

# The people's choice

## **Sprawl: A Compact History**

By Robert Bruegmann

Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 301 pages

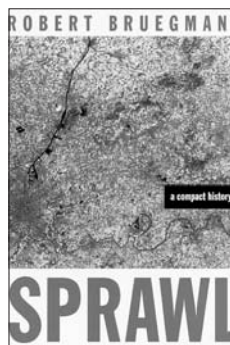
REVIEWED BY ALEX KRIEGER

**R**obert Bruegmann's *Sprawl: A Compact History* is a good and timely book, and I recommend it to anyone interested in cities or general patterns of human settlement. The book is meticulously researched, ambitious in scope, well reasoned, and enjoyable to read. It offers a carefully balanced, non-polemical overview of a subject much polemicized in recent times. I even enjoy the witty title.

Unfortunately, and for some of the same reasons, I predict that few will extol the book's virtues, because few today feel neutral about sprawl, or seek a balanced argument on behalf of sprawled America. *Sprawl's* legion of condemners will express outrage, and find Bruegmann irresponsible. They will ask: How can anyone in this day and age, especially an eminent historian of urbanization, defend the destructive impacts of sprawl? Whereas the defenders of sprawl, in the minority today but quite outspoken on the subject of protecting property rights, will regret that the book is not more of a manifesto on their side.

Bruegmann stops short of championing sprawl in all of its manifestations, though he enumerates the many social and economic benefits from low-density urbanization. Still, he acknowledges that decentralized growth also yields less positive consequences for society. His principal shots across the bow of the anti-sprawl movement are threefold: First, he rejects today's pervasive idea that sprawl has and continues to be forced upon Americans by some complicit combination of careless public policy, corporate marketing (namely the auto industry), and greedy land developers and homebuilders. He argues that the majority of Americans, and others across the world to whom similar choices are available, actually like the less dense environments they inhabit. People surely prefer the sprawl of their own making, though Bruegmann admits that those enjoying their own sprawl increasingly object to the sprawl being produced by newcomer neighbors.

Second, and as a partial rebuttal to the idea that sprawl is forced upon us, Bruegmann points to preferences for sprawl across cultures and across history. His command of urban history yields numerous examples of horizontal urban spread, from ancient Rome to the capitals of contemporary Europe. He makes a compelling case that in



many cultures it is affluence, with its resulting expansion of available dwelling choices, that leads to peripheral urban expansion. It is hard to deny that members of the traditional three "Ps"—the powerful, the privileged, and the pious (as in popes and cardinals)—consistently succumbed to the temptation of building villas

and estates out in the countryside. So why, he asks, is it so odd to assume that similar choices would not be taken advantage of in the modern era, once resources and technologies made it possible, first by members of the merchant and business classes and finally by you and me? Some anthropologists even theorize that humanity is biologically wired to thrive in, or be attracted to, smaller social groupings and natural settings, rather than enormous congregations of population. So Bruegmann intimates, as others have done, that the highly compact, dense, 19th-century industrial city—the city that aroused Charles Dickens's ire, not admiration—may have been an aberrant form of human settlement, rather than a model for contemporary urbanization, as some sentimentally assert.

Third, Bruegmann sets out to challenge some of today's near-hysterical claims about the destructive impacts of sprawl. He would like to detoxify the term, and in part does so by accounting for its various definitions, meanings that shift across time and across perspectives on suburbanization. He reminds us that for much of American history, from Jefferson's time on, decentralization was considered progressive, a social good, and a measure of citizens' economic advancement, the opposite of a major social problem. And he points out that such mental associations still exist, and continue to support the sprawling instinct.

