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ID 1668 | LEARNING FROM EUROPE?

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The rich history of European planning thought has been radiating out to countries outside of Europe for a long time, either in the form of colonial planning and by providing active guidance and orientation or simply by serving as a model for the look from the outside. Within Europe, the exchange of ideas and practical expe-rience has been continuous from the beginnings of planning and urban design – whether we consider our professional field to have started in the Renaissance and Baroque era or whether we want to restrict our per-spective to the discipline of 'modern planning' in the 19th century, or, again in a different context, in the 1960s. There is a rich literature dealing with periods and areas of planning in which the international exchange of ideas has been particularly lively and influential, extending from, say, the garden city movement, via the exchange of ideas in classic modernism and the period of post-war reconstruction to the very recent history.

My working experience while straddling two continents, Australia and Europe, in research and teaching for a number of years is the background for the survey in this paper. The paper essentially puts spotlights on the European scene of urban design and planning since the late 20th century and asks for the significance and prospects of the learning experience mainly in Australia.

I want to briefly mention, however, that the stream of ideas has not been a one-way street. There are windows upon the Australian scene that can help Europeans to learn from Australia. Colonel Light's plan for Adelaide, which served as a model for Ebenezer Howard's garden city is one example. The amazing practice of the Green Bans in Sydney during the 1970s that stopped the demolition of the atmospherically rich working class district of Woolloomooloo is another; and the visit of German politician Petra Kelly who came to Australia to study the Green movement led to the naming of the German Green Party in Germany is another (Coleman 2016).

Back to the basic theme; drawing inspiration from international models of urban design may conceivably make particular sense for a 'young' country with a relatively small population size such as Australia. But even Britain with its long and rich tradition of planning has repeatedly discovered that it may be useful to look for orientation abroad – to 'Europe'. Saying this, I am obviously accepting a definition of 'Europe' which is common in the UK, but is met with a degree of amused bewilderment on 'the continent' or the European mainland. If Britain sees itself as a separate continent, then the Brexit decision has certainly underscored that sentiment.

Shortly after the turn of the millennium, the experience that countries can learn from each other was expand-ed in Britain by another, rather drastic assumption. According to Sir Peter Hall, what Britain needed was much more than simply orientation. '...British planners have lost the art of urbanism' (Hall 2013 p.306) he argued; the UK had 'gone backwards and the current generation of planners do not possess the breadth of knowledge and skill to develop innovative world-leading places' (McGuinness 2014).

From the late 1990s on, Sir Peter Hall and the head of URBED, Nicholas Falk as well as the RTPA had gath-ered groups of British architects in order to (re-)visit a number of European cities. During the first decade of the new millennium, they were working on a book which they thought they might call "Learning From Eu-rope". Against the background of political economy and planning the book rolls out a broad

canvas of issues in the UK and of model-type approaches on the European continent. As in Hall's previous work, the issue of dealing with regional imbalances plays a major role.

Particular attention in the work of Hall and Falk was devoted to the so-called "new urban districts" or "eco districts" ranging from large-scale projects such as Hamarby in Sweden and Almere New Town in the Nether-lands via Hamburg's Harbour City to small model developments in Freiburg and Kassel. The work in and on Kassel knitted into practical work. Kassel, a city of 200.000 situated midway between Hannover and Frankfurt was at the same time exporting an innovative scheme of hybrid trams to Blackpool – a result of a co-operation with a team again headed by Peter Hall on the British side. This work garnered sufficient interest for transport planners from Australia, mainly from Melbourne to come to Kassel in the same context. For me, the experi-ence of taking part in such processes has been raising questions such as: Which elements of such model de-velopments can actually be implemented in a different cultural context?

The effect of studying an iconic model can result in a successful translation into a local context, it can turn into travesty and unintended parody (take the example of new urbanism and what it looks like when built for nouveau-riche New Russians); it can create myths such as the Bilbao effect; but it can also contribute to a creative process resulting in genuine innovation.

