

THIS LAND: THE BATTLE OVER SPRAWL AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICA

by Anthony Flint

The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006

Our nation is sprawling. By 2050, there will be 120 million more Americans, and all of them will need places to live. But where and how? The choices before us and the seldom-told story of the competing forces arrayed to battle over these questions are the subjects of *This Land*. On the one side are “smart-growth” advocates who, concerned about the negative impacts of suburban sprawl, urge more compact living patterns. Arrayed against them are the “don’t tread on me” property-rights advocates and the NIMBYs who resist new growth, particularly if it’s anywhere near them.

Flint provides a historical perspective on how we became a suburban nation. From the outset, a Jeffersonian anti-urban predisposition prevailed. Flint hammers home that our sprawl patterns are not just the result of consumer preference for the suburban life. They are also the direct result of real estate and auto-industry lobbying and government policies — including outdated zoning, the subsidized highway program, tax policy, and mortgage approval criteria that favor “low risk” suburban areas.

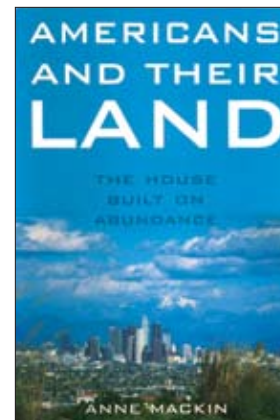
Flint then reviews all the familiar societal consequences of sprawl: traffic congestion; energy consumption; unaffordable infrastructure; race barriers to home-ownership; a voracious consumption of land; environmental degradation; and

increased social isolation. He also reminds us of suburbia’s enduring appeal: a consumer preference for more space, less density, safety, quiet, and better schools. Clearly, these preferences are often starkly at odds with the collective good — a classic American conundrum.

Given these counter-tendencies, acrimonious political skirmishes between smart-growth advocates and their adversaries still rage. With the easy-flowing, narrative skill of a journalist, Flint describes these battles. He reminds us how General Motors, Firestone, and Standard Oil bought up and then dismantled the extensive trolley-car system that once weaved through Los Angeles — thereby deliberately setting LA on the road toward the auto society it has become. He tells of the precipitous fall of the “Growth Limits Boundary” movement in Oregon, which is seen as a significant win for property-rights advocates. He then tells of the recent bitterly fought New London, Connecticut, “Kelo” Supreme Court decision, which ruled that local government can take homes by eminent domain simply to enhance economic value — a defeat for those same property-rights supporters. So the fights continue.

Looking forward, Flint believes that the smart-growth movement, to be persuasive, must become a better champion for increased consumer choice, rather than an advocate for more government restrictions. He is not optimistic, however, that Americans will choose societal interests ahead of their own consumer preferences for suburbia. Only when the consequences of sprawl approach intolerable levels, Flint argues, will the market finally encourage a change in consumer behavior that favors more compact living. Sadly for most smart-growth advocates, it seems that neither thoughtful arguments nor outright scolding will have much effect until then.

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AMERICANS AND THEIR LAND: THE HOUSE BUILT ON ABUNDANCE

by Anne Mackin

University of Michigan Press, 2006

Each generation seems curiously invested in the uniqueness of the challenges it faces. This is certainly true of our ongoing dilemma about the suburbs, refracted in the current sprawl debate. Though it seems indelibly contemporary, the debate is just the current manifestation of a much deeper duality about land use, with its tendency to foster privacy and prosperity at the expense of community and responsibility. Boston writer and planner Anne Mackin, in her engaging book *Americans and Their Land*, reveals how old the seeds of this debate actually are.

Mackin frames current US land-use disputes, from the debate over water rights in the West to the “civil war” over land-use regulation in burgeoning Loudoun County, Virginia, in the context of the country’s unique settlement history. Weaving together a variety of historical and contemporary sources with personal experiences, she explores how the beguiling idea of land as a limitless resource on the American frontier has shaped American values in ways that make the current sprawl debate so exquisitely contentious.

