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EDITORIAL

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

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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.

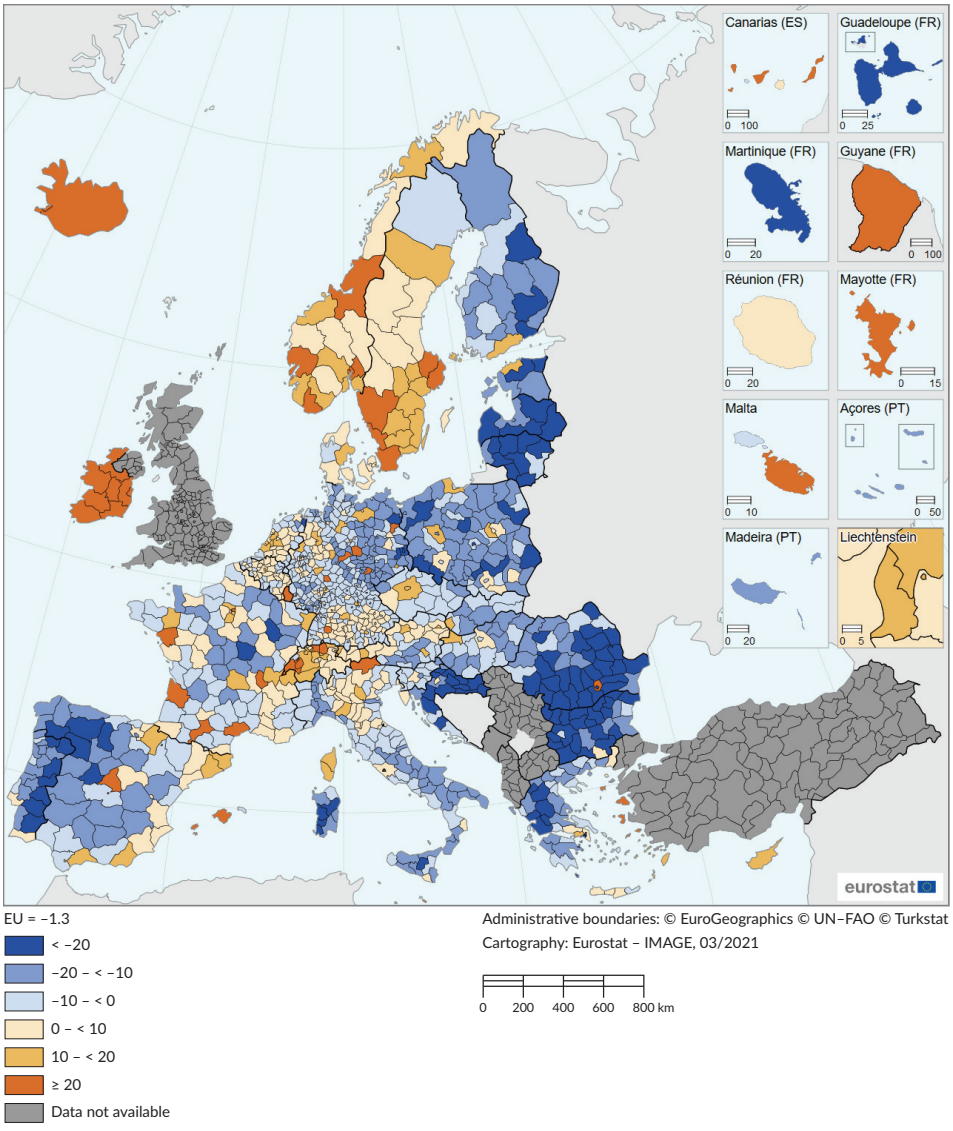

Figure 1. Projected relative change of the population in Europe, by NUTS 3 regions, 2019–2050 (%). Source: Eurostat (2021).

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 Ghoz (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.

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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.

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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.

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ARTICLE

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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 Ostenau 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 Ostenau. 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 Ostenau. 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 Ostenau 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 Ostenau 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 Ostenau 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 Ostenau. 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 Ostenau. 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 Ostenau.

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 Ostenau 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 Ostenau 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 Ostenau 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. Ostenau 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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None.

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ARTICLE

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Declining Opportunities? Perceptions of Housing Market Risk in Shrinking Cities

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Abstract

Housing in shrinking cities may be evaluated ambiguously: While it is often affordable and available, which encourages real estate investment, it may also be associated with specific financial and personal risks. A central determinant of who invests in housing and where may be perceptions and evaluations of homeownership, particularly in contexts of urban shrinkage. In this article, we investigate the perceptions of housing in shaping homeownership in shrinking cities and how these may transform patterns of real estate investment. Based on semi-structured interviews in six case cities in the Baltic Sea Region—Alytus and Šiauliai (Lithuania), Salo and Kouvola (Finland), Neubrandenburg and Frankfurt (Oder) (Germany)—this research examines evaluations of the housing market in terms of risk, uncertainty, and opportunity for different actor groups and considers the role of spatial and economic characteristics and institutional settings. The findings illustrate that housing markets in shrinking cities are characterised by substantial heterogeneity, implying that submarkets may be profitable in certain locations and for certain investors. Moreover, property investment decisions of owner-occupiers and investors may be affected by different types of risk and uncertainty. Experiences of urban decline and its effect on the perceived security of housing may thus reduce the expectation of wealth accumulation via homeownership. These issues hold implications for (spatial) inequalities and illustrate that the relevance of housing policy for shrinking cities goes far beyond providing adequate shelter but rather relates to broader questions of economic welfare and regional disparities.

Keywords

Baltic Sea Region; Finland; Germany; homeownership; Lithuania; perception; risk; shrinking cities

1. Introduction

Urban shrinkage is an increasingly common phenomenon, impacting and transforming cities globally (Richardson & Nam, 2014). Shrinking cities, characterised by population loss and often economic decline, are associated with a range of interrelated processes, including deindustrialisation, increasing suburbanisation, broader demographic change, and societal or political transformation (Döringer et al., 2020; Haase, Bernt, et al., 2016; Hartt, 2018; Reckien & Martinez-Fernandez, 2011). Beyond demographic and economic implications, consequences of urban shrinkage are also observable in the built environment, including phenomena of widespread vacancy or abandonment, delayed renovations, and decaying infrastructure. These effects hold specific relevance for real estate markets in shrinking cities, which may be confronted with falling property values, shifts in financial accessibility and investment capabilities, and changes in the housing careers of individuals (Ferreira et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025; Xie et al., 2024).

These trends have ambiguous effects on the perceived value of residential real estate: On the one hand, housing in shrinking cities may be more affordable than in growing cities due to excess supply. On the other hand, owning real estate in shrinking cities may hold specific risks, which can discourage investments. For instance, while homeownership serves as a mechanism to maintain wealth and hedge against inflation (e.g., Malmendier & Wellsjo, 2024), this function of property ownership may be evaluated differently in shrinking cities. Since housing is fundamentally entwined with investors' and households' wealth (e.g., Torgersen, 1987), these issues are closely related to socio-economic welfare as well as questions of inequality, vulnerability, and housing precarity in shrinking cities. Moreover, these dynamics hold consequences not only for individual households' living conditions but also for cities' future development prospects, socio-economic structures, and planning policy. At the same time, both urban shrinkage and homeownership are characterised by spatial and institutional heterogeneity as well as a significant degree of uncertainty. As a result, a central element of investment decisions in the housing market may be perceptions, i.e., the economic and normative evaluations of possible future costs and benefits, of risks and opportunities. Thus, in this article, we examine the role of differences in perception in moderating homeownership in shrinking cities. More specifically, we investigate perceptions of housing market risks, opportunities, and uncertainties among different actors and in different regional and institutional contexts and how they may shape patterns of homeownership in shrinking cities.

The Baltic Sea Region, which refers to the countries neighbouring the Baltic Sea (European Commission, 2009), emerges as a particularly relevant research area for these questions. On the one hand, the region has experienced a large degree of urban shrinkage but is characterised by significant economic, demographic, and institutional variety. On the other hand, urban shrinkage in the Baltic Sea Region is in some countries embedded in processes of post-socialist transformation, which raises context-specific issues (Haase, Rink, & Grossmann, 2016) and offers relevant perspectives relating particularly to the tension between housing affordability, housing market privatisation, and economic welfare. Although the crucial role of housing and homeownership in market practices, welfare policies, and politics is widely acknowledged (see Doling & Elsinga, 2013; Kohl, 2017), the existing literature focuses on primary markets and cities, often at macroeconomic scales. However, shrinking cities may hold both unique challenges and opportunities for participants in the real estate market (Kiviaho & Toivonen, 2023). Moreover, considering that investment decisions may be subject to behavioural biases and non-financial motives for various real estate actors (Salzman & Zwinkels, 2017), expectations and perceptions regarding value, risk, and opportunities of

homeownership may interact with shrinkage processes and vary with institutional frameworks. Thus, this article contributes to the literature by highlighting the issue of perception in shaping homeownership in shrinking cities and considering implications for questions of inequality and housing policy in the region. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of expert interviews in six shrinking cities in Germany, Lithuania, and Finland, we offer a comparative perspective, which allows insights into the role of various actors, spatial and economic conditions, as well as institutional factors.

This article proceeds as follows: First, the theoretical background structuring homeownership in shrinking cities and the relevance of perceptions are discussed, drawing on literature from housing studies. Second, the case areas are introduced before, third, presenting results. The final section discusses these results and offers concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Homeownership, Housing Wealth, and Financialisation

Housing, which encompasses all forms of residential real estate, is a central function within cities and a fundamental determinant of households' living conditions, with its role extending far beyond the aspect of physical shelter (Doling & Ronald, 2010). Housing is both a consumption and an investment tool that is "fixed in space" (Hårsman & Quigley, 1991, p. 2) and holds economic and cultural meaning. With the relevance of residential real estate as an asset class steadily growing, it is not only a source of household wealth but also embedded more broadly in a context of increasing (global) financialisation involving various actors beyond private homeowners (e.g., Aalbers, 2017; Ronald & Dewilde, 2017). *Homeownership* thus refers to the legal status of owning residential real estate, which can apply to households but also other legal entities (e.g., real estate companies). In contrast, *owner-occupiers* are households owning the housing that they themselves reside in.

From a household perspective, homeownership can secure housing long-term and allows participation in the economic benefits of increasing property values. It can also represent a significant step in household or family formation and evolving housing careers (e.g., Skobba, 2023). But beyond individual relevance, homeownership plays a vital role in broader national welfare systems and policy (Forrest et al., 1990). The notion of *asset-based welfare* refers to the principle that households invest in financial assets and property to ensure their future income needs (e.g., in retirement) and prevent poverty rather than relying on state support (e.g., Doling & Ronald, 2010; Ronald & Dewilde, 2017). Housing, as an asset, acts as a reservoir for accumulated savings in the form of equity, which can be liquidated to maintain or enhance living standards (e.g., Forrest, 2021). Even without selling a property, owners can consume part of their equity, e.g., through mortgages, but may also engage in intergenerational wealth transfer through inheritance (Toussaint, 2011). Moreover, homeownership can serve to decouple housing costs from contemporary income (e.g., in case of retirement or unemployment) or protect from increasing rents, thus complementing or substituting other forms of social security.

More generally, housing is a vehicle for deriving profit, particularly under expectations of continuing property price increases. It is promoted through policies (e.g., accessible credit conditions or subsidies) to support household welfare, but also to capitalise the housing market and ensure provision of housing supply. Thus, besides individual owner-occupiers, relevant market actors also include individual and institutional

investors, financial institutions, as well as regional and national governments. Furthermore, real estate practices are reshaped within the broader context of market transformation and the reconfiguration of policy frameworks under neoliberal market approaches, including increasing privatisation and financialisation (Aalbers, 2017), also leading to increasing speculation and landlordism (Ronald et al., 2017). The impact of transformations in the housing market and housing policy is particularly visible in the context of Central-East European cities, which simultaneously experienced fundamental political and economic restructuring (Bernt et al., 2017; Haase, Rink, & Grossmann, 2016; Pichler-Milanovich, 1994).

However, an underlying assumption and requirement for both asset-based welfare as well as broader discourses of financialisation in the housing market is a general trend of property prices steadily increasing and outpacing inflation rates. With a considerable amount of private wealth contained in housing assets, declining housing values or market crashes pose substantial risk for individuals and economies. Although the literature on homeownership acknowledges this, e.g., in the context of recent financial crises (Forrest, 2021; Toussaint, 2011), the consequences of geographic heterogeneity of local housing markets (e.g., Dörry & Handke, 2012; Martin, 2011) are often overlooked. At the same time, housing markets are shaped by and embedded in place-specific characteristics and perform heterogeneously nationally and locally. In particular, shrinking cities represent a sub-market of real estate where assumptions of increasing property prices may be uncertain, challenged, or empirically rejected. This raises questions on how homeownership and asset-based welfare are perceived and evaluated in these contexts.

2.2. Housing in Shrinking Cities

Shrinking cities experience population and economic decline, which can affect the built environment, the material housing stock, and its valuation. Whereas housing supply can be expanded relatively quickly, it contracts slowly, meaning that an oversupply due to reduced demand is expected to lead to falling housing prices (Glaeser & Gyourko, 2005). Thus, shrinking cities may experience increased vacancy, decreasing property prices, as well as delayed renovation and decaying or abandoned buildings (Haase, Bernt, et al., 2016; Kiviaho & Toivonen, 2023; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012). Population decline and vacancy may also negatively affect entire neighbourhoods, e.g., through negative effects on social and technical infrastructure, which can in turn decrease desirability and support further depopulation (Glock & Häußermann, 2004). It should be noted that demand reductions due to population loss could partially be offset by decreasing household size in some contexts (Hartt & Hackworth, 2020) but may also lead to changes in cities' demographic structure and corresponding shifts in demand for specific types of housing (e.g., by age group). The negative effect of population decline on real estate prices is well established in the theoretical and empirical literature and demonstrated in various geographic contexts (Glaeser & Gyourko, 2005; Hollander & Hartt, 2019; Maennig & Dust, 2008; Uto et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2024).

Considering the role of homeownership for household wealth, two types of consequences of (actual or anticipated) falling house prices in shrinking cities emerge. First, homeownership becomes more affordable. Reduced costs of housing could benefit households whether as owner-occupiers or tenants. Especially for low-income groups or young people, buying property in a relatively affordable area could represent a possibility to get on the property ladder and attain housing security. Similarly, investors may be attracted to property in shrinking cities if they consider it undervalued. However, second, if prices are expected to fall, property may become a financial burden. If a significant portion of household wealth is tied up in the

housing market, vulnerabilities to market crashes and fluctuations emerge, which could undermine the benefits of asset-based welfare by preventing households from recouping and eventually consuming their investment (e.g., Kennett et al., 2013; Ronald & Dewilde, 2017). Even if equity is reduced by falling property prices, homeowners remain responsible for running costs, taxes, and renovations, and may finally not be able to afford exiting the market. Suzuki and Asami (2019) argue for the case of Japan's peripheral cities that property values may effectively become negative if abandonment is costly. Moreover, even if prices are not (currently) falling, negative perceptions of housing in shrinking cities could make it difficult for individual owners to find interested buyers. Without the option to re-sell their houses, owner-occupiers may be "locked-in," i.e., unable to move (e.g., Chan, 2001), and landlords may have to continue letting out their property (even at a loss). Hence, Kiviaho and Toivonen (2023) argue for the case of Finland that households may avoid risky real estate markets by instead developing preferences for rental housing.

Patterns of vacancy, urban decay, and the consequences for city development also hold implications for planning and policy in shrinking cities, e.g., in the context of demolition and new urban development programmes (Bernt, 2019; Gao et al., 2023). To address oversupply, demolition is a prevalent but complex approach, involving a variety of stakeholders, including real estate management companies, developers, financial actors, policymakers, and current residents. Real estate companies may consolidate tenants from partially inhabited buildings to increase occupancy, while privately-owned residential stock is more challenging to demolish in the context of policy and practice (Gao et al., 2023). At the same time, housing policy takes place in and interacts with the general context of a financialised housing regime, whether in the case of privatisation in post-socialist economies (e.g., Bernt et al., 2017) or, as Fernandez and Hartt (2022) describe for the case of Spain, within growth-oriented strategies leading to housing expansion despite tendencies of population shrinkage. More generally, it should be noted that financial interests shape housing developments not only in growing cities but also in contexts of urban decline. Besides motives of private and commercial real estate investors, this also emerges clearly in the mortgage system and the relevance of loan conditions that may restrict access to capital (e.g., Forrest, 2021).

2.3. Perceptions of Housing in Shrinking Cities

Residential real estate has functions of shelter but also wealth accumulation and saving, which are used by private households and investors. However, these functions are constrained by the characteristics of local housing markets, with shrinking cities representing both challenges and opportunities. A central determinant of investment decisions in the housing market in a shrinking city therefore corresponds to actors' perceptions, evaluations, and expectations regarding future developments, costs, and benefits. This includes, fundamentally, judgment on risks, dealing with uncertainty, and seeking opportunity. Following Knight (1921), we understand risk to describe situations with specific outcomes and measurable probabilities, whereas uncertainty is not measurable. Although the concepts of risk and uncertainty can theoretically also apply to beneficial changes and events, they usually carry a negative connotation. To capture perceptions on positive outcomes explicitly, we include the notion of opportunity, which refers to the possibility of a desirable change or state. Opportunities feature prominently in the entrepreneurship literature besides concepts of risk and uncertainty, and can be conceptualised not only objectively but also with subjective components (e.g., McMullen et al., 2007). We are considering these concepts in the context of homeownership here, with risk and opportunity corresponding more closely to the financial and market-based aspects of an investment decision. Uncertainty, in contrast, may relate to more subjective or

emotional evaluations of (in)security. For instance, Colic-Peisker and Johnson (2010) analyse homeownership using the concept of "ontological security," the absence of which can lead to feelings of anxiety and fear.

Considering the relationship between housing demand and property prices, housing decisions in shrinking cities may inherently hold more risk and uncertainty than in strongly growing areas where demand is steadily outpacing supply. Nevertheless, and despite these challenges, the affordability of housing in shrinking cities may also make opportunities worthwhile. Thus, the evaluation of the housing market in a shrinking city may depend on perceptions of the degrees of risk and uncertainty but also of opportunities. Although perceptions (of housing markets in shrinking cities) are formed subjectively at the individual level, common patterns may be discerned depending on actors' characteristics and the spatial, economic, and institutional settings that they are embedded in (Figure 1). Different types of real estate actors (e.g., owner-occupiers, individual investors, private real estate companies, and semi-public or public real estate companies) engage with housing markets for different motives and with varying strategies and risk appetites, which may be more or less suitable for the context of a shrinking city. Moreover, shrinking cities are heterogeneous and offer different spatial and economic characteristics, which may influence how housing investment is perceived. Institutions, i.e., the formal and informal rules governing actors' behaviour and interaction (North, 1992), may encourage or hinder real estate investment in shrinking cities. This includes formal institutions, such as legal or administrative rules and policies, but also informal societal norms or values associated with homeownership. Of course, in forming perceptions of housing in shrinking cities, these three dimensions (actor characteristics, spatial and economic conditions, and institutional settings) operate jointly and interactively: For instance, particular institutions may offset or bolster specific economic circumstances, which, in turn, may attract actors with specific features or create hurdles for others. In the following, we investigate, using six case studies in the Baltic Sea Region, how perceptions of housing investments in shrinking cities are constituted for different actors, in different spatial, economic, and institutional settings.

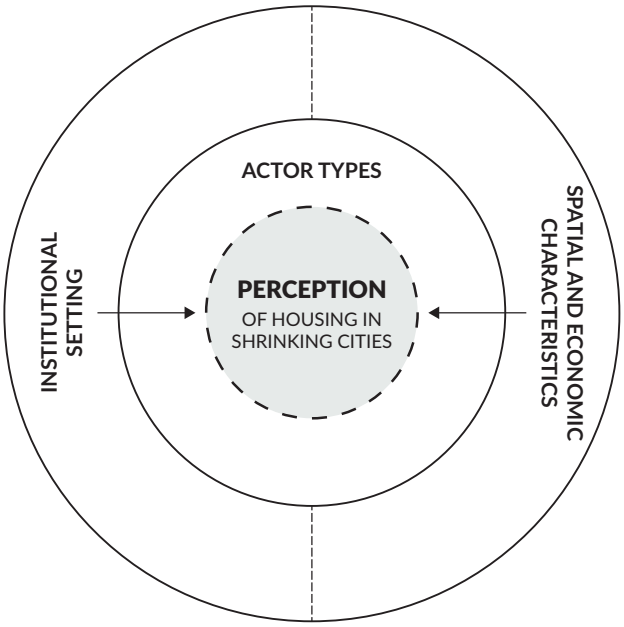

Figure 1. Theoretical framework of dimensions affecting perceptions of housing in shrinking cities.

3. Case Description and Method

Although the Baltic Sea Region exhibits various patterns of urbanisation, population structures, and economic growth (VASAB, 2016), many cities in the region experienced sharp population decline, especially following the fall of the Iron Curtain. Therefore, the region provides an economically and geographically diverse setting for comparative studies. We focus on three countries in the Baltic Sea Region: Germany, Finland, and Lithuania. Although these countries share characteristics regarding urban shrinkage processes, they differ markedly in terms of their housing practices (Krapp et al., 2022). Germany has the lowest homeownership rates in Europe, making it a "nation of renters" with only 41% owner-occupiers (Federal Statistical Office of Germany, 2022). Contrarily, homeownership is the norm in Lithuania, with owner-occupancy rates of approximately 79% (State Data Agency of Lithuania, 2022). In contrast, homeownership in Finland is moderate and slowly decreasing, falling from 65% in 2011 to 61% in 2021 (Statistics Finland, 2024).

Cases were identified following a systematic comparison of population development at the scale of local area units (LAU). Besides significant population loss since 2001, the selection of cases was based on economic conditions, including specific crises or turning points. For the comparative analysis, a secondary criterion was for cases to offer heterogeneous economic trajectories, with both stronger and weaker economic growth represented. Two case cities were selected per country: Alytus and Šiauliai in Lithuania, Salo and Kouvola in Finland, and Neubrandenburg and Frankfurt (Oder) in Germany (Figure 2). Table 1 shows demographic statistics for the case cities, and Table 2 presents indicators of economic conditions and the physical housing stock.

Salo is located between two important regional hubs (Helsinki and Turku) and was one of the first manufacturing locations for Nokia. The city suffered an economic shock when the Nokia plant shut down in 2012, resulting in unemployment temporarily rising to 18% in 2016. Whereas population had previously been growing, Salo began experiencing outmigration and urban decline. In contrast, Kouvola was a centre for paper milling in the region but has been experiencing economic transformation and continuous population decline already since the mid-90s. Although GDP per capita has increased, unemployment remains relatively high, and the suspension of the railway connection to Russia in 2022 poses new challenges. Owner-occupation rates in Salo (69%) and Kouvola (72%) remain high in national comparison but are falling, while vacancy rates have been increasing since 2011.

Alytus is located in southern Lithuania, in a region with no railway infrastructure. It was a growing industrial centre in the 20th century, but has suffered consistent population loss since the dissolution of the Soviet Union: Population declined by over 26% between 2001 and 2021. Compared to Alytus, Šiauliai has geographic and economic advantages. For instance, it accommodates a large aircraft maintenance centre, a NATO military base, and benefits from comparatively well-developed infrastructure. Nevertheless, Šiauliai has experienced ongoing urban shrinkage. Both cities share similar housing developments: Prefabricated apartment buildings, constructed during the Soviet era, dominate the city centres, while the outskirts consist of detached single-family houses. Despite severe population shrinkage, the owner-occupation rate in 2021 is slightly above the national average in Alytus (81%) and Šiauliai (82%), and vacancy rates are lower.

Figure 2. Case cities.

Table 1. Population size and growth rates of case cities.

Name	Population			Population change (%)	
	2001	2011	2021	2001–2021	2011–2021
Finland	5,194,901	5,401,267	5,548,241	6.8	2.7
Salo	52,852	55,283	51,400	−2.7	−7.0
Kouvola	91,226	87,567	80,454	−11.8	−8.1
Lithuania	3,486,998	3,052,588	2,810,761	−19.4	−7.9
Alytus	71,460	60,302	52,727	−26.2	−12.6
Šiauliai	134,032	109,748	100,653	−24.9	−8.3
Germany	82,440,312	80,327,904	83,237,120	1.0	3.6
Neubrandenburg	71,723	64,027	63,043	−12.1	−1.5
Frankfurt (Oder)	70,308	59,063	56,679	−19.4	−4.0

Sources: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (2025); State Data Agency of Lithuania (2025); Statistics Finland (2025).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for case cities.

	Dwellings per capita	% Owner-occupied	% Vacant	GDP (€)	Unemployment (%)	Dwellings per capita	% Owner-occupied	% Vacant	GDP (€)	Unemployment (%)
	2011					2021				
Finland	0.520	65.5	9.6	30,400	9.9	0.563	61.7	11.4	36,200	10.4
Salo	0.527	70.2	10.0	28,100	11.9	0.578	69.1	12.1	33,200	10.6
Kouvola	0.547	74.5	8.8	26,400	12.5	0.602	72.0	10.9	34,600	12.0
Lithuania	0.448	79.9	14.5	16,900	13.1	0.511	77.1	15.6	29,300	13.0
Alytus	0.431	82.7	11.8	11,200	15.3	0.502	80.8	10.5	16,800	13.2
Šiauliai	0.472	80.8	13.2	12,800	10.7	0.511	81.6	11.5	21,700	10.0
Germany	0.506	45.9	4.4	31,700	4.0	0.518	44.3	4.3	39,900	2.8
Neubrandenburg	0.584	19.2	4.2	21,400	12.2	0.594	20.0	4.1	27,500	9.6
Frankfurt (Oder)	0.591	19.7	8.2	33,900	11.3	0.593	21.4	6.3	37,200	6.7

Note: GDP per capita in purchasing power standard by corresponding NUTS 3 region. Sources: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (2025); Eurostat (2025a, 2025b); Federal Statistical Office of Germany (2022); State Data Agency of Lithuania (2022, 2023); Statistics Finland (2023, 2024).

Neubrandenburg and Frankfurt (Oder) have experienced urban shrinkage since the reunification of Germany in 1990, but the rate of population loss has been falling recently. Both cities remain characterised by high unemployment in national comparison. Frankfurt (Oder) has geographical advantages over Neubrandenburg, as it borders the Polish city of Słubice and can be reached from Berlin within an hour via a well-developed transport network. The volume of population loss has nevertheless been slightly higher than in Neubrandenburg, which was an industrialised city and one of the military bases in the German Democratic Republic. Although renting is the dominant tenure type in Germany, Neubrandenburg and Frankfurt (Oder) nevertheless stand out with very low owner-occupation rates of 20% and 21.4% respectively in 2021. Vacancy has increased slightly in Neubrandenburg since 2011, although it is lower than in Frankfurt (Oder) and in all other case cities.

From October 2024 to April 2025, 28 semi-structured expert interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately one hour. Interviews were mostly held face-to-face and in English, although two interviews were conducted as written statements in German and subsequently translated. Interviewees were selected based on professional background and expertise from three sectors per country (Table 3). Finnish respondents are slightly overrepresented in the sample, but since all sectors are well represented per country and the data are derived from extensive expert interviews, this is unlikely to be of concern. The first expert category consists of actors in the real estate market, including private real estate companies (investment, management, and development), semi-public real estate companies, and real estate associations. The second category comprises governmental bodies (policymakers and administrators in local and national governments). The third category represents researchers specialising in local housing markets and shrinking cities.

Table 3. Overview of interviews.

Sector	Expert Category	Finland	Lithuania	Germany	Total
Real estate market	Private companies	2	2	2	6
	Semi-public companies	3	–	1	4
	Associations	2	–	–	2
Government	Policymakers	3	2	1	6
	Administration	1	1	1	3
Research	Researchers	3	3	1	7

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using qualitative content analysis following Kuckartz (2014). The procedure included category development, iterative coding, category refinement, and thematic synthesis using software (MAXQDA). The coding process was a hybrid approach, utilising both deductive and inductive categories. This approach allows for a theory-driven structure while remaining open to new insights based on the participants' viewpoints (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). We deductively developed parent categories—namely actors, institutional settings, and spatial and economic characteristics—based on our theoretical framework, and traced each category in the concept of perceptions of housing in shrinking cities (risk, uncertainty, and opportunity) within a matrix. The subcategories ultimately evolved inductively from the data through the iterative coding process.

4. Perceptions of the Housing Market in Shrinking Cities

4.1. Perspectives of Different Actor Types

Real estate in shrinking cities, as well as its risks, uncertainties, and opportunities, may be evaluated differently by different types of actors. In the following, we distinguish four types of actors, who may consider buying a house in a shrinking city: private real estate companies, individual investors, semi-public real estate companies, and owner-occupiers.

The dominant factor in how real estate companies evaluate housing relates to financial risk. Private real estate companies are profit-oriented actors, who evaluate housing opportunities on this basis. Although the threat of falling house prices may limit profitability, shrinking cities in the Baltic Sea Region may sometimes still be considered valuable investment locations. In particular, despite population decline and uncertainties, the housing markets in shrinking cities in Eastern Germany have presented opportunities for companies since the market collapsed following reunification. As Bernt et al. (2017) describe, a combination of state-mandated quick privatisation that was largely not taken up by owner-occupiers, falling property prices, and, partially, insolvencies, provided profitable conditions for real estate funds and equity trusts. Investors were able to purchase cheap housing units, mostly prefabricated apartment blocks (*Plattenbauten*) that were often in need of physical and social improvements. Although prices have recovered somewhat, the interviewed real estate companies continue to see ample opportunities for profit in Eastern German cities, regardless of population shrinkage:

> We don't fear areas experiencing decline. We have never feared cities with shrinking or decreasing populations, because we viewed that as a challenge and an opportunity to buy property in these areas

> and to develop it in collaboration with authorities or joint venture partners. We aren't afraid of them and will invest there when necessary or if an opportunity arises. (Board member at a real estate investment company, Germany)

Thus, investment companies may view housing in shrinking cities as profit opportunities, particularly if they are able to shape conditions in cooperation with local partners. In these cases, urban decline is not to be feared but may, by these actors, be viewed as a chance or a challenge. However, this positive evaluation may not extend to other geographic contexts, as real estate companies in Lithuania and Finland express more caution:

> We are talking about financial risk, plain and simple. It is not attractive. You could invest the same money in Vilnius or Kaunas and get your return faster with lower risk and fewer headaches than in those smaller cities. (Director of a real estate company, Lithuania)

> Finnish and international institutional investors are playing only in these larger cities. So, they are leaving these smaller cities, for example Salo, to other types of investors, like private or bigger local investors. And I think international real estate institutions are looking even wider. They see too much risk in falling prices. So, they are avoiding investing in these areas. (Manager at a housing association, Finland)

Both quotes illustrate that real estate companies in Lithuania and Finland make comparative judgments on where to invest in the housing market. Since investing in shrinking cities inherently holds more instability, companies require a corresponding risk premium, i.e., larger expected profit, as compensation. Although prices in shrinking cities may be low and could be increasing in the future, they may not promise sufficient profits to compensate for higher risk. Thus, if the market does not offer high risk premia and investors are able to take their pick due to excess housing supply, they are likely to choose lower-risk locations with similar expected profits outside of shrinking cities.

Besides real estate investment companies, individual investors are also relevant actors. In comparison to larger companies, they are at a structural disadvantage since they cannot diversify risk of housing investments as effectively. However, while institutional investors are described as avoiding shrinking cities in Finland and Lithuania, the interviews suggest a relevance of individual investors in all case cities:

> Big investors, they are not that interested in shrinking cities. They are a bit careful. Then we have the "leather jacket investors." These are the wealthy individuals who live in the shrinking cities. So, there are some individuals who have some money and they can make investments there….They can make feasible investments. (Researcher, Finland)

Investors are described as courageous individuals with a higher risk appetite or access to superior information allowing them to identify profitable opportunities. The interviews suggest that a deep understanding and knowledge of the local market helps these investors to navigate risk and uncertainty in shrinking cities, often because they live or have lived there themselves. This distinguishes private investors from institutional investors since their housing investment may depend less on objective financial risk and more on personal evaluation of the uncertainty and opportunities.

State-owned and semi-public housing companies have various roles, including property management and affordable housing development. Although these actors are less interested in selling property for profit, they are dependent on housing market perceptions, e.g., by creditors. This was mentioned for the case of Finland where semi-public housing companies face difficulties in accessing financial resources, particularly for upgrading and renovation projects. With low or decreasing property values, it becomes challenging to use property as collateral for mortgages. Thus, creditors are reluctant to lend to semi-public companies seeking financial resources for renovations in shrinking cities. An interviewed manager at a real estate federation in Finland described that semi-public housing companies face high costs of renovation in Salo but can only access loans that cover a part of the expenses. As a result, building owners may delay or avoid renovations or pass on the financial burden to tenants. This example illustrates two inherent issues of house price risk in shrinking cities: On the one hand, the inability to access loans may lead to a deterioration of the housing stock, which can lead to further vacancy and property price decreases. On the other hand, part of this risk may be borne not by the owners of the property but by tenants, who do not participate in the buildings' equity.

