



21st Century Cities

In Defense Of Sprawl

Robert Bruegmann 06.11.07, 6:00 PM ET

If you really want to see urban sprawl, take a look at London.

Yes, it's true that Britain has some of the toughest anti-sprawl measures in the world today. But I mean 19th-century London--the miles and miles of brick row houses in Camberwell and Islington. If sprawl is the outward spread of settlement at constantly lower densities without any overall plan, then London in the 19th century sprawled outward at a rate not surpassed since then by any American city.

London's sprawl was attacked just like sprawl today. Although the middle-class families moving into those row houses were thrilled to have homes of their own, members of the artistic and intellectual elite were nearly unanimous in their condemnation. They castigated the row houses as ugly little boxes put up by greedy speculators willing to ruin the beautiful countryside in order to wrest the last penny out of every square inch of land. They were confident that they would become slums within a generation. The Duke of Wellington spoke for many when he denounced the railroads that made these suburban neighborhoods possible as only encouraging "common people to move around needlessly."

Of course, today these neighborhoods are widely considered to be the very essence of central London, the kind of place that the current elite feels must be protected at all cost from the terrible development going on at the new edge of the city. And so it has gone with every major boom period in urban history, from the ancient Romans until today. As each new group has moved up to newer and better housing by moving out from the central city, there has always been another group of individuals ready to denounce the entire process.

Today, the complaints about sprawl are louder than ever, but as in the past, they are built on an extremely shaky foundation of class-based aesthetic assumptions and misinformation. If history is any guide, some modern anti-sprawl prescriptions will prove as ineffective as the Duke of Wellington's. Others will actually backfire.

Even many of the most basic facts usually heard about sprawl are just wrong. Contrary to much accepted wisdom, sprawl in the U.S. is not accelerating. It is declining in the city and suburbs as average lot sizes are becoming smaller, and relatively few really affluent people are moving to the edge. This is especially true of the lowest-density cities of the American South and West. The Los Angeles urbanized area (the U.S. Census Bureau's functional definition of the city, which includes the city center and surrounding suburban areas) has become more than 25% denser over the last 50 years, making it the densest in the country.

This fact, together with the continued decline in densities in all large European urban areas, coupled with a spectacular rise in car ownership and use there, means that U.S. and European urban areas are in many ways converging toward a new 21st-century urban equilibrium. In short, densities will be high enough to provide urban amenities but low enough to allow widespread automobile ownership and use. The same dynamics are at work in the developing world. Although urban densities there are much higher than anything seen in the affluent West, they are plummeting even faster.

A lack of reliable information underlies many of the complaints against sprawl. Take just one example that is considered by many the gravest charge of all: that sprawl fosters increased automobile use; longer commutes; and more congestion, carbon emissions and, ultimately, global warming.

There is no reason to assume that high-density living is necessarily more sustainable or liable to damage the environment than low-density living. If everyone in the affluent West were to spread out in single-family houses across the countryside at historically low densities (and there is plenty of land to do this, even in the densest European counties), it is quite possible, with wind, solar, biomass and geothermal energy, to imagine a world in which most people could simply decouple themselves from the expensive and polluting utilities that were necessary in the old high-density industrial city. Potentially, they could collect all their own energy on-site and achieve carbon neutrality.

Certainly the remedy usually proposed by the anti-sprawl lobby--increasing densities and encouraging public transit--will not solve the global warming problem. Even if all urban dwellers the world over were brought up to "ideal" urban consumption standards--say, that of a Parisian family living in a small apartment and using only public transportation--it would not reduce energy use and greenhouse emissions, since it would require such large increases in energy use by so many families who today are so poor they can't afford the benefits of carbon-based energy.

Unless we deliberately keep most of the world's urban population in poverty, packing more people into existing cities won't solve anything. The solution is finding better sources of energy and more efficient means of doing everything. As we do this, it is quite possible that the most sustainable cities will be the least dense.

But let's assume for a moment that I'm entirely wrong and that sprawl is terrible. Could we stop it if we wanted to?

The record is not encouraging. The longest-running and best-known experiment was the one undertaken by Britain starting right after World War II. At that time, the British government gave unprecedented powers to planners to remake cities and took the draconian step of nationalizing all development rights to assure that these plans could be implemented. The famous 1944 Greater London plan, for example, envisioned a city bounded by a greenbelt. If there happened to be any excess population that couldn't be accommodated within the greenbelt, it was supposed to be accommodated in small, self-contained garden cities beyond the belt.

Did the plan work? In one sense it did: The greenbelt is still there, and some people consider that an aesthetic triumph. But the plan certainly did not stop sprawl. As usual, the planners were not able to predict the future with any accuracy. The population grew, household size declined and affluence rose faster than predicted. Development jumped right over the greenbelt--and not into discreet garden cities, because this policy was soon abandoned.

The ultimate result was that much of southeastern England has been urbanized. Moreover, because of the greenbelt, many car trips are longer than they would have been otherwise, contributing to the worst traffic congestion in Europe.

Finally, since the 1990s, with a new push to try to prevent greenfield development outside the belt, land and house prices have skyrocketed in London, creating an unprecedented crisis in housing affordability there and in virtually every other place that has tried extensive growth management.

Certainly sprawl has created some problems, just as every settlement pattern has. But the reason it has become the middle-class settlement pattern of choice is that it has given them much of the privacy, mobility and choice once enjoyed only by the wealthiest and most powerful.

Sprawl in itself is not a bad thing. What is bad is the concept of "sprawl" itself, which by lumping together all kinds of issues, some real and important and some trivial or irrelevant, has distracted us from many real and pressing urban issues. It also provides the dangerous illusion that there is a silver bullet solution to many of the discontents created by the fast and chaotic change that has always characterized city life.

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