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REVIEWED BY ANDREW ROSS

## Sprawl: A Compact History

by **Robert Bruegmann**

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005

## A Field Guide to Sprawl

by **Dolores Hayden and Jim Wark**

New York: W. W. Norton, 2006

**Robert Bruegmann has performed a rare feat** by writing a book about sprawl in which nobody has bad intentions. The usual suspects (venal developers, pushy lenders, road and housing lobbies, big-box retailers, traffic engineers) are cleared of all charges and sent back to continue their work — plowing under farmland and spitting up cookie-cutter subdivisions. In his book, the landscape of sprawl may not be the best of all possible worlds, but it is the people's choice, and anti-sprawl advocates who believe that ordinary people don't generally make the best choices will have to suck it up. While there are no villains in his book, Bruegmann works so strenuously to correct what he sees as "the balance of opinion" on sprawl that it is the critics of unplanned, low-density, suburban development who emerge as misguided and dangerous. Whether because of their arch contempt for lower-middle-class taste or their zeal in protecting their own interests as members of an "incumbents' club," they are generally portrayed as rank alarmists, pushing a cause that is way out of sync with reality. In Bruegmann's world, the remedies they promote — smart growth, high-density settlement, green belts, highway suppression, urban growth boundaries — may do more harm

than good. Their passion for moralizing is undemocratic; sprawl is always only where other people live, and these people are undisciplined, imprudent, and gauche. And the critics play fast and loose with the facts, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the rate of sprawl, far from accelerating at a disturbing pace, has been on the decline for the last few decades.

This last claim is the evidentiary core of Bruegmann's voluminous survey, and it deserves more attention than his effort to pick fights with the anti-sprawl brigades. With the aid of density gradient charts (drawn up, as are most of the book's data graphics, by Dennis McClendon, a fearless combatant in the planning profession's sprawl wars), Bruegmann argues that the rate of urban decentralization peaked in the late 1960s and early 1970s and has been slowing ever since. In almost half of the country's large cities — many with highly permissive land-use regulations — densities have been rising for some time now. In one counterintuitive leap, the much-maligned Los Angeles basin is revealed to be the densest metro region in the U.S.: it has always had small lot sizes, and its residential ground coverage is quite comprehensive. Permissive cities like Phoenix and Houston have done a good job, in Brueg-

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mann's view, of accommodating the poor and minorities. By contrast, he takes some pleasure in portraying smart growth strongholds like Portland and Nantucket as high-priced, racially exclusive bastions of privilege, choc-a-bloc with regulations that most liberty-loving Americans would reject out of hand.

Some of the factors cited for the flattening of the gradients are center city repopulation, the proliferation of row houses and multifamily apartments in the rings of suburbia, and the development of infill pockets that the first wave of suburbanization leapt over. These are all verifiable details and indeed might well be interpreted as successes of smart growth thinking. But Bruegmann has a more abstract and ultimately far-fetched explanation for the flattening. Sprawl, which, he observes, has been around "since time immemorial," is a natural product of affluence and urban maturation. The vast majority of the human populace, he believes (though there is no way of verifying this truism), would prefer to live in single-family, detached housing on a decent-sized lot, and so they pursue that desire whenever and wherever they are able to afford to do so. Sprawl is the unsavory label unfairly bestowed on this settlement pattern when it attracts a critical mass of the population. So how does Bruegmann explain the more recent shift toward densification? He speculates that it may be evidence of a society passing from an affluent to a super-affluent stage, when citizens can afford to act on their concerns about environmental quality. In fact, the heightened concern about sprawl in recent years is evidence that we are living in boom times, with ever-rising expectations. Things are so good, Bruegmann muses, that folks have to find new problems to worry about.

News about these happy-go-lucky times must have been slow to reach me. In the years that correspond to the flattening of his density gradient, the average wage of U.S. workers has not risen at all, and the rate of class polarization has been more dramatic than in any other period of history. By any socioeconomic measure, the stagnation of the American

standard of living and the rapid erosion of its famous middle class are hardly evidence of a super-affluent society. Rather, the crystal clear profile is one of a radical redistribution of wealth upwards. What the rich beneficiaries of this redistribution do with their housing choice — consolidate their luxury quartering in cities and carve out compounds in exurban retreat — hardly registers at all on the maps central to Bruegmann's speculations. After all, the most bourgeois urban enclaves were barely affected by population flight in the postwar era, and so they hardly required the attention of gentrifiers in the period of urban revitalization that followed. As for exurban settlement, it appears to fall outside the definition of sprawl that Bruegmann finds useful. In any case, as he rightly points out, there is little hard data on the repopulation of rural areas by the nouveau riche or by BlackBerry-toting professionals. Whether he is right or wrong, the battle over exurbia awaits its day.

