Only in the two centuries just past was urban growth so nearly universal that it came to be regarded as inevitable. Before that, urban populations generally waxed and waned due to wars, disease, dynastic politics and other factors. Moreover, the historians who study these things believe that, until the mid-19th century, poor sanitation in European cities caused such high mortality that cities needed continual immigration from the country just to offset the natural decline, much less grow. In short, for most people at most times, the success of an enterprise as precarious as a city was not something to be taken for granted.

It’s quite possible that citizens of the 21st century will have to re-learn that lesson. True, the main theme of urban histories of the next few decades will almost certainly be growth—staggering growth in the cities of Asia, Latin America and Africa—but there will almost certainly be a counterpoint to that theme. In the already urban societies of Europe and North America, the new century has brought unprecedented volatility, as cities experience the complex effects of ongoing globalization, market de-regulation and economic restructuring.

This new volatility is sometimes reflected in the fortunes of entire cities and regions. For example, a few years ago Las Vegas and Orlando were two of America’s hottest real estate markets, but in 2008 one reads of large numbers of people in both towns simply walking away from mortgages on brand new houses. The rule that we should expect the unexpected holds within individual cities as well. Despite current market troubles, condos in Downtown Cleveland are selling more than well enough to support several major new developments. Just a few miles away, there are neigh-
Neighborhoods where foreclosed houses are being stripped by astonishingly efficient metal scrappers. (Much of the copper, aluminum and steel they retrieve will ultimately go into the building of those new Chinese mega-cities mentioned above.)

This volume (and the series it begins) grew out of the experience of working in and with the volatile urban situation of Cleveland. Designing for neighborhoods with high vacancy and stagnant property values, the CUDC staff came to realize that the traditional tools of urbanism were not always right for the job. That experience led the CUDC to seek out partnerships with other researchers and practitioners who were looking for creative ways to improve cities with declining populations. Under the leadership of Terry Schwarz, the CUDC has conducted a variety of “Shrinking Cities” programs since 2004, and several of the collaborators we’ve met through those efforts are contributors to this book.

Their six articles divide evenly into two groups. The first three all look at the issue of urban shrinkage from a “big picture” or strategic perspective. Karina Pallagst provides an overview of the current state of discussion on the topic internationally, highlighting the pioneering work done in Germany, but also examining the state of discourse elsewhere in Europe and in North America. Thorsten Wiechmann looks at the particular German case of Dresden, where he discovers a complex history in which volatile trends have consistently led planners to adopt the wrong approach at the wrong time. His warning that “Linear trend extrapolation or ‘business as usual’ is very likely to lead to counterproductive strategies” should certainly resonate with students of American planning history. (Many of the worst planning decisions of the post-war era, including highway and urban renewal projects, were supported by population projections that never came to pass.)

Joseph Schilling’s article brings us to the US for a look at the sort of overall institutional and policy framework that would allow an American city (in this case Buffalo) to deal resourcefully with high levels of vacancy and depopulation and simultaneously package and transmit the lessons of that work to other cities in the Great Lakes mega-region that face similar problems.

The articles in the second half of the volume move to a more tactical—and much more local—perspective. These authors look at what is happening on the ground already and speculate on the impact it soon could have. This perspective is perhaps best exemplified in “IMPROVE YOUR LOT!,” in which the Interboro partners look at how Detroit citizens have begun to re-make their city and secure the quality of their own lives in the absence of effective urban governance. Their article demonstrates the importance of bringing an open mind to a shrinking city, as the values we associate with traditional urbanity may not be the ones that matter to the people who are dealing with the effects of chronic vacancy on a day-to-day basis.
Terry Schwarz and Brad Masi look at current efforts in our hometown to take potentially blighting vacancy and turn it into an asset that can lead to a healthier and more sustainable city. The Cleveland Land Lab is testing the hypothesis that properly tended vacant land can be an asset that stabilizes the real estate market for remaining residents and reduces the city’s overall ecological footprint. The urban agriculture initiatives Masi describes function within the larger intention of the Land Lab, but their impact goes well beyond land use to include public health and the creation of a more sustainable regional economy. Individually, the initiatives Masi describes are small and very grass roots, but collectively they could be revolutionary. Most importantly, the Land Lab proposals and the development of an urban-agrarian space both suggest that this moment of perceived crisis could actually leave the industrial cities of the “rust belt” very well engineered for whatever the next several decades may hold. Even if cities like Cleveland start to grow again—and it could happen—there is an opportunity to make them very different, and much better than they were at their 20th century height.

Online Resources

All of the articles in Cities Growing Smaller are available for download in PDF format at www.cudc.kent.edu/shrink, where you’ll also find material on the CUDC’s other programs on shrinking cities, additional images from the Cleveland Land Lab, and a slide show tour of Dresden to supplement Thorsten Wiechmann's article. Most importantly, a visit to the web site will give you the opportunity to order your very own Cities Growing Smaller t-shirt, while supplies last.

Acknowledgements

Primary thanks go to the contributors, whose patience and good humor has been much appreciated during the preparation of this volume. Thanks to the support of the George Gund Foundation, we’re able to offer this first book in the “Urban Infill” series free of charge. The Gund Foundation’s continuing support of the CUDC’s advocacy mission is greatly appreciated by the CUDC staff, the College of Architecture and Environmental Design and Kent State University. -SR
4 cities growing smaller