

# Negotiating Possibilities in Shrinking Cities: Potentials, Challenges, and Policy Implications

Bettina Knoop <sup>1,2</sup>  and Robert Knippschild <sup>1,2,3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Interdisciplinary Centre for Transformative Urban Regeneration (IZS) Görlitz, Germany

<sup>2</sup> IHI Zittau, TU Dresden, Germany

<sup>3</sup> Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development (IOER), Germany

**Correspondence:** Bettina Knoop ([bettina.knoop@tu-dresden.de](mailto:bettina.knoop@tu-dresden.de))

**Submitted:** 12 February 2026 **Published:** 15 April 2026

**Issue:** This editorial is part of the issue “Left-behind Places or Spaces of Possibilities? Shrinking Cities as Foregrounds for Urban Transitions” edited by Bettina Knoop (TU Dresden) and Robert Knippschild (Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development / TU Dresden), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i471>

## Abstract

Dominant narratives of urban success continue to privilege growth and acceleration. Within this framework, shrinking cities are frequently labelled as left-behind, lagging, or peripheralized places. Such stigmatizing interpretations not only obscure the structural conditions of urban shrinkage but may also foster a perceived loss of agency and subsequently constrain local capacities to envision and actively shape alternative urban futures. This thematic issue calls for a paradigm shift: Bringing together contributions from different disciplinary perspectives that address spatial scales from international comparisons to the neighborhood level, it explores both the potentials and the persistent challenges that urban shrinkage entails for a high quality of life and for urban sustainability transitions. Alongside a critical reassessment of quantitative growth indicators as measures of urban success, the editorial advocates integrating urban growth and shrinkage at both analytical and policy levels as a prerequisite for more resilient, just, and sustainable spatial developments.

## Keywords

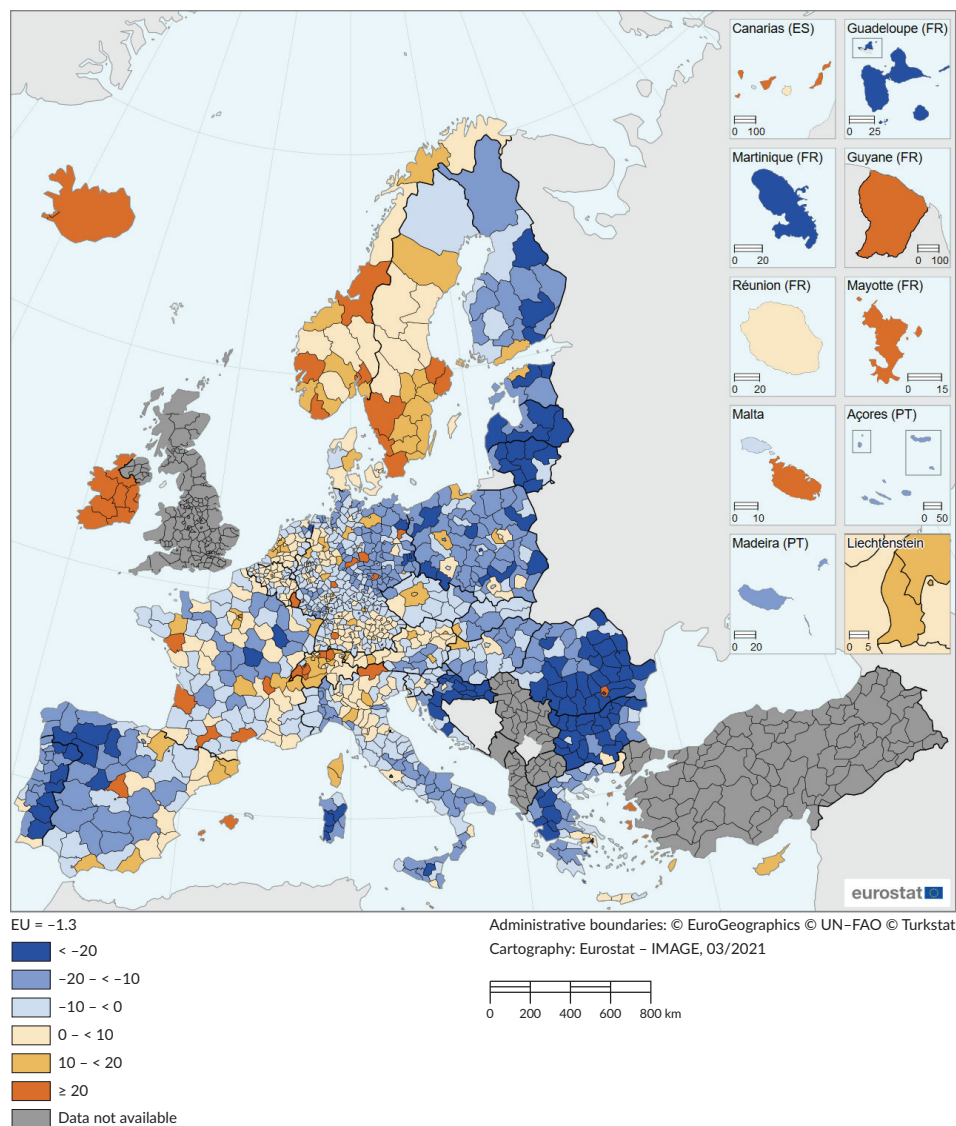
growth paradigm; peripheralization; quality of life; shrinking cities; spatial justice; urban policy; urban resilience; urban sustainability transitions

