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Janine Schipper. *Disappearing Desert: The Growth of Phoenix and the Culture of Sprawl.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. xiii + 146 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3955-5.

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Sprawling Suburbs and the Culture of Consumption

Janine Schipper discusses “suburban sprawl,” which she defines as the pattern of ever-increasing low-density development or previously undeveloped land that expands metropolitan areas into rural districts. According to Schipper, this development of rural lands is characterized by “cookie-cutter” subdivisions, strip malls, pollution, damage to rural and natural areas, and jammed traffic. The author is generally critical of attempts to sprawl “responsibly,” arguing that “responsible sprawl” still has dramatic ecological consequences that most often go unacknowledged. This book examines the effect of sprawl on the Sonoran Desert and the rapid expansion of the Phoenix metropolitan area. This region of sprawl merits special concern because of the particularly fragile and unique ecosystem of the desert.

Schipper encourages the reader to ask questions about the ecological legacy of sprawl, while also attempting to question some fundamental assumptions that serve to promote or control sprawl. The book discusses five primary cultural forces that drive suburban sprawl: the rational society, cultural productions of space and time, the selling of the American Dream, the consumption of that dream, and rights wars. According to Schipper, a rationalized relationship with the land dominates modern industrial societies. This rationalization emphasizes efficiency, predictability, and control. While this is not always absolute, the author states that industrial cultures display these tendencies. City planners, therefore, focus

on how developments are planned, conforming to developers’ plans rather than checking development. Sprawl, she argues, arises from an ideological framework that perceives the individual as distinct from and in control of nature. The author encourages the reader not only to question this perception but also to examine who benefits from the current framework, concluding that only those with access to the dominant power structure truly benefit.

In particular, Schipper examines the rise of the master-planned community, which extensively controls the environment. Thus, time and space flatten out, and the new communities become places of “hyper-reality” where the marketed dream replaces literal reality. The author points out that despite attempts to develop responsibly, low-density living tends to increase each individual’s “ecological footprint” because more energy is consumed per capita in supplying that person’s needs (pp. 58-59). Schipper maintains that the reader, and Americans in general, need to reexamine concepts that lead to sprawl.

The third cultural tendency that Schipper discusses is the various regionally influenced permutations of the American Dream, concentrating on the Southwest’s version: the standard private home, family, success, and material wealth, with the added promise of the experience of the “wild frontier” (p. 63). Yet, sprawl itself—the pursuit of this dream—undermines the very ability to experience

the âfrontierâ via a more rural lifestyle. Americans thus have created a built environment that undermines their dreams. The dream acts as a barrier to change. Schipper argues that sprawl is not necessary to support a growing housing market, but rather that old areas may be restored and put to new uses via inner-city rehabilitation, or that new housing can be built in clusters that use less land per capita, or that housing may be built up, rather than built out. The American Dream, which emphasizes private property and the idea that bigger is better, works against this more environmentally sound trend.

Schipper states that the primary driving force behind the culture of sprawl is the culture of consumption in the United States. Americans negotiate identity and social status, and orient their activities by means of consumption. The âfreedom to consumeâ works against limiting sprawl. Consumption is an âend in itself and is the ultimate road to happinessâ (p. 91). To curb sprawl, Americans need to alter their relationships with the land by developing a âland ethic,â which Schipper defines using Aldo Leopoldâs ethic, that recognizes that human beings are part of the ecology of an area, not masters of it.

The embrace of this ethic would develop a sense of responsibility for the land, which Schipper argues is the only lasting way to preserve land from sprawl. A broad cultural feeling for the land, rather than legislation about the land, would preserve land more effectively. A land ethic is necessary because it makes paving over more land intolerable. Schipper, therefore, concludes that Americans must address why sprawl occurs, culturally, in order to challenge sprawl. To end sprawl, she states, Americans need entirely new ways of thinking about and relating to their environment.

Schipperâs short work certainly fulfills her goal of encouraging readers to question sprawl and the cultural assumptions that help to facilitate continued land development. Her questions ask readers to assess not only the practices of suburban sprawl but also the beliefs underlying sprawl, and how even subtle ways of thinking shape the built environment. The book constitutes an engaging and thought-provoking contribution to the consideration of not just suburban sprawl but also of American culture and environmentalism.

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