

Q&A / ROBERT BRUEGMANN, architecture historian: IN DEFENSE OF SPRAWL

It's about 'privacy, mobility and choice'

Richard Halicks - Staff
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Urban sprawl, we've learned in Atlanta, is one of the great evils of modern life. But a new book argues that sprawl is neither evil nor even modern.

"Sprawl: A Compact History" says that cities have sprawled for thousands of years: Indeed, outside the walls of ancient Rome was a place the Romans called suburbium, literally "below the walls" --- a place for businesses that couldn't operate within the city and for people who couldn't afford to live there.

Author Robert Bruegmann, an architecture historian and urban planner at the University of Illinois at Chicago, reports that suburbium has been with us for thousands of years, and that it must be a desirable place because we keep creating it again and again, all over the globe.

"Atlanta got the label of poster child of sprawl in the late 1990s, about 1995," Bruegmann said. "It really moved into undisputed first place as the world exemplar of sprawl." But he maintains that Atlanta is simply going through the same growing pains that seized London in the early 1800s, Chicago in the late 1800s and Los Angeles in the 1900s.

"If you look at that list of places what you realize is that, without exception, these are places that were growing the fastest, that were changing the fastest, that were creating wealth for the largest number of people," says Bruegmann.

He spoke by phone last week with the Journal-Constitution's Richard Halicks. Here is an edited transcript of their conversation.

Q. You chair the art history department and are a professor of architecture and urban planning. How much did the art history side of your training inform your analysis in this book?

A. Actually, a lot. One of the biggest surprises I had was that these debates about sprawl are usually couched in terms of objective, quantifiable matters like efficiency or agricultural production or pollution, things like that. But in fact, if you look at the anti-sprawl literature over time, you see that the thing that really gets people annoyed and angry, and has for centuries now, is aesthetics. That is really the emotional linchpin of a tremendous amount of anti-sprawl agitation.

[He refers to the book "Sprawl City: Race, Politics & Planning in Atlanta," published in 2000.]
"Sprawl City" --- I was just looking at it a few minutes ago. It's heavily about race, because that's what the authors were preoccupied with. But if you look on almost any page, you see these words like "formless," "amorphous," "unplanned," all these things that are really about the aesthetic qualities of the place.

Q. You offer a startling thesis --- that sprawl happens. It certainly has negative aspects, but you describe it as a natural process?

A. Certainly there are major problems, as there were in London in the 19th century, Chicago in the late 19th century, Los Angeles in the 20th century, Atlanta at the turn of the 21st century --- sure those places had problems. But two things about that: One is, these are the kinds of

problems that every city in the world wants to have --- that is, enormous growth and growth in wealth. And the other thing about them is that they always, in retrospect, look like golden eras. I've absolutely no doubt that, at the end of the 21st century, when people look back 50 years or a hundred years, Atlanta will be seen as one of the great lands of opportunity in urban history.

Q. Really? What makes you say so?

A. The reason these problems occur is that these cities are so attractive. These are places that tens of thousands of people come to every year, because they offer what people really want more than anything else. That is, they offer privacy, mobility and choice. By privacy I mean the ability to control your own environment, and one of the ways you can do that relatively easily is if you have your own plot of land and your own house. By mobility, I mean physical mobility and also social and economic mobility. And choice --- that means you can do a lot of different things. I think there's absolutely no doubt that these places we're talking about, these growth machines, Atlanta being one of them, fulfilled those needs, and people poured in from all over the world.

Q. We've been trained to believe that "sprawl" is intrinsically bad. And that's not a hard argument to make in Atlanta in 2005. But you argue that it isn't true.

A. Let's say you had a choice between Atlanta and St. Louis. These are both low-density places. St. Louis has had really lackluster economic growth. Same sprawl, but lackluster growth and all kinds of problems. Given those two, would you rather be St. Louis or would you rather be Atlanta? Would you rather have the growth or not have the growth? If Atlanta were really the worse place, you wouldn't have all these people coming.

What happened there was, in many ways, similar to what happened to all the cities I'm talking about. When you have really fast growth over any length of time, infrastructure never keeps up. So you get crises, which you always get with really, really fast growth. The one that's been most dramatic in Atlanta has been road congestion, the one that really hits everybody's radar.

You can look at this two ways: Well, this is a function of poor land-use planning --- you don't have the jobs right next to where the residences are. Or you can say: No, it's a result of people wanting to have the very best jobs they can have and the very best residential situations they can have, and they're willing to drive long distances to get there.

In a place where wealth is increasing very fast, and population very fast, you get a lot of that. You get a lot of people who are willing to make that choice, because it's worth it to them.

Now, when the population growth slows down, in the next big slump --- let's hope it doesn't happen, but if history is any guide, it will happen to Atlanta as it has to every other place that's ever boomed --- then what'll happen is that people will adjust their lifestyles. They'll move closer to work. They'll minimize that congestion factor. And in addition, the public sector will catch up, will build some more roads, and the crisis will ease dramatically. We've seen that again and again and again: Every period of fast growth causes these dislocations.

Q. To many, the car has come to symbolize much of what is wrong with America --- particularly here in Atlanta. But you rise to its defense.

A. If we're talking about those three things that it seems people all over the world really want --- privacy, mobility and choice --- I don't think there's any single thing that's happened in world history that's given more people more of those three things more quickly or more dramatically.

