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Planning in Shrinking Cities

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Those of us here in the booming Sun Belt are familiar with the problems of rapidly growing cities: sprawl, mobility, affordable housing, economic development, etc. But, like many Floridians, I came from "up North" – Pittsburgh, originally – and I was part of an out-migration that took place during the 1980's and 1990's as the industrial base of the Northeast and Upper Midwest collapsed.

Even if I had wanted to stay in Pittsburgh when I graduated from college in 1980, there were no jobs to be had. And so I bounced around between St. Louis, MO and Columbus, OH for six years, working for Anheuser-Busch (beer sales are high during economic downturns!). I landed in the Tampa Bay area in 1986, working for a company, Anchor Glass Container, which had relocated its entire corporate headquarters from Lancaster, OH to Tampa. That job only lasted three years, and the rest is a story for another time, but it is an example of how both people and entire businesses can be part of these out-migrations, taking *everything* with them: jobs, incomes, tax revenues, and general socioeconomic stability.



Vacant: A house in Youngstown, OH sits vacant, overlooking industrial facilities (AP Photo/Mark Stahl).



Old infrastructure: Detroit's downtown people mover (author's photo, 2018).

Most of my family still lives in the Pittsburgh area, and I have friends in St. Louis and other cities in the Northeast and Midwest that are still seeing their populations decline. Detroit, of course, is the primary example of a hollowed-out city trying to rebuild itself from what is left of its original structure. But there are plenty of others in the same situation, as discussed in this article from [Next City](#) which reviewed the book *Shrinking Cities: Understanding Urban Decline in the United States* (Weaver et al., 2016).

Planning for decline is a very different process than planning for growth: land and buildings must be re-used and repurposed, economic foundations changed, revenue sources modified, and budgets and infrastructure "rightsized" (in the 1980's, that was code for "massive layoffs").

Knowing and applying such techniques is absolutely necessary. Cities have to respond or risk descending into anarchy. Some cities have accepted that they are going to be smaller in population and have a completely different type of economy—Cleveland and Buffalo come to mind—and are working to restructure themselves accordingly. Others have not yet given up, hoping to attract new residents and businesses by revitalizing their traditional economic foundations.

Pittsburgh has greatly changed its economy over the last several decades, from one based on manufacturing to "eds and meds" – tech jobs, the educational sector, and health care. UPMC (University of Pittsburgh Medical Centers) is now one of the largest employers in the region. Yet, according to the above article, Pittsburgh is still projected to lose 25% of its population over the period 2000-2040 (much of which, I assume, has already happened). When I visit Pittsburgh these days, I see clear evidence that some parts of the region have been left out of this transformation, especially the smaller steel towns downriver from the main city, which had absolutely no economic diversity from which to rebuild. Poverty and blight abound.

Planning professionals – and planning students – who may find themselves working in declining city regions are going to have to acquire some unique skills to address these problems. In some ways, it is a "blank slate," a chance to try something new and innovative. In other cases, it is a matter of damage control, trying to keep your city up and running while revenues that paid for even the most basic services dwindle. Either way, it presents a challenge for urban planners.

And this, in turn, presents a challenge for urban planning educators, particularly those of us here at USF. The majority of our students come from Florida, and their experience and focus is on planning for growth. Our program touts its location in Tampa Bay as a "living laboratory" for planning, but really only in planning for population increase and economic development, neither of which is projected to cease anytime soon.

Can we "reverse engineer" basic planning principles based on growth to work for declining cities? Well, comprehensive planning for shrinking populations and economic decline still requires the basics: analysis of existing conditions, projections and scenario planning, and establishing goals, objectives, and policies that plan the future. So I have confidence the planners we are preparing will know how to be effective in any city, growing or declining.



Repurposed: The formerly abandoned South Hills High School in Pittsburgh was converted to an independent living facility for seniors (author's photo, 2014).