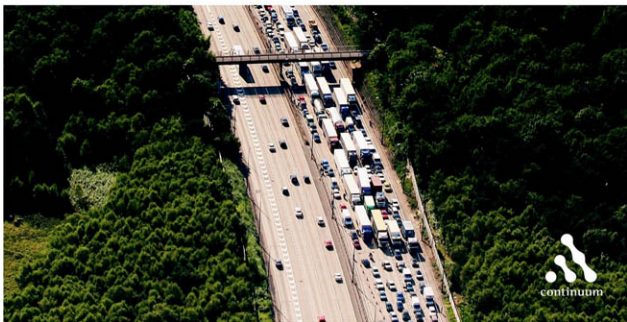




ROBERT KIRKMAN

THE ETHICS OF METROPOLITAN GROWTH

the future of our built environment



The Ethics of Metropolitan Growth

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The Ethics of Metropolitan Growth

The Future of our Built Environment

Robert Kirkman



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Preface

I grew up in the suburbs. To be specific, from the time I was two until I left for college at seventeen, my family lived in a two-story, single-family home in a subdivision that was built in the 1960s on what had been farmland near Toledo, Ohio. We had a two-car garage and a hedge in the front, and a patio, barbecue grill, and above-ground swimming pool in the back.

In many ways, my experiences growing up were typical of white, middle-class American children of my generation, a generation that came on the scene when the suburbanization of the United States was already well under way. I walked and biked around the neighborhood, and played with or avoided the children of other white, middle-class families. I went to the mall on weekends with family or with friends, often simply to pass the time – though I was unusually fond of passing time in bookstores. I watched too much television.

I also witnessed the process of suburbanization itself, though I cannot claim to have understood it at the time. Some years ago, I had the chance to look at a series of aerial photographs of the area where I grew up, taken at intervals from 1939 to 1998. As I looked at them, early memories of home came into focus and took on new meaning.

In the first photograph there are only the county fairgrounds surrounded by a grid of perfectly square farm fields cut diagonally by a railroad line. In the photo from the 1950s, the Ohio Turnpike slices across the landscape and the first few developments appear.

In the photo from the late 1960s, more developments are in place and my childhood home is under construction.

What struck me most about that particular image is that my old neighborhood, which for a long time seemed to me the very center of civilization, was in fact perched on the outer edge of development: had it occurred to me to do so as a child, I could have walked to the end of my block, climbed over two fences, and set out across open fields to the far horizon. By the mid 1970s, there was already another layer of subdivisions in place, a buffer between my neighborhood and open country. By the late 1990s several layers of commercial development and industrial parks had been added, pushing the open country a few miles farther away.

I could also see my elementary school in the photo from the 1960s, and next to it a triangular farm field that took its shape from the railroad tracks that cut diagonally across the old grid of country roads. In the spring of my fifth-grade year, as I was about to move on to the middle school across town, my teacher informed the class that the field had been sold to a developer. That summer, my friends and I spent an afternoon playing in a length of sewer pipe that had been buried in the ground but left open at both ends. I was impressed by its size; if I remember correctly, we could ride our bikes through it. By the fall, though, the sewer line was completed and buried, and streets had been laid out and paved.

Then, for several years, nothing happened.

By the time I was twelve, I had taken up a pastime few of my peers shared or understood: birding. One cloudy and chilly morning in early spring, I slung my new binoculars around my neck and struck out for the triangular field by the school. I ignored the empty streets, and walked instead over the dry, brown weeds and ice-crusting snow towards a line of old trees.

On the way, I was startled by a wild and unfamiliar call. Crouching and stalking as best I could, I chased the call across the field. I was rewarded with the glimpse of a wild eye staring back

at me through the weeds and the noisy flight of a large bird with a long tail. It was a ring-necked pheasant, a new addition to my life list.

In the summer of that same year, the field was well on its way to becoming a meadow. The dew was heavy on the ground one early morning, and my shoes and pant legs were drenched as I hunted, binoculars at the ready. Again, I was rewarded by the sight of something new.

Electric lines had already been buried in the field, awaiting the arrival of televisions and microwave ovens, so the meadow was dotted with light green posts, about two feet tall, with labels warning of high voltage and the hidden danger of underground wires. Perched on top of one of these posts was a small sparrow of some sort. As I watched, the bird threw back its head and sang. I was expecting a full-throated warble but heard instead a thin, high trill in two parts, like breathing in and breathing out.

