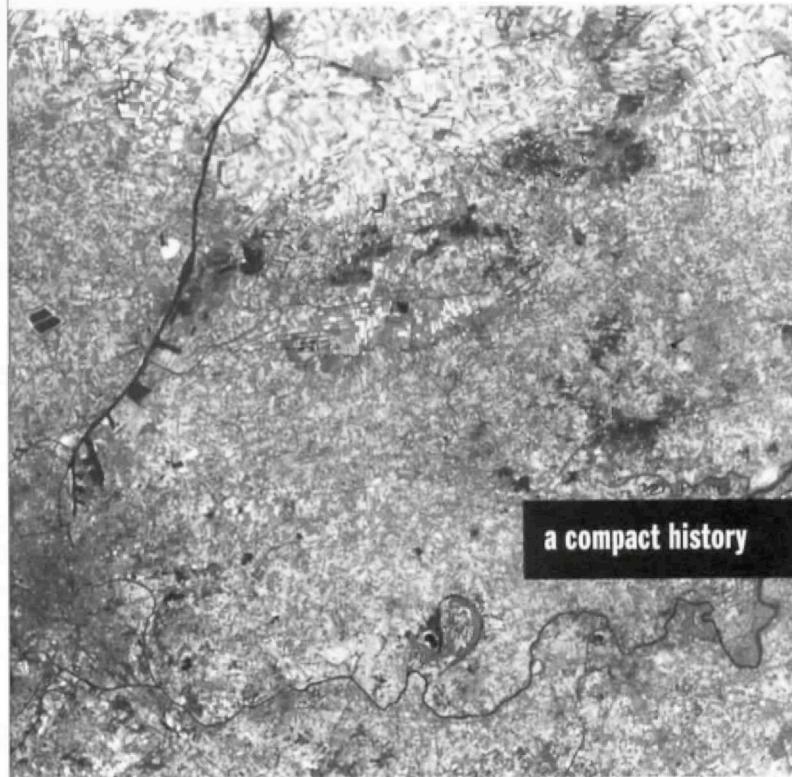


ROBERT BRUEGMANN



a compact history

SPRAWL

Liberte, Egalite, and Sprawl

Sprawl: A Compact History by Robert Bruegmann. Published by the University of Chicago Press, 2005. 280 pp., \$27.50.

Reviewed by Terrence Doody

Here are some facts from *Sprawl* author Robert Bruegmann:

"Los Angeles ... often taken to be the epitome of sprawl, has become so much denser over the past 50 years that it is now America's most densely populated urbanized area, as measured by the census bureau. It is considerably denser than the New York or Chicago urbanized areas.... Although this might seem preposterous since Los Angeles has no neighborhoods with densities anything like parts of Manhattan, Los Angeles has a relatively high density spread over an extremely large area. Los Angeles also has none of the very low-density exurban peripheral growth seen in the New York region. In fact, quite unlike Eastern cities, Los Angeles has almost no exurban sprawl at all because the high cost of supplying water makes relatively compact development almost inevitable."

This is the epitome of the argument Bruegmann makes in his well-organized book about the messy definitions and policies that have caused, confused, and tried to control urban sprawl. And here are some of the numbers behind this argument: At the time of the 2000 census, Manhattan contained 70,000 people per square mile, but New York City as a whole held only 26,000 per square mile. Chicago held fewer than 13,000 people per square mile.

And these were the only two cities in the country with a density of more than 10,000 people per square mile. Phoenix, for contrast's sake, distributed 1.3 million people over an area of 475 square miles. This is ten times the size of Paris, which like most other major European cities has been thinning out for a long time too. Cities naturally expand with

economic maturity, and they always have. Rome sprawled away from the tenements into the suburban latifundiae; London sprawled westward out of The City into the West End, which now feels like London's center.

It is through statistics such as those above, and the theories they permit, that Bruegmann's thesis will be developed or contested by the policy-intellectuals and academics he addresses, who'll agree with him, or not, about what sprawl actually is. According to Bruegmann, sprawl is definitely not a simply fixed demographic category or easily verifiable. Sprawl is a construct made of assumptions and values that over time have come to contradict each other. And it is a blunt rhetorical instrument, like its counterpart urban blight, that arms reform. Too often, he contends, it is a category of taste that means "others" do not live the way "we" do. They are too crowded and too poor and, therefore, alienated. Or they are too far from each other and too selfish and, therefore, alienated.

Cities are ecological rather than mechanical systems, and the cause of outward urban growth cannot be as simple as more cars and freeways, or racism, or zoning, or technology, or greed. Cities spread because, as their economies mature, populations prosper and want to exercise powers of choice, their new capacity for mobility, and their desire for privacy.

This is not all bad. The neighborhoods left behind are then open for the less prosperous to move up to. And when gentry move back into the center of a city, they can revitalize it without crowding it all over again. Gentrified neighborhoods are almost always more thinly populated than they were originally. Bruegmann himself lives in one such neighborhood just north and west of Chicago's downtown, where expensive renovations are inspired by both nostalgia for the area's original look and the

need for two-car garages.

Bruegmann is chair of the Department of Art History at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and brings to his scrutiny of urban policies both a historian's focus on the contexts in which assumptions are formed and an art historian's sensibility about progress. He doesn't wholly believe in it. Art and architecture haven't necessarily gotten "better," he argues. Cities haven't either, exactly. And then there's us, the human race—with more of us than ever before on the planet to foul things up.

Bruegmann has strong libertarian sympathies. He says that "many people [concluded] that congestion in fast-growing places proved the failure of highway building. It would probably have been more useful to consider congestion ... a testimony to an economy so vibrant and quality of life so high that people continued to move in and to drive despite the obvious problems." He also says: "At base, none of these objections to their arguments really mattered to the most passionate anti-road crusaders. Theirs was merely an update of the hoary tradition of wanting to reform the lives of other people who couldn't be trusted to make the right decisions on their own."

American downtowns now account for only about ten percent of a city's jobs,

and many of them have become theme parks of traditional urbanity. Intellectuals in particular love the old ideas and local textures of a pedestrian core. I love them as much as anyone. My daughter sent an e-mail from Antwerp recently to report, "We have had another wonderful European city afternoon." I was so proud of her, so heartbroken.

On the other hand, Bruegmann has this to say: "A higher percentage of newcomers to Houston than to Portland have been poor and members of minority groups. The fact that Houston has somehow managed to accommodate all of these new citizens and provide for them a median family income only slightly below that of Portland is an extraordinary achievement. In part it has been able to do this because of a permissive attitude about growth and land use that has resulted in land and house prices in Houston below the American urban average. For many families, the economic and social mobility seen in Houston are more important than the benefits of smart growth, as seen in Portland."

And this: "Many people, especially academics, have resisted the notion that ordinary citizens have played a major role in the creation of the great cities of the world."

See you at Starbucks. ■