

Shrinkage as an Opportunity? Local Cultures, Power Structures, and Spaces of Possibility in Two Communities in Lusatia

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Abstract

Building on the diagnosis of urban shrinkage, we examine how two cities in Lusatia are dealing with the challenges of structural change. Adopting the concept of “spaces of possibility” (SoP), we view shrinkage as a dynamic phenomenon that holds both risks and opportunities for urban development and is moderated by local actors, which can lead to conflicts of varying degrees. Using two qualitative case studies in the municipalities of “Rabenfurt” and “Ostenau,” we show that historical backgrounds, established cultures, and patterns of decision-making are particularly decisive factors in this regard. Rabenfurt represents a top-down logic with a focus on economic development, which tends to marginalise citizens’ opinions. Ostenau is characterised by a bottom-up perspective, actively involving local initiatives and citizens in decision-making processes. However, the created status quo in Ostenau is fragile. The results emphasise that local cultures and modes of decision-making should be taken into consideration when applying the concept of SoP.

Keywords

community study; left behind place; Lusatia; shrinking city; space of possibility; urban development

1. Introduction

To what extent can shrinking cities overcome their “peripheralisation, stigmatisation and dependency” (Bernt & Liebmann, 2013)? Which sources of potential are available, and how can they be activated? This article addresses these questions and examines them on the basis of two qualitative case studies in Lusatia.

Following Häußermann and Siebel (1987) and the concept of “urban shrinkage” (Haase et al., 2014), shrinkage is understood as a complex phenomenon with different paths and a variety of possible outcomes. On the one hand, we understand it as a phenomenon of a city’s or region’s demographic and industrial decline, often accompanied by structural decay. At the same time, it can represent an opportunity for local development or reorientation (Haase et al., 2014; Hospers, 2014). Within the scope of this understanding, regions and cities are not stagnant or fixed entities, but places that are constantly evolving and can develop new potential even in times of decline.

However, what is seen as risk or opportunity is not “naturally” given. Instead, diverging understandings and conflicting interests play an important role in defining and establishing the direction of urban and regional development. Therefore, a sensibility for local contexts and power structures is needed, in order to deal constructively with phenomena such as outmigration, vacancy, de-industrialisation, and demographic change. Referring to two communities in Lusatia, we elaborate on this perspective. For reasons of anonymity and confidentiality, we have decided not to mention the actual names of the cities and to refrain from references that would enable de-anonymization. Here we call them Rabenfurt and Ostenau. We show that very different historical experiences, established patterns of orientation, and modes of problem-solving prevail in these two communities. These varying initial conditions help determine what scope for development can be identified in connection with shrinkage.

The concept of “spaces of possibility” (SoP) is particularly relevant to these analyses (Kagan et al., 2018, 2019). It helps to present the two locations as socio-spatial entities with their own characteristics, challenges, and potential. SoP are usually understood as dynamic spaces whose primary significance lies in their potential for new and improved future actions, interactions, and ways of life. For this article, however, we adapt the concept as a socio-geographical heuristic tool to show how two different communities approach transformation. That is, we do not ask whether the two cities are or offer SoP. Instead, we ask, how, for which stakeholders, under what conditions, and with what results shrinking cities are seen as opportunities for urban development. To answer that question, we draw on empirical evidence from ethnographic studies in Rabenfurt and Ostenau. In Rabenfurt, securing the position of the city as a regional economic center is at the forefront of the city administration. This strategic direction comes into conflict with a local flying club, whose airport is seen as an economic expansion area. It becomes apparent that, due to a top-down power structure and resting on a very functional and business-friendly foundation, local needs and historical as well as identity-related factors sometimes take a back seat. In Ostenau, a younger generation has moved back to the city and has taken over a variety of voluntary activities from older generations, thus contributing to the vitality of the place. With the support of the mayor, their engagements are organised bottom-up, which makes debates about possible futures more inclusive and focused on community issues. At the same time, one can tell a high precarity and fragility of this approach to urban development, since it relies on voluntary engagement and self-sacrifice. Taking into account the different historical backgrounds and local cultures, the analysis of these two cases thus almost ideally shows two different poles of what opportunities and goals can be ascribed to urban spaces (economy vs. community), and how participation and decision making in transformation processes are thought of and organised (top-down vs. bottom-up). We conclude that these empirical variations must be taken into account when talking about SoP and deriving policy ideas for the respective cities and regions. Not all contexts are prone to the same future concepts and not all well-intentioned ideas for development fit every local context.

