

Book Reviews

Peter O. Muller, Book Review Editor

Sprawl: A Compact History. Robert Bruegmann. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 301 pp., maps, photos, bibliographic essay, and index. \$27.50 cloth (ISBN 0-226-07690-3).

Reviewed by Richard Harris, School of Geography and Earth Sciences, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

This is a book that a geographer should have written. Scholarly, yet accessible to a wide audience, it treats an important subject that is both controversial and inherently spatial. Conventionally enough, its author, Robert Bruegmann, defines sprawl in terms of low residential density and geographic scatter. Much less conventionally he concludes that it is “the grandest and most marvelous work of mankind” (p. 225). *Sprawl*, the book, does not quite sustain that extravagant claim, but it does provide a systematic, persuasive, and—given the brevity of the text—surprisingly exhaustive defense of its subject.

A historian, Bruegmann encourages readers to step back in order to gain a perspective on modern American conditions—back in several dimensions. Rhetorically, he gives us the view from above. He draws us in to his narrative by describing the changing scene from a plane window as we make the long descent into New York’s La Guardia; at the end he draws us back with a dusk departure from Los Angeles where, after more than fifteen minutes at 400 miles an hour, the lights end abruptly at the line of the desert beyond Palm Springs.

Substantively, Bruegmann takes us back in time. In the first section of his book he argues that, far from being an originally or uniquely American phenomenon, sprawl is almost as old as the city itself. This claim undercuts the popular assumption that scattered fringe development is a response to conditions peculiar to (or taking an extreme form in) the United States, whether white flight, anti-urbanism, unrestrained capitalism, automobile ownership, or state support for highways and home ownership. Instead he claims that, everywhere, sprawl has been a product of affluence and democracy. In the second section he shows that the recent international campaign against sprawl, which gathered momentum during the 1990s, had precursors in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s, and in Britain during the interwar years. He discusses the criticisms that have most commonly been leveled at sprawl: that it costs too much, that it exacerbates social disparities and problems, threatens local and global environments, and is often plain ugly. Conceding some aspects of some of these

points, he probes the motives of anti-sprawl critics, suggesting that (unconsciously, or cynically) they have disguised their desire to preserve and enhance social privilege behind the language of infrastructure costs and environmental stewardship. Here he makes good use of Michael Poulton’s concept of the “incumbent’s club”: the group of people who benefit from an amenity and who join together to limit access to it.

A widening geographical perspective emerges most clearly in the third section, where Bruegmann sketches the remedies that planners have offered for sprawl. The focus remains on the United States and he discusses at length the goals and, in his view, dubious achievements of regulatory initiatives, notably in the Portland, Oregon, area. Before doing so, however, he surveys various European planning endeavors since the 1940s, including London’s greenbelt, France’s *Grand Ensembles* (and other European equivalents), Stockholm’s planned suburbs, and Moscow’s modernist, apartment-flanked boulevards. His conclusion is that only the most authoritarian of regimes has been able to stem sprawl, and even then only temporarily. This comparative frame of reference is rare in the U.S. literature and adds greatly to the weight of the argument.

Also adding weight is Bruegmann’s command of an extensive literature. Not only does he cite an impressive array of published materials but his endnotes show that he has made judicious selections from more extensive bodies of literature. I am not familiar with all of these, but among the modern historical material I could detect only a couple of notable omissions: his discussion of the history of exurbia neglects the interwar trend toward part-time farming and also appears to omit reference to John Stilgoe’s *Borderland* (1988). (Since there is no comprehensive, alphabetic list of references I may have overlooked the latter.) But these are quibbles. The book has been fifteen years in the making; ironically compact, it is a distillation or reduction sauce.

