

## The bounds of smart decline: a foundational theory for planning shrinking cities

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Economic decline has led to a new wave of population decline throughout the US, meaning more and more cities are shrinking. Growing interest in using smart decline principles to respond to shrinkage has been met with controversy in cities such as Detroit and Cleveland. This paper advances a foundational theory of smart decline that takes as its starting point discussions of ethics, equity, and social justice in the planning and political theory literature, but is well grounded in observations of successful smart decline practice.

**Keywords:** abandoned property; land use/zoning; vacant land

### 1. Introduction

A quick perusal of any planning and development blog or even a major newspaper quickly demonstrates the increasingly fervent tenor of discussions surrounding the shrinking cities phenomenon. In the US, headline-grabbing “solutions” to urban decline range from the institutional to the physical, from the creation of publicly-owned land banks to administer abandoned properties to the proposed bulldozing of entire neighborhoods. Some work exists on how we might evaluate some of these proposed policies and actions – Fainstein’s (2010) work on the just city comes to mind – but few, if any, articles examine the process of planning in shrinking cities in particular. And many scholars in the shrinking cities milieu tend to focus on outcome over process – an important aim, but one that draws away attention from issues of representation, inclusion, and deliberation in planning and policy development.

This paper addresses these concerns by presenting a foundational theory of “smart decline” that holds at its core notions of equity and social justice. The criteria outlined provide a means for evaluation of planning processes with regard to these tenets. Although the principles we outline are also relevant to cities experiencing growth, we discuss how their application is particularly relevant in the context of planned or unplanned shrinkage.

A number of cities have shrunk in recent decades, with some experiencing tremendous population declines just since 2006, when the world economy began to

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slow. Shrinkage has affected cities internationally, with estimates showing that even before the downturn, 25 percent of all cities with more than 100,000 were in decline (Oswalt and Rienitz 2006). Researchers have shown heavy population declines in the cities of the former East Germany, in the United Kingdom, and France (Mace et al. 2004; Cunningham-Sabot and Fol 2007; Oswalt & Rienitz 2006; Wiechmann 2008).

In the US, the litany of shrinking cities is a veritable alphabet soup, as zip codes in cities such as Akron, Buffalo, Cleveland, and Detroit have succumbed to massive depopulation in recent years. According to the US Census, the City of Detroit lost 25 percent of its population from 2000 to 2010. But this trend is no longer confined to post-industrial Rust Belt cities; some of the most prominent population losses in this recent period can be found in Sun Belt locales that exploded in population in the 1990s and early 2000s, including cities such as Las Vegas, Atlanta, Modesto, and Phoenix. The numbers are striking: Hollander et al. (2010) examined Postal Service data to show that 20 percent of Sun Belt cities with more than 100,000 persons ( $n = 138$ ) experienced a net loss in housing units from 2006 to 2009. More than 80 percent of those cities contained at least one zip code that lost housing units during the same period. Among the most striking examples are Scottsdale, Arizona, which lost 1,575 housing units, St. Petersburg, Florida, which lost 3,122 units, and San Bernardino, California, with 876 units lost.<sup>1</sup>

The groundswell of popular media coverage of the shrinking city phenomenon began six months ago with a short article in *Time Magazine* “Detroit Tries to Get on a Road to Renewal” (Altman 2009). This was followed by a number of articles and opinion pieces in major newspapers, most surfacing within the past two to three months of this writing (July 2009). Many commentators writing on this issue provide a relatively balanced view of decline, while others tend to couch it as a major problem that must be overcome at all costs, especially in localities accustomed to recent growth. Nearly every major US daily has covered this issue, including the *New York Times* (“An Effort to Save Flint, Mich., by Shrinking It,” Streitfeld 2009) and the *Los Angeles Times* (“Empty Florida homes may return to nature,” Fausset 2009). But no headline caused more furor and debate than the (UK) *Daily Telegraph*’s article on June 12, 2009 entitled “US Cities May Have to be Bulldozed in order to Survive” (Leonard 2009). The provocative piece prompted significant debate and commentary in the US press (see Glaeser 2009), even meriting a spirited *Morning Edition* discussion on National Public Radio in July 2009.

At the same time, a number of broad-based coalitions and research centers, such as the Shrinking Cities International Research Network (<http://www.shrinkingcities.org>) and the National Vacant Properties Campaign (<http://www.vacantproperties.org>) and the \$3 million German government-sponsored Shrinking Cities research project ([www.shrinkingcities.com](http://www.shrinkingcities.com)) have tried to temper the rhetoric by providing more empirically-backed research and, sometimes, solutions to these perceived ills. Recently, the popular planning and development blog Planetizen ([www.planetizen.com](http://www.planetizen.com)) asked its readers – many of them professional planners – for suggestions on

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<sup>1</sup>While there are differences between a city losing population and housing units over three years and the kind of prolonged population and economic loss experienced by cities such as Detroit, Manchester, and Leipzig over decades, the basic physical processes and policy responses have much in common.

cities that might “shrink gracefully.” Several dozen solutions were offered, debated, and even voted on during the several days the feedback forum was posted.

