

Greening the Shrinking City – a new planning approach in the USA

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Abstract

A shrinking city is characterized by economic decline and – as an effect – urban areas in transformation. Moreover, the loss of a certain type of employment opportunity is setting off partial out-migration.

Unlike in Europe, the shrinking cities debate is a rather new research sphere in the US planning realm. Here, urban planning often concentrates on either managing urban growth, or tackling redevelopment in a fragmented (not a regional) way - this despite the fact that shrinkage often occurs throughout an entire metropolitan region (Pallagst, 2007). The current discourse in urban and regional planning in the USA still shows a high affinity to growth tendencies. Nevertheless, the realities of most Rustbelt cities have to deal with massive population losses: in general half of a city's population from 1950 onward moved out, leaving the cities with large portions of abandoned, blighted, and vacant spaces.

Even though the problems of shrinking cities can be found in a regional respectively urban-suburban context, planning in these areas is to a large extent focused on revitalizing the devastated city centers. These are the areas with the largest pressure of problems, but revitalization efforts often create gentrified areas and do not target the social needs of the poor.

It turns out that shrinking in the US is a problem more complex than perceived by urban and regional planning thus far. However, unlike as in most European countries, these shrinking processes are embedded in population growth on national level. The question is if planning in the US will be capable of dealing with a stigmatized topic in a pro-active way. The author has argued that „Shrinking Smart“ might have the potential for a new planning discourse in the USA (Pallagst, 2008).

Recent planning strategies in the USA focus on more realistic planning visions and tools apart from growth towards shrinking smart. One of them is 'greening', or 'green infrastructure' as a tool to re-utilize the leftover spaces in shrinking cities. Starting point is usually a green plan (Shilling 2009), where a range of actors (policy makers, civic leaders, residents, property owners) initiate, kick-off and steer the process. Measures and actions are manifold and comprise reviving streams, restoring floodplains, developing industrial waterfronts as greenpaths, or implementing urban agriculture. Many of these measures have been part of planning's toolset for decades, but there seems to be appropriate ground in shrinking cities to apply greening on a broader scale. The questions to be investigated in this paper are: What are the motivations behind the greening approach? Who are the key actors in this process? In what way does it differ from shrinking cities' strategies in Europe, and what can be learned from the related strategies?

The paper will highlight shrinking cities from the perspective of 'greening' by presenting different cases of shrinking cities in the USA (preliminary list of cases: Youngstown, Flint, Detroit).

Keywords: Shrinking cities, greening, planning in the USA