

Jaclyn Gault, Urban Studies Department

GREAT PLANNING DISASTERS

By Peter Hall

University of California Press, 1980



Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Preface

Introduction to the American Edition

Part One: Case Studies

London's Third Airport

London's Motorways

The Anglo-French Concorde

San Francisco's BART System

Sydney's Opera House

Two Near-Disasters: California's New Campuses and Britain's National Library



Part Two: Analysis

Approaching the Problem

The Actors: The Community

The Actors: The Bureaucracy

The Actors: The Politicians

The Actors in Concert

Towards Perception

Notes

References

Index



The main goal of Peter Hall's Great Planning Disasters is not to mock the projects or the people involved that are listed in its pages. It is also not a manual on how to fix these "disasters" or how to completely avoid future ones. Instead, it is a historical and analytical look at how seven very different plans and projects played out, why they were pursued in the first place, and how we could conceivably learn from them in the future. Although written more than 20 years ago, this book is still extremely relevant and gives a much needed, although at times depressing, perspective on planning. Peter Hall is a much respected planner as well as writer, professor, and researcher; and within this book all of these aspects are shown.

Introduction

The book Great Planning Disasters by Peter Hall focuses on seven particular plans and projects which he deems to be disastrous: London's Third Airport, London's motorways, the Anglo-French Concorde, San Francisco's BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) System, the Sydney Opera House, California's New Campuses, and Britain's National Library. The last two projects listed are not considered planning disasters by Hall, but rather close calls; these projects were initially on his list as disasters, but toward the end turned out to be somewhat successful. Not successful enough however, to be taken off his list completely. The remaining five are also broken into two categories: negative disasters (London's Third Airport and London's motorways) and positive disasters (the Anglo-French Concorde, San Francisco's BART System, and the Sydney Opera House). Negative disasters are those that sparked so much controversy and ended up being so infeasible that they resulted in the project being severely altered or thrown out completely. Positive disasters on the other hand, were carried out despite their detrimental consequences.

The Themes

Each project is very different from the next, but there are a few important reoccurring themes that Hall stresses as the major causes for these disasters. Of course each plan was carried out in a different time frame, in a different place, concerning different people, and of course had many different reasons for failing (or nearly failing), but the same issues come up time and time again. These include poor financial planning, inadequate population studies, and the ego of those in power.

Financial

The plans that Hall focuses on are massive and in turn are very costly. The plans range from a couple million pounds/dollars for the negative plans to the billions for the positive ones. Sydney's Opera house cost just under one billion Australian dollars, BART cost approximately 1.6 billion US dollars, and the Concorde, which was by far the most costly, ended up totaling two billion pounds. The problem that Hall has with these numbers is not simply due to the fact that the respective administrations spent this much money on projects that ended up not delivering on their promises (although this is obviously an important issue as well), but rather that the costs were never accurately forecasted to be so high.

The projects were all severely underestimated; either by a lack of understanding of the markets, extremely long time delays, or by the simple fact that studies were not done. In the case of the Concorde airplane, Hall states that the "cost estimates were simply made up" (107) because those in charge did not truly care about the feasibility of the project, they just wanted it done. Concorde and BART had the unique characteristic of being somewhat commercial projects, in that they needed to be "sold" to the public. However, the demand for both super-sonic jets and high speed rail were vastly overestimated, and again in the case of the Concorde, Hall states that there "was no firm estimate of sales at all" (101). Both Concorde and BART used incredibly expensive brand new technology that was wholly untested, resulting in escalating costs and a complete lack of knowledge by experts to estimate the final cost. Not to mention the fact that the new technology resulted in massive problems, such as delays and system failures in BART, resulting in more labor

costs and more time. The Sydney Opera House had a different problem; they could not accurately estimate the costs due to the fact that the main architect did not have detailed plans for the building, causing officials in Sydney to hire new consultants and finally a new architectural firm completely for several million extra dollars. The end result for all of these “disasters” was a final bill that shocked the public and required an explanation, and most of the people in power had no more to say than *we didn't know* or in the worst cases *we didn't care*.

Populations

Another reoccurring theme was that of a lack of planning for public reaction or for population shifts. Many of these projects lasted much longer than any government's term, and as governments change, so does public opinion; or rather governments change due to the shift in public opinion. All seven of the projects would by any criteria be deemed controversial, and in result public opinion matters greatly. A problem with several of the projects was that of a large reliance on the fickle government's interest and its funding; the most obvious are the two negative examples in London. For example, the motorways project received the most interest and the most funding when the government was more conservative, while when the Labour Party was in power the plan was highly criticized and placed on the sidelines. Ultimately the political controversy of the project became so extreme that development ceased altogether, and the same can be said for the Third Airport plan.

The people in charge of these projects also had the somewhat daunting task of forecasting populations' demographic change, and in many examples miscalculated these

changes based on faulty logic and anecdotal evidence. For example, the California's New Colleges plan estimated that after the 1950's the population would continue to grow at very high rates, and that people would continue to migrate into California at the same rates as they had in previous years. However, as we now know, the baby boom was short lived and the population in the 1960's actually dropped, only to recover to its original point in the 1980's. In the BART example they did the opposite, they saw that people were using their personal vehicles more and more, but rather than trying to accommodate that they assumed that people could be easily persuaded to get out of their cars and take the new rail system instead. In this case they underestimated not the actual number of car owners, but the effect that the new BART system would have on traffic. Within the first few years they had reached only 50% of their estimated ridership, and studies showed that the effect BART had on reducing traffic was less than 2%, "so slight as to be undetectable" (119).

