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## Being on the Losing Side of Global Urban Development - The Limits to Managing Urban Decline

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# Being on the Losing Side of Global Urban Development – The Limits to Managing Urban Decline

*By René Kreichauf*

## **Abstract**

At the beginning of the 21st century, the phenomena of shrinking cities spread widely over Europe. Cities shrank in peripheral, sparsely populated areas in Northern Europe, in Western European industrial agglomerations in economic decline, and in rural areas in Southern Europe suffering from emigration and a rapid decrease in birth rates. City shrinkage is the result of the on-going relocation of industry and metropolisation in a globalizing world. In the era of Post-Fordism, the transformation of local productive systems resulted in a polarisation of regional spaces and a growing imbalance among urban territories. The Post-Fordist economy in Europe has led to agglomerations of economic activity and urban growth while other regions have suffered a decline that reinforces prior trends toward an uneven economic and urban development. Today, European city planners have to deal with both the regulation of urban growth and the planning and management of urban decline. However, being a child of capitalistic logic and development, urban planning and its theories and guidelines are fundamentally linked to socio-spatial and economic growth.

Using theories on uneven urban development and the case studies of Bitterfeld (Germany) and Detroit (USA), this paper illustrates that strategies following a “departure of the growth path” reach limits as, within the context of capitalism and its logic, these strategies are contradicting the nature of the politico-economic system. In the long run, even declining cities are forced to generate (economic) growth to further compete in the global economy. Strategies such as “regeneration”, “re-imagining”, “redevelopment”, and “renewal” are ultimately an alibi to justify a “re-growing” of economic activity and performance in declining cities rather than increasing their population.

**Keywords:** global economic restructuring, socio-spatial polarisation, urban growth, urban decline, transformation

## 1. From the Limits to Growth to the Limits of Decline? – Introduction

In the first two decades after World War Two, the so-called “Golden Times of Capitalism,” Europe seemed to be on its way to economic prosperity and into a culturally integrated society established on the basis of social justice. Growth rates were high, the economy was close to full employment, and social security was upgraded. This specific form of modernisation, described as “Fordism,” also strongly influenced the development and structure of cities in the 1950s and 1960s. A regime of mass production and mass consumption led to economic growth and thus a second urban growth as well as the spatial transformation and restructuring of cities (Häußermann et al., 2008), but this “short dream of perpetual prosperity” (Lutz, 1984) was overtaken by capitalist reality. At the end of the 20th century, immense shifts in economy and society resulted in a rude awakening. The crisis of Fordism led to new economic, social and spatial solutions and Post-Fordist perspectives, which we are still experiencing today. Fordism has been replaced by a “new economy” characterized by new information techniques, neoliberalism, deregulation of the state, a shift from manufacturing industries to service economy, a free market attitude, and flexibility. Parallels to this economic development can be found in social and demographic changes.

Cities are not only the manifestation of social and economic processes, but also the scenes of the shift and struggles of the change in both the local and global economy and society. The processes of Post-Fordism and a more global economy led to an uneven development of urban territories. On one hand, the Post-Fordist economy in Europe led to new agglomerations of economic activities and urban growth. On the other hand, many former industrial spaces, once the birthplaces of industrialisation and urbanisation, were left behind by the process of economic restructuring. These regions have suffered a decline that reinforces prior trends toward an uneven economic and urban development (Cunningham-Sabot and Fol, 2009). Today in Europe, city developers have to deal with both the regulation of urban growth and the planning and management of urban decline.

Already in 1972, the study “Limits to Growth”<sup>1</sup> described the global growth perspectives and its consequences on society, ecology and economy. However, urban and spatial planning disciplines are liable to growth perspectives, failing to develop approaches to organise and plan a consequent urban decline. In this paper, two reasons for this resistance are explained:

1. Planners, policy makers, and practice-orientated scholars most widely underestimate the dominance, mechanisms and characteristics of the capitalist economic and societal system in the development of strategies for designing a decline of cities and regions. Alternative planning concepts that try to “leave the growth path” are defeated by the principles of the capitalistic production system. Urban planning as an outcome of capitalistic development submits to traditional economic argumentations and theories.
2. Historically, the understanding of urban planning is one-dimensionally shaped by top-down planning practices. (Supra-)national planning institutions and strategies are transported from the EU level to the national, regional and finally to the local level, promoting economic and urban growth and often neglecting local resources and characteristics.

Referring to the study of the Club of Rome “Limits to Growth”, this paper illustrates the relationship of tension between economic principles and the management of urban decline processes. Its main arguments are that the phenomenon of urban decline is mainly caused by global transformation processes in economy and thus approaches in planning and designing decline – especially in terms of accepting decline and developing strategies beyond the growth path – reach limits on the local level. Present-

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<sup>1</sup> Original: Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers & William W. Behrens III: *The Limits to Growth*. Universe Books, 1972.

ing theories on urban decline, shifts in policies, and the case studies of Bitterfeld (Germany) and Detroit (USA), this contribution argues that shrinking cities only have two options in managing decline in the current politico-economic system: generating growth to further compete in the global economy and urban hierarchies or a strategic retreat that leads to the disappearance of cities.

## **2. The historic development from Fordism to Post-Fordism and the effects on the economic transformation of urban development**

The beginning of industrialisation in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its driving force in the spatially concentrated emergence of capitalistic accumulation is closely related to urban growth. The Marxist argument for the primacy of economic development in the emergence of social institutions, formations, and the spatial development was further extended by the economic theories of Fordism and Post-Fordism. “Fordism” and “Post-Fordism” are terms that belong to regulation theories describing a mode of production that passed through several accumulation regimes. The term accumulation regime refers to the accumulation of capital. It describes the organisation of production and capital flows, including the mode of payment and wages, the creation of added values and distribution, as well as flexibility of capital. Accumulation regimes can have different forms at different points in time (Short, 2009). This chapter focuses on the analyses of the development from Fordism to Post-Fordism and its affects on urban development and planning.

