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Shrinking Cities: Like a Slow-Motion Katrina

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The catastrophic flood that followed Hurricane Katrina in 2005 brought such a quick and intense shrinkage to that city that planners have been unable to do much to manage or direct it. By contrast, the cases examined at the international shrinking cities symposium at UC Berkeley February 8-9 documented a more gradual process—“a slow-motion Katrina,” in which skillful planning may play a constructive role.

Participants in the event discussed case studies drawn from around the world in hopes of using each other’s experiences to help understand,

and plan for, urban shrinkage. The studies varied in economic, cultural and spatial context. Yet whether they were caused by low fertility rates (as in Germany and Japan), loss of jobs and industry (as in Buffalo, NY, or the mining towns of the Taebak mountains of Korea), or cultural and racial divisions (as in St. Louis), they resulted in problems that were largely similar: loss of population, abandoned infrastructure, and a city with an overly large footprint.

Furthermore, since people leave such slowly shrinking cities largely by choice, the society that remains is

comprised largely of the less mobile. Meanwhile, vacant plots, empty apartments, and gray and brown areas amount in some cases to 70 percent of the municipal area. The spread can be like an epidemic, causing a sharp drop in property values and a sense of helplessness among the remaining population.

Above: Problems caused by urban shrinkage become manifest in both residential and industrial areas. Penreco industrial building, Cleveland. Image courtesy of Terry Schwarz, Urban Design Center of Northeast Ohio.

Moving Beyond Old Dogmas

The symposium, formally titled “The Future of Shrinking Cities: Problems, Patterns and Strategies of Urban Transformation in a Global Context,” was organized by UC Berkeley’s Center for Global Metropolitan Studies. The center emerged from the 2005 conference which provided an initial forum for the articles in the “Future Metropolitan Landscape” section of this issue. Within the center, a Shrinking Cities Group is composed of visiting scholars and representatives from academic institutions in Europe, the U.S., Japan, Australia, Korea, Mexico, Indonesia, among other countries. They were joined at the symposium by city planners and politicians from a number of cities, mostly in the U.S.

Although New Orleans was not presented as a specific case study at the symposium, several speakers observed that its sudden and spectacular shrinkage may kick-start legitimate discourse on the topic in the U.S. Until now, urban shrinkage has been a taboo subject among both planners and municipal authorities.

“The dogma of growth is so inherent to cities, that no mayor will address shrinkage,” said Rollin Stanley, Planning Director of St. Louis. “It’s stigmatic of failure. He will never get reelected.”

More problematically, a dogma of growth has traditionally dominated planning, both as a discipline and a profession. “When I started studying shrinkage in Germany twelve years ago no one was willing to hear about it,” said Thorsten Wiechmann of the Dresden Institute of Ecological and Regional Development. “Shrinkage was completely outside the belief that planning should address growth.”

Recently, however, in Europe,

conditions have dictated a change of focus. “At present, planning for shrinkage is a hot issue in Germany,” said Karina Pallagst, program director for the symposium. But in the U.S., the Berkeley symposium may represent the first time shrinkage had been openly discussed among planners, she added.

The significance of this breakthrough can hardly be overemphasized, noted Terry Schwarz from the Urban Design Center of Northeast Ohio, part of Kent State University, because the problems of shrinking cities are very different from growing cities, and cannot be addressed in the same manner.

Toward this end, the discussion of shrinkage was conducted on two levels at the symposium: in relation to political agendas and specific planning strategies.

“There are several ways to tackle shrinkage,” said Kathryn Foster of the University of Buffalo Regional Institute. “We could ignore it, accommodate it, combat it, or embrace it. Most of the cities discussed in this symposium underwent several of them.” The main difference between cities, claimed Stanley, involves their perception of it. Some may attempt to overturn it, while others may embrace it.

