



## BOOK REVIEWS

**Sprawl: a compact history** by *Robert Bruegmann* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, USA, 2005, 301pp. ISBN 0-226-079690-3.

This book is a history, mostly American based, laid out in three main sections: sprawl in different historical periods (including an inconclusive explanation of its causes), arguments and campaigns against sprawl, and remedies that have been applied in different periods. Forty-six pages of endnotes might make the beginning of a journey of personal research but are difficult to refer to as one moves with the flow of the text.

The author offers an interpretation of sprawl which he defines on page 18 as 'low-density scattered, urban development without systematic large-scale or regional public land-use planning.' His definition has left me wondering whether he considered the many kinds of, and reasons for, sprawl: is this very large-sack term a holdall for many categories? He follows this with what, in my opinion, is likely to be an unsafe observation: 'using this definition, we can safely say that sprawl has been a persistent feature in cities since the beginning of urban history'. I find myself uneasy too about his description of the growth of London, in particular its timing.

It seems to me that in England there is a different sort of sprawl: it is a sprawl governed (even ordained) since the early post-war years by the planning system. Before that time, sprawl was of a very limited kind: in Victorian and Edwardian London outward growth was mostly compact, albeit piecemeal. In lesser towns and cities growth (was it sprawl?) was influenced by the needs of industry-based housing or facilitated by trams, trains and buses. In the 1930s, which marked the advent of the car for the aspiring middle class in England, there was ribbon development and this laid the rays between which speculative builders laid out their 'semis'. One of these bridging the Second World

War in south Manchester is 1km across, but that surely is small in the context of Los Angeles. London's growth, like that of many larger British cities, focussed around older villages, which then became engulfed but are still visible today (Stoke Newington, Barnes and Harrow are examples).

Today's English sprawl is mostly contained in growth areas and often determined by ring roads. Is this sprawl or incremental urban accretion? Will the planned new settlement north-east of Exeter be defined as sprawl? Devonians will call it that.

Bruegmann has the fluency to help us through the many gently differing arguments and proposals but leaves this evidence-orientated reader looking for bedrock statements. Many, I believe, would wish to find in such a book some firmly held objectivized personal views built on his 13 years of research. Which is not to deny that they will find a useful iteration of campaigns and remedies and a lot of valuable observation.

In the chapter on the causes of sprawl, many alternative explanations put forward by different groups are considered. It is concluded that the most convincing answer as to why sprawl has persisted over so many centuries seems to be that it allows privacy, mobility and choice.

Bruegmann has chosen a difficult topic: the history (over many years) of sprawl (problematic to define) in several countries (most of them radically different) within different landscapes (hardly discussed). I came to the book as someone whose job it is to analyse urban function and structure and its history by the hundred square kilometre and to define urban growth from aerial photographs. In this I am supported by historical maps and fieldwork. I warm therefore to his comment (p. 93) on the widespread lack of understanding of new urban areas by those who should be equipped to describe them – historians, social scientists, planners and urban theorists – but who have never looked carefully at them. For that is my opinion too. I warm also to his views on intellectual prejudice as a barrier to observation (Lewis

Mumford is cited) and to his own practical observation that 'even a little time spent studying the map and then driving around an urban area will disprove [its undifferentiated character]'. The author has also profited by the view from the plane window and chooses this as his picture overview to start and finish the book. Quite right too.

As to remedies, Portland, Oregon, with its strong planning, is discussed. Is this reminiscent of England? Perhaps the creation (as at Poundbury, Dorchester) of high-density, mixed-era replica housing (attached to older suburbs) is one way. This is being imitated widely.

Conversely we might choose to follow Mischa Balen's prescription (see 'Land Economy', a 40-page report from the Adam Smith Institute) and turn over 3 per cent of conveniently-placed farmland to wooded spacey housing – then we have a prescription for sprawl American style.

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**Suburban form: an international perspective**, edited by Kiril Stanilov and Brenda Case Scheer, Routledge, London, UK, 2004, 270 pp. ISBN 0-415-31476-3

Though little-commemorated, the year 2006 marks the sixtieth anniversary of the post-war suburban boom. It is, perhaps, sobering to note that suburban landscapes, so ubiquitous in the modern world, are no longer footnotes to the development of older cities, but are instead established urban phenomena in their own right. Existing suburban development shapes and constrains new expansion, while older areas, aging rapidly, confront planners with questions of conservation and renewal. Despite this current relevance, however, the urban form of the suburb has received far less attention than that of the central city. While these areas are all too often dismissed as essentially uniform and uninteresting, a trained eye can uncover rich complexity in suburban landscapes. *Suburban form: an international perspective*, edited by Kiril Stanilov and Brenda Case Scheer, explores this complexity. This volume, a collection of eleven essays presented at the 2001 conference of ISUF, draws together case studies of suburban morphology from four continents. These essays reveal that suburban landscapes worldwide vary greatly and begin to explore the suburb's guiding principles and the

planning dilemmas they create.

In addition to their regional diversity, the case studies comprising this volume draw on a variety of disciplinary perspectives, ranging from geography to planning to architectural design. The essays' authors raise numerous themes and concepts, many of which are still in their infancy. In light of this background, Stanilov and Scheer present the essays as explorations of a multitude of issues, rather than arguments advancing any single central thesis. Indeed, the introduction to the work has only limited success in developing a classification typology for the case studies. ('Sprawl,' the editors note on p. 7, 'is often applied to every type of suburban extension'.) Therefore, Stanilov and Scheer organize the book not by the type or origin of each case, but rather by a loose division of the essays according to their thematic emphases. While the volume is formally divided into four parts, two main themes emerge: first the origin, variety, and operating principles of suburban areas, and secondly the role of planning in the suburb's past, present, and future.

The first half of the book begins by showcasing the worldwide diversity of suburban environments, considering both differences between different cultures and variation of built environments within particular areas. This part opens by comparing the post-war development of Cupertino, California, USA and Toyokawa, Japan – two heavily technology-driven cities which nonetheless show their separate cultural backgrounds in their built form. Next, a research team from Laval University presents an analysis of five suburban areas surrounding Québec City, showing the partial – but far from uniform – influence of traditional French-Canadian long-lots. Finally, six *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro are examined, tracing the historical antecedents of their surprisingly different forms.

The focus then shifts away from the specific details of each case study, seeking to derive more fundamental principles of suburban geography from individual studies. Thus, in Chapter 4, Tatom reconstructs the historical development of two suburbs near Lyons, but uses this pattern to generalize conclusions about the differing tendencies of large and small land parcels over time. Similarly, in the next chapter Scheer develops the definition of 'elastic tissue' – rapidly-changing commercial development, as opposed to more static suburban housing. These are among the most interesting chapters of the book, as they openly invite further research to test their ideas' applicability to other areas.

In contrast to the arms-length perspective of the