

Does Reduced Space Result in Fewer Rights? Controlled Shrinking in the Urban Renewal of Genoa

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Abstract

This article explores three examples of urban design initiatives in Genoa in an attempt to highlight the potential and possible contradictions that controlled shrinking projects pose for the future of contemporary cities. Genoa, a symbol of Italian shrinking cities, has been strongly defined over the years by post-industrialisation transformations and by long-standing conditions of urban shrinkage. Despite facing continuous shrinkage, local urban development policies have historically focused exclusively on urban growth and expansion. Only recently have some areas in Genoa started to adopt spatial planning experiences that actively pursue degrowth policies, aiming to reduce existing urban fabric and decrease urban density. These initiatives are adopted in specific areas affected by demographic decline, hydrogeological risks, pollution, or catastrophic events. These spatial strategies justify their existence by invoking concepts like smart shrinkage and degrowth, promising improvements in both environmental and social conditions. However, this article notes how these concepts in Genoa are not aligned with the actual social and environmental challenges that these considerations and positions pose. In fact, the urban renewal initiatives introduced by institutions, in reality, lean towards a strategy of shrinkage and demolition of residential complexes, transportation infrastructure, and productive spaces, with diverse and conflicting results. The observed controlled shrinking projects neglect the synthesis of the territory as a palimpsest, ignore new ecological sensitivities, and lack awareness of the social implications associated with the concepts of smart shrinkage and degrowth. Instead, the three instances introduce a spatial project that still adheres to the underlying principles of growth and exploitation, presenting a shrinkage of the existing urban fabric that is mere illusion. It involves clearing out the deteriorated spaces only to fill them with capitalist rhetoric and models that, instead of creating space, undermine fundamental rights. Nonetheless, a closer examination of these three missed opportunities sheds light on the necessary knowledge, actions, and design approaches for a city to navigate urban shrinkage adeptly. This exploration also reveals the potential

for the city to transform into a framework and platform, inspiring and guiding new urban planning paradigms for sustainable development.

Keywords

controlled shrinking; degrowth; demolition; Genoa; port city; smart shrinking; urban renewal

1. Exploring Urban Design in Urban Shrinking

This article aims to investigate three ways in which spatial design culture is impacted by the process of urban shrinkage, with the aim of contributing to arguments to the public discussion on a topic that has a strong social and scientific value. In fact, the process of urban shrinkage remains a very topical issue since, after the illusion of continuous growth, there is a realisation that cities undergo complex cycles involving moments of growth, expansion, immobility, and decline, challenging the idea of a linear and progressive concept of time. The transformations within the city align with the unpredictable rhythms of individual experiences, evolving policies, shifts in social and economic landscapes, and the dynamic interplay of potential long-term changes in geography, politics, demographics, and the environment.

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, North America and Europe emerged as prolific hubs for researching and reflecting on the phenomenon of shrinking cities. These regions became emblematic sites for a period of intensive studies and the development of urban development models. Genoa stands out as one of these contexts that played a pioneering role in acknowledging and contextualising the topic of shrinking cities (Calza Bini et al., 2010). Therefore, the decision was made to revisit Genoa, a mature context, to understand how the city's knowledge, actions and design approaches are seemingly grappling with adapting to the enduring context of urban shrinkage. This article intends to take the form of a critical review that reconstructs the complexity of a rich description (Bianchetti, 2003) with the aim of provoking reactions and challenging established assumptions. Through a fresh perspective that sifts through writings, first-hand testimonies, investigations, evidence, and tangible spatial cues from specific territorial situations, this article strives to bring to light both the opportunities and potential ambiguities associated with spatial projects in the context of urban shrinkage.

