

Critiques of the Shrinking Cities Literature from an Urban Political Economy Framework

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Abstract

This article outlines the political economy critiques of the shrinking cities literature by answering the following: (1) how does the “shrinking cities” canon define a categorically distinct set of geographies with unique challenges and what solutions are proposed? and (2) how has the urban political economy literature engaged with and critiqued these ways of framing problems and solutions? This analysis finds that the “the shrinking city” is loosely defined and that debates exist around their exceptionalism. Urban political economy scholarship debates whether the solutions provided through shrinking cities literature are innovative alternatives to growth-oriented development or manifestations of austerity urbanism.

Keywords

shrinking cities, rightsizing, land bank, green infrastructure, urban austerity

Over the last two decades, a body of literature on shrinking cities has emerged describing the nature of problems associated with urban population loss and economic decline afflicting cities around the world. This literature has focused on declining cities from Japan, to Germany, to the American Rustbelt, attempting to understand the causes and challenges of shrinking cities and prescribe solutions for shrinkage. The process of shrinking has resulted from as diverse of causes as low birth rate, deindustrialization, and dissolution of socialist states (Grant et al. 2006; Beyer, Hagemann, and Rieniets 2006; Pallagst, Wiechmann, and Martinez-Fernandez 2013). This literature also proposes that an alternative to the growth-minded development ethos of cities is necessary to tackle the deeply complex issues of cities facing shrinkage (Czerniak 2013; Dewar and Thomas 2012; Beyer, Hagemann, and Rieniets 2006; Pallagst, Wiechmann, and Martinez-Fernandez 2013). From this standpoint, many tools emerge from both scholars and planning practitioners in affected cities. The literature on the prominent planning responses of planned shrinkage or rightsizing, greening through green infrastructure and urban agriculture along with reversion of publicly owned vacant properties, has been critiqued by scholars employing a lens of urban political economy to assess the viability of such strategies. These critiques often focus on the assertion that solutions proposed as alternatives to growth under the shrinking cities canon often mimic the tendencies of neoliberal governance in their creation of new markets and private management of public resources; these strategies also play out in the broader context of austerity urbanism (Hackworth 2015b; Akers 2015; A. F. Montgomery 2015; Clement and Kanai 2015; Safransky 2014).

This literature review outlines the problems and solutions defined in the shrinking cities literature and the critiques that have been presented from an urban political economy standpoint. This is not to say that the scholarship on shrinking cities has not acknowledged urban political economy, but the engagements, with few exceptions, rarely consider it in depth (Ryan 2014; Coppola 2019; Dewar, Kelly, and Morrison 2013). The urban political economy critiques of the shrinking cities literature highlight the tensions between these broad and often fragmented lines of thought. I aim to address the following: (1) how does the “shrinking cities” canon define a categorically distinct set of geographies with unique challenges and what solutions are proposed? and (2) how has the urban political economy literature engaged with and critiqued these ways of framing problems and solutions? In order to provide a backdrop for the main focus of this article, urban political economy critiques of the shrinking cities literature, I first review the literature that defines the shrinking city as a separate mode of development from growth, along with its causes and symptoms. I have defined the shrinking cities literature as the body of scholarship that addresses declining urban environments, particularly with regard to population loss, that treats them as categorically unique policy challenges from other urban

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environments. In contrast, I then review literature on the political economy of growth, focusing on analyses of the growth machine, and the ways that growth as a model of development has persisted even under the austerity of neoliberal governance. Lastly, this literature review covers the scholarship that proposes and describes the theoretical and practical backing of the most prominent solutions to urban governance in shrinking cities: rightsizing, greening, and vacant property reuse.

Because of the abundance of English literature on solutions proposed for shrinking American cities, the solutions covered in this review focus on those contexts. However, since this body of literature originates from European contexts, the sections defining the shrinking city draw also from non-American contexts (Ganning and Tighe 2018). The section on solutions will include the critiques of these strategies that largely link them to characteristics of austerity urbanism, often arguing that they are manifestations of neoliberal governance that constitute a dominant development paradigm. I conclude with suggestions for how the shrinking cities literature may be more completely theorized in light of literature on urban growth and urban political economy in order to pursue alternatives to growth.

Defining the Shrinking City

In order to discuss the arguments for exploring shrinking cities as unique geographies and as a backdrop for urban political economy critiques, it is important to first assess how the literature has defined the shrinking city as an object of analysis to begin with. Understanding the ways that shrinking cities are defined is also necessary to determine whether such cities are distinct from growing cities. While there are commonalities among the ways that scholars define the term shrinking cities, there are many ways of defining what constitutes shrinkage (Pallagst, Wiechmann, and Martinez-Fernandez 2013; LaCroix 2010). Cities under this “emerging planning phenomenon” are described by the Shrinking Cities International Research Network as, “. . . densely populated urban area[s] with a minimum population of ten thousand residents that ha[ve] faced population losses in large parts for more than two years and [are] undergoing economic transformations with some symptoms of structural crisis” (Pallagst, Wiechmann, and Martinez-Fernandez 2013, 3; 6). Similarly, some scholars focus their definition on population loss and economic decline, relating them to symptoms of structural crisis; others treat population loss as the main component in their definition (Pallagst 2008; Cunningham-Sabot et al. 2014; Wiechmann 2008; Beyer, Hagemann, and Rieniets 2006). Schilling and Logan (2008) link the characteristics of shrinking cities more closely to deindustrialization and subsequent undesirable transformations to the built environments of cities, saying: “We identify as shrinking cities a special subset of older industrial cities with significant and sustained population loss (25 percent or greater over the past 40 years) and increasing levels of vacant and abandoned properties, including blighted residential, commercial, and industrial buildings” (p. 452). LaCroix (2010) argues that the shrinking city cannot be strictly defined but should be understood through a broader group of

phenomena, stating that there is no precise or single definition, but that cities experiencing it “know it when they see it,” manifesting as, “long-term trends of significant population decline, associated with the loss or diminution of the industries that caused the cities to grow in the first place” (p. 227).

While efforts to strictly quantitatively define what does and does not count as a shrinking city are common, Hartt (2019) questions the utility of such a strict threshold for shrinkage, instead arguing that cities are situated on a spectrum from prosperity to shrinkage. Hartt (2019) and Weaver et al. (2016) also point out that shrinkage and decline are distinct phenomena; areas like affluent suburbs that are losing population but retaining quality of life should not be conflated with cities rife with abandonment, neglect, and lack of social support. Weaver et al. (2016) explain that a shrinking and nonshrinking dichotomy may oversimplify the dynamic nature of cities, and “that even ‘shrinking cities’ contain spaces of growth and stability within their boundaries. Thus, typology-based approaches to theorizing about urban shrinkage and decline at the city level can result in the loss of critical information about actually existing shrinkage and decline” (p. 73). Further, these areas of shrinkage may also be “embedded in a larger process of growth: not only the society as a whole may still be growing overall, but shrinking cities—for example in the rust belt in America’s Northeast—are often located within agglomerations that continue to grow” (Oswalt 2005, 12). Popular geographies of study in this literature are diverse and span the globe, including the American Rust Belt, former industrial corridors of Germany, and cities in Japan (Beyer, Hagemann, and Rieniets 2006; Pallagst, Wiechmann, and Martinez-Fernandez 2013; Grant et al. 2006). From these definitions and commentary on the difficulty of defining such a concept, we see that there are a broad variety of parameters considered by scholars, including population loss, deindustrialization, vacancy, blight, and economic decline (see Table 1). However, Bernt (2016) has observed that in nearly all instances where literature defines shrinking cities, authors have included population loss, and some type of external shock or cause to that population loss.

It is also important to note the differing goals of analyzing shrinking cities across the literature. Two main goals dominate the scholarship: describing the conditions of shrinking cities and critiquing the historic trajectories that have created them, and prescribing solutions in the form of urban planning, policy, and design interventions in the built environment. The majority of the shrinking cities literature is oriented toward prescribing solutions and alternatives to patterns of decline (outlined in more depth later in this article). Literature prescribing new solutions (e.g., Gallagher 2013; Schilling and Logan 2008; Pallagst 2008; Grant et al. 2006) often does so with the understanding that we are in need of a “new approach to the art of building cities that is much more complex, subtle, remediated, mediated, and difficult than the previous simple narrative of endless physical and material progress” (Czerniak 2013, 7). Very little of the research prescribing solutions does so through community partnerships or a community-engaged approach that draws conclusions about development by directly taking

Table 1. Symptoms, Causes and Solutions to Shrinkage as Described in the Literature.

Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Population loss ● Economic decline ● Vacancy/abandonment ● Concentration of poverty ● Lack of tax base ● Disinvestment ● Oversized infrastructure ● Low land values ● Unemployment ● Blight ● Socioeconomic disparity
Causes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Globalization ● Natural disasters ● Wars/armed conflict ● Low birth rate ● Deindustrialization ● Suburbanization ● Dissolution of socialist states ● Environmental degradation
Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Planned shrinkage/rightsizing ● Greening/urban agriculture ● Vacant land management ● Artist/creative class attraction ● Gentrification ● Public private partnership ● Demolition ● Entrepreneurialism ● Social enterprise ● Informal management of land/services

part in processes of development. This scarce work requires researchers to actively engage in the operations of organizations like community development corporations or other development related nonprofits and then make theoretical contributions that draw from such collaborations (Griffin and Thomas 2015; Dewar and Linn 2015; Draus, Roddy, and McDuffie 2014). On the other hand in literature that aims to describe existing scenarios, demographics and morphological features (e.g., Hartt 2019; Weaver et al. 2016; Beyer, Hagemann, and Rieniets 2006), the overarching goal is often to “present shrinking processes and make it possible to understand them, to see them within the overall context of global developments so that their status can be assessed” (Beyer, Hagemann, and Rieniets 2006, 6). With a few exceptions (e.g., Ryan 2014; Dewar and Thomas 2012), there is little overlap between scholarship that pursues both goals that would allow a conversation that theorizes about causes or develop solutions based on such ideas.

Like definitions and goals in the literature, there are also different ways that the causes of shrinkage are considered. They often differ according to the geography they are describing, but little has been written that uniquely categorizes these different traditions of shrinkage; apart from somewhat distinct scholarly traditions worldwide, places in countries as different as Japan, Germany, and the United States can all be described as

“shrinking cities.” The structural collapse of industrial economies in both Germany and the United States are often cited as causes of shrinkage, whereas literature on shrinking Japanese cities tends to focus on low birth rate (Ganning and Tighe 2018; Grant et al. 2006; Beyer, Hagemann, and Rieniets 2006). Pallagst, Wiechmann, and Martinez-Fernandez (2013) state that “Marked by a loss of employment opportunities and the attendant out-migration of population, many shrinking cities have suffered from the post-industrial shift from manufacturing to service industries” (p. 3). Literature on shrinking cities in the United States often focuses on the role of suburbanization and policies that have promoted the abandonment and disinvestment of the inner city (Weaver et al. 2016). More recently, American literature has begun to analyze the subsequent abandonment of the suburbs for a return back to the inner city, as well as “sunbelt” cities of the American Southwest (Hartt 2019).

Apart from these different geographic focuses, a commonality among several definitions is the understanding of shrinkage as the result of what has been termed “structural crisis” (Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, et al. 2012; Pallagst 2008; Pallagst, Martinez-Fernandez, and Wiechmann 2014). While only vaguely defined, structural crisis as the cause of shrinkage has been linked to several phenomena in the literature. Shrinking cities scholar Karina Pallagst, et al. (2013) explains that the causes of these conditions are myriad and include economic and population decline due to low birth rates, industrial shifts, political conflict, recent recession, and globalization. *The Atlas of Shrinking Cities* (is organized around still other structural causes including wars and armed conflict, epidemics, and environmental disasters, though many of these are tied to European contexts (Beyer, Hagemann, and Rieniets 2006). Ganning and Tighe (2018) have cautioned against oversimplifying what can be complex causes of shrinkage and also propose that shrinking cities in the United States must be theorized differently from other world geographies with different histories and causes of shrinkage.

In addition to a wide variety of causes and symptoms, the process of shrinkage is discussed in the literature on a broad variety of scales, from the neighborhood level, to the regional, to the global (Czernecki 2013; Pallagst 2008; Pallagst, Wiechmann, and Martinez-Fernandez 2013; Grant et al. 2006). Martinez-Fernandez, Kubo, et al. (2012) emphasize the many causes and scales of shrinkage, describing it as a “multidimensional process” that has shifting “economic, demographic, geographic, social, and physical dimensions” that change with local and global events (p. 214). Another theme is the attribution of shrinkage (however defined) to processes of globalization (Bernt 2009; Grant et al. 2006; Pallagst, Wiechmann, and Martinez-Fernandez 2013; Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, et al. 2012; Cunningham-Sabot et al. 2014; Beyer, Hagemann, and Rieniets 2006; Shetty and Reid 2013). Related to the industrial shifts emblematic of population loss in many American and European cities, Pallagst, Wiechmann, and Martinez-Fernandez (2013) understand shrinking cities to be victims of disparity created through the global movement of capital. Further, related to the role of globalization, shrinking

cities are often places that have relied on single industries that have migrated, leaving little in the way of an economic or employment base (Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, et al. 2012).

The fragmented nature with which shrinking cities have been described has received some criticism (Bernt 2016; Oswalt 2005; LaCroix 2010; Ganning and Tighe 2018). Oswalt (2005) points to a degree of superficiality, calling it “a problematic term” due to the multitude of causes that are said to be united under symptoms of population loss and economic decline (p. 12). Others have brought concerns that the lack of a unified definition creates challenges for how the term might be operationalized, “reflect[ing] simultaneous, overlapping, and uncoordinated publication of papers focusing on similar issues operationalized in different ways” (Ganning and Tighe 2018, 2). Bernt (2016) has made the argument that the causes and contexts of shrinkage do not seem to belong in the same analysis. He explains that

the state-of-the-art research on the “shrinking city” is based on a fundamentally misleading conceptualization of shrinkage as a universal phenomenon with local specifications. Within this perspective, essentially different urban constellations are forced onto the procrustean bed of a universal model of “shrinkage,” thus erasing fundamental differences which lie beneath the common characteristic of population loss. (Bernt 2016, 441)

In other words, the reliance on population loss as a unifying concept or frame of reference to group shrinking cities with what can be myriad causes is an imprecise approach and results in the prescription of solutions without a rigorous analysis of a very diverse set of causes. Rhodes and Russo (2013) are also concerned with the vagueness of the definition of shrinking cities in that globalization and other worldwide processes are implicated, yet the result has been to put forth a set of very localized, prescriptive interventions. With similar concerns, Bernt (2016) offers that the city as a unit of analysis for shrinkage may not be appropriate, as it fails to recognize how multiple processes at different scales may be intertwined to inform the symptoms of shrinkage.

In this broad array of characteristics and differing accounts of what constitutes shrinkage, quite a large number of cities and regions could potentially be considered to be shrinking. The vague definition of shrinking cities and their causes in effect create an umbrella category that can include many places. Several scholars have aimed to quantify the number of cities globally that could be considered shrinking cities. The various parameters of this phenomenon are so broadly applicable that “according to different studies, every 6th to 4th large city” could be considered shrinking since the 1990s (“Coping with City Shrinkage: A Global Issue” 2006, 1). This projection is echoed in *The Atlas of Shrinking Cities* that claims that “in the 1990s more than a quarter of all large cities had already experienced population losses” (Beyer, Hagemann, and Rieniets 2006). Bernt (2009) said that “It has been reported that globally, about 370 cities with more than 100,000 residents have either temporarily or lastingly undergone population losses of more than 10% in the last 50 years” (p. 754). In yet another staggering claim,

Beyer, Hagemann, and Rieniets (2006) state that “Between 1950 and 2000, more than 350 large cities experienced, at least temporarily, significant declines in population. In the 1990s, more than a quarter of the world’s large cities shrank” (p. 6). The ability of the term shrinking cities to encompass such a broad set of geographies utilizing a vast array of characteristics and causes raises questions about how easily and usefully such a designation can be used. An odd dynamic occurs in these representations where cities are pointed out as exceptional, or fundamentally different from other cities in their development patterns, while at the same time, through the above claims, are described as seemingly ubiquitous.

