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Table of Contents

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EDITORIAL

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Urban Shrinkage, Degrowth, and Sustainability: An Updated Research Agenda

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Abstract

Shrinking cities and degrowth thinking share their parting from the dominant growth paradigm and seem to have much to offer to each other. Could degrowth be an inspiring and guiding paradigm for the sustainable development of shrinking cities? Could shrinking cities be suitable testing grounds to apply degrowth's radical sustainability principles in practice? These and other questions regarding the connections between urban shrinkage, degrowth, and sustainability have hardly been addressed in the scientific literature thus far. This thematic issue brings together novel empirical contributions, taking stock of first attempts to connect degrowth to urban shrinkage, exploring in how far this potential unfolds in practice and what obstacles these attempts face, with a focus on the field of urban planning. In this editorial, we discuss the connections between shrinking cities, degrowth, and sustainability identified in the empirical studies and the dialogues that span across these contributions. We conclude with an updated research agenda for this field of study.

Keywords

shrinking cities; sustainable urban development; urban degrowth; urban planning

1. Introduction

Urban shrinkage has affected an increasing amount of cities and towns in the past decades and has attracted the interest of urban studies and planning scholars as well as urban policy-makers. Urban shrinkage can have several causes, but most often it is rooted in a structural economic crisis, resulting in population decline, vacant and decaying buildings, and underused infrastructure. While some cities manage to return to a growth path

after shrinkage, most may have to prepare for further shrinkage or stabilization instead. Generally, the urban shrinkage discourse advocates a departure from the dominant growth paradigm, and policy advice focuses on adapting to shrinkage rather than a forced attempt to return to growth (e.g., Hospers, 2014; Mallach et al., 2017; Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015). However, this is easier said than done: Both academics and policy-makers still struggle with how to revitalize shrinking cities sustainably in the absence of growth (Liu, 2020).

In the early 21st century, the "limits to growth" debate of the 1970s revived under the radical header of "degrowth." To achieve a sustainable society, the degrowth movement advocates for fundamental changes in economic and social systems to drastically reduce resource and energy use. Instead, societies should prioritize social and ecological well-being (D'Alisa et al., 2014; Kallis et al., 2018). Until recently, degrowth thinking remained rather abstract, but in the past few years interest in applying degrowth principles to the urban level has greatly increased (e.g., Kaika et al., 2023; Savini et al., 2022; Xue & Kębłowski, 2022). As such, it aims to provide a radical alternative to the mainstream "green growth" approach to sustainable urban development. The latter does not fundamentally question the current growth-based production and consumption systems, but rather attempts to minimize their negative impacts on sustainability (Jacobs, 2013).

Shrinking cities and degrowth thinking share their parting from the dominant growth paradigm and seem to have much to offer to each other. Could degrowth be an inspiring and guiding paradigm for the sustainable development of shrinking cities? Could shrinking cities be suitable testing grounds to apply degrowth's radical sustainability principles in practice? These and other questions regarding the connections between urban shrinkage, degrowth, and sustainability have hardly been addressed in the scientific literature thus far. This thematic issue therefore aimed to bring together novel empirical contributions, taking stock of first attempts to connect degrowth to urban shrinkage, exploring in how far this potential unfolds in practice and what obstacles these attempts face, with a focus on the field of urban planning.

2. Connections Between Urban Shrinkage and Degrowth

Judging from the contributions to this thematic issue, explicit adoption by shrinking cities of a degrowth perspective on sustainable urban development is still rare in Europe and North America. The only empirical study of such a case is the article by Brokow-Loga and Eckardt (2024). This rich case study of a small East German town helps to discern a variety of factors that play a role in this respect. Enablers are a long-term participatory process, attention for local social problems, and a public-civic partnership, in this case with an important activating role for the local Transition Towns group. Barriers to more than small incremental measures are the limited financial resources of shrinking cities, and the limited operating space for cities within the wider growth-oriented system. A relatively new barrier concerns the rise of right-wing populists and climate change-denying actors, which is particularly strong in shrinking cities with their socio-economic problems and disappointed "left-behind" elderly voters.

More obstacles to adopting a degrowth perspective in urban planning were identified by Lamker and Terfrüchte (2024) in their study of planning instruments in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany), from the state, down to the regional and local level. They found that pro-growth premises are deeply nested within these planning instruments, which, in addition to reliance on past developments or the status quo, makes achieving post-growth ambitions very difficult.

The analysis of comprehensive plans of 18 cities in the Rust Belt in the US by Marjanović et al. (2024) makes clear that, despite the advice of academics, most shrinking cities continue to pursue growth. In cities explicitly aiming for sustainable development, this is often labeled as "smart growth," which includes, for example, green building technologies. A closer look at these plans reveals, however, that the situation is not all black-and-white. Cities that aim for growth as well as cities that have adopted a degrowth or rather "smart decline" strategy often have a differentiated strategy for different parts of the city, with a growth strategy for the central district and a "smart decline" strategy for peripheral districts.

This differentiated urban planning approach to the socio-spatial variation often present in shrinking cities was also evident in the cases studied by Hermans et al. (2024) in the shrinking urban region of Parkstad in the Netherlands. Their question whether shrinking cities can serve as testing grounds for urban degrowth practices could therefore not be answered unconditionally, as this depended on the specific urban planning and development context which differed strongly between the two studied districts.

Whereas in the case of Parkstad the intentions of urban planners were sincere and their "smart shrinkage" or degrowth-like approach yielded positive social and ecological outcomes, this was not the case in three districts in Genoa, Italy. The case study by Kërçuku (2024) showed that here "smart shrinkage" and degrowth were only superficial statements, not really "internalised in the development models proposed by public administration" (p. 15), and that the outcomes of the three "controlled shrinking" projects were perceived very negatively by the residents.

Finally, the case study of Coimbra (Portugal) by Ferreira et al. (2024) shows that the connection between urban shrinkage and degrowth can be very different than commonly assumed. In their case, demographic shrinkage was not caused by economic decline, but by a perverse form of economic growth associated with speculation in the housing sector. To remedy this situation, they advocate to incorporate degrowth thinking into urban planning.

3. Dialogues Between the Contributions

Analyzing the eight contributions for this thematic issue, we identified four dialogues, each of them spanning across at least two contributions. These dialogues advance and nuance our understanding of the connections between urban shrinkage, degrowth, and sustainability.

One of these dialogues revolves around the question whether and in how far degrowth planning is actually happening. Has degrowth inspired new forms of urban planning, and has this translated into new policy goals? Marjanović et al. (2024) provide pessimistic empirical evidence of a survey of planning documents of 18 shrinking cities in the US Rust Belt. They find that urban shrinkage is accepted, but strategies remain focusing on growth. In their study of two urban greening initiatives with contrasting results in Parkstad, Hermans et al. (2024) provide the more optimistic account that "degrowth practices" in urban planning can be identified and conceptualized as experiments to foster joint learning on new urban planning approaches that make use of urban shrinkage to achieve an increase in social and environmental welfare. According to these authors, degrowth practices should be made more explicit as experiments to explore whether and how degrowth planning is fertile.

The second dialogue in this thematic issue concerns the role of a master plan or national policy in steering for a strategic response to shrinkage. In their analysis of strategic land use planning in a shrinking city region in Finland, Oittinen and Mäntysalo (2024) find that strategic land use planning is a feasible tool for managing shrinkage, as long as a master plan remains flexible. Specifically, in the case studied, it appeared that growth was not essential to implement the master plan. Bontje (2024), on the other hand, looks at national-level policy for shrinking regions in the Netherlands. However, flexibility appeared to be a problematic issue here, because the national policy changed over the years, affected by national government reorganization processes. As a result, the attention for shrinking regions has substantially diminished.

A third dialogue revolves around the question whether and how urban planning can steer for degrowth by looking concretely at the question of land consumption and population loss. Lamker and Terfrüchte (2024) analyze the premises of two key planning instruments in Germany to find out whether they can help in bringing land consumption to a sustainable net-zero level. They conclude that the premises of both instruments support the continuation of pro-growth practices, and that we might face a lock-in due to the way in which planning instruments have internalized growth as a goal. Ferreira et al. (2024) confirm their hypothesis that the city of Coimbra in Portugal experiences population loss due to urban policies that promote economic growth through housing speculation. Paradoxically, urban planning seems to have the capacity to steer for population decline through incentivizing economic growth.

The fourth dialogue addresses the connections between shrinkage, degrowth, and democracy. Here, Brokow-Loga and Eckardt (2024) examine the links between shrinkage processes, a local degrowth agenda, and the consequences of eroding democracy, focusing on a local process of arriving at a degrowth agenda in the small Eastern German town of Zella-Mehlis. They conclude that the process is ambivalent, because economic shrinkage and population decline have opened the doors for authoritarian politics. Nevertheless, long-term participatory processes within a public–civic partnership can challenge path dependencies and open new, degrowth-inspired perspectives. Looking at three controlled-shrinking projects in urban renewal areas of Genoa, Italy, Kërçuku (2024) finds that they still adhere to a logic of growth and neglect social implications. What was presented as "smart shrinkage" by planners was widely experienced as removal and loss by local residents. The "smart shrinkage" discourse was only deployed superficially by the public administration, without delivering on the participatory promises, ultimately leading to projects that "shrink" the rights of the local population.

4. An Updated Research Agenda

In the call for papers for this thematic issue, we listed a number of key questions concerning the connections between urban shrinkage, degrowth, and sustainability in urban planning. The contributions to this thematic issue helped to answer some and to make others more specific, resulting in an updated agenda for this area of research. The attention for degrowth and its application in urban planning and development has continued to grow strongly after the publication of our call for papers in 2021. We therefore expect that more case studies have become available as an empirical basis for answering questions regarding the adoption of degrowth-based planning approaches and practices by shrinking cities. We conclude with six questions that we consider most urgent and topical:

1. To what extent are degrowth-based approaches adopted in urban planning by shrinking cities? Are these approaches comprehensive or differentiated per district and combined with "green growth"-based approaches?
2. In what way does the rise of populist right-wing political parties affect the adoption of degrowth-based approaches by shrinking cities?
3. What is the role of non-governmental, civic parties in the adoption of degrowth-based approaches by shrinking cities?
4. What can be learned from shrinking cities that have adopted degrowth-based approaches, with respect to dealing with pro-growth obstacles, *inter alia* in planning instruments and multi-scalar governance systems?
5. To what extent do applications of degrowth-based approaches by shrinking cities deliver positive socially and environmentally sustainable outcomes and impacts?
6. What can be learned from current degrowth-like urban practices in shrinking cities concerning their wider feasibility and uptake in urban planning? To what extent can or do these practices also inspire new directions and ideas in urban degrowth-thinking?

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Can Acceptance of Urban Shrinkage Shift Planning Strategies of Shrinking Cities From Growth to De-Growth?

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Abstract

Shrinking cities scholars claim that planning actors in the cities where shrinking is accepted are more likely to change the focus of planning strategy from pursuing growth to actively planning for de-growth. Considering this argument, this article investigates to what extent planning actors in shrinking cities seek solutions outside the dominant growth paradigm if they accept the reality of shrinkage. This is accomplished by examining the comprehensive plans of 18 shrinking cities in the Rust Belt area of the US and establishing relations between the interpretations of urban decline expressed in these planning documents and the resulting planning visions and strategies. The findings demonstrate that although planning actors in most analysed cases accepted urban shrinkage as a reality and adopted a vision of a smaller future city, they mainly devised strategies that facilitate growth. This suggests that urban planning may be far less impacted by specific interpretations of shrinkage, including acceptance, than what is popularly believed to be the case. Instead, growth remains a focal point of most planning efforts in shrinking cities, even when planning actors acknowledge it may not be realistically attainable.

Keywords

de-growth; planning for decline; planning strategies; Rust Belt; shrinking cities; urban planning; urban shrinkage

1. Introduction

Urban shrinkage refers to the process of structural change that occurs in cities when their population declines over an extended period of time. With the start of the 21st century, this phenomenon began receiving more substantial attention from urban planners and scholars (Haase et al., 2017). Before that, it had not been extensively discussed as a separate policy concern; rather, it was primarily conceptualised as an anomaly within the growth trajectory of urban development (Mallach, 2017, 2023). While some of the problems associated with shrinking cities were subject to interventions in different policy domains, the broader issue was mostly overshadowed by more orthodox urban planning policy for which growth and expansion represented business as usual (Mallach et al., 2017). Consequently, counteracting shrinkage and restoring peak population levels remained the rule-of-thumb approach for most local governments dealing with sustained population decline (Haase et al., 2017; Weaver et al., 2016).

However, as many cities have failed to reverse shrinkage, such an approach has not proven viable. The need to reframe it and develop more de-growth-focused strategies became evident, prompting local governments to explore alternative avenues (Pallagst et al., 2021; Walling et al., 2021). As an illustration, Schindler (2016) writes how public officials in Detroit abandoned the idea of pursuing economic growth in favour of stabilising the economy and improving the quality of life. He characterises this changed approach as "degrowth machine politics," which stands in stark contrast to the "growth machine politics," not only prevalent in the urban political landscape of the US but also in numerous other countries worldwide (Großmann et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2021; Molotch, 1976). Similarly, Béal et al. (2019) observed the rise of "degrowth coalitions" in shrinking French cities over the past two decades. The authors note how these governing alliances advocate for "rightsizing" strategies that deviate, to some extent, from conventional pro-growth entrepreneurial policies.

Concurrently, planning scholars call for a paradigm shift to move beyond the concept of growth as a universal planning goal towards planning for de-growth (Dewar & Thomas, 2013; Hollander & Németh, 2011; Sousa & Pinho, 2015). For example, Wiechmann and Bontje (2015) ask for accommodating shrinkage by planning for a smaller population instead of reversing demographic decline with "back to growth" strategies. Others go even further and speculate that growth as the dominant planning paradigm has come to an end (Wiechmann & Pallagst, 2012). Scholarly literature on shrinking cities posits that developing an alternative approach to addressing urban decline largely depends on how key planning actors perceive the issue (Pallagst et al., 2017, 2021). Planning scholars argue that planners in cities where shrinking is accepted as an ongoing process are more likely to change the focus of planning strategy from pursuing growth to actively planning for de-growth. For instance, Schindler (2016) contends that the rise of degrowth politics in Detroit stems from the growing recognition that the city will never regain its former status as a manufacturing hub. Similarly, a comparable approach appears to have emerged in Youngstown, prompted by the realisation that it is not possible for the city to recapture the population peak reached in the 1950s (Rhodes & Russo, 2013; Schatz, 2013).

In light of this argument, we decided to investigate if the development of alternative interpretations of urban shrinkage can indeed change local planning strategies for declining urban areas from growth to de-growth. This involved examining the comprehensive plans of 18 shrinking cities in the Rust Belt area of the US. By establishing connections between the interpretations of urban decline expressed in these planning documents and the resulting planning visions and strategies, this research aims to describe the

extent to which urban planning changes in the view of urban shrinkage, with a possible orientation towards de-growth.

2. Understanding Planning Responses to Urban Shrinkage

In this section, we discuss potential relationships between the interpretations of urban shrinkage and planning by considering the model developed by Pallagst et al. (2017, 2021), reflect on some of its deficiencies, and propose several improvements by drawing on the work of political scientists. The constructed model has been recently applied by Heim LaFrombois et al. (2023) in their analysis of comprehensive plans for 35 shrinking US cities, aiming to determine the association between employed planning strategies and the acknowledgement of past and future population changes. Therefore, it provides a relevant starting point for our own study.

2.1. Perceptions of Shrinkage and Planning Strategies

In their work, Pallagst et al. (2017) searched for connections between the perceptions of urban decline and resulting planning responses, developing a model with four stages illustrated in Figure 1. Their rationale is grounded in the notion that urban shrinkage necessitates transformative changes in planning, with the extent of such changes hinging significantly on how planning actors perceive the issue (Pallagst et al., 2021). In the first stage, local decision-makers ignore or deny declining populations, persisting with traditional growth strategies. This perception usually leads them to delay taking action, with the hope that national or regional authorities will intervene, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle of continuous decline. According to Bernt et al. (2014), "non-decisions" and the avoidance or stigmatisation of discussions about shrinkage and its associated challenges represent a rational choice for decision-makers in shrinking cities. They explain that local leaders may find it more advantageous to deny the reality and prevent such an issue from moving on the political agenda than to bring it to public scrutiny as another problem for which local constituents would hold them accountable. This course of action becomes especially appealing when considering the inadequate financial and legal resources available at the city level to implement effective remedies to shrinkage.

Secondly, as urban shrinkage progressively acquires public attention, it becomes much harder for local leaders to completely dismiss the challenges surrounding sustained population decline. Nevertheless, resulting perceptions frequently fall short of appropriately recognising and accepting the issue. They typically associate shrinkage with urban distress, thereby prescribing not just recovery but a return to peak population through growth (Hirt & Beauregard, 2019). Consequently, planners mainly attempt to counteract urban decline with expansive strategies aimed at attracting investment and bringing back people, industry, and jobs (Dewar & Thomas, 2013; Sousa & Pinho, 2015). This is especially true for the US, where contemporary planning discourse is still mainly concerned with growth and dominant planning interventions are primarily designed to neutralise shrinkage (Schatz, 2013; Schindler, 2016; Weaver et al., 2016).

Thirdly, as the challenges posed by urban shrinkage, such as residential and commercial vacancies, increasingly manifest themselves, policymakers are compelled to acknowledge the issue and formulate a response. This partial acceptance usually results in a maintenance-oriented strategy geared towards eliminating visible signs of shrinkage, such as removing vacant and deteriorating properties, intending to preserve the appeal of the urban environment. Like the expansive strategy, this approach of maintaining

attractiveness is often considered essential for revitalising shrinking cities, playing a pivotal role in attracting people and investments, retaining population, and reigniting economic growth (Mallach et al., 2017). For instance, planning responses in shrinking US cities such as Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Buffalo have been predominantly focused on trying to bring lost businesses and people back to the city by clearing out former industrial sites to make room for high-rise buildings (Dewar & Thomas, 2013; Pallagst, 2012).

Lastly, as planning actors increasingly accept urban shrinkage as an irreversible structural trend, they gradually begin to consider the importance of applying alternative approaches not strictly focused on growth. This entails formulating adaptive strategies that seek to accommodate shrinkage rather than solely attempting to combat and reverse it (Dewar & Thomas, 2013; Pallagst et al., 2017). In other words, they turn to the implementation of a larger group of interventions that are collectively referred to as "planning for decline" (Pallagst et al., 2017), "smart decline" (Hollander & Németh, 2011), "smart shrinkage" (Rhodes & Russo, 2013), "planning for shrinkage" (Sousa & Pinho, 2015), "rightsizing" (Schilling & Logan, 2008), or "de-growth" (Schindler, 2016). The de-growth approach, as conceptualised in this context, mainly concerns the efforts to adapt cities to a smaller demographic size, i.e., to align more closely built environment, infrastructure, and services with the needs of its current and foreseeable future population (Marjanović, 2023; Schilling & Logan, 2008). Although it diverges from conventional degrowth economics (Kallis et al., 2012), this approach offers a compelling parallel, suggesting alternatives to the prevailing growth-restoring strategies in managing urban shrinkage. Similar to economic degrowth (Savini et al., 2022), planning for de-growth prioritises a quality change in the living environment of shrinking cities, informed by social and environmental considerations.

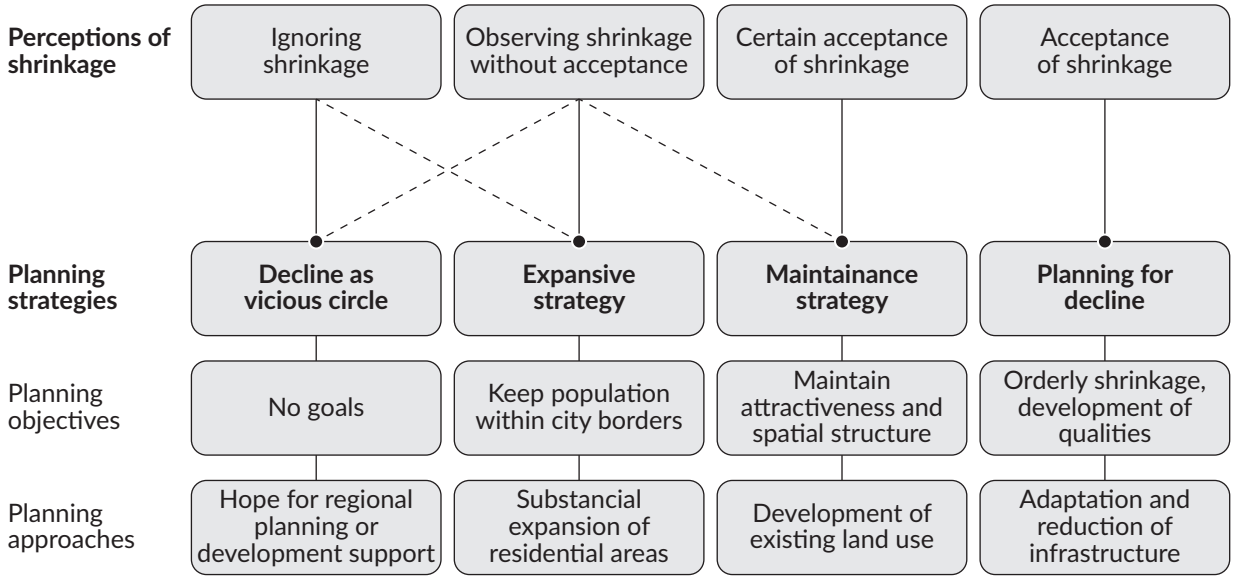

Figure 1. The interrelation of the perceptions of shrinkage and resulting planning strategies. Source: Authors' own work based on Pallagst et al. (2017).

The constructed model underscores that the de-growth approach in the planning of shrinking cities—here referred to as "the planning for decline" strategy—can only materialise when planning actors fully embrace the irreversible reality of shrinkage. While other perceptions may exhibit elements of flexibility between different strategies, such as "observing shrinkage without acceptance" straddling three different responses (see Figure 1), the unequivocal acceptance of shrinkage is highlighted as fundamental for shifting the focus

of planning from growth to de-growth. In other words, planning for smaller populations and adapting to the consequences of demographic decline requires planning actors in shrinking cities to first acknowledge the challenges of sustained population loss and then align their strategies accordingly (Heim LaFrombois et al., 2023; Pallagst et al., 2017).

2.2. From Ideas to Action: Interpretations, Visions, and Strategies in the Planning of Shrinking Cities

Despite the good fit between the categorisations of perceptions and strategies, Pallagst et al. (2017) cautioned that establishing direct associations between particular perceptions of urban shrinkage and specific planning strategies is challenging. In our view, this happens because of the relatively large distance between the notions of perception and strategy. They are found at almost opposite poles of the planning process. Perception forms at the beginning when problems are identified and understood, while strategy is located at the end when solutions are formulated. This means that a whole host of intermediary factors must be considered to establish an actual relationship.

To address this deficiency, we introduced "planning visions" as an additional concept to bridge the gap between perceptions and strategies, thereby providing a more robust grounding for examining the underlying relationships. We took inspiration from the field of political science, specifically its contribution to understanding how ideas influence actions (Hochschild, 2006). To analyse this impact, Hochschild (2006) introduced a third concept—interests—and defined each in relation to the other two. Namely, ideas are most notably defined in the sphere of causation or interpretation ("How do I understand this phenomenon or process?"), interests refer to material drives or personal desires ("What do I want to achieve?"), while actions represent intentional behaviours ("How do I achieve it?") or the steps taken to achieve a desired goal. Therefore, for the purposes of our study, ideas are conceived as different ways planning actors interpret and understand urban shrinkage. While interests conceptually consist of the professional goals and personal desires of actors engaged in the planning process, they are also reflected in various institutional visions and priorities set out in planning agendas, shaping planners' preferences for a specific type of policy response to urban shrinkage over another (Großmann et al., 2013). We demonstrated in the previous section how growth-oriented planning visions of shrinking cities are driven mainly by the vested interests of local elites who seek to safeguard their influential political standing, such as politicians who deliberately disregard the reality of urban shrinkage and promote growth to secure continued support from their constituents (Mallach et al., 2017). Lastly, the concept of actions relates to a set of planning strategies, tools, or practices deployed to achieve the desired goals. In our case, they can be aimed at achieving growth or involve measures oriented towards de-growth.

After defining all elements of the conceptual model—ideas, interests, and actions, and their respective correspondents—interpretations, visions, and strategies, it is essential to consider if and how they interrelate in the context of shrinking urban areas. Hochschild (2006) suggests positing "an idea that would lead to one action against an interest that would lead to a different action and to show that the former action occurs rather than the latter" (p. 285). Applied to our framework, interpretations accepting urban shrinkage will lead more frequently to de-growth planning strategies compared to the adoption of pro-growth strategies that stem from growth-supporting planning visions. Consequently, three possible ways in which ideas about urban shrinkage affect planning actions are put forward, as illustrated in Figure 2.

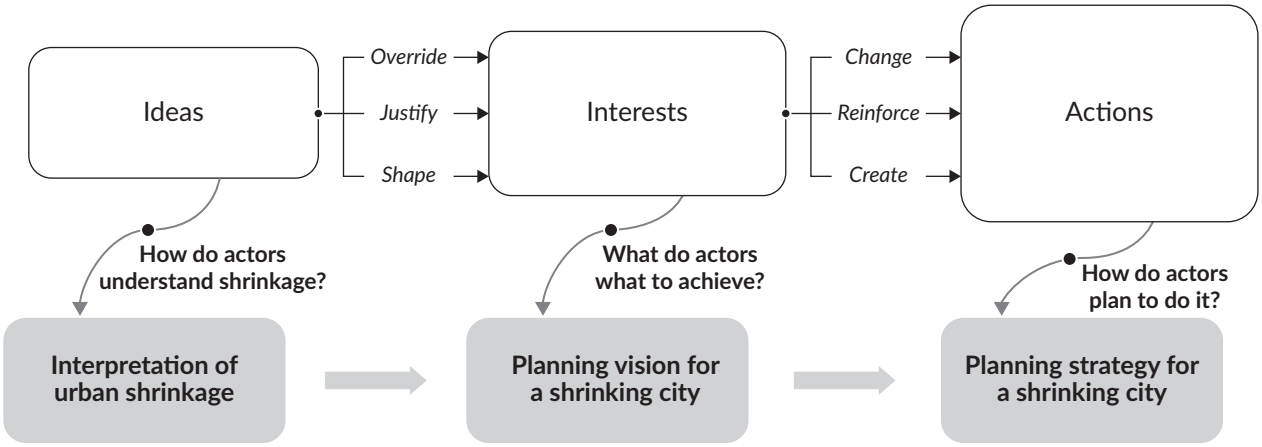

Figure 2. Understanding the influence of the interpretations of shrinkage on the choice of planning strategies. Source: Authors' own work based on Hochschild (2006).

First, ideas can override interests and, therefore, change planning actions. In terms of our study, this means that the acceptance of urban shrinkage may lead planning actors to abandon dominant views that their cities depend on growth, which would result in developing planning strategies focused on de-growth and adapting to shrinkage. Second, ideas can justify interests and thereby reinforce planning actors' preferences for growth, even when they defy realistic expectations. For example, interpreting urban decline as a problem that must be tackled may support dominant growth-based visions. Consequently, this would lead to planning strategies that attempt to reverse persisting decline trends. Last, ideas can shape planning actors' understanding of individual and institutional interests, creating a new set of preferred actions in the process. For instance, actors can interpret urban decline as an opportunity to deal with other specific problems. This may shape the planning visions to extend beyond the growth/de-growth dilemma, which can, in turn, create novel strategies. In each of these instances, ideas play a crucial role in affecting the responses to urban shrinkage by acting on the interests of involved planning actors.

3. Researching the Impact of Urban Shrinkage on Planning

To examine the relationships hypothesised in the previous section, we studied 18 American cities that have experienced continuous population loss, as shown in Table 1. All the chosen cities are situated in the Rust Belt area of the Northeastern and Midwestern US, a well-established hotspot of urban shrinkage. They also share a common industrial history, predominantly centred around steelmaking and car manufacturing, ensuring the comparability of the selected cases. Besides, the decline of the manufacturing sector stands out as one of the leading drivers of urban shrinkage in the cities of the Global North, particularly in the US, where more than half of the largest cities have experienced population loss since 1950 (Gillette, 2022; Hollander et al., 2009; Pallagst, 2012). Finally, for the sample to be comprehensive and representative, we included cities of varying sizes, assuming that the impact of shrinkage on planning visions and strategies may vary with respect to population size (Wolff & Wiechmann, 2018).

In line with Heim LaFrombois et al. (2023), we conducted a content analysis of the comprehensive plans for the selected cities (cf. Marjanović & Sagot Better, 2020). Comprehensive plans are relevant sources to study planning responses to the phenomenon of shrinkage because, for most places in the US, "the comprehensive

Table 1. Population decline in the selected shrinking cities and the selected comprehensive plans.

City (state)	Peak year	Peak population	2020 population	Decline from peak	%	Plan (year)
Detroit (MI)	1950	1,849,568	639,111	−1,210,457	−65.40%	*Detroit Future City* (2012)
Baltimore (MD)	1950	949,708	585,708	−364,000	−38.30%	*A Business Plan for a World-Class City* (2006)
Cleveland (OH)	1950	914,808	372,634	−542,174	−59.30%	*Connecting Cleveland 2020* (2007)
Pittsburgh (PA)	1950	676,806	302,407	−374,399	−55.30%	*Together We Move Forward as One* (2017)
Buffalo (NY)	1950	580,132	278,349	−301,783	−52.00%	*Queen City in the 21st Century* (2006)
Cincinnati (OH)	1950	503,998	309,317	−194,681	−38.60%	*A Comprehensive Plan for the Future* (2013)
Toledo (OH)	1970	383,818	270,871	−112,947	−29.40%	*Toledo by Choice* (2011)
Dayton (OH)	1960	262,332	137,644	−124,688	−47.50%	*CitiPlan Dayton: The 20/20 Vision* (1999)
Syracuse (NY)	1950	220,583	148,620	−71,963	−32.60%	*Comprehensive Plan 2040* (2012)
Flint (MI)	1960	196,940	81,252	−115,688	−58.70%	*Imagine Flint* (2013)
Gary (IN)	1960	178,320	69,903	−108,417	−60.80%	*City of Gary, Indiana: Comprehensive Plan* (2008)
Youngstown (OH)	1930	170,002	60,068	−109,934	−64.70%	*Youngstown 2010 Citywide Plan* (2005)
Erie (PA)	1960	138,440	94,831	−43,609	−31.50%	*Erie Refocused* (2016)
Niagara Falls (NY)	1960	102,394	48,671	−53,723	−52.50%	*Comprehensive Plan for City of Niagara Falls* (2009)
Utica (NY)	1930	101,740	65,283	−36,457	−35.80%	*A Sustainable Neighborhood-Based Master Plan* (2011)
Decatur (IL)	1980	94,081	70,522	−23,559	−25.00%	*Macon County/Decatur Comprehensive Plan* (2009)
Charleston (WV)	1960	85,796	48,864	−36,932	−43.00%	*Imagine Charleston* (2013)
Elmira (NY)	1950	49,716	26,523	−23,193	−46.70%	*City of Elmira Master Plan* (2016)

Source: Authors' own work based on US Census Bureau (2020).

plan is the only planning document that considers multiple programs and accounts for activities on all land located within the planning area" (Kelly, 2012, p. 2). It also encompasses a city's overarching vision and strategy along with the goals and strategies outlined in more specific plans (Heim LaFrombois et al., 2023). Moreover,

Wiechmann and Pallagst (2012) note that the comprehensive approach in the US planning tradition seems to be reinforced in reaction to changed planning conditions and requirements surrounding urban decline.

Since the prescriptions of comprehensive plans are neither legally binding nor enforceable but only express intent, our goal was not to assess the extent to which they are translated into regulatory instruments, such as zoning ordinances or capital investment programmes (cf. Ryan & Gao, 2019). Instead, we aimed to understand the intention behind devised planning strategies and how the underlying interpretations of urban shrinkage and associated planning visions shaped them. Usually developed by a wide range of actors (including city staff, private consultants, and participants in a public engagement process) and subsequently endorsed by city councils, these documents aptly capture the results of political deliberations and related community attitudes surrounding the issue of urban shrinkage. To ensure the comparability of findings, we focused the analysis only on the plans adopted around the turn of the 21st century and in the years following it, which corresponds to the period when the local governments in the US took a more active role in tackling urban shrinkage (Mallach, 2017; Mallach et al., 2017). Two analysts independently conducted the analysis and compared their findings for validity. The list of the selected plans is provided in Table 1 and in the Supplementary Material.

Following the framework presented in the previous section and the criteria given in Table 2, the assessment of comprehensive plans for the selected shrinking cities involved interpretive content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). This process was based on establishing qualitative measures of the concepts of interpretation (whether shrinkage is accepted or neglected/denied), vision (whether a plan foresees a smaller or a larger city in the future), and strategy (whether a plan adopts a pro-growth or de-growth strategy). Within each document, we identified the prevailing interpretation of urban shrinkage according to how the issue and related problems (i.e., population loss, economic decline, urban decay, or vacant properties) were considered, how deeply they were analysed, and what level of importance was given to their impacts on a city's development prospects. At the same time, planning visions were assessed for their consideration of urban shrinkage, while it was also necessary to understand if they were grounded in the assumption of continuing demographic decline or foresee levelling off and even its possible reversal and future growth. Last, planning strategies were evaluated based on whether they conceived measures that work to adapt to the conditions of shrinkage or attempt to mitigate its causes to attract population and whether they focused on tackling the associated problems to facilitate adaptation or building on assets to enable growth.

This approach differed from that of Heim LaFrombois et al. (2023), which focused on identifying statistical data concerning population change or a predefined set of planning interventions within a particular strategy. Our assessment went beyond merely detecting the presence of certain information, instead prioritising understanding the intentions underlying each analytical category. For example, while the demolition of vacant buildings is commonly associated with rightsizing and smart decline approaches, it is also employed within a growth-oriented strategy to improve the attractiveness of urban spaces for prospective residents and potential investors (Mallach et al., 2017; Pallagst, 2012; Rosenman & Walker, 2016). Failing to recognise this difference in intention within a specific case may result in erroneously categorising this intervention exclusively under the de-growth strategy.

The relationships between the three analytical categories were established as the next step in the analysis. The results consist of a set of defined relations according to the impact between interpretations of shrinkage, planning visions, and planning strategies. The concepts are matched according to the diagram in Figure 2.

Table 2. Main criteria for the analysis of identified categories.

Interpretations		Visions		Strategies	
Denial/Neglect	*Acceptance*	*Larger city*	*Smaller city*	*Pro-growth*	*De-growth*
No consideration of urban shrinkage Some consideration of urban shrinkage, but no importance is given to the issue (focus on less contentious issues) Urban shrinkage is considered, but its impact is neglected or denied (focus on more positive trends) Urban shrinkage is only superficially analysed	Urban shrinkage is explicitly considered Urban shrinkage is given substantial importance The impact of urban shrinkage is acknowledged Urban shrinkage is thoroughly analysed	Based on the assumption of levelling off or reversing population decline Not related to urban shrinkage Foresees a more competitive (rather than habitable) city in the future Considers the city's future position in relation to the broader environment, conditions, and relations or at the regional/ national/ international scale	Based on the assumption of continuing population decline Directly or indirectly related to urban shrinkage Foresees a more habitable (rather than competitive) city in the future Considers the city's future position in relation to the local environment, conditions, and relations or at the local scale	Predominantly develops measures to attract population Reactively focuses on mitigating the effects of shrinkage Addresses the causes of shrinkage to stimulate growth Prioritises assets or well-performing sectors/urban areas	Predominantly develops measures to improve the life quality of the existing population Proactively focuses on adapting to the conditions of shrinkage Addresses the consequences of shrinkage to facilitate adaptation Prioritises weaknesses or more problematic/ declining sectors and urban areas

The type of impact is determined by examining whether a specific interpretation of urban shrinkage justifies the planning vision of a larger city or overrides it to envision a smaller future city. It further assesses whether a planning vision reinforces or changes existing pro-growth planning strategies to de-growth. This analysis has not explored the possibility of the interpretations of urban shrinkage that shape planning visions differently, which may create a new strategic approach other than growth or decline. Unfortunately, relying solely on the content analysis of comprehensive plans limited capturing such nuanced associations. Finally, a cross-city analysis was performed by isolating the most dominant types of relations and influences.