The projects were chosen by exploring non-systemic fragments of the present disciplinary and non-disciplinary literature. The urban disciplinary literature was observed, as well as the extensive literature of some disciplinary fields that have historically attracted the attention of urban planners, including demography, economics, and social and environmental studies. The grey literature produced by public bodies and private organisations was also explored and the public debate on the issues in local and national newspapers and periodicals was monitored. The exploration of the literature was followed by frequent field trips to observe the tangible changes that affected Genoa's space. These trips aimed to trace the practices and uses of the everyday spaces and to conduct a number of interviews with scholars, associations, and local institutional actors. This combination of desk research and field research allowed the selection of three controlled shrinkage projects in Genoa: the demolition of the Begato Dam, the reconstruction of the Morandi Bridge, and the redevelopment of the Levante Waterfront. These projects, while not claiming to be exhaustive, were selected for their ability to address intertwined issues. The choice of these projects was determined by the fact that shrinkage cannot be given a single definition and cannot be represented by a

single action. Indeed, the three projects make it possible to observe three different ways of interpreting urban shrinkage processes and mobilising the topics of degrowth and smart shrinkage in the projects for the city of Genova. Moreover, their concretisation differed in technical and political processes (local, national, community, regional), driving factors (social, economic, environmental), types of spaces involved (housing estate, infrastructure, productive spaces), and timeframes (medium, short-emergency, long). The article is supported by a photo essay produced between March 2021 and December 2023 (Figures 1–10). The written and visual texts are to be considered in their dialogical dimensions. The photo essay represents a visual document capable of adding new descriptive and interpretative elements to the reflections elaborated in the written text. Together, the article contributes to the dense description of the observed project locations and Genoa's spatial stratification as a whole.

This article will give a critical reading of specific situations influenced by urban shrinkage and will be organised into seven parts. Following the first introductory part that traces the research question and research methodology, the second part of the article will explore the concept of urban shrinkage and examine how spatial projects have the potential to challenge conventional models of growth. The third part will delve into the trajectory of the City of Genoa as a shrinking city, relating it to both national and international contexts. The fourth, fifth, and sixth parts of the article will observe the processes and spaces generated by the controlled shrinking projects of the Begato Dam, the Morandi Bridge and the Levante Waterfront. These three parts will investigate the principles, forms, and expectations of the controlled shrinking projects. Finally, the seventh and final part of the article will offer some concluding reflections on the relationship between spatial design culture and the process of urban shrinkage, and potential directions for future research and actions related to the subject.



Figure 1. Genoa's historic centre, Sopraelevata Aldo Moro, and Porto Antico (the ancient port), 2023.

2. Is Urban Shrinkage an Opportunity to Question Conventional Growth Models?

The term urban shrinkage refers to these situations where demographic decline is coupled with a reduction in present practices and activities, neglect of soils and anthropised spaces, degradation of social fixed capital, and abandonment of the built and infrastructural heritage (Audirac et al., 2012; Beauregard, 2009; Pallagst et al., 2013). Since the 1990s, the increased focus on urban shrinking in certain European and North American contexts has attracted the attention of urban research (Haase et al., 2014; Rink, 2020). Scientific articles, essays, books, conferences, and exhibitions have multiplied, analysing its multiple origins and causes, its numerous effects and consequences (Bernt, 2016; Haase et al., 2013; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012; Oswalt, 2005; Oswalt & Rieniets, 2006; Pallagst et al., 2022; Turok & Mykhnenko, 2007). Shrinkage contexts became training grounds and provided professional opportunities for young administrators, planners, and technicians. Plans, schemes, and policies in shrinking contexts have become symbols of urban development models (Kërçuku, 2023; Lüdtke-Daldrup, 2003; Oswalt, 2006).

However, today this topic is hastily dismissed or read with greater difficulty and its conceptual content is somewhat elusive and incoherent (Pallagst et al., 2017). However, although the topic is no longer at the forefront of disciplinary debate as it was in the 1990s and 2000s, it remains highly topical since the political, economic, environmental, and demographic challenges in certain (not only European) contexts in recent years are presenting issues similar to those of the shrinking cities at the end of the last century. However, within the disciplinary and public debate, the term urban shrinkage still carries an unambiguous and stigmatised meaning, closely associated with the obsessive and restless idea of alarm, contributing to a pervasive cultural pessimism (Kërçuku, 2023) and still evoking the idea of spatial and territorial stigma (Audirac et al., 2012). The emptiness created by urban shrinkage instils fear, and an atmosphere of scaremongering fosters an uneasy and resigned mindset, making it challenging to appreciate the temporary reduction in activities as a potentially natural phase in the city's evolution. Against this backdrop, the topic has entered the public and disciplinary debate in an overbearing manner and has been the focus of many architectural and urban planning projects, plans, policies, and programmes. On the one hand, these initiatives look at the city and its issues through the (consolatory) lens of growth and, on the other hand, attempt to address and govern the process of urban shrinkage by challenging conventional growth models. Situations such as the aforementioned appear to focus attention on the limits of the economic and symbolic orders of an infinite exploitation of the territory. These are projects that mobilise terms such as "smart decline" (Hollander & Nemeth, 2011), "shrink positive" (Reuther & Bräuer, 2001), "healthy shrinking," "*Weniger ist mehr*" (less is more; Oswalt et al., 2002), "less is future" (Oswalt & Mittmann, 2010), "creative shrinkage," and "*Chancen der Schrumpfung*" (shrinkage opportunities). These initiatives view shrinkage not merely as a cause for mourning but as an opportunity to radically change the way we think about the future of the city. Shrinkage contexts can thus become arenas for spatial, social, and economic exercises that demonstrate a different way of modifying and transforming, a different way of inhabiting the city based on the degrowth and smart shrinkage debate.