Bruegmann's fantasy of super-affluence is only one example of the flawed sociological imagination at work in his book. His most consistent rationalization of urban change is a cyclical one — surely the most unhistorical of all explanatory models. According to this view, cities grow, mature, decline, and then are revived. Settlement patterns are simply natural reflections of the workings of each cycle. Notwithstanding that this cyclical motion would appear to override the influence of popular choice and mobility (Bruegmann's preferred engine of change), it also renders negligible the uneven impact of decisions made by the most powerful actors and institutions in cities. For example, Bruegmann observes that urban decanting became a mass movement in the 1920s and that industry naturally accompanied, or even preceded, the population shift, so that by 1950 half of all manufacturing jobs were outside cities. Corporations, he opines, "moved with the expectation that the residential population would follow." But why did the factory owners move? An innocent reader would have no inkling that the American industrial city saw the most intense class warfare in the world during its

heyday, and that the concentrated power of urban workers to halt production was the primary reason why industrialists opted to move their plants. There was nothing natural or cyclical about the reasons for, or the consequences of, that decision. A similar point could be made about the period when Bruegmann's density gradients begin to flatten. The 1970s saw the onset of a further wave of corporate flight — from the Midwest and Northeast to the southern U.S. and, eventually, from there to the global South. You can see the impact of that ongoing flight in the fabric of most American cities and suburbs. This move offshore originated in an explicit desire to escape unionized workforces, and it has fundamentally altered the character of urban landscapes, but it doesn't show up in *Sprawl* at all.

Bruegmann is quick to charge that the moral tirades of anti-sprawl advocates are usually based on their own aesthetic value judgments. On this point he is often on solid ground, even if his observations are mostly versions of those offered by Herbert Gans in the years following the publication of *The Levittowners*. But Bruegmann does his own share of aestheticizing. He prefers, for example, to view cities from the aerial perspective of jet aircraft, the higher the better. This impulse peaks in his attraction toward geographer Stuart Pierce's stratospheric standpoint theory of the "galactic metropolis." From a sufficiently great height, the settlements below appear like "stars, planets, and other celestial bodies, each exerting a force field," and subject to the "entire gravitational system of a galaxy." Social rationality is the first casualty in the sublime experience of this Milky Way.

In stark contrast is Dolores Hayden's use of Jim Wark's aerial photography in *A Field Guide to Sprawl*. Here the view is from a low-flying Cessna, and it allows us to zoom in on habitat forms obscured by the often abstruse nomenclature of the real-estate industry. Anti-sprawl lexicographers have taken to renaming those they consider most offensive, and Hayden and Wark offer readers a visual match for choice items in this devil's dictionary: *snout house*, *starter castle*, *boom-*

*burg, lulu, tank farm, alligator, edge node.* But the landscape is not demonized. This is hardly an exercise in the vein of Peter Blake's 1964 best-seller *God's Own Junkyard*, which used visual evidence to condemn the tawdriness and environmental ruination of postwar strip development. Hayden is not aiming at aesthetic shock; indeed, the aerial shots are unavoidably fascinating. Rather, the goal is pedagogical: We have to learn how to identify and recognize what lies behind the professional's jargon in order to lay the grounds for action. Environmentalists have long used aerial photographs as a political tool of landscape analysis, and the chief utility of these visuals for the activist is that they can readily be understood by non-specialists in a way that zoning maps cannot. Seizing this potential, Hayden has designed her book as a lucid primer for the anti-sprawl apprentice.

For Bruegmann, frank agitprop like this is not only distasteful, it is also evidence of the ill-advised tactics of those he imagines are coalition leaders of an anti-sprawl movement. In this somewhat conspiratorial vein, he portrays these advocates in terms similar to the New Right's image of the "liberal elite." No one who inhabits what he calls the "clubby culture of downtown elite cultural groups" could possibly understand the needs and desires of "real" Americans. The latter dislike the "dirt and disorder" of the vibrant center city, and they are skeptical of the multicultural diversity that anti-sprawl elites tend to praise. Bruegmann adopts a similar "red state" posture toward environmentalist claims. *Sustainable* is castigated as a "warm and fuzzy" term, species loss "is still not well understood," and there are no proven links between sprawl and global warming. The Bush administration would have no problem with these assessments.

In his classic essay on the strip ("Other-Directed Houses"), J.B. Jackson reminded us that urban form is best understood from the user's standpoint. The strip, after all, is designed to be viewed from a moving vehicle. It makes no sense from a stationary standpoint and least of all from an altitude. Should the spirit of Jackson's caveat be applied to the

debate about sprawl? It might help clear the air. Although Bruegmann and Hayden are poles apart, neither believes we can learn much from the users of the sprawl habitat. Bruegmann's vigorous libertarian defense of individual choice tells us no more about the lives and attitudes of sprawl residents than does Hayden's longing to turn them into citizen-activists. One upholds their rights, the other emphasizes their responsibilities. But neither really wants to deal with the messy business of how sprawlers interact, physically and mentally, with the built environment that has generated so much controversy.

If we really want to learn from sprawl, we can no more assume that people are where they want to be than assume that we know what's best for them. We need to meet them where they are and listen hard to their desires, complaints, and fears before moving to the next level. Sprawl may be more wrong than right, but that's not really the point. If you start with the users, you'll likely end up somewhere useful. □

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