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Can Acceptance of Urban Shrinkage Shift Planning Strategies of Shrinking Cities From Growth to De-Growth?

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Abstract

Shrinking cities scholars claim that planning actors in the cities where shrinking is accepted are more likely to change the focus of planning strategy from pursuing growth to actively planning for de-growth. Considering this argument, this article investigates to what extent planning actors in shrinking cities seek solutions outside the dominant growth paradigm if they accept the reality of shrinkage. This is accomplished by examining the comprehensive plans of 18 shrinking cities in the Rust Belt area of the US and establishing relations between the interpretations of urban decline expressed in these planning documents and the resulting planning visions and strategies. The findings demonstrate that although planning actors in most analysed cases accepted urban shrinkage as a reality and adopted a vision of a smaller future city, they mainly devised strategies that facilitate growth. This suggests that urban planning may be far less impacted by specific interpretations of shrinkage, including acceptance, than what is popularly believed to be the case. Instead, growth remains a focal point of most planning efforts in shrinking cities, even when planning actors acknowledge it may not be realistically attainable.

Keywords

de-growth; planning for decline; planning strategies; Rust Belt; shrinking cities; urban planning; urban shrinkage

1. Introduction

Urban shrinkage refers to the process of structural change that occurs in cities when their population declines over an extended period of time. With the start of the 21st century, this phenomenon began receiving more substantial attention from urban planners and scholars (Haase et al., 2017). Before that, it had not been extensively discussed as a separate policy concern; rather, it was primarily conceptualised as an anomaly within the growth trajectory of urban development (Mallach, 2017, 2023). While some of the problems associated with shrinking cities were subject to interventions in different policy domains, the broader issue was mostly overshadowed by more orthodox urban planning policy for which growth and expansion represented business as usual (Mallach et al., 2017). Consequently, counteracting shrinkage and restoring peak population levels remained the rule-of-thumb approach for most local governments dealing with sustained population decline (Haase et al., 2017; Weaver et al., 2016).

However, as many cities have failed to reverse shrinkage, such an approach has not proven viable. The need to reframe it and develop more de-growth-focused strategies became evident, prompting local governments to explore alternative avenues (Pallagst et al., 2021; Walling et al., 2021). As an illustration, Schindler (2016) writes how public officials in Detroit abandoned the idea of pursuing economic growth in favour of stabilising the economy and improving the quality of life. He characterises this changed approach as "degrowth machine politics," which stands in stark contrast to the "growth machine politics," not only prevalent in the urban political landscape of the US but also in numerous other countries worldwide (Großmann et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2021; Molotch, 1976). Similarly, Béal et al. (2019) observed the rise of "degrowth coalitions" in shrinking French cities over the past two decades. The authors note how these governing alliances advocate for "rightsizing" strategies that deviate, to some extent, from conventional pro-growth entrepreneurial policies.

Concurrently, planning scholars call for a paradigm shift to move beyond the concept of growth as a universal planning goal towards planning for de-growth (Dewar & Thomas, 2013; Hollander & Németh, 2011; Sousa & Pinho, 2015). For example, Wiechmann and Bontje (2015) ask for accommodating shrinkage by planning for a smaller population instead of reversing demographic decline with "back to growth" strategies. Others go even further and speculate that growth as the dominant planning paradigm has come to an end (Wiechmann & Pallagst, 2012). Scholarly literature on shrinking cities posits that developing an alternative approach to addressing urban decline largely depends on how key planning actors perceive the issue (Pallagst et al., 2017, 2021). Planning scholars argue that planners in cities where shrinking is accepted as an ongoing process are more likely to change the focus of planning strategy from pursuing growth to actively planning for de-growth. For instance, Schindler (2016) contends that the rise of degrowth politics in Detroit stems from the growing recognition that the city will never regain its former status as a manufacturing hub. Similarly, a comparable approach appears to have emerged in Youngstown, prompted by the realisation that it is not possible for the city to recapture the population peak reached in the 1950s (Rhodes & Russo, 2013; Schatz, 2013).

In light of this argument, we decided to investigate if the development of alternative interpretations of urban shrinkage can indeed change local planning strategies for declining urban areas from growth to de-growth. This involved examining the comprehensive plans of 18 shrinking cities in the Rust Belt area of the US. By establishing connections between the interpretations of urban decline expressed in these planning documents and the resulting planning visions and strategies, this research aims to describe the

extent to which urban planning changes in the view of urban shrinkage, with a possible orientation towards de-growth.

2. Understanding Planning Responses to Urban Shrinkage

In this section, we discuss potential relationships between the interpretations of urban shrinkage and planning by considering the model developed by Pallagst et al. (2017, 2021), reflect on some of its deficiencies, and propose several improvements by drawing on the work of political scientists. The constructed model has been recently applied by Heim LaFrombois et al. (2023) in their analysis of comprehensive plans for 35 shrinking US cities, aiming to determine the association between employed planning strategies and the acknowledgement of past and future population changes. Therefore, it provides a relevant starting point for our own study.

2.1. Perceptions of Shrinkage and Planning Strategies

In their work, Pallagst et al. (2017) searched for connections between the perceptions of urban decline and resulting planning responses, developing a model with four stages illustrated in Figure 1. Their rationale is grounded in the notion that urban shrinkage necessitates transformative changes in planning, with the extent of such changes hinging significantly on how planning actors perceive the issue (Pallagst et al., 2021). In the first stage, local decision-makers ignore or deny declining populations, persisting with traditional growth strategies. This perception usually leads them to delay taking action, with the hope that national or regional authorities will intervene, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle of continuous decline. According to Bernt et al. (2014), "non-decisions" and the avoidance or stigmatisation of discussions about shrinkage and its associated challenges represent a rational choice for decision-makers in shrinking cities. They explain that local leaders may find it more advantageous to deny the reality and prevent such an issue from moving on the political agenda than to bring it to public scrutiny as another problem for which local constituents would hold them accountable. This course of action becomes especially appealing when considering the inadequate financial and legal resources available at the city level to implement effective remedies to shrinkage.

