

2020 IGU Urban Commission Annual Meeting

Beirut – 23rd- 27th August 2020

Urban Challenges in a complex World Cities facing migration pressure

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Session number: 7- Shrinking and ageing cities

Experiencing urban shrinkage in a declining historical neighbourhood

The role of social capital in residents' trajectories

This paper will present the results of a research interrogating the impact of degrading historical housing on residents' experience, in the centre of a French medium-sized shrinking city. How are the residents affected in their living conditions, what is their experience of urban shrinkage, and how are they impacted in their residential trajectories? I will start by presenting, more generally, the topic of urban shrinkage itself: what does this phenomenon consist of and what is the state of the research (1)? Then I will present my project and the contribution I hope it will bring to the academic debate (2). Finally, I will explain more in depth a part of the results of this project: the role of social capital in the newcomers' residential trajectory (3).

1. What is urban shrinkage?

The topic of urban shrinkage has been for about twenty years on the European research agenda, raising awareness on this phenomenon and eventually placing it as a first-rank planning and political issue. Although there is no academic consensus on a common definition of urban shrinkage, shrinking cities have been defined as "urban areas that have experienced population loss, economic downturn, employment decline and social problems as symptoms of a structural crisis" (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012, p. 214)

There are five major factors of shrinkage, two being often enough to cause it: economic decline, demographic change, suburbanisation, structural upheaval and environmental pollution (Wiechmann and Bontje, 2015). In Europe, the restructuring of the Fordist industrial production system, the increased globalisation of the economy and the profound change in the information and communication technologies participated to the economic

decline of many regions (Fol and Cunningham-Sabot, 2010). Demographic change is another major driver of shrinkage, whether it is first caused by outmigration (because of the negative economic trends) or by falling birth rates (Wiechmann and Bontje, 2015). Yet these two trends have also been accompanied and reinforced by a deep spatial reconfiguration of Western cities from 1950 (Wolff and Wiechmann, 2018). In particular, suburbanisation has led to a hollowing out of city centres, while residents and employment were moving toward the peripheries (Charmes, 2019 ; Wiechmann and Bontje, 2015).

Ročak refers to the consequences of shrinkage in terms of hardware, mindware and software. Shrinkage affects buildings and infrastructures (hardware), causes a negative reputation of the area (mindware) and affects the social structure (software) (2018). Among the material manifestations of shrinkage, these cities are facing high commercial and residential vacancy. The maintenance of technical and social infrastructure is also made more difficult, mainly because of lower municipal income (Ročak, 2018). Shrinkage influences local socio-economic trends, such as the labour market (Wolff and Wiechmann, 2018). Finally, increased sociospatial inequality and segregation is a typical pattern (Ročak, 2018). Yet, these consequences are never identical and depend a lot on local contexts. Therefore, any general and standardized policy is almost impossible to implement (Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012).

Urban shrinkage is not a recent phenomenon: it has been documented since the 1970s (Bradbury, Downs and Small, 1982 ; Göb, 1977 ; Häußermann and Siebel, 1987). Yet, the problem has increased in recent years. About 20% of European cities experienced population loss between 1990 and 2010 (Wolff and Wiechmann, 2018). Despite a diversity of contexts, urban shrinkage is becoming remarkable by its geographic extent and globality (Pallagst et al., 2017). It seems to be a structural crisis which is expected to continue spreading (Bontje and Musterd, 2012), especially given the expected demographic trends (Großmann et al., 2013).

Following the pioneers works realised in the United-States on the hollowing out of city cores, and in Germany about the housing vacancy crisis, research on urban shrinkage really expanded in Europe from the early 2000s (Oswalt, 2005 ; Popper and Popper, 2017). Progressively, the debates that were initially held at the national level started to overcome borders, creating a space for international and comparative analysis (Cunningham-Sabot and Fol, 2009). Yet the presence of the topic on the policymakers and planner's agenda is even more recent (Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012), and all the manifestations of shrinkage are not yet completely understood (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2016). So, despite the pioneer works and the fruitful recent studies and debates, urban shrinkage remains a rather "recent" research object, which needs to be developed further.

2. Investigating the sociospatial dimension of shrinkage

In France, which might have been less affected by this issue, or in a less spectacular way, than the American Rust Belt or eastern Germany for example (Cauchi-Duval, Béal and Rousseau, 2016), urban shrinkage has been an emergent theme from the end of the 2000s (Wolff et al., 2017). In this country, medium-sized cities are particularly affected by shrinkage, and more precisely, the central cities are more affected than their periphery (Cauchi-Duval, Béal and

Rousseau, 2016 ; Guéraud, 2018). This is why this project has been looking specifically at the historic centres of shrinking cities.

