

WHEN CITIES SHRINK: REDEFINING ROLES FOR CONSERVATION, DEVELOPMENT, AND INVESTMENT

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Abstract. Real estate development often threatens heritage resources. Yet the investment it brings often provides an engine for conservation. What happens when the problem is not too much but too little investment? When instead of growing, cities shrink? When instead of becoming more valuable, historic properties lose value to the point where, far from being redeveloped, they are abandoned? This is the case today in many parts of Europe and especially in the US, where historically important cities like Philadelphia, New Orleans, Detroit, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh are entering their sixth or seventh decade of shrinkage. What should – what can – historic preservation do in the face of demographic, economic, social, and political decline?

Given its severe impacts, urban shrinkage has prompted surprisingly little attention from US conservation professionals. But the outlines of an approach are clear. If heritage is an engine for development in growing economies, in shrinking economies we must reverse the equation: development must provide an engine for conservation. Instead of focusing on blocking or redirecting investment, conservation must encourage it. Yet it must be recognized that in the absence of a functioning real estate market or profit potential, private investment is not the answer. Rather, we must stimulate public investment and community development. And heritage professionals must look beyond buildings or even urban ensembles to the community as a living entity, one rooted in history and capable of regenerating itself in place. Here the ultimate aim of conservation must be to assure the community's survival, including both physical fabric and living heritage.

The modern practice of heritage conservation arose in the United States in response to the pressure of growth, as revulsion against the endless cycles of destruction and development prompted new historic preservation laws. That was in the 1960s. Yet even today, growth continues to dominate the global consciousness. The world's population is swelling, as are its cities. A skyscraper in Dubai reaches the unprecedented height of 830 meters. A billionaire in Mumbai builds the world's tallest and most expensive house.

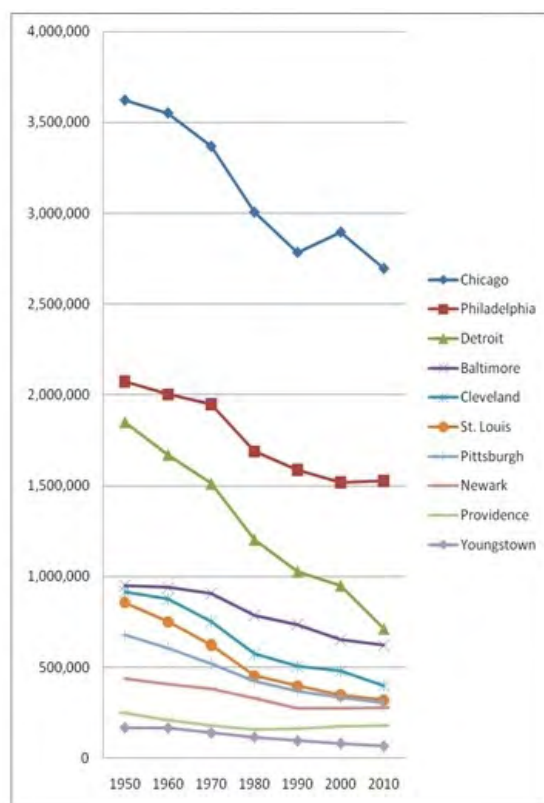
New oil fields are developed, new pipelines built. The evidence of growth assails us from all sides. Perhaps for this reason, heritage professionals in the US have failed to recognize that many of our most historic cities are not growing but, on the contrary, are shrinking. Between 1950 and 2010, Detroit lost over 60 percent of its population. Cleveland has lost almost half its peak population, Baltimore 35 percent, Philadelphia more than one fourth. All of these cities, and many others, have been shrinking for decades – in some cases more than seventy years. All suffer from lack of investment, lack of jobs, lack of

economic activity, a surfeit of poverty, and a surfeit of vacant and abandoned buildings – the very opposite of growth (Table 1, Fig. 1).

Urban shrinkage is not limited to the US: Turin, Bremen, Sheffield, Belfast, Budapest, Bucharest, St. Etienne, and Riga are among the European cities that have also been shrinking. Though Latin American cities are not shrinking, their historic centers show many of the same symptoms, such as disinvestment, abandonment of property, physical decay, and poverty. We should set the North American city in this larger context. Yet urban shrinkage in the US is distinctive in at least three ways: the early onset and long continuation of the problem; the importance of suburban growth as a causal factor; and the extreme reluctance to employ public investment as a solution.

