

# Embracing Smart Decline

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For several decades many major U.S. cities and small towns have been shrinking, with populations drastically falling. This has led to the large-scale abandonment and deterioration of both residential and commercial properties, major losses in tax base and revenue for public services, and heightened conditions for concentrations of poverty. Some of the most well-known shrinking cities include Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Buffalo, all having lost over half of their population, and all with losses occurring in every decade between 1950 and 2000.<sup>1</sup> While shrinking is not a new phenomenon, planners and policymakers have been slow to address its realities. Many continue to either ignore population decline entirely or respond with growth-oriented policies like the production of new housing stock to generate real estate demand and private investment. Neither approach recognizes the true challenges of decline. In cities that are shrinking, it becomes necessary for planning discourse to shift from an emphasis on growth to smart decline. Smart decline, or the idea of planning for less, focuses on strategies that improve the lives of existing residents rather than exhaust city resources through hopeless efforts to increase population. This article discusses the strategies of smart decline, highlights examples of them in various cities, and points to the importance of citizen engagement in their development and application.

Contrary to popular belief, shrinking is not an isolated Rust Belt or post-industrial phenomenon: other parts of the country are also experiencing its challenges. As Justin Hollander explains in *Sunburnt Cities*, the Sunbelt, known for its rapid growth during the housing boom, is also now home to its fair share of shrinking cities.<sup>2</sup> The recent collapse of the real estate market led to increasingly widespread foreclosures, housing abandonment, and ultimately population loss in the region, adding many of its

cities to the ranks of the shrinking. While rate of population decline has slowed in many cities, the problems caused by this decline still persist.<sup>3</sup>

Many other developed countries, including Germany, Japan, and Britain, also face the problem of shrinking cities.<sup>4</sup> Germany emerged as a clear leader in the initial body of shrinking cities research when in 2002 the German federal government sponsored the international Shrinking Cities initiative to examine shrinking on an international level.<sup>5</sup> Detroit, along with Manchester and Liverpool (Britain), Ivanovo (Russia), and Halle and Leipzig (Germany) were chosen as primary case studies on the process of shrinking, with contributors from each country participating in the project.<sup>6</sup> Other projects, including *Cities in Transition*, sponsored by the German Marshall Fund, have since been taken up to continue this overseas dialogue on shrinking cities, and exchange best practices for intervention.<sup>7</sup> These efforts examine creative architectural, landscape, and policy approaches applied by practitioners world-wide to address the problem of large-scale property vacancy.

Scholars and practitioners in the U.S. are also expanding the body of shrinking cities research, many advocating for the rethinking of current urban planning practice and policy in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> While many American cities continue to shrink, most U.S. planners and policymakers continue to respond with the more familiar – and in American society, the more politically and socially acceptable – growth-oriented approaches.<sup>9</sup> In a 2002 edition of *Planning Magazine*, scholars Frank and Deborah Popper coined the phrase smart

1 Hollander et al 2009, Dewar and Thomas forthcoming  
2 Hollander 2011

3 Beauregard 2009  
4 Hollander et al 2009  
5 Hollander et al 2009  
6 Shrinking Cities Project  
7 German Marshall Fund 2012  
8 Popper and Popper 2010, Hollander 2011, Dewar and Thomas forthcoming  
9 Popper and Popper 2010, Hollander 2011, Schatz forthcoming



*Globe Building, Detroit, MI 2009 (Photo Credit: Oleksandra Topolnytska)*

decline. It describes both a city's acceptance of the fact that its population and financial resources are declining, and its willingness to develop creative new strategies to mitigate the harsh impacts of this decline. Popper and Popper encourage former industrial hubs to "rightsize themselves in authentic, resilient ways that shun past magical thinking and face the realities of the post-carbon world."<sup>10</sup>

Smart decline calls for city officials, planners, and policymakers to accept that many shrinking cities will never return to their peak populations, and that new approaches are necessary to ensure that the best quality of life – including adequate service delivery – is possible for remaining residents. Adopting a smart decline strategy does not completely dismiss the possibility of future growth, but rather emphasizes the need for city infrastructure to more closely match the existing population of a city. Being able to concentrate services will reduce the overall financial burden on government and free up revenue for maintenance of and improvements to service delivery. Hollander describes smart decline as "a way to accommodate population loss in a way that does not require a manipulation of exogenous

<sup>10</sup> Popper and Popper 2010, 6

factors and with a focus on quality-of-life improvements in a neighborhood."<sup>11</sup> The necessity of new planning strategies and policy changes that effectively address the problems faced by shrinking cities cannot be overstated. American planners and policymakers must let go of an obsession with growth and recognize that smart decline is just as valuable of a tool for the future of our cities as smart growth.