The last group of actors is the one that is most central to perspectives of asset-based welfare: owner-occupiers. The same financial risks that have been discussed for the other actors apply to owner-occupiers, but this group also experiences housing market dynamics differently from institutional or private investors. Indeed, the interviews showed that housing is not only a financial tool but a symbol of security and shelter for owner-occupiers in shrinking cities, regardless of its financial relevance. However, in comparison to private or semi-public real estate companies, a decline in housing prices also directly impacts the wealth accumulation of a homeowning household:

> Finns traditionally prefer to own their apartments rather than live in rented ones. However, that has slowly been changing, especially here in Kouvola, where prices have not increased. In fact, they are decreasing. So, the old rules do not apply here anymore. I have heard young people say that buying a home here is financial suicide unless you are sure you will live here for the next 30 years. But if you know it is only temporary and you will be moving soon, you are just losing money. (City official, Finland)

This quote emphasises that house price decreases can have serious consequences for households' welfare, which the interviewee describes as "financial suicide." Although a wealth effect of price decreases also applies for individual investors, owner-occupiers are further faced with specific issues stemming from the fact that their investment is simultaneously their home. Moreover, decreasing or low house prices restrict mobility because houses may need to be sold at a loss or their value is not high enough to secure housing in another location. This is particularly evident in Lithuania, where very high rates of owner-occupation are the norm, and the rental market is correspondingly limited. Despite house prices currently not decreasing in the Lithuanian case cities, the rental market in shrinking cities was described in an expert interview as "frozen." A shortage of rental properties coupled with a slow housing market implies that moving becomes very costly. It should be noted that this can be problematic even if house prices in shrinking cities are stable or increasing slowly, but it becomes more severe if property values are in fact decreasing. In poor market conditions, households can become "locked-in," i.e., unable to migrate, upgrade, or downsize their current homes because their wealth accumulation would melt down. In this sense, homeowners need to be certain of their long-term plans before acquiring real estate. Thus, in addition to financial risk, uncertainty, e.g., on future preferences or life plans, becomes an obstacle to homeownership in shrinking cities.

Besides consequences for personal wealth, decreasing house prices also undermine possibilities of intergenerational wealth transfer. Moreover, in some cases, inherited property can become a burden, e.g., in the form of maintenance costs and taxes. Rather than building wealth for later consumption or to bequeath to others (as the concept of asset-based welfare suggests), homeownership in shrinking cities may have limited or even negative welfare effects. Similar to the results of Colic-Peisker and Johnson (2010) for Australia, the low housing demand and threat of falling prices in shrinking cities in the Baltic Sea Region could imply that homeownership, rather than providing security, may itself become a source of anxiety. More generally, the interviews show that the perception of housing as financially risky, insecure, or as a financial burden is a relatively new phenomenon. Whereas housing used to be seen as a valuable and secure investment in all cities, recent experience of urban shrinkage has introduced a different perspective. This shift, in turn, interacts with housing practices of younger generations as well as societies' broader norms and values around homeownership.

4.2. The Role of Spatial and Economic Characteristics

The perception of the housing market is also determined by the spatial and economic characteristics of the city. Indeed, perception highly depends on micro and macro locations, as well as industrial capacity, employment opportunities, and temporary effects of shocks. To assess the risks and opportunities of a specific housing option, it is crucial to examine its location and the surrounding environment. Interviewees particularly emphasise the relevance of micro locations: even one street can make a substantial difference for the evaluation of housing in a shrinking city. In general, central locations of shrinking cities are perceived as financially and socially more attractive and convenient. Reasons for this evaluation are related to the urban form and settlement structure. In Finland, accessibility of public services and social infrastructure varies geographically and is of high concern, which makes central locations more desirable. With urban structure in Lithuania predominantly shaped by urban sprawl and single-family detached houses, surroundings of shrinking cities experience growth. In contrast, urban areas in Germany are more compact with dense urban forms. In line with real estate companies' strategies to invest in A-locations in B-cities and B-locations in A-cities, particularly central locations in German shrinking cities emerge as attractive for the real estate sector. In this sense, while shrinking cities may be viewed as comparatively less attractive investment locations, there is substantial heterogeneity in these assessments.

Regional characteristics, such as location and proximity to cities, also play a key role in determining perceptions of the housing market in shrinking cities. For instance, Frankfurt (Oder) in Germany, Salo in Finland, and Šiauliai in Lithuania differ from the other case cities in terms of their macro-locational characteristics. Salo is located between Turku and Helsinki, two important regional hubs. Šiauliai benefits in its economic relevance from its distance to Riga, Latvia. With a commutable distance of 80 kilometres to Berlin, and in vicinity of the new Tesla Giga Factory, Frankfurt (Oder) also benefits from a comparably advantageous geographic location. These characteristics imply that, while the cities themselves may be shrinking, they are embedded in regional economic networks, which may support current and future economic growth and yield positive impulses for the housing market.

Another spatial and economic characteristic that impacts the perception of the housing market is the industrial capacity and employment opportunities of the cities themselves. Cities that rely heavily on a single industry can experience a significant downturn when that industry shuts down. This is illustrated by the example of the Nokia manufacturing plant in Salo:

> The housing market really collapsed after the closure of the Nokia production facility in 2012. It became nearly impossible to sell large houses, or homes of any size, for that matter. It was a terrible time for people who had taken out bank loans to build huge homes. The market melted down because the unemployment rate soared, and no one wanted to buy a house in Salo. (Housing market expert, Finland)

Similarly, potential future growth in industry and economic investments plays a role in how the housing market in shrinking cities is evaluated. For instance, Šiauliai houses a NATO base, a special economic zone, and is building the region's largest aircraft maintenance centre. Current and future industrial growth expectations imply that the city is a "winner" among other shrinking cities, leading to more favourable evaluations of the housing market by several interviewees:

> I am not sure if I would invest there, but I could. Of all the smaller cities in Lithuania, I would choose Šiauliai. It's just geographic logic. If you could see the growing places and cities in Lithuania, you would see Vilnius, Kaunas, and Klaipeda. They are growing metropolitan cities with airports, universities, and vast suburbs. Šiauliai is in the middle of it all. So, theoretically, Šiauliai has the potential to be a regional city in this area. (Researcher, Lithuania)

> Basically, Šiauliai is probably the only winner in this situation of urban shrinkage. I hate it because I feel bad for the other 59 municipalities that are being taken advantage of. Our interest is in the growth of the city. (City official, Lithuania)

Besides the geographic location and economic prospects, a further factor that should be emphasised as shaping the perception of the housing market in shrinking cities are temporary effects or shocks. Positive or negative external developments may (temporarily) affect the housing market of shrinking cities. In the interviews, refugee inflows from Ukraine were mentioned as a substantial boost for housing demand. In a context of population loss, a sudden increase in population can have substantial effects on demand, vacancy, and the valuation of housing. While these effects could persist, if people stay in the shrinking city in the long term, the impact of exogenous shocks is, by definition, uncertain and volatile:

> We should keep in mind that around 8,000 Ukrainians live in this city. Unofficially, there are more than 10,000. So, I would say that stability is not guaranteed….If the war dynamics change, we could easily lose up to 4,000 citizens living here right now. (City official, Lithuania)

4.3. The Role of Institutional Frameworks

Lastly, the risk, uncertainties, and opportunities of the housing market in shrinking cities depend on the local institutional framework. Different housing regimes fundamentally shape the functioning of the housing market, actors' behaviour, and perceptions. Historically, economic and social structures have developed differently in Finland, Lithuania, and Germany, and the different contexts lead to heterogeneous uncertainties and market risks. Germany is traditionally a nation of renters, whereas Finland and especially Lithuania are nations of homeowners. Depending on the housing regimes, the dominant evaluation and perceptions of housing in shrinking cities may be determined by different actor groups. In renter-dominated settings, real estate investors and housing companies own a larger share of the housing, and their motives and evaluations become central to the housing market in shrinking cities. For instance, while large real estate

companies in Germany may choose to invest in shrinking cities as part of a diversified portfolio, the larger relevance of owner-occupation in Finland and Lithuania implies that a higher share of the market risk of urban shrinkage lies with individual homeowners rather than institutional investors. This, in turn, may hold consequences for how homeownership is perceived, e.g., simply as necessary shelter, or as a rather safe or risky investment.

Indeed, and in line with housing regimes, homeownership may hold different normative value in different contexts. Owning a home, for instance, is the norm in Lithuania. While this is pragmatically also due to the limited rental market restricting opportunities, it is also reflected in tradition and cultural practice:

> There is an old saying in Lithuania: "What should a man do in this life? Planting a tree, raising a son, and building a house." So, it is like a destination for all men. It is a road map for life. (Member of parliament, Lithuania)

As discussed above, normative values may also change over time, and it seems like homeownership in Finland may currently be experiencing a transformation. Owning a home was traditionally a prerequisite for (economic and social) success in Finland, including in shrinking cities. However, with more difficult and insecure economic circumstances and the experience of falling housing prices, homeownership in shrinking cities seems to be evaluated more and more critically. This does not mean that people no longer buy houses in shrinking cities. However, based on the interviewees' statements, when purchasing a home in those regions, one should be genuinely committed to the place regardless of trends of urban shrinkage and potential future house price decreases. While this does not ensure that households will be able to accumulate wealth through their housing investment, it nevertheless offers housing security.

Besides informal institutions, policy support is another institutional factor that shapes perceptions in the housing market of shrinking cities. Especially in Lithuania, interviewees emphasised the national- and local-level financial support for prospective homeowners. For instance, a policy to support young families in buying a home in peripheral regions with excess housing supply was introduced in 2018. Such demand-side housing policy may encourage homeownership, but, in this case, excludes urban centres regardless of whether they are growing or shrinking. Thus, rather than supporting shrinking cities and their residents, such policies could unintentionally bolster trends of suburbanisation. In contrast, housing policy to address population shrinkage in Germany has mostly taken the form of supply-side policy via demolition of vacant and low-quality housing in former East Germany as well as investment in urban development and regeneration programmes. Neither Germany nor Finland currently implements housing policy aimed at increasing homeownership in shrinking cities specifically. Moreover, the effectiveness of such policies to address housing market issues in shrinking cities and their distributional effects remain unclear. For instance, interviewees in Lithuania pointed out that declining population leads to increasing competition among municipalities. Theoretically, and depending on the precise policies implemented, such competition could lead to inefficiencies or further disadvantage municipalities without the financial means to fund subsidies or regeneration policies.

5. Discussion

The empirical results presented here show substantial heterogeneity in how housing markets in shrinking cities are evaluated. Urban shrinkage may pose challenges of vacancy and reduced housing demand, which can depress prices, but owning real estate represents context-specific risks and opportunities. This applies to comparisons across but also within the countries considered here. Depending on spatial and economic characteristics, such as geographic location, the industrial structure, or growth prospects, housing investment may be evaluated as more or less desirable. The evaluations associated with such objective regional characteristics mostly represent perceptions of financial risk and profit opportunities, e.g., relating to expectations on whether the city and housing demand will recover or prosper in the future. However, these objective economic characteristics are entwined with place-based narratives of shrinkage, which also shape perceptions of attractiveness and the inherent value of locations beyond financial markets. For instance, Kouvola, a city described by interviewees as "the most depressed city in Finland," poses not only more financial risk but also more uncertainties than Salo, which is a "regional winner" and benefits from an advantageous geographical location. Similar relative comparisons are evident for Alytus and Šiauliai. Moreover, the relationship between housing market perceptions and urban shrinkage is reciprocal: Uncertain environments and risky housing markets in shrinking cities can accelerate the shrinking process, creating a vicious cycle of negative effects on individuals and the city.

Besides spatial heterogeneity, the results also illustrate more general issues of inequality and spatial justice that emerge with respect to housing markets in shrinking cities. First, it should be noted that even despite uncertainties of housing in shrinking cities, economic benefits and profitable market opportunities may still emerge. However, not everyone is able to bear the risk of investing in shrinking cities and capitalise on these opportunities. For instance, large investment companies that can diversify risk or individual investors with valuable local knowledge may be equipped to navigate the housing market in shrinking cities successfully. This includes strategies of property speculation, i.e., purchase of housing units at bargain prices in anticipation of an eventual increase in asset value. In contrast, owner-occupiers, especially in countries with a thin rental market, where homeownership may be less of an investment decision than a prerequisite for housing, may be more likely to face financial hardship in case of falling property prices. Attitudes towards homeownership may thus be shifting in certain institutional contexts, if societal narratives of the security and stability of homeownership are replaced with a focus on its financial burden. Furthermore, property speculation inflates prices, which may consequently exclude residents from the affordable housing market (e.g., Garriga et al., 2023). This may shift the balance of wealth concentration towards investors and amplify spatial injustice.

Second, even leaving aside profit opportunities, the actual ability to buy property is also unequally distributed. Homeownership in shrinking cities may be hindered by difficulty in accessing mortgages due to low property prices. This is particularly true in Finland and to a lesser extent in Lithuania. Prospective owners may only be able to buy a home with support, whether in the form of housing policy or through intergenerational financial support (e.g., Druta & Ronald, 2018). Although this highlights interpersonal inequalities in the context of property ownership in shrinking cities, it should be noted that this equally applies to growing cities, where high demand prices out individuals with lower incomes from certain locations. In contrast, difficulties in accessing loans required for renovation can lead to inequalities and spatial disparities emerging not only in ownership but in terms of housing quality when comparing growing with shrinking cities. This issue is not restricted to owner-occupiers but also extends to public or semi-public

housing associations, who struggle to secure loans for renovation, leading to tenants living in lower-quality buildings or seeing their rents increase to co-finance these investments. In this sense, our analysis relates to debates on housing precarity, particularly with respect to the ability to secure long-term and adequate housing in local contexts of urban decline (e.g., Pendall et al., 2012).

Third, issues of inequality are also central when considering the role of homeownership in wealth accumulation. Since housing is an asset that is used to sustain welfare, households, especially those living in shrinking cities in Finland, may experience a monetary loss if property prices fall. This may affect households' ability to save for future consumption and impact their current financial well-being (Atalay & Edwards, 2022) as well as their children's: Falling housing prices limit the potential for intergenerational transfer of asset-based wealth and housing security in shrinking cities. Moreover, having wealth tied up in devaluing residential real estate can prevent mobility and impact housing careers, particularly for elderly households for whom house price deflation may threaten livelihood and access to long-term care in retirement (Uto et al., 2023). In this sense, and perhaps unintuitively when focusing on a supposed status quo of population growth and rising prices, housing markets in shrinking cities show that homeownership may not always prevent precarious housing conditions. Crucially, since the described negative effects on wealth and welfare are tied to the valuation of the local housing market, these issues are spatially differentiated. Especially within welfare systems that include asset-based welfare as one form of social security, shrinking cities with falling house prices could therefore systematically see the welfare of their residents decline relative to locations with stable house prices, leading to increasing regional disparities.

These results illustrate that the relevance of housing policy for shrinking cities goes beyond ensuring adequate shelter and is fundamentally related to questions of economic welfare and interpersonal as well as regional inequalities. Policy addressing these issues can take various forms, including regeneration policies and demand- and supply-side interventions. Problems of housing in shrinking cities may be addressed within regional development policies. For instance, policies of local economic development as well as spatial planning are central to shaping the local characteristics and economic outlook, which in turn may determine how housing markets are evaluated. While a negative vicious cycle can link deteriorating housing markets to further shrinkage, there is also potential for positive feedback loops if policy is able to inspire confidence in the opportunities and growth potential of shrinking cities, thus making housing investments more attractive and increasing demand. However, the literature on shrinking cities cautions against relying on traditional growth-oriented policies to address problems of shrinking cities (e.g., Hollander et al., 2009; Pallagst et al., 2021). Supply-side policy addresses the housing stock itself, whether through targeted demolition programmes or financial support for renovation. Additionally, some countries, notably Lithuania, are experimenting with demand-side housing policies incentivising people to move to specific locations. By reducing the costs of homeownership in places with excess supply, the state is taking on part of the financial risk caused by urban shrinkage, although the effectiveness strongly depends on the precise implementation and rules of eligibility of these programmes. In general, the effectiveness and distributional implications of housing policies at an individual and spatial scale should be considered to prevent further disadvantaging vulnerable groups.

The analysis presented here explored the role of perceptions in understanding housing in shrinking cities, and investigated how they are shaped by different contexts and actors' perspectives. However, two caveats should be kept in mind. First, while expert interviews allowed depth of analysis, the sample per city is

relatively small, and interviewees were selected for professional expertise. Thus, although the interviews addressed perspectives of individual homeowners and tenants in detail, the data only cover these issues indirectly. Second, the analysis is restricted to cases that are relevant examples of shrinking cities more generally, but nevertheless should be viewed within the local context of the Baltic Sea Region. To validate and extend the results presented here, future research could combine evidence from expert interviews with real estate actors with firsthand experience of homeowners and tenants. This would yield more direct insights into the impact of perceptions of housing in shrinking cities on the affected groups. Similarly, it would be valuable to extend the comparative analysis undertaken here to other geographic regions to tease out similarities and differences across shrinking cities and further differentiate the effect of spatial, economic, and institutional contexts.

6. Conclusion

This article examined how residential real estate is perceived and evaluated in shrinking cities. Drawing on theoretical perspectives of homeownership, asset-based welfare, and financialisation, we analysed housing markets with a specific concern for local context as well as the varying motives of real estate actors. Based on expert interviews with housing market actors in six case cities in Finland, Germany, and Lithuania, we investigated perceptions of housing investments in the context of shrinking cities and considered the role of spatial and economic characteristics as well as institutional differences. Thus, our study contributes to literatures on housing studies and urban shrinkage by introducing a focus on the concept of perceptions and tracing how perceptions interact with notions of risk, uncertainty, and opportunity.

The results show that housing markets in shrinking cities are characterised by substantial heterogeneity, which implies that these submarkets can be attractive for investment in some places and for some but not all real estate actors. Moreover, our results suggest nuanced differences between factors influencing financial risk and factors of more general uncertainty, which may play varied roles in decision processes for investors and owner-occupiers. Whereas real estate investment companies are free to compare different opportunities and, at least in some geographic contexts, may not fear shrinking cities, buying a home can hold substantial financial and personal risk for owner-occupiers. In contrast to previous decades, where house prices could generally be expected to increase, and homeownership was considered a secure investment, prospective buyers facing uncertainty of urban shrinkage may decide to rent—if the housing market allows this option. These issues may affect households' mobility and wealth accumulation and hold implications for (spatial) inequality. Policymakers should acknowledge that local housing markets are affected by varied actors' evaluations of both objective and subjective risks, uncertainties, and opportunities, which shapes where and by whom asset-based wealth is developed and held. Therefore, housing policy needs to be evaluated not only for its effectiveness in encouraging housing market investments but also for its distributional implications. Regional development policy for shrinking cities should thus be considered alongside strategies that support the development of sustainable and equitable housing markets.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Who Matters in Residential Building Reuse? Navigating Conflicts and Collaborations Through Stakeholder–Issue Mapping

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Abstract

The reuse of vacant residential buildings offers a strategy for revitalizing "shrinking cities" and advancing urban sustainability by transforming underutilized spaces into community assets. However, the decision-making process involves stakeholders from diverse disciplines with conflicting perspectives, which creates significant challenges that hinder progress. This study therefore identifies these key stakeholders and maps their interrelations with reuse challenges, addressing the question: Who are the key stakeholders involved in the challenges and conflicts of interest that hinder the decision-making in residential building reuse? A semi-systematic literature review followed by thematic analysis was employed to identify stakeholder groups, supplemented by stakeholder–issue mapping to analyze their interrelations. The study identified five key groups: property owners, investors, government representatives and regulators, building professionals, and users, community, and civic society. The findings demonstrate that challenges are highly interconnected across multiple stakeholders, revealing patterns of conflict and opportunities for collaboration. The study underscores the role of government in initiating and steering the process and identifies emerging roles for other actors, such as building professionals acting as mediators. Existing research adopts a narrow disciplinary lens and focuses less on residential buildings, risking an overlooking of crucial actor dynamics. By offering a holistic perspective on the stakeholders and their interrelations with reuse challenges, this study provides vital insights for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to manage urban vacancies as resources in "shrinking cities" and advance a circular built environment.

Keywords

building reuse; circular built environment; shrinking cities; urban regeneration; urban shrinkage

1. Introduction

"Shrinking cities" are a global phenomenon characterized by population decline driven by political, economic, and demographic factors. A major consequence of this process is urban vacancy, manifested in vacant buildings and unused land, which undermines the economic, social, and environmental aspects of urban development (Fu, Zhou, Ma, et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2018). Residential vacancies are particularly significant in "shrinking cities" (Fu, Zhou, Sun, et al., 2025). Neglect by property owners often accelerates building deterioration, increases maintenance costs, limits business opportunities, and diminishes the overall attractiveness and vitality of urban areas (Fu, Zhou, Sun, et al., 2025; Han, 2014; Lee et al., 2018; Molloy, 2016; Son et al., 2015).

Despite the negative impacts commonly associated with vacancy in "shrinking cities," recent perspectives suggest that, if managed effectively, vacancies can be transformed into valuable resources for communities (Dubeaux & Cunningham Sabot, 2018). This reflects a paradigm shift in urban planning, where principles of reuse align with the circular economy, rather than demolition or abandonment (Cellucci, 2021; Della Spina et al., 2023; Dell'Ovo et al., 2021; Eray et al., 2019; Young, 2008). Moreover, emerging trends such as rapid digitalization, the rise of remote work, and ongoing housing crises in many cities further strengthen the recognition of such vacancies as potential valuable resources (Knippschild & Zoellter, 2021).

Accordingly, the reuse of residential buildings offers a promising strategy for revitalizing "shrinking cities." However, the process is complex, as it involves stakeholders from diverse disciplines with differing perspectives and conflicting interests, often creating challenges and slowing progress (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Amato et al., 2021; Armstrong et al., 2023; Cullingworth & Caves, 2013; Eray et al., 2019). In such contexts, where many actors are involved, stakeholder analysis becomes essential for identifying solvable problems, restructuring them, and developing technically feasible, politically acceptable solutions that serve the common good (Bryson, 2004; Crosby & Bryson, 2005; Ginige et al., 2018). Identifying relevant stakeholders, their stakes, and their interrelations is therefore crucial for the sustainable implementation of reuse, as it enables participants to understand how interests intersect and how these interconnections shape the dynamics of the process (Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Ginige et al., 2018).

Despite the growing attention to building reuse in fields such as cultural heritage, urban regeneration, urban vacancies, and the circular economy, existing research often remains siloed, adopting narrow disciplinary perspectives and paying limited attention to residential buildings. Such fragmented approaches risk excluding insights from other fields and hindering interdisciplinary collaboration (Lanz & Pendlebury, 2022; van Heur, 2025). This article directly addresses this gap by building upon a previous study (Ghoz, 2025) as part of a comprehensive research project. Whereas Ghoz (2025) established a multidisciplinary categorization of the challenges of residential building reuse, the present article identifies and categorizes the key stakeholder groups involved. It then integrates these two dimensions—challenges and stakeholders—to conduct a stakeholder–issue mapping that examines their complex interrelations. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this is the first study to systematically identify stakeholders from diverse disciplines and map their interactions with the challenges of reuse, specifically in the context of residential buildings.

This study analyzed data from 11 academic articles and identified five key stakeholder groups in the reuse of residential buildings: (a) property owners, (b) investors, (c) government representatives and regulators, (d) building professionals, and (e) users, communities, and civic society. The stakeholder–issue analysis reveals that reuse challenges are interconnected across these groups, producing both conflicts and opportunities for collaboration. The findings position government representatives and regulators to play a central role in initiating and steering reuse processes. Meanwhile, other actors could evolve beyond their conventional roles; for instance, building professionals could expand beyond their traditional technical functions to roles as mediators and facilitators. The findings also highlight the need for new types of actors who recognize the social, cultural, and environmental value of reuse, in addition to its economic potential. Embracing this broader value proposition could shift the perception of reuse from a narrow, economically driven process toward a more sustainable, circular economy practice. While this reframing offers a new context and overarching goal for negotiation, it does not presuppose the alignment of all stakeholder interests, which may remain in tension. Furthermore, although property owners and users often exhibit lower engagement, they retain decisive influence through mechanisms such as ownership rights and a dependence on financial incentives, which can significantly determine the feasibility of reuse projects.

The findings of this study contribute to sustainable development by supporting the adoption of reuse practices, revitalizing "shrinking cities," advancing circular approaches in the built environment, and generating environmental, social, and economic benefits (Bullen & Love, 2011; Pintossi et al., 2021a; Yung & Chan, 2012). Furthermore, mapping stakeholder–challenge interrelations makes these dynamics visible and provides a clearer foundation for developing more effective management strategies (Bryson, 2004). To this end, the stakeholder–issue mapping developed in this article presents a generalized model that, while directly relevant to debates on "shrinking cities," is also applicable to other urban contexts that are dealing with residential vacancies. This establishes a foundation for the future context-specific analysis of the framework, through geographically-specific data called for by scholars like Gentili and Hoekstra (2019). Ultimately, the dynamics identified offer valuable insights to foster collaborative decision-making among researchers, educators, policymakers, and practitioners involved in residential building reuse. Policymakers can be better guided by community expectations, initiators and stakeholders can recognize potential areas of cooperation, and overall, the findings can strengthen awareness and promote more organized networking in support of sustainable reuse.

This article is structured into five sections. Following this introduction, the first section reviews the definitions and frameworks employed in this research, including stakeholders and stakeholder analysis (Section 1.1), as well as the challenges associated with the reuse of residential buildings (Section 1.2). The second section outlines the methodology, including the methods for data collection and analysis. The third section presents the results, detailing the identified stakeholder groups and the findings from the stakeholder–issue mapping analysis. The fourth section provides a discussion of these results, offering reflections and formulating propositions. Finally, the fifth section presents the conclusions and provides recommendations for future research.

1.1. Stakeholders: Definitions

In both academic research and practice, the term "stakeholder" is defined in various ways. Mitchell et al. (1997), for instance, distinguish between narrow and broad approaches. The narrow definition limits stakeholders

to individuals or groups directly relevant to an organization or issue, often shaped by constraints of time and resources. A broader definition, in contrast, includes all actors who influence or are influenced by the organization or issue, viewing them as participants in exchange relationships.

The broad definition of a stakeholder aligns with perspectives from the public and nonprofit sectors, where stakeholders are understood as all parties affected by the outcomes of an organization's strategy or those with the power to influence, negotiate, or shape an organization's strategy (Bryson, 1995; Eden & Ackermann, 2001; Nutt & Backoff, 1992). However, this view continues to privilege actors with power, thereby excluding those who lose or lack it. To address this limitation, other scholars advocate for a more inclusive definition that also acknowledges individuals, groups, or organizations that are nominally powerless (Bryson, 2004). This study adopts Bryson's (2004) inclusive definition, as it aligns with the public policy context in which broad stakeholder engagement is essential, highlighting that sustainable policies, plans, and programs require wide stakeholder support to build and sustain effective coalitions.

Stakeholder analysis is central to this research, as the decision-making of reuse of buildings typically involves multiple actors and conflicting interests. It helps identify interlinked interests and supports more collaborative approaches (Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Bryson, 1995; Crosby & Bryson, 2005; Eden & Ackermann, 2001). Consequently, this study employs Bryson's (2004) stakeholder–issue mapping method, which structures problems to facilitate solutions that are technically feasible, politically acceptable, and aligned with the common good.

1.2. Challenges of Reuse of Buildings

The reuse of buildings is characterized by its multifaceted nature, generating challenges that are intrinsically multidisciplinary and require the integration of knowledge from diverse fields and their respective stakeholders (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Amato et al., 2021; Armstrong et al., 2023; Eray et al., 2019; Foster, 2020; Pintossi et al., 2021b; Zeadat, 2024). Furthermore, these challenges are not isolated; they are profoundly interrelated and mutually dependent (Dauda & Ajayi, 2022; Pintossi et al., 2021b).

Given these multidisciplinary challenges, scholars consistently argue that effective building reuse demands collaborative, cross-disciplinary responses. Foster (2020) characterizes reuse as an urban "nexus issue," inherently requiring such integrated approaches. Similarly, Nocca et al. (2021) and Amato et al. (2021) emphasize the need for transdisciplinary strategies that actively engage both multidisciplinary experts and societal stakeholders. Along these lines, Lanz and Pendlebury (2022) warn that a narrow, discipline-specific focus risks excluding valuable insights from other fields and limiting the interdisciplinary connections. They argue instead for broader, more inclusive frameworks that can advance both theory and practice when addressing the challenges of building reuse.

The challenges inherent in building reuse transcend tangible technical and regulatory concerns, which dominated early academic focus (Lou et al., 2020; Lucchi & Delera, 2020; Pintossi et al., 2021b). Significant intangible barriers include negative societal attitudes and a lack of public interest, which can critically impede or entirely prevent reuse projects (Amato et al., 2021; Velthuis & Spennemann, 2007). Furthermore, an overemphasis on financial viability can be counterproductive. As Rossitti et al. (2022) contend, a purely

economic approach to heritage reuse risks alienating local communities and diminishing social value. Consequently, they advocate for a balanced consideration of both community and economic interests to ensure sustainable and meaningful outcomes.

To effectively map the interrelationships between stakeholders and the challenges of building reuse, this research must first synthesize challenges identified across diverse disciplinary fields. Existing literature often addresses these challenges through a limited disciplinary lens. For instance, studies by Zeadat (2024), Jiang et al. (2023), and Yang et al. (2019) concentrate on cultural heritage dimensions, while others, such as Lucchi and Delera (2020) and Dauda and Ajayi (2022), prioritize architectural and technical concerns like retrofitting. Further perspectives, exemplified by Friedrich and Roessler (2023), analyze reuse through the framework of urban regeneration, emphasizing the social dimensions.

To overcome these siloed approaches, the present study employs the multidisciplinary categorization challenges framework developed by Ghoz (2025). This framework is interdisciplinary by design, synthesizing data from various fields to identify 75 sub-challenges categorized within 10 overarching themes: (a) economic viability and financial challenges, (b) building conditions, (c) design-technical challenges, (d) location challenges, (e) decision-making, (f) policy and regulations, (g) knowledge, capacity, and skills, (h) culture, perception, and awareness, (i) surrounding community, and (j) timeline. Its comprehensive nature aligns directly with this study's aim of facilitating a holistic stakeholder analysis.

2. Methodology

This research follows a two-stage methodology, as shown in Figure 1, to address the research question. The first stage focuses on identifying potential stakeholders involved in the challenges of building reuse, while the second stage maps the interrelations between each stakeholder and the relevant challenges.

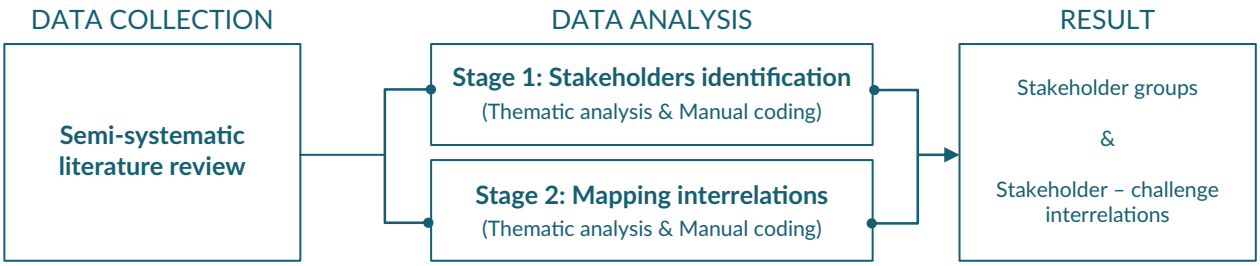

Figure 1. Overview of the methodological approach.

2.1. Stage 1: Identifying Potential Stakeholders

The objective of the first stage is to identify all potential stakeholders involved in the challenges and decision-making processes of residential building reuse across different disciplines. This directly addresses the research question: Who are the key stakeholders involved in the challenges and conflicts of interest that hinder the decision-making in residential building reuse? To answer this, stakeholders must be identified across multiple disciplines connected to residential building reuse, including the circular economy, urban revitalization, and cultural heritage. Adopting a multidisciplinary perspective ensures a comprehensive understanding of the diverse actors influencing and affected by reuse decisions.

A semi-systematic literature review was chosen as the data collection method, as it allows for a structured yet flexible exploration of relevant studies across multiple disciplines (Prasetyani et al., 2023; Snyder, 2019; Wong et al., 2013), without the restrictive inclusion criteria of fully systematic reviews (Snyder, 2019; Uttley et al., 2023). Moreover, instead of directly searching for articles that address key stakeholders, the search strategy focused on identifying studies discussing the challenges of building reuse, from which stakeholders would later be extracted through thematic analysis. Therefore, this study builds upon the same comprehensive bibliographic corpus that was established and described in the previous work (Ghoz, 2025), which identified challenges to residential building reuse. This deliberate choice ensures methodological consistency and allows for a direct analysis between the mapped challenges (the "issues") and the stakeholders involved.

The construction of the original corpus was as follows: The Web of Science database was selected due to its comprehensive multidisciplinary coverage of a wide array of scholarly publications and advanced search functionality (Norris & Oppenheim, 2007). The search strategy utilized essential terms like "challenges," "reusing," "residential buildings," and "multidisciplinary," expanded with relevant synonyms as detailed in Figure 2. The key term "challenges" was broadened to encompass terms such as "barriers," "hinders," "conflicts," "obstacles," and "impediments," and similarly, the remaining key terms were also broadened. In the case of "multidisciplinary," rather than using direct synonyms, terms reflecting various disciplines were added, including "economic," "ownership," "cultural," "legal," "regulatory," "technical," "social," and "demographic." Due to the limited results initially generated by the term "residential buildings," the search was extended to incorporate related terms like "buildings" and "built environments."

To ensure a comprehensive investigation of disciplines related to building reuse, an initial screening of titles and abstracts from the preliminary search results was carried out. As a result, further key terms—such as "urban revitalization," "urban regeneration," "vacancy," "building vacancy," "underuse," and "underutilized"—were identified, helping to expand the multidisciplinary scope of the review. These newly identified key terms were then incorporated to develop additional search strings. The search was performed between April 18 and May 7, 2024, and was limited to English-language publications. It covered the title, abstract, and keyword fields. This process resulted in the identification of 927 documents.

