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OVER-TIME

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HONORS PROJECT

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Artist Statement

The Industrial Revolution caused many people to move into cities. Since World War II, people have migrated from these urban areas into the city outskirts. Americans were able to distance themselves from the city because of the automobile (Meredith 449). The automobile provided opportunities for significantly higher levels of housing, called suburbs, and land consumption, as well as the convenience of quick transport back to the city (Nechyba and Walsh 178). Suburbs are rapidly spreading out as acre after acre of land is cleared for their development. Over half of the world's population now lives in urban environments. The combination of city dwellers, industry, and commerce has had degrading effects on the land, water, and air quality. Open fields are usually easier for developers to build on, and therefore they often pick ease and efficiency over the environment.

The term “sprawl” was coined in 1937 by Earle Draper, one of the first city planners in the southeastern United States (Nechyba and Walsh 177). Sprawl is the tendency toward lower city densities as city footprints expand (178). As the city expands, it becomes more segregated due to zoning laws (Meredith 449). Sprawl has led to at least four major social and environmental issues including unproductive congestion on roads, high levels of car pollution, loss of open space, and unequal provision of public goods and services across sprawling suburbs that give rise to segregation and poverty (Nechyba and Walsh 178). The consequences of this exponential growth in certain areas are taking a toll on big cities around the globe. Many are suffering from excess-demand for land, overcrowding, and significant price increases. This in turn puts pressure on the area’s infrastructures and the environment. These stresses include increases in pollution, water shortages, natural habitat lost, and many others (Costley 164). Many recognize deforestation, soil erosion, and global climate change as environmental problems but
urban sprawl is often forgotten or deemed as less important. Regardless, urban sprawl is a social, economic, and environmental problem that needs to be addressed.

Urban sprawl is even a local issue. After researching the history of a piece of land in Bowling Green in my Environmental History course, it became apparent that the city of Bowling Green has been affected by this problem. The amount of farmland and open space has dramatically disappeared and continues to decrease as the amount of developments, like subdivisions, increases.

After this class, I decided to focus my Honor's Project on the issue of sprawl in Bowling Green. As an interdisciplinary project, it was obvious that I would combine art and environmental studies since I have spent a lot of time studying both areas here at BGSU. I chose to work with oil paint because it is the medium I am most comfortable with. As a previous Art Education major, I was going to focus in oil painting before I changed my major to Environmental Policy and Analysis. I felt oil painting was a medium that I could pick back up more easily than others. I decided I wanted to create a series of images that showed the development of the Bowling Green over time. They would then be hung in series to show the audience the changes over time.

I could have taken a different direction to address the issue of sprawl but no one would have really listened to those avenues. Art, however, provides a way to engage others, in order to hopefully teach them something. I wanted to create compelling images that would compel my audience to question their notions of development and suburbanism, as well the cost of sprawl to the environment. I wanted them to step back and ask, “At what point do we say enough is enough?”
To begin this project, I had to find images to base my paintings off of. After my environmental history class, I knew I could go to the Engineer's Office in downtown Bowling Green to look at the aerial photos of the city from different eras. The oldest photos were taken in 1950 and the newest in 2011. The entire city grew and changed drastically over the years, spreading out in all directions from Main St. As an artist, I had to find the most compelling area of change. After perusing through photos for several hours, I decided the most visually captivating images were of the west side of Bowling Green. I decided to do three eras: 1950, 1980, and 2011, each thirty years apart, in order to show drastic change. The Engineer’s Office then scanned all the necessary images for me. Unfortunately, the area I decided on resided in the middle of four different aerial photos. I had to take the digital images and use a computer program to stitch the images together. The program was able to decipher the commonalities between the four photos and combine them into one single image. Once I had three stitched images, I then I had to prep them for printing. I used Photoshop, a graphics-editing program, to decrease the contrast on the images. I took these newly edited images to be printed on canvas in the BGSU Print Lab. I had each image printed on a canvas of about 12” x 16”.

Once each canvas was printed, I had to build the frames for the canvas to be stretched onto. I used poplar wood from a local lumber store because it is a relatively inexpensive, yet durable species of hardwood. Each piece of the frame had to be measured, cut, and glued in the BGSU Wood Shop. Once all three frames were built, the canvases had to be stretched. Using canvas stretching tools and a staple gun, each canvas was attached to a frame.

Once all three canvases were built, it was time to paint. It was difficult to determine what color scheme to use because the 1950 and 1980 images were in black and white. I researched aerial photos of farmland to help create the colors of the fields. After painting the fields, it was
time to paint the developed areas. For a long time I was unsure how I wanted to go about painting the developed areas. I drew some inspiration from previous artwork in which the developed areas I created were in a gray scale while the more natural areas of land were painted in their true color. I decided to carry this theme over into this project. I painted all the land around developed areas, gray. All buildings, including commercial and residential, were painted white.

As I began to develop this color scheme on the 1950 painting, several interesting elements began to develop. The paintings became less realistic, and more geometrically abstract with all the rectangular shaped homes and fields. I really enjoyed the sense of unknown associated with the paintings. It was not immediately apparent that this was a painting of an aerial photo. I loved the idea of letting my viewers wonder what they were witnessing in these paintings.

The second element that developed was the resemblance the paintings had to circuit boards or computer chips. This was also completely unexpected and unintended. The parallels are almost chilling. As time went on, these areas became more developed and therefore, looked more and more like these technologies. Ironically, as a civilization, we were only able to sprawl because of the advances in science and technology. As we become more technologically advanced, you would hope we would be solving more problems instead of creating new ones. Unfortunately, with regards to sprawl, we have been creating more problems.

These problems will not be able to be solved overnight. This brings me to my final point, which tie into the title of the project, “Over-Time”. The title has several meanings. First, at the most basic level, these paintings show the changes in Bowling Green over time. Second, it took the United States many decades to create sprawl, and therefore, we will not be able to fix it
overnight. We will have to work overtime to see real progress. Finally, we are in overtime.

Taking action to solve sprawl is overdue. The time to act is now, or frankly we may not have any green space left. If I add an image for 2040 I hope it does not continue to show the trend of exponential growth. If drastic changes do not happen soon, however, I’m afraid the painting would be entirely gray.
Works Cited

