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Book review

Dead End: Suburban Sprawl and the Rebirth of American Urbanism, by Benjamin Ross. 2014. New York: Oxford University Press. £19.99 (hardcover) £18.00 (ebook) ISBN: 978-0-19-936014-7

Benjamin Ross takes us on an insightful and interesting journey through the history of North American suburbia and its more recent return to urbanism, with his book, '*Dead End*: *Suburban Sprawl and the Rebirth of American Urbanism*'. Although this book is focused on America, it has a lot to offer to anyone who is involved in the planning, design and management of the built environment. Indeed, if you come from any anglo-tradition of suburban sprawl, high levels of car dependency and highway engineering dominance; the first two-thirds of this book are almost essential reading to understand how and why such outcomes arose. Many of the chapters of the book could even be read as stand-alone chapters, and should spark some interesting debate among students of urban planning, design and transport — including Ch. 3 'Government-Sponsored Sprawl' and Ch. 8 'Spreading like Cancer'.

The book deals with many topics of interest to the urban scholar including: the restrictive and exclusionary nature of zoning as a way to regulate land-use; the role of federal intervention through financial and other mechanisms in encouraging suburban sprawl; the failure of the slum clearance and urban renewal schemes of the post World War II era and the associated rise of an anti-highway and pro-urban counter-culture. The latter feeds into the continued ascent of the anti-sprawl movements of 'New Urbanism' and 'Smart Growth' today. The author discusses and largely criticizes many other issues that are relevant to other developed cities including citizen participation in the planning process, NIMBYism, historic preservation, gentrification and housing affordability. The planning and highway engineering professions come in for considerable censure in this book. The author challenges the profession to question practices that are now doctrine — are we just 'embalming' the status-quo, encouraging the 'windshield' (driver focused) view of the world; or is it time to re-look at how we plan our cities from first principles?

The author argues that zoning, restrictive covenants and historic preservation, as currently organized, all maintain the status quo of low density suburban sprawl. Zoning and covenants, and the homeowner associations that enforce them, are heavily criticized in this book. The author documents their historical and sometimes current role in social exclusion and racism. Although many books have dealt with the history of suburbia, the central theme that runs through this one, that differentiates it from many of its contemporaries, is the focus on status seeking. The author contends that the status quo is so difficult to change in America, because fundamentally, conventional suburbia and its associated land tenure have fostered snobbery — i.e. keeping less 'prestigious' people and their associated activities out. This presents a largely convincing perspective on why suburbia has been so pervasive. Without understanding the self-interested nature of many people, the prospect of change for the common good is small.

Of particular interest to those within the transportation field, the book provides an insight into the diverging roles of transport corridors. They can prop-up or fuel suburban sprawl (as in the case of vehicle-oriented roads), or be catalysts for positive urban regeneration (as in the case of rail). The author strongly argues (albeit somewhat zealously) for rail and associated transit-oriented design (TOD), as the key to a more sustainable urban future. This will be no easy feat in a country that has been focused historically on the so-called 'Great American Dream' of home-ownership in the form of a large detached suburban house. The book even provides us with sensible arguments as to why cyclists are disliked by so many on the road, and how pedestrians have been forced-out of our streets. The author argues that pedestrians are the most disadvantaged form of transport, even falling foul to the proponents of BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) in some cases (although, not all will agree with his arguments against BRT)!

This book illustrates the very close relationship between planning and politics in America. Readers from other countries may even be surprised that political ideology and planning can be so closely intertwined. We learn of the right-wing politics that is largely pro-sprawl, and the 'smart growth' or anti-sprawl agenda that is largely associated with the left. The author argues that for change to take place there has to be the political will to do so. Indeed, this book could be described as quite political; and perhaps those with an interest in affecting urban change, particularly at a grand scale, may even benefit from some of the political lessons that run throughout the book.

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