

## **Contextuality of shrinkage and positionality of urban design**

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The loss of population in some urban and rural areas, and the deep and lasting problems that such a loss brings about, are a worldwide challenge. Therefore, it is a worthwhile undertaking to investigate the possible contributions of urban design in responding to this challenge. This paper offers a good review of some of the existing remedies and some practical advice. In particular, it briefly proposes strategies for focusing on the declining areas, their connections to other parts of the city, and stimulating their regeneration through participatory and performative activities. As such, it is a step in the right direction, showing concern and understanding for social problems, and searching for spatial solutions that urban design can offer for overcoming them.

The problems of urban decline and shrinkage are complex and diverse, requiring a critical understanding of the context and of the position of urban design in the urban development process. The loss of population tends to be linked to different political, economic and social changes in various parts of the world, often associated with globalization and technological transformation. These changes are wide ranging: from deindustrialization, as in the European and American older industrial cities, to industrialization and urbanization, as in Asian cities; from the lack of opportunities and infrastructure, as in many remote rural and island areas, to suburbanization and hollowing out of the historic core, as in central cities; from ageing and gradual demographic change, as in a growing number of wealthier countries, to a sudden change in circumstances, as in Eastern Europe; not to mention war, natural disasters and climate change, as in the Middle East and elsewhere, or the recurring global economic crises that have left many places empty and abandoned.

The impact on the population who had no choice but to leave or, particularly, to remain may have been devastating, suffering from the lack of access to employment, to public services and social support. The abilities of local agencies to deal with these problems also vary widely. The diversity of these circumstances and problems suggests that the solutions would also have to be diverse and multidimensional, coming out of the local circumstances and mobilizing various resources in response to them. To succeed, urban design needs to recognize contextual differences and to articulate this local response, drawing on a wealth of local knowledge and giving a spatial shape to a multidimensional responsive trajectory. It cannot be developed in isolation from the specificity of its context and from the multidimensionality of the forces and concerns that are at work in a locality.

The feasibility of any proposed solutions, and their social impact on the locality, would also depend on the strength of the social contexts and the values of the political-economic institutions that would deploy them. Urban design is part of this institutional milieu, rather than standing outside it. The question is: what is the social position and institutional affiliation of urban designers? Who is going to commission and implement their designs? Should urban designers distance themselves from public planners and grassroots civil society, and if so who do they affiliate with in the urban development process? What is their relationship with the land and property market? Is it possible for urban designers to take the rule of the market for granted, and yet act as a benevolent and public-minded force? How far can a project-based process deal with long-term problems of shrinkage and decline? How far can temporary uses of space fill the structural gaps left by global forces, or provide stable futures for precarious conditions?

Shrinking areas often suffer from a lack of investment and attention. In some western settings, this has been the result of a decline of the welfare state, and the reluctance or inability of the public authorities for making such investments. Private investment, meanwhile, may avoid the declining areas, unless it is subsidized by the public authorities, or if it leads to gentrification and hence the expected rewards on real estate investment. In a region where development pressure is high, bringing land back to the market is far easier than where abandonment prevails. But bringing land back into the market as its own problems. In some cities, gentrification is pursued by both public and private authorities as a natural course of action, as if ignoring the pains of those who are left behind or displaced. How can investment be attracted to deal with the diversity of conditions in which shrinking takes place, without merely becoming a recipe for generating higher rates of real estate value? When places are improved but people are not empowered, the result would tend to be displacement; when people are empowered but places are not improved, decline and depopulation may accelerate.

There is a need for urban design's critical engagement with the rich experience of urban regeneration in areas that have gone into economic decline and have lost population. Decades of attempts at dealing with this problem in the UK and elsewhere offer valuable lessons to the urban designers who care about the social impact of their work and look for the creative potentials of urban design for the future of cities (Madanipour, 2014; 2017). The contextuality of shrinkage and the positionality of urban design are among these lessons.

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