The degrowth debate emerges from the social struggles and movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The term "*décroissance*," in clear opposition to the dogma of growth (Ariès, 2007), was coined in 1972 at the Club du Nouvel Observateur in Paris by French Sociologist André Gorz. 1972 also saw the publication of the report *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, which became the reference point for the surge in publications and discussions on the subject in the following 20 years

(Burkhart et al., 2020). Over the years, the concept of “*décroissance*” gradually has spread to other European contexts: In Italy, it is translated as “*decrescita*,” “degrowth” in Anglo-Saxon contexts, “*decrecimiento*” in Spain, and “*Postwachstum*” in Germany. Degrowth becomes a social project (Latouche, 2007), a provocative slogan that aims to change the dominant economic paradigm (della Porta, 2020) and becomes a social movement (Muraca, 2020). Degrowth evolves into a political attitude, bringing together a predominantly European movement of activists and scientists. This attitude aims to search for concrete utopias as alternatives to the imperative of the capitalist development model of continuous growth (Burkhart et al., 2020), an attitude that intends to warn the world about the physical limit of infinite growth and question the image, thinking, and everyday practices of the imperialist dimensions of development (Liegey & Nelson, 2020) as the dominant economic paradigm (D’Alisa et al., 2014; della Porta, 2020).

In more recent times, the concept of “smart shrinkage” has surfaced in the North American context (Beauregard, 2003; Ryan, 2012). This is a strategy that has emerged mainly in the spatial planning debate and is developed according to an approach that attempts to address and guide the ongoing phenomenon of shrinkage through planning that is more attentive to environmental and participatory issues. The objective of smart shrinkage is to offer an alternative planning model, no longer focused solely on growth and development, but able to accommodate shrinkage processes by downsizing the inhabited areas and ensuring a good quality of life for its inhabitants even under conditions of progressive shrinkage (Hollander, 2020). This objective is generally achieved through introducing building regulations that discourage new constructions in areas with high vacancy rates, encouraging the demolition of abandoned buildings, introducing relocation assistance for residents living in areas with high vacancy rates, implementing new zoning in shrinking areas to allow for new uses (Hollander & Nemeth, 2011), and encouraging land banking practices, i.e., aggregating land parcels that are generally fragmented into larger parcels, which are usually considered more attractive for potential transfer of ownership and development.



Figure 2. Carignano district and its relationship with the sea, 2023.

In this vision, the reduction of population, consumption and needs can be seen as a clear societal benefit within the context of urban shrinkage. But what is the price of this vision? Can the implementation of the degrowth and smart shrinkage narrative be democratic or can the strategies that support shrinkage end up leading to a shrinkage of rights? To answer these questions, this article explores that which is considered the most emblematic shrinking city in Italy, Genoa. Genoa, significantly impacted by post-industrialisation transformations, over the years, has served as a scenario where degrowth and smart shrinkage strategies have driven shrinkage and demolition operations. The following paragraphs will observe how degrowth and smart shrinkage attitudes have manifested spatially in Genoa. It will reconstruct the consequences and tensions between ideological promises and the effects of the actual spatial controlled shrinkage of residential complexes, transport infrastructure, and productive spaces.

