



## Viewpoint

## Shrinking cities: Notes for the further research agenda

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## ABSTRACT

Recently, an international debate on urban shrinkage has brought together national strands of research on those cities that have experienced considerable population loss over a prolonged period. Partially as the result of language constraints and varied terminology used, these national debates have occurred rather separately and the huge potential for eliciting cross-national knowledge has just begun to be exploited. The paper aims to augment and sharpen the international research agenda on urban shrinkage. We call for a more elaborate bridging of national discussions, enhancing scholarly understanding of urban shrinkage, and reflecting upon governance and policy. Last but not least, this paper seeks to align the research on urban shrinkage with general challenges and strands of research in urban and regional studies, human geography, and spatial planning. For the chosen topics, we highlight both recent accomplishments and open questions.

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## Introduction

Recently, an international debate on urban shrinkage has brought together national strands of research on those cities that have experienced considerable population loss over a prolonged period. The prominence of urban shrinkage has been highlighted by special issues in *Built Environment*, *Géocarrefour*, and *The International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (Bontje & Musterd, 2012; Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, Fol, & Cunningham-Sabot, 2012; Roth, 2011). In addition to large-scale quantitative research on urban shrinkage, single case studies have provided further evidence that urban shrinkage is neither a marginal pattern of urban development nor a short-term divergence from the ‘usual’ growth path (Constantinescu, 2012; Forrant, 2012; Haase, Herfert, Kabisch, & Steinführer, 2012; McGuinness, Greenhalgh, Davidson, Robinson, & Braidford, 2012; Rink, Haase, Grossmann, Couch, & Cocks, 2012; Silverman, Yin, & Patterson, 2012). In our understanding, urban shrinkage is a specific trajectory of cities that in many respect follows different logics of development than growing or stable cities, e.g. due to changed economic and population structures or a decline in demand for housing and services. Population loss is the indicator of urban shrinkage, the tip of the iceberg which results from underlying complex sets of causes propelling specific prob-

lems for urban development, typically listed as economic decline, demographic stagnation, decay, or abandonment.

The authors of this contribution have cooperated and exchanged ideas within international projects, including the EU-funded ‘Shrink Smart’ research project ([www.shrinksmart.eu](http://www.shrinksmart.eu)), the EU COST Action on ‘Cities Re-growing Smaller’ (CIRES, <http://www.shrinkingcities.eu>), as well as workshops and joint sessions at international conferences that were held at the UAA conference in Pittsburgh (see Großmann, Beauregard, Dewar, & Haase, 2012), the AAG meeting in New York, the IGB World Congress in Cologne, the AESOP conference in Ankara (all in 2012), the RC21 meeting in Amsterdam, the RSA conference in Newcastle, and the RGS-IBG meeting in London (all in 2011). The paper presents our conclusions from these events and discussions. It aims at augmenting and sharpening the international research agenda on urban shrinkage. Further, it seeks to align the research agenda on urban shrinkage with general strands of research in urban and regional studies. In the following sections, we elaborate on these topics by highlighting both recent accomplishments and open questions.

## Bridging national debates, aligning local concerns

Discussing urban shrinkage is not as novel as it may seem. With terms like ‘urban decline’, ‘urban decay’, or ‘depopulation’, the causes and consequences of urban population loss in the Northern Hemisphere have been studied and discussed for many decades. Partially as the result of language constraints and varied terminology used, these national debates have occurred rather separately

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and the huge potential for eliciting cross-national knowledge has just begun to be exploited. The diversity of local experiences of shrinkage in European, North American, and East Asian cities has been reflected in the variety of topical points of departure for the respective national conversations.

