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***Sprawl: A Compact History*. By Robert Bruegmann. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Pp. 301. \$27.50.**

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Today, most Americans who live in metropolitan areas live in single-family detached homes and commute to work by automobile. New York City is America's sole urban center where a significant fraction of the population lives in apartment buildings, works downtown, and commutes by public transit. We are choosing to live and work in the suburbs. But, this trend has triggered a "cost of sprawl" literature that posits that there are many unintended consequences of the pursuit of the "American Dream" that range from increased traffic congestion, urban air pollution, greenhouse gas production, farmland paving, to reducing center city tax revenues, and denying the urban poor access to employment opportunities.

In this book, Robert Bruegmann revels in playing the contrarian. In his opinion, sprawl opponents have too often dominated the debate. Bruegmann attempts to level the playing field by arguing that sprawl offers many benefits. "It has also provided millions of people with the kinds of mobility, privacy and choice that were once the exclusive prerogatives of the rich and powerful." (front book flap).

The book is organized around three broad chronologies. The first five chapters describe "sprawl across the centuries." In chapters 7 through 10, Bruegmann presents an excellent investigation of the intellectual history of the antisprawl movement. "Not incidentally, it was exactly at this point, when the automobile ceased to be a luxury item for the affluent and came into the hands of a large middle class, that the anti-automobile sentiment grew really strident" (p. 130). The final three chapters of the book offer a history of anti-sprawl policies ranging from London's Greenbelt to recent Smart Growth efforts in the United States.

Bruegmann also seeks to explain why sprawl has taken place. A short chapter 6 is devoted to this task. This is the book's weakest link. Bruegmann is a historian of architecture, landscape, and the built environment. He is not an empirical microeconomist. He engages in a peculiar form of hypothesis testing. If he can name a counter-example, he dismisses a potential cause of sprawl. Most economists would seek

to set up an econometric test to run a “horse race” of alternative explanations. For example, do we see greater sprawl in cities that have had worse urban riots in the past? Do we see greater sprawl in cities that have built more highways? Bruegmann chooses not to pursue this strategy and in the end he declares “In the case of urban areas and sprawl, as in the case of virtually any vast and complicated human or natural system, there is very little simple cause and effect. Rather, there are innumerable forces, always acting on each other in complex and unpredictable ways” (p. 112).

Bruegmann presents an evenhanded overview of what are the benefits and costs of sprawl. But, the debate over sprawl's merits hinge on how *large* are the benefits and costs of this trend. To answer this question requires some investigation of the existing empirical literature. As demonstrated by the smash success of Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner's *Freakonomics* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005) statistical analysis can *increase* book sales! Permit me to offer two examples where insights from the applied economics literature would have informed this cost/benefit analysis. To measure the benefits of sprawl, we need some measure of the consumer surplus that home buyers gain from purchasing a new, spacious suburban home at a reasonably low price. To measure one piece of the environmental costs of sprawl, we need an estimate of how many extra gallons of gasoline do suburban drivers consume relative to similar center city residents.

Unfortunately, Bruegmann is unwilling to get down and dirty to help the reader digest the existing empirical evidence that has been generated by economists, urban planners, and geographers. For example, consider this vague quote concerning the environmental consequences of sprawl. “For our present purposes, the first and most important question is whether global warming is necessarily linked to sprawl. Although low-density living has undoubtedly been accompanied by more miles of driving and more energy use per capita and this in turn has led to production of more greenhouse gases, it is certainly not clear that sprawl itself is the culprit” (p. 149).

For broad readers interested in urban history, this book is fun and worth reading. I greatly appreciated the author's highly engaging and clear writing style. The book's photographs and endnotes are highly informative. For teachers, this book will be a useful supplemental reading in a variety of undergraduate courses ranging from urban history to urban economics. Many undergraduates interested in long-run trends will be captivated by this book's ideas. This book highlights the importance of adopting a historical perspective when thinking about an important current policy issue.