

Sandmann, Leona et al.

**Article — Published Version**

## Local initiatives in shrinking cities: On Normative Framings and Hidden Aspirations in Scholarly Work

International Journal of Urban and Regional Research

*Suggested Citation:* Sandmann, Leona et al. (2024) : Local initiatives in shrinking cities: On Normative Framings and Hidden Aspirations in Scholarly Work, International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, ISSN 1468-2427, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Chichester, UK, Vol. 49, Iss. 1, pp. 214-223, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.13252>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/313746>

### Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

### Terms of use:

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

## – LOCAL INITIATIVES IN SHRINKING CITIES: On Normative Framings and Hidden Aspirations in Scholarly Work

LEONA SANDMANN, MARIA GUNKO, IRINA SHIROBOKOVA, RIA-MARIA ADAMS,  
JOHANNA LILIUS AND KATRIN GROSSMANN

### Abstract

*Questions of responsibility for future-making often arise in localities where the withdrawal of capital and state seem to leave tangible voids and a sense of loss. Over the past decade, academic discourse has furthered discussions on the role of civic engagement, local initiatives and their agency under conditions of urban shrinkage. However, scholars (including ourselves) are confronted with their own normative assumptions and aspirations when conceptualizing local initiatives in shrinking cities. Through reviewing the literature on this phenomenon, we identified three main epistemological pitfalls that emerge from the legacies of planning discipline, current neoliberal developments and scholars' own biases. By drawing from our fieldwork experiences, we conclude that local initiatives should be viewed in the plurality of their essences as extremely variegated in form and motivation. We therefore assert the need to disentangle research on local initiatives in shrinking cities from normative aspirations to avoid neoliberal responsibilization, and instead pay attention to the nuances of their aims and practices, achievements and constraints.*

### Introduction

When doing research, various practical, strategic, political, ethical and personal issues arise—many of which may seem to be separate from the research, yet they are constitutive of it (Katz, 1994). Research is never an objective or value-free practice; it is intertwined with the personal experiences, emotions and worldviews of the researcher (see, e.g. Worell and Remer, 2003). Thus, we as researchers carry the responsibility to be aware of our own positionality and subjectivity, which shape our inquiries (Peshkin, 1988) and set limits on the onto-epistemological assumptions that we have in relation to our research objective (Holmes, 2020; see also Mason-Bish, 2019; Kassan *et al.*, 2020). Against this background, in this essay we aim to discuss academic knowledge production about local initiatives in shrinking cities. We do so by analysing and questioning the normative implications that mark their presence and assessment in the shrinking cities literature.

Shrinking cities as a strand of research that formed its own epistemic communities (Audirac, 2022) first gained momentum in the planning and urban studies context of the global North. Throughout the early twenty-first century, the emphasis changed, reflecting both changes to the discipline and the shifting political rationales of urban planning. Local initiatives and residents' perspectives started to gain more weight within the shrinking cities debate. This can be attributed to the simultaneous, intertwined processes of what is known as urban planning's democratization (Jacobs, 1961; Alfasi, 2004) on the one hand and its neoliberalization on the other (Jessop, 1997; Peck, 2012; Hospers, 2014). Alongside the retreat of the welfare state, incentivizing mechanisms were put to work by planners and policymakers to create

This Interventions essay benefited from a Horizon 2020 ERA.Net RUS grant (no. 01DJ21008) and the European Research Council Project 'InfraNorth' grant (no. 885646). Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

self-responsible, entrepreneurial and prudent city dwellers (Stenning *et al.*, 2010). These new urban policies are centred on coproductive urbanism and self-empowering planning practices that are often referred to by scholars as ‘soft neoliberalization strategies’ (Heeg and Rosol, 2007: 496; see also Kinder, 2016). Some argued that there is an ‘intrinsic value of citizen involvement’ (Hospers, 2012; 2014), resulting in local initiatives being framed as social capital under conditions of urban austerity. Yet, this narrow lens obscures the variegated forms and motivations that inform and characterize local initiatives. Acknowledging the global-local scales as co-constitutive for places (Gibson-Graham, 2002; Katz, 2004; Tsing, 2005), we attempt to show how the case of shrinking cities is not marginal, but rather illustrative of wider urban development issues linked to deepening spatial inequalities (Bernt and Kühn, 2013).

