Opening of the International Shrinking Cities Exhibition at the CUDC, 2007
(Jerry Mann)
Shrinking Cities
Planning Challenges from an International Perspective

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Urban shrinkage is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing regions, cities, and parts of cities or metropolitan areas that are experiencing a dramatic decline in their economic and social bases. The causes of this urban decline are many and complex, though one common denominator is that each “shrinking city” has been significantly impacted by the forces of globalization [Palagst, 2007a].

Despite the fact that globalization is a strong influence in producing shrinking cities, economic change does not affect all cities and countries in the same way. On the contrary, shrinkage can show very different characteristics depending on national, regional and local contexts [Cunningham-Sabot and Fol, 2007].

Moreover, there is no clear definition of shrinking cities, but rather a range of various interpretations of the phenomenon. Beno Brandstetter and his co-authors detect a wide spectrum of definitions, ranging from a natural growth-opposing process to decline with negative implications. Combining previous approaches, they further speculate that urban shrinkage is a cyclical process, embedded in a broader context of growing and shrinking [Brandstetter et. al., 2005]. Within US discourse, “shrinking cities” only recently cropped up as a new term in urban planning and development, often used in a similar way to “urban decline” [Grossmann, 2007]. The Shrinking Cities International Research Network (SCiRN) defines a shrinking city more precisely as a densely populated urban area with a minimum population of 10,000 residents that has faced population losses in large parts for more than two years and is undergoing economic transformations with some symptoms of a structural crisis [Wiechmann, 2006].

Shrinking Cities in Europe

Despite the fact that changes in demography and urban density of cities occur quite regularly, the acceptance of the shrinkage phenomenon is low [Benke, 2005]. Yet urban shrinkage is not a new phenomenon.

Urban shrinkage has taken place in Europe since the middle ages. The collapse of the Roman Empire, plagues, and agricultural crises all left their mark in the urban fabric [Benke, 2005]. These cities were never completely abandoned and usually resettled. Later on, cities were frequently hit by epidemics, war, and fire. With the
19th century, industrialization led to urbanization processes and drastic changes in settlement patterns all over Europe, creating larger agglomerations on the one hand, and shrinking cities or regions on the other hand. Further polarization set in with the building of railways.

Today, the locales of shrinkage are the post-socialist countries (especially Latvia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and the eastern part of Germany), the northern countries (especially Finland and Sweden), and Southern European countries (in particular, Italy and Spain).

The reasons for shrinkage in Europe are complex and partly overlapping. In the post-socialist countries, economic transformation led to shifts in settlement patterns caused by migration. (e.g. Eastern Germany). New economic migration usually occurs in favor of the capital cities, while remote and peripheral regions lose population (e.g. in Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria). Many western European countries are affected by changing demographic patterns, such as a low birth rates. The Northern countries are still losing population in the rural and peripheral regions. Germany and Italy are affected by dramatically low birth rates, leading to city shrinkage on a larger national scale. Some of these developments are overlapping and thus increase the shrinkage problem. In Germany for example, population decline and economic transformations go hand in hand.

Shrinking Cities in the United States

When considering urban shrinkage in the United States, observations usually start with the post World War II era, the period when shrinkage of cities set in to a larger extent due to post-industrial transformations. Robert Beauregard’s research shows that only a few US cities lost population between 1820 and 1930. All of them were port cities heavily dependent on trade, and their decline was either affected by transportation decisions regarding the railway system or crises like fires or droughts [Beauregard, 2003].