Secondly, as urban shrinkage progressively acquires public attention, it becomes much harder for local leaders to completely dismiss the challenges surrounding sustained population decline. Nevertheless, resulting perceptions frequently fall short of appropriately recognising and accepting the issue. They typically associate shrinkage with urban distress, thereby prescribing not just recovery but a return to peak population through growth (Hirt & Beauregard, 2019). Consequently, planners mainly attempt to counteract urban decline with expansive strategies aimed at attracting investment and bringing back people, industry, and jobs (Dewar & Thomas, 2013; Sousa & Pinho, 2015). This is especially true for the US, where contemporary planning discourse is still mainly concerned with growth and dominant planning interventions are primarily designed to neutralise shrinkage (Schatz, 2013; Schindler, 2016; Weaver et al., 2016).

Thirdly, as the challenges posed by urban shrinkage, such as residential and commercial vacancies, increasingly manifest themselves, policymakers are compelled to acknowledge the issue and formulate a response. This partial acceptance usually results in a maintenance-oriented strategy geared towards eliminating visible signs of shrinkage, such as removing vacant and deteriorating properties, intending to preserve the appeal of the urban environment. Like the expansive strategy, this approach of maintaining

attractiveness is often considered essential for revitalising shrinking cities, playing a pivotal role in attracting people and investments, retaining population, and reigniting economic growth (Mallach et al., 2017). For instance, planning responses in shrinking US cities such as Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Buffalo have been predominantly focused on trying to bring lost businesses and people back to the city by clearing out former industrial sites to make room for high-rise buildings (Dewar & Thomas, 2013; Pallagst, 2012).

Lastly, as planning actors increasingly accept urban shrinkage as an irreversible structural trend, they gradually begin to consider the importance of applying alternative approaches not strictly focused on growth. This entails formulating adaptive strategies that seek to accommodate shrinkage rather than solely attempting to combat and reverse it (Dewar & Thomas, 2013; Pallagst et al., 2017). In other words, they turn to the implementation of a larger group of interventions that are collectively referred to as "planning for decline" (Pallagst et al., 2017), "smart decline" (Hollander & Németh, 2011), "smart shrinkage" (Rhodes & Russo, 2013), "planning for shrinkage" (Sousa & Pinho, 2015), "rightsizing" (Schilling & Logan, 2008), or "de-growth" (Schindler, 2016). The de-growth approach, as conceptualised in this context, mainly concerns the efforts to adapt cities to a smaller demographic size, i.e., to align more closely built environment, infrastructure, and services with the needs of its current and foreseeable future population (Marjanović, 2023; Schilling & Logan, 2008). Although it diverges from conventional degrowth economics (Kallis et al., 2012), this approach offers a compelling parallel, suggesting alternatives to the prevailing growth-restoring strategies in managing urban shrinkage. Similar to economic degrowth (Savini et al., 2022), planning for de-growth prioritises a quality change in the living environment of shrinking cities, informed by social and environmental considerations.

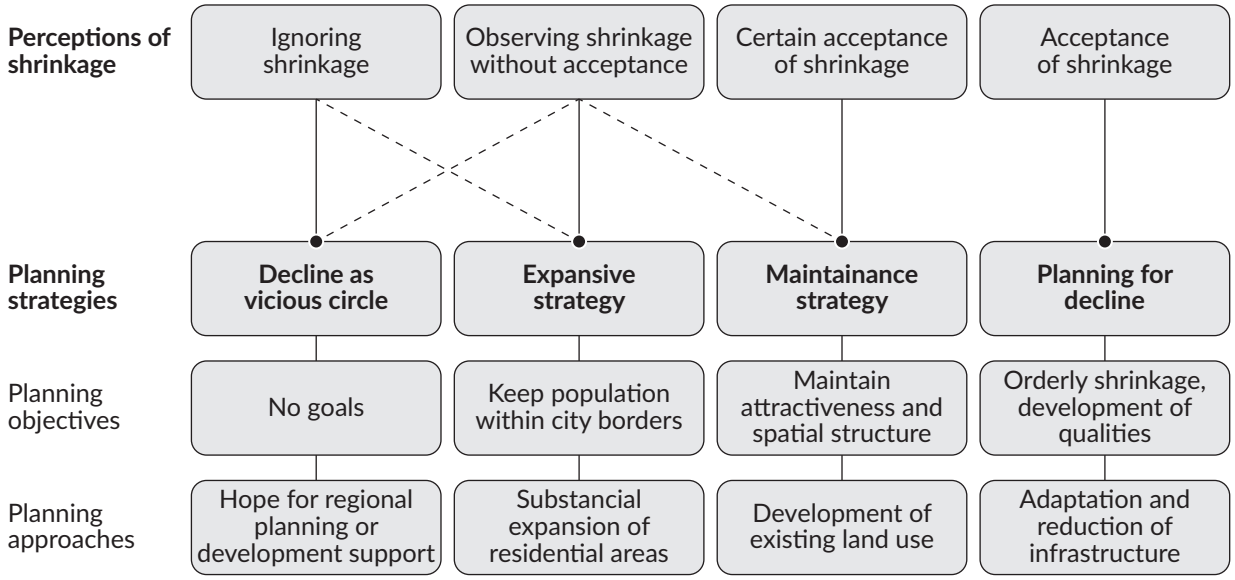

Figure 1. The interrelation of the perceptions of shrinkage and resulting planning strategies. Source: Authors' own work based on Pallagst et al. (2017).