A set of critiques addresses this tension and claims that the defining and framing of the shrinking cities concept is problematic from several perspectives (Bernt 2016; Audirac 2018; Kirkpatrick and Smith 2011; Akers 2013). Akers (2013) warns that this framing takes as a point of departure the assumption that shrinking cities are absent of investment potential and separate from the economic workings of other cities. In constructing such cities as “sites of exception,” this perspective “closes off the exploration of ongoing accumulation in declining cities, falsely implying that nothing can be learned about capital investment in places where the most vivid observable evidence involves disinvestment” (Akers 2013, 1073). To the contrary, both Akers (2013) and Kirkpatrick and Smith (2015) have discussed the ways that weak market cities are often used as sites of experimentation for market-centric policies. In the words of Kirkpatrick and Smith (2015), this tendency to dismiss such cities as “anomaly serves to camouflage the fact that the city may well represent the leading political edge and/or logical endpoint of advanced (post-crisis) neoliberal austerity” (p. 3). In other words, these authors argue that far from being exceptional, the market-centric policies enacted in these locations are emblematic of the most advanced stages of neoliberalization, coming to a city near you.

Audirac (2018) views the exceptionalism evoked in descriptions of shrinking cities as problematic from the standpoint that it tends to paint imagery of social pathology onto shrinking locales, drawing from Wacquant, Slater, and Pereira’s (2014) description of “territorial stigmatization.” This stigmatization, she fears, may lend neighborhoods that are home to disproportionate numbers of racialized, low-income communities to become victims of negative imagery put forth by the media, academics, and political figures. Further, framing shrinking geographies as such may have the effect of drawing rash policy decisions, that may bulldoze neighborhoods, only to allow them to be gentrified through renewed development interests in the future (which has certainly occurred in the planning profession’s relatively recent memory; Audirac 2018). Lastly, she argues that the label “shrinking” may embolden policymakers in their efforts to enforce austerity urbanism, putting vital social services and amenities at risk for vulnerable populations.

In Search of New Planning Tools

A pervasive theme in the shrinking cities literature is the urging for a new set of planning tools that will allow municipalities to

grapple with the described challenges of shrinkage. Many scholars of the shrinking cities canon argue that the assumption that cities will always grow is rooted in the most recent memories of industrialization and that spurred unprecedented growth patterns in cities around the world (Beyer, Hagemann, and Rieniets 2006; Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, et al. 2012; Grant et al. 2006; Pallagst, Wiechmann, and Martinez-Fernandez 2013). Contrary to a growth-oriented understanding of cities stemming from expansion during and following industrialization, scholars argue that a new paradigm is needed to understand and address shrinkage.

The questioning of assumptions about urban growth by scholars of shrinking cities is described in the *Atlas of Shrinking Cities*, that states that “This is difficult for us to imagine from the perspective of industrialized nations, because for generations we have experienced all but continuous growth in many areas of society, and from a global perspective, growth processes have dominated thus far” (Beyer, Hagemann, and Rieniets 2006, 6). Martinez-Fernandez, Kubo, et al. (2012) write that this investigation into urban shrinkage raises questions about our acceptance of growth as the main paradigm for urban development, stating that “a certain stigma is attached to industrial cities that are growing slowly or declining after losing their former glory” (p. 220). In this stigmatization, some contend that there is a resistance to pursuing planning tools that address the issues of shrinkage, as doing so would be to admit to failing to live up to the conventional ideals of a prosperous city (Shetty and Reid 2013; Sousa and Pinho 2015; Beauregard 2002; Mallach 2017; Weaver et al. 2016). The growth paradigm that many conventional planning and economic development tools are based on then makes it difficult from both a political and logistical standpoint to embrace shrinkage, placing planners at a stance where, “faced with the phenomenon of shrinkage, urban planning is merely reactive” (Oswalt 2005, 16). Zingale and Riemann (2013) have claimed in their studies of governance strategies in shrinking cities that this cultural shift away from the dominance of growth is the single largest challenge for planners in shrinking cities. In other words, the professional culture of planning is geared toward growth and unprepared to meet the challenges of cities with stagnant or shrinking populations. Dewar, Kelly, and Morrison (2013) suggest that what is needed is a shift from planning as a profession that is meant to manage growth to a profession that manages change.

The literature on shrinking cities is strong in its conviction that a new theoretical and practical paradigm is necessary to understand the challenges of such geographies. However, this literature does not offer much in the way of theoretical insight into the structural causes of economic decline. Further, from the above arguments, there remain unanswered questions about whether a shrinking city is categorically unique from other environments, from the block to the regional scale, that are suffering from similar symptoms of decline outlined in this literature. In order to evaluate the role of the shrinking cities concept in potentially informing development alternatives to growth as it aspires to do, in the following section, I now review the literature on urban growth and urban governance under austerity.

The Urban Growth Machine and Growth under Austerity

In 1976, Harvey Molotch made the argument that growth is the key strategy informing urban development and governance; a claim that many shrinking cities scholars critiquing the priority of growth and arguing for an alternative in economically strained cities would agree with. Molotch (1976), and later Logan and Molotch (1987), described an urban growth machine, where key development figures including developers, investors, land owners, business owners, and others who stand to benefit from development drive development agendas in cities. More specifically, these “growth elites” aim to pursue growth by enabling land use intensification that can be manifested in projects like renovations, the addition of public amenities, new construction, and sometimes mega projects like sports stadia or entertainment districts. The political support needed for private actors to pursue such projects is enabled by local governments and their politicians. Boosterism for development and land use intensification is often supported by key figures who wish to add to their political clout by being associated with their support for projects that make the city more desirable and more competitive with other cities for residents and investment. This imagery may also include assertions that a city is a “business friendly” place, touting docile workforces and low production or construction costs as assets (Short 1999). These growth stratagems, some argue, have become a common sense approach to urban development, a capitalist tendency deeply embedded in the agendas of politicians and their partners in development who both benefit from a public image of growth boosterism (Jonas and Wilson 1999).

While this theory is decades old, many scholars studying urban political economy still largely stand by its validity, building on Logan and Molotch’s (1987) general premise with new observations about the evolution of growth machines in contemporary cities (Troutman 2004; Kirkpatrick and Smith 2011; Jonas and Wilson 1999). However, there are some key shifts to development and management practices under neoliberalism that have evolved from what Harvey describes as managerialism, where the public sector manages key aspects of governance and is “primarily focused on the local provision of services, facilities and benefits to urban populations,” to entrepreneurialism, where the logic of the market is injected into the workings of the state (D. Harvey 1989, 3). By applying econometrics to the policy sphere, federal governments, beginning most intensely in the 1980s, made cuts to social services and amenities, justifying such cuts as essential to the bottom line. In the words of D. Harvey (2007), neoliberalism as a project aims to “restore class dominance to sectors that saw their fortunes threatened by the ascent of social democratic endeavors in the aftermath of the Second World War” (p. 22). This removed funding that many local governments relied on to provide vital social services that were seen as expendable, harming some of the most vulnerable populations (Wacquant 2009). Further, this strategy strained budgets for localized infrastructure maintenance and facilitated the decline of many inner-city areas. The neoliberal project

ultimately brought in a new era of governance where cities are reliant on creditors and negotiations with competitive private entities to provide the most basic services in cities; these practices have become profitable under what is understood as financialization (Peck 2012). In other words, the spread of neoliberalization as a governance strategy created a “structural crisis” in cities around the world. Despite the features of urban decline that have been linked to neoliberalization (like weak tax bases and under resourced public services and amenities) by these scholars, these processes are rarely linked to discourses on urban shrinkage by shrinking cities scholars.