Ego

All of the plans mentioned were subject to the whims of those in power, whether that whim was pushing for a project that had no real long term benefit, or postponing a project that would ultimately be a public good. In the cases of BART, the Sydney Opera House, and the Concorde, the egos of the people in charge got in the way of any form of good planning. BART is a somewhat excusable disaster due to the fact that the intent was respectable. They wanted to encourage public transit to those who were not using it, they wanted to decrease pollution and traffic, and make travel in and out of the city easier. High speed rail may not have been the right answer for the bay area, but at that point in

time they were not given any other alternative once the Bay Area Rapid Transit District and Commission was created.

The Sydney Opera House could have turned out differently if there had been stricter regulations on the design contest, or if there had been more supervision by the city. The architect showed no more than sketches to the city and to the contractors at any point of time, and when asked for more detailed and complete drawings, he refused to show them until he was paid. Eventually the government became so frustrated they refused to pay and the architect left. If in the beginning they had chosen a project that was more detailed to begin with, perhaps with a more experienced architect, the whole “disaster” could have been avoided. But, as Hall points out, the government “was committed to a prestige project for political reasons” and that “cost was almost a secondary consideration” (148-149).

The Concorde however, is a completely inexcusable project. Costing almost twice as much as any other project mentioned, it was known by its proponents to be financially infeasible almost immediately. They purposefully went behind the Treasury’s back in order to get funding from another source so that they would not be shut down. The Minister of Supply made the confession that she and her department “had no knowledge at all and made no attempt at all to estimate the size of the potential market” (90). They did not care about anything other than attempting to top the Americans’ success in the aircraft industry and the prestige of creating and marketing the first super-sonic jets. Unfortunately it all went downhill, the planes were too expensive to make, they could not carry more than 150 passengers, and they ended up selling only nine planes total. Only 16

planes were built, two were test planes, which leaves five planes never used. Costing £23 million (twice as much as a Boeing 747) that is equivalent to about \$230 (US) million total for the unused planes. The best quote to sum up the Concorde comes from a leading manufacturer who was asked why they chose to work on this project instead of working on something similar to the popular American 747, "his answer was that it would be 'boring'" (107). This displays the intent of the project in its entirety; there was more concern with flash and prestige than there was with any responsibility.

Planning Disasters: Planning, Environment, and Politics

Peter Hall mentions more than once that there is "no magic formula" (249) for fixing these projects or for creating perfect ones in the future. Rather one must look at this book as a means for making improvements and forming guidelines. Naturally all of the projects named involve planning, and more specifically long range planning. A handful of the cases involve the environment, either wanted to protect (as in the BART example) or not taking it into consideration enough (as with the London motorways or the airport examples). And all of the projects involve some government involvement and are very politically charged.

Hall attempts to give some theory about how long range planning can be accomplished for even risky and uncertain events. He pushes for detailed studies of projects in the past, as well as more realistic studies on current trends. Hall says that checks and balances should be created within the planning system so that no one agency or group has more control than another. This would take care of the problem of shifting governments and perhaps the lack of experience of some architects or planners. He also

believes that forecasts should be qualitative as well as quantitative in order to adjust for certain political or value changes in the mind of the public. He strongly suggests that projects should always have multiple alternatives so the people can pick and choose, and also so that if a project begins and an error is found, one can simply change direction instead of starting completely over.

Hall does not go into great detail about the environmental issues of these huge projects or a solution to its complicated involvement. However, things like EIRs (Environmental Impact Reports) address some of the issues raised. EIRs do take more time, but they generally give alternatives to the proposed project and allow the public to be aware of the process. The more open book planning does take time, but the benefits seem to outweigh most of the consequences. And although EIRs are often quite costly, they are much cheaper than the millions that were poured into the alterations that had to be made due to lack of detailed study in these projects.

As for the political nature of the projects, one must accept that you cannot separate planning from politics. They go hand in hand most of the time, and as Hall states "if a planner ignores political behaviour, his decisions will be simply unrealistic" (271), but at the same time he cannot bend over backwards to accommodate politicians. However, the checks and balances spoken of before would help control the often outrageousness of the governing body. Also Hall advocates for incorporating politics into the forecasting theory.

Analysis

Peter Hall's book has many very admirable characteristics and addresses several incredibly important issues. The case studies are as relevant as they were 20 years ago, and

show the many different ways bad planning can manifest itself. The stories of each are also somewhat entertaining, if you can get beyond the depressing nature of them. The theories he presents are practical, well-researched, and a very detailed. He does not think of himself as better than any of the people that he mentions, he acknowledges that he has the benefit of hindsight. He does not point fingers at individuals, but rather blames the system for not having nets in which to catch the things that may fall through the cracks. One can tell that the author genuinely believes that we can and should learn from these mistakes, and that the future of planning is not as bleak as those inside this book.

The only negative aspects of the book are the very technical terms and theories that he intersperses throughout. Although the tables, graphs, and maps are helpful at times, the technical aspects of engineering and population growth formulas may be lost on many a layman. He even uses game theory and different probability formulas towards the end to explain how one can make better “guesses” in the future. The evaluations of the individual cases at the end called “Disasters Re-Examined” is probably the most helpful section in his analysis, taking you through each project one last time and summarizing the most important lessons to be learned. I would recommend this book with a warning that if you are not interested in the more abstract theory side of planning, read the case studies, then skip to the end. Otherwise, this book definitely belongs on every planner’s shelf.