4. The Influence of the Interpretations of Urban Shrinkage on Planning Visions and Strategies

The results are summarised in Table 3. It is important to note that while assessing the interpretations of urban shrinkage and planning visions was relatively straightforward, estimating the nature of resulting planning strategies proved more challenging. Most analysed plans encompass a wide-ranging combination of contrasting interventions fragmented across different themes, areas, and sectors, making it difficult to discern a clear-cut strategy (Bernt et al., 2014; Marjanović & Sagot Better, 2020; Pallagst, 2009). Therefore,

measures aimed at both expansion and adaptation can be found in almost every plan. With that in mind, when referring to the defined orientation of a planning strategy towards growth or de-growth, we are, in fact, positing that it is *predominantly* of one type or the other. This was determined based on each plan's overarching strategic goals and intentions rather than solely relying on the number of interventions belonging to a particular category. For instance, Erie's comprehensive plan (City of Erie, 2016) incorporates several pro-growth elements aimed at enhancing the city's appeal for investment. Nevertheless, it is primarily grounded in the recognition that Erie must undergo a process of right-sizing and stabilising its population before the "catching up" strategy becomes feasible.

Table 3. The impact of the interpretations of urban shrinkage on planning visions and strategies in the selected cases.

City	Interpretation of shrinkage	→	Planning vision	→	Planning strategy
Baltimore (MD)	Acceptance	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Buffalo (NY)	Acceptance	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Charleston (WV)	Denial/neglect	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Cleveland (OH)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Dayton (OH)	Acceptance	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Decatur (IL)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Detroit (MI)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Change	De-growth
Elmira (NY)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Erie (PA)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Change	De-growth
Flint (MI)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Change	De-growth
Gary (IN)	Denial/neglect	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Niagara Falls (NY)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Change	De-growth
Cincinnati (OH)	Acceptance	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Syracuse (NY)	Denial/neglect	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Toledo (OH)	Denial/neglect	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Utica (NY)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Youngstown (OH)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Pittsburgh (PA)	Acceptance	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth

4.1. The Relationship Between the Interpretations of Urban Shrinkage and Planning Visions for Shrinking Cities

Of the 18 plans analysed, shrinkage receives significant acknowledgement in 14 of them. An excellent example of this is the plan for Baltimore, which recognises that "within the Baltimore/Washington region, Baltimore's position has shrunk from being the major economic engine" (City of Baltimore, 2006, p. 97). Similarly, the plan for Erie acknowledges that "sustained population loss over half a century is a disquieting reality—one that most of Erie's leaders and residents are well aware of" (City of Erie, 2016, p. 13). In contrast, the remaining four cases either ignore the issue or deny its importance. For instance, while Charleston's plan mentions that the city's population has gradually declined since the 1960s, little attention is given to urban shrinkage and related problems (City of Charleston, 2013). Rather than discussing negative demographic trends, attention is redirected towards more positive aspects, such as the rise in young adult age groups and

the relatively high level of educational attainment. Meanwhile, although the plan for Gary recognised the relevance of urban shrinkage for its development prospects, other problems were considered more substantial, such as the perception of safety, the tax system, and flooding (City of Gary, 2008).

The identified impacts of planning actors' interpretations of urban shrinkage on planning visions are presented in Figure 3. In half of the cases, interpretations of shrinkage had overridden the usual pro-growth visions and led to a consideration of more modest and possibly more realistic visions of a smaller city. The departure from the shared visions of growth appears to be a direct consequence of how planning actors interpret urban shrinkage. For instance, the plan for Utica acknowledges that the city "has been hit hard with the decline of the manufacturing industry," with many neighbourhoods that "are deteriorating and…threatened with continued decline" (City of Utica, 2011, p. 22). Therefore, it envisions "a great little American city…committed to correct sizing" (p. 5). Similarly, the plan for Flint "is grounded in the reality that Flint's population is approximately half of what it once was" (City of Flint, 2013, p. 37) and imagines a city that "adapts to change by reshaping our physical environment to be greener and more efficient for a smaller population" (p. 4).

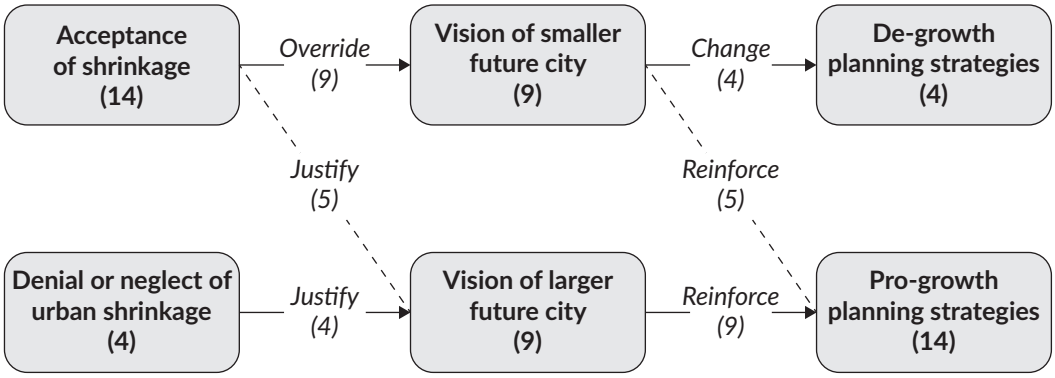

Figure 3. Analysed impacts between the interpretations of urban shrinkage, planning visions, and planning strategies in the selected cases.

In the remaining cases, interpretations of shrinkage that both accepted and denied or neglected the issue justified visions for future growth. Based on our starting assumptions, the inverse effect of counterfactual justification is particularly puzzling. Although some planners had recognised shrinkage's impact on their city's development opportunities, they still proceeded with visions anticipating future prosperity and growth. This was the case in Baltimore, Buffalo, Dayton, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh. An excellent example is the plan for Buffalo (City of Buffalo, 2006), where the planning vision foresees a city that is "growing again, renewed, and rebuilt from its foundations" (p. 4), although it previously acknowledged that Buffalo "faces great challenges: the long-term decline in population and jobs, deterioration in housing and neighbourhoods" (p. 1). Naturally, visions of a larger future city would result from planning interpretations that either deny or ignore the issue of urban shrinkage, such as in Syracuse, Gary, Charleston, or Toledo. For instance, the plan for Gary envisions the city as "a quality national and international location for business" with expectations that "the increase in job opportunities will also bring a rise in residential growth" (City of Gary, 2008, p. 176). Similarly, despite the stated emphasis on enhancing liveability, the vision for Charleston primarily revolves around positioning the city as a growing cultural, recreational, and business hub of the Appalachian region (City of Charleston, 2013).

By coupling the two types of impact, it can be inferred that planning actors in most shrinking cities accept urban decline and consider the related issues important. There is no guarantee, however, that a different

orientation besides growth will be adopted. While they, in principle, embrace the visions of smaller cities, it is evident in our sample that more plans still promoted interest in future growth compared to those that initially accepted shrinkage.

4.2. The Relationship Between the Planning Visions and Strategies for Shrinking Cities

The identified impacts of planning visions on planning strategies for shrinking cities are shown in Figure 3. In 14 of 18 cases, planning actors' preference for strategies that support growth is reinforced. This type of influence is derived from planning visions anticipating a future reversal of unfavourable demographic trends, as well as from those envisioning a smaller population. It is logical that a city aspiring to grow would devise growth-supporting strategies, such as "continued investment in downtown" in Toledo, which "will help to fuel greater growth for both the city and the region" (City of Toledo, 2011, p. 16) or the expansion of infrastructure in Syracuse "to support future population growth" (City of Syracuse, 2012, p. 15). However, anticipating a smaller city did not necessarily translate to commensurate strategies for de-growth. Although nine of the sampled comprehensive plans favoured planning visions of a smaller future city, more than half still supported growth in their planning strategies. This includes Cleveland, Decatur, Elmira, Utica, and Youngstown. For instance, the plan for Elmira opted to create amenities, build housing, and reduce taxes "to attract millennials and young professionals" to the city (City of Elmira, 2016, p. 50). Similarly, Cleveland's comprehensive plan (City of Cleveland, 2007) put forth diverse land use policy recommendations that stimulate new residential and commercial development, aiming to counteract outward migration and attract new residents.

Planning strategies changed from pursuing growth to adapting to urban shrinkage in the remaining four cases, which are Detroit, Erie, Flint, and Niagara Falls. These strategies all stem from planning visions that anticipate a decreasing urban population. For instance, the planning strategy for Niagara Falls aims "to better align service delivery and maintenance of the city's infrastructure with actual needs" and increase the amount of green space within the city by transforming derelict housing and industrial properties (City of Niagara Falls, 2009, p. 101). Similarly, the plan for Detroit recommends reforms "to adapt to the current population and to better coordinate public and private service provision for more efficient and reliable services that will adapt to future needs" (City of Detroit, 2012, p. 18).

By juxtaposing the two types of impact, it can be inferred that many comprehensive plans for shrinking cities put forward visions of a smaller city yet do not necessarily adopt planning strategies aligned with sustained demographic decline. In other words, despite envisioning a decreasing urban population, planning actors still devise strategies that pursue growth.

4.3. From the Interpretation of Shrinkage to Planning Strategy

Following the advice of Hochschild (2006), we also contrasted the acceptance of urban shrinkage with the vision of a larger future city, as illustrated in Figure 4. This comparison demonstrates that although structural shrinking is explicitly accepted in most analysed plans, this acceptance does not translate to de-growth planning strategies. Instead, the interest in achieving a larger city through pro-growth planning strategies occurs more often. In only four out of 14 cases (Erie, Detroit, Flint, and Niagara Falls), the acceptance of shrinkage has ultimately led to de-growth planning strategies. In contrast, the vision of a larger city has

influenced the adoption of growth-supporting strategies in all nine recorded cases. The plan for Cincinnati (City of Cincinnati, 2013) aptly illustrates that accepting shrinkage does not necessarily translate into adopting a de-growth approach. While the city's demographic and economic decline was evident as early as the 1980s, and city officials had directed their efforts towards adapting to this new reality—"shaping Cincinnati to become better, not bigger" (City of Cincinnati, 2013, p. 24)—the comprehensive plan still operates under the assumption of reversing these trends and proposes an "aggressive" strategy aimed at achieving population growth.

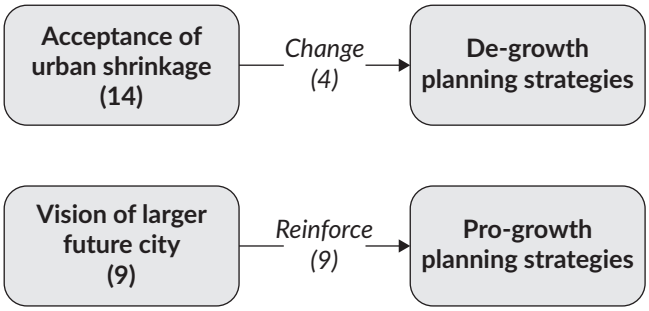

Figure 4. Acceptance of urban shrinkage does not necessarily lead to the adoption of de-growth planning strategies.

This finding further appreciates in value if we consider the cases widely recognised for their allegedly successful de-growth orientation in planning. One notable example is the comprehensive plan for Youngstown, enacted in 2005 (City of Youngstown, 2005). This plan is heralded as a pioneer of smart shrinkage in the US—one of the few cases where a city publicly plans to shrink (Rhodes & Russo, 2013; Wiechmann & Pallagst, 2012). However, even though it is accepted in the plan (City of Youngstown, 2005) that "Youngstown is a smaller city" (p. 18), and in line with that, a future vision of a smaller city is developed—"the need to plan for the new reality of a smaller city" (p. 28)—our analysis provides evidence that planning actors in Youngstown still turned to the planning strategies that aim at stimulating growth, redeveloping, and attracting new residents:

> Competitive industrial districts…can keep Youngstown competitive within the new regional and global economies….Building off the recent Federal Street renovations, convocation center construction, federal and state courthouse construction, state office buildings and arts expansion, new restaurants, night clubs and housing projects, vibrancy is returning to the core. (City of Youngstown, 2005, p. 45)

Importantly, this observation is consistent with the perspective of other scholars who contend that the comprehensive plan for Youngstown, ostensibly adopting a de-growth approach, actually represents an exclusionary initiative primarily centred on the revitalisation of central business districts while the neighbourhoods struggling with issues such as decay, vacancy, unemployment, and crime are conspicuously overlooked (Rhodes & Russo, 2013). This suggests that accepting urban shrinkage in Youngstown did not lead to the creation of planning strategies much different from those of a growing city. Meanwhile, in only four cases (Erie, Detroit, Flint, and Niagara Falls), such an interpretation induced both planning visions of a smaller city *and* de-growth planning strategies. These cities represent potential examples of a tangible change to the planning approach resulting from the acceptance of urban shrinkage.

Detroit, in particular, stands out in the literature for its pursuit of de-growth politics (Schindler, 2016). However, the *Detroit Future City* plan (City of Detroit, 2012), subject to our analysis, does not represent an official city plan but an informal private initiative that received a reluctant endorsement from the city's mayor at the time and has fallen entirely out of favour under subsequent leadership. Despite emerging from an extensive citywide public engagement effort, this document has had minimal influence on the actual planning endeavours in Detroit. In fact, the official planning documents published in the last decade barely consider urban shrinkage (City of Detroit, 2022), while city officials focus on pursuing downtown investments through public subsidies and lenient regulations (Gillette, 2022). In addition, in both Detroit and the other three cases, lingering uncertainties remain regarding the full extent of the shift in their planning strategies towards de-growth, particularly when accounting for pro-growth elements that have resisted the change.

5. Concluding Discussion

This article aimed to assess the impact of the interpretations of shrinkage on urban planning by examining comprehensive plans of 18 shrinking US cities. Our findings suggest that although urban shrinkage and related development constraints are usually acknowledged by planning actors, it is hard to account for how this actually changes shrinking cities' planning approaches. More specifically, urban planning appears to be far less impacted by particular interpretations of shrinkage, including acceptance, thus contradicting popular belief. While acknowledging urban decline can change the expectations of future growth into visions of smaller cities, it is less common for these interpretations to yield adaptive planning strategies and measures directed explicitly towards de-growth. As a result, the type of transformations that planning approaches to urban shrinkage require rarely occurs, and strategies for shrinking cities appear to be not much different from their counterparts for cities that grow. This finding suggests that regardless of what planning actors want to achieve in a shrinking city and whether urban shrinkage is accepted or not, growth remains a focal point of most planning efforts. This contradicts the assertion by some planning scholars that the acceptance of urban shrinkage would inherently change planning approaches towards de-growth (Pallagst et al., 2017). Instead, what seems to be the case is that the way shrinkage is perceived has little to do with the choice of planning strategies. As Mallach (2023) notices in his recent publication, even if acceptance occurs, it primarily remains at the conceptual level, and planners persist in adhering to established practices.

A sole content analysis of comprehensive plans conducted here did not enable us to ascertain the reasons why planning actors encountered challenges in formulating strategies to effectively pursue de-growth despite previously accepting shrinkage and envisioning smaller future populations of their cities. Nevertheless, several possible explanations for this outcome merit consideration. In the first place, the identified efforts aimed at addressing urban shrinkage are often limited to specific neighbourhoods, sectors, and activities. Even when planning actors actively embrace the issue, it rarely results in a broad and sweeping transformation of urban politics as a whole but leads to incremental piecemeal reforms within specific planning domains (Bernt et al., 2014). Indeed, the examined plans mostly involved pursuing a diverse array of interventions across different sectors rather than adopting a robust and clearly defined strategy. This demonstrates that pro-growth and de-growth interventions are not necessarily incompatible and are often used in synergy in the planning of shrinking cities. Such an approach could be argued to furnish planners with a comprehensive array of options for addressing the context-specific conditions of their cities, suggesting that the right mix of planning interventions is considered a more promising direction for

managing urban shrinkage than either a growth or a de-growth strategy alone (Heim LaFrombois et al., 2023; Sousa & Pinho, 2015).

Furthermore, it is necessary to consider what instruments and resources are available to planners of shrinking cities to effectively plan for de-growth, especially because entrepreneurialism dominates contemporary urban governance and politics. In the US, urban entrepreneurialism is characterised by the reduction of financial support from both state and federal levels for local governments, which restricts the range and scale of interventions accessible to municipal authorities (Rhodes & Russo, 2013). The success of planning endeavours depends on a wide range of actors, institutions, and resources, and even if planners and city officials shift their focus away from growth-restoring approaches, the development and effective implementation of de-growth-oriented strategies necessitate a collective effort and adequate institutional mechanisms (Schatz, 2013). Consequently, even when planning actors strive to address the challenge of shrinkage proactively, they find themselves compelled to seek solutions reliant on market forces, and their endeavours end up being governed by the imperative of fostering growth. This potentially underscores the need for tailored support from higher tiers of government in pursuing more de-growth-oriented approaches in the planning of shrinking cities (Martin et al., 2021).

Lastly, the supposed transformation of planning approaches towards embracing the reality of shrinkage requires new and different strategies to take effect. However, such strategies are limited in the examined comprehensive plans. Planning actors in shrinking cities may possess a restricted grasp of de-growth approaches or encounter institutional and practical barriers to their development and implementation, making them less willing to take risks by adopting untested solutions. This is particularly noteworthy given the influence of vested interests and constrained capacities for action that often define the formal planning process and its outcomes in shrinking contexts. The comparison of the informal planning effort surrounding the *Detroit Future City* plan with the city's official initiatives demonstrates the challenges of enacting de-growth strategies within formalised planning structures. The findings from the literature also recognise how de-growth approaches are more likely to emerge from informal planning initiatives, observing examples of such efforts organised by community groups and civic networks in other Rust Belt cities (Walling et al., 2021).

In summary, the mere political recognition of shrinkage appears to be inadequate for generating more extensive planning strategies that depart from the pro-growth status quo. Acknowledging the distinct circumstances faced by shrinking cities seems to be only a surface-level consideration, and other critical factors, including government support, the capacity of local authorities, and dominant political interests, must be factored into the equation. While creating awareness about shrinkage presents a political challenge rather than a cognitive one (Bernt et al., 2014), the adoption of a de-growth approach in urban politics and planning is more complex and shaped by the interplay of political, institutional, and practical considerations. Consequently, there is an evident need for further studies, discussions, and reflections on the desirability, necessity, and possibility of applying de-growth approaches to shrinking urban areas. In particular, planners should be provided with proper guidelines and equipped with an adequate toolbox and resources to successfully pursue de-growth in shrinking contexts.

It is also worth considering other possibilities for planning and action that extend beyond the growth/de-growth dichotomy (Marjanović, 2023). Numerous challenges linked to shrinkage persist in many cities,

including escalating poverty, urban decay, and disinvestment, even in those recognised for their progressive policies and proactive urban revitalisation efforts (Gillette, 2022). The predominant emphasis on redirecting planning strategies from growth to de-growth appears to divert attention from a potentially more crucial question: developing strategies that work. Since urban shrinkage is context-specific, we call for more strategic and experimental approaches to develop an effective mix of policies to manage shrinking cities. These approaches should transcend immediate growth-versus-de-growth considerations, fostering a nuanced and contextual understanding of the diverse challenges and opportunities that surround urban shrinkage. In our analysis, Erie's comprehensive plan, *Erie Refocused* (2016), stands out as the one most closely aligned with this direction, strategically formulating a set of principles to guide decision-making and establish a framework for exploring effective solutions. Consequently, we propose redirecting scholarly attention from cities traditionally recognised for their de-growth orientation in managing urban shrinkage, such as Youngstown, to investigating planning approaches and outcomes in places like Erie that embrace a more strategic and experimental course of action.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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ARTICLE

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The Shrinking City as a Testing Ground for Urban Degrowth Practices

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Abstract

To inform and operationalize an urban degrowth agenda, more systematic and larger-scale experimentation with degrowth practices is needed. The aim of this study was to explore the suitability of shrinking cities as testing grounds for urban degrowth practices. To answer this question, we analyzed two cases, both urban greening initiatives, located in the shrinking urban region of Parkstad Limburg, in the Netherlands. The cases show that in a shrinking city, with a large surplus of urban land and long-term vacancy and demolishing of buildings, there is literally abundant "room" to experiment with alternative ways and types of urban land use. There is also interest on the side of the local government in alternatives to the conventional approaches to urban planning and development. As both cases can be interpreted as "experiments with urban degrowth practices," it can be concluded that shrinking cities offer ample opportunities for urban degrowth experiments. The lessons learned from the two studied cases are not very positive concerning the wider feasibility of the tested degrowth practices, but as experiments, the cases can be considered successful. This is because they provided a better understanding of the conditions required for the implementation and upscaling of these practices, also in growing cities. To inform and operationalize an urban degrowth agenda, we, therefore, recommend more research on cases in shrinking cities that can be interpreted and analyzed as experiments with urban degrowth practices.

Keywords

degrowth; shrinking cities; urban experiments; urban greening; urban shrinkage

1. Introduction

To address the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, many cities around the world are currently embarking on multiple, interrelated sustainability transitions (Passarelli et al., 2021). Within the European Union, with its ambitious Green Deal, this concerns transitions towards climate-neutral, climate-resilient, circular, pollution-free, and biodiverse cities (European Commission, 2021). To discover what works, when, how, and for whom in these transitions, cities often resort to urban experiments (Hodson et al., 2017; Scholl & de Kraker, 2021b). Urban experiments can be defined as purposeful interventions in the city with the aim to innovate, learn, and/or gain experience (Bulkeley & Castán Broto, 2013). Whereas urban experimentation initially focused on real-life testing of technological innovations, it has nowadays broadened to novel products, services, as well as social and institutional innovations (Bulkeley et al., 2019).

Many of these innovations are based on a "green growth" approach to sustainable development, which does not fundamentally question the current growth-based production and consumption systems, but rather attempts to minimize their negative impacts on sustainability (Jacobs, 2013). The "degrowth" movement presents a radical alternative to this approach (D'Alessandro et al., 2020; Mastini et al., 2021) and makes a plea for drastically downscaling economic production and consumption to achieve environmental sustainability and social justice and well-being (Demaria et al., 2013). Until a few years ago, degrowth thinking was not systematically applied to urban planning and development (Ferreira & von Schönfeld, 2020; Kaika et al., 2023). In the words of Xue and Kębłowski (2022, p. 397), degrowth "proponents are yet to reflect on the role of urban development and planning in the transformations they envision, outlining where, how and for whom the principles of degrowth could be applied in urban contexts." However, more recently, several publications, including two special issues, focused precisely on the application of degrowth thinking to urban planning and development (Kaika et al., 2023; Savini, 2021; Savini et al., 2022; Xue, 2022; Xue & Kębłowski, 2022). After reviewing these contributions, Kaika et al. (2023) made an urgent call for a transformative urban degrowth agenda that can be translated into spatial practices and tangible methods to address the current urban sustainability challenges. To inform and operationalize such an agenda, real-life experimentation is required to discover what works and under which conditions urban degrowth practices can be scaled up (Kaika et al., 2023). Currently, urban degrowth practices, such as urban gardening, squatting, and co-housing (Demaria et al., 2013; Xue, 2022), are self-contained, localized and small-scale (Kaika et al., 2023), and scaling up seems problematic (Lloveras et al., 2018). Although various publications refer to these practices as "experiments" (Demaria et al., 2019; Jarvis, 2019), they have thus far not been studied as experiments in the sense of practices that could inform a transformative urban development agenda or provide insights into their success factors or potential for upscaling (De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023; Kaika et al., 2023). Rather, these practices have been presented by researchers as "nowtopias," alternatives outside present institutions, or "pre-figurations" of a post-growth future (Demaria et al., 2013, 2019). The term "experimental" is used for these practices in the sense of "not tried and tested" (Jarvis, 2019).

To operationalize an urban degrowth agenda, more systematic and larger-scale implementation of urban degrowth practices as experiments is thus needed, but in growing, booming cities this is problematic. Here, the competition for urban space is very high, leaving very few opportunities to experiment with practices that aspire to improve the sustainability and quality of urban living by enhancing social and ecological value while reducing traditional economic value. Along the same lines, degrowth thinkers have stated that within

the current, growth-based system, it is impossible to effectively make the necessary changes (Lloveras et al., 2018). This raises the question of whether shrinking cities are not a much more suitable place for degrowth experiments. In Europe alone, there are more than 500 cities with continuous demographic shrinkage, which in many cases concern small- to medium-sized, peripherally situated, former industrial cities (Wolff & Wiechmann, 2018). The surplus of space (land, buildings) in these cities and the diminished role of market parties might create favorable conditions for experimentation with alternative types and ways of urban development and land use (Mallach et al., 2017; Ryan, 2013). Moreover, in shrinking cities, there is also a need for urban development solutions that improve the quality of life in the absence of economic growth (Hospers, 2014; Ryan, 2017; Schindler, 2016; Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015), and therefore there may also be more interest in the outcomes or lessons of urban degrowth experiments and a higher probability for larger-scale uptake and implementation (Reverda et al., 2018).

This study aimed to explore this issue further and answer the question of how suitable the shrinking city is as a testing ground for urban degrowth practices. To this end, two contrasting cases were analyzed, both urban greening initiatives, located in the shrinking urban region of Parkstad Limburg, in the Netherlands. The main research question was operationalized in four subquestions, which were answered for both cases: (a) To what extent did the wider urban planning and development context offer "room for experimentation"? (b) To what extent can the case be interpreted as an experiment with urban degrowth practices? (c) What were the outcomes of the case, and what were the barriers or enablers for these outcomes? (4) What can be learned from this case about urban degrowth practices? In the next section, the methodology of the study is presented in more detail, whereas in Section 3, the findings are presented per case. In Section 4, the subquestions are answered based on the key findings combined for both cases, followed by a conclusion with respect to the main question, and a discussion of the lessons, limitations, and further prospects of this research.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Approach

To achieve the aim of the study and address the research questions, a comparative case study approach was followed. Two cases were selected that on the one hand are sufficiently similar to allow for a meaningful comparison and on the other hand represent the wide variation in urban development contexts that can be found in shrinking cities. Both cases are located in Heerlen, the central city of Parkstad Limburg, a former coal mining area and the largest shrinking urban region of the Netherlands, with currently approximately 250,000 inhabitants (Figure 1). The cases both represent citizen-driven urban greening initiatives, targeting vacant sites of similar size (2–3 ha) and aiming at the creation of social and ecological value.

The first case is Schurenbergerpark, located in Heerlen-Noord, a peripheral district with many long-term vacant sites. The second case is Stadstuin ("City Garden"), located in Heerlen-Centrum, the inner city district of Heerlen, with many long-term vacant shops and offices. In both cases, the abundant and long-term vacancy is a consequence of the closing of the mines, the ensuing loss of welfare and employment, and, ultimately, the decline in population, which has resulted in a large surplus of land and buildings in Heerlen. Both cases, including their wider urban planning and development context, will be described in detail in Section 3.

Figure 1. Location of Schurenbergerpark (Case 1) and Stadstuin (Case 2) within Heerlen.

2.2. Methods

The main method of data collection was interviewing: 10 one-hour long, semi-structured interviews were held with key actors of the cases (Table 1). All interviews were recorded and transcribed with Amberscript (https://www.amberscript.com). In the contact mail sent to the interviewees, the purpose of the interviews was explained as well as the way privacy regulations were respected in the handling of the data. At the start of each interview, explicit consent to recording and use of the interviews for research purposes was obtained.

Table 1. Interviewed key actors.

Case	Code	Interviewee	Date
Schurenbergerpark	KA1	Independent intermediary (broker), between citizen initiatives and municipality	19 April 2021
Schurenbergerpark	KA2	Citizen, initiator, and chair of the foundation Schurenbergerpark	21 April 2021
Schurenbergerpark	KA3	Municipal employee, manager of urban development project Gebrookerbos	23 April 2021
Schurenbergerpark	KA4	Researchers (two), responsible for monitoring and evaluation of project Gebrookerbos	2 July 2023
Stadstuin	KA5	Local entrepreneur, bookshop in Schinkelkwadrant	18 April 2021
Stadstuin	KA6	Citizen, active member of the association Stadstuin Heerlen	19 April 2021
Stadstuin	KA7	Citizen, chair of the association Stadstuin Heerlen	19 April 2021
Stadstuin	KA8	Municipal employee, manager of external relations for Schinkelkwadrant	23 April 2021
Stadstuin	KA9	Alderman, responsible for inner city development Heerlen	23 April 2021
Stadstuin	KA10	Project developer, director, responsible for real-estate development Schinkelkwadrant	23 April 2021

In the interviews, the following topics were addressed for each case: (a) wider urban planning and development context, (b) case history (when, who, why, what, and how), and (c) outcomes (substantive results, lessons and insights, and wider impacts). The information on these topics obtained from the interviews was cross-checked and supplemented with publicly available information about the cases (websites, news items, and documents). In Section 3, the outcomes of both cases are illustrated with relevant quotes from the interviews (Boxes 1 and 2).

To answer the second subquestion—To what extent can the case be interpreted as an experiment with urban degrowth practices?—a list of features of degrowth practices was used as an analytical framework to interpret the collected data. The development of this analytical framework is described in the next section.

2.3. Features of Urban Degrowth Practices

A list of features of urban degrowth practices was compiled from the literature (Table 2). Features are understood here as the general characteristics of practices, based on underlying principles. For example, a concrete degrowth practice is "co-housing," which has as an economic feature the "non-market-based, non-capitalist approach" to housing, based on the degrowth principle to "prioritize social use values and collective creation over exchange values and commodification" (Varvarousis & Koutrolikou, 2018). We defined urban degrowth practices as spatial practices, i.e., practices concerning the use of urban space, and thus ignored more socio-economic practices, related to work, consumption, and lifestyle, without a dominant spatial component, e.g., "voluntary simplicity, living better with less, downshifting and slowing down life's pace" (Demaria et al., 2013, p. 202). We also excluded conflicting features in the urban degrowth literature, notably "compact urban development" versus an "urban village" type of development with a high percentage of open space (Xue & Kębłowski, 2022). Most of the features are derived from two recent publications that aimed to identify degrowth principles that could be translated into urban spatial practices; for the original sources, we refer to these two papers: De Castro Mazarro et al. (2023) and Ruiz-Alejos and Prats (2022).

Table 2. Features of urban degrowth practices.

Dimension	Features
Economic	Reduction in production and consumption Shift to local production and consumption Non-market-based, non-capitalist approach Cooperation instead of competition Other types of ownership than private property
Social	Promotion of social interaction Socially inclusive
Ecological	Greening (replacing man-made artefacts with nature/green) Promotion of ecological value and biodiversity Reuse and repurposing of (abandoned) buildings and areas Reducing consumption of non-renewable energy and materials
Governance	Non-hierarchical relations between urban actors, including more equal relations between governments and citizens Self-organization and empowerment of citizens

2.3.1. Economic Dimension

In the economic dimension, five features are distinguished. The first, reduction in production and consumption, is based on the related core principle of degrowth (Demaria et al., 2013). A shift to local production and consumption (Ruiz-Alejos & Prats, 2022) is a feature of the frequently mentioned practice of urban farming or gardening (De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023; Ruiz-Alejos & Prats, 2022; Varvarousis & Koutrolikou, 2018). The non-market-based, non-capitalist approach (Lloveras et al., 2018) is reflected in practices such as freely sharing private space (De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023; Varvarousis & Koutrolikou, 2018), co-housing (Jarvis, 2019; Ruiz-Alejos & Prats, 2022), collective use of buildings (De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023), and communal or collaborative housing (Xue & Kębłowski, 2022). It is closely related to the features cooperation instead of competition, reflected in the practice of housing cooperatives (Ferreira & von Schönfeld, 2020), and other types of ownership and use than private or public, reflected in commoning practices (Ruiz-Alejos & Prats, 2022; Varvarousis & Koutrolikou, 2018), community gardens and other community-based facilities (Lloveras et al., 2018; Wächter, 2013), and, at the extreme end of the spectrum, the practice of squatting (Lloveras et al., 2018; Ruiz-Alejos & Prats, 2022).

2.3.2. Social Dimension

The feature promotion of social interaction is based on the degrowth principle of conviviality (D'Alisa et al., 2014; Lloveras et al., 2018) and reflected in various practices, also mentioned under the economic dimension, that involve living together, working together, or other forms of collective use of urban space. The same applies to the second feature, socially inclusive, which is reflected in the inclusive approach of these practices (Varvarousis & Koutrolikou, 2018).

2.3.3. Ecological Dimension

The ecological dimension encompasses both nature- and environmentally-oriented features. The first, greening (De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023), is often found in combination with the promotion of ecological value and biodiversity, e.g., by implementing a green infrastructure for pollinators (Ruiz-Alejos & Prats, 2022). Greening can also take the form of urban gardening, a practice already mentioned under the economic dimension. The environmentally oriented features of reuse and repurposing of (abandoned) buildings and areas (De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023; Ruiz-Alejos & Prats, 2022; Wächter, 2013) and reducing consumption of non-renewable energy and materials both follow from the degrowth goal to reduce economic activities with harmful environmental impacts. The first feature is about saving resources such as energy, materials and open, "virgin" land, e.g., by redeveloping brownfield areas (Xue & Kębłowski, 2022). The second feature is reflected in practices that involve the generation of renewable energy (Wächter, 2013) and the implementation of low-tech, low-carbon innovations in construction (De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023), but also in social innovations that reduce footprints, such as co-housing and co-working (De Castro Mazarro et al., 2023).

2.3.4. Governance Dimension

Finally, for the governance dimension, two features could be identified in the degrowth literature. The first, non-hierarchical relations between urban actors, including more equal relations between governments and citizens, is reflected in the phenomenon of citizens' initiatives in urban planning (Ruiz-Alejos & Prats, 2022),

but also in more horizontal decision-making processes and governing of urban space through assemblies and direct democracy (Lloveras et al., 2018; Varvarousis & Koutrolikou, 2018). The same applies to the second feature, self-organization and empowerment of citizens, which, in addition to self-organizing initiatives of urban residents (Lloveras et al., 2018), also refers to their enhanced participation in urban decision-making (Xue & Kębłowski, 2022).

3. Results

3.1. Case 1: Schurenbergerpark

3.1.1. Context

The wider urban planning and development context of the Schurenbergerpark case is the restructuring of Heerlen-Noord, aimed to address the loss of spatial structure and cohesion in this district. After the closing of the coal mines, former mining sites were converted into green areas, often without a clear function. In the following decades, the population and economic activity declined, and after long-term vacancy, many buildings were demolished, leaving a great number of vacant sites in Heerlen-Noord, mostly owned by the municipality or social housing corporations. The municipality decided to follow a two-track approach to restructuring. At the macro-level, spatial structure and cohesion were addressed by converting a former mining railway track, running through the district and connecting it with the other parts of the Parkstad urban region, into an attractive "highway" for slow traffic. Another major intervention at the macro-level was the restructuring of the stream valleys running through the district, with nature development and the construction of walking and cycling lanes. Due to a lack of public funds and interest from market parties, the municipality decided to follow a very different approach at the micro-level of the individual vacant sites in the district. Contrary to the usual approach to area (re)development with masterplans including well-defined goals and time horizons of 20–30 years, an open-ended bottom-up process was started as part of the Gebrookerbos project (see also Louali et al., 2022; Matoga, 2022). In this project, an independent intermediary or "broker" was appointed to coach residents of Heerlen-Noord who had ideas about new purposes for vacant sites in their neighborhood. The only prerequisite was that an idea should fit within one of three broad themes: urban food production, nature, and green leisure and recreation. The broker supported the residents in realizing their ideas by bringing them in contact with the municipality and helping them to build a network and acquire subsidies, recruit volunteers, get media exposure, and, more generally, become self-supporting through "empowerment" workshops. At the municipality, 10 civil servants were tasked with the role of "account manager." These account managers were responsible for the internal handling and guiding of citizens' ideas through the municipal bureaucracy. Throughout the duration of Gebrookerbos (2014–2020), the broker collected more than 70 concrete ideas for repurposing vacant sites in Heerlen-Noord of which 32 were realized at the time of the interview, representing a total area of 35 ha.

