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Sprawl: A Compact History By Robert **Bruegmann** University of Chicago Press, 301pp, £ 17.50 ISBN 0 226 07690 3 and 07691 1

Like Richard Sennett's recent critical work on American culture, *The Corrosion of Character*, Robert **Bruegmann's** history of suburbanisation starts with a moment of revelation in an aeroplane above New York. Yet where a chance encounter causes Sennett to dwell on the damage done to the contemporary American psyche by the erosion of traditional working cultures and responsibilities, **Bruegmann** looks down upon the sprawling New Jersey subdivisions and freeways and thinks of the sheer creativity and populist energy of the American Dream, still unfolding.

Bruegmann's *Sprawl* has the narrative drive of a polemic, taking issue with one of the great environmental issues of today: how to reconcile the burgeoning demand for detached modern family homes in greenfield settings with limits on the use of land, energy resources and the loss of traditional urban cultures and identities. In short, will there ever be an end to global suburbanisation; and does this matter?

In the 20th century, the suburbs had a bad press. **Bruegmann** compensates with a book that will be uncomfortable to read for many but is elegantly written and fair to nearly all points of view. Anybody interested in the future of planning policy will have to read it.

The book's principal argument is that housing policy across the world has been shaped by elite interests to protect the exclusive right of a privileged minority to live in leafy settings away from crowded and ageing cities. To this end, all manner of ostensibly high-minded policy objectives have been employed to disguise a basic resentment against the

lower classes enjoying their own version of the good life away from the city.

Furthermore, cafe-society intellectuals have aided this conspiracy by insisting that high-density living is the only true path to a genuine modern urbanity.

Bruegmann is an admirer of the sceptical environmentalist Bjørn Lomborg and a fellow traveller with those who think that the private motor car has been the greatest boon to personal liberty in the modern world.

Sprawl deals mostly with housing growth in 20th-century America. There are occasional references to Europe, and here some important differences are overlooked, notably in attitudes to the provision of social housing, car dependency and big-box suburban retailing. The wider geopolitical externalities of America's embrace of car-based suburban living are mentioned only briefly, particularly the historic embroilment in Middle Eastern oil politics and the growing trade deficit with China as a result of Wal-Mart's hegemony over great swaths of US retailing.

The author's optimism that human ingenuity and technological sophistication will solve every new problem is bracing, although even he acknowledges that the saturation point for car ownership in the US, at 650 vehicles per 1,000 population, has been almost reached. Other potential endgames implicit in the continuation of sprawl - ultimate limits to the proliferation of second homes, the growth of air traffic and the amount of material consumption and waste disposal - are not considered.

Sprawl is a tribute to American exceptionalism. Many living in smaller, more densely populated countries may balk at the assault on planning regulation conducted here. Many will be grateful to **Bruegmann**, however, for setting out the troubled history of 20th-century suburbanisation in such a provocative manner and for arguing for a new rapprochement between town and country forms of settlement and lifestyles.

Ken Worpole is an environmental writer whose most recent book is Last Landscapes: The Architecture of the Cemetery in the West.

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