

GODFATHERS OF SPRAWL

Witold Rybczynski

Sidebar: Real estate development, like all fields of human endeavor, has a history. The careers of three men who made real estate history--and changed the way American live.

Cities have existed in one form or another since Gilgamesh, but the shape of the American urban landscape is unprecedented: tangles of highways and interchanges punctuated by roadside restaurants and neon-winking attractions; boxy shopping centers and multiplexes sitting among vast parking lots; fleets of trailer trucks surrounding distribution warehouses and manufacturing plants; a crush of office buildings, warehouses, and hotels at the airport; suburban tract houses. We call it sprawl. The word means easeful repose, but sprawl makes many Americans anxious, not relaxed. Sprawl is sometimes described as if it were a natural calamity, like an earthquake or a forest fire. But it is hardly sudden--it's been taking place for fifty years. For better or worse, sprawl is likely to be an issue in the upcoming presidential campaign. With that in mind, it might be useful to recall the recent history of some of sprawl's pioneers.

FRANCIS C. TURNER

Francis C. Turner (1908-99), a Dallas native, studied civil engineering at Texas A & M University, and joined the Bureau of Roads, as the federal agency charged with highway construction was then called. Over the years, he oversaw the construction of the 1,523-mile Alaska Highway, rebuilt highways and bridges in the postwar Philippines, and worked on the Inter-American Highway. In 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower appointed him executive secretary of the President's Advisory Committee on a National Highway Program.

This committee had a monumental task: to lay the groundwork for what was to become the Interstate Highway System. As the only experienced road-builder on the committee, Turner was its *de facto* leader. After Congress passed the Federal-Aid Highway Act, he assumed greater and greater authority over the \$130 billion construction appropriation, the largest public works project ever undertaken in the United States. Acting as liaison between the Bureau of Roads and Congress, Turner negotiated with the states and oversaw the planning of the highways. It was a relentlessly deterministic process. The country was divided into grids and residents were polled to determine "desire lines," which became the basis for individual routes. By the time Turner retired as head of the Federal Highway Administration in 1972, the 42,000-mile highway system was the wonder of the world.

Eisenhower had been impressed by the *autobahns* he had seen in Germany during World War II, and the primary goal of the National Highway Program was to provide an overland means of transporting military forces from coast to coast, reducing dependence on the Panama Canal. That, at least, was the original intention. But big-city mayors, wanting to increase access to their downtowns--and yearning for a share of the highway budget--lobbied for urban connections to the Interstate system. Eisenhower and Turner

were reluctant, since urban land was expensive, as was the cost of elevated highways in congested downtowns. But they needed the support of urban politicians to convince Congress, and so the final Act included more than 6,000 miles of urban highways.

Federal highway money flowed to the cities, but with unintended consequences. Unlike German *autobahns*, Turners interstates not only went "to" the cities (disappearing into local streets), but also "through" the cities. Construction destroyed vast amounts of housing stock, mainly in poorer neighborhoods. Elevated superhighways and interchanges created physical barriers in the centers of cities. Since the banks of rivers and lakes had been blighted by industrial uses they offered a convenient site for the new highways. Later, when waterfronts were seen as potential amenities, these highways were barriers to development. A few cities are now beginning the difficult task of repairing the physical damage done by this intrusion into the urban fabric, but in most cases the harm will never be undone.

The effect of the Interstate system on the country as a whole has been momentous. High-speed public roads--"freeways"--have changed the way Americans live, work, and play. The highway system provides links to distant weekend cottages and recreation sites, including national and state parks. Since it is more convenient to ship goods long distances by truck instead of rail, factories that had once been located in cities next to railroad spurs, are now beside highway interchanges. So are shopping malls and office parks. Urban highways make it easier to get into the city, but they also make it easier to get *out*. An hour's commute on the Interstate describes a fifty-mile radius around the city, turning thousands of square miles of countryside into potential suburbs. The country has changed its shape, thanks in great part to Frank Turner, the unwitting godfather of sprawl.

STANLEY H. DURWOOD

By 1960, the Interstate highway system was well on its way to creating a spread-out suburban nation, but that was not Stanley H. Durwood's problem. He was worried about something else: television. Durwood (1920-99), born in Kansas City, had gone to Harvard and served in the Army Air Force during World War II, before returning to work for his father who owned a small chain of movie houses and drive-in theaters. Business was not good. Instead of going to the movies, families were staying in their sparkling new suburban homes to eat TV dinners and watch "Gunsmoke." Hollywood, and the giant movie palaces of the 1930s that the Durwood chain owned, seemed destined for oblivion. One evening, in the 600-seat Roxy Theater in downtown Kansas City, attendance was so poor that Durwood, who was the manager, had to close the balcony. "I thought, 'If we could just run another so-so picture up in the balcony, we'd double our gross,'" he later told *Variety*.