## 1. Introduction: Towards a Paradigm Shift in the Conceptualization of Shrinkage?

Population decline continues to affect settlements in Europe and beyond, in particular small and medium-sized towns. At least in the non-core regions of Europe, it is becoming apparent that the processes of population decline are not a temporary phenomenon but a long-term trend (see Figure 1; Eurostat, 2021).

Building on the discussion of the connection between urban shrinkage, degrowth, and sustainability highlighted in an earlier issue of this journal, edited by Bontje et al. (2024), this thematic issue extends the debate by exploring how shrinking cities can serve as foregrounds for urban sustainability transitions, while also considering the structural and institutional limitations that impede such transitions.

The demographic shrinkage of a city is often accompanied by economic decline and profound socio-spatial restructurings: selective outmigration of the young and well-educated, immobility of socio-economically disadvantaged groups, rising vacancy rates, and the gradual abandonment of parts of the building stock are a few examples. Thus, when addressed in public discourse, in urban policy making, and in the scientific literature, shrinking cities are commonly portrayed as left-behind, lagging, or peripheralized places (Kühn, 2015; Pike et al., 2023). Against the background of a dominant narrative of urban success that is focused on growth, innovation, and acceleration, these labels do more than describe—they stigmatize shrinking cities, with far-reaching implications for imaginaries, policy responses, and local identities.



**Figure 1.** Projected relative change of the population in Europe, by NUTS 3 regions, 2019–2050 (%). Source: Eurostat (2021).

The stigmatization of shrinkage in turn creates a particular pressure in urban policy and planning to regain control over an ostensibly undesirable situation. It narrows the scope for action and limits the capacity to successfully shape futures for shrinking cities. In contrast, interpreting demographic shrinkage as a value-neutral condition opens up alternative ways of engaging with the decline. Stepping back from growth-oriented paradigms of urban success and instead turning towards alternative evaluative criteria, such as quality of life or well-being, can foster a more differentiated and context-sensitive approach to understanding shrinking cities (Knoop, 2026). Such a shift allows for identifying the specific socio-spatial capacities and potentials as well as limitations that these cities hold for socially, ecologically, and economically sustainable transitions.

