

This article appeared in *Harvard Design Magazine*, Fall 2006/Winter 2007, Number 25. To order this issue or a subscription, visit the HDM homepage at <<http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/hdm>>.

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REVIEWED BY RICHARD DAGENHART

## Sprawl: A Compact History

by Robert Bruegmann

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005

Reading the many reviews of *Sprawl*, one finds widespread praise for Robert Bruegmann's book. His main claims are by now well known. He argues that sprawl is part of the history of cities, whether 4th-century Rome or 21st-century Atlanta, just a natural result of people voting with their feet — or wheels. We should understand contemporary sprawl as the result of global affluence, providing an expanding middle class with “privacy, mobility, and choice.” So, for Bruegmann, sprawl is, on balance, a good thing, and he goes on to say that many of its faults are now self-correcting because city peripheries are now becoming more, not less, dense. *Sprawl* seems to have made the 21st-century city legible for many reviewers. *The Boston Globe* referred to Bruegmann as “a Jane Jacobs of suburbia.”<sup>1</sup>

Educated as an art historian, Bruegmann chairs the Art History Department at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and teaches architecture, landscape, and urban history there in the School of Architecture and the Program in Urban Planning and Policy. With this background, he brings a welcome historical and cultural perspective to the sprawl debate. Where so many people see only chaos, congestion, and ugliness, Bruegmann takes a different approach. He looks for the positive qualities of sprawl, instead of assuming that it must be stopped or replaced by something better. He hopes “to reach individuals who

are concerned with urban issues, worried about the massive growth that they see around them, and willing to suspend judgment long enough to look without prejudice at some of the evidence actually visible on the ground” (12). These are laudable aims.

Although many believe *Sprawl* is an important book and a welcome addition to the urban literature, it is badly flawed. Bruegmann confuses the temporary and fluctuating market-based functions of the city — land uses and density — with the much more permanent urban form embedded within the subdivision of land. Bruegmann also mistakenly assumes that all forms of urban expansion on the periphery are the same. He simply declares that peripheral urban expansion, if low density, is normal and, therefore, not problematic.

A century and a half ago the industrial city, like the sprawling city today, was not understood. Alexis De Tocqueville and Charles Dickens, among others, described the new industrial city as a scene of chaos, a horrific accumulation of unrelated parts.<sup>2</sup> It was Friedrich Engels who read this new industrial city for the first time by exploring its streets and alleys during a twenty-month stay in Manchester. He recorded his experiences in *The Condition of the Working Class in Manchester in 1844*.<sup>3</sup> In the chapter “The Great Towns,” Engels describes the structure of the new industrial city:

# Book Review

“Manchester contains, at its heart, a rather extended commercial district, perhaps half a mile long and about as broad, and consisting almost wholly of offices and warehouses. Nearly the whole district is abandoned by dwellers, and is lonely and deserted at night; only watchmen and policemen traverse its narrow lanes with their dark lanterns. This district is cut through by certain main thoroughfares upon which the vast traffic concentrates, and in which the ground level is lined with brilliant shops. In these streets the upper floors are occupied, here and there, and there is a good deal of life upon them until late at night. With the exception of this commercial district, all Manchester proper . . . [is] all unmixed working-people’s quarters, stretching like a girdle, averaging a mile and a half in breadth, around the commercial district. Outside, beyond this girdle, live the upper and middle bourgeoisie, the middle bourgeoisie in regularly laid out streets in the vicinity of the working quarters . . . , the upper bourgeoisie in remoter villas with gardens . . . in free, wholesome country air, in fine, comfortable homes, passed once every half or quarter hour by omnibuses going into the city. And the finest part of the arrangement is this, that the members of this money aristocracy can take the shortest road through the middle of all the labouring districts to their places of business without ever seeing that they are in the midst of the grimy misery that lurks to the right and the left. For the thoroughfares leading from the Exchange in all directions out of the city are lined, on both sides, with an almost unbroken series of shops, and are so kept in the hands of the middle and lower bourgeoisie, which, out of self-interest, cares for a decent and cleanly external appearance and can care for it. True, these shops bear some relation to the districts which lie behind them and are more elegant in the commercial and residential quarters than when they hide grimy working-men’s dwellings, but they suffice to conceal from the eyes of the wealthy men and women of strong stomachs and weak nerves the misery and grime which form the complement of their wealth.”<sup>4</sup>

London’s mid-century furries furnished Dickens the backdrop for his novels of everyday life. Manchester’s visual disorder gave De Tocqueville the scaffold for his social and political commentary. In contrast, Engels read Manchester with his eyes, ears, nose, and feet. What was chaos to others was for him a radically new urban structure.<sup>5</sup> This structure included the small blocks and narrow streets in the commercial district, the wide thoroughfares extending from it, the tangle of little streets and alleys in the working-class girdle, the regularly platted middle-class district, and the villas and gardens for the upper bourgeoisie, most likely along the curving picturesque and gated streets of Victoria Park, the first fully developed English suburb.<sup>6</sup> Understanding this structure enabled Engels to weave it together with his careful observations, including of the complete separation of inhabitants’ housing and places of work, the strict territorial divisions by social class, and the horrific conditions of the working class. He made the industrial city intelligible for the first time.

