

The virtues of sprawl

Sprawl isn't what it used to be, some experts contend. Is it time we stopped worrying and learned to love the subdivision?

By Anthony Flint | October 2, 2005

FROM PASCO COUNTY outside Tampa to the ranchland north of Dallas to Phoenix and Las Vegas and Boise, the freshly built subdivision miles from anywhere has become the official choice for millions of Americans. Demographers today use the term "exurban" to describe this kind of location, on open land outside the farthest fringes of existing suburban development and completely lacking in any traditional relationship with a major city. Planners, environmentalists, and architects urging more compact growth call it wasteful sprawl.

But despite rising gas prices that make it increasingly expensive to get around these spread-out landscapes, some scholars and commentators have been stepping up to say that sprawl really isn't so bad.

Some recent developments outside Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Dallas are far-flung but quite dense, for example, suggesting a kind of creeping efficiency in America's continuing suburbanization. A Brookings Institution study on the Los Angeles area found an average of nine people per acre of newly developed land from 1982 to 1997, three times the rate of the New York metropolitan area. By the measure of people per square mile, Los Angeles--hemmed in, for all its expanse, by mountains and the ocean--is more dense than Chicago, according to the Census Bureau. The lines of single-family homes packed in close together have even prompted some grumbling that this fresh brand of suburbia doesn't provide enough elbow room.

Density is only one factor in the analysis of dispersed development. Because all the functions of life—homes, stores, entertainment, and work-places—are rigidly separated and spread out, everyone needs a car to get around. That means long commutes, traffic jams, and less quality time with family. Local governments are going broke trying to extend water and sewer lines and other infrastructure to outlying areas, even if it's dense once you get there. Sprawl eats up farmland and open space, and investment in sprawling areas has tended to be at the expense of inner cities, worsening social and economic fragmentation.

But is all that a bad rap? Maybe, says Robert Bruegmann, a professor of art history, planning and architecture at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who identifies many good things about sprawl. "It's no better or no worse than any other settlement pattern," Bruegmann says. "It works because it satisfies a lot of needs. When people have been able to afford it, people move out of cities. We now have tens of millions of people who can do what only a small minority once could do."

Bruegmann, whose new book, "Sprawl: A Compact History" (Chicago), will be published this month, joins consultant and author Joel Kotkin, New York Times columnist David Brooks, and others in finding inspiration in the subdivisions, like a Jane Jacobs of suburbia. The embrace of dispersal follows a long tradition started by Thomas Jefferson and followed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Today Bruegmann and others feel it's important to identify what's good about spread-out development because sprawl has been hammered

for over two decades by activists urging "smart growth" and New Urbanism, the latter an architectural movement promoting compact traditional neighborhood design.

Sprawl gives us "decentralization and democratization," Bruegmann says—an orderly use of land that draws in working-class and middle-class people and allows them to head upward in the economy and society. Homes in new subdivisions in the South and West commonly start at \$120,000. To try to curb sprawl is to stand in the way of the flourishing of the American dream.

"It's a way to get things once possessed by only a few," Bruegmann says. "Privacy, mobility—social and physical—and choice."

Nor is sprawl a new phenomenon. From ancient Rome and China to 19th-century London to Paris and Los Angeles today, society has spread out during economic good times. "There's a massive out-migration as soon as people can afford it," Bruegmann says. Accordingly, maybe we should all stop worrying and learn to love the subdivision.

Of course, a darker future is seen by others who look at the nation's spread-out landscape. James Howard Kunstler, a champion of New Urbanism and author of "The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the 21st Century" (2005), argues that when cheap oil is no longer available, the suburban economy will collapse: The physical arrangement requiring long trips to get everywhere will become folly. Kunstler all but predicts tumbleweeds in front of Wal-Marts on long commercial strips.

"Our cities are generally hypertrophic organisms—they have grown too large over the past century, via the growth medium of cheap energy," Kunstler says. "Whatever else they are now, they are certain to contract in the 21st century. The process will probably involve densification back in the core or around waterfronts, as cities generally contract in overall size." Our current living arrangement, he says, "follows the relentless logic of cancer, hypertrophy, and will prove to be self-limiting as it consumes and destroys its host."

Most smart-growth activists today don't spend a lot of time criticizing sprawl or predicting suburbia's demise. Their main focus is providing more choice for those people who don't want to live in sprawl—changing outdated zoning that prevents compact, mixed-use development near train stations, for example.

"Smart growth doesn't say all sprawl is awful," says John Frece, associate director of the National Center for Smart Growth Research at the University of Maryland. "It's not about taking away the ability to develop sprawl—just to add the ability to do different kinds of development and put that on equal footing. Then let the market decide."

Bruegmann says he's quite open to the idea that Americans choose different living arrangements at different times of life. And, just to complicate everyone's thinking a little further, he also predicts that as societies get ever more affluent, more people want to come back to cities. It's just a matter of understanding how wealth drives the popularity of different physical landscapes.

"If you have enough money, living at high density is very alluring," he says. "I think there will always be some people who will want to live in suburban settings no matter what. But if you have a spacious apartment on Fifth Avenue with a doorman, and you can get in a taxi or walk to the Metropolitan Museum of Art...millions of people would love to do that."

Ultimately, says Kotkin, author of "The City: A Global History" (2005), "The problems of sprawl have to be

solved within the context of sprawl. You're not going to stop it. You can't reengineer society by getting everyone to move back to Boston. Forget about it. It's not happening."

Sprawl is getting better, Kotkin says—more dense, and eventually featuring a better mix of uses, with stores and workplaces closer to homes. Kotkin predicts more of these kinds of suburban villages, which he calls "the new suburbanism," a deliberate echo of the New Urbanism. With the help of technology, more people will be able to work from home or closer to home. Car trips will still be necessary, but they could be shorter and done using hybrid and energy-efficient vehicles.

"In southern California we've been saying this for years: 'It's just a different kind of city,'" Kotkin says. "It's like someone from Florence coming to 19th-century Manchester. They'd say, 'Where's the church in the middle?' It's just different. The urbanization of suburbia is the great challenge of land-use planning in early 21st-century America."

Anthony Flint is a Globe reporter and author of the forthcoming book "This Land: The Battle Over Sprawl and the Future of America," to be published in the spring by Johns Hopkins University Press. ■

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