

BOOK REVIEWS

Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream

Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk and Jeff Speck.
New York: North Point Press, 2000. ISBN: 0-86547-557-1.
\$30.00.

Reviewed by Tracy Miller, Grove City College (PA).

Suburban Nation summarizes many of the most important arguments of a growing movement among architects and urban planners in North America known as "New Urbanism." The basic thesis of this book is that, since World War II, urban development in the United States has occurred according to a model and pattern that is unsustainable, unhealthy and self-destructive. Suburban sprawl generally does not pay for itself financially, consumes land at an alarming rate, produces insurmountable traffic problems, and exacerbates social inequity and isolation (p. 4).

The book begins with a definition of "sprawl" and compares it with traditional neighborhood development (TND). Chapters three through seven focus on housing, the design and arrangement of streets, traffic and transportation, real estate developers, and the victims of sprawl. The remaining chapters present a comprehensive vision of new urbanism, ending with a chapter that talks about the role that different levels of government can play in promoting better patterns of development.

This book argues that there is "a direct causal relationship between the character of the physical environment and the social health of families and the community at large" (p. xiii). In comparison with traditional neighborhood development, suburban sprawl weakens community ties. This raises an important question that should be of concern to Christians—does the structure of our cities and towns make it more difficult for us to love our neighbors?

This book also raises issues of stewardship and justice. Sprawling suburban development results in excessive amounts of land devoted to parking, streets and highways, and also in the waste of many hours and many gallons of gasoline on automobile trips. The most helpless victims of suburbia are the poor who are left behind in the cities (p. 129). Corporate flight to the metropolitan fringe combined with the lack of affordable housing makes it difficult for the poor to commute to the best jobs. Public transit is unavailable or undependable in low-density suburbs and most destinations are not within walking distance, marginalizing people who do not own or cannot drive automobiles.

Although the authors have backgrounds in architecture and urban planning, there is extensive discussion of economic issues associated with urban development. An important part of their argument is that most people would rather live in traditional neighborhoods, which actually cost less to create than conventional suburban sprawl. To an economist, schooled in the doctrine of consumer sovereignty, this immediately raises the question—why is it that people buy homes in conventional suburbs if they would be better off living in traditional neighborhoods? The authors argue that the form and character of post-World War II urban and suburban development were "imposed upon us, by federal policy, local zoning laws and the demands of the automobile" (p. xiii). Sprawl is referred to as an "innocent error," the unintended consequence of the standard approach to planning and zoning that is used almost everywhere (p. 20). In many areas, minimum street widths are required to insure accessibility by large firefighting equipment, which is preferred due to the incentives created by union contracts. Traffic engineers design streets with the goal of speeding traffic to its destination as quickly as possible, ignoring the interests of pedestrians and adjacent homeowners. Zoning laws in many areas specify minimum lot sizes, prohibit mixing residential, educational, retail, and office development in the same neighborhood, and separate single-family homes from apartments.

Although the authors do not use the term, much of their argument rests on the notion that development involves significant externalities, which are influenced by design principles and the mix of activities that are included in an area. Adhering to certain design principles, such as confining parking to the rear, uniform setbacks of buildings, sidewalks and planting of street trees at regular intervals would result in substantial external benefits. Automobile-oriented development with its associated strip malls and parking lots creates external costs while pedestrian-oriented development and public transportation create external benefits.

Duany *et al.* answer many of their critics by providing a comprehensive description of their vision. If TND is to replace conventional suburbs on a large scale, regional planning will be necessary. They recognize that transportation plays a critical role in determining settlement patterns. A good regional plan needs to emphasize providing public transportation along with promoting dense enough development so that transit can be self-supporting. Another role of regional planning is to prohibit or discourage the development of separate shopping centers and instead promote

neighborhood stores. Only if it is regional can planning prevent a large strip mall from being built in a nearby community and driving many neighborhood stores out of business.

In discussing the role of government, the authors are careful to argue against increased taxation or a greater role for the federal government. Rather than advocating more regulation, they want regulation and funding mechanisms changed to promote the building of communities instead of "building businesses" (p. 236-7). The federal government should use a greater share of revenue from gasoline taxes for public transit, with "federal funding criteria regulating urban design within a half mile radius of all new transit stations" (pp. 234-5). States must provide leadership in "purchasing land for conservation, mandating urban boundaries, or restricting low density development" (p. 233). The question they do not adequately deal with is, can we count on the same state and regional governments that have provided leadership in promoting and financing sprawl development to consistently promote well-designed communities? Will those governments instead use rhetoric about eliminating suburban sprawl to consolidate their power so that they can more effectively serve the interests of politically powerful groups? After all, these are the same state governments that have financed stadiums for the benefit of major league sports teams in the name of saving cities, even as they bulldoze urban neighborhoods to make room for the stadiums and their expansive parking lots.

A considerable amount of the book is devoted to critiquing the excessive reliance of Americans on automobiles. The authors claim that building more highways and widening existing roads only makes traffic worse (p. 88). While students of economics should not be surprised by the assertion that more and wider highways result in people traveling longer distances to work, this does not prove that more highways are not sometimes a solution to traffic problems. In mentioning how automobile use is subsidized the authors implicitly recognize that incentives are an important cause of the problem. They cite a source that claims government subsidies for highways and parking are equivalent to a fuel tax of approximately \$3.50 per gallon. This implies a much higher subsidy than estimates I have seen in other sources, such as Vuchic (1999).

The authors speak out in praise of European forms of

development, where governments rather than private entrepreneurs decide where new development is going to occur. Their vision implies an important role for regional planning agencies. These agencies must establish a permanent countryside preserve, which sets aside multiple parcels of conservation land to form a rural boundary based on criteria that could stand up in a court of law (pp. 143-44). They also must adopt a set of principles to distribute locally undesirable land uses, such as garbage dumps, power plants, affordable housing and homeless shelters, in an equitable manner throughout a metropolitan region. The problem with these proposals is that they do not recognize a role for market forces in determining which land is to be preserved and where undesirable land uses are to be located. Will regional planners, who do not bear the full costs of their actions, do a better job of making these detailed stewardship decisions than the owners of private property, whose wealth depends upon how well they anticipate the demands of future residents?

One of the big questions that new urbanism raises for Christian social scientists involves the appropriate balance between community standards, private property rights and individual freedom in regulating the development of cities and suburbs. This book raises an important question of political philosophy—"Is it the role of the government to promote individual rights while defending the common good, or to promote the common good while defending individual rights?" (p. 219). The Scriptures have little to say about individual rights, but we are commanded to love our neighbor. In order to accomplish this, shouldn't civil government do more to promote the common good by promoting well-designed communities?

This book is written with the intention of creating "expert generalists" who will become involved in promoting a new vision of urban development. One primary reason for economists to read books such as this is to remind us that economics ought to serve broader social goals such as promoting good communities, justice, and environmental stewardship.

Reference

Vuchic, Vukhan R. 1999. *Transportation for Livable Cities*. New Brunswick: Rutgers. ■