### **STRATEGIES OF SMART DECLINE**

Many strategies exist to aid cities in their drives to downsize. Hollander proposes several strategies, including stronger building code enforcement, discouraging construction of new housing in high vacancy areas, land banking, swift rehabilitation or demolition of abandoned buildings, relocation assistance for residents in highly distressed areas, and relaxed zoning codes that allow for a greater variety of uses in declining areas.<sup>12</sup> Other proponents of smart decline have argued for regional- and state-level policy changes, including the expansion of land banks to a regional scale and the prioritization of state funding to cities that plan for population loss and land reconfiguration.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Hollander 2011, 11

<sup>12</sup> Hollander 2011

<sup>13</sup> Mallach and Brachman 2010

Many shrinking cities have utilized these strategies. The most comprehensive application of a decline-oriented approach is in Youngstown, Ohio. The Youngstown 2010 Plan explicitly states the city's willingness to remain smaller, and highlights gradual and incremental changes to help maximize the quality of life for its remaining residents.<sup>14</sup> Some of these changes include incentives for home repairs in more intact neighborhoods and relocation assistance for those wanting to leave less intact neighborhoods.<sup>15</sup>

As another example, the City of Cleveland has taken up stronger code enforcement strategies through a unique process of outsourcing to help reduce blight and maintain properties around the city. The Cleveland Code Enforcement Partnership, a formal agreement between the City and 19 of its community-based organizations (CBOs), places the majority of code enforcement responsibilities in the hands of the CBOs in order to reduce the financial burden on short-staffed government departments.<sup>16</sup> This is also seen on a smaller scale in southwest Detroit with the Southwest Detroit Business Association (SDBA) and its Nuisance Abatement Program. SDBA identifies properties in violation of the City's building code and compiles documentation for the municipal Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department (BSEED). This helps to expedite the enforcement process and allow the department to focus its efforts on the collection of violation fees.<sup>17</sup>

Another notable smart decline strategy is land banking, which has become increasingly popular as it streamlines the legal process for returning tax-reverted properties to productive use. This allows cities to remove abandoned and vacant properties from the market more quickly, and maintain them while not in use, thus preventing properties from becoming a space for illegal activities and a long-term eyesore and safety concern for the community. Ideally, a land bank would return any given property to the tax rolls as soon as possible. A number of states have passed legislation enabling the creation of local and regional land banks.<sup>18</sup> One such land bank in Michigan, the Genesee County Land Bank, has been recognized nationwide by scholars and

practitioners for its contributions to revitalization efforts in Flint.

No combination is perfect or universally applicable; the appropriate combination of smart decline strategies will reflect their geographical and social contexts. Rust Belt cities that have been declining for decades will understandably react differently to decline-oriented approaches compared to cities in the Sunbelt which have more recently encountered the challenges of shrinking. Therefore, the process of selecting smart decline strategies is itself extremely important.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT**

While smart decline represents a valuable new tool in shrinking cities, planners and policymakers must ensure that citizens play a role in shaping this new strategy. Citizen engagement should be included in every planning process, but the problems of shrinking cities present unique challenges in a society unaccustomed to non-growth language.<sup>19</sup> Hollander and Nemeth warn that the discussion surrounding smart decline has focused primarily on outcomes and solutions while ignoring the process required to reach such solutions.<sup>20</sup>

This dismissal of process was clearly illustrated in the initial stages of Detroit's city-wide smart decline planning initiative, the Detroit Works Project (DWP).<sup>21</sup> In July 2011, Detroit Mayor Dave Bing suddenly announced that DWP organizers and their consultants had been working behind the scenes to develop a short-term implementation strategy that included the selection of three demonstration areas where city resources would be focused. No clear link existed between the initial community input that the DWP had solicited and the decision to implement revitalization strategies in these demonstration areas. Neglecting to truly engage the citizens of Detroit while simultaneously using politically charged terms like "rightsizing" put residents in a panic. It raised immediate concerns about service cuts and the potential abandonment of other neighborhoods by the City.<sup>22</sup> More transparency throughout the decision-making process could have allowed residents and community leaders to identify the most appropriate demonstration

14 Schatz forthcoming

15 Gallagher 2010

16 Mallach and Brophy 2012

17 Southwest Detroit Business Association 2011

18 Center for Community Progress 2012

19 Dewar et al forthcoming, Mallach and Brophy 2012

20 Hollander and Nemeth 2011

21 Oosting 2011

22 Heins et al forthcoming



Barcelona, Spain. (Photo Credit: Steve Luongo)

areas and prevented them from becoming suspicious of the City's intentions.

