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You gotta go where you wanna go

A professor defends suburban sprawl – for all the wrong reasons

Reviewed by James Robbins

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It's always fun to poke fun at conventional wisdom, and in his latest book, Robert Bruegmann sings a planner's version of "Sympathy for the Devil" by advancing a simple theme: Sprawl is good.

Bruegmann, an architecture professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, argues that sprawl is neither a recent nor an American phenomenon, but rather the natural result of any society characterized by increasing democracy, mobility and economic self-determination. He bashes at the arguments for growth management with all the enthusiasm of a child swinging at a piñata. Eventually, the piñata gets whacked a few times, and the reader is left to enjoy the shiny insights that spill out. The lasting memory, though, is a dizzy author swinging and missing.

To be fair, let's start with some of Bruegmann's shiny insights – but to be entirely fair, let's acknowledge that they aren't entirely his. There's never been a shortage of anti-urban proponents. For at least 200 years, intellectuals ranging from Thomas Jefferson to Karl Marx to the visionary French architect Le Corbusier have written about the corrupting influences and social misery of densely populated cities. Village Associations began planning idealized suburbs outside of the London metropolis as early as 1848, and there is a long history of visionary plans focused on low-density suburban living. Among the most famous are Ebenezer Howard's "Garden Cities of Tomorrow" (1902) and Frank Lloyd Wright's "Broadacre City" (1932); Bruegmann mentions Howard only in passing and ignores Wright altogether, perhaps because they don't fit into his view that growth-management advocates represent a cultural elite eager to impose their aesthetic and cultural values on unwashed commoners.

Bruegmann does argue convincingly that "sprawl has been a persistent feature in cities since the beginning of urban history," citing the steady drop in the density of cities from 150,000 people per square mile in Mesopotamian times. By way of comparison, he charts the density of a wide range of present-day American urbanized areas, including Los Angeles, our densest urban area, with a population of over 7,000 people per square mile. (Surprise! The Los Angeles metropolitan region is significantly denser than New York and almost twice as dense as Chicago. Who woulda thunk?)

In virtually every city in the world, Bruegmann demonstrates, population growth is rising faster at the edges than at the centers. The suburbanization of Europe lagged behind America in the aftermath of World War II, but rising affluence has changed all that. The growth rate in the ownership of private cars in Europe now parallels our own, despite

punitive fuel taxes. Amazingly, by 1999, when the city of Paris had a population of 2.2 million, the Ile de France, the French province whose heart is Paris, had grown to a population of nearly 10 million. Simply put: The city of Paris now accounts for less than 25 percent of all Parisians!

Bruegmann also effectively dispels many of the conventional explanations for suburbanization: white flight, a plot by General Motors to eliminate mass transit, government subsidization of freeways, a tax code that encourages home ownership and mass marketing of the merchant builders who have commoditized housing.

He argues instead that the city's waning role in societal defense, its increasing affluence and the rise of democratic institutions led inevitably to a mass exodus from crowded, unhealthy and chaotic city centers. Most critics of suburban development ignore the attraction of clean, orderly communities where citizens can band together to privatize maintenance (through homeowners' associations), security (through private patrol companies) and recreation (through private clubs and parks restricted to homeowners). Most important, suburbs allow new residents to enroll their children in public schools that are adequately funded.

Bruegmann takes the argument to extremes, however, defending the practice of "redlining" – banks' denying real estate loans simply because of a property's inner city location – for example, and pointing to Moscow as the only successful paradigm of anti-sprawl planning. He dons a cloak of impartiality, but he recounts the debate over growth management like a ring announcer at a wrestling match: In this corner, representing democracy, choice, affluence and mobility (and sprawl) – Mr. Market; and in the other, representing cultural elitists and centralized communist planning (and growth management) – Big Brother.

Toward the end of his essay, Bruegmann finally gets around to critiquing Portland, Ore., the city with the nation's most famous growth management program. Portland's plan emphasizes transit-oriented development and imposes urban growth limits. Even Bruegmann acknowledges the high quality of urban life there, but he struggles to find fault, dwelling on the "perverse consequences of regulation." He argues that the ordinance has made housing more expensive, created "winners and losers" and actually led to the development of some new exurban communities producing even longer commutes. (Think Temecula.)

A zoning ordinance that made some people richer and some people poorer? A municipal policy that had unintended consequences? We are shocked. Shocked!

Those aren't reasons to stop planning 7/8 they're reasons to do it carefully, and to go on amending the plan, as if our future depended upon it. Bruegmann never really confronts the unmeasured cost of not protecting our inherited natural and cultural resources for future generations. When he suggests that the direction of cities is best left to unbridled market forces, his tone is shrill – which is odd, since he's on the side that's winning.

We can build settlements on major earthquake faults, we can build them in floodplains, we can make cities ever more dependent on imported fossil fuels, and we can even build

them below sea level in Hurricane Alley – and we have and we do, for short-term economic reasons. Mother Nature has a way of evening the score, however, as Katrina has so powerfully reminded us.

Bruegmann's thesis that growth management is the undemocratic ideal of cultural elitists remains unconvincing. It was the populist preacher Robert Schuller, after all, not some Stalinist apparatchik, who said, "Failing to plan is planning to fail." Bruegmann also fails in his presentation of urban planning as an exercise in futility. He is surely correct that we can never eliminate sprawl from the American landscape, but his book will not extinguish the dream of an affluent, democratic society that offers its citizens more choices, not fewer, and a future that passes on to our children the natural and cultural resources we inherited from our parents.

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