The article is divided into the following sections. In the second chapter, we reflect on the theoretical framework of our discussion, focus in particular on the concept of SoP, and turn to the project's research methodology. Chapter three is devoted to Lusatia as a region under study and to the results of the case studies, which are discussed in light of the theoretical considerations. In chapter four, the conclusion is drawn that local cultural factors and power relations must be considered, in order to understand how on a local level SoP are established as cognitive images and are actually materialised.

2. The Concept of “Spaces of Possibility”: Theoretical Foundations, References, and Criticism

Beyond demographic and economic decline, shrinking cities exhibit highly complex social dynamics characterised by de-industrialisation, outmigration, and dwindling social ties, among other factors. Public and, in some cases, academic debate often reduces these dynamics to a simplified image of “left behind places” (Pike et al., 2024). Terms such as “dependence,” “disconnection,” and “outmigration” then characterise the image of shrinking cities (Bernt & Liebmann, 2013). We argue that this overlooks the complex processes and actual conditions on the ground, which certainly also offer potential for development. Taking up this shift in perspective, concepts such as “empowerment,” “engagement,” “innovation,” “sustainability,” “participation,” “self-organisation,” “transformation,” and “resistance” are now being discussed as a response to urban decline (Peer et al., 2024). They promise to activate local potential, promote civic engagement, and develop new forms of cooperation.

One such concept is that of the SoP. The term is often employed to highlight alternative development possibilities and applied in a flexible, context-sensitive manner. However, there are also approaches that are more conceptual in nature. According to Kagan et al. (2018), who focused on the ecological sustainability of cities, these are understood to be spaces “in which possible future developments are, already today, emerging; both physically located spaces with sustainability-related creative cultural developments, and shared social-psychological spaces where “mental infrastructures” (Welzer, 2011) are challenged and potentially destabilised” (Kagan et al., 2018, p. 35). This potential can unfold independently of the original design of the space in question (Ernst, 2018, pp. 109–110). It becomes clear that this concept often has a utopian impulse: it is about realising ideas of what is desirable, imaginable, and feasible in a specific place, or at least putting them up for discussion (Ernst, 2018, p. 111). It shows clear influences from French post-structuralism and its strong focus on the social influence of power. Kagan et al. (2018) draw on Foucault's concept of heterotopia (1993). SoPs are, in that sense, real, relatively open, and, at the same time, protected spaces in which it is possible to experiment with social alternatives, different temporalities, and new paths of development (Kagan et al., 2018, p. 35). In addition, Henri Lefebvre's (1974/1991) theory of social space production plays an important role in the debate on SoP. Spaces are not simply understood as rigid physical or fixed locations where life takes place. Instead, they are thought of as constantly (re)produced through social practices, power relations, and ideas, and thus possess a socially constructed dimension (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 26; see also Löw, 2001).

These considerations show that the SoP concept is about different ways of using and interpreting space—often in terms of sustainability and quality of life—which are to be tried out and experimented with. SoPs should, therefore, open up scope for action that challenges prevailing hegemonic ideas and urban power structures, and highlight future-oriented alternatives. This also means they always have the potential to

evoke social conflicts and localise them. This is because their establishment, respectively through their inherent reinterpretation of space, gives rise to questioning established ways of living and using space, which must be actively managed and shaped. We, therefore, do not see SoP as merely niches for undisturbed utopian change. Rather, they open up a potentially antagonistic terrain in which different actors (e.g., city administration, civil society, companies, citizens' initiatives, but also supra-regional actors) with their respective interests, values, and resources struggle for interpretative sovereignty and creative power. As Kagan et al. (2019, p. 16) emphasise, it is the task of research into urban SoP to include this factor of social conflict and the struggle for power as catalyst or obstacle of change into research.

At this point, we would also like to point out the pitfalls and problems that arise from the hasty use of the SoP concept in the context of shrinking cities. Firstly, we see the danger that the concept could be interpreted as euphemistic semantics, resulting in simplified statements. Simply renaming a city characterised by decline as a SoP and thus opening it up as a laboratory for experimentation does not solve any structural problems or create any realistic options for the future. Analogous to the concept of "left behind places" (Pike et al., 2024), there is, therefore, a need for a clear definition of the causal mechanism targeted by the term "space of possibility" and a differentiated understanding of the complex nature of local conditions and the diverse possibilities available locally (Pike et al., 2024, p. 1176). In addition, the concept is currently still so broadly defined that it has no limits in terms of socio-spatial configuration. As in the case of Kagan et al. (2018), for example, it can refer purely to specific real estate. However, neighbourhoods, entire cities, or even regions could also be designated in this way and thus renamed as SoP. From a spatial sociology perspective, very different spaces can also emerge simultaneously in a specific location (Löw, 2001). The question also arises as to whether SoP are created and utilised solely by civil society, or whether municipal authorities themselves or even actors from outside the city can open up such spaces and shape them according to their own ideas. In the literature, the formats of conversion found to date tend to be small-scale and pragmatic, taking advantage of local opportunities. Krug (2012, pp. 21–22) described, for example, how SoP are emerging in an old industrial wasteland in the Sulzer Areal in Switzerland.