While the current age of austerity under neoliberalism has slowed traditional urban growth with respect to the types of development initially described by Logan and Molotch (1987), it has also created new markets whereby private developers compete for contracts between cities, and other private entities (like corporate philanthropic foundations), to help provide services and amenities (Peck 2012; MacLeod 2011). Further, the “growth machine” has to a degree been replaced with a “debt machine” that has opened a market for creditors to lend to cities in dire need of resources (Peck and Whiteside 2016; Kirkpatrick and Smith 2011). Governance decisions then end up being made according to what will keep the city in good standing with creditors, that are often referred to as a “second constituency,” as opposed to democratically responding to the desires of residents (Hackworth 2006; Peck and Whiteside 2016). As Kirkpatrick and Smith (2011) found, a key bond market that has emerged is the private construction of infrastructure, historically funded and built by the public sector. While under the initial growth machine model, private enterprise capitalized on sound public infrastructure to support land use intensification, the crumbling infrastructure in many cities taking on austerity measures, has created opportunities for the debt machine to accelerate. In other words, the private market has proved quite adept at innovating new ways to pursue growth under austerity; these tactics are more entrenched in and integral to the workings of cities than ever—which many argue is key to the strategy of neoliberalization (Peck and Tickell 2002; D. Harvey 2005).

Envisioning Alternatives to Growth: Proposals from Shrinking Cities Scholarship and Planning Practice

Having summarized the main premises that define the causes and symptoms of growth, as well as the relevant urban political economy literature that broadly describes growth and development under neoliberalism, I now focus on the dominant modes of confronting the challenges of shrinkage and a summary of critiques from urban political economy scholarship. Shrinking cities scholars have suggested various practices by which cities might address the issue of shrinkage, not by encouraging growth but by planning for a model of urbanization that thrives despite sustained population loss (Grabner 2015; Schilling and Logan 2008; Oswalt 2005; Czerniak 2013; Dewar and Thomas 2012).

Scholars who promote “degrowth” similarly argue that the continued pursuit of economic growth as a main social goal in cities is not sustainable socially, environmentally, or financially (Kallis 2011; Kallis, Kerschner, and Martinez-Alier 2012; D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2014). Instead, they outline ways that society, from a national to a community scale, might pursue degrowth. In their view, “Degrowth is a rejection of the illusion of growth and a call to repoliticize the public debate colonized by the idiom of economism. It is a project advocating the democratically-led shrinking of production and consumption with the aim of achieving social justice and ecological sustainability” (D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2014). D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis (2014), with a similar sensibility to shrinking cities scholars, have called for imagining alternatives to the understanding that growth is necessarily an indicator of success. Similar to the sometimes utopian visions of shrinking cities scholars who at times conceive the realities in shrinking cities as opportunities to reimagine the ways that land markets and social stratification define urban environments, D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis (2014) explain that “A degrowth transition is not a sustained trajectory of descent, but a transition to convivial societies who live simply, in common and with less” (p. 11). In either conception, it is argued that to achieve an alternative to growth in shrinking cities, planners must develop a new professional mindset that moves away from growth, and just as significantly, are in need of an adequate set of tools to do so (Grabner 2015; Czerniak 2013).

To date, the tools implemented aim to remedy a wide variety of symptoms (but perhaps not causes) of shrinking cities. Vacant lot maintenance programs have aimed to provide maintenance for uncared for parcels (Amborst, D’Oca, and Theodore 2008). Cities have proposed shrinking infrastructure networks to “rightsize” the city (Faga and Garvin 2006; Palchick 2012). Encouraging artist and creative class enclaves has been proposed as a way to activate vacant spaces (Herscher 2012). Urban agriculture has been proposed as a solution to food deserts and vacant spaces that are prominent in shrinking cities (Mogk, Wiatkowski, and Weindorf 2010). Others focus on a new set of planning tools to address the more structural development challenges that are specific to markets found in shrinking cities. Schilling and Logan (2008) explain that these tools are needed to correct challenges of “dysfunctional markets” (p. 451), calling for alternatives to “Conventional market-based redevelopment policies to induce reinvestment[s that] are insufficient to reverse this imbalance and the cyclical nature of decay and disinvestment, creating a race to the bottom” (p. 453). While authors of the shrinking cities canon have cited the need for alternatives to the traditional economic bases and structures to weak market environments, from the stance of political economy critiques, it is still quite unclear whether the proposed tools present an opportunity for envisioning how these markets could function from a perspective other than growth; this critique is explored during the remainder of this article. The following sections analyze three key strategies explored by shrinking cities scholars, bringing these strategies

into conversation with their critiques based on an urban political economy framework.

Planned Shrinkage

Shrinking cities often suffer physically and financially due to their situation in oversized infrastructure and housing stock that is costly to maintain and outsizes the existing population's needs (Hollander and Németh 2011; Krohe 2011; Popper and Popper 1999). Downs (1975) originally described a triage strategy to urban development in economically strained cities, where areas that were seen as having potential for reinvestment, or "tipping point" areas, were prioritized for development resources. Of least priority for redevelopment funds were areas experiencing the most extreme disinvestment (Downs 1975). In order to address this mismatch, scholars and practitioners have proposed that shrinking cities with an abundance of land and unused infrastructure reduce the footprint of the city that requires costly maintenance like landscaping, street lighting, sidewalks, policing, and utilities (Cunningham-Sabot et al. 2014; Krohe 2011; Rhodes and Russo 2013; Hollander and Németh 2011). An additional concern, demolition of unused buildings and housing stock that are thought to be vulnerable to arson and potentially enable criminal activities, is also proposed (Slabinski 2012; Schilling 2008; Schilling and Logan 2008). A large number of these solutions fit under what are termed interchangeably as "smart decline," "smart shrinkage," or "right sizing" (Schilling and Logan 2008; Hollander and Németh 2011; Beckman 2010; Pallagst 2014). This strategy can be defined as the "stabilizing [of] dysfunctional markets and distressed neighborhoods by more closely aligning a city's built environment with the needs of existing and foreseeable future populations by adjusting the amount of land available for development" (Schilling and Logan 2008, 453). This strategy has been explicitly described as an alternative to growth oriented development as promoted by growth machines (Schindler 2016; Weaver et al. 2016).

As an example of how a city might achieve rightsizing, some of the strategies emerging from this literature include demolition, reduction of law enforcement, and removal of underutilized streets and other infrastructure like sidewalks and utilities, so that these features match the needs of the diminished population (Czerniak 2013). Weaver et al. (2016) have described the tactics involved in rightsizing as fitting into four main categories: disassembling, demolition, deconstruction, and consolidation. Disassembling refers to policies that aim to reduce excess infrastructure. Demolition refers to the removal of vacant and abandoned properties, while relatedly, deconstruction removes unused buildings while preserving their materials for future use; this is often done in the cases of historically significant but unviable buildings. Most controversially, consolidation refers to the resettling of declining and less dense communities into population centers of the city with more amenities and infrastructure in order to reduce costs. Schilling and Logan (2008) explain that "A right-sizing initiative should first address the blight and decay caused by vacant properties, aiming to stabilize neighborhoods with significant levels of property

abandonment" (Schilling and Logan 2008, 453). A more drastic approach to smart decline, shrinking the city's footprint to fit available resources is said to "streamlin[e] service delivery and reduc[e] oversized infrastructure systems" also described as deannexation (Beckman 2010, 390; Hollander 2017).

The literature focuses heavily on the implementation of smart decline-inspired plans in Youngstown and Cleveland, Ohio, as well as Detroit (LaCroix 2010; Beckman 2010; Schilling and Logan 2008; Pallagst 2014; Schindler 2016). The municipal plan from Youngstown, "Youngstown 2010," is often described as pioneering in its vision to implement smart decline strategies (Pallagst 2014; Faga and Garvin 2006; Morrison 2013). Main components of this plan aim to "abandon streets, close down infrastructure, and consolidate its remaining population in selected areas" (LaCroix 2010, 229). This plan also "shrink[s] the urban footprint through voluntary owner relocation and targeted municipal investment" (Beckman 2010, 391). The key "platforms" that the plan is built on include (1) accepting that Youngstown is not a growing city; (2) redefining and shaping Youngstown's role in the regional economy; (3) improving Youngstown's image and quality of life; and (4) developing a call to action that "highlights the need for a detailed plan to successfully compete for scarce public funds and to coordinate actions to be able to leverage opportunities wherever possible" (Shetty and Reid 2013, 206). This strategy includes at the forefront a marketing campaign to reinvent the city's image and a strategy for developing a competitive development district in the form of a business incubator (Faga and Garvin 2006; Shetty and Reid 2013).

