

## In Praise of 'Burbs

*Academics, planners and tastemakers may vilify suburbia as an American blight. But even the Romans knew: It can be nice to get out of the city*

### **Sprawl: A Compact History**

By Robert Bruegmann

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Reviewed by Joel Kotkin

For at least half a century, academics, aesthetes and all-purpose agonizers have looked at our ever-sprawling cities with disdain and even horror. The spectacle of rings and rings of humankind nested in single-family homes has inspired in them all sorts of revulsion and, relatedly, a whole discipline of blame: Suburban sprawl has been faulted for exacerbating racial tension, contributing to energy shortages, worsening pollution and heating up the globe -- even expanding waistlines.

Largely missing from this debate has been a sound and reasoned history of this pattern of living. With Robert Bruegmann's "Sprawl: A Compact History," we now have one. What a pleasure it is: well-written, accessible and eager to challenge the current cant about sprawl.

No, Mr. Bruegmann says, don't go blaming the Federal Highway Administration for sprawl or the executives at General Motors and Exxon or racist developers fleeing urban environments. Don't even blame Karl Rove. You really don't need to blame anyone. Mr. Bruegmann notes that contemporary sprawl -- best defined by places like Los Angeles, Phoenix and Houston -- is nothing new. It represents "merely the latest chapter in a long and curious history."

What propels that curious history is something often overlooked by the makers of grand theories -- the particular choices of individual human beings. Mr. Bruegmann places the urge to sprawl squarely where it belongs: on people's logical desire to escape the high costs, crime, pollution, congestion and lack of privacy that accompanies life in dense cities.

As is often the case, Rome, really the first great city, provides a telling early example. At its height in the classical period, Mr. Bruegmann notes, it possessed the population of modern-day Dallas but in one-fiftieth of the space. Even with an impressive water and sewer system, and sometimes enlightened administration, the place must have been unbearably noisy, noisome crowded and expensive.

Not surprisingly, a lot of folks headed out to the suburbium. For the poor and working class, the move was often a matter of finding cheaper housing and a less regulated

environment for running such distasteful businesses as slaughterhouses and such infernal ones as brick-making. For the elites, then as now, the cool hillsides or beachfront in the nearby hinterland represented the ideal place for the elegant pastoral estates so celebrated in Latin poetry.

Mr. Bruegmann finds this pattern of flight taking place virtually any place dense urban centers develop, whether in Ming China, Renaissance Italy or early modern Europe. But it was the Industrial Revolution that really pushed the growth of suburbia. Industrial-age cities of the 19th century were even more crowded, more dirty and more polluted than their premodern counterparts.

Clearly something had to be done. One solution, still widely appealing to many architects, academics and planners, was redesigning the metropolis to make density work. Napoleon III's renovation of Paris stands as the classic example of this approach.

Under Napoleon's edicts, many of the city's crowded, winding streets and neighborhoods -- breeding grounds both for revolutionary sans-culottes and crime -- were obliterated. In their place he created broad boulevards, elegant monuments and parks, making the city safe for the elites and the affluent. As for those whose neighborhoods were destroyed, they were shuttled out to the nearer suburbs, with long-term consequences we witnessed in this fall's rioting.

But most cities did not follow Paris's model, falling instead into that of London, the greatest metropolis of the time. In London, nascent democracy meant that no great controlling central authority could redesign the city by fiat. So anyone who could manage to get out, well, got out, usually to some country village that would soon become a residential bedroom of the capital. As an observer noted as early as 1843, London "surrounds itself, suburb clinging to suburb, like onions fifty to a rope."

With the rise of commuter rails, telegraph, telephones and then automobiles in the 20th century, urban dispersion accelerated dramatically. "Sprawl," loosely defined, became a global phenomenon. Cities in North America, Australia, New Zealand and South America -- with cheap land and growing populations -- took the idea of fleeing dense urban centers and, so to speak, ran with it.

Yet the reasons for the sprawl around Los Angeles, Houston, Phoenix, Mexico City, Buenos Aires and Tokyo are not so unlike those of third-century Rome. The needs and preferences of individuals, families and businesses matter most. To attempt to understand sprawl from this perspective, of course, flies in the face of most academic "urban theory" as well as the collected wisdom of most planners, architects and the media.

It is believed, for example, that sprawl is a peculiarly "American" disease, another sign of our decadence and wastefulness. Yet in reality, U.S.-style sprawl can be found everywhere now, including metropolitan Paris, where the far-out suburbs of the Grand Couronne are harvesting much of the region's job and population growth. Even crowded China has its suburban tracts, some with odd names like "Orange County."

Wherever it appears, sprawl incites its enemies. In our own time, Mr. Bruegmann observes, much of the anti-sprawl venom comes not from the working class or middle

class but from well-heeled urbanites with expensive apartments in Georgetown and Beacon Hill or on Central Park. Many such critics -- just think of John Kerry or Al Gore - - also own spacious country estates and naturally are not happy about exurban developers luring the masses too close to their weekend idylls.

Mr. Bruegmann rightly dismisses "the campaign to reform other people's lives" launched by these anti-sprawl scolds -- such as urban-growth boundaries and restrictions on the construction of single-family homes. Rather than try to strangle suburbia, he suggests, we ought to try to live with this new, expansive form of city.

As powerful as sprawl logic may be, the traditional city is far from dead. Mr. Bruegmann, a longtime Chicago resident and a professor at the University of Illinois campus there, is particularly bullish on amenity-rich older cities -- New York, Boston, Seattle and Portland, as well as Chicago. They can lay claim to a promising demographic niche among the nomadic rich, the young and those who cater to their needs.

Yet Mr. Bruegmann understands that the future of urbanity will likely be shaped not in these adult Disneylands but in the peripheries to which families, jobs and industries are now fleeing. Such flight should not be a cause for despair among those who love cities. Suburban communities are not frozen in their current form; many are busily developing their own core districts, cultural facilities and particular identities.

Urbanists interested in the future need to pay more attention and give more respect to such places. Mr. Bruegmann has told us why they grow and will continue to do so. The next step is figuring out how to make them work better.

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