

Salmagundi (Fall 2006, No. 152), the quarterly journal of humanities and social sciences of Skidmore College

Sprawl: a compact history

By Robert Bruegmann
University of Chicago Press , 2005
301 Pages

Reviewed by James Howard Kunstler

There is a species of fatuous thinking these days in America which states, in so many words, that suburbia is fine and dandy because so many people like it. Variations on this theme range from the idea that suburbia is the highest expression of free markets, to the notion that it is the natural outcome of our democracy, to the belief that God has ordained it. This has been the reasoning of some public intellectuals such as *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, Joel Kotkin, of the New America Foundation, and the preposterous Peter Huber of Forbes Magazine and the Manhattan Institute. Now Robert Bruegmann, professor of art history, architecture, and urban planning at the University of Illinois, Chicago, weighs in from academia with essentially the same argument floated on barges of statistical analysis.

That so many editors, foundation board members, and deans of faculty allow this obvious casuistry to pass as thinking at all says a lot about what a nation of morons we have become, and how deep the intellectual rot runs. The various above-named characters may differ somewhat in style, but they all employ the same specious logic in support of the status quo. Brooks functions as a cheerleader for successful yuppies like himself wishing to justify the blandishments they enjoy in going along with the suburban program. Kotkin is a highly-paid consultant to municipal governments who use him to rationalize the pernicious effects of their engrained practices. Huber gives aid and comfort to those who regard the public interest in any form as an affront to private gain. And now along comes Bob Bruegmann seeking to lend the imprimatur of empiricism to these arguments, so as to valiantly prove wrong for once and for all the peevish critics of suburbia (including yours truly) by driving the wooden stake of science through our superstitious and sentimental hearts.

Despite his boatloads of statistics, Bruegmann is just flat-out wrong in many of his positions and virtually all of his conclusions. At the center of his thesis is the unquestioned assumption that the suburban project can continue indefinitely, that it is a good thing, that we will get more of it, and we ought to stop carping and enjoy it. His book fails entirely to acknowledge the fact that we are entering a permanent global energy crisis that will put an end to the drive-in utopia whether people like it or not. This singular harsh fact obviates all the rationalizations brought to the quixotic defense of suburbia. What Bruegmann and his homies overlook is that American-style suburbia, aka sprawl, was an emergent, self-organizing system made possible only by lavish and exorbitant supplies of cheap fossil fuels, and once those conditions no longer obtain, not only will there be no further elaboration of this development pattern, but all the existing stuff built according to that pattern – which comprises more than eighty percent of

everything ever built in America – will drastically lose its usefulness and its relative “market” value. What’s more, the discontinuities-to-come in the global energy picture will pose challenges so severe to industrial society that we will be lucky to salvage anything resembling civilized life altogether.

It is necessary to insert right here that, contrary to a lot of wishful thinking and technostic wool-gathering rampant these days, no combination of alternative fuels or systems for using them will allow us to run America the way we currently run it, or even a substantial fraction of it. We are not going to run Wal-Mart, Walt Disney World, and the interstate highway system on hydrogen, coal synfuels, tar sand or oil shale distillates, bio-diesel, ethanol, recycled french-fry oil, solar electricity, wind power, or nuclear fission. The stark truth of the situation is that we are simply going to have to make other arrangements – and I’m sorry to have to repeat that this will be the case *whether we like it or not*. Suburbia will be coming off the menu. We will no longer be able to resort to the stupid argument that it is okay because we chose it.

Another very troubling aspect of Bruegmann’s book is that his statistical salvos fail to address altogether the many questions of quality and character in our everyday environments. The sad truth is that most of America has come to be composed of places that are not worth caring about, and they may eventually (if not already) add up to a nation not worth defending, or a culture not worth carrying on. You can cite the population figures and density trend lines all day long and never come to the conclusion that Hackensack, New Jersey, has become a soul-sapping sinkhole of auto-centric crap with strikingly poor prospects for maintaining its value or utility in the not-too-distant future.

When it is convenient, Bruegmann claims that the statistical analysis of his opponents fails to tell the story correctly.

He writes:

"We can use the Chicago area as a typical example. For years, sprawl opponents trumpeted the “fact” that between 1970 and 1990 the metropolitan area grew in population by only 4 percent, but grew in land by 46 percent. This kind of statistic, juxtaposed with a photograph of a new subdivision under construction in a cornfield conjures up images of a juggernaut moving inexorably across the countryside, flattening farms and forest, replacing country roads with highways lined with wall-to-wall strip centers and an endless sprawl of large lot subdivisions. . . . Even if the figures were accurate, they would not necessarily represent a crisis. There is no shortage of land in Illinois."