As we embarked on our own research of local initiatives in small shrinking cities in Europe, epistemological pitfalls of shrinking cities research became increasingly evident to our multidisciplinary research team (Großmann *et al.*, 2024). Initially, when talking with representatives of various local initiatives in our field sites, we asked questions such as ‘What does your initiative do and how does it help the city? With whom do you collaborate?’, implying an altruistic or at least pragmatic problem-solving mindset of the initiatives as a necessity and legitimation of their practice. By implicitly framing them as agents of urban change and democratic role models, we found ourselves entangled in normative assumptions. Viewing shrinkage as a ‘problem’ within a paradigm where growth is equated to development often leads to linking research grants to policy agendas that are aimed at ‘combating shrinkage’. Thus, scholars may find themselves feeling encouraged to develop their own agency for finding solutions rather than doing a mere description or analysis of the status quo. Implicitly taking part in the responsabilization (Rose, 1992; Barry *et al.*, 1996) of local initiatives in small shrinking cities, we were driven by a desire to understand them as those upholding the power to turn things around and offer bright outlooks for cities in which future-making became an arena for numerous contestations (Ringel, 2018). Against this background, our search for the incorruptible kind of autonomy and agency capable of change seemed to reflect more about ‘[our own] world-view than the world’ (Gledhill, 2000: 189). Yet, our field experiences taught us a broader understanding of local initiatives.

We acknowledged our own biases and, in order to continue fieldwork more critically, returned to the scholarly debate on local initiatives in shrinking cities. Our analysis of literature included publications on shrinking cities within thematic special issues of academic journals, edited volumes, monographs and seminal standalone journal articles published over the past two decades. Most of our sources were based on empirical data drawn from the global North (USA, Canada, Japan and countries of the European Union), reflecting the geographical bias of the shrinking cities literature, although we included publications contextualized in Latin America, China and the post-Soviet region in our analysis. Upon thorough examination, we found assumptions similar to our own mirrored in the works of others, indicating that the bias is a trend rather than an exception. In this contribution we engage in reflexivity work and critical (self-)evaluation of produced narratives, aspiring to initiate a dialogue with fellow colleagues which we hope will lead to more nuanced knowledge production on local initiatives in shrinking cities.

The essay is structured as follows. First, we introduce the terminology used to talk about local initiatives (and residents at large) in the shrinking cities literature. Secondly, we outline and discuss three distinct ways in which local initiatives are normatively framed. Finally, a short conclusion provides an overview and epistemological ground for further inquiries.

### **Civil society, community, activists or human capital?**

Policymakers, planners, businesses and residents are the broad groups of actors that research on shrinking cities commonly identifies as being constitutive of shaping urban matters at the local level (see, e.g. Hospers, 2014; Rink *et al.*, 2014; Neill and

Schlappa, 2016; Hollander, 2018; Garboden and Jang-Trettien, 2020). The grouping is neither definitive nor rigorous, as the conceptual boundaries between actors and scales are not always clear. Yet, it is used as a heuristic tool that, with a level of simplification, enables discussion about power dynamics, agentic capacity and resources. In this essay, we focus on ‘residents’ who neither have the formal authority or technical expertise of policymakers and planners, nor possess their decision-making agency. Throughout the literature, a variety of terms are used to talk about residents’ passive or active participation in urban issues, some of the most common of which pertain to ‘civil society’, ‘community’, ‘activists’ or ‘human/social capital’.

Each of these concepts represents a distinct set of normative assumptions, power dynamics, values and realms of action. Within state-like forms of political organization, non-state actors create networks and ties that come in contact with particular state regimes (Gledhill, 2000). While ‘civil society’ incorporates ideologies, apparatuses and modes of action associated directly with state grids (*ibid.*), societies built upon kinship ties and other types of intimate social relations represent a world of informality, reciprocity and mutual aid networks. Despite being seemingly dissimilar, neither of the above should be viewed or romanticized as autonomous spaces of social life (Keesing, 1992; Spivak, 2010). Within shrinking cities, ‘residents’ employ both civil-society modes of action in dialogue with the state (by engaging in participative planning, petitioning and other initiatives) and mobilize informal modes of action, often turning to the ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott, 1985; 1990) to get things done (Jansen, 2015; Kinder, 2016). ‘Community’ as a term assumes a group of individuals who have shared values, interests and resources, while ‘activists’ further implies solidarization within political and social struggle. However, shared values and a distinctly political character are not always the basis for local initiatives in shrinking cities. Finally, scholarship on shrinking cities may refer to ‘residents’ as ‘human/social capital’, suggesting that they are a resource among other resources to be capitalized by more powerful actors in their pursuit of a specific urban development agenda.

Our approach is to employ ‘local initiatives’ as a broader term to talk about the diverse constellations of ‘residents’ (including small-scale entrepreneurs) who ‘do in the [shrinking] city’ (Kinder, 2016). Local initiatives may or may not come about through common goals, norms or resources. The people who constitute them may have been brought together by a pressing problem alone or build upon a long-term, sustainable alliance. Local initiatives may be set up to generate profit or have a (semi-)altruistic nature. They might ‘jump’ across scales and space to advance their case (Smith, 1992) and function as an integral part of the established power structure, or fighting against it. Thus, ‘local initiatives’ as an umbrella term allows us to discuss a variety of social groupings while acknowledging their dissimilarities, complexity, heterogeneity and fluidity.

