

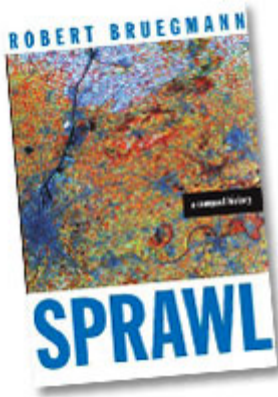
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## Suburban Despair

Is urban sprawl really an American menace?

By Witold Rybczynski

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We hate sprawl. It's responsible for everything that we don't like about modern American life: strip malls, McMansions, big-box stores, the loss of favorite countryside, the decline of downtowns, traffic congestion, SUVs, high gas consumption, dependence on foreign oil, the Iraq war. No doubt about it, sprawl is bad, American bad. Like expanding waistlines, it's touted around the world as yet another symptom of our profligacy and wastefulness as a nation. Or, as Robert Bruegmann puts it in his new book, "cities that sprawl and, by implication, the citizens living in them, are self indulgent and undisciplined."

Or not. In *Sprawl*, cheekily subtitled "A Compact History," Bruegmann, a professor of art history at the University of Illinois at Chicago, examines the assumptions that underpin most people's strongly held convictions about sprawl. His conclusions are unexpected. To begin with, he finds that urban sprawl is not a recent phenomenon: It has been a feature of city life since the earliest times. The urban rich have always sought the pleasures of living in low-density residential neighborhoods on the outskirts of cities. As long ago as the Ming dynasty in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese gentry sang the praises of the exurban life, and the rustic *villa suburbana* was a common feature of ancient Rome. Pliny's maritime villa was 17 miles from the city, and many fashionable Roman villa districts such as Tusculum—where Cicero had a summer house—were much closer. Bruegmann also observes that medieval suburbs—those urbanized areas outside cities' protective walls—had a variety of uses. Manufacturing processes that were too dirty to be located inside the city (such as brick kilns, tanneries, slaughterhouses) were in the suburbs; so were the homes of those who could not afford to reside within the city proper. This pattern continued during the Renaissance. Those compact little cities bounded by bucolic landscapes, portrayed in innumerable idealized paintings, were surrounded by extensive suburbs.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "sprawl" first appeared in print in this context in 1955, in an article in the *London Times* that contained a disapproving reference to "great sprawl" at the city's periphery. But, as Bruegmann shows, by then London had been spreading into the surrounding countryside for hundreds of years. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, while the poor moved increasingly eastward, affluent Londoners built

suburban estates in the westerly direction of Westminster and Whitehall, commuting to town by carriage. These areas are today the Central West End; one generation's suburb is the next generation's urban neighborhood. As Bruegmann notes, "Clearly, from the beginning of modern urban history, and contrary to much accepted wisdom, suburban development was very diverse and catered to all kinds of people and activities."

When inexpensive public transportation opened up South London for development in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, London sprawl took a different form: streets and streets of small brick-terrace houses. For middle-class families, this dispersal was a godsend, since it allowed them to exchange a cramped flat for a house with a garden. The outward movement continued in the boom years between the First and Second World Wars, causing the built-up area of London to double, although the population increased by only about 10 percent—which sounds a lot like Atlanta today.

It was not only by sprawling at the edges that cities reduced their densities. Preindustrial cities began life by exhibiting what planners call a steep "density gradient," that is, the population density was extremely high in the center and dropped off rapidly at the edges. Over time, with growing prosperity—and the availability of increasingly far-reaching mass transportation (omnibuses, streetcars, trains, subways, cars)—this gradient flattened out. Density at the center reduced while density in the (expanding) suburbs increased. The single most important variable in this common pattern was, as Bruegmann observes, not geography or culture, but the point at which the city reached economic maturity. In the case of London, the city's population density peaked in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century; in Paris it happened in the 1850s; and in New York City in the early 1900s. While the common perception is that sprawl is America's contribution to urban culture, Bruegmann shows that it appeared in Europe first.



Little boxes on a hillside

Yet haven't high rates of automobile ownership, easy availability of land, and a lack of central planning made sprawl much worse in the United States? Most American tourists spend their time visiting historic city centers, so they may be unaware that suburbs now constitute the bulk of European metropolitan areas, just as they do in America. We marvel at the efficiency of European mass transit, but since 1950, transit ridership has remained flat, while the use of private automobiles has skyrocketed. Just as in America. "As cities across Europe have become more affluent in the last decades of the twentieth century," Bruegmann writes, "they have witnessed a continuing decline in population densities in the historic core, a quickening of the pace of suburban and exurban development, a sharp rise in automobile ownership and use, and the proliferation of subdivisions of single-family houses and suburban shopping centers." Despite some of the most stringent anti-sprawl regulations in the world and high gas prices, the population of the City of Paris has declined by almost a third since 1921, while its suburbs have grown. Over the last 15 years, the city of Milan has lost about 600,000 people to its metropolitan fringes, while Barcelona, considered by many a model compact city, has developed extensive suburbs

and has experienced the largest population loss of any European city in the last 25 years. Greater London, too, continues to sprawl, resulting in a population density of 12,000 persons per square mile, about half that of New York City.

The point is not that London, any more than Barcelona or Paris, is a city in decline (although the demographics of European city centers have changed and are now home to wealthier and older inhabitants, just like some American cities). Central urban densities are dropping because household sizes are smaller and affluent people occupy more space. Like Americans, Europeans have opted for decentralization. To a great extent, this dispersal is driven by a desire for home-ownership. "Polls consistently confirm that most Europeans, like most Americans, and indeed most people worldwide, would prefer to live in single-family houses on their own piece of land rather than in apartment buildings," Bruegmann writes. So strong is this preference that certain European countries such as Ireland and the United Kingdom now have higher single-family house occupancy rates than the United States, while others, such as Holland, Belgium, and Norway, are comparable. Half of all French households now live in houses.

It appears that *all* cities—at least all cities in the industrialized Western world—have experienced a dispersal of population from the center to a lower-density periphery. In other words, sprawl is universal. Why is this significant? "Most American anti-sprawl reformers today believe that sprawl is a recent and peculiarly American phenomenon caused by specific technological innovations like the automobile and by government policies like single-use zoning or the mortgage-interest deduction on the federal income tax," Bruegmann writes. "It is important for them to believe this because if sprawl turned out to be a long-standing feature of urban development worldwide, it would suggest that stopping it involves something much more fundamental than correcting some poor American land-use policy."

What this iconoclastic little book demonstrates is that sprawl is not the anomalous result of American zoning laws, or mortgage interest tax deduction, or cheap gas, or subsidized highway construction, or cultural antipathy toward cities. Nor is it an aberration. Bruegmann shows that asking whether sprawl is "good" or "bad" is the wrong question. Sprawl is and always has been inherent to urbanization. It is driven less by the regulations of legislators, the actions of developers, and the theories of city planners, than by the decisions of millions of individuals—Adam Smith's "invisible hand." This makes altering it very complicated, indeed. There are scores of books offering "solutions" to sprawl. Their authors would do well to read this book. To find solutions—or, rather, better ways to manage sprawl, which is not the same thing—it helps to get the problem right.

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