Another widely cited example of planned shrinkage is the 2014 privately sanctioned Detroit master plan, *Detroit Future City*. This framework, funded and developed by corporate actors and philanthropic foundations, was supported by the city of Detroit, who's Planning and Development Department struggled at the time to provide an up-to-date master plan of the city due to personnel and financial restraints; it is touted by some for its democratic and sustainability-oriented aspirations (Schindler 2016). The framework defines a new set of triage-oriented land uses that designate some areas that are existing investment and commercial centers as areas where future development will occur, while reassigning land uses to sparsely populated areas that are oriented away from residential uses. These areas of high vacancy may become parks, productive agricultural land, or somewhat suburbanized medium-density areas with a mixture of housing and natural space (Detroit Future City 2015). In addition to the rollback of services in low density areas, this plan indicates areas where further investments to commercial and residential areas should be made, namely, in areas already seeing an influx of renewed development interest, like Downtown and Midtown.

These strategies, while lauded by many as innovative, have drawn much critique and analysis. A large degree of this analysis makes the claim that far from being an alternative to growth, such plans are potentially complicit in the neoliberal tendencies to leverage the conditions of austerity to concentrate wealth and create new markets (Akers 2015). Underlying these critiques of

planned shrinkage are the equity concerns that accompany what are seen as covert ways of reproducing market rationality in patterns unique to extremely weak property markets. Pointing to the analytical tools and econometrics that were used to determine the land use pattern in the *Detroit Future City* framework, Akers (2015) argues that far from an innovative way to counter the norm of urban growth, despite its rightsizing image, the plan is essentially a way of assigning land uses so as to create new market potential. Indeed, there are many instances of the literature promoting rightsizing relying on the measures of market potential endemic to neoliberal governance, like appealing to creditors, and incentivizing the relocation of high-tech businesses to remain competitive with other cities (Czerniak 2013; Norman 2013; Schilling 2008).

Apart from claims on the one hand that rightsizing is a top down, updated version of urban renewal, and on the other hand that it is part of a democratic or utopian vision, Hackworth (2015b) argues that rightsizing is actually more indicative of austerity urbanism seen ubiquitously in other cities. He explains that “These plans are not only occurring during the austerity moment; they are adopting many of its features, in particular the lack of state support for a social economy . . . Actualized rightsizing is not a postgrowth epiphany; it is an attempt to reset growth by converting the most expensive parts of the territorial social economy into a new investment opportunity” (780). Others have described rightsizing as a reorientation of the growth machine, where growth is concentrated in areas with market potential, creating unequitable outcomes for residents outside of these areas (A. F. Montgomery 2015; Berglund 2020). Such strategies are rife with social disparity, as cost-saving measures like green projects are placed in low-income, high vacancy areas, while employing a “growth regimen of investments in the public infrastructure of areas with market potential such as gentrifying downtown [Detroit]” (A. Montgomery 2016, 786). These concerns are echoed by Clement and Kanai (2015) whose spatial analysis points to a disproportionate amount of infrastructure reduction that is slated for some of the lowest income populations in the city. Mitchell (2013) describes planned shrinkage as a “class-based reinvestment” stating that it is essentially a “reinvestment—and fiscal—strategy, only now targeting a smaller footprint, and seeking out the funds that will allow for a mothballing or ripping out of infrastructure, the demolishing of houses, and so forth” (p. 95). He also points to the dubious claims of many plans to democratize the process through public engagement and enhancing quality of life, citing the example of Youngstown where social disparities very much persist despite the city’s celebrated vision for rightsizing (Mitchell 2013; Hummel 2015). This, Mitchell (2013) argues, is due in large part to the fact that priorities in the Youngstown plan were still largely determined on the basis of exchange value; social disparity will persist as long as use value is underemphasized in development discourses of declining cities.

Schindler (2016) has described the ways that the *Detroit Future City* framework has proposed to integrate natural landscapes into the city, and the rigorous public engagement that was done to inform the plan, as truly innovative. Counter to

Hackworth’s (2015b) perspective that the strategy of rightsizing is merely a continuation of austerity urbanism, Schindler (2016) makes the argument that conventional theories of neoliberalization are of no use in contexts of extreme decline because growth is out of the question. He describes rightsizing plans, particularly *Detroit Future City*, as democratic and ecologically friendly. Referencing literature on degrowth, he states that the city has entered into an era of “degrowth machine politics because it is geared towards managing the city’s further decline and reimagining its future. Unlike its growth-oriented counterpart, degrowth lacks out-of-the-box solutions offered by cosmopolitan consultants, and as a result, policy makers are forced to manage continued degrowth in Detroit in innovative ways” (Schindler 2016, 824). However, this debate is continued by Berglund (2020) who contends that growth machine politics are very much alive and well through such planned shrinkage strategies. In the case of Detroit, philanthropic foundations with corporate roots and developers are often the biggest champions of the framework. Further, the patterns of land use it proposes serve to promote existing concentrations of investment for future planned development, thereby bolstering investments in land use intensification.

Besides the question of whether smart decline is an alternative or just a reconfiguration of conventional urban growth, some authors have pointed to the logistical difficulties that stand in the way of implementing planned shrinkage. Due to the complex and often racialized histories in shrinking cities that inherently house higher populations of economically vulnerable groups than their surroundings, Hollander and Nemeth (2011) are concerned that discourses on rightsizing are too focused on the physical form that a shrinking city should take. In other words, their critique is that there is too much emphasis on what form could make a shrinking city more efficient and not enough consideration of the process of arriving at such a conclusion; such processes may be rife with histories of deep political and social divides (Hollander and Németh 2011). With a similar concern for the lack of appreciation for the political complexity of rightsizing, others have pointed to the fragmented nature of vacant land that presents difficulties for consolidating the population (Kirkpatrick 2015; Ryan 2014). Kirkpatrick (2015) has analyzed the institutional and logistical challenges to removing infrastructure and downsizing in the ways proposed. This is mainly because different entities with different scales of jurisdictions (city, county and state) often manage different aspects of infrastructure, including utilities like water and electricity, drains, and roads; they are also often a managed by a mixture of public and private actors. As an additional challenge with regard to managing vacant properties through a strategy of planned shrinkage, according to Kirkpatrick (2015), “The reality of decline belies the common image of the inner city as marred by a ‘swath’ of devastation—sweeping scythe-like across the urban landscape. In fact, abandonment is non-contiguous and sociospatially indeterminate. Abandoned urban spaces are clumpy and have fuzzy boundaries” (p. 270). Further, without displacing the last of a few residents living on a block that require utilities and roads, there is little evidence that planned

shrinkage strategies can significantly reduce the costs of infrastructure (Mallach 2012; Hackworth 2015a).

Greening the City

In order to address the significant amount of excess land generated when populations decrease, and homes and other structures become abandoned and blighted, shrinking cities have experimented with greening strategies (Schilling and Logan 2008; Krohe 2011; Gallagher 2013; Popper and Popper 1999; Slabinski 2012). These strategies often compliment the goals of planned shrinkage by repurposing old and excess space and infrastructure, thereby rightsizing for existing uses. Greening strategies in the literature largely fall into two categories: green infrastructure and urban agriculture. Green infrastructure can refer to many different configurations of green space and may “involve the regeneration of vacant properties for new parks, community gardens, restored habitat, flood mitigation and storm water treatment sites, and urban agriculture plots linked with existing green spaces” (Schilling and Logan 2008, 454). The strategy of creating green networks may also include mobilizing community and nonprofit groups to maintain and repurpose vacant lots for ecological uses (T. Schwarz 2008; Schilling and Logan 2008). Herrmann et al. (2016) have stressed the importance of stakeholder input in determining where and how to pursue greening strategies; the ecology of shrinking cities should be grounded in and led by communities who have the power to determine what types of ecological features would be considered desirable amenities. In their view, “The long term stability of transformations relies on early community engagement, because that promotes ownership and agency over place-making through shaping amenities . . . The sustained dialogue between ecologists and multiple stakeholders allows for the flexibility needed to address a constantly shifting social-ecological landscape, and the continued conversation assures that community desires and ecological visions are aligned” (Herrmann et al. 2016, 970).

