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rcgeogra_fchbog@unal.edu.co

Universidad Nacional de Colombia
Colombia

Navarrete Cardona, Steven

Urban Planning: A Tool for Achieving Spatial Justice in the Cities of the 21st Century

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Universidad Nacional de Colombia
Bogotá, Colombia

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ENTREVISTA

La planeación urbana: una herramienta para encontrar la justicia espacial en las ciudades del siglo XXI.

Entrevista con Peter Hall¹

Más allá de ser un ejercicio técnico en el que se definen los parámetros normativos en las espacialidades de la ciudad tanto en el presente como para el futuro (por ejemplo, a través de la creación e implementación de un Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial), la planificación es un ejercicio de poder. Sin duda, la forma en que se organiza la ciudad, sus espacios verdes, la amplitud de las vías de comunicación, los modelos de movilidad a implementar y el patrimonio a renovar, hacen parte clave de las ideas que componen la planificación. ¿Pero qué intereses mueven dicho ejercicio de la planificación? Esto es lo que se pregunta el ciudadano de a pie, el profano, el habitante de los barrios y localidades marginales, que, aunque pague el impuesto predial y de valorización, nunca verá las calles del lugar en que reside pavimentadas o más rutas de transporte público para llegar a su trabajo o a donde le plazca.

Lejos de ser una práctica somera de transformación estética de la ciudad, la planificación puede influir de manera radical en la vida de los ciudadanos: desde reducir los tiempos de desplazamiento de las personas a la hora de ir y volver de sus trabajos (lo que significa que los padres podrían pasar más tiempo con los hijos y que menos niños estarían expuestos en las calles a las pandillas o a problemas de adicción a sustancias psicoactivas), pasando por la creación de lugares de esparcimiento y promoción de la cultura como bibliotecas y

centros de expresión artística en los barrios marginales para la re-distribución del capital cultural, hasta contribuir a la supervisión de una relación más orgánica entre el campo y la ciudad, entre las necesidades sociales y los usos de los recursos en el interior y en los bordes de la ciudad.

Todas estas dimensiones hacen parte de lo que los teóricos de la geografía y el urbanismo han denominado “justicia espacial” (*spatial justice*). Sin la planificación como medio para construir la justicia espacial, la ciudad estaría condenada a ser un vivo reflejo de la polarización de la sociedad y de su magna desigualdad, lo cual ni siquiera tiene lugar en los sectores más deprimidos de las grandes ciudades mundiales de la globalización, como New York o Londres. La relación entre el hombre y el mundo urbano del siglo XXI tiene diversas dimensiones que van más allá de la racionalidad con que se ha concebido la ciudad, más allá de los grandes bloques grises de cemento y de los monótonos recorridos cotidianos. La ciudad está llena de simbologías y materialidades que influyen por completo en la vida cotidiana (privada y pública) de sus habitantes. Parece que el momento de las ciudades del mañana ha llegado con la globalización, con la urbanización acelerada del mundo y con la homogenización de los espacios urbanos.

Es por ello que se decidió conversar con Peter Hall, uno de los críticos más importantes del urbanismo de los siglos XX y XXI, sobre el papel de la planificación en la construcción de la “justicia espacial”, así como sobre otros temas de la cuestión urbana. En el mundo hispanohablante se conocen pocas de sus obras, entre ellas se

¹ Entrevista con Peter Hall realizada por Steven Navarrete Cardona, en diciembre del 2012. Título original: *Urban Planning: A Tool for Achieving Spatial Justice in the Cities of the 21st Century*.

destaca la clásica *Ciudades del mañana: historia del urbanismo en el siglo XX*. Su producción académica supera los 30 libros, entre los que cabe mencionar: *London 2000* (1963, 1969), *The World Cities* (1966, 1977, 1983), *Planning and Urban Growth: An Anglo-American Comparison* (con M. Clawson 1973), *Urban and Regional Planning* (1975, 1982, 2002), *Europe 2000* (ed. 1977), *Great Planning Disasters* (1980), *Growth Centres in the European Urban System* (con D. Hay 1980), *The Inner City in Context* (ed. 1981), *Silicon Landscapes* (con A. Markusen 1985), *Can Rail Save the City?* (con C. Hass-Klau 1985), *High-Tech America* (con A. Markusen y A. Glasmeier 1986), *The Carrier Wave* (con P. Preston 1988), *Cities of Tomorrow* (1988), *London 2001* (1989), *The Rise of the Gunbelt* (con A. Markusen, S. Campbell y S. Deitrick 1991), *Technopoles of the World* (con M. Castells 1994), *Sociable Cities* (con C. Ward 1998), *Cities in Civilization* (1998), *Urban Future 21* (con U. Pfeiffer 2000), *Working Capital* (con N. Buck et ál. 2002), *The Polycentric Metropolis* (con K. Pain 2006), y *London Voices London Lives* (2007)², entre muchos otros artículos publicados en revistas académicas y en el diario *The Guardian*. Estos trabajos le han valido distintos premios y distinciones, como The Founder's Medal de la Real Sociedad Geográfica en investigación, entre otros³. A continuación veremos entonces cuáles fueron las respuestas del profesor Hall a nuestros interrogantes.

