

RUST BELT CITIES AS EXEMPLARS FOR URBAN DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE IN A LOW-GROWTH FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

The social and political dynamics shaping 21st century urbanization are particularly visible throughout the American Rust Belt. In contrast to the periodic waves of economic and population growth common in American urban regions, slow- or no-growth in these communities has revealed the often-overlooked multi-scalar socio-spatial processes shaping land use, development, and revitalization. These processes, historically marked by racial segregation and political fragmentation, prompted rapid auto-oriented growth followed by years of population stagnation and suburbanization that created unsustainable twins: exclusive car-dominated suburbs disconnected from public transit, and urban centers decreasing in density through large-scale buildings surrounded by vacant and open space. Under these circumstances, community groups and civic networks—working at various geographic scales and aiming at different levels of city and metropolitan government—generate practices and places aligned with a more equitable and inclusive, although low-growth, future. Examples include shifts in master planning toward models grounded in equity and decoupled from growth, and innovations around adaptive vacant land reuse to support neighborhood quality of life with the rise of locally oriented social and creative enterprises. These interventions are significant for designing new ways of thinking about not only urban development, but how to foster sustainability in the diverse areas that constitute sprawling, stagnating, and even depopulating regions.

Keywords: shrinking cities; legacy cities; suburban sprawl; vacancy; local economic development; globalization; neoliberalism

INTRODUCTION: URBAN DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES FOR A LOW-GROWTH FUTURE

The future of many urban areas is increasingly likely to be marked by low growth, in relative if not absolute terms. According to the United Nations' Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the global population in the 20th century nearly quadrupled and the proportion of the urbanized population approximately doubled. The projections for the 21st century are starkly different, however, with total population less than doubling and the rate of urbanization slowing considerably in the developed countries of North America, Europe, and Asia (United Nations, 2018). Alongside general global trends, interest in cities with declining populations has attracted attention recently as hundreds of places have seen their peak population levels pass (Hollander et al., 2009).

Beyond US cities often thought of as declining or shrinking (Beauregard, 2009; Beauregard, 2012), the changing trajectory of urban population growth is notable. US cities of all sizes experienced lower population growth since 2017, and cities of more than a million residents showed actual losses (Frey, 2020). Considering aging trends, places characterized as higher growth today could soon be facing similar issues to what Detroit or Philadelphia started facing 50

years ago. Given the existence of such cities today, we should seek to learn as much as possible to plan for the society-wide presence of slow- or no-growth (SONG) cities.

Such a perspective is also important because of additional outside threats to a growth framework. Some include the afflictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the corresponding current economic recession, and the effects of global climate instability, all of which deepen the challenges of population decline and spread the complications of low growth to more regions. The severity of the pandemic is well-documented, including the disproportionate impact on racial minority and lower income groups, particularly Black and Latinx Americans (Lopez *et al.*, 2020), which itself is likely related to socio-spatial factors including environmental, housing, health, and food injustices (Alkon *et al.*, 2020; Brandt *et al.*, 2020; Essien & Venkataramani, 2020).

At the same time, the economic implications of the pandemic, public response, and citizen concerns are proving to be both uneven and unpredictable. A recent analysis of business data found that wealthier ZIP codes have experienced higher rates of business closure and unemployment claims (Chetty *et al.*, 2020). While historical patterns of disinvestment and concentrated poverty were often a result of deliberate racist practices to disinvest from majority minority communities, these closures even among higher income communities suggests a continued hollowing-out of local economies. Likewise, climate change puts vulnerable populations at greater direct risk and projects indirect negative costs through place-based effects of low-carbon and ecological gentrification, sustainability policies, and mitigation strategies (Bouzarovski *et al.*, 2018; Butcher-Gollach, 2015).

