



## Dead End: Suburban Sprawl and the Rebirth of American Urbanism

Benjamin Ross

*Reviewed by Rachel Eberhard*

In *Dead End: Suburban Sprawl and the Rebirth of American Urbanism*, Benjamin Ross pulls together a narrative detailing how the American suburbs came into existence and how the unintended consequences of sprawl created problems that planners are scrambling to resolve 70 years later. In something reminiscent of a psychological assessment of the built environment, Ross poses the question, why do so many Americans live in widely dispersed, single-family homes and willingly spend so much time sitting in traffic?

Personal frustration led Ross to tackle this challenging topic, and he recently traveled to Chapel Hill to discuss *Dead End* and the road he took to arrive in advocacy work. While visiting Flyleaf Books, he described how the little details often fail to get fixed until people start complaining, which is precisely what he aimed to accomplish when he organized a coalition to request more spending on sidewalks. After lobbying the Montgomery City Council for more dollars for infrastructure improvements, he soon found himself serving as president of the Action Committee for Transit in the Washington, D.C. metro region. In this role, Ross entered the battle for the light-rail Purple Line connecting Montgomery County, MD to downtown Washington, D.C. The hurdles Ross encountered during his 15 years with the grassroots advocacy group provided him with the questions *Dead End* aims to answer.

The main takeaway from Ross' research indicates that sprawl is the result of a clashing of value systems. He found that the primary motive behind a mass exodus to the suburbs resided with "status-seeking" Americans, which led to the structure of zoning rules, housing covenants, and other regulatory mechanisms to protect the social cachet. Throughout *Dead End*, Ross works to examine the struggle between what he terms "snob zoning" and "NIMBYism" versus the principles of smart growth and the benefits experienced within economically mixed communities.

The most persistent critique of zoning since its inception in the early twentieth century is that it infringes upon the rights of private property owners by defining what they can or cannot do with their land, and Ross wholeheartedly supports this notion. He argues that suburban zoning has roots in private covenants governed by today's homeowners' associations. In an effort to

maintain more effective control, the covenants gradually evolved into more formal zoning regulations. According to Ross, these mechanisms continue to hamper the emergence of more diverse urban-style neighborhoods that younger generations desire.

*Dead End* also covers a broad range of topics considered essential to the planners' understanding of how the profession matured and became more controversial. From the Garden City to redlining practices, Ross weaves an intricate web of how sprawl festered and unfurled across the landscape. He also highlights the roles of many influential figures in twentieth century planning. In describing the influence bohemian culture had on shaping urban neighborhoods, Ross devotes an entire chapter to the mother of the modern urbanist movement, Jane Jacobs.

He praises Jacobs and her core principles for urban design: dense cities are better than sprawl and train and bikes provide a better way to transport people than automobiles. He also supports the notion that mixed-use neighborhoods that encourage walking will simultaneously encourage social and economic life. Ross stops short of addressing the effect gentrification has on the neighborhoods that exhibit these qualities, something that Jacobs could not foresee in her beloved Greenwich Village. He also deviates from her core principles when he criticizes policies supporting historic preservation, arguing that it often works hand-in-hand with zoning ordinances.

The book is a timely discussion of the benefits of new urbanist principles, as young professionals and retired empty nesters increasingly want to live in urban environments that offer the benefit of close proximity to amenities and less reliance on driving. *Dead End* contains a remarkable level of detail and research, as evidenced by a plethora of footnotes. I cannot declare Ross' work to be a light read—as the publisher needed a full two years to complete the peer review and editing process.

As a planning student, it's refreshing to hear a perspective on the motivations for suburbia from a psychological perspective, and Ross lays out an array of strategies for tipping the scale back in favor of smart growth and urbanist policies. His ideas range from encouraging apartment tenants to have a voice in local planning issues to dissolving anti-residential zoning restrictions that work to drive up rent prices. He concludes with how urbanists can work to gain political influence in order to initiate structural change. *Dead End* serves as a total package that will round out the essential bookshelf for any planner or budding urbanist.

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