

# Robert Bruegmann

I live in a 1950s high-rise in central Chicago, which is one of the densest urban areas in the United States. My work at the university isn't far away. Nor are the libraries, museums and other institutions that I use. So my living situation suits me perfectly. But my needs are extremely unusual. I certainly don't believe I have the right or duty to impose my preferences on the population at large, the vast majority of whom have no reason to want to live in that kind of high-density situation.

For at least five hundred years the major development in affluent cities worldwide has been outward growth, typically at lower and lower densities, with affluent people pushing in one direction and poor people in the other. That characterizes ancient Rome; it has characterized London since the seventeenth century; it characterizes American cities today. In fact, almost all of what we think of as central in any city today was suburban at one point in history. For this reason I am sceptical about the field of suburban history. Done right, this history would be virtually synonymous with urban history.

To me, the notion that suddenly in the twenty-first century cities should be prevented from further expansion is highly dubious. Schemes that attempt to rein in outward growth by imposing growth boundaries, from London immediately after World War II to Portland, Oregon, today have produced many unintended consequences, most notably the way they limit the supply of land, drive up prices and have a disproportionate impact on people at the lower end of the socio-economic scale.

Historically, the reason given in support of such compaction measures has been to create better city form and protect the countryside. However, proper city form has always been a highly subjective matter. And, in fact, it appears that the architectural avant-garde is just now starting to discover the beauty in sprawl. There is certainly no reason we need to be protecting as much agricultural land as we do in North America or Europe. Almost every country in these regions produces a surplus of food. Not only is this expensive because of the subsidies involved, but these subsidies have made it possible for big food producers in the West to undercut farmers in the developing world, doing untold damage to the economies of these countries.

In the 1990s environmental groups signed onto the anti-sprawl movement in a big way. Some of the arguments presented were about the amount of surface paved over, about the run-off and about biomass but at the very top of the charge was the problem of global warming. Global warming does seem to be a significant problem, but the connection between global warming and sprawl is weak. The problem here isn't the pattern of settlement. It is the inefficient use of old technologies and the excessive reliance on fossil fuels.

Finding cleaner sources of energy is essential when we talk about the really dire problems in the urban world today. These are the problems faced primarily by the one third of the world's urban population that lives on less than a dollar a day and is subject to sanitary conditions that residents of the affluent world can barely imagine. For these people to pull themselves out of poverty is going to require access to more energy rather than less, so the solution to global warming has to involve major technological changes rather than just conservation or rearranging settlement patterns.

If one begins from that premise, there is no reason why a thinly dispersed urban form couldn't be more energy-efficient and less polluting than a densified city. If you lived in a society where each dwelling had a couple of acres of land, you could get all your energy locally through wind, solar and geothermal power. You could have much greater biomass than either the city centre, which is paved over or the cornfield, which is a monoculture. There are already a large number of people in the US and elsewhere who are living off the central power grid. Suddenly, with both low tech and high tech solutions, we are no longer talking about a fringe phenomenon but the very real possibility that large numbers of people will no longer need to rely on the 'big pipe' systems that were necessary to sustain nineteenth-century industrial cities.

In general, one of the biggest drawbacks to the whole sprawl debate is that it is predicated on the idea of the nineteenth century city as the model. What it is lacking is any curiosity about all the other possible urban models. It is strange to me that people who have called themselves progressive since the '60s – people who generally think of themselves on the political left – have stopped being interested in progress. Once they were interested in how technological innovation could shape the future. Now they seem to be absolutely paranoid about what the future will bring: about globalization, freer trade, genetic engineering and also alternative urban options. We keep talking about the car versus the train, for example, but neither of them is close to being an ideal system so let's ask what the next thing could be. There seems to be no technical reason why, in twenty years time, you couldn't go to your closet and get your pod which runs on clean fuel and which you take on very narrow guideways or up in the air. You might join up with 200 of these and go at 500 miles per hour to the nearest city. You would then unhook and drive to your destination.

If we could put aside the unproductive sprawl debate and concentrate instead on the specific and very real problems of urban life, whether in the central city, the suburbs or the very low-density exurbs beyond, we would probably be more likely to find unexpected new solutions to age-old urban challenges. *Robert Bruegmann was speaking with Ellis Woodman*



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