



Justin B. Hollander 2018: A Research Agenda for Shrinking Cities . Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing

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Urban shrinkage has long been considered by urban planners and decision makers as a transitory stage or a disenchanted urban interlude, needing to be quickly overcome to restore the traditional realm of urban growth. A long decade of research on shrinking cities has demonstrated how they should not be disregarded as a symptom of failure and despair, and how shrinkage should be considered a lasting urban process, a durable new urban form which challenges historic tools of urban planning.

Justin Hollander's *A Research Agenda for Shrinking Cities* takes its place in the booming literature on this topic, which has become fairly vivid and undergone acceleration and renewed geographical diffusion in the context of the post-2008 recession. In eight short chapters, the author portrays the different facets of one such new urban regime, which he wants to extricate from the interpretative rut of planners' unforeseen nightmare: 'Maybe population decline does not have to be a bad thing if we can plan for future uses' (p. 1). By paying more attention to a resident-oriented approach and the different aspects relating to quality of life rather than to an equipment-oriented approach, he highlights interesting shifts in the planning approach of cities. The smart shrinkage in which the author places his hopes probably resides in this perspective, giving free rein to the perceptions of inhabitants and their appreciation of their urban environments.

Defining urban shrinkage through a primarily demographic prism, Hollander narrates his own understanding of shrinking cities, which has been fed by his experience as both a scholar and regional planner in a Massachusetts agency. This background informs his scepticism of ready-made solutions, like (the widely diffused) creative city strategies, that are popular amongst decision makers but which he considers inadequate for shrinking cities on account of the structural issues prevalent in such places (chapter 5). All the chapters follow a similar didactic format (overview of the topic, key research questions, methods, a comment on a research article on the topic) to decrypt what the author has identified as different subdomains of research on shrinking cities. These are quite diverse, mixing different scales of urban shrinkage (regional perspectives, local focus, neighbourhood action, downtowns) and transversal topics such as social equity. Through these subdomains, the author illustrates the different patterns of urban shrinkage and the key challenges they generate for local authorities and planners. A recurrent one is the issue of urban maintenance: in the context of diminished fiscal revenue, how best to maintain both housing assets, like vacant homes, and urban services, such as roads, lighting or sewerage systems?

In his quest for smart shrinkage, Hollander suggests tools and approaches mainly relating to planning solutions, which he blends interestingly with contributions from psychology and cognitive sciences. Inspired by New Urbanism principles, he advocates for the implementation of 'reverse transect', according to which 'places can grow without reducing the quality of life of residents if that change is managed well through design' (p. 53). At the core of every management tool he mentions, the author places residents and their wellbeing. He thus invites scholars and professionals to change their view on the evolution of a city, epitomized in the humanist claim: 'do not measure success by population growth, incomes or employment, but instead concentrate on the subjective well-being of the people who live, work and play there' (p. 109).

Although well informed regarding planning patterns, the book somewhat lacks socio-political substance and an international dimension. The political and social implications of the different shrinkage management strategies are never mentioned, let alone rigorously analysed. The book would have benefited from a more detailed

description of the mechanisms of spatial and social redistribution in shrinking cities plus an analysis of emerging models of urban governance to gauge how much they might differ from other types of cities. The additional costs relating to urban shrinkage for local authorities and other stakeholders are only superficially evoked and possible alternative models are barely depicted. The author also enthusiastically promotes a smart shrinkage that would be based on 'just processes that will ensure just outcomes' (p. 119) but never defines clearly what vision of 'just' is to be understood here, thereby contributing to a form of de-politicization of shrinkage management. This feeling is reinforced by the recurrent plea for a 'rightsizing of the city', whose normativity is never questioned, implying a 'right' size and consequently a 'wrong' size for cities. On another level, the book's title promises to both portray all shrinking cities and provide a research agenda. Yet it is overwhelmingly focused on US cities and seems to ignore large segments of research into other contexts: a comparison between the different patterns of shrinkage and the different responses and strategies to deal with it would have helped to isolate the specificities of shrinking US cities. Probably on account of its intended audience, this very accessible book is also not so much a research agenda for researchers in this field but rather a guide for laypersons to start exploring this fascinating field.

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