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Medium-Sized Cities as Attractive Residential and Living Places. A Case Study from the German City of Görlitz

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ABSTRACT
The contribution relates to two major trends that currently dominate urban development in Germany. While large cities are experiencing an increase in population, more than half of the German municipalities have stagnating population rates or have to cope with a decrease in population. High vacancy rates lead to further challenges for cities, such as a deterioration of the building fabric or endangered social infrastructure due to low capacity rates. However, studies show that, only for some specific population groups, large cities are preferred locations. Regardless of other conditions, many people would choose a residential location away from the big cities. In the context of an ongoing dissertation, options for a future development for medium-sized cities are analysed within the case study of Görlitz. By highlighting location factors that contribute to a residential and living location with a high quality of life, recommendations on how medium-sized cities can develop in a future-oriented manner can be derived.

KEYWORDS
Medium-sized cities, Revitalisation, Urban experiment, Housing market, Living environment

RÉSUMÉ
La contribution porte sur deux grandes tendances qui dominent actuellement le développement urbain en Allemagne. Les grandes villes connaissent une croissance démographique au contraire de plus de la moitié des municipalités allemandes qui ont un taux de population stagnant ou doivent faire face à une diminution de leur population. Les taux d'inoccupation élevés entraînent d'autres défis pour les villes, tels que la détérioration structurelle des immeubles ou la mise en danger des infrastructures sociales en raison des faibles taux d'utilisation. Cependant, des études montrent que les grandes villes ne sont que des lieux privilégiés pour certains groupes de population. Indépendamment des autres conditions, beaucoup de gens choisiraient un lieu de résidence loin des grandes villes. Dans le cadre d'une thèse de doctorat en cours, des options pour le futur du développement des villes moyennes sont analysées *via* l'étude du cas de Görlitz. En mettant en évidence les facteurs associés à l'emplacement qui contribuent à un lieu d'habitation et résidentiel proposant une qualité de vie élevée, on peut en déduire des recommandations sur la manière dont les villes moyennes peuvent se développer de manière prospective.

MOTS CLÉS
villes moyennes, revitalisation, expérience urbaine, marché du logement, milieu de vie

INTRODUCTION

Two major trends currently dominate urban development in Germany. On the one hand, large cities and university towns are experiencing population increase due to the diversity of their offers for work, education, culture, and leisure. In particular, the so-called "Big Seven" (Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, Cologne, Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Düsseldorf) recorded high population growth rates between 2005 and 2015 (BBSR, 2018: 12). Their effects on local housing markets are currently subject of many discussions. Many cities face a tense housing market, as the existing supply meets much greater demand. This is also associated with rising rents, which have the most significant impact in those large cities. In addition to changes in the housing market, there are further constraints, such as a lack of green space due to increased sealing, increased traffic, noise and environmental pollution, and congestion of social infrastructure facilities.

In contrast, the situation in many other German municipalities is falling into oblivion. More than half of the German municipalities have stagnating population rates or have to cope with decreasing population. In addition to decreasing birth rates, internal migration is a main reason for population losses. In particular, small

and medium-sized cities in Eastern Germany have had to accept heavy population losses over the past 25 years due to migration to Western Germany or suburbanisation. However, there is an increasing number of West German areas that have to deal with shrinking to a greater extent too (BBSR, 2018: 12-13; Gatzweiler & Milbert, 2009: 445-448). Vacancies in residential and commercial buildings lead to a worsening of the building fabric. Many social infrastructures are endangered due to low capacity rates, although an aging population, especially in these cities, requires adequately equipped supply services (Brabazon, 2015: 35). New innovative and creative approaches are needed to ensure the continued supply of social infrastructure.
However, studies show that only for some specific population groups large cities are preferred locations. Regardless of other conditions, many people would choose a residential location away from these. Particularly after the educational phase, people indicate that they would prefer to live in a small or medium-sized cities. Urban structures are still desired, while many negative aspects of a large city, such as tense housing markets, noise and traffic congestion are critically assessed (Federal Foundation of Baukultur, 2016: 37). Drastic changes in the world of work in terms of digitalisation, flexibilisation and the steadily growing trend towards knowledge work could create conditions that would provide people with more freedom in their location choice and enable the realisation of the above-mentioned wishes.

