

Robert Bruegmann

**Sprawl: A Compact History**

Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 301 pp., 34 b/w illus. \$27.50, ISBN 0-226-07690-3

Robert M. Fogelson

**Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia 1870–1930**

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005, 264 pp., 2 b/w illus. \$30, ISBN 0-300-10876-1

Robert Bruegmann opens *Sprawl: A Compact History* by describing the bombardment of antisprawl reform messages to which the average urban dweller is subject today. Sprawl destroys open space, consumes farmlands, drives up energy usage, undermines community fabric, heightens inequalities, depletes natural resources, generates pollution, increases automobile usage, sucks retail business out of formerly vibrant downtowns, abandons center cities, escalates global warming, and is ugly as well. To counter these charges, the author reviews a broad swath of literature, concluding that sprawl has become “the preferred settlement pattern everywhere in the world where there is a certain measure of affluence and where citizens have some choice in how they live” (17). This book does not pretend to be evenhanded; the author aims to present “the other side of the coin, that is to say the benefits of sprawl and the problems caused by reform efforts” (11–12). Bruegmann’s principal method is to examine sprawl and the public policies devoted to it from an historical perspective. He provides a long view of urban deconcentration, but he also analyzes the way the concept of sprawl was invented and used over time.

*Sprawl* is organized into three parts. In part one, Bruegmann presents a selective history of sprawl—defined as “low-density, scattered, urban development without systematic large scale or regional public land use planning” (18)—to make the case that it is neither “a recent phenomenon nor peculiarly American” (9). A historical survey of urban deconcentration during three boom periods—the

interwar years, the post–World War II era, and the post-1970s—offers many counterintuitive nuggets to support the author’s claim that critics of sprawl have based their arguments on outdated and insufficient evidence. We learn, for example, that since the 1960s, suburban densities in the United States have increased while lot sizes have declined; that considerable multifamily housing has sprouted on the periphery; that cities such as Los Angeles, thought to epitomize sprawl, are quite dense; that, in short, sprawl is a much more complex phenomenon than critics and scholars portray.

In a chapter on the causes of sprawl, Bruegmann offers sharp rebuttals to a whole litany of explanations: antiurban attitudes, racism, capitalism, governmental policies, and technology. Cities disperse, he counters, wherever affluence and democratic institutions afford the middle classes sufficient privacy, mobility, and choice. Since the 1970s, European cities such as Paris, Munich, Hamburg, and Barcelona increasingly resemble American cities and suburbs in the proliferation of single-family detached suburban houses; their citizens steadily prefer the use of private automobiles to get around. These metropolitan landscapes, Bruegmann concludes, are the product of “the choices of millions of individuals and families about where and how they wanted to live” (224).

In parts two and three, Bruegmann moves to a historical analysis of sprawl as a cultural concept, by which he means how different critics articulated campaigns against and remedies for sprawl in the three economic boom periods of the twentieth century. Although antisprawl reformers during different eras share passionate convictions that sprawl is bad, they have never agreed on definitions, causes, or objective consequences, nor have they managed to link their diagnoses effectively to conditions on the ground. The driving circumstances behind the complaints in any given period, the author charges, have been “a set of class-based aesthetic and metaphysical assumptions” (11) that often take the form of an upper-

middle-class suburban cohort’s desire to preserve their own built environments while reforming others’ tastes and lives. Bruegmann, following Canadian scholar Michael Poulton, calls these activists the “incumbents’ club” (162): those who have achieved their measure of suburban amenity and fight any change that might prove deleterious to their own advantages. Most of the remedies they have proposed have been ineffective, out-of-date, or have had unintended bad consequences. Ultimately, the author concludes, the concept of sprawl is “hopeless as an objective description of the infinitely complex and fast-changing urban world around us and counterproductive as an analytic concept” (223).

