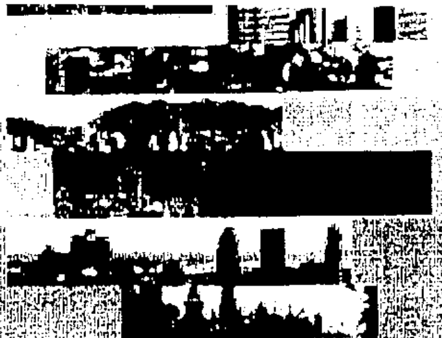
THE PROBLEM, OR NOT, OF URBAN SPRAWL

Raphaël Fischler



Urban sprawl must be distinguished from urban expansion in general, and scattered development must be seen as a particular form of sprawl. The key variables here, writes McGill University professor Raphaël Fischler, are density and urban form. The growth of low-density, car-orientated environments around cities is largely a response to individual demand but also a source of collective problems, some of which are yet to come. The extent to which sprawl constitutes a public-policy problem depends on the values we bring to bear on the issue and on the constituency that is affected.

L'étalement urbain doit être distingué de l'expansion urbaine, tout comme l'éparpillement doit être vu comme une forme particulière d'étalement. Les variables clé, nous dit le professeur Raphaël Fischler, de l'Université McGill, sont la densité et la forme urbaine. La croissance de milieux de faible densité et axés sur l'automobile privée répond principalement à une demande individuelle, mais elle est aussi une source de problèmes collectifs. La mesure dans laquelle l'étalement constitue un probleme de politique publique dépend des valeurs que nous utilisons pour évaluer la problématique et des groupes politiques qui sont touchés.

Day in, day out, news media bring us echoes of the battle that is raging among critics and defenders of contemporary suburbs. For the former, urban growth on the periphery constitutes "urban sprawl," a pernicious cancer that is eating away at our pristine countryside. For the latter, new subdivisions, shopping centres and industrial parks in urban peripheries are valuable real-estate investments that meet a demand for attractive housing, convenient shopping and efficient production, all at affordable prices. Among critics, sprawl is *the* problem of cities today, among defenders, low-density suburban growth isn't a problem at all. The purpose here is to define sprawl, to examine the various arguments that are being exchanged about the phenomenon and to assess the relevance of this debate for urban policy in Canada.

Despite the mushrooming of corporate and even residential skyscrapers in many a downtown, cities overall have become less dense over the course of the twentieth century. In North America, in Europe, in parts of other continents, the average number of inhabitants per square kilometer of urbanized territory has generally declined. Residents and employees in new suburbs use more land than their counterparts in older areas. Even where the number of housing units per hectare remains the same, population density declines as household size diminishes. Even the Dutch, renowned for their intense use of scarce land, have allowed urban population densities to go down by about two thirds between 1960 and today. (Not so for the Japanese: the density of Tokyo has actually increased.) Demographic growth has enlarged the aggregate demand for space, and economic growth has increased individual demand for it. Throughout the world, rising standards of living (affording ownership of private automobiles and single-family homes), changing systems of production (requiring single-storey facilities with large parking and loading areas) and supportive government policies (for instance in highway construction) have enabled people to live and work at greater distances from old city centres and to use land more extensively.

In assessing patterns of urban development, urban form as well as density matters. Peripheral growth can be contiguous with existing areas or cut off from them; it can be linear or concentrated. In Canada as in other western countries, discontinuous growth and "strip" development have been characteristic of suburban expansion. This loss of compactness has increased infrastructure costs and has made agricultural activities more difficult to carry out in the urban fringe. In general, with due regard to the constraints imposed by topography, density and compactness go together. Thus European cities are generally more dense and more compact than North American ones. But the link is not systematic: Tokyo is very compact but not so densely built, whereas Madrid is quite densely built (twice as densely as the Japanese megalopolis) but not very compact in form.

