

Shrinking Cities

Cities expand and shrink. What are the implications of shrinking cities for the development of cities worldwide when the positive image of a city is primarily characterised by growth? Is shrinking equivalent to loss or does it enable new beginnings?

Welcome to Liverpool/Manchester, the fastest growing city in the world.(1) Manchester and Liverpool, linked and strengthened by the Manchester-Liverpool Canal, reached their industrial prime in the 19th century. Today they are marked by the decades-long process of deindustrialisation and migration. Both cities have nowadays only half as many residents as in the 1930s. But their situation is not unusual, no longer a rarity. Cities expand and shrink. Cities which were once great and important, like Alexandria, Babylon or Carthage, have long since shrunk, and their greatness and significance live on only in historical memory. Other cities which were expanding strongly until recently are shrinking today. Shrinking cities are a phenomenon, which cannot be limited to a region or a regime, nor to a culture or a stage of industrial development. They are found in China, USA, Great Britain, Germany, Brazil, Italy, Russian Federation, South Africa, Afghanistan, India, the Netherlands, Mexico, North Korea and many other countries. In the past few decades, 370 cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants in 62 countries have shrunk consistently.

What are the implications for the development of cities around the world when the positive image of a city is primarily characterised by growth? Growth in terms of economy, residents, housing, industry, service provision and culture gives a city its worth. Is shrinking similarly equivalent to loss? Or do cessation and postponement enable new beginnings? What do the residents of shrinking cities think about the extensive change in their surroundings? What destroys a social field? Are empty spaces always negative? Or can empty spaces also indicate luxury, which it is necessary to recognise and utilise. Does physical decline mean fear, criminality and memories of better days? Are there alternatives to demolition? And what establishes the cohesiveness of a city, when the structural continuum no longer exists?

An international study pored over these and many other questions under the title 'Shrinking Cities' (2.) The objective of the project is not to find a standard recipe. Work should not be done in the hope of being able to stop the shrinking. Rather, the point is to demonstrate from different approaches the positive and negative aspects of shrinking as a form of urban change. The focus should be first on stock-taking and analysis of shrinking cities worldwide, concentrating especially on four selected cities: Detroit (USA); Ivanovo (Russia); Manchester/Liverpool (Great Britain); Halle/Leipzig (Germany). Local teams will explore how cities deal with surplus free spaces and buildings, and the fact that their urban landscape is becoming increasingly fragmented. One concern of this project is also to demonstrate new action strategies for shrinking cities. Currently, 40 artists, geographers, economists, cultural studies experts, architects, musicians, graphic designers, film-makers and journalists have been invited to work on and explore shrinking cities, and to present their own contribution in an international, culturally comprehensive discussion. Aspects from this could be absorbed by particular locations, to serve as seeds for new urban strategies and spatial networks or to question former cultural values. Thus, some projects would develop in a location-specific manner and others in a model-like way, linked to the consideration of being adjusted to a location.

Shrinking cities, according to Philipp Oswalt, curator of this project, cannot be understood from one point of view. Therefore, the project would like to collect as many different views as possible. Particularly because cities shrink for different reasons. Detroit in the northeastern USA, for example, developed since 1900 into a leading centre of the automotive industry. Ford, Chrysler and General Motors built their factories here. The city had 1.8 million residents in 1950. From that point, though, it started declining. By 2000 the city had shrunk to 950,000 residents. At the same

time, the surrounding countryside grew to almost 4 million inhabitants. This means that shrinking in Detroit is not a loss but rather a movement away from the centre. The region is shrinking and expanding simultaneously. The consequences include empty buildings and the demolition of 200,000 houses, 95% of which had been built in the 1920s. In the city centre there will soon be no more cinemas, no bookstores, no jobs, no petrol stations. In the surrounding countryside, called Metro Detroit (Metropolitan Detroit), the number of these items is continuously increasing. Detroit was a city of streets with detached family houses along with some skyscrapers. Today there are empty spaces with individual houses, which are often empty. The question is, what is so different and so attractive about living in a suburb, in similar houses and similar streets? What stimulated the migration to the suburbs, and can and should it be resisted?

