A GOOD WORD FOR URBAN SPRAWL

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Introduction

"Sprawl" is the word that we give to the dispersion of urban areas and urban uses. There is little agreement today on most of the aspects of urban development in the United States. However, there is almost complete agreement to the effect that "sprawl" is bad. Sprawl is almost as universally condemned as sin or as Fidel Castro. Yet, by and large, "sprawl" is a natural phenomena that is almost universal. Why should it be so condemned? What is wrong with it? If it is bad, is anything being done to stop it? When these basic questions are investigated, it becomes apparent that sprawl is not an isolated phenomena, but is actually the evidence of the development of a complete new type of arrangement of urban areas. Like all of our assumptions, this one requires occasional review and re-examination. Perhaps what we condemn as "sprawl" is actually something much more important and much more fundamental. Perhaps it is something that may justify our approbation and not our condemnation, particularly if it is developed in the proper manner.

Background

For the several millenniums of the history of western civilization, there has always been a basic assumption that the city was one thing and the country was another thing. The two have
been diametrically opposed and have been looked upon as being completely different. This is true, not only of the physical environment, but of the people that inhabited the two areas. There was the "city slicker" on one side and the "country hick" on the other side. And, up until the first or second decade of this century, this differentiation was pretty well indicated on the ground. There is no question as to what was "city" and what was "country". The city grew up to a certain point or a line and there it stopped. Beyond that line, the country began. There was a complete separation of the urban and the rural.

Generally speaking, and particularly in the United States, because of the influence of Jefferson and similar thinkers, there has been a general agreement that the "country" was good and the "city" was bad. The city was the place of the criminal and the evil; the country was the place of the godling and the upstanding. On the other hand, the city was also attractive because the city was the local of excitement, of civilization, itself, of entertainment, of culture. The important matter here, however, is the fact that these two types of areas were so separated they did not mix; one was separated from the other; there was a clear line of demarcation - geographic, sociological, psychological, in every respect.

Also, up until the first and second decades of this century, cities could grow with great difficulty. They could grow outward with a limit by the media of transportation which were fairly slow, or, if fast, were quite expensive to construct, operate, and maintain. Or, they could grow upward by the erection of taller buildings
and an increase in the density of population. However, basically insofar as the geographic area of occupancy was concerned, the city was quite limited.

Now, all of this was changed by the introduction of an extraordinary form of transportation - the privately owned and operated automobile. As the automobile became more and more common, as it became the possession of almost every family, then it became possible for the city to spread out over literally tremendous areas of land. Where the streetcar, for example, limited the area of urbanization to a radius of five miles from the common center, the area that could be urbanized under the automobile was extended and to 35 miles, in some cases, even a greater area could be developed. Thus, the geographic area that was subjected to urbanization, which under the streetcar was only _____ square miles was increased_____ fold or to ______ square miles by the introduction and the common use of the automobile.

The automobile enabled families to live much farther from their place of employment. New subdivisions, individual houses built along country roads, started to spring up in many directions. Then, the shop owner, the storekeeper, went out from the downtown area and started to locate new stores in the environs of the cities in order to be more convenient to his customers. He soon understood that although an automobile does not buy anything, the automobile customer appreciates a place that is convenient to reach by highway and a place where it is easy to park his car. Consequently, the shopping center came into existence, most of the shopping centers were built in outlying locations. Shopping centers provide some
employment and when built in outlying locations, they make it possible for their employees to live 25 to 30 miles from where the shopping center is located. Thus, the area of urbanization began to occupy an even greater area of land.