In our view, there is currently still a gap between the theoretically highly connected derivation of the term and the concrete design of SoP. Furthermore, doubts can be raised as to whether the change in perspective from pessimism about the future to optimism about shaping the future in left-behind places, which is intended by the term, can always be achieved empirically. Perceptions of decline are usually ingrained over a long period of time and cannot be reversed by one-off or small-scale property conversions, however well-intentioned they may be. Whether one experiences social transformation as an opportunity or a decline, whether one is optimistic or pessimistic about the future, depends heavily on one's own biographical and collective experiences and how deeply one is affected by certain changes (Mannheim, 1936/2013). Subsequently, it is also important to point out the general dependence on position with regard to what can actually be considered a desirable, progressive, or utopian alternative. Who has the mandate to determine the direction in which a municipality should develop and which projects should be initiated (Erhard & Jukschat, 2025)?

Taking up these points, we ask to what extent the two cities in Lusatia that we examined can be understood as SoP, and how SoP are designed in these municipalities. With this, we broaden the discussion about SoP. What can be considered desirable alternative uses of space is demonstrated from a cultural sociological perspective based on the local stakeholders and their respective views on how the city is and should be used. These

considerations are based on our research project “BePart,” in which we conducted ethnographically oriented community studies in two small cities in Lusatia. The aim of our project was to examine the perspectives of people who are directly affected by the ongoing structural change. In particular, the aim was to reflect on their ability and willingness to accept social innovations in their local communities, taking into account earlier biographical influences and collective experiences shaped by the post-socialist transformation. This focus is also reflected in the basic orientation of the German Federal Ministry for Research, Transformation, and Space Policy (BMFTR) funding line “REGION.innovativ. Exploring regional factors for innovation and change—strengthening societal innovation capacity” (BMFTR, n.d.), which provided funding for our project. Against the backdrop of multiple current crises and challenges facing structurally weak regions, funding will be used to specifically promote social innovation in these areas.

We identified locally specific orientation patterns and well-established problem-solving strategies as characteristics of the two municipalities, which we then bundled into local logics. For greater clarity, we briefly explain this procedure. We deliberately adopted a qualitative approach that placed the involvement and consultation of residents at the heart of our research. Using a mix of data from participating observations, documented walks, informal conversations, planned narrative interviews, and group discussions, we gained comprehensive and in-depth insights into the locations. We began our sampling by speaking with key figures from business, government, and civil society in the two locations who then helped us to contact various other interview partners. In addition, we started our own research and tried to speak to persons outside the established city’s person network. We had two longer stays for about a week and several shorter visits for single interviews and other official appointments in both towns. In sum, we gained 23 individual interviews, six group discussions, and 60 observation protocols. For the presentation here, all transcript excerpts have been translated from German and smoothed for better readability.

In our evaluation, we relied on a research style based on the grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and hermeneutic in-depth interpretations of the transcripts. We exploratively examined the collected material, continuously drafted hypotheses about our locations under study, and refined them in light of further evaluations. Specifically, we relied on sequential analysis (Erhard & Sammet, 2018) of our written protocols and interview transcripts for our evaluation. This means that we reconstructed the latent meaning conveyed in the transcripts. What are the underlying assumptions that form the basis for a statement? Which social rules are being invoked behind the scenes? What knowledge is required? Thus, after just a few lines and paragraphs, an initial impression of the case in question was formed and recorded in the form of a thesis. Whether this impression could ultimately be consolidated into a case structure or whether changes had to be made was then tested in further sequences and sections of the same protocol. The aim of this evaluation was to contribute to an understanding of the typical local characteristics of Ostenau and Rabenfurt. Therefore, each protocol was treated as a case for the respective city. The two cities, however, were regarded as cases of a local adaptation and development of space. The analysis of our data revealed two dominant, almost ideally contrasting communal logics that serve as foundation for the argument put forward in this article. Due to the empirical complexity and the space limitations, they cannot be made accessible in every detail in this article. Instead, in the following, excerpts are chosen in regard to questions about ideas and practices of spatial re-use. In doing so, it becomes apparent that innovations and disruptions in the form and implementation of land use depend largely on factors such as the local mode of governance, the commitment of local actors, and the availability of economic and social resources. However, before we elaborate on these considerations based on our empirical findings, we would like to characterise Lusatia as a region under study.