This paper focuses on **two associated processes** evidently at work in low-growth areas that have not received sufficient attention in the urban morphology literature: multi-scalar connectivity and citizen-based community influence. Multi-scalar connectivity shapes the forms of neighborhoods, cities, and metropolitan regions. The relationships among places, institutions, and individuals are fundamental to, and not simply context for, patterns of development, decline, and revitalization (Hart, 1982; Paasi, 1991). The socio-spatial interactions are complex and dynamic: bottom-up processes create macrostructures and, concurrently, top-down institutions affect and embed microscale activities (Granovetter, 1985; Peck, 2005; Mackinnon *et al.*, 2009). In urban areas with limited or no economic growth (that is, with lessened pressures from global capitalist demands), the social connections of community networks exert significant influence on planning, development, land use, and cultural life (Reckhow, Downey, & Sapotichne, 2019). These are important at different scales, including among citizens and groups of households, within or between neighborhood associations, in city-wide collectives, or via broader coalitions. Such groups direct the very local paths of district, corridor, and neighborhood change, including interwoven patterns of abandonment, disinvestment, and regrowth that are less evident in aggregate analyses (Ryan, 2013).

The appearance of not only vacant lots but abandoned properties—visible even from a great distance and dominating many residents' views—is one of the most striking features of cities and regions experiencing population decline and economic restructuring. This contrasts with the historically common trend of growing urban populations and declining vacant property (Bowman and Pagano, 2000). It is a fundamental challenge when communities have more land than can possibly be put to productive re-use (LaCroix, 2010). At sub-regional scales of analysis, the disruptions that accompany general growth patterns over time are apparent. For instance, Immergluck (2010) identified variations of foreclosed property rates during the most recent housing crisis at the ZIP code level. In weak-market metropolitan areas, including many in the Midwest, the most affected areas had larger shares of Black residents. In areas with stronger markets,

conversely, foreclosure was more closely associated with a higher share of new construction and development projects. This is portending for a SONG future—in which the mechanisms enabling what is now a general tendency to continue outward growth while in-filling only select central city neighborhoods through gentrification—will need to be reckoned with, particularly in regards to underlying socio-economic and spatial inequalities. Indeed, the income and racial inequality that marks much of the socio-spatial segregation of the declining Rust Belt could continue to be reproduced if the United States’ political sphere reinforces racial and partisan divisions (Mummolo & Nall, 2017).

SONG cities and urban regions are already experiencing the population decline demographers predict will beset most advanced economies within this century. Examples from the Rust Belt foreground outcomes that may be more commonplace soon: an urban development milieu influenced by society-wide population stagnation or decline. Regions in such a future will be affected by a mix of wider concerns, including the effects of climate change and shifts in the global economy. They will also be shaped by citizen and community organizing around, for instance, the creative reorientation of community development from macro-level and external to small-scale and innovative enterprises. In this way, citizen action can positively influence the built environment when private developers have less interest, and can influence policy and institutional reforms when government is inadequately responding (Ryan, 2017). Ultimately, the proliferation of SONG urban spaces will require wider adoption of the justice-oriented strategies attentive to these processes currently being fashioned and deployed throughout the American Rust Belt.

INNOVATIVE PUBLIC POLICIES AND LAND USE LEVERS

The economic, social, and political restructurings that shaped Rust Belt decline were highly specific to a span of time and set of places, but the urban forms they contributed to are not unique: suburban and exurban growth surrounding chequered urban decline and revitalization. A recent analysis of Detroit and other major U.S. cities illustrated the shared processes shaping postindustrial regions and the morphological variations among them, in which Detroit, along with Atlanta, Dallas, and Philadelphia, exhibits a high-degree of suburban clustering of higher-income white residents (Florida & Adler, 2018). Clearly, the block, neighborhood, city, suburban, and metropolitan scales are linked through housing and economic markets, while being mediated by local, state, and federal public policies.