All this promiscuous marshalling of statistics really demonstrates is that the story is hardly about statistics anymore than it is about the magical operations of markets or the wonders of democracy. The appropriate lesson of the sprawl era is that societies can make extremely unfortunate collective decisions, and the losses incurred are irreversible. This is really the central conflict between the sprawl champions and those of us who do not view sprawl as any kind of boon. Sprawl is, and always has been, to put it as plainly as possible, a living arrangement with no future – and to regard it as anything else is a disservice to our fate.

It is self-evident that human beings enjoy living in settings of domesticated nature – and no accident that the archetype for this is the *Garden of Eden* – but note that there is no mention of parking lots in the standard accounts of it. The suburbia of our time, which even Bruegmann identifies as “sprawl,” is something of a new and different order, not adequately described by sheer compilations of numbers. Because he is allergic to any consideration of the non-empirical, Bruegmann manages to misunderstand some important elements of the suburb in history. Yes, it is true that ancient Rome had extensive suburbs. It was an urban organism of roughly a million people in the time of Trajan and a substantial elite occupied villas in its hinterlands. They did it because they could – because this elite enjoyed fabulous imperial wealth, and because the enormous power of the empire allowed civil security to extend outside the city, indeed throughout Italy, where wealth enjoyed protection. Even the mild weather of the region favored these arrangements. But was life there comparable in quality and character to Hackensack? And what kind of empirical data might demonstrate the difference? You could say that suburban Romans owned fewer automobiles per capita as compared to the denizens of Hackensack, and that would be correct – but would it be meaningful?

When Rome fell apart, nothing like it was seen again until the beginning of the early industrial age. The gothic, medieval, and even Renaissance cities were designed more or less as extensive fortifications because political security was so dicey, and to be outside the protective walls was not advantageous. The industrial age marked a sharp change in the organization of cities and their relations to their hinterlands. The differences in the development of the industrial cities themselves has a pertinence to the consequent development of suburbs that Bruegmann seems to misconstrue. He writes:

"In nineteenth century, London exploded outward as developers threw up mile upon miles of brick terrace houses. . . . The resulting cityscape horrified highbrow British critics of the time, who considered the new districts to be vulgar, cheap, and monotonous. Nevertheless, the houses continued to be built because so many middle class inhabitants of central London saw them as a vast step upward for their families. In the second half of the twentieth century, highbrow opinion came around, and today they are widely considered to be the very model of compact urban life. Ironically, they are today often considered the antithesis of sprawl."

The redevelopment of Paris in the same period took a quite different form. The heroic renovation of the city by Louis Napoleon and George Eugene Haussmann, the prefect (i.e. mayor) of the city, was based typologically on the apartment building for the growing middle class rather than the private row house. These apartment buildings, generally seven stories and under, were zoned vertically by income, with the wealthy occupying the lower floors above the shop fronts and the less well-off above them, and finally servants and poor folk tucked under the mansard roofs. The result was a substantially different quality of city life, more compact and lively than London, with people of all social ranks thrown into proximity, and a rich mix of culture and commerce at street level. Returning to compare them today, in the 21st century, one could easily conclude that the seemingly endless, sprawling, row house neighborhoods of London are indeed monotonous to an extreme, tending to be income-segregated ghettos, with retail services and cultural amenity deployed often at an inconvenient remove.

In American cities, you got a mix of both patterns. New York went crazy for Paris-style apartment living and eventually elaborated it into the skyscraper, while other places like Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore stuck almost exclusively to the row house. In Chicago and San Francisco, you got some of both. In any case, the industrial growth of American cities was furious and resulted in an urban ecology with the ambience of a gigantic machine. Little of the pre-industrial scale survived, and once you got west of Chicago, it barely existed in the first place. The ensuing discomfort and revulsion inspired an intense nostalgia for the non-city, for country living, for the *garden*. Rural land outside these American cities was plentiful, cheap, and unencumbered by entailments beyond fee-simple ownership. So as the Civil War concluded, the new railroads facilitated a ready escape from the awful industrial city into the hinterlands and the American suburbs were born.

The suburban evolutionary sequence moved quickly from the railroad through the brief but exuberant streetcar phase to the drive-in utopia based on universal democratic car ownership, and the development pattern changed with it. Eventually, it resolved into the dendritic roadway system we see today, of cul-de-sac income-segregated housing tracts, commercial collector boulevards with the familiar chain retail, and the activity *pods* of the mall and the office park, tied together by limited access freeways – all of it predicated on the rationalized insanity of single-use zoning.

