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ABSTRACT

Regardless of the fast-growing popularity of shrinking cities in the literature, certain misconceptions persist. Urban shrinkage is often assumed to be near-synonymous with urban distress, and shrinking cities are assumed to be in need of growth. In this paper, we seek to achieve a greater conceptual clarity for both shrinkage and distress, thereby informing present debates on the topic and inviting more nuanced ones in the future. The paper is organized in three main parts. We first use a historical lens to challenge the conflation of shrinkage and distress. Western history is rife with examples of when growth—shrinkage's opposite—was associated with distress. Second, we comment on some contradictions in the conceptual currents that underlie the idea of shrinking as distress, particularly in the United States. Third, we highlight how shrinkage may benefit cities and the people who live in them.

Fourteen years ago, J. Robinson (2006) noted that the literature on cities focuses on three seemingly non-overlapping categories: global cities, megacities, and ordinary cities. Scholars writing on the first category emphasized financial services, global connections, and international elites. In the second category, the focus shifted to slums, informality, and governance failures. Regretfully, in Robinson's assessment, the third literature, on ordinary cities, was too small and the gap between the other two had not yet been bridged. A similar observation can be made about another set of categories: growing cities and shrinking cities. Those who write about one of these two categories appear to ignore the other. One consequence of this compartmentalization, we believe, is that planners and policy-makers, who are in part informed by the scholarly literature, associate 'their' category of cities with one set of issues ignoring those affecting the 'other' category. For example, urban growth is generally associated with benefits such as density, vibrant neighbourhoods, and environmental sustainability, whereas urban shrinkage, or long-term population loss, is generally associated with a host of distressful socio-economic conditions.

This is not, we believe, a problem just for the urban theorists. It has major implications for how urban planners and political leaders in cities experiencing population loss conduct their work: how they think about the conditions and consequences of shrinkage, how they write plans, and how they choose actions (Audriac 2017). In this paper, our aim is to rethink common perceptions of shrinkage, growth, and distress. Urban leaders, especially in the United States, continue to predominantly think of shrinkage as inherently distressful. Yet the link between shrinkage and distress is not wholly

self-evident. In fact, a growing literature questions the prevalent idea that shrinkage inherently means problems. To begin with, cities across the world have experienced growth and shrinkage many times throughout history and it would be simplistic to assume that when they were bigger, they were better (Rybczynski and Linneman 1999). In today's contexts, although it is intuitive to think that a city is shrinking because it is somehow failing, the smaller population counts could be, in part, caused by decreases in household size—not necessarily an indicator of failure (Hartt and Hackworth 2018). Furthermore, no matter the causes of decline, there are many examples, especially in Europe, where shrinkage, or what D'Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis (2015) calls 'degrowth,' seems to have presented opportunities for future betterment (e.g. Bernt et al. 2014; Dubeaux and Sabot 2018). And regarding US cities, there is now a lively scholarly discussion on the possibilities of 'planned shrinkage' or 'smart decline' (LaCroix 2010; Hollander and Nemeth 2011; Popper and Popper 2017).

The goal of this paper is to challenge further the purported connection between urban shrinkage and distress, doing so primarily in the context of the United States but also with reference to other Western nations. The paper accomplishes this goal in three steps. First, we argue that the shrinkage-distress link rests, in part, on a collective amnesia involving the many ways in which urban growth produces distress. Like decline, sustained growth brings about conditions that can make cities less livable. For a long time, urban distress was assumed to come from growth, not shrinkage; hence, limiting growth was seen as the desirable policy (Lima and Eischeid 2017, 692). Second, we bring to light the contradictory nature of the conceptual currents that underlie the idea that shrinkage equals distress, especially in the United States. Lastly, we summarize some opportunities that might appear when a city shrinks. Our hope is that if urban policy-makers question the common idea that shrinkage is distress, they would be willing to experiment with a broader array of planning tools.

