EXIT-RAMP CULTURE ; HOW WE BUILT IT AND WHERE IT'S TAKING US:

Urban and regional planners have been wringing their hands over urban sprawl for nearly half a century. Perhaps because I moved here from Alaska, an enormously large place, it strikes me that New England is already sprawled to the max. What I mean is that you can live almost anywhere, grab a morning coffee, get on an interstate freeway and drive somewhere else to work.

Thus, for me, the question isn't sprawl itself, but how to rid ourselves of its byproduct, the exit-ramp culture created by the unholy trinity of the real estate industry, the mass merchandisers and the transportation bureaucracies, which treat each exit ramp as if it were a commercial teat on an endlessly long sow.

What's needed isn't sprawl control, but the political will to undo the ugliness, energy waste, ethnic unfairness and congestion, the hallmarks of the exit-ramp society. What we need are serious market incentives and a government strong enough to stand up to the carnage.

Sprawl has a negative connotation. Hence, I will hereafter use the word "spread." Homo sapiens spreads out over the landscape because we have a biological imperative to do so. Somewhere, deep in our evolutionary heritage, is a visceral craving for open space, whether it is a territory to hold and defend from encroachers or a patch of turf in which families can take root. The urge to spread is almost as strong as the urge to congregate in large groups, which, in the most extreme cases, culminates in the large cities found in every culture and on every continent. There is no instinct to build an exit ramp.

New England has spread three times. Each time, we have done so with good intentions and with a different view toward the land. Each time was also accompanied by the haphazard ugliness of sprawl, which is the downside of rural progress, regardless of historical era.

America's first episode of spread helped create our Jeffersonian "nation of farmers," each of whom wanted to carve his own little piece of heaven out of what was then wilderness. The image I conjure up in my mind is the Minuteman, the early American self-sufficient farmer, standing alone, plow on one side, flintlock rifle on the other, simultaneously husbanding and protecting a mini-kingdom surrounded by stone walls and rail fences. This image was to be found not in the shoreline cities, but in the rolling hills away from the coast, beneath which was a soil nearly perfect for grazing livestock, growing hay and tilling the soil. Almost anyone willing to clear the forest, move the stones and work hard could earn an honest living from the soil. So, young families spread themselves out over nearly the whole landscape, converting it from forest to farm. This was America's first imagined utopia.

But sprawl was there as well, something the visiting Europeans were quick to point out. Coming from lands with tidy villages that had been tilled for millenniums, they saw here an irregular patchwork of clearings, complete with stump fences, tottering stone walls and crooked lanes, the smell of manure and the sounds of livestock and their flies.

Beginning about 1825, however, and continuing for a century, the eyes of our culture shifted toward the industrializing cities, the American West and the Civil War battlefields. Even those young families who stood to inherit good farms simply walked away from them. Land was abandoned.

America's second episode of spread took place during the expansion of suburbs in the late 1940s and 1950s. Though the countryside beyond cities had already begun to be repopulated when automobiles became affordable, spread accelerated dramatically during the baby-boom years following World War II. Young middle-class families drove away from the cities to that idyllic land of
kids running in packs through communities created not for working, but for sleeping, playing, going to school and worshiping.

Most of the commerce and the jobs remained in the cities or their perimeters. Gasoline was cheap. And by today's standards, housing was even cheaper because the land on which houses were being built had been abandoned and was virtually free for the taking. This was America's second imagined utopia.

Sprawl was there as well, often assuming the form of crowded housing developments just beyond the city lines, and cities beginning their long and precipitous decline. Commuting by car on roads first laid out as cow paths and cartways, led to traffic congestion of the sort that we now experience near county fairs, but with billboard ugliness inconceivable by today's standards. Highways between smaller cities were often bumper-to-bumper. The concept of "rush-hour" became compellingly clear.

America's third episode of spread skipped right over suburbia to the land of small rural towns lying within commuting distance of city jobs. This was greatly accelerated by the interstate highway system, of the 1960s and 1970s. Though designed principally for cross-country travel, the interstates made it so easy to get from place to place, that the land between town villages filled up with people commuting every which way, creating something called ruburbia. As suburbia engulfed more of ruburbia, and as the cities that spawned them both went into decline, the focus shifted to the exit ramps of the interstate highway systems, places generally devoid of history and almost wholly removed from civic affairs.

This time, sprawl struck with a vengeance. At important off ramps, enclosed shopping malls sprouted like glass and steel temples to materialism, each surrounded by moats of asphalt pavement for parking. At others exits, the malls were three-sided affairs surrounded by an ocean of parking, with an anchor store at one or both ends. Access-road restaurants, parasitic plazas, multiplex cinemas, and stand-alone superstores developed around the fringes of malls which slowly merged.

One can now get on almost any interstate within a metropolitan zone, take almost any exit ramp, and spend the entire day driving from one parking lot to another, all without entering a mall. A place with no parks, no historic architecture, no civic purpose, no museums, no sense of community ... nothing that might succor us beyond the goal of buying more for less. A place summed up by the statement "There is no there, there," as Gertrude Stein once said.

What next? More spread, of course. But hopefully with less sprawl, with much of the exit-ramp culture either done away with or cleaned up, and with the cities reinvigorated. Hopefully, this will be America's third imagined utopia, a place where we neither work the land for a living -- as we did in the days of the Minutemen -- nor merely live on it -- as we did in the early suburbs -- but instead, actually live with nature, listening to what it has to say, instead of listening to the cacophony of car-related things.

Go ahead. Call me a dreamy idealist. I acknowledge that we must face the real-world politics of urban renewal, fuel-efficient cars, mass transit, county-scale governments, and a broader cultural blend in human communities, and corporate telecommuting. But until that day comes, we will endure the death-by-a-thousand cuts of the exit-ramp culture, which unfolded somewhat accidentally during the age of easy oil, and the age of hyper-materialism, through which we have already passed, just in case you hadn't noticed.