After Durwood took over the faltering family business, more out of desperation than anything else--and remembering the Roxy--he started subdividing his large theaters into smaller halls. It was the beginning of an idea that came to fruition in 1963 when he built a new movie theater specifically designed to show several movies at the same time. Thus, in a suburban shopping center in south Kansas City, the multiplex was born.

Multiplexes proved enormously popular, and Durwood's company, which he later renamed American Multi-Cinema (today AMC) has become a common part of the

metropolitan landscape. Suburban multi-screen movie theaters offer moviegoers an array of choices in one location, something that previously had been possible only in the largest cities. They provide a venue for the kind of movie earlier shown only in downtown art-house cinemas. Does the recent rise of the independents owe something to Durwood's brainchild? Probably. Multiplexes also create a pleasant and comfortable atmosphere-- Durwood is credited with inventing the arm-rest cup-holder--that revived the custom of a "night at the movies." In 1993, the Foundation of Motion Picture Pioneers named Stanley Durwood Pioneer of the Year, an honor previously accorded Cecil B. de Mille and Darryl F. Zanuck, in recognition of his contribution to the industry.

JAY PRITZKER

Jay Pritzker (1922-99) was born in Chicago. After graduating from Northwestern University Law School in 1947 and serving as a naval aviator in World War II, he worked for the law firm founded by his grandfather. Then he struck out into the business world, acquiring and managing assorted small companies. In 1957, Pritzker was in the coffee shop of a hotel at Los Angeles International Airport. The coffee shop and the hotel were filled with business executives like himself. Pritzker had never thought of an airport as a location for a businessmen's hotel. "It was simply the first first-class hotel that I had ever seen at an airport," he later recalled. The hotel--named after its owner, Hyatt von Dehn--was for sale, and Pritzker, always on the lookout for new acquisitions, bought it on the spot for \$2.2 million. Not long after, together with his brother, Robert, Pritzker built a new hotel near San Francisco International Airport. Additional airport hotels followed in Seattle and Los Angeles. This was the beginning of the Hyatt Hotels Corporation, which today has 182 hotels, and made the Pritzker brothers among the richest men in the world.

In 1979, Pritzker endowed the Pritzker Architectural Prize, which is annually awarded to an outstanding architect. Yet the real Pritzker architectural legacy--a place for businessmen to sleep and meet at the airport--is at once more mundane and more influential. The airport hotel, widely imitated and today an international phenomenon, is not simply a successful marketing gimmick. We take it for granted that airports are surrounded by a dense agglomeration of car rental agencies, meeting facilities, restaurants, offices, distribution centers, manufacturing plants, and shopping malls. Airports began as simple transportation terminals. But, as Pritzker realized, the airport could be more than simply a place to park your car. In the railroad age, hotels, nightclubs and offices had clustered around the downtown train station. Airports couldn't be built downtown, of course, but parts of downtown could spread out around the airport.

In 1967, Pritzker bought an unfinished hotel in central Atlanta and built a giant atrium hotel, initiating an architectural trend that has lasted until the present day. Over the last two decades, his downtown hotels have been a part of urban renewal in Chicago, San Francisco, Dallas, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, Miami, and Memphis. Stanley Durwood's company, too, returned to the city. The multiplex was born in the suburbs and the sprawling one-story buildings were built in suburban malls, often near one of Frank Turner's highway interchanges. This year, a 13-screen Loews Cineplex opened on 42nd Street in Manhattan. Early next year, AMC will open a 25-screen movie theater across the street, incorporating part of the old Empire Theater into its design, neatly closing a forty-year-old circle.

There was a common theme in the visions of Turner, Durwood, and Pritzker; they each saw a market need, and filled it. They made plans, to be sure, but these were often altered by chance--and by the vagaries of the marketplace. Their stories are a reminder that our cities are not the result of grand political visions but the expression of millions of individuals' choices. Those who anticipate and respond successfully to these choices, as Turner, Durwood and Pritzker did, are the real planners of the American city.

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Executive Summary

Godfathers of Sprawl WITOLD RYBCZYNSKI

Three pioneers of real estate development have changed the way modern Americans live. Francis C. Turner was appointed executive secretary of the President's Advisory Committee for the National Highway Program in 1954 and, by his retirement from the Federal Highway Administration in 1972, more than 40,000 miles of interstate highway had been built. Turner's interstates went to, through, and around the cities, creating physical barriers to urban development and turning thousands of square miles of countryside into suburbs and edge cities. Stanley H. Durwood's suburban multi-screen movie theaters have also changed the metropolitan landscape, offering entertainment once possible only in the largest cities. Jay Pritzker's airport and downtown hotels have been a part of urban renewal in many major cities. The careers of these three innovators demonstrate how the shape of the American city is both the result of grand political visions, and the expression of millions of individuals' choices.