

Projects of becoming in a right-sizing shrinking City

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ABSTRACT

Urban shrinkage, and more recently the rise of right-sizing and smart-shrinkage as responses to its challenges, have attracted attention among scholars and policy-makers while igniting controversy on how to interpret them. The paper argues that while recognizing the relevance of cross-scale patterns of uneven development in the determination of urban shrinkage, research has to focus on the ways localized networks of actors respond through the mobilization of concrete policy situations and trajectories. Object of the study is the case of urban planning and policy experiments in land management and reuse, food production and local procurement in the city of Cleveland. Drawing from post-capitalism and social-innovation theories, the author posits that such experiments can represent as many “projects of becoming” towards a new community economy and concludes that right-sizing and smart-shrinkage are open, contested, fields of policy experimentation whose transformative potential has to be closely investigated by critical geographers, planners and policy-makers.

KEYWORDS

Urban shrinkage;
Right-sizing;
Smart-shrinkage;
Community economies;
Urban transitions

Introduction: urban shrinkage as the outcome of uneven development

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the changes that have occurred in the concrete forms whereby urbanization processes are actually produced across the world. The post-metropolitan coalescence of emerging socio-spatial formations in the context of North-American urbanism (Soja, 2000), the spectacular raise of megacities in the Global South and finally the advent of planetary urbanization (Brenner & Schmid, 2012) have imposed a fundamental recasting of inherited constructs in the field of urban studies (Brenner & Schmid, 2015).

In this context, localized phenomena of de-urbanization have been framed as largely aberrant variants of “urban shrinkage” (Oswalt, 2005, 2006; Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, Sylvie, & Cunningham-Sabot, 2012) mostly defined by the amount and persistence of population loss affecting specific cities and regions. Moving from this understanding, researchers have focused on case studies mostly conducted in the Global North and whose subjects, often examined in a comparative perspective, range from cities of the former socialist block experiencing decline in the context of their transitions to capitalism (Bernt, 2009; Mykhnenko & Turok, 2008) to cities located in

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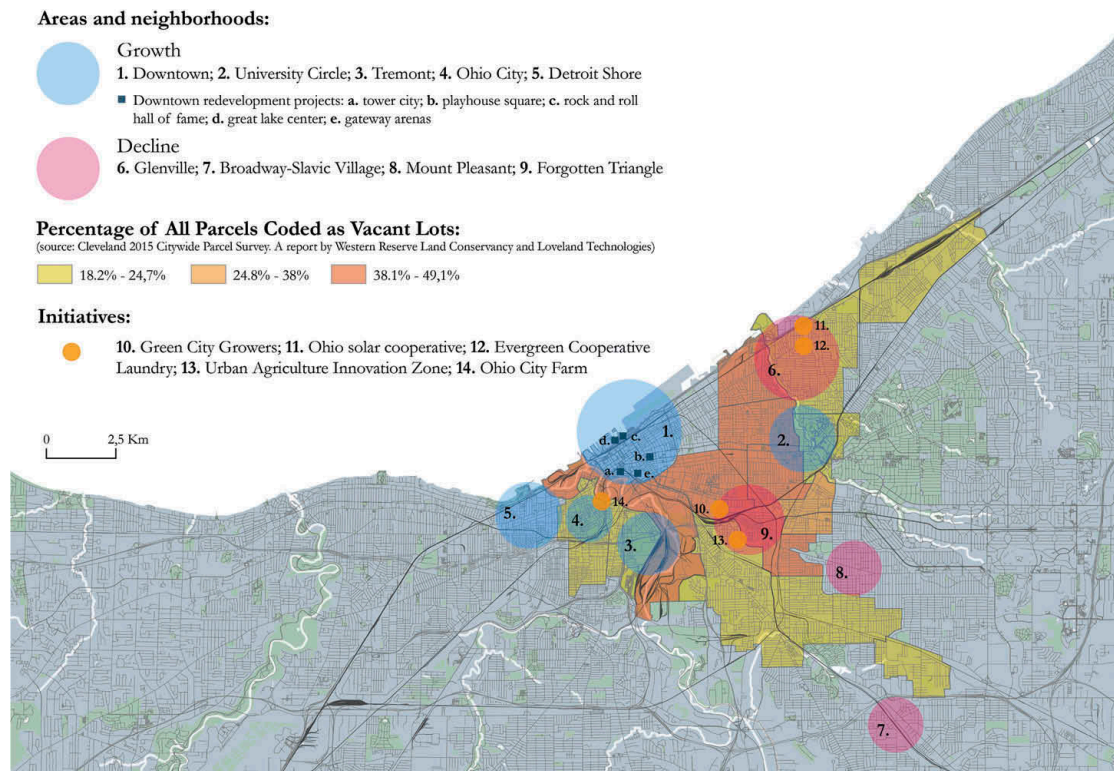


Figure 1. Land vacancy incidence and distribution, growth and decline areas, redevelopment initiatives and projects fo becoming in Cleveland.

Western Europe (Couch and Cocks, 2013; Crisci, Gemmiti, Proietti&Violante, 2014)) and North-America (Pallagst, 2009; Wiechmann & Pallagst, 2012) experiencing decline in the context of their transitions to a post-industrial local economic basis (Scott, 2009).