Suburbanisation as in Detroit and deindustrialisation as in Manchester and Liverpool are linked in the Greater Halle/Leipzig area with the problem of a drastic political change. German reunification brought the region's branch of industry (brown coal and chemicals) to a standstill, and unemployment rose to 20%. The first wave of migration into the West followed in the mid-1990s. In addition, the evacuation of housing, retail trade and industry abroad took place, with government support. Even if the surrounding communities are still profiting from this, the population as a whole has decreased. East Germany lost 1.5 million inhabitants between 1989 and 2000. For the Halle/Leipzig region this corresponds to a shrinkage of between 14% and 30%. On top of this, there has been a drastic drop in the birth rate since 1990. Some 20% to 30% of houses are empty, apartment blocks, entire streets in the old city centre. Demolition is slowly starting up, as growth is not expected any time soon. Nevertheless, Leipzig is considered a model city, which in contrast to Halle survived the drastic political and economic change. The city centre has been renovated well, the number of inhabitants has stabilised. The city concentrates on service provision, banks, media and the exhibition hall.

Ivanovo is far from a stable situation. Ivanovo is in the Russian Federation, 300 km northeast of Moscow, and has 450,000 inhabitants. The city developed rapidly on top of village structures since the middle of the 19th century into a centre of the Russian textile industry. This monotone orientation accelerated its decline in the 1990s. Similar to the situation in East Germany, all security departed. The market changed, as did the political system. Factories were closed, few are still running, often in the red. The city is dominated by a high concealed unemployment and extensive migration. Many moved to Moscow, which continues to expand. The remaining population is overwhelmingly elderly. Here, too, the birth rate sank drastically. A majority of the people live in apartment blocks, some still in wooden houses. There have been practically no new buildings erected since 1990. Several construction projects have been abandoned, and are decaying. Only churches and kiosks are expanding to fill the empty spaces. A sign of a religious and economic reorientation?

It is primarily the unplanned structures that are starting to be successful in abandoned regions, at different levels. They refer for example to nature, economy and way of life. Scott Hocking, an artist from Detroit, has been watching for years how nature is reconquering its territory in the middle of the city. Three hundred years ago, Detroit was only nature, then it became the fourth largest city in America. Its surface was sealed under concrete. Now cracks are appearing, grass and trees break through. Some parking lots look like flower beds, railways are no longer recognisable as such. Scott Hocking considers these signs of the time and change of a city. An abandoned city, a ghost town, as he calls Detroit, whose inhabitants are homeless people, living in the empty houses, which no-one gets to see or wants to see. Empty blocks are considered dangerous and thus avoided. Only in a car can they be crossed or better yet left behind. Empty houses are targets for arson, theft, vandalism and destruction. But does the criminal deconstruction of a house waiting for demolition mean anything? What does a breach of the law mean for property owners who have distanced themselves from their property? The problem is primarily aesthetic injury. If a house in a block stands empty, with broken windows, people will gradually move away. Broken windows symbolise that their perfect neighbourhood is damaged.

The artist Gordon Matta-Clark worked with that theme in 1976 in his project 'Window Blowout'. Gordon Matta-Clark had been invited to participate in the exhibition 'Idea as Model', which was held in the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York, whose founder and contemporary director was Peter Eisenman. Gordon Matta-Clark's first attempt was "a small-scale cutting for one of its seminar rooms - a windowless box of sheetrock"(3). He changed his plans the day before the opening. "Matta-Clark appeared with a BB gun borrowed from Dennis Oppenheim and asked MacNair permission to shoot out a couple of the windows of the Institute instead. The windows were already cracked, he reasoned, and he would use their empty casement as a frame for photographs of housing projects taken in South Bronx."(4) Gordon Matta-Clark shot out several of the Institute's windows and wanted to place photos of empty houses in the Bronx with similarly broken windows in their empty frames. But it was not to be. A shocked Peter Eisenman compared the act to the Crystal Night in 1938 in Germany, and Gordon Matta-Clark had to leave. For Pamela Lee it represented Gordon Matta-Clark's reaction to the modern sympathy of the participants in the exhibition, characterised by the 'New York Five' and the teachings of the 'Cornell School of Architecture': "For Matta-Clark's attack linked the abstract tendencies of modern architecture - the very notion of 'idea as model' - with the degeneracy these models wrought in the urban environment, witnessed in the failed housing projects of the Bronx"(6).

