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Reynold Brown

A giant alien housewife tramples suburban Los Angeles in *The Attack of the 50-foot Woman*, 1958.

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Suburbia's

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SPRAWL

by Brandi Burns

Growing Closer: *Density and Sprawl in the Treasure Valley* asks the essential question that faces every city in the midst of sprawling growth: what is the appropriate capacity of the land? The location of the land itself provides an answer. Appropriate capacity depends on where the land is—rural areas have a very low density whereas urban areas have a higher density. Defining the capacity of the land is essential to managing sprawl and enhancing the sustainability of cities.

The growth pattern termed “urban sprawl” in the language of city planning is most commonly an auto-dependent suburb with low-density single-family housing, a bedroom community where few people work. Sprawl often jumps away from the edges of cities. Planners refer to a pattern of housing that “leapfrogs” over open land. Critics denounce that pattern as the antithesis of responsible growth. Sprawl, the critics maintain, has paved over valuable farmland. It puts a strain on infrastructure and fosters an unsustainable dependency on oil and the car. Yet sprawl is deeply ingrained

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Radburn, New Jersey, was among the first suburbs designed for the automobile. Platted in 1928, it pioneered cul-de-sacs.

in suburban culture. Encouraged by the dream of homeowners, the love of cars and the longing for freedom of movement, it grows from deeply American roots.

The phenomenon predates the advent of the automobile. Historians trace modern sprawl to wealthy garden suburbs on the outskirts of industrial towns. Historian Sam Bass Warner, Jr., in a famous book about the advent of streetcars, showed how Boston became suburban through a network of electric rails. Boiseans followed Boston's example with streetcars looping west through orchards and farm communities. Ustick, Collister, Star, Geckeler, South Boise, Nampa, Meridian, Middleton and Caldwell were once tied to the capital city through electric streetcar lines.

By 1900, in Boise, Boston and elsewhere, promoters heralded streetcar suburbanization as a modern way to develop the land. Streetcar suburbs, said promoters, combined the open air of the spacious countryside with electricity, paved streets, sewers and other amenities of the city. Richard Hurd, author of *Principles of City Land Values* in 1903, described how residential developments were built on the fringes of cities, which encouraged the more influential social classes to relocate there. Cities took on a star shape as residential houses clustered together around major transportation routes, often traveled by streetcars. These routes frequently became the same ones that

cars now use. Historian Jon Peterson has described the turn-of-the-century cities as “great, center-dominated realms in which most commercial and retail activity concentrated at the core, as if drawn by a magnet, and residen-

tial functions dominated the periphery, as if expelled by the same force field.” Then as now, the centrifugal force of downtown commerce meant cheaper land prices on the periphery.

The New Jersey suburb of Radburn was one of the first built for the car. Opened in 1928, it pioneered superblocks, cul-de-sac streets and block-interior parks. Although the Great Crash of 1929 stunted suburbanization, the planned community movement

American Society of Landscape Architects



The 1929 plan for the proto-suburb of Radburn showed the segregation of housing from industry and stores.

survived. After 1933, with federal subsidies for housing and urban projects, New Dealers planned “garden cities” or “greentowns” surrounded by open land. City and farm would merge in these landscaped suburbs. Radburn would be the model for other towns intended to address the needs of the rural and urban poor. New Dealers planned 19 utopian greentowns. Only three—Greenbelt, Maryland; Greenhills, Ohio; and Greendale, Wisconsin—were actually built.

Greendale, Wisconsin, came to epitomize that New Deal suburban ideal. A Vivian Husher poem paid tribute to suburbs:

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Associated Press

Federal highway and housing subsidies sprawled suburbs across Long Island's municipal boundary lines. In 1947, a gallon of gas was 23 cents, a Ford coupe sedan was \$1,300 and Levittown's phase one of 2,000 houses sold out in two days.

Should you ask why we love Greendale,
Find it fun to work and play here,
We all answer, we all tell you...
It's awakening to bird-song
In the rosy dawn of springtime!
Watching frisky squirrels cavorting!
Romping space for pets and children,
Far from city's threatening traffic!
It's group picnics at grounds southward,
And the suppers cooked o'er charcoal
In one corner of our gardens;
Baby's playpen in the sunshine,
Knowing well that naught can harm him!