1. EXCURSUS: MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES

In Germany, cities between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants are classified as medium-sized cities. Especially in the context of international research, this classification does not hold up, and there are also discussions about a delimitation of cities up to 250,000 inhabitants. Furthermore, it is pointed out that a delimitation based solely on the number of inhabitants is insufficient and neglects aspects of location, function or urban structure. However, this category groups together very different cities, that nevertheless share certain characteristics. They are denoted by a clear size in both spatial and social aspects, and a clear multifunctional centre that is used by all inhabitants and urban actors. The inner city remains a clearly recognisable urban centre, with a wide range of cultural, leisure and shopping facilities, and most importantly contact point for residents and a wide variety of actors (Brabazon, 2015: 40).
However, urban research has studied little about medium-sized cities so far. Demazière (2017) shows that the importance of medium-sized cities as places to live and work for large parts of the European population is in danger of being forgotten. This would be serious, especially against the background of the current discussion about equal living conditions. In order to understand these cities and their future challenges, a theoretical and conceptual examination is required. The findings of urban research, which focus primarily on large cities and metropolitan areas, cannot be transferred to smaller cities and their specific characteristics, and thus ignores the heterogeneity of cities. Future research on medium-sized cities should move away from the perspective of bigger cities and pay more attention to the specific development processes in these cities and their functions in global process. By highlighting the specific political, economic, but also spatial, cultural and social characteristics, strategies and processes can be explored that have received little attention in previous urban research (Demazière, 2017: 57; Bell & Jayne, 2009: 690).

2. RESEARCH QUESTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The initial situation described in the first section illustrates a social challenge in both large growing cities and medium-sized cities affected by shrinking. In the context of an ongoing dissertation, options for future development of medium-sized cities are analysed. Consequently, future developments also have positive effects on large cities, without completely eliminating their problems. With an increased focus on medium-sized cities as residential locations, factors will be analysed that could attract potential new residents. By highlighting location factors that contribute to a high quality of life residential and living location, recommendations can be derived as to how medium-sized cities can develop in a future-oriented manner. The following research question is raised: What location factors make medium-sized cities affected by shrinkage to attractive residential and living locations and for what target groups?
Based on location theories of economic geography, it becomes apparent that the so-called soft location factors are increasingly important. The predominant application of these theories to companies and their choice of location shows that the hard factor of costs must be supplemented by a soft factor such as living and environmental conditions, political climate or location image. Thießen proved that companies are increasingly concerned in choosing a location where their employees can live well (2005: 19, 23). Besides, Grabow demonstrated that the most important soft location factors in a company's choice of location included housing and the residential environment (2005: 43). His study also related its results to cities of various sizes and showed

that, although large cities generally performed better in a direct comparison, mainly smaller cities scored well in these two most important soft location factors.
Additionally, migration research deals with the complex process of residential location decisions by private households. For migrations beyond the municipal boundaries or to other countries, economic incentives are usually cited as motivation. However, particularly in the case of migration of highly skilled persons, the question is increasingly being asked of whether, in addition to economic reasons, amenities lead to a decision to migrate and then, above all, to the choice of a particular location. As amenities, are mentioned amongst others the natural environment, attractiveness of the landscape, social infrastructure, the housing market and housing supply, opportunities for leisure and consumption (Buch & Hamann, 2014).

3. METHODOLOGY

For the empirical work, data from the project "Testing the City. Living and Working in Görlitz"[1] has been used. The project has been running since July 2018 in Görlitz. The easternmost city in Germany, located directly on the Polish border, is well known for its great architectural heritage. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the city lost about a quarter of its population and is still struggling with high vacancy rates, especially in the so called "Gründerzeit", neighbourhoods in Wilhelminian style from the end of the 19th century. The project is based on a series of "testing-projects" that aim to gain new insights in urban research by using an experimental approach which enables people from elsewhere to test the city for a certain period of time (Zöllter *et al.*, 2017), by providing them an apartment and a workplace for a period of four weeks free of charge. The project targets a group of people who are not tied to a particular location, e.g. those who are freelance and possibly work in the creative industries. The aim is to spark their enthusiasm for the city of Görlitz as a place to live and work. Within the framework of a scientific study, they become experts for the evaluation of the residential, working and living conditions from an outside perspective. In addition to a standardised online questionnaire, a guideline-based interview is conducted with each participant at the end of the stay. This allows a detailed comparison of the previously named requirements for a location, and the evaluation of real experiences in the city of Görlitz, in order to analyse different aspects of the choice of location. A secondary analysis of the data highlights how the participants weight the different factors and whether there are location factors that can compensate the disadvantages of a medium-sized city affected by shrinking.

4. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

An interim evaluation of the data obtained in the project shows that the hard location factors of costs –accommodation, but also the costs of living, as well as mobility and transport infrastructure– are still important aspects in the location choice. However, equally important are the soft location factors, e.g. green spaces and the availability of leisure and recreational facilities. It is shown that a medium-sized city like Görlitz has considerable potential, especially as a residential location. The supply and prices for apartments are perceived very positively, the location in a scenic environment increases the quality of life.
With regard to the working location, it is clear that the existing urban community and networks offer significant opportunities and potential. Nevertheless, these aspects do not replace the need for an economic basis or markets in conventional terms. For professional activities, which need above all peace, inspiration and little distraction, a city like Görlitz is a great advantage. Initial analyses indicate that there is a desire for a second home or temporary residence in Görlitz.
The data collection will be completed by June 2020 and detailed results will be available towards the end of the year.

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