### **Approaches to local initiatives in shrinking cities research**

Alongside the urban planning literature, publications in the fields of sociology, human geography and social anthropology have largely contributed to the research of local initiatives in the global North by focusing on agency, everyday practices and conflicts in shrinking cities (see, e.g. Safford, 2009; Ročak, 2018; 2020; Gunko *et al.*, 2021; Adams *et al.*, 2022). In this essay we draw on publications from various disciplines to critically discuss the ways in which local initiatives were framed and approached.

#### **– Sidelineing local initiatives as actors devoid of agency**

The planning studies discipline has produced the largest number of contributions about shrinking cities. Within this literature, the terms ‘city’ and even ‘community’ are often used as a synonym for ‘municipality’. The ‘city’ is regarded as a domain of experts and policymakers who come up with various strategies, tools and ‘planning

adjustments' to address the effects of shrinkage on the economy, society and the built environment (Panagopoulos and Barreira, 2012; Kotilainen *et al.*, 2015; Pallagst *et al.*, 2017c). These experts are ascribed the ability to reframe shrinkage as an opportunity and to rebrand abandoned spaces for value generation (Hollander *et al.*, 2009; Pallagst *et al.*, 2017b). Local initiatives are not considered herein at all (see, e.g. Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012; Hummel, 2015; Hartt and Warkentin, 2017; Pallagst *et al.*, 2017a; Batunova and Gunko, 2018; Ivanov, 2021; Wang *et al.*, 2021) or are mentioned merely in passing, which indicates a top-down perspective rather than acknowledgment of the transformative power they may have (Großmann *et al.*, 2013; Nelle *et al.*, 2017; Hollander, 2018).

In contrast to the above, in some writings, local initiatives, instead of being incorporated into the notion of the 'city', are explicitly semantically separated from it. This ascribes them a subaltern position within what is viewed as technocratic and expert-based urban planning (see, e.g. Pallagst *et al.*, 2019). If we continue this line of thought, it is not the residents who voice their concerns that urban shrinkage has become an issue (LaFrombois *et al.*, 2019), but planners, backed by the lobby of capital mostly troubled by changes in the housing market (Bernt *et al.*, 2014; Garboden and Jang-Trettien, 2020).

The overarching argument of literature that sidelines local initiatives in shrinking cities is that the 'success' of a shrinking city depends predominantly on the knowledge and skills of 'experts'. At the same time, 'residents' seem to be devoid of power and opinion, which (re)produces problematic power dynamics at the local level. This pitfall is partly defined by the nature of shrinking cities research, which originated within the planning discipline, where the focus was and still is on professional planners and policymakers. Thereby, planning practice-focused articles have implicitly contributed to the sidelining of local initiatives.

– Utilizing local initiatives as assets for urban (re)development

As scholars and government institutions shifted their focus from monitoring population development and pathways to broader questions of governance of shrinking cities, scholarly work gained a new perspective on local initiatives. Catchwords such as 'social capital', 'human capital', 'bottom-up', 'co-creation' or 'civic engagement' used by various stakeholders point to a tendency to frame such initiatives as having potential for urban development (see, e.g. Hospers, 2012; Feldhoff, 2013; Hospers, 2014; Schlappa, 2016; Ročak, 2020). Some scholars, referring to Putnam's work, use the concept of social capital as 'networks of civic engagement and trust' (Putnam, 1993: 150) to frame the capacities of local initiatives in shrinking cities. *Marginalisierte Städte* (Marginalized towns) (Hannemann, 2003), a pioneer work on civic engagement as capital in Germany, suggested that small shrinking cities, despite their economic decline and population loss, are characterized by strong social bonds that somehow 'stabilize' the place. Similarly, Ročak (2020) attributes social capital to small and medium-sized towns in the Netherlands and Wales, showing how emotional bonds, social ties and trust remain strong at the local informal level, yet warning that 'overestimating the potentials of social capital should be avoided' (Ročak, 2020). Leetma *et al.* (2015), who analysed postsocialist small towns during the first decade following the collapse of state socialism, claim that internal networks and local social capital play an important role in their development. The authors highlight local social capital in Viljadi, Estonia, as important for preserving the liveability of the place and claim that local administrations and institutions need to adjust their governance to that local form of social capital (a similar point is made by Adams *et al.*, 2022, on peripherality and liveability in northern Finland). Furthermore, Schlappa (2016), while arguing for the necessity of state support in monetary and recognition terms, locates resources in voluntary work. Overall, the danger of such an approach lies in researchers concurring with the inevitability of loss

of investment and public services and relying on social capital as a development resource instead.