3.1.2. Case History

The case of Schurenbergerpark started with a citizen's idea in 2014 and was one of the first initiatives to be realized. The site of about 3 ha, owned by the municipality, concerned former soccer fields that were abandoned when the local club had merged with a neighboring one in 2008. The new purpose for the area involved a "life-cycle forest," where trees could be planted and adopted by local residents to commemorate

life events, such as births, deaths, and anniversaries. The area was divided into three parts: a natural forest, a park with walking lanes, and an open area where large community events could be organized. The initiator was a former IT specialist, who had lost his job after a reorganization and since then had become active in volunteer work. With the help of the local neighborhood association and the broker, a foundation (Schurenbergerpark) was established with a small core group of active volunteers, and with the initiator and his wife forming the board. In a formal agreement, the municipality granted the foundation the right of use of the area for an initial period of 15 years. The municipality also supported the development of the "life-cycle forest" by helping out with the design, constructing walking lanes, and donating greenery. From the start, the initiative attracted much attention, including regular coverage in the local news and even once on national television. There was also much interest in adopting trees. By the time of the interview, 130 trees had been planted and adopted, with another 50 on the waiting list. In addition, 200 "paper trees" were planted by the municipality as part of a project to compensate for its paper consumption. Moreover, a large number of fruit trees was donated by another organization, the fruits of which could be picked for free by park visitors. The initiators are successful in the occasional recruitment of large numbers of volunteers, for example on tree-planting days, but it has turned out to be difficult to mobilize sufficient volunteers on a regular basis for the maintenance of the Schurenbergerpark. The municipality therefore formally agreed to continue regular mowing of the grassy parts of the area, but for maintenance of the trees (watering, pruning) no structural solution has been found yet, resulting in a heavy burden for the small core group of volunteers. As a consequence, they also lack the time and energy to elaborate new ideas for the further development of the social and ecological value of the Schurenbergerpark.

3.1.3. Outcomes

3.1.3.1. Economic Outcomes

The sites in Heerlen-Noord targeted in the Gebrookerbos project had become vacant as a consequence of a large-scale decrease in population, economic activity, and welfare. Given the lack of interest from market parties to redevelop these sites, the municipality turned to a bottom-up approach based on citizen initiatives. Logically, only a few of these initiatives were of an entrepreneurial nature and are generating enough income to be financially independent. The large majority of the ideas that are realized aim at the development of social and/or ecological values. An overall societal cost–benefit analysis of the Gebrookerbos initiatives conducted by Louali et al. (2022), showed that for the municipality the financial balance in terms of expenses (mainly time invested by municipal and project employees) and cost savings (mainly tasks conducted by citizen-volunteers) was negative. The Schurenbergerpark is no exception in this respect. The initiator indicated that maintenance and development of the park is very time-consuming for the volunteers, despite that part of the structural maintenance is still conducted by the municipality. Furthermore, the initiative is financially still 100% dependent on incidental external subsidies and donations, because there is a lack of interest from the wider community to organize events in the part of the park that can be hired at low cost for social activities, probably because the area lacks facilities such as toilets.

3.1.3.2. Social Outcomes

The wide interest in adopting trees in the Schurenbergerpark to commemorate life events demonstrates that it fulfils an important social need of the community. The park also promotes social interaction and cohesion

in the neighborhood and the wider district of Heerlen-Noord. It attracts many visitors each week, who also frequently make conversation with one another. On tree-planting days a large group of residents joins to work on a collective challenge. The core group of volunteers have considerably expanded their social network in the neighborhood, and for example nowadays often make conversation with other residents when taking a stroll. Finally, the core group also has become part of the Gebrookerbos network of citizen's initiatives in Heerlen-Noord.

3.1.3.3. Ecological Outcomes

The biodiversity of the area has greatly increased after the single-species soccer fields were allowed to develop into natural and herb-rich grassland. The planting of a large number and variety of indigenous trees and shrubs has further increased the species richness of the area and provided a habitat for many other species, such as butterflies and birds. The fruit trees, which are only partly harvested by park visitors, provide a rich source of food for even more species. Interestingly, the initiator indicated that he himself was not entirely happy with the ecologically motivated focus on indigenous tree species. He thought that the attractiveness of the Schurenbergerpark to visitors could be further enhanced by planting also exotic trees with more spectacular

Box 1. Relevant quotes from the interviews, illustrating the outcomes of Case 1.

Social Outcomes

KA2: "As initiators, our social contacts have increased by 1,000%. When we're in the park, we always have a chat with people. I'm not sure whether that applies also to others who just come for a stroll. But I guess it does, I think that there is more interaction between people now."

KA3: "We did not really expect this, but it turned out that most initiators of the various citizen's initiatives were interested in connecting with each other, sharing knowledge, and exchanging experiences."

Economic Outcomes

KA2: "One part of the park is an area for activities. The idea was that everyone could hire it for an event, and the revenues would cover the maintenance of the park. But that was a little too optimistic because there are no further facilities there. So that was not a success."

KA2: "At a given moment we discovered that maintaining an area of 3 ha with just volunteers is not possible. Or, let's say, it is in any case a big challenge. We had a lot of talks about this with the municipality, and now they come a few times a year to mow the grass."

Ecological Outcomes

KA2: "We have been advised by the municipality about the choice of tree species. The choice has been for indigenous species. The idea is: make sure that these indigenous species, and also the insects and the like that are associated with these trees, can develop in the park."

Governance Outcomes

KA1: "Perhaps the most important outcome was that the relationship between the municipality and the citizens has grown, that the mutual trust has grown. Each with their own role, but with trust and respect towards each other that both are contributing to the revitalization of the area."

KA4: "In the case of Schurenbergerpark, the broker has played a role there in accelerating certain processes. For example, one of the account managers was notified by the broker like, hey, can you get these departments going, where the request has been lying around already for so long now?"

colors and blossoms. Finally, another type of ecological value is created by the planting of a large number of trees that compensate in part for the resource use and carbon emissions of the municipality.

3.1.3.4. Governance Outcomes

Among the outcomes of the Gebrookerbos project from an urban governance perspective, two are often mentioned, both by the interviewees and in the literature (e.g., Matoga, 2022). The first concerns empowered networks of residents that run a large number of greening initiatives throughout Heerlen-Noord and a (restored) sense of pride, self-confidence, and ownership in the district. The second outcome concerns the insight that bottom-up development of urban areas is a real option. The interviewees stressed, however, that the success of this approach is critically dependent on a more equal relationship between the local government and the citizens and on the roles of the independent broker and open-minded, dedicated account managers at the municipality. The specific case of Schurenbergerpark is in line with these general findings. The initiator indicated that he felt taken seriously and supported by the municipality and that his self-confidence in dealing with authorities has strongly increased. For example, when he would meet an alderman in the streets nowadays he would greet and start a conversation, something which he previously would not have dared. Also the crucial help of the broker and the account manager at the municipality in realizing the initial idea was mentioned.

3.2. Case 2: Stadstuin

3.2.1. Context

The planning and development process for Heerlen-Centrum has followed more or less the traditional top-down approach, with the plans and visions being developed by urban planners and designers, followed by one or more rounds of public response to the presented plans, after which the (modified) plans are adopted by the city council. For the inner city district of Heerlen-Centrum, a development plan was published in 2016, called *Bidboek Urban Heerlen* (Gemeente Heerlen, 2016). The main problem identified and addressed in this plan is the large surplus of office and retail space in Heerlen-Centrum, resulting in long-term vacancy of many buildings, with negative impacts on social safety and attractiveness to visitors. The causes of this surplus are the economic and demographic decline described earlier, as well as the more recent shift towards online shopping. In response, the municipality aims to strengthen functions of the district other than office and retail, notably the residential function, as well as education (schools), sports and culture (swimming pool, events), and hospitality (hotels, restaurants, bars). This is to be achieved by demolishing or repurposing vacant buildings and concentrating retail in a smaller core area in the city center. For the neighborhood where the Stadstuin case is located, the Schinkelkwadrant, a more specific plan was presented in 2017, called “Central Park” (IBA Parkstad, 2017). This plan involved demolishing all long-term vacant office and retail buildings, except those with monumental status, and replacing these with residential buildings (including 50% social housing) in a green setting. The green space was originally mainly meant to make the area more visually attractive for residents and visitors and as a pleasant place for social interaction and activities. More recently, with the increasing need for urban climate adaptation, also the functions of water retention and shading are included in the plans.

3.2.2. Case History

In 2018, a large multi-story, long-term vacant office block and shopping center in the Schinkelkwadrant was demolished, after the municipality had acquired it for €4.2 million. This left a large, open area of about 2 ha in the inner city (called Schinkel-Zuid), while for the envisioned next step, residential buildings in a green setting, no approved design and construction plan was yet available. Residents living opposite the site feared that for years to come they would be confronted with this bare, vacant area. They therefore joined forces with a couple of interested citizens from the wider Parkstad area, elaborated their initial idea for an urban garden (*stadstuin*) together with some 40 other residents in a neighbourhood meeting, and then asked the municipality for permission to establish such an urban garden at the vacant site. The municipality granted them the temporary right of use in a formal agreement with the newly established association Stadstuin Heerlen. At the time of the interviews, the association had about 20 active members, a mix of "thinkers and doers" representing a variety of backgrounds, with a large social and professional network and excellent connections within the municipality. The Stadstuin actively used the area for three years (2019–2021), not only for urban gardening by its members, but also to promote education by involving schools, social interaction by placing benches and picnic tables, and playing, games, and sports by providing equipment (e.g., climbing trees, skating ramp, break dance floor, and soccer balls and nets). Stadstuin also offered the area for free to other parties for non-commercial activities. Especially during Heerlen's large, annual Cultura Nova festival, many cultural activities were organized in the Stadstuin.

In the second half of 2019, the first version of the detailed development plan for the site (Schinkel-Zuid) was published, which involved multi-story residential buildings including 158 homes. The publication of the plan was followed by a round of public response, in which 13 critical viewpoints were submitted, including one by Stadstuin. The criticism mostly concerned building height and density and the limited area reserved for green space (Gemeente Heerlen, 2020). Stadstuin made a plea to maintain the area as an urban garden with only minimal new buildings. In the first half of 2020, a second, revised version of the development plan was published, involving a strong reduction in the number of homes (98), lower building heights, and much more green space. In the round of public response that followed only a few critical viewpoints were submitted, and the design was approved by the city council (Gemeente Heerlen, 2020). All interviewees, including those of Stadstuin, were positive about the quality of the revised plan, while the chair of the association added: "If we would also have tried to stop the second version of the plan, then they probably would have reverted to the first, whereas the second is much better."

It turned out that there was a very large interest from buyers in the new housing development at Schinkel-Zuid, and as a consequence, construction activities could start already in mid-2022. This also meant the end of the Stadstuin at that site, but Stadstuin was allowed to move part of its (temporary) activities to an adjacent site (Promenade) until the construction of the new residential buildings was completed. In the final design for the green space of Schinkel-Zuid, indicated by the municipality as "preferred but not yet approved," part of the area is allocated to the Stadstuin (Buro Lubbers, 2022; Gemeente Heerlen, n.d.).

3.2.3. Outcomes

3.2.3.1. Economic Outcomes

By creating a pleasant, green environment, where one could stay and meet other people without the need for expensive consumption, the Stadstuin attracted people to the neighborhood and also made visitors linger longer in the area. One of the interviewees indicated that this made her decide to start a bookshop opposite the Stadstuin. She also started to develop ideas for a terrace in front of her shop to organize events and attract more potential customers. In return for creating a more pleasant atmosphere in the neighborhood, she helped Stadstuin with small jobs, such as taking care of the pieces of the large open-air chess game.

The insight that greening of public space in the city center is (also economically) more effective when it is not only visually attractive but also offers a non-commercial place to stay, relax, and meet other people was acknowledged by the external relations manager of the Schinkel-Zuid project. According to him, this would be taken into account in the final greening design for the area.

The municipality did not agree with the plea made by Stadstuin to replace the former, purely economic function of the area—offices and shops—with social and ecological functions, and not largely by a commercial housing project. According to the alderman, the municipality could not afford to grow a couple of vegetables at a cost of €4.2 million. The strong reduction in the number of homes in the final plan (98) as compared to the original plan (158) and the larger open green space was claimed by both the alderman and the project developer to be their own idea. Nevertheless, the plan was only adapted after Stadstuin and others expressed their critical views in the first round of public response. Hence, it is likely that the alderman and the project developer were at least to some extent inspired by the views and demonstrated success of Stadstuin.

3.2.3.2. Social Outcomes

During the period that Stadstuin used the area, it was effective in activating people in gardening, sports and play, and cultural events and in promoting social interaction. According to the chair of Stadstuin Heerlen, the area always quickly filled up with people, as soon as the weather allowed. Contrary to a park-like area, designed by architects and "passively consumed," Stadstuin actively involved citizens in the use and development of the area. A garden with fruits and vegetables is something that is never finished and continues to require active attention and collaboration. In the words of an active member of the association: "We grow much more than tomatoes, we grow togetherness." Also by leaving a large part of the area open to plans and activities by others, novel types of use could be discovered, such as urban sports.

The concept of an urban garden was quickly embraced by the municipality. Although it was repeatedly emphasized that the Stadstuin's current use of the area would only be temporary, the municipality offered Stadstuin to literally move along with the implementation of the Central Park plan, from site to site, and to "land" in the final greening design of the area. Moreover, the municipality asked Stadstuin to collaborate with them in the development of urban gardens in other parts of the city center.

Another new function included in the greening design for the area is room for kids' play and sports. According to the alderman and the project developer, this is to also attract families to come and live in the city center. However, it is likely that they have been inspired by the success of the Stadstuin in this respect.

Finally, the external relations manager of the Schinkel-Zuid project acknowledged the importance of a more open-ended, socially activating greening design, leaving space for ideas and initiatives of residents. According to him, the architects adopted this idea in the final greening design for the area.

3.2.3.3. Ecological Outcomes

For the urban gardening activities, containers with clean soil were used, as the quality of the soil of the site itself could not be guaranteed. Hence, by its gardening activities, the Stadstuin did not add much ecological value to the area. Yet, Stadstuin also offered space for a large indigenous wildflower garden as a habitat for butterflies. The provision of a sequence of temporary habitats can be an effective measure to promote biodiversity. However, this function was not integrated into the final greening design for the area, nor for other areas in the city center. Although the final design includes a range of ecological functions, such as green roofs, areas for rainwater storage and retention, and bird nesting boxes, these are not inspired by the Stadstuin but follow current policies on climate adaptation and nature-inclusive urban design.

3.2.3.4. Governance Outcomes

Contrary to the bottom-up approach in Heerlen-Noord, the municipality followed a classic top-down planning approach for Heerlen-Centrum. Nevertheless, the initiators of Stadstuin managed to convince the

Box 2. Relevant quotes from the interviews, illustrating the outcomes of Case 2.

Social Outcomes

KA 7: "There is always something to do here. When the weather is nice, we place the playing materials outside and then it is being used. Kids have discovered that they are allowed to run around here, and parents can just sit down here without the need to order a cup of coffee."

KA9: "If you have an outdoor area where kids can play, yes, that's by any means more attractive for a family to live than a stony square. So yes, the greening of the area is part of this. The area should become more attractive, also for families."

Economic Outcomes

KA5: "I think, before you have the right environment for shopping or living, before that is successful, first the public space should be attractive. Well, if I can contribute to that by just cleaning these public chess tables or taking care of the chess pieces, why not?"

KA10: "There's just a lot of interest in living in the city center. So there never really was a discussion about not rebuilding here anything at all. Yet, we kept always in the back of our heads that the area should be greener. Green is important, but it should not only be green."

Governance Outcomes

KA5: "What I see happening now is that the different parties talk to each other. What I also see is that one is not excluding another in advance. It even looks like they are listening to each other to achieve the desired result, that is, an improvement of this area."

KA6: "What happened is that we were invited to contribute to the development of plans for the wider area, and then they forgot to hear us about the redesign of the square! The municipality has admitted their mistake, and said, listen, next time you're invited to sit with us at the drawing table."

municipality to grant them an unplanned right of temporary use of the vacant area in the Schinkelkwadrant. The municipality also promised to involve them in the development of the greening designs for other parts of the Central Park planning area. Although Stadstuin was not always involved from the beginning, the relationship with the municipality became gradually more equal, and the municipality also sought their involvement in urban gardening plans in other parts of the city center. It is likely that the Stadstuin experience has made the municipality more aware of the need to always involve the residents in urban planning and development, also in Heerlen-Centrum. In the words of the external relations manager of the Schinkel-Zuid project: "As a municipality, we prefer to lay the groundwork, but after that, we should just let go a bit more."

4. Discussion

4.1. Key Findings Across the Cases

This section summarizes the key findings from the two cases in response to the four subquestions, as presented in Section 1.

4.1.1. Wider Urban Planning and Development Context

The typical situation of a shrinking city, with a large surplus of land and buildings and long-term vacancy and demolishing of buildings, offered in both cases literally abundant "room for experimentation" by citizens with alternative ways and types of use of this urban space. However, the position of the municipality in this respect differed greatly between the two cases. In the case of Schurenbergerpark, the municipality followed a strict bottom-up approach and invited the citizens to come up with ideas for new types of use of vacant sites with the prospect of long-term implementation, as there was no interest from market parties to develop these sites. In the case of Stadstuin, the municipality followed the traditional top-down approach, with the plan to leave the development of the site to market parties. Citizens came with their ideas uninvited and were granted only temporary use of the vacant site.

4.1.2. Cases as Degrowth Experiments

Both cases experimented with new ways and types of urban land use, but not from an explicit degrowth perspective. However, when comparing what was done, achieved, and learned in these cases, with the features of urban degrowth practices (Table 2), many similarities can be identified. In both cases, economic values are de-emphasized and management is done by not-for-profit citizen collectives (foundation, association). The focus in both cases was on the development of social values by addressing social needs, promoting social interaction, and opening up to a diversity of social groups. Although both cases concern greening initiatives, the creation of social value was more important than ecological value. Nevertheless, in both cases, there was explicit and successful attention to the promotion of biodiversity. Finally, in terms of urban governance, both cases are successful examples of the self-organization of citizens and more equal relations between citizens and the local government.

4.1.3. Outcomes, Barriers, and Enablers

Both cases were successful in achieving a wide range of outcomes but of a different kind. In the case of Schurenbergerpark, where the ideas for a different way and type of urban land use could be implemented for a more or less indefinite period, the economic, social, ecological, and governance outcomes are of a substantive nature. In contrast, due to the temporary character of Stadstuin, the outcomes here concern mostly lessons and insights and their integration into urban planning, design, and development of the city center. For Schurenbergerpark, the outcomes were greatly enabled by the bottom-up approach followed by the municipality and the lack of competing interests from market parties. However, the lack of sufficient volunteers in Heerlen-Noord willing to take care of regular maintenance tasks is currently a barrier to the further development of the Schurenbergerpark, and in the long-term, it could become even a threat to its continuation. For Stadstuin, important enablers of successful outcomes were the competencies and networks of the initiators and active members, and the openness on the side of the municipality to the insights generated by the Stadstuin "experiment." This openness is probably due to the need for the municipality to find alternatives to the conventional approach of urban development, in the context of urban shrinkage. Barriers to uptake of all the ideas that Stadstuin successfully experimented with were the tendency of the municipality to revert to a top-down approach throughout the process and the conviction of the municipality and others (project developer, local entrepreneur) that redevelopment of the site for housing is more beneficial for the flourishing of the city center than maintaining it as a large urban garden. Of course, also the fact that the municipality had invested €4.2 million in the site played a role here.

4.1.4. Lessons About Degrowth

The cases have demonstrated that urban degrowth practices are feasible. These practices are understood here as ways of urban planning and development characterized by citizen self-organization and more equal relations between citizens and governments, and concern types of urban land use that de-emphasize economic value creation in favor of social and ecological value creation. The extent to which social and ecological value creation can be prioritized and a bottom-up approach can be followed, depends mainly on the interest of market parties in competing, economic functions of urban land. The long-term feasibility of management of urban land by self-organized citizens as an alternative to market parties depends on the local availability of volunteers and their human and social capital.

4.2. Conclusion

In this study, we aimed to explore how suitable shrinking cities are as testing grounds for urban degrowth practices. To answer this question, we analyzed two cases, both urban greening initiatives, located in the shrinking urban region of Parkstad Limburg, in the Netherlands. The cases show that in shrinking cities with a large surplus of land and buildings and long-term vacancy and demolishing of buildings, there is often literally abundant "room" for citizens to experiment with alternative ways and types of use of urban space. There is also relatively much interest on the side of the local government in alternatives to the conventional approaches to urban planning and development. As both cases could be interpreted as "experiments with urban degrowth practices," despite not being framed that way, it can be concluded that shrinking cities offer ample opportunities for urban degrowth experiments. However, despite successful outcomes in both cases, shrinking cities do not by definition provide favorable conditions for large-scale and long-term

implementation of degrowth practices. In the case of Schurenbergerpark, long-term feasibility appears constrained by the local availability of volunteers and their human and social capital, whereas in the case of Stadstuin the extent to which the tested degrowth practices could be implemented was limited by the interest of market parties in a competing, economic function (development of a housing project).

4.3. Lessons and Limitations

The main lesson concerning urban degrowth practices that can be derived from the two cases is that their successful implementation critically relies on two conditions that in reality are commonly mutually exclusive. The first condition is a lack of interest from market parties in urban land use for economic purposes, as is the case in large parts of shrinking cities. The second condition is the availability of large numbers of volunteers with ample social and human capital, as is often the case in large, economically booming cities. As of now, the flow of this human capital from shrinking cities that are in demographic and economic decline to growing, bustling, and booming cities with strong competition for urban space, is much larger than the reverse flow from growing cities to shrinking cities that offer ample opportunity to experiment with and implement urban degrowth practices.

This study involves only two cases in one shrinking urban region. Therefore, caution must be exercised in generalizing the conclusions and lessons. However, by taking the cases from two contrasting contexts and, in that way, covering a wide range of conditions within shrinking cities, the conclusions and lessons seem relatively robust. Furthermore, the two case studies cover a relatively long period and, in the case of Schurenbergerpark, also a relatively large scale, considering that it was one out of many similar cases in the entire district of Heerlen-Noord. These larger time and spatial scales resulted in findings that otherwise could have been missed, such as the integration of insights from the Stadstuin in the final greening design for the area and the increasing difficulty in the case of Schurenbergerpark to recruit sufficient volunteers when there are many similar initiatives in an area. Finally, the conclusions and lessons are based on an understanding of the factors that underlie the different findings for the cases, which further contributes to their robustness.

4.4. Outlook

Even though the lessons learned from the two studied cases are not very positive concerning the feasibility of urban degrowth practices, the cases can be considered successful experiments, because they provided a better understanding of the conditions required for the implementation of these practices, also in growing cities. Given the current lack of empirical studies on urban degrowth practices, the opportunities provided by shrinking cities are interesting from a degrowth research perspective. However, as urban experiments are mostly opportunity-driven (Scholl & de Kraker, 2021a), a large research program with planned and targeted urban degrowth experiments in shrinking cities to inform and operationalize an urban degrowth agenda (sensu Kaika et al., 2023) will be difficult to realize. A more promising and recommended alternative is therefore to look for cases in shrinking cities that can be interpreted and analyzed as experiments with urban degrowth practices, as was done in this study. To identify relevant cases, the presented list of features of urban degrowth practices should be applied across its full range, as, for example, certainly not every greening initiative in a shrinking city can be understood as an urban degrowth practice (Akers et al., 2020; Safransky, 2014).

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Enabling Multiple Outcomes: Strategic Spatial Planning in a Shrinking City-Region

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Abstract

The population of Finland will start to decline in the near future, and most Finnish municipalities are already losing population. Can the tools used for land-use planning, which are historically designed to guide and control growth, be used to guide shrinking? The shrinking city-region of Kotka-Hamina has drafted a city-regional strategic master plan to manage the shrinking. The master plan and its documents are analyzed, and interviews are used to better understand how the plan is trying to achieve its objectives. The master plan is currently growth-oriented and used as a tool for place marketing. According to the interviews, growth is not essential to implement the plan. As a tool, it strives to show the potential of the city-region. The master plan guides future land use to denser areas and enables industry. Learning from this case study, strategic land-use planning can be seen as a feasible tool to manage shrinking, and the master plan hints at how that might be done, although it does need improvement. Since land-use planning has country-specific characteristics, the research findings may not be directly transferable to other planning systems. However, the findings may offer ideas on how planning tools can be adapted to similarly challenging conditions. The possibility of what strategic spatial planning has to offer in a shrinking context should be researched more to enable the development of planning tools that would be more usable in shrinking conditions.

Keywords

depopulation; Finland; municipal cooperation; Nordic states; scenario planning; shrinking cities

1. Introduction

Shrinking as a phenomenon has gained more interest in recent years. However, the subject has not gained much attention in Finland, where it is estimated that the national population will soon start to decline.

Internationally, a few studies have focused on how spatial planning tools work in a shrinking environment. The subject has not been studied as much as policy responses to (e.g., Heim LaFrombois et al., 2019; Özatağan & Eraydin, 2021) or causes and consequences of (e.g., Hartt, 2018; Wolff & Wiechmann, 2018) shrinking situations. However, it is often stated that planning is growth-oriented (Lehtinen, 2018; Rajaniemi, 2006) and that, in a shrinking situation, planning solutions are used to stop depopulation trends (Heim LaFrombois et al., 2019). This article aims to explore how strategic spatial planning (SSP) is used in a shrinking city-region in Finland within the statutory planning system and to discuss whether SSP might be better suited for shrinking areas than traditional land-use planning. Could SSP be more resilient and better suited to adapting to multiple outcomes if the first chosen vision turned out to be impossible to achieve?

We are interested in how statutory planning tools could work in the context of shrinking. These are the tools that are used to implement policies and strategies. If the national legal tools cannot support planning for shrinking, adapting to shrinking or degrowth is challenging. We see that the Kotka-Hamina city-regional strategic master plan (KHSMP) is interesting from at least three viewpoints. Firstly, the current Finnish planning system does not have a legal standing on SSP (Ekroos et al., 2018), but it was drafted to be legally binding. It is drafted according to the Finnish legal system, but it has, at the same time, strategic and non-strategic elements; it represents something that has been suggested in scientific literature. Second, KHSMP is a municipal-level land-use planning instrument that guides spatial development at the city-regional level. City-regional planning is not a planning level in the Finnish statutory planning system. Even though it was accepted by each of the municipalities of the city-region separately (through the municipalities' joint coordination of planning), it aims to solve problems at a city-regional level, which makes it an uncommon and rare planning solution in Finland. Lastly, we see it as a more open-ended tool, and it might be able to enable multiple outcomes, which is typically avoided in the Finnish planning system.

The setting for the drafting of the plan is uncommon, as the municipalities voluntarily work together, even though they are different in terms of size, population, and economic structure. Such differences might be reflected in their individual goals and cause political tensions. However, joint strategy work may create bonds between the municipalities and actors and, in a way, make them work together for a jointly beneficial future, with a shared understanding of mutual dependence, even if there are conflicting views and agendas (Albrechts & Balducci, 2013; Van den Broeck, 2013).

In the case of the Kotka-Hamina city-region, the municipalities are working together to adjust to the shrinking path they are facing. An analysis of the area is crucial to understand how the city-region is responding to shrinking. The analysis first examines how the city-region is experiencing spatial shrinking, and correlations are then made to how the strategic master plan responds to this phenomenon. Most studies (e.g., Haase et al., 2016; Hartt, 2018; Wolff & Wiechmann, 2018) on shrinking have focused on cities only, not on shrinking city-regions (e.g., Hoekveld, 2012; Hoekveld & Bontje, 2016).

This article has been divided into nine sections. After the introduction, the next three sections provide a theoretical overview of shrinking, SSP, and the Finnish planning system. The fifth section presents the methodology and data. This is then followed by an overview of the city-region. The study results are presented in the seventh section and followed by a discussion. Finally, an overview of the study and concluding thoughts are presented.

2. Shrinking and the Desire to Grow

The Nordic states are sparsely populated countries and thus differ from the larger shrinking cities discussion (Syssner, 2022). In addition to this, the topic is under-researched in the Nordic states (Syssner, 2016, 2022). For example, two-thirds of Finnish municipalities have fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, and most could be classified as rural towns, according to international research. Currently, Statistics Finland (2021b) predicts that Finland's population will start to decline in 2034. In more recent trends, comparing the population of Finland from 2015 to 2020, only 63 out of the 309 municipalities (LAU 2) grew (Statistics Finland, 2021a), and the national fertility rate in 2022 was 1.32, a level which has been decreasing yearly (Statistics Finland, 2023). Even though there has been some recent research on the shrinking topic in Finland, the amount conducted to date is insufficient for planners to know how to react. Shrinking has hardly been researched in the field of planning studies in Finland, except, for example, Kotilainen et al. (2015) and Rajaniemi (2006).

On the most general level, shrinking is usually discussed in Finland as an area losing population. However, research and reports on shrinking in Finland have identified variables such as population and demographic changes, employment, and housing or real-estate vacancy (Kahila et al., 2022; Kiviaho & Toivonen, 2022; Makkonen et al., 2022). Shrinking is a complex phenomenon that includes forces such as deindustrialization, out-migration, housing vacancy, lower population densities, lower birthrates, and brain drain, among numerous other things (Döringer et al., 2020; Hartt & Hackworth, 2020; Makkonen et al., 2022). The reasons, rate, and process behind shrinking are usually different in each location, even though shrinking as a phenomenon might appear similar (Großmann et al., 2013; Rink et al., 2010). Some studies show that economic difficulties and population losses are not always linked, even though these two are commonly thought to be (Hartt, 2019; Makkonen et al., 2022). As Meijer (2022) argues, shrinking is a collection of different changes and continues to question the need for the term shrinkage, as it is an umbrella term for these numerous changes.

Galster (2019) argues that shrinking is not the mirror image of growth, as processes differ in numerous ways. As a system, the process of shrinking has many variables and lags between these variables, which are connected in a feedback-driven way (Haase et al., 2016; Hartt, 2018; Hoekveld, 2012). The process can be influenced by outside factors, such as massive immigration or globalization (Hartt, 2018; Hoekveld, 2012; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012). As an example, Hoekveld and Bontje (2016) note that globalization usually affects the regional level, not the city level. Inside a region, individual cities have their own pattern of shrinking, which is connected to the regional shrinking pattern (Hoekveld, 2012, 2014). While sharing a larger regional problem, individual cities have local attributes that affect their shrinking patterns (Haase et al., 2016; Hoekveld, 2012).

Policy responses to shrinking vary; in many cases, the responses are growth-oriented (Hospers, 2014; Schatz, 2017), and often growth seems to be the only possible response to shrinking that cities see as viable (Knoop, 2014). As Syssner (2022) identifies, growth is a thing to be proud of, even after decades of shrinking. According to Makkonen et al. (2022), Finnish decision-makers tend to go for growth policies, and "relatively little is known about the acceptance of shrinkage in Finland" (Makkonen et al., 2022, p. 141). In general, two approaches to regaining growth can be identified: Cities either try to return to the previous growth pattern or find new growth patterns (Eraydin & Özatağan, 2021). Growth-oriented policies seem ineffective to combat shrinking (Knoop, 2014; Schatz, 2017). There is also the idea of degrowth, which Syssner (2022) identifies as being

linked to shrinking. Current planning practices are locked with growth (Lehtinen, 2018; Savini et al., 2022), and, in shrinking areas, this causes problems. The idea of a downscaled area, which could find new ways to live sustainably (Lehtinen, 2018; Xue, 2022), is, in our opinion, tied with the future of shrinking areas.

Then there is the problem of tools. Rajaniemi (2006) suggests that planning, as a system, can respond to population decline only by trying to gain growth. Growth is supported by trying to improve the economic conditions of the shrinking area. These growth-oriented responses might not be applicable because the root cause of shrinking might be hard to change. As Hoekveld and Bontje (2016, p. 283) theorize, "decline in recent years or decades can partly be explained by structural changes that took place many decades or even centuries ago."

3. Strategic Planning With Shrinkage

Galster (2019) argues that traditional planning tools, designed to leverage and guide growth, have a weaker power in a shrinking scenario. Accordingly, Rajaniemi (2006) observes that the Finnish planning system has been aimed at accommodating growth. SSP tools are often used in rapidly growing areas, but, in general, SSP is not used when faced with shrinking (Humer, 2018). In Novoshakhtinsk, Russia, strategic planning was used in a shrinking city that accepted shrinking (Batunova et al., 2020). However, other cases are difficult to find in the research literature, at least those reported in English.

Traditional institutional planning has a so-called project planning approach ("blueprint planning"), which assumes a predictable future outcome inscribed in the plan, and the implementation is then to be executed in detail based on this plan (Faludi, 2000; Van den Broeck, 2013). Because of shrinking's asymmetric nature, responses should be more open-ended. In terms of foresight, this could enable the ability to withstand unpredictability better (Minkkinen et al., 2019). In our view, SSP could be more suitable for this need. SSP might be better able to address contemporary challenges and future uncertainties. While in traditional land-use planning, the emphasis has been on comprehensiveness, SSP takes a selectively visionary approach to planning (Albrechts & Balducci, 2013; Van den Broeck, 2013). Traditional and formal planning is tailored for controlling or facilitating growth, whereas SSP could, because of its nature, be better accommodated to guide shrinkage (Humer, 2018).

Strategic planning focuses on change without trying to be comprehensive and solve everything (Albrechts & Balducci, 2013). Compared to traditional planning, strategic planning does not attempt to solve given environmental and land-use problems deterministically; rather, it aims to enable responsiveness to multiple futures while being visionary (Albrechts, 2004; Albrechts & Balducci, 2013; Faludi, 2000). This process often involves scenario planning, in which exploratory and normative scenarios are examined (Albrechts, 2005; Avin & Goodspeed, 2020). Strategic plans may maintain their responsiveness longer than traditional land-use plans, which need to be remade after a certain time if the plan's objective is not reached (Van den Broeck, 2013).

4. The Finnish Planning System

The Land Use and Building Act (LUBA) is the main legal entity that guides land-use planning in the Finnish planning system (Ministry of the Environment, 1999). The current planning system has four levels of planning:

The three lower levels are actual plans, and the highest level is the national land use guidelines. The highest level of plan, and in its detail, the most general of the plans, is the regional plan. It is drafted and accepted by the regional councils, which plan the regions (NUTS 3). Below the regional plan are the master plans. The final level is the detailed plans, which is the most elaborate level of the planning system. The master plans and detailed plans are drafted and accepted by the municipal councils and are legally binding. Municipal planning has a great deal of power in Finland, but this planning level must comply with regional and national goals. These municipal-level plans depict the desired future of the municipality within the borders of the municipality. According to LUBA, master plans can also be drafted and accepted so that they have no legal consequences. In this case, this would mean that a more detailed plan can deviate from the master plan (Ministry of the Environment, 1999).

The planning system works so that the more detailed plan supersedes the higher-level plans when ratified, but the higher-level plans guide the drafting of the more detailed plan. The higher-level plans convey their goals for the lower-level plans. All three plans consist of a plan map, with keys to the symbols and the written part of the plan's regulations (Ministry of the Environment, 1999). The map is accompanied by a plan report. LUBA does acknowledge a joint master plan drafted by multiple municipalities, which could be legally binding (Ministry of the Environment, 2014), but these are extremely rare. These joint master plans would operate as inter-municipal plans, making solutions in them more likely to be recognized by all of the municipalities within the area of the joint master plan.

Currently, LUBA has no legal standing in strategic planning, but some plans have strategic elements (Ekroos et al., 2018, p. 68). According to the Ministry of the Environment (2014), Finnish master plans are typically elaborate area reservation plans drafted with little room for interpretation and usually lose strategic elements during the planning process. At the same time, these plans aim to avoid confusion as guidelines for more detailed planning. Outside the formal legal planning system, some city-regions utilize informal city-regional plans, such as structural schemes, as strategic instruments (Mäntysalo et al., 2014). Mäntysalo et al. (2014) suggest that statutory land-use planning should use strategic elements together with the requirements of the legal system and non-strategic tools to make these plans work in the legal system while being strategic and non-strategic at the same time. Currently, we see that Finnish planning at the core is blueprint planning and is strategic when it is done outside the formal planning system, for example, structural schemes. Because these strategic plans are currently drafted outside the legal system, there are problems, for example, with participation, the legal position of the plan, and uncertainty for investors.

