American Shrinking Cities May Not Need to Grow

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Series: Shrinking Cities

Successful cities are expected to continually grow, and when this doesn't happen, city managers typically try to stimulate growth at all costs. But what if growth isn't the answer for shrinking cities? Deborah and Frank Popper argue instead for smart decline, where cities in difficulty accept their shortcomings and plan accordingly.

For most of US history, cities were expected to grow, and they largely did. The nation celebrated economic growth, and cities were its prime producers and beneficiaries—until they weren't. Until the 1950s, most large American cities were winners in a sort of national and international competition for population growth, continually pulling in people from smaller cities, rural areas, and abroad to staff their factories and spur their real-estate and retail expansion. As long as cities grew, even if slowly, they represented achievement. But when prospects changed, especially for the old, large, long-industrial cities in the Northeast and Midwest, and they began consistently shrinking, they were ignored or even denounced. Nothing seemed to counter the trend. They needed a profound rethinking, a whole new ethos to counter the congenital American one that favored growth. By now, it is clear that shrinking cities need to plan as if growth is neither inevitable nor especially desirable.

Until recently, when the numbers and persistence of shrinking cities became impossible to ignore, such places were on their own. As their plight became widely public, their leaders tried to explain its cause. The cities were victims of globalization, racism, Wall Street, or suburbia. They housed the deserving poor. They needed support. But their campaigns for help faced strong resistance from higher levels of government and their state's more prosperous places, including the suburbs. Such aid ran counter to a strong historic bias toward government as enabler for all rather than an aid for those in need. We would like to suggest a way around this barrier: change objectives.

The current situation

In 2002, the two of us began to urge shrinking cities to consider "smart decline," that is, to stop assuming they should keep campaigning for and promoting growth. Instead, they had to reimagine their objectives. We argued that governments, citizens, and organizations could help their cities best by assessing and accepting their losses and finding ways to reimagine themselves with their current numbers, or even lower ones. Smart decline meant deciding what to remove or renovate—perhaps some roads, houses, and individual lots. Then what should replace them—larger lots, say, or bigger or new parks, urban agriculture, alternate energy, land banks, outsider art, pop-up projects, or abandoned factories and warehouses turned into studios or mixed-use developments. These options and others, like luring promising immigrants or members of a vaguely defined but skilled creative class in need of cheap and expansive square footage, have now become basic parts of the shrinking-city toolkit.

Smart decline explicitly rejects the usual competition between places for growth. It acknowledges that the urban-growth coalition strategy that so often tried to lure outside or new businesses by offering benefits like land gifts or tax write-offs has not worked well. Competition between cities instead led to a race to the bottom, with each desperate city giving up more and more for less and less. They lost for winning, often contributing more in funds than they recouped in taxes.

Instead of competing by giving outsiders advantages, smart decline's first principle is to look inward at what the community offers those living there rather than how it compares to the rest of the region, nation, or world. Each city has to examine its own heritage, current assets, and sources of new ones. It must address its residents' needs and visions to then define its path.

But to do it well requires also facing up to the consequences of local competition. Smart decline, at least initially, creates its own within-city losers as choices lead to bulldozing some places while retaining others. It is a daring and scary public policy, since it entails grasping and acknowledging loss and risking more loss if unsuccessful.

Smart decline reorients to rely mainly on local, preferably personal or small-group judgments. It takes a city's losses down to perhaps neighborhood-by-neighborhood, lot-by-lot, and block-by-block choices. The national intercity growth competition the larger city opted out of still besets residents who feel their neighborhood or block is in a contest with others in the city. Each person's home and/or neighborhood becomes a place to fight for, to keep alive as a testament to its value. Decisions are psychically painful because they challenge practices and memories that go back to childhood or even earlier into family history.

Cities undertaking the process have found it demanding (Ryan 2013). Since 2005, Youngstown, Ohio, has had a path-breaking and well-publicized smart-decline master plan, which took years to devise and has taken several more to implement only partially (Campbell 2016). Buffalo, New York, less well-known for its smart-decline approach, has also seen some reinvigoration with new directions for its future. State aid for its region (the Buffalo Billion project), plus the seemingly adventitious rise of solar industries in and near the city have helped, but it had to battle development interests fearing smart decline would hurt them. Both cities may need years to get beyond this stage and move to one where better possibilities become visible ahead.

But at least the choices find grounding in the particulars of place rather than the larger system's too-detached assumption of growth and system-wide competition. Shifting planning and policy to identify plausibly attractive local uses for the gaps previous decline has exposed could have the decisive benefit of removing shrinking cities from the ongoing competition that has historically driven and now hurts them.