In the United States, the extension, severity and persistence of urban shrinkage has pushed scholars to articulate wider regional and historical readings of the phenomena. Beauregard (2009) and Frey (2005) documented the existence of a group of ‘hard-core shrinking cities’ mostly concentrated in the Rust Belt states (Coppola, 2009) characterized by population loss for over 50 years in the urban cores and the more recent spread of demographic decline or slow growth across metropolitan areas. The historical depth of these shrinkage patterns and the lack of evidence proving the existence of a different set of factors behind their successive waves have disputed the heuristic relevance of the notion of “urban shrinkage” in the US context compared with previous-ones such as “urban crisis” and “urban decline” (Beauregard, 2009). Furthermore, equally long-stand-ing characteristics of US shrinking cities – such as the demographic over-representation and spatial segregation of African Americans, high rates of poverty and indexes of poverty concentration, and a marked incidence of endemic public health problems –suggest a strong correlation between urban shrinkage and extensively documented forms of deep spatialization of the class and racial differences and discrimination structuring US society (Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987; Oswalt, 2004).

From this perspective, not only urban shrinkage does not look as a new phenomena but it does not look *just* as urban shrinkage neither but, instead, as a visible epiphenomenon of long-standing factors and patterns of uneven development (Harvey, 1982; Smith, 1984) that heavily contribute to the production of the US national space. A space

that critical readings have understood as being shaped by contextual, rapid and intense waves of disinvestment and devaluation, on the one hand, and of investment and valorization, on the other, that far from happening “naturally” are instead deeply political in their genesis and development. From the micro-politics of neighborhood-scale social homogenization and boundary defense, through the meso-politics of inter-urban competition to attract capitals as long the middle and upper classes, to the macro-politics of global and national economic restructuring, the production of the US national space has been in fact presented as closely presided by a wide range of actors and networks of actors – the federal government, local planning bureaucracies, corporations, real estate and property management industries, the insurance sector –engaged in the design and implementation of spatial, political and economic, projects that reproduce unevenness across different scales (Coppola, 2014).

If this is the context, the hollowing-out of Rust Belt inner cities can be understood as the final outcome of a multi-scalar drama: unevenness at the national scale in the form of the ascent of Sun Belt metropolitan areas, on the one hand, and of the decline of Rust Belt metropolitan areas on the other (High, 2003; Bluestone & Harrison, 1982; Sawers & Tabb, 1984; Teaford, 1993); unevenness at the metro-regional scale in the form of massive residential suburbanization (Jakson, 1985), edge-cities’ surge and post-metropolitan spatial restructuring, on the one hand (Garreau,1991; Soja, 2000) and intense and persistent disinvestment in the inner city on the other (Beauregard, 2003); finally, unevenness “from within” with the inner city itself experiencing an increased polarization between large areas that appeared to be in terminal decline and a few pockets of relative stability if not growth.

Left on their own in coping with these structural forces by means of anti-urban fiscal austerity and new federalism policies (Marcuse, 1981; Peck, 2012), Rust Belt inner cities gradually slid into a dystopian post-urban condition characterized by the quasi-collapse of fundamental structures in the economic and social reproduction spheres – the fiscal system, the distribution network, the real estate market – of contemporary urban capitalism (Coppola, 2012).

City governments reacted to the challenge by embracing “new urban politics” (MacLeod, 2011) development models and competing with booming suburbs, edge cities and rising Sunbelt metropolitan regions to intercept external investments in residential, retail and office markets (Harvey, 1989). The deployment of business-friendly fiscal and planning policies and of new public-private partnerships supported the spread of large downtown redevelopment programs aimed at re-branding declining inner cities (Hackworth, 2006) through the mobilization of visions of a “mythical natural urbanism” (MacLeod & Ward, 2002) consisting of new office developments, entertainment and tourist attractions (Harvey, 1993; Coppola, 2012). Following a “double-faced development model”, the so-called “community development industry” – the system of philanthropic institutions and neighborhood-based non-profit organizations rooted in declining urban areas – pursued policies aimed at the consolidation and promotion of “competitive” residential neighbourhoods through new housing construction, support to homeownership and community building (Coppola, 2009).

At the same time, even if seldom acknowledged, US shrinking cities have also been privileged sites for the development of alternative urban practices such as urban farming (Coppola, 2012b), temporary uses of vacant land (Oswalt, 2005; Schwartz, 2008),

sustainable energy and community economy projects (Boggs, 2004; Boggs, Kurashige, & Danny, 2011). These grassroots practices have mobilized local resources – such as abandoned land and buildings – and developed community agency moving, at times, from an explicit understanding of the transformative potential embedded in shrinking cities’ dystopian landscapes, where “vacant lots (*can be seen*) not as eyesores but as empty spaces inviting the viewer to fill them with other forms (. . .) in sharp contrast to the values of materialism, individualism, and competition” (Boggs, 2003). Such alter-native practices have been politicized as pre-figurations (Boggs, 1977) of possible socio-ecological and socio-technical transitions (Smith & Stirling, 2008) towards local economic development models different from established neo-liberal urban policies, as in the case of the Grace Lee Boggs’ campaign against new casinos in Detroit (Boggs, 2004).