5. Methodology and Data

This case study examines KHSMP to understand how the master plan is used in the shrinking context. The master plan is studied, focusing on its main map, its accompanying report, and some of the report's annexes. To understand the historical background of the area, GIS data provided by the Finnish Environment Institute was used for analysis. The data is part of a spatial data system called the Monitoring System of Spatial Structure and Urban Form (Yhdyskuntarakenteen seurantajärjestelmä/YKR). The GIS data used is in a grid format (sized 250 × 250 m), composed of population and workplace data (Finnish Environmental Institute & Statistics Finland, 2019). The study covered time-sequenced GIS data with five-year intervals from 1990 to 2015. A five-year interval was chosen as it has been seen in other studies (e.g., Hoekveld, 2012; Wolff & Wiechmann, 2018) as a more reliable indicator of population change than a shorter time

sequence. Newer datasets were not used, as the master plan was assessed against the previous development leading to the master plan.

Furthermore, to understand the adaptability of the master plan, this study has utilized 19 semi-structured interviews with mayors, chairs of the municipal council or executive board, and planners involved in the drafting of the strategic master plan. In the Finnish legal planning system, reports and annexes do not detail the background and planning process. Because of this, it was necessary to conduct interviews. The 19 interviews were conducted and analyzed in teamwork during 2019. The interviews were audio only, conducted in Finnish, transcribed in Finnish, and later partly translated into English. From these interviews, a generalization was made for this study so that the interviewees' anonymity was guaranteed, as the number of people involved in the process was low. The generalization focused on the main ideas of the plan and its drafting.

The last stage of analysis was to evaluate the results against established knowledge in the research literature. This research aimed to evaluate new planning methods that might be viable in a shrinking situation. We will study the city-region's shrinking development in view of slow-burning structural change and theorize how SSP could work in a shrinking context.

6. The Case of Kotka-Hamina

The Kotka-Hamina city-region includes five municipalities: Pyhtää, Virolahti, Miehikkälä, Kotka, and Hamina, of which the two last are cities. This city-region, being part of the Kymenlaakso region, is situated in Southeastern Finland, facing the Gulf of Finland to the south. The European route E18 goes through the city-region, making it a part of a larger development corridor from St. Petersburg to Helsinki and Stockholm. The city-region has an urban structure spreading almost continuously from Siltakylä, Pyhtää, in the west, to Hamina, in the east. Outside this main, most populated area, there are the municipal centers of Pyhtää, Miehikkälä, and Virolahti, as well as rural villages. Virolahti has a special position with its border crossing to Russia at Vaalimaa.

The population of the entire Kymenlaakso region has been influenced by significant industrial change since the 1870s, linked to the wood and paper industry (Saarinen, 1992). From around 52,000 inhabitants in the 1870s, the population began to grow and reached its maximum around 100 years later at around 200,000 inhabitants (Saarinen, 1992, pp. 17–19). In 2010, the Kymenlaakso region had a birth rate of nearly 1.9, similar to Finland's average, but has since dropped to 1.23 in 2022, below Finland's average (Statistics Finland, 2023). The linkage between industry and population can be seen even in quite recent trends. The Kotka-Hamina city-region was declared as an abrupt structural change area from 2008 to 2011 by the Finnish government as a result of a paper mill closure and the risk of a pulp mill termination (Felin & Mella, 2013, pp. 10, 40–41). The city-region has long been experiencing change, which is in line with Hoekveld and Bontje's (2016) suggestion that its recent decline is being affected by structural changes that happened long ago.

The GIS data used in this study reveals that all five municipalities are experiencing population loss, and out of the five municipalities, three had fewer workplaces in 2015 than in 1990. The percentage and the rate of both differ from municipality to municipality (see Table 1). In general, the city-region has lost about the same amount of population as workplaces in absolute numbers, but the relative loss in percentage is different. More recent data does show that the area has continued to lose population and workplaces (Statistics Finland, 2021a).

Table 1. Change in population and jobs in the city-region.

		1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	1990–2015	
Kotka	Population	55,914	55,057	54,392	54,389	54,290	53,708	−2,206	−4%
	Workplaces	23,462	19,966	19,877	21,631	21,706	19,941	−3,521	−15%
Hamina	Population	22,304	22,108	21,682	21,807	21,248	20,661	−1,643	−7%
	Workplaces	8,066	6,860	7,437	7,175	6,867	6,068	−1,998	−25%
Pyhtää	Population	5,612	5,565	5,384	5,284	5,286	5,249	−363	−6%
	Workplaces	834	573	955	915	938	873	+39	+5%
Virolahti	Population	4,118	3,963	3,893	3,629	3,490	3,297	−821	−20%
	Workplaces	1,136	1,142	1,370	1,273	1,111	1,209	+73	+6%
Miehikkälä	Population	2,733	2,626	2,526	2,428	2,198	2,045	−688	−25%
	Workplaces	736	666	621	455	502	477	−259	−35%
City-region	Population	90,681	89,319	87,877	87,537	86,512	84,960	−5,721	−6%
	Workplaces	34,234	29,207	30,260	31,449	31,124	28,568	−5,666	−17%

Sources: Authors' work based on data from Finnish Environmental Institute and Statistics Finland (2019); Statistics Finland (2021a).

The GIS data shows that the study area has experienced shrinking in terms of population and workplaces, and the area is experiencing a demographic shift toward older age cohorts. It seems that shrinking is more widespread than growth, but when growth does occur, it is more geographically concentrated than shrinking (see Figure 1). The growth is located nearer to the existing cores of the municipalities and route E18. The area of habitation is about the same in 1990 and 2015, but the main difference is that the density has been decreasing. The city-region is also facing a change in work structure. Agriculture, forestry, and industry have lost a large share of workplaces, while the healthcare sector has gained workplaces. The municipalities in the city-region have different paths of shrinkage, which might be caused by historical differences. We see Kotka-Hamina city-region's shrinking process as a series of events, which has had shocks but is mainly a slow-burning event.

7. KHSMP

KHSMP was planned jointly by the municipalities of the city-region, with Cursor, the regional development company, owned by the five municipalities of the city-region. Cursor was also responsible for controlling the project. The project had local municipal funding and funding from the European Regional Development Fund. The actual plan was drafted by a consultant company called Ramboll. By the end of 2018, the preparation of KHSMP had entered the final stage of being processed for decision-making by each municipality separately regarding their territory. KHSMP is a more detailed version of an earlier development scheme, and it is legally binding, except for the municipality of Pyhtää. Unlike the other municipalities, Pyhtää had accepted KHSMP as a land-use plan that has no legal consequences (Municipality of Pyhtää, 2018, pp. 124–126), which means that its legal status differs from the rest of the plan, as it is not legally binding. The drafting of the plan included three different development models and different possible paths for alternative futures. We identify these development models as scenarios. The development models had different emphases on different economic aspects and income sources, also in spatial aspects. Of these three development models, a single solution was formed that was assessed as enabling the best possible future. None of the development models explored different population development paths, such as shrinking, as habitation was very lightly assessed in these models.

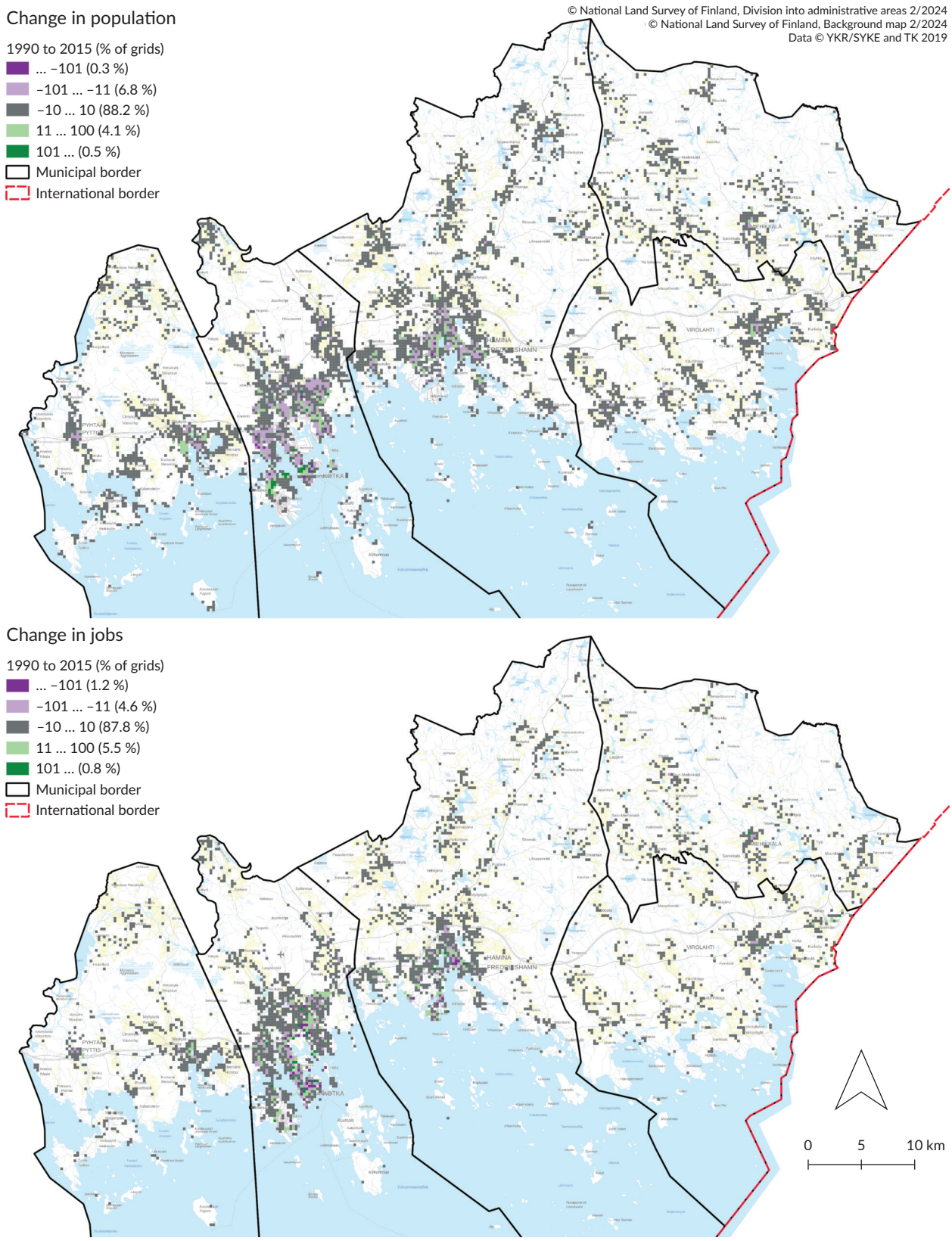

Figure 1. Change in population and jobs geographically.

The main goals of the plan are to convey the themes (integrated land use, housing, transport, services, and economic development), make the decisions of the earlier development scheme legally binding, answer the needs of industry (grey in Figure 2), prepare for population growth, develop habitation (different shades of brown in Figure 2), explore different options for the city structure, secure the ease of transportation, and to develop areas with a rural-like character. The drafting process also identified possible target groups of the city-region, regarding people and industry. The process produced an all-encompassing plan that was used as a basis for drafting the master plan. The resulting plan comprises two main documents: the master plan map (see Figure 2) and the report. There are eight annexes in the report, two of which are important regarding the role of the master plan as a tool for managing city-regional development: the implementation program and the overall plan. The implementation program sets the phasing and schedule for realizing the plan, and the overall plan elaborates the main plan map regarding both spatial specifications and overall thematic ideas. The implementation program can be updated if needed; its schedule is flexible, but the phasing of implementation is fixed. The overall plan also includes markings, which have informative and profiling functions without legal status.

7.1. Affecting the Trend

Because the city-region is suffering from population loss, as also acknowledged in the interviews, KHSMP is made to affect that trend. Tied to this, KHSMP is trying to affect the loss of workplaces in the area, which was identified to be caused by the downfall of the paper and wood industries. The plan aims to turn these trends towards growth to avoid, for example, service level deterioration.

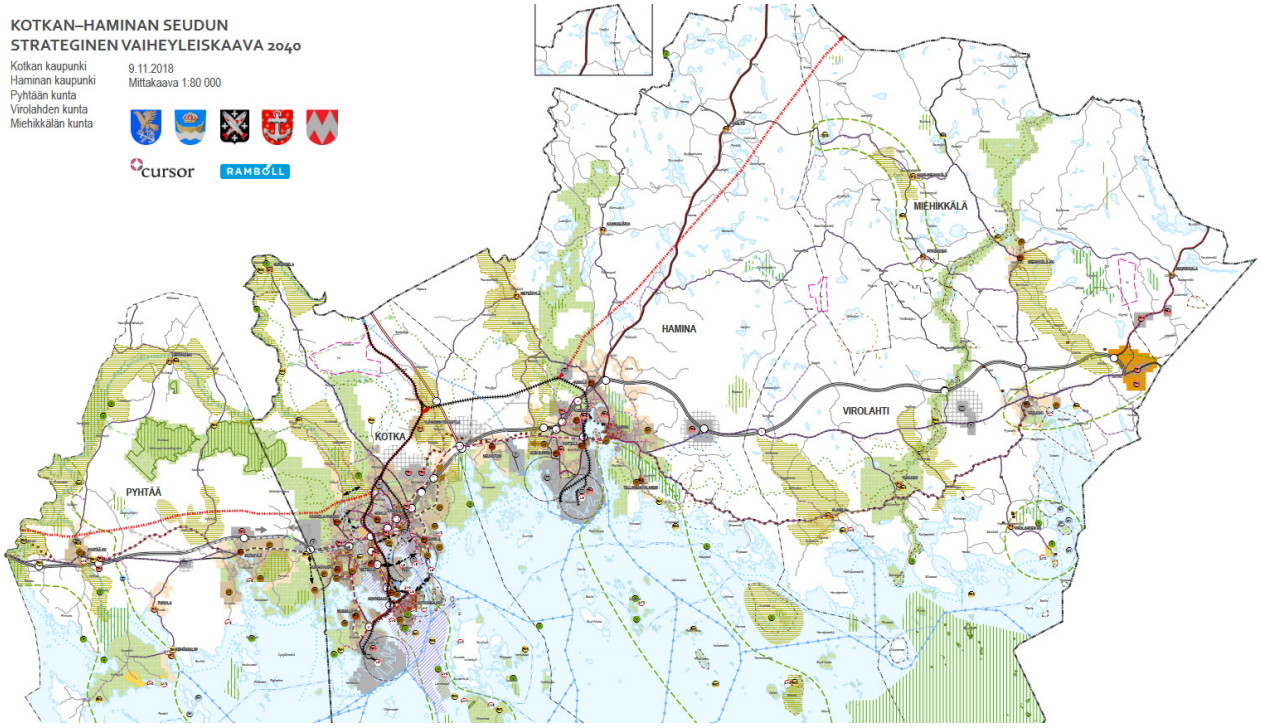

Figure 2. Caption of the master plan. Source: Cursor Oy (2018).

The growth orientation can be seen most easily in the goals of KHSMP: 25,000 new workplaces and around 35,000 new inhabitants by 2040. The number of workplaces should almost double, and the population should grow by almost 50%. Regarding industry development, the emphasis seems to be on the search for new options. It seems there has been no effort to regain workplaces lost in the paper and wood industry, agriculture, and forestry—This might be intentional. The goal seems to be to attract new sectors of the economy.

In the interviews, it became clear that KHSMP is a tool for marketing the city-region and that the plan is industry-oriented. The goal is to attract new businesses to the city-region. As a tool, it strives to show the potential of the city region as a well-connected location committed to inviting and incentivizing new operators into the area. KHSMP enables flexibility and quick adaptation to changed circumstances; the interviewees stated that KHSMP allows multiple locations to be offered to investors. KHSMP would also be used to create a specific profile for the entire city-region.

Historically, municipal mergers have not been possible, according to the interviewees, and because of this, there needed to be another way to promote and plan the city-region. Kouvola, located north of the city-region, has the size of a city-region because of a merger of six municipalities in 2009. The interviews revealed that Kouvola is seen to have shorter reaction times to development initiatives and to be able to guide its planning more easily than the Kotka-Hamina city-region. On the other hand, the interviewees also expressed that city-regional cooperation was good, with optimism for the future and pride in what has been done. KHSMP is seen as a solution to even the odds in challenging situations and a way to work together in unison to improve the city-region's future.

7.2. Relation With Other Levels of Planning and Cooperation

KHSMP is designed to work with and on top of current master plans. Legally, it is situated below the regional plan and is a municipal master plan, but it is designed to work more strategically on a city-regional scale. It will work in a municipality with other more detailed master plans to guide the municipal planning while connecting it to the city-regional vision.

KHSMP differs from a typical master plan, as it is drafted in cooperation with five municipalities. These municipalities have their own identities and roles in the city-region. The interviewees stated that the municipalities have become closer and each understands their strengths and weaknesses. Generally, a shared direction was seen as more beneficial than individual gains for each municipality. Together, the municipalities could enhance and affect the entire city-region better than individually. The cooperation enabled smaller municipalities to have a stronger voice in the city-region. The interviewees stated that it is important that each municipality accepts KHSMP separately, as this would be a statement of unity. It seems that the city-region understood that a gain for the city-region is a gain for all the municipalities and that municipal borders should not matter that much.

7.3. Solutions and Realization

The master plan, the overall plan, and the implementation program create an interesting combination, as these form the main body of the plan. The overall plan gives the planned areas certain profiles, while the

implementation program gives temporal programming and sequencing to the realization while aiming, at the same time, for flexibility. These documents are then linked to other strategies adopted by the city-region. KHSMP is depicted as a development platform in which the main structure is defined and, based on this outline, supports a variety of outcomes. According to the interviews, the city-region needs a new direction and initiative to generate change. As KHSMP is part of a larger set of actions, by itself, it is questionable whether KHSMP can affect the shrinking trend that the city-region is experiencing. The interviewees claimed that growth would result from other strategy measures and that the big picture had to be shared overall in the strategy work, and this caused KHSMP to be growth-oriented.

There is a strong connection between KHSMP and economic growth, which is seen as a response to the shrinking development. KHSMP is used to paint a picture of a possible future; the symbols used in the plan reflect certain visions and ideas for the area. This can be seen as a sort of marketing development opportunity or a vision of the future. As a tool, KHSMP makes it possible to react more quickly to potential initiatives by investors, as suitable locations can be offered based on the map. The enabling role of KHSMP is highlighted, which seems important for its realization, as it can support multiple outcomes.

As stated above, the implementation program is to be updated as needed, and it was made clear that KHSMP is designed to be monitored. Different municipal and city-regional initiatives and strategies will implement the plan, which will be reflected in the wider city-regional image of KHSMP. The implementation schedule is flexible; it has a predetermined phasing to be followed in more detailed planning. The phasing of implementation cannot be adapted to changed circumstances as easily as its scheduling; it needs to be separately updated. This is highlighted in the plan's report. The fixing of implementation phasing is stated to be necessary for the future that the city-region desires. It is argued to enable the development of the city-region to avoid fragmentation of urban structure and urban landscape, even if the development of population does not meet expectations. There is little room for readjustment, which might lock the path to the future to a single route.

KHSMP's report says that KHSMP will be implemented starting from the inner areas (red and dark brown in Figure 2), expanding outwards at a later stage. The interviews confirmed this and revealed that growth is not needed to implement the plan; rather, the plan shows the maximum positive vision of the future, which does not need to be achieved. Legally, KHSMP is subordinate to the regional plan and must take it into account. However, KHSMP is quite ambitious, as it tries to affect the regional plan. This can be seen, for example, in the delineation of the new eastern railway that differs in KHSMP from the one presented in the regional plan. This is a city-regional effort to influence regional and national decision-making in favor of the city-region. KHSMP, as an entity, tries to solve regional and city-regional problems on a higher level while guiding more detailed local planning toward a city-regional vision.

8. Discussion

KHSMP tries to move the planning of the area in a new direction. This is logical because of the historical context, and to move in a new direction, all the strategies should align with this view, including the land-use planning tool. KHSMP is currently directed towards growth, which we suspect is easier to accept politically in Finland than shrinking (see Makkonen et al., 2022). We see that the growth expectations come from other strategies, such as the development scheme, the economic development strategy, and local municipal

strategies. Furthermore, because these must be in line, this growth orientation is understandable, although possibly unrealistic. If these other strategies were changed, KHSMP could still work with these changed strategies and alternative futures. Currently, there is a mismatch between what is happening in the area and KHSMP. It seems that KHSMP is now oriented towards growth, countering shrinkage. However, according to the interviews, growth is not needed. If this is true, we would argue that a shrinking scenario within the drafting process might make the plan more adjustable to a future without growth.

KHSMP has the basic concept right in our view, but the plan should have included a shrinking scenario, which we see as crucial to enable multiple outcomes. With a wider view of possible futures, KHSMP could be adapted to different development situations, as suggested by Minkkinen et al. (2019). This kind of planning with a shrinking scenario might also be a step towards degrowth planning, as suggested by Xue (2022). We are left wondering whether the plan left out shrinking development as investors might have seen it as a lack of faith in the city-region's successful future.

Legally speaking, KHSMP is a master plan among other master plans, and LUBA does allow this sort of multilayered master planning. However, it is designed to work slightly above the normal municipal plans to convey the ideas of the city-region. The way that the plan links individual municipalities to a larger set of actions is what we see that planning in a shrinking environment could use. This aligns with Hoekveld's (2012, 2014) observations that the problems are individual to each municipality and shared on a larger city-regional level. The plan also works in Finland's statutory planning system. It is a legally binding plan that guides more detailed land use while still having strategic openness, as suggested by Mäntysalo et al. (2014). KHSMP is unfortunately not accepted as legally binding in Pyhtää, which might cause problems for the shared vision of the area. If it chooses to do so, Pyhtää can deviate from the shared vision without the rest of the municipalities having to adjust to it.

This sort of combinatory use of tools could work in a shrinking situation, which would argue against Rajaniemi's (2006) observation that the Finnish planning system can react only by trying to gain growth. The tools could also enable shrinking strategies as SSP is about enabling multiple futures (Albrechts, 2004; Albrechts & Balducci, 2013; Faludi, 2000). We see, as Humer (2018) suggests, that SSP has the potential for shrinking regions, especially when used with statutory planning. In the case of Finland, we do see a need for SSP to be conducted within the legal system of Finnish planning, not completely outside of it as an informal plan (Mäntysalo et al., 2014). The ideas and solutions of KHSMP seem to align with enabling multiple futures as KHSMP can adjust. It is, at the same time, both flexible and fixed. Certain solutions of KHSMP are partially locked. One of these is that the implementation program's current phasing is locked, but according to the interviews, it can be used to enable multiple different outcomes. The pace of realization is flexible, which is smart because it allows corrections in the speed of development, but the path is locked until the implementation program is updated. What hinders these outcomes most is the problem with the physical area reservations in the actual legally binding master plan map. These reservations cannot be changed after the plan is accepted, as LUBA directs toward clarity. The annexed overall plan is not legally binding, and it seems that it could be updated or completely ignored if needed. KHSMP seems to enable flexibility and rapid adaptation to situations while maintaining legal validity. In this light, it differs from what the Ministry of the Environment (2014) says about master plans losing their strategic elements during the planning process. We also see that it has more than just strategic elements (Ekroos et al., 2018) compared to typical Finnish plans.

Based on KHSMP, we suggest this sort of planning might work better in a shrinking environment than typical Finnish blueprint planning. If we then theorize that the city-region might be in a state that changes as time passes, we can theorize how SSP might work in these conditions. We see that the city-region's system is under constant change, which differs from growth patterns (Galster, 2019), and, because of this, a plan is needed to adapt to each of these situations. During the drafting, multiple possible futures are explored, which are then normalized into a single plan. These possible futures must also include typically unacceptable exploratory futures. There is the possibility that having a shrinking scenario with three growth-oriented scenarios could be politically more acceptable. This sort of plan then has the opportunity to support multiple outcomes as a starting point when the plan is accepted. Other related documents are also accepted during the plan's ratification, which act as bridges between the plan and broader strategic action. When there is a need to adapt to change, the broader strategic actions are changed, after which the plan's annexes are changed in response to these changes. The strategic plan's legally binding map does not have to be changed, which aligns with the Finnish planning system. The key is that the map can handle even large changes, but the annexes, which guide the plan's implementation, need to be flexible.

Regarding the idea of municipalities overly looking out for their own interests, KHSMP seems to differ from the view that Janssen-Jansen et al. (2012) give in the context of the Netherlands. It seems that, at least at some level, the municipalities have understood that the shrinking trajectory of the city-region is a joint challenge, and their solutions should not be inward-looking. Also, the observation that people commute within the city-region has fostered the municipalities' motivation to form a functional urban region together (Hoekveld, 2014).

9. Conclusions

The current study found that, as a tool, KHSMP allows and enables multiple outcomes. KHSMP also represents a new way to plan in the Finnish context. The plan is drafted jointly, and it is understood that working together will solve issues better. Because the municipalities in the city-region are different, the plan relies on the differences of the area to better attract parties with different needs. The municipalities work together for a shared future, which Albrechts and Balducci (2013) call for, and interestingly, this also has political backing. Because municipal mergers seem not to be an option in the city-region, this sort of planning is needed to reduce zero-sum competition for investment, workplaces, and residents between the municipalities. As a tool, KHSMP is suited for this kind of smaller-than-regional-size spatial planning.

We suggest that SSP might be more suitable as a planning tool than blueprint planning for shrinking areas facing a slow-burning change. SSP, by its nature, could be more suitable for reacting to an asymmetric shrinking process. It could allow for re-adjustment when the needs of the area change, and it could be more open to multiple futures. In this way, SSP could enable resilience and adjustments when needed. If used appropriately, it could make adapting to shrinking processes easier despite aiming for growth.

Further research is needed to investigate shrinking in the Nordic states, especially how they handle shrinking via spatial planning. We see that spatial planning tools suited for a shrinking context should be studied and developed. There is a need for spatial planning tools that can adapt as circumstances change and for plans with built-in resilience. This means that planning should explore multiple outcomes, including those that are plausible but do not correspond with the desired outcome. This case study has exemplified that, through SSP,

a city-region may accommodate multiple outcomes and thereby enable built-in resilience. However, in the case of the Kotka-Hamina city-region, we see that more diverse future scenarios should have been crafted. There ought to have been a scenario or scenarios addressing shrinking development to increase the plan's adaptability to a broader set of outcomes. The more recent Russian aggression in Ukraine and the resulting trade sanctions on Russia have brought dark clouds to growth expectations in the city-region, thus, in hindsight, underlining the relevance of this point.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Multiscalar Governance of Shrinkage in the Netherlands: Past, Present… Future?

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Abstract

The extent of shrinkage in the Netherlands is rather limited so far. Still, the Netherlands was one of the first European countries that introduced a national-level policy for regions facing structural population decline and shrinkage in 2009: the Population Decline Action Plan. This happened in response to local and regional policy initiatives and a lobby of local and regional governments, but also because the Minister of the Interior perceived shrinkage as a national policy challenge. This action plan was an attempt to arrange a multiscalar governance of shrinkage at national, regional, and local scales. However, this policy ended in 2019, and its last remaining element, a targeted subsidy for regions facing structural population decline, ended in 2022. This article will discuss (a) how and why the policy was introduced and how its governance was arranged, (b) how the policy changed between 2009 and 2022, (c) why it ended, (d) which new regional policies have been developed recently instead, and (e) what this could mean for the governance of shrinkage in the Netherlands.

Keywords

multiscalar governance; population decline; population policy; regional shrinkage; the Netherlands

1. Introduction

Shrinkage has claimed a prominent place on the research agenda of urban, rural, and regional studies scholars. While most research on shrinkage has been done in Europe, North America, and Japan, other parts of the world, like China, Australia, and Latin America, are also increasingly being studied. Looking at longer-term demographic and socio-economic development trends in the world, it is likely that shrinkage will become a global phenomenon in the decades to come (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2016).

For policy-makers and politicians, it is often difficult to accept shrinkage as a structural trend that requires other policies than the usual growth-oriented policies. Meanwhile, though, an increasing number of cities and regions are trying to adapt their policies to structural shrinkage. Such policies are mainly developed at the local or regional scale. The few exceptions where shrinkage is seen as a national policy concern include Germany and Japan (Mallach et al., 2017).

It is remarkable therefore that until recently, a national population decline policy existed in the Netherlands, a country where shrinkage has, so far, only affected a much smaller part of the country than in most other advanced capitalist countries (Ivanov, 2022). The Dutch population at the national level was still growing when this policy was introduced in 2009 and was still expected to grow for several decades. At the regional level, shrinkage was already acknowledged as a structural trend in the relatively peripheral regions at the country's borders, but also expected to spread across larger parts of the country. The Population Decline Action Plan was introduced in 2009 (BZK et al., 2009), followed by a second action plan in 2016 (BZK, 2016). The end of the second action plan in 2019 also meant the end of an explicit national population decline policy. New regional policies were introduced targeting all regions of the Netherlands. Population decline and shrinkage were still on the national policy agenda, but more implicitly and with much less priority than in 2009. This loss of urgency was related to changes in population development and changing policy agendas at both national and regional levels. Language also mattered: though shrinkage seemed to be accepted as a structural trend for some years, more recently national and regional policy-makers perceive it rather as too negative a policy concept.

In this article, we will reflect critically on how and why the Dutch national population decline policy was introduced and how its governance was arranged, how the policy changed between 2009 and 2022, why it ended, which new regional policies have been developed recently, and what this could mean for the governance of shrinkage in the Netherlands. Because frequent references are made to the regional and administrative geography of the Netherlands, a basic map of the Netherlands (Figure 1) is added below for the readers' orientation.

The policy documents analysed include the two action plans (2009 and 2016), letters from the responsible ministers to the parliament about these plans, reviews and evaluations of the plans and agreements to implement the plans at the regional level, lobby documents, research reports, and policy advice. Apart from analysing these policy documents, national and regional policy-makers involved in the action plans and/or more recent regional policies have been interviewed. The respondents included two former programme leaders of the action plans at the Ministry of Interior Affairs, a project coordinator at the knowledge platform and network organisation Platform31, and four policy-makers involved in the action plans at the provincial level in the provinces of Groningen, Limburg, and Zeeland. The interviews (some onsite, some online) lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour. After the interviews, some of the respondents also sent additional policy documents and/or other relevant texts like media articles to include in the analysis. Next to these respondents, additional information was collected from others involved in the action plans or related policies via mail exchanges and LinkedIn messages.

Because the action plans were set up as joint ventures of national, regional, and local governance actors, and because of the multiscalar nature of shrinkage (see also Section 2.2), it made sense to analyse these plans through a multiscalar governance lens. Both in the document analysis and in the interviews, the analysis focused on how governance was arranged within and between the governance layers, how tasks and

Figure 1. Map of the Netherlands and its provinces. Source: Kaarten en Atlassen (2024).

responsibilities were divided between the stakeholders at different governance levels, and how this changed over time. As will become clear from the analysis, this also involved creating new regional governance arrangements and instruments and/or strengthening existing ones to target shrinkage at the right scale level(s).

2. The Governance of Shrinkage

2.1. Shrinkage Governance Discourses

Stakeholders in the governance of shrinkage usually go through several stages of perceiving shrinkage and acting upon this (Derks et al., 2006; Elzerman & Bontje, 2015; Hospers, 2014). The first phase could be

called “ignoring” or “trivialising”: Shrinkage is not yet seen as a structural challenge, and planning remains mainly growth-oriented. Next, when shrinkage is perceived as a structural trend, it is not yet accepted, and planning response aims for a return to growth (“observation without acceptance” or “counteracting”). This may be followed by a phase in which shrinkage is finally accepted and planning is adapted to this situation. Hospers (2014) suggests that in a fourth phase, shrinkage could be utilised: perceiving shrinkage as a positive development and taking advantage of it. Though some cities and regions have indeed tried to do this, so far this perception of shrinkage has remained exceptional. Beunen et al. (2020) applied evolutionary governance theory in their comparative analysis of how Dutch regions responded to population decline. From this perspective, the evolution of policy responses to shrinkage is influenced by three types of dependencies: path-dependencies (legacies from the past, institutional arrangements, and discourses), inter-dependencies (between actions, decisions, actors, institutions, and relevant knowledge), and goal-dependencies (shared ideas about future development).

The language of shrinkage and its governance reflects how planners, policy-makers, and researchers struggle to accept shrinkage. Shrinkage originates from the German concept *schrumpfende Städte* (shrinking cities) and has been translated literally into several other languages, like *krimp* in Dutch (Cunningham Sabot & Ročak, 2022). For many, though, shrinkage is not perceived as a neutral concept, but as something negative to avoid or a problem to be solved. Alternative concepts with less negative connotations have therefore been introduced, like “legacy cities” in the US. Also, researchers accepting shrinkage as a neutral or positive concept frequently use other terms for the same process, like “vanishing cities,” “urban decline,” “post-industrial cities,” “a new phase of urban development,” “urban transformation,” “demographic decline,” and “demographic change” (Hospers, 2014). This conceptual confusion also includes researchers referring to shrinkage as “degrowth,” for example as the literal translation of the French *décroissance*. As should become clear in this thematic issue, though, degrowth should not be seen as a synonym for shrinkage.

So far, discourses about the governance of shrinkage are unfortunately hardly related to discourses about degrowth. Both debates problematise the mainstream growth paradigm in urban and regional planning. While “planning for shrinkage” has not yet managed to become a widely accepted alternative paradigm, and is sometimes even criticised as just another variation of the mainstream growth paradigm or “austerity urbanism” (Aalbers & Bernt, 2019; Hackworth, 2015), degrowth may become such an alternative paradigm. Instead of accepting shrinkage as a given and adapting planning to that situation, planning for degrowth rather calls for a fundamental change in how we plan and develop our cities, regions, and societies. Some shrinkage researchers have suggested that shrinking cities could serve as “labs” or “testing grounds” for sustainable urban development and degrowth (Haase et al., 2016; Hermans et al., 2021) or to establish a “culture of degrowth” (Reverda et al., 2018), and that adapting to shrinkage “resonates with thinking in degrowth and social-ecological sustainability” (Liu, 2022, p. 22).

2.2. Multiscalar Governance of Shrinkage

Debates about the governance of shrinkage are dominated by urban shrinkage. Urban studies scholars and urban planners, in particular, are prominently represented in this field of research. The first and most influential analyses of shrinkage were cases of de-industrialising cities and regions like Detroit, Liverpool, Leipzig, the US Rust Belt, and the German Ruhr Area. Most often, though, shrinkage takes place in less urbanised environments like small towns and rural areas. The results and policy recommendations of urban

shrinkage research are less applicable in less urbanised shrinkage contexts; and in urban shrinkage research, the local governance context is stressed most, while in less urbanised contexts the regional and national governance contexts are often at least as relevant. Fortunately, such contexts also get growing attention, related to concepts like peripheralisation and non-core regions (Leick & Lang, 2018).

Effective responses to shrinkage cannot be developed only at the local governance level. Processes and mechanisms causing shrinkage operate at scales varying from local to global, and the impact of shrinkage is often not just local but also regional. Shrinking cities and villages do not manage to solve their problems by themselves; they need support from governments and other stakeholders at regional and national scales. At the supranational scale in Europe, the EU is also a relevant governance partner with programmes like the Cohesion Policy (Haase et al., 2016). A shrinkage policy focusing on the regional level only would probably also not work well, because the impact of shrinkage may vary considerably within regions. The spatial and socio-economic inequalities related to shrinkage include not only inter-regional inequalities but also intra-regional inequalities (Hoekveld & Bontje, 2016; Randolph & Currid-Halkett, 2021). Sub-local governance scales like neighbourhoods in cities or villages within a municipality may also be relevant; often there is not just one regional scale, but several. Shrinkage is a multiscalar process requiring multiscalar governance.

