

Dust-Up 2

Is it smart to grow off the grid?

Does Smart Growth make any sense in a filled-in grid city like L.A., or only in older, hub-style cities? All this week, author Robert Bruegmann and activist Gloria Ohland debate the shape of America's cities.

June 19, 2007

Today, Bruegmann and Ohland discuss Smart Growth. Yesterday, they debated the [social tensions over urban sprawl](#). Later this week, they'll debate environmental concerns, modifying public behavior and more.

A greener American dream
By Gloria Ohland

Smart growth makes sense for every kind of city because it isn't a choice, really. Given the crises that we face—global climate change, traffic; housing affordability; lack of resources to maintain the infrastructure we already have and to build more; the loss of habitat and open space; dependence on foreign oil; air pollution; sedentary lifestyles that lead to obesity and ill health—we have no choice but to practice smart growth everywhere. Because smart growth is the only way we can begin to limit the number of vehicle miles traveled, it is an important solution to these many problems. And that is why we must practice smart growth.

Cities are developed and then they redevelop. As the value of land increases, parking lots are redeveloped as buildings. Strip malls, one-story buildings and underutilized industrial sites can be redeveloped for a higher use. Infill parcels that may not have been worth building on suddenly become valuable. Los Angeles is built out, but it is being redeveloped as a higher-density, mixed-use, more walkable and more visually interesting city. Green space that we used to turn our backs on is suddenly becoming valuable—the L.A. River is finally being recognized as a natural resource and important ribbon of green through our concrete city. Even the area under the arches and columns of the First Street Bridge connecting downtown Los Angeles with historic Boyle Heights is being reclaimed as public space for a park, cafes and shops—like the Viaduc des Arts in Paris or the Hackescher Market in Berlin.

Reconnecting America released a market study in late 2004 that found that because of regional growth trends and demographic changes in this country (older, smaller, more diverse households with singles becoming the new majority, as I [wrote yesterday](#)), demand for higher density housing near transit is likely to more than double by 2030. That means nearly a quarter of all households entering the market to rent or to buy are likely to be looking for higher density housing near transit. And that means that in order to meet demand we'd need to build another 2,000 housing units around each and every one of the 4,000 existing and planned transit stations in the United States.

The real estate market is coming back to urban core neighborhoods and suburban town centers all across the United States for the first time in 50 years. And we aren't the only ones to notice. The esteemed market study "Emerging Trends in Real Estate," released each year by ULI/PricewaterhouseCoopers, has for the past three years ranked sites near transit as a best bet for investors. The market has opened a window of opportunity to make our cities more sustainable environmentally and economically. Transit can become the armature for new development, with nodes of walkable, higher-density, mixed-use, mixed-income development around transit stations. This has the added and significant benefit of allowing us to redevelop to accommodate more growth at the same time that we preserve existing single-family neighborhoods.

I don't mean to suggest that it's the end of sprawl—contrast the opportunity for development outside cities compared to inside—but rather that we are sprawling and reinvesting simultaneously. But there are reasons to believe the balance could shift to the latter, to smart growth: because of rising gas and oil prices, because the capital for new infrastructure to serve new suburbs is tight and getting tighter and because the fees for greenfield development are getting higher (\$100,000 per house in Orange County). Moreover, infill development can be very lucrative because of the scale, and financing is getting easier. That's why nearly every major homebuilder and even big box retailers are developing infill models. Finally, the market is providing Americans with more housing and transportation choices, and providing for a greener American dream.

Gloria Ohland is vice president for communications for Reconnecting America, a national nonprofit organization that works with the public and private sectors to promote best practices in development-oriented transit and transit-oriented development (TOD). She is co-author and co-editor of the award-winning Street Smart: Streetcars and Cities in the 21st Century; The New Transit Town: Best Practices in TOD; and Hidden in Plain Sight: Capturing the Demand for Housing Near Transit, a national market study funded by the Federal Transit Administration and released in 2005.

If smart growth is the answer, what is the question?

By Robert Bruegmann

Gloria,

Along with most transit and "Smart growth" advocates, you would like to believe that changing demographics, the cost of land, energy costs and environmental worries will force Americans to abandon low-density suburbs and their cars and move into apartments in transit-oriented villages where they can take the train to work and walk to their local Starbucks. It is possible that many people will eventually choose that way of life. But there is very little evidence to date that this is happening, and it certainly won't happen for the reasons you give.

You cite a report that says that because household size is declining, more people will want higher density housing near transit. There may indeed be a demand in the future for smaller units and higher-density housing near transit, but the overwhelming evidence of

the last 50 years gives little support to this assertion. Household sizes have plummeted since World War II at the same time that average house sizes have risen from 1,000 square feet to well over 2,000 square feet. Despite over 50 years of campaigning by planners and others to stop sprawl, the overwhelming amount of new housing both in this country and in every urban area in the affluent world continues to be in the suburbs at some of the lowest densities ever seen in urban history.

The case for any massive increase in the use of buses or trains is no stronger. The reason the majority of people in every urban region in the affluent West use automobiles for most of their trips today is because, on average, automobiles are twice as fast as mass transit in getting from any given point A to point B. The average commuting time in Paris, for example is under 30 minutes by automobile and over 50 minutes by transit. This is why residents of dense cities, even with highly developed public transportation systems, spend longer getting to work than residents of low-density places where almost everyone drives. And that is why the average commuting times in the high-density Los Angeles urbanized area, with one of the smallest numbers of freeway vehicle lanes per capita in the country, is so much higher than the times in much lower -density cities like Houston. It is also why the commutes in Los Angeles are so much shorter in time than those in London or Tokyo.