The constructed model underscores that the de-growth approach in the planning of shrinking cities—here referred to as "the planning for decline" strategy—can only materialise when planning actors fully embrace the irreversible reality of shrinkage. While other perceptions may exhibit elements of flexibility between different strategies, such as "observing shrinkage without acceptance" straddling three different responses (see Figure 1), the unequivocal acceptance of shrinkage is highlighted as fundamental for shifting the focus

of planning from growth to de-growth. In other words, planning for smaller populations and adapting to the consequences of demographic decline requires planning actors in shrinking cities to first acknowledge the challenges of sustained population loss and then align their strategies accordingly (Heim LaFrombois et al., 2023; Pallagst et al., 2017).

2.2. From Ideas to Action: Interpretations, Visions, and Strategies in the Planning of Shrinking Cities

Despite the good fit between the categorisations of perceptions and strategies, Pallagst et al. (2017) cautioned that establishing direct associations between particular perceptions of urban shrinkage and specific planning strategies is challenging. In our view, this happens because of the relatively large distance between the notions of perception and strategy. They are found at almost opposite poles of the planning process. Perception forms at the beginning when problems are identified and understood, while strategy is located at the end when solutions are formulated. This means that a whole host of intermediary factors must be considered to establish an actual relationship.

To address this deficiency, we introduced "planning visions" as an additional concept to bridge the gap between perceptions and strategies, thereby providing a more robust grounding for examining the underlying relationships. We took inspiration from the field of political science, specifically its contribution to understanding how ideas influence actions (Hochschild, 2006). To analyse this impact, Hochschild (2006) introduced a third concept—interests—and defined each in relation to the other two. Namely, ideas are most notably defined in the sphere of causation or interpretation ("How do I understand this phenomenon or process?"), interests refer to material drives or personal desires ("What do I want to achieve?"), while actions represent intentional behaviours ("How do I achieve it?") or the steps taken to achieve a desired goal. Therefore, for the purposes of our study, ideas are conceived as different ways planning actors interpret and understand urban shrinkage. While interests conceptually consist of the professional goals and personal desires of actors engaged in the planning process, they are also reflected in various institutional visions and priorities set out in planning agendas, shaping planners' preferences for a specific type of policy response to urban shrinkage over another (Großmann et al., 2013). We demonstrated in the previous section how growth-oriented planning visions of shrinking cities are driven mainly by the vested interests of local elites who seek to safeguard their influential political standing, such as politicians who deliberately disregard the reality of urban shrinkage and promote growth to secure continued support from their constituents (Mallach et al., 2017). Lastly, the concept of actions relates to a set of planning strategies, tools, or practices deployed to achieve the desired goals. In our case, they can be aimed at achieving growth or involve measures oriented towards de-growth.

After defining all elements of the conceptual model—ideas, interests, and actions, and their respective correspondents—interpretations, visions, and strategies, it is essential to consider if and how they interrelate in the context of shrinking urban areas. Hochschild (2006) suggests positing "an idea that would lead to one action against an interest that would lead to a different action and to show that the former action occurs rather than the latter" (p. 285). Applied to our framework, interpretations accepting urban shrinkage will lead more frequently to de-growth planning strategies compared to the adoption of pro-growth strategies that stem from growth-supporting planning visions. Consequently, three possible ways in which ideas about urban shrinkage affect planning actions are put forward, as illustrated in Figure 2.

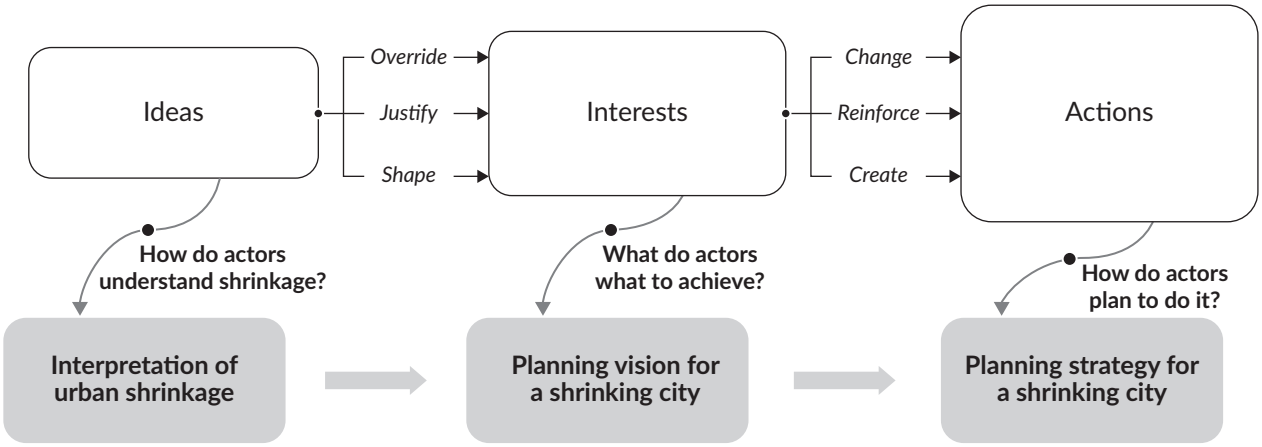

Figure 2. Understanding the influence of the interpretations of shrinkage on the choice of planning strategies. Source: Authors' own work based on Hochschild (2006).

First, ideas can override interests and, therefore, change planning actions. In terms of our study, this means that the acceptance of urban shrinkage may lead planning actors to abandon dominant views that their cities depend on growth, which would result in developing planning strategies focused on de-growth and adapting to shrinkage. Second, ideas can justify interests and thereby reinforce planning actors' preferences for growth, even when they defy realistic expectations. For example, interpreting urban decline as a problem that must be tackled may support dominant growth-based visions. Consequently, this would lead to planning strategies that attempt to reverse persisting decline trends. Last, ideas can shape planning actors' understanding of individual and institutional interests, creating a new set of preferred actions in the process. For instance, actors can interpret urban decline as an opportunity to deal with other specific problems. This may shape the planning visions to extend beyond the growth/de-growth dilemma, which can, in turn, create novel strategies. In each of these instances, ideas play a crucial role in affecting the responses to urban shrinkage by acting on the interests of involved planning actors.

