

Handbook on Shrinking cities

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Investigating a precise theme for a wider comprehension

Although shrinking cities is not an emerging topic in spatial planning, the *Handbook* offers a fertile ground for a wider reflection not just embedded in shrinking territories and wastelands, but on the 21st-century city-making process affected by continuous shocks (Venables, 2021). Declining cities and territories demonstrated to be vulnerable areas to be hit the most by crises, such as in the case of the 2007-2008 world recession (Großmann et al., 2013), but these disruptions constitute also an opportunity to rethink the way to mend fragile territories. Globally, cities and citizens have dealt with the severe consequence of COVID-19, such as a new wave of economic recession, along with the existing issue tied to the climate impact and spreading socio-economic disparities (Fabris et al., 2023). By considering the specific characters of shrinking cities, the pandemic affected local employment and started a recession, with consequent loss of jobs occurring at the same time as the shutdown of workplaces forced remote work (OECD, 2020; Mariotti, Di Marino, Bednář, 2022), with an increasing demand for urban green spaces (Maury-Mora, Gómez-Villarino, Varela-Martínez, 2022; Sikorska

et al., 2023). In light of these sudden and unpredictable dynamics, new possibilities for revitalizing and rightsizing shrinking territories started to appear. On the one hand, shrinking cities with a large presence of strategically-located wasteland can implement urban greening policies to provide more people-centered urban environments, with a better adaptation to climate change and creation of recreational and healthy urban environments (Mathey, Rößler, 2021; Pallagst et al., 2022: 222-237). On the other hand, the restrictions tied to COVID-19 triggered new social dynamics as the obligation for remote jobs has small municipalities and the countryside exploding with growth as workers explore alternatives to large cities, especially in the most-developed countries. This has been an unexpected turnaround for many declining rural and urban sectors by offering the ground for dealing with population and economic decline¹.

What is highlighted most in the *Handbook on Shrinking cities* is that Covid-19 has been just one of the many 'poly-crises' (Tooze, 2022) or 'black swans' that are growingly occurring in our society. In fact, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted in another planetary disruption because these countries are major commodities producers, so the war has caused

global prices to soar, especially for oil and natural gas, with a consequent jump in the cost of life.

Pre-pandemic solutions anchored to 'post-growth' (or 'de-growth'; Schmelzer, Vansintjan, Vetter, 2022) and 'urban commons' (Elia, 2021) have thus gained growing interest in academia and policy-making debates as a perspective to comprehend the nature of overlapping emergencies – ecological, economic, geopolitical, and pandemics – that are disrupting policy and politics worldwide (European Commission, 2023).

As claimed by Pallagst and Hammer (2022: 3), from a city development perspective, there is an urgency to implement place-based approaches in city development. The focus of policymakers should thus move from sustainable development to resilient societies capable to recover from unexpected and multidimensional crises. The contents of the *Handbook* show that many cities have sorted their shrinking out that went far beyond finding interim uses for wastelands. The elaboration of policies based on resilient economic and land-use development took the form of parks of photovoltaic panels at the edges of urban sectors, new tools for water management, regeneration plans based on

low-carbon principles, and the creation of new green and recreational spaces, all of which with local citizens' participation. The threat of the Handbook has been understanding the evolution of shrinkage, its causes, and the kinds of impact it generates, which constitute an essential phase to incorporate solutions for current societal challenges. The papers presented in the special issue "WASTELANDS. Recycling urban spaces for the shrinking city" come forward precisely in this direction by proposing ways to analyze the relationship between shrinkage and abandonment to provide the basis of proper solutions, as a sort of narrower focus with respect to the Handbook here reviewed.

What is new to highlight?

The Handbook is divided into four parts. The first section introduces the fundamentals, concepts, and paths for revitalizing shrinking cities in novel ways. The second section shows the evolution of the implemented processes, planning strategies, and policies in dealing with shrinkage and the stakeholders included in these phases. The third section contains new ideas and innovative methods to apply in shrinkage cases which are characterized by a paradigm shift from growth-centered planning to shrinking sustainability. Eventually, the fourth section proposed an analysis of the place-based development strategies applied

in shrinking territories. While many chapters included in the book truly constitute the basis for understanding the evolution of the concept of shrinking cities and their dynamics, here the reflection is based on the fact that COVID-19 has been constantly claimed to have marked a milestone in the way of dealing with the city-making process. A common character of the literature on the 'post-COVID-19 city' is the fact that the pandemic and its territorial implications have urged the need to realign public policies toward the creation of more human-centered environments (Camerin, 2021). However, how does this work for shrinking places? Is this book really giving new insights on post-COVID-19 shrinking cities or the attention should be focused on analyzing other factors and patterns? Across the volume, the effects of COVID-19 on shrinking cities appear to be a factor requiring attention by academics and policy but still, it may be too soon to understand what it has really implied for shrinking cities. While a primordial attempt to deal with post-pandemic shrinking territories has been attempted in America (Hartt, Bagchi-Sen, Hollander, 2021), the Europe context appears to be still understudied. Here there is the consequent interest in scrutinizing the Handbook in this nuance. Chapter 3 "Path dependence in shrinking cities: learning from the past" (Pinoncelly, 2022: 48-49) claims the need to insert COVID-19 into the historical