### ***2.1 Urban Development in the Fordist Era***

Industrialisation is highly linked with urbanisation. On the one hand, cities were the birthplaces of the industrial revolution in the 19th century. On the other hand, industrialisation can be seen as a city founder because industrialisation led to the development of the modern metropolis. The enormous industrial boom had several effects on the spatial organisation of cities. The gigantic migration from the countryside and higher birth rates resulted in packed city centres and a sprawl of settlements outside the former city walls, the so-called “19th century belt” (Marschalck, 1978). Train systems were built, industries were clustered in the city, and class structures were translated into the structure of cities thus leading to social segregation. At the beginning of urban growth, this chaos was unregulated and organised through land speculation. The improvement of living conditions at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century by new transport systems, reform movements (development of urban planning as an instrument to control urban chaos, regulate urban development, and improve physical and social conditions through sanitation, drainage systems etc.) and public health movements created even more growth for cities (Pacione, 2005).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the business doctrine of Henry Ford was consistently put into practice. The Ford Motor Company, founded by Ford, was one of the first national corporations. For the production of the ‘Model T’, Ford realised that it is not sufficient to produce cars; they also need to be sold. Thus, workers needed to earn sufficient money to be able to afford a car and need time to enjoy it. With this idea, and on the basis of Frederick Taylor’s theory, Ford introduced the system of mass commodity production and mass consumption. That is why this period is often called “Fordism.” The new system was made possible through technological innovations such as the development of the moving assembly line, specialized machinery, and innovations in labour organization. Innovations included the fragmentation of tasks and division of labour, the high wage system (‘Five-Dollar Day’) and, the limitation of working hours (Allen, 1992). These changes led to uniformity and standardisation of labour and produced goods, stable economic growth, and a higher general standard of living for the middle class they fostered. The shift to mass production and mass consumption did not only change the mode of production and the economic system, but also the social and political system. A new type of worker, a different kind of lifestyle, and a specific form of state and civil society developed. It led to the development of a ‘welfare state’, which, due to political inventions made by nation-



al governments to balance mass production and mass consumption, served the role of regulator. It provided the foundation for long-term growth and created far-reaching measures to increase the social, material and cultural well-being of its citizens (cf. *ibid.*)

Due to Fordism, the structure of industrialisation and capitalism changed. The combination of state, capital and labour organisations led to the successful economic growth and greater spatial growth of cities, especially after World War Two. These golden times of capitalism are characterised by economic prosperity and the social aim to implement social justice and sociocultural integration. The growth rates were high, full employment was achieved, and the health and welfare system was improved. Furthermore, this phase is marked by a general welfare state improvement of the economic standard of living (“trickle-down effect”) (Beck, 1968). The era of Fordism was at its peak in the 1950s and 1960s until the crisis of Fordism developed in the 1970s. This crisis was caused by high inflation, market saturation, poor quality of goods, inflexibility of the economic system, and the growth of divergence between rising wages and declining productivity. The oil crisis of 1973 is often described as a turning point because it led to increasing costs of raw materials.

The patterns of cities changed in conjunction with Fordism. City development in the era of Fordism is characterised by tendencies in mobilisation, decentralisation, and the separation of activities and functions through zoning and segregation between areas of residential, industrial, commercial, shopping and entertainment land use (Charta of Athens). Architects and urban planners adopted the Fordist model for dissection of complex processes into functional components for the development of residential buildings and urban structures. Functionalism, in which different areas of urban life are separated, became the central guiding principle of urban development in the 20th century. The separation of functions contrasted with the “old” city in the 19th century. Reacting to tradition, avant-garde architects developed concepts of ‘right’ living in the ‘modern city’ that were implemented in the public housing sector. Both the functionalism and the avant-garde experiments in urban architecture proceeded from the idea of a modern way of life without classes or class differences. The mass distribution of the private automobile made the long-range separation of working and living possible. Average income families could afford their own houses on the outskirts of cities and this led to the creation of new settlements. Even in the public housing sector, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, the standardization of floor plans and technical equipment was influential. Parallel to the expansion of private consumption culture, public social infrastructure had been expanded. This included education and health facilities, social centers and places for culture. Carefully calculated ranges of private sector institutions were created to attempt to guarantee the carefree modern life (Häußermann, 2012).

The Fordist city is tailored to accessibility for automobiles. The spatial centre for organisation of daily routines was no longer the inner city core, but the single-family house in the suburb that is equipped with consumer goods. The decentralisation of the city through the automobile and the implementation of highway systems led to an urban sprawl. Another main character in urban development of the Fordist era is therefore suburbanisation. It is a phenomenon that is highly linked with the aspects of Fordism (division of tasks, mass production and mass consumption) and with trends of the motorisation of people, functionalisation, but also an aspect of the new lifestyle of the middle class raised in Fordism (Pacione, 2005). The impact of Fordism on urban development implemented new regional patterns. The traditional city was transformed into a Fordist urban landscape that detached the structures of the early industrial city. On the one hand, the suburbanisation of the financially strong middle, service and utility companies as well as the deconcentration of jobs lead to the social differentiation between the city and the hinterland and to the downgrading of the economic basis of the core city. On the other hand, the surrounding communities experienced a rise in population, economic activity and tax receipts. This imbalance between the core city and its hinterland lead to the “urban crisis” in the 1970s (Häußermann, 2012).

## ***2.2 Urban Development in the Post-Fordist Era***

As a result of these problems, Fordism has imploded and replaced by a 'new economy' – a neo-Fordist system underpinned by information technologies and network around the globe and a new political strategy - neoliberalism – that view that the state should have a minimal role as a regulator (Hall, 1988). The most important differences between Fordism and Post-Fordism is the shift from unskilled to skilled labour force, reorganisation of the labour market by free market economy, new technologies (just-in-time-production, niche production), flexibility of labour power, delocalisation of manual labour, increased competition, dualisation of society, social restructuring, and cultural change. These changes are still having an enormous social and societal impact. There is a flexible utilization of labour and new requirements for qualification: New forms of monitoring as well as control and surveillance tasks require highly skilled, flexible, deployable, self-working employees. Trends in the society, like individualisation and the need for self-development, favour this new system. However, the problem of stagnating purchasing power remains. The high unemployment rate leads to the development of a sector of informal and precarious employment. This leads to a polarization of the workforce, which is also reflected in the market: There were cheap mass-produced goods on the one versus luxury goods on the other side (Short, 2009).

