

Book Review: Reinventing London by Bridget Rosewell

London has enjoyed an extraordinary period of growth in the past generation, symbolised by the towers of Canary Wharf built on the skeleton of the old docks. Finance had a lot to do with it, but its day is now over. This short read looks at how the infrastructure-driven regeneration of Kings Cross and the Olympic boroughs show what the next stage of London's growth will look like, with an economy driven by accountants and geeks, not bankers. Susan Parham finds that Bridget Rosewell's account of London change is well structured and the chapter topics work well thematically to explore some of the ways in which London has and continues to reinvent itself. However, more thorough discussion in some sections would be welcome.

Reinventing London. Bridget Rosewell. London Publishing Partnership. November 2013.

Find this book:

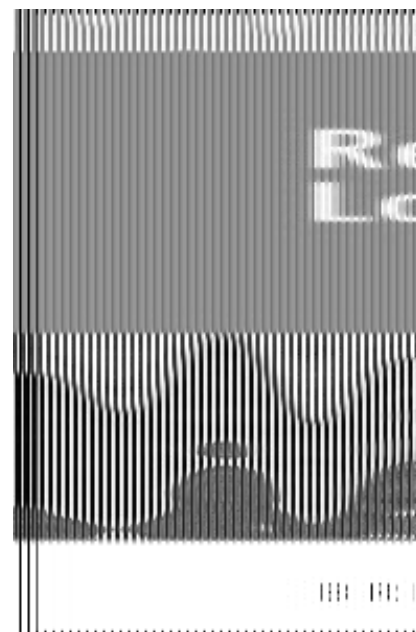
As [Bridget Rosewell](#) (p.1) notes, London defies neutrality, and her very short book – really an essay – *Reinventing London*, attempts to grapple with some of that complex, contradictory source material from an economist's point of view, within a publication series that describes itself as 'big ideas by leading writers, each given free rein and a modest word limit to reframe an issue of great contemporary interest' (back cover).

Rosewell worked as Chief Economist and Chief Economic Advisor to the GLA from 2002 to 2012, and it shows in her examples, which often connect to the cut and thrust of making economic policy for Londoners (as at p.80). It also shows in a writing style that is easy and self-assured, and is narrative rather than academic in tone (few references are given to data sources).

The book is framed around chapters that explore economic ideas about London through particular places which are thought to exemplify them. The Docklands allows Rosewell to consider finance and other services; Croydon is the location for thinking about living in London and the suburbs; the renewal of King's Cross and St Pancras offers the chance to delve into the world of big infrastructure; and Heathrow's contested situation, to contemplate London as global city. These explorations are topped and tailed by an introduction that sets out the stall – 'on economic change, living and localities, getting about' (p.12) and 'the international dimension' (p.16) – and by conclusions that reflect on critical points Rosewell draws from her analysis.

Rosewell begins by reminding us of how greatly life has improved in the last fifty years and argues that 'the reinvention of our capital city and its surrounding hinterland has become a crucial part of that change' (p.2), one that would have been hard to imagine from Britain's downbeat circumstances of the 1970s. Rosewell argues here that 'successful urban reinvention depends on changing, in the right way, four interrelated elements of the economy' (p.3) – to paraphrase – the structure and output of employment; the places people live and 'the kind of people' moving into London; transport links and other infrastructure; and communications, especially international ones.

These interconnected areas are situated in relation to transformations in London's economy, its population and its infrastructure. London broadly changed from a place where things were made to one where services are provided. It shifted from a British capital to a place where diverse ethnicities co-exist, where transport arrangements have been transformed and where international trade remains critical. Rosewell shows how this interconnects with London's spatiality: with the metropolis recentralizing after a period of sprawl and density reductions, but remaining a relatively low density and suburban city nonetheless.



kindle edition

amazon

In exploring the Docklands, Rosewell sketches the transformations in the way London has handled trade by sea and both its historical pre-eminence and decline in physical trade. She notes how Margaret Thatcher made what was essentially a political decision to inject a massive subsidy into the redevelopment of the Docklands, through financial support for the extension of the Jubilee Line, something that was not justified on economic terms. In exploring the transformation of the Dockland spatially and economically, Rosewell pauses to ask what constitutes economic value (a question which as a political economist this reviewer would be tempted to answer in terms of the theory of surplus value), and explores the disastrous groupthink that produced the financial meltdown.