Brief background of the 'shrinking cities' concept

The 'shrinking city' has become a significant concern around the world, especially for planners and politicians who work in cities classified as such. The phenomenon of cities losing population has been studied for decades under various names. Yet, the term 'shrinking city' was coined in Germany thirty years ago (*schrumpfende Städte*; Häusserman and Stiebel 1988) and has, since then, acquired global currency in many articles and volumes (e.g. Beyer et al. 2006; Grant et al. 2006; Mykhnenko and Turok 2008; Hollander et al. 2009; 2011b; Pallagst et al. 2009; Ryan 2012; Czerniak 2013; Dewar and Manning Thomas 2013; Großmann et al. 2013; Silverman et al. 2016; Weaver, Bagchi-Sen, and Frazier 2016).

Despite wide variations in shrinking cities across (and within) countries and across world regions (Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2016), policy-makers have remained steadfast in linking shrinkage with decay or distress. The 'business as usual' approach is for planning to presume growth (Sousa and Pinho 2015). This seems true especially in North America where urban leaders have continuously subscribed to a growth-dominated paradigm (Hartt, 2018a, 2018b). A US city having fewer residents than in the past is typically deemed in deep trouble: not just in need of recovery but of growth that returns it to its peak population. Shrinkage becomes an alarming problem, a 'territorial stigma' (Wacquant, Slater, and Borges Perreira 2014), an outright defeat (Audriac 2017). Urban leaders have difficulty admitting shrinkage and prefer to represent it as a trend that could and should be rapidly counteracted (Mallach 2016; Hartt and Warkentin 2017). Back in late 1970s, one New York City housing official, Roger Starr, dared to argue that 'planned shrinkage' might be the solution to the urban fiscal crisis. His proposal was not well received. Then-Mayor A. Beame scolded it as an example of 'projecting negative trends to absurd lengths.' He went as far to say that whoever buys the conclusion that urban shrinkage is coming buys into the idea of the 'end of the United States' (cited by Beauregard 2003, 191–92). Fast forward three decades and it seems as if not much has changed. In 2008, upon meeting the City Planning Commission, Philadelphia's then-Mayor Michael Nutter proclaimed that he could not imagine a smaller Philadelphia and pledged

to significantly grow the city's population, putting an end to 'that chapter of our story.' By then, Philadelphia had been losing population for five decades. That some losses might have been caused by the shrinking size of households did not console the mayor. 'It's Philadelphia's time,' he argued, 'to aspire, to compete and to restore its greatness' (Nutter 2008). Five years later, Baltimore's then-Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake declared in an interview for the *New York Times*, 'I'm trying to grow the city, not get smaller' and 'I'm not the first to say that a city that's not growing is dying' (cited by Williams, A15, 2013). H. McMahon, a community leader in Youngstown, Ohio—a well-known city which has otherwise taken several innovative steps to shrink 'smart' (Rhodes and Russo 2013)—nonetheless pointed to the difficulty of being frank about population loss: 'It's almost anti-American to say our city is shrinking' (cited by Williams, A15, 2013).

Urban leaders certainly have good reasons to worry about sustained population losses. Such losses often correlate with a decline in job opportunities, consumer purchases, property values, tax revenues and municipal services—and with a rise in crime, poverty and residential and commercial vacancies (e.g. Weaver, Bagchi-Sen, and Frazier 2016; Silverman et al. 2016). The lay observer driving the streets of Detroit, viewing derelict factories and empty blocks and reading that the city has 40,000 structures in need of demolition and 150,000 vacant or abandoned parcels of land (Detroit Future City Implementation Office 2012; Detroit Blight Removal Task Force 2014), will find it difficult to interpret these conditions as anything but indications of distress. The social commentator looking at data for Camden, New Jersey, where the unemployment rate is 30 percent and the high-school-dropout rate is 70 percent, will likely agree (Hedges 2010).

Yet, we argue, shrinkage may be distressful but not uniquely so. Growth, too, brings its own set of unwelcomed problems, although in today's discourses on Western cities, we rarely read about growth as distress (this discussion seems to belong to another literature: this on mega-cities in the global South). A brief, historical reflection can remind us how perceptions of what constitutes distress in Western cities have changed.