Post-fordism can be seen as one aspect of the increasing role of globalisation and an international orientated economy, but also as the end of the era of the economic growth. Both Fordism and Post-Fordism are very broad-ranging concepts used to analyse changes in the way people work, changes in the way industrial production is structured, and changes in the organisation of society as a whole. They are also key concepts used to study changes and processes in urban development using cities as the scene and mirror of these changes (Hall, 1988).

The shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism resulted spatially in a restructuring of national and sub-national spaces. While national governments had strong influences on the development of cities in the Fordist era, there are now global factors affecting large to small scaled urban developments in Post-Fordism. Due to the results of the economic crisis, new spatial consequences developed in the cities: the economic decay of traditional industrial cities and regions, the physical upgrading and cultural revival of inner city neighbourhoods, the economic upgrading and revitalisation of the city core, tertiarisation of the city centre, and the development of new industrial clusters (Paland, 2005).

In the context of Post-Fordist society that is characterised by specialisation and differentiation, it seems important for cities to develop architectural symbols that express the city's economy and identity. Thus, Post-Fordist city development is also characterised by the emergence of architectural landmarks and a wide range of architectural structures and buildings (cf. *ibid.*). Furthermore, the post-Fordist city's characters are new specialized commercial districts that produce for the global market and therefore attract global players, the development of global metropolises, recentralisation (regarding command centres into the new global economy) and decentralisation (in form of numerous sub cities and edges cities). Consequently, the very significant fact is that the Post-Fordist city has no recognizable pattern. Soja describes the city as an exopolis that is not defined as a unity, but as a city(-region) without a centre, "a kaleidoscopic social-spatial structure of geometric fragmentation, increasingly discontinuous, orbiting beyond the old agglomerative nodes" (Soja, 1992). The LA School of Urban Studies, which Edward Soja is a representative of, defines characteristics of the postmodern city that also concern the Post-Fordist city structure. Therefore cities are defined by privatisation of public space, polarised communities, the control of public space, and the development of global cities. Hence, the Post-Fordist city is part of a new wave of globalisation, hybridisation, polarisation and privatisation. Particularly trends of polarisation and privatisation are very reflected in the recent city development of European cities. Today every bigger city in Europe has to deal with tendencies of

Gentrification (due to the development of a 'new middle class' and the demand of housing in the city) in the inner city on the one hand, and with the downturn of deprived areas on the other hand. Hence, the polarisation (or dualisation) of the society is reflected in the city patterns. Another phenomenon that increased in European cities is the appearance of gated communities or lifestyle communities that are exclusive, physically separated from the city and developed by private investors. Gated communities determine both, the polarisation of the city's residents in spatial patterns and the privatisation of public space (Harvey, 1989).

Post-Fordist tendencies in urban development have two sides of one coin. Due to the restructuring process of economy, society and politics, there are cities benefitting of this fundamental change. These cities are still economically growing and they rise in relevance. However, there are also cities that struggle with the consequences of this shift and with the challenge of positioning in the global competition and in a global orientated urban development. In the Fordist era, cities changed their faces fundamentally and the traditional city structure became obsolete. However, the Fordist city was a result of comprehensive growth and a city that produced and symbolised egalitarianism, whereas Post-Fordist tendencies lead to a polarisation and an uneven development in cities and of cities.

### ***2.3 Developing a Theory of Urban Decline***

Researchers and scholars argue that the globalisation of economy, global financial flows and the internationalisation of production processes lead to the shrinking of numerous (industrial) cities because they were unable to compete in the international economic environment.

Harvey (1989) explains the uneven development of cities as a consequence of the internal contradictions and crisis-proneness of capitalism and capitalistic socialisation (the crisis of the over-accumulation of capital). According to him, capitalism has to incessantly look for new, time-limited, and spatially changing solutions to over-accumulation. Capital and labour power are constantly mobilised, but also *spatially fixed*. Redundant capital is a result of the over-accumulation crisis, and it is fixed in the western centres of capital in the form of infrastructural projects, investments and speculation or in their periphery, such as in the low-cost locations of developing countries. Harvey's concept of *spatial fix* explains not only the geographic relocation processes of production locations and the economic *renaissance of the cities* (reurbanisation), but also the immense suburbanisation processes of housing and industry in the Fordist era as well as the socioeconomic causes of urban decline.

Soja (1992) argues that the mobility and the volatility of capital and foreign investment, for which cities are now intensely competing, are unprecedented in their speed and scope. In the era of flexible accumulation, international outsourcing and *lean production*, footloose enterprises have abandoned obsolete industrial plants and infrastructure, and deserted many urban places giving way to the post-industrial city whose economic basis is increasingly oriented towards services. Castells (1991) further develops Harvey's spatial fix concept with his idea of the *space of flows* within the context of information society and the *informational city*. His abstraction describes the information society as a society whose spaces, location and users are organised by flows (f.e. composed of capital, technology, and communication flows), which create a network (f.e. composed of transport and communication networks) between *nodes*. These nodes are physical spaces – cities - which have a specific function for the space of flows. They are hierarchically organised and for example transport and communication hubs, financial centres, or power political centres (overall epicentres of capital). According to Castells, cities are fundamentally dependent on the networks and their position in the networks. He points out that a disruption from the network can lead to the exclusion of a city from the space of flows, which can result in its economic downfall (Castells, 1991). With his theory of the *space of flows*, Castells underlines the image of a dynamic capital, which is spatially fixed in the form of a node within a network of nodes. The structure of the network changes due to technological and economic develop-

ments. Thus, Castells explanatory model describes the different spatial development of cities, and the phenomena of declining cities not integrated into flows, remaining in what I call *spaces of non-flows*.

