

[Sprawl and Northeast Ohio](#)

Case Western Reserve Presentation Thoughts and Impressions

I am willing to openly admit that at first the idea of listening to a professor lecture that most arguments that expose the flaws of sprawl are unfounded and entirely questionable uncomfortable. Not unlike having someone start lecturing me on how their particular deity could offer salvation for my soul there was this inherent uncomfortable-ness. I knew I was to be in enemy territory, unarmed and alone and quite possibly I would not make it out alive.

As I read through some of the responses Robert Bruegmann's book [Sprawl: a Compact History](#), I came to realize that my greatest fears could possibly be realized and no matter how painful, I may be the better off for it. The most common complaint was that Bruegmann was to attack the liberal literati elite, those that envision social urban engineering as a savior for solving our social woes and that sprawl, in itself, was nothing more than an exercise in self protection and economic collection. "There wasn't to be a large argument" I thought to myself "from which I would be exposed to ideas I wouldn't be able to accept".

It wasn't that I was wrong, I just wasn't correct enough to remain complacent.

It is true, as some have claimed, that Mr. Bruegmann took a stance that Cleveland's sprawl issues weren't as awful or as large a hindrance to the central city as one would imagine, however his contentions were backed by reasoning that at best I would consider spurious and at least I would call insulting. Granted Bruegmann has a background in art history and not in urban planning, sociology, architecture, philosophy, economics, government or biology/ecology however not once was the mention how sprawl would influence master painting. Not once. This saddened me.

Now the reasoning for the time lapse that has been marked by the publication of this article is entirely due to attempting a way to form my impressions as well as to let the initial disappointment leave my opinion not as biased as it was for that past week. It was hard to decide on where exactly to begin so in my typical fashion I begin where I ought to, at the beginning.

I don't remember much of what Robert looked like. I sat way in the back. There was a lot of traffic, I left the office later than I would have liked and the main road out in front of the campus building was under construction or complete removal. It would be hard to ascertain for certain. I do remember the following statements happening in quick succession. I apologize for my summation, I couldn't write quickly enough to quote completely.

- 1- "I am not for or against sprawl; instead I am here to discuss how the arguments against sprawl are incorrect."

- 2- "...the main problem with sprawl is that there is a lack of agreed upon definition."
– But then goes on to states that issues of sprawl is as old as cities.

These opening statements immediately set the tone as biased. Not even in a way that I could argue it was because I was already biased against the conversation. No, there was an order of logic here that was severely lacking. Let me adjudicate;

...one may not attempt to propose a state without bias by proposing that only one side lack fundamental grounding for their argument. That is inferring support for the opposing side of the argument by not allowing the basis of its perspective to be questioned or judged.

...one may not rely upon a lack of definition and then make a concrete statement that alludes to a completely understood and accepted definition of what sprawl is. How can something start for sure, when one doesn't exactly understand WHAT it is?

I suppose that as soon as these statements were disseminated I immediately became guarded and perhaps overly defensive. What I am offering here are only my thoughts on comments that piqued enough of my attention and curiosity to be jotted down in my sketchbook. I suppose by now I should state that this is not meant to be a treatise or proper study of a simple presentation that may only appear lopsided due to time constraints or material being presented. Perhaps I took the entire thing out of context. I can't honestly be sure however I do believe that the lecture was video recorded and should be available online at some later date on Case Western Reserve University's website.

For organizational purposes and try to shorten this I will list ideas that Robert presented and then extrapolate my reactions upon them. Again, I am summarizing his statements and in no way am intentionally altering them so as to strengthen my argument. I am actually too lazy to do that.

- From the comment that sprawl had existed for as long as there were cities, even counting Hadrian's villa as an example of sprawl sort of made me wonder then why rural areas weren't considered more as 'sprawl' as they obviously act as support for more urbanized and centralized areas (the provision of raw materials to be manufactured or processed). Sure they can be self sufficient but that wasn't offered as a criterion for not being considered. I suppose that as one examines the change in human social behavior from nomadic to agrarian to current one could ascertain that centralizing communities was in fact at first a reaction to existing disjointed and decentralized communities. It is almost as if we were naturally experiencing a 'state of sprawl' and then collectively gathered for protection, maximize production, reproduction, etc and cities are actually the foreign ingredient to the mix. I would almost accept that line of thinking, that there is a natural tendency for people to exhibit what could be considered activities of 'sprawl' as a means to harkens back to more basic instinctive fulfillment? Regardless, a palatial retreat pales as an exurb example when utilized as a way to

