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Why sprawl is good

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SPRAWL: A COMPACT HISTORY

By Robert Bruegmann

University of Chicago, \$27.50, 301 pages

REVIEWED BY RACHEL DICARLO

Consider the much-maligned American suburb. For decades now, it has been mocked by authors and intellectuals as the sterile, soul-crushing birthplace of such cultural blights as McMansions and strip malls. Hollywood, too, has caught on. Witness the success of the Oscar-winning movie "American Beauty" and the Emmy-winning TV show "Desperate Housewives." Both depict everyone in suburbia as somehow weird or depraved. In recent years a whole movement has coalesced, the so-called New Urbanism, to sneer at suburban sprawl and all its various progeny.

Yet as Robert Bruegmann shows in "Sprawl: A Compact History," the conventional anti-suburbs wisdom is often just plain wrong. Mr. Bruegmann, a professor of urban planning and art history at the University of Illinois, takes every assumption about "sprawl" -- a pejorative to be sure -- and turns it on its head. Many of the characteristics associated with sprawl -- such as low-density development and lack of regional or public-use planning -- he argues, have been present in prosperous cities since the beginning of urban history. They are the natural effects of a city's gaining economic maturity -- not the recent consequence of vulgar Americans insisting on living in monstrous, single-use homes, as many sprawl detractors purport. As Mr. Bruegmann persuasively demonstrates, people and businesses have always had good reasons for wanting to leave the city.

Take Ancient Rome. Like most cities, Rome can credit its existence to felicitous geography: a piece of land that could be easily defended; a safe harbor; and rapids that could be harnessed and used for power. Mobility was a problem for all but the richest

Romans, so most urban functions -- residential, industrial and commercial -- lay in close proximity to one another. Walls that reinforced and protected the city compounded the density problem.

Beyond the city walls was what the Romans called suburbium, a vast parcel of land that accommodated industries the city could not, such as pottery works, burial grounds and slaughterhouses. Here lived the poorest residents of Rome, people who couldn't afford municipal services or the security of the walls. At the other end of the spectrum, many wealthy Romans kept villas in suburbium, which offered a getaway reprieve from the grimy, crowded city. "Ancient, medieval, and early modern literature is filled with stories of the elegant life of a privileged aristocracy living for large parts of the year in villas and hunting lodges at the periphery of large cities," Mr. Bruegmann writes.

Similar patterns appeared throughout the West and China as early as the Ming Dynasty. London, for example, the biggest economy in the Western world, maintained its population in the 17th and 18th centuries despite mass suburban and exurban development beyond its walls primarily because peasants continued to arrive from the countryside. English "sprawl" -- in the form of large country estates -- formed the literary backdrop for such Romantic writers as Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters. In the United States, the real push outward came during the interwar boom years, when blue-collar families discovered the allure of cheap land and lower taxes beyond the city limits. The rise of car ownership and the construction of superhighways gave many the option of moving out of the city to live in a detached house with a yard. If they did most of the building work themselves, they could become homeowners. These opportunities helped create a booming middle class.

But after World War II, factories and industrial jobs, especially in the northeastern "Rust Belt," headed for the suburbs or disappeared altogether. Indeed, it was many of the policies that sprawl critics now embrace -- high taxes, union wages, regulation -- that drove them outward. As jobs and citizens left town, large numbers of buildings were abandoned. Some of the buildings were bulldozed, the space used for parking garages or parking lots; others, in the wake of nostalgia for city life, were renovated and turned into expensive, "historic district" condos. In places like Baltimore's Canton, Philadelphia's Central City or Manhattan's Greenwich Village, living in a converted factory -- with high ceilings, oddly shaped windows and exposed brick walls -- is now a hallmark of sophistication. So-called historic districts have proliferated. Sidewalk benches, cobblestone streets and traditional streetlights have been either maintained or restored.

Meanwhile, as the factories disappeared, so, increasingly, did such urban irritants as pollution, bleak industrial landscapes and truck traffic. "What few people seemed to notice," Mr. Bruegmann writes, "was the way the rising fortunes of the center. . . were directly connected to developments at the edge." That is, as more affordable housing became available in the suburbs -- allowing the middle classes to live there -- the wealthy were more inclined to stay in the cities, particularly since many prestigious jobs in law, medicine and business remained there. For the most part, the richest Americans continue to populate the densest parts of an urban area, like Park Avenue in Manhattan or Beacon Hill in Boston. They can afford to make the trade off -- higher taxes and bad public schools for urban cultural and social stimulation.

Mr. Bruegmann also addresses the myths that sprawl detractors and "smart growth" advocates have fostered to claim suburban life is ruining cities. Are the suburbs

expanding at an ever-increasing rate? Not really. It's true some farms and forests have been converted into subdivisions, but right now suburban and exurban development is flat. Outward development is inevitable as the number of households increases and city governments make policies hostile to taxpayers. And the big picture is that 90 percent of America remains open space. Census Bureau statistics obscure that fact. Once part of a county near a city becomes populous enough the Census Bureau will make the entire county part of a metropolitan area even if large parts of it are rural.

But if we limited growth, wouldn't we relieve traffic congestion and pollution? It's a mystery how this argument ever got any traction. Trapping more people into a tighter space can only make pollution and traffic congestion worse. Indeed, traffic tends to be the thickest in metropolitan areas like New York, Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles, where politicians have refused to build new roads to accommodate more drivers.

Do the suburbs trap women? The suburbs give women, like everyone else, a choice. Central planners and cultural elites don't like to hear arguments about choice because they think that given a choice, ordinary citizens will usually make the wrong one. Moreover, the rise of car ownership, particularly in car-friendly suburban areas, has made life easier for a lot of women. Imagine toting two kids around on a rainy Tuesday, from school to soccer practice, then to the grocery store, then to the dry-cleaner, by riding around on light rail.

What about the hideous industrial parks that ruin the landscape? They provide great benefits for workers. Industrial parks have in fact narrowed the workplace-environment gap between white-collar and blue-collar jobs. They may still be home to vocations that are monotonous, dispiriting and dangerous, but at least the workers there have large, clean facilities that would have been the envy of workers 100 years ago, most of whom toiled away in filthy, cramped factories.

And those chain-store-heavy shopping centers with their mega-parking lots? They're not even anti-urban. Some of the first suburban shopping centers were developed by the same investors who built the downtown department stores. And, as Mr. Bruegmann points out, suburban centers took the idea of the old urban galleria and made it better. The giant parking lots make the stores more accessible to mothers with children in tow and other pedestrians. Some downtown businesses have responded to these strip malls by remodeling their shopping streets to make them more pedestrian-friendly. If that's not convincing enough, think about what smart growth would do to all those chain stores: Eliminate them in favor of higher priced urban retail outlets.

Then there are those who say that more Americans would be able to enjoy city life if only the government would stop building highways, pour money into mass transit and triple the gasoline tax to discourage driving. But that experiment has already been tried in Europe with little success, as anyone who has ever been on the highways in London or Paris during rush hour can attest.

In the course of demolishing such anti-sprawl shibboleths, Mr. Bruegmann repeatedly emphasizes the cardinal virtue of American suburbia. To wit, the suburbs have made it possible for ordinary Americans to enjoy the privacy, space, leisure time and choice that were once available only to the richest of the rich. The suburbs aren't a deviation from the American Dream -- they are the American Dream.

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