After the bubble: the rise of right-sizing planning discourses

Neo-liberal downtown urban regeneration and community development schemes succeeded neither in reversing the historical decline of Rust Belt cities nor in protecting them from new disinvestment waves such as the one related to the busting of the 2000s housing bubble (Coppola, 2012).

Confronted with this failure, at first among urban planners and later in the community development industry and other urban institutions, a new discourse based on the acceptance of demographic decline as a structural and long-term condition of these cities emerged. If demographic decline is to last, cities must plan and manage their actual shrinkage rather than their unlikely growth, finding the correct ways to “right-size” their physical footprint so that it is more consistent with current and near-future demographic realities. Identifying how to manage low population densities and increasing per-capita costs in the areas of service and infrastructure provision determined by decline and its effects on the spatiality of cities is the key policy challenge in the “right-sizing” discourse (Hollander, Pallas, Karina, Schwarz, & Popper, 2009; Popper & Popper, 2002; Schilling & Logan, 2008; Hollander, 2011).

To meet this challenge, city administrations, such as those of Youngstown, Detroit and Rochester, have promoted new planning strategies (Hackworth, 2015) proposing imaginative post-shrinkage futures made of a network of a few denser urban nodes and vast areas repurposed for uses as diverse as urban agriculture, energy production, recreation and light manufacturing (Gallagher, 2010). While the boldest components of these strategies have not yet been implemented – the Youngstown relocation initiative proving to be a failure for the lack of residents’ response to relocation incentives (Coppola, 2012) in the context of wider strategic and financial limitations (Rhodes & Russo, 2013) – city administrations have invested heavily in the demolition of abandoned housing (Ryan, 2011) while identifying new models and matrixes to retarget public investments and subsidies on areas that still retain some degree of density and market functionality (Detroit Future City, 2012). At the same time, drawing from the historical experience of alternative grassroots urban practices, city administrations and community development industry actors have also invested in supporting alternative uses of vacant land that have been framed in larger discourses on sustainability, resilience and human well-being (Coppola, 2015)

Despite their apparent common sense realism, these “right-sizing” strategies and practices have ignited intense debate among urban scholars on how to interpret them: as a true departure from former pro-growth and neoliberal urban development paradigms (Schindler, 2016); as a plain and simple adjustment and retooling of them (Aalbers, 2014); or as a peculiar form of local adaptive response to the pressure of higher scale austerity measures (Hackworth, 2015). Particularly critical in this discussion is the interpretation of the role that demolition initiatives have played in the deployment of right-sizing planning models especially in light of past episodes of proactive destruction such as 1950s “Urban Renewal” (Hirsh, 1988; Wilson, 1966), 1970s “planned shrinkage” and “urban triage” approaches (Aalbers, 2014; Cooper-McCann, 2016; Coppola, 2012; Wallace & Wallace, 2001) and 1990s *Hope VI* public housing demolitions programs (Popkin et al., 2004; Smith, 2016) that have proved strategic in the pursue of class and racial restructuring strategies in US cities. While correctly underlying the existence of a causal relation between the contexts in which right-sizing policies have arose and entrenched patterns of housing financialization – demolitions are, in fact, often the last segment of longer chains of actions made of speculative investment and dispossession through foreclosure – readings identifying a linear continuity between right-sizing and previous episodes, both merely announced and really implemented, of proactive destruction risk to under play relevant divergences among them. On one side, such readings do not fully acknowledge important differences in their respective rationalities and devices – current right-sizing strategies do not propose, in fact, demolition of inhabited communities and the relocation of their residents – and on the other side they fail to recognize the wider, multi-dimensional implications that right-sizing discourses have and may have in the realms of spatial, social and economic development in shrinking cities.

Assessing real policy trajectories and situations in shrinking cities

With the aim of contributing to this debate and inspired mainly by the work of J. K. Gibson-Graham, I argue that US shrinking cities that are variably engaged in a shift from traditional pro-growth to right-sizing planning models have come to represent actual and potential zones “of cohabitation and contestation among multiple economic forms” in which breaks “in the relations and practices constituting the performance” of previous development models have opened up possibilities for the flourishing of “new economic becomings” (Gibson-Graham, 2006) that can be understood as prefigurations of “a resilient, resourceful and convivial local economy” (North, 2014; North, 2017) diverging from hegemonic neo-liberal urban development models (Rossi, 2017).

By formulating this hypothesis, I do not in any measure imply that these cities – i.e., their governing, hegemonic forces – are engaged in intentional and systemic transitions towards a post-neoliberal urban development model: rather, I maintain that, in the context of the aftermaths of the subprime and foreclosures crisis and of the subsequent consolidation of “right-sizing” discourses, they have come to represent situations of policy experimentation whose political-economic character and transformative potential have to be closely analysed and assessed through situated and articulated qualitative research strategies. Research strategies that, while firmly based on the acquisitions of critical geographical theory in unveiling the relevance of cross-scale patterns of uneven

development in the determination of localized conditions of urban shrinkage, will have to focus on the ways formal and informal networks of actors respond to such conditions through the mobilization of concrete policy situations and trajectories. Situations and trajectories that are, on one hand, clearly limited by higher scale political and policy structures and interventions and, on the other hand, mediated by the diverse social and institutional arrangements that constitute the local contingency of places (Deverteuil, 2016). In recognizing the existence of an although limited agency on behalf of these networks of actors in local arenas, such research strategies can valuably document and assess the emergence, evolution and recombination of certain policies, tools, regulative frameworks and practices towards new discourses about the spatial, social and economic development of shrinking cities.

