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Elbow room

An urban history professor shares his sprawling ideas

Sprawl (\$27.50) is published by the University of Chicago Press.

Robert Bruegmann, professor of art history, architecture and urban planning at University of Illinois at Chicago, thinks the subject of his new book, *Sprawl: A Compact History*, has gotten a bum rap. Since World War II, the architectural and planning elites have denounced the global decentralization of cities and their devolution into undifferentiated suburban masses, to the point that much of the academic world's intellectual energies have been focused on how to fix them. Bruegmann thinks that before something can be fixed, it has to be understood-and most of us don't get it.

One big problem is the pejorative overlay we've placed on terms like sprawl and gentrification. He says we should interpret them more neutrally-as change. And change is good. Right?

Bruegmann is not exactly apologizing for sprawl, or defending it, but he's trying to put it in perspective. For starters, sprawl isn't a new phenomenon, and it's not exclusively American. More important is his contention that, given the option, most people would prefer to live in a single-family house on their private plot of ground and get where they want to go in their own motorized vehicle than live in an apartment building and take the El, ride a bike or walk. While this would have been out of the question for the general populace a century ago, today's economy has made it an affordable (i.e., financeable) dream throughout much of the industrialized world.

It's not that Bruegmann personally loves strip malls, cul-de-sacs and superhighways (he lives in Lincoln Park); he was irritated by the kind of knee-jerk bias so much of the intellectual community has shown toward the by-products of low-density development.

"If I had any single motivation, it's probably about tolerance in a democracy," he says during a recent interview, questioning the notion that there are "experts" -policy makers and government officials-who "know better," allowing them to dictate how ordinary citizens should live. "It's the coercive part that distresses me. In a democracy, you have to trust people, and if you don't believe people can make the right choices, then we might just as well abandon democracy right now."

Bruegmann is primarily advocating for choice; permitting decentralization and its supporting infrastructure without eliminating services that benefit the poor and disenfranchised. His book documents several antisprawl programs that have addressed the "problem," and while he notes some successes, he also reports on some unintended and unpleasant consequences.

The real "solution" to sprawl, Bruegmann says, is striking a balance.

"A

government is no more trustworthy than people," he says. "It has to make

policies that allow the maximum [number] of choices without hurting the

people who have the least amount of choice." -Philip Berger
Bruegmann discusses sprawl and more at the Graham Foundation on
Wednesday 7. It's free, but reservations are required.

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