This frontier abundance nurtured the notion that individual freedom, equality, and economic well-being could be achieved by unleashing private initiative and that land exploitation therefore served

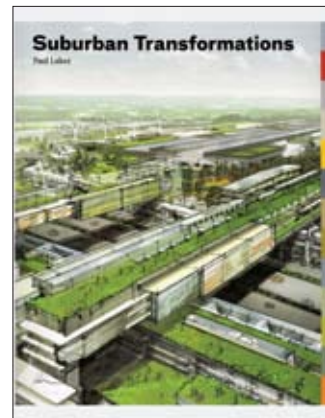
the public interest. Mackin gives an absorbing account of the early settlement of Ohio, describing the crucial role of the national government in adjusting the disposition of federal lands to encourage settlement, leading to a strong undercurrent of land speculation. Speculators were unscrupulous, but they laid out new towns and financed the roads, canals, and railroads to reach them, helping settlers fashion a civilization out of the wilderness. In a similar vein, Mackin describes how housing developers a century later built the tract subdivisions that satisfied post-World War II housing demand, but also attempted to influence federal housing legislation and stifle reforms.

In fact, as Mackin poignantly observes, encouraging the economic self-interest of risk-takers, which has served such an essential social function in our history, has always had a dark side: heedless exploitation, which depletes resources and concentrates wealth. Chapters on Progressive-era Cleveland mayor Tom Johnson and land reformer Henry George

and on contemporary affordable-housing advocates illustrate efforts to counter-balance these harmful side effects.

It turns out that our historical habits are hard to break, even though they are particularly ill-suited to current circumstances of increased population density, scarcity, and environmental degradation. And what may have begun as thoughtlessness has now hardened into active resistance to setting new rules, exemplified in the property-rights movement. Though Mackin clearly sides with the reformers, she avoids the stridency of anti-sprawl activists. Rather than offering a prescription for specific reforms, Mackin implicitly acknowledges that it is no simple thing to harness the unquenchable force of private initiative to better serve the public interest but insists, nonetheless, that we can do better.

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SUBURBAN TRANSFORMATIONS
by Paul Lukez
Princeton Architectural Press, 2007

In concluding *Suburban Transformations*, Paul Lukez asks: “Can we begin to transform the banal into the sublime, and in the process remedy the pathologies of present day suburbia?” Lukez thinks we can, and this book is his strong argument to prove the point.

That suburbia requires change is

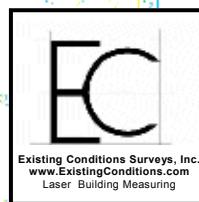
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assumed. In his foreword, Anthony Flint suggests that transforming existing suburbs into “more habitable cohesive places” will be the highest priority for urban designers in the 21st century.

Yet this book is not just for urban designers. The handsome jacket proclaims that this is “a work of theory and a practical tool.” The text is accessible, graphics and production are high quality, and the layout is organized for easy browsing. The book aims at an audience beyond academe.

Although not divided into sections of theory and practice, the book can be read this way. Lukez, an architect and assistant professor at MIT, offers a theory of suburban transformation founded on his belief that “engaging time in design is what creates a strong sense of identity,” and that identity is the basis for meaningful transformation. He cites Jung and Norberg-Schulz to explain identity’s role in orienting us in the world, providing a rationale to focus on urban form.

To foster suburban identity, Lukez proposes a set of intentional operations:

reading (analyzing); *writing* (constructing); and *erasure* (removing). Erasure and writing operations (for example, “excavation” and “infill”) can be combined to create more complex recognizable forms — “hybrid typologies” — that also incorporate the passage of time. Thus, typologies provide a shorthand tool for analyzing a site, documenting its history, and suggesting future possibilities. At this point, academics and practitioners may drift apart. Fore-stalling this, a fundamental message comes through: development that respects carefully selected physical traces of site circumstance can evolve *over time* into rich and identifiable suburban environments.

Theory begets application in Lukez’ “adaptive design process.” This process relies heavily on mapping for collecting information and cross-mapping (derived from Ian McHarg’s mapping overlays) to identify hidden site relationships. Next, a “useful history” for the site is determined through evaluation and editing. Thus armed, a designer can propose development strategies, for which Lukez includes

a useful tool set of building typologies. Studies of the edge city of Burlington, Massachusetts richly illustrate the process, providing examples of the mapping techniques and figure-ground “spatial models” that suggest alternative build-out scenarios developed over time.

Rounding out the argument are five case studies. Ranging from Burlington (further developed), Dedham, and Revere Beach to Amsterdam and Shenzhen, China, they vary in scope, detail, and vision, but are united in applying the “adaptive design process” to create design projections grounded in site history that can be implemented over time.

Suburban Transformations is a valuable contribution to urban-design discourse; one hopes that a future edition can provide additional case studies of actual projects, tested with real constraints in real time.

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