To get any significant number of people out of their cars and into transit it would be necessary for transit to be faster and more efficient than cars. Except in the case of rush-hour commuting trips to the very center of a few large cities in the United States, this not now the case. Without some dramatic changes in the type of transit we use, transit is very unlikely to be able to compete anytime in the near future.

It would take massive increases in density to boost significantly the present, extremely small market share of transit use in Los Angeles. And even if the market share of transit gained, the number of automobile users would increase more quickly than transit users for the foreseeable future. Without some dramatic increase in road capacity, this would guarantee worse traffic and longer trips for motorists and bus passengers alike. In fact this is what has been happening in L.A. for some years now. Most of the nostrums promoted by "smart growth" advocates are likely to make matters even worse.

At least, you might still claim, more transit use would save energy and reduce pollution and greenhouse gases. In fact, even this proposition is shaky. Because automobiles have become so much more fuel-efficient over the last few decades but buses typically have not, if you measure results per vehicle mile traveled, the automobile, even with only 1.25 people in it on average uses little more, if any, energy and emits little more, if any, greenhouse gases than the average bus. If this sounds implausible, it is important to remember that the bus, which carries the overwhelming majority of transit riders in the U.S. today, is a heavy piece of metal that uses a lot of gas and that the average number of people in the bus in American cities, when you average in all of the runs at night and over weekends, is fewer than 10.

In fact if we didn't have the polarizing debate about sprawl and smart growth, it would

probably be easier to tackle our transportation problems.

After all, the environmental problem is not the kind of vehicle people use to get around but the outmoded technology of the internal combustion engine used in both autos and buses. The most promising modes of transportation of the future are probably neither the car nor "big box" transit vehicles like buses and trains but small, nimble vehicles that use alternative fuel, run on guideways and can be grouped to achieve very fast and efficient transportation throughout our urban areas whether at high densities or low. That would afford maximum choice of living conditions and true smart growth.

*Robert Bruegmann is professor of Art History, Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His most recent book is *Sprawl: A Compact History*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2005.*

LA Times
Latimes.com

Dust-Up 1

Brawl over sprawl

Are objections to urban sprawl legitimate public policy concerns or just aesthetic snobbery? All week, author Robert Bruegmann and activist Gloria Ohland debate the shape of America's cities.

June 18, 2007

Today, Bruegmann and Ohland address the social tensions over urban sprawl. Later this week, they'll debate Smart Growth, environmental concerns, modifying public behavior and more.

Density, not sprawl, is the word of L.A.'s undoing

By Robert Bruegmann

The outward sprawl of our cities has clearly caused some problems that need to be addressed. However this sprawl has also had enormous benefits, and it is not at all clear that any alternative urban form would work better.

After doing a considerable amount of research on this subject for my book I concluded that very little of what was said about sprawl was either accurate or useful. The accepted wisdom today is that sprawl is recent, peculiarly American and caused by increasing automobile ownership and use. In fact, if we define sprawl in the most basic way as the decentralization of cities at constantly lower population densities and without any overarching plan, it is fair to say that it has been going on since the beginning of urban history. Whether in imperial Rome or 19th century London, whenever a new group of people could afford to escape the congestion, noise and unsanitary conditions of city centers, they did so. In fact the exodus from central London in the 19th century, made possible by the newly invented railroad and public transportation, was at least as great as anything seen in the United States after World War II.

And every time a new group moved out there was an intellectual and artistic elite that was affronted and wished to stop it. In 19th century London, for example, "right-minded" individuals condemned the miles of brick row houses then being constructed for middle class families as ugly boxes erected by greedy developers. They considered these new neighborhoods a blight on the countryside and were sure that they would become a slum in a generation. Of course, within a generation, this same class of people had decided that these very row houses were the essence of central London, the antithesis of the new sprawl they saw at the urban fringe.

And so it has gone over the centuries. Today we are told that sprawl is economically inefficient, socially inequitable, environmentally damaging and aesthetically ugly. The

current lead argument is often environmental, based on the notion that high-density compact settlements are more energy-efficient and less polluting than lower density, more scattered ones. However, there is little evidence that this is the case. The old 19th century cities were environmental horrors and only worked as well as they did because they were so much smaller than today's cities and most people were so poor that they had few choices in where they lived or worked. The most likely scenario to solve our energy problems and avert global warming is not to remake our cities at 19th century densities so that they can sustain 19th century technologies like the internal combustion engine, but instead to find new fuel sources and more efficient ways of using them at whatever densities people choose to live.

In any event, even if I am completely wrong and sprawl is a terrible thing, the record of attempts to stop it are not promising. In London, for example, where planners instituted a green belt and some of the toughest restrictions in the world immediately following World War II, they were unsuccessful. Indeed, the urban population of London has now scattered across much of the South of England. Throughout Europe, people are buying and using cars at a much faster rate than in the US and their dense, old cities are now sprawling outward faster than most American cities, particularly places like Los Angeles. In fact, the L.A. region has become so much denser over the last 50 years that it is currently the densest urbanized area in the United States. It is this increase in density and not density-lowering sprawl that lies at the root of many of the woes experienced by L.A. today.