For instance, in eastern *Germany*, it was a vast oversupply of housing stock resulting from combined effects of low fertility rates, outmigration and a building and renovation boom encouraged by tax incentives which in the 1990s brought together urban scholars, planners, policy-makers, and demographers to engage with urban shrinkage and demolitions to rebalance the market (e.g. [Bernt, 2009](#); [Kühn & Liebmann, 2009](#)). In the *UK*, the issues of urban decline, brown-field land, and abandoned housing have typically been discussed in the context of ‘urban regeneration’ and ‘neighbourhood revitalisation’ strategies (e.g. [Carmon, 1999](#); [Roberts & Sykes, 2000](#)). In *eastern Europe*, most of the discussion has centred on ‘depopulation’ and de-industrialisation; at the same time, the demand for housing has remained high, given the historical legacy of chronic under-supply in centrally-planned economies. Under postsocialism, urban and regional policy in eastern Europe has been geared almost exclusively towards attracting foreign direct investment and increasing the competitiveness of individual cities. In *Japan*, the phenomenon of shrinking cities has touched upon a host of determinants, including low fertility, ageing, out-migration from the peripheral areas into the leading metropolitan regions, widening economic inequalities between different parts of the country, and disintegrating local identities and social ties (e.g. [Buhnik, 2010](#); [Matanle & Soto, 2010](#)). In the *United States*, the challenges of economic restructuring, inner-city decay and urban sprawl have been the focus of attention of many authors at least since the 1970s (e.g. [Bradbury, Downs, & Small, 1982](#); [Finkler, Toner, & Popper, 1976](#)). However, only recently has an open and explicit discussion begun in North American urban studies as to how cities can be stabilised, reinvented, and re-imagined with a smaller population (see [Beauregard, 1993, 2009](#); [Dewar & Thomas, 2012](#); [Hollander, 2011](#); [Schilling & Logan, 2008](#)). Even in countries with no immediate experience of the issue e.g. *China*, where opportunities for urbanisation and economic growth seem almost boundless, shrinkage could well materialise in the near future, since the underlying factors like ageing, real estate oversupply, and property speculation shall sooner or later generate urban problems there, too (for a review of global trends, see [Audirac, 2009](#); [Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, et al., 2012](#); [Oswalt & Rienets, 2006](#); [Wiechmann & Pallagst, 2012](#)).

It appears that such a diversity of experiences often results in rather fruitless international debates when individual local stories are being told, with no agreement being reached even on the most basic, commonly agreed definition of a shrinking city, let alone a joint research strategy. The first significant attempt was made in the early 2000s in the course of the “Shrinking Cities” project ([Oswalt, 2005, 2006](#)), a joint enterprise of urban scholars, activists, artists, architects, and designers, which caught international attention and coined the term ‘shrinking cities’ as a direct translation from German *schrumpfende Städte* ([Häussermann & Siebel, 1988](#)). Consequently, a number of academic networks evolved. Founded in 2004 under the aegis of the Institute of Urban and Regional Development at the University of California, Berkeley, the “Shrinking Cities International Research Network” (SCIRN) has adopted a global focus and brought together international researchers to discuss the experience and publish research on the issue. The COST-Action CIREs has gathered a large number of researchers and practitioners to foster knowledge on regeneration strategies in European shrinking cities. In addition, the FP7 project ‘Shrink Smart’ involved urban scholars, comparatively investigating shrinkage trajectories and governance responses across the continent. Finally, within the U.S., the “Vacant Properties Research Network” and

the “National Vacant Property Campaign” have centred upon urban policies for handling vacant properties.

Nevertheless, it is fair to conclude that until now European, North American, and Asian debates on urban shrinkage have been conducted separately, in parallel, rather than being intertwined. In order to synchronise these various discussions, we suggest the following engagement strategy, with a focus on:

- Building a common platform from overarching interests

As the above-mentioned international projects have shown, building a common platform and identifying overlapping research interests across national research is the first step forward. The above mentioned series of conference sessions identified governance responses to urban shrinkage, the influence of shrinkage on sustainable development, and the interplay of economic decline, demographic change, and fiscal austerity as common interests.

- Uncovering blind spots by contrasting experiences

Inter-urban and cross-national comparisons also provide an opportunity to broaden the attention and thus discover phenomena and drivers at work in shrinking cities that have been overlooked locally. By learning about, for instance, the impact of demographic change in one place, the role of demography can be reflected in the trajectories of other cities, where, perhaps, deindustrialisation and economic decline used to dominate the debate and policy response. Furthermore, comparative research should allow one to better isolate the influence of local conditions, e.g. when national policy frameworks prevent importing policy solutions from the outside, and when various path-dependencies result in fairly unique dynamics of shrinkage. Thus, instead of asking how to counteract a specific urban problem such as decay, more general questions would focus on how to develop with no realistic growth prospects, under the conditions of low and falling demand? And how to keep a city liveable, maintaining the quality of life for the remaining residents?