Within the work of our team, the pitfall described above is apparent in the following example: In a policy brief of the European Union's Shrink Smart project, the Wächterhäuser (guardian houses) project in Leipzig/Germany was presented as an example of local governance responses to shrinkage and a 'tool' to combat vacancies (Bernt *et al.*, 2012). The guardian houses became a prominent local initiative that paved the way for inexpensive use of vacant space for creative projects in Leipzig and beyond. Yet, the regrowth of the city quickly led to local initiatives capitulating to the power structures of the real-estate markets. The project lost its creative spaces, its investments into the buildings and its agency. The policy brief also called upon other tiers of government to change their agendas, yet there is a thin line between acknowledging civic initiatives and implicitly promoting neoliberal exploitation strategies. This can happen when need is turned into a virtue, just as some scholars (us being part of such discussions) considered shrinkage to be a gateway to new development paradigms (Großmann, 2007)—to non-growth, even post-growth agendas that break up the 'old way' of doing things (Neill and Schlappa, 2016; Schlappa, 2016). When researchers pursue agendas that reorient responses to shrinkage away from striving for growth, they are in danger of normalizing state-retrenchment and responsabilizing of 'residents' for the fate of their cities (Pill, 2021). Murtagh (2016) emphasizes the social economy as a way to enforce local economic activity in situations where private investment is scarce and administrative resources are diminishing, to achieve moral values such as solidarity in return. Detroit, the poster child of the shrinking cities debates, has also been praised for local initiatives' potential or actual achievements in what is otherwise a sea of despair. Greening and urban gardening or farming are prominent examples of initiatives of this kind. The two remaining assets, vacant space and impoverished communities, form the basis of hopes for turning around the fate of the locality. 'Community-based' greening initiatives are thus seen as having the potential to improve the city (see, e.g. Pallagst *et al.*, 2017c).

With reference to Detroit, Kinder (2016), by contrast, discusses such initiatives as 'self-provisioning acts' only, rather than as big solutions. Instead, she makes it clear that 'advocates of neoliberal governance use the rosy rhetoric of flexible markets and grassroots governance to cast these splintering cities in a positive light' (*ibid.*: 196).

In this tradition of scholarly writing, local initiatives are (over-)responsibilized for the fate of their cities, while the retreat of a providing welfare state is normalized. Ultimately, the big unanswered question remains whether an advocacy for local initiatives to generate some sort of improvement and stability is a democratic step forward or a legitimization of the injustices that led to the decline in the first place. The interpretation lies in the hands of the researcher; the finding that initiatives develop self-sustaining practices despite or because of austerity doesn't necessarily need to slide into a justification of this condition.

- Romanticizing local initiatives as self-reliant actors of change and democratic role models

The final approach we identified in the literature tends to romanticize the role of local initiatives and heaps upon them a variety of normative expectations even further. In this literature, local initiatives are portrayed as active agents of change (Hollander, 2018) and as 'local responses to global forces' (Martinez-Fernandez *et al.*, 2012: 246). Hospers (2014: 1519) acknowledges that 'to address urban shrinkage, civic engagement is needed, all the more because citizens have the best local knowledge'. Their agency derives from various moments and practices of everyday life that include unsettling, enduring, reworking, reimagining, reinventing, resisting, contesting, occupying. Bottom-up initiatives, grassroots activism and support networks are discussed with an



emphasis on their historical rootedness in the culture of unionism, a community spirit of contestation and solidarity that remains from the industrial past (Martinez-Fernandez *et al.*, 2012).

Scholarship that uses the motto ‘shrinkage as a new potential’ refers to urban shrinkage as an opportunity for urban planning, redevelopment and investment to frame ‘shrinking cities as a “laboratory for the city of tomorrow”’ (Nelle *et al.*, 2017: 120). Against this background, emerging local initiatives—even those that started as truly bottom-up experiments and solidarization attempts—are at risk of being co-opted by more powerful capital and governance structures and turned into sources for value generation. Their institutionalization along with their blunt portrayal as authentic practices or democratic role models are means through which ‘utilization’ rationality sneaks into ‘romanticization’ framings. Thus, we argue that there is a close link between the romanticization and utilization approaches in which the former obscures and legitimizes the latter.

Discourses focused on the do-it-yourself or DIY approach in shrinking cities have become the locus for temporary land uses in the United States, Europe and Australia—and include initiatives ranging from guerrilla and community gardening to provisional art galleries and various recreational facilities. Initially deemed a new source of creative use of vacant and marginal spaces, with lessons for planners and the real-estate market for producing a vibrant public sphere, these micro-spatial urban practices have been recently problematized as DIY displacement (Oswalt *et al.*, 2013). Critical views of DIY urbanism cast it as a co-optable movement by mainstream planning and ‘growth machines’ (Molotch, 1976), which ultimately seek a revaluation of space and property values (Finn, 2014). Empirical studies of DIY urbanism in Detroit in the United States and Yubari, a small Japanese town (see Martinez-Fernandez *et al.*, 2012: 253), show that despite its quirky, rosy appeal, DIY culture does not provide a means of self-fulfilment and joy, but is a necessity for survival:

It is not leisure, satire, or a means of enrichment. It is instead a precarious method for managing cities which in the context of shrinkage is often foisted on low-income communities of color where people have few economically and politically viable options to resist disinvestment, depopulation, and austerity (Kinder, cited in Audirac, 2018: 3).

