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Shrinking cities: An unfit term for American urban policy?

Ivonne Audirac

Planning and Landscape Architecture Department, College of Architecture, Planning and Public Affairs, University of Texas-Arlington, 601 W. Nedderman Dr. Suite 203, Arlington, Texas 76019, United States

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ABSTRACT

“Shrinking cities” is a well-established term in academic discourse, describing cities in distress. Using the notion of spatial or territorial stigma (Wacquant, Slater, & Pereira, 2014), this paper raises the question of whether the term “shrinking cities” may be unbecoming to the policy discourse of planning and community development, at least in the American context. The necessity of considering this question is due not only to the traumatic legacy of American planned urban shrinkage and urban renewal in poor, minority communities, but also to the potential ramifications that the social construction of spatial stigma by journalists, politicians, planners and academics may have on these communities in the era of austerity urbanism. The vast symbolic power, due to the symbolic capital that specialists in symbolic production wield, gives reason to ponder whether ‘shrinking cities’ ‘urban shrinkage’ and cognate terms contribute to territorial stigmatization, since in the naming of social groups, cities, or regions to reveal a socio-spatial reality, such reality “begins to exist as such, for those who belong to it as well as for the others” (Bourdieu 1989: 23). Examining images and web content tagged to Detroit, this paper also explores the digital production of territorial stigma through the Internet’s social imaginary and aims to raise awareness of the potential ramifications of shrinking city scholarship “for” or “against” austerity urbanism.

1. Introduction

The term “shrinking cities” befits academic accounts of a familiar syndrome—e.g., population loss, economic decline, abandoned and derelict districts and neighborhoods—afflicting many industrial and fiscally restructuring cities throughout the world. The term “shrinking cities,” and its German counterpart “Schrumpfende Städte,” first gained international attention in academic and media circles in the early 2000s through the German Federal Cultural Foundation’s Shrinking Cities Project, which raised awareness of depopulating cities in the Global North and expanded the national city-planning debate of raze and rebuild¹ in post-socialist East-German cities beyond German borders (Oswalt, 2005, Oswalt & Rieniets, 2006). The term also gained cross-national notoriety through the Shrinking Cities International Research Network’s (SCIRN) urban scholarship, which underscored the global dimensions of urban decline (Pallagst et al., 2009; Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, Fol, & Cunningham-Sabot, 2012; Haase, Rink, Grossmann, Bernt, & Mykhnenko, 2014). Shrinking cities research and scholarship has since proliferated on both sides of the Atlantic with important conceptual refinements and a bevy of cross-national empirical studies (Großmann, Bontje, Haase, & Mykhnenko, 2013; Bernt et al., 2014). Shrinking cities and cognate terms like urban shrinkage have become overarching concepts reframing previously discourses on disurbaniza-

tion, decay, blight, urban distress, obsolescence, demographic depression, urban poverty and so on. However, “shrinking cities” mainstreaming in planning and policy interventions in the U.S. raises important concerns owing to the American historical record and policy legacy of planned obsolescence, urban renewal, and planned urban shrinkage justified on austerity imperatives and fiscal efficiencies.

This paper reflexively poses the question of whether “shrinking cities” research and policies, on account of their infrastructural, fiscal, land-rent, ecological and other physical planning concerns of place—with little or no regard for social equity and justice—could be unintentionally contributing to a form of spatial or territorial “stigmatization” (Wacquant, 2007; Wacquant et al., 2014; Pearce, 2012; Slater, 2015). It first profiles the lineage of planned urban shrinkage embedded in fiscal discipline discourses. It then discusses territorial stigma and explores its global reproduction through the Internet’s social imagery of Detroit. It overviews important social consequences of spatial stigma and the response it has elicited among deindustrialized cities including the avoidance of “shrinking city” and related terms. It closes with raising the possible specter of shrinking cities research and right-sizing planning approaches being co-opted by neoliberal policies of “austerity urbanism” (Peck, 2012, 2013), lest, aware of this possibility, shrinking cities research—shunning austerity politics—embraces progressive alternatives.

¹ E-mail address: audirac@uta.edu.

¹ *Stadtumbau unter Schrumpfungsbedingungen*: redevelopment under conditions of shrinkage.

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2. The legacy of planned shrinkage

Urban shrinkage and its relation to planning in American policy have been troublesome both as “symptom” and as “cure” for cities diagnosed as ailing (Table 1). Although the term “shrinking cities” did not appear in public policy until the mid 20th century, shrinking tax revenues and property values in central cities, provoked by suburban white flight, triggered the planning discourse of urban obsolescence from the inter-war years through the early 1970s. Urban blight and obsolescence defined in terms of density, congestion, and the American Public Health Association's appraisal system of quality housing, determined which city blocks could be saved or condemned. As a system of urban triage that diagnosed urban ills and prioritized areas for redevelopment, the obsolescence discourse's “political effectiveness rested on its scientism and apparent objectivity [and on its ability] to transcend the usual class and ethnic divisions of American big-city politics seen as stymieing reform and social improvement” (Abramson, 2012:88). Frederick J. Adams, founder of MIT's Department of City and Regional Planning, influential planner and author of the General Plan of Boston, echoing the best practices and scientific theories of the time, asserted that “the obsolete physical design of our cities [was] the major cause of the flight to the suburbs (Adams 1945 in Abramson, 2012: 89). And thus, Boston's West End—a thriving first and second-generation working-class immigrant neighborhood—designated “obsolete” by the plan, was demolished in 1962. Renewal by demolition responded to claims of economic survival and Schumpeterian notions of creative destruction that the Housing Act of 1949 expanded into an urban gentrification machine writ large. It aimed to replace minority and black working-class neighborhoods “with middle-class voters whose shopping dollars might reinvigorate nearby downtown retail districts” and help fiscally struggling municipalities compete with the suburbs for tax dollars (Abramson, 2012: 97). City-declared-obsolete neighborhoods were bulldozed, and federal funds defrayed the costs of condemned, cleared, and assembled sites conveyed to developers and the private sector for redevelopment. The planning discourse and politics of “obsolescence” connoting end-of-life, utility and value (then and now) degraded communities and stigmatized its residents and