perspectives of crises in strict connection with the 2008 global financial crisis, so the 2020 pandemic can be considered one of the critical junctures exacerbating societal issues. Haase et al. (2022, 348-350) remarked that the pandemic has hit hard all cities, but no differences between declining and successful cities have been specifically provided by the literature. The contribution by Besana and Böhme (2022) helps to fill this research gap through the use of the Territorial Impact Assessment (TIA) methodology applied in the first wave of the pandemic (from March to June 2020). The application of such a method comprises two steps. First, the assessment of exposure and sensitivity of all European regions to COVID-19 policy in terms of restrictive regulations. Second, the cross-analysis of exposure and sensitivity with EU shrinking cities data and their past and future demographic profile. The results of the work are that poor governance quality, fewer in-house economic resources, and higher social pressure are factors that can make more challenging the COVID-19 recovery, with the implementation of online platforms that can be potentially harmful. Cities suffering from declining in population show less sensitivity from lockdowns and restrictive measures, but those declining cities with early trends of re-growing – or being stable – have significantly higher sensitivity. This analysis, in turn, serves

to provide insights into designing policies, especially for implementing place-sensitive and -based policies, such as the EU-funded Just Transition Fund² aimed at supporting the EU regions most affected by the transition to a low carbon economy.

What about after? Towards new trends in the research agenda

The publication of the Handbook has surely provided a collective effort in remarking on the need to put shrinkage dynamics at the center of the urban agenda in Europe. While the Handbook is the result of an EU-funded program aimed to train a new generation of academics and practitioners in the field of study, other recent experiences deserve attention. For instance, the consortium of established researchers “Smart Shrinkage Solutions: Fostering Resilient Cities in Inner Peripheries of Europe”³ produced an inventory of best practices and most feasible solutions to the problem of urban shrinkage from 2017 to 2020 (Mykhnenko et al. 2021 and 2023)⁴. In general, academics choose two ways to shed light on many facets and consequently produce new knowledge on shrinking cities. They are systematic literature reviews and inquiries on specific case studies. Systematic reviews are useful to pinpoint the state of the art of shrinking cities in terms of major thematic clusters and key themes,

conceptual evolutions, and key players to detect trends, and research gaps (Khavarian-Garmsir, 2023; Lee, Park, Newman, 2023). On this ground, one can trace future concerns in the field of study. Some of these concerns are the following⁵. First, dynamics affecting remote territories are different from those in large cities, so policies and actions do. Second, the need to investigate the limitations and results of the already implemented planning policies by empirical research. Eventually, expand the research-by-design approaches to involve not just re-greening but wider ideas to revitalize shrinking spaces.

The second way to produce new information regards single case studies, region- and country-based approaches (Jeong, Gim, 2023; Le Borgne, 2023), and comparisons between different cities belonging countries on the same or different continents. Comparing different case studies located in the same city – or territory – or diverse countries appear the trigger for collaboration among researchers to put together local-based knowledge. Here are some of the latest research lines. First, Zhou et al. (2022) proposed an inquiry into the actions implemented by government agencies in China, the USA, and the Czech Republic that eventually resulted in the claim for multilevel governance to contextualize the locally-based phenomenon, de-contextualize the role of multilevel politics, and re-contextualize

solutions to adopt. Second, Gao, Jansen and Ryan (2023) proposed a new conceptualization of demolitions under the lens of comparison between American and German shrinking cities. Third, Matyushkina, Le Borgne and Matoga (2023) interrogated the limitations and opportunities of co-production in shrinking cities intended not just as purely co-delivery of public services, but also the reallocation of decision power to civil society.

To conclude, what appears to be at stake is the need to prevent the side effects of shrinkage by applying not just a reactionary approach to address decline after shrinkage occurred, but elaborate an anticipatory strategy based on resilience (Pineda et al., 2023) instead of pro-growth urban policies (Yang, 2023). Not just cities and their surrounding hinterlands need to become “resilient entities in an increasingly difficult world” (Mallach, 2023: 9) but medium- and small-size municipalities along with peripheral and rural territories deserve an embracing strategy (Escudero-Gómez, García-González, Martínez-Navarro, 2023; Makkonen, Inkinen, 2023).

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¹ Interesting are the debates raised in Italy for the so-called “aree interne” (interior areas; Lucatelli, Luisi, Tantillo, 2022) and “borghi” (hamlets; Barbera, Cersosimo, De Rossi, 2022) and in Spain on the empty territories (“España vacía”; Cabello, 2021; Tirado Ballesteros et al. 2022)

² https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/funding/just-transition-fund/just-transition-platform_en

³ <https://urbanresilience.web.ox.ac.uk/smart-shrinkage-solutions-fostering-resilient-cities-inner-peripheries-europe-3s-recipe#:~:text=Smart%20shrinkage%20solutions%20%E2%80%93%20significant%20new,liveable%2C%20and%20economically%20resilient%20urban>

⁴ The notion of ‘smart’ (Newman et al., 2018) and ‘resilience’ (Hartt, Zwick and Revington, 2020) seem a common thread in the current literature.

⁵ These reviews have revealed themselves as compelling to organize the contents of the special issue “WASTELAND. Recycling urban spaces for the shrinking city”. A number of papers have actually contributed to addressing the growing concerns detected in the study of shrinkage.