3. Researching the Impact of Urban Shrinkage on Planning

To examine the relationships hypothesised in the previous section, we studied 18 American cities that have experienced continuous population loss, as shown in Table 1. All the chosen cities are situated in the Rust Belt area of the Northeastern and Midwestern US, a well-established hotspot of urban shrinkage. They also share a common industrial history, predominantly centred around steelmaking and car manufacturing, ensuring the comparability of the selected cases. Besides, the decline of the manufacturing sector stands out as one of the leading drivers of urban shrinkage in the cities of the Global North, particularly in the US, where more than half of the largest cities have experienced population loss since 1950 (Gillette, 2022; Hollander et al., 2009; Pallagst, 2012). Finally, for the sample to be comprehensive and representative, we included cities of varying sizes, assuming that the impact of shrinkage on planning visions and strategies may vary with respect to population size (Wolff & Wiechmann, 2018).

In line with Heim LaFrombois et al. (2023), we conducted a content analysis of the comprehensive plans for the selected cities (cf. Marjanović & Sagot Better, 2020). Comprehensive plans are relevant sources to study planning responses to the phenomenon of shrinkage because, for most places in the US, "the comprehensive

Table 1. Population decline in the selected shrinking cities and the selected comprehensive plans.

City (state)	Peak year	Peak population	2020 population	Decline from peak	%	Plan (year)
Detroit (MI)	1950	1,849,568	639,111	−1,210,457	−65.40%	*Detroit Future City* (2012)
Baltimore (MD)	1950	949,708	585,708	−364,000	−38.30%	*A Business Plan for a World-Class City* (2006)
Cleveland (OH)	1950	914,808	372,634	−542,174	−59.30%	*Connecting Cleveland 2020* (2007)
Pittsburgh (PA)	1950	676,806	302,407	−374,399	−55.30%	*Together We Move Forward as One* (2017)
Buffalo (NY)	1950	580,132	278,349	−301,783	−52.00%	*Queen City in the 21st Century* (2006)
Cincinnati (OH)	1950	503,998	309,317	−194,681	−38.60%	*A Comprehensive Plan for the Future* (2013)
Toledo (OH)	1970	383,818	270,871	−112,947	−29.40%	*Toledo by Choice* (2011)
Dayton (OH)	1960	262,332	137,644	−124,688	−47.50%	*CitiPlan Dayton: The 20/20 Vision* (1999)
Syracuse (NY)	1950	220,583	148,620	−71,963	−32.60%	*Comprehensive Plan 2040* (2012)
Flint (MI)	1960	196,940	81,252	−115,688	−58.70%	*Imagine Flint* (2013)
Gary (IN)	1960	178,320	69,903	−108,417	−60.80%	*City of Gary, Indiana: Comprehensive Plan* (2008)
Youngstown (OH)	1930	170,002	60,068	−109,934	−64.70%	*Youngstown 2010 Citywide Plan* (2005)
Erie (PA)	1960	138,440	94,831	−43,609	−31.50%	*Erie Refocused* (2016)
Niagara Falls (NY)	1960	102,394	48,671	−53,723	−52.50%	*Comprehensive Plan for City of Niagara Falls* (2009)
Utica (NY)	1930	101,740	65,283	−36,457	−35.80%	*A Sustainable Neighborhood-Based Master Plan* (2011)
Decatur (IL)	1980	94,081	70,522	−23,559	−25.00%	*Macon County/Decatur Comprehensive Plan* (2009)
Charleston (WV)	1960	85,796	48,864	−36,932	−43.00%	*Imagine Charleston* (2013)
Elmira (NY)	1950	49,716	26,523	−23,193	−46.70%	*City of Elmira Master Plan* (2016)

Source: Authors' own work based on US Census Bureau (2020).

plan is the only planning document that considers multiple programs and accounts for activities on all land located within the planning area" (Kelly, 2012, p. 2). It also encompasses a city's overarching vision and strategy along with the goals and strategies outlined in more specific plans (Heim LaFrombois et al., 2023). Moreover,

Wiechmann and Pallagst (2012) note that the comprehensive approach in the US planning tradition seems to be reinforced in reaction to changed planning conditions and requirements surrounding urban decline.

Since the prescriptions of comprehensive plans are neither legally binding nor enforceable but only express intent, our goal was not to assess the extent to which they are translated into regulatory instruments, such as zoning ordinances or capital investment programmes (cf. Ryan & Gao, 2019). Instead, we aimed to understand the intention behind devised planning strategies and how the underlying interpretations of urban shrinkage and associated planning visions shaped them. Usually developed by a wide range of actors (including city staff, private consultants, and participants in a public engagement process) and subsequently endorsed by city councils, these documents aptly capture the results of political deliberations and related community attitudes surrounding the issue of urban shrinkage. To ensure the comparability of findings, we focused the analysis only on the plans adopted around the turn of the 21st century and in the years following it, which corresponds to the period when the local governments in the US took a more active role in tackling urban shrinkage (Mallach, 2017; Mallach et al., 2017). Two analysts independently conducted the analysis and compared their findings for validity. The list of the selected plans is provided in Table 1 and in the Supplementary Material.

Following the framework presented in the previous section and the criteria given in Table 2, the assessment of comprehensive plans for the selected shrinking cities involved interpretive content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2016). This process was based on establishing qualitative measures of the concepts of interpretation (whether shrinkage is accepted or neglected/denied), vision (whether a plan foresees a smaller or a larger city in the future), and strategy (whether a plan adopts a pro-growth or de-growth strategy). Within each document, we identified the prevailing interpretation of urban shrinkage according to how the issue and related problems (i.e., population loss, economic decline, urban decay, or vacant properties) were considered, how deeply they were analysed, and what level of importance was given to their impacts on a city's development prospects. At the same time, planning visions were assessed for their consideration of urban shrinkage, while it was also necessary to understand if they were grounded in the assumption of continuing demographic decline or foresee levelling off and even its possible reversal and future growth. Last, planning strategies were evaluated based on whether they conceived measures that work to adapt to the conditions of shrinkage or attempt to mitigate its causes to attract population and whether they focused on tackling the associated problems to facilitate adaptation or building on assets to enable growth.