- Discovering what lies behind the plurality of shrinking cities

Recent comparative research has revealed an astonishing plurality of shrinking cities’ pathways. Even within Europe, urban shrinkage is a highly diverse and multifaceted phenomenon. To us, this is a point of interest in its own right, not a reason to withdraw from attempts to link the debates and find commonalities. If the drivers leading to shrinkage are rather similar and few in number, why do various facets of shrinkage emerge? Should we not pay (more) attention to the interplay between these drivers, and complex inter-dependencies between the local and the national in terms of multiple scales of public policy ([Bontje & Musterd, 2012](#); [Haase, Bernt, Grossmann, Mykhnenko, & Rink, in press](#); [Martin & Sunley, 2006](#))?

### Enhancing the scholarly understanding of urban shrinkage

By now, a good deal of knowledge (and mountains of data) about the scope, the causes, and effects of the phenomenon of urban shrinkage have been accumulated. A number of broad international comparative studies have helped to underline the relevance of the phenomenon ([Kabisch & Haase, 2011](#); [Martinez-Fernandez, Kubo, Noya, & Weyman, 2012b](#); [Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, et al., 2012](#); [Turok & Mykhnenko, 2007](#)) and now need to be followed by more integrated, mixed-methods research, digging deeper into the local contexts and consequences of shrinkage. Qualitative research on the structures of decision making, agenda setting and local perceptions can be combined with a better quantitative understanding of the processes at work, – that support pol-

icy making, e.g. changing demand for schools and community services. Investigating a local case of *extreme* shrinkage, occurring from such 'shock' events as wars and natural disasters, can be illuminating (e.g. Ehrenfeucht & Nelson, 2011). However, most of us will engage with 'slow-burn' shrinking cities, where population loss has been a steady process over time.

In the post-war European and North American context, the three main causes of such slow-burn shrinkage include: (i) deindustrialisation, generally leading to net out-migration from the city region (e.g. Friedrichs, 1994; Galster, 2012); (ii) suburbanisation or urban sprawl, when local residents disperse from the core city towards more peripheral locations within the city region (e.g. Beauregard, 2006; Couch, Karecha, Nuissl, & Rink, 2005); and (iii) natural demographic change, whereby mortality levels exceed fertility rates and population naturally declines (Kabisch et al., 2008). Statements about the overlap between these three causes of shrinkage and their combined impact are of common occurrence (e.g. Haase et al., 2013; Hoekveld, 2012). What we currently lack is explanatory heuristics which go beyond causality, towards more complex and non-linear explanations and interpretations. To this end, we propose to:

- Shift attention from causes to the context and dynamics of shrinkage

To explore the interdependencies between the causes and effects of shrinkage, and the operating feedback mechanisms, academic interest should shift from the rather linear, static analyses of causes of population loss to dynamic influences of the local (and global) context. Future trajectories of cities are uncertain. Cities hardly ever get locked into continuous downward spirals of decline. Intermittent and surprising upswings and downturns in population development are frequently reported and need an explanation. We assume that intervening contextual factors such as changes in the administrative-political system as well as national, regional, and local policies play a role. Also, the morphological structure of the city, its ecology, and culture might impact upon the diversity of urban trajectories.

- Utilise urban and social theory to explain the global geographies of shrinkage

To explain population loss in a certain locality is one thing, but do global patterns of shrinkage exist? To understand this, we need to look at the global interplay of factors driving urban shrinkage. In addition to demographic factors having impact across national borders, globalisation, in particular, international and place-based competition, influences the geographies of shrinkage (Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, et al., 2012). As described by Bernt and Rink (2010), shrinking cities have become the 'backyards of globalization', places left behind by the global shifts of capital. Lang (2012) suggests understanding shrinkage as peripheralization, pronouncing the social and discursive production of peripheries as a process in close connection to metropolization. Here, we might draw from the now classical works in urban political economy which revealed how the flow and accumulation of capital tend to produce temporary 'fixes' in space and time (Harvey, 2006; Smith, 2010) and how geographical inequalities are shaped by the ownership and control of the means of production and of the built environment as well as by corporate decisions (Massey, 1995).

