SHAPE SHIFTING

Everyone thinks they know what it is. Yet a new and readable assessment of sprawl would seem to be welcome among its critics

Review essay by James Krohe Jr.

The Pretenders' Chris Hynde, rock'n'roll's Jane Jacobs, put the case against sprawl in her 1983 lament, *My City Was Gone*.

My pretty countryside
had been paved down the middle
by a government that had no pride.
The farms of Ohio
had been replaced by shopping malls
and Muzak filled the air
from Seneca to Cuyahoga Falls

Songwriters with guitars are not our only thinkers to damn urban sprawl. Academics, efficient-government reformers, architects and environmentalists have been singing along with Hynde, so to speak, since the 1950s. Sprawl is the subject of helpful conferences, earnest policy papers and sputtering polemics, and it even briefly appeared as a theme in a presidential campaign. All agree it is bad, yet no one agrees exactly what to do about it.

A new and readable assessment of the phenomenon would seem to be welcome among such critics. Robert Bruegmann's *Sprawl: A Compact History* is not, however, that book. The author — a widely published professor of architectural history at the University of Illinois at Chicago — insists that nearly everything we've heard about urban sprawl is wrong.

Sprawl, as everyone thinks they know, is the postwar blight wreaked by dispersed, auto-dependent development on the urbanizing fringe of our cities. The result is a landscape widely condemned as peripheral in every way, a maze of look-alike subdivisions and tacky malls, a numbing not-quite-city filled with endless pavement and bored kids. While usually reckoned a phenomenon of the suburbs, sprawl is reshaping all Illinois cities that have room to expand within their municipal boundaries, creating new cities-within-the-city that, while "urban" in a legal sense, are suburban in form and function.

These are not only new cities, but bad ones. Sprawl is polluting the air and has left the nation dangerously dependent on foreign oil. Sprawl accounts for the nation's shrinking farmland base and its expanding midriff. Depending on whom you read, these unhappy trends are the results of some mix of a federal conspiracy against cities, a socially pernicious impulse among middle-class whites to flee the city and its problems, or a conscienceless capitalism run amok.

Bruegmann insists that this brief is mostly uninformed or dishonest. He offers as a rejoinder a history of sprawl around the world, brief histories of anti-sprawl activism in three recent eras and a summary of the principal measures so far taken by governments in Europe and the United States to contain it. The lessons of this rather miscellaneous survey confound the popular understanding of the issue on nearly every point. Sprawl is indeed a postwar phenomenon — post-Civil War. Look at what happened in Chicago. Illinois' Ur city has been sprawling since after the Civil War. Ann Durkin Keating, in her book *Chicagoland*, reports that in the 19th and early 20th centuries, no fewer than 233 settlements were found in the collar counties. (Many of these settlements are now Chicago neighborhoods that have been stripped of suburban status by annexation.) Bruegmann notes there is nothing new in "edge cities," either, save the fact that they are now being built in suburbs. Places like Schaumburg are merely the most recent version of the business centers that once lay inside municipal borders, such as the area around Halsted and 63rd in the Englewood neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, which in the 1920s was second only to the Loop in the conduct of retail business.

Sprawl in big U.S. cites not only predates the automobile, it predates the United States. Hardly a product of postwar automobile culture, sprawl goes back at least as far as the Romans (from whom we borrowed the term suburb, or *suburbium*). Far from a peculiarly American disease, sprawl in its familiar form is a disease we caught from the Brits, who invented the modern suburb in the 17th and 18th centuries.

As for another recurring theme in much recent anti-sprawl writing — that suburbs foster a sense of alienation or decline in civic engagement — Bruegmann reminds readers that it was only 50 years ago that