The question which lessons can actually be applied in a different cultural context is a subject matter which research on urban design and policy has been examined under the heading of path dependence. The history of the local institutional structures, the character of the building industry, the constellation of local actors and event chains may constitute, reinforce or challenge patterns of behaviour and policy approaches leading to certain outcomes, eliminating others in seemingly deterministic ways. An awareness of this kind of context can contribute to a realistic assessment of the prospects of "learning from"; it can help in the process by avoiding naïve assumptions of instant one-to-one transferability as much as the cringe of defeatist abjection.

With this in mind, and against the background of my acquaintance with the Australian context, the paper is going to put spotlights on the European scene of current urban design and planning. It is briefly going to review the experience of some 'reference cities' of urban design/regeneration, the German international build-ing exhibitions, different phases of innovation in Barcelona, the urban renaissance in Britain, 'eco-cities' and 'Grand Projets', and then to focus on the question: Where do we stand today? i.e. how do today's models and principles deal with challenges such as globalisation, climate change and social change? And which approaches may be useful for Australia?

It is doing so with a historical perspective. Obviously, European cities have managed to transcend periods of urban blight and plight such as the dark age of the early industrial city and the stark age of the Corbusian 'City Functional' and to revive not only their historic centres with their specific texture of buildings and private and public spaces, streets, plazas and greenery, but also to foster urban villages in all parts of the urban fabric. Discussed under the heading of 'Urban Renaissance', processes of this kind have in fact been experienced by cities in all continents, albeit in very different contexts. Urban renaissance can be seen as a post-modern phe-nomenon - in the sense of a necessary post-Jane-Jacobs transcendence of the functional city ideal à la Corbu-sier and CIAM. Following the coining of the term in a campaign by the European Union and a publication by Yona Friedman in 1980, Britain gave it substance by implementing it in the form of a government program – emphatically design-led under the auspices of R. Rodgers around the beginning of the new millennium, but substantially policy-supported by planning guidance channeling the retail potential from peripheral shopping malls into the urban centres and developing integrated transport concepts.

In Germany, Urban Renaissance has been discussed in a more complex context and in controversial terms looking at winners and losers of gentrification processes, and it has been connected with the European City concept, which combines aspects of urban structure and design with the notion of socially integrative com-munities and governance patterns with strong municipalities. This has its roots in traditions that reach back to the cities of the middle ages and their elected councils, which were a safe harbor for migrants and run-away bondsmen ('Town air is liberating') – an important element in establishing path dependencies in the German context.

There is then of course not one European City, but a patchwork of traditions. Municipal autonomy guaran-teed by the national constitution is a feature of the German political system – not, however, the English one; which is why M. Thatcher was able to disband the GLC and to reduce the task of the local councils to

roads, rates and rubbish, a division of labour not unknown in Australia, but a utterly surprising for my students in Germany. Still it is precisely this diversity of cultures within that small continent which makes the European experience particularly interesting. The sober, rationalist Dutch architecture (which has been emerging in con-stant contrast with the existence of quaint traditional neighbourhoods), the specific mixture of trams, tradition and modernity in Germany, and certainly the grand gesture of French urban design, they all have their origins in different paths of modernization and local traditions.

Britain's post-war welfare state with its sweeping visionary utopianism and often rather rigid radical roots was rather different from the social state concept pursued in Germany, which had its oldest roots in late 19th cen-tury. Rhenish capitalism, which, as has been argued appears to have changed from Rhenish or Rheinish to a different form of capitalism under the auspices of Thatcherite neo-liberalism and the recent banking crisis. While this seems to confirm the theory of the convergence of economic and political systems, the path de-pendence engrained in local traditions and institutions, down to the ways of thinking and arguing, is always going to produce a striking diversity of political and urban realities, even in times of attempted European Un-ion harmonization.