The Population Decline Action Plans in the Netherlands could be seen as an attempt to establish a multiscalar governance of shrinkage. National, regional, and local governments, non-governmental organisations, and citizen initiatives were involved. In the governance of shrinkage debate, both multilevel governance and multiscalar governance are frequently used concepts that seem to be applied rather interchangeably. Though the concepts are indeed closely related to each other, Jonas (2015, p. 27) argues that scale is better able to capture political processes beyond formal hierarchies, acknowledging the emergence of "new scales of political organisation and governance, which do not map directly onto the corresponding levels of the state." Moreover, the action plans were set up and implemented in a political-economic context of rescaling, in which governance tasks were redistributed between governance layers and partly also to non-governmental actors (Kokx & van Kempen, 2010; Waterhout et al., 2013). Therefore, a multiscalar perspective fits better than a multilevel perspective in the analysis of the Dutch action plans.

3. How Shrinkage Became a National Policy Priority in the Netherlands

In the early 2000s, population projections indicated that population decline would become a structural trend in several Dutch regions. In some regions, population already started to decline in the 1980s or 1990s. Some local and provincial policies were already aware of the population decline in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but it was not yet seen as a structural phenomenon that needed more policy action (Beunen et al., 2020). Figure 2 shows municipal population change in 2003–2008, the years in which population decline was gradually more acknowledged as a structural trend, and 2008–2013, the years in which this increasingly led to national and regional policy action.

Limburg was the first Dutch province where *krimp* (shrinkage) was mentioned in research reports and policy documents. In 2004, it was mentioned in a report about Limburg's ageing population that had a considerable impact on policy debates. Even earlier, *krimp* had been referred to in a draft regional plan, but the provincial deputy of spatial planning personally deleted the word (interview former programme leader of demographic

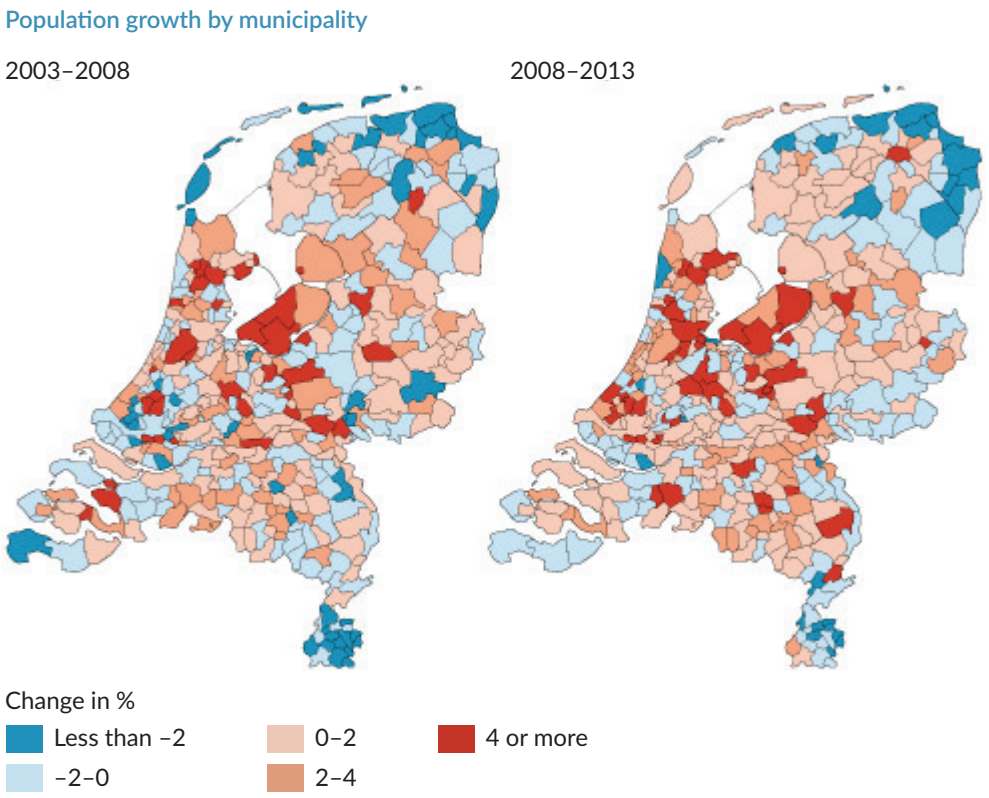

Figure 2. Population change in Dutch municipalities, 2003–2008 and 2008–2013. Source: CBS et al. (2014).

transition Province of Limburg, 10 October 2023). A breakthrough in the shrinkage debate was the report that Derks et al. (2006) wrote for two national policy advisory councils. In this report, Derks and colleagues made clear that population decline was already a structural trend in some regions, especially border regions, that this trend would spread across larger parts of the country, and that this would soon have a substantial impact on regional and national development. They considered the Dutch population projections unrealistic and were also critical of the dominant growth paradigm in spatial, societal, and economic development policies. According to Derks et al. (2006), the impacts of demographic change were hardly taken into account in national and regional policies. Even though the change from growth to decline still seemed some decades away in most of the country, related trends like ageing and a decreasing labour population were already starting to impact the economy and society, and this impact was expected to grow. Already in the 1990s, Wim Derks pointed at population decline as an emerging structural trend, but back then policy-makers did not accept that message yet (Gybels, 2016).

In response to this report, the regions already facing shrinkage and the provinces they were situated in started reconsidering existing policies and developing new policies. In the Province of Limburg, a "knowledge arena" meeting was organised in 2006, with Wim Derks as one of the keynote speakers. From then on, shrinkage and demographic transition were acknowledged as policy priorities in Limburg at the provincial level and in the most affected regions, in particular Parkstad Limburg. Parkstad is a polycentric city region in the southeast of Limburg. As a coal mining region, it urbanised rapidly in the 20th century, until the coal mines were closed between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s. Despite national government efforts to transform and revitalise the regional economy, the region has struggled socio-economically for several decades. Related to this, structural population decline started in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, the new

regional name Parkstad Limburg was introduced and a city-regional governance structure was set up (Beunen et al., 2020; Elzerman & Bontje, 2015; Hoekstra et al., 2020). The province, the Parkstad region, and local and regional policy advisors tried to frame shrinkage in positive terms. Shrinkage was referred to as a "chance"; Limburg was said to have a "demographic advantage"; and both Limburg and the Parkstad region saw themselves as "pioneers" in developing shrinkage policies. In the Province of Zeeland, the provincial executive taking office in 2007 considered a policy response to demographic changes one of their most important challenges. Though the population of Zeeland as a whole was still expected to remain stable until 2025, some regions were already experiencing structural population decline or would soon be faced with this trend. The agenda-setting policy document *Onverkende Paden* (*Unexplored Paths*) was the start of regional shrinkage policies in Zeeland (Provincie Zeeland, 2008; interview policy officers Province of Zeeland, 25 September 2023).

At the national level, shrinkage received increasing attention from research and policy advice institutions. The Spatial Planning Agency and its successor, the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL), published several reports and articles about shrinkage and its implications for spatial development and policy (van Dam et al., 2006, 2008; Verwest & van Dam, 2010; Verwest et al., 2008). In 2008, the Council for Public Governance (ROB) and the Council for Financial Relations (RFV) published influential policy advice concerning the financial and governance implications of population decline (ROB & RFV, 2008). In 2009, the demographic research institute NIDI dedicated its yearly report about population questions to the transition from growth to shrinkage (van Nimwegen & Heering, 2009).

In February 2009, the conference *De nieuwe groei heet krimp* ("The New Growth Is Shrinkage") was organised in Kerkrade (Latten & Musterd, 2009). The Minister of Housing, Neighbourhoods and Integration, Eberhard van der Laan, was invited to open the conference. He combined this with a work visit to the cities of Maastricht and Heerlen. In Heerlen, shrinkage was the main theme of this work visit. In a newspaper interview, he stated that he returned "quite depressed" from his visit to Heerlen, which he perceived as "a city in decay and decline" where a back-to-growth strategy would not work anymore. Being used to mainly thinking in terms of growth-oriented solutions, this opened his eyes to a new reality. Van der Laan saw shrinkage as a national concern and called for solidarity between growing and shrinking parts of the country (van der Laan, 2009). In the months following this conference and work visit, the Dutch parliament was informed about the planned interventions of the national government (van der Laan & Bijleveld, 2009). Former minister Hans Dijkstal and former mayor of Kerkrade and Enschede Jan Mans, the so-called *Topteam Krimp* ("top team shrinkage"), were asked to prepare policy advice for the region of Parkstad Limburg and the provinces of Groningen and Zeeland (Dijkstal & Mans, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). The *Topteam Krimp* helped to give shrinkage more urgency at national, provincial, and municipal policy levels (interview policy officer Province of Groningen, 6 October 2023). Meanwhile, a national policy agenda for the spatial implications of shrinkage was prepared (Renooy et al., 2009), and the knowledge network *Nationaal Netwerk Bevolkingsdaling* (National Network Population Decline) was founded. In June 2009, a policy conference was organised with representatives of the national government, provinces, municipalities, and relevant societal organisations. These were important stepping stones towards *Krimpen met Kwaliteit* ("shrinking with quality"), leading to the national Population Decline Action Plan (BZK et al., 2009).

4. First Population Decline Action Plan (2009–2015)

The first Population Decline Action Plan was a remarkable document in several respects. First, it was not a "top-down" national policy plan, but a joint product of national, regional, and local governments and several other relevant societal actors. It was acknowledged that structural population decline required a multiscalar collaborative strategy (Ivanov, 2022). Second, shrinkage was perceived as an irreversible process, so an explicit choice was made for an approach aimed at the consequences of shrinkage, instead of trying to get back to growth. Third, the plan combined short-term actions to tackle the most urgent issues and longer-term strategic actions. While the formal plan period was 2009–2015, several actions were intended to continue beyond 2015. Fourth, a programme of local experiments was included in the plan. The potential impact of structural population decline and shrinkage was not yet known sufficiently, so the local experiments were meant as a "learning by doing" programme in which lessons about the most effective policies could be learned. Examples included an innovative approach to reduce vacancies of retail space, establishing village development corporations and cooperatives, setting up a joint health centre to attract and retain general practitioners, housing corporations buying vacant dwellings from private owners unable or unwilling to invest in maintenance, and trying to make housing markets in border regions more attractive for residents from adjacent regions across the border. After the first round of experiments from 2010 until 2014, two more rounds of experiments followed until the programme ended in 2019. Some experiments failed, but most were successful, and some of them also led to follow-up actions (Platform31, 2013; Ubels et al., 2019; interview former coordinator experiments Platform31, 12 May 2023). Finally, the plan reminded the large cities that they had been helped by generous urban renewal programmes in the 1980s and 1990s. Now the regions facing population decline and socio-economic problems should be supported, and the large cities should show solidarity.

Three elements were highlighted as essential in the first action plan:

1. Timely awareness: Next to what was already discussed in the previous section, this included debates with the Dutch parliament, a documentary, information provision through several websites, and the founding of the knowledge institute NEIMED, with the ambition to become the national knowledge hub for the societal effects of shrinkage.
2. Clear task division and regional governance strength: This is where the multiscalar governance approach of the action plan becomes most apparent. National, provincial, and local governments each had their own roles to play but were also supposed to collaborate closely. Next to these formal governance layers, a new informal regional governance level in-between province and municipality was added, and non-governmental organisations were also actively involved in the implementation of the action plan. Municipalities were expected to develop locally specific policies, take the possible impacts of population decline on local finances and service provision into account, and actively involve their residents and make them aware of the consequences of population decline. The importance of regional governance strength was stressed. Because shrinkage in the Netherlands was affecting regions rather than single municipalities, the regional scale between province and municipality was considered the most appropriate scale to deal with the impact of population decline. Unfortunately, though, this scale is the weakest link in the Dutch governance system. Most Dutch regions do not have formal governments, so inter-municipal collaboration mainly has to be arranged voluntarily. The only shrinkage region that managed to establish a more formal regional governance arrangement was

Parkstad Limburg. Therefore, the role of the provinces to supervise and encourage regional collaboration in the shrinkage and anticipation areas was important, too. The national government saw its role mainly in setting the policy agenda, developing visions, increasing awareness, developing and exchanging knowledge, and adapting national policies, laws, rules, and financial instruments to the specific circumstances of regions facing structural population decline. Apart from these governmental actors, local and regional societal organisations like housing corporations, healthcare institutions, and school boards were also highlighted as important partners.

3. Effective funding system: The main topics highlighted here were the restructuring of the housing stock, maintaining and redesigning public space, and adapting public service provision like schools, healthcare, and social services to a changing population. In the Netherlands, the *Gemeentefonds* (Municipal Fund) is the main source of income for municipalities. Through this fund, the national government redistributes tax revenues to the municipalities. A set of about 60 characteristics determines how much money each municipality will get. This includes characteristics regarding population size and population composition, as well as the capacity of municipalities to generate their own income through local taxes and land development. As a pilot, a temporary extra characteristic was added to the Municipal Fund specifically for municipalities with structural population decline (former programme leader population decline BZK, personal communication, 20 October 2023). This enabled the national government to distribute about 11 million euros per year over municipalities with declining populations in the provinces of Groningen, Limburg, and Zeeland (Platform31, n.d.).

In the first action plan, three regions were designated as *krimpgebieden* (shrinkage areas): Parkstad Limburg, Northeast Groningen, and Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. However, more shrinking regions were expected in the coming years and the plan suggested that several regions should already start preparing for that future. In 2010, a second category of regions was therefore added to the policy: *anticipeergebieden* (anticipation areas). These regions should already start developing policies for expected population shrinkage well before that shrinkage would set in, to prevent unwanted effects like decreasing liveability, structural vacancy of housing and social infrastructure, and a reduction or loss of services (former programme leader population decline BZK, personal communication, 20 October 2023). Initially, 10 anticipation areas were designated. Later, because of regional lobbies and requests from Dutch parliament members and in response to evaluations of the first years of the first action plan, the total number of anticipation areas became 11 and the number of shrinkage areas was increased to nine (Figure 3). This also meant that the number of provinces involved in the action plan increased from three (Groningen, Limburg, Zeeland) to eight (adding Friesland, Drenthe, Gelderland, Noord-Holland, and Zuid-Holland).

In early 2010, the national government coalition fell. Soon afterwards, former Minister van der Laan became mayor of Amsterdam. He remained convinced that the largest cities of the Netherlands should show solidarity with regions facing structural shrinkage and initiated the programme *Amsterdam Verantwoordelijke Hoofdstad* ("Amsterdam Responsible Capital"). Amsterdam started a partnership with the municipalities of Delfzijl, Heerlen, and Sluis. The partnership consisted of, amongst others, study visits, masterclasses, exchanges of information and expertise, and cultural exchanges (Jansen & van der Wansem, 2017). This programme has continued under van der Laan's successor and still exists today (interview policy officer Province of Groningen, 6 October 2023; urban planner City of Amsterdam, personal communication, 17 October 2023).

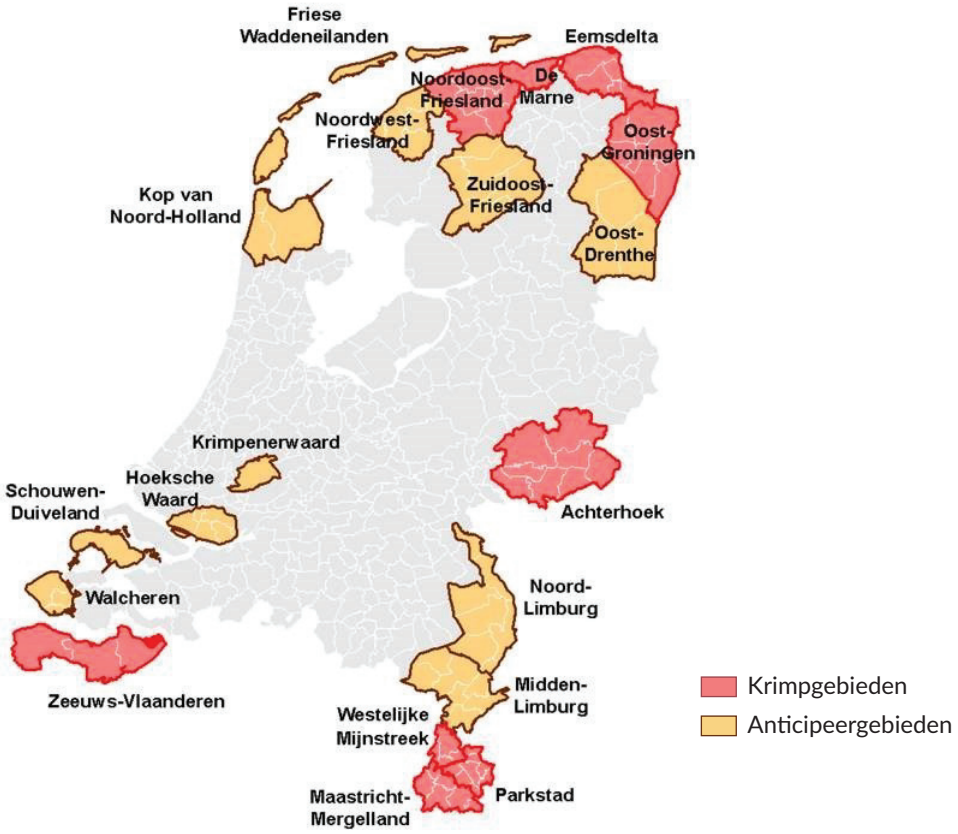

Figure 3. Shrinkage regions (*krimpgebieden*) and anticipation regions (*anticipeergebieden*) in the Netherlands. Source: BZK (2019a).

The action plan emerged and evolved in times of fundamental economic, societal, and political change, which impacted the plan's setup and implementation. The financial crisis of 2007–2009 gave a strong impetus to already ongoing trends of neoliberalisation and rescaling in the Dutch government and governance. The Dutch national government was radically reorganised by the right-wing coalition (VVD-CDA) taking office in 2010. A prominent victim of this reorganisation was the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment, which was abolished. Housing became part of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, and spatial planning and environmental policy went to the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment. This complicated the governance of the Action Plan: the plan was coordinated by the Ministry of Interior Affairs, but the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment and several other ministries were involved in the plan's implementation too. The Dutch national government retreated in several policy fields and decentralised tasks and responsibilities to provinces, local governments, and other regional governance arrangements; and non-governmental actors and organisations were expected to take more responsibility in societal development. A "participatory society" was encouraged in which citizens were supposed to care for each other and to be more self-reliant and less state-dependent (Ubels et al., 2019).

The action plan was a dynamic plan that was frequently evaluated and adapted. Based on the experiences, steps were taken to formalise responsibilities and make actions at each level of governance involved more concrete. In 2012, the national government signed agreements with the provinces of Groningen, Limburg, and Zeeland to maintain and strengthen liveability and a vital economic structure in the shrinkage areas (Public Result, 2015). These agreements emphasised the multiscalar governance of the action plan once

more. Shrinkage areas also differed in their approach and learned from each other. In De Achterhoek for example, a region at the border with Germany in the province of Gelderland, shrinkage started later than in East Groningen and Zuid Limburg. Therefore, De Achterhoek did not have to go through the entire process from denial to acceptance that the other two regions had to go through. It also chose another governance arrangement, in which a more diverse set of actors including citizen groups were involved, in line with the development towards a "participatory society" (Beunen et al., 2020).

5. Second Population Decline Action Plan (2015–2019)

The first action plan was meant to set the agenda and increase consciousness of shrinkage as a structural problem. The second action plan (BZK, 2016) focused on programming and implementation. Though this plan was finalised and published in 2016, its implementation already started in 2015. The first collaboration agreements between the national government and some of the regions were already confirmed in 2015; other regions followed in 2016. Though the list of nine shrinkage areas and 11 anticipation areas (see Figure 3) was maintained, three anticipation areas chose not to be actively involved in this second action plan.

Next to attention to financial support and maintaining liveability and amenities, the specific policy themes of this action plan were housing, space and mobility, education, health care, economic vitality, and the labour market. Experiments were also still part of the action package, with a last round of experiments taking place between 2016 and 2019. Two "expertise trajectories" were organised about making the housing stock future-proof and about the chances and challenges of energy transition and climate adaptation. Five professors were asked to form the *Wetenschappelijke Reflectiegroep Bevolkingsdaling* (Scientific Reflection Group Population Decline—WRB). This group wrote five individual essays with different perspectives on the impacts of population decline and a collective plea with recommendations for future national and regional policies (BZK, 2019b). Financially, a significant change was that the pilot with the temporary extra characteristic in the Municipal Fund ended in 2015. It was replaced by temporary "decentralisation subsidies" for municipalities facing structural population decline and the provinces they were situated in, about 11 million per year from 2016 until 2022 (Platform31, n.d.).

Meanwhile, the political and institutional context had changed considerably. Because of reorganisations at the national government level and the decentralisation of government tasks to provinces and municipalities, the team involved in population decline policies was reduced from about 30 people at the start of the first action plan to about six people during the second action plan. As several interview respondents made clear, this went along with a loss of urgency. In the First Action Plan, population decline was still considered an issue of national concern; when the second action plan was developed, it had mainly become a regional and local issue instead (Beunen et al., 2020). This also changed relationships and task divisions between national, provincial, and municipal governments (interview former programme leader of the Population Decline Action Plan, 27 September 2023). Compared to the first action plan, the second action plan's governance was less multiscalar, with less active involvement of the national government. The interview respondents from the provinces of Groningen, Limburg, and Zeeland recalled that contacts and meetings with national government policy officers became less frequent and that they could clearly notice that population decline and shrinkage lost priority. Moreover, at the provincial level, it was easier to agree on a common lobby and policy agenda with the three provinces involved at the start of the first action plan than with the eight provinces involved in the

later stages of the first and second action plan (interview policy officers Province of Zeeland, 25 September 2023). Parallel to this, as all interview respondents confirmed, the word *krimp* (shrinkage) gradually fell from grace at all government levels. This was partly because the population projections had changed; meanwhile, more and longer-lasting growth was expected at the national level and less dramatic and/or later decline in shrinking regions. One of the interview respondents stated that the projection makers "seemed to structurally overestimate the future problem." In the 1990s and early 2000s, critical academics like Wim Derks were rather stating the opposite: according to them, the projections were underestimating the pace and extent of demographic change. Beyond the degree of realism of the projections, though, the discourse and the language used in it had also changed gradually. Terms like "shrinkage" and "decline" seemed to have been accepted in the action plans and the shrinkage discourse. Apparently, though, this acceptance was short-lived. A clear moment when this acceptance disappeared is hard to find, it was rather a gradual process. One of the interview respondents also pointed at a difference in acceptance between *krimp* (shrinkage), which was seen as too negative and suggesting a spiral downwards, and more "neutral" terms like population decline and ageing.

6. The End of National Population Decline Policy?

Though the final evaluation of the second action plan was positive about the results achieved in the shrinking and anticipating areas, it was much less positive about the role of the national government. The regions involved were critical of the lack of attention to specific circumstances and differences between regions and the lack of an integral approach across ministerial and departmental borders. Still, the regions and provinces involved asked for lasting attention to the impact of population decline: leaving the dominance of growth thinking, continuing knowledge exchange and development, and supporting and improving regional collaboration. Instead of a following specific population decline policy, they would prefer an integrated policy for the Netherlands as a whole in which all regions are equally important (van Iersel, 2021). A few years earlier, the WRB arrived at similar conclusions, advocating "a coherent growth and shrinkage policy" that would benefit the country as a whole: "We challenge the national government to perceive shrinkage and growth in coherence, with specific attention for equal regional opportunities" (BZK, 2019b, p. 116). Next to this, however, the final evaluation of the second action plan also made clear that better policies for border regions would be needed (van Iersel, 2021).

Meanwhile, new regional and urban policy programmes and instruments were introduced, which could also be seen as new forms of multiscalar governance. This included a series of "deals": "Regio Deals" for regions, "City Deals" for large and medium-sized cities, and "Town Deals" for smaller cities. Any Dutch region (for the "Regio Deals"), city, or town (for the "City Deals" and "Town Deals") could submit a proposal in response to calls that the national government launched frequently. While each regional or local consortium should have had the same chance to be selected and funded, it was easier for growing and flourishing areas, especially for large city regions, than for stagnating or shrinking areas to submit a competitive proposal. Still, Parkstad Limburg and Achterhoek managed to apply successfully for a "Regio Deal." The population decline team of the national government deliberately supported these regions in preparing their proposals, so shrinkage and population decline would still claim the attention they deserved in regional policies (interview former programme leader of the Population Decline Action Plan, 27 September 2023). Though "Regio Deals" were welcomed as a new opportunity to encourage regional development, several interview respondents indicated that such deals are too incidental and short-term (usually a few years) to really help stagnating or shrinking regions; they would rather see longer-term structural policy programmes.

The recently launched policy programme *"Regio's aan de Grens"* ("Regions at the Border") could be seen as a partial replacement of the Population Decline Action Plans. One of the recommendations of the evaluations discussed above was to give more attention to the specific challenges of border regions. Most of the shrinkage areas and anticipation areas are situated at or close to the borders with Germany and Belgium. However, an interview respondent currently involved in this programme made clear that the programme also includes regions elsewhere facing comparable challenges (interview former programme leader of the Population Decline Action Plan, 13 September 2023). The focus of this programme was unclear to the interview respondents from Groningen, Limburg, and Zeeland. Though they appreciated the specific attention for border regions, they doubted whether this programme would be effective and how much priority it would get: There is not much funding available, the programme hardly connects to any other policies, and there is not much contact between the regions and the national government about this programme so far.

Some of the shrinkage and anticipation areas were impacted by crises and counterproductive policy responses beyond the population decline policies, making it more difficult to assess whether and to what extent the goals of the population decline policies were still realised. The most dramatic example of this is the impact of decades of gas extraction in the province of Groningen, resulting in a series of earthquakes causing substantial damage to many buildings. What caused even more damage though was the inability of the national government and the gas extracting companies to acknowledge the crisis and provide a proper programme of compensation and renovation to residents, also resulting in a growing distrust of government in the region. Verdoes and Boin (2021, p. 149) describe this as the "organised suppression of a creeping crisis." Less dramatic, but also with substantial impact on regional development, was the plan to move the barracks of the Netherlands Marine Corps to Vlissingen, Zeeland. In response to the protest of many marines against this move from the middle of the country to what they saw as a peripheral location, the national government decided to move these barracks elsewhere instead. To compensate Vlissingen and Zeeland for this missed opportunity, an investment programme of about 650 million euros should create about 1,000 jobs in, amongst others, a court, a prison, a healthcare centre, and knowledge institutions (interview policy officers Province of Zeeland, 25 September 2023).

7. Conclusions and Future Perspectives: Moving Towards New Regional Policies?

In the Netherlands, shrinkage has mainly affected less urbanised areas at the edges of the country. Pioneering researchers and policy advisors like Wim Derks had already foreseen in the 1990s that this could become a structural trend in some Dutch regions, but they did not manage to convince relevant stakeholders that urgent action was required. In 2006, a discussion meeting of the Province of Limburg and a report by Derks and his colleagues (Derks et al., 2006) put shrinkage on regional and national policy and research agendas. More reports, meetings, and debates followed, initially mainly in the regions most affected in Limburg, Groningen, and Zeeland. The next breakthrough moment was when Minister van der Laan made shrinkage a national policy concern in 2009. This resulted in the first Population Decline Action Plan (BZK et al., 2009). While this plan mainly served to set the agenda and increase consciousness, the second action plan (BZK, 2016) was supposed to take the next steps towards programming and implementation. The analysis made clear that both plans had only partly achieved their goals. This was partly due to the plans themselves and how they were implemented, but probably more influential was the changing political and societal context. Related to this, the extent to which these plans really managed to establish an effective

multiscalar governance of shrinkage also decreased over time. The first action plan initially had such multiscalar governance ambitions. Its point of departure was that shrinkage, though only affecting parts of the country, should be seen as a national concern and as a matter of solidarity between growing and declining regions. However, already during the implementation of this plan, national government involvement and commitment declined; and this process continued during the second action plan. Eventually, at all governance scales, shrinkage and population decline lost urgency because (so far) they did not become as structural as expected, but they will probably reclaim a more prominent place on the national policy agenda soon. According to the most recent regional population projections, 15% of Dutch municipalities are expected to face structural population decline in the next decades. Most of those municipalities are (again) at the edges of the country, especially in the north (provinces of Friesland, Groningen, and Drenthe) and the southeast (province of Limburg; see PBL & CBS, 2022; see also Figure 4). Both action plans suffered from national government reorganisations, resulting in a much smaller "shrinkage team" to coordinate the action plans and less intensive and frequent contacts between regions and national government. Still, the interview respondents and experts like the WRB agree that the regions most affected remain vulnerable and deserve more policy attention.

In the coming years, new regional policies may partly still rely on programmes and instruments already introduced in recent years, like the "Regio Deals." However, not only do the evaluations of the Population Decline Action Plans call for a different approach to regional development, but also several other analyses, policy advice, and debates in society and politics. One of the most recent pieces of influential policy advice was the report *Elke regio telt!* (*Every Region Counts!*). This report analysed regional differences and their

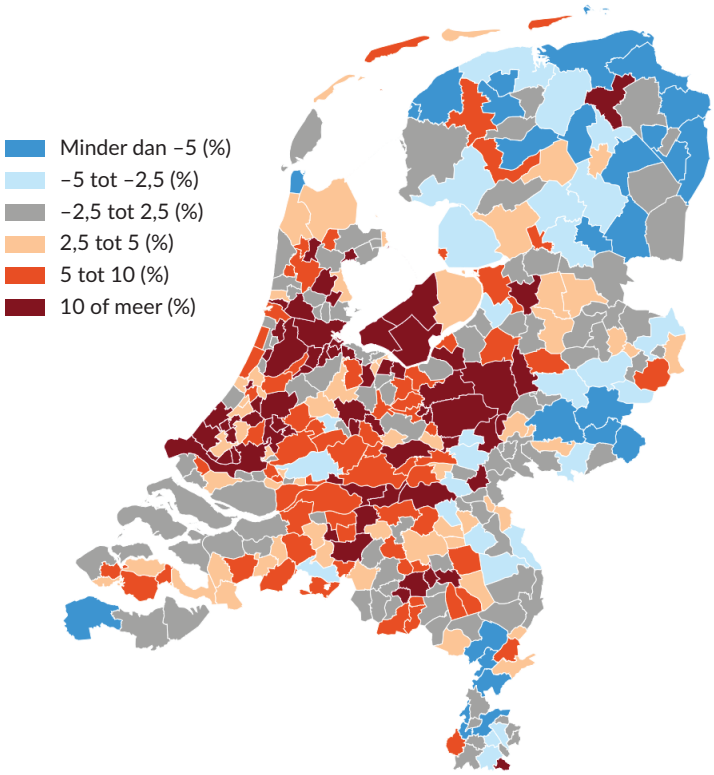

Figure 4. Projected population growth per municipality, 2021–2035. Notes: blue = decline; orange/red = growth; grey = stable or slight growth/decline. Source: PBL and CBS (2022).

causes, using 'broad prosperity' as the main indicator, and how people in those regions experience those differences. In this report, "broad prosperity" is defined as "comprising everything that people consider valuable: not only the spendable income, but also, for example, health, education, ecology and living environment, social connectedness, personal development and safety" (Rli et al., 2023, p. 6). The authors concluded that in the past decades, the Dutch national government has made wrong choices in its regional policy.

The assumption that increasing wealth and growth in the strongest regions is beneficial for the whole country appeared to be false: The disadvantaged regions remained as disadvantaged as they were or even became more disadvantaged. Several of the insights of this analysis reflected debates about perceived growing differences between a prosperous Randstad (the most urbanised part of the Netherlands, consisting of the metropolitan regions of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht) and the rest of the country, and a perceived growing distance between national government and regions in terms of misunderstanding regional problems, regions feeling "passed by," underinvestment, etc. The authors warned that such perceptions could also contribute to a decline in trust in the national government. Therefore, they recommended radical changes in regional policies: a fundamental reorientation of the regional policy and investment logic towards broad prosperity for the country as a whole; a shift from short-term incentives to long-term structural development programmes; and revitalising the relations between regions and national government (Rli et al., 2023). In March 2024, a letter from the Minister of Interior Affairs to the parliament announced the next steps towards a new regional policy logic in line with this advice (de Jonge, 2024).

In July 2023, the Dutch national government fell, only 1.5 years after it took office. In the national elections of November 2023, resulting in a landslide victory of the far-right populist party PVV and an impressive entry of the new centre-right party NSC, the Dutch political landscape changed radically. At the moment of finalising this article (May 2024), negotiations about a new governing coalition were still ongoing. Regardless of the new coalition governing the country, regional policies will probably change and broad prosperity will become a key priority in these policies. Contrasts in regional demographic development have a substantial impact on regional inequalities in broad prosperity, so the new regional policies will have to take such contrasts into account. Apart from this, we may also soon see a new national-level population policy related to the recently published report of the State Committee Demographic Developments 2050. This State Committee compared three demographic scenarios: fast growth, moderate growth, and stagnation or decline. It recommended moderate growth as the scenario offering the best prospects for broad prosperity in the coming decades (Staatscommissie Demografische Ontwikkelingen 2050, 2024).

Recent and future changes in Dutch regional policies and population policies are related to many other policy fields and their political and legal frameworks, which are fundamentally changing as well. From a spatial planning perspective, two recent changes should be highlighted here. First, since early 2022, the Netherlands has had a Minister of Housing and Spatial Planning again, after an absence of 12 years. However, this did not yet mean the return of the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment that was abolished in 2010. Will the new coalition also have such a minister again, and will this minister then get his or her own ministry? This could make a substantial difference in the governance, objectives, and instruments of future regional population policies. Second, after many years of delay, the *Omgevingswet* (Environment and Planning Act) was finally introduced in January 2024. This law has changed the objectives, instruments, and responsibilities in the Dutch planning system fundamentally. Anticipating this new legal

planning framework, national-level spatial planning has already returned with the National Environmental Vision NOVI (2020) and its further elaboration in the NOVEX programme (2022–2023). It is too early to estimate how this may impact future regional policies, but the new legal framework of the *Omgevingswet* may offer good opportunities to connect the policy and planning discourses about planning for shrinkage and planning for degrowth. It may also offer new opportunities to achieve a more effective and truly multiscalar governance of shrinkage in the Netherlands.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Joop de Kraker (Maastricht University / Open Universiteit) and Christian Scholl (Maastricht University).

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ARTICLE

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Post-Growth Ambitions and Growth-Based Realities in Sustainable Land-Use Planning

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Abstract

Governments have developed, agreed, and often embraced ambitious targets to meet sustainability and climate change demands. The use of land is foundational for long-term success and one of the most crucial resources where absolute limits of development become tangible. In Europe, success in stopping the expansion of settlement uses through building on natural or agricultural land remains limited in scope and speed. While planning instruments could be open for versatile uses, a pro-growth pathway continues at all planning scales. The premise of this article is that growth fixation is inscribed in planning instruments. We build on post-growth planning literature to conceptualize the relevance of (post-)growth for land-use planning. Two examples of planning instruments (modelling regional land use needs, density concepts) and their application in German case studies illustrate wherein growth has been locked and within which potentials for change lie. We investigate inscribed premises of the causal relation between population and household growth to land consumption that are leading to a divergence between the need for land and the provision of land. By doing so, we position post-growth planning to understand contemporary challenges in reducing the net consumption of land, and as a crucial body of thought that better accounts for the tangible limits of available land.

Keywords

land-need-modelling; land consumption; land-use planning; planning instruments; post-growth planning; sustainable land-use

1. Introduction

Sustainability along with the governance and planning of land uses are closely intertwined issues (Meyfroidt et al., 2022; Owens & Cowell, 2002; Weith et al., 2019). Policy ambitions have been set at international, national, regional, and local scales regarding sustainability and climate change, as well as their land-related implications. In the European context, statutory spatial planning within public administrations at multiple levels is the major institutional process by which land uses are organized and far-reaching changes can be realized. Countries like Germany have adopted a quantified net zero target for land consumption in their sustainability agenda (Akademie für Raumentwicklung in der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft, 2021; Bundesregierung, 2018; Eichhorn et al., 2024). This would be a key step towards a moderate post-growth scenario for land. The goal was further embedded within the implementation of the SDGs in Germany and is in line with the soil strategy of the European Union; the latter aims to reduce land consumption to net zero by 2050 (European Commission, 2021). This would mean moving to a closed-loop cycle/circular model of land use by which (in sum) no new land surfaces or greenfields are sealed by buildings or infrastructures. However, we observe a paradox in the application of planning instruments. At best, approaches achieve relative decoupling of growth from resource use, but conclusive signs of absolute decoupling are absent across contexts (Durrant et al., 2023; European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion, 2020; Næss et al., 2020). By planning instruments, we mean the mechanisms through which spatial planning connects policy to actual land-use changes, covering both statutory land-use plans themselves and the supporting tools that are used to develop and adopt these plans. In the following, the focus is on modelling regional land use needs and density concepts.

