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## Books

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Q&A with Robert Bruegmann

The professor and author of *Sprawl: A Compact History* on an unmistakably pejorative term

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*The phrase "urban sprawl" describes those vast regions of suburbs, acreages, office parks and industrial complexes pushing out from our cities into the countryside. It is an unmistakably pejorative term. The seemingly boundless reach of our cities has attracted the ire of planners, academics, authors and moviemakers -- it is one of the more frequently lamented phenomena of our times. In answer to these many critics, Robert Bruegmann has just published *Sprawl: A Compact History*. He is a professor of art history, architecture, and urban planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago.*

### **What are the conventional criticisms of urban sprawl?**

Well, there are four. It's economically inefficient, it's environmentally damaging, it's socially inequitable, and aesthetically it's ugly. But it's also been held responsible for everything from global warming to obesity.

### **Let's start with the first criticism, that sprawl is economically inefficient. How do you address that?**

There's been a series of studies since the 1970s arguing that because you have to build more roads and more sewers, this imposes a huge burden on municipalities. The problem with that argument is, first of all, even though the numbers look scary, they're not that great compared with the overall cost of government. Furthermore, these costs are increasingly borne by the developers and the purchasers of new houses, so you have to ask, if that's what people want and they're willing to pay for it, why should some anti-sprawl group or government agency say they shouldn't have it?

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**Some argue that the costs of suburban development are inequitably shared among ratepayers in municipalities. That suburbanites use more services -- and more expensive services -- but pay the same taxes as urbanites and that's not fair.**

That could be perfectly correct. But if it is, the logical corollary is to change the rate structure rather than change the whole city. And that's true with most of the criticisms of sprawl -- if there's a problem, it's usually much easier to solve that problem than it is to try to put the city back to its 19th-century form so that you don't have the problem to begin with.

**The charge of environmental damage would seem to be one of the more difficult to argue against, simply because suburban developments do use a lot of land and require more reliance on cars.**

Possibly, but let's look at it from a different angle. The notion that you'd have a very dense city that's environmentally friendly is very difficult to sustain. A whole bunch of apartment buildings that rely on big, centralized energy systems for all the heating and cooling and elevators, and everything else? By contrast, let's say everybody lived at two-acre densities. What could happen if they got all their energy right on site -- geothermal, wind, solar? You wouldn't need these huge systems of waste-water treatment and water delivery. You could have a more-or-less self-sufficient kind of situation. My point is there is nothing inherently environmentally friendly about the city as opposed to low-density living. It's simply a matter of what those problems are and how we solve them. So, for example, driving. There's nothing wrong with the car -- the car's the most efficient means of mass transit the world has ever devised. The thing that's wrong with it is that it uses this 19th-century technology of fossil fuels fuelling an internal combustion engine.

**The third objection was that suburbs are socially inequitable -- that suburban developments allow the affluent to flee the city, leaving everyone else to deal with its problems.**

But blaming sprawl for that doesn't explain much. You have the very same inequities when you have very large cities with few suburbs, or where you have very, very small

cities with massive suburbs. The problem here is that the solution that a lot of people would like to see -- a massive redistribution of wealth -- isn't going to happen, no matter what the physical arrangement is. That's a political and social choice that society needs to make. It's not something that will be solved by simply rearranging the population on the ground.

**I suppose one could argue that a massive redistribution of wealth might just allow more people to flee urban areas for greener pastures.**

I think that's the view that a lot of anti-sprawl people have. I don't necessarily have that point of view. The way I look at it, many of the very wealthy people in the world, whether you're talking about New York City on Park Avenue, or Paris in the 16th arrondissement, live at very high densities, and they love living that way. If you have enough money, you can take advantage of all of the benefits of high density and insulate yourself from all of the bad effects of it.

**What I was trying to get at was that the desire for a suburban experience seems to cut across class lines. It's not only the wealthy who want to live in suburbs.**

Oh, right. And that's worldwide. Whenever people are polled, they never say they want to live in high apartment buildings. People, ordinary people, want a single-family house on its own piece of land.

**Why do so many people want this when the consensus seems to be that suburban developments are ugly?**

I don't think that is the general consensus. You hear it a lot but it's an opinion propagated by an intellectual elite. I don't think most people feel that way.