What I would like to do now is consider urban shrinkage as a heritage problem. This is a novel perspective, for while its contributions to crime, sickness, poverty, and the collapse of public services have been widely studied, its devastating impacts on heritage have not – even by heritage specialists. This

TABLE 1. Ten shrinking cities: population change 1950-2010.



(Author; figures from US Census and www.populstat.info)

silence is puzzling, for urban shrinkage is one of the most severe threats facing heritage in the US today. It attacks at least six distinct categories of heritage:

First, *residential architecture and neighborhoods* (Fig. 2). Individual buildings and indeed entire neighborhoods have been abandoned and ultimately destroyed by urban shrinkage, erasing entire chapters in the history of American architecture and settlement.

Second, historic centers or *downtowns*, dense concentrations of commercial, retail, and civic buildings, culminating in the distinctively North American phenomenon of the skyscraper. These too have been devastated by urban shrinkage.

Long streets lined with shops are another characteristic feature of American cities (Fig. 3). They used to function as anchors of community life but are now shuttered and derelict.

Civic and monumental architecture encompasses a community's most representative buildings, including town halls, libraries, religious buildings, and places of public assembly such as railway stations, banks, and theaters (Fig. 4). All of these fall victim to declining population and budgets.



Figure 1. In shrinking cities, declining population and growing poverty combine, leading to large inventories of vacant or abandoned property, as here in Philadelphia. (photo: author)



Figure 2. The streets in this residential neighborhood in Detroit were once solidly lined with houses. Today, little remains. (Satellite photo: Google Earth)



Figure 3. Population decline, rising poverty, and suburbanization have turned healthy local shopping streets (above: Bozeman, Montana) into shadows of themselves (below: Rock Springs, Wyoming). (Photos: author)



Figure 4. Schools are important community anchors yet often fall victim to shrinkage and restructuring, as here in Rock Springs, Wyoming. (Photo: author)

Industrial buildings were the primary source of wealth for all of these communities. Yet as industry moved to the suburbs and then gave way to a service economy, they have been left behind. While a few are rehabilitated as loft apartments, art studios, or high-end shopping, poverty and low demand doom most to abandonment and demolition (Fig. 5).

Sixth and finally, *intangible heritage*, which includes both the traditions that communities develop from inhabiting a place over time and the feelings of attachment and affection that link people to that place. Obviously as neighborhoods are depopulated and their physical fabric decimated, their intangible heritage vanishes as well (Fig. 6-7).

While it is helpful to catalog heritage assets in this way, we should not forget that the most important and the most threatened heritage asset is the urban community itself. If this disappears, the rescue of specific assets becomes at best a tactical victory, overshadowed by a crushing defeat. Faced with urban shrinkage, then, conservation strategy must aim to help urban communities maintain their living connections to history and place, which means strengthening their ability to propagate themselves as living communities.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that many community development agencies are in fact doing conservation work, even though they would reject the idea. So are housing, planning, and social service agencies, fire and police departments, and mayoral offices. They are all trying to sustain the city as a living organism. But their views of conservation are not always the same as ours, nor have their efforts been entirely successful. And so conservation professionals have both an obligation and an opportunity to get involved. I would like now to consider how they might do so, reviewing the most promising policies and programs and suggesting how these could be



Figure 5. Industrial buildings were early casualties of a declining urban manufacturing economy. Some have been recycled as arts organizations (top: North Bennington, Vermont) or loft apartments (middle: Seattle). But most have been demolished or, at best, face an uncertain future (bottom: Williamstown, Massachusetts). (Photos: author)



Figure 6. This unassuming building in Pittsburgh once held the Crawford Grill, a center of African American social and musical life. (Photo: author)

optimized to meet the challenges of urban shrinkage.

Our initial observations must be of a negative nature. First, policies based on regulatory protection are largely irrelevant: designed to shield particular buildings from development pressure, they are powerless against its absence. Simply put, no law can prevent an owner from abandoning a building. Second, policies designed to protect a few special buildings while ignoring the rest are also unhelpful, because they don't strengthen the living historical fabric in which these special buildings will be used and maintained. What are we left with? Three areas are promising: first, public subsidies or social investment; second, practices of collaboration; and third, programs for intangible heritage. I'll take up each one in turn.

