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On: 08 October 2012, At: 05:47

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Urban Research & Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rurp20>

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Version of record first published: 05 Oct 2012.

To cite this article: Katrin Großmann, Robert Beauregard, Margaret Dewar & Annegret Haase (2012): European and US perspectives on shrinking cities, *Urban Research & Practice*, 5:3, 360-363

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2012.727565>

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CONFERENCE REPORT

European and US perspectives on shrinking cities

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Introduction

In recent years, urban shrinkage has gained the attention of scholars and policy-makers both in the United States and in Europe. At the annual meeting of the Urban Affairs Association (UAA) in Pittsburgh from 18 to 21 April 2012, a combined session and colloquy discussed ‘European and US Perspectives on Shrinking Cities.’ This was one of many recent events to bridge national debates – for example, sessions at the Association of American Geographers (AAG) conference in New York in February 2012, the International Geographical Congress (IGC) in Cologne in August 2012; see also special issues in *IJURR* (March 2012) and Bontje and Musterd (2012).

The aim of the combined sessions in Pittsburgh was to widen and deepen the understanding of urban shrinkage as a developmental trajectory that has received too little international attention.

Understanding different trajectories of urban shrinkage

Noting the astonishing variety of different trajectories and fortunes of shrinking cities, Annegret Haase and Katrin Großmann (Leipzig) used a comparative European perspective to suggest that a pluralist world of urban shrinkage exists. They made it clear that no ‘one-size-fits-all’ explanation exists – local specifics and context matter. National debates usually focus on the most obvious issues such as economic decline and housing abandonment in the United States, housing demolition policies in Germany, urban renewal in Great Britain or demographic change in eastern Europe. A comparative view of the causes, conditions and consequences of urban shrinkage as well as policy responses turns our attention to commonalities as well as blind spots. Subsequently, Haase and Großmann suggested a process model describing urban shrinkage as the result of the dynamic interplay of macroprocesses at the local scale leading to a number of consequences in various policy fields, which, in turn, affect the further trajectory of the given city. This frames comparative research without losing sight of the overall complexity of the phenomenon.

Sabina Deitrick (Pittsburgh, PA) provided a case study on Pittsburgh, the host city of the conference. She detailed the specifics of Pittsburgh’s long experience with shrinkage in

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contrast to other US cities. With the seeds of decline having been planted at the beginning of the 1920s, Pittsburgh was one of the first major US cities to experience population decline. Pittsburgh, moreover, has been a place of natural decrease for decades; the city's population aged before the rest of the (urban) United States. Today it pioneers in seeing an end to aging since the cohort of the baby-boomers, today's 55+, have mostly left. The recovery of the job market has also fostered rejuvenation, bringing in-migration, especially of young adults. In addition, its housing stock is much older than in most other cities because of the many decades of weak demand. Of note, African Americans live in the oldest sections.

The presentation of Marco Bontje (Amsterdam) added a valuable perspective on the plurality of shrinkage trajectories. He focused on gradual, non-dramatic population losses in the Netherlands and claimed that urban shrinkage is an issue there even though most Dutch cities are growing. He argued that in the long-run, population decline seems unavoidable due to the demographic shifts. In the discussion, Robin Boyle (Detroit) renewed the plea to be more historical about urban shrinkage and to look not just at today's troubles or tomorrow's answers.

Common challenges in governing shrinking cities

Apart from looking at different pathways, most of the discussion and contributions focused on challenges in governance. The issues included the role of different actors, barriers to policy learning across the Atlantic, a lack of government partnerships, the challenge to react to shrinkage in constructive and positive ways, and a lack of resources.

Regarding *barriers to mutual learning in policy-making*, Robert Beauregard (New York City) made a strong claim that the political conditions in the United States today are unfavourable for its shrinking cities or its national government to borrow ideas from Europe. All urban policies emerge within an 'Americanist framework' that focuses on market signals; the state, central to European urban policies, is considered as part of the problem rather than part of the solution. In Europe, both in the scholarly and practical discourse, a strong rejection of American urbanism also exists. The concept of the 'European city' with its dense structures and integrative powers is explicitly formulated in opposition to sprawl and high levels of residential segregation. Thus, barriers to mutual learning need to be overcome on both sides. Intermediary actors might make a difference here, not the least of whom are scholars as actors at the science-policy interface.