Underlying Bruegmann’s argument is the belief that debates about sprawl have never hinged on the use of objective, quantitative data. Social and aesthetic crite-

ria, he suggests, have framed prejudices and guided inquiry. Appropriately, then, he relies on his own fieldwork or, as he puts it, “going out and looking around.” In this he has been influenced by cultural geographers such as Peirce Lewis, whose description of the modern “galactic metropolis” Bruegmann cites (p. 94) with particular approval. Evidently he usually packs a camera, and the text is carefully illustrated with his own, well-captioned illustrations of sprawl from Virginia to Paris, and even Bangkok. But although Bruegmann is an art historian, he offers far more than an impressionistic or esthetic assessment. He has pored over census data and constructed density gradients to good effect. Some of his more telling findings concern the recent decline of central densities in such urban places as central Paris, coupled with the rise in suburban densities in such sprawling metropolises as Los Angeles and Phoenix. His point here is that national differences are fading, but that sprawl may have a limit.

Sprawl is contrarian and almost everyone will find something to disagree with. I myself am skeptical of Bruegmann’s assumption that sprawl, and the movement against it, experienced much of a dip in the early 1970s. Reaching farther back in time, however, I think he overstates the historical continuities between past and present: as he himself concedes (pp. 18, 43), the mass sprawl of the postwar era has involved an unprecedented proportion of the population and operated at an unprecedented scale. Then, too, his explanation of sprawl appears to assume that most (though not all) people everywhere would live at low residential densities if they only could. He may be right, and he does provide anecdotal evidence to support the claim, but in an era when we have become hypersensitive to cultural differences this sort of argument needs to be made more fully.

Sprawl is not the first defense of dispersed urban settlement. Indeed, as Bruegmann indicates, there has been an anti-sprawl backlash in the past several years. Joel Garreau’s *Edge City* (1991) was a partial harbinger and (I suspect) inspiration for this trend. But *Sprawl* is the most comprehensive and, in the end, most reason-

able statement of this point of view. To be sure, Bruegmann is frank about his bias. Noting that most of what has been written about suburban development and sprawl has been critical, he frankly claims not to be evenhanded: “I am stressing instead the other side of the coin” (p. 11). In general that is true. He mounts a systematic campaign, probing every argument against sprawl for signs of weakness. He uses the text to sketch his general case, reserving trench warfare for the endnotes, which can sometimes be read as a parallel text. But if Bruegmann is impassioned he is also careful and fair-minded. On many occasions he concedes that specific criticisms of sprawl do have a point, and this is especially true on the environmental front.

Most notably, Bruegmann manages to navigate some difficult ideological shoals. Those who have tried to defend weakly-regulated fringe development have been drawn disproportionately from the conservative end of the political spectrum. Their argument has been that governments have done more harm than good and that markets should be left to take care of the issue. Following the example of only a few other writers, notably the Australian urbanist Pat Troy, Bruegmann develops a critique that does not fit easily into this, or indeed any, ideological framework. *Sprawl*, then, may serve a polemical purpose but it accomplishes far more. Subtle and well-informed, it mounts a sustained critique of a set of assumptions and arguments that dominate public and academic debate. For anyone with an interest in, or a practical engagement with, urban development issues *Sprawl* is indispensable reading.

Key Words: metropolitan growth, sprawl, United States, urban history.

References

- Garreau, Joel. 1991. *Edge city. Life on the new frontier*. New York: Doubleday.
 Stilgoe, John. 1988. *Borderland. Origins of the American suburb 1820–1939*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Inventing Black-on-Black Violence: Discourse, Space and Representation. David Wilson. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005. 193 pp., diagrams, refs, index. \$24.95 cloth (ISBN 0-8156-3080-8).

Reviewed by Bobby M. Wilson, Department of Geography, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL.

Author David Wilson argues that no one can dismiss race in America. The accomplishments of the 1960s cannot be reversed, and to argue for racist ideology of the pre-civil rights era is to move to the proto-fascist fringes. But race can be (re)constructed to fit political

and economic objectives. To make race more consumable, the form and function of race have always changed with changes in the political economy. Wilson explains how the construction of black-on-black violence has been made to fit political and economic objectives.