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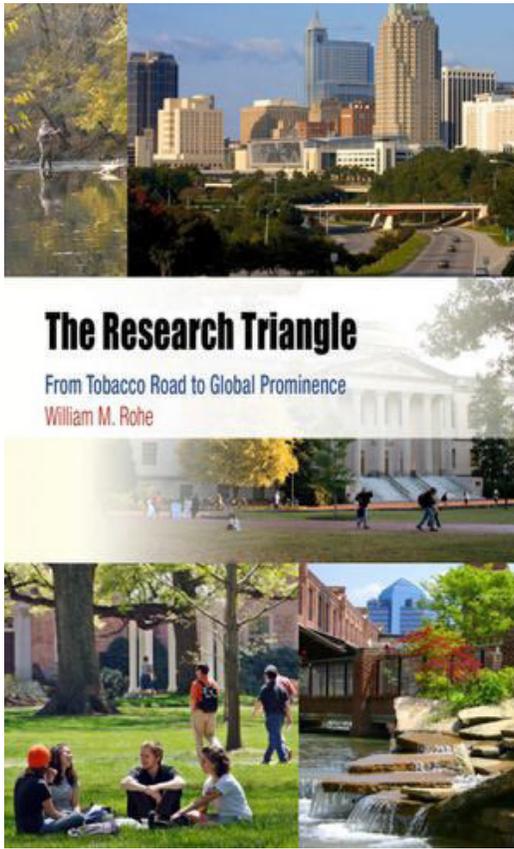
# Lessons for the future of the Research Triangle

## The economic experiment succeeded, but brought problems

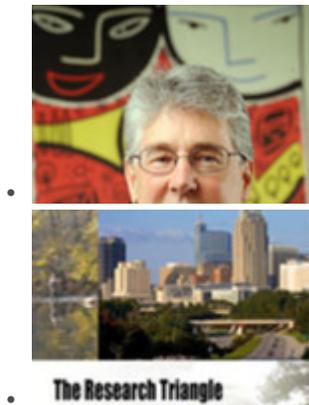
By Gene Nichol

Correspondent May 26, 2012

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"The Research Triangle: From Tobacco Road to Global Prominence" by William M. Rohe.



- More information Nonfiction The Research Triangle: From Tobacco Road to Global Prominence William M. Rohe University of Pennsylvania Press, 312 pages

When a strong scholar turns his attention to the home front, it can be both enlightening and daunting. We might come to understand, more insightfully, where we are and how we got here. Chances are good, though, we'll also discover that the challenges lying beyond the horizon are more imposing than we believed.

Bill Rohe's "The Research Triangle: From Tobacco Road to Global Prominence" fulfills both of these essential missions. Counterintuitively, and perhaps for my own purposes, I will, like Richard Nixon used to say, take the second point first and the first point second.

Rohe is a famed expert on urban planning and regional studies. Unsurprisingly, he focuses, laser-like, on the challenges arising from the breathtaking economic development success of the Research Triangle – framed principally by Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill – during the past four decades.

In 1960, the combined population of the Census Bureau's Raleigh and Durham metropolitan statistical areas was 238,000. By 2009, it was 1.7 million, and the Raleigh-Cary metropolitan zone was the country's second-fastest growing. Such explosion doesn't unfurl without costs and tensions.

The Triangle's astonishing growth has wrought much-improved rates of employment and income, expanded cultural opportunities and a potent sense of regional vibrancy. But as Rohe documents (and we experience), these benefits are now accompanied by predictable inconvenience: traffic congestion, air and water pollution, water-supply demands, and shortages of public infrastructure – from transportation to schools.

Rohe's lesson is that ever more powerful tools of regional governance and decision-making are required if we are to deal effectively with regionally driven and regionally suffered consequences. That'll be tough to secure from an array of cities so distinct and bullheaded. (Think, to make the point, of the Tar Heels, the Blue Devils and the Wolfpack – and all those mystical symbols are thought to encapsulate.)

Still, whether he intends it or not, the tale Rohe relates of the unfolding of the “most intentional and successful public-private development strategy” ever seen in an American metropolitan area is what astounds. Given our current political gridlock and our increasingly diminished appetite for public investment, it is easy to wonder whether we would today be capable of making such a profound contribution to our children's future. Perhaps we're wrong to believe in evolution.

Rohe focuses, necessarily, on three empowering Triangle changes of the past half-century. The first two are traditional and unexceptional: the development and expansion of Raleigh-Durham Airport and the extension and completion of Interstate 40. These essential arteries were required to link the region as an economic and cultural unit. The third, the creation of the Research Triangle Park, was anything but the expected and well-trod path. Its story, at bottom, is increasingly the Triangle's story.

It is impossible, in this short space, to highlight the bold cast of characters – from private industry, state and local government, the research universities, the nonprofit sector – who pressed the path-breaking idea to fruition. But before its launch in 1957, Gov. Luther Hodges decried North Carolina's haunting specter of low-wage jobs – yielding the second worst per capita income in the nation. He also fretted over a “brain drain” that led “two-thirds of the sciences graduates” from Carolina, Duke and State to leave the state to find suitable work.

Accordingly, RTP would “marry” our “ideals for higher education” with our “hopes for material progress.” Fifty-five years later, the “audacious idea” had produced “an internationally recognized cluster of knowledge intensive businesses” that has dramatically lifted our fortunes.

North Carolina climbed out of the nation's economic cellar by investing potently and imaginatively in its people and its places. Perhaps Rohe's book will help remind a new generation of political leaders that this is the central lesson of our economic history.

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