius by the end of the 1930s. Whilst undermining further the sense of corporate urban identity, such dispersion helped to save the city from the worst ravages of bombing during the Second World War.

In the immediate post-war years, planners such as Patrick Abercrombie, argued for a process of urban containment both as a way of protecting the surrounding region from creeping suburban sprawl whilst at the same time attempting to foster the idea of London as an organic whole. The primary means of achieving this goal was the creation of a protected green belt of countryside girdling the city. The importance of this green barrier was twofold: on the one hand it had the centrifugal effect of encouraging the movement of activities further away from London and, on the other, a centripetal effect

of concentration within the existing urban area. A consequence of this was the revival of inner city living, following the suburban rush of the interwar years, a trend that not only helps to explain why Londoners still live at higher densities than other urban dwellers but also why, compared to other cities, many parts of London remain socially and culturally mixed.

Apart from the green belt, other modernist plans for comprehensive redevelopment of the urban fabric, such as the arterial road schemes planned by the Greater London Council in the mid-1960s, failed to materialise. However, whilst comprehensive redevelopment failed to make a significant impact on London, planners nevertheless had a major influence through their regulatory role over the local environment, guided usually by a conservative presumption that emphasised stability rather than change.

If planning the post-war fabric of the city was one object of reform, the other was London government and Michael Hebbert sensitively traces the ebb and flow of the city's municipal authorities from the London County Council, through to the formation of the Greater London Council in 1964, its abolition by Margaret Thatcher in 1986 and the resurrection of schemes to elect a mayor for London following the Labour victory in 1997. The hands-off approach that prevailed after abolition of the GLC encouraged a multiplicity of schemes to take shape, such as those which have since transformed the derelict docks into London "Docklands". As Hebbert remarks, "if anything in London's history was more by fortune than design, this eastern renaissance was it"(182). Of course, the market-led approach to planning had significant failures, notably relating to the reluctance to provide an adequate transport infrastructure to Docklands. Nevertheless, a convincing case is presented which argues that the policy vacuum left by the demise of the GLC in no small way helped to foster new ways of thinking about the urban fabric.

Such changes did not take place either in a political or an economic vacuum. The Thatcher years witnessed repeated attacks on vested interests, including the City. Deregulation of the financial sector and the globalization of commerce undermined the City's traditional stranglehold on financial trading within the Square Mile. Instead there was an eastward shift in the geographical focus of financial services that was as much symbolic as it was functional. New buildings, such as the Canary Wharf tower, more suited to the demands of financial trading, rose from the city's abandoned docks, symbolising the manner in which old ways of working and long held traditions were being remodelled and recast across the face of London.

Some things, however, did not change, including the heterogeneity of London's population. Whilst the composition of the city's population has altered significantly in relation to its ethnic and racial mix, what stands out is the persistence of localised neighbourhoods and the cosmopolitanism of their inhabitants. Indeed, Hebbert argues forcibly that "cosmopolitanism is half the attraction of the city, and the key to much of its creative energy" (p. 179). In arguing the case for the significance of locality and heterogeneity, Hebbert follows in a long line of distinguished urban theorists, including Jane Jacobs and Richard Sennett. For Hebbert, no less than for Jacobs and Sennett, neighbourhoods that combine different social classes, racial groups, ethnic communities and land uses, are the basis of a liveable city. Not for them the purified, planned neighbourhoods in which conflict is ruled out by strict territorial segregation but rather the creative tensions that arise from the interaction of competing groups and activities. Along the former path lies sterility and decay, on the other lies the true vitality of city life.

Although Hebbert pays specific homage to Peter Hall (p. 1), whose scholarship and vision have had a marked impact on thinking about London, it is with those who recognise that the vitality of cities is more likely to be achieved by fortune than design that his work is most strongly aligned. In this respect, this book is more than just a biography of a city, a task that it performs admirably well. It is also a heartfelt manifesto for city life following in the great traditions of urban sociology, written by an author who is not only knowledgeable and insightful about London but whose empathy with the city is clear to all.

Note

[1]. As well as advising varous governments on planning issues, Sir Peter Hall has written extensively on London and urban planning. He has authored or edited nearly 30 books, including London 2000 (1963), Cities of Tomorrow (1988) and London 2001 (1989). His latest book is Cities in Civilisation (Harper Collins).

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