This approach differed from that of Heim LaFrombois et al. (2023), which focused on identifying statistical data concerning population change or a predefined set of planning interventions within a particular strategy. Our assessment went beyond merely detecting the presence of certain information, instead prioritising understanding the intentions underlying each analytical category. For example, while the demolition of vacant buildings is commonly associated with rightsizing and smart decline approaches, it is also employed within a growth-oriented strategy to improve the attractiveness of urban spaces for prospective residents and potential investors (Mallach et al., 2017; Pallagst, 2012; Rosenman & Walker, 2016). Failing to recognise this difference in intention within a specific case may result in erroneously categorising this intervention exclusively under the de-growth strategy.

The relationships between the three analytical categories were established as the next step in the analysis. The results consist of a set of defined relations according to the impact between interpretations of shrinkage, planning visions, and planning strategies. The concepts are matched according to the diagram in Figure 2.

Table 2. Main criteria for the analysis of identified categories.

Interpretations		Visions		Strategies	
Denial/Neglect	*Acceptance*	*Larger city*	*Smaller city*	*Pro-growth*	*De-growth*
No consideration of urban shrinkage Some consideration of urban shrinkage, but no importance is given to the issue (focus on less contentious issues) Urban shrinkage is considered, but its impact is neglected or denied (focus on more positive trends) Urban shrinkage is only superficially analysed	Urban shrinkage is explicitly considered Urban shrinkage is given substantial importance The impact of urban shrinkage is acknowledged Urban shrinkage is thoroughly analysed	Based on the assumption of levelling off or reversing population decline Not related to urban shrinkage Foresees a more competitive (rather than habitable) city in the future Considers the city's future position in relation to the broader environment, conditions, and relations or at the regional/ national/ international scale	Based on the assumption of continuing population decline Directly or indirectly related to urban shrinkage Foresees a more habitable (rather than competitive) city in the future Considers the city's future position in relation to the local environment, conditions, and relations or at the local scale	Predominantly develops measures to attract population Reactively focuses on mitigating the effects of shrinkage Addresses the causes of shrinkage to stimulate growth Prioritises assets or well-performing sectors/urban areas	Predominantly develops measures to improve the life quality of the existing population Proactively focuses on adapting to the conditions of shrinkage Addresses the consequences of shrinkage to facilitate adaptation Prioritises weaknesses or more problematic/ declining sectors and urban areas

The type of impact is determined by examining whether a specific interpretation of urban shrinkage justifies the planning vision of a larger city or overrides it to envision a smaller future city. It further assesses whether a planning vision reinforces or changes existing pro-growth planning strategies to de-growth. This analysis has not explored the possibility of the interpretations of urban shrinkage that shape planning visions differently, which may create a new strategic approach other than growth or decline. Unfortunately, relying solely on the content analysis of comprehensive plans limited capturing such nuanced associations. Finally, a cross-city analysis was performed by isolating the most dominant types of relations and influences.

4. The Influence of the Interpretations of Urban Shrinkage on Planning Visions and Strategies

The results are summarised in Table 3. It is important to note that while assessing the interpretations of urban shrinkage and planning visions was relatively straightforward, estimating the nature of resulting planning strategies proved more challenging. Most analysed plans encompass a wide-ranging combination of contrasting interventions fragmented across different themes, areas, and sectors, making it difficult to discern a clear-cut strategy (Bernt et al., 2014; Marjanović & Sagot Better, 2020; Pallagst, 2009). Therefore,

measures aimed at both expansion and adaptation can be found in almost every plan. With that in mind, when referring to the defined orientation of a planning strategy towards growth or de-growth, we are, in fact, positing that it is *predominantly* of one type or the other. This was determined based on each plan's overarching strategic goals and intentions rather than solely relying on the number of interventions belonging to a particular category. For instance, Erie's comprehensive plan (City of Erie, 2016) incorporates several pro-growth elements aimed at enhancing the city's appeal for investment. Nevertheless, it is primarily grounded in the recognition that Erie must undergo a process of right-sizing and stabilising its population before the "catching up" strategy becomes feasible.

Table 3. The impact of the interpretations of urban shrinkage on planning visions and strategies in the selected cases.

City	Interpretation of shrinkage	→	Planning vision	→	Planning strategy
Baltimore (MD)	Acceptance	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Buffalo (NY)	Acceptance	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Charleston (WV)	Denial/neglect	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Cleveland (OH)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Dayton (OH)	Acceptance	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Decatur (IL)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Detroit (MI)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Change	De-growth
Elmira (NY)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Erie (PA)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Change	De-growth
Flint (MI)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Change	De-growth
Gary (IN)	Denial/neglect	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Niagara Falls (NY)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Change	De-growth
Cincinnati (OH)	Acceptance	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Syracuse (NY)	Denial/neglect	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Toledo (OH)	Denial/neglect	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Utica (NY)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Youngstown (OH)	Acceptance	Override	Smaller city	Reinforce	Pro-growth
Pittsburgh (PA)	Acceptance	Justify	Larger city	Reinforce	Pro-growth

4.1. The Relationship Between the Interpretations of Urban Shrinkage and Planning Visions for Shrinking Cities

Of the 18 plans analysed, shrinkage receives significant acknowledgement in 14 of them. An excellent example of this is the plan for Baltimore, which recognises that "within the Baltimore/Washington region, Baltimore's position has shrunk from being the major economic engine" (City of Baltimore, 2006, p. 97). Similarly, the plan for Erie acknowledges that "sustained population loss over half a century is a disquieting reality—one that most of Erie's leaders and residents are well aware of" (City of Erie, 2016, p. 13). In contrast, the remaining four cases either ignore the issue or deny its importance. For instance, while Charleston's plan mentions that the city's population has gradually declined since the 1960s, little attention is given to urban shrinkage and related problems (City of Charleston, 2013). Rather than discussing negative demographic trends, attention is redirected towards more positive aspects, such as the rise in young adult age groups and

the relatively high level of educational attainment. Meanwhile, although the plan for Gary recognised the relevance of urban shrinkage for its development prospects, other problems were considered more substantial, such as the perception of safety, the tax system, and flooding (City of Gary, 2008).