3. Genoa: Denial, Discovery, and Acceptance of an Italian Shrinking City

From the end of the 19th century, particularly after the Second World War, Genoa experienced significant expansion beyond its city walls, encompassing Nervi to the east, Voltri to the west, and Struppa and Pontedecimo to the north. The territory is a succession of fragments squeezed between the sea and the mountains. The old town, historic centre, port, social housing districts, historic villas and gardens, large industrial complexes, and infrastructure meet, collide, overlap, and break up. Today this succession of fragments appears to be a territory at risk, threatened by hydrogeological instability, pollution, climate change, an ageing and shrinking population, and the consequences of the economic and employment crisis (Bobbio, 2012).

The City of Genoa has never followed a linear process of urban expansion and demographic growth over the centuries. Instead, it has experienced cycles of wars, pandemics, and economic and political crises that have alternated with periods of growth and expansion. Over the last 40 years or so, the city has entered a phase of constant shrinkage, becoming the symbol of Italian shrinking cities (Petrillo, 2020) and a reference point in the international debate on shrinkage (Bernt et al., 2014). Industrial reorganisation since the 1970s has led to significant shrinkage processes, affecting employment, property values, and population (Caselli, 1994). In fact, Genoa's population has decreased by a third since its peak in 1970. The crisis is linked to changes in the city's political, economic, and productive conditions and to a new and marginal position of the city on the national and international scale. Urban shrinkage in Genoa appears as an overlapping of different trends that accentuate the consequences of depopulation and abandonment: the interruption and reversal of the incoming migratory flows that had characterised its demographic profile throughout the 20th century, the accentuation of suburbanisation processes that have increased the housing stock even in a context of low demand, the progressive decrease in fertility and the exponential increase in the process of population ageing, the embrittlement of the housing conditions in the historic centre and suburbs with consequences on the housing market, the worsening of unemployment indicators and the emergence of social challenges, and the emergence of more critical environmental risks (Calza Bini et al., 2010; Neill & Schlappa, 2016; Salone et al., 2015). These trends became visible with extraordinary violence in the space of the city and made the topic of urban shrinking from the 1990s onwards overwhelm even academic discussions (Caselli, 1994). However, the process of urban shrinking is not easily understood, represented, interpreted, and governed through urban development models. As in other established North American and European contexts of shrinking, the process goes through three trajectories of recognition within the practices of governance, research, and design: denial, discovery, and acceptance (Kërçuku, 2023).



Figure 3. Le Lavatrici housing complex (The Washing Machines) and the Prà district, 2022.

These three phases are not separate but overlap and coincide in a specific way of thinking about the urban development model. Initially, in the local debate in Genoa, the urgency of the issue is denied and shrinkage is perceived only as temporary and transitory. The first phase, in fact, sees shrinkage as easily absorbed by the urban development models linked to growth and expansion proposed in those years. The second phase, identified from the late 1990s onwards, is the discovery phase. Some research and reports begin to emphasise the criticality of the process (Calza Bini et al., 2010). In these years, we have witnessed projects, policies, and programmes that attempt to reverse the process through urban regeneration policies and the implementation of an economy of tourism and cultural services (Gastaldi, 2009). In Genoa, however, there is also a third phase, more latent, that recognises the shrinking process as an opportunity for introducing new models of urban development. It is a phase that identifies the demolition and reduction of certain parts of the city, in the controlled shrinkage, an opportunity to improve environmental and social conditions. The debate in Genoa aligns with the perspectives of smart shrinkage and degrowth presented in the previous part of the work, which view shrinkage as a natural process of the city that should be accepted by many and interpreted through strategies of spatial reduction. In this view, the controlled shrinking of parts of the city should no longer be understood merely as a loss but as part of the city's life cycle. The controlled shrinking would thus become an opportunity to challenge the dogmas of infinite growth and acknowledge its limits. However, these reflections are still latent in the city's public debate, which has not yet profoundly influenced urban policy choices, as will be seen in the next three parts of this article introducing the three controlled shrinking projects in Genoa.