Urban growth as distress

Through much of Western history, urban commentators and decision-makers have seen urban growth as a threat and sought to prevent it. Suspicion of fast-growing cities on political and moral grounds is a Western tradition dating back to Greece and Rome (Thompson 2009). 'A very populous city,' Aristotle famously said in *The Politics*, 'can rarely, if ever, be well governed' (translated by Jowett 1885, 214). Juvenal saw imperial Rome as a 'terrible city,' 'dismal and lonely,' its people capable of 'every crime' and 'every lust' (Juvenal in Satires III and VI cited by Humphries 1958). Fast forward fifteen hundred years, and we see that some of the pioneering planning regulations of Renaissance Europe sought to save Western Europe's then-largest metropolis, London, from further growth. Sixteenth-century London had increased by about 400 percent, with people swarming to the royal capital from other parts of the country. The powers that be, personified by Elizabeth I, were concerned enough to pass a coherent package of growth-controlling measures that banned the subdivision of existing buildings and the erection of new buildings in London and Westminster and within three miles of their gates, and required all new buildings to be erected on old foundations (Green 2011).

Urban growth intensified exponentially during the industrial age. To stay with the example of England, the share of the urban population out of the total population of the country grew from 17 percent to 72 percent between 1800 and 1890 (Law 1967). London, Europe's largest and fastest-growing nineteenth-century city, increased its population by about 20 percent during every decade of the nineteenth century (Brown 2004). In the middle of the century, it contained about 2 million people; by 1900, that number had tripled. English urban concentration and expansion came hand-in-hand with shocking squalor, perhaps best described by F. Engels (1844) in his portrayal of Manchester as 'Hell upon the Earth'. As more and more people left the countryside to seek factory employment, pressures on land and buildings led to excessive crowding. The average

housing arrangement entailed a single windowless room occupied by a family typically numbering eight to ten wretched souls. Dozens of families shared a single cooking and sanitary facility (Hall 1996, 16–19). As industrialization spread and population pressures mounted, large German, French and other European cities fared just as poorly as London, if not more so. Berlin's population grew by a factor of ten from 1800 to 1900; Paris and St. Petersburg by a factor of five. At the end of the nineteenth century, the average number of people per dwelling in Berlin was about six times higher than in London (Horsfall 1904). In St. Petersburg, working-class households could not even afford whole rooms, so they rented room 'corners,' and up to fifty people often lived in a one-bath/one-kitchen facility (Lincoln 2002). In itself, growth and high density might not have led to the terrible living conditions that characterized the industrial city. But combined with substandard sanitation and ventilation, non-existing safety and building standards, poor nutrition and health care, contaminated drinking water, and dangerous working conditions, growth converted cities into nodes of vicious life-threatening diseases such as typhoid, cholera, and tuberculosis.

Not surprisingly, it became fashionable among elite observers to detest the growing city. In addition to lamenting the physical indicators of misery (i.e. the disease and mortality rates), Europe's leading commentators on industrial-era social life, such as F. Tonnies, E. Durkheim and P. Kropotkin, worried that urban expansion was destroying community networks and leading to moral decay and social unrest (Horner 1978; Willits, Theodori, and Fortunato 2016). French urban restructuring, much like English and German government-led urban planning and regulation in the late nineteenth century, could be easily interpreted as attempts to either limit urban growth (and the potential for unrest) or move the growing urban masses to where they were less threatening to urban elites. The nineteenth-century philosophy that seemed to embrace urban growth was Marxism. For Marx, Engels and their followers, urban misery was a cornerstone of the critique of capitalism while large proletarian populations were considered the key engine leading society's march toward communism. But even ardent Marxists expected that intense urban growth should cease once the revolution was complete. V. Lenin thought that the cities of the future would be 'very different' and 'very much smaller' (cited by Stites 1989), and the leading, early Bolshevik-era architects like N. Milyutin (1975 [1930]) sought the shrinking of large cities through the planned de-centralization of their populations.