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Transit is the answer
By Gloria Ohland

I agree that sprawl has worked very well for this country, spurred on by seductive incentives such as the mortgage tax deduction and promoting the growth of the auto and oil industries that have propelled our economy. But while the American dream of a house in the suburbs and two cars in the garage was particularly appealing during the last century, it just doesn't have the same appeal anymore. All moralizing aside about sprawl and the loss of open space, the effect of driving on greenhouse gas emissions, and our dependence on foreign oil, the fact is that the real estate market is changing, driven by changes in the demographics of the U.S. population. American households are older, smaller and much more diverse. Whereas the largest demographic group used to be households with children, singles are becoming the new majority and that has profound implications for how and where people want to live—and for the most part it's not in the suburbs. Moreover, traffic makes driving to and from the suburbs increasingly untenable.

Add the high cost of land to the equation and suddenly it becomes clear why new apartment buildings, row houses, live-work spaces, condominiums, lofts, and other high-rise residential buildings are springing up in urban neighborhoods and suburban town

centers all across the land. Times change. The homogeneity of our auto-oriented suburbs suited the homogenous population of yore. But a more diverse America wants more housing choices, and more transportation choices. That's why all the biggest homebuilders have opened urban infill divisions. That's why transit is in a building boom, with every region in the country either planning or building a new rail line. If suburban living was yesterday's fashion, today's American dream is much "greener." More and more households want "a room with a view" within walking distance of coffee shops, restaurants, yoga, a dog park, art, film and culture. "Small is the New Big," trumpeted the cover of *Dwell* magazine last year. "Smaller is Smarter," read the cover of last month's issue.

But the question we were to address is whether sprawl is a legitimate public policy concern, and quite frankly I can't believe anyone would argue otherwise. What follows is a partial list of reasons why an increasing number of cities and regions in this country *should be* and *are* beginning to promote more compact development near transit:

- It's more sustainable;
- It makes ore efficient use of land, energy and resources;
- It helps conserve open space and habitat, thereby helping to maintain biodiversity and endangered species;
- It results in less oil and gas consumption, therefore reducing dependence on foreign oil;
- Less driving to far-flung neighborhoods means less air pollution (the increase in asthma in children is just one related concern);
- It minimizes traffic increases;
- It encourages more walking;
- It concentrates development and activity and the tax base in a way that allows for focused "value capture strategies" like taxes and fees; this captured value can then be reinvested in our communities to make them better, and the increased revenues allow communities to lower tax rates;
- It increases transit ridership;
- It increases property values, lease revenues and rents;
- It increases foot traffic for local businesses;
- It creates opportunities for mixed-income housing;
- Height and density can pay for community benefits and affordability;
- Less time in the car means more time with family and friends;
- It reduces transportation expenditures;
- It promotes healthier lifestyles;
- Neighborhoods are safer because there are more people on the street and more "eyes on the street."

Research in Portland has shown that the residents of neighborhoods with good transit access and mixed-use development own fewer cars and use their cars less than residents of suburban neighborhoods. Only 58 percent of trips are by auto in mixed-use neighborhoods with good transit access, compared to 87 percent in suburban neighborhoods. Research in California has shown that people who live in more compact

development near transit are five times as likely to use transit as residents of the region at large, and people who work in transit-oriented development are three and a half times as likely. I believe that given our increasing concerns about traffic and climate change and our unhappiness with the Iraq war, reducing the amount of driving should be our number-one public policy goal!

But here's one final argument, one of the most important of all: Research done by the national nonprofit organization I work for has shown that while households that live in auto-dependent exurbs spend 25 percent of household income on transportation, households in "location-efficient" neighborhoods with higher-density mixed-use development and good transit access spend just 9 percent—a savings of 16 percent! This savings can be critical for low-income households: While the average household spends 19 percent on transportation, very-low-income households spend 55 percent or more! So building higher-density housing near transit is a key affordability strategy as well.

Have I convinced you, Bob? We've got to build more compact communities near transit instead of more sprawl.

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the last 50 years gives little support to this assertion. Household sizes have plummeted since World War II at the same time that average house sizes have risen from 1,000 square feet to well over 2,000 square feet. Despite over 50 years of campaigning by planners and others to stop sprawl, the overwhelming amount of new housing both in this country and in every urban area in the affluent world continues to be in the suburbs at some of the lowest densities ever seen in urban history.

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It would take massive increases in density to boost significantly the present, extremely small market share of transit use in Los Angeles. And even if the market share of transit gained, the number of automobile users would increase more quickly than transit users for the foreseeable future. Without some dramatic increase in road capacity, this would guarantee worse traffic and longer trips for motorists and bus passengers alike. In fact this is what has been happening in L.A. for some years now. Most of the nostrums promoted by "smart growth" advocates are likely to make matters even worse.

At least, you might still claim, more transit use would save energy and reduce pollution and greenhouse gases. In fact, even this proposition is shaky. Because automobiles have become so much more fuel-efficient over the last few decades but buses typically have not, if you measure results per vehicle mile traveled, the automobile, even with only 1.25 people in it on average uses little more, if any, energy and emits little more, if any, greenhouse gases than the average bus. If this sounds implausible, it is important to remember that the bus, which carries the overwhelming majority of transit riders in the U.S. today, is a heavy piece of metal that uses a lot of gas and that the average number of people in the bus in American cities, when you average in all of the runs at night and over weekends, is fewer than 10.