**T**he book is organized into three parts. The first six chapters Bruegmann uses to establish his position, outlining the difficulties of defining sprawl exactly, reviewing its many causes, challenging some of the accusations made by opponents, and offering examples of its persistence across urban history. Thus, he methodically

defends sprawl against the common supposition that it is unique to our time. The next four chapters are dedicated to a series of anti-sprawl campaigns over time. These include the arguments against urban spread made in Britain during the 1920s, when London was one of the world's largest and most spread-out cities; reactions in America, largely from academics, planners, and other "elites," against the rapid suburbanization in the post-World War II period; and finally the current campaign, accelerating in intensity since the late 1970s and maturing today under labels such as New Urbanism and "smart growth," the campaign that surely motivated him to write this book. But all these he sees as merely recurring arguments: "[V]irtually every argument leveled against sprawl today can be found in [the] description of London and other European industrial cities in the nineteenth century." Later, he refers further back in history still—for example, to Queen Elizabeth's effort in the 16th century to prohibit building at the edges of London, a prohibition that, of course, had little long-term effect.

The final three chapters are devoted to what he terms remedies for sprawl, and he points out their very limited success. On these pages he rightly notes the inevitability of winners and losers from any substantial efforts to control land use and urbanization. He acknowledges that centralized government authority can control urban expansion, citing the success of Soviet Moscow's efforts to control peripheral growth, but questions whether such success outweighs the disadvantages caused by limiting citizens' choices. He offers a lengthy and thoughtful assessment of America's most famous metropolitan effort at controlling sprawl, the case of Portland, Ore. While acknowledging the courage of the effort, he generally sides with skeptics who wonder whether it has been the growth boundary measures or the generally slow regional population growth of Portland, compared with Houston or Phoenix over the same time period, that has helped retain many of the urbane characteristics that advocates of Portland's livability cite. He notes that the overall density of the Portland metro area is significantly lower than that of Los Angeles, the longstanding poster child for uncontrolled sprawl. And he worries, as others recently have, about various inequities that may have been inadvertent consequences of land-use policies, such as the rapid increase in land values—or the decline in transit usage following the switch from bus lines to light rail systems, a move that actually reduced the percentage of the population with convenient access to transit. Though it took place after his book was finished, I am sure Bruegmann was not surprised by the victory of last year's referendum in Oregon that seeks monetary compensation for landowners outside the growth boundary, who claim a loss of value to their land. This is generally seen as a serious backlash to Portland's genera-

tions-long experiment in regional land-use controls.

While I generally admire Bruegmann's nuanced review of the causes and the appeal of sprawl, and while I concur with his supposition that there is a certain inevitability to the horizontal spread of urban populations, I do fault him for remaining all too silent on sprawl's consumptive nature. Low-density settlement may be appealing to those who enjoy the lifestyle or profit from it, whether real estate moguls or individual homeowners, but it is hardly an efficient use of land or the world's resources. And the cumulative burden upon the environment of pervasive urban sprawl cannot be wished away by its popular appeal. There is a not insignificant problem of multiplication that Bruegmann chooses to ignore. If 300 million Americans choose to sprawl, much less a billion affluence-and-freedom-gaining Chinese, that is quite a different matter than several thousand Englishmen planting themselves on the outskirts of 16th-century London.

Worldwide environmental degradation has many causes, but sprawl is certainly a contributor. Few can argue that low-density development does not increase auto emissions, water use, pollution, trash, loss of species habitat, and energy consumption. To cite but one example, most pollution of groundwater, lakes, streams, and rivers in the United States is caused by runoff, which collects various toxins on impervious surfaces, like roads and parking lots, in urbanized regions. The heating and cooling of free-standing homes, with their high number of exterior walls per capita, require more energy than denser, attached dwellings. And then there are those immaculate lawns, which require ample water and chemicals to maintain. Of course, such conditions are caused by increasing affluence, not just settlement patterns, though affluence and sprawl are related, as Bruegmann consistently points out. But in emphasizing that relationship, Bruegmann remains a little too sanguine about the environmental consequences. A billion sprawlers is cause for worry.

Even as detached homes with wide lawns retain their appeal in an increasingly affluent society, there is little doubt that calls for better environmental stewardship—including legislated restrictions on development—will increase in the coming decades, influencing urbanization patterns considerably, at least in the developed world. Bruegmann's courageous narrative would have even more force had he concluded, even as he articulated the historic benefits of sprawl, that the coming era—what some hope will be the "Green Millennium"—needs to unfold freer of sprawl than the prior one. ■

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