## 2. Possibilities in Shrinking Cities? Discussion of Potentials, Challenges, and Policy Implications in This Thematic Issue

Against this background, this thematic issue calls for a paradigm shift: Acknowledging that a stigmatization of shrinking cities can actively support the reproduction of negative development dynamics, contributions to this issue critically evaluate the potentiality of shrinking cities to become spaces of possibilities—spaces for sustainable urban development that prioritize the quality of life, well-being and agency of local populations, while aligning with ecological and social sustainability goals. While the idea of leveraging the potentials of urban shrinkage is compelling, the contributions to this issue reveal substantial structural constraints and entrenched path dependencies that limit the scope for potentiality-based urban development approaches in shrinking cities.

In a micro-level ethnographic empirical case study carried out in two shrinking towns in the region of Lusatia, Germany, Erhard et al. (2026) evaluate risks and opportunities of demographic shrinkage for the development of communities. Their research emphasizes the role of local cultures and decision-making processes in shaping the futures of shrinking communities. It becomes apparent how local actors often demonstrate significant capacity for agency and innovation. Yet, these capacities seem to be predominantly bound to individual persons and informal networks beyond the formal planning sector. As a result, the authors demonstrate how outcomes remain highly fragile and context-dependent, emphasizing that local agency alone is insufficient to generate broader, lasting effects in local (planning) cultures and urban development under conditions of shrinkage.

Both Orhan and Prenzel (2026) and Ghoo (2026) shift the focus to the housing sector. Orhan and Prenzel (2026) analyze subjective perceptions of residential real estate in a qualitative case study covering six shrinking cities with high vacancy rates in the Baltic Sea Region. Their research highlights the heterogeneity of housing markets in shrinking cities, as well as the diverse motives and perceptions of real estate actors within these contexts. The findings reveal nuanced differences in the decision-making processes between professional investors and owner-occupiers: while professional investors generally do not fear shrinking cities, purchasing a home can represent a substantial financial and personal risk for individual owner-occupiers. This example demonstrates that understanding the possibilities of urban shrinkage requires careful, context-sensitive analyses, including considerations of who can effectively take advantage of the possibilities—and who cannot.

Ghoz (2026) extends this perspective by emphasizing challenges of residential building reuse that arise from a complex set of conflicts and dependencies between multiple stakeholders, and that are not confined to shrinking cities alone. The contribution positions vacant residential buildings as potential spaces of possibilities for advancing urban sustainability transitions. The study identifies five key stakeholder groups involved in residential building reuse. It demonstrates how cross-cutting challenges shaped by their interactions affect decision-making processes. The findings reveal persistent tensions but also strategic opportunities for cooperation when it comes to reactivating vacant buildings, underscoring the pivotal role of government actors and the emerging mediating function of building professionals. Overall, the study provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how actor dynamics can hinder or enable the transformation of urban voids into components of a sustainable built urban environment.

The subsequent contributions draw attention to policy limitations that emerge when it comes to re-imagining shrinking cities as spaces of possibilities. They point at frictions that emerge when notions of possibility encounter entrenched narratives of growth and success, deeply rooted in planning rationalities and in institutional path dependencies. Focusing on five large cities in Poland, Kajdanek (2026) examines the paradox between municipal development policies aiming at population retention or growth, and actual developments like persistent suburbanization and demographic decline. While city authorities continue to adhere to long-standing urban development paradigms centered on growth and success, their policy toolkit remains severely constrained. The challenges they face in achieving re-growth are further intensified by the accelerating demographic decline in Poland. In sum, the study demonstrates that, despite an awareness of demographic challenges and available policy interventions, municipalities often remain constrained in their ability to act proactively and to realize development opportunities related to urban shrinkage.

The contribution by Ciesiółka (2026) examines urban regeneration as a contested and ambivalent strategy in a shrinking medium-sized city. Using the Polish city of Leszno as a case study, the article demonstrates how conflicts around retail development point to competing planning paradigms. The demographic shrinkage of the city did call the viability of traditional growth-oriented strategies into question in Leszno. Nevertheless, the city continued to pursue a defensive, conservative approach to the regeneration of its city center: Policy interventions focused on restoring former functions through project-based measures, yet largely failed to adapt to the ongoing demographic change. Drawing on this analysis, the author concludes that regeneration in medium-sized, shrinking cities should move away from grant-led, project-based interventions. Instead, affected cities should adopt adaptive, outcome-oriented, and long-term approaches that acknowledge demographic decline as a framework of urban development and that prioritize the functionality of everyday urban life for the remaining inhabitants.

