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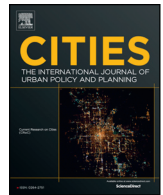

What we talk about when we talk about shrinking cities: The ambiguity of discourse and policy response in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Although United States cities began to shrink in large numbers as early as the 1950s, the shrinking city discourse was obscured by the overriding "urban crisis" narrative, and did not emerge until much later, in the late the 1990s and 2000s. Rather than trigger national policy change, however, the discourse became the starting point for local action, epitomized in the efforts to address widespread housing abandonment through land banks and greening strategies, spearheaded by an informal alliance of local officials and both local and national sources of expertise, largely outside academia. At the same time, the term 'shrinking city' was widely seen as problematic outside scholarly circles, and a major element of the discourse was the ongoing search for acceptable terminology to refer to the class of shrinking cities. In the final analysis, however, the association of growth with success and shrinkage with failure in the urban lexicon remains largely unchallenged.

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1. Introduction: Shrinkage in the American Urban Lexicon

Understanding the shrinking cities discourse in the United States, and why a distinct shrinking cities discourse not only did not emerge until many decades after shrinkage had become a widespread reality but remains highly contested to this day, must begin by confronting the unique difficulties associated with the idea of shrinkage in the American urban lexicon. Shrinkage is, of course, the antithesis of growth, a value that occupies a central space in the American ideology embodied in such central themes of the national mythos as manifest destiny or westward expansion. As sustainability crept into the national conversation in the 1970s, it was often portrayed as a challenge to the dominant premise of growth at all costs; a prominent foundational document of the sustainability movement, the 1973 report, *The Use of Land: A Citizen's Policy Guide to Urban Growth* (Reilly, 1973), acknowledged growth, albeit with disapproval, as "the national ideal" (p.14), and a symbol of the "good life" (p.13). The authors' expectations that these values were on their way out were dashed in the 1980s by the end of the oil price shocks of the 1970s and Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" rhetoric.

Planning in the United States has focused relentlessly on planning for growth; as German scholar Karina Pallagst has commented, there is "a cultural and political taboo" about acknowledging decline among American cities (quoted in Leonard, 2009), while two prominent planning scholars have written that "acceptance of sustained population decline contradicts the widely-held American belief that population growth equates with 'success' and population decline equates with 'failure'" (Morrison & Dewar, 2012, p.120). A prominent Youngstown community leader put it succinctly: "it's almost anti-American to say our city is shrinking" (quoted in Williams, 2013). In this light, the title of this paper seeks to reflect both the problematic nature of shrinkage and the difficulty those engaged in thinking about shrinking cities have in talking about it, echoing the well-known short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" by Raymond Carver (1981). This should be seen as the subtext to much of the discussion that follows, beginning with the question: since urban shrinkage has been a widespread, significant, reality in the United States since the 1950s or earlier, why did it take so long for a shrinking city discourse to emerge?

2. Shrinkage and the urban crisis

Leaving aside ephemeral communities such as mining towns in the Old West, urban shrinkage in the United States began early in the 20th century. A handful of small industrial cities from the earliest days of the industrial revolution and 19th century port cities reached their peak populations by 1920 or earlier and then started to decline. A second, larger cluster, including more substantial cities like Newark NJ or Scranton PA, grew through the 1920s, only to falter during the Great Depression and never regain their 1930 population. These cities were seen, if at all, as minor outliers in a larger pattern of sustained urban growth. Urban shrinkage as a significant national phenomenon emerged after World War II.

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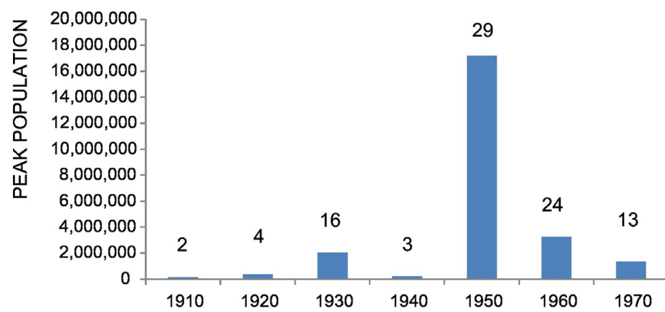

Fig. 1. Shrinking cities by peak year cohort: number of cities and total peak population. SOURCE: US Census of Population; Legacy City Design Network

Fig. 1 shows the population at the time for 91 shrinking cities by peak population year or cohort.[1] While 25 cities started to lose population prior to World War II, they were largely small cities; their total population was less than 3 million, roughly 2% of the nation's 1930 population. The 29 cities in the 1950 cohort, however, included eight of the ten largest cities in the United States, including Philadelphia, Detroit and Chicago, with a total population of over 17 million, 11% of the nation's 1950 population. While some of these cities saw modest declines during the 1950s, only to see decline accelerate in the following decades, others saw significant losses; Boston, St. Louis and Milwaukee each lost over 100,000 people during the 1950s, while the nation's population was growing by over 28 million. While for many cities, the effects of decline, at least through the 1970s, were cushioned by the simultaneous decline in household size, the reality of decline was widely recognized by both popular and scholarly commentators of the period (Bradbury, Downs & Small, 1982).