4. The Uprooting Project: Diga di Begato (Begato Dam)

The first project concerns the demolition and transformation of the social housing stock in Genoa. In particular, we explore how the Begato Dam demolition project aligns with the theme of controlled shrinkage. The dam

demolition project is part of the Restart Begato urban regeneration project, initiated by the municipality and A.R.T.E. Genova (Azienda Regionale Territoriale per l'Edilizia, Regional Territorial Housing Agency in English). The project consists of three phases. The first, which started in May 2020 and finished in the summer of 2021, involved the relocation of the remaining inhabitants and the demolition and reduction of the two buildings that made up the Begato Dam (the red dam and the white dam). One was completely demolished (the red dam), while 37 units of the white dam remained standing. The second phase of the project, which started in September 2023, envisages the regeneration of the 37 units of the white dam and their conversion into 55 new residential units. In the empty space left by the demolition, three new residential buildings will be constructed by the firm Studio Burlando Architettura. Finally, the third phase, which has not yet started, envisages the development of open spaces.

We are in Valpolcevera, in the Diamante district, west of Genoa's old town. Since the early 20th century, particularly after the Second World War, the valley underwent significant urban expansion. Industries, infrastructures, and new social housing districts densified and saturated a landscape characterised by country residences, agricultural fields, terraces, and woods. The A7 Genoa-Milan motorway and the railway link to Milan and Turin pass through the Valpolcevera valley. Numerous viaducts, including the Morandi Bridge (inaugurated in 1967 and collapsed in 2018, now replaced), bypass the valley. In this dense and stratified landscape, the Begato residential complex was built between the 1980s and 1990s. Designed in just four years, the complex was intended to house around 10,000 inhabitants in its 1,000 dwellings (Castagnola, 1980). The dam is the strongest symbol and sign of the new complex. Designed by Piero Gambacciani, it was built with funding from Law 25/1980, which provided for the increase of public housing stock in Genoa. The dam was built as the representation of a utopian urban macro-structure (Gambacciani, 1980) with 140,000 m³ of volume distributed in 521 flats, which, like a dam, obstructed the small side valley of Valpolcevera.

This persistent experimentalism was guided by a holistic approach which, however, resulted in a complex characterised by low-quality materials, rigidity in distribution and an absence of collective spaces, and a neighbourhood marked by forms of discomfort and social marginality and a strong physical isolation from the rest of the city. The neighbourhood becomes an epitome of those places defined as Wasteocene, that is, working-class neighbourhoods that become socio-ecological dumps (Armiero, 2021). In the collective imagination of Genoa, the Begato Dam experiences such a level of spatial stigmatisation that it leads many prospective new inhabitants to reject the housing assigned through public calls (Bobbio, 2010). Many dwellings were underused, with 32% inhabited by a single resident, others were abandoned, and others were illegally occupied (Putti & Rossi, 2022).

Over the years, there have been a number of projects and discussions on the future of the neighbourhood (Bobbio, 2010). In the end, the choice of controlled demolition prevailed. The project, mobilising concepts such as smart shrinkage, reduction of existing urban fabric, improvement of spatial and social quality, and environmental sustainability, presents itself as the only viable solution to the neighbourhood's degradation and abandonment. The demolition of the dam was completed in 2021, and the process immediately began to show its ambiguities. The demolition appeared more as a socio-cultural control strategy that attempts to remove the tensions present in the city by uprooting and relocating the inhabitants, rather than a project to reconsider the relationship with the environment. In the drawings and renderings of the winning project, this disparity between the vision and reality is clear. The empty space left by the demolition has not truly been designed and governed, it has only been filled. Physical demolition is followed by social demolition (Giberti, 2022), with



Figure 4. Diamante district, Valpolcevera, and Begato Dam during dismantling and demolition, 2021.



Figure 5. The facades of the red and white Begato Dam during dismantling and demolition, 2021.

the progressive dismantling of histories and consciousnesses built over time. Both the physical space and the sense of community have been weakened. Within the evident social vulnerabilities of the neighbourhood, there existed resilience and close social bonds formed in the spaces that, with the demolition, are gradually fading away and being extinguished. For about four years, the remaining inhabitants of the neighbourhood have been living in a state of perpetual precariousness; the construction site, ongoing since 2020, has not introduced spatial solutions or strategies to alleviate the challenges of uncertainty associated with demolition and reconstruction operations.

The actions taken by A.R.T.E. and the local administration were primarily motivated by the timing of national and EU calls for tenders—Programma Innovativo Nazionale per la Qualità dell’Abitare (National Innovative Housing Quality Program) and Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (National Recovery and Resilience Plan)—rather than by the will to build a shared strategic project for the area. The tight timeframe prevented the dam demolition from being used as an opportunity to introduce a chain of deconstruction and reuse of construction materials and hindered the chance to rethink the maintenance of the surrounding woodland, which is encroaching on the few collective spaces available. In Begato, an idea was demolished without giving rise to a new one (Marini, 2022).

