

METROPOLITAN GEOGRAPHIES

When Suburbs Collide

Jennifer Wolch

According to myth, the urban sprawl of Los Angeles and New York City will one day meet in a Nebraska cornfield. In *Sprawl*, Robert Bruegmann tells us not to worry about such an eventuality. He defines sprawl as “low density, scattered, urban development without systematic large-scale or regional public land-use planning.” The book is a lively discussion about why our current preoccupation with sprawl is unnecessary and why policies to address it are misguided.

Bruegmann (a professor of art history, architecture, and urban planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago) argues that sprawl has always been with us and that attempts to cast sprawl in a negative light are wrongheaded. He claims that remedies for sprawl have not produced the intended effects and that toying with urbanization patterns created by millions of individual decisions is a risky business. Debunking widely accepted myths, *Sprawl* defends urban development as a largely beneficial expression of human desires that transcend geography and history. A welcome tonic to anti-sprawl advocacy, the book forces us to rethink received wisdom. It will be widely read and debated by professionals and academics alike.

All the more unfortunate then, that so many of the book’s arguments are wrong. Just like the “anti-sprawl campaigners” he takes to task, Bruegmann cuts corners in his quest to create a defense of sprawl. This is bad science, which can only lead to bad public policy.

Where does Bruegmann go wrong? One flaw is his attempt to avoid the problem by defining it away. He correctly argues that categories such as city, suburb, and exurb are fluid. What one generation decries as suburban sprawl the next sees as a target for historic preservation. But is exurbia sprawl? His answer is no. Although most people would regard as sprawl a “subdivision of two-acre ranchettes with mowed front lawns,” he declares that an “old farmhouse on two acres where the husband commutes to a job in a central city but the family farms the land themselves” is not. According to Bruegmann, whether they farm or not is irrelevant, because agricultural surpluses mean we don’t need exurban land for food production. And he believes that the rich, rather than hurting central cities as they decamp to the exurbs, will

save the day: their downtown shopping allows older cities to retain some residents until they can be gentrified. This facile attempt to define away exurban sprawl and its effects is unconvincing in a country where, between 1970 and 1990, over half the new residential land consumed was in lots over ten acres and over 90 percent in lots of one or more acres.

Bruegmann next conflates form with process. He argues that something akin to sprawl has characterized urbanization since the birth of cities. Indeed, such transhistoric-ity of sprawl implies that it is “natural” and has adaptive benefits for human societies. But arguing that the expansion of Europe’s medieval cities beyond their walls was driven by the same dynamics as the post-World War II suburbanization of American cities is misguided. Not only is the geographic scale of the “city” vastly different, the forces driving growth—external threats, technologies, resource bases, economic and social structures, land tenure patterns, institutions of governance, etc.—are dissimilar. The superficial similarity in form masks enormous differences underlying process. Moreover, today many cities are no longer organized around a single center. Instead, the hinterland and multiple subcenters appear to be replacing the center. Bruegmann thus imposes a simplistic timeless organicism on urbanism that misses critical differences in the forces shaping cities across time and place.

The author’s use of scientific evidence is also flawed. For example, we know that white flight from central cities with growing African American populations helped fuel 20th-century suburbanization and defensive municipal incorporation. In combination with exclusionary zoning, it also helped create wealth for white homeowners and their children. But Bruegmann dismisses the role of race on the grounds that one city (Minneapolis) with a small minority population still experienced sprawl. Or consider low-density development, which demonstrably depletes developable land and promotes more rapid rural-to-urban land conversion. Bruegmann claims that this does not matter because totally developed land in the United States occupies no more than 5% of continental land area, which allows the entire nation to live at “suburban densities” within the 65,000 square miles of Wisconsin. Such nonsensical aggregate data ignore the locale-

specific constraints that invariably make sprawl problematic.

Confronted by issues of sustainability, Bruegmann complains that the concept is “warm and fuzzy” and relies on discredited notions of carrying capacity. He expects technology to extend resources to meet rising global demand, and he disregards mounting scientific evidence of rapid ecosystem services depletion by cities. Sprawl may actually promote sustainability, he claims, because “[a]t low enough densities, most citizens would probably be able to generate, using wind, water, solar, and geothermal power sources, a great deal of the energy they need on their own land.” But what about habitat loss? No need to worry, because “species extinction is still not well understood” and needs more research. Similarly, Bruegmann

concedes that human activities play a role in global warming, but “what can or should be done by whom and at what cost is still very much in dispute.” Sprawling cities and their auto-dependency may not contribute to global warming, so attention to urban greenhouse gas reduction is unnecessary. This tactic—denying scientific evi-

dence or consensus—has today become a depressingly familiar ploy to derail vital discussions on public policy matters.

After reviewing efforts to manage sprawl, Bruegmann concludes that results have been mixed at best. Even the nation’s largest smart growth experiment (Portland, Oregon) provides no “silver bullet in the fight against sprawl.” Unlike many European nations, the United States lacks the stomach for comprehensive land use management policies and suffers unanticipated negative effects from those policies that have been implemented. More important, sprawl is so good for so many, Bruegmann argues, that a market-driven approach to urban development is best. But because his ideas about the genesis of sprawl and its impacts are based on such weak science, his policy conclusions are inevitably misguided and impractical. The sustainability challenges created by a century of sprawl—concentrated poverty, fiscal disparities and socioeconomic polarization, jobs-housing imbalance, pollution and human health risk, habitat loss and species endangerment—cannot be addressed by individuals, families, businesses, and governments independently trying to maximize their utility. Concerted collective action has shaped cities in the past and is again needed to confront urban sprawl. Such action must be guided by the best social and natural science we can muster—and this *Sprawl* fails to deliver.

Sprawl
A Compact History

by Robert Bruegmann

University of Chicago
Press, Chicago, 2005. 307
pp. \$27.50, £17.50. ISBN 0-
226-07690-3.

The reviewer is at the Department of Geography, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-4012, USA. E-mail: wolch@usc.edu