The notion that Atlanta would be more economically viable or a more attractive place to live if it sprawled less appears to fly in the face of most of the evidence visible on the ground. Atlanta has been one of the most successful cities in the country in attracting population and jobs over the past 50 years. One of the main reasons for this growth is precisely because it is such a leafy, low-density place where middle-income home buyers have been able to afford a house with some land and home builders have been able to supply houses fast enough to meet demand so that house prices have remained fairly low. Call it the upside of sprawl. The same can be said of most of the most dynamic and lowest-density urban areas in the country— Houston, Dallas, Phoenix. It is certainly not true of many of the highest-density places in North America – urban areas such as San Francisco, Vancouver, Toronto or even Los Angeles—where public policies aimed at curbing sprawl have led to sharply higher housing prices.

In fact, if we look globally across urban areas during the last century, a striking pattern emerges. According to Shlomo Angel and his colleagues in *Planet of Cities* and *The Atlas of Urban Expansion* and demographer Wendell Cox on his demographia.com website, even though densities are falling in almost every urban area in the world today, every poor urban area in the world continues to have very high densities by historic standards, usually more than 50,000 people per square mile. On the other hand, every affluent urban area in the world, with the single exception of Hong Kong, where land use has been more stringently controlled than in any Western democracy, has densities that are a fraction of typical urban densities one century ago. Where urban densities often topped 100,000 people per square mile in 1900, in the Atlanta today the figure currently stands at an exceptionally low 1,800 people per square mile. As people have become richer they have demanded more space, and they have gotten it everywhere there has been a truly democratic government and anything resembling a free market in land.

This historical background helps explain why Atlanta, as a city in the affluent world that has done most of its major expansion fairly recently, is such a sprawling place. It is possible that this pattern will change and that more people in Atlanta and throughout the affluent world will want to live at higher densities and be less dependent on automobiles. There is some evidence that this is already happening, especially in some of the fastest growing cities of the American South and West. However, it has been a conspicuous fact of urban life that many of the same people who deplore sprawl at the edge are also determined to preserve the character of their existing neighborhoods in the center, so it remains to be seen whether or not any affluent cities will ever return to the kinds of densities seen in 1950, let alone in the early 20th century.

The negative press on Atlanta seems to follow an interesting historical trend. Every time a city has shaken the urban order with very fast growth, growth fast enough to allow a large population to move up the American middle-class ladder, there has tended to be a chorus of complaints from an already well-established urban elite about all kinds of alleged urban ills, especially what they perceive as social and physical disorder in the city's urban development. This was true in New York in the mid 19th century, Chicago in the late 19th century, Los Angeles in the early 20th century. Rudyard Kipling's long rant against Chicago in 1891 (most memorable phrase: “Having seen it, I urgently desire never to see it again. It is inhabited by savages.”) is typical.
There was, of course, some truth to the complaints of the critics, but for most of the families in those fast-growing cities, the vast expansion in social and economic opportunity vastly outweighed the problems. Eventually these urban areas, as they grew richer and the pace of development inevitably slowed, were able to alleviate some of the most glaring issues. This is probably what we will see in the case of Atlanta, Houston, Dallas and Phoenix. In the meantime strident efforts to reverse the course of urban history and push these places back into the mold of dense 19th-century cities heavily dependent on public transportation risk destroying the very things that have made them such magnets for population and economic growth in the first place.

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