5. The Cancellation Project: Ponte Morandi (Morandi Bridge)

The reconstruction project of the Polcevera Viaduct (commonly called Ponte Morandi) in Valpolcevera and efforts to rehabilitate the surrounding area following the collapse is the second case analysed in this article. Located approximately 4 km from the Diamante district and 1 km from the coastline, the area is located in one of the densest and most saturated areas of Genoa. The area experiences extreme levels of stratification, with residential complexes, industrial plants, public buildings, and infrastructural lines layered on top of each other. Over the years, the folds, slits, corners, and interstitial spaces formed by this complex layering have led to abandonment and neglect, but also colonisation and domestication. At the base of this complex stratification, on the one hand, there were disused production spaces, polluted soils, illegal dumps, abandoned residential buildings, and commercial spaces that represented urban objects symbolic of the city’s decline. On the other hand, however, there were also bowling alleys, recreation centres for the elderly and the young, associations, and neighbourhood bars that represented places of resistance, fundamental spaces of everyday sociality and the functioning of the area.

On 14 August 2018, the Morandi Bridge dissolved. The collapse of the entire balanced system of pile nine of the bridge caused 43 deaths and 566 displaced individuals from the buildings adjacent to the bridge. The news spread worldwide. When the people of Genoa woke, they discovered that one of the symbols of their glorious industrial history was no longer there. An important fragment of the stratification of Valpolcevera and Genoa was missing, and with it the everyday life at the foot of the bridge. The Morandi Bridge, another modernist utopia, marked the city landscape and represented one of the most significant infrastructural projects of the second half of the 20th century in Italy (Vergano, 2020). Built between 1963 and 1967, and designed by engineer Riccardo Morandi, the bridge served as an important road link, crossing the city on the east–west axis to connect the Polcevera torrent and the districts of Sampierdarena and Cornigliano.

After the initial confusion, unprecedented media coverage led to the criminalisation of the catastrophe, triggering a search for a suitable project for the tragedy and a political response for a quick reconstruction.



Figure 6. The new San Gregorio Bridge and the Sampierdarena and Certosa districts, 2023.



Figure 7. The new San Gregorio Bridge and the Sampierdarena and Certosa districts, 2023.

Perhaps too quick. Even though the debate on the viaduct's fate attracted diverse opinions—including the petition of 1,620 experts counting architects and structural engineers calling for its preservation, safety and only partial replacement in the collapsing part of the bridge (Saggio, 2018), or the open letter of the Istituto Nazionale di Architettura (2018) that emphasised the monumental and symbolic role of the work for the city—the emergency situation became a justification for national and local political action through unilateral and hasty solutions that were immediately perceivable. The reconstruction process and rehabilitation limited any possible discussion, reflection, and critical thinking (Piccardo, 2020). On 28 August, 14 days after the collapse, Renzo Piano, from Genoa, in front of the media, presented a reconstruction project for the new bridge. In February 2019, the remaining sections of the viaduct were mechanically dismantled, on 2 June the houses in Via Porro were demolished, and on 28 June 2019, the two surviving cable-stayed piers were demolished with explosives and this was broadcast live on TV. The state of emergency became the government's strategy, justifying the adoption of Renzo Piano's project: the San Gregorio Bridge. The new viaduct with its 43 piers, in memory of the victims of the collapse, was inaugurated on 4 August 2020, with the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, and local political figures present. The new bridge, named San Gregorio Bridge, lacks the monumental character of the Morandi Bridge. It no longer aims to be a prominent feature in the city's urban landscape but rather seeks to blend into the city's folds. It awaits the redevelopment project for the space beneath the bridge, known as Il Parco del Polcevera, designed by Stefano Boeri Architetti. The redevelopment project frees up and smoothes the saturated space of this part of the city to build a new centre for the local community made up of a system of parks connected by a circular pedestrian-cycling route, a wind tower, and a large cluster with a functional mix dedicated to housing, commerce, culture, and sport (Lülfsmann, 2020).