Scholars outlining processes for implementing green network systems in shrinking cities like Detroit, Cleveland, and Buffalo describe their ecological benefits (Haase 2008; Schilling and Logan 2008; Burkholder 2012; Mallach 2012). Urban ecologists point to this strategy as being a natural integration between urban environments and nature, and one that helps to reconsider this false binary—there have always been ecological processes in urban areas, and their conscious integration into cities has many benefits (Burkholder 2012). In light of the relationship between urban environments and nature, the role of ecologists in planning is significant for shrinking cities, especially when “green and blue spaces occupy a greater proportion of the urban matrix, [providing] an opportunity to shift along the urban-design spectrum from highly technical to highly ecological” (Herrmann et al. 2016, 966–67). In integrating green infrastructure networks into cities, natural processes play a role in regulating urban environments, and “can be used to restore the city’s ecosystem, improve air and water quality, restore urban soils, create wildlife habitats, and reduce storm water runoff”

(Mallach 2012, 104). Biodiversity brought by welcoming natural and green spaces into cities is also cited as a significant benefit (Haase 2008). In some shrinking or weak market cities, like Philadelphia and Detroit, the strained and outdated drainage infrastructure has been greatly assisted by the use of permeable green infrastructure (Mallach 2012; Gallagher 2013). In the case of Cleveland’s *Re-Imagining a More Sustainable Cleveland* plan, abundant vacant parcels were used to connect different types of green infrastructure (T. Schwarz 2008). Urban gardening has also been enabled through Cleveland’s “Healthy Cleveland Ordinance” that aims to place an urban garden within walking distance of each resident. It also put in place zoning that allows residents to keep animals and allows for grazing areas as maintenance for unkept lots (Coppola 2019).

The *Detroit Future City* framework proposed to implement new land use typologies to initiate green infrastructure planning. This plan intends to revert areas with the highest vacancy rates to new uses like “green residential” to address the physical challenges of abandonment and vacancy “by creating a new urban identity integrated with the landscape” that will remain residential, though with landscape features that require less maintenance, thereby reducing costs (Detroit Future City 2015, 114). Similarly, the typology, “innovation ecological” converts high vacancy areas to “forests, meadows, and other landscapes [that] develop gradually over time and cost very little (or nothing!) to ‘construct’ or and maintain” (Detroit Future City 2015, 117). While part of the broader Detroit development discourse for years, this privately sanctioned master plan has yet to see its zoning vision realized. Regardless of the benefits listed in the literature, infrastructure strategies with ecosystem services at their center are still very limited within shrinking cities (Burkholder 2012).

A broad array of literature stemming from a variety of fields from biology to law has begun to analyze the viability and implications of urban agriculture. For the purposes of this literature review, I will focus on literature that describes urban agriculture as a land reclamation or greening strategy while subscribing to the concerns of challenges faced by shrinking cities outlined in earlier sections. Urban agriculture has been promoted as a way to “address the problems of the post-industrial city including unemployment, food access, and vacant land issues” (Christensen 2011, 241–42). In many cities, urban agriculture has served as a grassroots movement where marginalized communities are able to utilize land to create resources in the face of scarcity in a communal fashion (Draus, Roddy, and McDuffie 2014; Christensen 2011). The ability for urban agriculture to be a meaningful source of food and nutrition for communities often abandoned by traditional grocery outlets is also described (Masi 2008; T. Schwarz 2008; Mallach 2012). Agriculture, some contend, when it is included in green networks of a city and at large scale, could potentially significantly address hunger in food deserts (Mallach 2012; T. Schwarz 2008; Popper and Popper 1999).

The aspect of building social capital in a socially fragmented city, while predating discussions around “shrinking cities,” is a key benefit described by the literature (Nassauer and Raskin

2014; Colasanti 2010; Gallagher 2013). In shrinking cities that often lack community resources and education hubs like recreation centers, community farms can be used as a means for “mobilization, education, policy advocacy, and . . . physical improvements in neighborhoods to increase the food supply and prevent hunger, thereby enhancing the health of its residents, revitalizing neighborhoods through shared activities that also improve and strengthen the community’s local economy, and building a sense of justice, equity, and self-determination” (White 2011a, 408). Facing myriad forms of economic and social disenfranchisement, White (2011a, 2011b) describes community farms as ways for African American communities in declining cities to exercise self-reliance, self-determination, political agency, and empowerment by providing for themselves outside of municipal governmental agencies that have historically excluded such communities from resources. In this way, urban farming can be considered a form of resistance.

Apart from its roots as a grassroots movement, the benefits of urban agriculture to green infrastructure networks include incorporating more green space into cities, allowing for processes like water absorption and management of biowaste (T. Schwarz 2008). Formal incorporation of urban agriculture into green network strategies, along with the legal means to address such land use patterns, is a continued challenge (Mogk, Wiatkowski, and Weindorf 2010; Colasanti 2010; Voigt 2011). Scholars have suggested ways that municipalities might encourage urban agriculture as a use for vacant land by updating the zoning and other laws that prohibit such activities in the city (Mogk, Wiatkowski, and Weindorf 2010; Christensen 2011; Krohe 2011). In many cities, zoning laws bar residents from owning farm animals, growing produce and/or selling homemade, or home-grown products (Voigt 2011). Requirements to register greenhouses and hoop houses with the city also present policy barriers for individuals interested in converting lots to agriculture (Christensen 2011). In Flint, urban agriculture counts as a prohibited “auxiliary use” that current zoning regulations cannot accommodate (Dewar, Kelly, and Morrison 2013). While zoning is seen as a key tool for allowing urban agriculture as a land use in cities, Slabinski (2012) points to barriers further upstream in ownership configurations that do not allow for the easy transfer of tax-reverted properties, so that they may be used for greening projects (this will be further discussed in the following section). Regardless of these barriers posed by zoning, Voigt (2011) argues that the intentions of zoning as a practice to prevent competing land uses from inhabiting adjacent parcels makes it an ideal tool for placing and regulating urban agriculture.

A significant portion of the literature describing the ecological and social benefits of greening through both green infrastructure networks and urban agriculture has also described the economic benefits (Schilling and Logan 2008; T. Schwarz 2008; Gallagher 2013; Carlet, Schilling, and Heckert 2017). Their potential to be marketed as productive sites for urban forests and organic materials for biofuels has been explored, though with few successful examples in practice (Schilling and Logan 2008; T. Schwarz 2008). Schilling and Logan (2008) contend that formalizing urban agriculture will allow for cities

to participate in the “green economy” by creating opportunities to produce products for biofuels, renewable energy stations, and to “market vacant land as sites for urban forests capable of long-term carbon sequestration” (p. 455). Precedents like the *Philadelphia Green* initiative have demonstrated that urban greening can stimulate local land markets for adjacent properties; the clean-up and landscaping of green infrastructure and urban agriculture projects increased adjacent property values by up to 30 percent (T. Schwarz 2008). T. Schwarz (2008) also argues that beyond improvements, the mere perception that a neighborhood is stabilizing due to greening may be enough to increase land values. The strategy of reducing the amount of vacant land is thought to be necessary for cities like Detroit, Cleveland, Youngstown, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Buffalo as “Value is derived from scarcity. As such, shrinking cities need to find ways to reduce their surplus buildings and land in order to stabilize real estate markets” (T. Schwarz 2012, 168).