Adding to these case-based insights, Saviaro et al. (2026) take a meta-perspective, examining growth orientations in urban planning in the context of shrinking cities. The authors critically question the widespread assumption that planning must be justified through economic and demographic growth. Drawing on an integrative literature review and on Cultural Theory, they develop an analytical framework linking planning approaches with modes of justification, and with their relation to growth. The analysis reveals how growth-related justifications continue to shape planning practices even where shrinkage is acknowledged as a structural reality, thereby constraining adaptation to demographic decline. It highlights shrinking cities as critical arenas for rethinking the normative foundations of urban planning beyond growth.

Another set of contributions focuses on physical and social dimensions of shrinkage, and on interrelations between them. Szymczyk et al. (2026) examine the interrelations between urban form—specifically spatial compactness—and urban shrinkage in medium-sized cities in Germany and Poland. Their large-scale quantitative longitudinal study demonstrates that, particularly in Germany, and to some extent in Poland as well, compactness is negatively correlated with shrinkage, i.e., more compact cities tend to experience lower population losses than less compact ones. Although the study does not investigate causal mechanisms, the findings indicate that urban compactness may constitute one potential factor in managing demographic shrinkage in medium-sized cities.

Brill et al. (2026) broaden the analytical lens by demonstrating the plurality of development trajectories that formerly shrinking cities can follow. Using the example of left-behind neighborhoods that have recently become arrival contexts for international migrants, the authors show that renewed growth does not automatically dissolve longstanding stigmatizations rooted in earlier periods of outmigration and decline. Drawing on an analysis of arrival neighborhoods across Germany, the study examines how notions of left-behindness intersect with narratives of migration. Against this background, the authors underline the ambivalence of the concept of left-behindness. In the light of an increasing pluralization of shrinking cities' developments, they propose to use "left-behindness" as an analytical lens to explore socio-spatial inequalities rather than as a spatial category bound to certain demographic or economic trajectories.

On a similar line of inquiry, Friedrich and Rößler (2026) offer a micro-level perspective on how the combination of (former) shrinkage, built environment, marginalization, and new migration flows results in the emergence of specific atmospheres in everyday life. The qualitative study focuses on large housing estates in three Eastern German cities that have recently become arrival neighborhoods for international migrants while still exhibiting "left-behind" material and socio-economic conditions. The authors demonstrate how people attribute meaning to places in their specific social configuration and in their built materiality, resulting in intersubjectively shared urban atmospheres. The results point to ways in which these left-behind places could turn into welcoming, livable, and sustainable urban neighborhoods. In line with Brill et al. (2026), Friedrich and Rößler (2026) suggest a decoupling of notions of shrinkage, growth, left-behindness, and success.

In a commentary in this issue, Mallach et al. (2026) broaden the analytical perspective and examine the relationship between quantitative demographic shrinkage, relational imaginaries of left-behindness, and anti-elite populist movements across Europe and the United States. The authors trace how economic and population decline intersect with subjective experiences of marginalization, which can, in turn, fuel support for populist movements. They emphasize that it is not the objective demographic or economic conditions themselves that shape populist political attitudes, but rather the ways in which these conditions are experienced and interpreted. Against this background, the authors suggest a further integration of social, cultural, and political dimensions into the study of shrinking cities in order to illuminate how subjective experiences shape the effects of structural decline.

### 3. Perspectives and Preliminary Policy Implications

Taken together, the contributions to this thematic issue provide a rich, interdisciplinary collection that critically examines the interpretation of shrinking cities as spaces of possibilities. The overarching message of this issue is that shrinking cities should by no means be relegated to the margins of urban research and policy making.