*Sprawl* is both a thought-provoking and exasperating read. One of its best features is Bruegmann’s insistence that scholars and critics respect and comprehend the urban landscapes that surround us in all of their ordinariness and typicality. His best sources of information have been the built environment itself. This is a historian who has committed substantial effort to visiting center cities, suburbs, and exurbs and looking around. One of the benefits of time invested in on-the-ground observation is the author’s understanding of the range, complexity, and heterogeneity of metropolitan settlement patterns, demographics, and form. He is keen to shift attention from housing for the wealthy to everyday landscapes, including manufactured houses, garden apartments, condos, and other forms of multifamily housing woefully neglected in scholarly literature. There is no disputing Bruegmann’s appreciation of the city, “whether dense and concentrated at the cores, looser and more sprawling in suburbia, or in the vast tracts of exurban penumbra that extend dozens, even hundreds of miles into what appears to be rural land—[this] is the grandest and most marvelous work of mankind” (225). No matter how resistant a reader might be to Bruegmann’s enthusiasm for modern metropolises, warts and all, he or she must come to terms with two of Bruegmann’s fundamental points: people in all regions of

the never-ending experiments in how to enforce and renew them. One can quibble with details here or there: Fogelson occasionally accepts a community's marketing for the situation on the ground; the Uplands near Victoria, for example, is no Tuxedo Park! In suggesting that suburban histories have overlooked deed restrictions, he fails to cite key sources.<sup>1</sup> More important, by limiting his purview to covenants, the author fails to capture the full range of mechanisms—official, unofficial, formal, informal, and by pure stealth sometimes—that suburban dwellers deployed to control their immediate environments. Nonetheless, the chapter is chock full of fresh material and is simply the best account of the history of deed restrictions to date.

In chapter two, Fogelson explores the bourgeois nightmares theme in earnest, distilling three categories of fears from the evidence contained in the particulars of the restrictions. That homeowners who took their personal liberties so seriously could be induced to accept stringent controls over what they could do with their property suggests the deep-seated nature of the fears. Most familiar is the fear of others, which evolved from Frederick Law Olmsted's distrust of how new homeowners might misuse their land to the exclusion of certain kinds of people because of their race or class. This highly effective category of covenants systematically prevented African Americans, Asian Americans, and others deemed undesirable from moving to many, many suburbs. Less familiar is the fear of one another, which motivated a large category of restrictions aimed at neighbors who, because they understood property as investment, might turn their land to adverse uses if they could make a profit doing so. Fear of one another generated a vast range of restrictions that excluded nuisance activities, multiple-family dwellings, eccentric house designs, certain domestic animals, and any use that undermined the permanence of the community. A heightened version was fear of the market. If the fundamental law of real estate is that land will always be put to its highest and best use,

landowners had to be prevented from using their lots in profitable but objectionable ways.

Fogelson's argument that fear drove certain patterns of suburban settlement provides an interesting counterpoint to Bruegmann's insistence that choice shapes the urban landscape. It would seem to be precisely the market philosophy that motivated the lion's share of restrictive covenants. Both developers and homeowners wanted to control personnel, aesthetics, cultural practices, inharmonious activities, and profiteering. If sprawl is the result of millions of choices, the choosers appear almost instantaneously to be exercising their ability to restrict others' rights, suggesting the incumbents' club in sprawl suburbia may be vaster and more heterogeneous than Bruegmann allows.<sup>2</sup> In the epilogue, Fogelson assures readers that covenants are still in force today and, if anything, more stringent and complete.

In conversation with one another, *Sprawl* and *Bourgeois Nightmares* raise policy considerations that architectural and planning historians may find worth pondering. Where, for example, do these studies intersect on the issue of suburban aesthetics? My own research on planned, exclusive suburbs shows that when communities protect their aesthetics, property values rise. The attention to aesthetic matters in deed restrictions may, in fact, benefit all classes and stem as much from ordinary homeowners looking to protect their investments as from cultural elites foisting their tastes on others. Should architectural historians, critics, and design professionals withhold aesthetic considerations from housing policy debates? Should they sponsor programs of hard ethnographic research to ascertain exactly how well ordinary suburban dwellers think their housing serves them? How might scholars and practitioners best foster practices that respect and include ordinary citizens' preferences in shelter while providing the benefits of professional expertise?