Similar to Martinez-Fernandez *et al.* (2012), Kinder (2016) insists on acknowledging weakness as the basis for DIY practices, which is crucial to a critical discussion of local initiatives in an era of seemingly romantic participatory democracy. It is, of course, fascinating to observe an ‘extraordinarily inventive bricolage—of cycling and recycling, of dividing the seemingly indivisible, of surviving on nothing’ (Piot, 2010: 3). However, while arguing that people in difficult circumstances still have agency and maintain creativity, Kinder (2016) claims that it is politically irresponsible to say that people’s capacity to live with hardship justifies market and government neglect. It is on us as scholars to be accountable for class, gender, and race structures and for critically reassessing how our evaluation of local initiatives and practices are informed by them.

### Conclusions

As new urban policies increasingly shift away from growth-focused development agendas, the restricting conditions of urban austerity raise questions of responsabilization and agency in shrinking cities. Against this background, urban studies seem to portray local initiatives in a somewhat teleological manner: local initiatives as strategic actors driven by an implicit sense of a ‘mission’ or hidden aspiration to work towards the greater good of the city. Being caught up in such assumptions and normative expectations ourselves, we attempted to analyse the pitfalls pertaining to analysis of

local initiatives in the shrinking cities literature. In doing so, we identified three broad ways in which local initiatives are being portrayed.

First, within research about governance and planning in small shrinking cities and peripheral locations, the lenses of inquiry tend to sideline local residents and initiatives as non-expert and therefore as actors of little relevance for urban future-making. By emphasizing the role of ‘experts’ and formal power holders in solving issues that emerge in shrinking cities, this type of literature (implicitly) disregards the agency of local initiatives that is not being adequately portrayed and recognized. Therefore, ‘local residents’ are seen as devoid of power, which results in neglect of their perspectives, knowledge and needs and ultimately hinders democratic decision making. Furthermore, some scholars praise regeneration efforts in shrinking and marginalized places underpinned by capital interests, and thus contribute to narrating cities as places for profit generation and not for people, contrary to claims within critical urban studies (Brenner *et al.*, 2012).

The second way of portraying local initiatives acknowledges their transformative power by focusing on their utilization. In this approach, local initiatives are framed in the language of ‘human capital’ or ‘endogenous resource’ in the face of lack of other assets. Residents become the (last) resort to help ascribe value to and extract value from a place. This results in a strategic and professionalized way to promote and stimulate forms of urban activism in a top-down manner. Financial incentives and structural support of local initiatives, thus, often turn out to be neoliberal appropriation strategies.

Thirdly, somewhat close to the utilization of initiatives is their romanticization. Local initiatives are portrayed as democratic role models, agents of change, actors of resistance and, thus, uncritically understood as ‘good’. They are described as a means to achieving positive change (whatever this means in the context of urban shrinkage) and returning dignity to the marginalized locality. This approach builds on the fantasies of close-knit community bonds that provide fertile ground for collaborative actions. Such a framing, however, offers an oversimplified view and fails to account for the multifaceted forms and motivating factors that drive local initiatives. Furthermore, discussing local initiatives as completely autonomous actors or means of resistance to existing power structures seems to be, in a way, ‘a cheap thrill ... balm to critics in the global North that may be no less exoticizing than earlier renditions of Orientalism’ (Katz, 2004: 240).

While considering these three ways of portraying local initiatives, we assert that researchers (us included) need to be careful when writing about local initiatives in shrinking cities and other places that have been devalued by capital and abandoned by the state. While we need to acknowledge the existence of local initiatives or other forms of ‘civic engagement’, we should not uncritically idealize and mystify them or place a load of normative expectation on their shoulders. Rather, we should attempt to see them in the plurality of their essences as extremely varied in form and motivation. While some have an altruistic or political character, aimed at increasing the quality of residents’ lives in a city, we encountered others that were self- or group-interest-driven. Alongside politics of placemaking, local initiatives are based on the desire for recognition, appreciation and dignity, as well as on purely pursuing individual pragmatic interests or profit-making agendas. Some initiatives may be supported by formal stakeholders that have resources to rely on, but others may be organized in anarchic ways and mainly draw from informal networks as resources. There is a trend in research to miss these nuances of aims and practices. While uncritically romanticizing—i.e. praising what may be merely a means of survival (Kinder, 2016), we could fall into the trap of indirectly justifying spatial injustice.

As David Harvey (2020) argues: ‘If we engage in “urban renewal”, we merely move the poverty around ... If we don’t, we merely sit by and watch as continuous decay takes place’. This is the dilemma scholars and practitioners are univocally facing when working with local initiatives in shrinking cities. By pointing to the legacy of modernist,



expert-based urban planning and the increasing neoliberalization of the discipline, we attempted to contribute towards a more diversified way of discussing issues concerning shrinking cities and to add a plurality to academic and public debates. The way we produce knowledge has a tangible effect (even if only indirectly) on the localities where we work. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge and attempt to disentangle our research inquiries from a view guided by neoliberal responsabilization, from goals set by the politics of knowledge production (such as getting published, getting funding, and so on), and from our own positionality, which suggests what a ‘good life’ should look like. Simultaneously, we understand that such disengagement is a hard task. At the same time as we raise awareness about the issue of disentanglement, we have no clear answer as to how to balance the personal, the professional and the political when doing research in shrinking cities—places that have a long history of being stigmatized and problematized. However, there is an obvious need to encourage more reflexive engagement within research on shrinking cities and to shift to a collaborative, reflexive sensibility that is mindful of wider contexts (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009; Lumsden, 2019). Along these lines, our essay is an invitation to think together about the complexities of working with local initiatives in marginalized places, and about the broader processes of uneven spatial development across scales.

