

Sprawl

A Compact History

By Robert Bruegmann

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Pp. 301. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliographic essay, index. \$27.50.)

Many decry urban sprawl, while a much smaller number of equally vocal advocates argue that sprawl is not really a problem at all. Robert Bruegmann contributes to this debate by looking at sprawl in an historical context. The book addresses the issue from three perspectives, considering the patterns of urban development that constitute sprawl, the development of anti-sprawl movements, and attempts to deal with sprawl.

Bruegmann makes a convincing argument that sprawl has been a persistent feature of urban development throughout history. Defining sprawl as unplanned, low-density, scattered urban development, he describes sprawl in times and places ranging from ancient Rome and seventeenth-century London to the present. While many consider sprawl as a new problem arising in recent decades in the United States, he describes its occurrence early in the last century, explaining that it probably reached its peak (in terms of the low density of development) in the period from 1930 through 1970.

The book goes on to describe three anti-sprawl campaigns—in England in the 1930s, in the post-war United States, and in recent decades, extending from the United States to much of the rest of the world. Bruegmann argues that the leaders of each

movement were elitists intent on furthering their own interests, and that their arguments about the problems created by sprawl were often ill-supported by evidence. His final section, describing attempts to deal with sprawl, focuses on the limitations and unintended consequences of such efforts.

This book presents a great deal of very good information enhanced by Bruegmann's historical perspective. I wish that I could recommend it to my friends who are ardent but uncritical opponents of sprawl—they would benefit from having solid information about alternative views. Unfortunately, Bruegmann's choice in taking an advocacy position against those who oppose sprawl will make it easy for them to dismiss this book (as has already happened in a flurry of negative reviews).

Bruegmann is honest and straightforward about his position. Since the vast majority of the work dealing with sprawl stresses its negative aspects, he says he is seeking to redress the balance of opinion. But doing so leads him at times to make arguments that are less effective and convincing than they might have been, had he taken a more balanced approach. His broad definition of the phenomenon leads him to classify virtually all urban growth and develop-

ment as sprawl, but he then fails to identify quantitative or qualitative differences in patterns of development that would acknowledge the considerable differences between sprawl in late twentieth-century Atlanta and seventeenth-century London. The discussion of the anti-sprawl campaigns includes lists of the problems attributed to sprawl alongside evidence of why these may not really be problems. Bruegmann does seem to realize that he may be overdoing it, at one point admitting that he “is not trying to suggest that all of the charges against sprawl are false” (p. 138). But that is what his subsequent arguments appear intended to do.

The author’s argumentative tone is very unfortunate. Amidst a highly polemical body of literature, Bruegmann’s book provides a valuable historical perspective on the problem of sprawl based on good research and scholarship. But by adopting the position of an advocate against those opposed to sprawl, his work can be too easily dismissed as yet another polemic.

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