As a separate concern, due to the general trend of crop production requiring public subsidy, some doubt the economic growth contributions that crops themselves might make (Christensen 2011). Christensen (2011) points to the tension between the historic tendencies for urban agriculture as a means of community building and sustenance, and the proposal of land use regulations that will allow for land to be commodified in terms of its food and crop production potential, along with its influences on land values. The benefits of urban agriculture that may include the building of social capital and providing nutrition on a small scale may not be measurable through the fixation on econometrics in this literature (Christensen 2011). The strategy of greening, along with its economic rationale, has garnered criticism from scholars framing the issue of vacant land reclamation in political economy, particularly in relation to the above claims. Hackworth (2015b) questions the long-term feasibility of such plans, stating that “each of the plans is only superficially committed to a permanent or semi-permanent implementation of these goals. The language of greening is actively deployed to sell the virtues of demolition, but disappears from the narrative when the question turns to the future of such spaces” (p. 779). The result is that greening may be used as a strategy to prime spaces in order to create markets for new development (Hackworth 2015b; A. F. Montgomery 2015; Safransky 2014). In this respect, the alternative strategy of utilizing vacant spaces toward economic development is not much different from conventional growth-oriented development. In the context of the shrinking city, comparisons can also be made between the goal of economic development imperatives of greening strategies and the land use intensification used by growth elites as described by Molotch (1976).

Safransky (2014) argues that the transition from vacancy to greening conjures imagery of a frontier or settler spirit, where developers aim to claim “vacant” land in order to tame it, ultimately working to the dispossession of local communities. This evocation of frontier imagery also serves to promote paternalistic attitudes on behalf of policymakers and investors, implying that citizens of shrinking cities, as racialized “others,” must be saved from the conditions of the city (Akers 2013). Similar to

Safransky's (2014) exploration of frontier narratives that support the investor excitement around greening or "settling" vacant land in cities, Clement and Kanai (2015) describe greening as a strategy of "discursive whitening." They explain that "The narrative of ecological restoration constructs an investment-ready set of urban spaces by recasting problematic forms of discursive blackness associated with urban and societal disorder" (Clement and Kanai 2015, 378). In making areas attractive and investment friendly, they are framed as separate from the majority of the city's association with disorder and the racialized 'other' that is seen as part of the pathology of the shrinking city; this relates to Audirac's (2018) broader concerns about the pathologizing label of "shrinking city." Further, through Clement and Kanai's (2015) previously mentioned spatial analyses, they revealed that in the case of the *Detroit Future City* framework, neighborhoods with high vacancy (and therefore ripe for green infrastructure uses) are often home to some of the most economically marginalized residents; in the case of Detroit, "vacant" areas designated for green infrastructure still house up to 90,000 residents (Safransky 2014; Clement and Kanai 2015).

As an added concern, some have noted that the uneven distribution of green amenities across neighborhoods of different race and class profiles has resulted in the emergence of environmental injustice (K. Schwarz, Berland, and Herrmann 2018; Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014). According to Wolch, Byrne, and Newell (2014), "By simultaneously making older and typically low-income and/or industrial areas of existing cities more livable and attractive, urban greening projects can set off rounds of gentrification, dramatically altering housing opportunities and the commercial/retail infrastructure that supports lower income communities" (p. 239). Concerns about the ways that rhetoric about greening may be used to dismantle some neighborhoods and provide green amenities in others are echoed by scholars who warn of the potential for "eco-gentrification" to prompt displacement in the aforementioned areas that may see an increase in land value due to greening (Pride 2016; Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014; K. Schwarz, Berland, and Herrmann 2018).

Vacant Property Reuse Strategies

Another proposed alternative to conventional growth-oriented development from the shrinking cities literature is the strategy to revert vacant land back to ownership and/or maintenance. Two prominent strategies in this category are the formalization of informal, community-initiated maintenance of lots and the establishment of land banking (which are tightly interlinked strategies). Over decades of disinvestment, households and community groups in shrinking cities have informally appropriated vacant lots, caring for them, and maintaining them through many types of uses. These include urban agriculture, parks, and other open spaces and have been called side lots or "blots" (Amborst, D'Oca, and Theodore 2008; Ryan 2014). The formalization of these practices by allowing for neighbors to obtain ownership of city owned vacant lots has been

implemented as Detroit's and Cleveland's "Side Lot Program," as well as New Orleans' "Lot Next Door Program" (Ganning and Tighe 2015; Amborst, D'Oca, and Theodore 2008; Krohe 2011). Similarly, Németh and Langhorst (2014) argue for a more formalized inclusion of informal land uses like "food trucks, pop-up shops, alleyway block parties, urban gardens, impromptu theatre stages, dumpster swimming pools or even riverside 'beaches' along the Seine" (p. 146). Gallagher (2013) has suggested that abandoned homes and properties might be places where artists and their work can reside, activating underutilized space. In contrast to rightsizing that ultimately concentrates residents into a smaller land area within the city, reinforcing existing patterns of informal land use through formalized means has been said to result in a new, less dense land use pattern, described as a "new suburbanization" (Dewar, Seymour, and Druță 2015; Amborst, D'Oca, and Theodore 2008).

One significant example of the ways that uses of vacant land might be formalized, as well as how excess derelict land might be repurposed, is the initiation of land banks. According to Mallach (2006), "A land bank authority or similar entity exists for the explicit purpose of gaining control over the city's problem property inventory in order to make possible its timely and productive reuse" (p. 128). By gaining control of these properties that often have complex ownership and tax delinquency issues, a significant opportunity is presented to city or county governments to determine the location and nature of vacant land through land banking policies (Dewar, Seymour, and Druță 2015). Further, when a single public entity takes ownership over often fragmented and scattered vacant properties, it becomes easier to assemble land into larger areas, bringing the potential for long-term, larger scale planning visions to form (Krohe 2011).

Land banks obtain properties into their ownership and control primarily through tax foreclosure but may also do so by purchasing them from tax foreclosure auctions or as real estate owned (REO) properties, receiving them as donations, or by purchasing vacant properties at risk of speculative behavior (Coppola 2019). However, several common barriers may prevent land banks from successful reuse of vacant properties, including lack of information about properties, lack of municipal capacity, complicated taxing structures involving multiple levels of government, and complex tax foreclosure processes. For these reasons, a significant amount of a land bank's energy and resources typically end up being devoted to sorting out these complicated aspects of taking public ownership of vacant properties (Mallach 2006). Dealing with such a high number of vacant properties is often impossible for bureaucratic channels and administrations of shrinking cities with strained resources, which is another reason why land banking may be an attractive option (Krohe 2011).

While this perspective represents what sounds like a less market-oriented solution to vacancy, Schilling and Logan (2008) propose that "By taking the initial risk on preparing land in weak real estate markets, land banks can encourage private investment and create momentum for neighborhood revitalization" (p. 458). In other words, the resources of the

public land bank may be used to uplift areas in order to make them attractive to investors. However, the uses that land bank-owned properties may be put to and their attitudes with regard to how readily they allow potentially speculative buyers to purchase vary widely. Often regarded as a best practice in land banking, the Genessee County Land Bank (GCLB) that includes Flint, Michigan, in its jurisdiction plays a relatively heavy-handed role in protecting their properties from being purchased by speculators or absentee owners that may allow the property to fall into worse disrepair (Hackworth 2014; Dewar, Seymour, and Druță 2015). Typically acquired through tax foreclosure, before reselling properties, the GCLB “strictly limit[s] who can take possession of reverted property. Those with code violations, tax arrears and no evidence of the intent to perform repairs are prohibited from buying property from the GCLB, and there are incentives to those who are residents and owner-occupiers” (Hackworth 2014, 19). Land being held by the GCLB is kept up through a number of strategies, including an Adopt-a-Lot program, demolition, and provision of gardening resources to a number of community groups that maintain the aesthetics of properties or use them for urban gardening (Dewar, Kelly, and Morrison 2013; Hummel 2015). Following a similar model to the GCLB that allows for mediation and careful transfer of land to the market in order to avoid speculation and absentee ownership is the Cuyahoga Land Bank (that includes Cleveland) and the Land Reutilization Authority of the City of St. Louis (Hackworth 2014; Coppola 2019; Zingale and Riemann 2013). These jurisdictions are also offered a first chance at purchasing from foreclosed properties going to auction rather than allowing them to be placed directly into a low-demand property market (Hackworth 2014).