As for recent shrinkage processes, the academic discussion has for many years concentrated on urban decline. This does not necessarily take population losses of the entire city (urban and suburban areas), or regional shrinkage into consideration, but addresses the consequences of urban sprawl. Correspondingly, planning responses have dealt primarily with revitalizing distressed city centers. Yet shrinkage in the United States occurs primarily in the context suburban development versus inner city decline. This pattern, called “hollowing out” or the “doughnut effect,” can be found all over the country.
Figure 1: Population change in Europe (Federal Office for Building and Planning)
Despite the fact that the problems of shrinkage are found in a regional or urban-suburban context, American planning has been focusing on revitalizing the distressed inner cities for many years, as these are the places with the largest problems. Cities like Pittsburgh and St. Louis, which have had to cope with economic decline and large population losses, receive a significant amount of attention from the American planning community. Less attention is paid to the fact that there are large-scale areas that are shrinking, in particular in the Northeast/Midwest “Rustbelt.” A city-regional approach is also discouraged by the fact that inner city revitalization lies in the hands of specific organizations like redevelopment agencies, which are acting separately from planning departments. Multi-agency competencies make accounting for urban complexity more difficult.

In the US, shrinkage can be part of standard post-industrial transformations, which are due to the decline of manufacturing industries, or it can be triggered by “post industrial transformations of a second generation,” which are connected to the high-tech industry (e.g. the dot-com bust) [Pallagst, 2007a].

Especially in the United States, urban planning often concentrates on either managing urban growth, or tackling redevelopment in a fragmented (non-regional) way—this despite the fact that shrinkage often occurs throughout an entire metropolitan region. The current discourse in urban and regional planning in the United States still shows a high affinity toward growth. Despite the increasing popularity of the revitalization approach, which is usually focused narrowly on city centers, there is little active discussion of shrinking cities [Pallagst and Wiechmann, 2005]. According to Beauregard, a focus on urban population losses and their consequences would form a counterpoint to the literature on urban growth. He refers to shrinking populations as a “stigma,” not fitting into the ideal of local decision makers [Beauregard, 2003].

However, there has been a ‘journalistic’ discourse on shrinking cities, as the press have been taking on the topic recently. This development has been fueled by an exhibition that has toured US cities, and a symposium on shrinking cities organized at UC Berkeley.¹

Figure 2 depicts the most recent clusters of shrinking cities over 100,000 inhabitants in the United States in order of their population growth rate (ascending from slowest growth rate). Interestingly, among them is the San Francisco Bay Area, with Silicon Valley as a shrinking region.

¹Recent coverage of the shrinking cities phenomenon includes articles in Governing Magazine, San Francisco Chronicle, USA Today, and Shelterforce Online. For more on the exhibit, see www.shrinkingcities.com/ausstellungen.0.html. The symposium was organized by UC Berkeley’s Center for Global Metropolitan Studies, Institute of Urban and Regional development, and the recently founded Shrinking Cities International Research Network (SCiRN).
The main observations of shrinking cities researchers in the United States are the following [Pallagst, 2007a]:

- The phenomenon of shrinking cities is not only related to the well-known post-industrial “Rust-Belt” examples, but other areas are affected as well.

- Transformation processes occur within the sphere of land use; shrinking and growing are processes that can be observed in a parallel mode. Due to the overall population growth triggered by immigration, many cities in the US have to provide for redevelopment in shrinking areas and growth-related development at the same time.

Unlike in old industrial regions of Europe, shrinkage in the US is usually taking place in the urban core, while the suburban region continues to grow. In fact, early processes of shrinkage of the 1950s and 1960s were triggered by suburbanization. The sprawl pattern led to dramatic losses of population in the city centers. The problems of derelict sites, vacancies and abandoned urban quarters are well known. Social consequences include poverty, segregation, and homelessness, which are happening to a much more dramatic extent in the United States than in European cities.

Nevertheless, suburbanization alone does not account for shrinking in the United States. Economic transformation has led to out-migration of the workforce on a regional scale ever since the manufacturing industry went into a downward spiral, while new economic centers of service, high-tech, and recreation industries have boomed.
The “German School” on the topic of shrinking cities

Post-industrial transformations have occurred in Germany since the 1960s and 1970s, mainly leading to the shrinkage of urban cores [Brandstetter et. al., 2005]. But shrinkage happened also on a larger scale. Most familiar are the economic downturns in the steel industry affecting the Ruhr Area, which is a region that has been in decline for decades. As for the urban planning discourse, as early as 1988, shrinking cities were identified as a new type of urban challenge with a profile to be distinguished from growing cities [Häussermann and Siebel, 1998], but this debate was not further elaborated until recent years.