Post-growth approaches are recognized for their potential to reach ambitious climate change and sustainability targets more effectively (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2023; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022). To meet sustainability goals, governments and spatial planning aim to reduce net coverage of land (land consumption), conserve or restore natural areas, and focus on densification and redevelopment. However, while ambitions are often high and clear, actual realities are mixed: Open spaces, natural areas, and agricultural land are covered and sealed every day, causing major implications. Impacts include but are not limited to the loss of biodiversity, accelerating resource use for building and operating, endangered food production, and threats to public health (Meyfroidt et al., 2022; Owens & Cowell, 2002; zu Ermgassen et al., 2022). Post-growth debates emerge within spatial planning and criticize the continuing focus of theory, research, and practice on economic growth and on fostering growth through planning for new land uses (Durrant et al., 2023; Rydin, 2013; Savini et al., 2022). Advanced and wealthy economies could be testbeds in post-growth directions as they have sufficient resources, finances, and wealth to (re-)distribute while meeting the needs of their population sufficiently (Dixson-Decleve et al., 2022). However, moving into the European context, evidence indicates growing demands for new land and resources for fast-growing metropolitan areas, and even more so for remote and shrinking cities and regions (Grundel & Magnusson, 2023). What and where has this gone wrong? Through the various levels of government and scales of planning, post-growth goals seem to trickle down as growth-oriented realities. We see this because of an often-unquestioned growth bias in spatial planning that is institutionalized at all scales of land-use planning and affects how instruments are used. Unchecked bias driving action in terms of the neo-liberalization, financialization, and commodification of land, it is no wonder that growth critiques highlight the potential divergence between the societal needs for land and the market demand, which leads to a diminishing role of welfare states and in particular state and regional planning (Galland, 2012; Janssen-Jansen et al., 2012).

To shed light on this paradox between high and outspoken sustainability ambitions and actual realities in the application of instruments in land-use planning, we ask one major question: How is growth an imminent part of instruments in land-use planning? We deliberately choose a context-specific example to fill a gap in a more fine-grained understanding of post-growth critiques and potentials in spatial planning. While this reduces the immediate generalizability to other contexts, our aim is to leverage power and understanding of particular cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Academically, we contribute to understanding why spatial planning continues a pro-growth pathway, though ambitious political targets and tangible resource limits are clear. Practically, this understanding could help build anchoring points for integrating post-growth into spatial planning. This is made possible by identifying points where earlier decisions remained unquestioned (path dependencies), where times and delays of changes play a role, or where growth dependencies are either invisible or deeply nestled in sophisticated planning instruments. We use the term post-growth because it opens the search for new roles and practices within spatial planning, while acknowledging the overlapping critiques and directions with degrowth (Durrant et al., 2023). Our scalar point of entry is through spatial planning above the local level (*Raumordnung*) in the German planning system with a focus on statutory plans. We also draw on related instruments and methods to grasp points that show why successes in reaching the net zero goal remain mediocre, at best.

In the following sections, we first outline the relation between land-use planning and policies for sustainability, then shed light on the bias towards growth in instruments of land-use planning. Subsequently, we analyze the state, regional, and local levels for the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia to understand the sequences of steps from policy ambitions to implemented realities. Afterwards, we reflect on the extent of challenges within the instruments themselves. Lastly, we reflect on the potential towards post-growth planning for achieving sustainability goals more effectively.

2. Sustainability Policies, Land-Use Planning, and Growth Bias

Land and sustainability are strongly connected. As a crucial factor in sustainability strategies globally, land—the use and the planning thereof—is pivotal to the successful implementation of sustainability goals (Owens & Cowell, 2002). Building on land or sealing land reduces available future options, can lead to path dependencies and lock-in situations, and implies challenges in relation to ownership, governance, and the instruments by which we deal with the use and transformation of land (Meyfroidt et al., 2022). In the German context, policy goals for land-use planning have incorporated sustainability since the 1990s. Formal articulations for sustainable development are through planning laws at the Federal level for state and regional authorities (*Raumordnungsgesetz*) as well as the local level (*Baugesetzbuch*) in 1998.

The Federal Climate Adaptation Strategy of 2008 quantified the goal of limiting land consumption to a maximum net value of 30 ha per day until 2020 with a long-term prospect of reducing to net zero. This target is also set and updated within national policies for the implementation of the SDGs as well as monitoring thereof until 2030; net zero is envisioned for 2050 (Bundesregierung, 2018). A fast-growing landscape of (applied) research on reducing net land-use includes evaluations showing Germany as a frontrunner in science and practice debates, but much less effective in actual implementation (Weith et al., 2019). In 2021, the daily number was still at 58 ha. Reduction after 2008 was attributed to the aftermath of the financial crisis. Watered-down targets of less binding guidelines or recommendations at lower scales of

spatial planning, such as debates around the State Development Plan in North Rhine-Westphalia in 2013, were of little help (Lamker et al., 2014).

Planning policies internationally have fostered densification and infill development (Næss et al., 2020). In Germany, and arguably beyond, they remain conflictual with regard to socio-ecological goals like preventing urban heat islands as a climate adaptation measure, or improving access to small-scale green open spaces, urban gardens, and playgrounds to support social cohesion. Existing studies focus on single levels of governmental decision-making and point to the relevance of the local level as the level where decisions about land uses are put into practice in contexts like Germany (overview in Eichhorn et al., 2024). However, we argue for the engaged interplay of all strata within a multi-level governance setting and, following the subsidiary principle in German law, overarching frames that relate to local decisions. Recent developments around climate change and the global climate crisis see faster and more fundamental needs for policy changes, culminating in the Federal Climate Law in 2019 and far-reaching legal and constitutional implications (Krämer-Hoppe, 2021). The responsibility of climate change actions in Germany extends towards other parts of the world by shifting problems and externalizing costs to the Global South (Akademie für Raumentwicklung in der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft, 2021), as well as limiting the freedom of future generations (Krämer-Hoppe, 2021). Questions around the foundations of democracy and justice open the scope for perceiving sustainability beyond balancing three equal dimensions of social, environmental, and economic concerns.

Globally, cities and regions trespass on limits for land conversion; these incursions, now appropriately protected spaces, incite conflicts between climate change, biodiversity, and economic development, and provoke contested debates (Meyfroidt et al., 2022; Reese, 2023). Post-growth emphasizes planetary boundaries and the limits we are already transgressing with economic justifications and related resource overuses (Lange et al., 2021; Savini, 2023). We will not delve further into these directions but recognize how contemporary debates in sustainability and post-growth discourses link deeply with (global) social justice, democracy, and even human survival (Dixson-Decleve et al., 2022; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2022; Lange et al., 2021; Savini et al., 2022). We also acknowledge academic discussions about deeper structural constraints rooted in capitalism or neo-liberal ideology (Barry, 2020) and the search for alternatives beyond a capitalist market economy in spatial planning (Savini et al., 2022) and geography (Lange et al., 2021). The first years after the Covid-19 pandemic show that physical development, especially at the local scale, is not as much a question of money, but equally of available resources, materials, and qualified workers afforded through the scaffolding of such macro concepts.

Post-growth perspectives criticize spatial planning from two directions. First, they address structural constraints connected to the economic system (Barry, 2020). Most fundamentally, this regards how capitalism and economic growth inevitably lead to resource depletion by means of immediate spatial interventions, but also through consumption-driven demands with global and distant reaches (Bues & Lucht, 2023). This position closely relates to the fields of ecological economics (zu Ermgassen et al., 2022) and political ecology with climate and environmental justice (Porter et al., 2020). Second, continuing from sustainability debates, post-growth perspectives challenge roles and practices within spatial planning while searching for alternatives from within by removing the need and desire for growth from the planning equation. This position has also been named planning "beyond growth" (Rydin, 2013), or a precautionary post-growth position that already finds wider agreement among German environmental specialists (Lehmann et al., 2022).

Moreover, post-growth positions relate to established debates about shrinking cities or regions in Europe and beyond (Wiechmann & Pallagst, 2012). Even though this has led to the development of new planning ideas and the adjustment of how to deal with changing empirical realities, research shows that shrinking cities continue with or even foster their dedication to growth (Grundel & Magnusson, 2023). An empirical reality of a declining population number is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for post-growth planning. Struggles for a new viable planning idea persist in growing and non-growing regions; both regularly continue to rely on growth or set growth as a goal. Durrant et al. (2023) argue that shrinking cities and growing cities might both be testbeds for post-growth. Whether in relation to population growth (as a measure against shrinkage) or economic growth (as a measure against loss of welfare), public policies to foster growth are regularly coupled to find and develop new land uses for business, industry, and housing. We argue that this is an inherent growth bias in contemporary spatial planning, in line with what Leick and Lang (2018, p. 223) describe for European non-core regions as an "ideological fix on growth-based thinking." So, it seems that while acceptance of post-growth grows among public, political, and environmental experts (Lehmann et al., 2022; Paulson & Büchs, 2022), its effect in the form of reduced land consumption is yet to be widely internalized and exercised.

3. Methodological Approach

To understand how a growth bias is immanent in spatial planning, we choose the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia as an explanatory context for our contribution. It is the most populated of the 16 German states (*Bundesländer*) and was recently the point of attention for research linking sustainable development and achieving net zero targets for land consumption (Eichhorn et al., 2024; Lamker & Terfrüchte, 2018). It is state-wide coherent from state to local scales in the type of steering settlement development across sub-regions (Pehlke, 2023). Furthermore, the state has an established history of engaging with the reduction of settlement-driven land use through both strategic and state-level goals (Lamker et al., 2014), along with supporting tools and methods to calculate needs (Vallée et al., 2012). We position post-growth planning twofold: first, to understand contemporary problems to reduce the net consumption of land within spatial planning, and second, as a crucial body of thought to orient the use of planning instruments so that tangible limits of available land are more effectively accounted for. We do not aim to downplay the contemporary European housing crisis nor the need to transform energy or production/consumption systems with related spatial implications. Rather, we aim to engage with the underlying assumption that all of this is only possible with an expansive appetite for land and uses thereof, while the basic needs of many are still not met.

In our policy analysis, we look at current statutory land-use plans at the state, regional, and local governmental levels in North Rhine-Westphalia and tools that regularly support their development and adoption (planning instruments). First, we examine the State Development Plan (*Landesentwicklungsplan*) in the version that was adopted in 2017. Complementing this, we included all amendments and changes that have been made up to and including October 2023. Two major amendments relate to the amount of land use in 2019 and 2023. Second, we assess the six currently adopted regional plans in the state area. Furthermore, drafts of not-yet adopted plans for four regions were included in our analyses after they were available in October 2023. Third, we use statistical data from respective public authorities at the federal and state level (especially from www.regionalstatistik.de) for the development of land use, employment, population, and private households since the adoption of the first net zero goal in 2008. The authors have further gained insights during the past 15 years in research projects, consultancy work, and working groups, on questions of land-use planning, evidence-based planning, and sustainable development.

4. Policy Analysis: From Ambitions to Instrumental Reality

Since the sustainability strategy of 2008, aims to absolutely decouple land use from population growth have not been achieved and lack teeth as the split is even increasing again (see Figure 1). This is worrying from an environmental perspective. Even more worrying is that costs for maintaining private and public buildings and spaces will have to be financed by fewer people—an experience already shared in other countries (Grundel & Magnusson, 2023). Studies for North Rhine-Westphalia show that the largest increase in net land-use is in rural areas with lower growth rates of economy or population. This may not be a growth fetish but an indication that public administrations still lack alternative ideas or retain flaws in how they make use of existing planning instruments. We argue that this is also grounded in the divergence of projections between higher and lower levels of government, planning approaches with safety buffers at each scale, as well as political contexts and competition. We follow a step-by-step approach in which we analyze independently, and in their connections, the state level, the regional level, and to a minor degree the local level.

The absolute annual utilization of new settlement areas in Germany has decreased significantly. However, between 2008 and 2022, the population has grown by 0.2 % per year and the number of households by 0.25 % due to decreasing household sizes. At the same time, the number of housing units outperforms this. It has increased by 0.57 % per year and the number of residential areas by 1.35 % (own calculations, based on Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, 2023). As Figure 1 shows for the period of 2008/2009 to 2021 in North Rhine-Westphalia, the annual change of residential areas almost consistently exceeds the population development and is always positive. The population data for 2011 (adjusted from 2011 because of the national census) and the area data for 2016 (new categories from 2016) are not shown here. The year 2015 shows a peaking inflow of migrants. While land development might have become more efficient in each

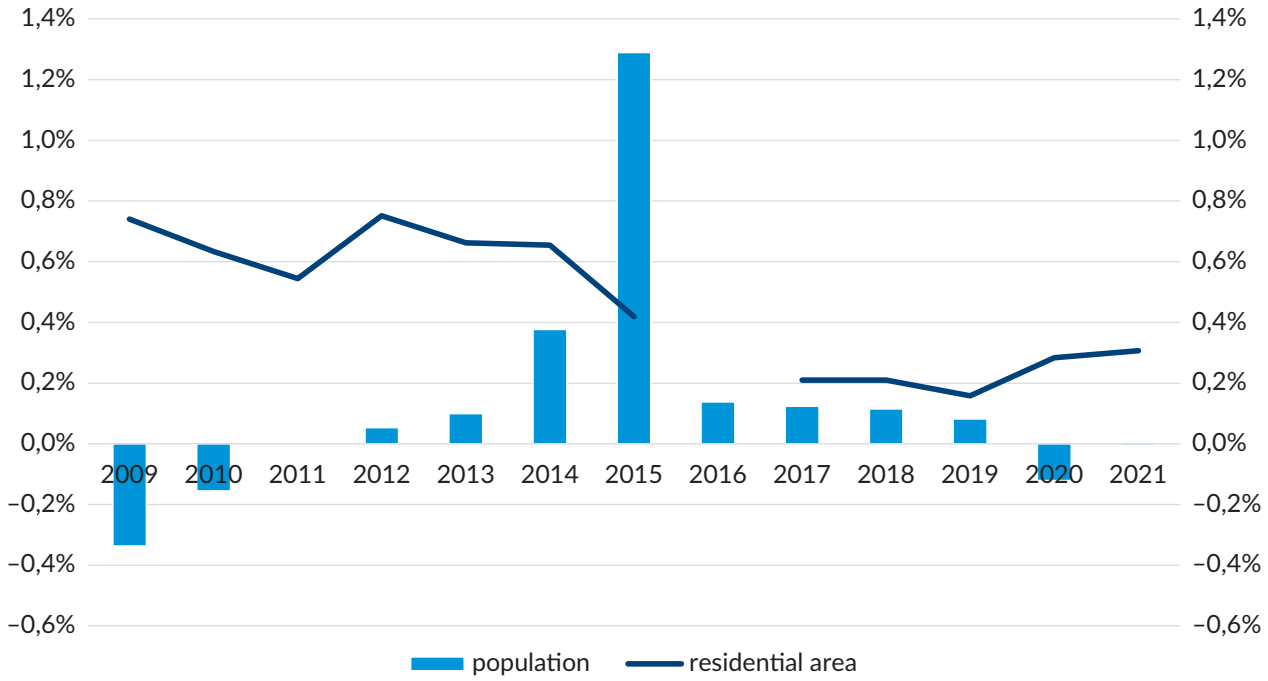

Figure 1. Development of population and residential areas in North Rhine-Westphalia 2009–2021. Source: Own calculation and illustration based on data from Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder (2023).

project, the data demonstrates an increase in demand by 1.1 % more residential area per household in 2022 in comparison to 20 years earlier. Efficiency gains have led to even more land consumption (rebound effect).

The federal sustainability strategy envisages a reduction in new land use to 30 ha per day by 2030 and net zero development by 2050 (Bundesregierung, 2018). Although this quantified ceiling is not taken up in the Spatial Planning Act (*Raumordnungsgesetz*), its intent is embodied in the legislation's guiding principle of sustainable spatial development (Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2008). This is further specified in the legislation with the supporting principles of: supporting sustainable economic growth, inclusion of demand forecasts from state and regional planning, spatial localization and concentration of settlement activity around central locations (central places), and protection of open space. There is therefore no formal obligation to reduce the amount of new land consumption as such.

4.1. State Level: Law, Principles, and Methods

The State Planning Act (*Landesplanungsgesetz*) sets the legal foundation at the state level and specifies the organization of spatial planning in North Rhine-Westphalia. Meeting the spatial needs of climate protection is mandatory (Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2008), but reduced land consumption is not explicitly seen as a contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The state development plan derives a state-wide target for reduction in land consumption of 5 ha by 2020 and net zero development in the long term as dictated by federal targets. However, none of these goals are binding nor do they include any number in the state planning target called "Land-saving and needs-based settlement development" (Ministry for Economic Affairs, Industry, Climate Action and Energy of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, 2017). The needs-based designation of settlement areas is legally assigned to regional planning and standardizes methodology for quantifying these needs. A review of the Sustainability Strategy 2020 of the state does not reveal further concrete details. It merely states that the state development plan "can make an appropriate contribution to achieving the goal of the German Sustainability Strategy to reduce land consumption" (Land Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2020, p. 56, own translation).

The process of developing the current state development plan (adopted in 2017) began with high demands for quantification and strong use of regulatory instruments, via restrictive targets (Lamker et al., 2014). A new coalition government under Christian Democrats and Liberals since 2017 led to far-reaching changes in a memorandum from 2019: The 5 ha principle was removed, and municipalities were conferred rights to designate land for development based on needs and beyond local self-development in smaller settlements (Land Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2021). The explanatory memorandum states that state development would now be more sustainable and flexible so that "the economy would be granted sufficient room for development in line with its needs," that "unnecessary obstacles to the designation of building land would be removed" in order to "quickly unleash spatial development potential" (Land Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2021, own translations). The state government recognized land as a finite resource but saw that more adequate and proportionate measures would be taken to achieve the objectives and focused on the goal of needs-based development. With the coalition of Christian Democrats and Green Party in 2022, new directions were set in June 2023 but have not yet been formally adopted. The intents of more sustainable land development, in particular a 5 ha principle in line with more efficient land use will be reintegrated and further changes to save land will be examined (Land Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2023).

Debates have focused much on the word *needs* as the lynchpin with which future land uses might be added. To find potential growth-based lock-ins, it is crucial to understand how these needs are defined in the plan itself (Land Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2022, especially pp. 49–52), and to distinguish these needs from market demands. Settlement development should be "geared towards population growth, economic development, existing infrastructure and the development potential of the natural and cultural landscape in a space-saving and needs-based manner" (Land Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2022, p. 44, own translation). Quantification and localization are devolved to the regional level. Even if the foreseeable development of private households is negative for individual municipalities and therefore could assume no need for new construction, the state development plan defines a calculated "basic need amounting to half of the replacement requirement" (Land Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2022, p. 50). This replacement need is defined as 0.2% per year of the housing stock—a rate determined by statistics that merged demolition and residential unit counts from the time when the plan was drawn up. Needs for housing units are converted into needs for land by using settlement densities that are typical for the respective municipalities. Calculations do not build a normative target, e.g., accounting for increases in density in line with growing resource concerns or changing household needs and demands. This means the long-term net zero target cannot be achieved even if the population and number of households shrink—unless a simultaneous reduction in other areas happens or is required. For North Rhine-Westphalia, with around 8.5 million households, an annual replacement need of 8,500 residential units is assumed, which means a need of 142 ha (at 60 residential units/ha) to 425 ha (at 20 residential units/ha) of land per year, depending on the settlement density.

Even more, the greater the inter-municipal fluctuation, the greater the need for additional land. This means that those cities with migration gains in household forecasts also have an attributed need for new construction. Migrations between a city and the surrounding area or between cities then give rise to a need for new construction on both ends: to meet the needs of a migration surplus and to cover basic needs in the place where people are leaving. In a zero-sum situation at the state level, ie., there is neither growth nor shrinkage, this results in the following needs for the North-Rhine-Westphalian municipalities in total (per year):

- New demand due to additional households: 0 housing units
- Replacement needs: 8.5 million units × 0.2% per year = 17,000 units per year
- Fluctuation reserve: 8.5 million units × 1% per planning period (25 years) = 3,400 units per year
- Total needs in stagnation scenario: 20,400 units per year or 56 units per day
- Area needs for residential development: 0.9 ha (with 60 units/ha) to 2.8 ha (with 20 units/ha) per day

For the state level, the need to consume new land is justified independently of growth through the number of employees or households and that growth in space (largely decoupled from the former) is therefore immanent in the instrument itself. In this understanding, saving land is also primarily operationalized with efficient land use (i. e., a minimum number of residential units per hectare) and not with sufficient land use, calling into question existing modes and pushing for deeper innovations and transformations.

We have shown that the annual growth rates of land consumption exceed the growth rates of population and households. While we focus on residential areas in the remainder of this article, it should be noted that similar trends are visible for commercial land use. State planning also addresses commercial, industrial, and transport areas; as well, it aims to integrate between different demands. However, we also observe here

that planning instruments are designed in a way that inevitably leads to growing land consumption. For commercial and industrial land, it is assumed that the development of the past will continue in the future, while innovative technologies and trends, business models, and societal preferences might alter this growth bias (e.g., working from home, urban production, artificial intelligence). Between 2016 and 2022, 910 ha of industrial and commercial space were added in the state, which equates to 130 ha per year or 0.4 ha per day.

4.2. Regional Level: Coordination and Allocation

Concerning regional planning, public administrations do justice to the regional characteristics of settlement development by focusing on the concrete determination of land needs. This is in accordance with the specifications and scope of the state development plan as well as the spatial allocation of (additional) land. In the case of residential development areas, the actual density key used (conversion of housing units to hectares) can be determined at the planner's own discretion following the settlement density class (< 1,000; 1,000–2,000; and > 2,000 inhabitants/km²) and the specified corridors (20–35; 30–45; and 40–60 units/ha). Deviations are possible but based on empirical investigation. The Cologne regional planning authority has made use of the option to deviate and defines four classes (20; 30; and 40 units/ha), by using the lower end of density in each category and adding a metropolitan category, reaching the maximum of 60 units/ha (Bezirksregierung Köln, 2021, p. 40). The regional plan Detmold, on the other hand, utilizes the possibility of a fundamental deviation from the state-wide density keys, justified by history, typology, and individual characteristics. Minimum densities are intentionally not assumed in the determination of land needs as the regional planning authority has not been authorized to do so by state planning. The draft regional plan assumes that, despite falling household numbers, there is still need for land in some municipalities in the region, as "the housing needs of prospective home builders and prospective tenants can only be partially met in existing buildings (qualitative need)" (Bezirksregierung Detmold, 2023, p. 114, own translation). Minimum densities or alike are not defined.

Regional planning authorities take different approaches regarding how commercial and industrial land needs are determined. This is possibly due to the reduced availability and experience with models and their assumptions, in contrast to population projections. For example, the district government of Detmold remains close to the specifications of the state development plan and derives a trend extrapolation of land utilization based on future needs. In comparison, the district government of Cologne derives the land use needs by extrapolation from employment data and industry-specific employment densities exclusively at the given moment (Bezirksregierung Köln, 2021). Potential changes and transformations accounting for economic structures and land uses are not part of the equation.

4.3. Local Level: Designation and Building

Regional planning hands over the task of development and land-use planning implementation (i.e., the legally binding designation of building rights) to the municipalities. In this article, we are only explicitly referring to the designation of new land and not to other spatial changes beyond the land designation and land coverage (such as infill developments and upgrading existing buildings). While the regional plan uses density criteria to calculate local needs, it does not determine actual building densities. Municipalities can realize lower densities than assumed and thereby not even meet the assumed need for land made available. In turn, this

gives them justification and proof towards regional planning for the need for additional land to develop (e.g., Bezirksregierung Detmold, 2023, p. 116).

More fundamentally, municipalities may not even have an interest in realizing assumed densities and therefore meet the calculated housing need within the calculated land use needs. For example, the city of Bornheim, lying between Cologne and Bonn, has a density of 40–60 units/ha according to the density key of the state planning authority and is planned with 40 units in the Cologne regional plan. However, they conducted empirical surveys and arrived at an average density of 24 units/ha. Recently planned developments had densities of 15 to 30 units/ha. The city council has therefore unanimously decided on a municipality-wide target density of 25 units/ha (Wildermann, 2018). One councilor recognizes publicly that: "At some point, we will have to go to a certain level. But our successors will then deal with this point. At the moment, we should defend the values we have" (Wildermann, 2018, own translation). The intent of sustainability in land-use planning is rendered irrelevant.

Further tensions arise in regions with imbalances between growth and shrinkage, or between strong core cities and small regional municipalities. For example, Everswinkel-Alverskirchen in the vicinity of Münster is recognized by the state level as a location for self-development only (*Eigenentwicklung*) with less than 2,000 inhabitants. Local disputes circled around the inability to hold population without adding land use needs, therefore removing the potential to counteract shrinkage by increasing land use. Experts have been consulted to calculate needs on the local level (Schulten Stadt- und Raumentwicklung, 2018). However, local calculations differ from regional ones, and make further assumptions, e.g., that one third of all out-migrating households would have stayed had they been able to designate more land for residential uses and supporting infrastructures. This contributes to a vicious circle of increasing land consumption.

5. Changing Planning Instruments Towards Net Zero Land Consumption

We argue that engaging with the realities of planning instruments serves three ends. First, it enables a better understanding of what it means to criticize growth-biased planning. What seems intentional and clear from the external critiques (such as in Barry, 2020; Savini et al., 2022) is much harder to locate in existing planning systems and the instruments by which goals, mediated through levels and through time, become reality. Second, we aim to foster debates in land-use planning about far-reaching (strategic) sustainability goals that encourage the identification of decision spaces across levels and the (political) choices that are consciously or unconsciously made. A perspective from post-growth planning enables the identification of entry points to overcome an intentional and unintentional bias (Akademie für Raumentwicklung in der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft, 2021). Third, this will enrich conceptualizations of a growth-independent planning itself. Learning from the German experiences as an early frontrunner in aiming for net zero land consumption offers lessons for theory and practice more widely.

The net-zero target for land use could align with moderate post-growth planning directions or a precautionary post-growth approach (Akademie für Raumentwicklung in der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft, 2021; Durrant et al., 2023; Lehmann et al., 2022), leaving aside for now wider questions of system changes in economy and politics. However, a lock-in makes it almost impossible to readily open non-growth development scenarios. Across scales and instruments, what starts with ambition ends up following a laissez-faire scenario (immanent in models, instruments, projections). As we have shown, the absolute

land-saving target, however quantified (30 ha, 5 ha, net zero), is hardly compatible with the way additional land use needs are calculated, allocated, designated, or deliberated. The determination of needs is always open-ended and does not factor in a ceiling. Land utilization is the dependent variable and growth (population, households, economy) the independent variable, leaving difficult enforcement options to those at the local level (Kießling et al., 2021). This makes it possible for political decision-makers to rally behind needs-orientated land development regardless of their ideology, though methods and reasoning often shift between serving identified needs (e.g., of households for housing) or recognizable demands (e.g., of local, national, and international market actors to buy property).

More specifically, the examples of the regions of Detmold and Cologne and the cities of Bornheim and Everswinkel show the need to revisit the interplay between levels of multi-level governance. While the counter-current principle of working up and down the levels is a foundation of federal democracy in Germany, it unveils deficiencies in effectively, efficiently, and transparently addressing fundamental transformation such as is the case with removing the requirement of building on new land in land-use planning. The examples show the acute and deliberate actions of hoarding more land than needed and illustrate a shift of burdensome decision-making onto future generations, contrary to sustainability and intergenerational justice (Meyfroidt et al., 2022). While the general agreement to see the reduction of land consumption, especially towards net zero, tends to hold, its less leading role in the calculation of needs, and general increase in ambiguous articulation at lower levels of government have a much steadier hold.

We have uncovered that practice in North Rhine-Westphalia orients visibly towards growth with regard to planning, its methods, and parameters, as well as the respective flexibilization. The aim remains to identify and provide land for growth-induced demands. This diminishes a push to think or experiment with post-growth planning directions, such as focusing on circular use of resources (Savini, 2023) or fostering diverse and alternative ways of economic and housing development (Lange et al., 2021; Savini et al., 2022). For example, additional households could live with, or even desire, other needs than their predecessors'. Migration across municipal boundaries could work well without inducing new land use needs. Even if sufficiency could become a leading paradigm, the current use of land-use planning instruments would not push against competing directions or would even counteract them.

6. Conclusion: Potentials of Post-Growth to Change Planning Instruments

Starting with the recognition of post-growth planning debates and their critique of an inherent growth bias in spatial planning (Durrant et al., 2023; Rydin, 2013), we have used the case of the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia to analyze where and how far this can be seen in the practice of statutory land-use planning. We looked at the key planning instruments for identifying, allocating, and designating land for building uses (housing, commercial, industry). We have worked through the state, regional, and local levels to uncover how far growth is immanent and unquestioned in the use of instruments in land-use planning. We have shown how an ambitious sustainability goal of net zero land consumption is watered down to partial successes and signs of potential relative decoupling. We have identified hindering premises within instruments, their use, and deliberate statements that contrast with opening pathways towards a post-growth future for land use. These are deeply nested within calculations of needs, density criteria, and the reliance on past developments or the current status quo to plan.

Building upon this, we have shown that critical junctures exist where instruments are used in a particular way to support ongoing growth agendas. Whether consciously or unconsciously, there is an underused potential in the existing planning instruments. Inevitably, planning becomes re-politicized again and cannot simply react to projections in the established ways. A relevant starting point here is to recognize the divergence between societal need for and economic demand for land; this follows calls for a deeper and more critical engagement with economic underpinnings in spatial planning practice (Adrian et al., 2018; Janssen-Jansen et al., 2012), but also more widely in spatial planning education (Kunzmann, 2017). This may explain why a differentiation between societal needs (such as for housing) and market demands (such as for financial investment) is often not or only vaguely made. It may also explain why, beyond the scope of this article, the implications of financial markets and changing interest rates on the demand for real estate and land seem surprising. To respond to these tangential but vital points, it is worth tuning into how sufficiency debates within post-growth touch on such questions of living, well-being, justice, and participation within ecological boundaries (Bues & Lucht, 2023). Also outside of the scope of this article are concerns with the entanglement of planning instruments with collective action, citizen involvement, legal considerations, and political disputes, which would deserve future case studies. Considering the global challenges of sustainability, it would be crucial to understand our concerns also in other contexts and the Global South and the non-Anglo-American world that is less represented in international scholarship. This should be done by research from the Global South, which could further delineate a practice-oriented approach to post-growth planning globally.

We have argued for a better understanding of how existing and proven instruments are limited in their means to foster immediate adjustments in practice. We recognize potential avenues to achieve sustainability in land-use planning by changing existing and developing new instruments as part of a wider change in thinking towards post-growth planning. Beyond more radical demands, we argue that a more intimate understanding of instruments and how they are used opens pathways within spatial planning practice and research to understand where, how, and why land-use planning could change. This more meticulous insight could make us better and structurally address growth-oriented biases or behaviors that underpin global, regional, and local sustainability crises. The pathway towards achieving net zero in land consumption and thus a potential piece of post-growth planning requires that we re-plan the use of planning instruments through daily practices. Only then can we in a similar fashion begin the re-tooling of planning as a discipline.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Shrinking Cities for Economic Growth? Insights From the Housing Sector

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Abstract

This research focuses on examining how the pursuit of economic growth can contribute to urban shrinkage. In contrast to the prevalent definition of urban shrinkage that links population loss to insufficient levels of economic growth, this study examines the case of Coimbra, Portugal, where something different is happening. We hypothesise that Coimbra experiences population loss due to urban policies that promote economic growth through housing speculation. We conclude that the hypothesis is valid using semi-structured interviews and document analysis as data collection methods. The identified phenomenon disproportionately affects younger and vulnerable residents, forcing them to relocate due to unaffordable housing options. However, it benefits the local authority and national government, which collaborate with global economic powers that invest in real estate to accumulate capital. The conformist and legalistic-bureaucratic nature of the Portuguese planning system, evident in Coimbra's local authority, exacerbates the problem. We emphasise the potentially transformative impact of economic degrowth thinking on housing policy. The implications of this research question the validity of mainstream economic theory as commonly applied to urban planning.

Keywords

Coimbra; economic degrowth; housing; population loss; Portugal; urban shrinkage

1. Introduction

This article argues that the housing crisis in Europe and beyond, along with urban shrinkage, stems from the neglect of economic degrowth principles in urban planning.

According to Kallis (2018), "degrowth" refers to a transformative process where social and environmental conditions improve because of a decline in gross domestic product (GDP). This transformation occurs as various activities, places, institutions, and ecosystems are no longer seen as expendable resources to fuel economic growth but as values to be preserved and nurtured.

In contrast, "urban shrinkage" involves a demographic decline in cities, often resulting in negative consequences such as deteriorating housing conditions, weakened social networks, and reduced well-being (Bernt, 2009; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012). Many views on urban shrinkage suggest that declining economic activity leads to population loss, which worsens economic decline in a downward spiral. It is, therefore, considered necessary to promote economic growth to address urban shrinkage. This article aims to highlight flaws in this definition.

We argue that urban shrinkage often follows a distinct chain of causality contrary to expectations. Instead of contributing to preventing and addressing urban shrinkage and associated problems, efforts to bolster economic growth typically induce population loss and negative well-being outcomes for many cities. This occurs through two primary mechanisms. Firstly, pro-growth policies striving to enhance cities' competitiveness based on GDP rankings benefit winning cities with heightened economic activity, attracting residents seeking opportunities. In contrast, less competitive cities experience population loss and financial instability, inhibiting future economic growth. Secondly, attempts to revitalise shrinking cities through additional pro-growth policies often spur even more destructive forms of economic growth, like property speculation, exacerbating economic hardship for vulnerable households and prompting further out-migration. In such instances, urban shrinkage reflects a zero-sum game, where demographic and well-being decline in less competitive cities fuels prosperity for some at the expense of others.

The housing sector became a lucrative domain for investors due to the exhaustion of global investment opportunities, giving rise to the "real estate state" (Stein, 2019). This governance model relies on counterproductive "spatial fixes" (Harvey, 2001) focused on housing, aiming to maximise housing costs for increased private profits, national taxes, and municipal revenues. Using the case of Coimbra, Portugal, this article illustrates how residential construction is subject to a 23% VAT rate, along with additional taxes like municipal property tax (IMI), property transfer tax (IMT), and various direct and indirect fees that burden developers and future owners. Delays in the approval and inspection process, particularly substantial in Coimbra (Ferreira, 2020), lead developers to adopt inflated profit margins to compensate for sluggish bureaucracy (C. Pinto et al., 2023). Through this, the planning system creates a perverse incentive logic in which the state and local authorities are financially rewarded for their own inertia. This is particularly relevant in an international context where the excessive deficit procedure has shaped European political philosophy, although it has been heavily criticised (e.g., Costantini, 2017; Varoufakis, 2018).

The excessive deficit procedure, a component of the European Stability and Growth Pact, monitors and rectifies member states' budgetary policies to ensure that deficits and public debt remain below agreed-upon thresholds relative to GDP. While ostensibly aimed at upholding fiscal stability, this procedure has prompted countries such as Portugal to implement additional and or heavier taxes to comply, placing a strain on vulnerable individuals and communities while crippling national sovereignty (Blyth, 2013; Varoufakis, 2018). Portugal now concentrates on maximising GDP and simultaneously imposes heavy taxes to fulfil the pact's requirements, which is a challenge since it cannot absorb economic shocks via monetary

policy (Stiglitz, 2016). Consequently, the Portuguese state forfeits much of its economic leverage and becomes self-contradictory, prioritising GDP growth while imposing taxes that stifle the economy. Real estate state policies are deployed to navigate an environment of imminent budget cuts, exacerbating social inequalities and undermining the long-term economic sustainability of multiple urban areas, which are treated as financial assets. This redistribution of capital concentrates wealth among a select few, eroding the social utility of the housing sector and inflating its market value.

