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Contrarian
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ARCHITECTURE

Sprawling into controversy

Professor and author Robert Bruegmann is defying conventional wisdom with his claim that suburban creep is both an ancient phenomenon and a beneficial one.

By Scott Timberg
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Professor and author Robert Bruegmann is defying conventional wisdom with his claim that suburban creep is both an ancient phenomenon and a beneficial one. At first glance, Robert Bruegmann — a childless academic whose modernist apartment building sits in a dense, upscale Chicago neighborhood — seems like the kind of guy who'd hate the suburbs. His peers and predecessors have, for decades, decried the unplanned, low-density, auto-dependent growth of shopping malls and subdivisions.

But he's emerging as the unlikely champion of what we've called, at least since the 1950s, "sprawl." His counterintuitive new book, "Sprawl: A Compact History," charts the spreading of cities as far back as 1st century Rome — and finds the process not just deeply natural but often beneficial for people, societies and even cities.

The Boston Globe has called Bruegmann "the Jane Jacobs of suburbia," after the urban historian who celebrated the serendipitous, high-density warren of Greenwich Village and other old neighborhoods.

"Sprawl has been as evident in Europe as in America," he writes, "and can now be said to be the preferred settlement pattern everywhere in the world where there is a certain measure of affluence and where citizens have some choice in how they live."

Debates over sprawl and urbanism tend to be very emotional and morally tinged to the point of moralism. Another new book, Joel S. Hirschhorn's "Sprawl Kills: How Blandburbs Steal Your Time, Health and Money," blames sprawl not only for social isolation but also for traffic accidents and untimely death caused by sedentary lifestyles. On the other side of the aisle, libertarians often excoriate sprawl's opponents as uptight liberal "elitists."

Though Bruegmann — a professor of art history, architecture and urban planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago — is making a bold, even contrarian argument, he discusses it with an art historian's detachment.

Bruegmann has always been interested in the built environment and urban change. "When I went to study this," he says by phone from Chicago, "I went to a department of art history, because that's where people talked about architecture. It probably wasn't the most logical place for me to go, because when I got there I had to learn about Nativity scenes and the Madonnas of 15th century Florence.

"However, it gave me something that I think is invaluable: a broad panorama of what people have thought about aesthetics over the last couple of thousand years. And because a lot of social scientists don't have that, they're often very puzzled by arguments that truly are aesthetic and metaphysical in nature but are disguised as being pragmatic and about objective things."

He's a historian of the beautiful, documenting something often taken as the height of ugliness. And the issue, he says, really is aesthetic at base. "And aesthetic judgments are not very susceptible to explanation or argument. That's why it's so hard to talk about."

Part of what's startling about the book is its defiance of the idea that sprawl was birthed in the postwar U.S.: Sprawl is not just bad but "American bad," architecture critic Witold Rybczynski writes in a recent Slate review, blaming it, with tongue in cheek, for everything from McMansions to the disappearance of countryside to an oil-driven Gulf War. "Like expanding waistlines, it's touted around the world as an example of our profligacy and wastefulness as a nation."

But Bruegmann's book is grounded in a history lesson — one that finds the roots of present-day Houston, Atlanta and Los Angeles in Augustan Rome or Restoration London. People of means, he writes, have always tried to get some distance from urban centers, often inhabiting villas outside city walls.

"I'm sure you would have found it in the very first city ever established," he says. "Living in cities has almost always been unpleasant and unhealthy — not something most people wanted. If you were in imperial Rome, crowded into dark, dingy, polluted apartment buildings, it would have been a nightmare. Most cities I looked at had just crushing density until about the 18th century."

In the Middle Ages, most cities in continental Europe had walls to protect them from wars and invasions, keeping them concentrated and providing relatively sharp distinctions between the city proper and the *suburbium*, as Romans called it, outside.

But a quirk of geography, and the nation's early-modern political unity, led London to become the first metropolis to sprawl massively. The fact that Britain was surrounded by water protected its capital from foreign invaders, so the city stretched beyond its medieval walls as nobles and burghers built country palaces in once-distant western reaches now woven into the city's fabric. As London became Europe's most populous and dynamic city, it grew horizontally.

Like London, whose unchecked growth was denounced by the intellectuals of its day, Los Angeles was deemed a sprawling, tacky, man-made disaster. Norman Mailer, for instance, described the "pastel monotonies of ... Los Angeles' ubiquitous acres ... built by television sets giving orders to men."

But L.A. was on its way to becoming highly dense, and greater L.A. is now, at more than 7,000 people per square mile, the densest urban area in the United States. (Unlike most East Coast cities, even L.A.'s outlying areas are very tightly packed.)

"Los Angeles is the most staggering thing," Bruegmann says of the city's vertical growth since the early '70s. Since then, he says, cities like San Francisco, L.A. and San Diego have become what he calls "hyper-versions of the rest of the country."

And while the traffic, pollution and housing prices may dismay residents, Bruegmann insists that "the problem of Los Angeles is the problem of success: It's become so attractive that everyone wants to live there." And it's done this, he says, without paying

the environmental and aesthetic price of more wide-open cities like Atlanta and Houston.

By contrast, he argues, the "smart growth" policies of Portland, Ore., have been ambiguous. Portland is eminently livable but has not reduced sprawl and remains a low-density city. As its density starts to climb, he says, housing prices are going up.

One of his most shocking assertions is that suburban spread helps cities and their urban centers: Look at the way immigrants and the poor moved out of Lower Manhattan, for instance, only to have the area later reborn as a chic living space for artists and young people. It wouldn't have happened, he argues, if the highways and houses beyond the city center hadn't siphoned off population, allowing these neighborhoods to be reborn.

Even fans of Bruegmann's book blanched at this notion.

"It's certainly true that deindustrialization of any downtown presents some opportunities," author and journalist Alan Ehrenhalt wrote in an approving review in the trade magazine *Governing*. "But for every inner-city district that has emptied out and retooled, many more have been emptied out and are waiting desperately for the revival to begin. Abandonment is an awfully high price for the chance to start over. I wouldn't expect the leadership of Detroit or St. Louis to find Bruegmann's long view of urban history very consoling."

But Bruegmann points at downtown L.A., where he sees this process, despite some rough years, bearing fruit. He has some emotional sympathy with anti-sprawl critics, just as he does with environmentalists. But he thinks both groups are a little shortsighted when it comes to the real costs of their programs.

"By trying to stop sprawl, you'll be doing something very beneficial to the incumbents' club," he says. "It stops change and makes it harder for people to get onto the middle-class ladder. It has a definite effect on social and economic mobility."

Sprawl may not be inevitable, but it is, he says, "completely essential" to the functioning of a free society. "It goes absolutely to the heart of people's aspirations — what it is they want to be, of how they want to live," Bruegmann says. "And tampering with that is very, very fraught."

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