I was not the best or most patient of birders, largely because I was too intent on adding to my life list. I restrained myself only long enough to note the bird's markings and to think of a way of describing its strange song ('like breathing in and breathing out') before I pulled out my field guide and tried to pin a name on this new find. There it was: a savannah sparrow. Although I could see the bird was native to North America, the name spoke to me of someplace more exotic, the grassy plains of Africa I had seen on television.

All that summer, on walks and bike rides, I would listen for a thin, two-part trill in the weeds, thinking vaguely of Africa. Then someone mowed the field, and I neither saw nor heard the savannah sparrow again. Not long after that, construction began in earnest, and it seemed only a matter of months before every trace of the meadow was gone. The photo from the late 1990s shows a triangular neighborhood of single-family homes with manicured lawns and trees already approaching maturity.

This was my first direct encounter with environmental change, and I reacted with grief and indignation: grief at the loss of habitat

for the native-exotic birds I had discovered, and indignation at the unseen forces of development, those persons unknown who seemed blind and deaf to the qualities of resurgent nature.

Stories of change and loss are common in the suburbs, and my own story now strikes me as a little bit trite. Looking back, I can also see how my reaction was exaggerated or, at least, misdirected. At the time, the situation seemed simple and the appropriate response seemed obvious: the meadow and its inhabitants had been good, and they had been destroyed; this was clearly an occasion for righteous anger. Now I can see the situation was really very complex, and the appropriate response not at all obvious.

For example, one of the values I thought had been destroyed was that of wild nature, the presence of untamed and untramed life just a short walk from my home. But the meadow that grew up in the field during that one season was hardly a remnant of the original swampy wilderness of northwest Ohio, even if it was an early step in the succession from cultivated field to second-growth forest. From the structure of the soil, to the hydrology of the surrounding landscape, to its very shape, the triangular field as I encountered it had already been changed and changed again by human activity. The ancestors of the ring-necked pheasant, that prized addition to my life list, had been introduced to North America from Asia by the descendants of Europeans so they could have something interesting to shoot at.

Then there is the fact that I myself was living in a house built on what had recently been a farm field, and that savannah sparrows might have sung from fence posts along the gravel road that once ran where my family had installed our swimming pool. The families who were soon to move into the new neighborhood would probably be just as content with their houses and lawns as we were with ours. The children of those families would ride their bikes, play with or avoid one another, go to the mall on weekends, and watch too much television.

Even if my family was complicit in the process of suburbanization that even now continues to convert fields and forests into

subdivisions, at the time I myself played no active role in the process. I was a spectator. I could only watch the triangular field turn into a neighborhood and think someone, somewhere, had made a bad decision.

I am no longer just a spectator. In small ways, at least, I am now myself complicit in environmental change. The decisions I make about where and how to live, how and how much to care for my property, which plants to cultivate and which to kill, what and how much to consume, how to get to work and to the store, which candidates to support for which public offices, and so on, all have some impact on the shape of my environment and the direction in which it changes. While there is still a great deal of environmental change that is beyond my control, I must still observe and judge my own decisions and their consequences, measuring them against my own standards of what is good and what is right.

I tell this story because, in a sense, this book has its start in my memories of that triangular field and in my response to a series of aerial photographs. There is more to the story of how this book came about, of course. For one thing, the timing was important.

When I first saw the photographs, I had already spent more than a decade engaged in the peculiar academic enterprise known as environmental ethics, which can loosely be understood as a way of asking critical questions about what is good and what is right in decisions concerning environmental change. My early work as a philosopher was taken up with offering a critique of the mainstream approach to environmental ethics, with its leaning towards meta-ethical theory and its emphasis on establishing the intrinsic value of natural organisms and natural systems. I aligned myself instead with a number of environmental ethicists who argue for a much more practical, policy-oriented, and frankly human-centered approach to environmental decision making.

By the end of the 1990s, I was prepared to leave behind the critical phase of my project and move on to something more

constructive. I thought I should aim to make a direct, practical contribution to some area of environmental policy. In short, I needed a real-world issue, something that really mattered to people, so I could see whether academic ethical inquiry could actually help people make better decisions. I cast about for a while – water supply? energy? agriculture? – but nothing really caught my imagination.

Then, at some point, I remembered the triangular field and my early experience of environmental change. I thought: Why not suburbs?

I was hooked.