STEVEN NAVARRETE (SN): Why did you decide to study Geography and not a different science? Please tell us what aspects of your life motivated you to choose that discipline and how your interest in cities arose.

PETER HALL (PH): In the final two years at school I studied geography, history and economics —an excellent basis for a life as an urban analyst and planner—. It was difficult to choose between them when I went to university, and in fact I have continued to study in all three disciplines. But geography is the most relevant among them, because it studies the effect of all relevant factors, physical and social, on the pattern of human settlement. Above all, enriched by an understanding of other social sciences —economics, sociology, politics—

it helps us understand how cities come into being, grow and change. That understanding is essential to the education of a planner. Marx memorably said that “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it”. But, unless you first understand the world—including especially the urban world—you will never successfully change it. Geography is the key to that understanding.

SN: As an urban analyst and planner, do you believe that it is possible to conceptualize a Latin American city from an ontological reality? That is, a city that is different from Western and African cities due to characteristics such as informal work, the construction of informal housing, the lack of urban planning, spatial injustice, the coexistence of pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production, illegal neighborhoods, and great migration flows toward Europe and North America? Do you think a specifically Latin American city exists?

PH: The Latin American city is in fact a special type of a developing-world city characterized by rapid demographic and economic growth, rapid in-migration from rural areas, increasing inequality, and informal processes—an informal economy, informal housing. It shares these features with cities in other parts of the developing world—Africa, the Indian subcontinent. But it is also notable, and effectively unique, in the ways in which it has successfully harnessed informal low-cost solutions in housing and transport. Informal squatter housing has been transformed, in the space of a few decades, into good suburbs. Bus rapid transit, developed by cities that could not afford metro systems, has become a highly effective basic transport system for a major city like Bogotá, serving a population as big as London's.

SN: In the preface to your book *Cities of Tomorrow*, you state that urban planners should apply their knowledge instead of sitting down to meditate. What is the role of urban planners and analysts in an unequal world?

PH: First, planners should not avoid meditation! They need to observe, to analyze, to synthesize and test possible solutions. They must always work within

2 Bibliografía tomada de <https://iris.ucl.ac.uk/research/personal/?upi=PGHAL68> (enero del 2013).

3 Datos biográficos tomados de <https://iris.ucl.ac.uk/research/personal/?upi=PGHAL68>.

the limits of the possible in the time and in the place where they work. But planning is more than a purely cerebral activity. Planners need to use both hemispheres of their brains: “logical” on the left side, “creative” for the right. Planning demands passion —and desirably even genius— to create great urban spaces.

SN: What is your opinion or your main criticism of current urbanism?

PH: Well, I'd have to say that in my own country, the United Kingdom, my criticism is that we don't have enough of it! Our present government believes in a free market model in which marvelous urban places and spaces appear all by themselves, without need for public action! But in Latin America, I'd say that the main issue is the huge differences in living standards and lifestyles between rich and poor city-dwellers, which we also observe in other parts of the developing world, and which we even begin to see in European countries where living standards were once more equal. The challenge for Latin America is above all to manage informal urban development by upgrading it through infrastructure provision, meaning not merely pure water and sewers but also high-quality urban transportation. And you've achieved remarkable successes in that area —here in Bogotá, in Lima, in Curitiba, in Mexico City, and in many other cities—.

SN: In his last lecture in Colombia, Françoise Choay made a forceful statement: “The concept of ‘city’ is obsolete in terms of defining the urban agglomerations that are arising in the 21st century; another concept is needed to replace that of ‘city’”. Do you agree that city is an obsolete concept for the understanding of contemporary urban reality?

PH: Yes and no! Yes, because the traditional concept of city has already been replaced by the concept of the urban agglomeration and is now in turn being replaced by the concept of the mega-city region: a vast complex, sometimes hundreds of kilometres across and including tens of millions of people, with 20, 30, 40, 50, even 100 cities still physically separate but linked by intense networks of transport and communications. The classic cases are the Pearl River Delta of China, between Hong Kong

and Guangdong, and the Yangtze River Delta including Shanghai, Nanjing and Hangzhou. But the Greater South East Region of the UK and the Rio de Janeiro-São Paulo-Belo Horizonte Region of Brazil are other major examples.