The situation of German shrinking cities was aggravated dramatically at the beginning of the 1990s. With Germany’s reunification, the former GDR joined a western European country, and a large-scale economic transformation of the eastern part of the country set in, leading to a high rate of unemployment (in many cities over 20%). The economic decline in this post-socialist phase led to a massive movement of population from east to west.

Despite various discussions in the 1980s, dealing with shrinkage is considered a new development in Germany today [Brandstetter, 2005]. The basic trigger was the report of a commission on housing vacancies published in the year 2000, which received huge public attention. The planning debate for the East German Länder indicated a change in perspective about these areas, moving toward an urban development policy that actively addresses declining development on a long-term basis. This has led to a paradigm shift in urban planning and development in (eastern) Germany. Meanwhile, it is now general consensus that the topic of shrinkage has reached an unique status in German urban planning and research.

Whereas population decline affects almost all eastern German cities, in the west it is a problem of specific cities and regions. However, despite the different dimensions in shrinkage, one shared trend is the ongoing demographic change of an ageing population and low birth rates. This problem will strongly reinforce shrinkage in the western part of Germany in the future [Fuhrich and Kaltenbrunner, 2005].

The latest trend in planning for urban shrinkage in Germany targets the large number of abandoned housing units in eastern Germany. Unlike the drastic revitalization procedures during the 1970s, when tear-downs were carried out in many cities, both in Europe and the US, this strategy is accompanied by revitalization, stabilization and beautification measures. Despite the fact that tear-downs have always been part of urban development, the 1970s procedures have left a stigma regarding this process [Fuhrich and Kaltenbrunner, 2005]. A framework for this strategy in Germany is the federal program “Urban Renewal East”, which comprises 350 cities.
The program targets housing vacancies that peaked at 14.9% of the housing stock at the end of the 1990s [Liebmann, 2007]. As a result, 190,000 housing units have been torn down.

The pioneer in this development was the city of Leipzig, which developed the first strategic plan that followed the federal program Urban Renewal East, thus becoming a model for many other East German cities [Glock, 2005]. This drastic intervention in the urban housing markets was fueled by the fact that building associations owning most of the housing stock [Fuhrich and Kaltenbrunner, 2005]. Yet not all neighborhoods were able to have their share in the revitalization process. Heike Liebmann has observed a polarization between revitalized, high-in-demand areas and those that have problematic development perspectives. In the future, the program will place a stronger emphasis on urban quality aspects than on quantitative (tear-down) aspects, in an effort to achieve benefits for the entire city, not only individual neighborhoods [Liebmann, 2007].

Tracing an international discourse on shrinking cities

While there is an extensive planning debate in some European countries about shrinking cities (e.g. Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom), the phenomenon has until now been overlooked in international comparative research. Moreover, although shrinking cities exist all over the world, there has not been much of an international discourse on the topic. German planners as the forerunners of the current shrinking cities debate are on the verge of developing a ‘German School’ on shrinking cities. However, for the most part, these discussions take place in German and are centered on a German epistemic community, with few or no links to scholars elsewhere. Problem-solving within national boundaries is typical for the shrinking cities debate and perhaps also for planning in general.