Perhaps no other industrial-age urban visionary described the parallel forces of growth and shrinkage as convincingly as Ebenezer Howard. His highly influential volume *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1965 [1898]) could be either hailed as the predecessor of the modern sustainability movement or condemned as the predecessor of modern mass suburbia (Fishman 1982). What is often overlooked, however, is Howard's analysis of the costs and benefits of *both* urban growth and shrinkage. Howard presented existing settlements in two archetypes. On one side was the rural settlement, whose perpetual shrinking came with benefits like keeping fresh air and abundant green space, but also had negative aspects like fewer work opportunities and less social interaction. On the other side was the urban centre, whose perpetual expansion had benefits like employment and social opportunities—precisely the reasons that rural populations flocked towards cities. But it also had terrible costs including high rents, overcrowding, pollution, and poor public health.

In the introductory pages of his book, Howard summarized the clear consensus of his age: Distress comes from growth (see also Lees 1985):

> There is, however, a question in regard to which one can scarcely find any difference of opinion. It is well-nigh universally agreed upon, not only in England, but all over Europe and America and in our colonies, that it is deeply to be deplored that the people should continue to stream into the already over-crowded cities. (Howard, 1965 [1898], 3–4)

In his concluding chapter, Howard envisioned the future of the English capital as a prototype of large cities around the world. London would shrink, he foresaw, and in its shrinkage lay great possibilities for rebuilding a better city. As he wrote: 'London must die … and London then must be transformed'

into a much smaller city but with more green space, cleaner air, and more generous and affordable housing:

> Imagine the population of London falling, and falling rapidly; the migrating people establishing themselves where rents are extremely low, and where their work is within easy walking distance of their homes! Obviously, house-property in London will fall in rental value, and fall enormously. Slum property will sink to zero, and the whole working population will move into houses of a class quite above those which they can now afford to occupy. Families which are now compelled to huddle together in one room will be able to rent five or six, and thus will the housing problem temporarily solve itself by the simple process of a diminution in the numbers of the tenants (Howard 1965 [1898], 155).

Howard's proposal to build 'garden cities' that combined the benefits of town and country but avoided their costs might have been utopian. Nonetheless, it served as the basis of much of post-WWII English, French and other European policies to divert growth from large cities and channel it to small and medium-sized towns. Strangely enough, no matter how influential Howard's ideas were in the twentieth century, twenty-first-century policy-makers seem to have forgotten two of his sharpest observations: that sustained urban growth could bring distress and that urban shrinkage could present opportunities.

Growth—urban and other—from an American perspective

It is tempting to expect that Americans would be especially welcoming of any process that makes big cities smaller. The history of ideas on anti-urbanism in the United States suggests as much (White and White 1962), as does the widely-acknowledged fact that today's USA is a suburban nation (Beauregard 2006). The year 1776 marked the birth of an agrarian republic with only 5 percent of the population living in cities. Although much of the inspiration that brought about the American Revolution came from intellectuals residing in cities, few welcomed urban growth. Many of America's founders were suspicious of urban expansion. They feared European-like urban densities and crowds (Coppa 1976). George Washington warned that the 'tumultuous populace of large cities are ever to be dreaded.' Thomas Jefferson declared that 'The mobs of great cities add just so much to support of pure government as sores do to the strength of the human body' and that 'our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries as long as they are chiefly agricultural … . When they [people] get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe' (cited by Bender 1975, 3–4). Although he conceded that cities must exist, he envisioned them as having an atmosphere like that of the country. John Adams hoped for people 'sprinkled over large tracts of land,' so that they would be immune from the 'contagions of madness and folly, which are seen in countries where large numbers live in small places' (Adams 1856, 587).

