



Shrinking cities in Australia, Japan, Europe and the USA: From a global process to local policy responses[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Shrinking cities can be considered as one of the most critical challenges of contemporary urban societies. Recently, this phenomenon has been the subject of growing interest both in terms of research and from an urban policy point of view. In this paper we argue that urban shrinkage and policy responses depend on the combination of global processes and local configurations. Based on a study of shrinking cities in Australia, Japan, Germany, the UK, France and the USA, this paper first aims to explore the global process of urban shrinkage in different contexts. While the phenomenon is global it is anchored at the local level and subject to particular manifestations. After analyzing the general trends of urban shrinkage in the six countries considered, the second aim of this paper is to study the way in which policies implemented in shrinking cities differ in the various national contexts. This symposium argues that policy responses need to consider both the global forces behind shrinkage and the local context where particular characteristics are found. There are however three common areas where local actors in shrinking cities tend to focus their strategies and programs: community resilience; urban regeneration strategies; and tackling the social effects of urban shrinkage.

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1. Shrinking cities in Australia, Japan, Europe and the USA: from a global process to local policy responses (Cristina Martinez-Fernandez, Sylvie Fol, Tamara Weyman, Ivonne Audirac)

During the last years, the Shrinking Cities phenomenon has been the subject of growing interest, from the media, from urban researchers and increasingly from policy makers (Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, Fol, & Cunningham-Sabot, 2012). In Europe, the topic emerged in the early 2000s, in relation to the disruptive consequences of the German reunification on the economic and demographic downturn of cities in the East (Florentin, Fol, & Roth, 2009; Glock & Häussermann, 2004; Hannemann, 2003; Kabisch et al., 2006). In the mid-2000s, Oswalt (2006) and the “Shrinking Cities” group insisted on the international dimension of the

process, studying examples from various continents (Europe, United States, Japan), while the “Shrinking Cities International Research Network”² based its research on the assumption that Shrinking Cities are one of the spatial manifestations of globalisation (Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, et al., 2012; Pallagst et al., 2009). The American foreclosure crisis of 2007 and the ensuing Eurozone debt crisis of 2009, in great measure the result of the globalisation of finance, international trade imbalances and burst real estate bubbles, brought into the limelight the plight of shrinking cities. In the USA, old Rustbelt cities like Detroit, Cleveland, Flint and Youngstown regained attention, but also Sunbelt cities like, Stockton, Las Vegas, Ft. Lauderdale, Miami, and Atlanta emerged as unsuspected shrinking cities (Brookings, 2012).

There is indeed some continuity between the Shrinking Cities phenomenon as it is analysed in recent research and the process of urban decline, which has been documented by a number of studies (Beauregard, 2003a; Breckenfield, 1978; Downs, 1997; Rybczynski & Linneman, 1999; Weaver, 1977). However, Cunningham-Sabot et al. (2013) have argued that the term “shrinking cities” is not simply a new “wrapping” for a long-known phenomenon in urban history. It rather refers to an urban process that is partly new not only regarding its causes and spatial manifestations but also in terms of social, economic and environmental implications. Shrinking cities are both the result of global processes and local policy responses to shrinkage. As “glocalised” urban territorial processes, their policy formation involves not only a rescaling of economic, institutional, and geographical arrangements (Swyngendouw, 2004), but also the politics and difficulties of planning for shrinkage in a growth-dominated and increasingly marketised public policy environment (Hackworth, 2014).

This paper first aims to explore the global process of urban shrinkage in different contexts. The six countries that we have chosen (Australia, Japan, Germany, the UK, France and the USA) offer a good illustration of the “glocal” nature of shrinking cities. After analysing the general trends of urban shrinkage in the six countries considered, the second aim of this paper is to display the way in which policies implemented in shrinking cities differ across the six countries. The manifestations of this phenomenon take different forms at the local level providing various responses and processes for *how to deal with* the demographic, urban and socio-economic impacts of shrinkage. As underlined by Hollander, Pallagst, Schwarz, and Popper (2009), while urban shrinkage is a widespread phenomenon, planners have still little “background, experience or recourse” to deal with it. Shrinking cities across the industrialised world face the greatest planning challenges in dealing with economic and demographic decline, particularly when an international recession and the global financial crisis render competition for domestic and international capital fierce and old strategies obsolete (Audirac, 2010). Assuming that urban shrinkage and policy responses depend on the combination of global processes and local configurations, we will try to illustrate this “glocal” dimension of the process.

