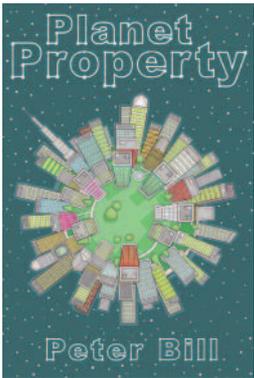


Planet Property

Peter Bill previews his new book



Peter Bill writes for the Evening Standard & Estates Gazette

Funny world, Planet Property. Most inhabitants of the UK real estate world spin around one another in tight semi-enclosed groups, bound by gravitational ties of common interest and common background. The only thing that tends to slow the dance is a planning system they see as Stalinist.

I came fresh to this pin-striped world in 1997 when I joined Estates Gazette, one year on from editing Building magazine. The happiest 12 years of my career followed. Builders don't much like journalists. Property folk entertain royally in eternal hope of a mention.

Older, fatter and a contented 62, I gave up editing EG in 2009 for life as a freelance writer, for both my old magazine and a weekly column in the London Evening Standard. I'd unwisely boasted when I left of writing a searing expose of the property industry to be called Boom, Boom, Bang! Lots of interviews with the Great & Good followed.

There followed an... er... lets say, fallow period. In 2011 work began on a 250-page tome retitled Planet Property, with a far broader canvas. This was published last month. Why write the book? As the intro says vanity and desire for posterity played a part. But a desire to provide a basic script of events, a simple plan of the stage, and a short cast list of players for novices and experts alike was the main driver. The play is set between 1997 and 2012. A time that saw the greatest boom and the biggest bust in history.

Quite a time. A time when efforts were made to reform the planning system. First, top down by Labour. Second bottom up by the Tories. A portion of the book covers the efforts by Labour's Charlie Falconer to bring in 'the greatest ever change since 1947. A revolution which ended in a whimper. As former RICS chief executive Louis Armstrong says "Falconer got frustrated because there wasn't a magic wand that even a sharp,

carefully focused minister could wave and get results. It was a quagmire into which he sank further and further; the more stones you turned, the more the alligators materialised." "Charlie's big idea, which was a good one," says the British Property Federation's chief executive Liz Peace, "was that if you put all the effort into making proper plans first for an area, then the decisions become easy. That was whole basis of the 2004 act of parliament.. it just wasn't terribly effective."

Peace says property companies are happy enough with the current National Planning Policy Framework, put in place by the Conservatives. "The policy actually goes further than the development industry had ever imagined." But she does conclude with a key message for planners everywhere. "Every ten years, there is a great review of the planning system, and it's all going to change everything and make it better – and then it sort of fizzles out and then we start all over again. That's just what happens. You could fill a room with reports on improving planning."

The chapters covering the boom, the bust and the impact of cheap money on the sector have attracted most attention. A tweeter accurately condemning the 'financialisation' of the sector. My next door neighbour was outraged, after reading what went on: he is a former tax inspector. Most interesting was the view of a former senior partner of a top ten agent who retired in 2004. "I thought things were getting too hot when I went. What came next was truly shocking."

Read the parts detailing what went on at Anglo Irish Bank and you will understand why. ■

Planet Property is published by Troubador and is available now in hard back, soft back and e-book via www.planet-property.net. The book will not be available in bookshops or on Amazon until December.

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