This article, targeting an international audience, employs Coimbra, Portugal, as a case study representing the Southern European periphery. Following Romano (2012) and Tulumello (2023), we emphasise the significance of insights from peripheral regions in reshaping concepts, theories, and practices concerning degrowth, urban shrinkage, and housing policies. While acknowledging, in line with scholars such as C. Pinto et al. (2023), that Portugal's high housing prices align with trends imposed by European and global fiscal policies, we underscore the importance of studying cases like Coimbra. They provide nuanced insights into the complex interplay among international financial policies, national planning systems, local policies, and the potential of degrowth thinking, alongside the drawbacks of prevailing pro-growth economic ideas. Hence, this article deliberately adopts an ideological stance to prompt planning scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to incorporate degrowth thinking into planning theory and practice, thereby decolonising national planning systems from pro-growth hegemony. In doing so, the article addresses the hypothesis posited by Haase et al. (2013), which proposes that urban shrinkage lacks grand explanatory heuristics. We question the validity of such a hypothesis by arguing that the pro-growth ideology of contemporary urban policy might be a key driver of urban shrinkage, even though it has unequal consequences across distinct geographies.

The empirical findings, derived from extensive semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders and a thorough document analysis spanning the past two decades, underscore the necessity of reforming Portugal's planning system to tackle housing and economic challenges in cities like Coimbra. Coimbra must balance pursuing a suitable economic model and reversing the population decline and ageing trend. Within this context, Janin-Rivolin's (2017) proposition that Portugal must move away from its "conformative" planning system holds relevance. Conformative planning systems, as delineated by Janin-Rivolin (see also Faludi, 2000), prioritise granting development permissions based on the morphological alignment of proposed projects with legally binding master plans crafted through a top-down architectural approach. However, these systems fall short in capturing the public value of new projects, as they prioritise morphological objectives over social well-being goals. This conformative approach renders the Portuguese planning system ineffectual in addressing the housing crisis, as it exacerbates the issue despite ostensibly seeking solutions. Recent efforts to enhance the Portuguese planning system's agility through implementing the SIMPLEX model of urban management (L. Pinto, 2024) have been met with scepticism by national planning experts. Experts contend that such measures will foster greater social exclusion and price escalation. Examining shrinking cities through a degrowth lens holds promise as it provides opportunities to reconsider urban planning theory and practice, thereby promoting social well-being beyond the confines of economic growth and profitability imperatives that lead to the emergence of instruments such as the SIMPLEX.

The article is structured as follows. Sections 2 and 3 discuss the literature on urban shrinkage and degrowth studies as related to the housing sector. Section 4 describes methodological choices, and Sections 5 and 6 present the empirical findings. Section 7 presents a discussion, and Section 8 concludes the article.

2. Urban Shrinkage and Housing

Academic research increasingly focuses on the challenges posed by "shrinking cities" or "urban shrinkage" as this phenomenon becomes more pronounced globally (Haase et al., 2014; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2016). Urban shrinkage is characterised by population decline and presents a paradoxical challenge to the prevailing growth paradigm in urban policy (Sousa & Pinho, 2015). It is typically attributed to factors such as globalised production systems, factory relocations, out-migration, economic downturns, ageing populations, inadequate local governance, and policies promoting economic competition among cities at national and supranational levels (Escudero-Gómez et al., 2023; Haase et al., 2013; Wolff & Wiechmann, 2018). These factors create self-reinforcing mechanisms, as noted by Hartt (2018). The drivers and consequences of urban shrinkage are diverse, cross-sectoral, and interconnected, leading scholars like Haase et al. (2013) to argue that urban shrinkage defies one-size-fits-all explanations. Instead, each city experiences its unique shrinkage trajectory.

Coping with urban shrinkage is a challenge because it goes together with selective migration patterns that often leave behind vulnerable groups such as the poor, the elderly, and the less educated. Efforts to combat shrinkage through city marketing can further impact these vulnerable populations (Fol, 2012). Importantly, urban shrinkage is not incompatible with economic growth. As Berglund (2020) notes, considering Detroit, private and corporate interests and philanthropic foundations are intertwined, driving a profit-driven, growth-oriented, and inequitable development agenda in selected areas of this shrinking city.

Housing is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of urban shrinkage, as population decline typically results in decreased housing demand and increased vacancy rates (Hoekstra et al., 2020; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012; Wiechmann & Pallagst, 2012). This often leads to disinvestment in housing, deterioration of well-being (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012), and infrastructure decay (Bernt, 2009). Housing redevelopment strategies are frequently employed to address these challenges (Döringer et al., 2020), including demolition programmes (Béal et al., 2019; Bernt et al., 2017; Hackworth, 2016; Hoekstra et al., 2020), reconstruction to enhance residential attractiveness (Fernandez & Hartt, 2021; Fol, 2012; Miot, 2015), and housing governance changes (Bernt, 2009; Cocks & Couch, 2012). However, there is little consensus on the efficacy of alternative housing strategies for shrinking cities. Demolition of surplus housing, known as right-sizing, aiming to align supply with reduced demand, has yielded mixed results (Béal et al., 2019) and has been criticised as an austerity measure (Hackworth, 2019). Selective housing decommissioning, focusing on unattractive housing segments, or repurposing cleared land for green infrastructure can foster predatory investment and gentrification (Akers et al., 2020; Hackworth, 2019). Strategies to enhance residential attractiveness often target the upper and middle classes, exacerbating segregation and failing to address urban shrinkage (Fol, 2012; Miot, 2015). As Wiechmann and Pallagst (2012) observe, the limitations of housing policy interventions in shrinking cities primarily stem from addressing the symptoms rather than the causes of urban shrinkage.

3. Degrowth and Housing

The degrowth perspective presents compelling arguments against the relentless pursuit of economic growth, often a primary driver of urban shrinkage. By stating this, we challenge the hypothesis proposed by Haase et al. (2013) that no overarching heuristic can explain urban shrinkage. While conventional narratives on shrinkage typically attribute it to complex dynamics, we posit that it is primarily caused by promoting pro-economic

growth urban policies, which inherently lead to economic crises (Fraser, 2014; Harvey, 2001). Confirming this, Kallis (2018) argues that constantly promoting economic activity leads to wealth accumulation at the expense of environmental degradation and diminished living standards among vulnerable communities first and then among all. Such arguments align with the law of diminishing marginal utility, which states that beyond a certain threshold, the benefits of growth become marginal compared to its costs (Daly, 1999). However, suppose one assumes that GDP must continually grow. In that case, economic agents eventually necessitate resorting to destructive forms of economic activity, even if doing so results in crises and urban shrinkage.

The law of diminishing marginal utility challenges the prevailing wisdom of pro-growth ideology, which assumes that continued economic expansion is indispensable for societal well-being. Growth proponents argue that sustained economic growth is required to support higher wages, robust pension schemes, improved national healthcare, enhanced education systems, and social benefits. This vision has significant flaws: Despite decades of continuous economic growth, real wages have declined, and essential social systems such as pension schemes, healthcare, and education have been dismantled or severely degraded, often to achieve economic growth. Furthermore, historically and in the present, there is evidence that society can experience great well-being without economic growth and without using indicators such as GDP to inform policy-making (Graeber, 2012; Jackson, 2017; Raworth, 2017).

Green growth and the circular economy have become popular strategies to supposedly overcome the tension between economic growth, social justice, and environmental protection. However, closer examination shows that such strategies rely on the monetisation of nature (which does not protect nature from destruction but only from non-monetised destruction) and on the promotion of technologically enabled efficiency (which triggers rebound and induction effects, i.e., both increased and additional resource consumption resulting from efficiency improvements; Lange et al., 2023; Unmüßig et al., 2012).

In summary, sustaining economic growth necessitates the continual creation of innovative methods and narratives that entail environmental degradation and the conversion of free and public goods into profit-driven economic activities, measurable in GDP assessments (Ferreira & von Schönfeld, 2020; Kallis, 2018; Pilling, 2018). However, as ecological concerns mount with the looming environmental catastrophe, growth fuelled by environmental exploitation becomes increasingly costly. In response, the housing sector has emerged as a crucial solution. As elucidated by Harvey (2001), capitalism has a propensity to deplete the means by which profits are amassed, necessitating the regular colonisation of new territories, areas, and sectors for continued exploitation. Consequently, places and sectors that previously experienced economic prosperity eventually face decline. With the depletion of the planet's resources and social capital, capitalism has turned its attention to housing, emerging as a lucrative investment opportunity (Stein, 2019). Governments have acquiesced to this reality. Amidst a global economic downturn, they pursue increasingly unethical strategies to sustain economic growth. We contend that urban shrinkage and its societal problems result from implementing such strategies.

4. Methodological Remarks

4.1. Case Study

Coimbra encapsulates several pivotal themes discussed earlier. For instance, the city actively pursued heightened international competitiveness and visibility by securing, in 2013, UNESCO recognition as

World Heritage for its university and surrounding areas. This has underscored its reputation as an elite university town. However, this strategy came at the expense of making urban regeneration difficult around the university (Ferreira, 2020) while compromising other sectors that did not align with the adopted elitist vision for the city, notably industrial and blue-collar economic activities, leading to a decline in overall job opportunities.

Moreover, Coimbra has witnessed a decline in its population over the past two decades, dropping from 148,443 inhabitants in 2001 to 140,816 in 2021, a loss of −5.14% over 20 years. This population decline is noteworthy when compared to the regional average loss of −4.46% across Coimbra and its neighbouring municipalities, including Cantanhede, Condeixa, Lousã, Miranda do Corvo, Montemor-o-Velho, and Penacova. Population losses in Coimbra are resulting in a rapid ageing process. In 2001, the proportion of Coimbra's population over 65 years was 16.5%. In 2011, this ratio rose to 20.1% and in 2021 to a record of 25.2%.

There has also been an increase in the number of households residing in overcrowded dwellings, rising from 4,221 in 2011 to 5,296 in 2021. Additionally, there has been a surge in the median value per square meter of dwelling sales, with Coimbra experiencing a 58% increase from 2016 to 2023, compared to the regional average of 53%. Therefore, Coimbra is characterised by above-average population loss and above-average rise in residential costs. Despite a 17.9% increase in the median value of gross reported income per tax household from 2015 to 2021 in Coimbra, this growth has clearly not kept pace with soaring residential costs.

The values presented above resonate with the regional commuting patterns. The proportion of Coimbra's resident population that commutes to another municipality is just 8.9%, while the region's average value (including Coimbra) is 24.6%. The proportion of the population who lives in living quarters most of the year and works or studies in Coimbra is 14.2% for Cantanhede, 21% for Lousã, 29.4% for Montemor-o-Velho, 33.8% for Penacova, 36.3% for Miranda do Corvo, and 42.3% for Condeixa.

Table 1 compares the value of real estate in Coimbra in 2023 (second quarter) with the surrounding municipalities, highlighting significant differences.

Table 1. Median value per square meter of real estate in Coimbra and surrounding municipalities.

Municipality	Median value per m^2 2023	Median value per m^2 2023 (Coimbra = 100%)
Coimbra	1,699	100%
Cantanhede	772	45%
Condeixa	1,103	65%
Lousã	859	51%
Miranda do Corvo	598	35%
Montemor-o-Velho	843	50%
Penacova	542	32%

Source: Authors' work based on data from Statistics Portugal (2023).

4.2. Methods

A qualitative research approach was employed, including in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders and experts closely connected to Coimbra's housing market, utilising the foundational questions outlined in Annex 1 of the Supplementary File. A total of eight individuals were interviewed, representing various activity sectors, including architecture, tourism development, international commerce, economics, NGOs, transportation, and real estate (see Annex 2 of the Supplementary File). The selection process for interviewees involved a stakeholder mapping exercise conducted through online research and previous work on the local and national housing market by the authors. These efforts aimed to ensure representation from diverse stakeholders. The respondents' names were omitted to safeguard anonymity. The interviews were analysed to identify recurring themes and patterns.

News coverage of street protests throughout 2023 and early 2024 was monitored, alongside the identification of local policy documents pertaining to housing policies over the past two decades. Broader economic and urban policies, master plans, regulations, and local-government-funded rehabilitation initiatives were sought (see Annex 3 of the Supplementary File). Document analysis aimed to validate interview findings and scrutinise the municipality's rhetoric used to justify decisions discussed by interviewees. Given the reluctance of local authority staff to participate in interviews, contact with municipal representatives was not pursued, understanding the sensitive nature of such requests in Portugal and Coimbra in particular. While news regarding housing protests was tracked through national and local outlets, including newspapers and social media platforms, this data was not extensively analysed. Subsequent interpretative analysis categorised themes into general and planning-related factors driving high property values in Coimbra.

5. General Drivers of High Property Values

All interviewees and several documents confirm that the attractiveness of Portugal for investors and tourists is an important factor explaining the high property values in Coimbra. The soaring housing costs, in turn, are a major driver of urban shrinkage, as an increasing share of the population cannot afford housing in Coimbra and moves to other cities or the periphery. Coimbra's car-dependent culture facilitates this mobility. Aggravating this, Coimbra offers limited career prospects for people wishing to settle permanently, as the university is the city's only major economic agent. Policy documents show a clear interest in catering for the needs of tourists and short-term residents (especially students and visiting academics), not only for urban regeneration and financial revitalisation purposes but also because this aligns with the city's understanding of itself. This, in turn, discourages economic actors from investing in initiatives that would create jobs in the city and instead invest in property. The result is the perpetuation of Coimbra as a socially exclusive city that lives in the shadow of its historical university. The following quote illustrates this well:

> Coimbra is a rare case of a city where a significant part of the inhabitants are not natives or residents, which is obviously due to the university's relevance in its daily life and structures. The university is the unifying element of Coimbra life and community, which, in turn, projects itself through a diaspora. There is a feeling of Coimbra that is not experienced in the city but in memory. (Parque EXPO, 2012, p. 5, translated by the authors)

In essence, the Strategic Urban Rehabilitation Programme (Parque EXPO, 2012), supported by the local authority, acknowledges Coimbra as a city that attracts people temporarily, mainly due to its university. Efforts to stimulate the city's economy and initiate urban revitalisation should align with this understanding, ruling out alternative future visions. Allowing extensive investment in real estate emerges as a natural response to this perceived absence of alternatives.

During the interviews, value creation through tourism and real estate investment was seen as easy due to several factors, including the country's good weather, landscapes, and gastronomy (for insights, see Visit Portugal, 2017). The government has taken measures to attract investors and tourists to Portugal since the 2008 economic crisis began, including favourable tax conditions for wealthy international residents (the Golden Visa policy). However, the situation might be changing. As an interviewee said:

> Tourists are getting sick of Portugal. They realise that we are exaggerating and that the quality–cost relationship is becoming unbalanced. They go to a restaurant and are charged 10 euros for a pot of olives with some bread. It is ridiculous. This dissatisfaction is noticeable. (Transport sector expert, male)

Despite these concerns, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the housing market remained unaffected, and prices continued to rise as international people sought an escape from denser central European areas. Portugal is on the European periphery, which creates distance from situations such as the war in Ukraine. The outcome is that Portugal and Coimbra have seen significant foreign investment in housing. This makes it unsurprising that many residents cannot afford housing in Coimbra, a city long characterised by socially exclusive features:

> The geography of Coimbra is prone to induce high property values. Coimbra has a natural belt formed by the river and the high hills surrounding it. It is also a hilly city with some scarcity of flat land. All this makes it relatively difficult to expand the city and build more….The situation is aggravated by Coimbra being a car-dependent city with poor in–out road connections….This makes living in the core city much more appealing than outside it. (Senior real estate agent, male)

Nevertheless, an exodus to the periphery of Coimbra and nearby smaller towns is ongoing. An architect who manages a large national architecture firm active in Coimbra explained this exodus that is happening in various Portuguese cities, including Coimbra, as follows:

> We are living in an economic crisis, but a crisis that does not affect real estate investors—For them, there is no crisis whatsoever. Their representatives constantly show up in my office, talking about wanting to make massive investments in buying this or that property and asking for help with the projects….They remind me of slavers or owners of farms in colonial Africa. They don't care about what is happening with the people. They want to know how much money they can make with their farms or, now, their buildings. (Senior architect, manager of a large national architecture firm, male)

Despite the difficulties caused by property investors, the housing sector remains lucrative, and investors continue seeking ways to maximise returns. Combined with tourism, these investments help keep GDP growth high while contributing to the regeneration of buildings and sometimes entire neighbourhoods, favouring richer populations. This association of housing and tourism leads to a new phenomenon: real estate tourism. As said by the interviewee above:

> I have a contact who organises holidays for wealthy tourists. He goes to the airport to receive them and offers a prime experience with the best hotels and restaurants. A part of the entertainment is to visit top properties, always above one million euros. They find these visits extremely entertaining. Sometimes, they buy the properties, and he receives his share as a real estate agent. Real estate tourism is becoming a new thing.

Both central and local governments are unwilling to change the situation. The real estate sector might collapse if measures are taken to curb the prices that appeal to international investors, as an International Chamber of Commerce representative noted during an interview. The government also wants to avoid this fall in property values because it would trap many Portuguese families in mortgages on properties without transaction value. As a result, the 2016 Strategic Development Plan for Coimbra, while stating the ambition to provide "dignified housing for all," allocates funds for the construction of social housing or the improvement of existing social housing exclusively to the city's most distant and unattractive outskirts, and not to the central areas where profitable real estate investments are expected. This maintains housing values high, which is desirable for the older population segments who acquired housing before the real estate boom, a point confirmed by C. Pinto et al. (2023). As described by an interviewee:

> What explains the high housing prices in Coimbra? Many factors. There have been very limited new houses in Coimbra for at least 10 years….All were oriented to the city centre and luxury markets; all were oriented to promote social exclusion in the city. This can be done because Coimbra has two high-level employers: the university and the medical sector. Some senior people working in the medical sector enjoy very high incomes, and new urban developments are oriented toward their expectations. This is a town with a small amount of people with much money. It is a pure spatial reflection of social inequality. (Senior architect, manager of an architecture firm based in Coimbra, female)

The lack of affordable housing options for families and the proliferation of profit-seeking small flats in the city centre tailored to tourists, students, and digital nomads exacerbate this inequality. Moreover, the country's housing and financial markets force many to purchase homes with indexed interest rates, threatening households' economic viability if rates increase. Rents are also rising, and the middle class is disappearing, as confirmed by an NGO representative, who mentioned that many people expect them to act as real estate agents. Their key problem is finding affordable homes (or just rooms or beds) to rent. She also described how the homeless are expected to find homes outside the city since there is no space for them inside its gentrified borders. However, public transportation options are still limited, and these people struggle to make longer commutes without cars they cannot afford.

Improving social well-being is far lower on the agenda for the local authority than luxury housing. However, social well-being is more at risk than ever since the European Central Bank imposed heavy interest rates to reduce inflation. The suspicion exists among dissident voices that the European Central Bank's goal is to facilitate profits among creditors instead of, as claimed, reducing inflation. This was a key argument behind the demonstrations in April and September 2023 and January 2024 in multiple cities across Portugal, including Coimbra. The demonstrations mobilised large crowds and received high media coverage (e.g., "Casa para viver, planeta para habitar," 2023). At the time of writing, the website of the organisation Casa Para Viver (House to Live) that organises these demonstrations presented this manifesto:

> We do not accept that the costs of renting a house are greater than our salary, which never increases when everything else does, and—despite that—they have just imposed another 7% increase in rents on us…at our expense, banks and real estate funds continue to accumulate historic profits! Yes, historic—Portugal's banking sector makes over 12 million euros daily. (Casa Para Viver, 2024)

The perception that the European Central Bank's high-interest rates policy primarily benefits the financial sector is founded on empirical data. While the Portuguese bank CGD only increased its profits in the first semester of 2023 by 25%, BCP managed to increase them by 580% (Maria, 2023; see also Bhattacharyya et al., 2023). As loans and rents become economically unfeasible for more households, developers increasingly cater to those who can buy luxury properties without loans, further contributing to rising property prices.

6. Planning-Related Drivers of High Property Values

Interviewees described the local authority and the university as institutions that care little about the social consequences of their actions and inactions, leaving profit-driven private investors to explore the housing crisis they jointly create. Confirming previous research findings on Coimbra (Ferreira, 2020), the local authority was described as restrictive, slow, and bureaucratic, particularly in granting building permits. Obtaining a building permit in Coimbra is a process that can take years, creating a low housing supply despite pressing housing needs. As the interviews and document analysis confirm, the Portuguese planning system legitimises this conduct by prioritising the defence of private property rights and the enforcement of architectural design rules over creating strategies for prosperous cities with an equitable and dynamic housing sector. This increases property values and reinforces Coimbra's tendency to lose population while serving the interests of the wealthy, who want Coimbra to continue gentrifying. As one interviewee stated, "What blocks the issuing of new construction permits [in Coimbra] is the will to maintain existing property values as high as possible" (senior real estate agent, male).

This difficulty in obtaining permits leads investors to force elevated profit margins on their projects, further driving up prices. According to an interviewee, this tendency was aggravated by high inflation:

> Inflation is soaring….The reason? Well, it's a mix of Portuguese business owners speculating and raising prices like crazy at the first sign of increased costs….Plus, dealing with the local authority of Coimbra is a real pain due to endless bureaucracy and red tape. This forces businesspeople to defend their interests, and since their mentality is all about protecting themselves, the situation goes out of hand. Note that businesspeople are afraid of the local authority and never complain….And then we get what we have now. (Senior economist based in Coimbra, male)

It is, therefore, unsurprising that some interviewees criticised the local authority and the university for dismissing student housing issues. The prevalence of investor-driven student housing has created problems for long-term residents and the broader community as follows:

> A very small number of investors have bought many buildings in Coimbra to rent them to students. This was initially considered good because they were regenerating the buildings. But now it is seen as a problem because they are transforming building after building into compounds of studio flats and

> rooms for renting….Due to negligence, the local authority and the university created a huge business for a minority of investors and a huge problem for most residents. (Senior architect, manager of an architecture firm based in Coimbra, female)

Indeed, the reluctance of the local authority and the university to constructively engage with the local community was regularly mentioned in the interviews in resonance with the following lines:

> The local authority is failing to communicate with investors, civil engineers, and architects responsible for developments….The University of Coimbra became impaired by its centuries of history and tradition. It takes years to make basic decisions….The result is that change is needed in Coimbra, and it just doesn't happen. (Senior real estate agent, male)

The new metro system, a flagship project of the current local administration, has overshadowed the housing crisis, which has not received priority. This real estate agent added that the metro system will increase property values while peripheralising vulnerable populations. In other words, while the university is disengaged, the local authority lacks both efficacy and a clear vision for the city, which, combined with the conformative nature of the Portuguese planning system, has contributed to a disjointed and speculated urban landscape. As an interviewee has put it:

> In Portugal, landowners do their best to speculate on land even before it is possible to speculate on housing. First, land speculation; second, housing speculation….In one moment, someone has a piece of forest or rural land. Next, a new master plan determines that this land is for urbanisation. Bang! You have an instantaneous millionaire. (Owner and manager of housing development for tourists in Coimbra, male)

Another interviewee presented this situation differently while focusing on Coimbra:

> We have a logic where the state is not supposed to determine what people do with their land. The state can only respond to people's development proposals and then assess whether they fit the box of the master plan. The problem is that it is very easy to make things fit in this box when you have enough money to pay professionals whose expertise is precisely to convert money into things that fit the box, namely architects and lawyers….Coimbra's local authority passes building permits based on legalistic principles and ludicrously detailed morphological rules. It remains oblivious to the city's key issues. (Senior architect, manager of a large national architecture firm, male)

7. Discussion

The research findings underscore Coimbra's need to address its housing crisis. Effective actions could incorporate economic degrowth theories into urban planning (Ferreira & von Schönfeld, 2020; Leick & Lang, 2018; Savini et al., 2022). Contrary to dominant views advocating for sustained economic growth to address urban shrinkage problems, this research reveals the flaws in converting homes into pro-growth financial commodities. This has significant negative social repercussions, making Coimbra an unwelcoming city, particularly for its younger and more vulnerable populations. Consequently, the city experiences crippling population losses, hindering economic activities, and deteriorating living conditions. There is a need to

diminish the economic value of the housing sector to promote the city's prosperity, creating conditions for an increase in affordable housing and population rejuvenation.

This housing crisis is exacerbated by a national planning system that conflates defending property rights with promoting the public interest. This planning system is also criticised for focusing too much on bureaucratic-legalistic rules favouring property owners and "conformative" (Janin-Rivolin, 2017) morphological principles aimed at materialising architectural visions. A shift is proposed to grant development rights in Portugal only when the public interest in a new development is confirmed, departing from the assumption that such rights belong to property owners and that the planning system should drive economic growth. While acknowledging the power of European policy influences, the practical measures proposed by interviewees could improve the situation and challenge the European pro-growth housing model critically described by Tulumello (2023).

Implementing a new comprehensive housing plan in Coimbra, addressing inequality and affordability, and constructing social housing at controlled prices were measures often suggested during interviews. Indeed, it remains paradoxical why housing developments are so profitable, yet the state consistently dismisses the opportunity to build them. A new master plan should prioritise public value capture and the construction of affordable housing over delineating legalistic and morphological principles that benefit predatory developers. Exempting younger generations from housing taxes and promoting economic diversification would be constructive. The attraction of businesses offering stable, well-paid jobs might gather acceptance among wealthier residents, offering them investment opportunities beyond housing speculation.

The measures proposed oppose the views of C. Pinto et al. (2023), who argue that a key problem in Portugal is the unwelcome interference of the state in the housing market. This interference increases housing costs as investors compensate for the delays and uncertainties imposed by the planning system with higher profit margins while refusing to invest in affordable homes. They argue that it is necessary to permanently liberalise the Portuguese housing market so that investors can assess it as predictable and trustworthy. They add that this would increase housing production and induce lower housing costs due to supply adjustments to demand.

Even though we agree with the identified problem, we disagree with the proposed solution. The research findings confirm that reducing bureaucratic hurdles would encourage housebuilding and help alleviate the housing shortage. However, despite growing supply, new measures could easily be implemented to maintain high-profit margins. The ability of the ongoing partnership between the state, banks, and real estate investors to maintain high residential values even during the Covid-19 crisis demonstrates their resourcefulness and the low validity of the supply and demand law in the housing sector. It is concerning that planning theory has not yet contributed to a deep reformulation of such a simplistic construct. Instead, planning practice continues to be shaped by it.

Any restructuring of the *planning* system must be carefully *planned*, which cannot be achieved through ideologically driven liberalisation and pro-growth market-led supply adjustments to demand. Despite being dissolved by the Portuguese president over corruption suspicions (Claudino & Céu, 2023), the outgoing state executive is implementing the SIMPLEX, a simplistic set of rules endorsed by Decree-Law No. 10/2024, effective January 8. It curtails the authority of local governments in development control, shifting responsibility for technical and legal compliance to architects and engineers hired by developers, thereby

creating a perverse conflict of interest for these professionals. According to prominent national planning experts (see L. Pinto, 2024), this liberal approach will yield adverse consequences, fostering legal and technical uncertainties as local authorities overlook potential issues until the final stages of construction, potentially leading to unsafe or unusable buildings. Developers and owners will resort to private insurance coverage, likely driving up property prices. With heightened risks in the housing market, insurance companies are poised to capitalise on this new profit opportunity.

The SIMPLEX exemplifies how prioritising the expectations of pro-growth economic stakeholders consistently blocks actions effectively aligned with the public interest, fostering cycles of makeshift solutions for extracting monetary value through increasingly outlandish means. One interviewee, a senior architect and manager of an architectural firm in Coimbra, emphasised the threat to the public interest the SIMPLEX represents. According to her, this legislation fails to engage local authorities constructively; instead, it seeks to dismiss them of their responsibility to safeguard public welfare by aligning with liberal principles. The SIMPLEX appears designed to dismantle the local state in favour of unchecked economic growth, undermining efforts for genuine planning system reorganisation geared towards fostering public well-being. The future is unclear, but the outlook is bleak for vulnerable households.

8. Conclusion

This article delved into the complex relationship between urban shrinkage, degrowth studies, and the housing sector. Empirical insights were gathered from interviews conducted in Coimbra, Portugal, alongside document analysis and news monitoring. The conclusions underscore the urgent need to address Coimbra's housing crisis and mitigate social inequality.

The article challenges the conventional wisdom of promoting indiscriminate economic growth as a panacea for societal well-being and prosperity. The evidence reveals that while the commodification of housing may fuel economic growth and finance national and local governments, it engenders severe social repercussions, making cities like Coimbra inhospitable for younger and vulnerable populations, thus leading to urban shrinkage. A revaluation of the economic value attached to housing to foster city-wide vitality is advocated, potentially increasing the availability of affordable housing, a critical need. Moreover, the housing crisis in Coimbra (and Portugal) is attributed to a national planning system and local authorities prioritising morphological rules and property rights over the public interest. Recommendations include redirecting the planning system focus on prioritising the public interest in new developments before granting development rights, abandoning morphological imperatives, and making the procedures required to grant building permits more predictable and faster (but not simplistic).

While acknowledging the overriding impact of European policies, this study proposes measures to improve the situation locally, including implementing a comprehensive housing plan, re-evaluating planning regulations, exempting younger generations from housing taxes, and promoting economic diversification. Caution is urged in reforming the system, though. The enforcement of SIMPLEX, a streamlined set of rules for new urban developments in Portugal published as national law in January 2024, is critiqued for increasing legal and technical uncertainties likely to escalate housing costs further. Future research should assess the impacts of this abrupt liberalisation of the Portuguese planning system.

Overall, this research cautions against equating promoting economic growth with advancing the public interest. A deliberate restructuring of planning systems rooted in economic degrowth theorisations is recommended instead to address the *shrinking for growth* paradox.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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ARTICLE

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Upwind Despite Headwind? Degrowth Transformations Amidst Shrinkage and Eroding Democracy in an East German Small Town

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Abstract

Spatial transformation follows the logic of a growth-oriented economy that values cities according to their place in the chain of capitalist wealth production. Many cities in East Germany have lost their significance as sites of production and are consequently facing population decline and the weakening of social bonds in the community. For this reason, citizens of the East German small town of Zella-Mehlis (state of Thuringia) have begun to reflect on alternative models for urban development. In this article, the process of arriving at a degrowth strategy, as provided by the academic discourse, will be documented. It will be demonstrated that the process of shrinkage has not only left little space for a degrowth planning approach put into practice. Moreover, the article reveals that the costs of the growth economy on society are not limited to population shrinkage, but also have a severe impact on the sociability of the local community. The rise of right-wing populists and climate change-denying actors mirrors the decreasing social ability for collective learning processes needed for a shift to a solidary degrowth strategy. However, the case study shows how ambivalent these developments are: Long-term participatory processes within the public–civic partnership framework of the Aufwind (German for upwind) initiative in Zella-Mehlis can challenge path dependencies and open new degrowth-inspired perspectives. The article is informed by many years of intensive field research in a qualitative mixed-method design and focuses on the close links between shrinkage processes, the local degrowth agenda, and the consequences of an eroding democracy.

Keywords

civil society; degrowth; East Germany; municipality; public–civic partnership; urban shrinkage

1. Introduction

By law, the German state of Thuringia must become climate-neutral by 2045 and will likely lose at least one-tenth of its population simultaneously (Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik, n.d.). These enormous transformation processes require decisive political and planning action, which can currently only be seen in rudimentary form. On the contrary, there are many indications that existing practices will prevail. In the field of tension between shrinking processes, socio-ecological transformation, and authoritarian and right-wing extremist political tendencies, this article puts Zella-Mehlis, a left-behind small town in Thuringia, in the spotlight. Instead of a one-sided rejection of any capacity for transformation, the focus is on the ambivalent perspectives of actors and their sociability.

Zella-Mehlis is a small town that developed in 1919 from the merger of small communities in Zella and Mehlis. Zella-Mehlis is part of the remote and sparsely populated south of the Eastern German state of Thuringia, with the nearest large city of Erfurt 44 km away (cf. Figure 1). As part of the Thuringian Forest region, which is economically structurally weak, Zella-Mehlis is also connected to the so-called Rennsteig, which is important for tourism as a hiking trail of national rank. In recent years, the population has stabilized at around 12,000. The population of 16,000 from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) era has not been reached since then and has now fallen to around 10,000 (cf. Figure 2). As the double town of Zella-Mehlis, in contrast to Suhl (Eckardt, 2015), was not occupied with the dismantling of large vacant housing estates from the GDR, a future-oriented discussion and an active civil society was able to establish itself relatively soon after 1990. This is reflected in a lively association system and the Aufwind (German for upwind) initiative, which was supported by a broad alliance of citizens, some of whom also came from the former opposition in the GDR.

However, degrowth transformations, also and especially in shrinking regions, must not close their eyes to the political realities—namely the erosion of liberal democracies in Central Europe. In 2023, the openly right-wing extremist, racist, and authoritarian party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) had consistently achieved over 30% in polls ("AfD mit hohen Werten in Wahlumfragen," 2024). This party thus has a considerable influence on

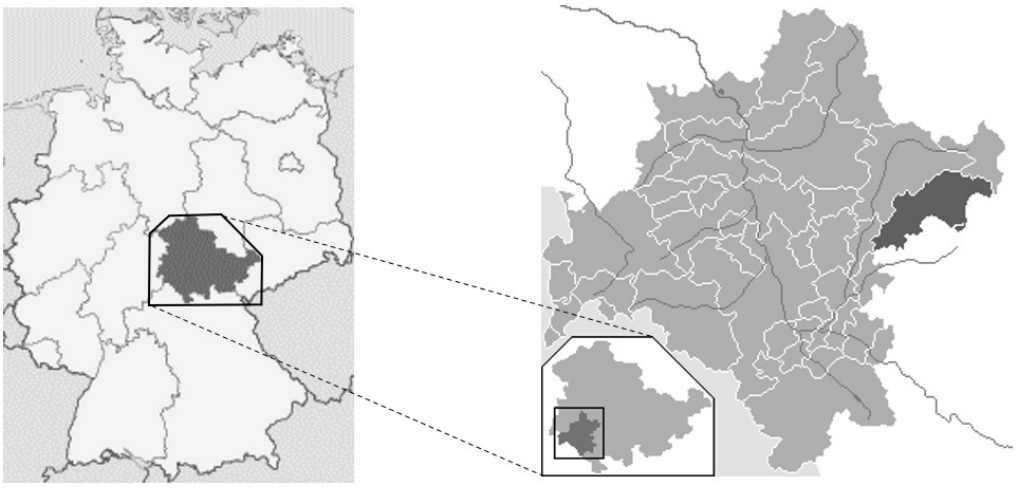

Figure 1. Location of Zella-Mehlis in the district of Schmalkalden-Meiningen in the federal state (Free State) of Thuringia in the Federal Republic of Germany. Own compilation based on maps from Wikimedia Commons (2005, 2007).