Let us very briefly look at the sequence of 'reference cities' of European urban renaissance; a sequence which can be seen as a kind of step-by-step learning process. One by one, these cities have learnt from each other, quoting this learning process, too, in the sense of "Learning from Europe" within Europe and outside the continent, too. It began with Bologna, which took a pioneering role by placing the entire historical core under protection – including the residents' rental contracts – and by doing the opposite of what the urban renais-sance approach has been doing since the 1980s: In order to protect the historic centre, Bologna banned new shopping centres and businesses outside the medieval city walls. One of the major actors in this process was Leonardo Benevolo, who is well known for his "History of the City".

In step # 2, cities such as Berlin and Vienna extended the attention of urban preservation and careful renewal to the city extension areas of the 19th century. Berlin fought many a battle against the myth that the typical 19th century tenement building was supposedly inherently bad beyond salvation. And it fought many a battle against the interest blocks of political party sleaze, banks, developers, and architects driving the machinery for urban redevelopment and suburban high-rise estate construction. Their descent from the late 1970s on marked the end of large-scale clearance and the practical re-orientation of urban policy towards the rehabilita-tion of the inner urban areas.

The associated breakdown of public confidence in Berlin's municipal politics required a radical re-orientation of planning policy, which was met through the establishment of a new special authority working in parallel to the existing authorities in 1978 and culminating in the opening of Berlin's International Building Exhibition in 1987 (Fischer 2013). It served as a model for the rehabilitation of the 19th century housing stock through careful urban renewal, and for the resurrection of the perimeter block instead of the modernist rejection of the "corridor street". Crown Street in Sydney was probably the earliest development along similar lines in Australia.

The IBA also developed a method termed "critical reconstruction", which aimed for an orientation towards the historic pattern of streets and public spaces, building parcels, density, social mix as well as a mix of actors and architects. A key to the success of these developments lay in the precedence of process and structure over individual architecture.

Step # 3 in the sequence was the fundamental transformation of the industrial city and the city functional, and Barcelona was the pacemaker and model. While the transformation really came about in three phases between the late 1970s and 2004, it was mainly associated with the Olympics of 1992. Re-conquering public space from the dictates of automobile traffic, turning town squares from parking lots into centres of urban life re-connecting the city with the waterfront, re-vitalizing decaying districts through big cultural projects, the development of mix-use areas, middle-class and up-market apartments in central locations, a new appreciation of traditional buildings and structures (albeit rather selective), coupled with neo-modernist gestures signifying ostentatious futurability – these were the key themes of this approach to urban transformation, which have been influencing debate and practice in Europe, in North and South America ever since.

The darker sides of Barcelona's transformation are discussed less frequently: the architectural heritage of the Catalan city is falling victim to the overhasty realisation of projects, and social aspects are being neglected almost completely. More conspiucuously, Barcelona has created a brand in its own right, a new

icon for “Learning From” introduced as a point of reference in planning reports including Roger’s big yellow book on the urban renaissance in the UK. The Barcelona Model is referred to in professional circles when distinguishing small-scale design programmes in public space as a central component of neighbourhood development. It has become a model for a kind of “living city” people have found desirable anywhere between Sydney and Lyon. And each city has found its own approaches for turning it into reality; Lyon with its public spaces strategy banning the cars into luxurious underground garages, and with turning waterfront parking into waterfront parks. The Barcelona model also serves as a point of reference when implementing large-scale infrastructure projects using an integrated design approach. The reasons underlying the special status of urban planning in Barcelona no doubt lie in a specific connection between tradition and the avant- garde, as well as in a mix of cosmopolitan openness and individualistic originality. These are specific aspects of a fertile path dependence.

The other cult cities of urban transformation of the 1980s pursued this new programme as well: Paris with its Grand Projets in a carefully cultivated traditional city and London with its projects of transforming the railway station districts such as that around Liverpool Street.