To discuss this hypothesis, I address in this paper the emergence of a set of policies advanced by a variably formalized, close-knit network of actors in the context of the aftermaths of the subprime and foreclosures crisis in the city of Cleveland, Ohio. Central in this network are the actors belonging to the Community Development Industry (Yin, 1998), such as CDCs engaged in neighbourhood-level housing and development activities, and intermediary organizations, such as *Cleveland Neighborhood Progress* (CNP), which play a higher-scale strategic role often in partnership with the city administration in those same fields. Community foundations – such as the *Cleveland Foundation* – and so-called “anchor institutions” (Patterson & Silverman, 2013) – such as *University Hospital* and the *Cleveland Clinic* – have played an increasing role in urban policy by opening up new fields of intervention, while academic institutions – such as *Case Western* and *Kent State* and some urban NGOs – have been offering knowledge-intensive services to many of these actors (Author, Interview).

The choice of Cleveland as a case-study is based both on its belonging to what has been defined as the “hard-core” of urban shrinkage and on the long-standing relevance and strength of its Community Development Industry (Yin, 1998), a combination of factors that make it particularly well situated in the research perspective that was presented above. The case study draws on an extensive review of relevant documents across the period 2011–2017 and fieldwork mostly conducted in 2012 and 2013 with 20 semi-structured interviews with key leaders and several sessions of participant observation of meetings and events promoted by the above-mentioned network of actors. The rest of the article is organized as follows: the first section presents the trajectory of Cleveland both in terms of the consolidation of structural conditions of shrinkage and of the urban policy response to them advanced from 1960s onwards; the second addresses the re-orientation of the above-mentioned network of actors towards the repertoire of right-sizing in the context of the long sub-prime and foreclosures crisis while reviewing some of policies and practices that are relevant in the perspective of the paper; and the conclusions discuss the relevance and limitations of the case-study in light of the study’s main hypothesis.

Cleveland, a trajectory of crisis after decline

Having lost over 50% of its population since its 1950s demographic peak in the context of a “sprawl without growth” dynamic at the metropolitan scale (Keating, 2013), as

noted above, Cleveland can be considered a quintessential example of the “hard core” of US urban shrinkage concentrated in the Rust Belt.

Thanks to its strategic location on the Cuyahoga River and Lake Erie, the city rose to prominence as an international port and manufacturing centre in the early 20th century (Barney & Holly, 1997; Miller Poh & Weeler 2009) to start experiencing plant closures and heavy losses in factory jobs in the early 1970s (Cowell, 2013). Early signs of inner-city decline appeared well before then and, in the late 1950s, urban renewal plans were launched to address them (Jenkins, 2001). A first backlash against downtown-centred urban policies occurred in the mid 1970s with the election of a short-lived progressive administration proposing an “equity planning” agenda focused on neighbourhood revitalization (Krumholz, 1982; 1999). Shortly thereafter, in the context of a deepening fiscal crisis, a new growth-oriented coalition animated by business leaders and major philanthropic institutions took control of City Hall (Hill, 1997). With the aim of making Cleveland “the prominent business and professional centre between New York and Chicago” (quoted in Hill, 1997), the new administration mobilized public-private partnerships (Vogelsang-Coomb, Denihan William, & Bauer, 2016) in the promotion of a post-industrial “urban vision” based on modern corporate headquarters, hotels, recreational facilities and tourist attractions (Rosentraub, 2006). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, leveraging on a varying mix of federal and state grants, new local taxes and tax breaks, projects like the Tower City, Playhouse Square, the *Rock and Roll Hall of Fame*, the Great Lakes Science Center and the Gateway Arenas reshaped the city’s downtown and lakefront, making Cleveland a “comeback city” – a case of supposed “urban renaissance” amidst the ruins of the Rust Belt (Hill, 1997; Chapin, 2004; Cook & Ward, 2012).

In the same years, the neighbourhood policy arena was profoundly restructured as well, through the professionalization of grassroots community organizations in the context of the new community development industry model (Yin, 1998) designed and sponsored by large philanthropic and government institutions (McQuarrie, 2013; Coppola, 2009). CDCs became key actors in the new urban governance, promoting housing initiatives and designing broader neighbourhood development strategies (Krumholz & Hexter, 2012). Leveraging on federal and local incentives and subsidies, CDCs pushed for an impressive surge in housing production (Bogart, 2003) while moving away from a traditional focus on affordable housing in favour of the creation of so-called “regionally competitive neighbourhoods of choice” (Mallach, 2005; Author, Interview) able to attract middle-class residents and investors back to the city away from suburbs. Accordingly, the number of new housing units, the long-term increase in real estate values, and the expansion of homeownership became the key indicators of success for community development projects and organizations (Lowe, 2007; McQuarrie, 2013; Newman, 2016; Author, Interview).