By contrast, the Wayne County Land Bank (where Detroit is located) places very few limitations on who may purchase properties and even allows for online property auctions (Akers 2013). This practice has led to widespread speculation, and many would argue a worsening real estate climate in the city of Detroit (Dewar, Seymour, and Druță 2015; Akers 2013). In the case of Baltimore’s SCOPE program (Selling City Owned Properties Efficiently), the city has even worked with realtors to unload properties onto the market as quickly as possible (Krohe 2011). As Hackworth (2015a) and Dewar, Seymour, and Druță (2015) have demonstrated, depending on market conditions to fix a failing market is counterintuitive and often destructive. Additionally, Weaver et al. (2016) have stated that a key goal of establishing land banking is to “return erstwhile vacant and abandoned structures to the municipal tax rolls by placing them in the hands of private investors . . . While in some cases prosocial neighborhood residents use these auctions to acquire adjoining lots and improve their local communities, the auction system regularly leads to land and property speculation, absentee ownership, and associated potentially antisocial outcomes” (p. 110). However, the desire to return properties back to the tax rolls by any means necessary still prevails in vacant land discourses in shrinking cities. This is not a coincidence, as Akers (2013) and Hackworth (2015a) have both commented on the tendency toward financialization of

public-sector responsibilities, often advanced by the role of private, market-oriented think tanks that partner to develop the legislation that enables capital accumulation strategies in shrinking cities. Land banking is a key example of this as it relies on the authority to ultimately, depending on a particular jurisdiction’s ideology, allow for tax-foreclosed properties to return to the market. Further, although land banking is pursued as an alternative to traditional economic development strategies that rely on the existing strength of the property market, Silverman, Yin, and Patterson (2015) found that such strategies do not necessarily replace growth minded development—even in shrinking cities. A spatial analysis of Buffalo revealed that the location of properties sold by the land bank corresponded to patterns of growth-oriented development and investment potential rather than to their vacant land use plan *Blueprint Buffalo* (Silverman, Yin, and Patterson 2015).

Conclusion

This literature review sought to review the ways that shrinking cities are defined and which solutions to shrinkage dominate the discourse in the interest of summarizing urban political economy critiques to these ideas. While a consistent definition of shrinkage is somewhat vague, critics caution against the narratives of exceptionalism that underpin the treatment of shrinking cities as unique environments in need of policy intervention (Akers 2013; Kirkpatrick and Smith 2015). To the contrary, scholars employing an urban political economy framework have made the argument that such environments represent the “leading political edge” of neoliberalization and serve as laboratories where the furthest bounds of austerity are tested (Kirkpatrick and Smith 2015, 3). Of the primary means of managing shrinkage (in explicit opposition to growth), a comparison with the main features of the growth machine reveals similarities. A key and consistent commonality was the desire to intensify land uses and to make way for new markets in doing so; much of the literature on vacant land management and greening is explicit about this (Schilling and Logan 2008; Carlet, Schilling, and Heckert 2017; T. Schwarz 2012; Gallagher 2013). Further, the role of econometrics and tools typically used to measure and encourage growth are pervasive in strategies of shrinkage (Akers 2015). Critics often referred to initiatives to rebrand and market shrinking cities differently, so as to compete for development resources, and incentivize the relocation of firms (Rhodes and Russo 2013). Also consistent was the priority of reallocating meagre resources in order to create attractive districts through rightsizing, while simultaneously facing devastating cuts to social services, public education, and law enforcement (Audirac 2018; A. Montgomery 2016; Safransky 2014).

Based on these critiques, there are several weaknesses to the current conceptual framing of shrinking cities. The literature on shrinking cities proposes alterations to the physical environment without thorough consideration of the political economy of urban growth or decline. This scholarship calls for alternatives to growth, and a change in development practices away from growth, but with a weak consideration of the political and

economic mechanisms that make growth possible in growing cities. In this way, there is potentially a missed opportunity to analyze solutions for shrinking cities and explore whether they are an alternative to growth minded development. When it comes to planning strategies like planned shrinkage, there is an underappraisal of the role of the governance structures that created and perpetuate urban economic inequality; this analysis is often absent in proposals for solutions for shrinking cities. The trend in political economy literature of engaging with and often critiquing the strategies set forth by scholars and practitioners in shrinking cities presents compelling arguments that such strategies potentially serve to reproduce and even mirror the tendencies of neoliberal governance and accompanying social inequality. Because the urban austerity and rollback of public funding under neoliberalization is worsened in cities that are losing population and experiencing economic decline, it is foreseeable that the shrinking cities solutions would follow such trends. However, in proposing strategies that are common among cities operating under austerity (which includes most cities to at least some degree), shrinking cities scholars have not recognized that the strategies they have proposed are not necessarily alternatives to growth. When considered in light of scholarship on governance under neoliberalism, they mirror the ways that urban governance has been transformed through neoliberalization, along with the ways that private enterprise has adapted to and prospered from such conditions by ultimately expanding into public-sector activities (like developing city planning frameworks or providing public incentives to support business incubation or innovation hubs). This includes the ways that cities, in partnership with private entities, have generated new markets through green branding or removing services for some of the most vulnerable populations or even the general priority of reverting land ownership to private entities to enhance investment potential. In other words, the shrinking cities literature at times underestimates capitalism's demonstrated ability to adapt to new market conditions and underestimates the role of the state in enabling this exploitation of the conditions of decline. In many ways, private enterprise under neoliberalism has already defined an alternative to conventional growth machines as described by Molotch (1976), and they are embodied in standard practices like public private partnerships, entrepreneurialism, and private management of public services that have concerning social consequences; all of these strategies are reflected in the alternatives presented in the shrinking cities literature.

This is not to say that the scholarship on shrinking cities is without merit. To the contrary, it is necessary that quality of life issues like racialized patterns of poverty and unemployment be mitigated in declining cities. However, without adequate theorizing of the ways that growth is pursued in cities, or the ways that private enterprise has effectively created new markets from the conditions of austerity around the world, it is difficult to conceive of how cities might be able to develop alternatives to the dominant paradigm of growth. This is likely related to the tendency for the goals of much of the shrinking cities literature to critically examine policy and current conditions or to prescribe solutions, but not usually both. From this standpoint, I

suggest several key strengths of the literature that I believe should be exploited and expanded upon.

First, the mechanisms that allow for growth could be more directly compared and contrasted to the many proposed solutions for shrinking cities. Using more current literature on growth under neoliberalism, the proposals for development strategies in shrinking cities could be more thoroughly theorized. This could be done in light of the ways that cities operating under austerity that are not designated as "shrinking" have seen an increase in private management of public resources and services (Peck and Tickell 2002; Peck and Whiteside 2016; Kirkpatrick and Smith 2011; Hackworth 2015b; Akers 2015). The ways that this tendency has become business as usual and the commonalities between key strategies in the shrinking cities literature should be more completely understood when suggesting alternatives.

Second, by the diverse list of definitions, causes, and symptoms that describe the shrinking city, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that the shrinking cities phenomenon merits the strict binary of shrinkage and growth that is often implied. Several scholars such as Ganning and Tighe (2018), Hartt (2019) and Bernt (2016) have already begun to explore how shrinking cities could be defined in ways that do not exaggerate their exceptionalism but still allow for exploration of their unique conditions. Instead, they propose ways of understanding decline in more malleable, context-specific ways that might exist at different scales, from the neighborhood to the region. Continuing on this more nuanced trajectory, perhaps through a more thorough analysis of the causes, and the political economy of the development landscape in these diverse sites, perhaps multiple new, narrower, frameworks for analysis will emerge; this is already occurring to a degree in the shrinking cities literature with subsets focusing on postindustrial "legacy cities" of the American Rustbelt as well as assertions that have been made that shrinking cities in the United States warrant distinct consideration from other geographies (Ganning and Tighe 2018; Mallach 2011).

Third, this literature is in need of a retheorizing of the reasons why it is important to study shrinking cities. There is also a need to resolve the tension of the simultaneous framing of shrinking cities as exceptional while also constituting a large portion of cities worldwide. In other words, the motive for studying such cities should be reconciled between their exceptionalism and the claims made by the political economy literature that their tendencies toward extreme austerity are perhaps generalizable and indicative of future directions for neoliberalization. Finally, and relatedly, this literature could take into consideration how the broader context of austerity endemic to neoliberalization may serve as a backdrop for worsening conditions in shrinking cities rather than treating shrinking cities and their economic decline and strained public services and amenities as wholly unique sets of challenges.

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