A major field in which Europeans are trying to learn from each other is at the level of the local nuclei, at the level of the planning principles for what in Europe and also in the US is called eco-districts, and which German planning policy called more modestly “new urban districts” in the tradition of the urban village idea.

They come in different sizes, and the crew around Peter Hall and Nicholas Falk even included big ones like Almere New Town, Hamarby in Stockholm and Hamburg’s Hafen City under that heading. In fact, a German government report listed more than a hundred of them in Germany alone, including the Hafen City and the “Water Cities” in Berlin.

They are compact urban places, designed for walking and cycling and public transport; with densities to support that objective; there is a high proportion of apartments around mixed uses, especially in and around centres. They follow traditional urban designs with sidewalks and street blocks.

Looking back we can see that the opportunity for large-scale urban regeneration had arisen in many cities following the closure of urban docks and railway freight yards, and, particularly in Germany, of army barracks in the 1980s and 1990s. This has led to the creation of new urban quarters, often inner city districts close to city centres, where the ideas of the urban village, have come into play. The location of the new developments was significant. They happened to be in parts of the city that either had an existing infrastructure of public transport, or could fairly easily have it injected. This, plus the fact that the land was accessible and potentially valuable, meant that higher densities were a logical and accepted consequence. Add to this the fact of a new niche market for apartments arising from socio-demographic change (students, dual-career households), the reaction against suburban lifestyles on the part of so many who had experienced growing up in suburbia unexciting as adolescents – then it was perhaps logical that these quarters should become the location of the new urban lifestyles. This kind of urban renaissance was easier to forge in Europe and Australia as inner city 19th century suburbs including Paddington or Carlton demonstrate than in the US, where urban decay following industrial decline had proceeded much further.

Let’s look at a range of European examples, which Peter Hall and colleagues have been examining, and ask the same question Nicholas Falk was asking in an article: “Why not here?” (Falk 2009b) In the context of their first wave of research on what they chose to call eco-districts, and which is going to result in the book I mentioned, “Learning from Europe”, they looked at a number of districts that were very different indeed in size and composition.

Each of these examples has a variety of lessons to learn from. But on the occasions such as those of the conferences of RUDI (Resource for Urban Design Initiatives) in London, where I reported on them, I found no example which had attracted more attention than those of the Vauban district in Freiburg and the French Quarter in Tuebingen. Both have been developed on former military grounds.

When the army barracks in Freiburg closed down in 1992, the city bought 80 acres for a politically negotiated price; the rest was divided between the university students’ union and a self-organized, independent housing initiative that converted several of the earlier barracks into student housing and inexpensive living space for single occupants and apartment sharers.

The city developed Vauban into a neighbourhood with a distinctive ecological profile and planned living and working in small subdivisions. The individual lot is at the core of a development which has been carried out by groups of developers in balance of coordinated urban development and individual design.

Tuebingen has developed its French Quarter, formerly occupied by the military, into an internationally renowned new neighbourhood. The short distances concept has been taken seriously here: a mix of uses in small subdivisions and the integration of work give the area a high practical value in everyday life. The re-urbanizing of space, projects carried out by small investors and joint building groups, who purchase theiraesthetic diversity but also its social mix all go to make up this neighbourhood's special qualities.

In Kassel, it was initiatives coming from the university which have initiated a process of re-developing a large area "on the other side of the river", which had not been reconstructed after the war but had been left as a parking space. This was in municipal ownership. In 1992, a joint initiative of university, city council and housing associations started a process which they called the "re-founding of the Unter-Neu-Stadt" (the lower new town). Just as in medieval times, when individuals had played a significant role in founding the city, it was now to be individual house builders, co-housing groups, co-operatives plus a carefully balanced set of activities by banks and by housing associations who would all act as "Stadt-Gruender", as city founding fathers and mothers.

