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Not New or Bad?

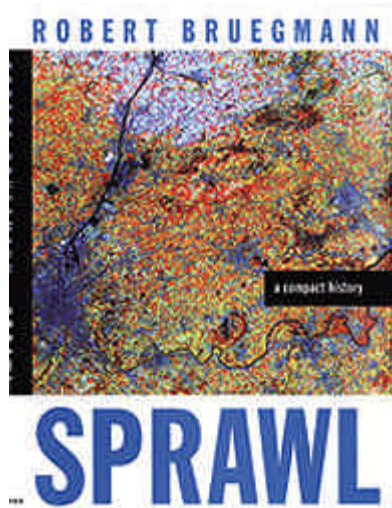
Taking a different look at urban sprawl

BY MARTIN ZIMMERMAN

Sprawl: A Compact History

By Robert Bruegmann

The University of Chicago Press, \$27.50



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What is sprawl? is it, as renowned city historian Lewis Mumford believed, a monotonous wasteland "inhabited by people of the same class, the same income ... witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods?" Or is it a recurring settlement pattern, even a basic human need, as ancient as civilization itself? In this insightful, informative, and rigorously researched book, Robert Bruegmann, a professor of architecture and urban planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago, attempts to dispassionately dismember all manner of 20th-century contradictions and dubious assumptions about sprawl and its unrealized remedies—from British new towns to New Urbanism, from anti-highway arguments to allegations that link suburbs to global warming. *Sprawl* is less a compact history of suburban growth, as the title suggests, and more a biting critique of those who undervalue its holding power and inevitability, although the book contains questionable lapses that raise doubts as to whether it is as objective as it purports to be.

Bruegmann argues that low-density urban dispersal is intrinsic to all cities and dates back to the beginnings of city life. In first-century Rome, the appellation *suburbium* was used to describe land uses not otherwise accommodated within the capital's dense walled

sectors. Even "exurbia," that outer zone derided by many as a haven for huge-lot McMansionists, has a lengthy history, as illustrated by a 1740 map of the Paris region showing large aristocratic estates scattered well beyond the city's outskirts (the largest being Versailles).

Not until the 20th century, however, did the term "sprawl" appear as a pejorative to defend various but similar ideological movements. Despite increasing popularity, these modern antisprawl campaigns, which the author discusses in detail, could not possibly contain a growing middle class intent on living in low-density settings. Nor is this trend limited to the United States. Revealing photos of places as seemingly varied as Bangkok, suburban Paris, or Bangalore, India, portray densities and land patterns akin to Phoenix or Los Angeles.

Granted that many bold government programs have tried to rein in sprawl. But the text suggests, through program-by-program analysis, that these have achieved limited success. For example, Portland, Ore., with its urban growth boundary, sleek light-rail transit, and thriving compact core, is a city closely watched as a countersprawl incubator. Many articles and books have validated Portland's planning efforts; one research paper, publicized by the National Center for Smart Growth, indicated that by 1990, Portland had turned a corner in outpacing cities that lacked growth management systems—proving that at last "the war on sprawl" was being won. But Bruegmann submits what he considers evidence to the contrary: The rail system carries only two percent of all regional trips, growth controls have pushed some people far beyond the boundaries because they cannot afford pricier real estate, and densities may have increased in accordance with national trends with or without growth boundaries. He does admit, however, that they "have almost certainly kept a great deal of suburban growth out of the countryside around Portland."

The scorecard of Hamburg, Germany, is comparable to Portland's, as in much of Europe, contends Bruegmann, where government controls are much more stringent than here. In Hamburg—where laws regulate store sizes, business hours, and numbers of employees to ward off discount chains—the net result is to force prices higher. Residents must live in smaller dwellings because of limited land and rising purchase costs, despite polls showing a preference for the suburban lifestyle. But as Hamburg's affluence has grown, he states, the public has sought "privacy, mobility and choice," the three values Bruegmann defines as the basis for present-day urban dispersal. As a consequence, "the system of regulations that protected traditional European centers from competition is under siege."

Sprawl generally avoids the temptation to foist a pro-sprawl agenda upon the reader. Yet, to those of us who do support vigorous antisprawl reforms, it is tempting to suspect that the book's pronounced tilt toward free-market mechanisms and consumer choice is a subtle guise for the sprawl-supporting voices of libertarianism. But nowhere does Bruegmann defend property rights as inalienable, nor does he dismiss government controls outright. In fact, the book's closing remarks, tracking recent trends to higher densities, illustrate his basic stance, which is simply that people have a right to live where and how they desire—high-rise condo or cul-de-sac. By asking tough questions, postulating rational responses, and trying to separate fact from fiction, *Sprawl* may be the

most intelligent critique of antisprawl reform in print. It is unquestionably a book to be read and debated.