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19. Creative cities and shrinking cities: False opposites?

Marco Bontje

The European Union sees towns and cities, and especially the major cities, as a 'motor of growth'. At the same time, the EU recognises that many towns and cities are not growing, and 'shrinking cities' also occupy a prominent place on the European policy and research agenda. Shrinking cities do not fit the principles of European (or national) policy. They do not, for instance, meet the principles of the European model for sustainable urban developments: shrinking towns and cities are usually not 'attractive places' or 'motors of growth', they do not usually exhibit 'social progress', they are not 'powerful regional centres' and they are often situated in economically underperforming regions. Policymakers, not only in Brussels but also at the national, regional or local levels, usually wish to combat shrinkage with measures to return to growth as quickly as possible. One of the development concepts that often raises strong expectations is 'the creative city'. But isn't the creative city above all a policy concept for 'winners', for growing cities? Or do shrinking cities perhaps also have creative opportunities?

Shrinkage need not be a disaster

Before exploring possible answers to this question, we need to question the obsession (not only in Europe) with population growth and economic growth. Population shrinkage is not by definition a disaster for a city. There are different types of shrinkage: shrinkage occurs in all kinds of forms and degrees. Before a population forecast leads to panic in a city, one should first take a close look at what is really happening and whether there are

real reasons for concern. Elements that should be considered are whether just the number of city residents is decreasing or also the number of households (and linked to this: are houses standing empty or not), which population groups are shrinking and which may also be growing, whether the shrinkage is long-term and structural or only incidental, and above all the extent to which the population shrinkage is accompanied by economic shrinkage or stagnation. In this context cities also need to realise that many European towns and cities already have a shrinking population and that in the coming decades this will apply to many more European cities. Unless Europe becomes much more generous in admitting migrants (which is unlikely) or European birth rates rise strongly (which is also unlikely), population shrinkage is set to become 'the new normal'. Not only in rural areas but certainly also in a large number of European towns and cities.

Creativity as salvation of cities?

Every city would like to be a creative city. The term creativity has a positive connotation – not only among policymakers – especially when it involves forms of creativity that enable money to be earned and let a city put itself on the map. Since the 1990s the creative industry has been one of the fastest-growing economic sectors, and it also seems to have a promising future in the coming years. Museums, theatres, festivals, creative clusters, incubators and architectural landmarks have become important weapons in the international struggle between cities for investments and highly trained talent. But there is also a downside to a strategy aimed at the creative city. Not every city can be a creative city and not even all city inhabitants profit from such a strategy: it is often a strategy with relatively few winners and many more losers. The most successful creative cities are often cities that were already doing well economically and already have a long tradition as centres of culture and knowledge: this is usually not a new success 'that came from nowhere' but instead built on existing success.

Shrinking cities that need creativity as a means of rescue will unfortunately often find themselves grasping at straws.

Nonetheless, there are some examples of shrinking cities in Europe that, thanks also to a flourishing creative industry, have begun growing again after decades of decline, both demographically and economically. Leipzig for instance: after seven decades of dramatic shrinkage, which actually seemed to be accelerating in the 1990s, the population began growing again from 2000 onwards, quickly followed by a remarkable economic recovery. The creative industry seems to have played an important role in this recovery, including the art of the New Leipzig School as a successful export product, a growing media sector and crowd-pullers such as music festivals and game industry fairs. A growing knowledge cluster in the life sciences, the formation of a new automobile cluster and the superbly renovated city centre have also contributed to Leipzig's recovery. Comparable stories from the last ten to fifteen years can be told about Dresden (rebuilt historic centre as a tourism magnet and successful high-tech industry) and Manchester (from industrial to creative knowledge city).

But for the time being these seem to be exceptions. Having already been centres of culture, innovation and knowledge earlier in their histories, these cities can now successfully reference this tradition after spending several decades trapped in a temporary vicious cycle of decay due to an unlucky combination of circumstances. They are profiting from a more general 'back to the (big) city trend' that we have seen in many European countries, including the Netherlands, in recent years. Moreover, their recent growth is at the expense of their surrounding regions, which are growing much less strongly or even shrinking. Part of the new urban growth in these formerly shrinking cities is due to a reduction in the exodus from the city to the surrounding areas (less suburbanisation and people remaining resident in the city for longer) and an increase in the influx from the surrounding region to the city. Smaller shrinking cities and towns usually do not have these possible sources of new growth: they are not and never were centres of culture, innovation and knowledge,

and their surrounding regions are usually thinly populated, or they themselves are situated in the shadow of a larger city that attracts people from these smaller cities and towns.