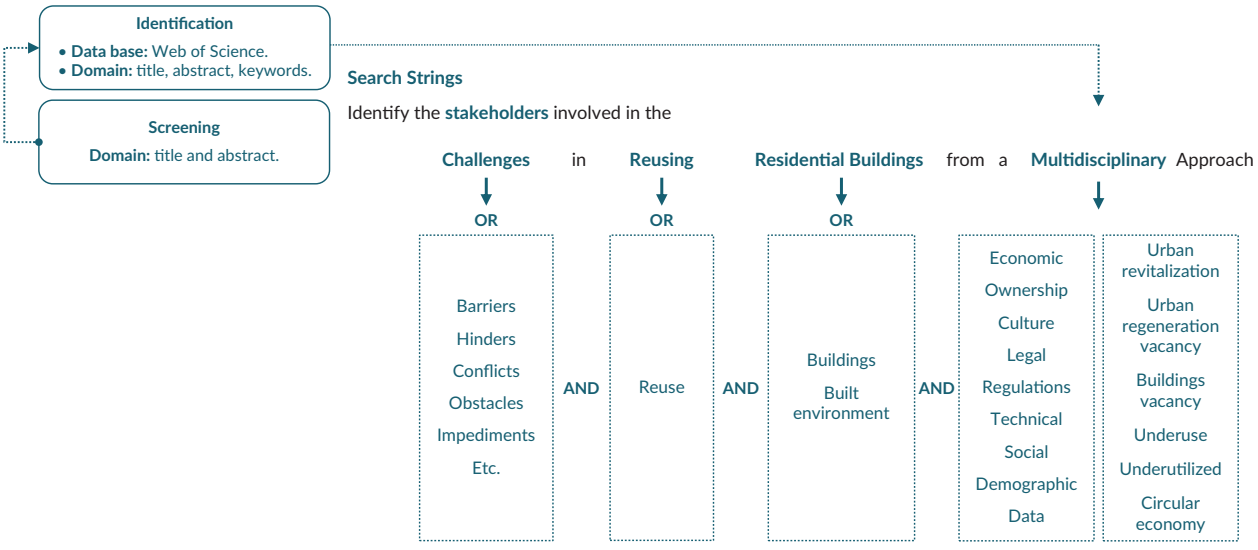

Figure 2. Diagram illustrating the development of the search strategy. Source: Adapted from Ghoz (2025).

Table 1 presents the search strings used, the dates of each search, and the filters applied in the search engine.

Table 1. Search strings used in identification of articles.

Date	Search string	Search filters
18/04/2024	((barriers OR hinders OR conflicts OR obstacles) AND (reuse) AND (buildings OR built environment))	Open access, Document type: article
26/04/2024	((ownership OR economic OR social OR culture OR legal OR regulations OR technical OR demographic OR data) AND (barriers OR hinders OR conflicts OR obstacles) AND (reuse) AND (buildings OR built environment))	Open access, Document type: article
28/04/2024	((ownership OR economic OR social OR culture OR legal OR regulations OR technical OR demographic OR data) AND (impediments) AND (reuse) AND (buildings OR built environment))	Open access, Document type: article
29/04/2024	((urban revitalization OR urban regeneration) AND (barriers OR hinders OR conflicts OR obstacles OR impediments))	Open access, Document type: article
04/05/2024	((reuse) AND (vacancy OR buildings vacancy OR underuse OR underutilized))	Open access, Document type: article
06/05/2024	((urban revitalization OR urban regeneration) AND (barriers OR hinders OR conflicts OR obstacles OR impediments) AND (reuse))	Open access, Document type: article
07/05/2024	((circular economy) AND (barriers OR hinders OR conflicts OR obstacles OR impediments) AND (reuse) AND (buildings OR built environment))	Open access, Document type: article
	Total no. of identified articles = 927	

Source: Adapted from Ghoz (2025).

While the source data (the identified 927 documents) remains the same as the previous study (Ghoz, 2025), the analytical focus and exclusion criteria for this study were distinct. The corpus was re-analyzed to target literature that explicitly identified or discussed the roles, interests, and influences of actor groups, thereby identifying and categorizing key stakeholders. This shift in focus is reflected in the specific thematic analysis applied to the corpus, as detailed in the following sections.

A two-phase manual screening process was conducted. In the initial phase, titles, abstracts, and conclusions of the 927 identified documents were reviewed, leading to the exclusion of 846. Subsequently, a full-text review of the remaining 81 documents was performed, resulting in the exclusion of 70 and the inclusion of 11 articles, as shown in the flow diagram in Figure 3. Both the initial and full-text screening phases aimed to identify articles addressing or mentioning stakeholders involved in the challenges and decision-making processes of building reuse. The inclusion criteria for these phases were as follows:

a) The definition of "reuse": The study included articles that addressed the reuse of buildings as functional spaces, encompassing reuse for the same, new, or mixed functions. Articles addressing reuse at the component or material level were excluded. The emphasis lies on the articles addressing reuse of buildings regardless of the specific terminology or disciplinary context used by the authors, such as adaptive reuse, rehabilitation, or urban regeneration.

b) Typology and function of the building: To maintain a clear focus on residential reuse, this study excluded articles that addressed the reuse of industrial heritage, market buildings, or other explicitly non-residential functions. Cultural heritage includes a wide range of building types—such as places of worship, royal residences, commercial and industrial sites, offices, civic structures, and military buildings (Foster, 2020; Gravagnuolo et al., 2024). Therefore, articles discussing cultural heritage buildings without a clearly defined function were included, along with those addressing the reuse of buildings that are either residential or had no specified function.
c) Relevance to addressing the research questions: The contribution of the article was assessed based on its relevance to identifying stakeholders involved in the challenges of reuse of residential buildings. For this study, a "stakeholder" is defined as any party that is either affected by, or has the ability to affect, these challenges (Nutt & Backoff, 1992).
d) Additional criteria for selection included the use of the English language, and open access availability.

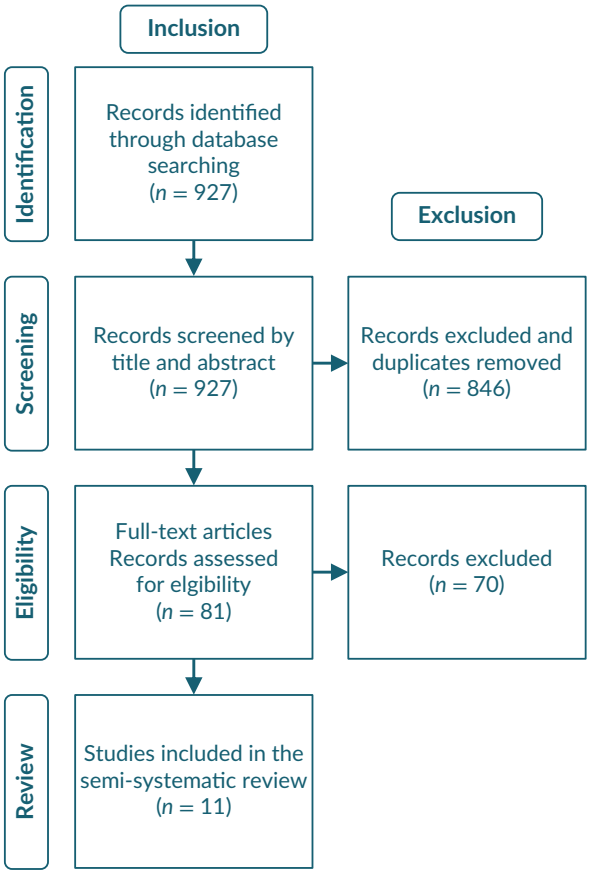

Figure 3. Flow diagram of the semi-systematic literature review.

Following the screening process, data were extracted from each of the 11 selected articles to address the research question. The extracted data included:

a) Bibliographic details, such as author, year of publication, title, and journal;
b) Contextual information, such as building type, whether the building was repurposed or retained its original function, and the geographical region;
c) Excerpts from the text that mention stakeholders involved in the challenges of building reuse.

Each excerpt was then manually coded using inductive thematic coding to develop categories representing stakeholder groups. In this context, stakeholders refer to any individual or group with an interest (direct/indirect or formal/informal) in the processes or outcomes of reusing residential buildings (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; van den Hove, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen as it enables the systematic identification, organization, and description of key themes within a dataset by coding relevant statements into categories that reflect the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017; Nzimande, 2023).

The coding process involved the iterative categorization of the text, during which descriptive labels (codes) were manually assigned by the author to stakeholders mentioned in the extracted text. As the analysis progressed, recurring stakeholder groups were identified and iteratively grouped based on shared interests or roles. This iterative process helped refine the coding framework and improve consistency in both coding and categorization, as illustrated in Figure 4. Importantly, this iterative process also clarified the rationale for the final sample size: After the analysis of 11 articles, no new stakeholder categories emerged, indicating that data saturation had been reached. We therefore proceeded with the analysis based on this saturated sample.

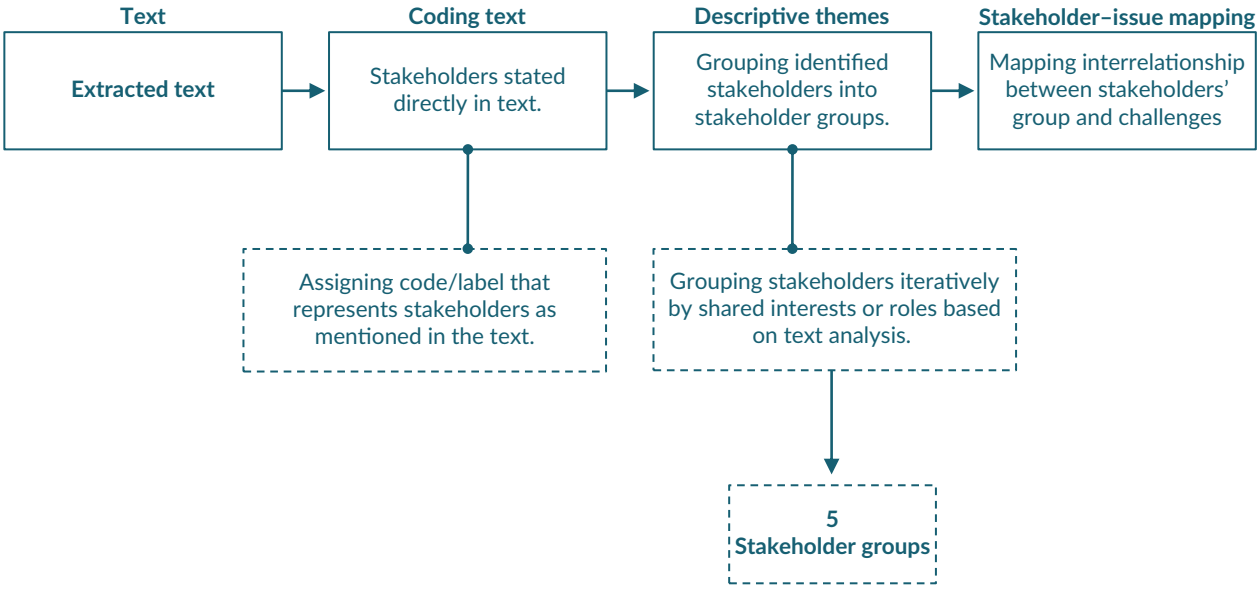

Figure 4. Diagram illustrating the steps for thematic synthesis.

The results were ultimately organized into five stakeholder groups, which will be discussed in detail in the following section. All extracted information was systematically recorded in an Excel spreadsheet (see Supplementary File), and a summary is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Overview of extracted data from the selected articles used for stakeholder identification.

Bibliographic information	Context	``Quoted text''
Author	Type of building	"The text mentioning stakeholders involved in the challenges of building reuse."
Year of publication	Same function/New function	
Title	Region	
Journal		
Topic/Aim		

2.2. Stage 2: Stakeholder–Issue Interrelations Mapping

The second stage focused on mapping the identified stakeholders in the previous stage to the relevant key challenges of reuse of buildings using the stakeholder–issue interrelations method developed by Bryson (2004). This method facilitates the identification of which stakeholders have interests in specific issues and reveals how stakeholders are interconnected through these shared challenges. The resulting stakeholder–issue interrelations diagram offers valuable structuring of the problem area, making visible potential areas for cooperation or conflict among stakeholders. To apply this method, the following steps were undertaken:

a) Identify all stakeholders through brainstorming or based on previous analyses (Bryson, 2004). In this study, stakeholders were identified in stage 1 of the methodology through an iterative inductive thematic analysis. This involved refining the extracted data and focusing on the role of each stakeholder and their relationship to building reuse challenges.
b) Identify the key issues or challenges present in the situation (Bryson, 2004). In this research, these issues concern the reuse of buildings, drawing on a previous study (Ghoz, 2025) that outlined 10 overarching themes representing the main difficulties in residential building reuse.
c) Place the identified challenges and arrange the involved stakeholders around them, as illustrated in Figure 5. Note that a stakeholder may be involved in multiple issues, with arrows indicating which stakeholder has a stake in which challenge (Bryson, 2004).

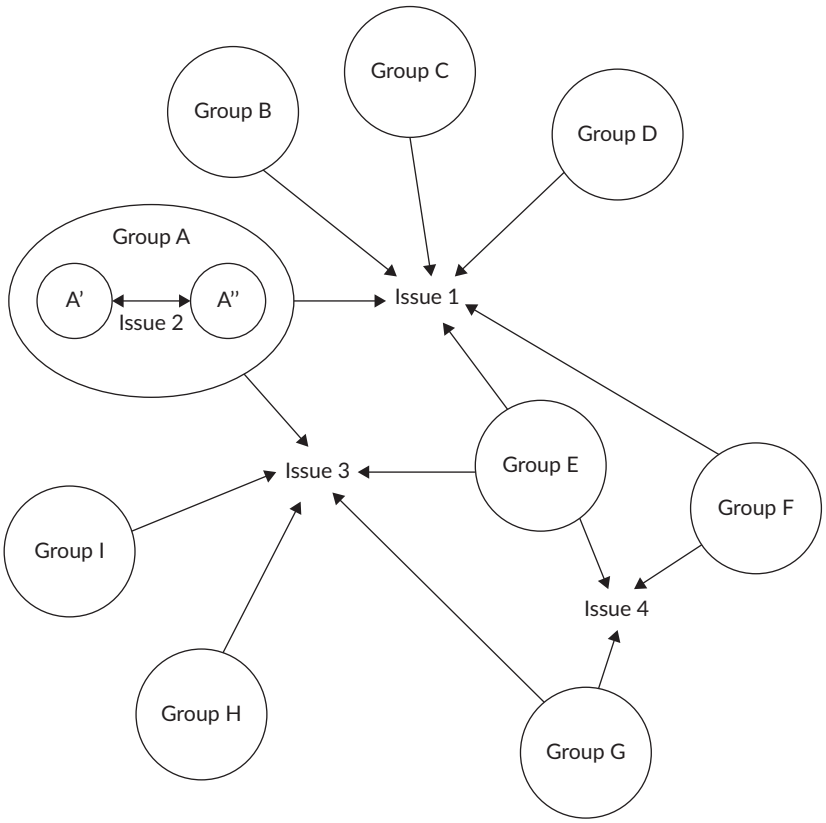

Figure 5. Stakeholder–issue interrelations diagram. Source: Bryson (2004), adapted from Bryant (2003, pp. 196, 264).

3. Results

This section presents the results of the thematic analysis, outlining the five main stakeholder groups that emerged from the data, along with their definitions and associated roles. It also reports the findings of a further analysis examining the relationships between these stakeholder groups and the key challenges related to the reuse of residential buildings, offering insights into their interconnections.

3.1. Identified Stakeholder Groups

Through an iterative coding process applied to the extracted text of 11 articles, this study identified five stakeholder group categories. These categories are: S.1 Property Owners; S.2 Investors; S.3 Government Representatives and Regulators; S.4 Building Professionals; and S.5 Users, Community, and Civic Society, as illustrated in Figure 6. Each category encompasses individuals or groups who share common interests or roles in the context of reuse of residential buildings. In the following subsections, each stakeholder category is defined, and the specific individuals or groups it comprises are described in detail.

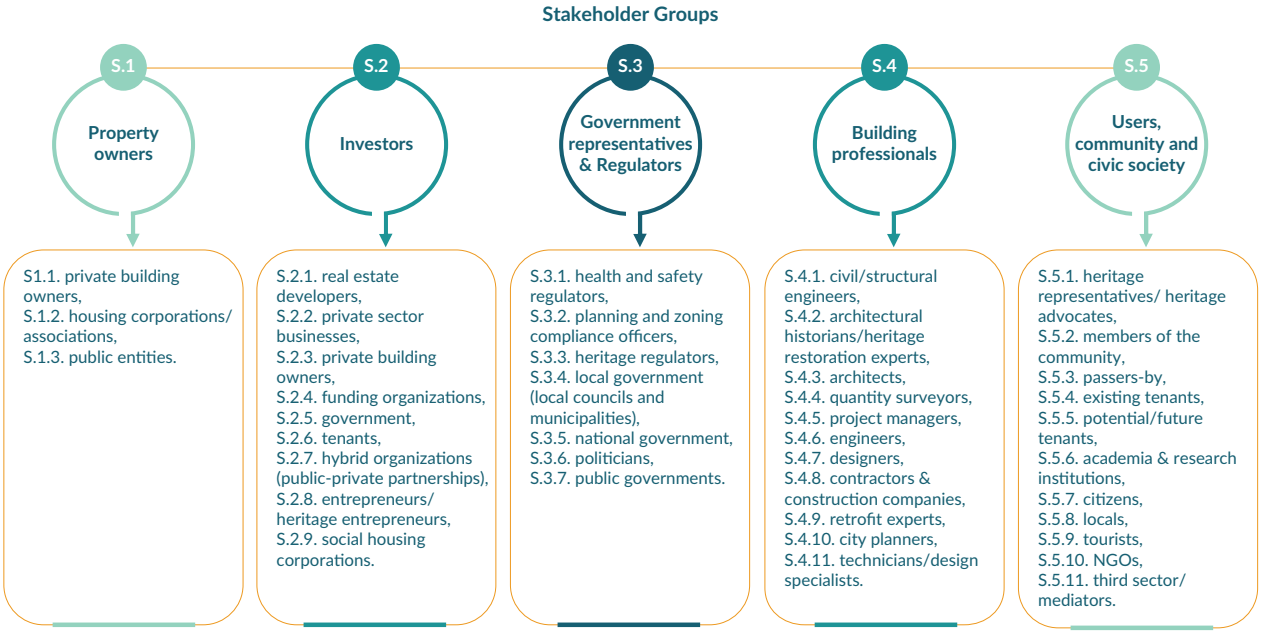

Figure 6. Diagram illustrating the identified stakeholder categories in reuse of residential buildings.

3.1.1. Property Owners

This stakeholder category includes any individual, group, or entity that holds ownership rights over a residential building within the reuse process. It comprises S.1.1. Private building owners, S.1.2. Housing corporations/associations, and S.1.3. Public entities (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Aigwi, Ingham, et al., 2020; Amato et al., 2021; Foster, 2020; Guo et al., 2021; Nocca et al., 2021; Pintossi et al., 2021b; Zeadat, 2024). Property owners are typically involved in challenges related to policies and regulations, particularly those concerning ownership and property rights. Their role can vary, ranging from that of a passive owner to an active or potential investor. When acting as investors, property owners are also engaged in issues linked to economic and financial challenges. Although some studies, such as Aigwi, Ingham, et al. (2020), categorize

them under the broader group of investors, this study considers them as a distinct group due to their significant influence—particularly in cases where unclear property rights or unknown ownership can delay or obstruct reuse projects (Guo et al., 2021).

3.1.2. Investors

This stakeholder category comprises individuals, groups, or entities that have the potential to, or currently do, provide financial investment or support for the reuse of residential buildings. It includes S.2.1. Real estate developers, S.2.2. Private sector businesses, S.2.3. Private building owners, S.2.4. Funding organizations, S.2.5. Government, S.2.6. Tenants, S.2.7. Hybrid organizations (public–private partnerships), S.2.8. Entrepreneurs/heritage entrepreneurs, and S.2.9. Social housing corporations (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Aigwi, Ingham, et al., 2020; Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Amato et al., 2021; Pintossi et al., 2021b; Yang et al., 2019; Zeadat, 2024). As noted by Aigwi, Ingham, et al. (2020), investors can also include building owners or government representatives, highlighting that some stakeholders may play multiple roles in the reuse process. While the primary objective of most investors is financial return and profit, in some cases their goals may also include the preservation of cultural value, or a combination of both. In this sense, Pintossi et al. (2021b) describe a new type of investor, the "heritage entrepreneur," who recognizes the cultural significance of heritage assets, their specificity, and the potential of their reuse.

3.1.3. Government Representatives and Regulators

This stakeholder category encompasses individuals and entities involved in, and responsible for, creating and enforcing regulations and policies, ranging from granting building regulation consents to overseeing planning and zoning regulations. They represent the government at both local and national levels. This group includes S.3.1. Health and safety regulators, S.3.2. Planning and zoning compliance officers, S.3.3. Heritage regulators, S.3.4. Local government (local councils and municipalities), S.3.5. National government, S.3.6. Politicians, and S.3.7. Public governments (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Aigwi, Ingham, et al., 2020; Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Amato et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2021; Nocca et al., 2021; Pintossi et al., 2021b; Yang et al., 2019; Zeadat, 2024).

The role of the "Government representatives and regulators" group is not limited to ensuring that other stakeholders comply with regulatory procedures; rather, they also play a significant and influential role in creating stimuli and facilitating reuse processes (Aigwi, Ingham, et al., 2020; Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Pintossi et al., 2021b). This can be achieved through financial incentives (Zeadat, 2024) or through diversified funding mechanisms, such as public–private partnerships (Amato et al., 2021; Boniotti, 2023).

3.1.4. Building Professionals

This stakeholder category comprises individuals and groups involved in both the preparation and implementation of the reuse process, particularly at the technical scale of the building. These professionals often carry concerns raised by other stakeholder groups (Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021), placing them in a central position to orchestrate and navigate the diverse interests involved. Their role is to coordinate and mediate among stakeholders to achieve the shared goal of building reuse (Aigwi, Ingham, et al., 2020; Dauda & Ajayi, 2022). For example, a retrofit expert may be required to balance the preservation of a building's cultural value while improving functionality (Dauda & Ajayi, 2022).

This stakeholder group includes: S.4.1. Civil/structural engineers, S.4.2. Architectural historians and heritage restoration experts, S.4.3. Architects, S.4.4. Quantity surveyors, S.4.5. Project managers, S.4.6. Engineers, S.4.7. Designers, S.4.8. Contractors and construction companies, S.4.9. Retrofit experts, S.4.10. City planners, and S.4.11. Technicians/design specialists (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Aigwi, Ingham, et al., 2020; Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Amato et al., 2021; Dauda & Ajayi, 2022; Foster, 2020; Nocca et al., 2021; Pintossi et al., 2021b).

3.1.5. Users, Community, and Civic Society

This stakeholder group comprises individuals, groups, and entities who are current or potential users of a reused building, as well as residents of the surrounding area, the broader society, and organized civic groups or movements. Their cultural, social, and spatial contexts both influence, and are influenced by, the processes of building reuse. This stakeholder group includes S.5.1. Heritage representatives and advocates, S.5.2. Members of the community, S.5.3. Passers-by, S.5.4. Existing tenants, S.5.5. Potential future tenants, S.5.6. Academia & research institutions, S.5.7. Citizens, S.5.8. Locals, S.5.9. Tourists, S.5.10. NGOs, and S.5.11. Third sector/mediators (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Aigwi, Ingham, et al., 2020; Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Zeadat, 2024).

Despite their strong direct and indirect influence on reuse strategies—through their perceptions, awareness, and engagement—this stakeholder group is often overlooked in reuse projects (Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Amato et al., 2021). Limited participation leads to an incomplete understanding of their current social and cultural needs, while other groups, such as tourists, may benefit more from reuse projects than users, communities, and civic society (Pintossi et al., 2021b). This suggests a potential mediator role for civic organizations, such as NGOs, in connecting users with government stakeholders and supporting the continuity of reuse processes (Pintossi et al., 2021b).

3.2. Stakeholders and Their Relations to Each Challenge

This section examines and maps the interrelations between the identified stakeholder groups and the challenges of reusing residential buildings, as illustrated in Figure 7. The mapping structures the problem area by showing how stakeholders are connected to specific challenges and to one another, thereby making potential areas of cooperation or conflict more apparent (Bryson, 2004).

The participation of users, communities, and civic society as a stakeholder group is often overlooked, despite its importance (Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Amato et al., 2021; Mısırlısoy & Günçe, 2016). This group is linked to three thematic categories of challenges. First, the theme of culture, perception, and awareness, where their attitudes shape reuse strategies; for instance, limited awareness and negative perceptions can hinder effective implementation (Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Pintossi et al., 2021b). Second, the theme of surrounding community challenges, reflected in concerns about reuse strategies, changing spatial needs, and detachment from place (Nocca et al., 2021; Pintossi et al., 2021b; Zeadat, 2024). Finally, their relation to the decision-making process may be direct or indirect, although their participation remains rare and often overlooked (Aigwi, Ingham, et al., 2020; Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021).

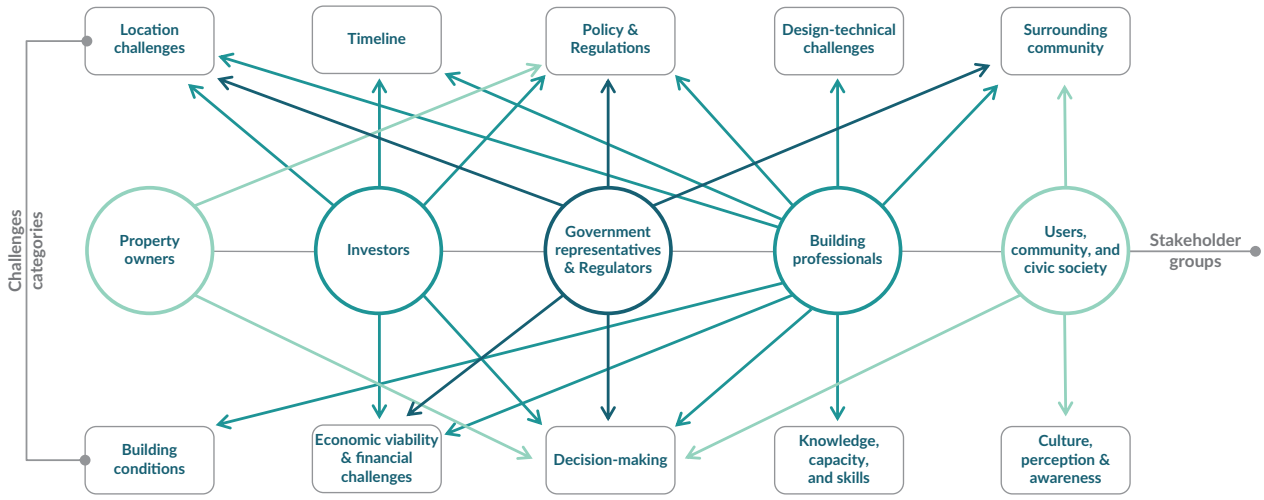

Figure 7. Stakeholder–issue interrelationships diagram showing the identified stakeholder groups and challenge categories in the reuse of residential buildings. Grey lines indicate the categorisation of stakeholder groups (horizontal) and challenge types (vertical).

Due to the nature of their role, the building professionals stakeholder group is often perceived as being primarily associated with technical challenges, since they are directly responsible for the technical aspects of reuse projects—a link frequently highlighted in the literature (Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Dauda & Ajayi, 2022). However, their involvement extends well beyond the technical dimension, as they are connected to nine thematic categories of challenges: surrounding community, design and technical issues, policy and regulations, project timeline, location-related constraints, economic and financial viability, decision-making processes, knowledge and capacity, and the physical condition of buildings (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Aigwi, Ingham, et al., 2020; Dauda & Ajayi, 2022). For example, their role in design, building conditions, timelines, and policy implementation ranges from balancing the preservation of cultural and historical value with modernization, minimizing structural damage, and ensuring safety, to complying with regulations and addressing delays caused by lengthy approval or closure procedures (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Aigwi, Ingham, et al., 2020; Dauda & Ajayi, 2022; Nocca et al., 2021). In addition, their limited knowledge, capacity, or skills can significantly hinder the reuse process (Foster, 2020). Their involvement across most categories also underscores their important role in decision-making, particularly in mediating diverse interests and working toward shared project goals (Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021).

Government representatives and regulators play a central role in governing and streamlining the decision-making process in building reuse projects (Amato et al., 2021). This stakeholder group is closely connected to the themes of policy and regulations as well as decision-making, since they are responsible for developing, enacting, and enforcing relevant policies and regulations (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Pintossi et al., 2021b). They are also involved in surrounding community challenges and location challenges, for instance they establish planning regulations in response to such challenges (Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Pintossi et al., 2021b). Furthermore, they contribute to the economic and financial challenges by providing incentives or simplifying regulatory frameworks, which can facilitate reuse projects, or, if absent, hinder them and increase costs (Aigwi, Ingham, et al., 2020; Zeadat, 2024).

Investors, in contrast, are primarily concerned with financial returns and are therefore strongly associated with the themes of economic viability and financial challenges (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Aigwi, Ingham, et al.,

2020; Zeadat, 2024). The investor stakeholder group is also connected to location, policy and regulatory, and time-related challenges, all of which affect their willingness to participate in the reuse process and shape their decision-making (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Eray et al., 2019).

Property owners also hold a decisive position in the reuse process, primarily through their rights and responsibilities within the policy and regulation theme. Unclear ownership or disputes over property rights can obstruct the process entirely, highlighting their critical role in decision-making (Guo et al., 2021). In addition, a lack of financial incentives may discourage property owners from supporting reuse, thereby hindering the reuse process (Zeadat, 2024).

From the stakeholder–issue mapping shown in Figure 7, it is clear that all stakeholder groups are involved in and contribute to the decision-making process, either directly or indirectly, through their different stakes and perspectives, which collectively shape decisions on building reuse. Therefore, it is essential to take into account all stakeholder interests, even those that may initially seem irrelevant.

4. Discussion and Reflections

This study identified the key stakeholders involved in the reuse of residential buildings and mapped their interrelations with the challenges of reuse. Decision-making in reuse projects involves stakeholders from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, each bringing a different perspective on both the potential of reuse and the challenges it entails (Amato et al., 2021; Hong & Chen, 2017). For example, government representatives, building professionals such as architectural historians, and heritage advocates often approach reuse from the perspective of preserving culturally and historically valuable buildings (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019). Investors and property owners, in contrast, view reuse through the lens of economic profitability, considering factors such as project timelines and return on investment (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019). Meanwhile, structural engineers focus on ensuring the building's structural integrity and preventing potential damage or failure (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Dauda & Ajayi, 2022). Recognising these diverse contributions underscores residential vacancy as a dynamic field of stakeholder interaction, aligning with emerging perspectives that conceptualise vacancy as an active process within urbanisation (O'Callaghan, 2024).

As a result of the multidisciplinary nature of the stakeholders, they are engaged at different phases of the project (Nocca et al., 2021). However, this raises concerns about unequal representation, as those entering the process later may have limited capacity to shape outcomes. Furthermore, although some groups may appear to lack direct influence on decision-making, overlooking their interests risks reinforcing misinformed narratives about their needs and priorities (Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Amato et al., 2021). For instance, cultural factors such as evolving spatial requirements or perceptions of reuse could influence the attractiveness of reuse projects for current and potential users as well as the surrounding community acceptance (Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021). Neglecting such aspects not only privileges certain groups, such as tourists, over long-term residents (Pintossi et al., 2021b), but may also undermine the social sustainability of reuse projects in the long term.

Within a multidisciplinary environment characterized by diverse perspectives, building professionals, universities, and civic society actors can play a facilitator role in mediating and coordinating the diverse interests involved in reuse. Building professionals, in particular, are often regarded as the key actors responsible for translating reuse from concept to reality, especially in its technical aspects (Aigwi, Phipps,

et al., 2021). However, the stakeholder–issue mapping diagram (Figure 7) shows that they are involved in the majority of challenges, providing them with a broad perspective on the interests of other stakeholders and positioning them as potential orchestrators throughout the reuse process. Similarly, universities and civic society actors can act as mediators between government actors and users or surrounding communities (Pintossi et al., 2021b), while also raising awareness about the benefits of reuse across economic, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions.

Reuse of buildings requires not only reviewing stakeholders' roles beyond their typical responsibilities but also considering new types of actors. Pintossi et al. (2021b) highlight one such example: the "heritage entrepreneur," an investor who recognizes both the cultural value and complexities of heritage reuse and looks beyond purely economic considerations. Building on this idea, the perspective on building reuse can be expanded beyond economic or cultural heritage considerations to include environmental aspects. From this viewpoint, reuse can be understood as a circular economy strategy that preserves resources and the embedded energy within the built environment. Adopting such a broader approach could shift the perspective on building reuse beyond narrow economic and cultural concerns toward a more sustainable, circular economy approach.

The diverse interests and stakes involved in the reuse process require a strong role from government representatives and regulators in governing and managing the entire decision-making process (Amato et al., 2021). In addition, they play a crucial role in addressing economic and financial challenges. It is strongly recommended that governments create financial incentives—whether through dedicated funds, public–private partnerships, or easing regulations—to reduce time, minimize financial risks, and lower costs for potential investors or property owners (Aigwi, Egbelakin, et al., 2019; Aigwi, Phipps, et al., 2021; Amato et al., 2021; Dauda & Ajayi, 2022; Dell'Ovo et al., 2021; Hamida et al., 2023; Nocca et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the stakeholder–issue mapping demonstrates that the challenges of residential building reuse are not isolated but interconnected across multiple actors. These interconnections highlight not only areas of conflict but also opportunities for cooperation that can serve as leverage points. For example, investors and government actors frequently intersect in challenges related to policy, regulation, and economic viability. Here, collaboration could take the form of supportive policies, regulatory adjustments to incentivize investors, or public–private partnerships to finance reuse projects. Similarly, users, communities, civic society groups, government actors, and building professionals are often linked to challenges concerning the surrounding community. In such cases, cooperation could involve building professionals acting as mediators between communities and government, or civic representatives facilitating dialogue to balance different interests.