Another factor in this picture: for many years industry had occupied central, close-in locations. Industrial activities were held close to the sources of power. Generally, a multi-story and congested type of operation, this development. This became obsolete with the introduction of the one-level assembly line type of manufacturing operation. Furthermore, the industry on a one-story operation needed much more land, not only for the buildings, but for parking for its employees and for some open space, and most important of all, for some room for future expansion. Many industries had gotten into difficulties because their sites were too small and when they came to expand the factory, there was no room. The wise industrialist, not wanting to make the same mistake twice, chose a large area for his new site. No sites of this kind were available in the central city but good sites of these characteristics could be found many miles out into the countryside. Thus, industry began to disperse to the country, many miles out from the center of the city, and, here again, the industrial employee could live 20, 25, 30 miles away from the newly located and decentralized industry. Thus, these separate waves of cause and effect, began to have their influence felt many miles out into the country.

We are all too familiar with what this looks like. Rows of houses, intermixed with stores, junk yards, filling stations,
and occasional industries strung themselves up and down the countryside. The easy and cheap land was developed first. Difficult sites, and sites expensive to buy or to develop were bypassed. Our urban areas began to exhibit all of the effects of this tremendous "sprawl". Along the eastern seaboard, a tremendous megacephalous, extending from Maine all the way down to Washington, began to be created. Here, apparently, was an urban development without rhyme or reason, without form, without sensible arrangement, created haphazardly and by chance. In most cases, the expansion took place into governmental units arranged to handle rural problems, that had no experience or knowledge of urban affairs, controls in the way of planning, zoning, subdivision regulations were almost uniformly imposed too late, and in many cases, were almost inadequate.

**Beneficial Effects of Urban Sprawl**

Urban sprawl has been quite popular. The 1960 Census indicated that a sizeable percentage of the population of the country, 40,600,000 persons were classified as "rural non-farm" population. This is in contrast to a "rural farm" population of 15,000,000 persons. The "rural non-farm" population includes those persons living in unincorporated areas not making their primary living from farming and those persons living in incorporated areas of less than 2,500 persons. The "rural non-farm" population in 1930 was only ________, by 1940 it had reached _______, and by 1960, __________. It is thus growing
at a rate ______ times as fast as the growth of the national population. Why do so many families move into this type of environment? There are probably three major reasons.

1. It is possible by going into the countryside areas to provide housing development at a lower cost. Living costs could be less expensive in the "rural non-farm" area.

2. Environment in these areas provided fresh area and open space.

3. Living in the countryside areas gave a feeling of "pioneering"

A fairly large size piece of property could be obtained surrounding the house. Some gardening could be done at least on a part-time basis. There was a feeling of getting back to the soil and of going into a relatively small community with perhaps a more responsive and more intimate type of local government. While possibly very few of these families had Thomas Jefferson's observations in mind, nevertheless for many of them there was a definite appeal to get their family and children away from the city (evil) and out into the country (wholesome). In doing this, they were also encouraged by the mores of our society, which hold up home ownership as a desirable family arrangement and by the promotional activities of real estate men and homebuilders who are anxious to market homes located in these areas. The homebuilders knew that if they could lower the price of the commodity, they could appeal to the many times more families and that one way to do this was to get out into the country where land was cheap and where an inexpensive product could be provided.

Adverse Effects of Urban Sprawl

One of the major effects of urban sprawl is that it represents an almost unbelievable waste of land. As William Hodges observed,
here is one of the few civilizations that has figured out a way whereby we can have ten acres doing the work of one, the haphazardness that characterizes urban sprawl, the hit or miss type of development, the fact that here and there we will have a handful of shacks that will ruin property values within a square mile or so or that we will spoil whole sections by a few junk yards or cheap commercial developments. These have been adverse characteristics of urban sprawl.

Two, urban sprawl represents a most wasteful type of development insofar as the provision of utilities and services is concerned, with much of the land being bypassed in favor of cheaper or more easily developable property. It is obvious that many more miles of water lines and sewer lines will be required and that many more miles of telephone and power cables will be necessary to serve the same units of population. There are similar problems in connection with provision of police and fire protection. And, again, the whole and highly expensive systems of public transportation for public schools are undoubtedly necessitated by this characteristic of urban sprawl. It became virtually impossible over large sections of the country to create any kind of an efficient school system where the students could be required to walk to school.

