

# **Global Suburbs: Urban Sprawl from the Rio Grande to Rio de Janeiro**

By Lawrence A. Herzog

## **Table of Contents**

Series Forward

Preface

Acknowledgments

Chapter 1: The Globalization of Urban Sprawl

Chapter 2: Sprawl Kills: Ecological Crisis on the Urban Periphery

Chapter 3: Fast Suburbs in the Southwest Borderlands

Chapter 4: Sprawl South of the Border: From Mexico City to Tijuana

Chapter 5: A Global Suburb in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Chapter 6: Beyond Urban Sprawl in a Globalizing World

Index

## PREFACE

The inspiration for writing this book lies in a career divided between two cultures: teaching/working in my home university in southern California, and frequent sojourns to my “second home” in Latin America. Since my undergraduate semester abroad in Cuernavaca, Mexico in the 1970’s, through my graduate studies along the Mexican border, and a Fulbright professorship in Peru, consulting work in the Bolivian Andes, and across the more than three decades of my academic career, Latin America has been my home-away-from-home, both literally and spiritually.

When I first resided in Mexico in the 1970’s as a young exchange student, the presence of the United States in the built landscape of our southern neighbor was far more subdued. I lived in the city of Cuernavaca, Mexico, and attended a school on a former estate just outside the city, a school run by writer/philosopher Ivan Illich. I walked everywhere, or rode buses. In those days, the outskirts of Cuernavaca and other Mexican cities had scattered homes for the upper classes, and pockets of poor *colonias*, but the city’s main hub was its central core around the historic downtown. There were no mass suburbs in Mexico. Yet.

Fast-forward thirty years. While on sabbatical as a Visiting Scholar at the Tec de Monterrey, Queretaro campus, I lived on the northern outskirts of the booming urban region of Queretaro, along the “NAFTA highway” between Mexico City and the border cities of Texas. The love affair with American suburbs was in full bloom in the early 2000’s, less than a decade after the signing of NAFTA. Many high-tech companies were relocating to the Queretaro region, creating a demand for housing among the growing middle and upper class migrants from

Mexico City and beyond. The region was expanding outwards along highways, especially to the north and west. Traffic congestion was now a way of life in Queretaro. Freeways, shopping malls, and suburban subdivisions were sprouting in all directions. In one agglomeration of malls and shopping centers along the freeways north of town, Costco, Office Depot and other signs of American consumerism prevail. A Mexican architect friend of mine jokingly refers to this section of the city as “McAllen,” because it reminds him of the intense consumerism of the U.S. border city in Texas, where so many middle and working class Mexicans often go north to shop.

While writing about the movement to revitalize Queretaro’s downtown among artists, architects and local merchants in the historic center, I was struck by the countervailing growth of a “U.S suburban culture” in the northern part of the city. Subdivisions were being built even before master plans established infrastructure or services. This same phenomenon, as it turns out, was being reproduced across Mexico, on the outskirts of Puebla, Guadalajara, Tijuana, and, of course, Mexico City, where the American suburb was embraced as early as the 1950’s.

The export of the American suburb model was also spreading like wildfire across the Americas well beyond the Rio Grande. A few years after living in central Mexico, I traveled to the southern cone, and witnessed the mass suburbs being built outside Buenos Aires, Argentina and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. I was later fortunate to return and study the Rio de Janeiro region more closely, and never ceased to be surprised that residents who could afford to live in cosmopolitan, older neighborhoods in Rio’s Zona Sul (south zone) would nevertheless trade their comfortable, walkable life for the car-oriented exurbs further out.

As a professor and practitioner of urban design and planning, I felt compelled to write about the emerging phenomenon of the global suburb in the western hemisphere. It is no simple task to write this book, since so much attention is usually devoted to the problems of the poor on

the outskirts of Latin American cities, and, indeed, those problems have not gone away, and deserve all the attention they receive. However, it seems equally problematic that, in the midst of the unresolved difficulties facing squatter neighborhoods across the Americas, the worst elements of American suburban sprawl have now spread to the periphery of cities south of our border, from Mexico to Brazil. In fact, in many places, U.S.-style suburbs are displacing land that once housed the poor. We must, therefore, challenge the ecological problems inherent in these flawed suburban developments as passionately as we seek solutions to the dilemmas facing *favelas* and *colonias* outside these same cities. I trust this book will contribute to this effort.