On the situation in post-socialist shrinking cities, Annegret Haase explained that the political climate in postsocialist European cities resembles much of this Americanist framework with a strong belief in market forces and a reluctance to embrace the governing role of the state. The growth paradigm is much more present in these countries because of a commitment to a catch-up modernization guided by Western standards. Strategic planning for a reduced-size city is not evident here. Thus, with respect to governance, what resulted from the session was the insight that comparing across the Atlantic might encompass three geographies: the United States, western European welfare-states and the postsocialist countries of eastern Europe. At the same time, because much of the responsibility for addressing problems associated with shrinkage rests with local governments in the United States, considerable differences in governance also exist across the United States.

Another challenge for pro-active planning and policy-making are the *barriers between local, regional and national policy-making* discussed by Joe Schilling (Alexandria, VA).

Partnerships of regional government systems need to be researched, compared and discussed more in depth across the Atlantic. Margaret Dewar (Ann Arbor) raised the question of where *resources and finance* would come from if central funding is not available and partnerships are hard to build because common interests among political leaders are rare. Whereas western Europe has a tradition in public top-down funding from regional to EU level, US initiatives largely depend on local government funding and resources from philanthropies. Philanthropic funding, in contrast, is largely lacking in Europe. Further, land-use laws differ profoundly between the United States and Europe, so policy measures appropriate in one country or one locality in a country may well not apply to others.

Finally, along with the debate on success and failures of policies, the question arose as to what would be an *appropriate agenda for governing shrinking cities*. Whereas a consensus seemed to exist that exclusively pro-growth strategies are inappropriate, possible alternative goals ranged from moderate re-growth via stability to a controlled shrinkage. Positioning depended not only on normative aspects but also on the severity of local experiences and the realistic prospects of a place.

Cities in both Europe and the United States have attempted to *strategically give up selected parts of cities*. Whereas in Europe, the governance of ‘districts with limited life-spans’ is discussed, the question of ‘hospice care’ was mentioned by Margaret Dewar as a similar concern with neighbourhoods that have experienced extensive disinvestment and property abandonment in US cities. Such areas may be de-populated in the foreseeable future. Questions of relevance are: What services do these places need for how long? Who will provide them, with what resources? How can a safe and gradual reduction of structures and services be accomplished while avoiding unnecessary inequities?

Rethinking general urban challenges against the background of shrinkage

Because most urban scholarly research builds on the experience of growth, the discussion also underlined the necessity to re-think general urban challenges such as social cohesion, ecological challenges or land use set against the experience of urban shrinkage.

For instance, Joe Schilling examined the sustainability potential of US shrinking cities. Numerous opportunities exist for shrinking cities to adopt approaches more consistent with environmental sustainability, whether using vacant land to manage storm water runoff, grow crops or generate energy. However, few shrinking cities have adopted plans that do a good job of guiding the cities towards more environmental sustainability. A contribution by Caterina Cortese (Rome) and colleagues focused on the question of social cohesion policies. In the case of Genoa (Italy), delays in the awareness of the spatial impacts of population loss led to fast evolving social tensions. Policy response has been selective rather than comprehensive, and policy priorities in shrinking cities are not focused on social cohesion issues. Alan Mallach (Roosevelt, NJ) chose a different angle in looking at neighbourhood destabilization: housing market activities. Using housing property sales and mortgage originations as indicators, he showed that in three US case studies very few neighbourhoods show a demand-driven, healthy housing market, whereas areas with no activities or speculative activities dominate.

The discussions and exchange across the Atlantic will continue. The rather new international debate on urban shrinkage has much to learn from the existing national debates in order to identify their gaps and blind spots and to feed insights back to mainstream urban research and theory. A more international view on local trajectories, national contexts and cross-Atlantic theory-building would pave the way for a more productive global debate.

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