However, the housing surge was soon undermined by the spread of predatory lending and of its disruptive effects, well before the 2008 financial meltdown. Between 1995 and 2007, foreclosures on residential loans for failure to pay taxes or make mortgage payments more than quadrupled in Cuyahoga County (Keating, 2013), while at the end of the 2000s, high-cost sub-prime loans were responsible for 84% of all foreclosures (Coulton, Schramm, & Hirsh, 2010). As a result, housing prices fell dramatically, from a median sale price of around \$100,000 in 2005 to \$15,500 in 2007 (Coulton et al., 2010; Mallach, 2009). Along with a soaring number of foreclosures, the

number of vacant, abandoned housing units also rose to a peak of almost 25,000 by 2010 (Ford, 2016).

African-American, minority and low-income neighbourhoods were disproportionately hit by subprime lending and subsequently by foreclosures (Coulton et al., 2010). As elsewhere in the urban rustbelt, neighbourhoods targeted in the 2000s by “reverse red-lining” practices in the form of subprime lending (Aalbers, 2011) had been targeted between the 1950s and 70s by “red-lining practices” (Metzger John, 2000). Even if in the context of different operational devices – first “red lining” as plain disinvestment strategies in the context of a Keynesian spatial fix and then subprime lending as “accumulation by dispossession” in the context of a “neo-liberal fix” – the same demographics were hit (Aalbers, 2011). The combined effects of place-based and race-based targeting of predatory loans made Cleveland East Side the epicentre of the crisis, with the neighbourhood of Slavic Village – which at one point had more foreclosures per capita than any other urban neighbourhood in the US (Keating, 2013) – being labelled the “ground zero” of the foreclosures crisis (Lind, 2008),

A specific challenge raised by the foreclosure crisis was the stark increase in REOs (Real Estate Owned) – bank- and lender-owned foreclosed properties – from 1499 in 2004 to over 10,000 in 2008 (Coulton et al., 2010). The failure of REOs legal owners to maintain low-value foreclosed homes and speculative practices such as “flipping” – purchasing low-value properties, inflating their value, and quickly selling them, often online – by successive buyers put additional pressure on already distressed and destabilized neighbourhood housing markets (Coulton et al., 2010; Keating, 2013).

The foreclosures crisis contributed to accelerating the demographic decline of both Cleveland and its inner ring suburbs in Cuyahoga counties: by 2010 the city’s population had returned to 396,000 inhabitants, the population it had around 1900 and a 17% drop from the 2000 Census (Keating, 2013). Other key social and economic indicators such as poverty – 39.2% (2015) – and median household income – 49,889\$ (2014) – worsened as well, while the real estate market started to show some signs of stabilization only in 2009 (Ford, 2016).

Long-standing trends of intra-city spatial unevenness strengthened as well, further characterizing Cleveland as a city made of “islands of renewal” in a “sea of decay” (Berry, 1985). Among the renewal pockets were downtown, the *Flats* area along the Cuyahoga River, the *University Circle* area on the East Side where major anchor institutions are headquartered and a limited number of neighbourhoods involved in CDCs-led revitalization strategies such as Tremont, Ohio City, Detroit Shoreway. Areas of decline were mostly concentrated in the East Side – the neighbourhoods of Glenville, Broadway-Slavic Village, Mount Pleasant – and south of Downtown – the so-called “Forgotten Triangle”.

After the crisis: from standard growth-search to soft right-sizing

In 2008 and 2011, CNP and the City sued, although unsuccessfully, 21 financial institutions in relation to subprime lending (Bron, 2010): a fairly dramatic rebuttal of what had been the central urban policy’s creed – the beneficial outcomes of homeownership expansion – for both these key actors in the city’s governance. In fact, until the early signs of the foreclosures crisis, many of the actors involved in the network –with specific reference to CDCs and intermediary organizations – regarded urban

shrinkage as a serious and long-standing challenge that could be effectively addressed and eventually reversed by their traditional pro-growth policies: the rise in real estate values, even if coupled with the persistent demographic decline, was in fact taken as a proof of the effectiveness and sustainability of their policies (Author, Interview).

Breaking this belief, the foreclosures crisis acted as “a shakeout of the community development industry” potentially in favour of “organizations which are not overly interested in rising real estate values” (Krumholz & Hexter 2012) and of an evolution of the local urban policy and planning environment away from standard growth enhancement and management towards the *right-sizing* repertoire (Author, Interview).

But, differently from other shrinking cities such as Detroit and Youngstown, in Cleveland these actors did not engage in the production of a grand, comprehensive planning gesture ostensibly characterized by right-sizing principles and ideas. Rather, they engaged in the creation of a series of new partnerships, policy initiatives and spatial plans that were aimed at countering the surge in abandonment during the early phases of the foreclosure crisis while setting the stage for more consistent, longer-term, and systemic actions (Author, Interview).

