

This article appeared in Harvard Design Magazine, Fall 2003/Winter 2004, Number 19. To order this issue or a subscription, visit the HDM homepage at <<http://www.gsd.harvard.edu/hdm>>.

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Suburbia and Its Discontents

Notes from the Sprawl Debate, by **MATTHEW J. KIEFER**

Most Americans don't think much about the design of the built environment, odd though this may seem to those who do. But every so often broader issues bubble up into public discourse. The debate over sprawl, until recently confined to land use planning circles, seems to be everywhere now: at town meetings, in daily newspapers, and in latte lines at Starbucks. For most of its long etymological life, *sprawl* was only a verb: "to spread out awkwardly." The modern noun form emerged in the 1960s as the pejorative phrase "urban sprawl," reportedly coined by William H. Whyte. As the concept has gained wider cultural currency (commensurate with the awkward spread on the landscape it describes), this phrase has been shortened to a single word. Many Americans who would have difficulty naming a living architect other than Frank Gehry readily understand this meaning of *sprawl*.

"Smart Growth" has emerged as the consensus antidote. If sprawl is simply an after-the-fact description of a phenomenon, Smart Growth is a move-

ment, a collection of environmentalists, planners, and preservationists advocating a set of land use and design strategies—although, with the exception of New Urbanism, one with no ideal physical form—intended to direct new development toward existing urbanized areas and away from agricultural and natural landscapes. The name reflects both a realization that development will occur and a desire to shape it toward positive ends. Who could oppose that? Well, many do: libertarians, property-rights advocates, suburban home-builders, and, increasingly, urban residents who view Smart Growth as a move by wealthier suburbanites to shift the burdens of growth back to the city so they can continue to race to soccer games in their SUVs.

A review of the emerging literature of Smart Growth reveals both a lively internal discussion about sprawl's causes, consequences, and remedies, and the beginnings of a countermovement defending the status quo as more closely reflecting American needs and values. The first generation of sprawl books geared to a wider audience, such

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as James Howard Kunstler's *Geography of Nowhere* (1993), Jane Holtz Kay's *Asphalt Nation* (1997), and, most recently, Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck's *Suburban Nation* (2002), are mostly of the "Ten Things I Hate About Sprawl" variety: polemics against prevailing land use patterns and practices.

Several more recent books, reviewed for this article, form what might be called the second generation: books focused on Smart Growth solutions. For instance, *The Limitless City: A Primer on the Urban Sprawl Debate* (2002), by Massachusetts architect Oliver Gillham, tackles the origins of sprawl, the current debate over its impacts, Smart Growth alternatives, and prospects for future directions. Though more interested in framing the debate in a balanced and thoughtful way than in staking out a rhetorical position, Gillham concludes that the consequences of sprawl are sufficiently problematic to warrant attention, through both market-based measures and government action, particularly at the state level. (If you plan to read only one book to understand the general terms of the debate, this should be it.) *Smart Growth: Form and Consequences* (2002), edited by Massachusetts planners Terry S. Szold and Armando Carbonell, is a collection of essays by academics and practitioners on several aspects of Smart Growth. While not attempting to provide a single coherent viewpoint on Smart Growth, the book's essays are full of insights (more about these later) for those already familiar with the broad outlines of the debate.

The Regional City: Planning for the End of Sprawl (2001), written by Sacramento architect and regional planner Peter Calthorpe and Los Angeles planner William Fulton, examines cities and suburbs as an integrated whole and uses Calthorpe's own work—designs for transit-oriented developments and regional planning and policy efforts for Portland and Salt Lake City—to describe strategies for infill develop-

ment in maturing suburbs and for revitalizing older central cities. In *Solving Sprawl: Models of Smart Growth in Communities Across America* (2001), the Natural Resources Defense Council presents sprawl as an occasion for environmental advocacy. Though reductive in its analysis of sprawl, the book's heart is a series of descriptions of thirty-five exemplary projects, grouped according to their location in cities, suburbs, and natural or rural areas.

The case against Smart Growth is increasingly being made by people associated with conservative policy institutes, such as Wendell Cox of the Heritage Foundation, Samuel Staley of the Reason Public Policy Institute, and Randal O'Toole of Oregon's Thoreau Institute. O'Toole's *The Vanishing Automobile and Other Urban Myths: How Smart Growth Will Harm American Cities* (2001) closes the debate circle by describing what the author hates about Smart Growth: basically everything. Grounded in his experiences in Portland, Oregon, for twenty-five years a national leader among American cities in growth control, his book energetically attacks several dozen Smart Growth "myths," including the "Myth of the Vanishing Automobile," the "Myth of the Sterile Suburbs," and the "Myth of Urban Decline" (1, 52, 214). (To dispel any lingering doubt about his intentions, O'Toole dedicates the book to "freedom fighters . . . who are working for freedom of choice, mobility, and local control.")