1.1. Is urban shrinkage a global phenomenon?

In the United States, urban decline has a long history and has been explained by a combined process of suburbanisation and deindustrialisation (Beauregard, 2003a). Due to the post-fordist restructuring, a number of cities in the US saw their manufacturing

sector shrink dramatically (Di Gaetano & Lawless, 1999). Along with this economic downturn, the decrease in the number of jobs led to a process of out-migration that left many cities, especially in the Rustbelt, with vacant buildings and a weak real-estate market. At the same time, the decentralisation of jobs and the suburbanisation of middle-class and affluent residents tended to accentuate the decline of central cities. They became places where the combination of cheap housing and weak labour markets cities led to the concentration of low-skilled, low-income and African-American and immigrant populations (Glaeser & Gyourko, 2005). While private capital was reluctant to invest in declining central cities, except for a number of dwindling national assistance programmes to cities, government policies have continuously favoured suburban expansion leading to a process of “parasitic urbanisation,” characterised by suburbs growing at the expense of central cities (Beauregard, 2006).

In Europe, shrinkage processes associated with deindustrialisation and suburbanisation are partly similar to those affecting shrinking cities in the US. However the phenomenon is much more prevalent in Europe and is affecting the deindustrialised regions (such as the Ruhr region in Germany) but also the peripheral regions located in the Central and Eastern part of Europe. The demographic factor plays an important role in these regions. The sharp decrease in fertility in these countries, sometimes described as a “demographic shock” (Steinführer & Haase, 2007), is seen as leading to the rapid decline of cities, linked to a very pronounced alteration in the population’s birth and death ratio. The combined effects of deindustrialisation, suburbanisation, post-soviet transformation and demographic change have led to a new pattern of urban decline (Oswalt, 2006) and have conferred a unique character on the urban evolution taking place in the cities of Eastern Europe (Steinführer & Haase, 2007). The transformation of the economic structure and the privatisation of industry have occurred over a very short period of time, as a “shock therapy” (Bontje, 2004).

In terms of low fertility rate and demographic decline, Japan is probably in the most dramatic situation and the phenomenon of shrinking cities is now increasing at a rapid pace. Since 2007 the country’s population is decreasing and at the same time the share of cities with a population over 100,000 inhabitants that are shrinking has reached more than 45%. Smaller cities or local cities outside the metropolitan areas are in an even worse situation and will be ‘marginalised’ meaning these cities will be unable to be sustainable, with decreased tax base and industrial losses. Compounding the demographic decline is the increased ageing of the population, whereby in 2060 the ageing rate (over 65 years old) will be 40% according to estimates by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (OECD, 2015).

In Australia, the loss of employment opportunities in certain cities, most of them mining cities, are closely linked in a downward spiral, leading to an out-migration of population. Australian cities and towns have been experiencing fluctuations of growth and decline since 1960. The internationalisation of mineral markets played an important role on processes of growth and shrinkage especially in these mining towns and in large cities such as Newcastle and Wollongong. The series of processes that have generated demographic change in Australia include: capital city growth, coastal growth, urbanisation within regions, small town shrinkage, youth migration, fluctuation in mineral markets, climate change and policy change in the localisation of government services (Cunningham-Sabot et al., 2010; Martinez-Fernandez and Wu, 2007a,b,c).

As reflected by the variety of processes at work in the different national contexts mentioned, urban shrinkage has multiple, often interconnected, causes. However, the current phenomenon of urban shrinkage seems to reflect the emergence of more global processes linked to societal transformations such as the second

² SCiRN was initiated in 2004 by visiting scholars at the Institute of Urban and Regional Development, University of California, Berkeley. It is an interdisciplinary group of urban planning academics and researchers from five continents, which conducts research on shrinking cities in a global, comparative perspective. They have carried out research in the US, Mexico, Brazil, Canada, Germany, France, United Kingdom, South Korea, Australia, and Japan. The authors of the present paper are all members of the SCiRN. <http://www.shrinkingcities.org/>.

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