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L.A., the king of sprawl? Not at all

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ON THE FIRST page of his widely read 1958 essay "Urban Sprawl," William H. Whyte Jr. described the view out the window of a plane flying from Los Angeles to San Bernardino as "an unnerving lesson in man's infinite ability to mess up his environment."

Whyte was a young editor at Fortune magazine, already famous for his groundbreaking 1956 study of suburbia, "The Organization Man." But in describing L.A., he was merely rehashing an old argument. For many academics and intellectuals living in apartment buildings in Boston and New York, L.A. represented everything that was wrong with cities. They complained that it was unplanned and incoherent, too dispersed and automobile dependent; it lacked a definite form or true center.

In short, it was devoid of what they considered real urbanity. It was sprawl. For more than 50 years (until just recently, when it has had to share the honors with Atlanta), Los Angeles has had the distinction of being the poster child for sprawl, a settlement pattern reputed to be economically inefficient, environmentally degrading, socially inequitable and aesthetically ugly.

But, in fact, Los Angeles is not a particularly good example of urban sprawl. Take the part about being unplanned. The truth is that New York, Chicago and most of the older American cities had their greatest growth before there was anything resembling real public planning; the most basic American land planning tool, zoning, did not come into widespread use until the 1920s.

L.A., by contrast, was one of the country's zoning pioneers. It has had most of its growth since the 1920s, during a period when planning was already important, and particularly since World War II, when California cities have been subject to more planning than cities virtually anywhere else in the country.

Then there is the part about how the city is too dispersed. Although it is true that the Los Angeles region in its early years had widely scattered settlements, these settlements were not particularly low in density. Since World War II, moreover, the density of the Los Angeles region has climbed dramatically, while that of older cities in the North and East

has plummeted. The result is that today the Los Angeles urbanized area, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau, has just over 7,000 people per square mile — by a fair margin the densest in the United States.

Many people think that this must be a statistical trick because no part of the L.A. region could possibly be as dense as Manhattan or central Chicago. But there is no trick. Los Angeles has always had relatively small lot sizes, very little abandonment and, because of the difficulty in obtaining water, almost none of the really low-density suburban and exurban development that extends for dozens of miles in all directions outside older cities in the northern and eastern United States.

In fact, a surprising number of the densest municipalities in the country are suburbs of Los Angeles, including, among others, Huntington Park, Hawthorne, Lynwood and South Gate.

Then there is the question of automobile dependence. Many people believe that sprawl was caused by the automobile, and they cite Los Angeles as a prime example. However, this conclusion is difficult to sustain in light of the fact that L.A. already had become one of the most dispersed urban areas in America by the very early 20th century, during the railroad era and well before the automobile played a major role.

It has, moreover, increased dramatically in density since the 1950s, during an era when the automobile has dominated transportation. Although anti-sprawl crusaders contend that low-density sprawl has led to longer commutes and more congestion, it is fairly obvious that the growing congestion in the Los Angeles region is a direct consequence not of low-density sprawl but of high and fast-increasing densities and the fact that the region has so few miles of freeway per capita compared to most other American urban areas.

Of course, none of these objections to standard wisdom are likely to sway many highbrow critics of sprawl. Their desire to see L.A. as sprawl and therefore as not truly urban is based less on rational analysis than on subjective aesthetic judgments and class resentment.

But there are major problems with their position. First, there is considerable room for doubt that sprawl is necessarily the major problem that many anti-sprawl crusaders believe it to be. But, in any case, Los Angeles is not a good model of sprawl. The urban area of New York or Boston, for example, each surrounded by a huge low-density penumbra, would make a better poster child for sprawl than the dispersed but relatively dense and compact Los Angeles.