The lesson from “The Great Towns” is clear: the organization of the city’s territory — its subdivision — comes first. This is a fact so self-evident that it is often overlooked. Simply put, four parts comprise urban structure, whether a city is sprawling or compact. First is **land subdivision** into public and private domains, whether in small lots, blocks, and street rights-of-way, or big parcels, superblocks, cul de sacs, and arterial roads. Second is the **design of the public domain** — whether boulevards or highways, parks, or open spaces, city halls or civic centers. Third is the **design of the private domain** — the many different types of buildings and landscapes — shotgun houses or shopping malls, front yards or corporate campuses. Fourth is the **arrangement of activities** — the land uses, building uses and events that occupy the public and the private domains. In Manchester, land uses and densities have changed generation after generation. Although some residential districts, like Victoria Park, remain, practically none of the businesses or industry that Engels observed still exists. Buildings, many of

which housed different uses during their lifespan, have been demolished and replaced, again and again. Streets no longer look the same, although most are in the same location. All of these changes occurred — and continue to do so — within the overall framework that Engels recorded a century and a half ago. Subdivision comes first, and the subdivision pattern then becomes the most permanent part of the city. Breugmann does mention Engels briefly, but only to support *Sprawl’s* central theme of ubiquitous decentralization, not the critical role of urban structure that “The Great Towns” reveals so clearly.

Unlike Engels’ up-close observations, Breugmann begins his reading of the 21st-century city by recounting the view from his window seat during a descent into New York’s LaGuardia Airport. He describes the visible sequence of exurban penumbra, expanding fringe, first- and second-ring suburbs, early 20th-century speculative subdivisions, even “many of the most densely packed inner-city neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Manhattan” (4). Whether it once was the leading edge of New York’s urban expansion, or is so presently, it is all the same to Breugmann. He calls it sprawl. All of it. But his aerial view — and his book — remain detached from the structure of the city he is observing. With only 220 pages, Breugmann’s *Sprawl* is not a large book, and it carries the subtitle *A Compact History*. Only about half purports to be a history of sprawl. The other half is his account of what he describes as the 20th-century campaigns against sprawl followed by his critique of anti-sprawl remedies. Anyone familiar with the major themes of the sprawl debate will find this second half informative and well-referenced, but it does not change the terms of the debate or add new substance to it.

Breugmann defines sprawl in his first chapter. It is “low density scattered urban development without systematic large scale or regional land-use planning” (18). That this turns out to be a stealth definition has received little attention, but it is at the heart of the flaws of *Sprawl* — both in his historical account and in the sprawl debates. For Breugmann, sprawl is just a

corollary of any peripheral urban development that is lower density than the historic center. But peripheral development is almost always built at lower densities. Soviet-era Moscow and topographically constrained Hong Kong are two of few anomalies. Peripheral expansion also typically appears scattered at first because it is built incrementally, even when the later result may be compact. Systematic large scale or regional land use planning is rare indeed, especially in the U.S. Even Breugmann discounts the effectiveness of the Portland and Boulder planning efforts. His definition of sprawl enables him to shift away from his claim to understand sprawl for what it is and, instead, focus on the many arguments for and against it. His libertarian bias then becomes a platform for him to target sprawl's critics as "anti-sprawl reformers" and "intellectual elites" and to claim that just about anything other than free-market ideas are ill founded. If his definition is straightforward, not stealthy, then it is clear that Breugmann misunderstands the fundamental lessons of urban structure.