In addition, popular articles with titles such as “Demolition a Wrong Answer For Imperiled Neighborhoods” (Gratz 2009) and “Bulldozing Our Cities May Wreck Our Future” (Rodriguez 2009) acknowledge the need for less drastic, longer-term proposals. Nonetheless, the visibility and notoriety of the more extreme solutions far outweigh the less radical propositions. This is not surprising given the need for popular media to attract readers or viewers by whatever means necessary.

This paper tempers this fervor by advancing a foundational theory of smart decline that takes as its starting point discussions of ethics, equity, and social justice in the planning and political theory literature, but is well-grounded in observations of successful smart decline practice. Each day, proposals for addressing this crisis are debated in public meetings, town hall discussions, and council hearings. By providing a means to judge and evaluate the merits of potential solutions to decline, this theory aims to guide the burgeoning cadre of professional planners, policy makers, urbanists, students, and academics attempting to address urban decline in a more thoughtful and broad-based manner.

It is important to note, however, that this theory of smart decline provides very little guidance – if any at all – as to the proper physical, outcome-based solutions to a locality’s decline. Economic, historical, and political circumstances differ from context to context, and any theory claiming to provide specific proposals will inevitably fall short. Accordingly, our theory offers a set of broad criteria for judging the functioning of the planning process itself, while also touching on issues of scale, power, and agency. As such, it is rooted in more expansive notions of procedural justice, political representation and participatory planning, all central concerns in much of the recent literature on cities and social justice.

Before we sketch this theory, we provide the reader with some clarity on these urban phenomena by first outlining some basic definitions of urban decline and shrinking cities. Next, we provide a summary of meta-narratives on planning theory and depopulation as well as a discussion of some popular approaches to smart decline. We argue that many, although not all, contemporary smart decline planning applications in the US espouse solutions that are: top-down in nature, assume a blank slate at project locations, and require a quieted public. Critical of these trends, we outline the principal tenets of our more bottom-up theory, then discuss the role planners might play in facilitating this shift in smart decline thinking. Finally, we address some of our own concerns with the theory and outline future research directions.

## **2. Defining shrinkage**

Decline in the urban planning literature has often referred to population loss, employment loss, or decrease in neighborhood quality (Bradbury et al. 1982; Berg et al. 1982; Clark 1989; Rusk 1995). Beauregard (2009) further unpacked population loss in his examination of historical patterns of shrinking cities to include four qualities: prevalence, severity, persistence, and geographical incidence. Rust (1975) detailed the high correlations between population and employment loss in his study of two dozen US cities over the last 200 years. Some scholars have looked at counts of abandoned buildings (Accordino and Johnson 2000; Bowman and Pagano 2004) as a proxy for neighborhood quality.

The emergence of a cohort of academics with fresh concerns about how to measure and plan for decline led to the formation of the Shrinking Cities International Research Network (SCIRN). SCIRN defines a shrinking city as a densely populated urban area with a minimum population of 10,000 residents that has faced population losses in large parts for more than two years and is undergoing economic transformations with some symptoms of a structural crisis (Wiechmann 2008; Hollander, et al. 2009). For many of the leaders in the field, two years may seem to be short, particularly when looking at how three and four decades of depopulation have tended to wreck havoc on cities. But we will adopt this same definition in this paper for the purposes of focusing less on the severity or degree of depopulation, but rather on how planning ought to respond to any level of depopulation.

### **3. Planning theory and depopulation**

There is no single explanation as to why a place depopulates. Depopulation has been blamed on forces including natural disasters (Vale and Campanella 2005), deindustrialization (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; McDonald 2008), suburbanization (Jackson 1985; Clark 1989), globalization (Sassen 1991; Hall 1997) and of course the natural economic cycle of boom and bust (Rust 1975). Beauregard's (2009) analysis of shrinking US cities from 1820 to 2000 argued against such wholesale claims, concluding instead that causes of population decline vary from one historical period to another.

Understanding the theoretical and conceptual explanations for decline is important, but not the focus of this paper. Instead, we explore the theoretical frames available in evaluating smart decline practice. To understand those frames, we must first explicate two distinct bodies of thought on why neighborhoods depopulate: neighborhood life cycle theory and alternative neighborhood change theory.

By viewing neighborhood change in terms of a life cycle, the first theory posits that places grow and die in a way analogous to the human body: "the constant cycle of birth, life, and death is inevitable in both ..." (US Federal Home Loan Bank Board 1940, 3). Hoover and Vernon (1962) described five stages in a neighborhood's life cycle: new development, transition, downgrading, thinning-out, and renewal. The Real Estate Research Corporation (1975) outlined five similar steps along a continuum: healthy, incipient decline, clearly declining, accelerating decline, and abandoned.

Neighborhood life-cycle theory was developed in order to better understand and rationalize the declining city. Many writing on the topic set out to identify planning and policy interventions that might either arrest or reverse this "natural" process (Bradbury et al. 1982). The stated goal of policy makers was to help revitalize devastated places while preventing future deterioration of existing stable neighborhoods. Neighborhood life cycle theory has been tremendously influential in US urban policy and planning, but has been subject to insightful critique (see Metzger 2000).