The third adverse effect of urban sprawl was that much of it resulted in bad development. Development was poorly planned in relation to the land, and particularly in relation to the land form and areas of rough topography. Land use controls were almost universally exercised too late, there were intermixtures of land use, drainage courses were disrupted, wooded areas needlessly demolished, wildlife unnecessarily disturbed and good farm land unnecessarily preempted. Bad development is not an essential con-
comitant of urban sprawl; however, it has almost universally accompanied it.

Programs for Control of Sprawl

By the late 1920's, a few students of urban affairs began to recognize the problem of urban sprawl as a dispersion of our cities. By the early 1930's, the voices of condemnation reached a virtual chorus. The numbers joining the chorus have increased each year until now virtually every student of urban affairs joins in condemning this process of city building as resulting in poor living conditions, being wasteful and being destructive of both urban and rural values. In common with Mark Twain's observation about the weather, however, there has been much more talk about it than there has been any actual measures to do anything about it. However, the phenomena, which is not unique to the United States, but which is found in many other countries, and particularly those in the western Europe and the western hemisphere, has evoked two general methods for combating it or dealing with it.

The first of these is the "Greenbelt". This is probably the most direct and effective method of dealing with urban sprawl. Under this approach, a study is made of a city based upon factual land use information and land use trends and an estimate is made of the area that will be required to provide an assumed future population with the necessary lands for residence, commerce, industry, recreation, public and semi-public purposes and the like. The most advantageous location for this required area is in set down on the ground in relation to the site of the city, keeping in mind the most efficient and economical area to be served with sewer, water and other public service facilities. Then beyond this line or "boundary of urbanization" the land is purchased.
by the government, either in fee or partially, to preserve the
"Greenbelt" of agricultural land. Either the entire fee can be pur-
chased and the land leased or the government will go out and purchase
from the agricultural owners the "development" right", which is
simply their right to utilize the land for anything other than agri-
cultural purposes. This method has been used most frequently in
England where "Greenbelt"s have been established around a great number
of cities by such a process and has been used in North American
Continents, one instance in Ottawa, Canada, where the Canadian
Government has purchased a "Greenbelt" to protect the environs with
capital.

In the United States, this type of action has not been possible
because our cities have not had the resources with which to purchase
such vast amounts of land area lying substantially beyond their bor-
ders. In the United States the never to be controlled urban sprawl
has been, however based upon somewhat the same theory i.e. a calculation
of the urban area required, a plan for its location and then instead
of land purchased the zoning of the land lying beyond for agriculture
purposes, precluding an urban development. This type of zoning has
generally required a large lot area. To be effective, the individual
lot area should be five to ten acres or more and there never has been
true government action to put a limit to urban growth by requiring
agriculture use beyond. Accompanying such a plan and program, of
course, have been proposals for coordination of public utilities,
particularly sewer and water, with such a plan and a policy not to
make these available to areas beyond the limit of urbanization. In
some instances, such policies have actually been much more effective
than have been the zoning requirements.
Two Attempts to Control Urban Sprawl

It is well at this point to look at two attempts to control urban sprawl. Because urban sprawl primarily affects the unincorporated areas outside of the cities, these two examples are both of county governments in metropolitan areas.

St. Louis County

The first of these is St. Louis County, Missouri, the area surrounding the area of St. Louis. (St. Louis is a city-county and is not included within the limits of St. Louis County. This separation was made in 1875. This, however, has no bearing upon the control of urban sprawl.)

