

## BOOK REVIEW

**Sprawl: A Compact History**

by Robert Bruegmann

University of Chicago Press, 2005, 301 pages

Reviewed by Jason Alexander Hayter

Search a well-stocked library or bookstore for works on urban form and you might reach the same conclusion drawn by Robert Bruegmann: “Most of what has been written about sprawl to date has been written about complaints” (p. 3). But what separates Bruegmann, a professor of art history, architecture, and urban planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago, from most people is what he does next. “[S]o many ‘right-minded’ people were so vociferous on the subject that I began to suspect that there must be something suspicious about the argument itself” (p. 8). The result of this questioning is a work lauded by Alexander Garvin on the book’s jacket as no less than “the most important book on the American landscape since Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*”. This surprisingly ebullient endorsement from one of the most public personalities in city planning should make us all take notice.

In *Sprawl: A Compact History*, Bruegmann presents a history, not of suburbia, but of, as the title indicates, *sprawl*, which he defines as “low-density, scattered, urban development without systematic large-scale or regional public land-use planning” (p. 18). Divided into three major sections, the book delineates the history of sprawl, the history of campaigns against sprawl, and the history of proposed solutions to sprawl. Bruegmann does all of this while presenting *sprawl* as a non-pejorative term, part of a “process that affects every part of the metropolitan area” (p. 9). In choosing this ideological tack, and in presenting the history of sprawl together with the cultural and policy responses it has evoked, Bruegmann has created a unique, if somewhat flawed, work of considerable educational utility.

Bruegmann’s central contention is that sprawl is not an aberration in history, but the norm. Sprawl is not unique to a particular era, on a particular historical trajectory, nor the manifestation of a specific cultural value system. To those who claim that sprawl is a post–World War II phenomenon that has been growing ever worse since William Levitt began developing on Long Island, Bruegmann notes that Levittown was not particularly different from the late-nineteenth-century work of large Chicago developers such as Samuel Gross (p. 43). What’s more, despite the claims of critics, suburban lot sizes peaked in the 1950s (p. 5). To those who lament

that sprawl is inherently American, he asserts it is “only possible to call Americans anti-urban if one accepts a specific set of assumptions about urbanity” (p. 96). After all, that which we consider “urban” and that which is “suburban” is forever changing; yesterday’s “sprawl” is today’s Faubourg Saint Germain.

More importantly, Bruegmann asserts that from ancient Babylon to imperial Rome to Ming Dynasty China, high density was almost always “the great urban evil” which “the wealthiest and most powerful citizens found ways to escape” (p. 23). Today, “from Boston to Bangkok and from Buenos Aires to Berlin” dispersed development is occurring everywhere “where incomes have risen and there has been an active real estate market (p. 12). These factors — rising affluence combined with social and market freedom — are what allow for sprawl. Urban dwellers, regardless of geography, culture, or time, cause sprawl by merely seeking the options historically only afforded to the affluent (p. 109).

This leads to Bruegmann’s second key argument: “[W]herever and whenever a new class of people has been able to gain some of the privileges once exclusively enjoyed by an entrenched group, the chorus of complaints has suddenly swelled” (p. 116). If sprawl is caused by urban have-nots becoming haves, then anti-sprawl movements are caused by the haves growing outraged. Bruegmann asserts that while there is “no strong correlation between political affiliation and anti-sprawl,” there is such an affiliation of class (p. 163). When the “rush to the urban periphery” became a “mass movement” (p. 33), it was then one began to hear individuals such as Clough Williams-Ellis make criticisms “drenched in class resentment” (p. 118).

While Bruegmann makes these points well, throughout the book he also attempts to respond to virtually every factual and rhetorical arrow hurled at sprawl. In this task he falters at times. With certain issues, such as how rates of urbanization are calculated, he makes compelling arguments. But with other issues he slouches into the dismissive tone of those he condemns, giving, for example, the same short shrift to important arguments about redlining that he does to aesthetic rants about societal taste. More disappointingly, at other moments he counters overstatement with overstatement, making comments that fly in the face of on-the-ground evidence, such as asserting that exurban development is not a problem in the Southwest (p. 88).

While this work seeks to use the term “sprawl” in a non-ideological way, Bruegmann makes no claims of impartiality. Since the vast majority of literature on the topic of sprawl is against it, he states that “I am stressing instead the other side of the coin” (p. 11). Presenting argument and counterargument together is useful in theory, but in practice he unfortunately

creates multiple opportunities to pigeon-hole this work as a simple pro-sprawl tome. This book is too important to be dismissed in such a way.

Suburbs are not the counterpoint to the city anymore; statistically speaking, they are the city. According to some estimates, suburbs are home to 62 percent of metropolitan area populations.<sup>1</sup> Yet today the public debate on urban form often seems as if it was scripted fifty years ago, and the academy appears only capable of shaking its collective head in condescending disgust. *Sprawl* is not a deep historical work along the lines of Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier* or Robert Fishman's *Bourgeois Utopias*, nor does it claim to be. But Bruegmann brings fresh thinking to a topic that desperately needs it, and gives readers something that is woefully lacking on all sides of the debate: perspective. If eighteenth-century London is now considered an urban "golden age," he asks, is "it so inconceivable that in fifty years Los Angeles and Atlanta in the 1990s might not be seen in a similar way?" (p. 165). If Bruegmann's predictions for the future turn out to be true, this book may live up to the claims of Alexander Garvin.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census, "Population Trends in Metropolitan Areas and Central Cities: 1990 to 1998," taken from U.S. Census website: [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).

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