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probably be easier to tackle our transportation problems.

After all, the environmental problem is not the kind of vehicle people use to get around but the outmoded technology of the internal combustion engine used in both autos and buses. The most promising modes of transportation of the future are probably neither the car nor "big box" transit vehicles like buses and trains but small, nimble vehicles that use alternative fuel, run on guideways and can be grouped to achieve very fast and efficient transportation throughout our urban areas whether at high densities or low. That would afford maximum choice of living conditions and true smart growth.

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Nothing seems right in cars

How do you "get people out of their cars" and, if you can't do that, will Smart Growth plans accomplish anything other than increasing traffic? All this week, author Robert Bruegmann and activist Gloria Ohland debate the shape of America's cities.

Times Staff Writer

Today, Bruegmann and Ohland debate modifying public behavior. Previously, they discussed [Smart Growth](#), and the [social tensions over urban sprawl](#). Later this week, they'll debate environmental concerns, and more.

Mass transit: why the masses abandoned it but some yearn for its return

By Robert Bruegmann

Gloria,

For two centuries now, as one mode of urban transportation has succeeded another, ordinary citizens have benefited from an extraordinary increase in mobility and choice. Less than 200 years ago, the only way most citizens had to get around the city was walking, which severely restricted their geographic range. From the horse-drawn omnibus to the street railway to the cable car to the streetcar to the bus to the private automobile, each succeeding wave of innovation in transportation modes dramatically enlarged the speed of travel and the range of choices enjoyed by ordinary citizens in their working, living and playing environments.

There have always been those who, rather than celebrating this wonderful enlargement of human possibilities, have been affronted by the problems caused by the new technologies. In the name of civility or decorum or aesthetic sensibilities or more practical concerns, these people would restrict the mobility of ordinary citizens and turn the clock back rather than forge ahead with solutions to the problems. In the 19th century, for example, the steam railroad tore neighborhoods apart, drove huge viaducts through people's backyards, belched smoke into the air, created a din in the streets and killed or maimed countless people unlucky enough to get in its way. As a result, many citizens, particularly from elite groups that already were comfortable in their situations, fought furiously to bar the railroad from entering their city or complained loud and long after it had been built. The duke of Wellington expressed this sentiment perfectly when he excoriated the railroad as only allowing "common people to needlessly move around."

Of course, in the end, the more practical solution was not to stop the construction of railroads but to work on solving the problems, whether they were technological ones involving the locomotive power or logistical ones, such as eliminating grade-level crossings. Today, we face a similar situation with the automobile. In recent years, travel times have increased along with the congestion of our roads, and this has brought a heightened awareness of the problems of energy use, pollution and the challenges faced by people who either can't or don't want to drive.

The idea that the best way to solve these problems is by remaking our cities at higher density to discourage the use of the automobile and to make it easier to run traditional trains and buses is not just a confusion of ends and means. It is a symptom of a fear that human ingenuity can no longer solve our problems by moving forward, solving problems and creating more opportunity for everyone.

Rather than put as our goal a reduction in vehicle miles traveled, we should instead be looking first of all to maintain or increase mobility for all citizens. This will, of course, involve major changes to our current transportation system that we have clearly outgrown. Public transport can and should play an important role in this, but given the low densities of our cities, the scattered locations of homes, jobs and other activities and the enormous gains in efficiency provided by private transportation, it is highly unlikely that traditional buses or trains will supplant private transportation in any significant way.

In fact there has never been a moment with greater possibilities to forge ahead with the transportation systems of the future, whether public or private. The technology to tap new fuel sources, route and control traffic more effectively, build new rights of way underground, explore privately funded toll roads and congestion pricing, deploy smaller and more flexible vehicles (on-demand or rented by the hour), jitneys or personal rapid transit systems all suggest the possibility of significant breakthroughs that could resolve some of the transportation woes we currently face.

During the 20th century, Los Angeles exhibited to the world a new, more decentralized and democratic kind of city, one that provided good jobs, an unmatched standard of living and an unprecedented degree of social, economic and physical mobility to millions of people who came from all over the world. Now other cities, from Phoenix and Las Vegas to Shanghai and Shenzhen, are pushing forward with this exploration. Los Angeles could reinvent itself once again with new technology and new ways of doing things, or it could decide to abandon the race and attempt to return to older, more familiar urban forms. The latter choice might be reassuring to some current residents who wish to protect their existing way of life. It is not likely to achieve that goal, however, and it is quite likely to reduce opportunities for everyone, especially the millions of newcomers who will continue arriving in the city for generations to come.

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We need more choices
By Gloria Ohland
Bob,

I agree with you that the answer to our problem, however the problem is defined, is all about providing more mobility and choice. But I would argue that sprawl has severely restricted choice so that the only way that it's possible to get to school or work or the

grocery store is by car. This situation has severely restricted the mobility of poor people, young people and older Americans, as well as all those who would prefer not to drive all the time (whether because of concerns about the environment or because they see more benefit in making investments that will appreciate over time, such as in property or a college education, than investments that rapidly depreciate, like cars).