The physical collapse of the bridge also represented a cultural and social collapse of the city. The response to the trauma is immediate. Unprecedented energy and resources are mobilised to quickly erase all traces of the Morandi Bridge as if its very existence declared the city's structural problems. A haste to act that, however, has not allowed for a critical reflection on the city's development model. In fact, there has been no debate or sharing on the fate of the bridge and the area below it. The infrastructure design only takes into account the technological dimension of the work without considering the symbolic and compositional dimensions. Instead, the design of the surrounding space seems to re-present the same formulas and models used elsewhere that ignore the folds of the city. The red zone designation for controlled demolition of certain spaces in the city beneath the bridge and the presence of the reconstruction site has led to the cancellation and suspension of many social places. It has led to the loss of spaces of resistance and coexistence between the folds that welcomed momentary and lasting shared experiences among the community, virtuous configurations that help inhabitants take care of the territory and the community. However, the projects that were hastily introduced do not seem to have acknowledged this.

6. The Project of Value Extraction: Genoa's Waterfront

The demolition of existing urban fabric on the waterfront and the renewed relationship between water and the city is the topic of the third project. Unlike the previous two cases, this project is presented with a more extensive timeframe, starting from the 1980s until today. Genoa's waterfront has undergone a more significant transformation during the city's growth and urbanisation process, influenced by the city's morphological characteristics. Its beaches have been progressively saturated by the bundle of infrastructural axes, the industrial port, the airport, and the production platforms; the Ponente district and the old town

suffered the most. The popular Voltri Beach, Foce Beach, Sestri Ponente, and Cornigliano are progressively being cemented over. The neighbourhoods and old towns begin to cope with the pollution and smells coming from the factories. Moreover, the Genoa people gradually lost any visual and spatial connections with the sea, as the waterfront and city turned away from each other. While the substantial alterations to the territory until the 1960s, which irreparably consumed the extensive environmental, historical, and landscape resources, were justified by port expansion and related activities, the abrupt decline of the industrial era has now challenged these notions of limitless growth, environmental artificialisation, and pollution (Bobbio, 2005) and calls for a new urban development model.

The waterfront also becomes the place where the city's crisis is most visible. In fact, the process of urban shrinking first manifests itself in the processes of progressive downsizing, underuse, and abandonment of the vast port areas and industrial facilities. As early as the late 1970s, some reflections on the future of the city and its relationship with the port began to take hold (Ferrari, 2007). In 1981, six designers were commissioned to draw up proposals for the redevelopment of six urban areas of the city and the port (Gastaldi & Camerin, 2020). New facilities and functions were envisioned in old port spaces, as well as the demolition of some barriers between the centre and the port and the architectural and urban redevelopment of some parts of the historic centre (Tasso, 2015). These proposals will never be realised due to the lack of financial backing. However, some of the proposals identified in those six projects would resurface in the subsequent projects for the 1992 World's Columbian Exposition proposed by Renzo Piano, who was one of the six proposing designers from 1981. In Renzo Piano's project, Porto Antico is functionally reconnected to the old town and its spaces are repurposed for recreational and tourist use. The project involved demolishing and repurposing existing buildings and creating a spatial link between the medieval port and the old town by burying one of the city's crossroads (Gastaldi & Camerin, 2020). These projects were mainly facilitated by a renewed collaboration between urban planning and port management logics. In fact, until the 1980s, the Port Consortium (renamed the Port Authority in 1984) and the local administrations ignored what was happening on both sides of the customs barriers. It is precisely this renewed relationship between the various local actors over the years that has allowed the gradual re-appropriation of the seafront.

Between 2004 and 2008, Renzo Piano and the Genoa City Council proposed new scenarios for reducing the anthropic footprint and rethinking the Voltri and Foce-Fiera del Mare areas, known as Affresco. However, these proposals were abandoned due to local opposition (Gastaldi & Camerin, 2020). In 2017, Renzo Piano presented new, more scaled-down ideas for reshaping the city's waterfront, initially with the Blue Print project and later with the Levante Waterfront project. The new projects focus on establishing connections between the 19th-century neighbourhoods of Carignano and Foce and the Fiera del Mare area. The Waterfront project, through a public-private partnership and project financing that will support the work's cost, envisions the repurposing of the Palasport, demolishing the EX Nira building and certain barriers, introducing new residential and commercial buildings, creating an underground car park with 1,000 parking spaces, constructing some canals, building an urban park, and revitalising the Foce Urban Beach (Renzo Piano Foundation, 2017).