At the same time, the stakeholder–issue mapping also reveals challenges that appear more strongly associated with a single stakeholder group, creating opportunities for new forms of collaboration. For instance, in the areas of cultural perception, awareness, and knowledge capacity, greater involvement from government or joint initiatives with investors could provide meaningful support. Such efforts might include awareness campaigns, training programs to build technical expertise, or city walks to highlight underused building assets. Finally, while regulators and building professionals emerge as central actors across multiple challenges, other stakeholders—such as property owners—may appear less involved overall but nonetheless retain decisive influence. This is particularly the case when it comes to ownership rights and the lack of financial incentives or support, which can discourage their engagement in reuse processes.

Furthermore, although the stakeholder–issue mapping findings are highly relevant to "shrinking cities," they also provide a valid framework for understanding residential vacancy in other urban contexts, including those experiencing growth. However, as Gentili and Hoekstra (2019) argue, a critical pathway to deeper insight is through context-specific calibration using geographically-based data. Therefore, the intended next step in this research is to build upon this generalized framework by integrating such localized data to test how the identified stakeholder dynamics manifest, vary, and intensify in contrasting urban settings.

5. Conclusions

The reuse of residential buildings involves stakeholders from diverse disciplines. This research identified five key stakeholder categories: property owners, investors, government representatives and regulators, building professionals, and users, communities, and civic society. While some of these groups, such as users, communities, and civic society, may not always be directly involved in decision-making, their involvement is nevertheless crucial for the long-term success of reuse projects.

Through the stakeholder–issue mapping, this study revealed areas of both conflict and potential cooperation. For example, opportunities for collaboration exist between governments and investors in addressing challenges of economic viability and policy regulation. Similarly, in challenges related to knowledge, capacity, and community engagement, meaningful collaboration could emerge between governments, building professionals, users, and civic society actors. These findings highlight the value of rethinking not only where conflicts lie, but also how they can be transformed into leverage points for cooperation. It is crucial to note, however, that these findings are based on a generalized, theoretical perspective. Their specific dynamics are likely to vary in real-world settings. Therefore, further empirical research across diverse urban contexts is essential to examine how these stakeholder patterns manifest, vary, and intensify under different local conditions.

The decision-making process for building reuse requires a reconsideration of the roles typically assigned to stakeholder groups. For instance, the role of building professionals could extend beyond technical responsibilities to include mediation and coordination. In addition, innovative roles—such as that of the "heritage entrepreneur"—are needed, as they connect the value of reuse not only to economic value but to other dimensions such as heritage preservation. Nevertheless, government representatives and regulators remain central in governing and managing the reuse decision-making process and can provide critical financial incentives.

Finally, the reuse of residential buildings should not be understood solely through economic or cultural heritage preservation lenses. It should also be framed within environmental and circular economy approaches. Reuse has the potential to preserve resources and embedded energy, reduce waste, and contribute to urban sustainability. Reframing reuse in this way could shift perceptions from viewing it primarily as a costly and complex challenge toward recognizing it as a valuable strategy that aligns with broader sustainable urban development goals.

Building upon the previous discussion, future research could focus on four main areas. First, the development of decision-support tools to coordinate the diverse interests of stakeholders and enhance their ability to identify common ground. Second, exploring the linkage between the reuse of residential buildings

and housing policies, including housing challenges, which could strengthen the societal relevance of reuse strategies. Third, examining mechanisms for transforming areas of conflict in building reuse into opportunities for collaboration among stakeholders. Finally, assessing the broader impacts of residential building reuse, not only in economic and cultural terms but also in relation to circular economy principles and environmental sustainability.

6. Research Limitations

This study identifies key stakeholders and their roles in the challenges and decisions of residential building reuse. A core difficulty was consolidating multidisciplinary data from varied sources into a coherent overview. Consequently, while the findings provide a thorough analysis, they are necessarily limited, underscoring the topic's inherent complexity and dependence on specific contexts.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the Supplementary File; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT was used as a paraphrasing aid to refine wording while ensuring clarity and coherence, with the author making all final revisions.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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The Reurbanization That Never Was: Governance Challenges in Poland's Suburbanizing Cities

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Abstract

The article examines the paradox of urban governance in Poland's five largest cities (excluding Warsaw)—Kraków, Łódź, Wrocław, Poznań, and Gdańsk—where municipal authorities articulate policies aimed at population retention and growth while simultaneously experiencing persistent suburbanization and demographic decline. Drawing on 13 semi-structured interviews with high-ranking city officials, transcribed and coded according to a semi-standardized protocol, the article analyzes how local authorities in these cities approach the challenge and aspiration of population retention and reurbanization within increasingly challenging demographic contexts. The findings reveal a significant implementation gap between aspirational policy goals and actual governance capacities. City authorities recognize population retention as vital for maintaining tax revenues and urban vitality, yet their policy toolkit remains severely limited by several interrelated factors (insufficient regulatory authority within the fragmented planning system; contentious relationships with suburban municipalities; weak leverage over real estate developers, and ambiguous national policies incentivizing suburbanization). The study contributes to debates on shrinking cities by highlighting how governance limitations transform reurbanization from a potentially transformative policy framework into merely aspirational rhetoric. This governance gap illuminates why potential "spaces of possibility" remain unrealized despite awareness of demographic challenges and knowledge of possible interventions. By analyzing the interplay between institutional constraints, market forces, and municipal responses, this research advances understanding of the specific governance challenges facing post-socialist cities and their metropolitan areas attempting to navigate demographic decline in contexts of planning deregulation and weak metropolitan governance.

Keywords

demographic decline; post-socialist cities; reurbanization; suburbanization; urban governance

1. Introduction

Cities across Europe face complex governance challenges as they navigate shifting population dynamics, with many post-socialist cities experiencing particularly acute demographic pressures through both population decline and suburbanization (Haase et al., 2021; Hesse & Siedentop, 2018; Korczyński & Kajdanek, 2025; Śleszyński et al., 2018; Stanilov & Sýkora, 2014). The largest Polish cities exemplify this tension, as municipal authorities attempt to implement policies aimed at population retention and growth (Couch & Fowles, 2019; Glatter & Siedhoff, 2008; Kajdanek & Radzimski, 2025; Krzysztofik et al., 2017; Kurek & Gałka, 2017; Lever, 1993; Spórna & Krzysztofik, 2020; Zasina, 2015) while simultaneously experiencing persistent suburbanization and, in some cases, absolute demographic decline (Figure 1). This article examines this governance paradox through an analysis of how Poland's five largest cities (excluding Warsaw)—Kraków, Łódź, Wrocław, Poznań, and Gdańsk—approach population challenges within their institutional, market, and civic contexts.

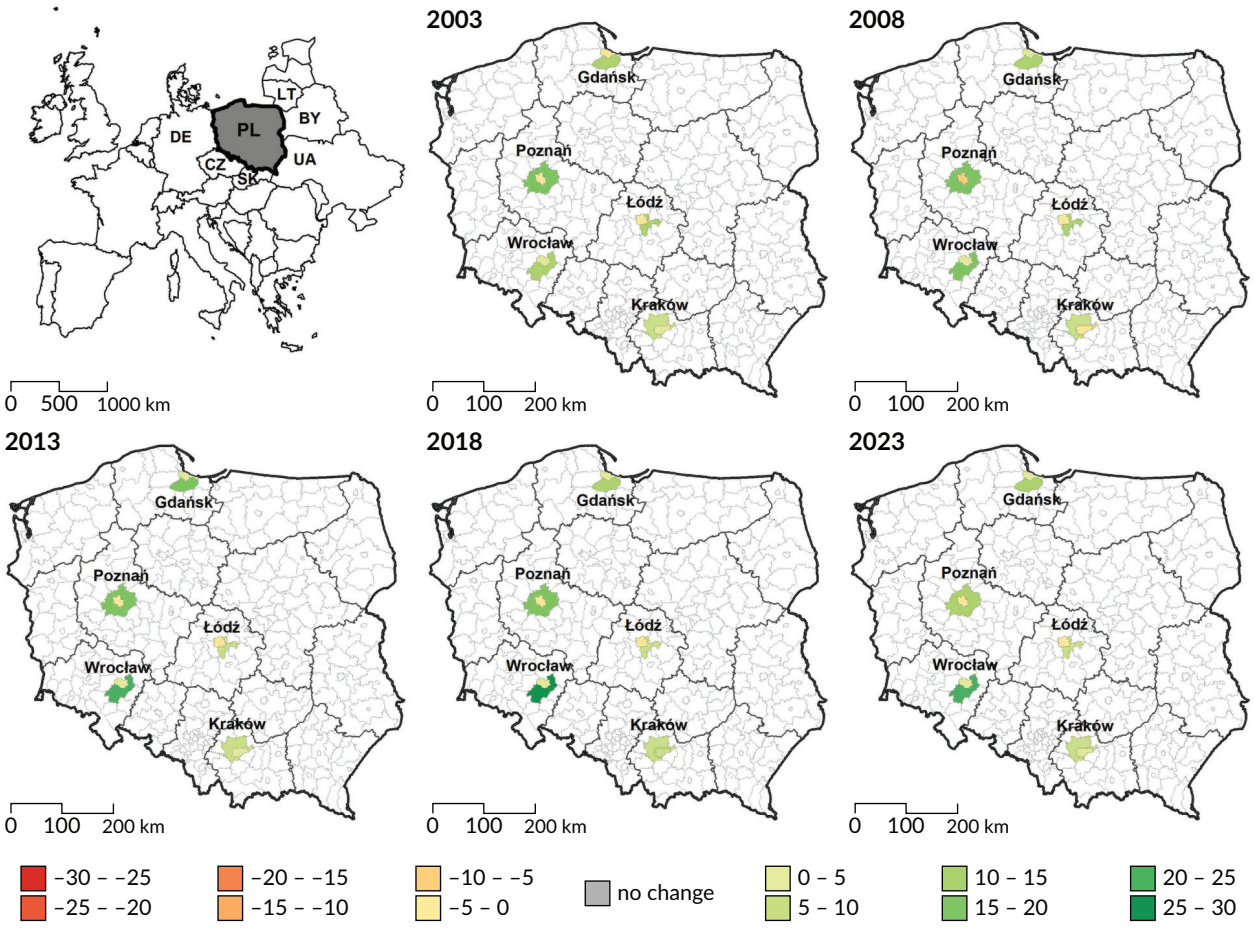

Figure 1. Gmina * migration for permanent residence by migrants' direction (urban area, rural area)—net migration per 1,000 inhabitants. Source: Bank Danych Lokalnych (n.d.). Note: * Unit of basic, the lowest level of fundamental three-tier territorial division of the country; a self-government community (gmina inhabitants) and the relevant territory, i.e., a unit as uniform as possible in terms of settlement and spatial layout as well as social and economic ties, ensuring the capability of performing public tasks. The current number of territorial division units: http://www.stat.gov.pl/bip/36_PLK_HTML.htm

Suburbanization has been the dominant trend within urban development in Poland for the last two decades (Gałka & Warych-Juras, 2018; Kajdanek, 2014, 2020; Kryczka et al., 2025; Lisowski et al., 2014; Mantey & Pokojski, 2020; Stanilov & Sýkora, 2014; Trojanek et al., 2016; Wagner, 2017) and continues to reshape metropolitan regions, frequently outpacing any countervailing reurbanization trends. From the local planning point of view, suburbanization is often explained by an inefficient planning system in Poland (Kryczka & Szmytkie, 2025; Nowak et al., 2023). But also, Polish government housing policies inadvertently promote suburbanization through mortgage subsidy programs that prioritize homeownership over alternative housing forms. Successive governments have implemented credit support schemes (such as "Rodzina na swoim" 2007–2012 and "Mieszkanie dla młodych" 2014–2018) providing down payment and interest subsidies to buyers, which inflate urban housing prices and push middle-class families toward cheaper suburban locations. The focus on addressing housing shortage through ownership-oriented solutions, rather than diversified rental options, effectively channels demand toward peripheral areas where homeownership remains financially accessible, thereby reinforcing suburban sprawl patterns. According to the National Census of Population and Housing (Statistics Poland, 2021), housing stock in Poland increased by 1.7 million units (12.8%) compared to 2011, with the highest growth occurring in municipalities immediately surrounding large urban centers. This outward migration creates significant fiscal challenges as city authorities lose tax revenue while continuing to bear service provision costs for suburban commuters.

The governance of reurbanization extends beyond traditional demographic processes to encompass what Ouředníček et al. (2015) identify as a policy approach, an urban vision, or a town planning policy of municipal governments dealing with the impacts of demographic change in urban space. In the Polish context, this governance landscape is particularly complex due to the fragmented planning system established during post-socialist transformation, where municipalities gained complete planning authority within their respective territories yet were unprepared for these responsibilities (Wagner, 2017). The reurbanization process demands deeper involvement of local government in town planning, stemming from the increasing popularity of public-private partnerships (Barke & Clarke, 2016). This shift brings new actors—particularly investors and developers who shape the housing market in cities and thus also reurbanization per se (Rérat, 2012)—into the policy arena. Understanding how these multi-actor governance arrangements function in practice, and why they often fail to produce effective reurbanization despite official commitments, forms the central inquiry of this article.

In this context, reurbanization has emerged as both a conceptual framework and a potential policy response. As a demographic process, reurbanization describes population growth in inner cities after periods of decline (Haase et al., 2017). However, as this article emphasizes, reurbanization can also function as a policy approach—an urban vision or town planning policy of municipal governments dealing with the impacts of urban change (Glatter & Siedhoff, 2008; Ouředníček et al., 2015). This dual understanding allows us to analyze not only demographic trends but also the governance mechanisms that cities employ to influence these trends.

The governance dimension is particularly significant in post-socialist contexts where institutional structures, market dynamics, and planning cultures underwent radical transformation after 1989. Unlike Western European cities that developed metropolitan governance mechanisms gradually over decades, Polish cities face these challenges with relatively new institutional arrangements within a decentralized governance system established in the 1990s. As Wagner (2017) observes, the transfer of legislative power in spatial

planning to gminas occurred when these entities had little experience or competence to do planning—so their main pattern became uncontrolled development. This historical legacy directly shapes contemporary governance capabilities. The challenges of urban governance are further complicated by the underdeveloped nature of urban–rural coordination in Poland. Unlike many Western European countries with established traditions of metropolitan governance, Poland has struggled to develop effective institutional arrangements at the city-regional scale (Lackowska & Zimmermann, 2011; Mikuła, 2023, 2024; Mikuła & Kaczmarek, 2017). Attempts to create formalized metropolitan structures have largely failed, with the Metropolis GZM (Górnośląsko-Zagłębiowska Metropolia) being the only statutorily recognized metropolitan body in Poland (Mikuła et al., 2024). This institutional void significantly constrains cities' ability to address suburbanization, as core cities lack formal mechanisms to coordinate planning and development policies across municipal boundaries. While this analysis focuses on the post-socialist context, similar governance challenges arising from municipal fragmentation have been documented in other decentralized systems, particularly in the United States, where competition between suburban municipalities and weak coordination create comparable constraints on central cities' capacity to address population decline (Beghelli et al., 2020). However, the post-socialist context presents distinct characteristics—including the relatively recent nature of decentralized planning authority and the rapid pace of institutional transformation—that warrant separate analytical attention (Bučaitė-Vilke & Krukowska, 2020).

The absence of statutory metropolitan governance in Poland represents what Mikuła (2023) terms "fragmented post-socialist city-regions," where voluntary bottom-up approaches remain the primary avenue for inter-municipal cooperation. These arrangements, exemplified by associations like the Poznań Metropolis Association, rely on consensus and persuasion rather than formal authority. As he demonstrates in his analysis of the Poznań city-region, even when metropolitan planning visions are developed through collaborative processes, their implementation at the municipal level remains problematic. The "soft spaces" of metropolitan planning created through these voluntary associations lack enforcement mechanisms, resulting in what he calls "passive city-regionalism"—where municipal authorities express support for metropolitan coordination but fail to translate this into concrete planning decisions (Mikuła, 2023, p. 680).

The metropolitan governance gap is particularly significant for reurbanization policies, as it limits cities' ability to control development patterns at the urban fringe. While urban authorities frequently express frustration with the "unfair" land-use policies of suburban municipalities that create "massive oversupply of land available for development with no infrastructure and poor transport access" (Mikuła, 2024, p. 158), they possess few instruments to influence these decisions. This territorial mismatch between functional urban areas and institutional boundaries creates incompatibility between the functional and political spaces of the metropolitan area due to intensifying suburbanization. These governance limitations directly impact cities' capacity to implement effective reurbanization strategies that extend beyond their administrative boundaries.

Urban governance in this context refers to what Couch et al. (2011) describe as "the process of governing an area or field" which includes "institutions and actors involved, structural conditions, and normative conditions" (p. 16). Expanding on this definition, urban governance is understood as the coordination of horizontal and vertical actions between interrelated actors and institutions (Hamel & Keil, 2015), and their capacities for socio-spatial transformation. This coordination happens within a specific institutional environment characterized by what we term a "governance gap"—the space between policy aspirations and implementation capacity.

This governance gap becomes evident in how urban authorities conceptualize and respond to population dynamics. While many city officials recognize population retention as essential for maintaining fiscal health and urban vitality, their ability to implement effective policies is constrained by multiple factors: insufficient regulatory authority within a fragmented planning system; contentious relationships with suburban municipalities; weak leverage over real estate developers (Antczak-Stępniak, 2022); and national policies that often incentivize suburbanization rather than urban consolidation.

Previous research on post-socialist urban development has extensively documented suburbanization patterns (Brade et al., 2009; Hirt & Kovachev, 2018; Kajdanek, 2014; Leetmaa et al., 2012; Leetmaa & Tammaru, 2007) but less attention has been paid to how city governments attempt to develop and implement reurbanization policies within these constraints. Studies that examine reurbanization in post-socialist Europe (Haase et al., 2017) note that while this phenomenon has emerged in urban debates, no distinct focus has evolved so far. Similarly, Barke and Clarke (2016) question the concept of re-urbanisation as some kind of "natural" phase in an urban development cycle, emphasizing instead the "strategic role of the local authority" as "central to the process" (p. 1).

In exploring this governance dimension, the article examines what institutional and structural factors determine the gap between declared reurbanization policy goals and actual implementation capacities in Poland's largest cities, and how municipal officials understand and respond to demographic challenges from multiple angles: their relationships with state-level policies, neighboring municipalities, market actors (especially real estate developers), and citizens. These relationships reveal not only formal governance structures but also informal power dynamics and policy norms. As Pacione (2009) argues, urban policy is the product of power relations between the different interest groups that constitute a particular social formation. The most influential actors are the state, operating at both local and national levels, and capital—whether financial, property, or industrial. This analysis contributes to debates on urban governance in post-socialist contexts by highlighting how institutional constraints transform reurbanization from a potentially transformative policy approach into merely aspirational rhetoric. It is demonstrated that municipal authorities possess significant awareness of demographic challenges and theoretical knowledge of possible interventions, yet face severe limitations in their ability to implement comprehensive strategies. This implementation gap explains why potential "spaces of possibility" for reurbanization remain largely unrealized despite official policy commitments.

The article proceeds with an analysis of 13 semi-structured interviews with high-ranking city officials, transcribed and coded according to a semi-standardized protocol. These interviews reveal how cities approach three key dimensions of urban governance: vertical relationships with national government, horizontal relationships with suburban municipalities, and public-private relationships with market actors. Through this analysis, we illuminate not only the governance challenges that post-socialist cities face but also the specific mechanisms through which institutional arrangements either enable or constrain policy implementation in demographically challenged urban environments.

2. Methods and Data

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine how urban governance structures and practices in Poland's major cities influence approaches to reurbanization. The research was conducted as part of a

preliminary investigation designed to understand the role of city authorities and developers in shaping inter-municipal migration patterns, with a particular focus on return migration from suburbs to city centers.

The research design followed an exploratory approach, appropriate for investigating an emerging phenomenon that remains largely undocumented in official statistics (Śleszyński, 2011) and understudied in the academic literature. This qualitative approach allowed us to capture the perspectives of key stakeholders who shape urban policy and development, revealing both explicit strategies and implicit assumptions that influence governance approaches to population dynamics.

The study focused on Poland's five largest cities excluding Warsaw: Kraków, Łódź, Wrocław, Poznań, and Gdańsk. These cities were selected because they represent the most significant urban centers in Poland after the capital city, have experienced substantial suburbanization in recent decades, are actively developing policies to address population challenges, and offer comparative value as they operate within the same national institutional framework but with varying local contexts.

Within each city, participants were identified and recruited based on their institutional roles and expertise related to urban development policies (Table 1). The participant selection followed a purposive sampling approach (Creswell, 2013), targeting high-ranking municipal officials with direct responsibility for or insight into urban development policies, spatial planning, housing policies, strategic planning and development, relations with suburban municipalities and urban coordination, and interactions with real estate developers.

The primary data collection method consisted of 13 semi-structured interviews conducted with municipal officials across the five cities. In each city, interviews with 2–3 representatives were conducted, typically including a deputy mayor or equivalent high-ranking official responsible for urban development, the director of spatial planning, urban development, or similar department, and where applicable, an official responsible for urban-suburban coordination.

Table 1. Characteristics of the interviewees.

Interview number	City	Function (descriptive)
1	Poznań	Department of City Development and International Cooperation
2	Poznań	Deputy Mayor
3	Kraków	Department of City Development and Strategy
4	Kraków	Deputy Mayor
5	Kraków	City council representative
6	Gdańsk	Department of Social Development
7	Gdańsk	Department of City Development
8	Gdańsk	City council representative
9	Gdańsk	Deputy Mayor
10	Wrocław	Deputy Mayor
11	Łódź	Deputy Mayor
12	Łódź	Urban Renewal Office representative
13	Poznań	Deputy Mayor

Note: Author's own elaboration.

The interview protocol was designed as a semi-standardized guide with open-ended questions organized around several key themes: the significance of suburbanization as an urban challenge, awareness and importance of return migration for urban development, implementation of policies aimed at retaining and attracting residents, significance of cooperation with developers, and developers' relationships with the city. The semi-structured format allowed for both consistency across interviews and flexibility to explore city-specific contexts and unexpected insights. Interviews typically lasted 60–90 minutes and were conducted in Polish. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

In addition to addressing the informational aspects of these topics, the interviews were designed to assess the extent to which these issues were consciously recognized and addressed by the respondents, versus being relatively new and unexplored concerns. This meta-analytical approach helped illuminate the maturity of policy thinking around reurbanization across the different cities.

The analysis of interview data followed a qualitative thematic approach as outlined by Gibbs (2018), involving both descriptive and analytical coding procedures. The analysis process began with thorough familiarization with the transcripts through multiple readings. Initial coding used descriptive codes that closely followed the interview themes, identifying key statements related to governance approaches, policy tools, challenges, and relationships with other (state, market, and civic) actors. These initial descriptive codes were then developed into more interpretive analytical codes that identified underlying patterns, assumptions, and frameworks guiding officials' approaches to urban governance and reurbanization. Codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes reflecting key dimensions of urban governance: vertical relationships with national government, horizontal relationships with suburban municipalities, public-private relationships with developers, and understandings of reurbanization. Finally, themes were compared across cities to identify both commonalities in governance approaches and city-specific variations. The coding and analysis process utilized a semi-standardized protocol to ensure consistency while allowing for the emergence of unexpected themes. This approach enabled us to move from descriptive accounts of policy approaches to a more analytical understanding of the governance gap between policy aspirations and implementation capacity.

Several limitations of the methodology should be acknowledged. While the study captured the perspectives of municipal officials, it did not directly incorporate the views of other stakeholders such as developers, suburban municipalities, or residents. This limitation is partly addressed through officials' accounts of their interactions with these groups, but future research would benefit from including these additional perspectives. Additionally, the research focuses on officials' accounts of governance approaches rather than direct observation of policy implementation. This creates the potential for discrepancies between described and actual practices. However, the semi-structured approach allowed for probing questions about concrete examples and outcomes, providing some verification of officials' claims. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides valuable insights into how urban governance structures and practices shape municipal approaches to reurbanization in post-socialist cities, illuminating the constraints on policy implementation that contribute to the governance gap identified in this study.

3. Results

The analysis of interviews with high-ranking officials in Poland's five largest cities (excluding Warsaw) revealed consistent patterns in how municipal authorities perceive suburbanization challenges and approach reurbanization efforts. Despite variations in specific strategies, the cities share common constraints in implementing effective population retention policies. The findings presented below are organized around four key themes that emerged in the process of thematic data analysis, culminating in an examination of the fundamental implementation gap that characterizes Polish urban governance approaches to demographic challenges.

3.1. Framing Suburbanization: Problem, Definition, and Perception

Municipal officials across all five cities consistently identified suburbanization as a significant challenge, though their framing of the issue revealed subtle but important differences in perception that would later influence policy approaches. The dominant perspective positioned suburbanization primarily as a fiscal problem related to tax base erosion. Officials in Poznań, Wrocław, and Kraków explicitly quantified this impact, with one Wrocław official noting that: "From tax return about 3,200 PLN flows to the city treasury, and people are 'networks of expenditures'—if they have one expenditure category in the city, this category drives other expenditures in the city" (Int. 10). This understanding of residents as economic assets whose departure represented direct financial loss permeated official discourse across all study cities.

Despite recognizing suburbanization's negative fiscal impacts, many officials simultaneously characterized it as a "natural process" reflecting consumer preferences rather than policy failures. This framing sometimes included attributing suburbanization to residents' affluence, particularly in Poznań where officials (Int. 2) described suburbanization as explained by the wealth of the local community. The language of inevitability that accompanied this framing, characterizing suburbanization as a natural market response, revealed how deeply officials had internalized market-oriented explanations for spatial development patterns, even when these patterns undermined their cities' fiscal sustainability.

A third framing emerged in several cities, particularly Poznań, where officials expressed frustration that suburbanization continued despite their municipal investments: "We do a lot as city authorities, but people still leave" (Int. 13). This perspective revealed an underlying expectation that infrastructure improvements and urban amenities should naturally reverse suburbanization trends, without accounting for other structural factors affecting residential location decisions.

The way officials understood suburbanization's causes directly influenced their policy responses and their assessment of municipal capacity to address demographic challenges. Those who framed suburbanization primarily in fiscal terms tended to emphasize retention-oriented policies focused on tax incentives and service improvements. Officials who characterized it as a natural market process were more likely to express fatalism about municipal capacity to influence residential patterns, while those frustrated by the persistence of outmigration despite infrastructure investments showed greater willingness to consider more interventionist approaches, though they often lacked the institutional tools to implement such strategies. Notably, officials in Kraków emphasized that official statistics underestimate the city's actual population, claiming "about 400,000 people live in Kraków without being registered, so population statistics are actually

more favorable for the city than public statistics show" (Int. 5). This perception potentially diminishes the perceived urgency of addressing suburbanization.

3.2. Policy Responses: Aspirations and Limitations

3.2.1. Retention-Oriented Policies

All five cities have implemented loyalty programs (city cards) offering residents discounts and benefits, explicitly designed to incentivize tax registration within city boundaries. However, officials acknowledged these programs' limitations, as they incentivize tax payment rather than actual residence in the city. As one Poznań official explained, "Poznań Card is good for everyone; it encourages paying taxes in Poznań, but does not encourage registration" (Int. 1). Another official from Gdańsk showed a connection between local taxes and using public services: "We say officially: we invite you to preschool, but attach the first page of your PIT [tax return]. If you use roads, transportation, education, then we ask you to contribute to this, because you will use [these services] more than in your own municipality" (Int. 6).

Beyond fiscal incentives, cities have also invested in public space improvements, with officials across all cities emphasizing the importance of "a multifunctional public space" (Poznań) and "cool courtyards" (Kraków) for resident retention. Environmental policies featured prominently, especially air quality initiatives in Kraków, Łódź, and Wrocław. Transport policies included expanded parking zones, improvements to public transportation, and bicycle infrastructure.

Housing policies showed greater variation between cities. Poznań officials highlighted urban villas (small-scale multi-family developments) as a way to retain residents seeking single-family-like housing. This approach represents an attempt to provide suburban-style amenities within urban boundaries, though officials acknowledged limited municipal capacity to influence the broader housing market through such targeted interventions. Wrocław, Gdańsk, and Kraków emphasized affordable housing investments, with Gdańsk notably maintaining a non-privatization policy for its municipal housing stock since 1992. However, officials across all cities acknowledged their limited capacity to influence the broader housing market.

3.2.2. Implementation Constraints

Despite these diverse policy initiatives, officials identified numerous constraints limiting policy effectiveness that created what many described as a governance deadlock. Cities consistently reported their inability to sell land to developers below market price to encourage affordable housing development, reflecting legal constraints on municipal discretion in land transactions. This limitation undermines cities' capacity to use land policy as a tool for influencing development patterns and housing affordability.

The absence of legal tools requiring developers to cover infrastructure maintenance costs emerged as a particularly significant constraint across all cities. Officials repeatedly emphasized their frustration with bearing ongoing infrastructure costs for developments that primarily benefit private developers and suburban residents. This cost burden represents a direct fiscal impact of the governance gap, where cities provide infrastructure that enables suburbanization while lacking mechanisms to recover associated costs. Cities also reported their inability to modify existing land-use designations without providing financial

compensation to landowners, reflecting property rights protections that limit municipal planning authority. These constraints create significant barriers to implementing more sustainable development patterns, as they prevent cities from redirecting development toward more suitable locations or higher-density configurations.

The limited scale of municipal housing stock, typically around 10% of the total housing supply but often in poor technical condition, fundamentally constrains cities' ability to influence overall housing market dynamics. This limitation reflects the post-socialist transformation's emphasis on housing privatization, which reduced municipal housing stocks while failing to develop alternative mechanisms for public influence over housing development patterns. High land prices in city centers further limit affordable housing development, creating a market-driven cycle where urban housing becomes increasingly unaffordable relative to suburban alternatives. Officials across all cities acknowledged their limited capacity to address these market dynamics through municipal policy interventions, reflecting broader constraints on public sector influence over private market outcomes in post-socialist planning systems.

3.3. Inter-Municipal Relations: Cooperation Amid Competition

3.3.1. City-Suburb Relations

Relations between core cities and suburban municipalities revealed tensions between competition and cooperation that illuminate broader challenges in metropolitan governance. In Poznań and Wrocław, officials described these relationships as "investment" rather than "cost," emphasizing long-term benefits of urban-suburban coordination. This perspective reflects a strategic approach to regional development that recognizes interdependencies between core cities and suburban areas, though it also acknowledges the financial costs of maintaining these relationships. However, Kraków officials characterized their approach more transactionally, focusing on specific arrangements around public transportation and education.

All five cities provided services to suburban residents without full cost recovery, creating what might be termed a "service provision paradox" where cities subsidize suburbanization through their own service delivery. Educational services emerged as particularly significant, with Wrocław officials noting that: "Secondary schools in Wrocław have about 50% of students from outside Wrocław, and the city bears 100% of the costs of their education" (Int. 10). Similar patterns existed for transportation services, though with varying cost-sharing arrangements. The persistence of these arrangements reflects the absence of effective mechanisms for urban-suburban cost-sharing and the political difficulties of modifying established service provision patterns.

3.3.2. Metropolitan Coordination

Officials across all cities expressed frustration with the lack of a metropolitan governance framework. As one Poznań official stated, "there is no metropolitan legislation, as a result each local government unit manages on its own" (Int. 13). Multiple interviewees identified the absence of a metropolitan law as a critical barrier to addressing suburbanization effectively.

Despite these limitations, cities have developed various coordination mechanisms, ranging from informal (Poznań Agglomeration Council) to more structured arrangements (Metropolitan Associations in Gdańsk and

Kraków). Integrated Territorial Investments have provided financial incentives for cooperation, though officials noted these arrangements focus more on project implementation than strategic planning. The governance vacuum at the metropolitan scale particularly limits reurbanization efforts, as effective population retention strategies require coordination across municipal boundaries to address regional development patterns. Without metropolitan institutions capable of coordinating land use planning, transportation systems, and fiscal arrangements, individual cities find themselves competing with their suburban neighbors rather than developing comprehensive regional approaches to demographic challenges.

3.4. Public-Private Relations: The Developer Dimension

3.4.1. Characterizing Developer Relations

Municipal officials described complex relationships with real estate developers. In Poznań, officials characterized this relationship as "dialogue but not cooperation" (Int. 13), noting an "unspoken thread of understanding." Łódź presented the most constrained relationship, with one official asserting that "institutional frameworks make dialogue with developers impossible" and that "relations between the public and private sectors are a myth" (Int. 11). This assessment suggests a deliberate municipal strategy of maintaining arm's-length relationships with developers, framed as institutional limitations rather than policy choices, allowing officials to avoid both direct confrontation with development interests and public criticism of being overly accommodating to private sector priorities.

In contrast, Gdańsk officials described more formalized arrangements where developers contribute to infrastructure development in exchange for favorable land-use designations. Wrocław officials highlighted "meetings and conversations" that create "positive competition" between developers. Kraków mentioned structured mechanisms like the Housing Dialogue Commission, representing the most institutionalized approach to developer relations among the study cities. However, even these structured approaches operate within broader legal and institutional constraints that limit municipal capacity to significantly influence development outcomes or extract public benefits from private development activities.

3.4.2. Governance Limitations

Despite these variations, officials across all cities identified similar constraints in their ability to influence developer behavior. These included:

- Inability to impose infrastructure maintenance costs on developers—this constraint represents a fundamental governance failure that subsidizes private development while imposing fiscal burdens on public authorities.
- Absence of "marked money" from investments that could be directed to infrastructure, which prevents cities from capturing value created by public investments and redirecting it toward additional public improvements, limiting the capacity for strategic public investment in urban development.
- Developers' market power due to limited competition—officials across cities noted that concentrated ownership of development-ready land (as a result of broader patterns of post-socialist privatisation) reduces municipal leverage in negotiations, as developers face limited competitive pressure to accommodate public sector priorities.