The development method was to follow a principle invented at the IBA Berlin in 1987, the method of the "critical reconstruction". While employing new architecture, the urban design of the district follows the structural principles of what had been in place before war time destruction in 1943: The street network, the pattern of building parcels and house blocks, the building height and density and aspects of the functional and social mix as it had once existed.

In each of these cases, it is the principles of participation, process planning and sustained local leadership, the mixture of municipal encouragement and community initiative which have accounted for the success.

In most of the new neighbourhoods it is a number of niche markets which have made up a development patchwork not well suited for the classic volume house builders whose interest is focused on a rapid turnover, and who, it has to be said, play a bigger role in the UK as well as in Australia than in Germany. In order to collect information on these markets, niche and otherwise, German market research has developed interesting as well as curious methods of modeling the demand of house builders, renters and other actors on the scene. Moving away from the classic models of social classes and stratifications, the German Sinus Institute has made extensive surveys of life style characteristics, and they have produced graphics of social milieus which are supposed to provide a closer approximation of social reality and for predicting people's needs and requirements.

The milieu approach examines not only socio-demographic variables, such as age, gender,

income and education, but also a range of aspects of modern, individual lifestyle such as cultural

activities and preferences of residential location. These two directions are shown in this milieu-diagram:

The vertical axis is related to social structure and the horizontal axis displays varying degrees of modern lifestyle. We recognize for instance, the milieu of the conservatives on the upper left hand side, the milieu of the classical middle class in the centre and the milieu of the hedonists on the lower right hand side.

Each of these various milieus has specific preferences for residential location. These preferences are important indicators of how each household of the corresponding milieu would behave in terms of effort made for the relocation. And we can link other categories with this including household size, preference for housing typologies ranging from individual houses to dense apartments. Linking census data with thousands of telephone interviews, the market researchers have produced these diagrams for various segments of the European market. Here's the English diagram, in which I particularly like the category "quiet peaceful Britain". I wonder what the Australian map would look like if they were do produce one, or the map of Sydneysiders. It would probably include a long drawn-out bubble of hedonists and modern performers lapping into the post-materialist milieu, similar to the composition of people who are supposed to have contributed to the Freiburg Vauban success. A couple of questions arise of this: One is: does the German researcher take his own theory serious? I'll be coming back to this in a moment with Johan Galtung's help. The other question is: Can this be sensibly translated into urban design categories? Here,

Kassel Unter-Neu-Stadt is an interesting case. In the development process, a typology of developers and house builders was linked to a typology of building blocks and parcels ranging from garden lots for terrace houses via court parcels to compact blocks with high to very high densities (for the commercial buildings near the big arterial road in the north). Each house is then designed by a different architect, modern, but with typological reference to the historic precedent. Competitions are held for the major buildings including the “urban villa”, a housing type that had been “invented” at the Berlin IBA.

All of these examples have led to enthusiastic reactions by quite a number of British teams. The desire of learning from their experience has imposed an atmosphere of a museum or a zoo on some of them teeming with visitors. “Why not here?” was Nick Falk asking (Falk 2009b), and the model lingo of eco-sustainability has been propagated wildly in the UK.

But so far, the UK sustainable housing programme, which came as part of the Urban Renaissance Programme, has neither been sustainable nor community based. The term is a misnomer for the major housebuilding initiative in the South East. The focus on the economic competitiveness of the volume house builders has ignored the question of design quality, and the poor quality apartment housing has produced shocking results leading to broad-based public disenchantment.

Unfortunately, the next wave of eco-towns that have appeared on the UK horizon, do not seem to have learnt sufficiently from the mistakes. While the design quality promises to be better, the flashy label of carbon-neutrality and the ecological house design are to distract from the essential greenwash nature of the exercise. Worse, a number of the so-called eco-villages are employed as a vehicle to finally gobble up the greenbelts around Oxford, Plymouth and elsewhere.