Fears of urbanism did not prevent it from happening. The industrializing cities of nineteenth-century USA grew with a breathtaking speed. Small towns turned into large cities in a few short decades: Chicago, for example, grew from about 30,000 people in 1850 to over a million by 1890. In one century, from 1800 to 1900, America's urban population increased from 6 percent to 40 percent of the country's total population. By the late nineteenth century, large U.S. cities had equaled or exceeded European-like levels of congestion, squalor, and misery. Some 60 percent of New York's population lived in overcrowded, substandard tenement buildings (Hall 1996, 35). Density on late nineteenth-century Manhattan island was 100,000 people per square mile; in the city's most populated wards, it was several times higher (Levy 2011, 11). Industrial emissions and lack of ventilation and sanitation made these areas dirty, smelly and deadly. New York's Tenement Housing Commission wrote graphic reports on urban living:

> The tenement districts of New York are places in which thousands of people are living in the smallest place in which it is possible for a human being to live—crowded together in dark, ill-ventilated rooms, in many of which sunlight never enters and in most of which fresh air is unknown. They are centres of disease, poverty, vice, and crime, where it is a marvel, not that some children grow up to be thieves, drunkards and prostitutes, but that so many should ever grow up to be decent and self-respecting (cited in Hall 1996, 37).

These horrid conditions did little to make most Americans friendlier to cities. Henry James's description of New York as a giant 'swarming' of various human species that should definitively be 'fled rather than enjoyed' (cited by Hall 1996, 34) summarized the prevailing attitude among intellectuals—and in terms kinder than many other commentators used. Urban growth, not shrinkage, was America's enemy.

A few decades later, America's most iconic architect Frank Lloyd Wright gave a warm welcome to the idea of shrinking the city. In his 1932 book, appropriately titled *The Disappearing City* (Wright 1932), Wright argued that large and dense cities were 'malignant' and reflected the ideals of European autocrats. American democracy, in his view, could flourish only in rural and small-town conditions. Wright wished the big city away and hoped that the largest of America's cities would lose population to the point that no U.S. town would be larger than a garden-variety county seat. Like Howard but more resolutely, he wanted to save the city by shrinking it (Fishman 1982). Although American urban centres did not shrink to the size of county seats, like Wright expected, many lost population for decades through the twentieth century. These populations did not return to the countryside. Instead, they formed low-density settlements surrounding the shrinking cities. America 'became suburban' (Beauregard 2006). Cities became smaller and their old inner areas hollowed out, but their periphery grew much larger—a trend that has only begun to soften and, in some cases, reverse since the 1990s.

If anti-urbanism is deep in the 'genetic code' of America's culture, and suburban living is preferable to urban living for most Americans, why isn't city shrinkage viewed as desirable today? Why are Americans, who have traditionally disliked urban growth and appreciated small towns much more than have Europeans, reluctant to acknowledge city shrinkage? Why is urban shrinkage a stigma, a 'cultural and political taboo' for American urban leaders, as German-born scholar K. Pallagst noted in an interview with an English newspaper (cited by Leonard 2009; see also Pallagst 2008)? Why is it that although the term 'shrinking cities' is in wide global use, it is an 'unfit term' for American policymakers (Audriac 2017)?

This seeming paradox can be resolved in two ways. First, by acknowledging that both growth and shrinkage are deeply uneven processes that affect different places at different times, often in opposite directions. At the height of the industrial era, as the countryside shrank, manufacturing cities expanded. Through much of the twentieth century, cities in the Rust Belt have been generally shrinking, but those in Sunbelt have been generally growing. And even in shrinking Rustbelt cities, substantial growth has occurred—it's just that the growth has not been in their centres, but in their peripheries. In one century, from 1910 to 2010, the population of a well-known Midwestern city like Cleveland fell by 30 percent, but that of its metropolitan area, Greater Cleveland, rose by 250 percent (Exner 2011). And whereas the City of Cleveland has been shedding residents, its neighbourhoods have behaved differently. Cleveland's Hough neighbourhood lost over 30 percent of its population between 2000 and 2010, but its gentrifying Downtown neighbourhood gained over 30 percent (World Population Review 2019).