The identified impacts of planning actors' interpretations of urban shrinkage on planning visions are presented in Figure 3. In half of the cases, interpretations of shrinkage had overridden the usual pro-growth visions and led to a consideration of more modest and possibly more realistic visions of a smaller city. The departure from the shared visions of growth appears to be a direct consequence of how planning actors interpret urban shrinkage. For instance, the plan for Utica acknowledges that the city "has been hit hard with the decline of the manufacturing industry," with many neighbourhoods that "are deteriorating and…threatened with continued decline" (City of Utica, 2011, p. 22). Therefore, it envisions "a great little American city…committed to correct sizing" (p. 5). Similarly, the plan for Flint "is grounded in the reality that Flint's population is approximately half of what it once was" (City of Flint, 2013, p. 37) and imagines a city that "adapts to change by reshaping our physical environment to be greener and more efficient for a smaller population" (p. 4).

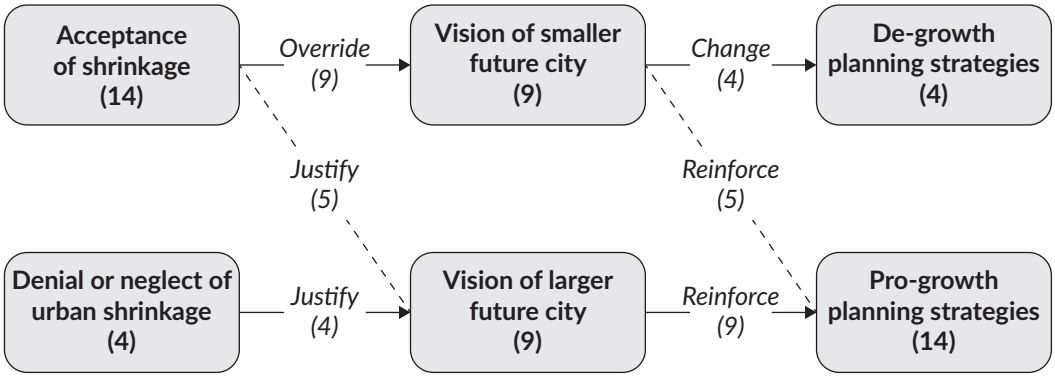

Figure 3. Analysed impacts between the interpretations of urban shrinkage, planning visions, and planning strategies in the selected cases.

In the remaining cases, interpretations of shrinkage that both accepted and denied or neglected the issue justified visions for future growth. Based on our starting assumptions, the inverse effect of counterfactual justification is particularly puzzling. Although some planners had recognised shrinkage's impact on their city's development opportunities, they still proceeded with visions anticipating future prosperity and growth. This was the case in Baltimore, Buffalo, Dayton, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh. An excellent example is the plan for Buffalo (City of Buffalo, 2006), where the planning vision foresees a city that is "growing again, renewed, and rebuilt from its foundations" (p. 4), although it previously acknowledged that Buffalo "faces great challenges: the long-term decline in population and jobs, deterioration in housing and neighbourhoods" (p. 1). Naturally, visions of a larger future city would result from planning interpretations that either deny or ignore the issue of urban shrinkage, such as in Syracuse, Gary, Charleston, or Toledo. For instance, the plan for Gary envisions the city as "a quality national and international location for business" with expectations that "the increase in job opportunities will also bring a rise in residential growth" (City of Gary, 2008, p. 176). Similarly, despite the stated emphasis on enhancing liveability, the vision for Charleston primarily revolves around positioning the city as a growing cultural, recreational, and business hub of the Appalachian region (City of Charleston, 2013).

By coupling the two types of impact, it can be inferred that planning actors in most shrinking cities accept urban decline and consider the related issues important. There is no guarantee, however, that a different

orientation besides growth will be adopted. While they, in principle, embrace the visions of smaller cities, it is evident in our sample that more plans still promoted interest in future growth compared to those that initially accepted shrinkage.

4.2. The Relationship Between the Planning Visions and Strategies for Shrinking Cities

The identified impacts of planning visions on planning strategies for shrinking cities are shown in Figure 3. In 14 of 18 cases, planning actors' preference for strategies that support growth is reinforced. This type of influence is derived from planning visions anticipating a future reversal of unfavourable demographic trends, as well as from those envisioning a smaller population. It is logical that a city aspiring to grow would devise growth-supporting strategies, such as "continued investment in downtown" in Toledo, which "will help to fuel greater growth for both the city and the region" (City of Toledo, 2011, p. 16) or the expansion of infrastructure in Syracuse "to support future population growth" (City of Syracuse, 2012, p. 15). However, anticipating a smaller city did not necessarily translate to commensurate strategies for de-growth. Although nine of the sampled comprehensive plans favoured planning visions of a smaller future city, more than half still supported growth in their planning strategies. This includes Cleveland, Decatur, Elmira, Utica, and Youngstown. For instance, the plan for Elmira opted to create amenities, build housing, and reduce taxes "to attract millennials and young professionals" to the city (City of Elmira, 2016, p. 50). Similarly, Cleveland's comprehensive plan (City of Cleveland, 2007) put forth diverse land use policy recommendations that stimulate new residential and commercial development, aiming to counteract outward migration and attract new residents.