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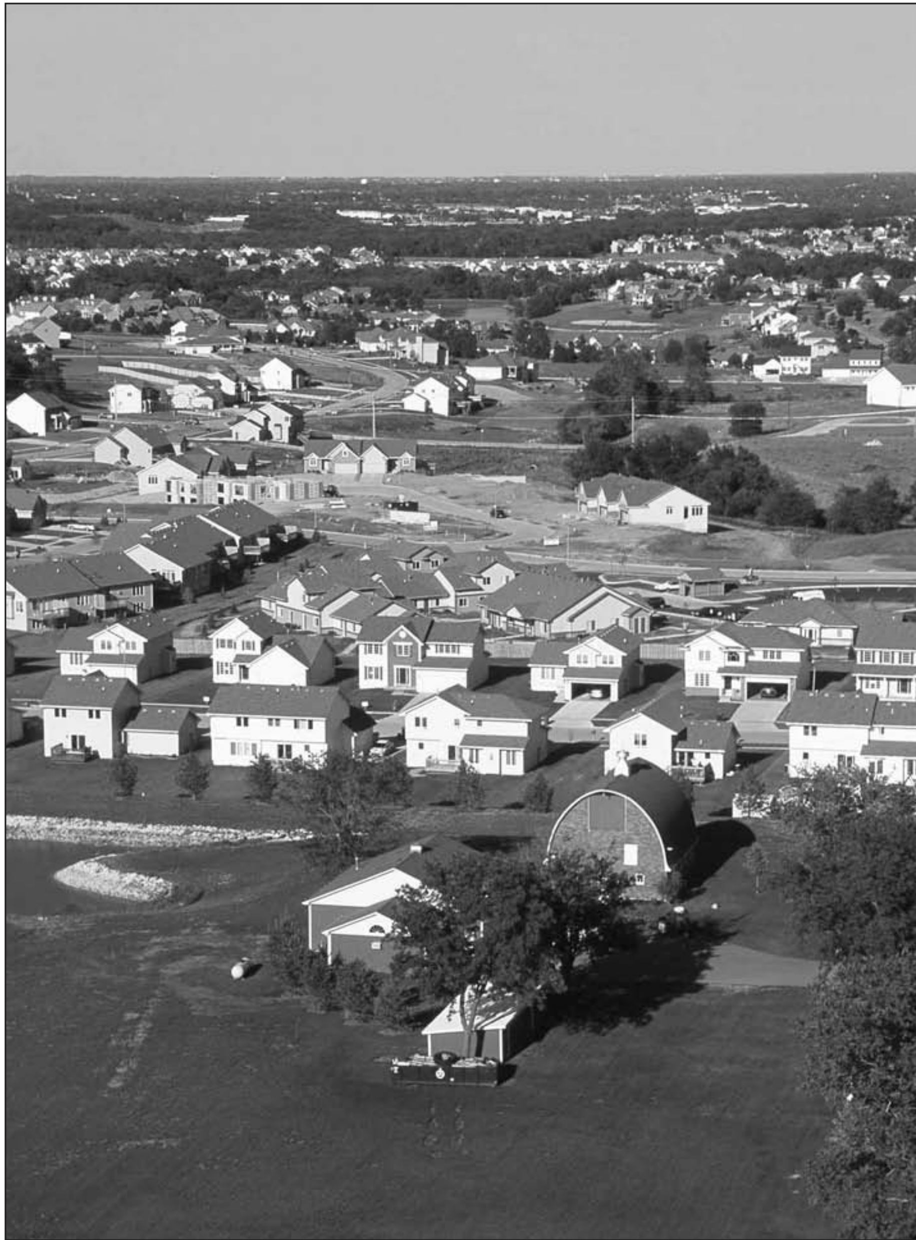

sociologists were describing how it was the central cities that were causing alienation and suburbs that were turning their residents into compulsive joiners and volunteers. And far from a product of the private automobile, peripheral residential development on a mass scale was a product of mass transit. The nickel streetcar ride allowed the lower-middle-class out to the then-periphery of our cities, where land was cheap enough that a new house was within reach financially as well as physically. And if we want to see mile after mile of cookie-cutter houses, we shouldn't look on today's suburbanizing fringe but in the bungalow belt, most of which was built on former farm fields when hundreds of thousands of Chicagoans began to move in the 1920s.

If sprawl is not new, neither are attempts to rein it in. Bruegmann notes, accurately, that critics of sprawl are mainly people from the upper-middle-class, including what Bruegmann calls "an elite group of academics, central-city business leaders, and employees of not-for-profit organizations." (One is obliged to note that the critics of the sprawl critics, including Bruegmann, also come from this elite stratum.)

'Twas always thus. Nearly a century ago, Progressive-Era reformers from that same group organized into bodies such as Chicago's Citizens' Committee of One Hundred to argue for an end to Illinois' overlapping local governments on grounds of efficiency. Today's anti-sprawlers have added a further reason for regionalizing some government functions — cooling the competition for taxable projects that creates a buyer's market for developers — but the larger dynamic is little changed.

Cities — growing, prosperous cities anyway — make sprawl necessary by rendering the city center crowded, dirty, dangerous and expensive. They also make sprawl possible by generating the wealth people need to escape it. Bruegmann's ultimate point is that the desire for more privacy, more space and the social comfort of dwelling among people of one's own class — whatever their color or creed — seems universal, with the result that dispersal to the urban fringe happens whenever and wherever people have enough money and enough freedom to move. In short, given a certain level of wealth and a free market in land, sprawl is inevitable and universal.

"Although sprawl has developed differently at different times and in different places," Bruegmann writes, "the history of sprawl suggests that the two factors that seem to track most closely with sprawl have been increasing affluence and political democratization."