- Lack of legal instruments for effective negotiation as Polish planning law provides limited tools for extracting public benefits or modifying private development proposals to better serve public objectives.

These limitations created an asymmetrical power relationship that officials believed favored developers. As one Gdańsk official explained, "the city sold off its land and real estate because it once needed input for investments" (Int. 8). This historical context has reduced cities' leverage in current negotiations with development interests.

3.5. Reurbanization Potential? The Implementation Gap

Despite recognizing suburbanization challenges and implementing various policy responses, officials' accounts revealed a profound implementation gap between aspirations and capabilities that fundamentally limits reurbanization potential in Polish cities. Most cities have developed aspirational policies to promote urban living, but they consistently lack effective tools to implement comprehensive reurbanization strategies that could meaningfully counteract suburbanization pressures. This implementation gap stems from multiple interconnected factors that create systematic barriers to effective policy implementation. Fragmented planning authority limits cities' ability to coordinate development across municipal boundaries, preventing the regional-scale interventions necessary for effective reurbanization. Since suburbanization operates at metropolitan scales while municipal authority remains constrained within administrative boundaries, cities find themselves unable to address the spatial dynamics that drive demographic challenges.

Market-dominated housing development processes operate with minimal municipal direction, reflecting the post-socialist emphasis on market mechanisms over public planning authority. Cities consistently reported their limited capacity to influence housing market outcomes through policy interventions, as private developers maintain primary control over housing production while facing few requirements to accommodate public priorities or provide affordable housing options. National policies often incentivize suburbanization rather than compact development, creating policy conflicts that undermine municipal reurbanization efforts. Tax policies, infrastructure investments, and housing finance mechanisms frequently favor suburban development patterns while providing limited support for urban consolidation, forcing cities to work against rather than with national policy frameworks.

Fiscal arrangements fail to adequately compensate cities for services provided to suburban residents, creating perverse incentives that subsidize suburbanization while imposing costs on urban governments. These arrangements represent a fundamental flaw in metropolitan governance that enables suburban free-riding on urban services while undermining urban fiscal sustainability.

These constraints create a situation where municipal officials can articulate the benefits of reurbanization and demonstrate awareness of policy approaches that might promote urban living, but they possess limited capacity to translate this vision into reality. Rather than implementing comprehensive reurbanization strategies, cities instead rely on incremental interventions such as loyalty programs, public space improvements, and targeted housing initiatives that have modest impacts on overall population patterns.

The implementation gap was particularly pronounced in housing policy, where officials across all cities acknowledged their limited ability to shape market-driven development. As one Kraków official candidly

noted, "the city is not a significant player in this process and has no impact on housing prices" (Int. 5). This assessment highlighted the fundamental limitations of municipal governance in addressing suburbanization through reurbanization policies, revealing how market-oriented development patterns operate largely independent of municipal policy interventions. The persistence of this implementation gap three decades after the post-socialist transition suggests that current governance constraints reflect institutionalized limitations rather than temporary transition effects. The internalization of market-oriented approaches to spatial development by municipal officials, combined with legal and fiscal constraints on public intervention, has created a governance system that recognizes the benefits of reurbanization while lacking the institutional capacity to implement effective policies. This situation transforms reurbanization from a potentially transformative policy approach into primarily aspirational rhetoric that serves symbolic rather than instrumental functions in municipal governance.

4. Discussion

The findings on the governance gap addressing suburbanization and population decline in Poland's major cities contribute to several streams of literature on post-socialist urban governance, metropolitan coordination, and reurbanization processes. The empirical material reveals a significant disconnect between aspirational policy rhetoric and implementation capacities in addressing demographic challenges. This discussion is organized around three key dimensions: the paradoxes of post-socialist urban governance, the institutional constraints on reurbanization, and the implications for theoretical debates on city-regional planning and governance.

4.1. Post-Socialist Urban Governance Paradoxes

The findings illuminate several paradoxes in how post-socialist cities approach population challenges. First is what might be termed the "naturalization paradox," wherein officials simultaneously recognize suburbanization as problematic while framing it as a natural, market-driven process. This contradictory framing echoes Stanilov and Sýkora's (2014) observation that post-socialist urban development has been driven by a set of free-market practices centered around the right to private property and a highly decentralized, regionally uncoordinated system of land-use controls favoring urban sprawl. Our findings suggest that three decades after the transition, municipal officials have internalized this market orientation to such an extent that they struggle to imagine more interventionist approaches to spatial management, even when recognizing its negative fiscal implications. Municipal officials across our study cities repeatedly cited property rights protections as a primary constraint on their ability to modify existing land-use designations or implement more sustainable development patterns. This reveals a form of path dependency in post-socialist planning, where the initial rejection of centralized planning in the early 1990s continues to constrain policy options decades later, even as the negative externalities of uncoordinated development have become increasingly apparent (Dąbrowski & Piskorek, 2018; Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012).

The conceptualization of suburbanization as a "natural process" by municipal authorities reveals a deeper governance paradox. As Barke and Clarke (2016, p. 1) argue, this "calls into question the concept of re-urbanisation as some kind of 'natural' phase in an urban development cycle," emphasizing instead the strategic role that local authorities should play. The interviews revealed this contradiction explicitly—while Poznań officials described suburbanization as "explained by the wealth of the local community," they simultaneously expressed frustration that "we do a lot as city authorities, but people still leave." This

naturalization of market-driven development reflects what Wagner (2017) identifies as an uncritical social perception of suburbanization in Poland, where society has internalized market logic to such an extent that alternative approaches seem unimaginable.

A second paradox emerges in what can be termed the "capacity-expectation gap," where officials simultaneously acknowledge limited governance capacities while expressing frustration that their efforts have not yielded better results. This finding aligns with Wagner's (2017) argument that Polish municipalities were unprepared for planning responsibilities transferred to them during decentralization in the 1990s. While officials have developed a sophisticated understanding of how suburbanization threatens municipal fiscal health, they have not developed correspondingly sophisticated governance tools to address these challenges. As Haase et al. (2017) observe regarding Polish metropolitan areas, "new growth is discussed more in a sense of a potential development" (p. 356) rather than being concretely managed through coordinated governance arrangements.

4.2. Institutional Constraints on Reurbanization-as-Policy

Our findings contribute to the emerging literature on reurbanization in post-socialist contexts by highlighting the institutional constraints that limit its effectiveness as a policy approach. While Ouředníček et al. (2015) argue that "reurbanization demands deeper involvement of local government in town planning" (p. 29), our study reveals the significant barriers to such involvement in the Polish context. As one official candidly acknowledged, "the city is not a significant player in this process," highlighting the limited leverage of municipal authorities in shaping development patterns.

This limited capacity for municipal intervention aligns with Couch et al.'s (2011) observation that governance arrangements are place-specific and subject to structural and normative conditions. In the Polish context, these conditions include fragmented planning authority, limited fiscal resources, and a cultural orientation toward market-based solutions. These conditions create what Hytönen et al. (2016) have termed "defensive routines" in land use governance, where authorities avoid confrontation with established development interests even when recognizing the need for more sustainable patterns.

The evolving role of public-private partnerships in Polish reurbanization efforts deserves particular attention. While Stoker (2019, p. 3) notes that "private investment is considered a key component of revitalization efforts," our findings reveal significant limitations in how these partnerships function. The Łódź case is particularly telling—despite Antczak-Stępniak (2022) arguing that to initiate the reurbanization process, the overarching goal should be a sustainable compact city, officials acknowledged that "institutional frameworks make dialogue with developers impossible." This represents what Pacione (2009) describes as the tension between capital seeking accumulation and the state seeking legitimation—a dynamic that in the Polish context consistently favors market actors over public planning goals.

The difficulties in establishing metropolitan coordination further constrain reurbanization potential. As Mikuła (2023) observes in his study of the Poznań city-region, even when metropolitan planning visions are developed through collaborative processes, their implementation at the municipal level remains problematic. Our findings corroborate his identification of "passive city-regionalism," where municipal authorities express support for urban-suburban coordination but fail to translate this into concrete planning decisions. The officials in our

study cities consistently cited the absence of a metropolitan governance framework as a critical barrier, yet most had only made limited progress in developing voluntary cooperation mechanisms.

Significantly, Polish authorities' concerns differ from typical "shrinking cities" discourse. As interview material revealed, it is not about shrinking cities per se but about the shrinking tax base—a distinction that shapes policy responses. Haase et al. (2021) emphasize that urban population regrowth requires more control over suburbanization through consistent and coordinated planning policies. However, the lack of consistent policies for the support of cities both at the national and local level in Poland and the Czech Republic is clearly one of the factors hindering core city growth (Haase et al., 2017). This is exemplified by the case of Poznań, where bottom-up integration demonstrates how diverse ideological orientations and practical attitudes intermingle, enforcing uneasy coalitions (Mikuła, 2023).

This implementation gap relates directly to what Lackowska and Zimmermann (2011) observed in their Polish-German comparison of metropolitan governance arrangements. They noted that in Polish metropolitan areas, "among the aims of the arrangements the economic argument of the new regionalism still lags behind the problems of the inner functioning of the areas" (p. 166). The findings confirm this observation, as cities focus primarily on practical issues like transportation coordination and educational services rather than developing comprehensive economic development strategies at the metropolitan scale.

4.3. Theoretical Implications for City-Regional Planning and Governance

Our findings have several implications for theoretical debates on city-regional governance and planning. First, they challenge the applicability of Western European models of metropolitan governance to post-socialist contexts. While much of the literature on metropolitan governance emphasizes the shift from government to governance (Kübler & Heinelt, 2004; Savitch & Vogel, 2009), our findings suggest that in post-socialist contexts, this shift has often resulted in governance vacuums rather than innovative governance forms. The absence of effective metropolitan institutions, combined with weak regulatory authority at the municipal level, creates what Mikuła (2024) identifies as "incompatibility between the functional and political spaces of the metropolitan area due to intensifying suburbanization" (p. 3).

Second, our findings contribute to debates about the nature of reurbanization as a policy approach versus a demographic process. Haase et al. (2021) argue that any regrowth needs, subsequently, a multiple policy approach to be stabilized or continued. The results suggest that in Polish cities, reurbanization remains primarily rhetorical, with limited policy integration or implementation capacity. This contradicts Barke and Clarke's (2016) assertion that the strategic role of the local authority has been central to the process of reurbanization, as the study reveals municipal authorities with significant awareness but limited leverage to influence development patterns.

The concept of "soft spaces" in planning provides a useful framework for understanding the emerging metropolitan arrangements in our study cities. Mikuła (2023) applies this concept to post-socialist city-regions, arguing that these arrangements operate as "soft spaces of planning visions, intermediary spaces of delivery" (p. 683). The findings support this characterization, as municipal officials described various voluntary coordination mechanisms that generate planning visions but lack implementation authority. However, our research suggests an important qualification to Mikuła's framework: in many cases,

these soft spaces function primarily as discursive arenas rather than vehicles for policy coordination, with limited impact on actual development patterns.

The governance gap identified in the study also illuminates what Mikuła et al. (2024) describe as the process of co-creation of new territorialities through institutional dialogue and soft planning. While studied cities have established various forms of dialogue with suburban municipalities, these dialogues have primarily focused on practical coordination issues rather than the creation of new territorial imaginaries or governance capacities. This suggests that the "soft planning" approach may have significant limitations in contexts with weak institutional foundations and market-oriented development pressures.

5. Conclusion

This study advances urban governance literature by providing empirical basis for the concept of a "governance gap"—the systematic disconnect between reurbanization aspirations and implementation capacity in post-socialist cities. Through access to high-ranking officials in Poland's five largest cities, it reveals a paradox: municipal authorities possess understanding of demographic challenges and knowledge of interventions, yet remain institutionally unable to fully translate this awareness into effective action. This finding challenges prevailing assumptions that policy failure stems from lack of awareness or innovation, demonstrating instead how structural constraints embedded in fragmented planning systems transform reurbanization from potentially transformative policy into an aspirational rhetoric.

The empirical contribution lies in documenting how post-socialist legacies continue shaping urban governance three decades after transition. It reveals how municipal officials have internalized market-oriented explanations for suburbanization as "natural processes" while simultaneously expressing frustration at their powerlessness. This extends beyond documenting suburbanization patterns to expose the governance mechanisms that perpetuate them, filling a critical gap in post-socialist urban studies. While Western literature emphasizes the strategic role of local authorities in reurbanization, our findings reveal cities with awareness but without leverage, operating within institutional architectures that systematically constrain their ability to realize "spaces of possibility." The persistence of voluntary coordination mechanisms and "soft planning" approaches proves inadequate for contexts characterized by weak institutional foundations and market-dominated development.

These findings suggest that addressing demographic challenges requires fundamental reforms beyond municipal-level innovations. National planning frameworks must provide cities with stronger regulatory tools, while metropolitan governance arrangements need statutory foundations rather than voluntary coordination. As demographic pressures intensify and governance constraints prove counterproductive for entire metropolitan regions, understanding these gaps becomes an urgent practical challenge for ensuring the long-term viability of post-socialist urban systems.

Looking forward, the trajectories described in this study raise important questions about the sustainability of current urban development patterns in post-socialist contexts. As demographic pressures intensify and suburban municipalities face their own fiscal and infrastructure challenges, the governance constraints identified here may ultimately prove counterproductive not only for core cities but for metropolitan regions as a whole. Understanding and addressing these governance gaps thus becomes not merely an academic exercise but an urgent practical challenge for ensuring the long-term viability of Poland's urban systems.

Future research should examine how these governance challenges play out in practice through detailed case studies of specific policy initiatives, while also incorporating the perspectives of suburban municipalities, developers, and residents to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex stakeholder dynamics that shape urban development outcomes. While the governance constraints identified here reflect broader patterns of post-socialist urban transformation, comparative analysis across CEE contexts would illuminate how these common mechanisms interact with specific national institutional legacies to produce varied governance outcomes and policy responses.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

LLMs Disclosure

Claude was used for grammar check.

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ARTICLE

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Planning Culture and Local Agents of Change: Shaping Urban Transition in a Shrinking Polish City

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Abstract

The article analyses regeneration processes in a medium-sized city in Central and Eastern Europe, using Leszno (Poland) as an example. Particular emphasis is placed on investment conflicts, policy learning, and the challenges associated with urban decline. The case study is based on a triangulation of sources: analysis of (a) strategic documents and (b) press materials, as well as (c) in-depth interviews with actors of change, such as representatives of NGOs, entrepreneurs, property managers, residents, and municipal officials. The construction of shopping centres was the subject of a major dispute, which was interpreted as a critical juncture, revealing a clash between different planning culture models: (a) modernisation and market-oriented, focused on attracting large investments; and (b) local and community-oriented, emphasising the protection of traditional trade and social ties. Regeneration, initially developed as a response to this conflict, served as a laboratory for institutional learning. A salient context is depopulation: Since 2012, the population of Leszno has fallen by more than 8%, a phenomenon that has particularly affected the city centre and limited the effectiveness of regeneration measures. Leszno's experiences indicate a broader phenomenon observed in post-socialist cities: a hybrid planning culture, strong dependence on external programmes, and deficits in social trust and participation. The study's findings suggest that urban transformation in shrinking cities can be a platform for institutional learning. However, its transformative potential remains limited by the lack of long-term vision and project-by-project logic.

Keywords

agents of change; institutional learning; planning culture; shrinking cities; urban regeneration

1. Introduction

Central and Eastern European cities have faced challenges in recent decades related to socio-economic transformation, globalisation, and depopulation processes (Mykhnenko & Turok, 2008). These challenges are particularly evident in medium-sized cities—understood here as those with roughly 50,000–200,000 inhabitants—that have lost their industrial functions or have not found their place in the new, post-1989 economic order (Liebmann & Kuder, 2012). The literature indicates that regeneration is becoming one of the key tools for counteracting social, economic, and spatial degradation (Roberts, 2000; Tallon, 2020). However, its effectiveness is limited by urban shrinkage, capital flight, and planning culture (Haase, Bernt, et al., 2016; Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009; Pallagst et al., 2021). In this context, the perspective of policy learning—i.e., learning within the framework of public policy processes—takes on particular importance. It concerns the capacity of institutions and agents of change to learn from previous experiences, adapt tools, and introduce innovations in urban policy (Argyris, 1977; Rae, 2011). In shrinking cities, policy learning has a dual dimension: On the one hand, it enables the correction of technocratic practices, while on the other, it prompts reflections on the assumptions of development policy itself. Urban regeneration is therefore an area in which processes related to planning, culture, and policy learning intertwine. The dynamics of these processes and the strategies employed depend on local institutional and social conditions.

The article aims to analyse urban regeneration processes in the context of planning culture, policy learning, and the challenges associated with shrinking cities in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Particular emphasis is placed on how local conflicts and participatory practices become an impetus for institutional learning and how they influence the evolution of planning culture in conditions of depopulation. The research focuses on the city of Leszno, located in western Poland, analysing urban regeneration processes from the early 2000s (when the conflict surrounding the construction of the Manhattan and Galeria Leszno shopping centres took place) to the implementation of the Municipal Regeneration Programme in 2016–2023. From a broader perspective, this study is embedded in discussing the challenges facing medium-sized cities in CEE, which share a common experience of urban transition. To achieve this goal, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do conflicts surrounding investments and regeneration processes reveal the clash of different planning culture patterns?
2. How can the urban regeneration process be interpreted in terms of policy learning?
3. How do urban shrinkage processes influence regeneration strategies and the evolution of local planning cultures among various agents of change?
4. How do the experiences of Leszno fit into the broader processes of urban transition of shrinking cities in CEE?

The article is divided into seven parts. After the introduction, a theoretical framework is presented, covering the concept of planning culture, institutional learning, and the issue of urban shrinkage. This is followed by a description of the research methodology, including qualitative interviews and document analysis. Section 4 presents the local context of Leszno, while the fifth section contains an analysis of the results, which is further explored in the discussion section, where the results are compared with the literature on the subject. The article concludes with a summary.

To frame the subsequent analysis, urban shrinkage is treated as a structuring context that reshapes local planning culture and necessitates policy learning. Depopulation reconfigures actor coalitions, objectives, and time horizons, calling for mechanisms that move beyond routine adaptation (Eraydin & Özatağan, 2021; Pallagst & Fleschurz, 2022). Haase, Rink, and Grossmann (2016) point out that in post-socialist cities, urban regeneration becomes an arena for negotiation between interest groups, and the effects depend on the capacity for policy learning. Großmann et al. (2013) analyse regeneration as a process of adaptation in conditions of structural demographic crisis. In turn, Stryjakiewicz et al. (2012) show that urban shrinkage in Poland is closely linked to the legacy of post-socialist transformation, while Stryjakiewicz and Jaroszewska (2016) argue that the process of shrinkage poses a significant challenge for local governance and requires the inclusion of policy learning mechanisms.

2. Theoretical Framework

Research on CEE cities often stresses that urban regeneration processes cannot be analysed in isolation from the broader cultural and institutional context. Three concepts are particularly relevant here: planning culture, policy learning, and urban shrinkage. Together, they provide a framework to capture local conflicts and urban transition better. This section offers an integrative, shrinkage-aware reading that brings together established strands on planning culture, policy learning, and urban shrinkage, making their connections explicit through an outcome-oriented lens applied to medium-sized, post-socialist cities (as illustrated by Leszno).

Planning culture is not only regulations or planning documents, but also a particular set of values, norms, and practices that influence the daily actions of planners, city authorities, and local communities (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009). In CEE, a technocratic model of centralised planning, based on top-down decisions, prevailed for many decades. After 1989, the situation changed. New patterns, often taken from Western European countries, began to overlap with the legacy of the socialist system (Sagan & Grabkowska, 2012; Scott & Kühn, 2012). In practice, this means that we are dealing with a hybrid system in which, on the one hand, solutions in line with European standards, such as integrated approaches or participation, have been introduced (Pallagst & Mercier, 2007). On the other hand, elements of hierarchical decision-making and low levels of public trust are still strongly present (Maier, 2012; Sanyal, 2005). Jaššo et al. (2025) aptly point out the characteristics of planning culture in CEE:

- Long-time horizons for planning and decision-making: The planning culture is adaptive, evolutionary, and highly bureaucratic, based on multi-step processes that are difficult to accelerate. Although this slows things down, it ensures the system's rationality, predictability, and stability.
- The important role of social aspects and social cohesion: Planning has always had a stabilising function for society and was egalitarian. The transformation of the 1990s introduced neoliberal models that increased inequality and spatial polarisation.
- Increasing vulnerability of spatial and social systems: Market pressures, unfavourable demographic trends, and the geopolitical situation have exacerbated social instability and the erosion of cohesion. Declining trust and alienation undermine planning effectiveness and public participation.
- Great methodological depth but lack of interdisciplinarity: Planning in CEE is mainly based on data, classifications, and regulations, marginalising public participation and dialogue. Although participatory elements have been introduced, the system remains closed and is hardly open to innovation, including in the area of digital planning tools (Hasler et al., 2017).

- Sceptical public attitudes towards planning: Public trust in planners is low, and smaller stakeholder groups are often marginalised. The legacy of socialism, the politicisation of processes, and local arrangements mean that planning is sometimes reduced to the technical implementation of political decisions.

Conflicts around significant investments clearly demonstrate the above characteristics—a modernisation and market logic approach clashes with a local, community-based one. Such conflicts do not always lead to simple solutions, but can become a turning point in the development of urban policies. These are referred to in the literature as critical junctures, which open the way to institutional change (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). These changes do not happen automatically—they require a learning process that can follow two paths: single-loop learning, which involves adjusting actions within existing rules, and double-loop learning, which allows the rules of the game themselves to be questioned and changed (Argyris, 1977; Stam et al., 2023). Examples from CEE show both levels: Minor adjustments in consultation procedures are the first option, and the creation of formal deliberation and co-decision mechanisms is the second (Innes & Booher, 2010). It is worth noting that learning processes in the region are often accelerated and heterogeneous. They arise from local disputes and external pressures, especially EU requirements. It is also impossible to ignore the discourses shaping urban policy's role. In Poland and other countries in the region, two main ways of thinking have been clashing for years: the modernising one, focused on economic growth, investment attractiveness, and integration into the global economy, and the local one, which emphasises the protection of social ties, jobs, and the identity of space (Havel, 2022). Planning conflicts are therefore not merely technical. However, they carry deeper meanings, and analysing narratives lets us grasp why some decisions are accepted and others are opposed.

Regeneration takes on particular significance in this context. It is a tool for the renewal of degraded spaces and a platform for institutional learning. Shaped by post-socialist legacies, funding-dependent governance, and uneven municipal capacities across CEE, regeneration practice often oscillates between technocratic routines and emerging participatory approaches. Poland, thanks to the support of EU funds and national development programmes, has become a space for testing new forms of cooperation between the administration, residents, and the private sector (Ciesiółka & Burov, 2021). Additionally, the 2015 Regeneration Act provided the legal framework, defining regeneration as a territorially focused, comprehensive process to lift degraded areas from crisis through integrated social, spatial, and economic actions led by local stakeholders under a municipal regeneration programme (Republic of Poland, 2015). In practice, this framework has taken on a concrete institutional form: Regeneration committees and dialogue forums introduced under the Act now serve in many cities as testing grounds for deliberative planning (Masierek, 2021). Over time, they may influence the broader evolution of planning culture, from a technocratic model towards a more participatory one. At the same time, these processes are taking place in the context of shrinking cities. Depopulation, ageing populations, and migration outflows particularly affect CEE (Haase, Rink, & Grossmann, 2016). Based on the assumption of continuous growth, traditional planning strategies are proving insufficient in this context. Therefore, learning new ways of urban transition is necessary: reusing empty buildings, adapting infrastructure, and redefining development priorities into smart solutions (Mykhnenko, 2023). Shrinkage can be seen as a challenge, but also as an opportunity. This forces greater flexibility and the creation of solutions that respond to the real needs of city residents. As Pallagst et al. (2021) note, how local authorities and communities perceive the process of decline has a significant impact on the choice of strategy. A more defensive approach often predominates, focusing on preventing population and investment outflows. In contrast, in other local authorities, an adaptive

perspective is adopted, treating the decline in population as the new norm and an opportunity for innovative solutions. These differences lead to different development trajectories, which influence the evolution of planning culture.

3. Source Materials and Research Methods

This article uses a qualitative approach, combining desk research and in-depth interviews. It is a case study in nature, allowing for a detailed understanding of the dynamics of local urban policy processes and their embedding in a wider socio-economic context (Stake, 1995). This case study approach is beneficial in researching regeneration processes that are complex, multidimensional, and embedded in local institutional contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Several categories of material were collected and analysed as part of the desk study:

- Archival press materials documenting the conflict around the construction of the Manhattan and Galeria Leszno shopping centres, which became the starting point for subsequent regeneration activities;
- Contemporary press materials on the regeneration of the city centre, including articles in the local media containing statements by local authorities, experts, and entrepreneurs, as well as anonymous residents (included in the comments to the articles);
- Strategic and planning documents, such as the Local Regeneration Programme (2007), the Municipal Regeneration Programme (2016–2023), the regulations of the Regeneration Committee, and related municipal documents on development policy and promotion.

Press materials and policy documents were analysed using a public policy discourse analysis approach (Fischer, 2003), paying attention to the language used to describe problems and proposed solutions.

The second key data source was in-depth interviews conducted with local agents of change (Kostourou, 2022) involved in regeneration processes. Their commitment to effecting change is manifest in their active participation in the advisory body to the mayor of Leszno—the Regeneration Committee. The respondents were:

- Two representatives of an NGO active in promoting economic activity in the regeneration area;
- Two entrepreneurs operating in the city centre;
- A property manager (owner and administrator of a multi-family building) active in the process of renovation of tenements;
- Two residents who are tenants of private flats in the regeneration area;
- Two officials from Leszno City Hall: one from the Regeneration Department and another from the Promotion and Development Department.

The interviews were conducted in September 2023. They were semi-structured, which allowed for a balance between data comparability and freedom of narration for the respondents (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was recorded with the consent of the participants and then transcribed.

Data analysis took place in multiple stages and included:

1. Open coding: In the first stage, the interview transcriptions and documents were subjected to an exploratory reading. Main thematic threads were identified, following grounded theory procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).
2. Axial coding: The analysis was then deepened by combining codes into broader analytical categories, such as planning culture, policy learning (single-loop vs. double-loop), modernisation and localisation narratives, and adaptation strategies to urban shrinkage.
3. Narrative analysis: Elements of narrative policy analysis (Roe, 1994) were applied, focusing on identifying competing narratives about town centre development and urban regeneration processes. These narratives were interpreted as expressions of differing patterns of planning culture (Knieling & Othengrafen, 2009).
4. Triangulation of sources: Data from the interviews were juxtaposed with press releases and policy documents to enhance the credibility of the qualitative research.

To increase the reliability of the analysis, the coding results were internally validated by re-reading selected transcripts and documents and comparing the interpretations with the literature. However, it should be emphasised that the case study results have limited generalisability (Stake, 1995). The aim of the study was not to create a universal model of urban regeneration: The intention was to analyse local dynamics that could serve as a reference point for comparative studies on planning culture and institutional learning in Central and Eastern European cities.

4. Local Context: Leszno in Transition

Leszno, a medium-sized city in western Poland, is an example of the development trajectory followed by many urban centres in CEE during the post-socialist transition. During the era of centralised planning, the city developed based on light industry, construction, and municipal services. However, 1989 brought radical changes: rapid deindustrialisation, privatisation, and restructuring of the economy, which led to the closure of numerous workplaces, rising unemployment, and increased migration. Some residents left for larger regional centres, such as Poznań or Wrocław and abroad, especially to Western Europe. At the same time, the process of suburbanisation intensified. These dynamics are part of a broader pattern of urban shrinkage in CEE, where population decline is driven by population ageing and migration outflow (Haase, Rink, & Grossmann, 2016). In Leszno, shrinkage manifested not only in population loss but also in related indicators: intensified suburban sprawl, weakening local labour demand and business base, rising commercial/ residential vacancies in the historic core, and a decline in births (lower fertility). Since 2012, Leszno has lost over 8% of its population (Figure 1), particularly in the historic centre. In doing so, the population decline has been faster than in other parts of Poland.

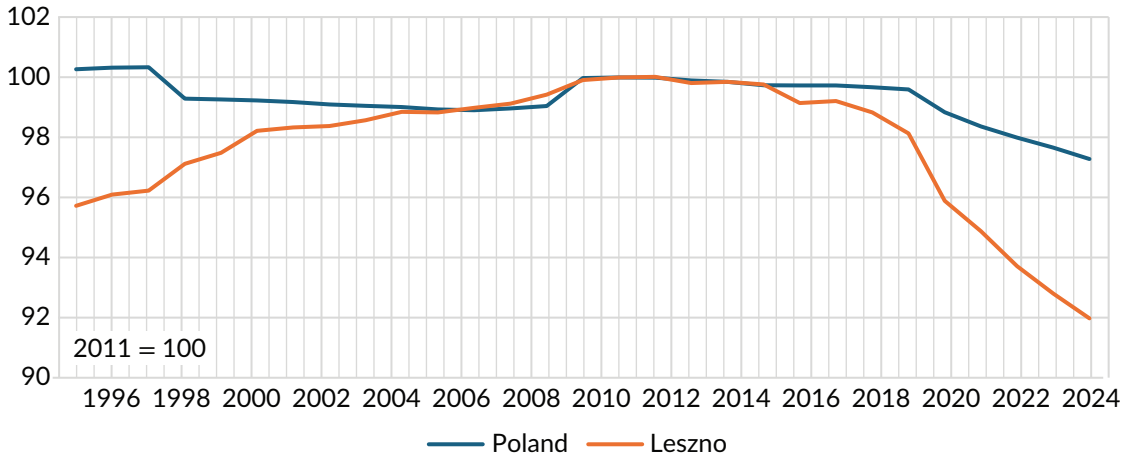

Figure 1. Population change in Leszno and Poland between 1996 and 2024. Notes: 2011 = 100 (base year set at Leszno's population peak in the series); indices show annual values relative to 2011 for Leszno and Poland. Source: Own compilation based on Statistics Poland (2024).

A timeline of key events in Leszno's regeneration process is presented in Figure 2.

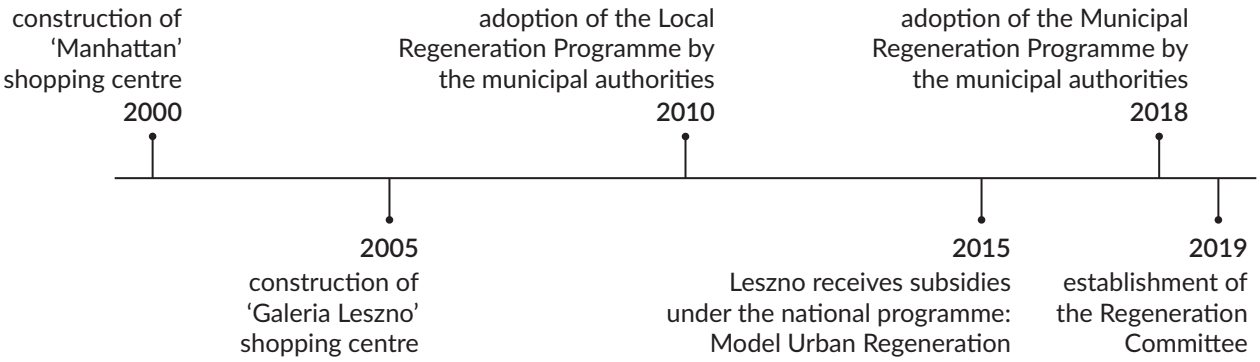

Figure 2. Key milestones in Leszno's regeneration planning (2000–2019).

One of the key moments was the conflict related to the construction of shopping centres: Manhattan in 2000 and Galeria Leszno in 2005. These investments, part of a broader expansion trend of large shopping centres in Central and Eastern European cities, generated strong reactions and protests from local entrepreneurs. In their view, the facilities, located outside the centre (1,100 m and 2,500 m from the Market Square) and on the city's ring road, threatened traditional downtown trade, based on small, family-run shops that had performed an important economic and social function in the city's structure for generations. Numerous comments in the local press pointed to the risk of social life being "washed out" of Leszno's historic centre. These concerns aligned with the experience of many medium-sized cities in Poland, where the opening of large shopping centres resulted in an exodus of customers from the city centre and exacerbated the suburbanisation of commercial functions. The conflict surrounding new shopping centres can be interpreted as a critical juncture at which the two logics of planning culture collided: modernisation, promoting development by attracting significant investment and external capital, and localism, focused on protecting traditional forms of urban economy and spatial identity. In response to the planned investment, local associations and entrepreneurs began to look for alternative solutions. Among other things, a concept was developed for the Goplana shopping centre, located closer to the city centre, which was to bring

together local merchants and compete with large shopping centres. However, due to a lack of sufficient funds and the inability to agree on a common concept for the investment, the project was abandoned. Ultimately, another shopping centre, Starówka, was built on this site, which did not fulfil the original vision of including small businesses (Figure 3).