Let's consider the wealthy landowner in Britain in the 17th century or 18th century. This person has a great country house, private transportation which will take him into his London house. This person would have the ability to live anywhere he wanted with his family, go anywhere he wants, without having to ask anybody's permission. Maximum amount of choice. Maximum ability to control his own environment.

OK, now fast-forward a couple of hundred years to, let's say, Atlanta, circa 2000. You have a lower middle-class of factory worker who has many of these same things: a single-family house on his own plot of land; he and his family are able to control it as they see fit. No lord or master to tell them what they can or can't do.

The automobile has enabled that family to have two people working. The husband works up near the [Perimeter] in North Atlanta, and the wife has a job at the airport, clear on the other side of town. And in the midst of all this, they want to take their daughter, who's really talented in ballet, to the foremost dance teacher in Atlanta, who happens to be out by Lenox Square.

This family has choices that were impossible to consider even 50 years ago, or even in many cases 25 years ago. It creates a situation where they do a tremendous amount of driving --- they may not be happy with that; they probably don't like that --- but it's hard to imagine a system, any system, that would have allowed them to do these things, to have all those choices, to have all that mobility. So, the problems of sprawl are really, to me, the problems of an awful lot of people having all kinds of choices and privileges that once were simply unavailable to most people.

Q. Let's turn to race, which is a permanent issue in Atlanta. White flight to suburbia, particularly to Gwinnett County, was clearly one cause of sprawl in the 1960s and '70s. A recent book argued that suburbanization in Atlanta was simply an effective way for white people to maintain segregation even after it was legally prohibited.

A. There are a couple of ways to respond to that. The first way, and I think the best way, is that when you look at sprawl across the world, you can see that sprawl has happened whether or not there were minority populations. If London in the interwar years sprawled at least as much as Atlanta --- and there's no appreciable minority factor there --- if you can see the same kind of sprawl in, let's say, Minneapolis/St. Paul as in Atlanta, that starts to suggest that race can't be the primary factor.

There's no doubt that race is really important. Certainly a lot of suburbanization has happened because people want to segregate themselves out. I think the more important thing is to talk about the way that societies segregate themselves, whether we're talking about African-American vs. white, or whether we're talking about any other group. There are very powerful reasons that people want to associate with people they consider to be like themselves. These things are not wrong. These are things that create the vibrant communities that we celebrate.

The second answer is a little different. OK, so Atlanta is sprawl capital of the world, late 2000. Does this mean that this is the worst place for African-Americans, which would be the logical conclusion to that story? But that is demonstrably false. There is arguably no city in America that has created greater opportunities for African-Americans. If you look at the behavior of a lot of the African-American community, you see that it follows exactly the same logic, the same dynamic as the white community. That is, as more African-Americans become more affluent, they are likely to move out to large houses in the suburbs exactly the way whites do.

Q. I was struck by your remark that "most urban change, no matter how wrenching for one generation, tends to be the accepted norm of the next generation and the cherished heritage of the one after that." And I wondered whether you'd say the strains and stresses we see today are simply a moment in the evolution of communities.

A. I'm sure that's right. Every community feels those dislocations. By the time those dislocations have been more or less settled, because they usually do settle, then people will have completely forgotten those dislocations and are worried about the new ones.

What you'll see next in Atlanta is a densification. I think that the downtown and the Midtown areas, the whole Peachtree corridor spine, probably will be densified dramatically in the next couple of decades. And when that starts to happen, then I think you're going to see people

starting to scream about high density as being the real problem, as it's becoming now in Los Angeles.

Q. The root of all urban problems in the early 20th century was high density in the city. And now the root of all urban problems is low density in the suburbs. And soon, you're suggesting, the root of all urban problems will be high density in the cities again.

A. Downtown Atlanta is a really good case. My impression is that it has been on the verge of gentrification for a long time, but it just keeps sputtering. There's never been enough critical mass, and there've been too many attractive alternatives, particularly to the north, so downtown has not quite started its revival of a residential district. But if it follows in the path of virtually all the other cities that are comparable, it will. You'll start seeing an awful lot of people wanting to live downtown in high-density districts.

With its Midtown phenomenon Atlanta follows the model of Houston. Midtown became a second downtown and in many ways eclipsed the original downtown. Eventually these old downtowns find a niche. As in Manhattan, which I think could very easily become a high-end cultural and residential resort area, rather than a business center. That may in fact be the fate of downtown Houston and downtown Atlanta somewhere down the road.

Suburb dwellers aren't anti-city

An excerpt from "Sprawl: A Compact History," by Robert Bruegmann, University of Chicago Press, \$27.50, 301p.

Most Americans do not like the dirt and disorder that characterized historic 19th-century industrial cities, and they may be indifferent if not downright hostile to the clubby culture of the downtown elite cultural groups, but there is no evidence that suburbanites are opposed to urbanity. . . .

It is true that some suburbanites see their environment as the opposite of the old central city, peripheral to their everyday lives and just another exit on the freeway. However, it is likely that the majority considers these two places as good for different things. For them, suburbia is a good place to live, work and raise children, while downtown is a place to see ballgames, visit a museum or do some special Christmas shopping. As the old downtowns remake themselves as tourist destinations and places of entertainment, it appears that they have, if anything, become a more valued part of the larger urban world.