For the leaders of U.S. shrinking cities, like those of Baltimore, Detroit, Philadelphia and Youngstown, the point is not whether small cities are better. Mayors everywhere are elected to promote their cities. And in the United States, where the financial and therefore social well-being of cities depends on local taxation more heavily than in Western Europe (e.g. Nivola 1999), the behaviour of urban regimes is greatly tilted towards city-to-city competition. Numbers, sizes and even degrees of lavishness count. Cities operate as individual 'growth machines' (Molotch 1976) and inter-urban competition means that someone's win is someone else's loss, and vice versa. Success is often understood not only as a function of population and economic growth, but also as the presence of finance and high-tech headquarters, the size of the international airport and the art museum, the number and eccentricity of attention-grabbing buildings, the concentration of members of the 'creative class,' and even the extent to which cities use advanced data-mining technologies ostensibly to improve residents' quality of life (e.g. see Gertler 2018).

The second way to potentially resolve the seeming American paradox of hating large cities yet simultaneously fearing their shrinkage entails appreciating the extent to which growth in general has been integral to the American cultural experience. The country's pro-growth culture is probably just as old and consequential as its small-town worship. And while pro-growth national visions are common in many cultures (the British, French, and Russians come to mind, especially at moments of imperial glory), none is perhaps as powerful as this vision in the United States. Growth comes closest to being the US national ideal (Reilley 1973; Marx 1991; Mallach 2016). Thomas Jefferson may have liked farms and small towns, but he believed that unending territorial expansion was key to the nation's health. Alexander Hamilton, in a letter to George Washington, praised men who 'think continentally' (1783). Throughout the nineteenth century, the spirit of growth became closely intertwined with the idea of 'Manifest Destiny,' and together they walked into the twentieth century as the United States became a global superpower (Mallach 2016).

In recent times, the impetus for American cities to grow seems to have become stronger because of concerns expressed by certain commentators that America's global domination is under threat. To the extent that it reflects these concerns, the current political discourse on shrinking cities in the United States is often less about the concrete disadvantages of shrinking in cases like Detroit or Buffalo and more about the global competitiveness of premier cities such as New York, Los Angeles and Miami, which are viewed as the engines of national and international economic growth (e.g. see Jacobs 2013). The argument is that for the national economy to prosper, these cities must be significant actors in the global circuits of capitalism. Proponents of this position claim that the US must trade and engage globally as never before, with its 'global' cities acting as the primary conduits of capital production and distribution (Katz and Bradley 2013; Glaeser and Joshi-Ghani 2015). Such worries about the potential loss of status of America's global cities, however, seem to focus on the whole metropolitan areas rather than the central cities where most human suffering from shrinkage occurs.

So powerful is the appeal of growth in the United States that a city does not even have to shrink to cause concern. Just lagging behind other cities on various measures of growth is itself problematic. Once, a city had to actually lose things—households, jobs, buildings, and value—to be deemed in trouble. In the twenty-first century, even if a city grows but does not grow sufficiently (i.e. does not grow at the rate of its competitors), it can be seen as falling short. R. Rybak, who served as Mayor of Minneapolis—a Midwestern city that is well known for its high quality of life, and a city that shrank (albeit slightly) in the late twentieth century but has been growing since 2000— opined that what the city needs is not just growth, but *substantial* growth. Minneapolis has outperformed most US cities and delivers excellent services to its residents and businesses, he argued, but this was insufficient. The city must grow decisively to reach its potential: 'The more new people and business we attract, the more they share the cost of running a great city. The bigger the tax base, the more we can do … . The long-term financial health of Minneapolis depends on us growing' (cited by Berg 2010).

Are there opportunities in shrinking cities?

Shrinking does not have a monopoly on distress. For much of modern Western history (American history included), good reasons existed to argue that a city's fast growth was the menace. And ironically, the current US distaste for shrinking cities seems out of step with historical attitudes toward urban growth, although in step with historical attitudes toward growth per se. That said, there are manifest practical downsides to shrinking cities in terms of quality of life. Could there be some upsides?

