

Jam Sessions

A nightmare of transport chaos is unfolding in the south-east of England. Stuck on a bus in another rush-hour jam with an irritable four-year-old, Jos Boys reflects on the limits of Peter Hall's vision of London in 2001

Twenty-five years ago, in his book *London 2000*, the prolific, populist writer on urban planning, Peter Hall, invented a 'representative' London family, the Dumills. They illustrated his vision of the future in the south-east of England. Edward, 54, Mary, 52, Sebastian, 25, and Chloe, 21 were highly mobile with jobs, schools and social lives spread far across the London region. They think 'as little of going 25 miles to work as of going over to Brittany for the weekend.'

Since the mid-60s, this vision - and its associated landscape of high-level expressways and pedestrian decks - has come in for increasingly heavy criticism. Feminists in particular have exposed attempts by planners and architects to re-order cities to meet the needs of an assumed 'norm' of a white, male, middle-class car driver commuting to work in the city centre and returning to his non-working wife and suburban retreat in the evening.

There are two major problems here. First, the norm was a stereotype of the middle classes particularly inadequate in its description of the lives of many middle-class women. It also marginalised working-class people, the elderly and less mobile, the unemployed, and people living in the inner cities. Yet this assumption about how 'most' people lived was offered as common sense, and justified by simple juxtaposition with data about population distribution or employment.

The second problem was the unspoken belief that freedom of movement in

cities somehow equated with wider freedoms of opportunity. This contained, of course, a partial truth. Increased mobility *does* open up access to more job locations, more choice in shopping and cultural facilities. But it was partial because it assumed that everyone started with equal access to a car, with equal mobility, without the severe restrictions of poverty. For Hall, poverty and deprivation in inner cities are an 'inconvenience' equivalent to the irritation of getting stuck in traffic jams a lot. His vision offered freedom and choice while ignoring basic economic and social inequalities.

Now, 25 years on, Hall has reassessed his view of planning in the south-east of England in *London 2001* (Unwin Hyman £17.95 hbk). The Dumills re-appear, commuting freely across south-east England and to France, but the predicted townscape is no longer 'swooping expressways in a series of gigantic one-way loops' (1963) and the 'pedestrian deck is far less vast' (1989). The London region now stretches from Dorset to Suffolk and its economy is still expanding.

The 'norm' has been adapted to conditions in the expanding city regions of London's 'outer rings'; Bournemouth-Poole, Swindon, Milton Keynes, and Ipswich. Here, London's growth is

concentrated in a series of overlapping job markets and centres, providing mainly white-collar employment and the semblance of semi-rural home life. Inner London loses both manufacturing and servicing jobs and, like other major cities, only attracts high-status company headquarters. The normal husband still commutes from an outlying suburb - now much further away - to the centre. Mrs Dumill commutes to a more local centre.

The same pattern of partial truths still obscures deeper understanding. Hall's sample household seems to reflect some real and potential changes in social, economic and physical structure. The patterns of growth in the London region reflect a wider economic restructuring of production into city-centre headquarters, suburban, white-collar work and the removal of routine production to other regions of Britain and the Third World. It reflects the increasing presence of women in professional employment, and the increased commuting distances of both women and men. But it is still offered as a 'norm' to generalise from. And it still offers (controlled) growth and increased mobility as a planning solution to the current state of cities and towns.

Yet how can I possibly relate to the Dumills when I

remain invisible in his scenario; a single parent with a child under five, a part-time teacher and, ironically enough, a PhD student in Peter Hall's own department at the University of Reading? While he jets across the Atlantic (to his other university at Berkley) I struggle on two buses to get my child to nursery, and a further four changes on bus, tube and train to reach my lectures.

Playing the professional, apolitical role, Hall manages only the occasional reference to economic and social differences. But the inequalities of wealth distribution, of restricted mobility in a society which rewards freedom of mobility, clearly affect our use of the physical environment. And it affects us all in different ways. We cannot generalise from the Dumills, or for that matter from my experience. We need a much deeper understanding of how different inequalities affect different groups in society.

Not all planners think like Peter Hall. Many are committed to planning for equality. Schemes like the GLC's Fares Fair campaign, for instance, which benefit the poorest and least-mobile sections of society as an alternative to Hall's proposed toll-roads and car-changing systems, which clearly least penalise wealthy car drivers. But the way planning is taught and practised is still based on assumptions masquerading as apolitical and *obvious* truths. If planning is to be a force in improving our physical surroundings for everyone the Dumill approach must change. •