That is not to say that automobile suburbs are to everyone's taste. They are often damned as ugly, for example,

The social problems caused by subdivision life are hardly on par with those that fester in slums or the worst of our public housing projects. Yet "sprawl" is used almost universally as a pejorative, applied with as much malice, and as little accuracy, as the word "slum" when used to denote any poor neighborhoods.

although this may be a carelessly chosen word. (The public realm of such places is jumbled, certainly, even incoherent, and certainly banal, but in ugliness even the meanest retail strip scarcely compares with their equivalents across the city line in Chicago.) We don't really know how to design for the low-density city. Its characteristic elements, such as wide setbacks from the street, are intended to create an ambiance that is not urban. The problem is, such environments are not much of anything else either.

Happily, to some extent, sprawl and such related ills as road congestion sow the seeds of their own reform. Consider transportation. Commuting times in the United States did not increase much between 1960 and 1990, a period when sprawl was sprawliest, because the decentralization of residences was accompanied by a decentralization of jobs. Development spurs rises in land costs, with the result that the number of dwelling units per acre has been going up; sprawl is becoming less sprawly, as much of the new housing in many suburbs is in the form of multi-unit projects such as rowhouses. A city that requires a three-bus commute to a minimum-wage job is not a city that works, in the opinion of the dishwasher who cleans the plates after every anti-sprawl conference.

But the CTA's L lines are being extended — slowly, yes — into suburban job centers like Schaumburg. Even middle-class workers with nice cars who find the daily commute unpleasant and time-consuming are buying housing clustered nearer their jobs. This has transformed both the old working-class parts of Chicago just outside the Loop into dormitories for the upscale and generated city-style condo and rowhouse and flats-above-the-shops developments near transit stops in the suburbs. Which is exactly what happened in Chicago a century ago, of course; just as the city went from farmhouses to weekend places to bungalows to four-flats to condo towers, so the suburbs are going from single-family ranches to townhouses to, well, condo towers.

Sprawly places are preferred by certain kinds of people for living certain kinds of lives — just as city neighborhoods are, come to think of it. The social problems caused by subdivision life are hardly on a par with those that fester in slums or the worst of our public housing projects. Yet "sprawl" is used almost universally as a pejorative, applied with as much malice, and as little accuracy, as the word "slum" when used to denote any poor neighborhoods. The fevered nature of the complaints about sprawl is reflected in the titles of such recent jeremiads as *Sprawl Kills: How Blandburbs Steal Your Time, Health And Money*; *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*; and *Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930*.

Bruegmann traces this animus to social class. "Wherever and whenever a new class of people has been able to gain some of the privileges once exclusively enjoyed by an entrenched group," he writes, "the chorus of complaints has suddenly swelled."

Not surprisingly, this has happened during every period of major prosperity because during these times a greater number of families have enjoyed a greater choice of living arrangements. Predictably, every time this has occurred, in the judgment of certain already well-established groups, the newcomers have made the "wrong" choices. Also predictably, criticism of sprawl has virtually always been aimed at people outside the speaker's or writer's own circle.

"Sprawl is where other people live," asserts Bruegmann, speaking more frankly for his critics than they usually do, "particularly people with less taste and good sense than themselves." This is unkind to sprawl's many critics, but not especially unfair. As Bruegmann makes plain, most of the arguments against sprawl from social and environmental perspectives are little more than rationalizations of what is, in essence, a cultural judgment.

Viewed thus, the countryside is one more thing — television, higher education and politics are among the many others — that have been ruined by the participation of the larger public. Its customs, its tastes in clothes and architecture, most of all its casual indifference to the city, offends the cultivated urbanite. Contempt for the subdivision/mall lifestyle runs through most anti-sprawl writing, and is expressed in language strikingly reminiscent of that used by previous generations to sneer at the small town or the Old Country.

Class bias is not the only impulse behind the reflexive rejection of low-density development. As noted, sprawl is nearly universally blamed on the post-World War II prosperity and its evils, such as expressways and general automobile ownership. This analysis certainly isn't buttressed by history; as Bruegmann notes, "Postwar suburbanization and sprawl were different in scale but not really different in kind from what had gone before … in American cities for more than a century, particularly in the boom periods of the 1880s and 1920s." In Mayer and Wade's *Chicago: Growth of a Metropolis* is a photograph of the Austin neighborhood on Chicago's far West Side — new houses here and there in a landscape festooned with scrawny trees and new streets as yet uncluttered by houses — is the very image of sprawl. It was taken around 1890.