Associated Press

Bill Levitt's suburb came to epitomize white-flight from the inner city and post-war consumerism. Covenants still excluded people of color long after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down segregation in 1954.

New Dealers saw a science in suburban planning. In 1939, in his book *The Structure and Growth of Residential Neighborhoods in American Cities*, Homer Hoyt set out to explore city development, particularly as it concerned the development of neighborhoods. His main issue was whether or not "there is segregation of different types of dwelling units in definite areas, or whether the American urban community contains a hodgepodge of all kinds of residences in all parts of the city." He became concerned with the way cities develop because he found that the richer classes moved to the periphery of the city, leaving behind buildings to be occupied by the poorer classes, in turn depreciating the value of those buildings.

The postwar housing boom and a sharp increase in car ownership extended suburbia's sprawl. Suburbs began to surface in popular culture. The movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, released in 1946, chronicled the worldly dreams of small-town banker George Bailey, who eventually built an afford-

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Social Capital Blog

Architect Andrés Duany promoted Seaside, Florida, as the “neo-traditional” antidote to low-density sprawl. Walkable and compact, Seaside inspired a Hollywood spoof called *The Truman Show*.

able-housing suburb called Bailey Park to provide an alternative to Potter’s slums, and in turn made the American dream of home ownership possible for many. But praise for the suburban ideal was hardly universal. One critical account came from Hal Burton of *The Saturday Evening Post*. Burton, writing in 1955, scorned the “utter confusion to be found wherever people have moved to the suburbs, which [were] virtually everywhere. Suburban growth was “zestful but disorderly.” Burton feared suburbs might fail because of their dependence on cars, because the houses all looked the same, because of inadequate sewers and the over-reliance on septic tanks. Yet he closed on a hopeful note: “There are troubles aplenty, but time and money will solve them all, if ever the boom slows down. When that time comes, suburbia may finally be able to live up to its reputation. Meanwhile, people will grumble about the suburbs, and people will continue to stay there.”

Authors Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford were among the first to directly link suburban sameness to housing sprawl. In 1961, Jacobs denounced the dangers of sprawl in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, an indictment of highways and urban renewal. Jacobs claimed that

America went awry by “replacing, in effect, each horse on the crowded city streets with half a dozen or so mechanized vehicles, instead of using each mechanized vehicle to replace half a dozen or so horses.” The result was a “slothful” overabundance of cars. Speedy but inefficient, the vehicles were “choked by their own redundancy.” Horses in the crowded city moved almost as fast as cars.

Another critique of technological overdependence was Mumford’s *The City in History*, also published in 1961. The historian Mumford saw suburbs as the result of mass production of prefabricated housing. Suburbs had become “a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis.” Postwar Americans suburbs had been “alienated” from the culture of historic cities. Flight to the suburbs continued, nevertheless, as states added lanes to the highways and white families segregated around whiter suburban schools.

The critiques of suburbia’s sprawl in the wake of Jacobs and Mumford were increasingly environmentally based. Mumford sounded the first alarm when he warned that suburban growth would “undermine our historic cities and deface the natural landscape.” Suburbs would create “a large mass of undifferentiated, low-grade urban tissue, which in order to perform even the minimal functions of the city, will impose a maximum amount of private locomotion, and incidentally, push the countryside ever further away from even the suburban areas.” A movement was started to limit sprawl through the preservation of open space. One plea for growth boundaries came from a 1973 Rockefeller Foundation task force report on urban land use. Another critic of sprawl was the architect Peter Blake. In *God’s Own Junkyard*, published in 1979, Blake foresaw “the wholesale destruction of our countryside.”

Concern for suburbia’s sprawl included a fear of “white flight” social stratification. “An unusual set of circumstances in the United States helped to ensure that suburban areas in the second half of the 20th century would be segregated by income, race and lifestyle,” wrote historian Peter Jackson in 1985. Jackson’s sweeping history of American suburbanization detailed the restrictive zoning and housing laws that kept people of color from sharing white suburbs. Parkways and expressways promoted segregation either by avoiding or bisecting inner cities. Standardized suburban tract housing, meanwhile, had segregated homeowners by income. Unwritten codes and discrimination kept whites and blacks living apart.