**Leona Sandmann**, Department of Urban Sociology, University of Applied Sciences Erfurt, Altonaerstrasse 25, 99085 Erfurt, Germany, leonasandmann@posteo.de

**Maria Gunko**, University of Oxford, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), 58 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 6QS, UK, maria.gunko@gtc.ox.ac.uk

**Irina Shirobokova**, City University of New York Graduate Center, Earth and Environmental Sciences, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY, 10016, USA, ishirobokova@gradcenter.cuny.edu

**Ria-Maria Adams**, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, 7 Universitätsstraße, 1010 Vienna, Austria, ria.adams@univie.ac.at

**Johanna Lilius**, Aalto University, Department of Architecture, PO BOX 11000, FI-00076 Aalto, Finland, johanna.lilius@aalto.fi

**Katrin Großmann**, University of Applied Sciences, Architecture and Urban Planning Faculty, 1 Schlüterstraße, 99089 Erfurt, Germany, katrin.grossmann@fh-erfurt.de

## References

- Adams, R.-M., A. Bolotova and V. Alasalmi (2022) Liveability under shrinkage: initiatives in the ‘capital of pessimism’ in Finland. *European Planning Studies* 31.1, 212–29.
- Alfasi, N. (2004) Public participation and the democratization of urban planning. *Horizons in Geography* 60/61, 21–28.
- Alvesson, M. and K. Sköldberg (2017) *Reflexive methodology: new vistas for qualitative research*. SAGE Publications, London.
- Audirac, I. (2018) Shrinking cities from marginal to mainstream: views from North America and Europe. *Cities* 75 (May), 1–5.
- Audirac, I. (2022) Shrinking cities as epistemic communities. In K. Pallagst, M. Bontje, E. Cunningham Sabot and R. Fleschur (eds.), *Handbook on shrinking cities*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham and Northampton, MA.
- Barry, A., T. Osborne and N. Rose (1996) Introduction. In A. Barry, T. Osborne and N. Rose (eds.), *Foucault and political reason*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL.
- Batunova, E. and M. Gunko (2018) Urban shrinkage: an unspoken challenge of spatial planning in Russian small and medium-sized cities. *European Planning Studies* 26.8, 1580–97.
- Bernt, M. and M. Kühn (2013) Peripheralization and power—theoretical debates. In M. Naumann and A. Fischer-Tahir (eds.), *Peripheralization: the making of spatial dependencies and social injustice*, Springer, Wiesbaden.
- Bernt, M., M. Cocks, C. Couch, K. Großmann, A. Haase and D. Rink (2012) Shrink Smart: the governance of shrinkage within a European context. Research brief no. 2: Policy response, governance and future directions [WWW document]. URL [https://www.ufz.de/export/data/400/39031\\_ResearchBrief2\\_.pdf](https://www.ufz.de/export/data/400/39031_ResearchBrief2_.pdf) (accessed 14 May 2024).
- Bernt, M., A. Haase, K. Großmann, M. Cocks, C. Couch, K. Cortese and R. Krzysztofik (2014) How does(n't) urban shrinkage get onto the agenda? Experiences from Leipzig, Liverpool, Genoa and Bytom. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38.5, 1749–66.