Why then this peculiar focus on the past 50 years? Because that was when the baby boomers were growing up. A generation who grew up in those post-war subdivisions preaching the need for change now recoil with dismay at seeing

change invade the sacred precincts of their childhoods. Thus the weirdly anachronistic cast of their criticisms. They castigate “Ozzie and Harriet” suburbs as if it was still the ’50s, notes Bruegmann, though suburbs were never exclusively white, middle-class bedroom communities even then. In fact, today’s Illinois suburbs are as diverse socially, economically and racially as the city neighborhoods they are beginning to resemble.

Nostalgia is merely one form of our cultural narcissism. Many people (and not only Americans) lament the loss of a countryside whose virtues were ruined by people who moved in just after they did. Only ignorance of local history insulates from self-criticism the people who throng to Illinois’ “heritage farms” on summer weekends to see recreated the kinds of places that the construction of their houses caused to disappear. In this they are like the elites who built faux-country estates outside Chicago a century ago. They didn’t think of their new houses as sprawl, although they must have seemed so to the farmers they displaced, just as those farms had seemed like sprawl (though they lacked a word for it) to the Potawatomi whose Eden the farmers had destroyed.

Sprawl is part report, part polite polemic. It is not, however, a prescription. This will frustrate some readers and annoy others who believe that an author who presumes to criticize reformers’ ideas without offering better ones is derelict in his responsibilities as a public issues pundit.

If critics are too often hysterical in advancing the case against sprawl, Bruegmann can be a bit glib in dismissing it. The fact that sprawl is a manifestation of city life with a long pedigree is hardly grounds for accepting it; so is tuberculosis. The flow of federal subsidies to cities and suburbs deserves a more sophisticated analysis than it gets here. Bruegmann is most sound when he is talking about what he knows, which is cities and their histories. *Sprawl* will become an indispensable primer on the subject, insofar as apologists will be able to mine it for insights, and critics of sprawl will have to tailor their arguments to take it into account.

Some will find it hard medicine to swallow, however good it is for them. Bruegmann offers an explicitly libertarian take on issues that many will find not just unpersuasive but unpalatable. For example, we can rue that suburban new house buyers don’t pay all the public costs of their private decisions, but, like it or not, avoiding social costs is precisely why so many Americans love the suburbs.

“A proliferation of small governments,” he notes, “has made it possible for citizens not only to choose the kind of community and the kind of services they wish but also to have a larger voice in planning for the future than they would in a larger regional government.”

Usually, the kind of community citizens instruct their small governments to provide is one without the complication, exception and unpredictability of the city. The impulse is not one that Bruegmann (unlike most sprawl critics) presumes to judge. The educated cosmopolitan thrills at the chance to mingle on the street every day with people he would never invite to dinner, but most people do not. For them, the good life is lived in places where all their neighbors are pretty much like they are — whatever their color and accent.

Bruegmann argues that many things about our spread-out cities are good, and that while some things about it are bad, they are less bad than imposing a solution through government *diktat*. “The most convincing answer to the question of why sprawl has persisted over so many centuries,” he observes, “seems to be that a growing number of people have believed it to be the surest way to obtain some of the privacy, mobility, and choice that once were available only to the wealthiest and most powerful members of society.” The United States is, for the moment, a democratic republic; if sprawl is what most people like, most people — acting through the market or their elected agents in local government — will get just that.

The “problem” with sprawl, in short, is the problem with democracy. Changing present land use policies means leaving decisions in hands other than the public’s. That’s been tried, in other realms, with results that are often well-intended, but seldom wise. In the end, the reformers’ program consists of the

SPRAWL
A Compact History
Robert Bruegmann
University of Chicago Press, 2005

CHICAGOLAND
City and Suburbs in the Railroad Age
Ann Durkin Keating
University of Chicago Press, 2005

CHICAGO
Growth of a Metropolis
Harold M. Mayer and Richard C. Wade
University of Chicago Press, 1969

hope that Americans will follow their advice and become better people. This is much to be desired, but not to be expected.

Bruegmann argues that the remedies so far advanced for such social ills not only probably won’t work but probably shouldn’t work; banning land for new housing drives up costs, for example. “[The agitation against sprawl] is being directed toward things that may not be real problems,” he complains, “or problems that can’t be solved without causing severe unintended consequences and real losses for part of the population.”

Sure, the dispersed city causes problems — pollution, energy dependence, social exclusion, the built ugliness of the public realm — that merit attention. The old compact city caused problems too, at first. Most of these have been solved, or at least rendered tolerable. However, if people of influence refuse to engage our new kind of city, thus never coming to understand it, they are unlikely to be able to solve its new kind of problems. Fixing them by simply reining in sprawl, Bruegmann insists, is a bit like fixing a squeaky hinge by rebuilding your house. ❑

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