Of course, every debate begins with a concise statement of the problem, but it is not easy to define sprawl and its negative consequences, let alone to define Smart Growth and what distinguishes it from sprawl. Dolores Hayden's essay in *Smart Growth: Form and Consequences*, "What is Suburbia? Naming the Layers in the Landscape, 1820–2000," advances a chronological morphology, reminiscent of John Stilgoe's and Sam Bass Warner's, of seven layers of suburbia from the first "borderlands" and "picturesque enclaves"

through 1970s "edge nodes" and 1990s "e-space fringes" (19–21, 21–24, 31–33, 33–34). As Hayden points out, each of these layers (really concentric circles) still exists on the landscape, moving ever farther from the urban core in search of the triple dream of house, yard, and community.

Gillham carefully documents the origins of sprawl and particularly the effects of government policy—ranging from FHA mortgage insurance standards to federal interstate highways—in promoting sprawl. This touchstone of the anti-sprawl literature—government's role in promoting sprawl—is sometimes stretched by commentators like Hayden to suggest a conspiracy between federal officials and real estate developers to segregate social classes and increase property values. Others, including land use attorney Brian Blaesser, another essayist in *Smart Growth: Form and Consequences*, and, more insistently, Randal O'Toole, emphasize that government policy, whether at the federal, state, or local level, more often merely honors consumer preference.

It turns out it is also not so easy to state, in a satisfying way, what is wrong with sprawl. Of course it's ugly—although Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown might disagree—but the Smart Growth movement struggles mightily to overcome the suspicion that it is an effort by urban aesthetes and environmentalists to impose their lifestyle choices on the majority, who generally prefer a suburban lifestyle (they just don't want so many others to like it so much too). The case against sprawl is based on its broader environmental, social, and economic impacts: its link to climate change, diminished air and water quality, and habitat and farmland destruction; its tendency to diminish community and quality of life; its increased public health costs due to respiratory ailments, traffic accidents, and even obesity—a growing problem in the United States due in part to our sedentary, auto-oriented lifestyle; the

costs of extending new infrastructure to the urban fringe; and reduced productivity and other economic costs of traffic congestion.

While these linkages might seem obvious, each of them is problematic in its own way. If sprawl threatens public health, why are public health advocates largely absent from the sprawl debate? Will sprawl be acceptable if zero-emission fuel cell vehicles become widespread? Is it ultimately less costly to adjust to global warming than to reverse it? Since truly significant habitats and ecosystems are mostly preserved already by wetland protection, endangered species, flood management, and other targeted land use controls, is the loss of natural areas per se more important than allowing human settlement to expand freely? How serious an issue is farmland preservation really, since American agricultural production continues to increase in spite of diminishing acreage under pasture or cultivation? It seems almost impossible to isolate the effects of settlement patterns among all the factors eroding community in contemporary American culture. Aren't television and the internet more subversive? Should we regulate them instead? Since sprawl can be tamed only by revitalizing older cities, aren't the costs of rebuilding urban infrastructure likely to be at least as great as extending new infrastructure into farmland at the fringe? Isn't that part of why we avoid these costs now?

At least as difficult as defining the sprawl problem in a satisfying way is defining the Smart Growth antidote. Oliver Gillham quotes Microsoft's *Encarta World English Dictionary's* serviceable and concise definition of Smart Growth as "economic growth that consciously seeks to avoid wastefulness and damage to the environment and communities" (158). Gillham also quotes former Maryland Governor Parris Glendening, who is widely credited with popularizing the term and who defines Smart Growth as "sensible growth that balances our need for jobs

and economic development with our desire to save our natural environment" (157). Other oft-articulated Smart Growth goals include compact walkable communities; a mixture of land uses and a so-called jobs/housing balance, which reduces commuting distances; affordable housing production; and preservation of significant cultural and natural resources.

However, sometimes the term seems to be used merely as a benediction for every favored land use, design, and social policy goal. The NRDC's *Solving Sprawl* falls into this trap, articulating Smart Growth principles that include fostering attractive communities and making predictable and fair development decisions that involve community collaboration (4). These overinclusive formulations open the Smart Growth movement to criticism, not only as having a primarily social agenda and inevitably failing to achieve its lofty ambitions but also by making it almost impossible to evaluate what fraction of new development qualifies as Smart Growth.

