



Figure 5. A fractal from the Mandelbrot Set, illustrating how fringe urbanization might be conceptualized in a fractal manner (source: author).

Measuring the built environment of sprawl

The aesthetic characteristics of sprawl—images that it conjures in the mind’s eye—are one of the less tangible qualities of the phenomenon, yet they are also amongst its key components. Sprawl is as much an aesthetic architectural and design-based problem as it is an issue of urban structure. Urban sprawl is widely regarded as a lazy and undisciplined expression of urbanization (Gordon and Richardson 1997a), almost universally met with criticism and distaste: “Urban sprawl, roller-painted across the countryside is often without form, grace, or a sense of community. Planning philosophies aimed to strike down this amorphous creature should only gladden our hearts” (Lessinger 1962, p.159). The aesthetic qualities of sprawl certainly provoke a level of eloquence in commentary, but the subjective nature of aesthetic sensitivities leave us with little room for quantification.

One of the often-vocalized criticisms of sprawl, apart from a widespread dislike of low density and scatter, is “ribbon sprawl,” generic fast-food-lined alleys of car parks and neon signs that burn phosphorously, long into the night. The phenomena of ribbon sprawl, or “retailscape” (Gordon and