If urban expansion in general denotes the simple fact of suburban growth, urban sprawl signifies a particular form of growth, one that is characterized primarily by low densities, segregated land uses and automobile landscapes. Urban growth that is also discontinuous can be called "scattered" or "leapfrog" development. (The equivalent French terms are "*étalement urbain*" and "*éparpillement*" or "*mitage*.") Much as in the case of pornography, people have a hard time defining urban sprawl but seem to know it when they see it. A review of the literature on the topic suggests that certain features are seen as characteristic of this form of urban development. They are:

- the expansion of urbanized areas at low building or population densities
- a high rate of growth at the urban periphery
- the presence of dysfunctional, unused spaces left over amidst new development
- a pronounced segregation of land uses
- a heavy dependency on private automobiles for daily transportation
- a particular architecture and urban design characterized by low-rise structures, prominent signage and the strong presence of cars.

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Suburban environments display these different features in very variable measures. But these six characteristics do tend to typify most of the urban peripheries created in the past decades.

Sprawl is all the more an object of attention if it occurs at a fast pace and changes environmentally attractive areas into expanses of concrete and billboards. More piecemeal and sensitive development — a golf-course development here, a classy business park there — seem to arouse a lesser wrath. But, generally speaking, critics of sprawl fault it for replacing nature by something that is neither fish nor fowl, countryside nor city, and that is allegedly both environmentally unsustainable and esthetically unappealing. Reflecting these thoughts, members of the New Urbanism movement, who aim to inject more urbanity in suburban development, insist on increasing densities, mixing uses, reinstating the traditional street grid and using traditional, street-oriented architecture.

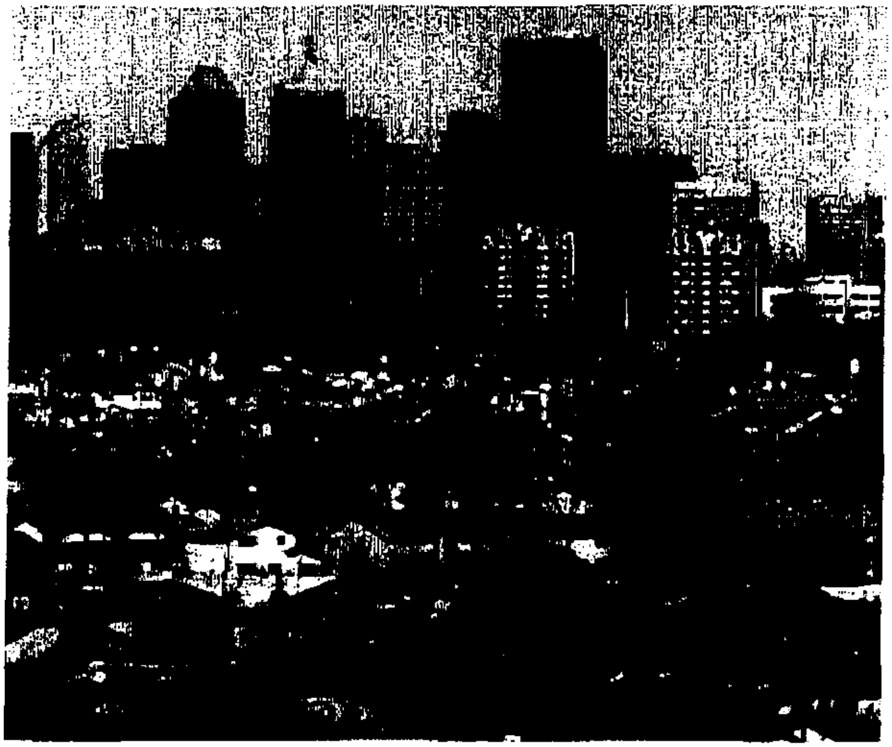
Of particular note in the debate on sprawl is the role and impact of the private automobile. Car ownership makes suburbia possible and suburbia makes car ownership necessary. Because of the low urban density, sprawl does not allow for efficient public-transit service, at least in its current form (which is based on economies of scale and large-capacity vehicles). Long distances between places of residence, work, commerce and recreation compel people to drive instead of cycling or walking. In fact, it is the transportation dimension of urban sprawl that has created the greatest amount of consensus across political and ideological lines. Employers bemoan the loss of time on congested roads (time is money); environmentalists condemn the loss of precious natural amenities and the production of harmful smog; health-care specialists lament the increasing rate of respiratory disease and the lack of exercise; architects and planners denounce the functional and aesthetic failings of landscapes dominated by the car; social critics censure the individualism enforced, if not fostered, by individual occupancy of private vehicles.