Recent efforts are aimed at enhancing an international discourse on the topic of shrinking cities. Initiated by the visiting scholars’ roundtable at the Institute of Urban and Regional Development, University of California, Berkeley, an interdisciplinary group of research specialists from five continents has been dealing with shrinking cities in a global perspective since 2004. A comparative viewpoint is essential to the research because the phenomenon of shrinking can be noticed all over the world, albeit within different cultural and socio-economic settings. The starting point of the investigation is European discourse about shrinking cities, since in other areas—the US in particular—urban growth persists as the dominant planning paradigm [Pallagst, 2007a].
This networked research will be vital in redefining land policy and regional governance for the international planning debate. Experiences and case studies from the US, Mexico, Brazil, Germany, France, United Kingdom, South Korea, Australia, and Japan are currently being investigated by an international team of researchers under the aegis of the Shrinking Cities International Research Network (SCiRN).

The SCiRN network has established a web site\(^3\) and bi-weekly online discussions. The international discussion on shrinking cities is still an ongoing process. However, a first comparison reveals a multitude of similarities and differences. Further results were presented and discussed at several international occasions: a symposium at Dresden in March 2006, the World Planning Schools Congress in Mexico City in July 2007, and a symposium at Berkeley in February 2007. An in-depth case study analysis is currently provided by the shrinking cities network, and it will be developed further at future conferences of planners and urban geographers.

The first results of this international research reveal that the location of shrinking cities varies from country to country. For example, whereas the United Kingdom shows a north-south divide with shrinkage in the northern parts of the country, France’s shrinking cities are located in the center of the country, away from European transportation networks [Cunningham-Sabot and Fol, 2007]. The east-west divide of German city shrinkage was mentioned earlier in this paper. In the United States, the Rustbelt cities are the most affected by shrinkage.

Moreover, international comparison of shrinking cities reveals that there are different patterns of shrinkage on the level of the city. While in the US the pattern is usually a “hollowing out” of the inner city leading to the so called “doughnut effect,” [Pallagst and Wiechmann, 2005]\(^4\) other countries display different changes in the urban structure. For example, the Paris region has to face shrinkage in the outer suburban rings, which were the traditional locales of industrial development, while the core remains stable. Eastern German cities display a pattern of perforation, where shrinkage occurs in different areas throughout the city.

**Shrinking cities - a paradigm shift in planning?**

One dilemma of dealing with urban shrinkage from a planning perspective is that urban development is strongly interlinked with growth, leading to the perception of shrinkage as a threat or a taboo [Brandstetter et. al., 2005; Cunningham-Sabot and Fol, 2007]. Maintaining a strategy of economic growth with the aim of regaining population growth used to be the most common reaction of cities towards urban shrinkage, not very often leading to success. In challenging the predominance of growth as the normative doctrine in planning, Cristina Martinez-Fernandez and...
Tong Wu asks whether shrinkage is a problem to be solved or an opportunity not to be missed [Martinez-Fernandez and Wu, 2007]. Manfred Fuhrich and Robert Kaltenbrunner advocate a new sensitivity in planning that relies on honesty when it comes to coping with future challenges of shrinking cities [Fuhrich and Kaltenbrunner, 2005].

Creating realistic visions for shrinkage on the scale of the entire city is the main planning strategy in eastern Germany, sponsored by the federal funding program Urban Renewal East (‘Stadtumbau Ost’). In other parts of the world, like the United States, this dramatic change in planners’ ways of thinking and acting is still quite unusual. Some cities have a more difficult time in adjusting their visions for growth to confront the reality of shrinkage. The United States example of Youngstown can be seen as an attempt of a shrinking US city to break with the existing growth paradigm [Pallagst, 2007a]. In view of the traditional focus of economic and urban growth in the United States, it is still not clear if Youngstown will initiate a shift in planning trends that affects other cities as well.


Conclusions

In many European countries, processes of shrinkage go hand in hand with demographic change and a shrinking population. In the United States, processes of shrinkage are embedded in an environment of population growth. For this reason—and given the growth-oriented planning culture of the United States—a debate on urban shrinkage like the current European one is not in sight in the US. The question is whether planning will be capable of actively dealing with a topic that has been stigmatized for so long.

Bibliography


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