Believing that such policies can arrest the slow death of neighborhoods, Blakely (1994) and others in the economic development tradition draw on neighborhood life-cycle theory in advocating public intervention through monetary investments in vacant land. Described as redevelopment or revitalization, this approach is often

top-down in nature and uses forced relocation via eminent domain to achieve its objectives. A notorious example of this approach is the Boston Redevelopment Authority's urban renewal program in the West End of Boston (Gans 1962; Teaford 2000). More recently, the City of New London's Supreme Court victory allowed it to move forward with the condemnation of 64 privately-owned homes in order to allow the expansion of a large corporation (Langdon 2005; Salzman and Mansnerus 2005). The *Kelo v. City of New London*, 125 S. Ct. 2655 (2005) case generated a groundswell of popular sentiment against eminent domain for the purposes of economic development and provoked a rash of new state laws and public protests against government taking of private property for economic development (Egan 2005).

The dominant interpretation of neighborhood life-cycle theory is that public investment is needed to stop an out-of-control process. This view of neighborhood change fails to account for a scenario where a city loses population but does so without suffering the expected accompanying blight. Rather than look for ways to manage population loss so that blight does not occur, the theory only allows for the neighborhood to be seen as growing or declining, alive or dead (Hollander et al. 2009).

According to Metzger (2000, 7), the future of a city depends not on its stage in a "natural" life-cycle, "but on whether residents had access to financial resources within an environment of community control". Metzger draws on a body of critical theory that rejects the modernist notions of advance and retreat, of growth and decline. Beauregard (2003) also explores this dialectic in examining the discourse of urban decline. He finds that urban decline was incorporated into a socially constructed story of the rise of suburbia and fall of the city – a fictional account reified into the public consciousness through oral and written communication.

Critics such as Dear and Flusty (1998) advance a postmodern notion of neighborhood change that escapes this grand narrative and allows the details of each city, each neighborhood, and each block to speak for itself. Mitchell (2002) also contributes to this alternative theory in his account of planning in Egypt. He shows how the "informal, clandestine, and unreported" activities of society determined planning outcomes, not the "fabricated" script developed by Western colonizers. An understanding of urban decline as a disaggregated, finely complex phenomenon is possible under this alternative theoretical framework. This alternative theory of neighborhood change allows planners to be cognizant of urban problems, but to avoid the inevitability embedded in the discourse of urban decline. Such an unshackling from the structures of urban decline opens up the possibility for the planner to work towards proactively managing depopulation.

A planner or policy analyst drawing on this alternative theoretical framework may attempt creative intervention as described above, or may avoid action altogether. Hoch (1996) suggests that a consequence to postmodern planning practice is that a sense of hopelessness may infect the planner because all interventions are somehow intertwined with the forces of power. The planner who embraces alternative neighborhood change theories may be reluctant in labeling her city as "in decline," or might be timid about her own ability to manipulate power relations in an affected neighborhood.

Indeed, we can attribute much of the success of community development professionals in general, and community development corporations (CDCs) in

particular, to their grounding in this alternative neighborhood change theory. For decades, CDCs and grassroots organizations have fought for a higher quality of life for residents of some of the poorest neighborhoods in America. For the most part, CDCs reject conventional views of neighborhood death and dying and instead promote new building and growth, often through the construction of new affordable housing. New movements are underfoot, however, that recognize a certain inevitability of decline but plan for these demographic and socioeconomic shifts in proactive ways.

#### **4. Defining smart decline**

Popper and Popper (2002, 23) define smart decline as “planning for less—fewer people, fewer buildings, fewer land uses.” Community leaders in Youngstown, Ohio (which has lost half of its population since 1950) adopted this smart decline approach with a new Master Plan to address its remaining population of 74,000 (US Census 2008). In the Plan, the city came to terms with its past population loss and called for a “better, smaller Youngstown” focusing on improving the quality of life for existing residents rather than attempting to grow the city (Youngstown, City of 2005; Hollander 2009). *The New York Times Magazine* recognized the city’s Plan as one of the most creative ideas in 2006.

The clearest practical example of smart decline is their proposal to establish a Buffalo Commons in severely shrinking parts of the Great Plains (Matthews 1992). The Poppers’ (1987) research found that the preservation of a large portion of the Great Plains as “somewhere between traditional agriculture and pure wilderness” offered “ecologically and economically restorative possibilities” (Popper and Popper 2004, 4). Vergara (1995) proposes an American Acropolis in downtown Detroit to preserve the scores of abandoned skyscrapers. He sees cultural benefit in establishing a park at the site to attract visitors to walk the crumbling streets. In addition, Clark (1989, 143) encourages preservation of declining areas as vacant, arguing that these areas can be greened for “parkland and recreational spaces.”