Though it undermines Smart Growth's appeal as a paradigm shift, it seems more sensible to view growth options along a continuum from those that are more consumptive of land and resources (and, in the process, perhaps more destructive of public health and quality of life) to those that are more land- and resource-efficient (and thus tend to promote public health and quality of life). Virginia Tech's Professor Arthur Nelson, in an essay in *Smart Growth: Form and Consequences*, argues that developments should be evaluated against specific Smart Growth objectives to determine whether they merit the moniker and categorizes some developments and communities (for example, the DPZ-designed new urbanist Kentlands outside Washington, D.C., and the city of Boulder, Colorado, which has had an urban growth boundary since 1978) as "better growth," but not good enough to be Smart Growth. Part of an emerging

effort to develop "indicators" of sprawl and Smart Growth, this suggests a baseline against which alternatives can be measured, although that's not so easy to establish either.

An example of the problem on a small scale involves the width of new residential streets. The fifty- to sixty-foot width recommended by the Institute of Transportation Engineers for the last half-century is now widely viewed as promoting excessive impervious surface, unnecessary land consumption, and the exaltation of fire access above all other goals. MIT Professor Eran Ben-Joseph's essay in *Smart Growth: Form and Consequences* includes a table of smarter standards from cities around the country ranging from twenty to twenty-two feet widths for streets with parking on one side to between twenty-eight and thirty-four feet for streets with parking on both sides (116–117). Is a twenty-eight-foot street always "smarter" than a thirty-four-foot street? At what point between thirty-four and fifty feet have we shaded from Smart Growth into sprawl?

Thankfully, the many examples of thoughtful planning and development described by Calthorpe, Gillham, and the NRDC remind us not to get too bogged down in a semantic debate. For instance, recycling the American Can Company's industrial complex in the Canton neighborhood of Baltimore into an office, retail, and restaurant complex, with the support of Maryland's Smart Growth program, seems a clearly preferable outcome to having this growth occur at a suburban highway interchange or even to a previous proposal to demolish the late 19th-century buildings and construct two high-rise residential towers. (Neighborhood opposition defeated this.) If Smart Growth can become a rallying cry—and, in Maryland at least, a source of funding—for better outcomes like this, how can it be bad? Similarly, Calthorpe's "Crossings" neighborhood in Mountain View, California, located

near a supermarket, a department store, and a newly opened Caltran station between San Jose and San Francisco, contains about 400 housing units mixed among single-family houses, townhouses, and apartments. It is difficult to argue that this is not an improvement over the failed mall it replaces.

Of course, the libertarian position would dispute that these outcomes warrant limiting freedom of choice. O'Toole claims that since only 5% of the country's total land area is now developed, there is plenty left for future population growth even at low densities. In fact, this is a difficult assertion to prove or disprove, based as it is on assumptions about the amount of undeveloped land that is developable at all, the likely rate of population growth, increases in agricultural productivity, and the limits to commuting distances as urban areas atomize. Other libertarian critiques seem more obtuse: for instance, the assertion that, because air quality is worse in urban than in suburban areas, Smart Growth actually diminishes air quality. Not content merely to question whether the scope of the sprawl problem warrants compromising other deeply held American values, the libertarian critique tries to refute every tenet of the Smart Growth movement as factually unproven or philosophically misguided. It perhaps tries to prove too much, without acknowledging that its own position is a form of social engineering, too, just with different goals in mind.

A lively debate exists both within and outside the Smart Growth movement over which mechanisms are most effective to achieve it. As Harvard professor Jerold Kayden points out in his clear-eyed essay in *Smart Growth: Form and Consequences*, the United States Supreme Court has left the states wide latitude in choosing whether or how to adopt growth controls. Some—most notably Oregon—in the 1970s chose urban growth boundaries administered by regional government with far-reaching, though sometimes controversial

results. (They create winners and losers by making land within the boundary more valuable than land outside it.) No other large cities have adopted them, and the smaller ones that have often lack the regional authority over land use and transportation decisions necessary to fulfill their purposes.

Maryland's Smart Growth program takes a more incentive-based approach: it directs state aid for roads, sewers, and schools to existing urbanized areas and provides funding for open space acquisition, farmland preservation, and brownfields redevelopment. Adopted in 1995, however, the program is still too new to evaluate. Perhaps more troubling, its champion, former Governor Parris Glendening, was succeeded in January 2003 by Bob Ehrlich, a Republican whose commitment to the program is uncertain at best. A host of other measures trumpeted at Smart Growth conferences, including cluster zoning, community land trusts, more compact New Urbanist development, and bicycle and walking paths funded through the federal Transportation Efficiency Act, reduce the pace of sprawl only marginally, without materially changing land use and development patterns.