In 2005, the county-level *Vacant and Abandoned Property Action Council* (Vapac) – a partnership of government institutions, community development industry actors and the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland – was founded with the goal of finding and implementing innovative tools to prevent abandonment and to reclaim vacant land (VPRN, 2014). In the same year, CNP promoted a new “strategic investment initiative” and a new matrix identifying five different neighbourhood types (Cuyahoga County Land Re-utilization Corporation, 2012) aimed at concentrating available resources on neighbourhoods hit by the foreclosures that still retained reasonable densities and a recognized market potential (Schilling & Schames, 2014). In 2006, the geo-referenced information system “Northeast Ohio Community and *Neighborhood Data for Organizing*” (NeoCando) was created with the goal of integrating different databases so as to ensure better monitoring of neighbourhood conditions and early responses to abandonment and speculative practices (Treuhaft & Kingsley, 2008). In the same year, a new comprehensive zoning plan – *Connecting Cleveland 2020* – was adopted, with the identification of six core development areas on which to target redevelopment efforts while opening up other areas to alternative uses (City of Cleveland, 2016; Author, Interview).

While promoting these initiatives, the same set of actors intensively lobbied at the state level for the institution of a new regional land-bank authority, a major change in the local governance system. The *Cuyahoga County Land Re-utilization Corporation* (CLB) was eventually founded in 2009 with the aim of strengthening and concentrating powers of intervention in the acquisition, management and transfer of property and land in one new metropolitan authority (Keating, 2010; Schilling & Schames, 2014; Author, Interview).

Since its founding, the CLB has used funding from interest and penalties on unpaid or delinquent property taxes, bond issues and federal and state funds to acquire properties from tax foreclosure actions, donations, REOs and other vacant properties at risk of speculative behaviour (Lind Kermit & Keating, 2012; Schilling & Schames, 2014). Further strengthening its powers, CLB has also been granted the right to assess foreclosed properties before they are sold at public auctions, while the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Fannie Mae, and some

major banks have agreed to give CLB their foreclosed and blighted properties, contributing to demolition costs (Keating, 2013).

Operating within the above-mentioned matrixes, CLB has been a pivotal actor in the implementation of the soft-triage principles that have characterised the right-sizing turn in Cleveland. In areas considered in great distress, it has promoted extensive demolitions – 3996 buildings since its foundation – and alternative uses of vacant land (see next section), while in areas considered still viable it has acquired abandoned housing – 1355 buildings – to be rehabilitated and put back into use through rent-to-own and mortgage assistance programs – such as the *Opportunity Homes* program and other initiatives promoted by the Cleveland Housing Network – reserved for a middle and low-income demand (Author, Interview; Lind & Shilling, 2015).

The federal government has provided the essential policy framework of these interventions: Neighbourhood Stabilization Programs I, II, III and the Hardest Hit Fund have provided significant funding, while new funding is now expected from settlements with national mortgage lenders, the state of Ohio, and a countywide issue of bonds (Bratt & Immergluck, 2016; Rosenmann & Walker, 2016). CLB has therefore contributed greatly to the larger programme of demolition promoted by the city that – between 2006 and 2012 – demolishing 6,100 so-called “nuisance properties” at a cost of \$44 million (Schilling & Shammess, 2014). This fairly extensive retooling of inherited forms of spatial control and development that followed the subprime and foreclosure crisis acted as the backdrop of a larger set of policy initiatives and practices that contributed to the emergence of new urban policy realms in the areas of vacant-land reuse, local food production and distribution and of local procurement and development. Such policies and practices, that played a critical role in the further articulation of the right-sizing discourse, are reviewed in the following sections.

Vacant land reuse

Grassroots vacant land reuse practices have been established in Cleveland since the 1960s (Author, Interview) but have experienced a significant change in scale and scope with the governance and policy innovations that were just mentioned. Since its foundation, CLB has in fact reclaimed almost 700 acres for alternative uses through selling and leasing plots at nominal prices to community groups, CDCs, and neighbouring home-owners for the implementation of a wide range of alternative uses developed mainly in the framework of some zoning decisions and partnerships activated across the network (Sustainable Cleveland, 2014; Author, Interview).

In 2005 the city adopted the open space and recreation zoning district, which allows designation of vacant land for parks, recreation facilities and open space (Sustainable Cleveland, 2014; Author, Interview). In the same year, the “Reimagining a More Sustainable Cleveland” initiative was promoted with the goal of persuading residents and policy makers to see vacant property “not as a formidable obstacle” but as a “catalyst and a valuable resource to advance a larger, comprehensive sustainability strategy for the city, benefit low-income and under-employed residents, enhance the quality of neighbourhood life, create prosperity in the city and help address climate change” (Cleveland City Planning Commission, 2008; 2014; Richtell, 2012). The program was based on a 2004 study promoted by

CNP and the *Urban Design Center at Kent State University* that advanced a land-use decision matrix that supported the city's Planning Department to assess different re-use options for vacant land based on economic variables, sustainability goals, and local quality-of-life factors (Author, Interview). The suggested uses ranged from *temporary greening* treatments of vacant areas to *green infrastructure strategies* aimed at the restoration of urban ecosystems and metabolisms, and *productive landscapes strategies* aimed at food production and energy generation (Schwartz, 2012; Author, Interview).

Based on these guidelines, an *Idea Book for Vacant Land Strategies* was developed with the provision of designs, budgets, resources and guidance to projects to be implemented by community groups and other actors.. Funded through foundation grants and later by NSP funds, the initiative has led to over 120 projects among agriculture, side-yard expansions and ecological restoration while extending to other locations in the metropolitan area with the *Reimagining a Greater Cleveland* initiative launched in 2009 (Author, Interview).