Since the basic problem in shrinking cities is the collapse of demand and the consequent withdrawal of investment in buildings and infrastructure, conservation policy must aim to stimulate investment. This is the opposite of a growth-dominated environment, where the central challenge is to restrain investment. The difference is immediately visible in the contrast between over-building and abandonment (Fig. 8). Unfortunately, since normal market structures have collapsed in severely affected neighborhoods, we cannot turn to private business for investment: instead, we must look to the public and non-profit sectors. Thus we are talking specifically about subsidized, public, or social investment.

Social investment comes in two forms. First,

since the US political culture is so averse to direct social investment, it comes as tax reductions offered to developers in exchange for investing in socially beneficial projects. We have three tax credit programs which interact in complicated ways: one for rehabilitating historic buildings, another for building or rehabilitating affordable housing, and a third for projects located in certain low-income neighborhoods. These programs have encouraged rehabilitation of historic buildings yet have not greatly helped shrinking cities and neighborhoods: first because they are not targeted for use there; second because their stringent preservation requirements limit their adoption in those stressful economic conditions; and third because the subsidies are generally unavailable to homeowners and not-for-profit organizations.



Figure 7. Local traditions that give spaces social meaning and historical significance cannot survive in the absence of people (above, Washington Heights, New York; below, Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia). (Photos: author)





Figure 8. Whereas too much investment produces over-building (left: Manhattan, New York), too little leads to vacancy and abandonment of property (right: Philadelphia). (Photos: author)

Still, low income levels limit homeowners' ability to benefit from tax breaks based on investment. Fortunately, we have other forms of subsidy. Our second category of social investment includes direct grants and loans for rehabilitation, typically awarded by state or local agencies or not-for-profits. Although the small size of these awards – often as little as a few thousand dollars – seems trivial in the face of urban shrinkage, they can actually be quite effective. Covering the roof of an empty house will prevent its collapse and may thereby deter the neighbors from abandoning their homes. A new boiler may help a low-income homeowner stay in her home, thereby averting the depopulation of an entire block. In this way, small investments can pay large social dividends (Fig. 9). Clearly an enhanced program of direct subsidies is a necessary component in our conservation strategy: to be effective, help must be targeted to shrinking cities and prioritize basic maintenance over high-quality craftsmanship.

Our second policy area is practices of collaboration. We have got to work hand in hand with others who are trying to revitalize shrinking cities in their own ways. This is a truth that was once widely understood. For example, Pittsburgh's leading heritage group was founded in 1964 to revitalize affordable housing in deteriorated neighborhoods without displacing residents or triggering gentrification. Over time, however, the once-united fields of historic preservation and community development began to drift apart and then to develop along separate

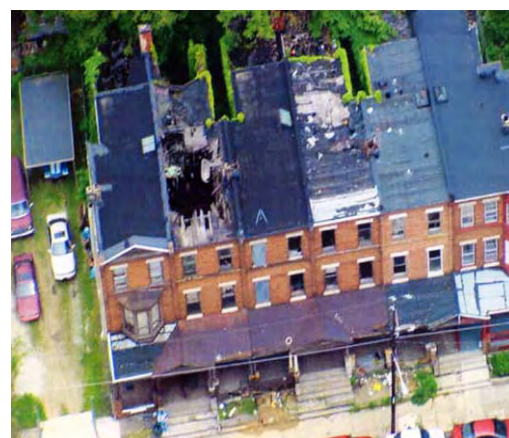


Figure 9. Replacing the roof on the rowhouse at left (Philadelphia, left) might prevent its collapse, forestalling further abandonment and deterioration. What would keep the low-income homeowner at right (Butte, Montana) from leaving? (Photos: National Trust for Historic Preservation, author).

trajectories. It is no longer possible to reunite them. But we can certainly collaborate.

