



Heritage amid an urban crisis: Historic preservation in Cleveland, Ohio's Slavic Village neighborhood



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 July 2015

Received in revised form 10 March 2016

Accepted 4 May 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Shrinking cities

Historic preservation

Community development

Neighborhood stabilization

Urban heritage

ABSTRACT

Cleveland, Ohio's Slavic Village is a shrinking neighborhood within a shrinking city that, in recent years, garnered national attention as an epicenter of the foreclosure crisis. High vacancy rates, deferred maintenance, vandalism, and low market-values present challenges to neighborhood leaders and policymakers. While demolition has dominated policy discourses in shrinking cities, Slavic Village's built environment is the tangible manifestation of the community's rich working-class and immigrant heritage. Thus, this research asks: In an era of urban shrinkage, what role do heritage and historic preservation play in stabilizing or revitalizing shrinking neighborhoods? Drawing on a qualitative case study of Slavic Village, the findings show that neighborhood leaders value heritage, yet historic fabric is in peril as traditional preservation regulations and incentives are insufficient given the scale of devastation. For historic preservation to retain relevance in places like Slavic Village, the profession needs to consider new, creative, even radical approaches that respond to the challenges of urban shrinkage.

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1. Introduction

Cleveland, Ohio's Slavic Village is a shrinking neighborhood within a shrinking city that recently garnered national attention as an epicenter of foreclosures (Krumholz, Keating, Star, & Chupp, 2006; Kotolowitz, 2009; GOPC, 2014a; GOPC, 2014b). Shrinking cities suffer from population loss and economic contraction resulting in high vacancy, property abandonment, overbuilt infrastructure and fiscal distress. Demolition dominates urban shrinkage policy discourses, as an over-supply of buildings depresses the market (Mallach, 2012a; Mallach, 2012b). Yet, shrinking cities also have rich heritages and historic fabric that can support revitalization (Bertron & Rypkema, 2012; ACHP, 2014). Thus, the overarching research question for this study is: In an era of urban shrinkage, what role can heritage and historic preservation play in stabilizing or revitalizing shrinking neighborhoods? This study adds a preservation lens to the shrinking cities literature, using an in-depth case study of Slavic Village, following Großmann, Bontje, Haase, and Mykhnenko's (2013) call for more "qualitative research on the structures of decision making, agenda setting and local perceptions" (p. 222).

Slavic Village has lost 68% of its population since 1940, a vacancy rate of 28% and a poverty rate of 35% (CCPC, 2015a).¹ It faces an uphill battle to recover from depressed housing values and widespread deferred maintenance, vacancy, abandonment, and vandalism. Slavic Village's immigrant and working-class heritage is formally recognized through the designation of a historic districts and landmark buildings at the

local and national level. Slavic Village Development (SVD), a non-profit community development corporation, and Slavic Village Recovery (SVR), a for-profit initiative, are shaping the neighborhood's future by making decisions about what to build, demolish, and restore.

The findings show broad agreement that Slavic Village's buildings, traditions, and institutions manifest an important heritage. While SVD has restored a few historic buildings, they struggle with a vast landscape of distressed, working-class housing. The neighborhood's historic fabric is in peril because traditional preservation regulations (e.g. local historic districts) and incentives (e.g. federal tax credits) are insufficient within the context of shrinkage, suggesting the need for new preservation approaches if the field is to retain relevance in distressed neighborhoods.

2. Preservation in the era of shrinking cities

The concept of shrinking cities emerged in the popular lexicon and academic scholarship in the first decade of the 21st century (Rybczynski & Linneman, 1999; Popper & Popper, 2002; Hollander, Pallagst, Schwarz, & Popper, 2009; Krohe, 2011; Großmann, Beauregard, Dewar, & Haase, 2012).² There is no singular definition of shrinking cities (Olsen, 2013; Ganning & Tighe, 2015), although significant population and job loss in the latter half of the 20th century is a common thread (Rybczynski & Linneman, 1999; Hollander, 2010; Hollander, 2011; Hollander & Cahill, 2011; Hollander & Németh, 2011; Beauregard, 2012; Hill, Wolman, Kowalczyk, & St. Clair, 2012; Großmann et al.,

² Shrinking cities are variously termed right-sizing cities (Bertron & Rypkema, 2012; ACHP, 2014; Hummel, 2015), legacy cities (American Assembly, 2011; Mallach, 2012c; Mallach & Brachman, 2013) or simply older industrial cities (Vey, 2007).