Creative opportunities for shrinking cities?

How can these smaller shrinking cities and towns nonetheless play a role in an economy that is increasingly focused on creativity, innovation and knowledge? If we could develop the 'creative city policy strategy' in a rather more diverse and inventive way than has been the case in Europe up until now, then smaller shrinking cities should find opportunities as well. The nature of these opportunities depends partly on the location of these cities with respect to the dominant creative centres. Small shrinking cities and towns that lie close to major creative centres, and perhaps are shrinking precisely because of this proximity, may be able to augment the regional creative economy. They might be able to offer what the large creative city does not have (or no longer has): room for affordable working and living environments and free spaces for creative starters and marginal creativity. Commercially successful creative companies often arise from small businesses that are not profitable in their first years, or require these small businesses and freelancers as suppliers or project partners. The more large, commercially successful, creative businesses there are in a city, the bigger the chance that precisely these small start-ups and freelancers can no longer find an affordable place in the city. Then smaller cities and towns close to the big creative city may present an alternative start-up environment. An environment that still offers space (literally and figuratively) to experiment – with experiments that can also fail from time to time without this obstructing new opportunities.

Smaller shrinking cities and towns that lie further from the major creative centres will need to come up with something else. They could, for instance, see whether there are niches in the creative industry that are not, or hardly, represented and in which

the smaller cities could play a pioneering role. An exploration of local and regional traditions may provide inspiration: what do we have that others don't, or what are/were we good at? This can also include the valorisation of creative craftsmanship or old trades, or a combination of creative ideas and a more sustainable economy and society. Another option, separate or supplementary to the above, is to explore possibilities for creating alliances with the large creative centres or, on the other hand, with players in a similar position (other smaller shrinking cities and towns) to find growth options under the motto 'united we stand'.

Growth-shrinkage partnerships

The fastest growing cities in Europe often grow at the expense of other areas: either the rest of their own urban region, or other parts of the country. This raises questions about which kind of development is ultimately the most desirable at national and European levels: placing all bets on the fastest growers with the most competitive strength, or putting an emphasis on mutual solidarity between growing and shrinking parts of Europe? Two recent projects explore possibilities of helping, as a growing urban region, to solve the problems of shrinking regions. Under the title 'The Responsible Capital', Amsterdam has entered into a partnership with three shrinking towns and their regions at the edges of the Netherlands: Delfzijl (north-east Groningen), Sluis (Zeelandic Flanders) and Heerlen (South Limburg). This alliance includes knowledge exchange on urban development and cooperation in cultural events. A European project with similar principles was the Interreg IVC project 'Urban-Rural Partnerships in Metropolitan Areas' (URMA, 2012-2014). Led by researchers at the HafenCity University Hamburg, an international consortium worked on knowledge exchange on, and possible improvement of, partnerships between urban and rural regions. These projects are congenial in nature and certainly contribute to discussions that deserve a higher place on the European policy agenda. But

the concrete results of these partnership plans remain modest for the time being and such projects also raise questions about whether the shrinking regions really benefit from this, or whether it is the growing urban regions that ultimately profit the most. Nonetheless, they are a possible start for a new type of urban and regional development programme that creates better opportunities for shrinking parts of Europe.

Creative cities do not necessarily have to be growing cities; shrinking cities and towns can also play their part in a creative economy. A European urban policy that focuses exclusively on cities as 'motors of growth' threatens to exclude a large proportion of European cities and towns, or to impose a forced 'back to growth policy' with a major chance of failure. European urban policy should be a policy for all European cities and towns, not only for the growing and/or most creative ones and also not only for the most creative and/or highly educated parts of the population.

The author

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Further reading

- Bontje, Marco. 2014. *Leipzig: back to growth, but not for everyone*. <http://theprotocity.com/leipzig-back-growth-everyone/>
- Bontje, Marco. 2014. *The responsible capital: Amsterdam's hinterland*. <http://theprotocity.com/the-responsible-capital-amsterdams-hinterland/>

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URMA project website for '*Urban-Rural Partnerships in Metropolitan Areas*' (URMA). <http://www.urma-project.eu/>