3. Shrinking Cities as SoP: Empirical Contextualisation

3.1. A Look at Lusatia

Lusatia, which for centuries was shaped by textile and agricultural industries as well as lignite mining and the energy industry, has been faced with the challenge of developing new economic and social prospects (Markwardt et al., 2023, p. 16) since the reunification of Germany in 1989/90 and the subsequent post-socialist transformation (Kollmorgen, 2005). In particular, the closure of numerous lignite mining companies and the associated loss of jobs and population in the 1990s caused profound economic and social problems that continue to have an impact today (Ehrich & Werchosch, 2022, p. 6). A demographic analysis of Lusatia shows that after German reunification, it was primarily young, employable people who left the region. As a result, birth rates fell significantly in the years following reunification, and the region has been steadily losing residents while at the same time the proportion of older people in the total population increased (Ehrich & Werchosch, 2022, 9). The wave of people returning in recent years, especially young families, could not make up for this development; therefore, Lusatia can still be considered a depopulated area today (Ehrich & Werchosch, 2022, p. 17; Markwardt et al., 2023, p. 38). In addition, the government-mandated lignite phase-out by 2038 and the shift towards renewable energies bring about a second structural change in the region that started in 2016. The few remaining open-cast mines and coal-fired power stations will also close. With them, the region is losing long-standing major employers and traditional points of identification.

These specific challenges and conditions encountered in Lusatia represent tangible problems. Nevertheless, describing Lusatia as a left-behind region is not quite accurate. In terms of indicators such as GDP, unemployment rate, and real wages, there has been successful economic development since the 2000s. In addition, there have been numerous federal investments in the region and federal institutions were located here. However, these conditions for a catch-up process vary greatly from county to county and are often tied to a fragmented economic structure. Those parts of Lusatia that already had a high job density before the lignite phase-out have greater potential for catch-up than others (Markwardt et al., 2023, p. 19). In consequence, Lusatia's economic landscape has become quite heterogeneous in the previous years and a club divergence between the different counties is emerging (Markwardt et al., 2023, pp. 17–19).

Therefore, what potentials, opportunities, and needs concerning the repurposing and reinterpreting of spaces are seen also differ from county to county. Against this backdrop, the concept of SoP must be understood as a socio-geographical heuristic tool to engage with very local contexts and the conditions, ideas, and practises of the re-use of space found there. What are prevalent conceptions of space, and what opportunities but also problems may arise from them? We will now examine this point using examples from our study that was based on research in two communities, which we refer to as Rabenfurt and Ostenau. The result is a very contrasting picture. In Rabenfurt, which is the centre of a more affluent county despite its shrinking and ageing population, space is primarily being designed as a disposal and planning area for economic expansion and structural adjustment. Ostenau, on the other hand, which is heavily affected by population decline, ageing, and a weak economic structure, appears to be a city with less defined urban planning that offers opportunities for individual planning horizons and civil society initiatives.

3.2. Rabenfurt: Economic Focus and Top-Down Logic

Rabenfurt is a small city that has been strongly influenced by its industrial history, which was closely linked to lignite mining. Located on the edge of a large industrial complex, significant parts of the city were built from the 1930s onwards to accommodate the growing number of workers at the factory until the reunification of Germany in 1990. Since then, the city has experienced a steady decline in population from around 8,000 in 1990 to 5,600 inhabitants today, leading to it being a rapidly shrinking and aging community (Wegweiser Kommune, 2025). However, there has been significant investment in public infrastructure in recent years due to the second structural change. Nowadays, the city administration is strongly focused on improving the city's regional and EU-wide competitiveness through continuous urban development, which also includes the improvement of location factors. The main focus is on sustainable economic development in the field of green energies. Companies that fit in with the strategic orientation will find opportunities to settle there or opportunities will be created for them to do so, for example by developing brownfield sites or repurposing land. In addition, high hopes are also being placed in the Chinese Silk Road project. For this reason, the expansion of rail transport connections is also being pushed forward.