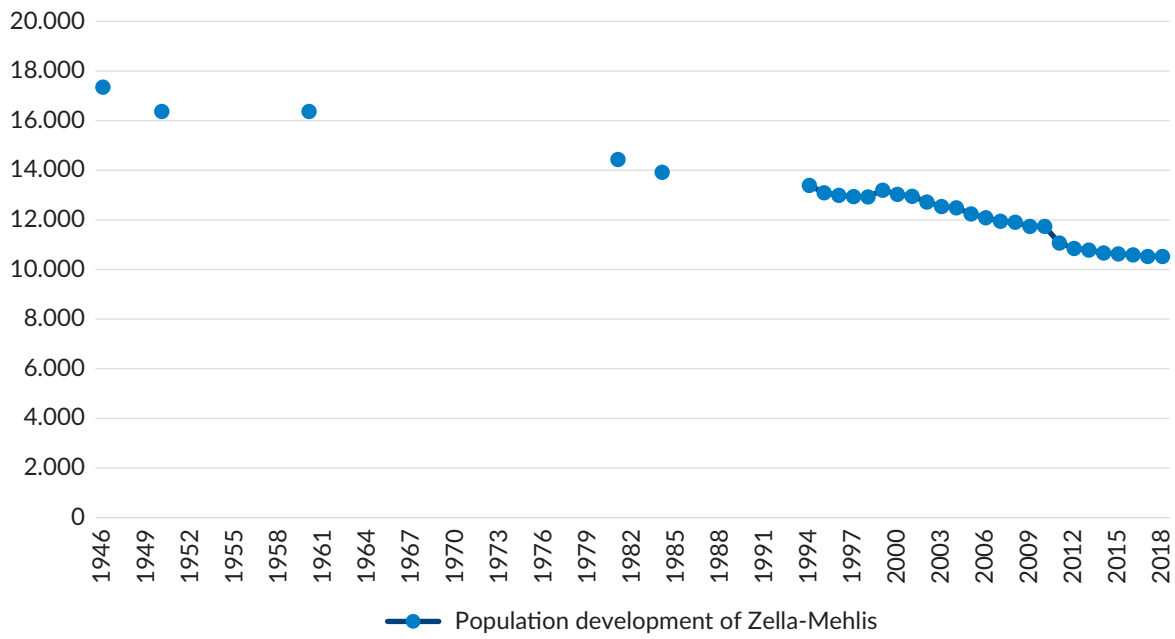

Figure 2. Population development of Zella-Mehlis between 1946 and 2018 before the incorporation of Bernshausen. For the years up to 1994, unfortunately, no continuous data availability could be established. Sources: Thüringer Landesamt für Statistik (n.d.) and Zentralverwaltung für Statistik der DDR (n.d.).

the political culture in Thuringia (Richter, 2022; Steiner, 2023) and also polarizes with its opposition to climate policy (Adam & Meyringer, 2019). In particular, the party was able to establish Thuringia and Saxony as its political homeland within just 10 years (Bergmann et al., 2023; Bergrich, 2019). This electoral success takes place in the context of significant problems with organized right-wing extremism, which is already intimidating cities in Thuringia with various forms of violence (Eckardt, 2022). Given the widespread rejection of ecological issues and the implementation of degrowth approaches, initiatives such as Aufwind appear to be particularly worthy of investigation.

This article therefore intends to provide an insight into how this initiative has developed in Zella-Mehlis—against the regional and general trend—that is openly committed to a degrowth policy and has initiated a bottom-up urban society perspective in different ways. The example raises further questions about which strategies discussed in the specialist literature for implementing the degrowth agenda have so far been discussed. In particular, the question of the relationship to the state (D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020) and its institutions becomes relevant because of the need to strengthen civil society against right-wing tendencies. This also includes the question of the political answer to the shrinking processes in the Zella-Mehlis area.

The article is organized as follows. First, we will conceptually discuss the connection between shrinking processes in Thuringia, the shift to the right, and the necessary adjustment of degrowth strategies. Then, based on a presentation of our observations on the processes in Zella-Mehlis since 2018, we will show how degrowth activists and municipal practitioners have developed their perspectives and activities since then. Finally, conclusions for the ambivalent aspects of a degrowth strategy under the conditions of shrinkage and strengthened authoritarianism will be discussed from the example of Zella-Mehlis.

2. Urban Shrinkage and Degrowth Amidst Eroding Democracy: Key Concepts and Their Relationships

To gain a focused overview, a systematic, analytical form of literature review is adapted here. Rather than presenting and defining the individual sub-areas of the problem individually—shrinkage, eroding democracy, and degrowth—the focus is placed directly on the respective relationships between them. This is intended to quickly get to the core of the multiple problems on the ground and to illustrate the interconnectedness and interdependence of current overlapping crisis dynamics. This is intended to highlight that it is less about what, for example, municipal shrinkage processes are in themselves, but rather what they mean in the context of growing authoritarianism with actors that work actively towards a degrowth agenda. This procedure is also intended to take account of the (in)ability to act on the part of municipal actors. The literature review refers to relevant literature primarily from the research field of urban planning, urban studies, and planning theory. The areas of tension identified in this theoretical manner have been critically examined, differentiated, and expanded through the empirical results.

2.1. Urban Shrinkage and Degrowth

Urban shrinkage and degrowth are related concepts, albeit with distinct meanings. Urban shrinkage refers to the decline in population, economic activity, or physical infrastructure in a previously thriving urban area or city (Hollander et al., 2009; Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015). Bartholomae and Schoenberg (2019) claim that only the combination of both population and economic decline can be defined as urban shrinkage. According to many authors, who have increasingly focused on the shrinkage processes in Central Europe since the 1990s, it is characterized by a decrease in the number of residents, vacant or abandoned buildings, and a reduction in public services and amenities. Urban shrinkage is typically associated with various factors such as deindustrialization, suburbanization, demographic changes, and economic downturns. It can have significant social, economic, and environmental impacts on affected cities, including increased poverty, unemployment, and disinvestment.

Conversely, degrowth is a broader socio-economic and political concept that promotes a deliberate reduction in economic production and consumption to achieve ecological sustainability and social justice (cf. D'Alisa & Kallis, 2020; Hickel, 2019; Khmara & Kronenberg, 2022). It is a response to the negative impacts of unlimited economic growth on the environment and social well-being. Degrowth advocates argue that societies should prioritize human well-being, community, fair distribution, and the environment over unlimited economic expansion (Schmelzer et al., 2022). Whereas urban shrinkage is a specific phenomenon related to declining urban areas, degrowth encompasses a wider perspective on sustainable and equitable development, including rethinking economic systems, resource consumption, and social structures. Urban shrinkage can be seen as a manifestation of the need for degrowth in urban areas, as it challenges the dominant paradigm of continuous economic growth and calls for alternative models of urban development. The blanket equation of degrowth with ongoing shrinkage processes and often subsequent austerity policies is particularly common in political discourse, which is why many degrowth scholars emphasize the essential difference. Hickel (2019, p. 66, emphasis in the original) notes that "while austerity calls for scarcity in order to generate more growth, degrowth calls for abundance *in order to render growth unnecessary*."

Connecting these related, complex processes in detail, with a particular focus on new horizons for urban planning, is an ambitious undertaking. In recent years, several articles have been published that lament the

"missing dialogue" (Xue, 2022) between degrowth and spatial planning. Nevertheless, there are now numerous articles that shed light on this field in a structured way (Brokow-Loga & Eckardt, 2020; Krähmer, 2022; Mocca, 2020; Savini, 2021; Schmid, 2022; see Krähmer & Brokow-Loga, 2024, for an overview). To this end, the Municipal Degrowth Network and the Postgrowth Cities Coalition were founded in 2021 and 2023, respectively (Postgrowth Cities Coalition, n.d.). Previous operationalizations either focus on the differentiation of municipal sectors such as housing and transport (Khmara & Kronenberg, 2022), the demystification of vanguard cities (Krähmer, 2022), or the role of conflicting interpretations of nature (Brokow-Loga & Krüger, 2023). Until now, much of the research on urban degrowth bypasses the shrinking periphery, with Khmara and Kronenberg's (2023) comparative analysis as an exception. Vice versa, the shrinking cities discourse fails to go into detail about degrowth-related perspectives, with Schindler's (2016) work on Detroit being a notable exception to this.

Thus far, however, an explicitly actor-related analysis has been lacking, which is one of the purposes of this article. This goes in line with the discourse on shrinkage, e.g., Hollander et al. (2009) identify, among other things, a special need for empirical studies on how planners, policy-makers, and other stakeholders operate within a shrinking city and how they conceptualize decline in economic activity or population loss. As Wiechmann and Bontje (2015) remind us, each shrinkage situation is unique and necessitates individual strategies and planning measures. The ambivalent strategies and positionalities of central agents—city council and city administration, businesses, and civil society initiatives—in a particular small town will therefore be examined in more detail here.

A central area of tension is the integration of the local experience of shrinkage into a planning reality that continues to be geared towards growth-creation:

> Planning in a structurally shrinking city or region is in many respects very different from planning in a city or region experiencing long-term growth. While planning laws, systems and strategies in most European countries are still mostly growth-oriented, possibilities to adapt to a situation in which shrinkage may become the rule rather than the exception should be considered more seriously than before. (Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015, p. 9)

While degrowth points to the social and ecological costs of a society-wide focus on the growth dogma, urban shrinkage already serves to a certain extent as illustrative material for the effects of this focus, and the lack of growth rates is seen as a deficit of a municipality per se. However, the municipal agency is limited in the face of the growth imperatives that have been embedded in the planning system (Xue, 2022, p. 410), such as municipal financing. In empirical research, particular attention must therefore be paid to the extent to which references are made to systemic growth constraints, criticizing them at the state or federal level. The question also arises as to whether the long-term shrinkage is accepted as a reality or whether it is much more likely that innovation-led political and planning strategies (Bartholomae & Schoenberg, 2019) will be used to stimulate economic and demographic growth again. However, the hope of a return to growth that improves the causes of poverty, inequality, and exclusion is often an illusion (Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015, p. 164). Thus, how far the degrowth ambitions result in a concrete approach to shrinkage is a key question, as Khmara and Kronenberg (2023, p. 3) rightly coined the variety of these approaches from "business-as-usual pro-growth policies to smart decline and right-sizing" towards radically new concepts.

A second area of tension deals with the question of the extent to which the experience of shrinkage promotes the capacity to act sustainably and adapt to a low-carbon world (e.g., Tumber, 2011)—for example through increased food production in the surrounding area, dense settlement patterns, and emission-reduced transport connections in a city of short distances (currently discussed under the catchphrase "15-minute city"). However, some authors point out that this intuition could be mistaken and that per capita emissions could instead increase even in shrinking areas. In this context, Großmann et al. (2013, p. 224) state:

> The contemporary reality of shrinkage can be fairly different, often resulting in a rise of emissions per capita. Shrunken, perforated urban structures require extra heating. Various networks of technical infrastructure, utilities, and transport become under-used and less efficient. On top, the fiscal stress of shrinkage hinders a compact city strategy. Given that political priorities are often geared towards stabilizing and re-growing the city as well as increasing competitiveness, what role do environmental policies play? What priority does climate change mitigation have in shrinking cities?

A third focus of the debate is dedicated to the question of concrete governance on the ground. Khmara and Kronenberg (2023, p. 3) state that "the halt of growth tracks in shrinking cities seems to provide possibilities for more non-profit-oriented uses of spaces, implementing new economic options and pathways, and creating niches for experimenting and innovation." However, alternative approaches and transformational policies would need institutional reconfiguration, shifts in the principles of planning and urban policy as well as in concrete power relations (Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015). Eventually, this raises questions about the specific degrowth coalitions (Béal et al., 2019) and potential partnerships between public, private, and civic actors (Eraydin & Özatağan, 2021) as well as the question of embedding bottom-up approaches in local cultures and institutional configurations (Bernt et al., 2014; Schlappa, 2017).

2.2. What Has All This Got to Do With (Eroding) Democracy?

In planning discourse, there is a lack of consideration of the current turning away of many people from liberal democracy and the associated idea of participatory and deliberative urban planning. The trend towards authoritarian notions of politics and, intrinsically linked to this, of urban planning that has been observed for a number of years, has led to enormous changes in the general political culture in some countries across Europe and the US. The strengthening of authoritative and climate change-denying political parties at the national level is being observed with great concern. However, the local effects have received less attention in public and professional discourse. Germany offers a good example for a better understanding of how the different local circumstances reinforce the authoritarian tendencies in society on the one hand, and on the other hand, it is also possible to observe to what extent possible effects on local strategies for degrowth transformation can still be implemented there. Although discourses on post-growth planning (cf. Ferreira & von Schönfeld, 2020; Lamker & Schulze Dieckhoff, 2022) in particular are gaining momentum, the analysis of the links between eroding municipal democracy and growth-critical municipal governance approaches in the climate crisis remains rudimentary.

In fact, the connected but partly contradictory processes of degrowth and shrinkage (and in between) do not occur in a political vacuum. On the contrary, the focus must be on how the planning policy processes in light of an eroding democracy have to be dealt with in the area under investigation. The analysis of German cities shows a double chain of causes. First, in a growth-driven society, where shrinking processes take place,

social crises intensify. This is particularly the case where there is no political culture of understanding and pragmatic approach to local issues. Second, where strong local politics and civil society fail to do this, strategies by anti-democratic groups can gain a foothold. This is achieved through different strategies (Stanley, 2020). An approach that has been particularly successful here is one that changes the political agenda in such a way that the issues of socio-ecological transformation are not seen as important, but other societal challenges are placed in the foreground with a threat scenario. This can be seen very clearly using the example of East Germany, where the AfD and right-wing movements such as Thügida and Pegida have succeeded in placing the issue of migration on the political agenda and public debate as an all-determining and priority issue (Eckardt, 2020). This new political orientation succeeded above all in those municipalities that can be described as peripheral in the changed political economy.

Despite a long-lasting economic boom in the 2010s, Germany did not develop regionally even growth. The growth economy created contrastingly developing areas, with a persistently strong disparity between the rich and economically strong Southwest of Germany and the poor and economically weak East (Küpper & Peters, 2019). This also applies to the geographic constellations within Eastern Germany, where highly profitable business locations such as Jena are located in a declining region. The new geography of the post-Fordist economy centralizes processes of increasing value in a few centralized places, while in the periphery, there are at most supplier companies, consumption, and the minimal provision of social infrastructure from the state (Schmalz et al., 2021). Progressive alliances for socio-ecological transformation, especially degrowth proposals, are mostly carried out locally where no peripheralization processes take place—this may also be due to the increased interest in these metropolitan regions from scholars in this field (Schmid, 2022). In the economic periphery, which neither receives much attention politically nor in academic or public discourse, organizations that can use the dissatisfaction of the citizens in view of this neglect to pursue their anti-democratic goals can therefore advertise themselves successfully. The connection between peripheralization and the emergence of right-wing populism and anti-environmental politics is not only clear in the Eastern German regions, where the boom town of Jena had an AfD share of only 10% in the local elections in 2019, whereas in the neighboring city of Gera, three times as many people voted for right-wing populists (Eckardt, 2011). The city of Gera has long suffered significantly from the consequences of deindustrialization, withdrawal, shrinkage, and poverty due to the closure of mining.

According to Krastev (2017), right-wing populism is particularly strong in regions that have seen a significant loss of inhabitants over the last 25 years due to immigration to other regions. For the (often old or poorly educated) people left behind, this not only means a so-called "demographic panic" (van der Walt, 2020) but also the loss of long-term figures of identification. Can degrowth approaches contribute to new narratives of the good life for all? It is precisely these specific degrowth narratives, which aim for frugal, primal, and sufficient individual lifestyles and understand localization as anti-globalization and closure, that can connect to these feelings and fears of loss (Benoist, 2023; Wilmsen, 2020). On the other hand, co-optation and overlaps with far-right or fascist agendas are also quickly apparent. In this context, Wilmsen (2020) states that the degrowth movement, at least in Germany, failed to develop an "anti-fascist consensus." In addition to the areas of tension mentioned above, this means a further nuance to the research design. The embedding of planning research in the conditions of eroding democratic systems requires a closer look at the attitude towards authoritarian or far-right ideologies, especially within the groups of actors who react to shrinkage processes with degrowth approaches.

3. Methodology

The data generated and discussed in this article is based on qualitative social research in a mixed-method case study design. The procedure was characterized by an explorative approach and iterative loops. The main methods used were taken from the toolbox of social science and urban studies: During the research period, semi-structured expert interviews, moderated workshop discussions and qualitatively evaluated workshops, urban planning surveys, and participatory observations during field trips were used. The variety of methods was chosen to gain an extensive understanding of the local political and planning processes, but also to be able to react flexibly to new social developments at a micro level (local elections) or macro level (Covid-19 pandemic). The starting point was the preliminary considerations on the connection between degrowth approaches and de-democratization processes in a shrinking small town, which are explained in more detail in the state of research in this article. However, the categories for evaluating the observations and interviews were formed, reviewed, and expanded both deductively and inductively.

The research results from a cooperation between the Aufwind initiative, the town of Zella-Mehlis, and the authors. The initiative for this came from members of the initiative, who sought conceptual support and approaches for reflecting on their actions from the university. The research period covers the years 2018 to 2024 and can be divided into four phases (Figure 3). In the first exploratory phase, there were intensive discussions with individual committed supporters of the association and local politicians, including the incumbent mayor. This phase can be understood as an orientation phase in which the committed members of the association collected content-related suggestions from academic contributions and the spatial planning debate (Brokow-Loga & Eckardt, 2020). The first phase was completed by a public event, forging connections and gaining the trust of the stakeholders.

In the second phase of the research, a project with urban planning students from the Bauhaus University Weimar was initialized. The project was able to follow up on the ongoing preparations for the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the twin town of Zella-Mehlis in 2019. Opportunities and pitfalls to local action for a degrowth transformation should be identified. In this "stocktaking phase," the situation was systematically

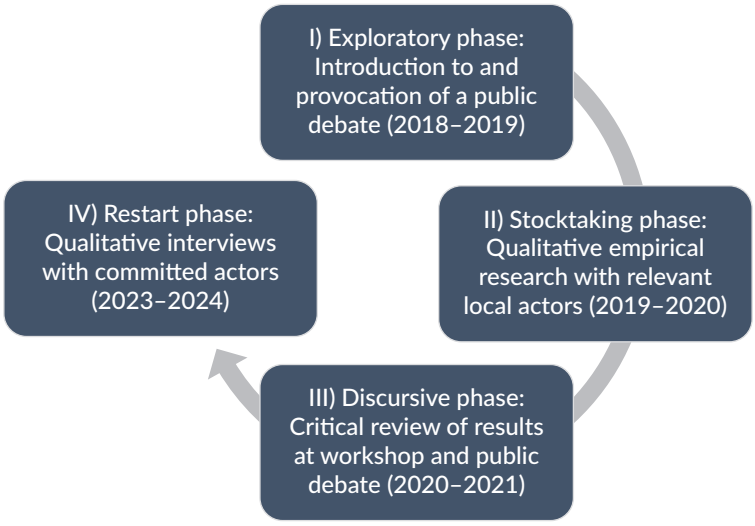

Figure 3. Visualization of research methods and process.

explored and interviews were conducted with 14 actors, including four economic actors, four political actors, and six civil society actors. As qualitative research is about selecting cases for the survey that are particularly important for answering the research question, a purposive sampling process was used here to identify exposed local actors from previously defined fields relevant to planning policy (civil society, urban policy and administration, and business). The structured interviews were then transcribed, anonymized, and systematically coded using qualitative content analysis (direct and paraphrased statements are cited in this article in anonymized form, e.g., Ref A). Sampling and analysis bias were reduced by triangulation and verification with other data sources; interview conception, conducting, and coding were carried out by several people; finally, the third phase incorporates a review by people with local and thematic knowledge.

The findings were presented and discussed in January 2020 at an expert workshop at Bauhaus University Weimar and at a public and well-attended event in Zella-Mehlis, which can be seen as the third phase. The feedback from citizens on the results presented confirmed the conclusions drawn from the interviews. The main topics of participation, politics, potential, nature, and sustainability were used for a subsequent workshop to be able to translate the process of cooperation between the municipal administration and the University into concrete projects of socio-ecological transformation.

However, for various reasons, this did not take place. By far the most significant was the Covid-19 pandemic, which meant a kind of restart of the cooperation could only be initiated in 2023 (fourth phase). Renewed interviews with committed actors gave the authors an insight into how the town and the exchange between its inhabitants was not only slowed down in its transformation by the pandemic but also how the town was strongly affected by the changed political culture in the state.

4. Aufwind Case Study: Upwind for Municipal Degrowth Through Increased Participation in Troubling Times

Aufwind is an initiative of the Art and Culture association and the town of Zella-Mehlis. It emerged from many years of voluntary work in the region, in particular from the local Transition Town group known as the Wendeinitiative. According to its description, the locally committed initiative focuses on:

> A design practice that is human- and nature-friendly and has a unifying view of the social fabric. The focus is on raising awareness and addressing current local and global challenges. We attach great importance to sustainable thinking and action in all areas. (Aufwind Zella-Mehlis, n.d.-a)

Thus, degrowth references are both implicit and explicit, though expanding the involvement of citizens in local future planning takes center stage (Roth, 2023, p. 126). The initiative's main tools are evening lectures, storytelling events, a repair café, guided tours on specific topics, and publicity campaigns.

It should be noted that, interestingly, the operational framework for this was a public–civic partnership (Frantzeskaki et al., 2017) between the municipality in the form of the Aufwind initiative, whose content-related work on the topic of socio-ecological transformation was significantly supported by the administration over several years with two staff positions. For a municipality in this population size category, this approach is rarely seen. In addition to the employees, who mainly take on organizational tasks, around 10 people between the ages of 20 and 80 years from the local population and neighboring villages are

involved in the initiative. From 2002 onward, events were organized with a supra-regional impact and with well-known critics of growth such as Harald Welzer (Aufwind Zella-Mehlis, n.d.-b).

A great deal of openness among many actors towards the interaction of social and ecological pressures for action and participatory means of overcoming (or at least accepting) shrinkage could be observed in the first and second phase of the observations (2018–2020). This followed, among other things, projects such as the permanent support for the Edible City project, which was used to grow food for their own town. For example, the initiative first had to deal with the topic intensively and organize many learning processes, such as the exchange with Andernach, a particularly exemplary community for local food production that some involved actors visited on an excursion (Ref H; cf. Sartison & Artmann, 2020). In this phase, a certain normativity in favor of degrowth policies could be observed, with climate adaptation and reduction of private traffic as general entry points.

It seems clear that the long periods of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis when group meetings on site were complicated or even impossible had a negative impact on civil society and, thus, the degrowth activities in Zella-Mehlis. As one person stated during the third phase of the observation, the citizens were self-isolating even after the end of the pandemic, developing rather private attitudes (Ref C). However, it is very clear that the participatory-deliberative approach was severely curtailed precisely by the restrictions and polarizations (Brokow-Loga, 2022) of the Covid-19 pandemic and has not been able to regain momentum since.

5. Local Actors and Their Degrowth-Related Agenda

As has been argued more comprehensively elsewhere (Brokow-Loga & Eckardt, 2020; Brokow-Loga & Krüger, 2023), this view of the individual sectors and thematic areas of planning and municipal policy is insufficient to address the totality of the transformation. Rather, a comprehensive view of the ascribed roles and power relations in the local context is needed to examine the heterogeneous motivations, drivers, and hurdles for municipal degrowth in shrinking regions. In the following, we therefore focus on the agency of actors from the fields of civil society (Section 5.1), municipal council and administration (Section 5.2), and companies (Section 5.3).

5.1. Civil Society and Public–Civic Partnerships

There are comparable strong and interlinked association structures in Zella-Mehlis (Roth, 2023, p. 127) as well as communication and consultation channels to the city administration, particularly through the senior and youth advisory councils. Actors from the civil society in Zella-Mehlis attest to themselves that they play a key role in the preservation and further development of the municipality: “Well, if it weren’t for the work of the association, Zella-Mehlis would already look old” (Ref D). This self-image is even increased to a unique selling point: “We live in a village here, the culture of the village is association life” (Ref J). However, the positive contribution of the municipality in terms of civil commitment to the redesign is emphasized: “It is certainly also up to the mayor, the city administration” (Ref C). Within this context, the Aufwind initiative can be understood as a public–civic partnership (Frantzeskaki et al., 2017, p. 75), as it is supported by the municipal cultural association and financed by the municipality despite tight municipal budgets. However, we would be careful to characterize the constellation between the administration and the art and culture association as a “degrowth coalition” (Béal et al., 2019; Eraydin & Özatağan, 2021), due to its omnipresence of participation in redistribution and structural changes.

According to statements from the interviewees, there is a small group of citizens who call themselves the city caretakers (Stadtkümmerer) and consciously seek an exchange with the residents and check where there is room for improvement (Ref D). This group was not associated with the Aufwind initiative but was initiated by the town administration itself. Although this group could be assigned tasks and be institutionally supported in the future, similar to neighborhood management, however, the danger of a gradual (self)responsibilization of civil society for tasks that are the responsibility of the (welfare) state is not considered and is hardly mentioned in any of the interviews (cf. Jessop, 2020, pp. 149–150). This tendency should be taken particularly seriously, as the Stadtkümmerer group was apparently initiated top–down. Nevertheless, participation and deliberation are the central pillars of the transformation efforts in Zella-Mehlis. From community wasteland development over workshops to extensive citizen surveys, it has been shown that the efforts in this area have paid off in recent years, as more and more people have been motivated and the generation change is noticeable (Ref B; Ref K). "In all things, especially with what happened here in Zella-Mehlis, the population…is 80% behind it" (Ref K).

Others call for the socio-ecological expansion of natural resources into the cityscape itself: "There [in Andernach] the entire city is actually a bed that anyone can use….I think that makes sense here too, it just needs to be expanded a little further" (Ref H). There is also a desire for short distances to everyday infrastructure: "That I still have my baker…that I can still walk there as an old person to see a doctor…that I also have shopping facilities within walking distance" (Ref D). These highlights from organized civil society in Zella-Mehlis make it clear how intertwined social and ecological issues are (Roth, 2023, p. 132). With this awareness, they demand the preservation of social standards by ecologically transforming the city. The future of Zella-Mehlis is thought of here in very specific projects, such as changing the street space in favor of cycling, expanding the Edible City project, and improving the quality of local green spaces and woodland that refer to equally specific needs. These demands conceal starting points for a socio-ecological transformation, although this would require longer-term vision and strategy work (which is only partly visible). The self-made culture that characterizes the Aufwind initiative is clearly reflected in the activities of the other associations and civil society projects.

5.2. Municipal Council and Administration

Politically, with the election of Richard Rossel in 2012 and his re-election in 2019, the town population has also opted for a candidate who, as an independent, is perceived as pragmatic and future-oriented (Roth, 2023, p. 127). The national parties (CDU, Linke, SPD) have a share of only about 35% in the town council, while the three local parties Freie Wähler (German for Free Voters), Bürgerinitiative Rennsteig, and Verantwortung für Benshausen have a mathematical majority. In a way, the independent voter associations elude the traditional left-right scheme, as they were founded and operate partly on the basis of particular issues and events. According to Wurthmann et al. (2023, p. 99), the party Free Voters can be considered as a "decent alternative for conservatives" concerning their agenda: Voters often tend to be generally dissatisfied with democratic outputs. The right-wing AfD party only achieved 11% in the last local elections, while it received over 17% in other Thuringian cities. However, polls and electoral successes in nearby district elections suggest that the right-wing actors are gaining strength here as well ("AfD mit hohen Werten in Wahlumfragen," 2024).

After the city of Zella-Mehlis initially focused on stabilizing its financial budget, various necessary projects in connection with funding from the EU, the federal government, and the state of Thuringia have been

implemented over the past seven years (Ref B; Ref E). In this context, a connecting road between Zella and Mehlis was built, the Mehliser market was renewed, and investments were made in the redesign of the Lerchenberg and the station situation, which will be explained in more detail in the following two paragraphs. Some interviewees emphasize that the will to spatially transform the city could not least be attributed to the mayor and the sports clubs (Ref E; Ref K).

In terms of the transformation issues the council and administration are dealing with, three themes are ubiquitous on the ground. First, this concerns transport and mobility infrastructures. A good example in this area is the redesign of the station forecourt with funding from the state of Thuringia: In recent years, a hub for southern Thuringia with connections to all modes of transport has been created here. The local Verkehrswende (German for traffic transition; discursive term from the German debate, which can mean both a comprehensive and radical mobility turnaround and a gradual increase in electromobility) in the topographically challenging region could be advanced in particular through the e-bike boom. Second, the focus is on regional integration, with the "eternal rivalry between Suhl and Zella-Mehlis" (Ref A), which prevents cooperation, as a pitfall. Here, however, politics is seen as responsible for promoting regional ties to jointly face "changes such as municipality mergers [and] administrative communities" (Ref J). A current development here certainly concerns the controversial creation of a South Thuringian Uppercenter of the towns of Suhl, Zella-Mehlis, Oberhof, and Schleusingen.

The third topic, which according to several interview partners influences municipal decision-making, is contributions to an ecologically sustainable and climate-friendly development. The omnipresent starting point is the surrounding Thuringian Forest, which must be preserved and protected, which offers local recreation and is a resource for the development of sustainable tourism. The best example of this is the redesign of the area on the Lerchenberg—a redesign that was controversially discussed among the population and initially met with little acceptance. The construction of the barrier-free monument entrances, the arrangement of the seating niches and steps as well as the creation of the parking areas at the monument entrance, and the planting work were financed from the funds currently available in the budget, whereas the asphalt paving of the circular path was funded by the European Regional Development Fund (Stadt Zella-Mehlis, n.d.). In the meantime, however, it seems to be popular with the residents—especially the children—and the measure seems to have a positive effect on the coexistence of town and forest (Ref B; Ref E). The Aufwind initiative may also have contributed to this growing acceptance by organizing workshops on nature-oriented gardening and establishing beehives and insect hotels at Lerchenberg.

5.3. Economic Actors

Originally known for its weapons industry, the comparatively small companies of Zella-Mehlis are now also known for precision engineering in the automotive industry and tools used in auto parts supply or processing. Research and development seems to be underrepresented in Zella-Mehlis, with more cooperation with universities such as the TU Ilmenau or the FH Schmalkalden demanded by interviewees. However, a long-term approach appears to be difficult due to the high fluctuation of the students, as most of them would leave the region after completing their studies (Ref E).

One of the challenges for the municipal economy is compliance with the social, ecological, and economic pillars of sustainability (Knox & Mayer, 2009, p. 109)—or, to make it even more complex for the actors, with

a serious engagement in the sense of a "strong sustainability" (Dedeurwaerdere, 2014). In small towns, local companies promote the community of the place in a special way. Economic interests are combined with other values of coexistence (Knox & Mayer, 2009) which puts the focus on the credo of cooperation instead of competition. As shown in the Zella-Mehlis case, the creation of sustainability can only be made possible through participation and cultural encounters. This underlines the relevance of municipally active companies as potential sponsors for events of all kinds. Therefore, one possible development path is to strengthen cooperation between the local population and local companies in order to create "alternative economic spaces" (Knox & Mayer, 2009, p. 117). In the example of Zella-Mehlis, the strengthening of existing cooperation between the administration and civil society in the form of the Aufwind initiative, whose events and campaigns could be supported by economic stakeholders in the form of sponsorship, is also discussed here. The alternative economic strategies analyzed by Knox and Mayer (2009) and others thus appear here in the potential of public–civic-private partnerships.

Another mission for Zella-Mehlis is to continue to avoid dependence on (fossil) monostructures in order to be able to generate greater flexibility in economic structures that can adapt to environmental requirements and design new visions (cf. Rydin, 2023). Reliable supply structures are to be created and preserved that make it possible for the monetary service to remain within the city and prevent residents from spending the money outside of the community—a challenge many local actors point towards (Ref B; Ref E; Ref K). In the absence of regional models, there is no demand for regional currencies. However, this can be linked to Douthwaite's (2012) position that only the introduction of debt-free regional and local currencies, among others, could lead to degrowth by design instead of degrowth by disaster or catastrophic collapse.

Undoubtedly, the geographical location of the city and forestry is the pivotal point for this transformation. The upheavals taking place, especially the fluctuations in world market prices and the disruption of global value chains, can be an important opportunity for companies to initiate the shift towards a more sustainable economy. The strategy of local actors in this regard was based on showing the benefits of the local economy with sufficient ways of life, often contrasting it with a tendentially negatively associated globalized world order. However, this reveals the tension that has also been repeatedly described in research on municipal degrowth approaches (Schneider & Nelson, 2018), far-right localism (Benoist, 2023), and the "local trap" (Purcell, 2006): If local narratives only emphasize local strengths without mentioning the web of (global) relationships, this may encourage parochialism and far-right isolationist strategies. Even if no concrete personal links between degrowth-oriented and right-wing extremist actors can be identified, there is an argumentative openness and integrability that points to a merging of the camps. Thus, the research in Zella-Mehlis ultimately confirms Wilmsen's (2020) statement that a "clear line" is missing: "The post-growth spectrum in Germany lacks an anti-fascist consensus."

6. Conclusion: A Lot of Headwind for a New Hope

In the following, conclusions for the ambivalent perspectives of a degrowth strategy under the conditions of shrinkage and strengthened authoritarianism will be discussed from the example of Zella-Mehlis. In the literature review, we first focused on whether new objectives can indeed be achieved within the existing system; second, whether sustainable measures are really being taken; third, which governance models are (newly) emerging; and fourth, whether this ultimately contains or strengthens far-right tendencies.

First, the limitations of local or municipal degrowth approaches quickly become apparent, as they inevitably remain trapped in a growth-oriented planning system. Without path changes to sustainable development (Liu, 2020) or even a questioning of the paradigms of growth and development at the state or federal level, one cannot expect much from municipal policies. Ultimately, it remains an ambivalent relationship that is subject to micro–macro interactions: In this perspective, transformations in financing, funding, and requirement structures at the EU, state, and federal levels would include a mandatory municipal task of climate protection that is consistently financed. At the same time, these changes are neither conceivable nor feasible without experience, pressure, and scientific knowledge from the local level. However, the example of Zella-Mehlis demonstrates that a one-sided municipal powerlessness is by no means the case.

Concerning the second perspective opened up, it must be made clear that, beyond small, incremental measures, no comprehensive degrowth-related strategy for dealing with shrinkage could be designed. The shrinkage process in no way implies a substantial reduction of urban metabolism—rather, the precarious financial situation prevents a clear change towards a strategy of post-fossil energy, mobility, and housing. This finding is in line with Großmann et al.'s (2013) skepticism towards climate change mitigation in shrinking cities. Yet, it is precisely the advocacy for the local community and for communication and democracy that has acted as a door-opener and confidence-building measure in Zella-Mehlis. The prerequisite for this was the municipal assumption of costs for a few staff positions, connections to external partners from science and communication, and government funding programs. Following Mallach et al. (2017), the political will to address the problem and present positive framings can be recognized as a decisive factor here. In this way, thinking social and environmental dimensions of transformation together seems to succeed, but only incrementally.

Third, the governance system developed in Zella-Mehlis seems to be highly reliant on short-term public–civic agreements and a few persons instead of a stable governance structure. What the case study tells us is that participation and communication culture are key to navigating through governance transformations—they only emerge from the joint practice of storytelling and listening. Instead of explicit work on degrowth principles, the communicative and open approach often helped in Zella-Mehlis. As Gebauer et al. (2023, pp. 13–14) point out, transformation does not take place "on the ruins of post-socialism," but "with the ruins of post-socialism"—it thus remains shaped by pre-existing institutions and practices. Especially in East German communities like Zella-Mehlis, it seems necessary to open time and space for exchange about past practices and stories of loss and pain. Ultimately, the Aufwind initiative has done just that again and again—through open discussion groups, lectures, and the opportunity to tell each other's stories. However, only if these ideas can be embedded substantially in the local planning system and culture, can the door be unlocked for an open-mindedness towards an even more comprehensive transformation that is yet to come.

Last but not least, it was noticeable in the communication with the public and the events held that an individualizing logic towards frugal lifestyles and incremental transition strategies tended to come into play, associated with particular parts of the degrowth spectrum. The popular post-growth theorist Niko Paech, who was invited by the initiative and quoted several times, is often criticized in the degrowth debate for leaving out power relations, social justice, or gender issues (Dannemann & Holthaus, 2018). Wilmsen (2020, pp. 1–2) also points out that slogans such as "Liberation from Excess" (Paech, 2012) can easily be hijacked by right-wing and far-right actors and have already been appropriated, for example by the Thuringian fascist Björn Höcke under his pseudonym Landolf Ladig (Wilmsen, 2020, p. 1). However, even if the

consumer-critical, back-to-nature, and individualizing perspectives had the upper hand, guests such as Harald Welzer also critically and explicitly discussed right-wing populism on site in 2018 (Aufwind Zella-Mehlis, n.d.-b). The elaboration and dissemination of concepts such as open localism (Schneider & Nelson, 2018) could possibly provide a solution path, not only for Zella-Mehlis.

Despite the urgent need for a just socio-ecological transformation, the local political culture is increasingly influenced by the continuing rise of right-wing actors. During the ongoing research for this article, a far-right politician has won the position of a county administrator in the neighboring county (Landkreis) of Sonneberg, although precisely this party is assessed by the Thuringian Office for the Protection of the Constitution as assuredly extreme right-wing. Even if many local actors are currently turning much of their attention to the upcoming 2024 state elections, it is worth taking a look at the long-term horizon, where the combination of degrowth and shrinkage will continue to put the planning system and democracy to the test.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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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 Levanto 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 Levanto 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 "*décroisance*," 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 "*décroisance*" 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 m^3 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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