In the last few decades, mass migration from the former East Germany to West Germany following the fall of the Berlin Wall has left cities and towns emptied. The German Federal Cultural Council responded in 2004 by funding an arts-grounded Shrinking Cities Project (Oswalt 2006). The Project included an international competition that generated scores of ideas on how to make smart decline happen, in the process defining the scope of the problem and outlining the boundaries of policy and planning responses while initiating a sketch of what smart decline looks like. In one response to the competition, Hollander and Popper (2007) devised a method for projecting where decline will occur – so-called “decline nodes” – and recommended a community-based planning process to identify successor land uses to the projected abandoned homes and vacant lots. Following on the energy generated by the conference, Schilling and Logan (2008) highlighted the potential of a green infrastructure framework as a strategy for managing land use change in shrinking cities. Lastly, the Shrinking Cities in a Global Perspective Program at the University of California Berkeley studies the effects of population decline on cities throughout the globe and builds on this work to further advance description of what smart decline can be (Pallagst et al. 2008).

Nonetheless, despite some examples to the contrary (see especially Oswalt 2006 and Hollander et al. 2009), many of these smart decline practices suffer from three

serious flaws: a top-down orientation, the assumption of a blank slate at project locations, and the requirement of a quieted public. This typology provides a basis for evaluating the work of smart decline against the foundational theories of planning and public policy.

#### **4.1. Top-down smart decline**

Smart decline is hardly a new idea. For at least 80 years, officials have implemented various policies with mixed success. Below, we present several examples of smart decline processes: what these all have in common is that they were devised and implemented in a top-down<sup>2</sup> manner, with little regard for the advances in bottom-up planning and policy approaches so widely accepted today.

In the United Kingdom before the outbreak of World War II, federal officials devised a strategy for shutting down mining towns in the countryside where mines had closed (Pattison 2004). Following the basic premise of smart decline, the UK government saw widespread unemployment and declining population levels in a geographically concentrated area and reduced the number of homes, streets, and other infrastructure to meet that lower employment supply. Their top-down approach led to a major pushback from activists and residents, halting the program after only just a single village was dismantled.

A similar program was developed by officials in New York City in the 1960s under the banner of triage planning and planned shrinkage. Facing fiscal disaster due to declining tax revenues associated with population loss, New York City Housing Commissioner, Roger Starr, led an effort to remove housing for the poorest residents and invest in the city's most economically viable areas (Sites 2003). Starr was ultimately removed from his position due to the political uproar his policies generated, but his ideas persisted: when the City of New York faced its worst fiscal crisis ever in the 1970s, planned shrinkage once again gained favor among the policy elite. Wallace and Wallace (1998) document in fastidious detail how the City of New York, working with the RAND Corporation, orchestrated the closing of dozens of fire stations in parts of the city experiencing the highest depopulation levels. Their research demonstrates a strong causal link between those closures and the rampant arson and public health emergency that followed. The closure of fire stations in impoverished neighborhoods is indicative of the weakness of applying smart decline from the top down.

The contemporary application of smart decline in US cities suggests the potential for a repetition of past top-down planning. While Youngstown's innovative Master Plan employed a bottom-up planning process, the implementation of the Plan so far is very much the opposite (Schatz 2010). In fact, Hollander's (2009) research on the Youngstown experiment shows that neighborhood district boundaries were drawn for the express purpose of limiting citizen participation in smart decline strategies: some districts were created that were known to have few residents so that city officials could fully control land use decisions. While current public outreach efforts are stepping back from such a top-down posture, Youngstown Mayor Jay Williams

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<sup>2</sup>Here we define "top-down" as any policies or plans that originate and are implemented from political and administrative leadership within a city government. This approach is in contrast to "bottom-up" policies that come from grassroots organizations or neighborhood groups with implementation duties shared across governmental and non-governmental organizations.

set the tone early by boasting publicly about plans to pay residents to leave depopulating neighborhoods – even hinting at the potential use of the City’s eminent domain powers (Schatz 2010).

#### **4.2. *Assumption of blank slate***

The German Shrinking Cities Project (2008) published a book *Interventions*, which broke smart decline practice into four categories: deconstruction, re-evaluating, reorganizing, and imagining. Throughout the book, these terms are used to presume a blank slate at each location: a place can ostensibly be deconstructed, re-evaluated, reorganized, or imagined without reverence for history, culture, or ecology. In response, most postmodern planning theory – including feminist and collaborative approaches – present alternatives to this blank slate assumption. Much of this literature critiques Habermasian theories of communicative rationality that assume an “ideal speech situation,” instead arguing that planning processes must recognize the inherent imbalance of power between community members and the powers that be that control decision-making avenues.

#### **4.3. *Quieted public***

Related to the top-down planning heading above, many smart decline processes to date require a docile or disengaged public, happy for any crumbs city leaders or outside experts might bring to a desperate community. The Youngstown 2010 planning process began with the idea that city residents were waiting for something to happen, eager to be told what would become of their shrinking city (Schatz 2010; Hollander 2009). Because of such passivity, outside planning consultants along with the city’s director of community development, Jay Williams<sup>3</sup> were able to develop a comprehensive vision for what a smaller Youngstown could look like. The lack of community activism or resistance is well documented in Safford’s (2009) recent book *Why the Garden Club Couldn’t Save Youngstown: The Transformation of the Rust Belt* and serves as a principle explanation for why smart decline is happening in the city.

