

The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism. By Adam Rome. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 299 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$54.95; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth 0-521-80059-5; paper 0-521-80490-6.

Reviewed by Patricia Burgess

The Bulldozer in the Countryside's title conjures up the image of a pastoral farm scene threatened by an advancing bulldozer. The subtitle adds meaning to the image by positing that one source of the American environmental movement was post–World War II suburban sprawl. In focusing on the consequences of large-scale suburbanization, Adam Rome adds to the literatures of both suburbanization and environmentalism. He illustrates that the loss of wilderness was only one prompt to environmentalism; that scientists other than ecologists made important contributions to it; that even while some federal agencies contributed to suburbanization, others sought to mitigate its ill effects; and that environmental activism brought about a multifaceted backlash.

Rome divides his subject topically, setting out his premise and its context in an introduction, devoting each of seven chapters to a different dimension of the subject, and then pulling everything together in the conclusion. He logically begins his story with the rise of large-scale suburban development. This is familiar territory to many, with its discussion of Levittown, the Federal Housing Authority, and the economies of large-scale building. He thus sets the physical stage for all that will follow. Chapter 2 deals with domestic energy consumption and how early efforts to popularize environmental design and solar homes lost out to maximizing efficiency. At the same time, economic growth and advertising helped stimulate demand for an ever-increasing variety of electric appliances for the home, which led the United States to become the most energy-consuming society in the world. The result of combining large-scale development with septic systems is the subject of Chapter 3. Because builders sought large tracts of inexpensive land, they often built outside municipal corporation limits and thus beyond the reach of sewer systems or regulations. Only later, when septic tanks overflowed because the soils could not support their number, and when the groundwater became polluted, did people realize that the environmental and public health costs more than offset the “savings” of not installing sewers.

The next two chapters shift the focus from the house to the land. Chapter 4 addresses the decreasing amounts of open space, whether it be fields and forests giving way to subdivisions or developers denying a need for parks when each house has a yard. The decreasing amount of open

space also sparked larger concerns about population growth. In the 1970s one began to hear the term “sprawl” to describe the phenomenon of a metropolitan area’s geographic expansion outpacing its population growth. Chapter 5 shows how changes in building technology and economics allowed “problem” land on hillsides and in wetlands and floodplains to be developed. Unfortunately, such development eroded soils, disrupted watersheds, and destroyed ecosystems.

During the same time that federal highway programs encouraged suburban development and federal housing programs made it more affordable, researchers in other federal agencies began to study the consequences. In the Geological Survey, the Soil Conservation Service, and the Fish and Wildlife Service, scientists and researchers documented the increasing number and severity of floods in metropolitan areas and the increased runoff and soil depletion. Developers had altered drainage basins and destroyed habitats. Chapter 6 discusses the research and notes that although these studies were not part of a coordinated program to document the effects of suburbanization, they provided some scientific underpinning for efforts to regulate it. The research also supported a larger public policy based on a “land ethic,” which Rome discusses in Chapter 7. The National Environmental Policy Act and the work of the Council on Environmental Quality unified some of the disparate activities already underway. Although the proposed National Land Use Policy Act was never passed, several states developed statewide or regional land-use programs. Not surprisingly, the various environmental and land-use laws and programs sparked objections from those who believed their property rights had been unduly restricted.

In illustrating this suburban strain in the environmental movement, Rome draws a very big picture. An in-depth case study of one or two sprawling metropolitan areas probably would not have allowed his broad themes to emerge. His macroscale approach also allowed him to draw on a wide and interesting array of primary and secondary sources. There are lengthy discussions of the work of William H. Whyte and Ian McHarg, as well as details from scientific reports and studies and discussions of articles and ads from the trade publications of several professions. Aldo Leopold and the Sierra Club are here, as are Peter Blake and the Real Estate Research Corporation’s *The Costs of Sprawl*.

The illustrations enhance Rome’s work nicely, and some will be new to many readers. Particularly illustrative of the title are two drawings published nearly thirty years apart, each showing a bulldozer, backed by houses and toppling trees—presumably so more houses can be built. Rome presents his topics in what he describes as a rough chronological order. However, since the time frame of each topic’s discussion covers two or three decades (often with expansion at each end), there is considerable temporal overlap, making the simultaneity of events and trends

less apparent. A visual or graphic time line might have helped. *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* is a good addition to the literature on suburbanization, with its focus on effects, and also to the environmental literature, for it illustrates the multifaceted complexity of that movement. People came to environmentalism in a variety of ways and with sometimes differing goals. Moreover, if slowing suburban expansion was one of their goals, they were up against a formidable obstacle. In tying suburban development to a consumer society and developers' ability to shape and respond to Americans' desires for large modern homes ever further from the city, Rome has shown how a powerful fifty-year cultural trend produced problems that stimulated the environmental movement while simultaneously lessening its chance for success.

During her academic career, Patricia Burgess researched and published on urban development and land use regulation, including Planning for the Private Interest: Land Use Controls and Residential Patterns in Columbus, Ohio, 1900–1970 (1994). She is now changing careers and completing a J.D. degree at Case Western Reserve University, after which she will practice law in Cleveland, Ohio.