- Brenner, N., P. Marcuse and M. Mayer (2012) *Cities for people, not for profit: critical urban theory and the right to the city*. Routledge, London and New York, NY.
- Feldhoff, T. (2013) Shrinking communities in Japan: community ownership of assets as a development potential for rural Japan? *Special issue, Urban Design International* 18.1, 99–109.
- Finn, D. (2014) DIY urbanism: implications for cities. *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* 7.4, 381–98.
- Garboden, P. and C. Jang-Trettien (2020) 'There's money to be made in community': real estate developers, community organizing, and profit-making in a shrinking city. *Special issue, Journal of Urban Affairs* 42.3, 414–34.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2002) Beyond global vs. local: economic politics outside the binary frame. In A. Herod and M.W. Wright (eds.), *Geographies of power: placing scale*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- Gledhill, J. (2000) *Power and its disguises: anthropological perspectives on politics*. Second edition, Pluto Press, London and Sterling, VA.
- Großmann, K. (2007) *Am Ende des Wachstumsparadigmas? Zur Transformation von Deutungsmustern in der Stadtentwicklung: der Fall Chemnitz* [At the end of the growth paradigm? On the transformation of interpretive patterns in urban development: the case of Chemnitz]. transcript, Bielefeld.
- Großmann, K., M. Bontje, A. Haase and V. Mykhnenko (2013) Shrinking cities: notes for the further research agenda. *Cities* 35 (December), 221–25.
- Großmann K., R-M. Adams, A. Bolotova, M. Gunko, J. Lilius, S. Messerschmidt and L. Sandmann (2024) Self-responsibilization, the municipality, and the state: peripheralization shaping local initiatives in shrinking small towns. *Cities* 150 (July), 105067.
- Gunko, M., N. Kinossian, G. Pivovarov, K. Averkieva and E. Batunova (2021) Exploring agency of change in small industrial towns through urban renewal initiatives. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 103.3, 218–34.
- Hannemann, C. (2003) *Marginalisierte Städte—Probleme, Differenzierungen und Chancen ostdeutscher Kleinstädte im Schrumpfungsprozess* [Marginalized towns—problems, differentiations and potentials of East German shrinking small towns]. Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, Berlin.
- Hart, M. and J. Warkentin (2017) The development and revitalisation of shrinking cities: a twin city comparison. *Town Planning Review* 88.1, 29–41.
- Harvey, D. (2020) Capitalism is not the solution to urban America's problems—capitalism itself is the problem. *Jacobin* 6 February [WWW document]. URL <https://jacobin.com/2020/06/david-harvey-cities-capital-labor-crisis> (accessed 17 January 2024).
- Heeg, S. and M. Rosol (2007) Neoliberale Stadtpolitik im globalen Kontext: ein Überblick [Neoliberal urban policy in a global context: an overview]. *PROKLA* 149.4, 491–509.
- Hollander, J. (2018) *A research agenda for shrinking cities*. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.
- Hollander, J., K. Pallagst, T. Schwarz and F. Popper (2009) Planning shrinking cities. *Progress in Planning* 72.4, 223–32.
- Holmes, A.G.D. (2020) Researcher positionality—a consideration of its influence and place in qualitative research: a new researcher guide. *Shanlax International Journal of Education* 8.4. <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v8i4.3232>
- Hospers, G.-J. (2012) Coping with shrinkage in Europe's cities and towns. *Special issue, URBAN DESIGN International* 18.1, 78–89.
- Hospers, G.-J. (2014) Policy responses to urban shrinkage: from growth thinking to civic engagement. *European Planning Studies* 22.7, 1507–23.
- Hummel, D. (2015) Right-sizing cities in the United States: defining its strategies. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 37.4, 397–409.
- Ivanov, B. (2021) Narrative of crisis: how framing urban shrinkage and depopulation shapes policy and planning responses in Spain, *German and the Netherlands. Sustainability* 13.19, 1–23.
- Jacobs, J. (1961) *The death and life of great American cities*. Random House, New York, NY.
- Jansen, S. (2015) *Yearnings in the meantime: 'normal lives' and the state in a Sarajevo apartment complex*. Berghahn, New York, NY, and Oxford.
- Jessop, B. (1997) The entrepreneurial city: re-imagining localities, redesigning economic governance, or restructuring capital? In N. Jewson and S. MacGregor (eds.), *Transforming cities: contested governance and new spatial divisions*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Kassan, A., S. Nutter, A.R. Green, N. Arthur, S. Russell-Mayhew and M. Sesma-Vasquez (2020) Capturing the shadow and light of researcher positionality: a picture-prompted poly-ethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920977325>
- Katz, C. (1994) Playing the field: questions of fieldwork in geography. *The Professional Geographer* 46.1, 67–72.
- Katz, C. (2004) *Growing up global: economic restructuring and children's everyday lives*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Keesing, R.M. (1992) *Custom and confrontation: the Kwaio struggle for cultural autonomy*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Kinder, K. (2016) *DIY Detroit: making do in a city without services*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Kotilainen, J., I. Eisto and E. Vatanen (2015) Uncovering mechanisms for resilience: strategies to counter shrinkage in a peripheral city in Finland. *Special issue, European Planning Studies* 23.2, 53–68.
- LaFrombois, M., Y. Park and D. Yurcaba (2019) How U.S. shrinking cities plan for change: comparing population projections and planning strategies in depopulating U.S. cities. *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 43.1, 81–93.
- Leetma, K., A. Kriszan, M. Nuga and J. Burdack (2015) Strategies to cope with shrinkage in the lower end of the urban hierarchy in Estonia and central Germany. *Special issue, European Planning Studies* 23.1, 147–65.
- Lumsden, K. (2019) *Reflexivity: theory, method, and practice*. Routledge, New York, NY, and London.
- Martínez-Fernández, C., C.-T. Wu, L.K. Schatz, N. Taira and J.G. Vargas-Hernández (2012) The shrinking mining city: urban dynamics and contested territory. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 36.2, 245–60.
- Mason-Bish, H. (2019) The elite delusion: reflexivity, identity and positionality in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research* 19.3, 263–76.
- Molotch, H. (1976) The city as a growth machine: toward a political economy of place. *American Journal of Sociology* 82.2, 309–32.
- Murtagh, B. (2016) The role of the social economy in the shrinking city. In W. Neill and H. Schlappa (eds.), *Future directions for the European shrinking city*, Routledge, London and New York, NY.
- Neill, W. and H. Schlappa (eds.) (2016) *Future directions for the European shrinking city*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Nelle, A., K. Großmann, D. Haase, S. Kabisch, D. Rink and M. Wolff (2017) Urban shrinkage in Germany: an entangled web of conditions, debates and policies. *Cities* 69 (September), 116–23.
- Oswalt, P., K. Overmeyer and P. Misselwitz (2013) *Urban catalyst: the power of temporary use*. DOM Publishers, Berlin.
- Pallagst, K., R. Fleschur and S. Siba (2017a) What drives planning in a shrinking city? Tales from two German and two American cases. *Town Planning Review* 88.1, 15–28.
- Pallagst, K., R. Fleschur and F. Trap (2017b) Greening the shrinking city—policies and planning approaches in the USA with the example of Flint, Michigan. *Landscape Research* 42.7, 716–27.
- Pallagst, K., J. Vargas-Hernández and P. Hammer (2019) Green innovation areas—en route to sustainability for shrinking cities? *Sustainability* 11.23. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11236674>