To overcome deep-ingrained structures of path dependence, a lot has to happen. A special, new relationship has to be developed between the private sector, which still has to build the new communities, and the public sector, which will have to help fund the necessary infrastructure, i.e. from capturing the resultant rise in value for the community. There are challenges here for planners at every scale of planning, from the strategic to the local, and in every kind of specialization, from architectural and urban design to transport engineering to fi-nancial. Trying to learn from Europe may help, if the complexity of the processes is taken into account in this sense, and if long-term leadership alliances can be forged and maintained. Another important role is played in the UK by the institutions ranging from CABE and English Heritage to the National Agencies.

Australia is well behind in this respect, and possibly the initiative for a national urban policy has great poten-tial. Within each planning culture the specific path dependencies have to be explored and checked for their potential as well as their bog-down effects.

What are the path dependencies in Australia? To an extent, they are similar to the British situation, as might be expected; slightly more complicated as a consequence of the State/Local Council contradictions and without the benefit of substantial national government funding and guidance; similar constellation of volume house builders without any serious architectural guidance; a tradition of too many broken promises, of watered-down competition results alienated by secret back-room deals. No wonder then that my Australian colleagues throw up their hands in disbelief when I tell them that I have written an essay entitled “Learning from Aus-tralia” (Fischer 1999). Only an alien from outer European space could do such a thing. But the point is that among everything that has gone wrong, excellent bits of urban design have remained, and at least fragments of interesting development processes, and yes, that they have sometimes even survived; examples we in Europe can learn from too, even if in the long run, a great deal of the achievements may go down the drain as a rule.

This is understandably more painful for those involved in the local scene than for this here distant observer, who can hold up for instance the Green Games as a fascinating process with long-term benefits – in spite of bitter details, and who can find positive elements even in what is often considered as an icon of a design disas-ter, Pyrmont/Ultimo.

There are a number of explanations for the episodic manifestation of achievements of planning politics and their subsequent frequent disintegration. I’d like to propose one in the form of the image of Australia as a desert country; a metaphor with correlations at the physical as well as the cultural level. Down under, specifi-cally Australian aspects of the path dependence can be seen in the prevailing, let us call it: ‘liberal’ nature of the economic climate of the ‘desert continent’ and the occasional rainy season brought about by

politics rising beyond the horizon of short term gains, which has repeatedly led to a flowering of blossoms in the desert (ranging from national planning programs to broader cultural achievements including the film industry) - fol-lowed, unfortunately, of course, by their withering in the next long drought season. One reason for this lies in the existence of a high-quality discourse and design practice, which have their roots in traditions of social and cultural reform dating back to the 19th century.

Australia was then characterized by a social climate in which a strong will for democracy and egalitarianism lead to the creation of legislation for women's rights bills, manhood suffrage, minimum wage regulations and the beginnings of a trade union System. It was a period in which Australian legislation was ahead of that of many older nations, and became known as “The Social Continent”.

In an important instance, this political situation permitted Australia to learn from its bitter experience with a land-speculating 'squattocracy' of graziers and consequently to create a system of public ownership of land for its capital, but also to develop the most extensive tram networks in the Commonwealth. The strong pluralist tradition, which was at the back of these developments, was marginalized following World War I in the after-math of the trauma of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) in the First World War. But it has been surviving within a minority culture, which mainly shows up in the centres of Australia’s capital cities, sometimes in exurbia, too.

Just as rain in the desert suddenly makes the flowers bloom (because the ground is fertile and the seeds are there) a favourable constellation in Australian planning politics will once in a while divert resources from their usual purpose of just oiling the big-money machine in the direction of planning in the public interest.

And then, like the flowers in the desert, ideas for Australian cities can come to fruition and exceptional results spring up. There are plenty of examples between the foundation of Canberra and achievements in the other capitals. Why? Because the ground is fertile and the seeds are there. The seeds lie in a sophisticated, far-sighted, globally aware Australian planning discourse of high quality providing solutions ready for implemen-tation.

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