The urban growth of St. Louis reached the limits of the city about 1919. While there had been some earlier suburban residential development in communities such as Webster Groves, Kirkwood and Ferguson, which could be reached by commuter service offered on the railroads, the development in the county was not substantial until the decade started in 1920. As the metropolitan area grew, St. Louis County became the major area to contain this growth. The county's population, which was only _______ in 1900, reached _______ in 1920. Between 1920 and 1930 the population doubled. The growth between 1930 and 1940 was not quite so rapid; however, the population was almost 275,000 by 1940 and then by 1950 the growth reached 406,000 and the 1960 population became 675,000. While continuous planning efforts were not undertaken by the county until 1939, an early planning study made in 1928 recognized the problem of "urban sprawl" confronting the county. The 1928 plan estimated a future population of 1,000,000 persons to be living in the county. It visualized most of these located within nine miles of the limits of the city of St. Louis with the major portion of the county area lying beyond this line.
reserved for a very low density population – a rural or agricultural
type development. Urban sprawl being a new thing, the 1928 study
did not go into detail in stating how the plan was to be effected.
Instead, the authors of this study, the population pattern, sug-
gested being so intimately sound and logical and so almost inevit-
able in character as to not require any counter measures to insure
confirmation.

The next county planning effort was undertaken in 1938, which
initiated the continuous planning process as an integral part of
county government. The 1938 study, being made in the psychological
depth of the depression, rather than on the psychological peak of
a boom as was the case in 1928, took a dimmer view of the county's
future. It looked ahead twenty to twenty-five years through a
population of __________ persons by 1960. For instance, the
actual population of the county at that date was somewhat higher
___________ persons; however, this error was not so significant
as to nullify any of the dates and proposals of the 1938 study.
The 1938 study included a significant and a detailed attempt to
grapple with the problem of urban sprawl. It included land use
calculations, projections of population for a comprehensive zoning
plan for the county, which would guide and direct a more intensive
development into a more sound land pattern. Looking back over the
development of the county, the plan has three possibilities for
future county development – a very congested one, a very scattered
and wasteful one and a pattern that would balance out.

Unfortunately, the recently completed re-analysis of the county
plan indicated it was the "more scattered and wasteful" pattern of
development that was actually followed; subsequently, the 1938 plan.
The proposals for zoning and coordination of areas of utility service were not successful in grappling with the urban sprawl problem. By the time the plan was revised and brought up to date in 1960, much of the county had been developed since the 1960 plan proposed only a small amount of "open space" areas and areas for "large lot estates" type development. In other words by 1960 insofar as controlling urban sprawl is concerned, the planners virtually "threw in the sponge" and gave up on the attempt. The 1960 plan incidentally forecast a population of a little over a million persons in the county by 1975, as going back to the basic population figures in the 1928 study.

Hamilton County, Ohio

Hamilton County, Ohio contains the City of Cincinnati. It differs from the St. Louis area in that the city is in and a part of the county. In addition, there are some _______ other incorporated problems. The county contains a population of 850,000 with about 500,000 inside the City of Cincinnati and about 196,000 in the other incorporated areas. It is part of a larger regional area and has some urban development across the river in the Kentucky area, some extending into Montana and also has a close link with the Cincinnati-Middleton, Hamilton-Dayton urban corridor extending from the northend to northeast.

The Cincinnati-Hamilton County area is a most difficult yet attractive one on which to build a city. The land is quite rough, the hills become steeper and the valleys deeper as the tributary water courses approach the Ohio River. There are scenic views of extraordinary interest, there is little flat land either in the park plains of the rivers or on the top of the hills available for industrial development or available for residential development.
In 1948, the Cincinnati Planning Commission compared a metropolitan plan for all of the urban areas on both the Ohio and Kentucky sides of the river. This plan was made with the assistance of committees and citizens and officials from portions of the metropolitan area beyond the City of Cincinnati. This plan is similar to the 1938 St. Louis County Plan in that it also endeavors to grapple with the problem presented by urban sprawl. The problem was in a way more difficult in the Cincinnati area and the plan, as proposed, included not a simple outlining of the limit of urbanization but rather established a series of "communities" each located upon the smaller developable land topographically speaking and separated by the less developable land which was proposed for permanent open space. The plan was not too specific as the now "permanent" open space was to be made so; however, presumably this was to be done by combination of zoning and land ownership. The Greenbelt areas have communities and surrounding the urban development were also to be used as a site for public golf courses, parks and recreation areas, et cetera. The plan was hindered upon again a sincerity of estimates of growth, the plan estimated a 1960 population of , whereas the actual population as of that date was included persons.