As a result of these uneven development processes, former industrial and Fordist shaped cities and regions, like the Rustbelt in the USA or the Ruhrgebiet in Germany, experience an economic and urban downturn, whereas new economic centres, for example in the Silicon Valley in California, gain in political and economic importance (Wissen; Neumann, 2008). Furthermore, the process of globalisation leads to uneven development of cities and to the development of a small number of “global cities” (Sassen, 2001), which gather high-level financial activities, service activities, and information and communication networks. Thus, the geography of the capitalistic (urban) development has changed fundamentally. The spatial distribution of *productive capital* and the concentration of political, economic and cultural power in some cities has caused the decline of other cities that have not been able to position themselves in the global competition for capital. Due to international division of labour and restructuring of the economy, including a massive relocation of manufacturing jobs from developed to developing countries, cities create temporary or permanent decline in the restructuring process. Because of these restructuring processes cities can be cut off from international engines of growth. This progress leads to growing inequalities between cities and regions, between those who are integrated into the global economic network and those that are not. Moreover, innovation and knowledge economies are local development engines, whose future are more than ever influenced by the strategies of international corporations. Thus, while certain cities become attractive to investment and to most qualified workers, others lose their economic base, their jobs and their population (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012).

The socioeconomic changes caused by the crisis of Fordism and its Post-Fordist solutions have modified urban development, urban hierarchies, and the urban system. Urban decline is the result of these global transformation processes and of the uneven spatial development of immobile capital that is inherent to capitalism. Brenner (2004) argues that the uneven urban development in capitalism illustrates social and economic inequality in spatial dimensions: „Within a capitalist political-economic system, inequalities are not only expressed socially, in the form of class and income stratification, but also spatially, through the polarization of development among different territories, regions, places, and scales“ (Brenner, 2004: 13).

### **3. Political Strategies in dealing with Urban Decline**

The socioeconomic framework for urban development and urban planning are indeed defined by the growth paradigm. Political, societal, demographic and cultural transformation processes also affect them. Until fairly recently, however, political planning tasks and strategies were primarily shaped by overall concepts of socioeconomic growth, spatial growth, and compensation. Specifically on the level of the EU regional policy, and in national concepts of the EU member states, there has been a change in perspective toward adopting the economic conditions illustrated in chapter 2.

#### ***3.1 The Change of the European Regional Policy***

The regional policy of the EU aims to strengthen economic and social cohesion by promoting balanced spatial development. Over decades, the regional policy tried to compensate for disparities in Europe. While in the funding period 2000-2006, “promoting the development and structural adjustment of regions whose development is lagging behind” (objective 1), “supporting the economic and social conversion of areas experiencing structural difficulties“ (objective 2), and „supporting the adaptation and modernisation of education, training and employment policies and systems“ (objective 3) were the central guidelines of the regional policy (European Commission, 2005). This funding period was predominantly focused on regions experiencing a socioeconomic transformation in the areas of

industry, service, declining population and economic restructuring. However, the last funding period (2007 – 2013) presents a fundamental shift: on the one hand, the *European Regional Development Fund*, the *European Social Fund*, and the *cohesion fund* keep contributing to the “economic and social cohesion due to the reduction of regional disparities” (European Commission, 2013); on the other hand, the new agenda offers, for the first time in the history of EU regional policy, the opportunity to financially promote growing regions. The second objective, “Regional Competiveness and Employment,” especially focuses on the economic attractiveness of prosperous regions (European Commission, 2011).

The reorientation of the EU-cohesion policy (as part of the regional policy), passed in 2014, underlines the development toward strengthening regions of economic growth. The reform aims to implement a “maximal impact in the fields of growth and employment” (European Commission, 2013). Its first two objectives underline further fundamental changes. The first objective illustrates that funds can be invested in all regions of the EU – the concentration of funds is thus further concentrated in growing regions. The second objective focuses exclusively on the specific targeting of resources into strategic sectors of growth such as innovation, research, the promotion of companies, and a low-carbon economy.

Both the current as well as the most recent program period demonstrate a basic change of values in the EU regional policy: a renunciation of the traditional convergence approach to declining economic differences in order to promote economically weak regions toward a strengthening of economically strong regions. “Whilst in the passing periods the focus was to strengthen economic and social cohesion, the promotion of the competitiveness gains centre stage in the new program period” (European Commission, 2010). It seems more than questionable that this “investment policy, which serves as an instrument to create competitiveness and economic growth” (European Commission, 2014), is compatible with the convergence objective.

### **3.2 The Change of National Policies: Case Study of Germany**

In Germany, the purpose to create “uniform living conditions” (Art. 72; 106.3) was established in the constitution until 1994. The creation of similar living conditions served as the primary objective in policy leading to destruction of extreme spatial disparities. Since 1994, this law was changed from “protection of the uniform living conditions” to the “creation of equal living conditions”. Busch (2013) argues that this shift resulted in a softening or even a decline of the convergence objective. The new law aims to promote “deprived regions” to reach the same level as “advanced regions”, and to participate in the “process of modernisation” (Barlösius, 2006).

In the passing ten years, the political attitude toward development of equal living conditions among regions in Germany has been further modified. A Fordist, economically justified objective appears to be increasingly in contrast to regressive economic developments and growing spatial inequalities. Regions and cities are more and more seen as locations for businesses that have to compete for capital and investment, and, thus, equal living conditions are not even a consideration (Butterwege et al., 2008).

The departure from this aim is further visible in the *Annual Reports on the Progress of German Unity*. In the 2008 report the German government openly professed to the “overcoming of the spatial difference as a result of the division of Germany, as well as to the alignment and harmonisation of living conditions between East and West” (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2008). However, in the 2009 report, the German government states that its aim is bring the five former East German states to the same level as the “structurally weak West German states” (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2009). Hence the new federal states should no longer reach the productivity and income level of the average

of all West German states, but only the level of Schleswig-Holstein, Lower Saxony and the Saarland. The original convergence objective was noticeably scaled down (Busch, 2013). In the 2010 report, the level of development was changed again. The objective is now to come close to the level of the structurally weakest states of the West but not to the same level anymore (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2010). In the recent report on the German Unity, the German government to lower down the disparities between regions in Germany, but at the same time it promotes the use of “specific regional potentials” (Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2013).

For decades, governments in Europe aimed to regulate the spatial distribution of productive capital through regional policy and the co-ordination of structural instruments. However, the imbalances and inequalities between cities, regions, and even countries have grown significantly in the last two decades. Due to economic transformation and the polarization of economic, social and spatial developments, the up to the 1980s prevailing belief of equalizing the living conditions of the people not only within a country but also on an international scale, become apparently superfluous (Wissen; Neumann, 2008).