Empty houses are no longer subjects for architects. They limit their field of activity mostly to what is to be erected. Broken windows mean emptiness, and emptiness means decay, but also the possibility of taking possession. Scott Hocking reports on 'Scrappers', who live homeless in the old factories of Detroit and earn their living with the removal and sale of any metal from empty houses. Naturally this is illegal. But nobody cares. Nevertheless, they live in hiding, as a precaution. The houses in which they live are unsound, and so they put planks across holes in the floors and construct their own entrances and exits. Another form of appropriation and reconstruction is the so-called 'Crack Houses'. 'Crack Houses' are empty houses with still intact accommodation structures, with walls that have been broken through. This produces new passageways, other forms of organisation.

These physical interventions can be seen in a negative light, as vandalism, as damage to another person's property, or in a positive light, as taking possession of space that has become free, space that nobody seems to want to use, in which almost no-one wants to live. After all, the transfiguration of the houses occurs after they have been standing empty, it is not the reason, just a possible consequence. Here the question of ownership becomes decisive. In the Netherlands, for example, a house that has been empty for over a year can be inhabited and used without paying rent after making an arrangement with the owner, only paying the extra costs. The owner is entitled to cancel the agreement at any time.

This model makes it possible to prevent the decay of a house through temporary use, and thus strengthens the neighbourhood, even increases its value, as has happened in many areas of Manchester. It was primarily the contemporary music scene that created something from nothing. Empty houses were brought to life as clubs and bars, and thus raised the status of some areas. The best-known club was the 'Hacienda Nightclub', which opened in 1982. Its success was the start of an industry, of music producers, graphic designers to architects. Today the 'Hacienda Nightclub' no longer exists, it was torn down. The area became so famous, however, that it is still worthwhile building lofts and expensive apartments there.

Nevertheless, Manchester is a conglomeration of fallow areas, well used and renovated factory buildings, different types of housing estates, more or less inhabited. Empty houses are used as huge advertising boards, or torn down, like many council blocks. Today construction is limited to two to three storey houses in clearly demarcated areas, which are often heavily guarded, and have only one or two access roads. And although the migration is not yet ended, the mood is not entirely bad. Manchester has been developing since the 1990s into a service provision and culture city. This is primarily due to the impulses from subcultural movements.

Manchester, like Leipzig, is shrinking from outside to inside. They have managed to strengthen their cities around the centre. Detroit, in contrast, is constructing an increasingly stronger ring around an increasingly empty centre. In both cases the empty spaces are replaced by green spaces, which can be used in different ways. You can find gardens and vegetable plots laid out by the inhabitants in the centre of Detroit. And in Leipzig you can see how the landscape penetrates to the city centre. Should we use abandoned areas to bring light, air and greenery back into the cities, lay out parks or meadows? Or is that too utopic from an economic point of view? In Berlin, also a shrinking city, open spaces and parks in the centre are being built on, because this works out better for the city. Green areas must be maintained, and the city has no money for that. This means that if green spaces are to take over from empty spaces, then it will be as weeds, as Scott Hocking has observed in Detroit. Which the inhabitant will consider neglected fallow ground, that does not add to the quality.

Even in Berlin there are many fallow areas, created by war and separation. However, the Berlin subculture has long considered these areas as full of potential, just like in Manchester. Places for experiments in music, theater, dance, art and architecture. The entire Berlin club and music scene developed in run-down and cheap factories, courtyards, cellars and is world famous today. As Berlin is also not a city of economic growth, but is one of cultural development, the question arises of whether the inhabitants will offer economically weak areas the chance to renew themselves culturally. Detroit, Manchester and Berlin were examples of this. Interestingly enough, they mutually influenced each other in their musical styles, which they fashioned from soul, techno and acid-house. Suburbanisation, deindustrialisation, deconstruction and migration were thus not associated with a loss of culture. Quite the contrary, culture seems to be building up while the economy fails. However, no city can live from culture alone. We need new urban strategies. Networks of the city that extend beyond its physical presence. The shrinking of cities does not mean the end is nigh. Rather, they must grow into a new role, which they will have to create themselves. The aim must be a new interpretation of the shrinking city. That they can be the start of new cultural practices has already been shown. Now it is important to find a new identity for this new type of city. For example, if a city defined itself in its prime as an 'industrial city', it should not now apply the negative term 'deindustrialised city'.

- (1) The statement is the creation of Joshua Bolchover. He is the curator of the Manchester Team in 'Shrinking Cities'.
- (2) 'Shrinking Cities' is an initiative project of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes in Germany in cooperation with the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst Leipzig, the Stiftung Bauhaus Dessau and the magazine Arch+. Term 2002-2005
- (3), (4), (5), (6) - Pamela Lee, Object to be destroyed. The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2000

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