

## The Next American City

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REVIEW: Robert Bruegmann, *Sprawl: A Compact History*

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Whether it be Lewis Mumford's *The City in History*, Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Joel Garreau's *Edge City*, or most recently, Joel Kotkin's *The City: A Global History*, city planners have long relied on those trained in other disciplines for a fresh understanding of the structure and organization of cities. This is the task art historian Robert Bruegmann of the University of Illinois at Chicago sets for himself in his new book entitled *Sprawl: A Compact History*. Unlike too many recent books on sprawl—for example, Dolores Hayden and Jim Wark's *A Field Guide to Sprawl*, Andres Duany's *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*, and James Kunstler's diatribes, *The Geography of Nowhere* and *Home from Nowhere*—Bruegmann approaches the topic with an open mind. He admits enjoyment of traditional cities and rural landscapes, but he avoids the all-too-common trap of seeing suburbs as physically homogeneous and socially uninteresting. Blessed with a historian's keen eye, Bruegmann can't help but notice that many things today's anti-sprawl crusaders would have us undo about America's suburbs are the same things that first drew people out of the crowded and congested industrial cities of the early-20th century and attracted them to suburban living. For all the books, articles, and media documentaries decrying sprawl, Bruegmann notes that the debate has generated far more heat than light.

Befitting its title, *Sprawl: A Compact History* is a relatively compact book. It is nicely organized into three sections: the first looks at the history of sprawl; the second looks at the various arguments against sprawl; and the third looks at proposed remedies for sprawl. Bruegmann's strength is in synthesizing and explaining others' works; those hoping for original research and fresh evaluative studies will not find them here.

The first of *Sprawl: A Compact History*'s three sections begins by defining sprawl as any urban spatial structure that follows a downward sloping density gradient—that is, a structure where residential densities are highest in the core and then steadily decline with distance. Bruegmann follows this definition with a succession of brief chapters on urban decentralization in ancient Rome, early-20th century New York, London, and Paris, and then finally, the U.S in the post-World War period. These chapters illustrate Bruegmann's fundamental point that sprawl is hardly a new phenomenon: for much of history, decentralization was regarded as desirable.

Next, in *Sprawl*'s best chapter, Bruegmann carefully catalogs the alleged causes of sprawl (such as anti-urban attitudes, government housing policies, highway construction, technology, and the automobile), and shows how, alone or in combination, none suffice to explain the popularity of suburban development. He instead posits consumer choice and the demand for both space and mobility that comes with affluence as the real

“causes” of sprawl. The suburbs provide many households with a desired combination of privacy, accessibility, and proximity to nature. This powerful argument is the heart of Bruegmann’s investigation. Unfortunately, Bruegmann leaves any technical or empirical discussions, as well as detailed citations, for *Sprawl’s* endnotes, making his arguments seem more facile than they really are.

Bruegmann attempts in *Sprawl’s* middle section to explain and interpret what he calls the “campaign against sprawl.” The early chapters in this section are a bit sketchy, but the last one, “The Third Anti-sprawl Campaign: Since the 1970s,” does a credible job of focusing on increasing suburban wealth and rising expectations as the principal sources of popular concerns over sprawl. Now that suburbanites have as much house as they might want, they are shifting their aspirations to the quality and unique character of their communities. Yet in his haste to discredit these crusaders, Bruegmann dismisses the merits of their complaints. Sprawl is destroying farmland and open space. It is producing an auto-dependent society. And it does facilitate community-sorting by income. These social costs may be worth bearing to obtain the private benefits of decentralized development forms, but Bruegmann does not make that argument, instead minimizing the importance of these costs.

*Sprawl’s* concluding section focuses on the various policies and programs that have been proposed to remedy sprawl. These chapters provide a good, albeit too brief, introduction to different growth management approaches, including greenbelts, regional planning, new towns, agricultural protection schemes, and Portland’s urban growth boundary. But by now Bruegmann’s die is cast: in keeping with the previous section, Bruegmann seems far more interested in critiquing such approaches by focusing on their apparent lack of effectiveness than in presenting a balanced evaluation.

Bruegmann is an engaging writer who puts his reader right in the center of what might otherwise be a dull and complicated subject. Yet, beyond its clever organization and engaging presentation, *Sprawl: A Compact History* suffers from two critical problems. The first is that it is too compact and, as result, omits key elements in the history of suburbs and sprawl. By jumping 2000 years from the decentralization of ancient Rome to the decentralization of London, New York City, and Paris in the early-20th century, and then another 50 years to post-World War II suburbanization, Bruegmann omits such crucial suburban milestones as Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux’s 1875 design of Riverside (America’s first planned suburb), Ebenezer Howard’s Letchworth Garden City, and Clarence Stein and Henry Wright’s 1928 plan for Radburn. The designers, planners, and developers who produced these iconic communities were active and reflective participants in the discussions of the time regarding the tradeoff between privacy and sociability inherent in suburban life. William J. Levitt’s Levittown is discussed, but in a manner that makes the mass production of suburban housing seem inevitable, without adequately crediting Levitt’s unique-for-the-time marketing savvy and understanding of what Americans wanted from their communities.

Short shrift is also given to the ways in which planners historically tried to use the natural landscape to enhance the suburban experience. In their plans for Riverside, for example,

Olmstead and Vaux sought to heighten suburban residents' appreciation of nature by fully integrating it into their designs. Today's suburban subdivisions—which over-separate land uses and over-compartmentalize private buildings, public spaces, and the natural landscape—fail to achieve such harmony. For a historian to miss the formative stages of the very debate he is attempting to adjudicate is a bit surprising. Interested readers would still do well to turn to Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, twenty years after its initial publication still the best single source on the historical evolution of U.S. suburbs and the emergence of the debate over sprawl.

*Sprawl: A Compact History's* second critical problem is that in Bruegmann's quest to concisely define sprawl so that he might evaluate its pros and cons, he vastly oversimplifies it. Bruegmann's "downward sloping gradient" definition characterizes sprawl solely in terms of density. The use of a single, simple definition may make it easier for readers to follow Bruegmann's later summary of the sprawl debate, but it does little to improve the reader's understanding of the full range of environmental, transportation, social, and equity issues associated with that debate. Other writers, notably researcher Reid Ewing and planning professor George Galster, have done a much better job of describing the multi-dimensional nature of sprawl, including its excessive land use separation, auto-dependency and poor pedestrian connections, and lack of functional open space. Even economists like Jan Brueckner, who for the most part agree with Bruegmann and see suburbs as a faithful expression of consumer preferences, have voiced some concern over the lack of transportation, retail, open space, and housing choices that characterize so many suburban communities.

By choosing to define sprawl solely in terms of density, and then concluding that there is no historical and contemporary case to be made against sprawl, Bruegmann steps into the same over-simplification trap that he accuses the anti-sprawl crusaders of falling into. Given Bruegmann's commendable skepticism of the conventional wisdom, his keen eye for the built environment and natural landscape, and an engaging writing style, *Sprawl: A Compact History* could have been a rich and nuanced inquiry into a difficult and important issue. Instead and regrettably, it substitutes compactness for completeness.

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