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A Call to Rethink Sprawl

By Jay Tolson

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The unruly expanse of subdivisions, malls, office parks, and congested roadways spreading far beyond the old urban centers has come to be known--and often condemned--as sprawl. But does sprawl deserve such a bad rap? **Robert Bruegmann**, a professor of art history, architecture, and urban planning at the University of Illinois-Chicago, talked to *U.S. News* about his own distinctive take on the subject, set forth in his new book, *Sprawl: A Compact History*.

Sprawl is a loaded word. How do you define it?

I try to define the word in the most objective way possible, as relatively low-density settlement without any overarching master planning.

Is sprawl a modern phenomenon?

It goes back at least as far as we have historical records of cities and seems to be a reaction to the reality that, from the earliest days up to very recently, cities have been extremely dense--up to about 150,000 people per square mile in most of the larger ones. Cities had to be very compact because the main way of getting around was walking, and also, up until recently, cities had to have walls to protect them from attacks. The wall was a crushing financial burden, so cities had to be built at absolute maximum density to cut down on these tremendous costs of defense. This density was something people wanted to avoid because of all the pollution and congestion. But the only people who could take advantage of less densely settled areas beyond the city walls were the very powerful and wealthy members of society. If you were a very wealthy Roman, you could have a villa at Herculaneum or on the seashore.

So what is new about sprawl in the past two centuries?

A much larger percentage of society, including the middle class and then later the working class, has been able to afford to live in the same way that the wealthy and powerful once did.

What are some of the major arguments against sprawl?

The four major ones are that it's economically inefficient, that it's socially inequitable, that it is environmentally degrading, and that it's aesthetically ugly.

How well do these arguments hold up?

I find them weak. True, you have a slight premium in the amount of money it takes to build sewers and roads if you have people living at lower densities, but so much of that cost is now being transferred directly to homeowners. If they can pay for it, why shouldn't they have it? Then, too, as more and more people telecommute, you have a revolution in the way people live that will be much more energy efficient and less polluting than living at very high densities. Socially, it is true that the suburbanizing trend has left a heavy concentration of minority and poor people at the center of cities. But thinking you can stop social problems by bottling everybody up in the city seems to be an unworkable solution when you see even within the city we can't solve the inequities. The aesthetic arguments generate the most heat. The important thing to remember is that every generation's sprawl is the next generation's historic landmarks.

You argue that it's wrong to call Los Angeles the epitome of sprawl.

Los Angeles was the poster child for sprawl for a good 50 years, but the density levels of the Los Angeles metropolitan area went from about 4,000 people per square mile in 1950 to just over 7,000 people per square mile in 2000, which makes it by far the densest urbanized area in North America. The problems we see in L.A. today--the congestion and some of the pollution--are really the problems of increasing density without increasing in any commensurate way the road system. And by the way, L.A. has one of the lowest per capita miles of superhighway in the country.

Is it true that European nations are relatively free of sprawl?

Paris has certainly sprawled as much as any American city. It's amazing to me that so little attention has been paid to the fact that European cities, first in the north but also more recently in the south in places like Barcelona and Naples, have decentralized in really dramatic fashion. And efforts by European governments to control or limit sprawl, as with London's greenbelt plan, have not really succeeded.

Portland, Ore., is often cited as the U.S. model of antisprawl smart growth.

Portland is still a very low-density city at little more than 3,000 people per square mile. With all the efforts not to build highways but to build transit instead, the percentage of ridership on transit continues to decline, and, of course, congestion has increased because they haven't built roads to keep up.

What are the benefits of sprawl?

The most important thing about sprawl is that it has given to millions and millions of people the kind of privacy, mobility, and choice that was once the privilege of a very small number of people.