However, while the proposed partial privatisation promises the generation of economic, social, and environmental value, it also raises concerns about potential greenwashing and gentrification effects. In fact, the Genoa Waterfront urban planning projects appear to be driven by the ideas of growth, concentrations of population, and consumption (Lehtinen, 2018) rather than the idea of reducing urban density and existing urban fabric. If not carefully managed, the new model of urban management and planning may lead to



Figure 8. Levanto Waterfront, Carignano and Foce quarters, and the work in progress at the Fiera del Mare, 2023.



Figure 9. Genoa's historic centre, Carignano district, and Porto Antico, 2023.

inequalities and the erosion of potential public spaces within the city. The introduction of environmental sustainability in the project is a new expression of consumption logic, altering parameters but not the fundamental paradigm (Mandraccio, 2020) of capital accumulation.

7. Conclusion: Three Missed Opportunities?

The relationship between spatial design culture and the process of urban shrinkage was explored by examining three controlled shrinking projects in Genoa. The work aimed to understand whether and how models of urban development have been enriched and renewed policies and plans models. This article explores the consequences, conflicts, uncertainties, and contradictions that arise from controlled shrinking projects in Genoa. It adopts a cognitive and critical approach, delving into three specific situations to shed light on themes and issues that may resonate in other contexts.

The demolition of the Begato Dam, the reconstruction of the Morandi Bridge, and the rethinking of Genoa's Waterfront represented three opportunities for the city to experiment with spatial, social, economic, and environmental proposals that mobilise issues such as smart shrinkage and degrowth. Yet, in Genoa, these themes have not been fully embraced, shared, and internalised in the development models proposed by public administration. Smart shrinkage and degrowth have remained only superficial statements. In the urban development models proposed in the three cases, the paradigms of growth and expansion remained dominant and the logic of capital accumulation and planning hypertrophy still prevailed. In the three controlled shrinking projects, the tensions and contradictions between the ideological promises and the implemented solutions show clear signs of inflexibility and expulsion, resulting in a shrinking of rights for the local population and a weakening of the city's public space.

The actions taken have been prompted with urgency and a vision of the future put forward by a few big players who have distinct interests, viewpoints, and methods of involvement and improvement compared to those of the local community. In fact, the primary criticism of public policies is that they are accused of not being aware of the social impact of the projects implemented in the city. Over the past 40 years, the challenges related to society, economy, and the environment in a community have become apparent, yet public policies still do not seem to be able to fully comprehend either their importance or their scope.

The series of projects in Genoa provides an opportunity for us to reflect on how smart shrinkage and degrowth are socially perceived. The controlled shrinking project, in certain cases, was perceived more as a removal and loss, rather than a change and improvement. Even when the shrinkage has been planned and governed, it is often viewed as the elimination of an accidental and unintended consequence, representing a failure of the already weak planning utopia (Easterling, 2014). Therefore, it becomes essential to move away from the speculative and emergent visions of the controlled shrinking project and instead highlight the complexity and challenging parts of daily life for inhabitants and manage the long-term uncertainty. The decline that spatial projects deal with often differs from the decline perceived by the inhabitants. When significant spatial changes are announced, the local population also expects equally significant social transformations. A more coordinated process is required that also takes into account the emotional, social, and cultural reactions associated with controlled shrinking processes. While the necessity for demolition is acknowledged and considered beneficial in some cases, the inability to communicate the timing, objectives, and conditions of these processes to the local population undermines their scope and possible effects.



Figure 10. Hennebique Silos and the *stazione marittima* (maritime station), 2023.

The three controlled shrinking experiences offer an opportunity to revive important research perspectives in urban studies, which, after a successful research period in the 1990s and 2000s, had been somewhat neglected in recent years. Despite their contradictions, the added value of these project experiences lies in the problems and ambiguous questions they raise. Emphasising the social aspects of controlled shrinking projects can be a useful tool for exploration and taking action. These projects demonstrate the existence of economic and social relationships grounded in principles beyond market dynamics, exchange, growth, and consumption. This awareness compels us to take into consideration less explored directions in research and design which engage in widespread reciprocal interactions that go beyond mere technical dimension, quantities, and emergent timing of final results.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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