SN: It has been 50 years since Jane Jacobs published her great work, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), where she formulated a strong critique of urban renewal plans and their products: spatial segregation and urban violence. In your view, what is the most pressing problem American cities face?

PH: Undoubtedly it is sustainable urban development: in particular the issue, first identified by Peter Newman and Jeffrey Kenworthy in their classic work over twenty years ago, low-density urban sprawl leads to long and car-dependent journeys to work and for all other purposes. Fortunately there is encouraging recent evidence of a reversal: William Frey of the Brookings Institute has revealed that in 2010-2011, for the first time in 70 years, the central cities of America's major metropolitan areas grew faster than their suburbs! No one yet knows whether this is a temporary feature caused by the house-building crisis after 2007, or a longer-term structural trend back towards city living. But it is remarkable.

SN: All your books are an essential reference for understanding the history of urban development and contemporary cities. Among them, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing 1988, 1996, 2002, was the most widely disseminated in the Spanish-speaking world. What were your motivations for writing this book and what problems did you encounter in doing so? Where, when and how did the idea arise?

PH: Well, it is all set out in a very few words at the start of the preface, and then in the first pages of Chapter One of the book —which incidentally I am busy revising for a fourth edition, to appear in October 2013!—. Basically, I do not believe that planners can effectively plan cities unless they have a deep sense of what their ancestors tried to achieve decades earlier. The UK governments are now saying

they want to see a new generation of garden cities, which they are claiming as a great British achievement, but it is not at all clear that they even know what these garden cities were. Very often policy-makers seem to have no sense that they are proposing solutions that did not work twenty or thirty years earlier. And they have little understanding that some basic problems—like the segregation of rich and poor—have been with us for a long time.

SN: The automobile has become an obsolete and contaminating mode of transport, as demonstrated by the seemingly endless traffic jams in world's largest cities from Beijing to Los Angeles to London. In your view, what is the most effective option for mobility in developing countries? Expanding routes, establishing traffic restrictions, such as Colombia's *Pico y Placa*, or promoting a mass transit system covering the entire city in order to replace single occupancy vehicles?

PH: The key is what I call the “Heineken effect”. Thirty years ago the Dutch Heineken Brewery invented an advertising slogan that proved to be the longest-running and most successful in advertising history—at least in the UK!—. It was “Heineken reaches the beers other beers cannot reach”. We need the transport equivalent. New research in the UK, from Professor Peter Jones of UCL and Scott Le Vine of Imperial College, shows that outside London, the idea of “Peak Car”—the notion that car use has peaked—is a myth: most of the country is as car-dependent as ever. And in parallel, new research in France, from Xavier Desjardins of the Sorbonne, shows that in the peri-urban fringes of provincial French cities, beyond the tram termini, much of the new growth has been outside rail corridors and thus car-dependent. There are two obvious ways to do this: tram-trains that run from city streets on to national rail tracks, pioneered by Karlsruhe and Kassel in Germany and now being followed by other cities across Europe; and BRT on the model of Curitiba and Bogotá, also being followed in cities worldwide. They point the way forward!

SN: How do you define ‘spatial justice’?

PH: I have some problems in deconstructing this phrase, because for me justice—in the original legal

sense of the word—is supposed to be blind to the personal circumstances of the people involved in the process. The statue above the Old Bailey Criminal Court in London, with the figure of Justice carrying the Scales of Justice and wearing a blindfold, symbolizes that ideal. Of course I recognize that justice is used with a much wider connotation: Justice as Fairness, in the famous formulation of John Rawls. But I think it far better to call that simply Fairness. There are all kinds of unfairness in contemporary cities, most of them having to do with unequal income coupled with unequal access to education, health, housing and other services that most people would regard as essential to any kind of good life. Fighting those inequalities is essentially a political process, though urban planning can help powerfully if it gets the right political direction. I think here of outstanding examples like the great German Siedlungen of the 1920s, the French cités-jardins of the same period, the post-World-War-Two British New Towns and the Stockholm satellite towns, to name just a few outstanding examples. If people want to call them achievements of social justice, I suppose that’s OK. But to me it’s fuzzy language.

SN: You are one of Le Corbusier’s leading critics, as evidenced in Chapter 7 “The City of Towers: The Corbusian Radiant City” of your book *Cities of Tomorrow*. Today, some developing countries are adopting Le Corbusier’s ideas, especially that of building upwards. Do you think that his ideas are obsolete in terms of addressing the rapid changes in the global cities?