Much more is at stake in contemporary debates on urban growth, however, than automobile dependency and its side-effects. As the following tables show, questions of metropolitan governance and fiscal equity, of economic and environmental sustainability are involved as well. There is a distinction to be made, as noted, between urban expansion in general — i.e. the very fact that people live and work further and further away from the city centre — urban sprawl, which is a particular form of expansion, and scattered development, which is a specific form of sprawl. Criticism of expansion applies to sprawl and "scatterization" as well; criticism of sprawl generally applies to "leapfrogging," too.

A further simplification is the distinction between central cities and suburbs. The former term must be understood as the older, denser parts of the metropolitan area where rates of growth are low, if not negative, and where concentrations of wealth are starkly juxtaposed with concentrations of poverty; the latter must be understood as the newer, less densely built zones that house the suburban middle-class, the large-scale commerce where it shops and the business parks where it works. It is more and more evident, of course, that the distinction between central city and suburb is a relative one and that suburbs display a great diversity of social and economic circumstances, including those traditionally associated with the city. This is why the plural forms of "central cities" and "suburbs" is being used.

Critics of urban sprawl are in the main situated politically to the left of their intellectual opponents; they tend to believe in collective action, including centralized state action, to pursue societal goods. Apologists are found more often among defenders of personal freedom and private enterprise over government intervention; they tend to express a stronger belief in the power of technological progress and of market processes to solve some of our problems. Thus opponents of sprawl highlight inter-municipal competition in metropolitan areas and blame uncoordinated growth patterns on it.

Defenders counter that this competition in fact enables households and businesses to find the environment that suits their particular needs and forces municipal authorities to be efficient in the provision of services. For critics, change must come in part from new regulations, perhaps including coercive measures, that mold development into more appropriate shapes and from new incentive programmes that steer private and municipal decision-making in the desirable direction. For supporters of suburbia, change must not occur at the expense of individual choice and sound fiscal management. In the end, the two groups differ first and foremost in their attitude toward sprawl as *problématique*. One side sees sprawl as an acute ill, best captured by worrisome statistics on air quality and respiratory diseases; the other considers it a normal condition, indeed a desirable one, as made clear by the continued departure of urban households to the periphery and by the high level of satisfaction that suburbanites express when asked about their living conditions.



CP Photo

From the suburbs to downtown, urban sprawl is a question of density and of urban expansion. From the suburbs to the towers of the oilpatch, Calgary is an example of both.

What constitutes a public-policy problem is of course a matter of opinion. Our values inform our perception of reality, let alone our assessment of it; our ability to make a difference (i.e. our understanding of causes and effects, our access to political and economic resources) influences our willingness to make a problematic situation into a target of public action. The idea of a war on poverty, of a war on drugs or of a war on terror makes sense only if one believes that one knows the causes of the problem and that one can effectively deal with them. For its critics, sprawl is a major problem that involves not just our way of spending scarce tax dollars but also our relationship to nature, our social bond to each other and our image of ourselves; yet it is a condition that can be remedied, if only partly and slowly, by government planning. For their counterparts in the debate, sprawl is hardly a problem: it is a valid answer to the needs of households and businesses. At worst, they hold, it is a generally positive phenomenon that happens to generate some negative externalities; these side-effects, whose magnitude is being overstated by ideologically driven critics, will be reduced by the use of improved technology and improved market mechanisms.

The rapid gains of the Smart Growth movement in the US lends credence to the idea that critics of sprawl have won over public opinion on the continent — and this, at a time when private-property rights have been asserted with particular vigour and success in courts and executive offices. Though its simple name conceals a great variety of beliefs and actions, from fiscally conservative policies to economize on infrastructure costs to pro-active interventions in land and housing markets to ensure a more equitable settlement pattern, the Smart Growth movement expresses a widespread recognition of urban sprawl as a problem and of government action as a solution. Even opinion leaders in the real-estate industry, most notably members of Washington's Urban Land Institute, have jumped on the bandwagon, if not actively pushed it forward. In Canada, urban growth that is frugal in its use of natural and fiscal resources has in some ways been the order of the day since the advent of urban planning as a profession, under the aegis of the Commission on Conservation, in the 1910s. But the idea of growing smart has been given new prominence by the work of the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, among other organizations.