Consistent with this portrait, the city's logic that we induced from our data shows that economic progress and innovation are highly valued. Education, competition, and performance are important aspects which extend into leisure activities and the lively club scene. Among Rabenfurt's decision-makers, the notion of predictability and maintaining order, which are supposed to lead to a good life for everyone in the city, is also important. This contrasts with the fact that, due to the amalgamation into an "industrial community," many residents have no emotional attachment to the city as such. For most people, the former villages, now districts, are still their actual points of reference. As Rabenfurt also has a long history of labour migration, many people associate the city primarily with their work and political administration.

With the following excerpts from interviews conducted in 2023, we show how this historically derived basic orientation of the place affects the way space is designed as a category of social action. The point of contention is a dispute over a small airfield that belongs to the municipality and has been operated by a local association since the GDR era. At the time when the group discussion took place, the future of the airfield was in doubt, as the city is grappling with new requirements and options arising from the second structural change in Lusatia and is considering the site as an area for expansion for the above-mentioned renewable energy companies. This contrasts with the strong sense of identity and belonging felt by members of the flying club, who now see their cross-generational commitment to the site and the city under threat.

The mayor of Rabenfurt, who is one of, if not *the* representative of the city's leadership, should be the first to speak here. His ideas about urban development are very directive and focused on economic growth, as he is primarily concerned with the prosperity of the city. Although the current situation is fraught with uncertainty, he is simultaneously pleased that the structural change is already making progress in his community. He considers the early acquisition of funding an important foundation for this. In addition to economic growth, he cites the safeguarding of jobs in the traditional industrial city as an important ultimate goal:

Mayor: But at the moment we have a lot of growth in the city thanks to early restructuring and subsidies. But that's largely thanks to the funding agencies so that this city actually has a chance to grow

in the right direction....And our shared task now is to find out what the new signs of the times are? Where can we replace the traditional with things that will also be economically viable in the future and give people jobs?

In the context of this economic development, he sees the airfield site as a place that would enable the reorientation of the local economy. Consequently, planning processes with the neighboring municipality have already begun to create space on the airfield for the establishment of promising economic segments:

Mayor: We are working together with the city council of *neighbouring city*, which is the city to the north, our northern neighbour, to establish the '*neighbouring city* Rabenfurt airfield' as a new industrial and commercial area. There are also a lot of interested parties, and we have established a planning association and want to establish another settlement there that is promising for the future and fits into the new economic segments that are opening up. Economic development. This may be observed this year if we are successful.

This excerpt reveals the mayor's strategic approach to his city. He actively embraces economic change and opportunities. Against this backdrop, the local airfield becomes a geographical object of desire. Stripped of its history and the interests and identities of the association members who run and use it, it offers a cleared space and infrastructure that would otherwise have to be created at great expense elsewhere. Consequently, there are already several "interested parties." As investors, they would develop the site, create jobs, and generate business tax revenue. In summary, it can be said that the mayor focuses primarily on the well-being of his municipality in terms of economic prosperity and sustainability.

As the group discussion with representatives of the local flying club shows, this orientation pattern and its manifestation in specific construction projects marginalise the views and needs of parts of the local population. This shows that economic development of the airfield would mean the end of the flying club in its current form. The association members feel ignored as a result and hurt in their identification with the place. An initial excerpt from the interview shows how this identification is derived and how a right of disposal over the airfield is legitimised:

Alfons: So, we basically turned the area into an [airfield].

Wotan: [Yes, we] turned the area into an airfield, we cleared the forest, and we initiated recultivation measures there....So the site was then systematically laid out accordingly.

Alfons: By the members.

The representatives speak here on behalf of the association as a whole, which is extended into the past. Together, they had first made the land arable through their own efforts. As mentioned briefly in the interview, this development took place from 1959 onwards. Meaning that, today, it is possible to look back on more than half a century of tradition and own work. This heritage, which inspires a sense of attachment to the open space, now appears to be under serious threat from the local council's plans. As the following excerpt shows, this creates a feeling that, as an association with specific interests and a long history, they do not count when it comes to implementing an economically promising project.

Alfons: Well, we feel a bit taken for a ride. Uh, everyone knows that it takes a long time to establish an airfield, to even get permission for it. And we're being 'chased out of court,' so to speak, by politicians in no time at all. I'll say it as it is: we really are being chased out of court from here. So, there's no chance of having a reasonable discussion about this with politicians anywhere here. And, I've never experienced that before. And it's a very difficult time for the club internally as well. Because something like this puts a strain on the members and also on the club. And that could go so far that the club ends up falling apart because of this whole situation.

By pointing out that they know how long it takes to establish an airfield, Alfons shows that he misses the appreciation for the identification and commitment that the association has shown for decades. The expression "to be chased out of court" refers to a practice in royal households when individuals fell out of favour and were declared "persona non grata." This impression is underscored by the fact that no dialogue with the relevant political representatives is possible. As a consequence, this de facto status as "outcasts" means that the association could break apart.