Utilizing a Regional Framework

A geographical perspective comports with expanding the lens beyond the lot, block, and neighborhood to see the wider urban and regional patterns of uneven distribution of growth and decline. This proves to be a challenge for many studies of vacant property that briefly note the importance of metropolitan trends but then stop the analysis of blight and abandonment at the city level (examples Mallach, 2011; National Vacant Properties Campaign, 2005). Moreover, larger multi-state regions (e.g. U.S. Census Regions) have varying population trends affecting urban population loss (Beauregard, 2012) and diverse drivers of prosperity risk, spatial inequity, and social vulnerability (Sadler *et al.*, 2020). The regional framework affects the dynamics at the local level as, for instance, Southern and Western regions continue to grow while Northern and Midwestern regions experience relative or absolute declines. In the near or long-term, places will be confronting climate change, resource depletion, or other factors that cause population redistribution and may exacerbate spatial inequality without justice-oriented interventions (Fainstein, 2016).

Resetting Hierarchies of Governmental Authority

Alongside the innovative levers for land use decision-making is the reality that urban areas in the Rust Belt simultaneously lack state statutes or county policies enabling growth boundaries. The development context is therefore marked by political fragmentation of municipal governments (Sadler and Highsmith, 2016). Such practices have effectively allowed each township to weigh the decisions about preserving farmland and green space or opening for residential, commercial, and industrial development. The result is a low-density pattern of sprawl with significant vulnerabilities to decline; a theme extensively explored in research on urban resilience (Wilson & Chakraborty, 2013). This highly localized decision-making also creates a mismatch between the wider benefits of limited sprawl and protected open space and the small number of people setting policies. In fact, the negative externalities of localized decision-making show up with vacant parking lots and abandoned buildings throughout the region as the inventory of developable property outstrips the demand.

The construction of zero-sum realities of SONG contexts bolsters the argument to institute growth boundaries and similar containment policies that could effectively shrink the suburbs (Woo and Goldmann, 2011). Such policies ensure the diversity and integrity of existing land uses, including farmland, which have a heightened value in a future burdened by climate change. This dilemma illustrates that it is necessary but not sufficient for policymakers and planners to include regional demographic and economic analysis. Hollander and Nèmeth (2011) recommend that local implementation is paramount in a context of global injustice and regional inequity. But a further necessary step entails recognizing the dynamics of inter-local competition and designing channels of collaboration that in these cases appear as lacking, and represent a negative example of a glaring structural problem that remains to be addressed.

Taking Public Control of Land

Numerous policies, institutions, and interventions have been implemented in the Rust Belt in the past two decades around blight and abandonment, most notably the proliferation of state, county, and city public land banks (Alexander, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2010). This phenomenon represents a degree of cooperation across levels of government. Land banking is authorized in more than a dozen states including Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia (Alexander, 2015). County-level entities often have legal authority for addressing tax-foreclosed properties and finding ways to return them to productive use (Genesee County Land Bank, 2015). In Genesee County (Flint, MI), funding for the Genesee County Land Bank Authority (GCLBA) results from land-sale proceeds, brownfield tax increment financing, and grant support from various sources, as provided for in Michigan state law (Schilling and Logan, 2008).

While some properties in tax foreclosure have a market value and allow for resale, many properties require long-term public or community stewardship. In the absence of funds for costly renovations of abandoned buildings, they are added to demolition lists. Land Banks, in practice, straddle multiple scales. They are a conduit for federal demolition funds, such as the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, and offer a point of interface with larger public and private institutions such as Fannie Mae (Spader, 2015). Critics contend the availability of directed funding for demolition without feasible plans for preserving the community fabric or creating public green spaces means that private interests are served more so than residents, particularly in low-income areas (Hackworth, 2015). More important than the existence of the institution, and the required legal

authority undergirding its existence, is the way in which a land bank links to and engages with the local community. This point will be explored in detail in the next section.