### ***3.3 Urban Planning in terms of Urban Decline***

Finally, paradigm shifts at the EU and national level illustrate that the economic restructuring and redistribution processes described in chapter 2 are also adapted or even supported by politics on the EU and national scale. Currently there is no explicit objective that deals with strategies for managing urban decline beyond the growth path. Today’s urban development is characterised by a polarisation, concurrency and overlay of both urban growth and urban decline. In the current political and scientific discourse on city shrinkage, scholars demand a paradigm shift from traditional theories and approaches of urban growth to other ways of planning urban life that would focus on the quality of space and slower but smarter growth, as well as a sustainable and governed urban retreat. Therefore, the “acceptance of urban decline” as a path in urban development, and a refocusing on the way that planning instruments and mechanism are implied, are demanded (Bürkner 2005; Häußermann 2008; Hirschler, Frey, 2013). There is an agreement that urban decline has to be accepted as a phenomenon of urban development and that – mostly on the local scale – a new planning approach has to be defined. However, this paper argues that urban decline is mainly a result of the transformation of national and local production and distribution systems within the context of globalization. Thus, the management and organization of decline is restricted at the local level. “Acceptance of processes of urban decline” assumes an understanding of traditional economic capitalistic logic as well as particular social institutions, logic of actions and value systems. As a consequence, a “real acceptance of urban decline” may lead to two development paths as a result of an urban development in terms of urban decline:

1. Accepting decline as a departure from the growth path, and as a cause of global economic transformation processes, may lead to the “death of cities” in the sense of a coordinated and managed urban retreat.
2. Shrinking cities are tempted to develop spatial strategies that generate economic growth and activity due to the nature and primacy of the capitalistic system. The acceptance of the shrinkage may therefore be a (strategic) alibi employed by cities and urban policy, behind which hides a long-term economic growth orientation.

#### **4. Phoenix *in the ashes* – Accepting Decline to Generate Growth: The Case Studies of Bitterfeld and Detroit**

The following analysis of the case studies and their way of dealing with urban decline is based on the conduction of the research projects “Flint/Michigan, Smart Decline? Shrinking Cities in the USA” (Technical University Berlin, 2009/10), “Objectives and Perspectives of the Programme *Urban Rebuilding East* in East Germany” (2010/11), as well as the publication project “Who is afraid of Detroit City? (in: *Stadtaspekte*, Vol. 1, Berlin, 2013). Using qualitative research methods, the projects discussed causes, impacts and consequences of urban decline, and approaches of cities reacting and planning on the shrinkage. Further, they investigated different development paths of declining cities and future perspectives. Additionally, further interviews regarding recent trends in the urban development have been conducted with people in Detroit and Bitterfeld.

##### ***4.1 Bitterfeld – The dirtiest City of Europe between Decay, Solar Valley and Lakescape***

The famous German author Monika Maron describes Bitterfeld in her 1981 novel “*Flugasche*” as the “dirtiest city of Europe” (Maron, 1981: 32). *Flugasche* (fly ash) is not a metaphor. In the era of the GDR, Bitterfeld was characterised by air contamination from coal power stations, coal mining and the chemical industry. This caused health problems for its inhabitants and major ecological destruction. With the connection to the German railway network in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the start of brown coal mining, and the settlement of national industrial companies like AEG, Agfa and IG Farben, Bitterfeld developed to be one of the major industrial locations of Germany. After World War Two, the chemical mass production reached its climax in the socialist command economy. After the German reunification in 1990, Bitterfeld became a “quasi-synonym for the destruction of nature, land, and economy” (Maron, 2009). The extensive closing of industrial companies and the end of brown coal mining were followed by huge unemployment rates, an exodus of Bitterfeld’s residents, and a high residential vacancy rate. Today, 42.000 people live in Bitterfeld. The city lost 45 per cent of its inhabitants. The unemployment rate reached its climax with 29 per cent in 1995 (Hermann, 2014).

Since the economic and political change in 1990, Bitterfeld’s urban development has been focussed on the redevelopment of the chemical park, the renaturation of the brown coal mine area, and the restructuring of the city through redevelopment programmes, recruitment of new investors and industries. Due to the sanitation of the industrial sites, the privatisation or decline of industrial companies, and the promotion of federal industrial policy, new globally acting companies like Bayer, Hereaus and Degussa moved to Bitterfeld. Today, the city’s chemical district (is one) of the biggest in Germany and includes 360 companies, 12.000 industrial employees, and an area of 1500 hectares.

In 2001, the addition of a branch of the solar cell manufacturer “Q-Cells” lead to a further transformation for Bitterfeld’s business location. The company grew significantly within only a few short years. By 2005 it became a listed company and subsidiaries were developed. By 2008 it would become one of the largest solar cell companies in the world, initiating the establishment of the “Solar Valley” (in reference to the Silicon Valley in California, USA, one of the most prosperous and important IT and high tech industry locations in the world), a new location for industries related to high tech and sustainable energy production. In 2009, more than 6.000 people worked in Bitterfeld’s solar industry. However, the solar cell industry was orientated toward a top-line growth. Due to the economic crisis that also began in 2008, and growing competition from Asian solar cell manufacturers, the Solar Valley companies experienced a collapse that finally led to the decline of some solar industries (Hermann, 2014). In 2012, the South Korean company Hanwha overtook Q-Cells and several subsidiaries. Three out of seven solar manufacturers were closed and 4.500 employees were released. The crisis of Bitterfeld’s solar industry resulted in a second restructuring and transformation of the city’s economic basis. Furthermore, it illustrated the city’s vulnerability to crisis and its dependence

on an industrial sector that is no longer limited to local operations, but also integrated into international business processes.

