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Right-Sizing Cities, Part I: What is a Shrinking City?

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The term “shrinking cities” has been defined by authors Joseph Schilling and Jonathan Logan ([2008 *Journal of the American Planning Association* article](#)) as a “special subset of older industrial cities with significant and sustained population loss and increasing levels of vacant and abandoned properties, including blighted residential, commercial and industrial buildings.” In their definition, the authors set a minimum standard for a city to qualify as a shrinking city—population loss of 25% or greater over 40 years. This definition would appear stringent, but it provides a framework for separating seriously challenged cities from others that are much less challenged.

The fact of the matter is that virtually all American cities have lost population from their peak levels, and almost all of the nation’s major cities have lost population since 1950. Although some of them do not meet the official definition of a shrinking city, the rapid decline of American city’s population and economic activity should have been an even greater concern to our public policy makers than it has been to date. The fact that this situation is so wide-spread should have raised questions about the fundamental basis for the future of our cities. Was the idea of cities in America a bad one in the first place? Is it the case that our cities just happened and we never did have the opportunity to develop our own concept of cities and how to help guide their evolution in the direction of sustainability? Is it the case that the world has experienced such a paradigm shift that the old notion of cities no long applies? Or, is it the case that somewhere along the way, we lost track of what we, as a society, needed to do to ensure that our cities optimally serve society?

The notion that places like Detroit, MI, were below the radar screen of federal policy makers for so long reflects the possibility that our law makers do not really understand the magnitude of the challenges facing American cities. The challenges are daunting. A 25% decline in 40 years is a pretty significant decline, especially considering how many of our cities were included in that statistic. Very few important things in our society go through that much down-grading without some intervention. It seems that if this issue stemmed from a natural disaster, not an economic disaster, we would have done something different. Is our country’s national policy framework for intervention immune to economic disasters? Is the issue of how we deal with long-term economic disasters even important? If “no,” why not? If “yes,” why has it been so difficult to turn the situation around? Perhaps the notion of long-term economic disasters is foreign to our society and we just don’t know how to resolve them yet? Perhaps we have become so used to automatic prosperity, and have learned to ignore even the most obvious disasters around us.

On one hand, according to Witold Rybczynski and Peter Linneman (authors of the 1997 *Wharton Real Estate Review* article, “Shrinking Cities”), the vast majority of large American cities have lost population. On the other hand, we have this subset of American cities that have experienced significant, steady and gradual population loss over long periods of time. What is the difference between these two categories? It seems to me that our official definition of shrinking cities is a subset of those cities that are troubled, which is most of our nation’s large cities. So, our shrinking cities simply represent extreme cases of a condition that plagues American cities in general. The fact that the American landscape is littered with so many of these challenged cities makes one wonder whether our cities can ever again reach the level of prosperity they attained in the past. The point is that American cities are challenged, and the nation may need an aggressive strategy to deal with the problem. If not, we definitely need a clear statement of reason for why this situation is acceptable.

Whether or not we should do something about our cities—especially our shrinking cities—depends on what Americans want their cities to be. It also depends on our understanding of what cities actually do within the context of a metropolitan region, a state and the nation. Perhaps most relevant is the issue of whether or not any action we take will actually bear fruit.

In other words, do our cities have the ability to rebound again? Answers to this question can be found in turn-around cities. Such cities as New York, NY; Chicago, IL; and Washington, D.C., were able to break free from the persistent cycle of decline. The fact that people are flocking to these cities, and that Americans generally like these cities, may suggest that not only do they have the ability to turn around, but also that such a turn around is a good value proposition, at least in the case of some cities. A little caveat may be appropriate at this point. New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C., either grew by receiving massive inflows of immigrants, or by aggressively annexing surrounding cities and towns. The few cities that experienced turn arounds without the help of immigration and annexation did so by rediscovering themselves—shedding old paradigms of growth, leveraging new principles of urban viability and working hard to reposition themselves. This suggests that while the natural fate of cities is to continue to shrink, that a city may well have within its power the ability to shape its own future.

The first option, regional expansionism through annexation, is definitely still a possible strategy for growth, but it is becoming increasingly unfeasible politically. The second option, international expansionism through international immigrant attraction, is also feasible, but is largely constrained by national immigration policies, which have become even more restrictive in recent years. Besides, more and more reports (e.g., [The Pew Charitable Trusts](#) and the [Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation](#)) seem to be suggesting that because other parts of the world are now booming and prosperity is more evenly distributed across the globe, immigration reform alone may not yield adequate results for it to work as an urban revitalization strategy. The Indians, Chinese and Brazilians, I am told, are increasingly either staying at home in the first place or returning to their country of origin from the U.S. after going to school here or having lived here.

The third option, thinking and working hard and discovering new growth paradigms, is obviously a tough road to hoe, considering the numerous obstacles in the way, and the fact that few places have been able to accomplish this. However, the fact that some places such as Pittsburgh, PA, have been able to effect some turn around may suggest that this is the way to go. So, on the issue of whether or not it is possible for a city to reverse the trend and grow, the answer seems to be “yes.” However, it would require new ways of thinking about the function of cities and the policies we implement to reposition them.

Clearly, for a city to be better positioned to effect its own turn around, it needs to understand its history, the growth model and trends that led to its emergence in the first place, and the fact that the possibility of that model is no longer valid and its associated trends are no longer relevant. A city would also need to understand how the drivers of prosperity have changed, and why the development of a can-do culture that balances the need to address current economic challenges against the need to be forward-looking and strategic about the future is critical.