A UIC professor argues that sprawl isn’t so bad—just misunderstood.

By Harold Henderson

Robert Bruegmann went to Paris as a graduate student in the 1970s to study 18th- and 19th-century architecture. But when he flew in and out of Orly Airport, on the city’s southern edge, he saw something that blew his mind: a cityscape that looked like suburban Chicago or LA. European cities, he thought, were supposed to be pedestrian-friendly, not like our monstrous agglomerations of auto-dependent sprawl.

He couldn’t assimilate what he saw at the time, but it stuck with him. He came to UIC in 1977 to teach architectural history, and after acquiring a car in the early 1980s, he spent a lot of time exploring the urban perimeter.

On airplane trips he’d book window seats on daytime flights and take pictures as the plane landed and took off. The more he looked, the more suburban Paris began to make sense. Sprawl, he realized, is global.

“Anywhere Bruegmann pulls on his sweater: Why do antisprawl arguments want to protect and preserve places like Sonoma Valley and Nantucket Island but not Oak Brook?” Bruegmann notes that Oak Brook is denser and was built to a plan. If the suburbs are impoverishing the inner city, why are many of them even poorer? Drive U.S. 30 through Ford Heights sometime, a suburb so poor that it fighting the Illinois EPA to allow it to keep a massive, allegedly hazardous dump open.

There’s more. If LA is more densely populated than Chicago why is it considered a more sprawling city? If the Europeans do these things better, why do less than 10 percent of Amsterdam commuters use public transportation? If living in the city is an alternative to suburban blandness, then why do Chicago dwellers choose to travel by car, kick factories out of their neighborhoods, and patronize big-box stores? Bruegmann describes the grifted Chicago neighborhoods he’s written about as idealized versions of urban life, without the packed tenements and smoke-belching industries.

Similarly, the ten-acre lots are idealized versions of rurality, minus the machine sheds and manure. These opposite ends of the regional continuum have a common thread: suburban sprawl. Bruegmann sees sprawl critics as gentrified Chicago neighborhoods and the affluent exurbanites who leave them in the 70s—and the many proposed remedies. (I’m mentioned in the acknowledgments for reading an earlier, much different version of the manuscript.) He scrupulously documents and evaluates his sources, but his book isn’t an everhand-ed summation of the evidence. He’s a contrarian who chooses to emphasize the benefits of sprawl and the costs of reform because most writers do the opposite. He goes so far as to suggest that Chicago might be better off if the long-planned crosstown expressway—abandoned amidst protests after Richard J. Daley’s death in 1976—had been built to take some pressure off the Ryan/Kennedy corridor.

Bruegmann’s “compact history” comes in three parts: a history of sprawl across the centuries, the campaigns against it—including in Britain between the world wars and the U.S. after World War II—and in the 70s—and the many proposed remedies. (I’m mentioned in the acknowledgments for reading an earlier, much different version of the manuscript.) He scrupulously documents and evaluates his sources, but his book isn’t an everhand-ed summation of the evidence. He’s a contrarian who chooses to emphasize the benefits of sprawl and the costs of reform because most writers do the opposite. He goes so far as to suggest that Chicago might be better off if the long-planned crosstown expressway—abandoned amidst protests after Richard J. Daley’s death in 1976—had been built to take some pressure off the Ryan/Kennedy corridor.

It’s least convincing when he tries to downplay some of the human costs of sprawl. While affluent exurbanites can choose to trade extra commuting time for distant residencies, less affluent residents may be forced to make less pleasant tradeoffs. Bruegmann describes a dishwasher who’s used the stove to heat his food. He?’s a contrarian who chooses to emphasize the benefits of sprawl and the costs of reform because most writers do the opposite.

That’s no way to cultivate powerful friends, but Bruegmann would rather understand cities rather than make them fit a viewpoint. His harshest criticism of anti-sprawl is that they pontificate instead of looking around. From the Monadnock Building to the Japanese shopping center in Arlington Heights to an exurban trailer park in Indiana, he sees the subtly interconnected metropolis as “the grandest and most marvelous work of mankind.” And he’d be the first to say that it’s bigger and more complex than anybody’s ideas about it.
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I would like to point out that if Mr. McClurg has had such an interest in age diversity in our north and northeast city neighborhoods, he might like to know that, as far as Andersonville, Uptown, and Ravenswood are concerned, only 11 percent of families in the area can afford an average-priced condo, more than 40 percent of the area’s seniors make less than $25,000 a year, and the community has lost 3,500 senior families between 1990 and 2000. Thus, Mr. McClurg, the next time you pull the “age diversity” card in defense of well-to-do children, please also express your commitment to maintaining adequate and affordable housing for children of neighborhood families who have been here for several generations and for our neighborhood’s seniors. It’s great that you want your children to get their lattes and scones along with everyone else, but there seem to be bigger fish to fry than this.

Molly Sturdevant
Ravenswood/Andersonville

Letters

Ink Well by Ben Tausig

Mental Blocks

ACROSS
1. Star-filled late-winter night
6. Curtis Sittenfeld novel
10. Bands on the radio?
13. Hammer out
14. Volcano flower
15. Brave or Grande
16. With 59-across, the brilliantly simple basis of 28-down
19. Definitive def. source
20. Butterflies
21. Dalloway, e.g.
22. In case
23. “Who’s your daddy?” resolution
24. High-speed inits.
25. “Who’s your daddy?” resolution
26. Branch
27. Castle Grayskull hero
28. “Got it!”
30. Biblical term
31. Lessen
34. High-speed inits.
36. Ranch
37. Castle Grayskull hero
38. “Got it!”
40. Sea salt?
41. Carrier to kibbutzim

DOWN
1. “... short pier!”
2. Imminently
3. Central idea
4. Introduction to culture, on the farm?
5. Repair a pump, say
6. Hidden agent
7. Like public bathrooms in Chicago
8. Nights before
9. Hits Muhsin Muhammad, say
10. Sea 27-down
11. Short-lived Bush nominee
12. Covers some ground
13. Haggard, e.g.
14. Pittsburgh co. cofounded by J.P. Morgan
24. Tire type
25. Moines or Plaines preceder
26. Gorby Park refresh
27. With 50-down, a description of 28-down
28. Theme of this puzzle
29. Poetic nightfall
32. Docc Mc
33. Mozart rival
35. Poetic nightfall
37. That woman
39. Summer abroad
40. Seeing
41. Friendster status option
48. It’s often pitched from a deck
49. More competent
50. ___ Men (“Who Let the Dogs Out” group)
52. Failed runner-up
53. Exile isle
54. Market, as a ballet
55. Man-to-man defense alternative
56. One in the red
57. ___ account

LAST WEEK: SPARE TIME
1. Star-filled late-winter night
2. Imminently
3. Central idea
4. Introduction to culture, on the farm?
5. Repair a pump, say
6. Hidden agent
7. Like public bathrooms in Chicago
8. Nights before
9. Hits Muhsin Muhammad, say
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