

Hidden Shrinkage, Burgeoning Inequality and Opportunistic Urban Design

We live in an ever-urbanised world, yet there are many cities that are ‘shrinking’. As Saehoon Kim’s paper rightly points out, shrinking cities are not just a phenomenon of the rust-belt American Midwest or Eastern Europe, but also exist in Latin America, Asia and Southern Europe (Kim, 2018) . Shrinking cities come in many forms, but have been defined by two key issues, declining populations and increasing abandonment. In my invitation to respond to Saehoon Kim’s paper, while not in any sense detracting from the plight of these places, I would like to broaden the debate on what ‘shrinking’ means and why different kinds of ‘shrinkage’ may deserve our attention.

In the UK some cities are not shrinking in terms of their population, nor developed land, both of which may in fact still be increasing. However, the roll back of the state - deep reductions in spending, political neo-liberalism and deregulation - has induced a drastic and imbalanced shrinkage in the provision of public services in relation to every other aspect of urban life. A withering of the civic elements of the city, which is leading to an ever more inequitable society. This results in huge disparities in terms of health and wellbeing between rich and poor, and daily struggles not just for the poorest in society, but the merely less well-off.

Despite retaining its position as one of the largest economies in the world, ‘austerity’ measures in the UK since the global crisis in 2008, have devastated public services. This is particularly so in those areas which have traditionally been dominated by the political Left; former industrial cities of the midlands and north. Newcastle, the regional capital of northeast England, is a good example. It has experienced modest yet sustained population growth – approximately 1% per annum – over the past decade. Yet during this time public services have faced swingeing cuts of over £300million, and despite the prime minister’s announcement that ‘austerity is over’ (The Guardian, 2018) more cuts of 60 million will have to be found over the next two years (Newcastle City Council, 2018) .

The impact of cuts in Newcastle, however, have been experienced very differently across the city. In wealthy neighbourhoods, public provision has been seamlessly replaced either by private delivery, or well-resourced and operationalised volunteering. Articulate and networked groups, who know how to capture political backing and unlock necessary resources, now run facilities such as libraries and swimming pools.

Beyond these neighbourhoods there is a large ‘middle ground’. Areas not desperate enough to secure the scant remains of public resources, nor rich enough to run themselves. My own neighbourhood is one such area. A pleasant inner suburb of Edwardian and interwar streets, it is home to a diverse population. Older long-term residents, young families attracted by relatively affordable house prices, a substantial gay population and a good ethnic mix. When the local authority started to withdraw services in the local park, for example, an enthusiastic band of volunteers rose up to fill the gaps. They were happy to pick up litter, tend flower beds and run community events. However, now the authority has withdrawn all but completely, the enormity of what the group has taken on, has begun to dawn. Civic parks need more than goodwill and domestic garden tools to manage them effectively. In a desperate attempt to cope, far from ideal practices have crept in, damaging to aesthetic quality, habitats and biodiversity. The group is well-meaning, but need support to help them cope, however it is simply not there. A story repeated across the neighbourhood and a range of services, I hear my neighbours talk frequently about “breaking point” and “living on a knife edge”.

The very poorest neighbourhoods still attract what scant public resources there are, though grossly inadequate as highlighted recently by the United Nations Special Rapporteur (United Nations Human Rights, 2018). Even these poorest areas however may not be 'shrinking' in the accepted sense of loss of population. While residential areas may suffer population 'churn', people need somewhere to live and homes are often not empty for long. Moreover, retail areas generally look surprisingly vibrant, though closer inspection will reveal businesses dominated by nutritionally poor 'fast food' outlets, betting shops, pay-day loan lenders, pawn brokers and cut-price alcohol and tobacco outlets. A toxic mix, feeding a syndemic of obesity, indebtedness and substance abuse; escapes from reality for the most desperate in society (Townshend, 2017) .

The City is not shrinking in the traditional sense, but essential elements within in it are shrinking, withering, diseased and dying. The result is burgeoning inequality. You can easily walk from one neighbourhood to another in Newcastle where the difference in average life expectancy is over 12 years. The City is certainly not unique in this, or in the other regards described.

What can urban designers do in the city of hidden shrinkage and burgeoning inequality? There isn't necessarily the space of abandonment found in traditional shrinking cities in which to operate. For example, it is unlikely there is much scope for *urban connector strategies*, as outlined in Kim's paper, because the infrastructure of the city is still largely functioning. Even trying to 'squeeze in' elements like new cycle paths can be problematic. *Social incubator strategies* are undoubtedly needed, but as in the case of my neighbourhood park group, volunteerism may have already been well and truly 'nurtured' in nearly every place it realistically can be. Volunteerism is good, but it can only go so far and often reaches a point where an injection of resources and expertise is desperately needed. This latter point rather goes for *process-based strategies* as described by Kim as well. There must be reengagement of the public sector with provision of precious resources such as parks, which are essential to the wellbeing of whole communities. There needs to be balance, volunteerism supported in appropriate ways.

As urban designers we must be realistic under such challenging circumstances, we cannot solve such deep-rooted social problems. We can only achieve so much and, therefore, I am most drawn to the *place patchwork* approach. Small-scaled, scattered and yes if necessary reversible interventions. As observed by Kim this approach has been around for some time and has often been referred to as 'urban acupuncture' . I'm drawn to the healing metaphor, but acupuncture requires meticulous insertion at pre-specified points and I'm not convinced that reflects current realities.

I would like to propose a looser term, 'opportunistic urban design'. Urban designers need to become fleet of foot; identify spaces for intervention, however unprepossessing and join in projects when there is apparently little urban design aspiration, but where there may be some resources, even if meagre. Engage and co-design with communities where and whenever opportunities arise, figure 1, (see also Newcastle University, 2018); be aspirational, yet pragmatic. In this way we can provide a wide range of communities with assets which lift the spirit, provide hope, and yet be within their grasp to own, manage, treasure and develop well into the future.

References

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