The situation shows that processes of spatial development in the context of current transformative processes can lead to conflicts and experiences of devaluation. In Rabenfurt's case, this is due to the prevailing logic of organizing transformation top-down and orienting the city mainly toward the idea of economic progress, which serves to maintain it as a traditional industrial location and secure corresponding jobs. Although opportunities for public participation exist, uncertainty remains and the solution process does not appear to be sufficiently explained to the citizens affected. With regard to the SoP in this case, however, it should be noted that, due to the focus on wealth and prosperity in Rabenfurt, they are primarily conceived as development spaces intended to secure the city's economic future. This manifests itself in a struggle for sovereignty over a place in which the city administration can use its political and economic power to resolve the conflict in its own favour. Leisure activities that make the small city more liveable beyond economic considerations and promote local identity are given consideration but are subordinated to this.

3.3. *Ostenau: Fragile Urban Development and Bottom-Up Logic*

Ostenau is a small city with a rural character that is characterized by a small-scale economy and is heavily dependent on financial support from state, federal, or EU funds. Until the end of the GDR era, the city's economy focused on the textile industry, especially leather production, and agriculture. In a few years after the reunification, these economic sectors were abandoned due to a lack of profitability. This led to a shift toward renewable energies in the form of heat generation using biomass, supplemented by solar thermal energy and a hydroelectric power plant during the 1990s and early 2000s. Due to urban planning decisions, this economic sector has not been further developed since the 2010s. In addition, the local economy is based on small family businesses that meet daily needs. However, many of these enterprises are gradually going out of business because the next generation sees no economic future in continuing the family business and prefers to pursue new careers.

A glance at demographic trends reveals that the population in Ostenau has declined sharply from 3,900 in 1990 to 2,200 in 2021 due to unemployment and outmigration, particularly among young people (Statistisches Landesamt Sachsen, 2023). This has led to an aging of the urban population and the demolition of various residential complexes as part of the state funding program "Stadtumbau Ost" (Urban

Redevelopment East) from the 2000s onwards. These restructuring measures have resulted in a cityscape characterized by renovated apartment buildings and family homes alongside vacant prefabricated buildings and wastelands on the outskirts of the city as well as unrenovated houses and vacant lots, even near the center. In recent years, several young families have been moving back to Ostenau, which can be seen as a soft sign of local recovery. Nevertheless, the perception of many people here is still characterised by loss and decline. It is a general impression of Ostenau that prospects for the future are expressed in rather vague or pessimistic terms. As we will show, positive prospects are expressed only in specific life situations.

Culturally, local life has a tradition of civic engagement, which already played an important role in the GDR era. There was a strong civil society opposition movement under the umbrella of the church. To this day, this educated, middle-class, Christian-influenced section of the population continues to shape the city's fortunes. They see themselves as bearers of community and social responsibility, and are accustomed to seeking and finding their own solutions to problems that arise. Efforts can be found in this milieu to emphasise positive portrayals of their own city, for example, by pointing to the return of young families to the city or highlighting the advantages of rural life. This orientation became particularly clear in a group discussion with a circle of family and friends who had emerged from the opposition movement during the GDR era. The group still meets regularly to discuss various topics. In the discussion, they also touched on the outmigration of younger generations since the 1990s and the social consequences of this development. At the same time, a dynamic emerged that countered the narrative of decline and loss:

Brigitte: But many families have completely fallen apart because [the] children, the youngsters, have left.

Alfred: [Of course]. That's the problem, the main problem, actually everywhere [but that]

Brigitte: [Really a problem]

Alfred: They also have this further up towards Brandenburg, Mecklenburg...? Oh, that's a disaster. We are (populated?) And then, of course, most young girls...

Margarete: Yes, but then you have to say that a lot of young people have already returned to Ostenau. You have to see that too. We have got a few more over the last couple of years.
[...]

Jörg: Yes, that's what Margarete said, that was two or three years ago, there was a movement where young people who weren't really in the west, but like our children in *large city in Saxony* and so on, had settled down and then, when their children were reaching school age, they said, I don't want to do that to my children, living in a big city with all the things that go with it. So there are, in our children's circle of friends, three or four who have all come back to the area, more or—well, mostly—because of the children, but still a little bit.

Brigitte: In the countryside.