This general attitude is confirmed by the popularity of the expression "sustainable development" in planning and policy documents in Canada and the world over. As no one merely grows but grows in an intelligent manner, no one merely develops: all develop in a sustainable fashion. For most people, this means that we develop our economy and our cities in a way that meets the needs of today's generation without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. But this definition of sustainable development is only partial. The concept has a second dimension that tends to be obscured, a social dimension. Development is sustainable, Gro Harlem Brundtland and her colleagues argued in *Our Common Future*, only if it is based on an equitable distribution of resources — material, cultural and political. According to this norm, is urban sprawl still the major problem that its critics claim it is? In other words, using a social-equity criterion, does sprawl deserve to be high on the public agenda?

> The real social problems associated with sprawl, those acute conditions that will force public action for reasons of equity or of self-protection, are yet to come. They will arise when older suburbs, too low in density to support a full array of commercial, cultural and social facilities and too distant from areas that offer them, will loose their middle-class residents.

Public opinion seems to be giving a negative answer to this question. What is high on the public agenda is not sprawl per se, but *road* congestion and the need to reduce public expenditures, thus the contradictory demands of adding road infrastructure and limiting the cost of urban growth. Also on the media's radar are the environmental consequences of sprawl, the subdivision of natural expanses into housing lots and the transmutation of fields into parking lots. The social disadvantages of sprawl, on the other hand, do not seem to arouse much passion. This is so for two very good reasons.

First, the social problems that are directly associated with urban sprawl do not attract much attention because they generally affect those who have chosen to expose themselves to them. Households struggling to meet heavy mortgage and car-loan payments, adults lacking exercise, teenagers getting bored in shopping malls: these are willing victims of their own desires (or of their parents'). That government policies and commercial advertisement have sustained these desires and made their realization possible does not cancel individual responsibility in the matter. Suburbanites who complain about road congestion and, in so doing, call on governments to protect them from the consequences of their own choices, do not really speak from a moral high-ground, even if they do occupy a strategic position on the political checkerboard.

Other social problems associated with sprawl, most notably the political fragmentation of metropolitan areas and the fiscal inequities that exist among their constituent municipalities, are receiving more attention these days, as central cities are struggling to cope with a crumbling infrastructure, poverty, homelessness, etc. But sprawl per se is not the issue here. Calgary sprawls like no other city in the country, but its policy of annexation of newly developed territory enables it to maintain a certain level of unity in the urban region, and the relatively younger age of its infrastructure gives it a lesser burden of expenditures than Montreal and Toronto.

The second reason for the weakness of public support for tough government action on sprawl, then, is the fact that, as Anthony Downs has argued, the link between sprawl and social problems in central urban areas has not been clearly established. What cause-and-effect relationship is there, indeed, between the low density and functional segregation of new development around our cities, on the one hand, and the prevalence of poverty, unemployment, and homelessness in older neighbourhoods, on the other hand? Whatever link there is, it is due more to federal and provincial policies in matters of infrastructure investment and of social spending and to the "normal" workings of real-estate markets than to our preference for a particular urban form. At best, one could argue that low-density development unduly increases the distance between zones of low-skill employment and areas of affordable housing while not allowing for efficient public transit service between them.

Social problems, in fact, do not have a "spatial fix." It is true that, although their concentration in particular neighbourhoods renders them more intractable in some ways, they can be more easily alleviated where population densities are high, public-transit service is good and access to public facilities is easy. But the solution to our social problems in cities, if there can be one, must involve fiscal and welfare policies, first and foremost — to be clear, a certain redistribution of wealth, education and political power. Regulations and incentives aimed at producing higher densities, a finer mix of land uses or more pleasing environments in new developments will just not do.

The real social problems associated with sprawl, those acute conditions that will force public action for reasons of equity or of self-protection, are yet to come. They will arise when older suburbs, too low in density to support a full array of commercial, cultural and social facilities and too distant from areas that offer them, will loose their middle-class residents and be occupied by lower-income households (perhaps the children of previous residents, victims of downward social mobility). Aside from areas of poorly built apartment complexes, central areas are more likely to gentrify than to decay, whereas vast regions of bungalows and strip malls are probably destined to become our new slums. Then, and only then, will we want to deal with urban sprawl as *sprawl* — perhaps.

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