In a decline-oriented approach, citizens are positioned both to be the most affected and to have the most to contribute. In a time of limited revenue sources, leveraging existing community resources - including manpower, local knowledge, information-sharing and grant money - becomes extremely important. It would be a devastating mistake for cities to attempt to tackle shrinking solutions without the support of its citizens. Not only does it foster distrust in city government, but it also hinders the opportunity for any future partnerships between the City and the community. This friction between the City and the community will only work to slow progress as most shrinking cities simply cannot afford the costs of implementing strategies on their own. Some cities recognize the value of citizen engagement in addressing problems associated with shrinking. For example, Richmond, Virginia's Neighborhoods in Bloom program illustrates how inclusionary processes not only effectively gather input from residents, but also help to

foster partnerships and encourage investment.<sup>23</sup> Richmond also utilizes an online Citizen's Response System (CRS) for residents to report problems ranging from illegal dumping to code violations to abandoned properties. Systems like this allow residents greater access to city government, making them active partners in the betterment of their communities.<sup>24</sup>

Some smart decline strategies are more controversial than others, making citizen engagement even more important. Relocation of residents to higher-functioning areas of the city, for example, may offer more positive outcomes for both individual residents and the city as a whole by allowing for more efficient delivery of services, but raises social justice concerns. To ensure that a fair relocation policy is adopted, citizens must be a part of the policymaking process. The City of Baltimore - guided and funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation - utilized citizen engagement in the East Baltimore Revitalization Initiative's relocation policies to ensure that resident needs and concerns were addressed. Residents sat on permanent committees to shape policy recommendations on relocation support services and just compensation. Such inclusion of affected residents in policy development is something which could be adopted in other cities.<sup>25</sup>

Improving the coordination between community-based organizations (CBOs) and cities also presents a crucial opportunity for greater citizen involvement and improved efficiencies in service delivery. CBOs are already undertaking much of the revitalization work and engaging residents in their efforts. For example, in Detroit, the WARM Training Center provides workforce training in the deconstruction of homes.<sup>26</sup> With an abundance of vacant structures - many made up of durable and salvageable material - deconstruction presents a much more sustainable alternative to demolition, and, through the inclusion of community partners and residents, becomes a more financially feasible strategy. Additionally, SDBA's Nuisance Abatement Program works closely with community residents to identify properties that are a physical nuisance. This includes regular documentation, directly from

23 Dewar and Thomas forthcoming

24 City of Richmond 2011

25 Casey Foundation 2010, Cromwell et al 2005, Heins et al forthcoming

26 Deconstructing Detroit 2011

residents, that is then compiled by SDBA and given to the City.<sup>27</sup> This reduces the financial burden on government and drastically expedites the code enforcement process. The WARM Training Center and SDBA, therefore, are clearly allies in a smart decline approach for Detroit. It would be a mistake not to build on partnerships with such community organizations and thereby coordinate and implement the most effective policies. Clear communication with these organizations helps the City reach its larger-scale goals, provided that it can gain the support of its CBOs and citizens.

### CONCLUSION

In order to effectively address the problems of shrinking, planners and policymakers must look beyond advocating only for growth and begin to see the value in decline-oriented approaches. Smart decline can help cities become more flexible and shrink gracefully while allowing them to remain open to the possibility of future growth. However, for smart decline approaches to be implemented successfully, residents must be considered valued stakeholders in the process.

More research is needed in the area of shrinking cities, specifically in regards to the processes of planning and policymaking, and the role citizen engagement plays in these processes. Community organizations and residents are taking on the responsibilities of government more and more each day. Rather than attempting to impose top-down solutions to combat shrinking, city government should partner with its citizens and community organizations to address the needs of existing residents and implement smart decline strategies effectively. As recent history shows, the federal government - with its minimally-funded revitalization and housing programs - will be an unreliable ally for American cities. It will be up to city governments and local residents to develop the most socially equitable strategies for addressing the challenges of shrinking.

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