Planning strategies changed from pursuing growth to adapting to urban shrinkage in the remaining four cases, which are Detroit, Erie, Flint, and Niagara Falls. These strategies all stem from planning visions that anticipate a decreasing urban population. For instance, the planning strategy for Niagara Falls aims "to better align service delivery and maintenance of the city's infrastructure with actual needs" and increase the amount of green space within the city by transforming derelict housing and industrial properties (City of Niagara Falls, 2009, p. 101). Similarly, the plan for Detroit recommends reforms "to adapt to the current population and to better coordinate public and private service provision for more efficient and reliable services that will adapt to future needs" (City of Detroit, 2012, p. 18).

By juxtaposing the two types of impact, it can be inferred that many comprehensive plans for shrinking cities put forward visions of a smaller city yet do not necessarily adopt planning strategies aligned with sustained demographic decline. In other words, despite envisioning a decreasing urban population, planning actors still devise strategies that pursue growth.

4.3. From the Interpretation of Shrinkage to Planning Strategy

Following the advice of Hochschild (2006), we also contrasted the acceptance of urban shrinkage with the vision of a larger future city, as illustrated in Figure 4. This comparison demonstrates that although structural shrinking is explicitly accepted in most analysed plans, this acceptance does not translate to de-growth planning strategies. Instead, the interest in achieving a larger city through pro-growth planning strategies occurs more often. In only four out of 14 cases (Erie, Detroit, Flint, and Niagara Falls), the acceptance of shrinkage has ultimately led to de-growth planning strategies. In contrast, the vision of a larger city has

influenced the adoption of growth-supporting strategies in all nine recorded cases. The plan for Cincinnati (City of Cincinnati, 2013) aptly illustrates that accepting shrinkage does not necessarily translate into adopting a de-growth approach. While the city's demographic and economic decline was evident as early as the 1980s, and city officials had directed their efforts towards adapting to this new reality—"shaping Cincinnati to become better, not bigger" (City of Cincinnati, 2013, p. 24)—the comprehensive plan still operates under the assumption of reversing these trends and proposes an "aggressive" strategy aimed at achieving population growth.

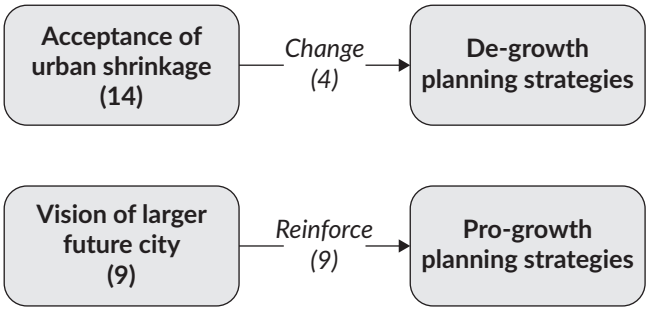

Figure 4. Acceptance of urban shrinkage does not necessarily lead to the adoption of de-growth planning strategies.

This finding further appreciates in value if we consider the cases widely recognised for their allegedly successful de-growth orientation in planning. One notable example is the comprehensive plan for Youngstown, enacted in 2005 (City of Youngstown, 2005). This plan is heralded as a pioneer of smart shrinkage in the US—one of the few cases where a city publicly plans to shrink (Rhodes & Russo, 2013; Wiechmann & Pallagst, 2012). However, even though it is accepted in the plan (City of Youngstown, 2005) that "Youngstown is a smaller city" (p. 18), and in line with that, a future vision of a smaller city is developed—"the need to plan for the new reality of a smaller city" (p. 28)—our analysis provides evidence that planning actors in Youngstown still turned to the planning strategies that aim at stimulating growth, redeveloping, and attracting new residents:

> Competitive industrial districts…can keep Youngstown competitive within the new regional and global economies….Building off the recent Federal Street renovations, convocation center construction, federal and state courthouse construction, state office buildings and arts expansion, new restaurants, night clubs and housing projects, vibrancy is returning to the core. (City of Youngstown, 2005, p. 45)

Importantly, this observation is consistent with the perspective of other scholars who contend that the comprehensive plan for Youngstown, ostensibly adopting a de-growth approach, actually represents an exclusionary initiative primarily centred on the revitalisation of central business districts while the neighbourhoods struggling with issues such as decay, vacancy, unemployment, and crime are conspicuously overlooked (Rhodes & Russo, 2013). This suggests that accepting urban shrinkage in Youngstown did not lead to the creation of planning strategies much different from those of a growing city. Meanwhile, in only four cases (Erie, Detroit, Flint, and Niagara Falls), such an interpretation induced both planning visions of a smaller city *and* de-growth planning strategies. These cities represent potential examples of a tangible change to the planning approach resulting from the acceptance of urban shrinkage.

Detroit, in particular, stands out in the literature for its pursuit of de-growth politics (Schindler, 2016). However, the *Detroit Future City* plan (City of Detroit, 2012), subject to our analysis, does not represent an official city plan but an informal private initiative that received a reluctant endorsement from the city's mayor at the time and has fallen entirely out of favour under subsequent leadership. Despite emerging from an extensive citywide public engagement effort, this document has had minimal influence on the actual planning endeavours in Detroit. In fact, the official planning documents published in the last decade barely consider urban shrinkage (City of Detroit, 2022), while city officials focus on pursuing downtown investments through public subsidies and lenient regulations (Gillette, 2022). In addition, in both Detroit and the other three cases, lingering uncertainties remain regarding the full extent of the shift in their planning strategies towards de-growth, particularly when accounting for pro-growth elements that have resisted the change.