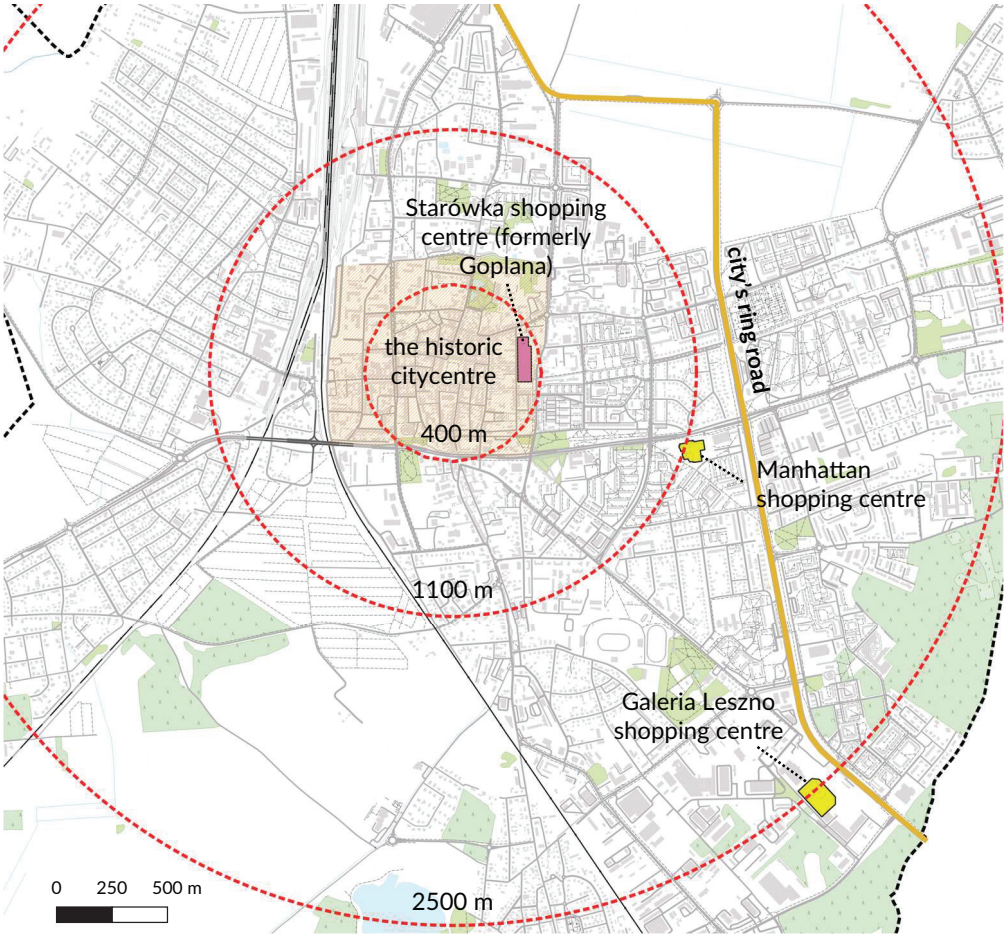

Figure 3. The centre of Leszno and facilities influencing the city's transition. Source: Own compilation based on Head Office of Geodesy and Cartography (2025).

Nevertheless, the conflict around shopping centres contributed to creating a cooperation network between local actors, which in the long term resulted in the authorities' interest in revitalising the inner city. The invitation of regeneration experts by local NGOs reinforced this process, inspiring the search for a broader strategic framework. Meetings with experts encouraged the city authorities to start work on a Local Regeneration Programme, which was the first step towards institutionalising a regeneration approach in Leszno. The launch of European regeneration funds was also significant because it brought about organisational and legal changes in the field of renewal of degraded areas in Poland (Ciesiółka, 2018). In its initial iteration, the Local Regeneration Programme focused mainly on technical measures and renovations—street and sidewalk upgrades—prioritising quick, visible outputs. By contrast, "soft" components (social and economic regeneration, community capacity-building, activation of local actors, governance reforms) remained marginal, and participation was largely procedural.

The subsequent strategic document, Municipal Regeneration Programme for Leszno, prepared under the implementation of Poland's 2015 Regeneration Act and adopted in 2018, broadened the approach to include infrastructure renewal and social and economic activation of the inner city. As a result of the programme, projects combining infrastructure and social activities are being implemented. The aesthetics and functionality of the town centre have been partly improved thanks to the renovation of the main pedestrian zone: Słowiańska Street and the Market Square. Some of the tenement houses in the town centre have been renovated, which has raised the standard of living of residents. The programme also supported local entrepreneurs by modernising commercial spaces and creating conditions for the development of services. At the same time, social projects were implemented: senior clubs, initiatives for young people, and integration activities strengthening the bonds of the local community. In this regard, it is worth emphasising Leszno's participation in the Model Urban Regeneration and Regeneration Regions programmes. The former was a national initiative in which 20 Polish cities developed model solutions to implement the Regeneration Act. The latter continued this effort at the voivodeship level—run by Marshal's Offices—covering a larger pool of municipalities and offering training courses and study visits.

Building on all the above experiences, in 2019 the mayor of Leszno—following publicly consulted regulations—established a 10-member Regeneration Committee as an advisory body. Bringing together NGO representatives, entrepreneurs, property managers, and residents previously active in downtown renewal, the Committee reviews all municipal actions in the field of regeneration (including ongoing projects) and may table its own initiatives. Its statute—aligned with the 2015 Regeneration Act—assigns further tasks: issuing opinions on Municipal Regeneration Programme preparation and updates (delimitation, project selection, phasing, budget shifts); monitoring implementation and outcomes (e.g., vacancy, service mix, footfall) and recommending corrective measures; facilitating stakeholder dialogue and co-design through consultations and mediation; and submitting an annual report to the mayor and city council.

5. Research Results

Research has shown that urban transformation in Leszno, although it has led to some improvement in both the spatial and social spheres, is not proceeding uniformly and consistently. Discussions with various agents of change—representatives of NGOs, local entrepreneurs, property managers, residents, and officials—reveal diverse expectations and numerous disappointments. These interview findings are consistent with the press discourse identified in the content analysis of local newspapers and portals, which alternated between growth-oriented narratives around retail investments and scepticism about everyday liveability in the historic core.

5.1. Representatives of NGOs

The activities of NGOs in Leszno began with loud opposition to the construction of the Manhattan and Galeria Leszno shopping centres. Members spoke primarily about the need to protect traditional trade and local identity. An important element of their activities was inviting a regeneration expert, whose proposals for commercialising the Old Town influenced the authorities' further thinking on regeneration. Their activities could be seen as an attempt to initiate an alternative development model based on local merchants and smaller initiatives. Press coverage from the period frequently highlighted NGO petitions and open letters, framing the conflict as a clash between big-box retail and traditional downtown commerce.

Although these ideas were not fully implemented, the NGOs' activity led to greater interest among the municipal authorities. Their role was therefore to introduce a grassroots voice into the debate, which, although weaker in organisational terms, forced the administration to adjust how it thought about the city centre. A significant milestone in the involvement of NGOs was the inclusion of some of their representatives on the Regeneration Committee. For many activists, this presented an opportunity to formally influence urban policy and continue their previous activities defending traditional trade in the city centre. However, the presence of NGO representatives on the Committee had a dual nature. On the one hand, they contributed their experience of grassroots mobilisation, their knowledge of local issues, and their contacts with residents. On the other hand, the Committee's limited decision-making power, coupled with the authorities' failure to implement its recommendations, led to frustration. Nevertheless, NGOs' participation in this body enabled the regeneration debate to continue and ensured that the social dimension of the entire process was maintained.

5.2. Entrepreneurs

Interviews with entrepreneurs showed that they were primarily motivated by a pragmatic attitude towards regeneration. They were interested in renovating buildings, improving business conditions, and receiving support from the city. One respondent mentioned that he ultimately renovated his building on his own, but became interested in the Regeneration Committee as a forum that, at least initially, offered hope of influencing decisions. Other owners of shops and service outlets in the city centre also joined the Committee's activities motivated in part by a willingness to cooperate in countering the competitive pressures of new shopping centres. Over time, however, disappointment set in. The interviews revealed frustration with the lengthy procedures and limited decision-making power of the Committee. Although the meetings initially generated some enthusiasm, they gradually lost their significance as several participants noted that "nothing can be changed anyway." The entrepreneurs' proposals rarely translated into concrete actions, and the meetings were mainly consultative in nature. This experience shows that the formal presence of economic entities in participatory structures does not automatically translate into real influence on urban policy.

5.3. Property Manager

The results of the interview with a property manager reveal a slightly different perspective. The interviewee recounted renovating inner-city tenements and keeping rents low to avoid replacing residents—a (perhaps unwitting) response to the city's shrinkage, aimed at stabilising the existing tenant base rather than inducing gentrification. While modest, this practice can be seen as an attempt to combine economic goals with a concern for social cohesion. However, this type of action operates on the margins of official policy. There are insufficient mechanisms to support similar initiatives. The manager also complained about the closed attitude of the authorities and the lack of developed public–private partnerships. Such experiences align with broader observations about post-socialist cities, where individual initiatives are rarely incorporated into systemic solutions.

5.4. Residents

The residents were the most critical. They believed that no visible changes could be seen in the centre and that there was no coherent action plan. Some residents of the regeneration area were also involved in the

work of the Regeneration Committee. For some, it was an opportunity to report everyday problems, such as the condition of courtyards, the lack of meeting places, or insufficient support for social activities. However, a sense of powerlessness often recurred in the interviewees' accounts—their demands did not translate into real decisions by the authorities. Sometimes, officials viewed residents' initiatives with reserve, suspecting that there was a "hidden agenda" behind them. Nevertheless, the participation of residents allowed for the preservation of the authentic voice of the community and served as a reminder that regeneration is not only about infrastructure but also about everyday life in the city centre. Residents participating in consultations with the city authorities stated that attendance at meetings was low because "nothing came of it anyway." The lack of leaders and scattered social activity meant that the potential of grassroots initiatives remained limited.

At the same time, it is worth noting the examples that stood out positively. Respondents pointed to a community centre organised by an NGO and events promoting shops in the city centre. These examples show that the potential exists, but there remains a lack of support and a sustainable institutional framework.

5.5. Officials

The officials' perspective suggests a gradual learning process unfolding under severe constraints. As noted, the local debate on regeneration was sparked when city-centre entrepreneurs—responding to plans for new shopping centres—invited an external expert. Contemporaneous press articles framed this moment as a turning point, after which the city moved toward more formal programming. Although both regeneration programmes (the Local Regeneration Programme and the Municipal Regeneration Programme) can be read as addressing aspects of shrinkage, this was largely incidental; their immediate drafting was driven by broader policy and funding considerations. The first Local Regeneration Programme focused almost exclusively on renovations, and it was only the Municipal Regeneration Programme whose scope resulted from new legal regulations (the 2015 Regeneration Act), which broadened the approach to include social aspects. Participation in the Model Urban Regeneration Programme run by the national authorities played an important role. Such participation in the programme meant the opportunity to obtain additional funding, conduct workshops with residents and entrepreneurs, and access training and networking with other local governments. Officials emphasised that participating in the Model Urban Regeneration Programme allowed them to compare their own experiences with the practices of other cities and assess which solutions could be adapted locally. The Regeneration Regions programme played a similar but slightly smaller role. At the same time, however, there was a lack of funds to implement many of the ideas developed, which limited the lasting effect of the programmes. As a result, though the programmes constituted an important step towards expanding institutional knowledge and awareness, it did not translate into a complete change in the city's operating logic, remaining more of an impulse for selective innovations than the foundation of a long-term strategy.

In practice, according to officials, regeneration was heavily dependent on the availability of external funds, and activities were carried out on a project-by-project basis (grant application cycles and ex-post reporting). The lack of a strategic vision of local authority and limited staff meant that the effects of regeneration were not very spectacular, and the administration lacked people who could act as leaders of this process. Officials who dealt with regeneration on a daily basis often emphasised that they felt needed and appreciated in their work, but at the same time they recognised that for the rest of the municipal authorities, regeneration was

not a priority area of urban policy. In this context, external consultants frequently filled capability gaps—supporting diagnosis, delimitation, and project packaging—but their involvement also reinforced an approach that was funding-led rather than strategy-led. This situation hindered the development of a coherent, long-term vision and left implementation largely driven by funding windows rather than by clearly articulated development goals.

6. Discussion

6.1. Planning Culture Patterns Among Various Agents of Change

The conflict surrounding the construction of the shopping centres in Leszno highlighted the limitations of the local planning culture and its characteristics typical of CEE. This dispute represented more than just a clash over the commercial function of the city; it also marked a critical juncture, where two logics collided: modernisation and market logic, which promote development by attracting capital and significant investments, and local and community logic, which are based on the protection of traditional trade and social ties in the city centre (Sanyal, 2005). At the same time, this conflict reflected broader characteristics of the planning culture in the region (cf. Jaššo et al., 2025). Firstly, the processes involved in the investment demonstrated the importance of long-term horizons and the bureaucratic nature of planning—the procedures were multi-stage and difficult to expedite, which ensured formal predictability but caused frustration among local actors (cf. Maier, 2012). Discussions concerning the Manhattan and Galeria Leszno shopping centres also highlighted the significance of social aspects and community cohesion. NGOs and local merchants contended that the new shopping centres would erode the traditional egalitarian character of the city centre. This observation underscores the role of planning as a mechanism for social stability (Healey, 2020). The conflict revealed the growing vulnerability of spatial and social systems: Investment pressure coincided with unfavourable demographic trends and an outflow of residents, which weakened the potential of the city centre, deepening the sense of alienation and distrust of institutions (Jaroszewska & Stryjakiewicz, 2020). Although regeneration programmes, analyses, and regulations were prepared, their methodical nature was not accompanied by interdisciplinarity—the process remained closed, and social knowledge and dialogue were treated as marginal (Hlaváček et al., 2016). Finally, the conflict confirmed residents' sceptical attitudes towards planning: In their opinion, it was a political process, in which real decisions were made outside the public forum, and public participation was mainly symbolic. Kotus (2013) wrote about this in the context of Poznań. The case of Leszno shows that regeneration—initially developed as a response to an investment dispute—was firmly rooted in the hybrid planning culture typical of CEE, where new participatory tools and modernisation strategies coexisted with a legacy of bureaucratic procedures, technocratic methods, and deficits of public trust.

6.2. Regeneration as a Process of Institutional Learning

The first Local Regeneration Programme focused mainly on technical measures and renovations, which corresponds to the logic of single-loop learning, in which the administration adapts its actions to the existing rules without questioning their basis (Argyris, 1977). It was only the Municipal Regeneration Programme, developed after the adoption of the 2015 Regeneration Act and thanks to participation in the Model Urban Regeneration programme, that introduced a social component and attempted to involve residents, which can be interpreted as a step towards double-loop learning (Innes & Booher, 2010; Robinson, 2001). Throughout

these stages, external consultants played a substantial role in diagnosis, delimitation, and project packaging—reflecting broader trends of consultant influence over urban agendas and participatory processes (Linovski, 2019). However, even these innovations were partial and did not change the fundamental logic of local government action. As per the interviews and document analysis, the learning process was incremental, procedural, and funding-led, with feedback loops formed around (a) grant application cycles and ex-post reporting, (b) template-based diagnostics for the Municipal Regeneration Programme, and (c) the Regeneration Committee's opinions. Officials learned how to translate legal/financial requirements into compliant projects (e.g., coupling public-space upgrades with "soft" modules), consultants refined problem-framing and indicator design aligned with calls, while NGO leaders and property managers learned how to access small grants and co-produce micro-projects in specific streets. This was possible because three enabling conditions emerged in 2016–2023: a clear legal framework (Regeneration Act), capacity-building programmes (Model Urban Regeneration; Regeneration Regions), and a formal venue for dialogue (the Committee). Yet, as interviewees stressed, learning remained narrow: Indicators prioritised outputs (m^2 refurbished, number of events) rather than outcomes (vacancy, footfall, service mix), and project sequencing followed grant calendars more than locally defined priorities.

The learning process unfolded within bureaucratic procedures that were lengthy and inflexible; their adaptive nature, while ensuring predictability, slowed the uptake of new solutions (Maier, 2012). A further brake was low public trust: Residents and NGO representatives reported that their initiatives were often met with scepticism by officials, which complicated partnerships (Curry, 2012). The limited interdisciplinarity of planning teams and the outsized role of consultants narrowed the scope for double-loop adjustments to core assumptions. Despite successive documents and analyses, social knowledge and qualitative aspects of everyday life received scant attention; similar patterns are noted elsewhere (Sielker et al., 2021). Consequently, participation frequently remained formalistic, reinforcing public scepticism (Innes & Booher, 2010). In sum, regeneration in Leszno was an arena of gradual, rule-conforming (single-loop) learning with selective double-loop moments (e.g., adding social components, experimenting with co-design on specific micro-areas), but fundamental assumptions about goals and success metrics largely persisted.

6.3. The Decline of Cities as a Context for Urban Transition

The decline of Leszno, like many medium-sized cities in CEE, was an important factor in the urban transition and significantly limited its effectiveness. Depopulation and ageing undermined traditional growth strategies based on attracting investors and consumers, while simultaneously creating pressure to develop new models of spatial management. As the literature indicates, the perception of decline is crucial. If it is considered temporary, cosmetic measures are taken; if it is considered permanent, however, there is room for adaptive innovation (Pallagst et al., 2021). In Leszno, a defensive approach prevailed: Regeneration was intended to restore the former function of the city centre, rather than redefine its role in the context of permanent demographic change. From today's perspective, the Manhattan and Galeria Leszno shopping centres yielded short-term commercial gains but reinforced the shift of everyday retail away from the historic core and contributed to an increase in vacancies in the centre. Later, small-scale projects—public-space upgrades coupled with social programmes—delivered localised benefits, yet were too limited to reorient citywide trajectories. Bureaucratic procedures hindered rapid response, low levels of public trust blocked the development of partnerships, and scepticism about planning deepened residents' alienation (Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012). Nevertheless, there were examples of micro-innovations, such as the activities of

property managers maintaining a social mix or NGOs running community centres and social projects, which point to the potential for grassroots adaptation. Taken together, these observations reveal a persistent gap in shrinkage-aware planning strategies—goals, indicators, and instruments remain only loosely aligned with long-term demographic change. To address this gap, further research should more explicitly develop outcome-oriented metrics (e.g., vacancy, service mix, footfall) and examine governance arrangements that enable double-loop learning. Ultimately, however, the city's decline remained the backdrop against which regeneration was a partial learning process, but did not translate into a complete transformation of planning logic and urban strategies (Haase, Bernt, et al., 2016).

6.4. Leszno and the Broader Experiences of Cities in CEE

Leszno's experiences are part of broader regeneration processes in shrinking cities in CEE, which, since the early 1990s, have been operating under political transformation, globalisation, and demographic pressure. As in other centres in the region, regeneration was a response to tensions resulting from deindustrialisation, the suburbanisation of commercial functions, and the outflow of residents (Ciesiółka & Burov, 2021; Hlaváček et al., 2016; Sýkora & Bouzarovski, 2012). Its course was hybrid in nature. On the one hand, Western standards such as participation and an integrated territorial approach were adopted. On the other hand, however, established technocratic and hierarchical practices continued to dominate the decision-making process (Jaššo et al., 2025). In many cities, as in Leszno, a lack of stable financial and human resources mechanisms resulted in a strong dependence on external programmes and a project-by-project logic (see Sielker et al., 2021). Conflicts over significant investments, such as shopping centres in Leszno, found their counterparts in other cities in the region and revealed the same tensions: between modernisation aspirations and the defence of local interests and traditional social ties. Regeneration in Leszno, as in many cities in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and eastern Germany, served as a planning laboratory in which new cooperation mechanisms were tested, but the results were often fragmentary and limited (Pallagst & Mercier, 2007). The common features of the planning culture in the region—lengthy procedures, a lack of trust, a lack of interdisciplinarity, and scepticism towards participation—meant that institutional learning processes rarely translated into lasting systemic change (Maier, 2012). The case of Leszno is therefore representative: It shows both the potential of regeneration as a tool for adapting to city centre decline and the barriers resulting from the institutional conditions.

7. Summary

An analysis of the regeneration process in Leszno provides a better understanding of the complexity of changes undergone by medium-sized cities in CEE in the context of institutional transformation, and depopulation. This study has shown that regeneration is not only a tool for the technical modernisation of space but also a field of negotiation where different logics of action are met—modernisation, market, and community. The conflict surrounding the construction of the Manhattan shopping centre marked a turning point, revealing the clash of different planning culture models and triggering the process of searching for alternative development narratives. Although this process was mainly single-loop learning, it also showed limited double-loop shifts, notably, the explicit elevation of the social dimension in the 2018 Municipal Regeneration Programme (beyond façade-first logics), the formal acceptance of stakeholder input through the Regeneration Committee as part of decision-making, and pilots with NGO-run community spaces and shop-promotion events that reframed the centre's role beyond large-scale retail. Officials, NGOs, and

entrepreneurs gained new experience. However, the weak position of participatory structures, the lack of a coherent strategic vision, and the dominance of a project-by-project logic proved to be barriers.

An important research context was depopulation, which has particularly affected the centre of Leszno in the last decade. The shrinking of the city limited the social and economic base for revitalisation efforts, while at the same time raising questions about the validity of traditional growth strategies. Leszno took a predominantly defensive approach, focusing on restoring the former function of the city centre, with little reflection on the need to adapt to permanent demographic change. From a theoretical perspective, this confirms the observations of Pallagst et al. (2021) that the perception of decline is crucial for the choice of urban strategies between defensive and adaptive ones. As in other regional centres, this process combines the adaptation of Western planning models with the legacy of a technocratic and hierarchical decision-making culture. Regeneration remains an arena for testing new forms of cooperation between different agents of change: the administration, residents, and the private sector. However, institutional barriers and the lack of a long-term vision sometimes limit its transformative potential.

Drawing on the Leszno case and wider Polish experience, regeneration in medium-sized, shrinking cities should shift from grant-led, project-by-project fixes toward an adaptive, outcome-oriented approach that acknowledges demographic decline and prioritises everyday urban functions. This implies stronger strategic coordination and institutional learning across local actors—linking spatial, social, and economic measures within a coherent, long-term framework rather than isolated interventions.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Planning Approaches Liaised With Justification and Relation to Growth: Missing Link in the Shrinkage Context?

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Abstract

This article seeks a framework applicable to analysing planning in the context of shrinkage. Our preliminary observation is that shrinking cities tend to lean toward pro-growth planning instead of actively planning for shrinkage. This seems to apply even in cities where shrinking is a politically accepted phenomenon, and even if growth-dependent planning approaches have been claimed to fit poorly in contexts of shrinkage. Could understanding the liaisons between planning justification and relation to growth help explain why planning tends to lead towards growth even in a context of shrinkage? This article links cultural theory-informed planning approaches with planning justification and their relation to growth. In the context of shrinkage, growth-dependent planning approaches easily become economically unviable and politically contested due to increased inequalities. Planning approaches that lack a clear connection to growth can provide nonmonetary benefits to the local community, help to accept the shrinking reality, and encourage awareness of unexpected opportunities. The suggested framework aims to deepen the understanding of polyrationality in planning approaches through the lenses of justification and growth. It is worth noting that when planning is justified in terms of growth, it can ultimately become growth-oriented, even if its stated objective is non-growth.

Keywords

cultural theory; planning approach; planning justification; shrinkage; urban growth

1. Introduction: Planning Paradoxes in the Context of Shrinkage

Our preliminary data collected from small and mid-sized shrinking cities in Finland suggest that they tend to lean towards pro-growth planning rather than actively planning for shrinkage. This has appeared to be the case also, for example, in the Rust Belt area of the US, even in cities where shrinking is a politically accepted phenomenon (Marjanović et al., 2024). The premise of this article is hence that urban planning has most often been portrayed as growth-dependent or growth-related (e.g., Rajaniemi, 2006; Savini et al., 2022; Sousa & Pinho, 2015; Wolff et al., 2017), and that in the context of shrinkage, the predominant task for urban planning has been to aim for new economic and demographic growth (e.g., Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015) even though growth-dependent urban planning is presented as challenging to fit into a context of shrinkage (Janssen-Jansen, 2013; Kosunen, 2021; Pallagst et al., 2021; Rajaniemi, 2006; Rydin, 2013; Sousa & Pinho, 2015). When viewed as a physical, demographic, and economic process (Dadashpoor & Etemadi, 2024), the concept of growth in urban planning can be linked to economic growth, demographic changes, and the expansion of the built environment.

Urban planning can be seen as part of a paradigm in society aiming for perpetual economic growth (Ferreira & von Schönfeld, 2020; Rajaniemi, 2006), and urban policies based on economic growth may be used without a critical examination of whether the approach is suitable for different market contexts (Janssen-Jansen, 2013; Kosunen, 2021; Rydin, 2013). Political agendas might harness urban planning to increase the competitiveness of cities and regions and boost economic development (Janssen-Jansen, 2013; Mäntysalo et al., 2011). Urban planning based on economic growth might be challenging in the context of shrinkage, as it is unable to steer development without economic growth and tends to base decision-making on competitiveness and economic perspectives rather than social perspectives or the long-term sustainability of the urban structure (e.g., Janssen-Jansen, 2013). Cities may also seek to respond to competition for potential investors by reducing land use control through the most attractive business sites possible (Mäntysalo et al., 2011; Rajaniemi, 2006), potentially leading to a shift away from the broader strategic goals of urban planning (e.g., Janssen-Jansen, 2013; Mäntysalo et al., 2011; Rajaniemi, 2006). Notably, an economic downturn can drive cities to make quick fixes for financial gain at the expense of the living environment (Rajaniemi, 2006).

Urban planning also has extensive experience with infill planning alongside population growth (Taylor, 1998). Demographic growth is discussed in the literature in the context of shrinkage, with plans to reverse the depopulation trend towards growth, and optimism about future growth (Heim LaFrombois et al., 2023; Rajaniemi, 2006; Sousa & Pinho, 2015). However, attracting residents through new neighbourhoods and plots, for example, has proven to be a challenge in the context of shrinkage and can lead not only to urban sprawl, but also to urban segregation, poor service levels, an unfinished-looking environment, and a vicious cycle in the planning of new attractive areas (Rajaniemi, 2006, pp. 146–147). In the competition between cities, environmental development can therefore be determined by the pursuit of growth.

Notably, urban planning focused on economic and/or demographic growth can lead to urban sprawl even in the context of shrinkage (e.g., Rajaniemi, 2006), and growth-dependent planning might prevent adaptation to a shrinking reality by clinging to past opportunities (Kosunen et al., 2020). This can lead to over-zoning and possibly underdeveloped areas within an urban structure, and shrinking cities might remain hoping for the overly optimistic population growth projections from the past (Rajaniemi, 2006).

Growth is seen as a desirable aspect (e.g., Heim LaFrombois et al., 2023; Janssen-Jansen, 2013; Kosunen, 2021; Rajaniemi, 2006), while shrinkage has negative connotations and appears as a threat (Heim LaFrombois et al., 2023; Rajaniemi, 2006; Sousa & Pinho, 2015). While multiple scholars have questioned the concept of growth as a default in urban planning in general, for instance, because of environmental and social consequences (Durrant et al., 2025; Rydin, 2013; Savini et al., 2022), growth orientation is strongly present as a response to how to deal with urban shrinkage (e.g., Marjanović et al., 2024; Pallagst et al., 2021; Rajaniemi, 2006). Accepting shrinkage rather than growth is not obvious either (Marjanović et al., 2024; Pallagst et al., 2017), and shrinking cities tend to lean towards pro-growth planning rather than actively planning for shrinkage, even in cities where shrinking is a politically accepted phenomenon (Marjanović et al., 2024). The literature has also noted the limitations of shrinkage-acceptance policies, potentially constraining future growth opportunities (e.g., Hartt, 2019; Manville & Kuhlmann, 2018). Furthermore, examples of planning practices for shrinkage exist, such as the German programme Stadtumbau Ost (Bernt, 2019). Indeed, if growth-based planning policies are used as a one-size-fits-all solution, shrinking cities may end up adopting unsuitable planning approaches.

Since urban planning is seen as an activity that needs justification (e.g., Mäntysalo et al., 2015; Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016; Weghorst et al., 2024), the tendency towards growth in urban planning raises a question about how planning is justified in relation to growth. Could understanding the relationship between justification and growth in urban planning help explain why planning tends to promote growth even in the context of shrinkage? In this article, we derive justification in planning from different concepts of justice from Hartmann (2012) and Schmitt and Hartmann (2016). By "justice" we refer to "the quality of being just. Cf. justness" (Justice, n.d., Sense III.7) where "justness" refers to "the quality or fact of being morally right or equitable, or of having valid or reasonable grounds; rightfulness, lawfulness; fairness; validity, soundness, justifiableness" (Justness, n.d., Sense 1). With "justification" we refer to the viewpoint where "*justice* should be conceived as a logic of justification that should always be a central and transparent, and thus explicit, element in the justifications of planning decisions" (Weghorst et al., 2024, p. 243, emphasis in the original). In general, by justification in planning we refer to the way in which planning is defended, as well as to the plan's legitimacy, by which we mean its acceptability in the eyes of the public. With "growth" in urban planning, we build on understanding the different aspects of urban growth as physical, demographic, and economic processes (Dadashpoor & Etemadi, 2024), with the focus in this article on economic and demographic growth. By the context of shrinkage, we refer to the context where demographic shrinkage is often combined with economic decline, and to which the most conventional planning theories and practices are complex to apply (e.g., Pallagst et al., 2017; Sousa & Pinho, 2015; Wolff et al., 2017). Notably, we perceive shrinkage as a complex phenomenon and "particular pattern of urban development, rather than a mere urban problem" (Sousa & Pinho, 2015, p. 26).

To understand planning in the context of shrinkage, this article seeks to answer the following research question:

> How is planning aligned with justification and the relation to growth, especially in the context of shrinkage?

In this article, we first introduced the need to explore the justification of urban planning in the context of shrinkage. As the key theoretical framework, we will apply planning approaches (e.g., Davy, 2012; Hartmann, 2012) derived from cultural theory (Davy, 2008, 2012; Douglas, 1978; Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020;

Mamadouh, 1999). The use of planning approaches as a theoretical framework is built on previous research on urban planning in different contexts (e.g., Hirvonen-Kantola, 2013; Kosunen, 2021; Rajaniemi, 2006; Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). There is a call for plurality in planning since a "brutal plurality of truths" between people is present in everyday life, including in organisations, making it impossible to have a single monorational theory or approach (Davy et al., 2023). So far, cultural theory has provided a rough pluralist model that has been applied in urban planning research (e.g., Davy, 2008, 2012; Davy et al., 2023; Hartmann, 2012; Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020; Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016) allowing a reduction in "the pluralism to a manageable number of four without rejecting pluralism" (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016, p. 43). The planning approaches derived from cultural theory have been linked to different theories of justice used as logic to justify planning (e.g., Hartmann, 2012; Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016) and to different contexts of growth (Kosunen, 2021; Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020), including the context of shrinkage. However, cultural theory-informed planning approaches have not yet been integrated with planning justification or its relation to growth, especially in the context of shrinkage. To address this research gap, we integrate planning approaches informed by cultural theory with the literature on planning justification, the relation to growth, and the context of shrinkage. This article is conceptual (Reese, 2023), presenting a novel perspective on urban planning justification and the relation to growth in diverse planning approaches, especially in the context of shrinkage.

The research gap was confirmed through an integrative literature review (Snyder, 2019) that addressed justification and growth in urban planning in the context of shrinkage. When reviewing the literature, the observation was that the alignment between planning justification and relation to growth, particularly in the context of shrinkage, is not yet a well-researched topic. Based on preliminary searches, an integrative approach was needed to combine perspectives and insights from diverse scientific discussions in urban planning. Thus we complemented the search results (from Scopus and Web of Science) with "a citation pearl growing strategy" (Oulu University Library, 2025; see also University of Toronto Libraries, 2025) by using a meaningful document found in the original search as a core document to search the databases for documents that cite the core document, looking into the core documents' reference list (cited references), making a new search with new search terms found in the core document, and/or making a new search again using the core documents' authors' names. The selected literature has been manually reviewed to look for intersections between justification, growth, and/or shrinkage. The findings are structured through the lens of planning approaches, as well as insights into growth tendencies in urban planning, especially in the context of shrinkage.

2. Planning Approaches Aligned With Planning Justification and Relation To Growth

Cultural theory is a social constructivist theory that was initially developed in the 1970s and has its roots in cultural anthropology (Douglas, 1978; Mamadouh, 1999). It is based on the analysis of social interactions; each perception delivers a way to understand a problem and propose a solution (Thompson et al., 1990). At the heart of cultural theory are four rationalities—hierarchism, egalitarianism, individualism, and fatalism—which "describe different rational ways to perceive and act in certain situations" (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016, p. 45). These four rationalities do not offer a single solution to planning but provide "a variety of strategies and a number of possible spatial outcomes" (Davy et al., 2023, p. 2270). Cultural theory does not claim there to be only four rationalities (Douglas, 1999), but that these four are present in all social situations (Davy et al., 2023; Hartmann, 2012).

In cultural theory, it is proposed that the perception of reality depends on two dimensions, called "grids" and "groups" (Douglas, 1978; Mamadouh, 1999), in which a "grid" is the dimension of individuation and a "group" refers to the dimension of social incorporation (Douglas, 1982). Kosunen and Hirvonen-Kantola refer to Douglas (1978) and Mamadouh (1999) when illustrating this two-dimensional view of reality: "The grid dimension denotes how individuals position themselves in relation to externally-imposed control, whereas the group dimension denotes their willingness to belong to a group or act on their own" (Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020, p. 253). Often, this two-dimensional concept is illustrated with a diagram, in which the two dimensions are independent of each other, forming two axes and four quadrants (Douglas, 1999; Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020; Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). This two-dimensional conception of reality is illustrated in Figure 1.

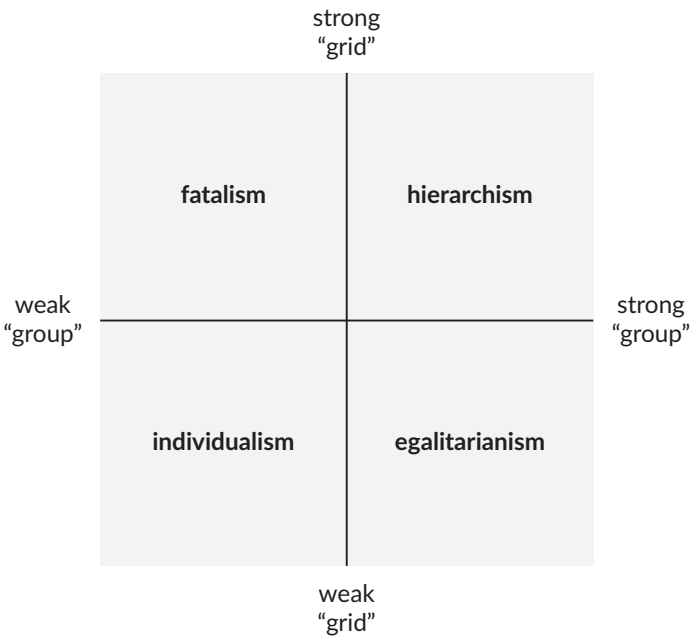

Figure 1. The rationalities of cultural theory according to the two-dimensional conception of reality. Source: Adapted from Kosunen (2021) and Schmitt and Hartmann (2016).