Developing a modernised chemical park and the establishment of Solar Valley were in line with Bitterfeld's guiding principal to combine modern industries and a sustainable and environmentally compatible region and landscape. By the end of the 1990s, the city, supported by funding from the state and federal government, initiated the development of the landscape garden "Goitzsche". Opencast mines were thus fluted and the brown coal mines were developed into a recreational area consisting of a lakescape, beaches, and several leisure and tourist facilities (Kommunaler Zweckverband Bergbaufolgelandschaft Goitzsche, 2011). The Goitzsche is located right next to Bitterfeld's city centre. The "touristication of the region" (Zelinger, 2011) aims to replace the image of an old industrial city and destroyed nature with an image of a quaint and sustainable city-region. Today, the former "city of chemistry" appears as a city on the lake. In 2013, more than 500.000 tourists visited the Goitzsche. Stefan Hermann, head of Bitterfeld's urban development, notes that "the tourism business is a new phenomenon for the city" (Hermann, 2014). Meanwhile, it developed to one of Bitterfeld's major growth engines for the local economy and the development of the city.



**Fig. 1: Barbados or Bitterfeld? The stigmatisation of Bitterfeld as an industrial city in a commercial of the Berlin radio KissFM in 2010.**



**Fig. 2: Nowadays, the skyline of Bitterfeld looks different.**



**Fig. 3: The crisis of the solar cell industry developed to the crisis of the city: 4.500 jobs were cut.**

Already in 1998 – three years before the implementation of the federal government's programme "Stadtumbau Ost" (Urban Reconstruction East) – Wolfen, a district of Bitterfeld, began to introduce a local approach to the demolition and upgrading of residential areas as a reaction on to its immense population decline and housing market vacancies. Due to the plans for Bitterfeld in the Stadtumbau Ost programme (for example land use plans and integrated urban development concepts), the city accepted its population decline and created planning tools to react to it. However, Hermann (2014) argues that the resizing of the city does come along with the development of new housing units and housing forms, as well as promoting the acquisition of assets. New housing is predominantly created near the Goitzsche. New urban villas are currently being constructed in the harbour neighbourhood between the Goitzsche and the city centre. The development of new residential quarters aims to attract new higher income households. However, premium price residential units are putting increasing pressure Bitterfeld's housing market. Due to the creation of the customary comparative rent, which is orientated towards new developments and the restoration of prosperous housing units, housing companies and associations increased the rent to 15 per cent. As the increase is not covered by public social support, socially weak residents, especially those that are dependent on public transfers, are forced to



move to more economically feasible apartments (Caritas, 2014). It is concerning that socially weak and unemployed residents are not benefitting from Bitterfeld's positive development. It seems that the combination of urban demolition and the redevelopment of new neighbourhoods, economic activity, and economic crisis (for example the mass layoff of Q-Cells) all happen at the expense of the vulnerable social strata.

In conclusion, Bitterfeld is characterised by a permanent and on-going population decline, high structural housing vacancies and economic crisis. Nevertheless, the city (with support of the federal government and the state) is successful in developing "isles of prosperity" in contradiction to the general trends of urban decline. On the other hand, it seems these "isles of prosperity" are also a fundamental part of the decline process. For more than 10 years, Bitterfeld has experienced an economic growth that is at the same time the city's engine for its urban development. "Attracting investors" (Maron, 2009), "raising the interests of further investors" and to "create a competitive and future-orientated economy" (Ministerium für Landesentwicklung und Verkehr des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt, 2010), „upgrading neighbourhoods" (GINSEK, 2006), "strengthening the growth impulses of the Goitzsche" and developing Bitterfeld "as a sustainable centre for innovation and knowledge" has become the mantra and major guideline for Bitterfeld's urban development.

#### ***4.2 Detroit – Bankrupt city and global speculation object***

Over the course of four years, famous artists repeatedly proclaimed the rebirth of Detroit in Chrysler's annual Super Bowl commercials. In a 2010 commercial, rapper Eminem drove through the *motor city* declaring that Detroit is the car manufacturing city producing automobiles not only for America, but also for the whole world. In 2012, actor Clint Eastwood argued that the US car industry is invincible and "the world will hear the roar of Detroit's engine". He also states that Detroit will help to reclaim the USA's global economic hegemony. The underlying fear in of losing economic power and to competition in Europe and Asia is further underlined in the 2014 spot with musician Bob Dylan. He states that Germany can brew Beer for America, but Detroit produces cars for the whole world.

Detroit is a symbol of urban decline and the demise of an economic era (Kreichauf, 2012) and, on the other hand, it is a place that inspires hope and speculation about returning to its former economic power (Gallagher, 2010). The urban development of Detroit reflects these two features. On one side, alternative forms of organisation and economic activity have emerged as a reaction to decades of urban crisis.<sup>2</sup> On the other, investors and private sector interests are increasingly influencing Detroit's development.

Scarred by the financial crisis, the economic crisis, the housing crisis, and finally by the automobile crisis resulting in the insolvency of General Motors in 2009, Detroit filed for bankruptcy in June 2013. The debts of the city amount to 18 billion dollars per year while it only collects two billion dollars. Since summer 2013, the city is under the receivership of the governor of Michigan, Rick Snyder, and his "emergency manager" Kevyn Orr. Detroit is therefore lacking any democratically legitimised scope of actions for its development. Furthermore, the bankruptcy involves major restructuring of the local budget for not only urban, public spaces such as administration buildings and Belle Isle, a recreation area southeast of Detroit, but also services provided by the city. Electricity, gas and water distribution have already been privatised since 2013 or are in the process of being privatized. Further cuts in the local budget have been made by firing city employees as well as through wage and pension reduction. In Spring 2014, the restructuring and privatisation of water distribution raised media coverage. Due to the impending sale of Detroit's water department, the third largest in the USA with reve-

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<sup>2</sup> This trend cannot be elaborated upon further due to the limitation of pages for this paper.

nues of over one billion dollar per year, 30 per cent of the employees were fired and 3.000 households that are in default of payment were cut off from service (Kishore, 2014). This sanction primarily affects socially weak residents in a city where 30 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. Kishore (2014) summarises: „This is the real face of the Detroit bankruptcy. While the media and the political establishment proclaim the “revival” of Detroit, what is taking place is the wholesale theft of public resources and the pensions and benefits of city workers and their families.“ However, emergency manager Orr argues that “only a complete restructuring of the city's finances and operations will allow Detroit to regain its footing and return to a path of prosperity“ (quoted from Barone, 2013). With this quote Orr underlines the major objective for Detroit’s long-term development: economic prosperity.