CITIZEN POWER AND PARTICIPATORY PLANNING TECHNIQUES

In SONG cities, the context of austerity and limited public resources has shifted governance pressure onto nonprofit and community-level organizations. This is in stark contrast to the political and social dynamics in high-growth areas, where well-resourced developers, real estate agents, and consultants are often setting the agenda and driving projects in tandem with municipal entities. Citizen and community action therefore have an outsized effect on land use and other socio-spatial patterns in SONG cities.

Casting an Inclusive Vision for the City

Rust Belt city governments have responded recently to the persistent challenging regional conditions, population decline, and limits on local capacity by adopting new comprehensive master plans as guides for a post-industrial future (Walling, 2014; Hackworth, 2015). The plans share common land use management features such as encouraging dense mixed-use redevelopment and creating green infrastructure and open space. New urban forms have been introduced in concept, such as for lower density green neighborhoods, although the extent of implementation through zoning codes is variable (Ryan & Gao, 2019). Viewed from current scholarship, these plans such as Youngstown 2010 are often categorized as to be about right-sizing or shrinking (e.g. Hollander & Nemeth, 2011; Rhodes & Russo, 2013; Morckel, 2020).

While these labels gesture toward an important contextual reality, they also obscure the process of negotiation among residents and officials about distinctive and alternative forms and futures for their communities that do not fit neatly into the dichotomy of growing or shrinking (Williams & Pendras, 2013). Practitioner-informed scholarship, such as Morrison & Dewar (2012), notes the value of planners engaging with residents' feelings of injustice, listening to their aspirations, and building a shared identity before moving to prescriptions, particularly around adjusting land uses and changing public services. The inclusion of business and regional leaders has been criticized in the case of Flint's master planning (Lederman, 2019), however, following the importance of the regional context, there is an argument to be made about the value of expanding engagement to the maximum possible diversity.

Effective comprehensive or master planning in SONG cities therefore needs to take on a unique form. While in theory they guide the direction of efforts to shape the city, they first must reshape ideas about place and position the notion of being smaller as better (Morrison & Dewar, 2012). Even in rapidly growing cities, plans and citizen engagement processes are slow to make an impact; this effect is pronounced in SONG cities, where the processes of change and redevelopment are much slower (Ryan & Gao, 2019). Of course, urban form is affected by other drivers, but the role of social, civic, and neighborhood organizations is worthy of attention, both practically and theoretically.

Building Community through Beautification

Efforts around greening and community beautification are often undertaken to activate and improve vacant or under-utilized spaces. Depending on their form and purpose, these have numerous benefits, including helping youth develop a sense of place (Kudryavtsev et al., 2012) and addressing food insecurity, unemployment, and hopelessness via gardening initiatives (Brown

and Jameton, 2000; Allen *et al.*, 2008). One of the models for large-scale community beautification of vacant properties was developed by the Pennsylvania Horticulture Society, which now maintains 12,000 lots. In another example from Flint, a community beautification program engaged hundreds of people in maintaining thousands of vacant parcels (Sadler and Pruett, 2016). Beyond the direct effect of the beautification, however, most participants believed that their efforts made their neighborhoods look better, and that neighbors were participating more in civic life. This mirrors the notion that neighborhoods with more social cohesion both have a stronger sense of community and are better equipped for collective action (Can, 1998). In a development field of ongoing contestation, this equipment is an important reservoir for neighborhoods, in addition to the value of maintaining the neighborhood patterns.

These community-led beautification initiatives are distinct from top-down efforts to create green infrastructure or public open spaces, although they involve coordination with public authorities and civic networks (e.g., Keep Philadelphia Beautiful, 2018). The variety of greening initiatives has its detractors and drawbacks around concerns for green gentrification and unequal distribution of new amenities, both of which further entrench socio-economic and racial and ethnic divisions (Blok, 2020). Absent of a wider inclusive community and economic development framework, beautification does impose burdens and the sustainability of local benefits is questionable, according to the Center for Community Progress (Bird, 2016). Moreover, community members can be overburdened by the massive need for lawn maintenance, and communities must rely on the creation of land banks to manage these vacant properties (Garvin *et al.*, 2012, Sadler and Pruett, 2017). These concerns illustrate the value of ongoing public engagement and taking stock of public opinion as noted by Baptiste *et al.* (2015) in Syracuse, New York.