In urban planning, cultural theory has been proposed to conceptualise the polyrationality of planning situations (Davy, 2008, 2012), and manage expectations (Hartmann, 2012). For the matter of justification and growth in planning, the four-field approach of cultural theory offers a manageable pluralistic model to reflect the addressed growth tendencies in planning. It is a more polyrational view, compared, for instance, to dividing planning into dichotomies. Planning debates have been described as having "a tendency to become entrenched in dichotomies, typically between pro- and anti-development positions or between pro- and anti-regulation positions" (Rydin, 2013, p. 13) or historically to strive for clean monorational planning theories (Davy et al., 2023). Dichotomies have been used in urban planning, for example, to describe the change in planning practices with terms such as "plan-led" and "development-led" (e.g., Valtonen et al., 2017), "hierarchical planning" and "project-oriented planning" (Mäntysalo et al., 2011), or "market-critical" and "market-led" (Brindley et al., 1996). In the context of a shrinking city, dichotomies can appear when dividing planning into "de-growth" and "pro-growth" strategies (Marjanović et al., 2024) or "smart decline" and "pro-growth" strategies (Heim LaFrombois et al., 2023), for instance. Dichotomies can be criticised, but they can be relevant perspectives when considering the justification for planning and parallel

growth relations. This is why the four fields of cultural theory are complemented in this article with additional dichotomous planning approaches found in literature, such as "market-critical" and "market-led" (Brindley et al., 1996), which have also been linked to some planning approaches derived from cultural theory (Kosunen, 2021). Furthermore, cultural theory-informed planning approaches only partially capture reality, and they should eventually be combined with each other to address complex situations (Thompson et al., 1990; Verweij et al., 2006).

Next, we present and reflect on the planning approaches derived from cultural theory, from the perspectives of justification and growth. Three fundamental concepts of justice serve as a basis for examining justification in planning (Hartmann, 2012; Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). Schmitt and Hartmann address justification as a crucial matter in urban planning, highlighting the contradiction between different conceptions of justice, which inevitably leads to injustice. According to Schmitt and Hartmann, designers should therefore be aware of various concepts of justice. Notably, none of the presented concepts of justice is better than the others, as they all have their own logic and problems (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). We are linking these three concepts of justice to growth by reflecting on the suitability of different planning approaches to different growth contexts based on Kosunen (2021) and Kosunen and Hirvonen-Kantola (2020), complemented by other literature based on the reviewed literature and the definition of urban growth as a physical, demographic, and economic process (Dadashpoor & Etemadi, 2024).

2.1. Hierarchical Planning Approach With Utilitarian Justice and Liaison to Growth Through History

The hierarchical planning approach is based on hierarchism, which, as a rationality, has both a strong grid and group dimension (Figure 1). This connects hierarchism to externally imposed control and to the willingness to function as a group. Hierarchism is linked with "strongly incorporated groups with complex structures" (Douglas, 1999, p. 412) and can be seen supporting tradition and order with a hierarchical form of organisation (Douglas, 1999). With a hierarchical planning approach, "planning problems are best solved with coordination and control" (Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020, p. 254). Hierarchical planning is linked to top-down planning guided by the expertise of a technocratic planner (Hartmann, 2012), in which the city can be described as a "well-ordered city" (Davy, 2008, p. 308). Still, it has been suggested that it appears rigid or despotic from the perspective of other rationales (Davy, 2008, p. 308). When examining land use, this rationality has been connected to Hobbesian property ideals (Davy, 2012, p. 87), where the emphasis lies on public property, and where "the government either owns the land or controls the use of the land through regulation" (Davy, 2012, p. 16).

The concept of justice that the hierarchical planning approach refers to is "utilitarian justice" (Hartmann, 2012; Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). This is an effort to maximise happiness based on the ideas of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Central to this concept of justice is "utility," which focuses on weighing the effects of different solutions in terms of whether they produce happiness or suffering, benefits or disadvantages, and balancing the decisions based on this evaluation. This is why this planning approach accepts sacrifices in planning, such as expropriation of landowners and disadvantages for some, if the planning choices bring benefits for more land users (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). Connected to the ideas of Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan, in a hierarchical planning approach, this evaluation of justice is given to an institution whose integrity is essential (Hartmann, 2012). With the utilitarian concept of justice, planning choices can be seen as benefiting the general public (Davy, 2012, p. 24), which we understand as possibly

overlooking the needs of minorities and possible structural inequalities in society, or seen as aiming for the "public interest." This is why a city based on utilitarian justice has been described as a "city for the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016, p. 44). Utilitarian justice has been criticised because of the difficulty of thoroughly assessing all the benefits and disadvantages (Davy, 2012, p. 103; Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016) and whether it is possible to succeed in forming fair and unanimous evaluation methods (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016, p. 44; see also Davy, 2012, pp. 110–111). Another aspect is that the rights of the individual can be claimed to be a value in themselves, which is not the focus of the utilitarian conception (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016, p. 44). A hierarchical planning approach can be perceived with the idea that "a comprehensive plan of what is needed in society can be formulated," with the assumption that there is "a single true world that can be fully understood when carefully analysed with a scientific method" (Kosunen, 2021, p. 46).

When reflecting on the connection between growth and planning, Kosunen (2021) links the hierarchical planning approach to "market-critical planning styles," referencing Brindley et al. (1996). These planning styles are "redressing imbalances and inequalities created by the market" (Brindley et al., 1996, p. 9). Similarly, a utilitarian plan can be seen as protecting land uses from potential sacrifices that landowners and developers might make in pursuit of short-term profits (Davy, 2012, p. 107). According to Schmitt and Hartmann (2016), hierarchism is characterised by prioritising the common good over market-orientation or community projects. Simply put, "hierarchist planning trusts expert knowledge, distrusts markets and communities and issues spatial plans to control land uses and urban developments" (Davy et al., 2023, p. 2270). However, Kosunen (2021, p. 58) also couples a hierarchical planning approach with "the state-led approach" historically associated with postwar economic growth in Europe, when growth was assumed to be continuous and public planning became responsible for "the social redistribution of the economic surplus." In this context, land markets were supposed to act and invest in accordance with urban plans (Healey, 2006, p. 146; see also Kosunen, 2021, p. 58). This means that, without the capacity to implement its plans, a planning institution might not have much influence (Kosunen, 2021). When planning aims to improve social and economic conditions, urban development can be justified by "predictive models of economic and demographic growth and by the marketability of the real estate" (Savini et al., 2015, pp. 306–307; see also Sousa & Pinho, 2015, p. 26). If we link this to utilitarian justice—weighing the pros and cons—we can propose that highly rated outcomes depend on a society's general values. This can mean that economic and demographic growth are seen as "public interest" in planning (Rajaniemi, 2006; see also Valtonen et al., 2017).

In the context of shrinkage, a hierarchical planning approach might have little influence without growth prospects, if it depends on markets to drive urban development, and if the planning institution lacks the means to implement its plans. Still, when looking at planning in a context of shrinkage, attention has been given to the importance of public authority protecting general welfare (Walling et al., 2021, p. 478), and possibilities with a hierarchical approach to "direct the benefits of wider urban growth to non-growing areas or control how these areas respond to shrinkage" (Kosunen, 2021, p. 64).

2.2. Individualistic Planning Approach With Libertarian Justice and Its Alignment With Economic Growth

The individualistic planning approach is based on individualism, which, as a rationality, has both a weak grid and group dimension (Figure 1). This connects individualism to a high degree of self-determination and

willingness to act alone. With this rationality, individual liberty is seen as valuable (Hartmann, 2012). Individualism is described as having "weak structure, weak incorporation" (Douglas, 1999, p. 412), and organisationally, it is competitive with dominant positions open to merit and no support for tradition "for its own sake" (Douglas, 1999, p. 411). With an individualistic planning approach, "planning problems are best solved by experimentation and innovation in competitive environments" (Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020, p. 254). The individualistic planning approach is linked to neoliberal schemes, emphasising openness to experimental planning, while focusing on efficiency and serving economic welfare with respect to individual property rights (Hartmann, 2012). The ideal city can be described as a "bold city," but has been suggested to appear careless from the perspectives of other rationales (Davy, 2008, p. 308). When examining land use, this rationality has been connected to Lockean property ideals (Davy, 2012, p. 87) with an emphasis on individualism and private property where "the purpose of government is to establish general respect for private property and to promote its best use" (Davy, 2012, pp. 17).

An individualistic planning approach can be linked to "libertarian justice" (Davy, 2012; Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016) or to "elitist justice" (Davy, 1997, as cited in Hartmann, 2012, p. 247). With libertarian justice, "everyone should have equal basic freedoms and rights which are institutionally secured; there should be no direct influence on distribution" (Weghorst et al., 2024, p. 248). With a politically libertarian worldview, a government or centralised institution should not have "coercive power to redistribute income and wealth, but should respect people's rights to exercise their talents as they choose, and to reap their rewards as defined by the market economy" (Sandel, 1998, p. 205). This is connected to the ideals of Robert Nozick, Milton Friedman, and Friedrich A. Hayek (Sandel, 1998). Libertarian justice can be seen as emphasising individual rights and the liberty to pursue one's happiness, and a city based on libertarian justice has been described as a "city of freedom and opportunity" (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016, p. 44). When it comes to elitist justice, the benefits from planning choices go to the future high-end users (Davy, 2012, p. 24), which has a link to the criticism of libertarian justice: It has been connected to privatisation and gentrification processes as well as the inherent increase of inequality (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). It can be stated that property rights are initially unequally distributed and hence undermine "the very principle of the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016, p. 45).

When reflecting on the connection to growth, Kosunen (2021) links the individualistic planning approach to "market-led planning styles," citing Brindley et al. (1996). These planning styles are aimed at correcting "inefficiencies while supporting market processes" (Brindley et al., 1996, p. 9). Libertarian justice and individualistic planning approaches can be associated with ties to the market economy and avoidance of external control by centralised institutions (Davy, 2012; Davy et al., 2023; Kosunen, 2021; Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020), which can be seen as linking this planning approach initially to economic growth and to private property. Simply put, "individualist planning relies on market forces; a spatial plan must offer economic incentives to private actors who can contribute to desirable spatial changes" (Davy et al., 2023, p. 2270) with an emphasis on private property (Davy, 2012). Urban planning with libertarian justice emphasises freedom and opportunity by minimising rules, leading to development characterised by "large plots of individually owned land and minimal public spaces" (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016, p. 45). When an individualistic planning approach is coupled with Lockean ideals, planners are left to control only "the adverse effects of individual land use" and not to make decisions on behalf of individuals on how they use their land, expecting "individual owners to use land most efficiently and equitably" (Davy, 2012, pp. 34–35).

Because of its strong link to market processes, this planning approach is growth-dependent: It requires some prospects for economic growth to function correctly and to drive urban development (Kosunen, 2021). In the context of shrinkage, planning that aims to correct market inefficiencies by offering economic incentives to private actors can easily become politically contentious due to the increased inequality.

2.3. Egalitarian Planning Approach With Social Justice and no Alignment With Growth

The egalitarian planning approach is based on egalitarianism, which, as a rationality, has a weak grid dimension and a strong group dimension (Figure 1). This connects egalitarianism to a high degree of self-determination and to a willingness to function as a group. Egalitarianism is linked with "strongly incorporated groups with a weak structure" (Douglas, 1999, p. 412), and organisationally, it can be associated with a closed community with rules aiming for equality, where ambitious leaders are not tolerated (Douglas, 1999). Equality, democracy, and community are seen as valuable rather than individual liberty, while community is seen as valuable rather than personal liberty or institutional integrity, and reasons for taking action are driven by concern or moral responsibility (Hartmann, 2012, p. 247). With an egalitarian planning approach, "planning problems are best solved by achieving mutual agreement at the local level" (Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020, p. 254). An egalitarian planning approach is linked to participative and collaborative planning (Hartmann, 2012), where the ideal city can be described as a "sharing city" (Davy, 2008, p. 308). Still, it has been suggested to appear exclusive from the perspective of other rationales (Davy, 2008, pp. 308–309). When looking at land use, this rationality has been connected to Rosseau's property ideals (Davy, 2012, p. 87) with an emphasis on community and its general will where the community uses discretion deciding whether "land should be used 'in common' or divided up between the citizens" (Davy, 2012, p. 18; see also Rousseau, 2017, Book 1, Chapter 9).

An egalitarian planning approach can be linked to "the concept of social justice" (Hartmann, 2012; Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). Social justice concerns the socially fair distribution of well-being in society (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016), focusing on justice "at the level of a society or state as regards the possession of wealth, commodities, opportunities, and privileges" (Social Justice, n.d.). With egalitarianism, the emphasis is on the concept of "egalitarian justice," where "the right distribution or allocation is the one that causes the most equal distribution or allocation among everyone" (Weghorst et al., 2024, p. 248). The social justice concept is strongly associated with John Rawls and the social contract theory, including the concept of a so-called "veil of ignorance," where in decision-making one is unaware of their rank or status in society making it possible to make decisions regardless the socio-economic background (Rawls, 1971, pp. 12–13; see also Davy, 2012, p. 24; Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). This is why planning according to social justice aims to include all groups in society, giving "space for bankers and beggars, children and elderly, citizens and refugees" (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016, p. 45). With social justice planning, choices can be seen as guided by the threat of gentrification (Davy, 2012, p. 24). A city based on social justice has been described as a "city of fairness and equality" (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016, p. 45). Social justice can be questioned as to whether it is possible or too costly to implement, even though it is often seen as inherently morally preferable compared to other concepts of justice (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). From a libertarian point of view, a purely socially just world would lack innovation and performance (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). In contrast, a utilitarian viewpoint would require strong planning to implement redistribution and resource allocation (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016, p. 45).

When reflecting on the connection with growth, Kosunen (2021) does not link the egalitarian planning approach to market-critical or market-led planning styles but frames it as community-led without any link to growth. In a community-led approach, local communities and groups can be seen as urban development actors (Kosunen et al., 2020, p. 62). In cultural theory, egalitarianism has been presented as a rationality that does not fit within the contrasting, dichotomous distinction between bureaucracies and markets that has been used in the social sciences and to which hierarchism and individualism are often linked (Douglas, 1999). Egalitarianism implemented in planning can be described as pursued through consensus and cooperation, aiming for social spaces to assemble and collaborate, rather than through law and regulations as in hierarchical planning or through the maximisation of private property as in individualistic planning (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016, p. 46). A downside with the egalitarian planning approach is that "it might benefit only those who are involved in the community or group that makes the planning initiative" (Kosunen, 2021, p. 52), and that local communities might not have "the prerequisites to organize for collective action" (Kosunen, 2021, p. 65). Similarly, social justice has been criticised in planning regarding how participation processes can truly be made just and equal, preventing the most resourceful actors from having more footing in the process, as referenced by Kosunen (2021, p. 51). Simply put, "egalitarian planning seeks to build trust within the local community; a spatial plan helps the community to protect itself and to exclude outsiders" (Davy et al., 2023, p. 2270). Considering communities' preferences for economic growth (e.g., Panagopoulos et al., 2015), community-led approaches have been deemed suitable for situations where growth is not a realistic prospect. Egalitarian planning focuses on the local needs and "aims to support urban development activities that directly bring nonmonetary benefits for the locality" (Kosunen, 2021, p. 65).

The emphasis on local needs and nonmonetary benefits makes this approach potentially valuable for the shrinking context. This planning approach aims to foster collaboration and participatory planning processes in which local communities and groups can function as actors in urban development. However, planning must be sensitive to be truly socially just, so that it does not benefit only those who engage in the process or exclude participants with fewer resources. Social justice has been linked to shrinkage in the planning literature with an emphasis on the justice of planning processes that should, for instance, be inclusive and explicitly recognise multiple voices, as well as be deliberative and transparent, with an understanding of power imbalances and structures of domination (Hollander & Németh, 2011). Similar to the egalitarian approach, in the shrinking related literature, there is also attention given to engagement in planning with "genuine citizen and resident participation" as well as "setting social and economic equity goals on equal footing with conventional community and economic development purposes" (Walling et al., 2021, p. 478).

2.4. Fatalistic Planning Approach With no Connected Concept of Justice and no Alignment With Growth

The fatalistic planning approach is based on fatalism, which, as a rationality, has a strong grid dimension and a weak group dimension (Figure 1). This connects hierarchism to externally imposed control and to the willingness to act alone. With fatalism, this could also be described as an externally determined world beyond reach or impossible to influence (Hartmann, 2012). Fatalism is linked to being "literally alone or isolated in complex structures" (Douglas, 1999, p. 412), and when it comes to organisation, a person with a fatalistic rationality can be described as avoiding alignment with no expectation or intention to lead, follow, persuade, or organise (Douglas, 1999). With an egalitarian planning approach, "planning problems cannot always be solved, reality must be taken as is" (Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020, p. 254). A fatalistic

planning approach is said to neglect planning or be sceptical of it since it believes the world to be too complex and wicked (Hartmann, 2012). The ideal city can be described as a "relaxed city," but it can seem indifferent to other rationales (Davy, 2008, p. 308). When examining land use, this rationality does not connect to any property ideals. Still, it could be described as a form of land use heavily influenced by external forces with little relation to other uses where users have little influence or responsibility (Davy, 2012, pp. 87–88).

The fatalistic planning approach has not been linked to any concept of justice but just to luck and fate, without believing in justice. This is also why planning based on fatalistic rationality is described as a highly planning-hostile rationality: Every planning intervention depends on luck and fate (Hartmann, 2012; Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). It could be described as accepting reality as it is (Hartmann, 2012; Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020), without any specific connection to growth in planning, either.

The fatalistic planning approach is seen as passive, whereas planning approaches based on other rationales are seen as active or proactive (Hartmann, 2012; Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020; Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). Simply put, "fatalist planning has come to terms with the fact that planners have very little influence, but that plans are what politicians and other powerful stakeholders demand" (Davy et al., 2023, p. 2270). However, for example, Kosunen and Hirvonen-Kantola (2020) propose that, when combined with other active planning approaches, the fatalistic approach could help accept uncertainty about the future and situations in which proactive, forward-looking planning does not lead to the desired results. Thus, there can be benefits in a fatalistic approach, which suggests that planning problems cannot always be solved and that reality must be accepted as it is.

This approach can be helpful in a context of shrinkage because it might help accept the shrinking reality and uncertainty about the future, as well as encourage awareness of unexpected opportunities (Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020). It may be that the shrinkage could mean "first and foremost a relief in pressures for growth" and "an opportunity to deconstruct created situations, otherwise unthinkable" (Sousa & Pinho, 2015, p. 27). This could, for instance, provide opportunities to test urban degrowth practices through citizen experimentation (Hermans et al., 2024) or strategic planning that might allow for re-adjustments when needed and which would be open to multiple futures (Oittinen & Mäntysalo, 2024).

3. Concluding Discussion: Planning Approaches Justified in Relation to Growth

Shrinking cities as a planning phenomenon have been said to manifest "the inability of most of the current policies, instruments and tools to deal with them" because they assume growth and no flexibility to adapt (Sousa & Pinho, 2015, p. 26). For a long time, in planning, the focus has been on reversing shrinkage and resuming growth, which can be seen as a reaction to shrinkage rather than much of an adaptation to the consequences (Sousa & Pinho, 2015; see also Wolff et al., 2017). Using planning approaches derived from cultural theory, we next summarise our understanding of the alignment between cultural theory-informed planning approaches, planning justification, and the growth context (Table 1). This resulting framework offers a new perspective on planning in the context of shrinkage. The theoretical framework enables the examination of planning justification and relation to growth in diverse planning approaches in the context of shrinkage. In the future, this framework will be evaluated and further developed through empirical case studies.

Table 1. Planning justification and relation to growth in diverse planning approaches, especially in the context of shrinkage.

Planning approach	Planning justification	Relation to growth	Context of shrinkage
Hierarchical planning approach Top-down planning through a centralised institution Coordination, control, and regulation	**Utilitarian justice** Maximising happiness based on the concept of utility Assessing pros and cons, striving for solutions that have more benefits than disadvantages for most land users and the public Connected to the idea of "public interest" Difficulties in fully assessing all benefits and disadvantages for the stakeholders, in a fair way Protecting the common good	**Seen as market-critical, and aligned with growth-related planning** Protecting and controlling land uses from unwanted impacts created by the market, but can be linked to periods of economic growth in Europe with growth-related planning Can see economic and demographic growth as "public interest" and as justification	The approach can have only little influence without growth prospects, if planning depends on markets to drive urban development, or if the planning institution lacks the means to implement its plans
Individualistic planning approach Efficiency and economic welfare through market-led planning Neglect of externally imposed control over land use Experimentation and innovation in a competitive setting	**Libertarian justice** Focusing on the individual's right to pursue happiness through self-determination, with rewards according to the market economy Trusting the market economy to lead planning for fair outcomes without considering individuals' inherently unequal starting points in society Connected to privatisation and gentrification	**Seen as market-led, with emphasis on economic growth** Correcting inefficiencies by relying on market forces, where a spatial plan must offer economic incentives to private actors who contribute to desirable spatial changes Perceives planning as economically growth-dependent	The approach can easily become economically unviable and politically contested due to the increased inequalities
Egalitarian planning approach Participative and collaborative Local consensus Emphasis on the community	**Socially fair justice** Focusing on the socially just distribution of well-being in society, where decisions do not favour anyone based on their social status Connected to inclusiveness in planning	**Seen as community-led, without a specific relation to growth**	The approach can provide nonmonetary benefits to the local community
Fatalistic planning approach Neglects planning Passive	**No concept of justification** Luck and fate No belief in justice	**Seen as passive without a specific relation to growth**	The approach can help to accept the reality of shrinkage, and to be aware of unexpected opportunities

When examining the framework (Table 1), both hierarchical and individualistic planning approaches, with the associated concepts of justice, show growth tendencies. An individualistic approach with libertarian justice has the strongest link to growth, as it can be presented as interdependent with it. As growth-dependent, it needs economic growth prospects to function correctly and to drive urban development. Since the context of shrinkage might not be the most conducive to economic growth, growth-dependent planning easily becomes economically unviable. Hierarchical planning, on the other hand, can justify planning based on financial and/or demographic growth since utilitarian justice can be seen as dependent on society's values. However, as a planning approach, it is not dependent on growth. Even though the hierarchical planning approach can be seen as market-critical, the history of planning binds it to some extent to growth-related planning approaches, where the justification has been derived.

From the framework (Table 1), egalitarian and fatalistic planning approaches, with (or lacking) the connected concept of justice, have no alignment with the context of growth or shrinkage. When it comes to an egalitarian planning approach with social justice, it has no ties to growth. It can be seen as community-led, emphasising local needs and nonmonetary benefits, making this approach potentially valuable for the shrinking context. Lastly, the fatalistic planning approach, unlike other approaches, lacks links to any concept of justice or growth. Nevertheless, this approach can be helpful in a context of shrinkage because it might help accept the shrinking reality and uncertainty about the future, as well as encourage awareness of unexpected possibilities (Kosunen & Hirvonen-Kantola, 2020).

In cultural theory, the premise is that rationalities are present in all social situations, and thus, there should be plurality in planning (Davy et al., 2023). This means that if planning is based solely on one rationality, other rationalities neglect it (Schmitt & Hartmann, 2016). At the same time, some approaches might fit better into the context of shrinkage, as presented. We propose that awareness of different planning rationalities and their links to justification and growth can help to understand growth tendencies and inconsistencies in planning, especially in the context of shrinkage.

This can have valuable managerial implications since there are notions that that even if shrinkage is an accepted phenomenon with a vision of a smaller city, planning might end up with pro-growth strategies, highlighting that the mere political awareness of shrinkage is inadequate to evoke planning outside the growth paradigm (Marjanović et al., 2024), and that planning is heterogenous and more diverse than the dichotomy between growth and non-growth (Heim LaFrombois et al., 2023; Ivanov, 2021). Additionally, when it comes to inconsistencies in planning, for example, right-sizing strategies are portrayed as "patchy" and inconsistent within planning processes, where there can be various autonomous urban policies that even have different spatial perimeters and contradictory goals (Béal et al., 2019). Right-sizing strategies or other strategies like smart decline and degrowth can have pro-growth agendas and links to expansion or austerity (Béal et al., 2019; Kërçuku, 2024), and can lead to the "shrinking of rights for the local population and weakening of the city's public space" (Kërçuku, 2024). Interestingly, actors involved in right-sizing strategies are portrayed as diverse, evolving, and unstable in their interests, logics, and rationalities (Béal et al., 2019). Hence, the added value of the suggested framework is that it enables us to understand the polyrationality and different views needed to approach planning through justification and growth. We argue that if planning is justified through growth, it can end up being growth-focused, regardless of whether it aims at non-growth. In such cases, it might be challenging to achieve a form of planning that is not related to growth. With the theoretical framework, it could be possible to identify suitable planning approaches that fit the shrinking context as well as evaluate plans and their justification in relation to growth.

We have offered insights into planning in the context of shrinkage by aligning planning approaches with justifications and the relation to growth. Our article can also be seen as a response to the need for a more relational perspective on the dimensions of shrinkage in urban studies (Döringer et al., 2020). Notably, justification could be approached through more than four distinct concepts of justice (Weghorst et al., 2024), or through varying views on democracy coupled with contrasting forms of governance leading to different aspects of legitimation (Mäntysalo et al., 2011, 2015). We conclude that this is an opening for further studies and empirical validation of the developed framework, through case studies illustrating diverse planning approaches and stages of shrinkage.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Does Compactness Matter? Comparative Study of Medium-Sized Shrinking Cities' Compactness in Germany and Poland

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Abstract

Urban shrinkage is an increasingly pressing phenomenon in Europe, affecting medium-sized cities that are vital to regional stability. However, large-scale, longitudinal research on the relationship between urban form characteristics and shrinkage remains limited. This study examines whether urban compactness influences the trajectory of shrinking cities by comparing all medium-sized cities (20,000–100,000 inhabitants) in Germany and Poland over 15 years. Using geospatial tools and multi-criteria indicators, we quantify urban shrinkage through a composite score and assess urban form compactness based on CORINE Land Cover data, employing two measures: urban population density and the Schwartzberg compactness index. Pearson's correlation analysis is used to examine how the relationship between urban shrinkage and compactness evolves over time. The findings indicate that medium-sized German cities show a clear and consistent negative correlation between urban shrinkage and the two compactness measures throughout the period. In other words, the more compact and dense a medium-sized city is, the less likely it is to shrink. Polish cities exhibit more mixed trends. The correlation results show that there is a temporal positive coefficient between shrinkage and density, but a negative correlation between compactness measures and shrinkage. Overall, results suggest that urban compactness, among other factors, can play an important role in medium-sized cities' shrinkage management. This study identifies patterns in medium-sized cities in both countries regarding compactness and shrinkage trends, supporting cross-national knowledge exchange and the development of context-sensitive planning strategies.

Keywords

compactness; Germany; medium-sized cities; Poland; urban shrinkage

1. Introduction

The UN-Habitat *World Cities Report 2022* highlighted that half of the cities in so-called developed nations experienced depopulation from 2000 to 2018, predominantly in Europe, Japan, and North America (UN-Habitat, 2022). Substantial population losses have also been documented in cities across Australia, Latin America, and China (Gao et al., 2024; Pallagst et al., 2021; Wang & Fukuda, 2019; Wang et al., 2022). Consequently, urban shrinkage has become a significant challenge for many countries worldwide, including Poland. The projected 18.5% decline in Poland's urban population by 2050 (Central Statistical Office, 2023) underscores the urgent need for action. Negative demographic trends can lead to financial instability, rising vacancy rates, the loss of services and shops, deteriorating infrastructure, and ultimately, a decline in the quality of life in affected cities. While resilience theories suggest that cities can adapt and transform (Alves et al., 2016), informed urban planning strategies are essential to support this process.

Understanding urban shrinkage and its cause-and-effect relationships is crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate its adverse effects. However, it remains challenging due to its multidisciplinary and complex nature. Research on urban shrinkage has primarily focused on large cities, while smaller cities, which are often the most affected, have received less attention (Gajewski & Knippschild, 2024; Gao et al., 2024; Śleszyński, 2017; Terfrüchte & Growe, 2024). Moreover, while major urban centres often reap the benefits by attracting capital, people, and innovation, smaller ones are frequently sidelined, struggling to remain competitive. Medium-sized cities (MSCs) often experience more severe and prolonged urban shrinkage processes (Śleszyński, 2017). According to urban scaling theory, the characteristics of an urban area depend on its size (D'Acci, 2024); thus, MSCs experience different challenges when compared to large or small urban centres. Large European cities are typically the first to recover from shrinkage and become migration destinations (Rink et al., 2014). They also densify more easily after temporary population outflux (Cortinovis et al., 2022). This trajectory is uncommon for medium and small cities. Such patterns were evidenced in Germany (Gatzweiler & Milbert, 2009), France (Chouraqui, 2021), Poland (Śleszyński, 2017; Szymczyk & Bukowski, 2023), and Spain (Escudero-Gómez et al., 2023), among other European countries.

While MSCs are projected to experience a significant population decline, the way they manage shrinkage will affect the overall stability of the urban settlement network. It is crucial to examine whether effective local-level urban planning strategies can enhance resilience to population decline. The question of how urban planning can promote sustainable development in shrinking cities is complex, primarily because existing planning theories focus on growth. Reis et al. (2016) call for tools specifically designed to address urban shrinkage. This article addresses the above gap by investigating the relationship between the urban form in MSCs and patterns of urban growth and shrinkage.

The article is structured as follows: Section 1 provides a context on urban shrinkage processes in Germany and Poland. Section 2 reviews the literature on urban shrinkage and its relationship to urban form. Section 3 outlines the data, study area, and methodology. Section 4 presents the empirical findings from the analysis. Section 5 discusses the results. Finally, Section 6 concludes with implications for planning and suggestions for further research.

1.1. Contextual Overview

In Europe, urban shrinkage, defined comprehensively as an interplay among demographic, social, and economic changes (Häußermann & Siebel, 1988), has emerged as one of the most frequently discussed topics in urban research over the past two decades (Slach et al., 2020). Deindustrialisation and demographic trends were seen as the leading causes of urban decline in the late 1990s (Döringer et al., 2019; Pallagst et al., 2021). However, the cause-and-effect relationship is hard to disentangle, and planning responses to this phenomenon differ by country. This study looks at the two European countries, Germany and Poland, which showed a similar degree of urban shrinkage between 1990 and 2010 (Stryjakiewicz et al., 2014) but responded with different planning approaches.

1.1.1. Germany

In Germany, urban shrinkage in the early 2000s was particularly prominent among MSCs in East Germany, the former German Democratic Republic, as shown in Figure 1 (Gatzweiler et al., 2003). In response to the "one million empty flats" problem (Pfeiffer et al., 2001), German planning answered with proactive "right-sizing," combining building demolitions with a holistic "smart decline" strategy (Hollander & Nemeth, 2011). Overall, the outcomes of German policies are viewed positively when compared to those of many other countries, particularly the Stadtumbau Ost (Urban Redevelopment East program) and the complementary Internationale Bauausstellung (International Building Exhibition) Saxony-Anhalt 2010, which have become reference points of good shrinkage management practice.

Significant progress was made in addressing shared challenges among small to medium-sized towns during the eight-year urban renewal programs (2002–2010). A primary goal was to promote compact city principles, encouraging a shift from peripheral housing estates to urban centres (Internationale Bauausstellung, 2011). Over a decade later, most participating cities reported improvements, showcasing stable de-growth or re-growth and a change of perception among their citizens (Internationale Bauausstellung, 2011). Attributing the success of urban renewal solely to the IBA Saxony-Anhalt and Stadtumbau Ost would be an overstatement, as national and global economic factors also contributed to the process. However, by enhancing spatial qualities, densifying urban centres, and mitigating urban sprawl, shrinking cities in East Germany have effectively navigated their futures without relying on growth, and have developed new identities and ways forward (Internationale Bauausstellung, 2011).

