The Bulldozer in the Countryside

The concern today about suburban sprawl is not new. In the decades after World War II, the spread of tract-house construction changed the nature of millions of acres of land, and a variety of Americans began to protest against the environmental costs of suburban development. By the mid-1960s, indeed, many of the critics were attempting to institutionalize an urban land ethic. *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* is the first scholarly work to analyze the successes and failures of the varied efforts to address the environmental consequences of suburban growth from 1945 to 1970. For scholars and students of American history, the book offers a compelling new insight into two of the great stories of modern times – the mass migration to the suburbs and the rise of the environmental movement. The book also offers a valuable historical perspective for participants in contemporary debates about the alternatives to sprawl.

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The Bulldozer in the Countryside
Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism

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For Robin
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Preface

As my subtitle suggests, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* is about the relationship between two of the great stories of modern American history, the mass migration to the suburbs and the rise of the environmental movement. Each story has inspired a considerable scholarly literature. Yet scholars so far have not recognized the important connections between the two stories. The construction of tract-house subdivisions after World War II changed the nature of millions of acres of land, and a variety of people soon began to complain about the environmental costs of suburban development. *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* argues that the elaboration of an environmental critique of homebuilding in the period from 1945 to 1970 played an important role in the emergence of environmentalism.

When I started my research, however, I did not expect to write a book about the environmental movement: I simply saw a chance to help overcome a serious shortcoming in the literature of environmental history. The scholarship in the field has focused mainly on rural forms of production – farming, ranching, mining, lumbering, fishing, and hunting. Yet the enterprises of the metropolis also have had profound environmental consequences. Since I wanted to write about suburbia, I decided to focus on homebuilding. How had the environmental impact of residential development changed over time? In answering that question, I hoped to contribute to scholarly understanding of urban environmental history.

I found abundant evidence that the environmental cost of homebuilding rose sharply after 1945. But that fact by itself seemed lifeless to me. What problems did people notice first? Who took the initiative in trying to reduce the environmental costs of tract-house
Preface

construction? How did the critics define the issues? What solutions did they propose? Which problems proved relatively easy to overcome, and which problems proved relatively intractable? I realized that my analysis of the environmental impact of homebuilding no longer was the heart of my work. I was most interested instead in how environmental problems became part of the public agenda. As a result, I began to plan a book that would join intellectual, political, and environmental history.

I thought at first that I would write about a particular place. Like social historians, environmental historians often have used case studies to examine big changes, and many of the issues I consider here were discussed in countless cities and counties across the country. I soon concluded, however, that a case study would not allow me to discuss all the intellectual and political changes that interested me. The postwar transformation of the homebuilding industry received national attention, and the most important debates about the environmental impacts of tract-house development took place in national forums: journals published by trade and professional organizations, congressional hearings, conferences sponsored by federal agencies. I therefore decided to focus on national trends.

With the exception of the introduction and conclusion, The Bulldozer in the Countryside proceeds roughly in chronological order. The first chapter considers the political, social, and economic forces behind the rise of tract housing. The next five chapters discuss different stages in the evolution of the environmental critique of homebuilding. Because I am most interested in the course of environmental activism, I make no attempt to consider all the environmental consequences of suburban development: I only discuss the problems that became important subjects of public debate. The seventh chapter analyzes a remarkably ambitious attempt in the early 1970s to institutionalize a new way of thinking about metropolitan land use. The introduction suggests how my work challenges influential interpretations of the history of the environmental movement; the conclusion reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of the early efforts to reduce the environmental costs of homebuilding.

Throughout the book, I use “tract-house construction” and “suburban development” interchangeably, but I recognize that the two phrases are not strictly synonymous. Many tract-house subdivisions
Preface

lay within the borders of large cities. Because mass building required large and inexpensive tracts of land, however, the great majority of the homes built after World War II were in the suburbs – the communities surrounding long-established urban centers. The typical tract house was a suburban house.

Though I write mostly about the period from 1945 to 1970, the environmental impact of suburban development continues to be a source of controversy. I chose not to carry the story to the present because I saw my work principally as a contribution to the historical literature on environmentalism. Yet I hope *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* will help people think more clearly about the state of the environment today.
Acknowledgments

I began this project as a graduate student at the University of Kansas, where I worked under Donald Worster, and I cannot imagine a more wonderful mentor. Don is wise, inspiring, and supportive. He helped me to find my way in the field, and he continues to offer much wisdom, inspiration, and support. Now he is a wonderful friend.

Joel Tarr and Martin Melosi each read several versions of this book, and I appreciate their insightful suggestions. I also owe much to their work. Joel's ideas about retrospective technology assessment initially gave me the idea of doing a historical environmental-impact study of homebuilding. For years, both Joel and Marty have argued for the importance of urban environmental history, and their pioneering work in the field made my research possible.

I have presented material from this book at conferences of the American Society for Environmental History, the Society for the History of Technology, the Society for City and Regional Planning History, and the Urban History Association. I also gave talks about my research at the University of Kansas, Columbia University, the University of Virginia, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Pennsylvania. I am grateful to all who shared thoughts on those occasions.

In addition, I received thoughtful criticism from the editors and reviewers of several journals. I particularly appreciate the suggestions I received from Joel Tarr and Christine Rosen, co-editors of a special Journal of Urban History issue on “the environment and the city”; Paul Starrs, editor of Geographical Review; and John Staudenmaier, editor of Technology and Culture. I also thank the
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I owe much to Penn State too. To ensure that I had sufficient time for research and writing, I was given a term off from teaching. The staff in the Interlibrary Loan office enabled me to use a wealth of hard-to-find books, articles, and government documents. The University Photo/Graphics shop produced the prints of most of my illustrations. My department heads and deans—A. Gregg Roeber, Roger Downs, John Dutton, and Susan Welch—have given me helpful counsel and strong support. I have also enjoyed the chance to work with so many fine colleagues.

At Cambridge University Press, Frank Smith was a model editor. He was enthusiastic about the project from the time of our first conversation, and he was a fine guide on the trail to publication. I also appreciate the work of all the people involved in the production of the book.

I have always felt blessed in my family, and I owe more than I can say to my parents and my siblings—Donald and Sheila, Ethan and Lisa. I also have been fortunate in my friends. I especially thank Ben Fine, Alina Macneal, and Randy Scholfield. All became friends long ago, during formative periods of my life, and all continue to enrich my years.

Robin Schulze has lived with this book as long as I have. She is a true scholar, and her example and sage advice have helped me immeasurably. But I am grateful for much more. For me, Robin is home: comfort, joy, love. I dedicate this book to her with thanks for everything.