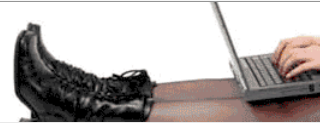


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### A Sprawling Debate

Saturday, March 20, 2010, 2:56 PM  
Samuel Goldman

In a recent post, Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute **takes on** Austin Bramwell's argument that suburban sprawl is **the result of government planning**. How can this be, O'Toole asks, when notorious sprawls like Houston don't even have a zoning code? Bramwell **responds** by pointing out the litany of non-zoning regulations that discourage mixed-use neighborhoods scaled for pedestrians. He points out that in Houston buildings must be set back at least 25 feet from the street and provided with free parking—which pretty much guarantees a landscape of strip malls.

I can't add anything to the debate on land-use law, although Bramwell's case seems pretty convincing. But there is a broader issue that's worth isolating from the specific details. That's the meaning of "planning". While O'Toole sees planning primarily in fiat concerning *ends*—what gets built where—Bramwell recognizes that government can exercise as much influence by determining the *means* of economic activity.

To use a popular example, American cities and states rarely decree a price floor for residential real estate. But by imposing building codes that require the use of more expensive materials, they effectively set a minimum price for housing. Sometimes results like this are an unintended consequence. In other cases, governments use indirect regulation to influence behavior without being seen to do so. Consumer preference for detached houses with a scrap of yard is one factor contributing to sprawl. But "hidden" planning is evidently another, as documented by countless studies of the housing policies of the 1940s and '50s, which included the physical destruction of hundreds of traditional neighborhoods in the name of urban renewal.

You'd expect libertarians to be sensitive to subtle forms of influence as well as obvious coercion. But they often fixate on gross attempts to regulate citizens' behavior, while ignoring "**nudges**" like the location and dimensions of highways and other roads, a tax code that favors home-owners over renters, and a political commitment to keeping gasoline cheap. A reasonable case can be made for all these policies. But let's not pretend that our built environment is exempt from planning just because it hasn't been decreed by a dictatorial Secretary of Suburbanization.

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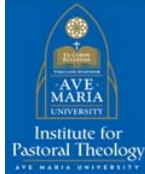
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