More recently, these initiatives have been joined by other programs that focus on the role that vacant land can play in the enhancement of ecosystem services and in the climate adaptation of the city. The “Clean Lake Project” – a 3-billion, 25-year programme promoted by the North East Ohio Regional Sewer District in partnership with the City – plans to spend 42 million on green infrastructure projects also involving vacant lots with the goals of contributing to the depollution of Lake Erie and to a more sustainable management of the urban water cycle (Author, Interview; NEORSD, 2016; Melissa et al., 2013; Schwartz, 2012;) while Ohio State University in 2014 launched a research project, funded by the National Science Foundation, to assess the biodiversity role of vacant land in Cleveland with a specific reference to the alternative uses currently experimented (OARDC, 2016),

Local food production and distribution

In the same years, the city has seen the emergence of a wide network of actors and initiatives pursuing the development of a localized food production and distribution system (Author, Interview; Sustainable Cleveland, 2014) and a significant expansion of the land involved in agricultural production (Schuering, 2011).

The city has supported these developments by offering financial and technical support to several projects and approving ordinances and zoning variations (La Croix, 2010). Examples are the “Healthy Cleveland Ordinance” aimed at ensuring the existence of a community garden within walking distance for every resident in 2020; the “urban garden districts” zoning variation instituting areas in which urban agriculture and related activities are the only admitted uses; the so-called “chicken and bees” zoning ordinance allowing residents to keep a variety of up to eight animals; new standards that allow agriculture as a principal use in all vacant residentially-zoned lots and also permit the local sale of produce (Author, Interview). Initiatives aimed at developing urban grazing as an alternative to standard upkeep of vacant green spaces have also been proposed (Sustainable Cleveland, 2014) and later implemented by CDCs (Author, Interview).

The most significant productive projects are the *Urban Agriculture Innovation Zone* – currently 8 acres of urban agriculture, with plans for a total of 28 acres, located in the highly

disinvested “Forgotten Triangle” area – and the *Green City Growers Cooperative* – the nation’s largest urban farming facility designed to produce three million heads of lettuce and 300,000 pounds of herbs every year for local consumption – that currently employs 25 low-income residents (Author, Interview; Sustainable Cleveland, 2014) while, on the demand side, initiatives like the EBT Incentive programme have aimed at increasing the consumption of local fresh food among low-income residents who rely on food stamps (Sustainable Cleveland, 2014).

Local procurement and development

One last emerging policy arena, significantly interconnected with the previous-ones, involve the development of localized markets for goods and services. In this perspective, the city has in recent years expanded its *Community Benefits Policy*, which provides bid discounts to locally, minority and women-owned businesses and requires local and minority hiring and subcontracting (Author, Interview) adopting in 2010 a *Local and Sustainable Purchasing Ordinance*, which provides bid preferences for companies that source products locally and bid discounts to companies that buy at least 20% of their produce from regional food growers (Sustainable Cleveland, 2014). Also thanks to these incentives, between 2010 and 2014, the City increased contracting to these business groups from 29% to 39% of total contracting dollars (Duffy and Pringle, 2013)

Anchor institutions have been the leading actors in the development of local procurement. In the context of implementation of its \$1.2-billion facilities expansion, *University Hospitals* introduced local procurement and employment targets that were eventually met with 92% of goods and services procured from local and regional firms, 17% of workers that were residents of the city, and 18% of contracts awarded to minority-owned enterprises (Duffy & Pringle, 2013). As of 2016, the hospital has embedded these new practices throughout its annual supply chain – its value being around \$800 million a year – with local purchasing goals set for all purchases over 50,000 dollars (Howard, 2012)

In 2007, based on a partnership between the Cleveland Foundation and the *Democracy Collaborative* – a think-tank based at the University of Maryland – the anchor institutions located in the University Circle area were set-up a community development strategy based on the leveraging of their purchasing needs through the set-up of a network of community-based and worker-owned cooperatives: the *Evergreen Cooperative Laundry* offering services to a wide range of local institutions; the *Ohio Solar Cooperative*, which leases, installs and maintains photovoltaic arrays on public and private buildings; and the already-mentioned *Green City Growers Cooperative* (Author, Interview; Wang & Fillion, 2011). Leveraging on the sustainability targets of anchor institutions, the network focuses on products and services based on a more sustainable use of resources through the reduction of energy and water consumption, the development of alternative systems of energy production, and the satisfaction of a local demand (Author, Interview). The funding for the start-up of the three cooperatives has been assured mainly by the Cleveland Foundation, which has capitalized a revolving local fund that invests in the cooperatives while attracting so-called impact investors; HUD, which has offered a combination of long-term and low interest loans

the department of economic development of the city of Cleveland; and local banks (Author, Interview; Howard, 2012).

As already mentioned, a key aspect of the strategy is the cooperative character of the three enterprises that have been designed to be owned and managed by workers who must be residents of the mostly low-income neighborhoods located in the University Circle area (Author, Interview). At its final stage, the project should include the creation of an umbrella organization grouping all cooperatives, and of a land trust aimed at ensuring “the availability of strategically located property both for future business expansion and to maintain affordable housing and protect against gentrification” (Coppola, 2014).