Breugmann's major claim, the one that has received the most attention, is that the history of the city is the history of sprawl. Rome's expansion outside its walls counts as sprawl, whether composed of widely scattered aristocratic villas or clusters of huts for those who are too poor to live elsewhere. The residential squares in Georgian London are implicated as sprawl because they were less dense than the City and were built only in increments, house by house, over time. The northern expansion of Manhattan in the 19th century — presumably including such buildings as the *Frick Mansion* and scattered apartment buildings like the *Dakota* — was also sprawl, despite the fact that all that growth occurred within the rigid framework of 25' x 100' lots and 200' by 600' blocks of the 1811 Commissioners' Plan. The ubiquitous American streetcar extensions and suburbs, now admired for their skillful urbanity, were also built incrementally at low densities, so they too are sprawl. Olmsted's *Riverside*, just outside Chicago, escapes mention, but it must be sprawl. Even Thoreau's lit-

tle cabin in exurban Boston might qualify. For Breugmann, the peripheries of 21st-century Atlanta and 4th-century Rome are the same. The subdivision form of the Bedford Estate in 18th-century London is clearly different from the Commissioners' Plan of Manhattan, Olmsted's *Riverside*, the periphery of 4th-century Rome and 21st-century Atlanta. Subdividing land is the primary act of urban design, regardless of who does it — surveyors, citizens, traffic engineers, developers, or subdivision and zoning regulations. The form of subdivision has always been the basis of urban structure — how it is established, how it is inhabited, and how it changes over time. Urban expansion can and does take many forms. Defining sprawl to include almost any development on the urban periphery empties the word of meaning and misrepresents urban history.

Density and land use are the day-to-day battlegrounds of the sprawl debate and the heart of Breugmann's definition. This follows logically from conventional planning practices, which set out land uses and densities first and then attempt to regulate them with zoning. That this privileges the temporary over the permanent parts of urban structure escapes Breugmann's attention. Densities and land uses change generation by generation; the subdivision patterns they occupy resist change and persist for generations.

Density is Breugmann's primary measure of sprawl. He uses the density gradient, which was a standard method for geographers and economists to represent the industrial city: higher in the center, lower at the edges. Each city, whether Manchester, Chicago, or Phoenix, has a specific gradient at any specific time.<sup>7</sup> Breugmann shows that these gradients are now flattening and / or rising. That is, as density falls in the center of many cities, like Chicago, the density of the periphery is rising. In others, like Phoenix, where the gradient is relatively flat, density now seems to be rising across the entire urban area. Although noting that densities change over time, Breugmann fails to recognize the role that subdivision form plays in enabling or constraining those density

changes. The central areas of most American cities have easily accommodated radically changing densities — higher and lower — during the 19th and 20th centuries. Superblocks and arterial roads in the periphery likewise contain both low and high densities, but in very different arrangements and development processes. The proper question is this: What subdivision forms enable densities to vary either up or down over time, and what subdivision forms appropriately or inappropriately constrain density changes? If density is the only measure, then Breugmann's claim that sprawl may be self-correcting is simplistic and applies only if one blindly accepts his narrow definition — low density equals sprawl — and that subdivision form does not matter. For the urban periphery to be truly self-correcting, then its subdivision form must respond to changes over time in sustainable ways. We have historical evidence — from every city — that densely connected small block subdivisions — like Manhattan or San Francisco or hundreds of other cities — can accommodate widely varying densities over time. We have little evidence how the contemporary periphery will enable changing densities. Breugmann refers on several occasions to low density as a settlement pattern. It is not. A settlement pattern is formed only by land subdivision.

For more than a half-century, land use has been the foundation of planning practice in the U.S. Land use designations come first. Zoning regulates land use first and then shapes building types with height limits, setbacks, parking regulations and minimum lot sizes. Land subdivision is either backed out of zoning regulations or is simply an accidental result. This reverses the traditional hierarchy of urban structure. The least permanent — the inhabitants and uses — becomes the most important. Land subdivision — the template upon which land uses rest — is ignored. Lord Bedford's 18th-century surveyors did not anticipate that the Architectural Association would occupy buildings on London's Bedford Square. The New York surveyor Simeon De Witt did not have Saks in mind when he and his fellow commissioners platted

Manhattan's Fifth Avenue. Planning a city with land uses — whether single or mixed — is to mistake the ephemerality of inhabitation for urban form. Breugmann confuses land use with land subdivision throughout the book. “One of the ironies of this [downtown] revival is that while central cities have traded on their ‘traditional’ character, much of what is most attractive about them is the fact that so many of the things that once defined them have disappeared. The decanting outward of all kinds of manufacturing and warehousing functions led to a dramatic reduction in street congestion, truck traffic, and pollution” (53). There is surely no irony in this downtown revival if one recognizes that the primary urban structure — the lots, blocks, and streets of the historic city — make up the primary part of the tradition being marketed so successfully in his example. Vacant buildings that make great lofts are an addition to that, not a substitute for it. When urban renewal or public housing erased the urban structure of lots and blocks and streets, as well as older buildings, the areas did not remain so attractive and only become so when the original urban structure was put back. It was Jane Jacobs who discovered — with her eyes, ears, nose, and feet — that the first requirement for urban structure is subdivision: to make blocks, not superblocks. Sidewalks for the ballet of everyday life, mixed-age buildings, and mixed uses are supplements to that primary structure, not substitutes for it.<sup>8</sup> Breugmann does not recognize that the expanding fringe has an urban structure, but one with its hierarchy of parts reversed. Subdivision comes last, although it remains the most permanent. Even when it dominates planning processes and local politics, land use is not urban structure.