The postwar decline of so many American cities reflects many different influences, which have been well-described elsewhere, particularly by Robert Beauregard (2006). They include massive migratory shifts, from city to suburb and from the northeast/Midwest to the Sunbelt, and the collapse of the urban manufacturing base, and in particular the urban manufacturing jobs, which had sustained these cities since the 19th century, abetted by federal programs that favored financing new homes over existing ones and that built thousands of miles of highways within and between cities (Beauregard, 2001), as well as by local government fragmentation and the use of land use regulations to wall suburbs off from central cities (Danielson, 1976). Many of those last factors played a strong role in furthering the white flight that was so much a part of the urban reality of the 1960s and 1970s, while keeping disproportionate numbers of urban black populations pent up in the now-declining cities.

By the 1960s, the idea that the United States was undergoing an "urban crisis" had become a common theme in the national policy discourse; as Merkowitz (2010) has written:

> The urban crisis became the catch-all name for these hard times across America. The confluence of race riots, suburbanization, urban blight, deindustrialization, the decline of retail corridors, a rising crime rate, perceived declines in the quality of public education, financial crises in city governments, increased racial tensions contributed to the pervasive sense that cities in America were no longer vital places (p.iii).

A popular book of those years entitled *Cities in a Race for Time* (Lowe, 1967) began "as almost every American knows, our cities are in serious trouble. More and more the local problems of cities have become the major domestic problems of the nation […]" (p3). The same theme appears in the titles of many other books published at the same time. It is particularly salient that the trope is "the cities" or, in Lowe, "our cities"; accurately or not, the urban crisis was represented as a generic or universal one, with variations between cities seen as insignificant in light of the overwhelming forces driving decline.

While the 1970s were arguably the high mark in federal urban spending, the discourse on the cities reflected a radically different perspective. Prominent urban advocate Paul Ylvisaker could comment ruefully that "you don't rate as an expert on the city unless you foresee its doom", while social critic Stewart Alsop, in a Newsweek column with the foreboding title "The Cities are Finished," "inform(ed) his readers that the cities may be finished because they have become unlivable; that the net population of cities will continue to fall, […] and that the cities will come to resemble reservations for the poor and the blacks surrounded by heavily guarded middle-class suburbs," quoting New Orleans Mayor Moon Landrieu that "…the cities are going down the tubes." (Lamanna, 1972; Beauregard, 1993).

After the traumatic 1960s, urban population losses accelerated. The 29 cities that had begun to shrink in 1950 collectively lost over 15% of their population or nearly 2.3 million people during the 1970s. Few people, though, were talking about shrinkage as a phenomenon distinct from the larger multifaceted urban crisis. It was not that observers had not noticed that cities were shrinking; it was not seen, however, as an issue separate from the urban crisis. Moreover, as Beauregard (1993) points out, few writers saw it as a long-term phenomenon as distinct from a temporary break in a long-term trajectory of growth; others, sharing a long-standing American intellectual tradition of seeing density or congestion as major problems (Conn, 2014), actually saw it as potentially beneficial.

Shrinkage as a distinct issue briefly came to public attention during the 1970s. The 1976 call for planned shrinkage by Roger Starr, New York City's Housing and Development Administrator at the time, triggered protests that led to his dismissal by Mayor Beame. He subsequently elaborated his views in the *New York Times Magazine,* in which he argued that New York "does not receive enough wealth to sustain the city at the level to which its citizens have become accustomed," he suggested the city "accept the fact that the city's population is going to shrink, and […] cut back on city services accordingly" (Starr, 1976). In the context of New York's fiscal struggles and deteriorating public services of the time, his arguments were seen as far more than a speculative intellectual exercise. He became a symbol of the city's policies, and his name continues to reverberate in the blogosphere (Muriella, 2010; Merrifield, 2015). A similar proposal in St. Louis by a planning firm known as Team Four led to a similar, albeit far more localized, controversy (French, 2002; Cooper-McCann, 2016).

The 1970s saw the most severe urban shrinkage in the United States before or since. Had urban shrinkage as such been widely seen as a matter of urgent public concern during those years, it is unlikely that even the controversy over Starr's remarks would have prevented for long a robust discourse from emerging. In contrast to pressing issues of poverty, racial conflict, crime and – increasingly – housing abandonment and deindustrialization, urban shrinkage as such was not yet perceived as either central to the crisis or as a matter in need of policy intervention; as Haase, Rink, Grossmann, Bernt, and Mykhnenko (2014) point out

> ...urban population losses have been the subject of various strands of urban andregional studies since the middle of the 20th century — yet rarely have the phenomena under study been given the same name. In the majority of studies, even the term 'shrinkage' itself was not used. Terms such as 'decline', 'decay', 'blight', 'abandonment', 'disurbanization', 'urban crisis' and 'demographic depression' were more popular.
>
> (Haase et al., 2014, p2)

[1] For these purposes, shrinking cities have been defined as cities that (1) had a peak population of 50,000 or larger; and (2) had a 2010 population that was at least 20% below the peak population. I am grateful to Stephanie Sung of the Legacy City Design Network for assistance in preparing this list.

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