

# How Cities Work: *Suburbs, Sprawl and the Road not Taken*

by Alex Marshall. Austin: University of Texas Press; 2000:243 pp. ISBN 0 292 75240 7

Reviewed by Ken O'Brien

**W**hat forces create cities that are different from one another? Alex Marshall uses this question as the starting point for a sensible look at cities, suburbs, sprawl and New Urbanism.

Marshall, a journalist and student of architecture and urban design, recognizes the formative roles of politics and economics, but considers transportation to be the foundation of cities. Many cities began at harbours or river mouths or crossroads; these external transportation systems, and the systems within each city, shape each city's character.

The author examines four American places with different internal transportation systems: Portland, Oregon; Silicon Valley, California; Jackson Heights, New York City; and Celebration, Florida.

Portland has channeled development into an urban-growth boundary, thus curbing sprawl. Silicon Valley is a sprawling landscape of industrial campuses and parking lots. A neighbourhood in New York City, Jackson Heights is an early 1900s subway suburb. Celebration, a New-Urbanist town founded by the Walt Disney Company, has attractive houses and shopping streets but, in Marshall's estimation, is still a suburb at the end of a highway off-ramp.

Some people blame zoning for sprawl. For Marshall (page 11), "Zoning . . . only tidies up decisions [dictated by] the marketplace and the physical infrastructure." Sprawl is created by transportation decisions that use urban highways and six-lane arterials rather than modest roads. People must drive rather than walk. Businesses and other land uses need large parking lots, and grow larger themselves to serve wide catchment areas.

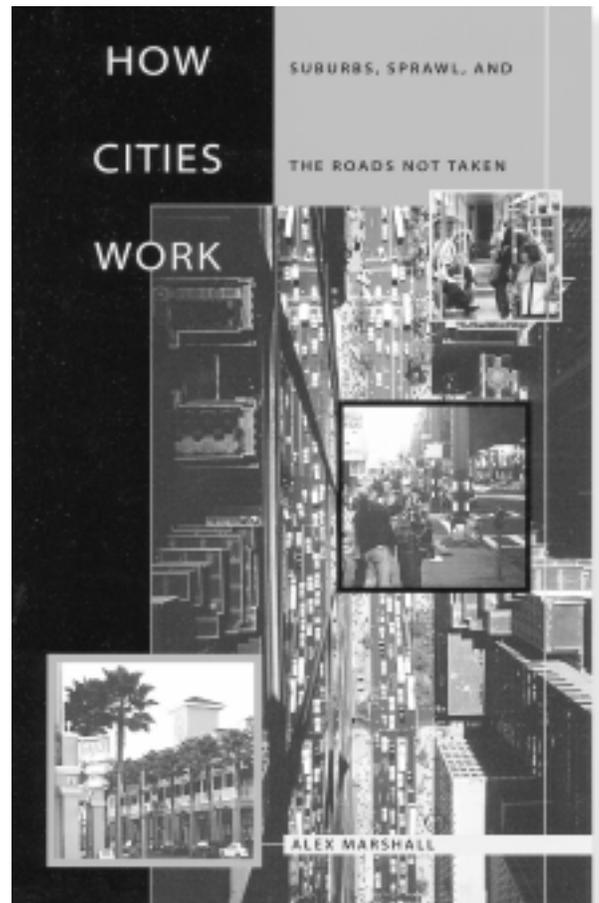
Marshall (page 56) quotes Lewis Mumford, writing about transportation in 1958:

The purpose of transportation is to bring people and goods to places where they are needed, and to concentrate the greatest variety of goods and people within a limited area, in order to widen the possibility of choice without making it necessary to travel.

Marshall (page 57) wants this quote "stapled to the head of every policy maker in every city hall and state capitol." Ouch.

*How Cities Work* evaluates New Urbanism, the most influential movement in city design in the past half-century. Marshall's verdict (page 108) is negative: "That these [New Urbanist developments] . . . located miles from the center city, low in density, completely isolated, limited in their income appeal, composed almost entirely of homeowners and without businesses, could be called 'urban' is the height of absurdity."

New Urbanists such as Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk emphasize neo-traditional design but have not addressed sprawl. Marshall is more favourable toward Peter Calthorpe', whose transit-oriented design pays attention to transportation systems.



Marshall is too harsh on New Urbanism. The juggernaut of urban sprawl will not be stopped easily. The New Urbanist attention to walkability, streetscapes and local retail captures attractive features of older neighbourhoods, but those lessons need to be applied on a much wider scale.

While Marshall criticizes New Urbanism, he is no fan of sprawl, calling it harmful to the poor and the elderly and environmentally destructive. In an interesting cultural observation, he considers modern paintings and movies, which often use older towns as their setting, calling to mind stability or

nostalgia. Few artists choose modern suburbs as their subject. In a tongue-in-cheek comment on the typical disaster movie, Marshall (page 61) writes, "No one can work up a good goddamn about whether the lava is going to get the Wal-Mart."

So what is his solution to sprawl? Plan the roads. In 1811, a state commission laid out a street plan for New York City that shaped the Big Apple for more than a century. In 1905, planner Daniel Burnham<sup>2</sup> wrote of San Francisco, "A city plan must ever deal mainly with the direction and width of its streets." Imagine if sprawling places like Houston or Florida's Dade County had laid out a coherent street plan early on.

The weakness of Marshall's solution is that it oversimplifies the process of urban development. Road design is not

the work of planners; it falls mainly to transportation engineers. It will take more than saying, "No more six-lane arterials" to reshape cities. One key is getting planners and transportation engineers onside, to consider vehicles as well as pedestrians and walkable streets.

Marshall acknowledges that suburban life can be pleasant; certainly, millions of people choose to live there. To their credit, New Urbanists are trying to shape future suburbs to make them more compact. But until population growth levels off, or until people accept more intensification in older neighbourhoods, cities will continue to grow at their edges, far from downtown.

Despite the shortcomings of Marshall's solution to urban sprawl, his engaging style makes the book worthwhile for its thoughtful insights into our cities. ■

#### References and Notes

1. Calthorpe P. The next American metropolis: Ecology, community, and the American dream. New York: Princeton Architectural Press; 1993.
2. Burnham D. San Francisco Civic Plan. San Francisco: Association for the Improvement and Adornment of San Francisco; 1905.

**Ken O'Brien, MCIP**, a planner for the City of St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, is involved in land-use policy, heritage conservation, environmental planning and a review of the St. John's Municipal Plan. He studied at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. He can be reached at: [kobrien@stjohns.ca](mailto:kobrien@stjohns.ca)

## CORRECTIONS

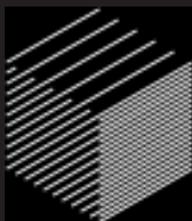
Listed below are details of errata from previous issues:

In the Fall 2003 article entitled "Politics and Planning: Ten Lessons from an Old Campaigner" by Art Cowie, the correct web site address for Daniel Burnham should be: [http://www.architechgallery.com/arch\\_info/artists\\_pages/burnham\\_bio.html](http://www.architechgallery.com/arch_info/artists_pages/burnham_bio.html)

In the Winter 2003 article entitled "The Process of Changing Process: Planning Technologies and Variance Review" by Ari Goelman, the text should read "By the late 1990s, GIS was in use in approximately **eighty** percent of the larger city and county planning agencies in the United States."

We offer our apologies to our readers for any confusion these errors may have caused.

## Walker Nott Dragicevic



planning & urban design

Associates Limited

phone: 416-968-3511  
facsimile: 416-960-0172  
website: [www.wndplan.com](http://www.wndplan.com)