Odd as it sounds, Detroit may be the smart-decline leader. Its July 2013 bankruptcy, by far the largest municipal one in US history, revealed nearly $20 billion in debt, perhaps quintupling the second-biggest collapse two years earlier, that of Jefferson County, Alabama, which includes Birmingham. Detroit, like other Michigan shrinking cities, fell under the rule of a city-specific emergency manager appointed by the state's Republican governor, Rick Snyder, who was previously affiliated with the Tea Party. Detroit's manager, Kevyn Orr, a Washington corporate lawyer who had directed Chrysler's 2009 bankruptcy, served until December 2014, when the city was no longer bankrupt.

In the last few years, Detroit's prospects have brightened a bit. An ironic factor in Detroit's turnaround, given our anti-competitive argument, could be its position atop the shrinkage contest. No city anywhere has gotten more media about its losses. The *New York Times* listed it ninth in its travel section's selection of the world's most interesting destinations to visit in 2017.[1] All the attention gave rise to a genre of photography and literature called ruin porn that features fabulous photos of the city's fall and nature's return: pheasants, typically seen in the countryside, among the vacant lots; trees pushing up to occupy old factories; the vast, iconic, recently re-windowed 1918 railroad station; dilapidated houses covered by colorful sneakers or dolls, as in the East Side's Heidelberg Project. The gritty aesthetic has drawn tourists nationally and globally. The widespread attention has combined with local efforts to ignite change and investment. The downtown real-estate market, both commercial and residential, improved, along with less-central parts of the city's main street, Woodward Avenue, especially near Wayne State University and the Detroit Institute of Arts. A hopeful new bright-red streetcar line of 3.3 miles will soon run up and down the street. Millennial neighborhoods such as Corktown, Mexicantown, and West Side Industrial, more established, suburb-bordering Palmer Woods and Sherwood Forest, and a few others still emerging are doing fairly well. An active indie art, music, movie, and theater scene surfaced, often animated by Detroiters and non-Detroiters who enjoyed the less-known neighborhoods' cheap rents and dearth of nearby homeowners likely to complain about mess or noise.

Detroit's partial reversal may spring from its embrace, albeit forced, of shrinkage. In recent years, its mayors tore down over 10,000 deserted properties and rehabilitated 2,000 more. But there is still a long way to go. Many neighborhoods have not improved. The crime rate is still staggeringly high, and public services are deficient. The city's average home price is $59,000, about a third of the US figure, and it remains the country's poorest big city. Yet the parts of Detroit that have seen improvement hint that something positive recently unimaginable might be possible, shrunk or not.

The way forward

Detroit is no ordinary shrinking city, and we are not sure where its shaky success leaves other, less iconic ones. Should they switch their strategy to promoting their own ruin porn and trying to dominate their state's discussion of shrinkage? Or should they collaborate with nearby struggling cities, and, as we urge, opt out of the competition? Should they find ways to pair up with growing ones and create a new market comparable to that for carbon emissions, where growing cities would have to buy credits from shrinking ones? Such a program would parallel New Jersey's Mount Laurel doctrine for fair housing that allows credits or payments from wealthier localities to be transferred to poorer ones in lieu of building affordable units. In truth, most still slog and slug it out in a losing competition for growth.

Buffalo's recent advances, for instance, might be bigger if the city were not in upstate New York, nearly all of whose cities, including other large ones like Rochester and Syracuse, contend with it for growth. All of Ohio's large and mid-sized cities except Columbus, the state capital and home of flagship Ohio State University, are in a similar situation.

Realistically, shrinking cities still have to appeal to the state and the federal government for help because the American political system puts cities at their will. But perhaps localities will get better results if they start with the smart-decline principle that it is improvement that is at stake, not growth. At the federal level, some of the Obama administration's most distinctive urban actions adapted the individual-competitive model by running contests between cities, with winners getting help (meaning funds and technical support) and losers not. Parts of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, usually called the stimulus, used that model. Pieces of Obama's signature education law, the Race to the Top, have functioned likewise, as does some brownfield legislation. Cities compete by entering their plans, and the winners get funding to test new approaches to their problems. Presumably, competition stimulates innovations, and the best approaches will soon find wide acceptance, but the criteria for judging derived from a generic model rather than the specifics of place.

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1 See: www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/travel/places-to-visit.html?_r=0.

Moreover, the competitions' losers cannot wait for clear results. Nor can they wait for President Trump's urban policy to emerge. They need and deserve their own distinctive smart-decline strategies now. In addition to the now-traditional smart-decline toolkit mentioned above, shrinking cities may move in unpredictable directions: toward off-brand or neglected technologies, unusual political departures, and perhaps explicit attempts to degrow local economies—all perhaps pursued by deliberately expelling unhelpful land uses. It's time for Americans to escape their centuries-long political/cultural growth bias, with each city's prosperity standing or falling in its all-against-all struggle. Until then, large parts of the idealized American city on a hill will keep sliding down it.

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