**Fig. 4: The sell of products of Detroit’s urban farms.**



**Fig. 5: Neighbourhood protection by residents within the programme „Neighbourhood watch“**



**Fig. 6: Founder of Quicken Loans, Dan Gilbert, owns more than 30 huge properties in Detroit’s downtown. He maybe seriously calls downtown *his* new hometown.**

The *Detroit Strategic Framework Plan 2012*, published in 2013, was written in reaction to Detroit’s urban decline and proposes short term and long term projects and perspectives. On one hand it aims to conduct a sustainable decline by promoting prosperous neighbourhoods, so called “employment districts” understood as investments, densifying approaches, and infrastructural improvements. On the other hand, it is a plan and basis to transform declining neighbourhoods that are affected by high vacancy rates into farms, forests or other land forms (Hollander, 2013). The framework of the plan deals critically with the decline and Detroit’s social problems, offering rudimentarily spatial and strategic solutions. However, the plan is also dominated by approaches to generating economic activity in the fields of “digital and economic growth” as well as in the traditional automobile industry. By these means, after a period of decline and stagnation, it aims to generate a new growth of population in the consolidated neighbourhoods as well as economic prosperity. This aspect of the plan exemplifies the weaknesses of its framework. Due to the long and on-going economic crisis and the city’s bankruptcy, Detroit is forced into creating economic and population growth over the long term (at least in the densified and consolidated neighbourhoods). This highlights a basic dichotomy declining cities are experiencing: the management and organisation of decline is often seen as a starting point and platform for the long term goal of recapturing economic activity and the increase of a specific (wealthy) population group as new residents. The vision for Detroit in the year 2050 perfectly illustrates this objective: „Detroit regains its position as one of the most competitive cities in the nation“ (Detroit Strategic Framework Plan 2012, 2013).

The promotion of a “rebirth of Detroit” (Martelle, 2014), the housing crisis, decreasing land costs, the privatisation of public services and the sale of properties formerly owned by the city have resulted in land speculation, change of ownership structures, and investment (especially in downtown Detroit). Only a hand-full of investors drive this development. Dan Gilbert, millionaire and founder of Quicken

Loans, a US mortgage finance company, bought more than 290.000m<sup>2</sup> of property in Detroit for more than one billion dollars. Field (2013) states that he holds major parts of Detroit downtown, and thus he argues, "Gilbert owns downtown". Certainly, the biggest private landowner in Detroit is Michael G. Kelly. He holds more than 1.500 properties in Detroit, predominantly at strategic places like the area around which a new bridge to Windsor, Canada is planned (N.N., 2011). Compared to Gilbert, who feels responsible for the revitalisation of the downtown and invests in the development of parks and traffic infrastructure, Kelly has no intention to develop his properties. Chinese investment groups also play a significant role in Detroit's urban development. Like Kelly, they buy masses of properties and wait for enhancement of value with the aim of reselling them profitably.

The activists of the website "Why-dont-we-own-this city" collect information on characteristics of all properties and land uses in Detroit. They explain the misery Detroit experiences: „We are living in an occupied city, (...). The municipality of Detroit is facing fiscal insolvency while at the same time the economy is experiencing a degree of revitalization. (...) Investors often see crises as opportunities that allow them to reorganize institutional resources and to pick up assets at bargain prices (Jerry, et. al, 2013). Whilst public and democratically legitimated authorities are practically paralysed due to the clearance of public services and spaces, only a few private investors, speculators and interests increasingly influence Detroit's urban development. They do not appear to want to strategically decline Detroit within the context of a strategic framework that was created by the participation of more than 30.000 residents, but rather to demolish buildings and rehabilitate areas in order to develop them for a possible future growth. Dan Gilbert argues, „When all the utilities are there and the land is close to free (...), it becomes very cheap for a builder-developer to develop a residential unit. And they are going to develop them (...) in mass as soon as we get the structures down and maybe we don't have to worry about raising peas or corn or whatever it is you do in the farm" (Gilbert quoted from Jamiel, 2013).

Detroit has not recovered from the crisis of the passing decades. The "rebirth of the city" serves predominantly as an advertisement of private actors for Detroit, denying the reality that social problems continue to be a major concern (Ketcham, 2014). Although, after a long political and societal standstill, there are approaches by civil society toward policy to organise a sustainable and strategic decline of the city, private investors pursue Detroit's urban development. They are acting within the logic of the capitalist economic system by trying to generate a new economic growth. The media and the society already refer to Dan Gilbert as the new Henry Ford. Ford strongly influenced the city's economic and urban development in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His impact on Detroit further demonstrates what urban development that is mainly driven by the ambitions and design interests of large business operators can lead to. It has been manifested in Detroit since the 1990s. Will history repeat itself?

#### ***4.3 Where there is a will there is not always a way – The limits to managing urban decline***

Detroit and Bitterfeld are certainly extreme examples of declining cities. On the other hand, they are former industrial cities with a long industrial past characterised by several innovations that influenced economy. They were and still are integrated into regional and global transactions and economic chains. Even though both cities are characterised by an enormous population decline and economic crisis, the economic and urban development of the cities are focused on growth - not necessarily growth of the population, but of the economic activity of the cities as places for international capital. Despite some efforts by the civil society to establish alternative forms of economy and urban organisation, they have not left the "path of growth". They are styled as "phoenixes rising from the ashes", which revive after a period of decline. This is certainly not the fault of individual administrators and planners who are often trying to find alternative solutions to develop the city with very few resources. Bitterfeld, and more-so Detroit, are parts of a growth centred economic system the rules of which they

are pressured to adopt. They are thus not fundamentally different in their development and strategies from growing cities within an international acting economy.

These case studies help to explain two prejudices often discussed in the urban decline context. Firstly, declining cities are able to experience new economic prosperity, after a phase of economic, population decline and stagnation, that is detached from demographic development (Franz, 2003; Göschel, 2007; Altrock et al., 2009; Paal, 2010). A city that loses population is still able to gain economic growth. The economic growth must not necessarily take place on the same level as it was before the economic transformation and on the level of the economic growth centres and engines. Therefore, the declining city is a multidimensional and contradictory subject. This finding proves the theories for different paths of economic and urban development in the Post-Fordist era (see chapter 2). In addition to this, it is obvious that 1) cities that are experiencing a population decline have to generate economic growth in order to compete in the international competition for capital and 2) the study of economic growth or decline is limited to clear statements related to the quality of the growth or shrinkage, population groups that are benefitting or suffering from the development, as well as detailed spatial references.