**What's your view?**

Well, let's assume for a moment that many people today think that these suburban developments are ugly. I'm reasonably sure, based on history, that 50 years from now, when these same elites go out and find a wonderfully intact original big-box Wal-Mart circa 2005, they'll want to save it as a historic or architectural landmark, exactly the way we're doing with the buildings of the 1950s now. Outside London in the 19th century there were miles and miles of brick row houses that we now take to be the very epitome of central London. Those houses were almost universally decried by the intellectual elite of that day as hopelessly ugly boxes built by greedy speculators and inhabited by people living totally monotonous, uncultured, and futile lives. So in other words, the complaints are always the same, and they always change after a generation or two.

**I suppose it would be hard to sell this tremendous volume of new suburban homes every year if the public actually thought they were ugly.**

Of course.

**What is it, then, that is particularly appealing about suburban life? You demonstrate in your book that throughout history people have fled the city for suburbs or exurbs as soon as they've been able to afford it. Why is that?**

Well, sprawl allows ordinary middle- and even lower-income people to have privacy, mobility, and choice that were once available only to the wealthy. By privacy I mean control over one's environment, the ability to say who can be there and who can't, and

what it looks like, and how it operates. By mobility, I mean social as well as physical mobility. And by choice I mean you have a wide range of possibilities for the way you live and work and play. You might also be able to get these if you had vast amounts of money. You could live in a single-family house in the middle of, let's say, Manhattan, or you could live in a co-op building with a doorman and have a car at the ready to take you wherever you wanted to go, but for most people the way to get these things within their own budget is to have a little house out in the urban periphery.

**Another argument against sprawl is that it tends to diminish the core of a city. People and money spread to the peripheries of modern cities and prevent downtowns from taking on the social and cultural characteristics of great cities. The claim is that we suffer as a society from these trends.**

Yeah, sure. And you can answer it in two ways. You could say that the culture of the city, with its operas and art museums, was always an elite culture, and ask if it's fair that all the citizens of France -- including the least affluent -- have to pay taxes to support an opera they could not care less about. I think a better answer is that one thing doesn't preclude another. Over the past 50 years, you have this burgeoning concern about sprawl at the edges of cities, but we've also seen an absolutely astonishing resurgence of some of the most important cities. They are gentrifying dramatically, with new restaurants and new high-end cultural institutions. For instance, San Francisco has had tremendous amounts of sprawl but it has also been enormously vital at the centre. And that's true of Chicago or Toronto or Paris or London.

**So cities can still choose to be as grand as they want.**

Yeah, but these choices are more voluntary now. We tend to look back through rose-tinted glasses at the great cities. We think they were wonderful places. In fact, for most people living in, let's say, Chicago in the early 20th century, it would have been extremely unpleasant. Think of all the pollution and the congestion of industrial cities. But people had no choice. They had to live there, they couldn't go very far because they couldn't afford to get to work. As soon as they had the choice, they got a house and a car. The moment that that happens and you have a whole lot of people leaving the city, you have the possibility that the city could be filled up with people who really want to live there. And I think that's, in great part, what we've seen happening in these resurgent cities.

**You've got some interesting data in the book on urban density. The general perception is that cities are densely populated and suburbs aren't. You've found something else entirely.**

Yeah, cities throughout much of the Western world have been declining in density at the core. Paris is a tremendous example -- it's lost a third of its population. We don't tend to notice that because the buildings remain pretty much the same, but when people become affluent, even if they're in the central city, they want more space, and they can pay for it, and they do. Meanwhile, density has been increasing at the edges of many cities. One of the things that surprised me most is the way Los Angeles has increased in density. Los Angeles never had a really dense downtown the way New York or Toronto or Chicago did, it was always spread out. But its density is increasing at the core as well as at the edge. Throughout the United States -- and I assume this is true in Canada -- the density at

the suburban edge is actually going up because there are many, many more apartments and row houses going up at the very edge, and also smaller lots than they had in the 1950s. So in a lot of cities now, especially newer ones, the difference in density between the urban core and the edge is negligible.

**Where did you grow up?**

Suburban Pittsburgh.

**Where do you live now?**

I live very close-in in Chicago.

**So, urban?**

Yeah, I live in a 1950s high glass-walled apartment building.

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