The automobile and all of its requisite infrastructure, of course, would not have developed the way it did without ready supplies of cheap oil, and America coincidentally had vast supplies easily obtainable inside our own borders. Europe had to rely on much more distant supplies of oil. Meanwhile, their societies were savagely disrupted by two world wars, with after-effects lasting for decades. On top of that, they had age-old land-tenure laws that did not favor real estate subdivisions. So, it was not so easy for them to suburbanize. They got into the game late, never enjoyed cheap gasoline, and did not sprawl even close to the extent that we did, or the *way* we did – a point that Bruegmann obscures with a blizzard of statistics about relative city densities in late 20th century Europe that would have the reader think that the Ile de France today is not substantially different from Nassau County, Long Island.

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Something strange happened to American suburbia as it went through its phases of development. It started out as country living, the sovereign antidote to the industrial city. Then it became a rigorously domesticated variant of country living. Then, after World War Two it mutated into something insidiously different: a cartoon of country living in a cartoon of the country (in a cartoon of a country house). This sad fact explains why the chronic disappointment of suburbia inspires ridicule even among those who live in it. It hasn't delivered very well on its promises for a long time now. In its florid, climactic incarnation today – the McMansion precincts of Dallas, Atlanta, or Northern Virginia – it presents the worst elements of urban and rural life in the same package, with few of the benefits of either. The megaburbs have all the congestion of a city and none of the human contact. They have all of the isolation of the country, but no real connection to nature.

The issue at the heart of Bruegmann's book is whether this is, after all, a good thing. He writes:

“ . . . sprawl has been beneficial for many people. . . . Even where sprawl has created negative consequences, moreover, there seems to be very little evidence that for most people sprawl itself has precipitated any kind of crisis. The vast majority of Americans have responded to a whole battery of polls year after year saying that they are quite happy with where they live. . . . I would argue that worries about sprawl have become so important not because conditions are really bad, as critics suggest, but precisely because conditions are so good.”

What Bruegmann leaves out of the picture is the same thing that the mandarins of American municipal planning have left out for half a century: any consideration of quality and character of place, and the means for achieving it. This is evinced most dramatically in the issue of the public realm, the part of our everyday world that belongs to everybody and that everyone ought to have access to most of the time. In postwar America, the public realm was trashed, relegated purely to the needs of the automobile until America became a nearly uniform automobile slum from sea to shining sea. It didn't even matter whether you were in a rich place or a poor place anymore – the parking lots of Beverly Hills weren't any more rewarding to the human spirit than the parking lots of Hackensack. More to the point perhaps, the very methods of the municipal planners, which produced the ghastly sprawl environments of our time, are based on exactly the same kind of statistical methods employed by Bruegmann, instead of the one thing that might have mitigated or constrained the mess, namely artistry in design.

The public realm has two crucial roles in our collective existence. First, it is the physical manifestation of the common good. Second, is literally the dwelling place of civic life. And so if you fail to design the public realm with deliberate artistry, and by so doing degrade and dishonor the public realm by turning it into a uniform automobile slum simply to accommodate x-number of cars, you will automatically degrade the quality of civic life and the public's collective ability to conceive of a common good beyond incessant motoring. These are issues which do not yield to strict empiricism and cannot be comprehended by it. The result in American suburbia today is a set of places where private luxury is exalted and public space is grievously dishonored, damaged, and diminished, places where there are more bathrooms per inhabitant than any other society on earth, but where public space is so debased that the only place children can find to play beyond their back yards is the berm between the WalMart and the Winn Dixie.

We flatter ourselves to think that the shopping malls are an adequate substitute for real main streets. We saw an interesting case locally here a couple of years ago, in Albany, New York's Crossgates Mall, where a man bought a T-shirt in one of the mall's shops with an anti-war slogan printed on it, and was then arrested for wearing it in the mall corridor when security guards hassled him and called the police.

Because Bruegmann's analysis omits entirely the issues of physical form and its quality, it cannot comprehend the additional problem with suburbia today: that it is a development pattern with no future because of the looming global energy crisis. All matters pertaining to physical form Bruegmann wrongly identifies (and denigrates) as “aesthetic” issues. This allows him to argue that physical form (including development

patterns) are simply differences in taste, which takes us back to the fallacy that an appraisal of suburbia is simply a sum of opinions, or a set of poll numbers, or the mere fact that at a given time in history, any number of people chose tragically to invest their life savings in a particular kind of house because they mistakenly believed that current conditions would continue forever.

We're about to find out the hard way that life is tragic and history is merciless and that reality doesn't care what we like or don't like. The suburban system we have come to think of as "sprawl" is going to fail spectacularly. We will be desperate to make other arrangements, and all the statistical bullshit in the world will not avail us to bargain our way around it.

The global oil crisis we face, in combination with climate change, is about to bring on perhaps the greatest discontinuity that the human race has ever faced. If there are any historians left to unearth this book centuries from now, they will marvel that anyone ever thought that simply liking something was enough to guarantee its existence.

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