A lively debate is also going on about the effects of digital technology on sprawl. As William Mitchell writes in *Smart Growth: Form and Consequences*, every new type of infrastructure loosens spatial linkages. Just as piped water diminished the importance of proximity to the village well, new communications technology allows corporations to locate their call centers in India and allows employees to telecommute, thus, perhaps, lowering traffic congestion but increasing decentralization. Digital television makes home entertainment more appealing, maybe reducing vehicle trips for movies and concerts. E-retailing, though reducing shopping excursions, replaces private automobile trips with delivery truck trips; this may work at cross-purposes with the move to narrower, more pedestrian-friendly

residential streets. Freed from the tyranny of geography, people can choose to live in the most livable places, converting sites from manufacturing centers to lifestyle venues where social interaction is by choice rather than by chance. Does this foster less community or more?

The reader strains to draw firm conclusions from this bewildering variety of viewpoints on sprawl and Smart Growth. Human settlement seems to spread inexorably as population grows and technology advances. The region is now well established as the basic spatial settlement unit, yet land use, for the most part, continues to be regulated at the local level. Sprawl can thus be viewed as a consequence of an effectively unregulated land market, aided by government tax and transportation policy. It will be reduced only if Americans choose to give government a mandate to use basic powers of regulation, taxation, and spending to intervene in the marketplace to serve important public policy goals, just as it did to build interstate highways, create a federal system of mortgage insurance favoring single-family homes, and offer a mortgage-interest deduction. All of these deliberate governmental actions responded to powerful popular wishes and were extraordinarily successful in achieving their goals. Americans enjoy levels of homeownership, mobility, and economic prosperity unknown in history. On these matters, the suburban experiment must be pronounced a resounding success.

As with other raging successes, however, suburbia suffers from the failings of its virtues. In our continual, poignant quest to achieve a pastoral ideal based on privacy, economic security, and mobility, we have converted concentric borderlands into the thing they once bordered, with mounting secondary consequences, and it is not clear that we have yet reached a turning point. Enormous private and public capital costs have been sunk into existing low-density suburban devel-

opment. It seems foolhardy to count on igniting a mass outbreak of altruism to change this, as more evangelical Smart Growth advocates sometimes do, even if altruism is often merely an appeal to longer-term self-interest. Americans tend to venerate mobility and freedom of choice and are likely to limit them only when it increases their economic security within a comprehensible timeframe.

Zoning became accepted in the early decades of the 20th century mainly to protect homeowners from industrial and commercial expansion. Its effect was, on balance, to increase property values, even if some individual owners suffered. Smart Growth has already taken root where it has a similar effect. For instance, most smaller communities that have adopted urban growth boundaries—including Boulder, Colorado; Lancaster County, Pennsylvania; and Keene, New Hampshire—are places with a small industrial base where second homes and tourism, and thus aesthetic appeal, are economic engines. What will it take for more Americans to perceive it in their economic interest to change their ways?

Of course, rapid change could be brought about by a galvanizing event—the way nuclear power's upward trajectory was halted by the accident at Three Mile Island in 1979. One or more large-scale environmental breakdowns traceable to overly consumptive land use practices could lead to concerted action if they cause serious economic dislocation. Security concerns in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks may be exerting another centrifugal force on central cities. Other factors, such as our increasing global environmental footprint, seem less likely to force change. As Gillham points out, with only 5% of the planet's population, the United States consumes 35% of the world's transportation energy. But Americans show no signs of greater willingness to curb consumption in response to international pressure to address global climate change. It also

seems unlikely that the world's oil reserves will be depleted before alternative-fuel vehicles are widely available, forcibly reducing auto dependence. Although some Smart Growth advocates emphasize that suburbanization's tendency to concentrate poverty in central cities could lead to social unrest, at least two recent studies of 2000 census data show that poverty became less concentrated, not more, since 1990.¹

While it may be more engrossing to speculate about world-changing events, it seems more likely that change will come incrementally because of a factor that is much more mundane: consumer preference. As commuting distances increase, cities from Boston to Bilbao are reinventing themselves with notable success as lifestyle venues, based in large part on providing a more pedestrian-friendly, culturally rich environment. This has little to do, really, with environmental protection or threats to public health, but it is unwise to underestimate the power of the consumer, which produced suburbs in the first place.

Democracy—consumer preference writ large—unfailingly reflects the popular will. Its self-correcting mechanism is reactive, nonlinear, and certainly imperfect, but it does provide some comfort that, if sprawl is as outmoded as many are coming to believe, sprawl will have to change. □

BOOKS REVIEWED

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NOTES

1. Robert Pear, "Smaller Percentage of Poor Live in

High-Poverty Areas," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2003, 20, describing studies by Paul A. Jargowsky of the University of Texas and G. Thomas Kingsley and Kathryn L. S. Pettit of the Urban Institute.

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