Much literature on the topic of shrinkage focuses on its most visible manifestations, such as the commercial and residential vacancy, population loss or the economic consequences on the industrial sector (Florentin, 2017). Less is known about social manifestations, both as drivers and consequences of shrinkage. Thus, to fill this gap while building on the knowledge on architectural change in shrinking cities, this project focused on the residents' experience of their neighbourhood in degrading housing conditions and architectural environment. This qualitative analysis is based on 40 interviews, which were realized as part of an ethnographic study, conducted in Nevers in 2018. I organized semi-structured interviews, which lasted approximately two hours, with local residents as well as major actors of the housing sector, such as important private landlords.

3. The role of social capital in inhabitants' residential trajectories

The aspect which will be developed in this last part form some of the results of this project: the role of social capital in this context of shrinkage. More particularly, how does it play a role in the success of the residential trajectory of the newcomers ?

We questioned the logics behind this capacity or incapacity to arrange favourable living conditions in a degrading built environment, focusing on the role of social capital. Why social capital? This aspect was not expected to stand out, but the results highlighted the importance of this resource in the success of the residents' trajectory. A successful social trajectory will have an influence on the residential trajectory. In this context, social capital becomes a resource, to limit how one can be affected by shrinkage.

To illustrate and explain this, I am taking two groups of residents as an example: those who have the most advantageous residential situation (and are satisfied of it), who belong to the local economic bourgeoisie, and those who declare having a problematic residential situation, who are also more socially diverse than the first group.

I will start with the first group, because in a context of outmigration, brain drain, ageing and impoverishment, I found interesting to investigate the logics driving young families and qualified professionals to settle for good in the city?

As they are arriving in a rather small city, these new households expect to live in an individual family house in the centre. But these are very scarce and only constitute 12% of the dwellings. Thus, it often proves more difficult than expected. What I found, is that if financial capital is of course a necessary condition to buy these homes, it is not enough.

Whether it is thanks to a friend who works at a notary, or because some other friends are leaving and offer to buy their house, there is a secondary informal housing market, which is based on word of mouth. So, it is actually their social capital, which in the end allows a sustainable installation.

However, what is interesting is to understand how this resource was acquired by these newcomers. They did not have such a network when they arrived. So, how did they become integrated? Two key elements were identified as main drivers of social integration for this group of people.

The story of their arrival in Nevers is one of a fast integration into a new sociability network through the invitation to social events. One of the interviewees said several times that he immediately became friend with the “jet-society”. He also describes the city as very “bourgeois”. An architect who arrived in the late 1970s declared:

" It's a traditional city, it's a kind of conservatory of ancient social practices. [...] When I lived there, I had the impression of jumping back in the nineteenth century, you know. So, as I was an architect, well for them it's a notable right? So, well I was invited to a dinner organized by a notary, who had invited the bishop, the mayor... and I found myself in a downtown mansion still in its original state, with the original dishes, and a table as one would have imagined in the nineteenth century." (D.F.)

In addition, one school in particular has played a key role in the integration of new households.

"With the children's school we made friends very quickly. No, but it's true that school did it all. [...] And there was a large playground, where parents met while waiting for children. [...] And it created an incredible link from the start. [...] We phoned someone who knew people in Nevers, who gave us a contact, and the only recommendation we were given was 'put your kids at Fenelon if you want to make friends'." (F.L.)

This private Catholic school has been a place of socialization for both children (unsurprisingly) and parents. This is a conscious choice, which has been made possible thanks to a recommendation. Once again, the network is mobilized to be developed further.

These bourgeois residents of the city-centre are not the only ones who have a large and active sociability network. What distinguishes their stories is the fact that they all share this experience of fast integration and strong relationships built and recall this aspect as a crucial element of their arrival and trajectory in their city. This aspect was even more striking as several interviewees from different social class or generation on the contrary talked about their difficulty to integrate when arriving in the city at first.

Now, how did their story help understand the mechanisms at work in the city centre, beyond this group ? I compared it with some residents of the city centre who do encounter problematic situations with their house or immediate environment.

The discourse of these residents about their situations expresses a feeling of abandonment, isolation or fear of loneliness, caused by disempowerment and lack of information. Not at any moment can we see them make use of a social network. Either they don't know anybody, or they do have friends but don't consider them as a possible resource.

As we mentioned above, these residents are socially diverse and belong to different generations. Some of them are young, or old and poor, some moved after a divorce. Behind the capacity to have a comfortable living environment is the capacity to make use of a

network. The residents who are the most affected by shrinkage in their living conditions are not just the poorest, but more precisely the most precarious, fragile or isolated.

Conclusion

This analysis builds on the literature on urban shrinkage, which advocates for smart shrinkage planning strategies aiming at improving the quality of life for local residents, rather than searching for exogenous regrowth (Popper and Popper, 2002). But improving quality of life for current residents also means working on social inclusion where it is lacking.

And the results also showed that declining city centres can attract a type of more fragile population of tenants, for example to compensate a certain isolation (elderly people), or else because it is a place where housing is affordable.

Thus, it appears that in this context of decline, ageing and impoverishment, historic city centres have a special role to play, and can offer opportunities for innovative planning strategies that would combine the spatial and social issues, especially by focusing on the quality of housing, and the access to it.

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 813803