

Urban myths

Sprawl gets a bad press but it has given us privacy, mobility and choice

Robert Bruegmann
Saturday January 28, 2006
The Guardian

London, with its long and illustrious history and its infinitely varied cityscape, is one of the grandest cities in the world. It is also one of the least dense and most sprawling. This latter assertion will no doubt raise eyebrows. After all, the word "sprawl", in the minds of many people, conjures up images of postwar American suburbia. Britain, on the other hand, particularly in the period after the second world war, instituted some of the strictest growth-management laws in the world and is usually considered a leader in the fight against sprawl.

But much of what we think we know about sprawl is wrong. In the case of London, it is clear that by the end of the last war the city had already been sprawling prodigiously for centuries. Even the term "sprawl" in its current sense seems to have been a British coinage, not an American one. In fact Britain pioneered both producing sprawl and trying to stop it. The result, in Britain as elsewhere in the affluent world, has been ambiguous.

Today a coalition of architects, planners, academics, government officials and others across the affluent world believes that sprawl is economically inefficient, socially inequitable, environmentally damaging, and ugly. Sprawl, they assert, is a prime factor in everything from obesity in suburbanites to global warming. They also believe that sprawl is a recent phenomenon, peculiarly American, driven by excessive car usage and the result of poor public policies. Given this diagnosis, the remedy is clear. Policies need to be changed so that sprawl can be stopped and any new growth channelled into better-planned and more compact settlements.

So common has this set of diagnoses and prescriptions become that even airlines' magazines, always sensitive about offending any potential customer, have run stories decrying sprawl and celebrating "smart growth". Whenever right-minded individuals reach such unanimity of opinion on any subject, it is perhaps time to become suspicious. In the case of sprawl, even a little reflection suggests that the great edifice of received opinion rests on the shakiest of foundations.

The notion that sprawl necessarily brings with it higher energy usage, increased car travel, longer commutes and more traffic and pollution, for example, is difficult to sustain. If this were true, commuting times would be shortest in the densest cities and longest in the most sprawling ones. In fact, the reverse is closer to the truth. Commuting times in American cities are substantially lower than those in European cities. And the

high-density Tokyo area, despite one of the best public transportation systems in the world, has some of the longest commuting times.

There is no paradox here. As cities have spread out, jobs as well as houses have moved from the centre. There is no inherent reason why low-density living needs to lead to more energy use or produce more pollution than high-density living. In fact, at low enough densities it is possible to imagine urbanites producing almost all of their own energy through solar, wind and geothermal power, harvesting water and returning waste water to the ground locally, all without the vast centralised systems that were necessary to sustain the dense industrial cities of the 19th century that we now often mistake for the natural urban state.

Historically the majority of cities took the shape they did not because anyone thought that this was ideal but because of the necessities of defence, accessibility and energy. Now that new technologies have loosened the noose, there is no reason why cities couldn't look very different from the way they did in the 19th century. And, in fact, that very thing is happening in cities the world over as densities at the core plummet and settlement at the edge burgeons, bringing with it freeways, shopping centres and single-family subdivisions. How is it possible that sprawl is accelerating worldwide in the face of all the efforts to stop it? History seems to provide some interesting clues.

One problem with the currently accepted wisdom on sprawl is the fact that anti-sprawl crusaders have never been able to agree on what the term means. This is not surprising. Just as one person's weed is another person's prized native plant, so one person's sprawl is another's cherished neighbourhood. Sprawl, like many terms used by reformers of all stripes, simultaneously confirms the wisdom of the person using it while castigating those who don't agree. You hardly ever hear people use it to describe their own neighbourhood: sprawl is where other people live, the result of bad choices and poor judgment by other people.

Using a more neutral definition of sprawl, that it is relatively low-density settlement with little overall planning, one can confidently say that sprawl is as old as cities themselves. It was already in full swing in the ancient world, for example when wealthy Romans escaped to seaside resorts.

This sprawl happened because dense cities, from the beginning of urban history until fairly recently, were terrible places to live. Not just unpleasant, they were often unhealthy and unsafe. For this reason whenever, throughout history, a new group of citizens achieved enough affluence, many of them obtained for themselves houses in low-density areas around the cities. And with each new group came a cry of alarm from the "incumbents' club".

Because London was wealthy, and because the tranquillity of the British countryside allowed it to dispense with defensive walls earlier than cities on the continent, it experienced the greatest decentralisation in Europe. Already by the 18th century the push of affluent people into what were then low-density residential squares in the direction of Westminster had made London one of the least dense urban areas of Europe.

During the reign of industrialisation in the 19th century urban fabric exploded outward, pushing miles into the surrounding countryside as developers threw up thousands of brick row houses for families of relatively modest means. Where few people had objected when a handful of wealthy families built great houses in the countryside, there was consternation among an intellectual elite that thousands of families were able to enjoy a little of the same privacy, mobility and choice. Observers described the new suburban areas as ugly and monotonous, the product of greedy speculators heedless of civility or beauty. Of course by now this 19th-century sprawl is almost universally considered part of central London and the antithesis of all that is wrong with contemporary developments at the urban periphery.