allowed “those with power to deem dysfunctional, valueless, and out of time the habits and habitations of those without power” (Abramson, 2012:95).

Spurred by the politics of obsolescence, urban renewal, an influential factor in the ensuing urban upheaval and inner city riots of the 1960s, further boosted suburban white flight and by the 1970s, the term “shrinking cities” began to be used in policy circles to denote the annihilation of American central cities by suburbanization characterized as a “flight from deterioration—real or anticipated—in large part a movement away from poor immigrants, or more recently from blacks, Puerto Ricans or Chicanos” (Weaver, 1977: 4). In the midst of the American economic stagnation of the 1970s, planned urban shrinkage was offered as cure to the crisis of American older cities, which were expected to recognize that their white “population and economic bases [were] shrinking, [while] ... “increasingly, many inner cities had become repositories for the poor, the unwanted” (Breckenfeld, 1978:112). To age gracefully, these cities were advised to “adjust to face up shrinkage through painful retrenchment” (Breckenfeld, 1978: 113) by downsizing their bloated budgets and inefficient bureaucracies; resisting union demands and attacking crime, bad schools and making themselves more competitive (Breckenfeld, 1978: 113).

“Planned shrinkage,” was New York City Housing Commissioner Roger Starr's policy of public service cuts to poor neighborhoods under the Nixon administration's policy of benign neglect for poor and racially segregated communities. According to (Wallace & Wallace, 2001), poor neighborhoods in New York City's Bronx were the target of drastic cuts in fire departments and firefighting services, which led to ruinous fire destruction and subsequent landlord abandonment, population displacement, and spikes in homelessness. The ensuing fire epidemic resulting from “planned shrinkage” of municipal services in poor neighborhoods—deemed chronically “ill “or in the dying stage of their life cycle—was a new and more effective form of slum clearance, which began in 1970 and ended in 1990. (Wallace & Wallace, 2011) estimate that from 1970 to 1980, 250,000 to 300,000 housing units were lost to fire and landlord abandonment, and close to two million New Yorkers were displaced. Among these, 1.3 million Whites fled the city, while 600,000 Black and Latino New Yorkers were evicted by fire and

Table 1
Shrinking city policy lineage: from obsolescence & planned shrinkage to right sizing & austerity politics.

Period	Narrative	The problem and prognosis	Urban planning and policy intervention (the cure)
1930 to 1960s	Obsolescent cities undergo shrinking tax bases	Devalued ageing structures and low-income neighborhoods “scientifically” measured as blight and branded obsolete. Neighborhood obsolescence and poor design determined to be the cause of middle-class white flight and depressed tax bases.	Restore city tax bases by bringing back White residents and shoppers. Federally financed demolition and urban renewal of “obsolete” low-income neighborhoods, often not the most blighted but most strategically located vis-à-vis the CBD (e.g., Boston's West End).
1970s to 1980s	Declining cities: shrinking economic and tax base	1970s economic stagnation. Crisis of shrinking economic and tax bases in American older cities afflicted by deindustrialization and suburbanizing white populations moving away from deteriorated neighborhoods, immigrants and poor minorities of color. Declining cities becoming repositories for poor and “unwanted populations”	Federal benign neglect of older cities, drove to age gracefully by downsizing their bloated budgets, bureaucracies, and belligerent unions; urged to make themselves more competitive.
1990s	Shrinking cities	Public recognition of East German cities' massive depopulation and vacant housing. Central cities left behind in the American economic recovery of the 1990s; Highly concentrated joblessness, poverty, and minority populations; loss of fiscal capacity to respond and adapt to the new global economic challenges.	Planned shrinkage: Roger Starr's cuts in New York's municipal services intended as removal of blight and poor Black and Latino neighborhoods. Municipal and private developer coalitions lobby federal grants for extensive demolition of vacant housing. Empowerment zones and enterprise communities, affordable-housing and welfare-to-work vouchers, 100,000 new community police on America's streets, judged ineffectual. City de-annexation proposals of blighted and high vacancy areas for mass demolition and redevelopment into high-end within-city-suburbs.
2000 to 2015	Shrinking cities globally	Global phenomenon compounded by global financial crisis and 2008 Recession. Austerity politics blame profligate local governments, lack of fiscal discipline and political will to downsize fiscal and physical footprint to match reduced population. Shrinking city narratives without social equity concerns complicit in promoting austerity urbanism.	Right sizing, smart shrinking planning approaches premised on ecological ideals and rejection of the growth paradigm. New “degrow political machine” without social equity a new form of austerity urbanism. A new wolf in sheep skin?

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