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The Shape of the Suburbs: Understanding Toronto's Sprawl
(review)

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The Shape of the Suburbs: Understanding Toronto's Sprawl. JOHN SEWELL. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009. Pp. 208, \$65.00, \$24.95

This book has been eagerly anticipated by Toronto urbanists. John Sewell has a substantial local following from his years as a community activist, city councillor, mayor, public administrator, political columnist, and general champion of communitarianism. And his 1993 book, *The Shape of the City*, remains a widely read introduction to Toronto's urban planning history, in particular to the city's apparent rejection of technocratic modernism in the early 1970s. So this follow-up on the suburbs meets a ready audience.

It would be interesting to know what the locals think, but reviews of the book have been surprisingly rare in Toronto, so one cannot yet gauge the response. It may find favour among these readers, for it has an appealingly direct but friendly tone, as Sewell's writing usually does, and it is premised on the belief that suburbs are intrinsically evil – a popular notion in non-suburban Toronto – but as scholarly history the book falls far short of the mark. Its fundamental argument is dated, weak, and unconvincingly presented, and it is surprisingly uninformed by the scholarly literature for a book from a major scholarly press.

The book begins with Toronto at mid-twentieth century – a reasonably compact urban area with a self-financed water and sewer system and a user-paid public transit system. It then moves on to various aspects of postwar suburban growth outside Toronto, with chapters on metropolitan and regional plans, superhighways, transit and commuter rail, piped infrastructure, and the municipal restructuring that created the area's regional municipalities. These chapters are the heart of the book, and they form the basis of the central argument that 'sprawl' – considered here as any low-density suburban development – has been caused by the actions of the provincial government, notably by subsidies to the highways, pipes, and commuter trains that serve the suburban areas. Without provincial subsidies, the argument goes, sprawl simply would not occur because low-density communities cannot sustain expensive services on their own tax base. The book then concludes with chapters on provincial policies in the 1980s and 1990s, including a chapter on the 1997 amalgamation of Toronto that the author passionately opposed.

The main argument is not as explicit as it might be. The connection between the events narrated and the fact of low-density suburban form is not always explained. But the weaknesses are deeper than mere presentation, for this argument is, in short, an overly simplistic explana-

tion of a complex phenomenon. There is no doubt that governments throughout the Western world have grown since the Second World War, and with this came a proliferation of what might be called subsidies. Nor is there any doubt that the density of most new urban development declined over the same years. But making the case that the former caused the latter is not so simple. Many other changes occurred concurrently – personal incomes rose, car use increased, industrial employment dispersed. One can in fact make the case that Sewell's provincial subsidies are as much the consequence as the cause of sprawl. The complexity of this 'chicken and egg' argument should, at the very least, be addressed, but the author makes no attempt to do so. Furthermore, as anyone familiar with the international literature will know, this line of thinking has been around for some time and has not yet won the day. In the United States, the tax deductibility of residential mortgage interest payments is often said to have caused sprawl, though infrastructure subsidies are also blamed at times. To present a local argument with almost no recognition of the international scholarly context, and what one can learn from it, lessens the value of this work considerably.

There are also some logical inconsistencies, suggesting that the work has not been fully thought through. How far would the author go, for instance, with 'user pays'? Would he cut off 'subsidies' to small-town school boards, or hospitals, because they too encourage low-density settlements? Sewell seems to be drifting, perhaps unknowingly, into a libertarian argument. Postwar provincial government growth has actually brought a degree of urban/suburban/rural equity that one should be careful about throwing out. And, rather curiously, he has disdain for the provincial government's forced amalgamation of Toronto in 1997, but admiration for the creation of Metropolitan Toronto in 1953, even though the political dynamics, and popular opposition, are nearly identical.

For anyone who has not yet encountered the argument that postwar government policies caused postwar suburban sprawl this book can serve as an introduction. Beyond that, one has to look hard for value. The chapters on suburban growth provide a useful account of events and people (though they have some errors, and in some cases one might be better off looking at books the author drew from), and the final chapters on the 1980s and 1990s cover important ground for the first time (though they are based entirely on recollections and opinions, not on research). One senses that *The Shape of the Suburbs* will not have the lasting value of *The Shape of the City*.

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