Still, the purpose of this paper is not to provide an assessment of recent attempts at smart decline planning. This would require extensive knowledge of each locality’s history, an understanding of its political and economic engines, awareness of existing power structures, and extensive familiarity with norms, values and cultures of its community members. So we are less concerned with outcomes than with process, or how a city, town or municipality decides what solution is appropriate for itself. Still, though, we find a lack of theoretically-grounded guidance when it comes to assessing the merits of the planning process, especially as it relates to this fast-moving subfield of smart decline. This is a serious flaw in this recent discourse, as much of the discussion surrounding the shrinking cities phenomenon is eerily reminiscent of Urban Renewal-era policies of “creative destruction” (Schumpeter 1975 [1942]). For the remainder of the paper, we provide a foundational framework that reconnects action to theory and enables planners, policy makers and community members to assess their own attempts at smart decline – considering the weaknesses of top-down, blank slate, and quieted public elements that are frequently built into smart decline practices.

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<sup>3</sup>Mr. Williams later became mayor of Youngstown.

## 5. Social justice and smart decline

Responding to the various criticisms posited above, we offer a theory of smart decline rooted in a social justice framework. It is important for us to put forth a theoretical framework that is both unifying and universal, but also adaptable to various contexts and circumstances. For this, our starting point is the work of both David Harvey (1973, 1996) and Iris Marion Young (1990, 2000), a geographer and political scientist whose normative work on social, spatial, and procedural justice is explicitly intent on developing a framework for defining and interpreting the ‘justness’ of planning actions. Some – most postmodernists included – might argue that no unified discourse is possible, that no higher-order arguments are worth pursuing, and that there is no way to universalize criteria for judging the success of a venture. These same critics might also contend that universal claims to rationality – to “one right answer” – were deconstructed decades ago in the humanizing civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. There is significant merit to these arguments, but they are also deeply disconcerting to those in search of transformative practice (see Sandercock 1998). As David Harvey (2003 [1992], 107) offers: “If we accept that fragmented discourses are the only authentic discourses and that no unified discourse is possible, then there is no way to challenge the overall qualities of a social system”.

But what discourse – what frame – could possibly liberate the argument from the traps of formless relativism and deconstructionism indicative of postmodern social theory? Here, Harvey (2003 [1992]) turns to Marx and Engels for his position:

The stick used to measure what is right and what is not is the most abstract expression of right itself, namely justice ... nothing more than a striving to bring human conditions, so far as they are expressed in legal terms, ever closer to the ideal of justice, eternal justice. (Marx and Engels 1951, 562)

We maintain that justice is at the core of planning ethics discussion, as it is “the first virtue of social institutions” (Rawls 1971, 586). We argue, however, that any such overarching theory depends on the availability of a coherent and concise set of principles that can guide practice. Our discussion provides some basic principles that should be met in any just process.

Still, a number of definitions of social justice exist, from the utilitarian, relativist, egalitarian or social contract views of justice, each differing from place to place and society to society. Therefore, we use as our starting point David Harvey’s (1973, 97) simple assertion that social justice describes a “just distribution, justly arrived at.” In this statement, Harvey is critical of John Rawls (1971) and his focus on simple distributive justice; instead, he posits a model that also accounts for justice of process, or procedural justice.

Responding to or assessing the level of justice distributed to a population is extremely difficult due to aforementioned concerns about knowing a locality’s history and understanding its economic realities. In addition, as McConnell (1995) argues, the assumption that a just distribution can be arrived at via bottom-up process is flawed. When trying to assess how principles of distributive justice might be met, questions would likely include how need should be specified and what types of mechanisms would justly allocate shared resources. The answers to these questions traditionally depend on the political views and values of the decision makers charged with determining whether (and how) proposals are implemented

(McConnell 1995, 44). Put another way, while distributive justice proponents argue for “the greatest benefit for the least advantaged” (Rawls 1985, 224), a goal we find laudable and necessary, the decision of who gets what and who qualifies as the “least advantaged” is left to the powers that be.

The distributive paradigm also makes some problematic assumptions as it focuses solely on possession and does not consider what people actually do, what rules govern their actions, and how people are positioned in society. As such, distributive justice theories concern themselves more with allocation and less with essential issues of domination, oppression, power, language, inclusion, and representation. Young (1990) argues that such assertions are situated outside of specific social contexts and assume a homogeneous, undifferentiated public that shares the same desires and needs. She further claims that any conception of social justice must attend to both the just distribution of resources and a framework that allows full, effective participation in decision-making (Young 1990, 35; see Mitchell 2003, 31). Mitchell (2003), Young, and Harvey all argue for decentralized, bottom-up control over the means of distribution. Individuals or groups must be able to determine their own actions and the conditions for these actions in order to combat structures of oppression and domination. Indeed, Mitchell argues, this is a fundamental right that must be protected, the right of “groups and individuals to make their desires and needs known, to represent themselves to others and to the state . . . as legitimate claimants to public consideration” (Mitchell 2003, 32–33). This right of representation and inclusion in the public forum provides the core of our model of bottom-up planning for smart decline.

