THE AUSTRALIAN

Even urban sprawl finds defenders

Deborah Hope
10dec05

WHEN Joni Mitchell sang "they paved paradise and put in a parking lot" in 1970, she encapsulated a generation's contempt for urban sprawl: McMansions, denuded landscapes, shopping malls, traffic congestion, alienation, environmental disaster. Drive through Kingswood country in any Australian city and you'll find the modern urban equivalent of hell, right?

Wrong, according to a surprising new book on the subject that describes cities - including their ever-spreading suburbs - as the "most marvellous work of mankind" and critics of sprawl as class-prejudiced snobs who resent the less well-off invading what was formerly the preserve of the rich.

Architecture historian Robert Bruegmann, of the University of Illinois, Chicago, says the yearning for a life outside crammed, rat-infested city centres is as old as ancient Rome. While most Roman families lived in crowded, poorly ventilated apartment blocks and put up with pollution from human waste and cooking fires and frequent epidemics, the wealthiest and most powerful retired to elegant villa surbana near the sea or the cool hills east of Rome near Tivoli or Frascati.

In the new millennium, what is generically understood as urban sprawl is as common to Paris and Perth as London and Los Angeles and can be said to be the world's preferred settlement pattern, writes Bruegmann in his jokily titled Sprawl: A Compact History.

Research shows 85 per cent of people who live in flats would rather live in a house. But Sydney's planners, as seen in a government blueprint NSW Premier Morris Iemma released this week, want to turn history and human nature on its head by stuffing an extra 1.1 million people into a few city growth centres during the next 25 years.

According to the City of Cities report, more than two-thirds of the 640,000 new dwellings needed in Sydney by 2030 will be built in existing suburbs, with 55,000 more units in high-rise towers slated for the city centre and neighbouring precincts.

Advocates of urban consolidation, or smart growth, claim increasing city density will provide an answer to everything from the startling decline in household size and pressures on infrastructure and services to pollution and obesity.

However, as with Patrick Troy - the best-known Australian opponent of urban consolidation - Bruegmann argues that most of the aesthetic, cultural, economic, health and environmental criticisms the anti-sprawl movement hurls at city spread are class-based, misguided, short-sighted, unimaginative and, in many cases, plain wrong.

He rails against the sweeping condemnation of suburbia by "an entire generation of academic sociologists" and other social critics who discerned dissatisfaction and alienation in the suburbs.

"Curiously, this alienation was exactly what a previous generation of intellectuals had associated with life in high-density central cities," he says.

Bruegmann points out the "direst predictions" of many critics - that the flight to the suburbs would kill historic city centres - has proved groundless. If anything it has been accompanied by an unprecedented revival of city centres with the worst industries and slums dispersed, the most affluent entrenched in the core near the best transport, amenities and professional jobs, and a

flourishing economy involving tourism and international business. What's more, he argues in his hymn to suburbia and exurbia, higher yields and subsidies to over-producing farmers show less land is needed for agriculture.

Economic maturity, not geography, is the most important variable in wholesale migration to the fringe, he says. Crowded as never before, the world's most affluent cities began decanting rapidly by the late 19th century in Europe and especially New York, where immigrants moved to better housing in less dense neighbourhoods as soon as they accumulated enough money, then farther out with the arrival of inexpensive public transport to ferry them to jobs.

Unprecedented prosperity, vastly improved public transport and the rise of car ownership in the US during the 1920s saw a virtual revolution in working-class expectations, with large numbers of blue-collar families having the option of living in a single dwelling for the first time.

In Britain, a similar "incredible growth" of the suburbs of its cities produced a "violent reaction from the artistic and literary elite", with one typical essayist decrying the new development as crawling "like a slug over the country leaving a foul trail of slime behind it".

According to Bruegmann, a minority cultural elite is still trying to impose its narrow interpretation of urban living "as the kind of life lived by people in apartments in dense city centres that contain major highbrow cultural institutions". This attack on middle-class culture as somehow inferior to highbrow culture is a view being rejected or ignored across the world, he says, as suburbanites find that even those without a great deal of money can attain a "convenient and pleasant" life. Ironically, the "little boxes made of ticky tacky" Pete Seeger sang about in the 1960s, delivering a critique of middle and working-class culture to youth everywhere in the English-speaking world, were houses in the relatively high-density San Francisco suburb Daly City now viewed by "hip young urbanites" as "charming period pieces and an important part of the Bay Area's architectural heritage".

Sprawl is scathing when it comes to strident environmental criticisms of suburbia. While car use has increased everywhere, for instance, Bruegmann writes there is no evidence residents of suburbia are more attached to their automobiles than city dwellers.

Taking into account better car design, regulation and cleaner fuel, he claims that even with only 1.5 occupants per car, most new cars generate little or no more pollution per person per passenger kilometre than the average bus. And he says car ownership has extended to the lower classes the privacy, comfort and security previously available in earlier times only to the wealthy owners of private carriages.

Troy, whose tome The Perils of Urban Consolidation caused a stir in 1996, says increased density is "code for decreased standards for people who can't afford to buy their way out of it". Average house sizes may have increased in Australia, but at the same time the size of flats has fallen, "cramming the low income and transitory end of the market".

As with Bruegmann, Troy, emeritus professor at the Australian National University's Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, argues that whether you are talking about water use, energy consumption or life satisfaction, the single house outclasses the apartment block.

According to Troy there is very little difference between per capita water consumption of flat dwellers and house residents, even taking into account external uses such as watering gardens, and low density development provides more possibilities for grey-water recycling. Additional needs for airconditioning, security lights and lifts and greater reliance on clothes dryers and dishwashers mean high-density residents consume more energy than their suburban counterparts and they also produce more waste.

By composting and recycling, he says, single-home dwellers can cut their household waste by as much as 60 per cent.

Urban Development Institute of Australia executive director David Poole identifies design elements and new amenities as essential to community acceptance of the smart growth drive if a political backlash is to be avoided. "The problem is how do you build new ovals and parks in areas that are already high density?" Poole says.

The NSW Government's urban planning director Chris Johnson plays down the need for these amenities, telling Inquirer new-era city apartment dwellers will see "the whole town centre as their territory" and be fitter than most, walking to work as well as to cafes, gyms and other urban recreations.

It's bureaucratic spin, according to Troy. The idea that you can reduce the the size of a city by doubling its density, he says, doesn't take into account the way people live or that only about one-quarter of the area a city occupies is taken up by the places where people sleep.

© The Australian