In 1960 and 1961 a new plan was prepared for Hamilton County. This plan included an exhausted analysis of the land use trend as taken place between 1948 and 1961 and included new projections of future population and a new land use plan. The land use figures are of some interest. In 1948, within the county, each 100 persons was utilized being 10 and one-half acres for all urban purposes, i.e. resident, commerce, industry, public and semi-public uses,
parks, streets, railroads, airports, et cetera. By 1961, this ratio had increased to 12.3 acres. Significant, however, was the fact that the new growth that occurred from 1948 to 1960 required 19.6 acres per 100 persons. In other words, the new growth that occurred in the period of 1948 to 1961 required almost twice as much land area per capita as had the growth prior to 1948.

Hamilton County no effort at all had been made to follow the open space proposals of the 1948 plan. The largest lot required in the county zoning regulations was one-half acre and in addition to _____ percent of the townships in the unincorporated parts of the county rejected the proposed zoning for many years and in these areas there has been no land use whatsoever. Because of the rough topography, the scattering and the sprawling of the urban area had been even more pronounced in many cases as in ___________. The country roads ran along the ridges down through the valleys, became lined with homes and in a few instances subdivisions went up off these roads into an odd bit or two of flat land essential to development, but in general the pattern of scatterization in the urban area was most pronounced. As an endeavor to control urban sprawl, the major suggestion in 1948 had been a complete failure. The 1960 plan in effect recognized this reserved certain extremely rough portions of the county for low density development and included some proposals for open space along the major service channel; however, this plan did not include any proposals to control the urban sprawl but building instead in virtually all of the remaining county would be developed for urban purposes made possible by the circumstances. Here again, in essence the planners, "threw in the sponge" did not try to control urban sprawl. Although they had many suggestions as to how a better type development could result from the sprawl.
Can Urban Sprawl be Controlled

The two examples sited above of St. Louis County, Missouri, and Hamilton County, Ohio, are deemed fairly representative of a great number of similar studies, plans, efforts that have been made over the country in an endeavor to try to come _________ grips on the problem of urban sprawl. Almost all of these have been equally unsuccessful. The conclusion that can be reached from the rejected study of the examples is that urban sprawl probably cannot be controlled at ______________. There are several reasons for this including among them the following:

There is a strong minority of oppositions to any endeavor to control urban sprawl. This opposition is found on the part of real estate interests and the homebuilder. The difficulty here is a basic dichotomy and that is that it is virtually impossible to have both at the same time and land speculation and to achieve the planning. The construction of our cities is a "business" in some places that the city could move southwest. This has been frankly recognized and there is no attempt to direct the form and pattern on the part of the city because to do so would interfere with the land speculator and the land speculator is frequently an important person in the community power structure. In almost every American city, civic leaders are bothered by this situation. There are many groups that have been formed in an endeavor to bridge the gap. This may lead to element in community development. These are groups that the American committee to improve our neighborhood for the urban land institute on the national scale and there are many local civic groups that are turning their attention to this problem. It all boils down, however, much of what they try to do is in essence an endeavor to pull a very thin "respectability"
over the land speculation process. Urban sprawl cannot be controlled unless a local government is willing to: say that certain lands may be developed and certain of the lands may not be developed. This line has to be drawn on a map and has to be recorded. The drawing of such a line would, of course, markedly reduce the property values on one side of it while it might have a tendency to raise them on the other side. There are then very few people that are willing to support local councils or county boards in action of this type and there are a great many people, many of them prominent persons of influence in the community, whose interest is to see that controls and installations of this type not be put into effect. Consequently, any type of governmental action to control urban sprawl will immediately arouse and intense the well financed opposition from persons of power within the community.

