

Changing things

Location Matters
by Tony Vickers
Shepherd-Walwyn, 2007, 100pp
ISBN: 978-08568-3251-2 £8.95

We all understand the importance of location. Hampstead is different from Hackney and property prices reflect this fact. Even the location's name has value. When Henrietta Barnett built her famous garden suburb in north London she didn't call it Hendon Garden Suburb which is where it was but Hampstead Garden Suburb where most certainly it is not. Hampstead, even as a name, has a price.

Tony Vickers' carefully researched book examines location in relation to land values and possible solutions to our perennial financial problems. He analyses the dead-end land tax options and shows where they went wrong. Usefully, he records land value tax round the world and points out where it has failed and occasions where the instigators got it right: Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan being success stories, but now under threat from ignorance and vested interests.

Tony Vickers gives a thorough examination of the implications of lvt in the UK and a timetable for its introduction through Parliament. If only there was a party prepared to sponsor it!

Geoffrey Lee

Thump this

The Bible: The Biography
by Karen Armstrong
Atlantic Books, 2007, 302pp
ISBN: 978-18435-4396-1, £16.99

A major theme of the Bible is the relationship – secular and divine – between mankind and the land. In fact the word 'land' appears 1,308 times in the New International Version: and the Bible is full of stories which can help us understand our earthly place.

In *The Bible: The Biography*,

Karen Armstrong argues that the Bible is (and through history has most-often been used as) a guide which has to be interpreted. She explains the Bible's gestation and its transformation from the earliest Judaean books into today's modern sacred texts. She explains the historical process as one of *exegesis* – a Greek word meaning "to 'lead or guide out'; the art of interpreting and explaining the biblical text". *Exegesis* has purpose, and Armstrong says that the Bible must be used with generosity. "Modern philosophers of language have argued that 'the principle of charity' is essential for any form of communication. If we truly want to understand the other, we have to assume that he or she is speaking the truth".

Exegesis "is a quest for something new" the author tells us. Paraphrasing Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Armstrong says "Scripture was not really a text but an activity". Acknowledging that "the Bible may have been used to

back up doctrines and beliefs" she asserts that this was "not its chief function". The author warns us away from claiming authority by scripture: "The modern habit of quoting proof-texts to legitimise policies and rulings is out of key with interpretive tradition".

For the West in the opening years of the twenty-first century, a modern day *exegesis* from Ezekiel xxii would seem to be straightforward. "Son of man, say to the land, 'You are a land that has had no rain or showers in the day of wrath.' There is a conspiracy of her princes within her like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they devour people, take treasures and precious things and make many widows within her" (24-25.). "Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain. Her prophets whitewash these deeds for them by false visions and lying divinations..." (27-28.) "The people of the land practice

extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice". (29.)

Maggie Hold

The domain of sex

SEX.COM
by Kieren McCarthy
Quercus, 2007, 280pp
ISBN: 19052-0466-3, £12.99

In 1995 Stephen Cohen, a lifelong con man – abusing the somewhat relaxed systems then governing the internet – walked off with exclusive title to a rather special prize – "the most valuable piece of virtual real estate on the planet" – *SEX.COM*. But one man certainly wasn't happy about Cohen's good fortune: Gary Kremen. Because the domain was his property – Cohen had stolen it – and Kremen set about getting it back.

In this book Kieren McCarthy tells the story of "one domain, two men, twelve years and the brutal battle for the jewel in the internet's crown". Kremen had actually paid nothing for the property himself when he'd first acquired it – but he thought the battle was worth it: the subsequent development of the internet meant the domain had become worth \$100 million a year.

In fact the legal fight between these two quite singular men came to rewrite the law. It "shaped the history and development of the internet as we know it" McCarthy notes.

The drama unfolded at a time when the legal basis of the virtual world was at a very early stage of its development. By the time the legal arguments were all over the case had helped define just what virtual domain was, and what the rights of owners were.

From the start, one of Kremen's lawyers had "pointed out that the area of law that was being dealt with was new and evolving. Internet domain names had appeared in the real world in vast numbers, but they had not been

created by statute or by legislation, so in a legal sense they [the plaintiff and his team] were in a no-man's-land".

Co-defendants in court were Network Solutions Inc. (nsi). The company was the first public registrar of domain names. In court nsi argued successfully in the beginning that an internet domain was just a service – and that a service could be withdrawn or provided to another party. "Official spokesman Brian O'Shaughnessy was succinct: 'We provide a service. This is not property *per se*.'" Lead witness Phillip Abarbaro echoed that argument – "To say people buy and sell domain names is the vernacular, but it's not accurate". nsi's "entire philosophical position on the nature of domain names was not only flawed but flew in the face of what everyone else on the internet knew to be true. nsi held that domain names were equivalent to telephone numbers – despite the fact that all the evidence pointed to the fact that domains had become intrinsically valuable in themselves.... The simple fact was that Network Solutions, like any monopolistic organization, had grown so attached to the status quo – itself – that it saw only risk, damage and conspiracy in any attempt to change it".

But by the end of the *SEX.COM* case – partly as a result of the arguments aired during it – it was established that internet domain, legally, was in fact good old fashioned property. The judge found that Kremen's property had been stolen by Cohen, stating that he had "substantially interfered with" Kremen's use of the domain and deprived Kremen of its use and of "earning substantial rents, income and profits". Kremen's lawyers told Wired magazine that the case proved "the internet is not a lawless wasteland – and told the BBC that "the domain name is a valuable property right...that can and should be protected".

The internet was emerging from its wild west phase.

Milton Appel

'ate 'em, I does

Why We Hate Politics
by Colin Hay
Polity Press, 2007, 200pp
ISBN: 978-07456-3098-4, £14.99 pb / £50 hb

In this book Colin Hay attempts to analyse our disenchantment with politics as manifest in the often low turnout at elections. Part of the reason is that people feel that power has moved elsewhere – in Britain to the European Union. Globalisation straddles the borders of the world so that if a multi-national company finds regulations in one country difficult they move their business to another country.

Colin Hay raises the question of whether global companies will relocate their production to economies with the lowest rate of corporation taxation. He seems to think that this is not the case. He says that the most generous Welfare States have consistently proved the most attractive locations for foreign direct investment. Once attracted to a particular locality, and having paid for buildings, plant and machinery, their exit options are limited. While foreign investors may loudly proclaim that they will if necessary move, the *threat* of doing so is their most effective weapon. Their prime considerations are access to markets and the availability of a skilled labour force. Labour regulations, pension and national insurance costs do not seem to be a major factor in their decisions.

Land value taxation is not discussed but if it could replace corporation taxation then, in spite of what Colin Hay says, it could be a factor in multi-national's locational decisions.

Geoffrey Lee