5. Concluding Discussion

This article aimed to assess the impact of the interpretations of shrinkage on urban planning by examining comprehensive plans of 18 shrinking US cities. Our findings suggest that although urban shrinkage and related development constraints are usually acknowledged by planning actors, it is hard to account for how this actually changes shrinking cities' planning approaches. More specifically, urban planning appears to be far less impacted by particular interpretations of shrinkage, including acceptance, thus contradicting popular belief. While acknowledging urban decline can change the expectations of future growth into visions of smaller cities, it is less common for these interpretations to yield adaptive planning strategies and measures directed explicitly towards de-growth. As a result, the type of transformations that planning approaches to urban shrinkage require rarely occurs, and strategies for shrinking cities appear to be not much different from their counterparts for cities that grow. This finding suggests that regardless of what planning actors want to achieve in a shrinking city and whether urban shrinkage is accepted or not, growth remains a focal point of most planning efforts. This contradicts the assertion by some planning scholars that the acceptance of urban shrinkage would inherently change planning approaches towards de-growth (Pallagst et al., 2017). Instead, what seems to be the case is that the way shrinkage is perceived has little to do with the choice of planning strategies. As Mallach (2023) notices in his recent publication, even if acceptance occurs, it primarily remains at the conceptual level, and planners persist in adhering to established practices.

A sole content analysis of comprehensive plans conducted here did not enable us to ascertain the reasons why planning actors encountered challenges in formulating strategies to effectively pursue de-growth despite previously accepting shrinkage and envisioning smaller future populations of their cities. Nevertheless, several possible explanations for this outcome merit consideration. In the first place, the identified efforts aimed at addressing urban shrinkage are often limited to specific neighbourhoods, sectors, and activities. Even when planning actors actively embrace the issue, it rarely results in a broad and sweeping transformation of urban politics as a whole but leads to incremental piecemeal reforms within specific planning domains (Bernt et al., 2014). Indeed, the examined plans mostly involved pursuing a diverse array of interventions across different sectors rather than adopting a robust and clearly defined strategy. This demonstrates that pro-growth and de-growth interventions are not necessarily incompatible and are often used in synergy in the planning of shrinking cities. Such an approach could be argued to furnish planners with a comprehensive array of options for addressing the context-specific conditions of their cities, suggesting that the right mix of planning interventions is considered a more promising direction for

managing urban shrinkage than either a growth or a de-growth strategy alone (Heim LaFrombois et al., 2023; Sousa & Pinho, 2015).

Furthermore, it is necessary to consider what instruments and resources are available to planners of shrinking cities to effectively plan for de-growth, especially because entrepreneurialism dominates contemporary urban governance and politics. In the US, urban entrepreneurialism is characterised by the reduction of financial support from both state and federal levels for local governments, which restricts the range and scale of interventions accessible to municipal authorities (Rhodes & Russo, 2013). The success of planning endeavours depends on a wide range of actors, institutions, and resources, and even if planners and city officials shift their focus away from growth-restoring approaches, the development and effective implementation of de-growth-oriented strategies necessitate a collective effort and adequate institutional mechanisms (Schatz, 2013). Consequently, even when planning actors strive to address the challenge of shrinkage proactively, they find themselves compelled to seek solutions reliant on market forces, and their endeavours end up being governed by the imperative of fostering growth. This potentially underscores the need for tailored support from higher tiers of government in pursuing more de-growth-oriented approaches in the planning of shrinking cities (Martin et al., 2021).

Lastly, the supposed transformation of planning approaches towards embracing the reality of shrinkage requires new and different strategies to take effect. However, such strategies are limited in the examined comprehensive plans. Planning actors in shrinking cities may possess a restricted grasp of de-growth approaches or encounter institutional and practical barriers to their development and implementation, making them less willing to take risks by adopting untested solutions. This is particularly noteworthy given the influence of vested interests and constrained capacities for action that often define the formal planning process and its outcomes in shrinking contexts. The comparison of the informal planning effort surrounding the *Detroit Future City* plan with the city's official initiatives demonstrates the challenges of enacting de-growth strategies within formalised planning structures. The findings from the literature also recognise how de-growth approaches are more likely to emerge from informal planning initiatives, observing examples of such efforts organised by community groups and civic networks in other Rust Belt cities (Walling et al., 2021).

In summary, the mere political recognition of shrinkage appears to be inadequate for generating more extensive planning strategies that depart from the pro-growth status quo. Acknowledging the distinct circumstances faced by shrinking cities seems to be only a surface-level consideration, and other critical factors, including government support, the capacity of local authorities, and dominant political interests, must be factored into the equation. While creating awareness about shrinkage presents a political challenge rather than a cognitive one (Bernt et al., 2014), the adoption of a de-growth approach in urban politics and planning is more complex and shaped by the interplay of political, institutional, and practical considerations. Consequently, there is an evident need for further studies, discussions, and reflections on the desirability, necessity, and possibility of applying de-growth approaches to shrinking urban areas. In particular, planners should be provided with proper guidelines and equipped with an adequate toolbox and resources to successfully pursue de-growth in shrinking contexts.

It is also worth considering other possibilities for planning and action that extend beyond the growth/de-growth dichotomy (Marjanović, 2023). Numerous challenges linked to shrinkage persist in many cities,

including escalating poverty, urban decay, and disinvestment, even in those recognised for their progressive policies and proactive urban revitalisation efforts (Gillette, 2022). The predominant emphasis on redirecting planning strategies from growth to de-growth appears to divert attention from a potentially more crucial question: developing strategies that work. Since urban shrinkage is context-specific, we call for more strategic and experimental approaches to develop an effective mix of policies to manage shrinking cities. These approaches should transcend immediate growth-versus-de-growth considerations, fostering a nuanced and contextual understanding of the diverse challenges and opportunities that surround urban shrinkage. In our analysis, Erie's comprehensive plan, *Erie Refocused* (2016), stands out as the one most closely aligned with this direction, strategically formulating a set of principles to guide decision-making and establish a framework for exploring effective solutions. Consequently, we propose redirecting scholarly attention from cities traditionally recognised for their de-growth orientation in managing urban shrinkage, such as Youngstown, to investigating planning approaches and outcomes in places like Erie that embrace a more strategic and experimental course of action.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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