

Sprawl: Urban Legend?

“Measuring Sprawl” by Witold Rybczynski, in *Zell/Lurie Real Estate Review* (Spring 2002), The Wharton School, Univ. of Pennsylvania, 256 S. 37th St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19104.

To many critics, urban sprawl is like landscape pornography: They know it when they see it, and they know where to look for it. Or do they? According to Rybczynski, a professor of architecture and urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania, those who decry sprawl as irresponsible growth and liken its haphazard and aggressive patterns to cancer may be guilty of misdiagnosis.

Conventional measures of population density—the number of inhabitants per square mile—largely confirm conventional notions of sprawl: Older metropolitan areas such as New York and Chicago sprawl the least, while cities in the South and West sprawl the most. But the picture changes when one takes into account how land is actually used. Metropolitan areas contain surprising amounts of acreage that is devoted to parkland or can’t be developed, such as mountain slopes and wetlands. Using a 1997 U.S. Department of Agriculture study of urbanized land (land used commercially, residentially, or recreationally), Rybczynski draws a “radically different” portrait of sprawl. Los Angeles, with 5,318 people per urbanized square mile, is the most densely populated city in the United States, followed closely by New York, Miami, and Phoenix. Philadelphia ranks a surprising tenth, not far ahead of Dallas,

Houston, and least-dense Atlanta, which, with 1,818 people per urbanized square mile, remains the “poster child” for sprawl.

Moreover, U.S. Census Bureau data tracking changes in the population density of urbanized land from 1982 to 1997 yielded unexpected results: In the old industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest, land urbanization occurred at twice the rate of population growth. Even though droves of Americans flocked to western and southern cities, land urbanization in those regions actually proceeded at a slower pace than population growth. New development was actually more sprawl-like in the older metropolitan areas.

So what’s behind sprawl? Disparities in land costs and the rate of population growth, argues Rybczynski. The localities consuming the most land are in the slow-growing Northeast and Midwest, possibly because the existing compact city centers there stimulate a greater demand for less-dense development. Conversely, geographical and water-resource constraints in the South and West have tended to restrict the amount of land available for development, and thus contributed to higher land costs. What really may be bothering the public, Rybczynski suspects, is not sprawl but rapid growth.

PRESS & MEDIA

Bias in the Middle East

“Days of Rage” by Sharyn Vane, in *American Journalism Review* (July–Aug. 2002), Univ. of Maryland, 1117 Journalism Bldg., College Park, Md. 20742–7111.

A tidal wave of indignation hit news organizations last spring—angry e-mails, phone calls, letters, even boycotts. The complaint: bias against Israel (or, in the minority view, in favor of Israel) in coverage of the latest violence in the Middle East. “It’s more continuous and more intense than I’ve ever seen it,” said beleaguered National Public Radio ombudsman Jeffrey Dvorkin, who received some 9,000 furious e-mails between March and May.

“People have bristled at everything from word choices to story play,” with failure to cover rallies (pro-Israel, usually) an especial sore point, notes Vane, books editor of *The Austin American-Statesman*. In Minneapolis, some 350 readers of the *Star Tribune*, including the state’s highest elected officials, objected to the paper’s refusal to describe Palestinian “suicide bombers” as “terrorists.” A letter writer from an editor of B’nai B’rith’s *International Jewish Monthly* complained that

while a front-page *Washington Post* feature vividly portrayed the suffering of a Palestinian family, no comparable attention was paid that month to Israeli victims of Palestinian attacks. Meanwhile, writes Vane, the online Palestine Media Watch urges readers to protest news accounts that use the words “retaliation” or “response” in describing Israeli actions, or that fail to refer to the Gaza Strip or the West Bank as “occupied” territories.

“Across the country,” reports Vane, “editors acknowledge they have made mistakes, but to a one maintain that there’s simply no bias shaping coverage. Yet the sheer volume of

complaints raises the question: Can so many readers be wrong?”

Yes, they can, insist the editors. They maintain that much of the criticism is generated by the Internet, which speeds information and misinformation around the world with dizzying speed. Also upping the volume, notes John Schidlovsky, director of the Pew International Journalism Program, are the innumerable pundits now holding forth on the Internet and cable TV. A lot of the critics aren’t really interested in fairness and accuracy. They just want to see their views reflected in news coverage.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Postmodernism after 9/11

A Survey of Recent Articles

After terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center, some cultural commentators suggested that the attacks might at least do some salutary collateral damage to the doctrine of postmodernism. That voguish academic outlook’s disdain for universal abstractions such as justice, its denial that any objective warrant exists for moral judgment or truth, suddenly appeared terribly hollow. “This destruction seems to cry out for a transcendent ethical perspective,” columnist Edward Rothstein wrote in *The New York Times* (Sept. 22, 2001). “And even mild relativism seems troubling in contrast.”

Postmodernist superstar Stanley Fish, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has been eager to take up the challenge, speaking out in an assortment of venues: the *Times* op-ed page (Oct. 15, 2001), *Harper’s Magazine* (July 2002), and *The Responsive Community* (Summer 2002), where he is the main participant in a symposium that asks, “Can Postmodernists Condemn Terrorism?”

Though he deems the word *terrorism* “unhelpful,” Fish answers that question in the affirmative. The Fishian postmodernist—who may or may not be typical of the breed—appears like nothing so much as the quintessential Humphrey Bogart character:

a cynic on the outside, impatient with high-sounding abstractions and causes, and an idealist underneath, ready in the actual event to do battle for truth and justice. “I in fact do” support the U.S. war in Afghanistan, Fish avows.

It turns out that there *are* universals, after all, according to this prominent postmodernist. “I am not saying that there are no universal values or no truths independent of particular perspectives. I affirm both.” It’s just that they can’t be independently proved to everyone’s satisfaction, Fish explains. So the postmodernist must fall back on his own convictions, about which, by definition, he can hardly be a relativist.

“The basis for condemning what was done on September 11 is not some abstract vocabulary of justice, truth, and virtue—attributes claimed by everyone, including our enemies, and disdained by no one—but the historical reality of the way of life, our way of life, that was the target of a massive assault.”

Simon Blackburn, a professor of philosophy at Cambridge University, one of the dozen participants in the *Responsive Community* symposium, hails Fish’s postmodernist as “a mature, imaginative, and open-minded individual. His large human sympathies make him impatient with facile