The alarms attendant to shrinking cities are mainly based on quantitative assessments. In such formulations, commentators count things—typically, people, jobs, property sales, consumer expenditures, home values, rents, vacancies, tax revenues, capital investments—as the obvious indicators of a city's well-being or lack thereof (just as the Minneapolis Mayor did). The counting of material

things is often supplanted by the use of social indicators, such as poverty and unemployment rates, high-school drop-out rates, and crime rates. An example of this approach is the otherwise rich and illuminating book on a shrinking St. Louis, Missouri (Gordon 2008), where such measures form the backbone of the introductory chapter. Such socio-economic measures reflect the real suffering of people. Nobody can dispute that a city with many people searching for jobs in vain, unable to afford decent housing and services, or afraid for their lives and property because of high crime rates is a city with people 'in distress.' Yet such conditions do not necessarily follow from population loss. Victorian London was full of jobless, homeless, fearful, vulnerable people, which is precisely why Howard hoped that it would *stop* growing. Unemployment, crime, and poverty can be high in both shrinking *and* growing cities. The literature has yet to establish a clear causality: Does population loss necessarily spur economic and/or social decline or does economic and/or social decline spur population loss? Why is economic and social distress omnipresent in some fast-growing cities?

The pertinent point here is that insights about quality of life—or lack thereof—can be derived from both growing *and* shrinking cities. On one side, population growth is not inevitably linked to economic growth (Glaeser and Resseger 2010), and on the other, population loss can co-exist with economic prosperity (Wiechmann and Pallagst 2012). Hartt (2018a) studied the hundred largest cities in North America between 1980 and 2010 and found a variety of experiences: In some cases, population loss correlates positively with declining per capita income, but in others, population loss coincides with growth in per capita income. Furthermore, perceptions of prosperity and well-being do not seem inevitably dependent on a city's growth or shrinkage. Hollander (2011a) demonstrated that residents' perceptions of neighbourhood quality of life do not necessarily worsen because they live in a shrinking city. Delken (2008) concluded that although residents of German shrinking cities were aware of the declining population and other losses in their cities, this did not make them unhappier.

If the variety of experiences is so wide, is it possible that, at least in some cases, shrinking cities are 'saturated with urban opportunities' (Herscher 2012, 7)? To begin with, shrinking cities may present more possibilities than fast-growing cities to improve environmental and public health. When an urban population becomes smaller and the density of built-up areas is reduced, more vacant land is available for creative re-purposing (Schwarz 2008; Schilling and Logan 2008; LaCroix 2010). The decline of heavy industry and traffic improves air, water, and soil quality. Opportunities become available to overcome errors in urbanism often committed in times of fast growth, e.g. by converting existing 'grey' into 'green' and 'blue' infrastructure, increasing the tree canopy, remediating contaminated soils, day-lighting streams, restoring natural drainage patterns, re-introducing native plants, creating bird, insect and non-predatory mammal habitats, establishing solar 'farms,' and developing edible landscapes, community gardens and urban agriculture. These are all ideas that are in some stage of consideration or implementation not just in Europe but also in some experiment-minded US cities like Detroit and Youngstown, as reflected in their recent planning efforts. In addition to such ecological benefits, there may be social ones. Bottom-up, problem-solving, do-it-yourself urbanism, which takes advantage of the opportunities presented by shrinking cities, may build up a culture of self-empowerment and strengthen community bonds. If a city's population were to grow again, the new land patterns would allow for more sustainable ways to develop in the future (Haase 2008; Hermann et al. 2016; Lima and Eischeid 2017).

Another perhaps obvious but seldom-discussed potential benefit of shrinking cities is that they offer expanded low- and middle-income housing options (Glaeser, Kahn, and Rappaport 2008). After decades of cuts in affordable housing programmes in the United States, low- and middle-income households in many metropolitan regions struggle to find places to live. One solution is to move to a shrinking city, where property values (and rents) have fallen. As Mallach (2012, 92) notes, 'houses that come on the market in these [shrinking] cities already sell for prices so low that their affordability as such is no longer an issue.' In 2016, the average median gross rent in shrinking cities such as Cleveland and Youngstown, Ohio, was roughly half that in growing cities such as Seattle and Miami (about $600 compared to $1200; US Census Bureau American

Community Survey 2016). And while it is true that the quality of housing and services is poorer and employment opportunities are more limited in Cleveland-like cities than in Seattle-like cities, for some households, relocating to Cleveland is possible, whereas relocating Seattle is decidedly not. This is especially true for households living on fixed incomes (e.g. retirees for whom the lack of a strong job market in a city like Cleveland is not an issue) and for young people, artists and other 'creatives,' who appreciate cities and embrace innovative strategies for making a living. Leipzig in Germany and Detroit in the USA are prominent examples of positive transformations led by the young creative class.