We now sketch the five fundamental propositions of our foundational theory, each rooted in a conception of procedural justice and each addressing the weaknesses of smart decline practice today. Below each proposition we also provide some actions planners can take in making these a reality. It is important to note that these propositions are neither novel nor innovative on their own, but their packaging and their application to smart decline planning serves to remind us of the potential these tenets have for guiding future practice. The planning theory and smart decline literature help us understand that just processes in shrinking places demand a uniquely tailored set of propositions.

*(1) Smart decline planning processes must include and explicitly recognize multiple voices*

As stated above, a central goal of a just planning process must be the inclusion of multiple parties and multiple voices, removing the barriers that effectively quiet the public. It is especially important to initiate and nurture processes that are broad-based and inclusive because each community and each individual can impart certain meanings and values on what should occur in a locality. Every account of what is good or appropriate is a personalized account, since “justice is relative to social meanings” (Walzer 1983, 312). In this regard, social justice necessarily involves producing “the institutional conditions for promoting self-development and self-determination of a society’s members” (Young 2000, 33).

Harper and Stein (1996, 425) argue that it is important not only to search for some consensus in just planning processes but also to recognize different voices and claims for presence. They offer a number of reasons why processes must be broadly inclusive, namely that any attempt at progress requires a rich critique of past actions,

that all persons have a right to be heard, and that active participation increases the chance for disparate individuals to find that a “common good” does indeed exist (Harper and Stein 1996, 425). In this reading, it is the planner’s job to raise consciousness of competing views among groups maintaining divergent opinions on what actions should be taken (or not). At the same time, the planner must be utterly realistic about expectations for consensus or compromise lest they mislead and frustrate stakeholders (Healey 1996, 266).

Recognizing that divergent viewpoints often hold at their core similar truths or aims, some theorists argue that radical or insurgent planners should help like-minded groups form coalitions around higher-order, often progressive, causes (Friedmann 1987; Sandercock 1998). Harvey (2003 [1992], 104) finds fault with this coalition-building exercise, instead arguing that “to hold the divergent politics of need and desire together with some coherent frame may be a laudable aim, but in practice far too many of the interests are mutually exclusive to allow their mutual accommodation.” We agree that coalitions of progressive causes can be important in struggling against the status quo, but maintain that voices from all sides need to be heard, and disagreement and deliberation must occur before any consensus or coherence is formed. Fernandez Agueda (2009) lends further credibility to this proposition by providing evidence that shrinking cities are more likely to “rebound” – not necessarily grow – if they diversify industries, economies and actions. Multiple voices allow for multiple policies and proposals to be struggled over and acted upon.

## (2) *Smart decline planning processes should be political and deliberative in nature*

Here we follow theoretical assertions by Mouffe (1996), who claims that the struggle over personal rights and limited resources is constantly redefined through deliberation over value-laden claims of diverse groups. This model, which Benhabib (1996, 9) calls the “agonistic model of democratic politics,” is necessarily oppositional, as it involves the “the incessant contestation over ethical and cultural questions.” But some, including Wolin (1996, 31), contend that this is precisely what we mean by a “deeply democratic” politics, or a politics that celebrates “the legitimized and public contestation, primarily by organized and unequal social powers, over access to resources available to the public authorities of the collectivity.”

So where the smart decline practices of today are often top-down, we call for a bottom-up, deliberative style of smart decline. Young (2000) argues that while we recognize that participants are differently positioned in society, a just process is one in which “differentiated social groups must attend to their particular situation *of others* and be willing to work out just solutions to their conflicts and collective problems from across their situated positions” (Young 2000, 7, emphasis added). Broad-based inclusion is vital, and planners must facilitate discussion and debate about what the state “ought to do:” ethics, values, and passions are thus brought to the fore (Young 2000, 177). Still, there can be no presupposition of effective communication within and among groups; instead planners must help varying groups empathize with the plight and conceptual frameworks of others. Therefore, the ultimate barometer of a socially just process is the simple recognition and appreciation of other people’s claims, or an acknowledgement of difference. Therefore, planners involved in smart decline processes must recognize the important fact that groups can dwell together in cities without forming a normative

public, or a “community” of like-minded individuals (Young 1990, 227; see Staeheli and Mitchell 2008).

*(3) Smart decline planners should be cognizant of differential communication techniques and should provide information that enables citizens to recognize and challenge power imbalances and structures of domination*

The ability for groups – especially traditionally marginalized groups – to express political power, to engage in self-expression, and to simply “be heard” are fundamental rights often overlooked in traditional planning processes (see Harvey 2003 [1992]). Planners should aim to create processes in which participants recognize each other as vital participants in deciding future action (Young 2000, 61). But as these individuals and groups are differently positioned within society, planners must explicitly recognize structures of domination and oppression as well as any extant imbalances of power. In this sense, planners can no longer be value-neutral: they must be committed to the “possibility of a non-oppressive society” (Friedmann 1987, 306). Planning and development activities are shaped by both relations and distributions of power, and these relations must be explicitly revealed (Healey 1996, 266). But while planners should strive to expose uneven power relations, they must be careful not to speak *on behalf* of any particular individual or group, lest they disempower them by robbing them of their voice. Still, “the temptation always stands, for even the most politicized of us, to speak for others without listening to them” (Harvey 2003 [1992], 112).