PH: Well, of course it depends on the circumstances! If you are a planner in Hong Kong or Singapore, where land is very scarce and it is clearly impossible to give everyone a single-family house with a garden, even assuming they all wanted one, then you have to go for a high-rise solution. And I accept that in China’s major cities, where land is not absolutely scarce in that same sense but where you have a combination of huge urban size and very rapid urban growth, high-rise living may be a necessary solution for many people. But I do observe that wherever people have a choice, which the richest people do even in these places, many seem to be willing to pay a great deal for the luxury of their own single-family-home

—and I observe that urban spread (a term I prefer to the pejorative urban sprawl) has been an observable long-term trend for most cities over the past 200 years—. I dislike the notion of imposing solutions on people for political or quasi-political motives. They should have a choice.

SN: In “The City of the Tarnished Belle Époque”, Chapter 12 of your book *Cities of Tomorrow*, you draw attention to the different aspects that have transformed cities, such as new urban policies, information society, and environmental issues. Today, it has become crucial to address environmental factors such as climate change, global warming, acid rain, and flooding, among others. In your view, what would be the solution to the environmental problems cities worldwide face? Do you think that urban planning could allow cities to address those issues?

PH: They certainly won’t achieve solutions on their own: it is going to require action at a national and even more at an international level, as the recent Doha round has amply demonstrated. And achieving that won’t be easy: it will demand that we adopt the formulation of Antonio Gramsci, pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will. I have hope that technology will come to the rescue, particularly in developing and diffusing low-carbon energy generation and distribution. Some European countries, led by Germany, are transforming their entire economies in this way, creating a new Industrial Revolution; I can only hope that all countries, including my own, will follow. But cities can play an amazingly important role, as seen by a few outstanding examples in Europe —Freiburg, Zürich, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Malmö, Stockholm— and elsewhere in the world, including the conspicuous example of Bogotá. Such cities are way ahead of the others, setting examples inside their own countries and now, on an increasing scale and at an increasing pace, worldwide. At city as at national level, enlightened political leadership is the key.

SN: In “The City of Permanent Underclass”, Chapter 13 of your book *Cities of Tomorrow*, you provide a historical overview of the creation of black ghettos in Chicago and other cities in the United

States, and address their erroneous definition by the Chicago School sociologists. Nowadays, the formation of ghettos and the isolation of certain city dwellers is a crucial problem worldwide. Loic Wacquant recently published a book called *Das Janusgesicht des Ghetto*, in which he takes up some of your ideas set forth in *Cities of Tomorrow* and defines “ghetto” as an institutional mechanism for ethnic-racial domination. How can ghettos and urban marginalization be eliminated? Is the solution economic growth and generation of employment?

PH: Loic Wacquant has made the most profound sociological studies of this issue over the last twenty years. His recent work intensifies his earlier emerging conclusion that the so-called ghetto in American cities is a special phenomenon, not paralleled in superficially-similar areas in European cities but now emerging in special circumstances in other parts of the world (refugee camps in Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, and the occupied territories of Palestine and the Gaza Strip): it is a kind of quasi-penal settlement segregated from the rest of urban society. If so, it is important that a substantial part of the African-American population do not live in such ghettos. Nor, according to his own analysis, do the informal settlements of Latin American cities — the Brazilian *favelas*, the *ranchos* of Venezuela and the *poblaciones* of Chile, the *ciudad perdida* in Mexico, the *cantagril* in Uruguay, and the *pueblo joven* in Peru— fit into this category.

SN: Are you working on a book or project at the moment?

PH: Yes, I’ve just finished a new book, *Good Cities, Better Lives*, looking at “best practice” European cities and what lessons they can offer us in better planning of cities worldwide. I’ve also revised the book I wrote with the late Colin Ward, *Sociable Cities*, which will be co-published with the new book in Spring 2013. And I’m working now to revise *Cities of Tomorrow*, my best-selling book (and my personal favorite) for a fourth edition to appear in October 2013. At the same time I’m working on an EU project to develop the idea of tram-trains as a solution to the problem of transport in peripheral urban areas (Q.8). It isn’t proving too easy!

SN: What would be your message to new generations of Latin American researchers, architects, urban planners, geographers, and sociologists?

PH: First, learn from the past both the best practice examples, and the failures. Remember that though history never exactly repeats itself, it does tend to run in cycles. Second, try constantly to adopt a zoom-focus approach: zoom out to the

big strategic picture, zoom in to real people in real places in real cities. Third, keep your vision concrete: write it out clearly and simply, illustrate it in understandable maps and graphs and pictures. Ensure always that your work is understandable. You don't need to be obscure to be smart; the reverse, in fact.

Steven Navarrete Cardona

Estudiante de Sociología de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia (Bogotá). Sus intereses investigativos se enfocan en la sociología urbana, y los métodos de investigación en geografía. Miembro asociado a la *International Sociological Association* y a su comité de investigación sobre sociología urbana y desarrollo regional rc21.



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