Sprawl has created vast single-use suburban neighborhoods—homes over here and everything else way over there—dissected by wide, heavily-trafficked roads and gigantic surface parking lots, with long commercial corridors of strip malls and big box retail fronted by parked cars. Sprawl has leveled everything, including trees and natural landforms, and covered it with asphalt so that we can accommodate the ever-increasing demand for automobiles. While the population of this country increased 41 percent from 1969 to 2001, the amount of vehicle miles traveled increased 193 percent. In the last 50 years the amount of urban land has quadrupled. Gargantuan growth like this can't provide for quality design or architecture or building materials. Instead we build the fast-food equivalent of architecture for our population on the go. And what about global climate change? What about sustainability? We'll get nowhere in addressing these issues with sprawl.

There is little mobility or choice in a country where sprawl is the dominant growth pattern. Traffic isn't going away—we can't build our way out of congestion, though we certainly have tried. Families can no longer get by on one or two cars once children reach driving age—they need three or four or more cars, which exacts a significant toll on the household budget. Cities and suburbs are no longer fun places to walk around in because they're not about the pedestrian streets and sidewalks. Public places don't provide the kind of intimacy or intensity of uses or visual variety or shade or quality streetscape that makes walking interesting, pleasurable or safe because our streetscape is all about cars. Our cities have become so vast that it's impossible to create quality places at this scale. We get drive-by architecture with blank walls on the street because buildings are intended to be viewed from the freeway at high speeds.

This, Bob, is why it's so hard to get people out of their cars. People really have no choice but to drive.

Moreover, the single-family home in the single-family neighborhood is good for a homogenous population of single families. But as I pointed out in my earlier discussion about demographics, there aren't very many families anymore. While the vast majority of U.S. households used to be families with a mom and dad and more than one child living in the same household, this demographic group now comprises just 22% of households, and it's shrinking. More and more households are childless or headed by single parents; single adults comprise 41% of households. All the demographic groups that are increasing in size are the same ones that have historically preferred higher-density housing and mass transit. Moreover, the "creative class" of workers—the college-educated, tech-savvy, 25-to-35-year-olds who are coveted by cities everywhere because they are adaptable and (compared to aging baby boomers) relatively inexpensive—have shown a marked preference for city living, especially in 24-hour cities with transit.

But the market has recognized these changing demographics and tastes. This is why there are 96 residential projects underway in downtown Los Angeles, a neighborhood where very few people have lived for the past 50 years. This is why even ultra-low-density sprawling places like Plano, Texas, and Salt Lake City, Utah, have begun focusing on building walkable, high-density, transit-oriented downtowns. Almost every region in the United States is either expanding an existing rail system or building a new one. Cities that are too small for light rail are considering streetcars—there are at least 60 new streetcar systems planned. And I agree with you that we need every possible kind of transit option: more bike paths, much better provisions for pedestrians, jitneys, bike cabs, maybe even rickshaws.

It is all about choices. This is about providing for urban as well as suburban living, for high-quality public transit as well as the private automobile, for pedestrians and bicyclists as well as motorists. I believe that single-family neighborhoods should be preserved, but that all along our rapidly expanding public transit system we should provide people with other housing options in mixed-use, mixed-income neighborhoods that are convenient to transit. Let there be lofts, live-work spaces, row houses, town homes, condos, granny flats and the whole spectrum of housing choices that provide for more sustainable and high-density choices in addition to the conventional single-family home and garden apartment. Let diversity reign across the land!

Gloria Ohland is vice president for communications for Reconnecting America, a national nonprofit organization that works with the public and private sectors to promote best practices in development-oriented transit and transit-oriented development (TOD). She is co-author and co-editor of the award-winning Street Smart: Streetcars and Cities in the 21st Century; The New Transit Town: Best Practices in TOD; and Hidden in Plain Sight: Capturing the Demand for Housing Near Transit, a national market study funded by the Federal Transit Administration and released in 2005.

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Dust-Up 4

The challenge of growing green

Isn't Smart Growth necessary to address environmental problems? All this week, author Robert Bruegmann and activist Gloria Ohland debate the shape of America's cities.
June 21, 2007

Today, Bruegmann and Ohland debate environmental concerns related to sprawl and growth. Previously, they discussed [modifying public behavior](#), [Smart Growth](#), and the [social tensions over urban sprawl](#). Tomorrow they'll focus on zoning and new construction.

Stop the sixth great extinction
By Gloria Ohland

Bob, I'll let you in on a secret: For the past dozen years I have been an advocate for transit and development around transit, believing that it is the most profound way for this country to move toward more sustainable growth patterns. But honestly, I don't care about transportation. What I really care about is the environment. It is the impact of sprawl and the road-building that makes sprawl possible, and the impact of all those cars on both the built and the natural environment, that really ticks me off. It seems downright immoral! I wrote a paper on biodiversity and smart growth for the Funders Network for Smart Growth in 2002, for which I gathered many of the facts cited below.

As I mentioned yesterday, the nature of development has changed dramatically since the invention of the suburb and sprawl. The amount of developed land has quadrupled in 50 years, consuming a third of our most productive farmland and more than half of all wetlands (91% in California) and it's bumping up against the boundaries of national parks, forests and other protected lands. A 1994 survey of national parks found 85% were experiencing threats from outside their boundaries. A recent Nature Conservancy study found that roads and utility corridors posed a critical threat to biodiversity in 55 of 89 conservation areas. At our current rate of growth the amount of land developed in the next 25 years would equal the total amount developed since this country was founded! I can't believe you would argue that this kind of growth is sustainable! Bob, don't you care about sustainability?