### Comparing and contrasting governance response to urban shrinkage

As early as the 1980s, academic research was dealing with strategies for coping with and reversing shrinkage in the old industrial

cities in Western Europe and the United States. That research did not explicitly use the label "governance". Yet its focus was on the evaluation of the local, regional, and national policies, on what had been done, and what needed to be done. Following on, we suggest unpacking the 'black box' of the governance of urban shrinkage by:

- Turning the spotlight on the policy actors, their modes of cooperation and decision making

To address governance issues explicitly, one ought to ask who does what with whom and why? The heuristic of cities as 'growth machines', ruled by particular growth regimes or coalitions (Molotch, 1976) has served as an inspiration for uncovering the existence of 'grant coalitions' in Germany (Bernt, 2009). We have recently learnt that such coalitions, on the one hand, establish networks and capacities in the cities, and, on the other hand, the continuity of their work heavily depends on the availability of external grants and funding (Couch et al., 2012). Therefore, we further suggest to:

- Analyse the interplay between policies and resources

Local attempts to cope with shrinkage are faced with declining local budgets and thus depend on external resources attached to long-term national urban policies (as opposed to just short-term interventions), and the alignment of urban regeneration policy and spatial planning. The dependence on external public funding means that the providers of capital funds influence the objectives of shrinkage-related policies, be they the federal state or the EU institutions, as in Germany and the UK respectively, or the big corporate foundations in the United States.

- Explain the direction of policies and objectives of policy-makers

Generally, urban policies can be classified as (i) *objective-based*, where we can distinguish between growth-orientated and accepting/mitigating policy responses; and (ii) *spatial* policies, either focussing on investment in the areas of decline (typically inner urban areas and peripheral social housing areas) or in the areas with the best growth potential, typically suburban and urban fringe areas (Verwest, 2011; Wiechmann & Pallagst, 2012). What we do not know is what influences the direction that policy-makers take in favouring one type of a policy response over the other. Research into the interests of actors and institutions engaged in governing shrinking cities, their values and motives, and power relations involved could provide further clues in this regard.

- Identify barriers in cross-national policy learning

Given the stigma of failure and the lack of knowledge and experience in coping with the challenge of shrinkage, cities could greatly benefit from cross-national learning and knowledge transfer. However, one can identify a number of hurdles on the way. Within Europe, the new hotspots of shrinkage are mostly located in eastern Europe (Mykhnenko & Turok, 2008). These cities could profit from learning from the experience of western European cities, which have dealt with the causes and consequences of shrinkage for decades. Yet, as we have witnessed, in the post-socialist realm there is a strong belief in the 'invisible hand' of market forces as the main driver of development. The central government and a strong public sector are distrusted. We found a strong preference for the private sector to solve urban regeneration problems and a heavy reliance on exogenous investment to stimulate economic growth (Couch et al., 2012). Similarly, barriers to policy exchange and learning exist in the U.S., where the state is generally considered part of

the problem rather than part of the solution. In turn, this “Americanist” approach is strongly rejected in (western) Europe, both in the scholarly and practical discourse. The ideal of the “European city”, with its dense structures and integrative powers, is celebrated in opposition to sprawling and highly segregated North American cities. Joint, collaborative research might act as an intermediary in overcoming such barriers.

### Rethinking broader urban challenges against the contemporary background of shrinkage

Finally, research on shrinking cities should feed into a more general discussion about urban development. Most of the knowledge and the overwhelming majority of concepts we use to study urban development have been developed through researching urban growth and expansion. But what is the added value of shrinking cities for urban theory? What difference does shrinkage make for the new and old challenges of local and regional development? It has recently been asserted that urban research and practice could be enriched by re-focussing on “ordinary cities”, not just western metropolises (see [Robinson, 2006, 2011](#)). We trust that shrinking cities can also inspire a similarly fruitful engagement.