According to Bruegmann, every part of the urban system affects every other part. Center and periphery are interre-

lated; to understand gentrification, for example, we must grasp its relationship to sprawl. Both books suggest that scholars need to analyze more carefully how contemporary suburban and city forms and lifeways interact as well as how desire and fear may shape urban landscapes in tandem. Many readers may conclude that Bruegmann does not sufficiently engage with the long-term environmental consequences of sprawl, but his argument that the "automatic equation of sprawl with environmental degradation has obscured the issues surrounding both the very real threats to our environment and the potential means of dealing with them" (150) could provide a fresh point of entry for moving the debate forward. Both *Bourgeois Nightmares* and *Sprawl* reveal suburbanites' ongoing, essential interest in the quest for permanence and the ability to exercise choices, or what I call local control. Local control is fundamental to the cultural logic of suburban living. Public discourse has never sufficiently grappled with that logic and its implications for a vital question that Bruegmann raises: "at what level and through what means should planning and decision-making take place? Should this be intensely local, at the level of the family, municipality, or county, or should these decisions be pushed upward to a region or a state or an entire country?" (222–23)

Readers will find that both of these studies intervene in conversations that are timely and relevant for architectural and planning historians. However, they left this reader longing for deeper social and cultural investigation. Both texts purport to reveal profound tensions in North American society, but neither go far enough to uncover the logics of suburban dwellers' choices or the genealogies of their fears. One cultural context missing from both studies is the realm of representations: how did visual and ideological messages influence ordinary individuals' shelter expectations? It would be instructive to consider, for example, whether the bombardment of suburban-ideal and urban-slum imagery might have influenced the bourgeois

North America and in many countries of Europe have voted with their feet to embrace sprawl development; it is incumbent upon scholars and antisprawl reformers, then, to acknowledge this phenomenon and analyze the ways these complex metropolitan landscapes work and organize life for a diverse range of people on the ground.

These compelling observations and lines of inquiry, however, get undermined by the exasperating facets of Bruegmann's argumentation techniques, beginning with his slippery definition of sprawl. By emphasizing factors of density and planning, he can refute the reformers' charge that suburbia is expanding at ever lower densities while he deflects attention from the dramatically increasing volumes of acreage consumed by sprawl development. Throughout the book, one encounters insufficiently substantiated statements. Bruegmann characterizes the critique of sprawl in Britain during the 1920s as class-motivated based on two sources, with no discussion of a broader public discourse on the matter. In a controversial analysis of gentrification during the post-1970s, his assertion that "in neighborhoods all over North America, it is Asian-Americans, Latino-Americans, and even African-Americans with rising incomes who are doing the gentrification" (56) is accompanied by no footnote and no demographic data. The author dismisses the claim that sprawl was caused, in part, by "white flight fueled by racism" (97) by citing the counterexample of Minneapolis that, with its small minority population, has sprawled as much as multiethnic cities like Chicago. This disputation of the causes of sprawl overlooks serious bodies of scholarship on topics such as institutional racism and white flight and fails to consider how multiple causes—such as race, economics, and governmental regulations—may have interacted to influence suburban settlement patterns.

Throughout his critique of anti-sprawl campaigns, Bruegmann assigns the majority of activists to a series of urban and cultural elites whose diagnoses and proposed remedies boil down to

social, aesthetic, or symbolic biases rather than scientifically derived observations. This is an intriguing argument since it suggests that successors of the upper-middle class that promoted decentralization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are now championing its control, illustrating the author's contention, perhaps, that one person's cherished neighborhood is a later generation's sprawl (18). It would be useful to have hard research delineating the class origins and cultures of anti-sprawl activists across time. But assuming that Bruegmann has profiled his reformers correctly, what might account for the ability of an upper-middle class to shape public discourse on leading development issues of the day over the long haul? What combination of social background, education, economic status, political and business connections, cultural capital, racial privilege, and ambition consistently translates into that kind of power? Bruegmann's insistence that the choices of millions of individuals and families determine urban form cannot explain the apparent cultural staying power of upper-middle-class reformers to frame these debates and some of the development outcomes.

