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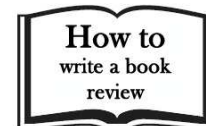
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## Book Review: The Blitz and Its Legacy: Wartime Destruction to Post-War Reconstruction, edited by Mark Clapson and Peter J. Larkham

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*Drawing together scholars from across the fields of planning, history, architecture and geography, this volume presents an historical and cultural commentary on the immediate and longer-term impacts of wartime destruction. **The Blitz and Its Legacy** includes war experiences of destruction, architecture, urban design, the political process of planning, and also popular perceptions of rebuilding. Its findings provide very timely lessons which highlight the value of learning from historical precedent. This fertile collection promises to provoke and stimulate much fresh thinking about the connections*



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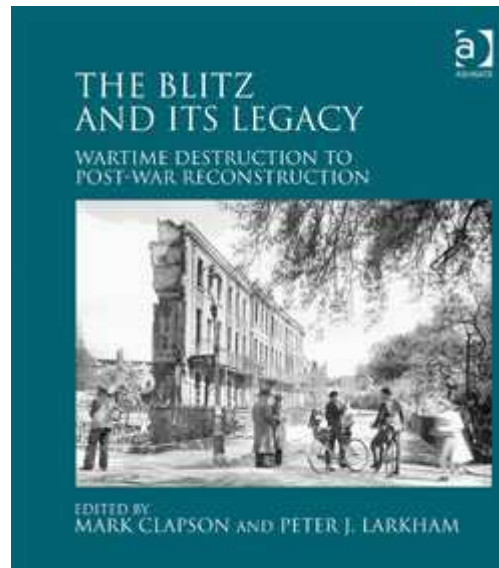
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*between the experience of the blitz and later reconstruction, concludes Peter Webster.*

**The Blitz and Its Legacy: Wartime Destruction to Post-War Reconstruction. Mark Clapson and Peter J. Larkham (eds). Ashgate. April 2013.**

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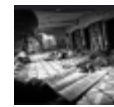


One of the most cherished popular myths of the Second World War centres on the London Blitz: a story of stiff upper lips, social solidarity and unity of purpose in the face of a terrifying onslaught; keep calm and carry on. Although this interpretation of the 'People's War' has taken as intense a pounding from historians' artillery as did London from the air, elements of it are left standing. This collection of essays examines two of them.

The first of these was that, at least in Britain, the experience of war turned the people into a 'nation of town planners'. The utopianism that lay behind the nationalisation of key industries and the foundation of the National Health Service also produced a consensus that cities should not merely be repaired, but reimagined, and created afresh on clean and rational lines. The second myth refers to the reconstruction process itself, in which all the subsequent problems of urban Britain, all decaying concrete and thin social fabric, can be laid at the door of 'the planners'. The contradictions between these two myths have not shortened their life or restricted their apparent explanatory power.

Britain was hardly alone in experiencing such damage, of course, and academic interest in destruction and reconstruction has been heightened in part by more recent conflicts in the Balkans and the Middle East. The editors,

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academics from the disciplines of history and of planning, have brought together an interdisciplinary team of specialists in history, planning, architecture and urban geography. There are valuable perspectives also from France, Germany and Japan, but two thirds of the papers relate to Britain, on which this review will concentrate.

As the editors acknowledge, the fourteen essays are highly diverse, on subjects ranging from the evacuation of disabled children from London to architectural style in a post-Hiroshima Japan. But there is design in this assembly of fragments, which points the way towards a reconnection of previously disparate literatures. The preoccupation of the book is to suggest how connections might be made between the lived experiences of individuals in blitz conditions, and the processes in which local populations interacted with local and national government to plan and then build. The social history of the People's War has seldom been connected with the study of post-war planning. This collection begins to form those connections.

One such starting point is Mark Clapson's essay on the London blitz and the dispersal of the London working class to the out-county estates within greater London, and the new towns beyond. Far from causing the fragmentation of the London working class, the Blitz only interrupted and then shaped and accelerated a longer-term process which can be traced back to late Victorian slum clearance and the Garden City movement. Part of that acceleration was caused by the experience of evacuation to the country, which to some extent prepared Londoners for suburban living. As Sue Wheatcroft shows, the evacuations also led directly to the post-war establishment of a system of residential special schools for children with disabilities.