Conclusions: assessing and exploring the conditions of socio-spatial change in shrinking cities

Urban shrinkage is a complex socio-spatial process (Soja, 1989) that neo-liberal policy making discourses have strategically naturalized by overlooking the role played by historical actors in unleashing, through determined courses of action, the structural forces of decline. Similarly, a lack of consideration of the role that diverse social and institutional arrangements as long as local actors’ agency patterns play in the shaping of local policy responses to urban shrinkage risks to represent one more paradoxical form of naturalization of the complexity of such processes. As suggested in this paper, to avoid such a risk, critical geographers, urban planners and policy-makers should closely track the unfolding of shrinking cities’ individual trajectories over time while investigating and assessing continuities and departures in the local urban policy and planning landscapes.

Cleveland represents a relevant case in point in this perspective, precisely for having been the locus of a consistent implementation of neoliberal urbanism through two of its foundational and intermingled policy strands: the search for exogenous investment influxes and the financialization of housing. The belief that these policies were the breakthrough for the return to growth has been general consensus among many of the actors involved in the city governance, included the ones of the community development industry. By dramatically exposing the ineffectiveness of these policies in reversing the long-term decline of the city’s competitive position and their contribution to its heightened vulnerability to new and intense disinvestment waves, the subprime and foreclosure crisis has represented a break in the inherited state of affairs. This break has allowed the opening of a “window of opportunity” for the production of collective learning processes, a window that has led at first to the development of resistance against highly financial exploitative practices and later to a concrete situation of experimentation in the established framing and tooling of local urban planning and policy.

In this context, and based on the evidence presented in this paper, I argue that the mobilization of the right-sizing/smart-shrinkage discourse has acted as a strategic platform for the development of multiple, interconnected policy conversations and experimentations that have critically engaged with the entrenched ways in which both Keynesian and neo-liberal urbanisms have framed and organized the relationship between the economic, social and ecological dimensions of development. The relevance of such conversations and experimentations did not lay in their quantitative dimensions neither in the rationality of the actors involved but, rather, in their ability to act as

possible pre-figurations of a different urban development model. In this perspective, the expansion of land-banking institutions, while not an explicit departure from the financialization of housing, has represented a conscious response to its failures (Coppola, 2014; Hackworth, 2012) and a potential development in the direction of a “diversity of property rights regimes” (Johan & Barthel, 2013) and of a new understanding of the ways in which land can be accessed and mobilized in support of a wider range of urban uses. Vacant-land re-use practices and rezoning ordinances have advanced a new epistemology of environmental politics and policy that leverages on the opportunities offered by vacancy to reverse an over-a-century long trajectory of ecosystems’ disruption and exploitation (Heynen, Kaika, & Swyngedouw, 2006) and urban space sanitization actively promoted by mainstream urban planning. Finally, the growth of local procurement policies and practices along the lines of the “community wealth” movement (Kelly & McKinley, 2015) has proposed a reframing of local development policy focusing on the expansion of endogenous economic activity (North, 2010, 2014) through the matching of local demand with local resources and the experimentation of cooperative and participative models including and empowering marginalized social and racial groups (Gibson Graham, 2009; Moulaert, 2009).

If the potentials of such conversations and experimentations have yet to be fully assessed, the open questions for future research mostly involve their effective ability to represent the gateways of a truly counter-hegemonic, articulated perspective of socio-spatial change both at the local scale and across different scales. In fact, while the rediscovery of the physicality, morphology and ecology of cities (Batty & Marshall, 2009) brought upon by the “smart-shrinkage”/“right-sizing” discourse has represented an essential acquisition in respect of previous mainstream planning and policy approaches, it is still unclear at which conditions the spatial transformations it entails can be intentionally articulated with distinctive and systemic elements of economic, social and governance transformation. Particularly critical on this issue is the extent at which the context of extreme, long-standing and spatially organized patterns of social and racial inequality characterizing Cleveland as other shrinking cities is recognized by the actors of these conversations and experimentations as both a source of framing and as a strategic target of their actions. Although empirical evidence shows how some of them – the cooperative projects being a case in point – can be understood as innovative forms of collective action addressing issues located at the nexus of social, ecological and economic contradictions and inter-dependences at the urban scale, it is also clear that none of them appear to be the outcome of significant episodes of conflictual collective action directly led by social and racial groups that have been historically marginalized if not dispossessed in the context of the different urban regimes. Rather, the overall situation of policy experimentation that we have described has had mostly the form of an incremental process of reframing and adjusting inherited policy models among organized actors that were already in a position of influence within that regime while, in order to insure their evolution in the sense discussed here, these actors should now strategically invest in the collective empowerment and in the autonomy of these same marginalized social and racial groups.

Right-sizing/smart-shrinkage discourses are open, contested fields of policy experimentation whose transformative potential can be recognized and deployed only if critical geographers, planners and policy-makers will be able to bridge different fields

of theoretical analysis and political intervention – from the right to the city throughout environmental justice and transition studies – in the context of a holistic reframing of urban development. Only doing so, the current local significance of these potential “projects of becoming” will be put in that broader systemic, inter-scalar perspective that is needed to produce relevant and lasting transformation.

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