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block! They shave off the fertile topsoil and move it aside for later use. They dig out the stubborn subsoil and hardpan. When the foundations of the buildings are set, these master machines backfill with excavated material. Finally, they spread the topsoil back on the surface and landscape the yards for lawns and gardens.

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restored by Paul Malon

Post-war housing transformed the suburban landscape. Pictured: advertisement *Colliers*, 1946.

Architects and planners joined the critique with nostalgic pleas for a return to neighborly streets that predated suburbanization. The critique draws strength from the Congress for the New Urbanism, founded in 1993. Self-styled New Urbanists advocate pedestrian-friendly streets in compact communities. Some emphasize mixed-use developments that combine housing, commerce and schools. Others are chiefly concerned with mass transit. All oppose government policies that pave over rural land and promote inefficient low-density housing.

Critics of sprawl often maintain that government subsidies for highways discourage responsible growth. When residents of a community or a region are spread out over vast distances, it is hard to support a viable bus or rail system. Other transportation options like bicycling or walking become impractical. During the housing boom of the mid-2000s subdivisions grew at unprecedented rates, often at the sacrifice of farmland and small towns that became bedroom communities. But this growth came to a halt as the economy fell into recession three years ago, much like the Great Depression hampered the growth of subdivisions like Radburn, New Jersey. As the building boom slowed with the economy, there were more calls to increase density by infilling empty lots in established cities before developing land on the rim of cities. Density, a measure of how many buildings and people are on a specific amount of land, is just a number and is difficult to visually and spatially imagine. The concept is complicated because many people do not want the density of their neighborhoods increased. But density affects the sustainability of a community. If appropriate density can be achieved, then the community can become "livable" in New Urbanist terms, which means that the residents would be within reasonable walking, biking or public transit distance to quality jobs, affordable housing, shopping and entertainment. Well-designed infill projects that increase density can reduce outward sprawl.

The recent focus on sustainable and livable communities has resulted in steps at the federal level to manage sprawl. The Interagency Partnership for Sustainable Communities was formed in 2009 by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency. The federal agencies formed the partnership to "help improve access to affordable housing, more transportation options and lower transportation costs while protecting the environment in communities nationwide," according to its website. The partnership has identified six livability principles to guide its efforts: (1) provide more transportation choices; (2) promote equitable, affordable housing; (3) enhance economic competitiveness; (4) support existing communities; (5) coordinate and leverage federal policies and investment; and (6) value communities and



Denise Ramirez

Opened in 1953 in Downey, California, the world's oldest McDonald's still has golden arches and a neon "Speedee" sign. Fast-food drive-ins of the 1950s and '60s shadowed suburbia's sprawl.

neighborhoods. These principles will combine to create more sustainable communities by offering transportation options in combination with affordable housing to decrease commuting costs and by providing quality jobs in communities. The three federal agencies individually can only fight sprawl on a limited level, but the partnership allows a more aggressive and holistic approach, resulting in a higher quality of life for residents choosing higher density places to live.

Some reformers see an expanded role for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Sprawl becomes an agricultural problem when the loss of farmland destroys the local food economy. If the interagency partnership included the Department of Agriculture, a seventh livability principle could be added, and it would read something like this: promote and support local farmers, especially family farmers, to provide communities with healthy local produce. The Department of Agriculture may not be a part of the current partnership, but some of their programs, especially Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food, may begin to bring local produce closer to residents of nearby communities and provide an economic stimulus.

In the Boise Valley the issue of sprawl pervades most every policy debate over the highest and best use of land. Sprawl aggravates traffic. It clouds the valley with dangerous air. Sprawl also poses problems related to flood control, mass transit, gas prices, infill housing, the food economy and local control. *Growing Closer* offers ten case-study examples of sprawl-related controversy. Each is a story of the local response to auto-dependence and traditional patterns of growth.

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