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¹ For comparison, the City of Cleveland as a whole has lost 55% of its population since 1940.

2013; ACHP, 2014; Hummel, 2015; Ganning & Tighe, 2015). While research on shrinking cities has gained recent popularity, studies about the causes and effects of urban decline has a long history (Beauregard, 1993) and scholars argue that urban population loss is not necessarily a recent phenomenon (Beauregard, 2009).

Existing research documents the causes of urban shrinkage, including suburbanization and sprawl, deindustrialization, and societal changes such as declining birth rates (Pallagst, 2010; Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, Fol, & Cunningham-Sabot, 2012). Urban shrinkage results in municipal financial crises, large swaths of vacant and abandoned buildings and land, and underutilized infrastructure (Pallagst, 2010; Mallach & Vey, 2011; Brophy & Mallach, 2012; Dewar & Thomas, 2012; Hummel, 2015). For example, the City of Cleveland Planning Commission estimates that the city has about 3300 acres (about 5 mile²) of vacant land, including about 20,000 parcels (CCPC, undated.). In Detroit, there are about 20 mile² of vacant land, including nearly 150,000 parcels (DFC, 2012). The foreclosure crisis exacerbated vacancy and abandonment, particularly in shrinking cities' already distressed neighborhoods (Swanstrom, 2011).

For urban scholars, policymakers, and planners, to urban shrinkage is a paradigm shift from the traditional orientation towards growth (Pallagst, 2010; ACHP, 2014; Hummel, 2015). Within the past decade, planners have developed rightsizing strategies, epitomized by the Youngstown 2010 plan, which responded to decades of population loss by recommending "a thirty percent decrease in land intended for residential use" (Finnerty, 2005, p. 50). Policymakers advocate for demolition, arguing that an oversupply of buildings further depresses demand (Bernt, 2009; Mallach, 2012a; Mallach, 2012b). For instance, Ohio created the Neighborhood Initiative program with a portion of its federal Hardest Hit funds to stabilize neighborhood values and prevent additional foreclosures, with an emphasis on demolition (OHFA, 2015). Other strategies include land banks and schemes to repurpose vacant land with green infrastructure, community gardens, side yard programs and other reclamation activities (Schilling & Logan, 2008; LaCroix, 2010; Tappendorf & Denzin, 2011; Schwarz, 2012; Reichtell, 2012; CCPC, undated.; Johnson, Hollander, & Hallulli, 2014; Németh & Langhorst, 2014). Shrinking cities have embraced the idea of strategically targeting investments under the theory that concentrating limited municipal and limited federal funds in specific areas will have a greater impact than equal distribution across the city (Galster, Tatian, & Accordino, 2006; McGovern, 2006; Thomson, 2008; Thomson, 2012; Accordino & Fasulo, 2013). While studies show that housing rehabilitation is key to neighborhood stabilization (Smith & Hevener, 2011; Will & Baker, 2013), federal policies favor new construction even in cities where low market demand precludes widespread new development (Accordino & Johnson, 2000; Hummel, 2015).

Within the shrinking cities discourse, there is recognition of these cities' rich histories and heritage (American Assembly, 2011; ACHP, 2014), including "historic neighborhoods and downtowns that were the glory of American urban life at the end of the 19th and for much of the 20th century" (Cisneros & Lashutka, 2012, p. xi). Yet, the role of historic preservation is not widely discussed (Bertron, 2011; Evans, 2011; Ryberg-Webster & Kinahan, 2014), marginalized (Mallach, 2010; Mallach, 2011), or outright dismissed (Ryan, 2012). For example, Mallach (2012a, p. 92) states that "no number of heartwarming anecdotes of small victories...should divert attention from the overarching reality that these cities have a vast oversupply of housing and other buildings." In his book, *Bringing Buildings Back*, Mallach (2010) gives cursory attention to preservation, although he briefly acknowledges that federal preservation tax credits are "a powerful incentive for rehabilitating abandoned properties" (Mallach, 2010, p. 227). The disconnect between (a) promoting shrinking cities' historic value and (b) incorporating preservation in planning for their future reflects longstanding tensions between these professions (Birch & Roby, 1984; Tiesdell, 1995; Ryberg-Webster & Kinahan, 2014). Ryberg-Webster & Kinahan (2014, p. 120) note that "preservation research and advocacy

largely exist in a silo that is disconnected from the dominant urban policy making discourses of the early twenty-first century" and highlight the dearth of scholarly research focused on preservation in shrinking cities.