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One of the last remaining scars from the Blitz in central London, Ham Yard, behind Piccadilly Circus, was never redeveloped after a sound pounding from the Luftwaffe in the 1940s. It was finally redeveloped in 2011. Credit: [David Merrigan](#) CC BY-NC 2.0

Susanne Cowan provides a salutary note on the limitations of public enthusiasm for planning in the immediate post-war period. Whilst the enthusiasm for a 'better Britain' was genuine, it was short-lived; and the desire for change was at least as much directed towards older, more basic needs, such as for better housing, than any longing for more far-reaching change. Cowan shows that planners were proactive in shaping public opinion; but were ultimately mistaken in believing their own propaganda.

Catherine Flinn provides a wryly downbeat assessment of the real influence of "the planners". Far from being set free to design new urban environments without constraint, the planners were in fact hemmed in by planning law itself, and by the inability of local authorities to agree amongst themselves. Reconstruction was also low amongst the priorities of those who controlled the supply of scarce building materials, particularly outside London; the members of the Investment Programmes Committee of the cabinet were clearly not among the 'nation of town planners.' Instead, much of the building took place slowly, and largely on private initiative, and so few post-

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war city centres bore much resemblance to the grand plans prepared for them. If later public opinion disliked these centres, it was not the planners who were to blame.

There are also case studies in which all these themes combine. Particularly interesting are those by David Adams and Peter J. Larkham on Birmingham, and on Plymouth by Stephen Essex and Mark Brayshay. Plymouth was perhaps the most fully realised modernist scheme for a new city centre, in which even those Victorian buildings that survived the bombing were demolished to allow the complete remodelling of the centre, with little of the street plan surviving. However, to view Plymouth as a straightforward victory for the 'planners' obscures a more complex and more interesting story. The site of a key naval dockyard, Plymouth was hit very hard by the bombing, and an early statement of intent to rebuild was felt necessary for morale. The initiative was seized very early by a tight knot of the elite, including Lord Astor, the mayor, and John Reith, minister of Works and Building. The *Plan for Plymouth* (1943) became as it were a local Magna Carta, which the objections of neither the local council, nor of city landowners deprived of their freehold, nor of the new Ministry of Town and Country Planning in London could amend. With a pleasing irony, the modernist scheme which allowed nothing old to remain, in recent years has itself become an object of conservation.

The editors have unfortunately been let down in the preparation of the text for the press. One essay contains the longest sentence this reviewer has ever read (running to some 75 words), and another so mangled as to be nonsensical. This is a shame, as this fertile collection promises to provoke and stimulate much fresh thinking about the connections between the experience of the blitz and later reconstruction. It deserves a large and diverse readership.

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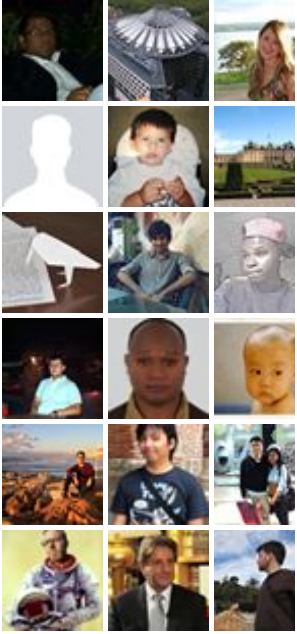
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**Dr Peter Webster** is an historian of religion in twentieth century Britain, with particular interests in church architecture and the memorialisation of world war. He is to be found blogging at [peterwebster.wordpress.com](http://peterwebster.wordpress.com) or on Twitter [@pj\\_webster](https://twitter.com/pj_webster). By day he masquerades as a librarian. [Read more reviews by Peter.](#)

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**Mark Clapson** 10/29/2013 at 11:13 am - [Reply](#)

Peter,

Many thanks for such a generous review of The Blitz and its Legacy. It's commonplace for reviewers to attack the diversity of edited collections without acknowledging unifying themes, so I am very grateful for your interpretation. I am sure Peter Larkham is too.

Best wishes,

Mark

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[God and War: a review | Webstory: Peter Webster's blog](#) 12/13/2013 at 9:21 am - [Reply](#)

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