Development causes the fragmentation and degradation of habitat and water resources, interrupts natural processes such as floods and fires, and ushers in an invasion of non-native species. Almost all species listed under the federal Endangered Species Act are endangered by the loss, fragmentation or other alteration of habitat, and exotic plants that readily invade habitat that's been disturbed. Roads usher in an invasion of exotic weeds, pests and pathogens, and pollute habitat with noise as well as heavy metals, carbon

monoxide and dioxide and pesticides, which typically end up in nearby aquatic systems. Sprawl is the No. 1 cause of habitat loss and fragmentation in California, threatening 188 of 286 imperiled or endangered species!

Moreover, conservationists say that in order to maintain a healthy ecosystem we need to provide for large predators such as grizzlies, wolves and lynx because without them ecosystems undergo dramatic changes that lead to "biotic simplification" and species loss. But big carnivores need big wilderness—the "Yellowstone to Yukon" wilderness stretching from the American West up into Canada—in order to keep the gene pool healthy. In order for large carnivores to use this landscape they must cross 23 highways in Montana, 17 in Idaho, four in Wyoming, and 17 in British Columbia and Alberta. Road kills are a leading cause of death for animals; researchers estimate at least a million are killed each day on U.S. highways. Many large mammals avoid roads entirely, and smaller species are afraid to cross them, which means that roads fragment habitat into smaller and smaller patches, seriously constraining breeding populations and posing a major threat to biodiversity.

Concerns about road-building have prompted wildlife and wilderness advocates to join smart growth advocates in asking why the federal government is providing so much funding for sprawl-inducing infrastructure in the first place—not only roads but also sewers and water lines. That's why wildlife and wilderness advocates are joining campaigns for more environmentally friendly transportation modes including intercity and high-speed rail—which have the potential to concentrate growth near stations—instead of roads, which disperse growth everywhere.

Part of the problem is that animals and plants thrive in the same places that humans do: Florida, Southern California, the Pacific Northwest and coastlines, riparian corridors, valley bottoms and foothills everywhere—the very same regions that are either developing most rapidly or that are already developed. Historically the extinction of both plant and animal species has closely followed the spread of humans from Africa and Eurasia. But the rate of extinctions is increasing so rapidly that conservation biologists now predict the loss of a third of the world's plant and animal species within the next 50 years, a phenomenon of such apocalyptic magnitude they call it "the sixth great extinction."

I think that this information compels us to safeguard our natural heritage by implementing smart growth measures wherever possible and reducing sprawl-inducing road-building.

Gloria Ohland is vice president for communications for Reconnecting America, a national nonprofit organization that works with the public and private sectors to promote best practices in development-oriented transit and transit-oriented development (TOD). She is co-author and co-editor of the award-winning Street Smart: Streetcars and Cities in the 21st Century; The New Transit Town: Best Practices in TOD; and Hidden in Plain Sight: Capturing the Demand for Housing Near Transit, a national market study funded by the Federal Transit Administration and released in 2005.

Don't blanket the land with condemnation
By Robert Bruegmann

Gloria,

Many people who consider themselves environmentalists wrap themselves up in a mantle of moral superiority and, in so doing, strongly suggest that people who don't agree with them either don't have any interest in sustainability and the environment or are selfish and quite willing to damage the environment if it is in their own personal interest. To my mind, it is arguments of this kind, along with the equally rigid rejection of such claims by individuals who feel that environmentalists as a whole are elitists who put things like spurious animal rights ahead of human needs, that have led us to such an impasse on environmental matters. I believe everyone would be better off if more people could lower their voices and listen to alternative views.

You claim that the nature of development has changed greatly in the last 50 years and so it has. The rural population has fallen, the urban population has soared and cities across the affluent world have seen their densities plummet as the urban population has spread across more of the landscape. But seen in a longer perspective this is just the latest change in the tumultuous history of human settlements, and it is not necessarily alarming.

Let's consider for a moment the Boston area. Rural New England has lost a large proportion of its rural population over the last 150 years because the land wasn't really good for farming and technological advances in agriculture have dramatically increased crop yields across the world despite a dramatic fall in the number of farmers. In New England many of those farmers went to Boston, which swelled and in turn started to decentralize and scatter. Today you can find exurbanites in the Boston economic orbit living on 5 or 10 acres across much of New England.

According to much conventional environmental wisdom, this would be a tragedy because it would reduce agricultural production, consume an excessive amount of land, destroy habitat, reduce biodiversity, require excessive amounts of energy and increase pollution and greenhouse gases. But are any of these charges necessarily well founded? The first is perhaps the easiest. There is no need for New England, with its rocky soil and harsh climate, to grow large amounts of staple crops. The United States, like most affluent countries in the West, grows more food than it needs, largely because of massive subsidies that not only are costly to American taxpayers but result in terrible damage to the economy of some of the world's poorest countries when these surpluses are dumped there.