Many environmentalists and most environmental ethicists focus on the process of suburbanization – which I now call ‘metropolitan growth’ – only long enough to point out how awful it is. After all, suburbanization has been one of the most important drivers of environmental change in the United States since at least the 1940s, and mainstream environmental ethicists are predisposed to see most environmental change as change for the worse. What matters, from their perspective, is that expanding development destroys wild and rural landscapes, and it encourages ways of living that are more broadly destructive of ‘the environment’.

I had already openly questioned some of the assumptions behind mainstream environmental ethics, including the widespread assumption that wilderness is the standard against which all landscapes are to be measured. I had also questioned the common practice of referring to ‘the environment’ as though it were a single thing, a non-human other that can be damaged or destroyed as soon as humans touch it.

What I found most compelling about focusing on suburbs, then, was the thought that suburban or metropolitan landscapes are themselves the environments of immediate concern to most Americans, environments that should be taken seriously in their own right. When people make decisions about environmental change, it seemed to me, the degree to which their environment

departs from some original wilderness condition is, at most, one consideration among many, and usually not the most important consideration. This struck me as entirely appropriate.

It was at about this point that I first saw the aerial photographs of my old neighborhood and started seriously to rethink my early reaction to the development of the triangular field. Not long after that, the outlines of my approach to the ethics of metropolitan growth came sharply into focus.

To see metropolitan landscapes with clear eyes, and to make decisions about them with clear heads, we need to consider very seriously what may be good about them as well as what may be bad. We need also to be as precise as we can in distinguishing all the different ways in which a landscape and our way of living in it may be good or bad. Then, when we deliberate about what to do in a particular case, we can work towards a rich understanding of what is at stake and a detailed understanding of both the roots of disagreement and the possibility for common ground.

This book is a distillation of what I have learned, so far, about how to identify and distinguish the values and obligations that are in play when we decide how to shape our environment and how to live in it. I offer it in the hope it will help people, on their own and in their communities, to see their own environment more clearly and to make more thoughtful decisions about its future.

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I owe thanks to many people for helping me along with my exploration of ethics in the built environment, starting with my cousin, Drew Sager, who sent me the aerial photos.

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An earlier version of Tables 4.1, 5.2 and 5.3 appeared in Robert Kirkman (2004), 'The Ethics of Metropolitan Growth: A Framework', *Philosophy & Geography* 7.2, 201–18. Also, an earlier version of some of the material in section 5.3, including my adaptation of the 'layer-cake' model, appeared in Robert Kirkman (2005), 'Ethics

and Scale in the Built Environment', *Environmental Philosophy* 2, 38–52.

Chapter 6 has been informed in part by my collaboration with Doug Noonan on technology, urban form, and the limits of ethics, including research we have conducted under a grant from the National Science Foundation (SES-0646739). The discussion of impure agency in sections 6.1 and 6.2 appears in a different form in Robert Kirkman (2008), 'Failures of Imagination: Stuck and Out of Luck in Metropolitan America', *Ethics, Place and Environment* 11.1, 17–32. The discussion of actor-network theory in section 6.2.c appears in a different form in Robert Kirkman, 'At Home in the Seamless Web: Agency, Obduracy and the Ethics of Metropolitan Growth', *Science Technology & Human Values* 34.2, 234–58.

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Introduction

This book is about the decisions we make that shape our built environment, from everyday decisions of home-owners and commuters to grand gestures of national policy. Here is a commuter faced with the choice of driving alone to work, joining a carpool, or using public transit. There is a home-owner trying to decide whether to renovate her current home or move to a new house in the outer suburbs. Meanwhile, a home-owners' association is deciding how strictly to enforce a covenant restricting the size and placement of flower beds, and a zoning board is deciding whether to grant the variances required for an innovative mixed-use development. Elsewhere, a developer has to choose whether to include affordable housing in a new subdivision. Far away, in the capitol, a legislator considers whether to introduce a bill that would impose a heavy tax on gasoline while subsidizing public transit.

As of this writing, such decisions have become more complicated and some of them have become more urgent. The financial crisis that began in 2008 with the collapse of securities backed by sub-prime home mortgages in the United States has expanded, feeding a cycle of home foreclosures and job losses that shows little sign of abating. While energy prices are, for the moment, relatively low, there have been recent signs of instability in the market for the fossil fuels that make the contemporary metropolis possible. All of this is compounded by growing evidence of human-induced climate change, which is likely to