The term "sprawl" first became common in Britain in the years after the first world war. It was used primarily to disparage the semi-detached houses that were starting to go up in great numbers around London. The London area in the 1920s increased by only about 10% in population but it doubled in land area. The reaction was predictable. "We are making a screaming mess of England," started one typical jeremiad.

But, once again, urban conditions and aesthetic norms have shifted since that time to such an extent that many developments of the interwar years, if built today, would easily pass in many places for "smart growth". Because of these constant redefinitions, the term has survived to serve in each succeeding era as the label for a new outrage perpetrated on the landscape, whether the ranch houses in Los Angeles in the 1950s, the large-lot "McMansions" in ex-urban America in the 1990s or the big box retail outlets appearing on the edges of every European city today.

Just as Britain led the world in producing sprawl, so it also has led the world in trying to combat it. The most dramatic episode took place after the second world war. With the country's cities in ruins and its economy decimated, the Labour government was able to put in place some of the measures that had long been urged by planners such as Thomas Sharp, the most famous of which was the Greater London regional plan produced by Patrick Abercrombie in 1944. To give planners the power to implement this and other plans the Labour government passed a series of laws capped by the draconian step of nationalising all development rights.

As the planning historian Sir Peter Hall has demonstrated, the resulting system was both radical and conservative. Radical was the attempt to give a definite shape to the sprawling metropolis by government decree. This was achieved by mandating a green belt around the existing built-up area and, to accommodate the excess population in a city still considered overly dense, an "overspill" area beyond the green belt where growth was to be accommodated in carefully planned "new towns". Most of the new building would be done by the government. Private building would all but stop.

At a more basic level, however, the plan was conservative. It assumed the shape of the city would not be left to the vagaries of the market or determined by the cumulative choices of individual families but dictated by well-educated planners working in central London offices. And it was to be a one-time change. Once the central city was thinned out and the satellite new towns established, things would settle down.

But Abercrombie did not anticipate the rise in population in the London area or the increase in affluence and the surge in car ownership and demand for home ownership.

The results of the British postwar anti-sprawl offensive have been hotly contested. For some observers the London plan did rein in sprawl and did preserve a precious greenbelt. However, the greenbelt was saved only at the price of forcing more of the population out beyond the greenbelt altogether, in effect urbanising the entire southeast of England, causing even more far-flung sprawl than if the greenbelt had never been put into place and leading to the highest commuting times in Europe. What is more, say many economists, the restriction on land necessary to make the system work has caused prices for land to soar, in turn making it more expensive for Greater London residents to secure housing.

Not surprisingly, given the vast increase in affluence during the past few decades, particularly the boom years of the 1990s, sprawl has accelerated across the affluent world. Whether in North America, Europe, Japan or Australia, density at the core of cities is falling, peripheral development is burgeoning and the use of private cars is booming. Still, because of its long lead in decentralisation, the density of the London area, while greater than that of any American urban area, is far below that of most of the largest cities of the world, most of which are in developing countries.

And, despite the efforts of the planners, sprawl continues around London. Sir Richard Rogers, who has taken on the mantle of anti-sprawl crusader, wrote about England in the 1990s: "We continue to believe the future belongs to the suburbs, or rather, to suburban sprawl. Over the past 20 years - under a free market, laissez-faire planning regime - the built-up area in England has doubled, and we have allowed the development of 4m square feet of out-of-town shopping centres."

And this in the country that has led the world in the anti-sprawl crusade!

None of this is meant to suggest that sprawl has not caused problems. Like any kind of settlement pattern, it clearly has. However, the history of sprawl seems to suggest that it has persisted and flourished because it has given a great many ordinary people something that they value.

And what of the future of sprawl? It is possible that the ideal residential location for most people will be a single-family house on a large plot of land in the countryside. But it could also be that, with enough affluence, most people would prefer an apartment in a very dense neighbourhood, such as Islington, near museums and the hippest social gathering spots. The city has always been about change, often disconcerting change, making it hard to predict the future.

One of the main obstacles in trying to imagine all of the remarkable possibilities that will open up for future urban dwellers is that the concept of sprawl is so mired in dubious assumptions about the way cities are and have been. It seems to discourage close analysis of the way people actually live, the ways they might want to live and then any exploration of the political processes that will allow the most people the maximum amount of choice without unduly harming any particular group.

• Robert Bruegmann is professor of art history, architecture and urban planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the author of *Sprawl: A Compact History*, published by the University of Chicago Press at RRP £17.50. To order a copy for £16.50 with free UK p&p go to guardian.co.uk/bookshop or call 0870 836 0875