- Pallagst, K., H. Mulligan, E. Cunningham-Sabot and S. Fol (2017c) The shrinking city awakens: perceptions and strategies on the way to revitalisation? *Town Planning Review* 88.1, 9–13.
- Panagopoulos, T. and A.P. Barreira (2012) Shrinkage perceptions and smart growth strategies for the municipalities of Portugal. Special issue, *Built Environment* 38.2, 276–92.
- Peck, J. (2012) Austerity urbanism: American cities under extreme economy. *City* 16.6, 626–55.
- Peshkin, A. (1988) In search of subjectivity: one's own. *Educational Researcher* 17.7, 17–21.
- Pill, M. (2021) Neighborhood collaboration in co-production: state-resourced responsiveness or state-retrenched responsibilisation? *Policy Studies* 43.5, 984–1000.
- Piot, C. (2010) *Nostalgia for the future: West Africa after the cold war*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Putnam, R.D. (1993) What makes democracy work? *National Civic Review* 82.2, 101–7.
- Ringel, F. (2018) *Back to the postindustrial future: an ethnography of Germany's fastest-shrinking city*. Berghahn Books, New York, NY, and Oxford.
- Rink, D., C. Couch, A. Haase, R. Krzysztofik, B. Nadolu and P. Rumpel (2014) The governance of urban shrinkage in cities of post-socialist Europe: policies, strategies and actors. *Urban Research and Practice* 7.3, 258–77.
- Ročak, M. (2018) Perspectives of civil society on governance of urban shrinkage: the cases of Heerlen (Netherlands) and Blaenau Gwent (Wales) compared. *European Planning Studies* 27.4, 699–721.
- Ročak, M. (2020) *The experience of shrinkage: exploring social capital in the context of urban shrinkage*. PhD dissertation, Radboud University, Nijmegen.
- Rose, N. (1992) Governing the enterprising self. In P. Heelas and P. Morris (eds.), *The values of the enterprise culture: the moral debate*, Routledge, London.
- Safford, S. (2009) *Why the garden club couldn't save Youngstown: the transformation of the rust belt*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Schlappa, H. (2016) If not growth, then what? In W. Neill and H. Schlappa (eds.), *Future directions for the European shrinking city*, Routledge, New York, NY.
- Scott, J. (1985) *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Scott, J. (1990) *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts*. Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.
- Smith, N. (1992) Contours of a spatialized politics: homeless vehicles and the production of geographical scale. *Social Text* 33, 54–81.
- Spivak, G.C. (2010) 'Can the subaltern speak?' Revised edition, from the 'History' chapter of *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. In R.S. Morris (ed.), *Can the subaltern speak? Reflections on the history of an idea*, Columbia University Press, New York, NY.
- Stenning, A., A. Smith, A. Rochovská and D. Świątek (2010) *Domesticating neoliberalism: spaces of economic practice and social reproduction in post-socialist cities*. Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA.
- Tsing, A. (2005) *Friction: an ethnography of global connection*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, and Oxford.
- Wang, Y., M. Lin, J. Gao and Z. Zhou (2021) Fading attraction of the shrinking city: an empirical study from an urban resource perspective. *Sustainability* 13.20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su132011550>
- Wiechmann, T. and K. Pallagst (2012) Urban shrinkage in Germany and the USA: a comparison of transformation patterns and local strategies. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 36.2, 261–80.
- Worell, J. and P. Remer (2003) *Feminist perspectives in therapy: empowering diverse women*. Wiley, Hoboken, NJ.