Most agriculture, moreover, is not particularly environmentally friendly. In fact the large-lot exurban spreads almost certainly have a far greater biodiversity and create less pollution than the heavily fertilized monocultures they replaced. New England has seen an explosion of green in this century as farmers abandoned their fields and moved to the city, and the farms became forests. This trend has continued even with massive

suburbanization and exurbanization.

In fact, many suburbanites and exurbanites moved to their current locations precisely because they wanted a connection with the land. Individuals from the suburbs and exurbs, after all, probably constitute the majority of members in most environmental groups in this country, and many are among America's most ardent stewards of the land. Families who live in a relatively low density are also the ones most likely to be able to disconnect from the power grid and generate all of their own power on site, collect all the water they need on their property and discharge it back into the ground on site. There is no reason to assume that high-density living is more sustainable than low-density living.

You spend most of your essay talking about species extinction. In doing so you confidently cite statistics about the spread of cities, the rate of species loss and damage done to habitat by roads and settlement. Let me admit up front that this issue is for me personally the one that gives me perhaps the most pause when I say that sprawl is not necessarily a problem.

Having said that, let me make a few observations. The first involves the idea that cities are "consuming" an excessive amount of land. Note first the highly prejudicial wording. How often do you hear the word "consume" applied to other uses, for example land used for ranching or national parks? Secondly, it is important to remember that the total urbanized portion of the United States, that is all the cities and suburbs, roads and other urban uses put together, uses much less than 10% of the total land.

Moreover, estimates about the number of species becoming extinct annually vary wildly. This is not surprising since we don't even have any firm idea of the number of species in existence, with estimates ranging between 2 million and 100 million. Furthermore, we have very little way to know how many of these extinctions would have occurred with or without human settlement. In short the subject of species extinction is something of a black box. We obviously need to know a great deal more.

I am not suggesting that this means we should do nothing in the meantime. If we believe that species extinction is a big problem, let's make a thorough survey a national priority and even before this is done hammer out some sort of agreement on remedies. Our extraordinary lack of knowledge on this issue is hurting not just the endangered species but every taxpayer in the country, because we are all paying for the epic courtroom battles and loss of time and money involved in arguing things parcel by parcel.

At base, though, species extinction has always been more than just a practical matter. It is so difficult to resolve because for many environmental activists it is a moral and metaphysical issue. Environmental activists often see Nature as purposeful and benign and Man as outside Nature. For many skeptics of remedies proposed by these environmental activists, Man is not outside Nature and so everything that human beings do is, by definition, natural. They would argue that all species are forced to share their habitat and question whether keeping man and animals apart is necessarily the best way to promote the welfare of either.

Blanket condemnations of low-density development and automobiles as environmental disasters are not, in my opinion, part of the solution to our very real environmental problems. They may even be part of the problem.

*Robert Bruegmann is professor of art history, architecture and urban planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His most recent book is *Sprawl: A Compact History*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2005.*

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DUST-UP #5

Smart sprawl?

Are New Urbanist or Smart Growth plans just a stalking horse for increased development? Author Robert Bruegmann and activist Gloria Ohland conclude their debate on the shape of America's cities.

June 23, 2007

Today, Bruegmann and Ohland discuss zoning and smart growth plans. Previously, they discussed [environmental concerns related to sprawl and growth](#), [modifying public behavior](#), [Smart Growth](#), and the [social tensions over urban sprawl](#).

New Urbanism is good, but it doesn't stop sprawl

By Robert Bruegmann

Gloria:

I imagine that at this point in our debate you might be expected to celebrate the New Urbanism because of its anti-sprawl rhetoric, and I could reasonably be expected to denounce it. After all, faculty in most academic architectural departments these days tend to prefer modernist design and consider New Urbanism just historical pastiche. Many go further and condemn places like Seaside or Celebration, Florida as creepy, fake environments of the kind portrayed in the movie *The Truman Show*.

If that is the expectation, I'm sorry to throw a wrench in the works. In my opinion the New Urbanism has been one of the most successful movements in the world of design over the last several decades because it has supplied a number of things that were sorely lacking, and it has provided some interesting choices in the marketplace. I only fault some of its advocates for claiming too much.

First the genuine achievements of the New Urbanists. At their best, for example in the excellent book [Suburban Nation](#) and other writings by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, New Urbanists have provided penetrating insights into the relationships among the house, the street, the neighborhood, the city and the region. Moreover, the New Urbanists have not just been critics. Their ideas have flowed directly out of their attempts to create communities that are more compact, walkable and sociable than the typical subdivision. In the process they have proposed alternatives to standard practice including, for example, a major rethinking of zoning and building codes.

Many of the new communities New Urbanists have built across the United States, starting with Seaside on the Florida panhandle in 1981, have been extremely popular with a large public, suggesting that they do fill an important market niche. Their ideas have also been

popular with many design professionals because, after the fall of orthodox Modernist planning doctrine, theirs is that rarest of species, a coherent set of ideas about the design of everything from the front door of a house to the design of the entire region. The most intelligent of the New Urbanists have always been flexible in their thought. Duany, for example, has always insisted that New Urbanism need not be done in historical styles, and he constantly surprises with new insights.