What the group is developing here is a connection to their own location, which is intended to paint a positive picture of the future of the place. Instead of dwelling on the departures of the past, the focus is on encouraging young families to return to the city. Having entered a new phase of life, those returning to the countryside want to escape the hustle and bustle of the big city and enjoy the peace and quiet of country life. At the same time, it conveys a narrative about the appeal and potential that peripheral communities have, especially for families. This perspective on the returnees is also supported by the mayor from private experience. The mayor sees the temporary absence from the city as an enrichment, as it brings new impulses and ideas back to it and supports the urban development:

Mayor: And I have to say about those, about our circle of friends, that even those who have moved further away or work elsewhere. One works in *city in Bavaria* but still comes here regularly. So, he is still so deeply rooted in this place. And what's nice about it, though. But that's perhaps only a thing of today....What you can also observe now is that when the...people come back with their families...that's actually what makes it. Then there's the chance that new input will come in. Or also from those who have returned. That's just, as we've already said. Actually, I think it's nice when you go away, see something different, and then come back here with those things or with your impulses.

Furthermore, this conscious focus among parts of the population on the positive aspects and future potential of Ostenu also aligns with the perspective of the local government. The city hall sees itself less as a controlling body with its own agenda, but rather as a facilitator that actively supports existing activities and creates opportunities. There is a broad structure of associations, initiatives, and loose groups in Ostenu. Networks that can be quickly activated for common local causes are organised in a highly informal manner: people know each other and share expectations and commitments.

This interplay between historical and cultural influences and the bottom-up approach to shaping the future of the city is important for understanding local dynamics and conceptualising SoP in Ostenu. These are created dynamically through civil society initiatives. However, this *modus operandi* makes their (long-term) existence precarious. This ambivalence is particularly evident in the metaphor of Ostenu as a “stork's nest,” which was raised in another group discussion with women from the group of returnees. It is Sarah who suddenly introduces the metaphor, thereby pointing out that life for returnees in Ostenu is currently still perceived as a temporary stay:

Sarah: Hmm. That sounds like a stork's nest where you go to hatch children.

[Group laughs]

Sarah: [And then] you fly again/Hanni: Yes./away.

The stork's nest metaphor is used by the participants to portray Ostenu as a place of contemplation and security, and a retreat for bringing offspring into the world. This projection is familiar from discussions about “new rurality” or the new “attractiveness of rural areas” (Berger et al., 2014; Kujath et al., 2019; Marchner, 2016; Redeping, 2013; Sept & Reichel, 2022). This attribution takes place against the background of a specific biographical turning point. As becomes clear during the interview, all participants completed their education and transition into working life in large cities or even abroad and enjoyed an urban lifestyle there. Now, they want to settle for a specific phase of life, namely starting a family. On the one hand, this biographical decision represents a potential gain for Ostenu. Having been away, the returnees bring new impressions and perspectives to the community. On the other hand, it is precisely this awareness that there are alternative, attractive ways of life that have the potential to challenge people's current attachment to Ostenu. This latent precariousness in terms of the temporary nature of the stay in the community is already hinted at in Sarah's subsequent statement, “and then you fly away again,” and is discussed explicitly in the following passage:

Alma: But it's interesting that you're already thinking about whether you can imagine it—because I mean, you also haven't been back that long. Or in Ostenu.

Hanni: Well, we've been here for [two years now].

Alma: [So two] years and you?

Bekka: Um...the fourth year.

Alma: The fourth one./Hanni: Mhm./Okay, but also it isn't that long ago./Bekka: Mhm./And now I'm already thinking about this, given that the children are still quite young. So/Bekka: Mhm./they're not that big yet, they won't be gone tomorrow, but—already now in the back of my mind somehow, in the long run it's really small. That's not how I feel at all.

Sarah: Me neither/Alma: laughs/really. Indeed. laughs

The topic discussed here is the possibility of leaving the stork's nest once the children have "fledged." This surprises Alma, who explains that she does not share these thoughts, although she anticipates that Ostenau could be "really small in the long run." None of the participants has lived in the small city with their families for more than four years, and there is a consensus that there is currently no desire to leave. Nevertheless, the very fact that the possibility is being discussed shows that there is no unquestioned attachment to the place that is anchored in everyday life.

Using the interview excerpts and the inherent orientations as examples, conclusions can be drawn about how SoP are designed in Ostenau. Linked to a specific, historically grown, future-oriented, and creatively inclined milieu, Ostenau is designed as a liveable place whose advantages are particularly evident in contrast to the hustle and bustle of the big city. What is possible in terms of the use of space in the city is mainly left to civil society and its initiatives. Based on a DIY attitude, various small festivals, action days, and themed events take place in the city. At the same time, the younger generation, in particular, who have returned to the area, associate this mode of spatial use with a certain phase of life and do not feel the same attachment to the place and its fate as their parents. This means that the concept of SoP must be understood as temporary and interwoven with the life plans and worldviews of this milieu.