Rather, they should be understood as critical spaces for imagining alternative futures and for implementing urban sustainability transitions that put quality of life and ecological sustainability at the forefront. Reframing urban shrinkage in this way requires profound analytical shifts and a reorientation in urban planning and policy making across multiple scales, from supranational bodies to local authorities.

At the same time, the collection of contributions to this issue emphasizes that recognizing the possibilities of shrinkage must be balanced with the constraints and challenges that come with declining populations, like institutional path dependencies, financial burdens, or populist movements challenging liberal democracy. We thus advocate for viewing demographic shrinkage as a value-neutral condition of urban development in the first place; a context that bears both challenges and potentials.

In the light of increasing polarization of spatial developments, with shrinking cities on the one hand and congested metropolises on the other, it appears misleading to continue framing growth as success and shrinkage as failure. Rather than relying on such a reductive dichotomy, urban analysis and policy making should foreground the specific challenges and potentials of these divergent pathways of urban development in their own distinctive specificity. Central evaluation criteria should include the quality of life and well-being of residents, with adequate provision and accessibility of public services, urban infrastructure, and housing, as well as ecological aspects, like land use and resource consumption (Knippschild et al., 2025).

Alongside this critical reassessment of quantitative demographic and economic indicators as measures of urban success, an integration of growth and shrinkage is needed at both the analytical and policy levels (Knippschild et al., 2024). Currently, debates on urban development pathways remain largely isolated, as seen in the disconnect of discussions regarding national housing policies across Europe: On the one hand, the severe lack of affordable housing in growing metropolitan areas has become an increasingly urgent problem; on the other hand, high numbers of vacant and abandoned buildings characterize shrinking communities, sometimes located in the direct hinterland of these congested metropolises. Both situations—congestion in growing cities and vacancy and abandonment in shrinking ones—are predominantly treated separately. Coordinated, overarching data collection and evaluation, alongside planning and policy interventions, could help foster a more balanced socio-spatial distribution of housing resources. Instead, in shrinking places, buildings continue to be demolished, with negative consequences for cultural heritage and natural and anthropogenic resources (Warda et al., 2025), while limited availability of land, restricted planning resources, and escalating costs of construction reduce the ability to accommodate new construction in growing areas and to keep up with the demand. This is one striking example to highlight the persistent misalignment between contemporary urban development dynamics and policy responses.

Moving beyond growth-centered planning paradigms would allow the underlying development conditions in both growing and shrinking cities to be addressed more strategically and holistically. Such a shift in perspective forms the basis for a value-neutral assessment of the distinct potentials urban shrinkage holds for a high quality of life and for urban sustainability transitions. Translating these potentials into urban planning and policy requires coordinated, multi-scalar strategies and evidence-based decision-making that remain sensitive to local context conditions.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our colleague Ritu George Kaliden for proofreading this editorial.

## Funding

Publication of this editorial in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Technische Universität Dresden and Cogitatio Press.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## LLMs Disclosure

The authors used LLMs (OpenAI's GPT-4, and DeepL) for minor editing, specifically to refine sentence structure and improve the clarity of the manuscript. All outputs were carefully reviewed and revised by the authors to ensure accuracy and alignment with the intended meaning.