Planners must ensure that stakeholders are aware of power differences and should attend to the dynamics of rhetoric that can influence the manner in which face-to-face communication takes place, reducing the quieting effect present in smart decline practice today. Specifically, planners should aim to expose the ways in which rhetorical devices are employed to foster or deter inclusion in the planning process (Young 2000, 70). At its core, planning is an exercise that asks what life can be. It raises the hopes of a better life for many. Therefore, as Forester (1996, 256) argues, planners must attend not only to process, not only to products, but also to a good amount of passion.

Fundamental to any comprehensive planning for smart decline is the recognition of the political and economic factors and forces shaping growth, shrinkage and the potential for just processes. In particular, a planner must provide relevant information that allows citizens to better understand, recognize, and potentially challenge structures of domination. Among other things, this information should describe: the fiscal rationale for redevelopment, especially as the federal government, banks and redevelopment agencies are often the primary drivers for housing clearance and renovation; the mandates of the infrastructure sector, including agencies dedicated to utilities, energy and service delivery; and the exigencies of the housing market, along with an understanding of its principal actors and historical trends.

*(4) Smart decline planning processes must be transparent and value different types and sources of information*

Good science must be freely available to all participants, and different types of information must be considered equally relevant. Data sourced from experts and

professionals – including demographic models, decline node predictions, land use patterns or zoning overlays – should not be automatically prioritized over data derived from community members’ experiences, perceptions and observations made on the ground (Sandercock 1998). Put another way, planners should value equally multiple styles of communication, including both official data projections and impassioned narratives from engaged community members (Young 2000, 71). In this sense, they must be active mediators between the “clashing rhetorics” of participants in the planning process (Howe 1995, 138).

A number of participatory visualization and mapping devices exist in the planner’s toolbox to ensure more bottom-up community participation. These tools can uncover less official or measurable sets of information, and as these observations are inherently differentiated from individual to individual, they can produce alternative, and often competing, sets of knowledge about the same space, place or project. Such methods utilize all community members as sources of relevant information, recognizing alternative, subjective, perceptual and indigenous knowledge and visions as acceptable data forms (Dunn 2007). These participatory methods can also encourage communities to question the assumptions inherent in any official model presented by decision makers, acknowledging instead that any such “reality” is still socially constructed (Lejano 2008). This commitment further challenges the viability of planning processes aimed at forging consensus at the expense of active, discursive, deliberative processes. Instead, more bottom-up methods serve to legitimize knowledge from the community or other non-expert participants (Dunn 2007).

*(5) Smart decline planning processes should be regional in scope, but local in control and implementation*

The question then arises as to where to draw the geographical bounds of the smart decline process. While we acknowledge that the scope of justice must be global, we argue that the broader planning process should be regional in scope and local in implementation – to block the kind of blank slate thinking that currently dominates smart decline (see Frug 1999). We follow Young’s definition of a region as a place where 50 percent or more of residents live in the population center, where residents experience similar climatic/topographical conditions throughout the area, and where nearly all of those in the labor market both live and work in the region (Young 2000, 232).

Our rationale for taking the region as bounds for the process is that regional plans have the ability to focus on major smart decline (and growth) issues about which disparate groups can debate, deliberate, agree and disagree, such as transportation plans, infrastructure development, environmental protection, heritage and historical preservation, and proposed regional economic drivers (see Fernandez Agueda 2009). These interventions can serve to connect populations and activity centers, bringing people together around fundamental improvements. Regional planning processes can serve to expose political-economic conditions operating outside of a locality’s borders, while coordinating future actions taken in the region as a whole. However, the regional plan must not dictate what is to be done in each locality comprising the region, and it must leave localities in control of the built environment and the construction (or destruction) of actual places, spaces and structures. This is an especially critical point in smart decline planning in the US,

because there the region often has no legislative authority or decision-making capacity. Rather, the city, town or municipality most often holds these powers (Fernandez Agueda 2009).

This briefly sketched model of governance “requires that local governments take the interests of others in the region into account, especially where they are affected by the actions and policies of that locale” (Young 2000, 233). The regional plan can set a framework and protocol for inter-local negotiation and conflict resolution that can “trickle down” to local planning activities. Indeed, since communities of difference cluster locally, local governments must remain autonomous in the sense that “their citizens, through their political institutions, have the right to decide the form and policies of social services” (Young 2000, 233).