In fact, our community development partners need our technical expertise. Their planning decisions are often informed by large quantities of data, yet one kind of data that is nearly always lacking is information on architectural and historical significance. It is not only community development agencies that lack this information. To a surprising extent, heritage groups also lack it. As of 2007, for example, only 4 percent of Philadelphia's buildings had ever been surveyed. Thus planners routinely decide the fate of neighborhoods in total ignorance of their architecture or history. Heritage groups can fix this problem by carrying out large-scale surveys and, collaborating with planners, by integrating the information into city data-bases and decision-making processes.

In addition to our expertise, our funding can be helpful to our community development partners, for even though the sums at stake may be small, we have seen that their leveraging power is disproportionately large. That leveraging power can be multiplied through collaboration – that is, by aligning our spending with community development priorities. Together, quite simply, we can achieve more.

The third promising area for conservation policy concerns intangible heritage. An urban community's living connections to history and place are its most valuable heritage resources. Where they are weak or threatened, as in shrinking neighborhoods,

conservation professionals must focus on strengthening them. There is nothing sentimental about this. Life in shrinking neighborhoods is difficult at best, and anything that supports residents' commitment to stay also helps conserve the neighborhood. Celebrating local history and traditions is a very efficient way to achieve this.

The techniques are well known. The most promising require working directly with residents, validating their own experience as a starting point for connecting with the community's history. The question is how to integrate heritage work into the larger community development effort. One approach, developed by community-based arts organizations, is to link heritage to cultural events such as theatrical productions, art projects, block parties, and local festivals. These do not sound like heritage programs, but by grounding them in a solid understanding of local history and tradition, conservation professionals can participate constructively. A second approach leads through social services. This was pioneered by community-based organizations like London's Centreprise, which combined local history initiatives such as oral history programs with basic services such as English classes, health care, immigration assistance, and daycare for its working-class and immigrant neighbors. More recently, a Chicago non-profit, Neighborhood Housing Services, launched a Historic Chicago Greystone Initiative, which is intended to build appreciation for the neighborhood's distinctive building stock and its unusual history as both a Jewish



Figure 10. Launched by a housing services organization, the Chicago Historic Greystone Initiative seeks to build appreciation for North Lawndale's handsome though deteriorated building stock, of a type known locally as greystones, and its illustrious past. (Photo: author)

and an African American neighborhood (Fig. 10). NHS continues to offer its regular menu of subsidized rental housing and low-interest mortgages to residents of the poor and severely shrunken North Lawndale neighborhood.

These three strategies – enhanced subsidies for investment, collaboration, and intangible heritage – form the core of a conservation policy for shrinking cities. All are aimed at arresting or even reversing deterioration. But in many cases, deterioration can't be arrested. Here, conservationists will find two additional strategies useful. The first is to move buildings. Though conservation dogma is strongly opposed to moving building, the shrinking city presents many circumstances in which it is probably the best available option. For example, where a once-thriving neighborhood has been reduced to a handful of surviving houses, those houses may well be doomed unless they are moved. If doing so can strengthen another neighborhood that still has hope, then relocation is probably the right decision.

Second, recordation. In shrinking neighborhoods, entire chapters of urban history can and do vanish without a trace. Information about what kinds of places they were, what they looked like, what local traditions they nurtured can quickly become unrecoverable. In this situation, conservation groups must become the guardians of the city's historical memory, using photography, drawings, interviews, and oral histories to create the necessary record for the future.

I've outlined five strategic initiatives that form the basis of a constructive heritage policy for shrinking cities. They are summarized in Table 2 below. Obviously none of these initiatives will reverse urban shrinkage. Yet a constructive heritage policy can save buildings, urban ensembles, and local customs. Most importantly, it can help threatened urban communities re-generate themselves, thereby preserving their living connections to history and place. Rather than being daunted by the challenges of urban shrinkage, conservation groups and professionals should become constructively involved, energetically applying the remedies at hand while working to develop new and better ones.

TABLE 2. A Conservation Policy for Shrinking Cities

① Enhance and target investment subsidies <i>including tax incentives and direct grants and loans.</i>
② Work collaboratively <i>with all who seek to revitalize shrinking cities.</i>
③ Promote intangible heritage <i>to strengthen sense of place and feelings of belonging.</i>
④ Move buildings <i>where it is constructive and feasible to do so.</i>
⑤ Create a record <i>of whatever cannot be saved.</i>