

# BOOK REVIEWS

## **SPRAWL: A COMPACT HISTORY**

**Robert Bruegmann.** The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, 301 pages.

Robert Bruegmann's *Sprawl* adds a necessary, though not flawless, point of view to the historic debate about urban growth and the implications of sprawl. Bruegmann's extensive literature review—which also provides the reader with a useful compendium of resources on the topic—details several eras of sprawl and in a three-part historical narrative focusing on three broad periods of debate: pre-World War I, the Postwar Years through the 1970s, and the years following the 1970s. Examples include arguments from the United States and countries from all over the world, but the book focuses on affluent society in the United States, Paris, and London.

While previous literature by seminal authors such as Lewis Mumford attacks sprawl as the root of all that is aesthetically unpleasing, criminal, and diseased, Bruegmann, quite refreshingly, does not believe sprawl deserves the negative connotation historically attached to it. It is also quite apparent from each new wave of sprawl that its combatants had learnt little from previous campaigns. Although opponents of sprawl tell us it is undesirable and that people prefer high densities and city sidewalks, Bruegmann demonstrates that all countries mentioned in the book contain sprawl, and he posits that it would not be as prevalent if it were not the lifestyle preferred by many residents throughout the world.

Bruegmann does an excellent job pointing out the shortcomings and faulty viewpoints of others; however, he provides no empirical evidence to support his own assertions. Many of his statements throughout the book are too idyllic. For example, Bruegmann declares technology, rather than resource conservation, to be the savior for the future of mankind. In many instances it appears that he believes in a dream where all the development on exurban and rural land uses green technology to decrease negative impacts on the natural environment.

Members of the planning community should make themselves aware of the attention this book received. Activities of planners and the traditional causes they support are frequently criticized in many sections of the book. For instance, Bruegmann makes many comments on the lack of efficiency and effectiveness of policies regarding transportation and defends the use of the automobile as a primary mode of transportation. He downplays the role the automobile plays in contributing to pollution and places doubt in the minds of readers that using public transportation is a solution to pollution problems.

If for no other reason, planners should add this book to their collection to serve as a reminder that most anti-sprawl policies and plans of the past have been championed by what Bruegmann and Michael Poulton deem the incumbents' club—those who reside in the more elite and powerful echelons of society. This reminder challenges planners to develop creative solutions to land use problems that can benefit society as a whole rather than a select few.

- AMANDA M. GOSKI