- Urban inequalities, residential segregation, and gentrification

Typically, housing markets of most cities are under a permanent pressure of housing shortage and restricted access of marginalized and low income households to good quality housing. However, preliminary studies of the effect of shrinkage on residential segregation have pointed to fast growing concentrations of disadvantaged households in the least attractive neighbourhoods with an oversupply of cheap housing stock ([Fol, 2012](#); [Grossmann et al., in press](#)). Thus, one has to problematize the impact of housing oversupply on residential segregation. What could be an appropriate policy response to intra-city inequalities under shrinkage? Does shrinkage foster or hinder gentrification? Is gentrification an unavoidable cost of any attempts to re-urbanise shrunken inner city neighbourhoods? And, most importantly, can we speak at all of gentrification, when devastated neighbourhoods are redeveloped with hardly any (immediate) displacement?

- Land use and land consumption

As experience has demonstrated, some shrinking cities continue to ‘grow’: although the pressure on land consumption might decrease, physically and administratively, shrinking cities could still sprawl. U.S. cities experience continuous sprawl with growing suburban communities and declining inner city districts; the same holds true for many shrinking cities across eastern Europe. By contrast, in the UK and other west European states with a developed culture of spatial planning, public programmes and funding have fostered a reuse of vacant space for redevelopment in inner urban areas or as a way to introduce green structures, improve the quality of life and functioning of urban ecosystem services. What are the new land use patterns that emerge in shrinking cities? How can one steer a shrinking city to reduce its land consumption and turn it into a compact, smaller urban settlement? What role do planners and planning cultures play in influencing relevant national policies?

- Resource efficiency and climate change mitigation

Intuitively, a reduction in population should lead to a reduction in the use of resources, energy, and green house gas emissions. [Tumber \(2012\)](#) argues that smaller, compact industrial cities in the U.S. (e.g. Flint, Michigan, and Youngstown, Ohio) have a better capacity

to adapt to a low-carbon world. These cities, so the argument goes, can adjust to a more dense settlement pattern, being surrounded by rich land assets ready for food and energy production, and profit from short transport connections. The contemporary reality of shrinkage can be fairly different, often resulting in a rise of emissions per capita. Shrunken, perforated urban structures require extra heating. Various networks of technical infrastructure, utilities, and transport become under-used and less efficient. On top, the fiscal stress of shrinkage hinders a compact city strategy. Given that political priorities are often geared towards stabilizing and re-growing the city as well as increasing competitiveness, what role do environmental policies play? What priority does climate change mitigation have in shrinking cities? And how can shrinking cities increase energy efficiency of buildings, if private investment becomes riskier under the conditions of low and uncertain real estate demand?

- Urban resilience

Last but not least, urban resilience is a buzz-word highlighting the (in)ability of cities to adjust and ‘bounce-back’ from a number of shocks and challenges. In a rather classic field of responding to natural hazards, [Kuhlicke, Kabisch, Krellenberg, and Steinführer \(2012\)](#) raised the idea that shrinking cities are much more capable of withdrawing from endangered areas like river banks. Yet can one extend this argument to other types of shocks? Urban and regional economy is another aspect discussed within the resilience framework especially with respect to the post-2007 international financial crisis and its euro zone aftermath. Shrinking cities had already had quite a history of experiencing drastic fiscal austerity long before the Great Recession. What lessons can be drawn from that? Are there any models of ‘best practice’ that one could develop to help mitigate sudden economic decline and severe cuts in local public services?

### Conclusion

Urban shrinkage is a widespread phenomenon today. Many advanced capitalist countries face declining birth rates and an ageing population, whereas immigration might not balance the losses.

History has shown that any city can fall into shrinkage, if even former leading economic hubs like Liverpool, Glasgow or Detroit could lose their importance. Advanced capitalist countries face declining birth rates and an ageing population, whereas immigration might not balance the losses. Numerous smaller towns fall into shrinkage due to migration to the bigger cities. Shrinkage will not “disappear” from Europe’s urban picture; on the contrary, given the global demographic change and the local dynamics of the global economy (and of global crisis effects), it is very likely that urban shrinkage will become an even more widespread phenomenon in the near future.

As in almost every other aspect of urban research, the list of intriguing new questions concerning shrinking cities continues to expand. We are looking forward to further discussions and exchange.

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