4. Conclusion

The SoP concept advocates a change of perspective in dealing with shrinking cities and regions. Instead of reducing them to problem cases that need to be fixed or even neglected, they should instead be seen as spaces for development and creativity, where new forms of coexistence, economic activity, and urban development can be tried out. This seems to be an important enhancement in the debate about spatial development in regions and cities affected by outmigration, vacancy, de-industrialisation, and demographic change. However, we found the concept to be too presumptuous, simplistic, and empirically underinformed. It fails to address the complex realities of concrete municipalities and how they have an impact on what opportunities for urban development are seen in the cities themselves and how they are acted out. In this regard, the analysis of Rabenfurt and Ostenau unravelled two contrasting cases of what opportunities and goals can be ascribed to urban spaces and how they are implemented.

In Rabenfurt, urban development is focused on the shift toward renewable energies and adjacent sectors that promote the continuation of the city's industrialization history and the preservation of corresponding jobs. Decisions are made top-down and in favour of economic potential. Ostenau stands for a tangible population decline, a wealth of unused space, and a strong civil society. Decisions about the development of the community are found in bottom-up processes. These factors attract urban milieus from the outside.

They enrich community life with perspectives from the outside but also come with romantic projections of Ostenu that reveal the precarity of their local engagement.

Considering these different backgrounds and cultures, we conclude that the idea, design, and implementation of SoP is always closely linked to prevailing local logics and power structures. The case studies of Rabenfurt and Ostenu clearly show how different these conditions are in shrinking cities in Lusatia when it comes to keeping pace with the next phase of transformation. Thus, the aforementioned club convergence between certain Lusatian counties is confirmed. Rabenfurt represents an economically more affluent part of the region, whereas Ostenu is clearly part of a structurally weak area. In addition, this perspective can now be expanded in light of our results. The localised, well-established world views and ways of decision making determine how innovation and change are imagined and how the practical path to achieving them is organised. This has a significant impact on the scope available for urban planning in the cities and on the resources and repertoires that local actors can draw on. Besides the economic situation, local cultures and power dynamics embedded therein are thus another explanatory factor for the internal diversification of Lusatia as a region. In this sense, it also became clear that establishing SoP is not always a peaceful process. Rabenfurt in particular unravelled that change in the usage of urban spaces—no matter how well-intentioned—can lead to conflict and the marginalisation of positions. This is a point that deserves more attention in the discussion.

Returning to the overarching discussion picked up in this article, the examples show that the theoretical mechanisms assumed in the SoP concept are not always correct. Empirically, the idea of SoP as brought forward by Kagan et al. (2018) is counteracted by the fact that Rabenfurt is seemingly more efficient to halt shrinkage and utilize the second structural change for urban development. This includes strong administrative decision-making and the associated profiling as a business location. Ostenu is more in accordance with the idea of trying out non-economic, unconventional models of space usage and ways of decision-making. However, it is questionable whether the civil society that has emerged as a result will enable the city to prosper again after post-socialist transformation and current structural change. Surely, there are signs of such a development, for example, in the form of returning families. They represent a growing interest among younger generations in repopulating and shaping shrinking cities and could serve as an anchor for the consolidation of the municipality. At the same time, it also became clear that this interest is fragile because it is bound to a specific biographical phase. In addition, it might fade away due to an appropriated knowledge of alternative, more urban ways of living. The precarious commitment resulting from this could turn out to be disadvantageous for the city both in terms of development policy and demographics.

From these results, three recommendations can be drawn for policymakers and urban planners. First, it is necessary to develop an understanding of the local structural situation, cultural background, and decision logics so that actual local challenges and potentials can be addressed. This empirical contextualisation provides insights into how SoP are thought of and the extent to which they are an adequate strategy for dealing with processes of urban shrinkage. At this point, it is also worth including comparisons into the assessment of a city and not analysing one municipality as an individual case. Second, building on the gained knowledge, existing and potential conflicts, and strategies to moderate them must be included into planning. Since change always produces resistance, this point must be brought to people's attention. Third, idealising SoP as utopian projects to alter the ways of an urban society as a whole seems to overestimate the long-term commitment of the milieus that would support such projects. In sum, urban planning thus needs to find ways to strengthen

this commitment and foster bottom-up developments, but also to moderate new economic developments and transformations.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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