Redeveloping around Equity

The current crises around the pandemic, racial injustice, and economic collapse are sorely affecting Rust Belt cities (Brachman, 2020). This new context deserves renewed scrutiny. While the dynamics around demographic changes, institutional strains, and business restructuring are certainly not new, prior and current efforts to advance equity through redevelopment by community organizations, social entrepreneurs, and artists are as relevant as ever.

The development of local food systems is contributing to more equitable spatial patterns and urban forms. In Detroit, for example, research by Pothukuchi (2015, p. 419) found that, “urban agriculture, neighborhood farm markets and retail grocery, and community-based food entrepreneurship have taken hold; initiatives exist to foster racial justice in and cultivate black ownership of the food system in a city that is overwhelmingly African American; and a food policy council provides comprehensive attention to community food issues.”

The power of artists to initiate revitalization especially in smaller cities, irrespective of formal planning mechanisms, is well established (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010). In Calumet, Michigan, a long-declining formerly industrial copper mining region is now marked by a heavily vacant landscape. There, the arts and culture community have been catalysts for trying to sustain the area in a no-growth state (Winkler *et al.*, 2016). This has taken the form of maintaining the facades of former businesses and residential structures. Much the same as vacant land maintenance in Flint, as there is never sufficient funding for upkeep of these facades, the art community supplements it.

In concert, a group of heritage professionals, including academics and staff at the Keweenaw National Historical Park have used a public participatory mapping project entitled the Keweenaw

Time Traveler (www.mapyourhistory.org) to document how the built and social environments of the region have changed through the transitions from industrial to post-industrial (Lafreniere et al., 2019). The project has supported the preservation efforts of both the social identity of the region (Scarlett et al., 2018), and both the legislated formal historical preservation and vernacular material culture of the historical built environment (Arnold and Lafreniere 2017; 2018).

The effects of these efforts is that more of the urban fabric is preserved. Even so, many buildings remain unoccupied and identities continue to be shaped by economic shifts to heritage and adventure tourism. Looking at the intersection of planning and artists' activation of space is not without complication. As Chapple and Jackson (2010, p. 481) ask: "To what extent is it appropriate to 'plan' the arts in a city space if aesthetic effects by definition cannot be fully planned?" This indicates the importance of viewing redevelopment as a contingent and negotiated process with the attitudes and actions of community members being critical variables in the outcomes.

FURTHER RESEARCH AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The current characteristics and challenges of SONG cities in the American Rust Belt may become more prevalent globally, particularly in advanced urban economic systems. In conventional frameworks, population and economic activity are assumed to be the driver of urban form. Evidence exists, however, that urban form will be shaped significantly by citizen activism and socially-driven development, as places enter SONG futures (Parr, 2015). Therefore, it is important to further the discussion about the reassertion of community influence in urban development and morphological processes.

Following the thinking of Kaufmann and Sidney (2020) in recent work on urban policy analysis, it is clear that incorporating participation and recognizing multi-scalar processes are valuable in practical and theoretical urban scholarship. The ongoing community-based yet multi-scalar contestation and innovation in policies, networks, and practices that is taking place in SONG cities is noteworthy. Moreover, the work of planners and policymakers would be enhanced by exploring how these dynamics inform applications of urban morphological concepts through tools such as design guides (Oliveira, 2006).

The institutions and interventions that have been highlighted are examples of how communities are balancing what Lynch (1981) calls the meta-criteria of urban quality: efficiency and justice. They are actions able to be taken and worth taking. Looked at in this manner, they are constructive starting points for places facing, or planning to face, periods and pockets of low-growth.

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