Preservation advocates argue that building rehabilitation can and should play a positive role in the future of shrinking cities (Gratz, 2010; Hurley, 2010; Bertron, 2011; Evans, 2011; Bertron & Rypkema, 2012; Markowicz, 2013; ACHP, 2014). Mobilization around this issue stems from concern about "a wave of demolition on the scale that occurred half a century earlier with urban renewal and all its attendant loss of historic structures" (Moloney, 2012). In response, preservationists advocate for a more prominent role in shrinking cities: "historic preservation has not been recognized as a gauge regarding the quality of the community, and the value of historic buildings to economic recovery and community identity has not been universally acknowledged" (ACHP, 2014, p. vi), yet it is unclear the extent to which longstanding preservation policies, programs and strategies might adapt to the market realities of urban shrinkage.

Existing research shows preservation's contribution to revitalization, although few studies focus on shrinking cities. For instance, asset-building and amenities-based community and economic development often include historic buildings as unique resources offering a competitive advantage (Sohmer & Lang, 1998; Listokin, Listokin, & Lahr, 1998; Blakely, 2001; Filion, Hoernig, Bunting, & Sands, 2004; Carr & Servon, 2009; Silver, Clark, & Yanez, 2010; Ryberg-Webster & Kinahan, 2014). Historic district designation can stabilize and improve property values, a core goal for distressed neighborhoods (e.g. Mason, 2005; Coulson & Lahr, 2005; Gilderbloom, Hanka, & Ambrosius, 2009; Ijla, Ryberg, Rosentraub, & Bowen, 2011; Shipley, Jonas, & Kovacs, 2011; Thompson, Rosenbaum, & Schmitz, 2011; Zahirovic-Herbert & Chatterjee, 2012; Kovacs, Galvin, & Shipley, 2015). Ryberg-Webster (2013) found that federal historic tax credits play a significant role in reshaping downtowns, including those of six shrinking cities.

There are unique challenges to preserving historic, yet shrinking, neighborhoods. Listing in the National Register of Historic Places and local historic designation are the most common means of recognizing historic resources. National Register designation provides little protection against demolition, but is a precondition for using the 20% federal historic tax credit, which is only available for income-producing properties (excluding all owner-occupied housing). For inclusion in the National Register, historic resources must have historic significance, be at least 50 years old, and retain material integrity. The latter is a structural barrier in shrinking neighborhoods, where neighborhood buildings are in severe disrepair after decades of population decline and deferred maintenance. According to the National Park Service (NPS), which oversees federal preservation activity including National Register listing, "a property must retain the key exterior materials dating from the period of its historic significance. If the property has been rehabilitated, the historic materials and significant features must have been preserved" (NPS, 2016). The integrity standard is largely inflexible, with NPS clearly stating, "historic properties either retain integrity...or they do not" (NPS, 2016). Furthermore, many shrinking city neighborhoods have historic significance manifested in a vernacular landscape of "workaday urban housing forms like row houses and duplexes and also utilitarian single family dwellings lacking any particular stylistic elements" (PHMC, 2015), architectural styles that have gained the attention of preservationists relatively recently.

At the local level, historic designation typically comes with regulatory oversight of material alterations, including demolition. These local regulations foster the idea that preservation is costly by requiring such things as historic windows and/or prohibiting low-maintenance materials such as vinyl siding. To counter arguments of elitism and to build an inclusive profession, preservationists have begun focusing on working-class, low-income, minority and/or immigrant neighborhoods (Hayden, 1995; Dubrow, 1998; Lee, 2003; Harris, 2004; Kaufman, 2004; Nieves, 2008; Kaufman, 2009) and have emphasized using historic buildings as

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