Heron Quays DLR and building works, October 1989. Credit: [Tim@SW2008](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Moving on to discuss 'Tech City', Rosewell takes the uncontentioned view that 'London's continued and continuing ability to reinvent itself relies on the ability to attract bright young things who are well educated and ambitious' (p.31). Yet the kinds of urban, vibrant places such 'bright young things' might want to live do not seem particularly well connected to the discussion of Croydon in south London, in relation to which locality Rosewell argues that 'suburbs remain not only where most people live but most people want to live' (p.35). This is a place where in the 1950s 'most women did not work' (or actually, did not work for pay) but has undergone transformations in which revitalisation efforts have been blocked by 'planning and planners' (p.36).

One of the areas in which Rosewell has difficulty in mounting a convincing argument is in relation to planning, about which she has strong, confidently expressed views. For instance, Rosewell seems enthusiastic about new high-rise towers and offers what appears to be a broadly approving perspective on the phalanx of apartment buildings that now block views of the Thames in stretches including from Vauxhall to Barnes. Although there is the mandatory disclaimer that 'no one is keen on a free-for-all in development' (p.38), the thrust of her argument seems to suggest otherwise, and planning is seen as preventing 'the process of reinvention that is the key to successful location' (ibid). However, it is not made clear exactly how planning 'flexibility' (p.48) can address a housing crisis caused by a very complex set of structural factors.

The chapter on Kings Cross and St Pancras is more successful in exploring the difficulties of ever agreeing the economic case for major transport infrastructure to reinforce what are effectively transport-oriented developments, sensible though these are. It also shows how instrumental these inputs are in making possible transformative area regeneration, and the massive boost this provides for the London economy.

While Rosewell acknowledges that economic models can be based on incorrect assumptions, or 'a belief that using the word 'perfect' in a description means that such a world would be either desirable or achievable' (p.17), there still appears to be a reliance on certain highly contentious notions, for example that growth will continue apparently ad infinitum, and that technical fixes can sort out sustainability problems. There also seems to be an issue of generalizing from the writer's own circumstances — not everyone is an owner-occupier although the discussion appears to be framed as though that is the case (p.43); and from some basic areas of confusion — post-war New Towns were not conceived of as 'garden cities' (p.47).

However, it is the lack of focus on sustainability that is for this reader the most problematic absence from the analysis and perhaps the essay's central weakness, most clearly displayed in the discussion of Heathrow and the future of air travel in which sustainability simply isn't mentioned. Rosewell attempts to disarm criticism in her concluding chapter by situating the critics as using this as 'a handy stick with which to beat anyone who talks about 'growth'' (p.85), but the areas that she argues will get her 'off this hook' (*sic*) about this are unconvincing. They appear to boil down to reliance on new technologies, and on human ingenuity, with a view that 'people in cities can invent, develop and implement the new, which can respond to these challenges' (p.86). Rosewell argues in relation to climate change and London that 'it is not my purpose to evaluate these policies' (ibid), but really it should be if the analysis of London's reinvention is to be handled successfully.

All in all, this is both an interesting and a frustrating essay. The structure is well conceived and the chapter topics work well thematically to explore some of the ways in which London has and continues to reinvent itself. Rosewell has the grace to admit some of the weaknesses in economic assumptions and analyses which have become all too obvious to those outside the discipline in recent years. But a number of points discussed in this review perhaps work to undercut the essay's cogency, which is a pity because how London reinvents itself affects all those who live and work in London now and will do so into the future.

Dr Susan Parham is Head of Urbanism at the Centre for Sustainable Communities at the [University of Hertfordshire](#). Read more reviews by Susan.

Related

[Book Review: Remaking London: Decline and Regeneration in Urban Culture by Ben Campkin](#) In "Architecture and Urban Studies book reviews"

[Book Review: The BRIC Road to Growth by Jim O'Neill](#) In "Africa and the Middle East"

[Book Review: London 2012: How Was It For Us? by Lawrence and Wishart](#) In "Architecture and Urban Studies book reviews"

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books