The influence these persons exerts is made simpler for them by the numerous zoning jurisdictions in their town and in the useable urban area. In Ohio and Michigan, for example, much of the zoning is done by townships. In most of our states, it is relatively easy to incorporate a municipality or suburb. If the real estate people are developers and don't like the zoning imposed in the county, perhaps they can get a handful of disreントled farmers (many of whom are also speculators) to go together, create a new city and put in zoning ordinances to their liking. This process has taken place numerous times in all of our major metropolitan areas and can very quickly make a laughing stock out of any county or metropolitan plan.

There is some justice, however, on the side of the homebuilders and real estate people because they have great difficulty in obtaining land for development. As cities grow, land around them becomes divided into smaller and smaller parcels. The farmer on the edge of town
often divides his farm among four or five children or he may sell off a five, ten or twenty-acre tract. People who would like to build their homes without a neighbor in back then a decade or so later when the pressure of urban growth becomes intense, it then becomes necessary to develop the entire parcels more intensely. It is virtually impossible to do this and to have the results be any type of a sound or reasonable neighborhood residential development. The modern homebuilder cannot operate on a five or ten-acre tract; he can build houses efficiently only when he has 40 or 50 acres, and preferably several hundred acres, to operate on. The tract that he requires needs to be suitable for their purpose, not too rough, needs to have reasonable close-at-hand basic public utilities, such as sewer and water, need good street access and to be reasonably quiet. These tracts of land are few and far between and he feels somewhat justifiable so that he must build on those that he can find no matter where they may be and no matter what they do to the overall pattern of urbanization. He, of course, is more interested in the practicabilities of the moment than in long-range development of the urban area. The long-range development of the urban area suffers in turn because persons involved in it have not given sufficient attention to the land assembly problem of the homebuilders.

Problem of land assembly in the environ cities is a "blind spot" in present American planning theory and practice. Virtually no attention whatsoever is given to__________, yet this is a problem probably is causing our cities more difficulty than any other single factor. Certainly, it is a problem the magnitude of which far
outweighs the problem of urban renewal to which both federal, state and local government has given so much attention. What can be done? Some authorities have suggested that large home building corporations be reconstituted in a manner similar to public utilities, and under proper public guidance and control, be given the power of condemnation to assemble land between them. Perhaps this solution is too drastic. There is a second, however, and that would be a compulsory assembly of land with each property owner being paid for his land in proportion to the proportionate representative of a total project and then receiving stocks for this portion which he could sell upon completion of the project. A somewhat similar type of legislation has been on the books for many years in British Columbia and is entitled the "Compulsory Land Use Plan Attack". This type of an approach involves no more extensive governmental powers than does urban renewal and certainly should be investigated and tried. This problem of land assembly in the fringe areas cannot be over emphasized.

The fourth factor is the inadequacy and maldistribution of planning personnel. A number of qualified persons who can undertake comprehensive urban planning and, particularly site planning which is so badly needed in the development of the fringe areas, is very few in relation to the problem at hand. And then, the planning personnel that is available is to a surprisingly large extent concentrated upon the problems of the central city and particularly upon the problems of urban renewal. Thus far, we focus our attention on these relatively few square miles of blight and slum around the center of our cities, we have a much larger and much more difficult problem in the poorly planned and poorly laid out extensions of our community around their fringes. Thus,
we do not only have inadequate planning personnel but it is poorly distributed in relation to the problem at hand. This is probably another example of the principal that it is always easier and most of us prefer to lock the door after the horse is stolen.

Finally, however, the major reason why urban sprawl cannot be controlled is that planners do not come up with any alternative that has the public approval. The 40,600,000 rural non-farm persons in the country are, in effect, population that has voted in favor of urban sprawl. We have few people that have not even heard of, or given any thought to an alternative to urban sprawl and certainly no simple concrete effective proposal has been made as an alternative to it that has any popular appeal.

**Future Trends Point to More and More Urban Sprawl**

All of the trends that can be determinable today indicate that there will be more influences toward sprawl in the future than there has been in the past. The inter-state highway system will be a major factor that will hence forth encourage persons in the urban area out. As we go into the future, there is even more emphases on the automobile.