Breugmann deserves credit for trying to bring a fresh and expanded viewpoint to the contemporary city. His stealth definition, however, leads to failure by engaging only the sprawl debate, not the promised “completely new vision of the city and its growth.”<sup>9</sup> Arguing among market-based practices, where presumably only land use and density design the city,

and reconstructing the historic city, made up of little blocks and lots, is no longer very useful. More useful would be to drop the word “sprawl” altogether and instead adopt the widely used term, “network city,” which follows primarily from the work of Manuel Castells.<sup>10</sup> Understanding more about this network city — its structure, local conditions, inhabitation, and prospects for change — is the necessary first step. Well taken is Breugmann's point that rising affluence and cultural traditions — “privacy, mobility, and choice” — explain much of urban growth and decentralization. Readers would be better served, however, with Robert Fishman's *Bourgeois Utopias* and Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier*.<sup>11</sup> Both of these classic works are more complete sources because they recognize that the forces causing decentralization are a different from the forces enabling it and shaping its form. Unfortunately missing from *Sprawl* are the works of many who have sidestepped the sprawl debate and begun to reveal the new peripheral city during the past decade: Manuel Castells's *Rise of the Network Society*, Albert Pope's *Ladders*, Edward Soja's *Postmetropolis*, Xavier de Guyter's *After Sprawl*, notable essays by Alex Wall and James Corner, and Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin's recent *Splintering Urbanism*. These have been joined, just after the publication of *Sprawl*, by David Graham Shane's *Recombining Urbanism* and Alan Berger's *Drosscape*. These are thoughtful and diverse research efforts on the periphery and the network city, and provide a platform for more.

Imagine a new Friedrich Engels reading Atlanta closely, with his eyes, ears, nose and feet, weaving an understanding of its urban structure with issues of environmental sustainability and social justice. Imagine a new Jane Jacobs observing Orange County discovering its structure and finding a ballet of diversity somewhere and somehow in the periphery. And imagine another J. B. Jackson, who on the back of a motorcycle, behind the wheel of a pick-up truck, or flying over the rich and varied landscape of the U.S., could discern a cultural geography of contemporary urban form and the

lives inscribed upon it. The frontispiece to his essay, “A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time,” is a photograph of a neighborly picnic on a cul-de-sac.<sup>12</sup> Breugmann is right. We need to know more about that. We need to know it in a way that weaves together its urban structure with the everyday life it accommodates and is inscribed upon it, the political ideas and ideals it represents, and how, and if, it might change over time for new uses, buildings, and streets. Robert Breugmann ends his book only by recounting the awesome view — at a great distance — from his window seat during a long urban departure from LAX. □

## NOTES

1. Anthony Flint, “The Virtues of Sprawl” *Boston Globe*, October 2, 2005.
2. Among the many descriptions of the emerging industrial city are Alexis De Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, J. P. Meyer, ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1958) and Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Sons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
3. Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (London: Penguin Books, 1987). First published in Germany in 1845 as *The Condition of the Working Class in Manchester in 1844*.
4. *Ibid.*, 68.
5. Steven Marcus, “Reading the Illegible,” H. J. Dyos, ed., *The Victorian City: Images and Realities* (London: Routledge, 1973), 257 – 275.
6. Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of the American Suburb* (New York: Basic Books, 1987) 73 – 102.
7. Breugmann uses the density gradient to make his general point about the recent increase in peripheral density in many cities. However, the density gradient is mono-centered, meaning it reveals little except gross generalities about the urban structure of poly-centric Atlanta, or the many other cities like it.
8. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 392 – 404, “Salvaging Projects.”
9. University of Chicago Press description of *Sprawl* (<www.press.uchicago.edu>).
10. Manuel Castells, *The Manual Castells Reader on City and Social Theory*, Ida Susser, ed. (Blackwell Publishers, Ltd.), 2005.
11. Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
12. John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 149

RICHARD DAGENHART, Associate Professor for Architecture, Adjunct Professor of City and Regional Planning, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta; researcher on subdivision practices and urban form.