## References

- Bontje, M., de Kraaker, J., & Scholl, C. (Eds.). (2024). Urban shrinkage, degrowth, and sustainability: How do they connect in urban planning? [Thematic issue]. *Urban Planning*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.i315>
- Brill, H., Schemschat, N., Hanhörster, H., Hans, N., Hartig, L., & Ramos Lobato, I. (2026). Negotiating “left-behindness” and migration-related diversity in (new) arrival spaces. *Urban Planning*, 11, 11159. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.11159>
- Ciesiółka, P. (2026). Planning culture and local agents of change: Shaping urban transition in a shrinking Polish city. *Urban Planning*, 11, 11359. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.11359>
- Erhard, F., Mann, S., Socha, E., & Borchard, J. (2026). Shrinkage as an opportunity? Local cultures, power structures, and spaces of possibility in two communities in Lusatia. *Urban Planning*, 11, 11081. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.11081>
- Eurostat. (2021). *Population projections at regional level*. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population\\_projections\\_at\\_regional\\_level](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_projections_at_regional_level)
- Friedrich, K., & Rößler, S. (2026). Shrinkage and marginalisation in large housing estates: Impacts on atmospheres in public spaces. *Urban Planning*, 11, 11265. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.11265>
- Ghoz, L. (2026). Who matters in residential building reuse? Navigating conflicts and collaborations through stakeholder–issue mapping. *Urban Planning*, 11, Article 11249. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.11249>
- Kajdanek, K. (2026). The reurbanization that never was: Governance challenges in Poland's suburbanizing cities. *Urban Planning*, 11, 10841. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.10841>
- Knippschild, R., Rößler, S., Bräunel, M., Ehrhardt, D., Griesbach, J., Gruhler, K., Jehling, M., Schiller, G., & Zöllter, C. (2025). What (and how) revitalisation of cities and neighbourhoods can contribute to urban sustainability. *disP—The Planning Review*, 61(2), 4–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02513625.2025.2561509>
- Knippschild, R., Rößler, S., Zöllter, C., Behnisch, M., Blum, A., Gruhler, K., Janssen, G., Jehling, M., Schiller, A., Wende, W., & Wolfram, M. (2024). *Revitalisieren statt neu bauen! Regional denken und Wohnraum nachhaltig schaffen* (IÖR Policy Paper I/24). IÖR. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13770061>
- Knoop, B. (2026). *Urbanität in geschrumpften Städten? Zur stadtgesellschaftlichen Potenzialität der Leere* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. TU Dresden.
- Kühn, M. (2015). Peripheralization: Theoretical concepts explaining socio-spatial inequalities. *European Planning Studies*, 23(2), 367–378. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2013.862518>
- Mallach, A., Wolff, M., & Haase, A. (2026). Not just shrinkage: Left-behind places, the polycrisis, and populist politics. *Urban Planning*, 11, 11887. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.11887>
- Orhan, C., & Prenzel, P. (2026). Declining opportunities? Perceptions of housing market risk in shrinking cities. *Urban Planning*, 11, 11077. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.11077>

- Pike, A., Béal, V., Cauchi-Duval, N., Franklin, R., Kinossian, N., Lang, T., Leibert, T., MacKinnon, D., Rousseau, M., Royer, J., Servillo, L., Tomaney, J., & Velthuis, S. (2023). 'Left behind places': A geographical etymology. *Regional Studies*, 58(6), 1167–1179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2023.2167972>
- Saviaro, A., Hirvonen-Kantola, S., & Hentilä, H.-L. (2026). Planning approaches liaised with justification and relation to growth: Missing link in the shrinkage context? *Urban Planning*, 11, 10944. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.10944>
- Szymczyk, E., Bukowski, M., & Tomski, A. (2026). Does compactness matter? Comparative study of medium-sized shrinking cities' compactness in Germany and Poland. *Urban Planning*, 11, 11075. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.11075>
- Warda, J., Schiller, G., & Knippschild, R. (2025). Heritage in a circular economy: Integrating conservation, resource management, and community engagement. *Urban Planning*, 10, 10750. <https://doi.org/10.17645/up.10750>

## About the Authors



**Bettina Knoop** is a geographer and works at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Transformative Urban Regeneration (IZS) in Görlitz via TU Dresden (IHI Zittau). In 2025, she successfully defended her doctoral thesis on the production of urbanity in shrinking cities. A focus of her research is on social meanings of urban voids in contexts of shrinkage and peripheralization.



**Robert Knippschild** is a spatial planner and since 2016 head of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Transformative Urban Regeneration (IZS) in Görlitz, which is a joint unit of the Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development and TU Dresden (IHI Zittau), where he is a university professor. His research interests focus on revitalisation of shrinking cities as well as urban and regional transformation processes.