- justify the decades (centuries) or residential community decentralized development.
- Exurbia allows for all economic classes and then we were presented with a quick example of collective minority organic development. This really actually was probably the most interesting portion of the presentation and was covered to the depth which I had just passed on to you. Here was the potential of utilizing examples on self-gentrification or community social engineering that was missed and that I feel could lead to some rather interesting investigations into ethnic community growth and self identification as well as community policies and practices. Damn.
 - There was this very pretty chart that showed that the automotive saturation point in the US has almost been reached and that European automotive use mirrored American auto use with a slight time delay. I believe it was being used to illustrate that as wealth increased people were moving to an automotive based culture and therefore sprawl was inevitable. The charts were based upon a comparison of auto ownership to 'registered drivers'. I question that survey sample and what it represents. That is similar to asking people with buses passes if they take the bus. Chances are when you are utilizing a specialized license it is being done so as to take part in the activity for which the license is required. Anecdotally, I am aware of quite a few people who only utilize state ID's since they do not own a car, do not need one and would rather not spend the extra money for the driver's license. I wonder if they were proper counted in the study.
 - The comment was made that "Sprawl is rarely for the affluent with taste". I have no comment on that. I was just amazed it was said out loud at Case.
 - There was some discussion on the word 'sprawl' being coined after World War II (think around 1955) for being used to describe cities spreading out into the countryside and the introduction of the 'Garden City' (England) as a way to keep communities centralized and control the lose of green space. These examples were brought up to show that any way of controlling sprawl would inherently fail and would only increase commute time without adding any sort of the community pleasure of urban life who's protection was being attempted. This was done without any sort of economic understanding of what the 'garden city' was or was attempting to be; instead we were only presented with the creation of disparate bedroom communities completely severed from the urban infrastructure that was being relied upon for jobs and goods. At around this point Portland, Oregon was singled out as an American city which totally failed as controlling sprawl. I believe it was also at this point that the comments that public transit has continuously been losing ridership and do nothing to stitch the urban fabric together. It was also here that I realized that the presentation would consist of gross generalizations with some weak statistical analysis tossed in to support whatever oversimplified point was being alluded to. There is so much research to the contrary of these remarks that I find even contemplating offering a rebuttal tedious. Perhaps later that can be it's own response, for now just utilize Google and search for RTA Ridership, Public Transportation, or glance at census statistics for major urban areas and the surrounding exurbs which would mostly lead one down the path of understanding that decentralizing all services does little

- but remove a great portion of the tax base of the urban industrialized or commercial center and transplant it to the surrounding areas who may or may not share that funding. Then glance at education statistics, income, health and age gaps as compared to specific areas and I am pretty sure you could imagine what the housing stock, street width, utility infrastructure, etc would be before you visited. Then perhaps you could understand why cities such as Portland, Oregon are attempting to control expansive growth and cap development. The main problem with Portland is that the outlying suburbs don't follow similar rules and instead have developed the same typologies that all sprawl developments exhibit, decentralized commuter bedroom communities that lack any employment infrastructure and cannot support themselves if cut off from the urban core.
- A spurious accusation was made (perhaps just another generalization) that sprawl has a rather miniscule impact upon the local environment other than the possible dislocation of native plant and animal species. This didn't include emission from commuting vehicles nor the embodied energy to build the vehicles in the first place, the fact that most suburban homes are greatly oversized for the American family resulting in a larger use of raw materials, energy to refine the raw materials into construction materials, extensive increase of energy to heat or cool oversized homes which become little more than storage spaces for the collection of extraneous material goods (to fill them) which themselves took raw materials and energy to produce. Or, one could argue that by simply creating larger roof surfaces to capture and re-radiate the sun's energy that heat island effect is a measurable impact to the environment. Or runoff/groundwater pollution and control (think Painesville, Ohio) or decentralizing infrastructure to transmit power, water, roadways further distances than if everything existed in a collected area. There are really too many environmental arguments to make so I will defer some of those to later conversations as well.

The conclusions drawn by Bruegmann from his studies were that sprawl was a bad diagnostic tool for judging how well a city is doing, that it distracts from real urban problems and that shifting industry is to blame for many of the sprawl problems facing American cities (at least the older industrialized ones, such as Detroit and Cleveland).

It was also alluded to that Cleveland hasn't much to worry about as the suburbs are getting denser with consolidation and infill as the overall population grows (is it?) and that city government should concentrate on maintaining infrastructure in order to capitalize on future opportunity.

My problem with those conclusions is that I honestly believe sprawl is a problem that does affect the urban core. It displaces tax revenue that should be used for capital improvements and contributes to a declined urban educational system which results in families fleeing to the schools of the suburbs. I also don't entirely accept that shifting industry can be only to blame; otherwise one could wonder how any city manages to maintain or even increase an urban population. If everything is constantly changing and no city could adapt then there wouldn't be any cities (or at the very least they would be moving around all the time). I have no idea what city governments should do to rebuild

the city. I suppose there is always 'rebranding' or 'redefining' but I don't believe that much can be accomplished until government streamlines its processes and clarifies its functions making it easier for businesses to operate and for citizens to utilize.

I also feel that many facets of community living were glossed over such as general aesthetics, social behaviors/patterns/needs, neighborhood/community development and economic development and requirements, all of which are important concerns regarding the degradation of urban cores and the migration of population to decentralized and unconnected neighborhoods.

I would like to thank Case Western Reserve University and Mr. Robert Breugmann for the lecture and forum from which this important and current topic was presented and while I find it hard to respect many of the conclusions that Mr. Breugmann alluded to I am excited by the possibility that perhaps he has gotten more people thinking about how any sort of gross overgeneralization, either for or against 'sprawl' does little to advance solutions or offer possibility for specific change to counter the economic and social conflicts that exurban/suburban living have presented us.

Resources cited by Bruegmann:

[Demographia](#)
[Wendall Cox](#)