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Robert Bruegmann 'Takes Five'

Author says suburban sprawl isn't new, and isn't all bad

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Its critics view suburban sprawl as wasteful, ugly and soul-sapping. Architectural historian Robert Bruegmann sees it as part of an ancient yearning for space and freedom. In a provocative new book, "Sprawl: A Compact History" (University of Chicago Press; \$27.50), he traces sprawl to the beginnings of urban settlement and argues that it offers the benefits of privacy, physical and social mobility and personal choice. Bruegmann, 57, grew up in a Pittsburgh suburb and teaches at the University of Illinois-Chicago, where he is chairman of the Department of Art History. He talked about his contrarian perspective with urban landscape writer Whitney Gould.

Q. You make sprawl seem perfectly natural. But haven't federal highway policies, home-mortgage subsidies and zoning regulations played an important role in scattering development?

A. Virtually every cause you can think of you can actually make into an effect. For example, you can say the rise of auto ownership caused sprawl. But we might never have had a major auto industry if people didn't want to live in lower-density environments. The mortgage-interest deduction did play a role. But it did not become a potent mechanism until the 1960s. The period of the 1880s to 1950 experienced the greatest dispersal. And, contrary to popular belief, the decentralization of cities is not actually increasing. It has been declining steadily since the 1950s.

Q. There are all sorts of studies documenting the costs of sprawl: lost farmland and open space, money and energy spent on commuting, social and racial isolation, the tax burden of new services like roads, schools and sewers. How can you ignore all that?

A. Many of those studies have been almost entirely discredited. For example, does it really make more economic sense to restore an old loft in the center of the city than to build six new units outside the city? It may cost less initially, but more over the life cycle of a building. Also, sewers and roads are really cheap compared to the personnel costs of running city governments. And who pays the costs of (new) services? Mostly it's the people buying suburban property, in the form of exactions and fees passed on by developers.

Q. You seem to leave poor people out of the equation. They can't live in the sprawl zone because there is little if any affordable housing out there, and they may not have cars or adequate public transit to commute out to jobs there, either. What about their needs?

A. Most poor people in America live in single-family homes and they have cars. Los Angeles is a good example. But as more jobs are created on the edges of cities, one answer might be to give every (poor person) a car and make it easier to get out of the city. Government attempts to create affordable housing have not been very successful.

Q. One of the less tangible effects of sprawl is the loss of a sense a place. Do we really want an entire landscape filled with anonymous big-box stores and cookie-cutter homes?

'Takes Five'



Architectural historian Robert Bruegmann is chairman of the Department of Art History at the University of Illinois-Chicago.

A. What offends you may not offend most people. People made the same criticism about brick row houses on the periphery of 19th-century London; they said the same thing about (American) ranch houses. Some day the buildings in our suburbs may be considered "historic." They might even be candidates for landmark designation!

Q.Do you live in the suburbs?

A. No. I live in a high-rise apartment on the north side of Chicago. I can't imagine living in the suburbs. But the last thing I want to do is impose my own choices on everyone else.