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Learning to sprawl

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Complaining about suburban sprawl is a national pastime. It's bad for the planet, the prevailing theory goes -- energy-consuming, highway-clogging, pollution-creating, farmland-gobbling -- and soulless and ugly to boot.

But in his controversial and gleefully contrarian new book *Sprawl: A Compact History* (University of Chicago Press, \$27.50), Chicago author Robert Bruegmann questions the assumptions behind each of those assertions. A professor of art history, architecture and urban planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago, he doesn't exactly defend sprawl, but he argues that it's no worse than other urban settings.

"Dense central cities have some advantages, but they also have some tremendous disadvantages: congestion, pollution, crime, all the things that central cities have been criticized for in the past 100 years," says Bruegmann, whose previous books include an award-winning history of the Chicago architecture firm Holabird & Roche. "The same is true of sprawl -- it has all kinds of problems, but I don't know that they're any worse than any other part of the urban area."

Among the suburban sprawl presumptions:

Sprawl leads to excessive energy consumption caused by long commutes: "The problem isn't private transportation," Bruegmann insists. "The problem is that we have an old-fashioned 19th-century technology, the internal combustion engine using fossil fuels. Let's solve that problem -- maybe by creating small, fuel-efficient vehicles -- and stop talking about putting the city back into its 19th-century state to make mass transit work. Instead, let's see what people want to do, then see how the city can be built around them."

Sprawl causes loss of farmland: "Despite all of the scare tactics that we've had for 200 years about population inevitably outstripping agricultural production, agriculture is on the rise throughout the globe, except in those places where people are killing each other in civil wars," Bruegmann says. "In the U.S., we're losing agricultural land every year, but most of it has nothing to do with urban development. Most of it's just because you don't need the land. The amount of land we have for agriculture is so great that about 50 percent of the annual income of farmers in the U.S. is government subsidy, because we just don't need all of that food."

Sprawl is bad for the environment: "What the farmer will do is take the land and strip off the native, natural vegetation, expose the land to all the elements, plant it with a monoculture and then douse it with chemicals," he says. "It's hard for me to see how that's a particularly environmentally sensitive use of the land. By comparison, low-density suburban or exurban development will have much greater biomass, much greater species diversity, and much less impact on the land."

Sprawl is ugly: "Most people are so sure that strip malls and big-box retail are bad, but what we find ugly today, we may not in the future," Bruegmann says. "Exactly the same criticism was made about fast food joints and service stations 50 years ago. Now, if you have a service station

that's over 50 years old, or you have an intact McDonald's, it's so interesting, it's novel, it's quaint. You might not call it beautiful, but you're likely not to call it ugly anymore."

Sprawl is racist: In many Southern cities, it's true, whites fled city centers in the 1960s, but the pattern of out-migration in cities with minimal African-American populations, such as Minneapolis, was exactly the same, Bruegmann says. What's more, he adds, "Blacks move out of the city the same way whites do, when they have the chance, because nobody wants to be in neighborhoods with crime and bad schools. Those are problems that need to be fixed, but I simply don't believe that forcing people back into the city is the answer."

Overall, Bruegmann contends, sprawl is a natural, historic, worldwide process of decentralization that's been going on at least since ancient Rome and China, when the wealthy got away from the bustle and noise of city centers by building homes in outlying areas. More recently in the United States, he says, sprawl is essentially democratic. "Sprawl is largely the result of people of the middle class and even the working class getting what once only the wealthy had: single-family houses and private transportation."

A 'skewed' history

If your head is spinning from reading the above, you aren't alone. *Sprawl: A Compact History* is the subject of a furious assault by liberal/progressive "smart growth" advocates, New Urbanists and anti-sprawl bloggers, some of whom admit they haven't read the book. Even some critics who concede the book is refreshingly thought-provoking call it distressingly one-sided.

"It's an interesting history but a skewed one," says Ruth Knack, executive editor of *Planning* magazine, the monthly publication of the American Planning Association. "For one thing, Bob essentially equates early suburban development with the sprawl we have today, but in fact, what we have today is far different from what we had in the past in this country and in Europe. The big difference is that the early suburban development was along streetcar and then rail lines. It was a walking kind of development that didn't impinge on the countryside the way development does today."

As for Bruegmann's contention that the loss of farmland in Illinois and other parts of the U.S. isn't a serious problem, Knack says: "The reason those farms were here to begin with is that this is the *best* land, and we're losing it. And what about the so-called slow-food movement, and the popularity of farmer's markets -- where is that produce going to come from?"

Knack is equally skeptical of another of Bruegmann's central ideas: that sprawl is an expression of personal decisions by millions of individuals who are merely exercising their freedom to choose where to live.

"That sounds good, but when people actually get out to the suburbs, especially if they don't have a lot of money, they find that they have few choices -- about how to get around, for example," she says. "Often the only way to get anywhere is to drive. And there's the fact that there really isn't enough affordable housing in the suburbs, which leads to pockets of income and racial segregation. As suburban governments go for more expensive housing, that leaves the poor out in the cold."

Then there are the aesthetic and cultural concerns that some can't shrug off as easily as Bruegmann does.

"There's a certain contrarian glee that Bob takes in going sacred cows, and I think there's value in challenging us to look at these issues fresh," says Ned Cramer, curator of the Chicago Architecture Foundation. "But I don't think I can set aside my prejudices about the vacuousness of life in suburban sprawl. Gertrude Stein said, 'There's no *there* there,' and I still on an emotional, psychological and intellectual level fail to find any 'there' in the vast majority of sprawl-style

developments that I visit and have lived in. And it's interesting that Bob lives and works in a traditional city. I don't see him moving to Aurora."

An 'iconoclastic little book'

Still, the early critical response to Bruegmann's book has been mostly positive, with reviewers such as Witold Rybczynski, the architecture critic of the online magazine *Slate*, lauding *Sprawl* as an "iconoclastic little book" that "demonstrates that sprawl is not the anomalous result of American zoning laws, or mortgage interest tax deduction, or cheap gas, or subsidized highway construction, or cultural antipathy toward cities."

Chicago architect Stanley Tigerman is equally enthusiastic.

"The intellectual perception of sprawl is a snobbish one that says it's all crap, and Bob points out that it just ain't that way," Tigerman says.

"It's not a black-and-white topic -- in fact it's terribly complex -- and he goes through it all in a compelling argument that's going to have a huge popular appeal. I'm not saying that Bob is a messiah and has all the answers, but it's a really refreshing second look at what's happening."

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