“Trying to turn shrinkage to growth in areas where growth is not likely to happen again is a waste of resources, as well as denying different lifestyles,” said Matthias Bernt from the city of Leipzig. “We should deal with shrinkage not as a source for new growth but as a source for a better quality of life in less dense cities. The challenge is a change in mentality.”

Such a change of mentality, claimed Chung-Tong Wu from the University of Western Sydney, is ultimately a local issue. The real chal-

lenge is “to consider shrinkage as a community instead of expecting governments to solve it.”

Several speakers also mentioned the “cultural shrinkage” that may follow the abandonment of houses, factories and schools, and the disappearance of important sections of local society. New developments, such as a casino in the once-prosperous mining area of Korea or American industry in San Pedro, Mexico, may address problems of physical shrinkage. But they may do little to stem cultural shrinkage in these areas.

Exploring Multiple Strategies

The symposium highlighted the great variety of strategies being taken by cities when confronted by the facts of shrinkage. These are directly influenced by their views of the past and the future.

For example, Dresden has embraced shrinkage as an opportunity to demolish abandoned structures and create more green public spaces. Korean mining towns, by contrast, have tried to reverse shrinkage by attracting new activities, like tourism.

Other strategies have included subsidizing the construction of improved housing units, as in St. Louis, MO; land-banking in Flint, MI, and Cleveland, OH; and redefining municipal boundaries, as in Jakarta-Bandung, Indonesia. Initiatives may sometimes be prompted by community action, as in the case of the Korean Taebak mining towns, where organized demonstrations called on the government to “save the city.”

Due to the great variety of contexts and responses, however, it was difficult to draw broad conclusions about planning for shrinkage from the symposium. Furthermore, as Elizabeth Deakin of the Center for

Global Metropolitan Studies concluded, many strategies rely on local tax and legal systems and on individual social agents in the community. They are therefore not easily transferable to other contexts. Moreover, tactics like land-banking frequently rely on a single tax or state policy, and are fragile in the face of policy changes.

“We need to further investigate the economic and legal, as well as social contexts of shrinking cities, in order to be able to alert fragile cities and be able to learn from the tactics employed by other cities,” Deakin said.

Following the sprawl and segregation of the past three decades, shrinkage today stands ready to become the “new fear” of planners. This would be a dangerous development if it led only to the creation of new dogma.

The world planners address is rarely simple, Wiechmann explained. Thus, even though Dresden has been experiencing growth in the past five years, its planning policy still addresses shrinkage through actions such as housing demolition.

“Planning should not be about shrinkage or growth,” he argued. “But about flexibility to change.”

For more information on the symposium or the Shrinking Cities Group, visit www-iurd.ced.berkeley.edu/scgsymposium/bios.html or www-iurd.ced.berkeley.edu/scg/.

To the editors,

I write with appreciation for the recent volume of *Places* (18.3) acknowledging my work along with the other EDRA/*Places* award winners for 2006. It is especially valuable to have the jurors comments along with the synthetic description and selected images of each project. The Environmental Design Research Awards are an important venue for academic architects who believe we can make a difference in the physical and social landscapes we inhabit.

I also write asking for a necessary clarification. I initiated the project for co-housing at Ohio State that grew into the Buckeye Village Community Center along with Dr. Beverly Toomey as noted in the article. I was the research architect for the project, while George Acock Architects were the architects of record. Andrew Rosenthal was the project architect, and after he left the office, Dave Lee assumed his responsibilities for site supervision. Suzanne Toney was responsible for interiors. (Acock, Rosenthal, and Lee are graduates of the Ohio State School of Architecture; Toney earned her design degree at Ohio State.) The talents of each of the key collaborators contributed to the success of this building and landscape. Without the research component that fostered dialogue, contact between unlikely partners, difficult debates as often as joint understanding, and tough decisions, we wouldn't be having this conversation. It is important to me that my collaborators are fully recognized for their contributions.

Respectfully,

Kay Bea Jones
Associate Professor
The Ohio State University