A similarly overlooked opportunity in shrinking cities pertains to patterns of inequality (Rae 2011). Although distress can be stark in shrinking cities, these cities tend to have a more even wealth distribution than growing cities. Having lost most of their affluent households and having been left with a moderately (if not minimally) sized middle class, they have narrower income disparities: people live in more similar circumstances. High-income households are found mostly in stable or growing metros like Boston and San Francisco; they are rare in shrinking cities like Cleveland and Youngstown (Bee 2013). In only few cities do population and economic growth *not* coincide with growth in inequality (Florida 2017). Inequality increases faster in growing cities than in non-growing ones (Berube 2014). Granted, equality achieved through shared poverty should not be celebrated. Nonetheless, studies have long shown the negative immediate impacts of living in places with wide income disparities (e.g. high crime and violence; Pickett and Wilkinson 2015). In the long term, societies with low inequality indexes develop faster. This might, also, be true for cities (Florida 2017).

Conclusion and limitations

Shrinking cities seem to be a 'problem,' and much of this perception is justified. Signs of daily suffering are obvious. Job opportunities are often fewer, public services are substandard, housing choices are of low quality, and many residents struggle on the margins of security and well-being. Still, these heart-wrenching truths sometimes obscure a point now widely available in the literature: what may seem to be a dreadful issue today could present opportunities tomorrow. Both shrinking and growing cities may have serious problems, but both may offer benefits as well. Yet in today's pro-growth culture, only shrinking cities are evaluated in a purely negative light. Urban politicians continue to treat growth and decline asymmetrically—growth is understood to create both costs and benefits, but shrinkage is understood to create only costs.

In this paper, we questioned this common wisdom. We did so in three ways. First, we recalled the often-forgotten fact that through much of modern Western history, it was urban growth—shrinkage's opposite—that was labelled distress. In the United States, big and growing cities have been especially detested, so it is ironic that their shrinking is now seen as a crisis through and through. Second, we highlighted how discussions of cities failing to grow are often not about the actual problems that this trend brings, but rather about something else: e.g. maintaining a competitive edge at regional, national, and global scales. It would be more productive and compassionate to focus on the concrete plights of the people living in shrinking cities and on the potential solutions to these plights, rather than on the anxieties of urban and national elites about winning and losing. Where there are real, concrete problems such as persistent poverty, high unemployment, housing abandonment, and fiscal insolvency, these problems lie not solely with shrinking cities. They are regional, national, and global in origin and may exist in growing cities as well. This was as true in the history of the Western world as it is today in fast-growing, industrializing regions of the globe. Third, we argued that shrinking cities and their residents' experiences vary widely. Moreover, not all aspects of shrinkage are problems, and some problems can be converted into opportunities.

The paper used a historical and conceptual lens to discuss the utility of the common idea that urban shrinkage is inherently problematic. This approach has its limitations. Many alternative methods exist to shed light on the same issues. One does not need to turn to perceptions of

urban change in nineteenth- and twentieth-century cities in the Western world to demonstrate that urban growth, too, comes with distress. Instead, one could turn to today's fastest growing cities in China, India or Latin America and similarly conclude that growth has its many problems. But, as we said at the beginning, these two literatures—on shrinking cities and on growing cities—seldom overlap.

To shrink seems bad because you lose something. But is it? Neither cities, nor countries, nor families, nor people are better off just because they are bigger. And if 'shrinking' is an admission of defeat so intolerable that American politicians cannot bring themselves to utter the term publicly, then the planners who advise them should help them find another term—not shrinking cities, but perhaps lean cities, legacy cities, smart cities, skinny cities, slim cities (*schlanke Städte*?) or any other acceptable term—and then focus on shrinking's specific problems and solutions.

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