Although the historical perspective Bruegmann applies to his analysis of sprawl generates valuable insights, ultimately he goes too far when he says that "the sprawl of the postwar years was really just an extrapolation of the process visible in London since the seventeenth century" (43). Few historians will want to countenance this disregard of so many differences between, say, Elizabethan England, the 1880s in the United States, the 1920s in Great Britain, and the post-1970s era. Surely scholars, if they want to comprehend accurately the forms, processes, and motivations of urban deconcentration, must attend with care to changes in suburban settlement forms, home construction, financing, regulatory environments, size and density of cities, demographics, employment, governance, available technology, social institutions, and consumer environments.

One context that constrained who

could purchase in certain suburban neighborhoods historically and what they could do once they got there is presented in Robert M. Fogelson's *Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870–1930*. This tidy, well-researched study provides a history of deed restrictions, those covenants between suburban buyers and sellers that governed everything from who could live in a neighborhood, what size, height, cost, and style of house one could build there, to what uses one could and could not put their property. Restrictive covenants were found in upper-middle-class suburbs, in tracts for the less affluent, and occasionally in working-class subdivisions. Fogelson goes a considerable way toward explaining why, in a nation where citizens cherish their autonomy and property rights, restrictions made a community more appealing to purchasers. He argues that deed covenants "tell us much not only about the dreams of suburbanites . . . but about their nightmares; not only about their hopes but about their fears": fear of others, fear of change, fear of people just like themselves, and fear of the market (24).

These themes are set out concisely in two chapters and an epilogue. Chapter one begins by articulating the principal logics of deed restrictions from the standpoint of the industry: they regulated the market, excluded undesirable people and activities, ensured long-term stability (what Fogelson terms a "quest for permanence" [57]), and thus enabled developers to prevent the decline of subdivisions long enough to sell the final few lots, where they gained their profits. Next comes a well-selected sampling of key moments in the deployment of restrictions. To illustrate their full range and fine print, Fogelson presents an extended case study of the thirty pages of covenants governing Palos Verdes Estates, takes the reader on an extensive tour of restricted subdivisions around North America, and offers the only comparative analysis of deed covenants by class difference of which I am aware. Readers will enjoy coverage of the sales jobs competing realtors concocted to market restrictions to homebuyers and

nightmares of the average metropolitan dweller Fogelson studied. Although Bruegmann criticizes scholars who overlook the process of analyzing the way urban regions actually work, he provides no ethnographic evidence to support his central argument that ordinary citizens think sprawl works well for them. A more interdisciplinary mode of inquiry might have helped both authors bring their subjects further to ground.

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#### Notes

1. See, for example, June Manning Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf, eds., *Urban Planning and the African American Community: In the Shadows* (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1997); Susan Mulchahey Chase, "The Process of Suburbanization and the Use of Restrictive Deed Covenants as Private Zoning" (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 1995); and Mary Corbin Sies, "Paradise Retained: An Analysis of Persistence in Planned, Exclusive Suburbs, 1880-1980," *Planning Perspectives* 12 (Mar. 1997), 1-27. Several histories of individual planned, exclusive suburbs provide detailed accounts of protective mechanisms as well;

see, for example, Carol A. O'Connor, *A Sort of Utopia: Scarsdale, 1891-1981* (Albany, 1983); and William S. Worley, *J. C. Nichols and the Shaping of Kansas City: Innovation in Planned Residential Communities* (Columbia, Mo., 1990). Fogelson cites Chase later but, curiously, not in his initial review of the literature.

2. During the third quarter of the twentieth century, according to Fogelson, "restrictions were found just about everywhere in suburbia, even in the large-scale planned communities that were among the hallmarks of the postwar landscape" (202).