So, as far as I am concerned, the New Urbanists have made quite a contribution, and I salute them for it. Where I part company with them is in what I consider to be the tendency of many of the most zealous camp followers to claim too much. For example many New Urbanists believe what they are doing is somehow an antidote to sprawl. They say that their settlements are higher in density and therefore require less driving. But few of the New Urbanist communities built to date are actually very dense. In fact, most of the best known of them have densities no higher than many conventional suburbs now going up on the periphery of urban America.

It appears to be true that residents of New Urbanist communities, particularly ones built at a rail stop and using notions of Transit Oriented Design (TOD), walk more and drive less than their counterparts in conventional suburbia. But the difference is usually not very significant, and most people in New Urbanist communities continue to get to most destinations by driving. In fact, if anything, it is probably surprising that there is not more difference between New Urbanist and conventional settlements given the reality of self-selection, the tendency of people who already know they don't want to drive to choose places designed for this purpose.

New Urbanists also advocate mixed use developments. But most New Urbanist communities to date have been little more than subdivisions. Trying to dislodge retail from shopping centers and strip malls and insert it into small buildings at the center of these subdivisions has always been a hard sell. The problem is that design itself isn't sufficient to re-order our existing economic order. It is probable that many suburban Americans wish they could walk to a corner store to get a gallon of milk which they can't do in their conventional subdivisions. But until our economic system makes it possible for that corner store to pay the clerk a wage sufficient to buy a home in the community, this can only be a token gesture.

I don't see that the New Urbanism is inherently good or bad just as I see no reason to believe that sprawl is one or the other. If that is the case, I think that the implication for public policy should be that government ought to confine itself to fixing things where there is a high degree of consensus on both the problem and the solution and leave the rest to the citizens who will decide for themselves where and how they wish to live.

*Robert Bruegmann is professor of Art History, Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His most recent book is *Sprawl: A Compact History*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 2005.*

Happy at last

By Gloria Ohland

Good Dust-Up, Bob. Now we're putting a little feeling into it. It's interesting to take the Google Earth view and look at sprawl from a distance, in the context of civilization over the ages, with its ebb and flow of populations. But even taking the long view, I'm compelled to do what I can to help maintain life on this planet as we know it! These are the issues that compel me! What is at the heart of this debate for you?

But our debate for today is about whether New Urbanism is just a stalking horse for increased development.

Sure. It can be. But it's about the kind of development. Arguing against development is kind of like arguing against procreation. It's going to happen. It's only a question of where the development will happen and what it will be like. We can continue with business as usual and encourage development at the suburban fringes (through the provision of new roads, sewers, water lines and other infrastructure subsidized by existing taxpayers and rate-payers), and we've seen what that's done to our cities and to traffic. Or we can decide that—because of concern about the impending crises of affordability and traffic, the high-cost of infrastructure, climate change, our dependence on Middle East oil and the impact on habitat and biodiversity—it is better to encourage development near transit.

Maybe we'll figure out how to build sustainable sprawl. Living in harmony with nature and the animals—I'm all for it. But until we have the sustainable sprawl model figured out I vote for building more mixed-income mixed-use development near transit. One recent study shows that people who live in transit-oriented developments in California are five times more likely to ride transit and that people who work in TOD are three and a half times more likely to ride it. Another shows that neighborhoods in Portland with mixed use and good transit have a much lower share of auto use: 58% of trips by auto compared to 87% in suburban neighborhoods. I already mentioned the study by the organization I work for that showed that families who live in neighborhoods with mixed use and good transit access can save 16% on transportation over households in auto-oriented neighborhoods. Many other studies show that car ownership and use is significantly lower in transit-oriented neighborhoods. This is the best kind of development for public policy to encourage at this time.

We've got a plethora of sprawl choices in Los Angeles. But we need more smart growth choices, and we are getting them. Los Angeles, like most cities across the U.S., has come back to life around all the new investment in walkable downtowns and suburban town centers. Witness the riot of small, new, locally owned shops and restaurants stretching for miles along Sunset Boulevard, the hipsterism of Silver Lake, Hollywood and Venice with all the new loft development, the South-of-France feel of the Mission Meridian rail station with its transit-oriented development, which has supported a string of new shops and restaurants all along Mission in family-friendly South Pasadena. Look at all the development in downtown L.A. And the walkable suburban town centers that are developing around train stations in places like Fullerton, San Fernando, San Juan Capistrano. Southern California is beginning to offer it all—urban and suburban,

walkable, transit-oriented and auto-oriented.

It's an exciting time to live in the city with everyone out and about, dining, walking their dogs, pushing baby strollers, seeing and being seen. This kind of development is good for our cities and our souls and our culture! Communities once again feel like real communities.

We will continue to sprawl. And we will continue to reinvest in existing communities. The monolithic auto-oriented model of the single-family home and single-family neighborhood is giving way to something much richer. The suburban model served us well during a period of rapid growth in this country. But we've matured as a country and a culture and are able to support a more complex and more diverse range of choices for a more diverse population. We're evolving. I think we're riding off into the sunset happy, Bob.

Gloria Ohland is vice president for communications for Reconnecting America, a national nonprofit organization that works with the public and private sectors to promote best practices in development-oriented transit and transit-oriented development (TOD). She is co-author and co-editor of the award-winning Street Smart: Streetcars and Cities in the 21st Century; The New Transit Town: Best Practices in TOD; and Hidden in Plain Sight: Capturing the Demand for Housing Near Transit, a national market study funded by the Federal Transit Administration and released in 2005.