### **5.1. *Justice in practice?***

Whereas a number of groups are dedicated to revitalization in shrinking cities, few recognize explicitly the importance of just planning processes. Our general criteria can be used to determine levels of procedural justice in any planning intervention, although we stop short of enumerating specific policies conducive to social justice in a particular place and time. We leave our criteria general and context-dependent since measuring justice of *process* is, perhaps, more elusive than an assessment of just outcomes. A burgeoning urban literature, most strongly represented by recent work from Purcell (2008), Soja (2010) and Fainstein (2010), revisits and reinterprets foundational philosophies of justice to present more concrete rubrics for understanding justice as manifest in urban space. In particular, Fainstein identifies a list of specific criteria that must be embraced by any planner or elected official dedicated to attaining just outcomes. Although none of these focuses specifically on the context of shrinking cities – indeed, nearly all focus on world-class global cities like Amsterdam, London, Los Angeles, and New York City – all are useful attempts to understand how justice plays out “on the ground,” in the trenches, in the messy everyday world of planning and politics.

So can we point to a planning or development process wherein a commitment to just, bottom-up process influenced strategic decision making? London’s Coin Street development immediately comes to mind: although the centrally located project occurred in a (now) high-profile location on the edge of the City of London, the lessons learned with regard to process are relevant in shrinking contexts, especially since the successful redevelopment occurred on land that had sat vacant for decades.<sup>4</sup>

In this case, two mixed-use development proposals were presented for this site in 1980, one by a major developer and the other a community-based scheme to be developed by the non-profit Coin Street Community Builders (CSCB). An effective local grassroots campaign resulted in the selection of the latter scheme, and once CSCB was selected as the developer it immediately bequeathed the land to the Society for Co-operative Dwellings, which eventually served as housing developer for the project. This move ensured that all units slated to be “affordable” would remain so. In addition, the CSCB redeveloped a nearby landmark for use as local craft workshops and a restaurant, and stipulated that all proceeds would be

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<sup>4</sup>Details of this case are widely available but are drawn principally from Fainstein (2010) and Brindley et al. (1996).

reinvested in future CSCB endeavors (Fainstein 2010). CSCB also redeveloped the wharf area adjacent to the Coin Street housing; this area now hosts independent local merchants, frequent community festivals, a neighborhood-serving community center, and similar community-driven amenities.

Most attribute the success of Coin Street to the commitment of CSCB to a bottom-up, inclusive, participatory process and the cycling of benefits back to the neighborhood associations involved since the outset. Fainstein (2010) agrees, but with a caveat: while the planning process initially resulted in “the reinforcement of democracy, diversity, and equity,” the resulting popularity of the area 25 years later has served to increase gentrification pressures and attendant commitments to design and consumption over social equity and redistributive priorities (Fainstein 2010, 128). This example reflects both the tradeoffs inherent in development strategy and the importance of recognizing the spatiotemporal contexts in which these strategies are deployed.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper sought to draw connections between the rich literature on social justice and planning with the emerging area of smart decline practice. By setting out the bounds of a theory of smart decline we argue that new opportunities and challenges arise for both the theoretician and the practitioner.

As Beauregard (2009) pointed out, decline is just one stage in a cycle of boom and bust that has characterized US cities for at least 200 years, and represents an opportunity to reflect on community change patterns. While a time of growth is busy with new development and the associated fights that accompany it, citizen groups and non-profits can use the period of decline to focus on long-term goals for improving quality of life in their communities.

But depopulation has traditionally been a great challenge for planners and for achieving any degree of social justice. During times of growth and vitality, the poor and politically marginalized need to fight for their seat at the table and attempt to pick up the crumbs of capital that fall to them. During times of decline and disinvestment, there is often not a table at all and certainly few crumbs. When jobs are scarce and city services meager, the poorest segment of a community often need to struggle to meet their very basic needs and are less likely to be able to focus on urban planning processes.

The propositions presented here provide a foundation for making a real difference on the ground in places like Youngstown, Baltimore, or even Las Vegas. Through socially just processes, grounded in principles of fairness and equity, planning for shrinkage will likely result in just outcomes. Neighborhoods can have more green space, streets can be less congested, more food can be locally produced, and inner-city wilderness can provide habitat for endangered species and enhance regional biodiversity.

We maintain that the theory presented here applies best to post-industrial contexts and places where decline is a reality and is something residents have dealt with for years (i.e. they want change). In many Sunbelt cities, where growth is all they know, getting people to the table to discuss smart decline means admitting the reality of decline. Beyond the issue of denial, broad policy structures in Sunbelt cities related to taxation, development, education, and transportation tend to depend upon population and employment growth (Pack 2005; Schulman 1994). For

example, much of local education funding in the Phoenix area comes from state government sales of vacant land to real estate developers. When growth halts, so does funding for schools. More research is needed to explore how such fiscal frameworks can be redesigned to match changing demographic fortunes.

Coming to terms with demographic change in the Sunbelt or elsewhere can be the biggest challenge to developing fair and just smart decline practices. In their study of former mining towns in rural Pennsylvania, Mayer and Greenberg (2001) found that it often took a generation for locals to acknowledge that their local industries were not coming back and for them to effectively plan for the future. For poor, marginalized residents suffering disproportionately from the impacts of population and economic decline, waiting for another generation is hardly desirable.

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