Secondly, the analyses of the case studies show that the “acceptance of decline”, which is demanded by scholars and which is often introduced into political objectives, has very different interpretations. Urban decline itself has an “acceptance problem” when it comes to planning approaches and analysis of the process. It has not been finally determined whether shrinkage really represents the end of the growth era (Oswalt, 2006) and a paradigm shift toward alternative economic forms and strategies beyond the growth path, or if urban decline only defines temporary characteristics of transformation processes (Kil, 2007) in the course of cyclical urban development processes. The “acceptance of decline” can – depending on the interpretation – be used differently in urban decline discourse. Its meaning spans from the acknowledgment of decline made in order to generate economic growth (see case studies) to the radical acceptance of a new paradigm that also includes the downturn and death of cities. To accept shrinkage and its consequences in all its forms can thus, on the one hand, mean a reaction to existing political and economic circumstances of a polarised urban development and irreversible structural deurbanisation processes. On the other hand, this acceptance can be seen as an acknowledgement of the existing structures for developing growth within cyclical urban development processes.

## **5. The Future of Declining Cities: Growth and/or active Euthanasia?**

This paper aims to stimulate the debate on the relation of tension between urban planning and the issue of future perspectives for declining cities. It argues that the recent differentiation of economic logics on the level of globalised economic processes further develops the Marxist paradigm for the primacy of the economic impetus towards socio-spatial and societal trends. Urban decline certainly has to be accepted as a phenomenon of urban development in order to create suitable planning instruments and strategies to deal with the management of this trend. However, it has to be acknowledged that the process is a consequence of the transformation of national and local production and distribution processes in the context of Post-Fordist trends, globalisation and the emergence of a concurrency of “winners” and “losers” in the global economic system. Thus, urban decline is a phenomenon inherent to a radical politico-economic system which is based on competition and profit making (Brenner, 2004). Of course, as explained in chapter 3, economic transformation comes along with changes to political strategies and objectives. The former convergence objective of the EU regional policy and Germany’s establishment of equal living conditions have been relativized and weakened due to the new paradigm of “strengthening the strongest”. Relying on competitively viable growth regions, it seems that politicians and decision makers have reacted to the reality of uneven economic, spatial and social develop-

ments by implementing policies that reinforce these inequalities. Inequalities are less politically balanced out.

What does this mean for the reality of declining cities? For one thing, the diversity of local spatial characteristics is acknowledged. The local level also becomes more important in the design and composition of cities and in the formation of local identities and features. These are the so-called “opportunities” provided by urban shrinkage (Hirschler, Frey, 2013). But how can these opportunities be used within the context of a capitalistic economic and societal system? Their uses are limited. Phrases such as “the acceptance of decline”, “shrinking smart”, and “regeneration of declining cities” (in the very narrow sense) recognize the conditions of the global economic system and the global causes for urban decline. However, the allowable opportunities are limited to two development paths for declining cities: the urban retreat/city death or a (new) growth.

Due to decline as a consequence of global transformation processes, a subsidies policy that is increasingly orientated towards growth and competition, and the concurrency of economic growth and population decline, declining cities are forced by the established economic system into generate growth. Population growth is not needed, but economic performance and activity in a service and knowledge orientated economy is required. The case studies of Bitterfeld and Detroit illustrate that focussing on economic growth, investments and the competition for international capital does not contradict the organisation of population decline and the adjustment of city structure for a smaller number of inhabitants. (Demographically) declining cities are finally pressured by the same economic requirements and challenges. Thus, they are barely distinguishable from the urban growth centres in terms of traditional planning strategies for generating economic(!) growth. On the contrary, due to the difficult situation, urban planning policies for declining cities (see the approaches of the case studies) are even more orientated toward economic growth to stabilise the urban fabric and the local budget. Alternative forms of economy, urban organisation and a bottom-up urban development are thus barely integrated into the urban policies of declining cities (at least not in the case studies).

Cities do decline. Nevertheless, they have to deal with economic and strategic limits to conduct a sustainable and organised shrinkage. To accept an economic decline within a system that is based on profit making and growth seems impossible. In this context, what would a “real acceptance of decline” mean? An actual *smart shrinkage* within the logic of capitalistic production and distribution processes, with all its consequences, has to recognise the death of cities and their complete urban retreat as a consequence of economic, societal and political transformation processes. A smart shrinkage of a city may include the acceptance that the economic and demographic position will not improve, but decline.

Stephan Hermann, head of Bitterfeld’s urban development department, explains pragmatically: “Bigger metropolitan areas are relatively stable in their economic development. They have a specific growth potential. Cities and regions in the periphery instead are excluded from positive economic trends and thus they break off in the long run” (Hermann, 2014). Hence, urban decline has to be investigated from different angle. Urban strategies and trends are dependent on the size and location of cities and regions and, predominantly, on the manner by which they are integrated into economic and distribution chains. Cities that are still actively involved in regional and global economic processes, like the former industrial cities Detroit and Bitterfeld, are trying, after an experience of decline, to connect to former economic relations and potentials and to adapt to changing economic conditions in order to finally generate economic growth. Bitterfeld and Detroit did not leave the growth path. In fact, they are trying to remain on it.

Due to the increasing exodus of residents, the demographic change, and the absence of economic dynamics, urban settlements are dissolving and disappearing. Because of the fact that the economy as well as politics eliminated a socially, spatially, and economically balanced development, not only the global causes of decline but also the local consequences, and the limits to manage decline on the local

level, have to be accepted. This means that cities can “die” and that urban planning has to create ways to support and organise this cleaning: conducting an active euthanasia for disappearing cities. It is these spaces that have the potential to really leave growth logics and to become a playground for alternative economic organisation, urban organisation and public services (Faber, Oswalt, 2013). Or these spaces can be the incubator for resistance against all the current economic and political conditions that are causing inequality on various levels.

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