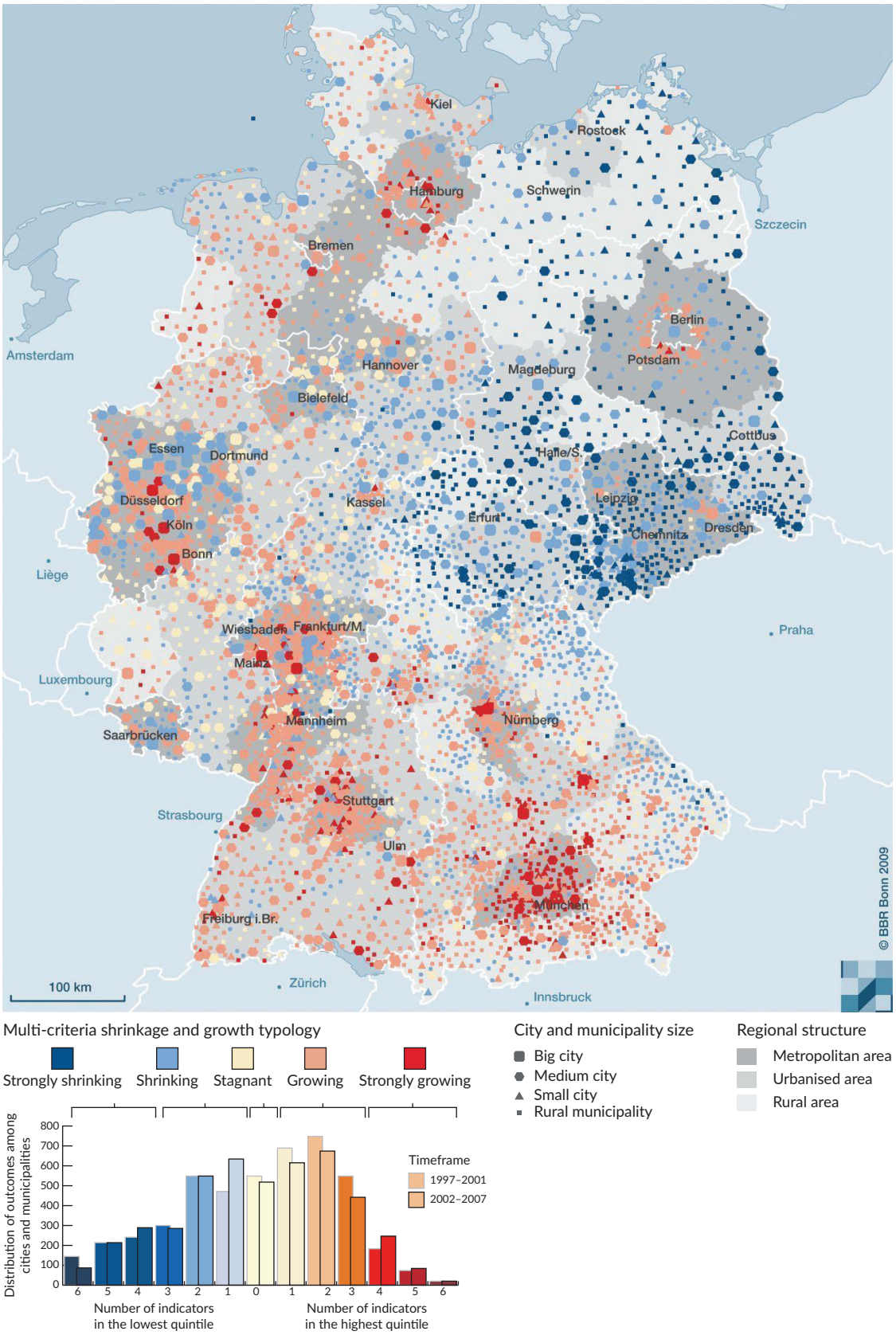

Figure 1. Multi-criteria shrinkage and growth assessment of German cities and municipalities 2003–2008. Source: Gatzweiler et al. (2003).

1.1.2. Poland

In contemporary Poland, urban shrinkage began to emerge around 2002 as the initial effects of the economic "shock therapy" (Bontje, 2004) became evident. While urban demographics have been a focal point of Polish researchers for several decades, the concept of urban shrinkage was first identified by Zborowski (2002) and Parysek (2004). This was followed by broader comparative studies, including Cities Re-growing Smaller (CIRES) and Shrink Smart (Krzysztofik & Szmytkie, 2011), as well as multi-criteria assessments by Śleszyński (2017, 2019), Sroka (2021), and others. As shown in Śleszyński (2019) and confirmed in more recent studies (Szymczyk & Bukowski, 2023) for 2006–2021, urban shrinkage is especially prevalent in MSCs (see Figure 2), which tend to have fewer resources and less planning capacity to respond than large cities.

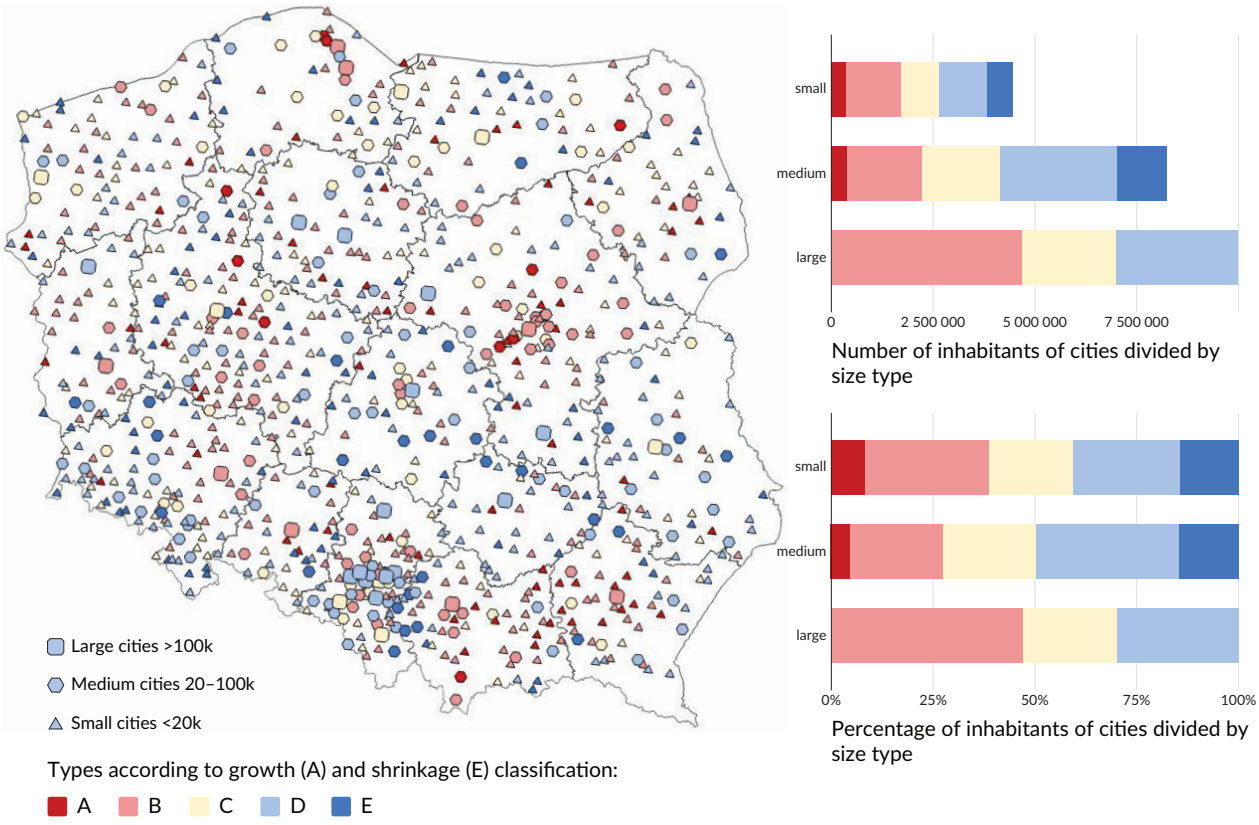

Figure 2. Classification of shrinking and growing cities in the years 2016–2021, divided by growth and shrinkage (A–growing significantly, B–growing, C–stagnant, D–shrinking, E–shrinking significantly). Source: Author based on Central Statistical Office (2025) and Milbert (2020) methodology.

In the coming years, urban shrinkage in Poland is expected to intensify and, according to Jaroszewska (2019), will constitute one of the greatest challenges of the country's spatial policy. The importance of the problem is evidenced by the Senate report entitled *Management of Shrinking Cities* (Polish Senate, 2013) and the National Spatial Development Concept 2030, which acknowledged these issues and proposed strategies to counteract negative effects. However, no tangible actions in the form of strategic support followed, leaving MSCs in need of guidance on how to plan for future challenges.

2. State of the Literature

2.1. Measuring Urban Shrinkage

The process of urban shrinkage varies due to historical, geographical, and socio-economic factors (Stryjakiewicz et al., 2014). It can occur on various urban scales (e.g., district, city, or regional scale) and may occur alongside urban growth (Ribant & Chen, 2019), complicating comprehension. While the term "urban shrinkage" encompasses the multifaceted nature of the process—including economic, demographic, spatial, and structural changes—much of the research has focused on its demographic dimension, with population change as the predominant indicator (Döringer et al., 2019). A meta-analysis by Reis et al. (2016) indicates that spatial aspects of shrinkage remain less explored because built-up areas persist even as populations decline.

Theories that aim to understand the cycles of urban growth and shrinkage in relationship to space suggest that shrinkage can be seen as part of a city's life cycle, alternating with phases of reurbanisation that affect different parts of the city (Klaassen, 1988; van den Berg et al., 1982). Here, shrinkage is viewed not solely as a result of population change but as a sign of deeper structural and spatial cyclical transformations. In the United States, urban shrinkage, often termed "urban decline," was historically observed in cities such as Detroit, where post-industrial job loss and suburbanisation ("white flight") triggered population decline and sprawl (Beauregard, 2009). In Central and Eastern Europe, by contrast, declining inner-city densities have been linked not only to demographic and economic change but also to market-driven suburban growth (Schmidt et al., 2014). Comparing German and Polish cities, therefore, provides insight into how urban form relates to socio-economic processes.

2.2. Research on Urban Form and Shrinkage

Research indicates that compact, contiguous urban areas have significantly lower infrastructure costs compared to dispersed ones (Carruthers & Ulfarsson, 2003; Miyauchi & Setoguchi, 2023). In dispersed service areas, the length of inter-neighbourhood service components is above average (Burchell et al., 1998). As a result, infrastructure costs can be several times higher than in more compact urban areas. In shrinking cities, there is already "too much town for too small a population" (Internationale Bauausstellung, 2011). Such an imbalance often leads to a weakened fiscal base, disrupted infrastructure maintenance, less vibrant and walkable public spaces, and, as a result, diminished quality of life. In a study conducted in China, researchers found that a higher degree of urban shrinkage correlates with lower compactness and reduced land use efficiency (Wang et al., 2022). Consequently, many shrinking cities struggle to sustain themselves (Hollander, 2009). Siedentop and Fina's (2008) research on spatial patterns of growth and shrinkage illustrates the divergence between urban form expansion and urban population decline, resulting in lower urban population density. A recent study (Szymczyk et al., 2024) found that from 2006 to 2018, Polish MSCs became less compact and less dense. A follow-up analysis (Szymczyk & Bukowski, 2025) revealed that urban areas in urban municipalities exhibited a positive relationship between compactness and resilience to shrinkage. Denser cities were initially more prone to population loss (2006–2016), but this trend diminished in the subsequent period (2016–2021), suggesting an evolving relationship between urban form and decline. In conclusion, the study (Szymczyk & Bukowski, 2025) underscored the need for further research into the relationship between urban compactness and shrinkage across different national and regional contexts.

2.3. Comparative Studies

Recent years have seen a rise in case study research on shrinking cities. However, comparative cross-national analyses remain scarce, even though they reveal how local and national planning frameworks shape similar dynamics (Großmann et al., 2013). Großmann et al. (2013) argue that a comparative approach "provides an opportunity to broaden attention and discover overlooked phenomena and drivers in shrinking cities" (p. 222). Comparing Germany and Poland is particularly valuable, as both face shrinkage in MSCs but differ in policy traditions.

Although numerous studies compare shrinking cities in Germany and Poland, contributing valuable insights on specific case cities (Rink et al., 2014) or regions (Al-Alawi et al., 2022; Sroka et al., 2025), a longitudinal, empirical, comparative study covering entire urban networks is still missing. Moreover, studies examining urbanisation trends across entire urban networks tend to focus exclusively on demographics (ESPON, 2023). This study therefore examines the relationship between urban form and shrinkage using a composite score that incorporates socio-economic and demographic aspects relative to national statistics.

2.4. Research Concept

German programmes such as Stadtumbau Ost and Internationale Bauausstellung Saxony-Anhalt 2010 demonstrate the potential of compact-city strategies in managing shrinkage. Building on these experiences, this study analyses whether compact, densely populated MSCs, in Germany and Poland, exhibit similar resilience to shrinkage than more dispersed ones. It covers 814 cities, measuring compactness and shrinkage/growth dynamics over 15 years using a composite score (Milbert, 2020) and spatial metrics calculated in QGIS. Pearson's correlation is used to test the relationship between compactness and shrinkage, addressing two key questions:

- Do MSCs in Poland and Germany show the same relationship between the compactness measures and urban growth and shrinkage?
- How does this relationship change over time?

3. Data and Methods

This section outlines the data sources and methodological approach used to investigate the relationship between urban form measures of compactness and the degree of urban growth and shrinkage in MSCs in Germany and Poland.

3.1. Input Data on Urban Shrinkage

The study uses existing composite shrinkage and growth scores (Sc) for cities based on six indicators, as developed by Milbert (2015, 2020). In short, each of the six socio-economic indicators (see Table 1 in the Supplementary File) is assigned a point value, resulting in a composite score (0–24). Cities are classified, based on the score, as shrinking (0–10), stagnating (11–13), or growing (14–24). For Germany, data were drawn from assessments by the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (2021), covering three five-year periods: 2003–2008, 2008–2013, and 2013–2018 (Bukowski

& Szymczyk, 2025c). For Poland, assessments were also divided into three five-year periods: 2006–2011, 2011–2016, and 2016–2021 (Bukowski & Szymczyk, 2024).

For this research, only MSCs, defined by Polish and German national statistics as 20,000–100,000 inhabitants, were considered. Data at the municipality level (*Gemeinde* in Germany, *Gmina* in Poland) serve as the unit of analysis. In total, 814 medium-sized urban municipalities were analysed. These include 634 MSCs in Germany and 180 in Poland (184 MSCs in the period 2011–2016).

It should be noted that in Poland, municipalities are classified as "urban," "urban-rural," and "rural." While cities (*miasto* in Polish) can belong to both "urban" and "urban-rural" municipalities, the latter often cover areas with multiple small settlements and villages. While the calculations were conducted for both municipal types, only "urban" municipalities were considered for the correlation stage. This is because the 33 "urban-rural" municipalities were not comparable to German medium-sized urban municipalities from an urban form perspective.

3.2. Input Data on Urban Form

The spatial study relies on widely available land-use data to analyse urban form metrics. The dataset is sourced from CORINE Land Cover (CLC). CLC data are a key resource for understanding land use and landscape dynamics from a European perspective. They represent the only consistent and harmonised multinational collection of land-use information at a continental scale. CLC uses a standardised methodology to produce comprehensive continent-wide land cover data based on 44 land classes. The product, updated every six years, has a minimum mapping unit (MMU) of 25 hectares (ha) for aerial phenomena and a minimum width of 100 m for linear phenomena. This study employs the latest datasets from 2006, 2012, and 2018. However, it should be acknowledged that the 2006 dataset differs—within the accepted margin of variation—from those of 2012 and 2018 (CLC, 2025). This variation is due to improvements in data quality, methodology, and the integration of revised datasets.

Spatial data on administrative boundaries were retrieved from national geospatial registries. For Poland, boundary data were obtained from the National Register of Geographical Names (2025) and converted to datasets (Bukowski & Szymczyk, 2025b), and for Germany, from the Geodata Centre of the Federal Agency for Cartography and Geodesy (2025) and converted to datasets (Bukowski & Szymczyk, 2025a). Each municipality was linked to the corresponding dataset via a unique identifier.

3.3. Research Timeframe

The timeframe of this research is determined by data availability. Since both the spatial data and composite score periods must be aligned, the timeframes for Poland and Germany differ. Figure 3 illustrates how the periods of various datasets align.

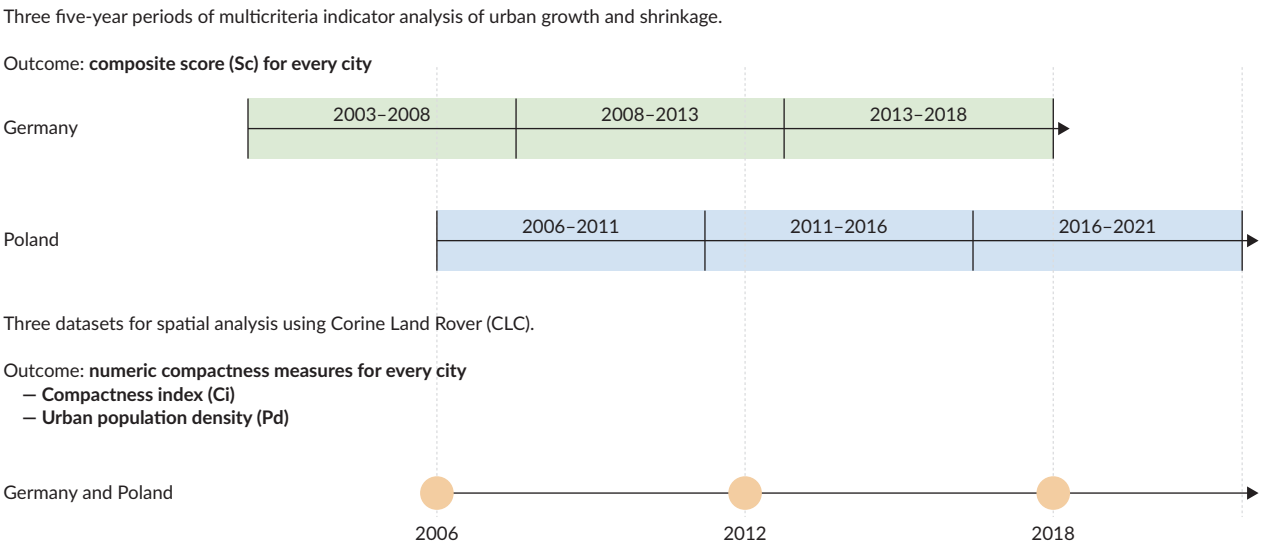

Figure 3. Research timeframe aligning Sc and compactness analysis based on the available Corine Land Cover (2025) database. Source: Authors.

3.4. Compactness Measures

Urban compactness is commonly seen as the opposite of urban sprawl, which is associated with significant social and environmental costs (Squires, 2002; Tsai, 2005). Though the term "compact city" has various definitions, it generally refers to dense, mixed-use development with good public transport and access to services and jobs (OECD, 2012). Originating with Dantzig and Saaty (1973) as a model for efficient resource use, the concept has evolved to encompass economic, morphological, and functional dimensions—measured through indicators such as population or employment density, land-use mix, and urban boundaries (Ahlfeldt & Pietrostefani, 2017). A methods review was conducted in a study on compactness measures by Szymczyk and Bukowski (2025). This resulted in Szymczyk and Bukowski (2025) selecting two commonly used measures: urban population density (Pd) and the urban areas' shape compactness index (Ci). Considering the aim and scope of this study, the available data, and the prerequisites mentioned above, these two measures are employed to describe the compactness of MSCs' urban areas in this study.

Pd is calculated using the urban area (A_D) calculated based on CLC layers and the municipality population (Pop) in the corresponding year, using the formula:

$$Pd = \frac{Pop}{A_D}$$

Compared to the simplified Pd reported by Statistics Poland (Central Statistical Office, 2025), this method excludes agricultural land, forests, water bodies, and other non-urban uses, providing a more accurate picture of Pd. Urban areas were defined in two ways: "artificial surfaces" (11 CLC layers) and "urban fabric" (2 CLC layers; see Figure 4), to ensure that both approaches allow for control of potential errors related to urban form definition.

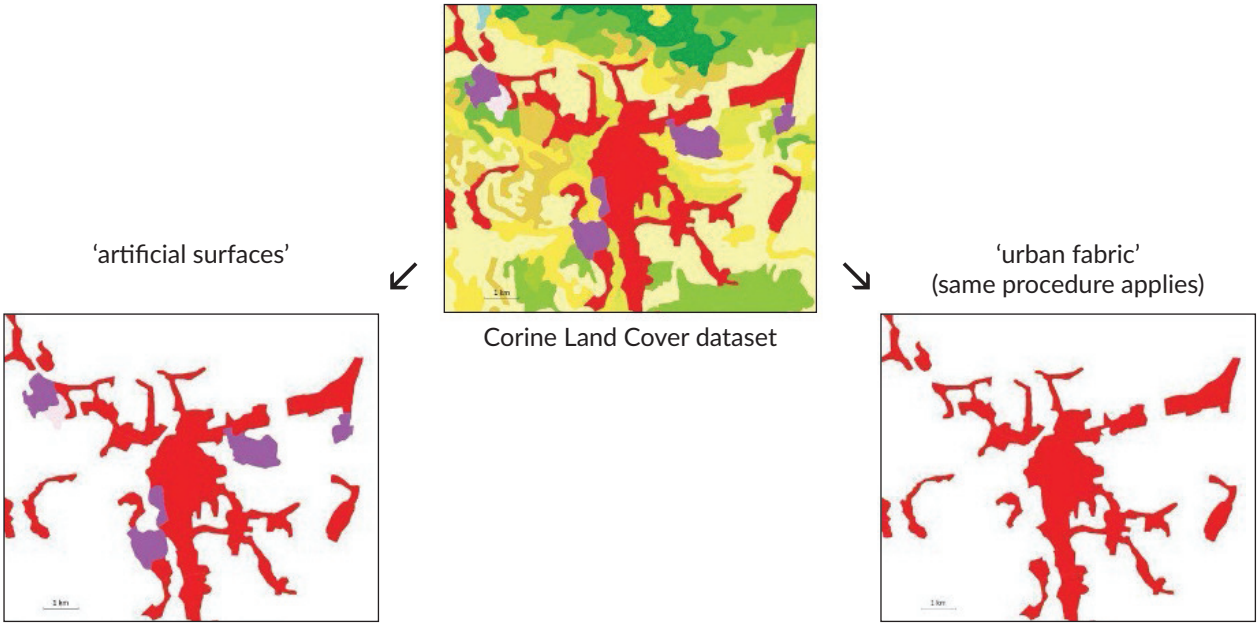

Figure 4. Compactness analysis based on the CLC dataset selects urban areas as "artificial surfaces" and as "urban fabric" for comparison. Source: Szymczyk et al. (2025).

Ci measures how irregular or dispersed the shape of an urban area is. As described by Reis et al. (2016), it helps determine whether a city is more continuous and concentrated or more fragmented and scattered. In general, an area is considered more compact if it is centred around a core, resembling a circle, with less scattered development.

While there are many ways to calculate compactness (e.g., Altman, 1998; Chambers & Miller, 2010; Niemi et al., 1990), this study focuses on one commonly used method: the Schwartzberg Index (Schwartzberg, 1966). This index, like the similar Polsby–Popper Index (Polsby & Popper, 1991), compares the shape of an urban area to a circle, which is considered the ideal compact form. The Schwartzberg Index (Ci) compares the perimeter of an urban area (A_p) to the circumference of a circle with the same area (A_D), with a circle representing the most compact shape. To ensure Ci is comparable with other methods (e.g., Polsby–Popper Index), the formula was inverted, resulting in values from the range 0–1:

$$Ci = \frac{1}{\frac{A_p}{2\pi\sqrt{A_D/\pi}}}$$

This formula was simplified to:

$$Ci = \frac{2\pi\sqrt{A_D/\pi}}{A_p}$$

This inverted version is used throughout the remainder of the manuscript. Figure 5 illustrates the step-by-step methodology for defining urban area shapes and calculating the two compactness measures (for a more detailed explanation, see Szymczyk et al., 2024).

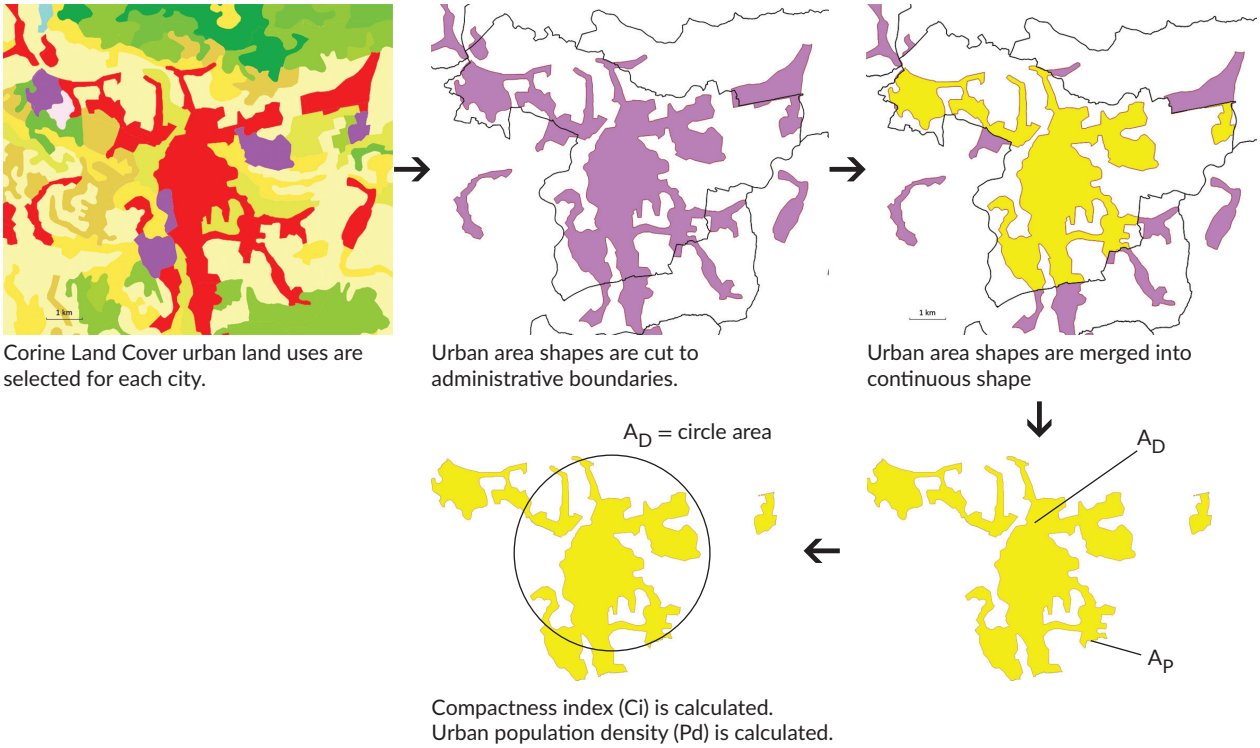

Figure 5. Urban form measures analysis diagram based on the Jasło urban municipality example. Source: Szymczyk et al. (2024).

3.5. Correlation

A correlation analysis was conducted between Sc (range 0–24) and Ci (range 0–1), and separately between Sc and Pd, using Pearson's correlation. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was used to assess the relationship between these variables. The coefficient, calculated from the normalised values of two variables across a sample of n values, ranges from +1 (maximum positive correlation) to −1 (maximum negative correlation), with values near 0 indicating no correlation. While Pearson's correlation traditionally assumes normally distributed data, it is generally robust to modest departures from normality, including slight skewness, particularly in the absence of strong outliers. Classic simulation studies (e.g., Havlicek & Peterson, 1976) have shown that the sampling distribution and Type I error rate of r remain reliable under non-extreme non-normality. More recent reviews (e.g., Schober et al., 2018) support this, noting that serious distortions in results typically arise only with severe skewness or heavy-tailed distributions. Given that the distribution of the Sc, Ci, and Pd dataset exhibits only mild skewness, the use of Pearson's correlation is considered appropriate. Statistical significance was assessed using the p-value, with correlations considered significant at $p < 0.05$. This threshold guided the interpretation of the research questions. Correlation analyses were conducted separately for urban areas defined as "artificial surface" and "urban fabric" to account for potential discrepancies in urban form delineation. In addition to the Pearson correlation analysis, a non-parametric Spearman's rank correlation was applied to verify the robustness of the results.

3.6. Tools

This research was conducted using the open-source QGIS program for spatial analysis and data visualisation. Data harmonisation and management were handled with the Python language and Pandas libraries. All resulting datasets and outputs were published in open-access data repositories (Bukowski & Szymczyk, 2024, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

4. Results

The results are presented in two stages. The first stage (Section 4.1) reports the outcomes of the spatial compactness measures—Ci and Pd—separately for each country. The second stage (Section 4.2) presents correlation analyses between these variables and Sc, also disaggregated by country and compared.

4.1. Urban Compactness Measures

4.1.1. Germany

The urban compactness analysis for MSCs in Germany displays relatively consistent patterns across the three periods (Table 2 in the Supplementary File and Figure 6). The Schwartzberg Ci is expressed in numbers ranging from 0 to 1, with 1 being the most compact. It shows a close to normal distribution across all years. While the maximum values for Ci decreased over time, the maximum values for Pd increased. The minimum values of Ci also declined, while those for Pd increased in 2012 and 2018. The medians of both measures indicate a slight increase in spatial dispersion among MSCs. Among the most compact and dense cities across the analysed timeframes were Germering, Griesheim, Bad Soden am Taunus, and Obertshausen, each consistently ranking in the top 10 in all analysed periods.

The results, presented in Figure 6, show MSCs alongside large cities (>100,000 inhabitants) to support comparative interpretation. As expected, the Pd of large cities is generally higher than that of MSCs. At the same time, Ci values vary, with many MSCs exhibiting higher compactness than their larger counterparts.

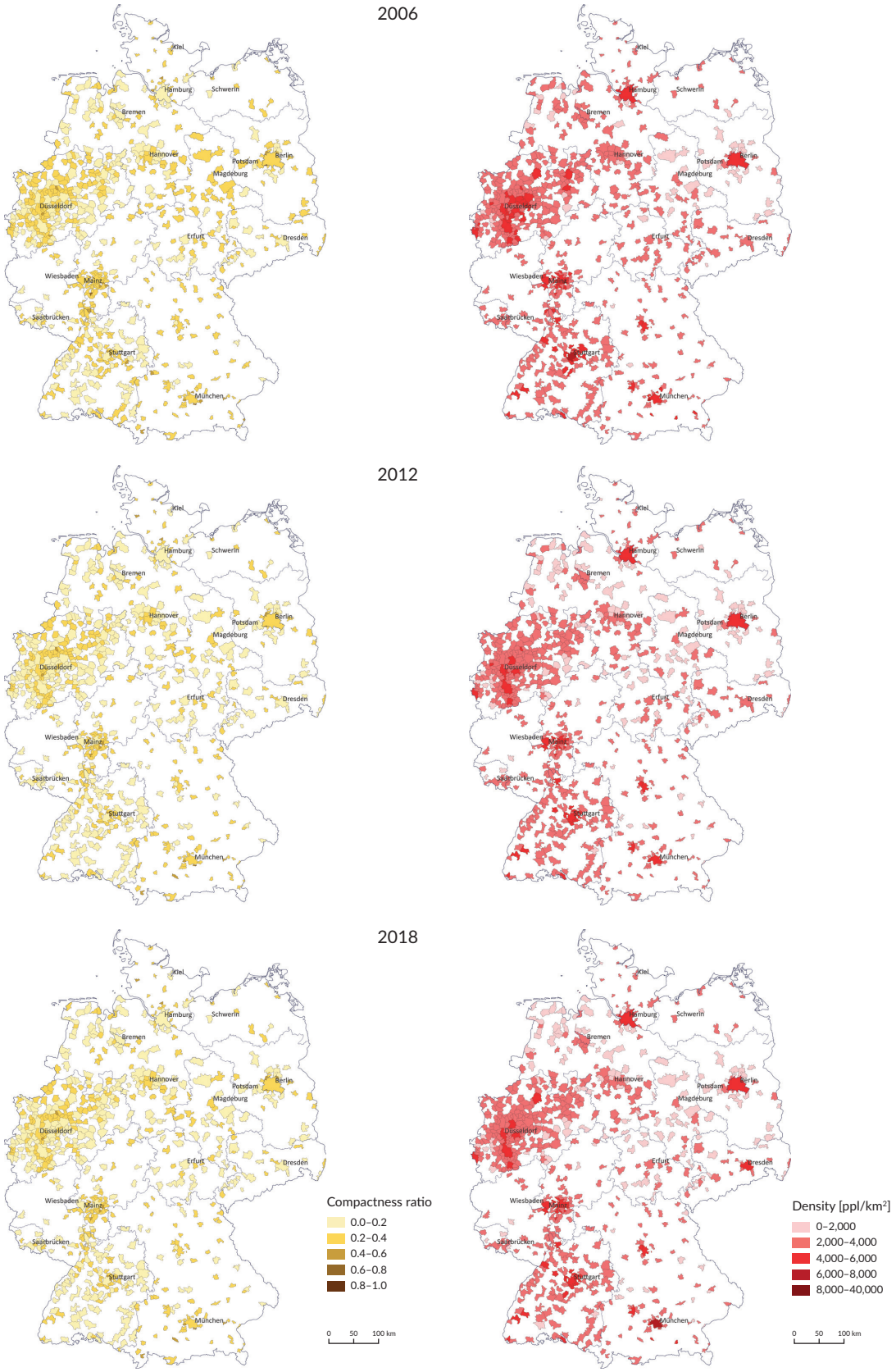

Figure 6. Ci (left) and Pd (right) results for German large (>100,000 inhabitants) and MSCs (20,000–100,000 inhabitants). Source: Authors' calculation based on Corine Land Cover (2025).

4.1.2. Poland

The results of the urban compactness analysis for MSCs in Poland show broadly similar patterns to those observed in Germany across the three analysed periods (see Table 3 in the Supplementary File and Figure 7). Both the minimum and maximum values for Ci and Pd declined over time. The average Ci was 0.22 in Germany and 0.21 in Poland. Average Pd values were 3,414 people per km² in Germany and 2,343 people per km² in Poland. While the median values for Poland were initially higher, they declined more steeply, indicating a stronger trend toward spatial dispersion in Polish MSCs. Among the most compact cities throughout the analysed timeframes were Ząbki, Piastów, Żyrardów, Legionowo, Słupsk, Giżycko, Świdnica, and Rumia—consistently holding top 10 positions across all periods. The least compact cities included Wyszków, Świebodzin, Opoczno, Jastrzębie-Zdrój, and Pszczyna.

The results, presented in Figure 7, show, similar to Germany, that the density of large cities is higher than that of MSCs. At the same time, Ci is typically higher for MSCs than for the large ones.

In summary, the outcomes of compactness analysis, measured by Ci and Pd, reveal broadly similar spatial dispersion trends. While Polish MSCs are, on average, more compact and dense than German MSCs, they are experiencing a more rapid decline in density over time. The next section presents the outcomes of the correlation analysis between these urban form indicators and urban growth and shrinkage dynamics.

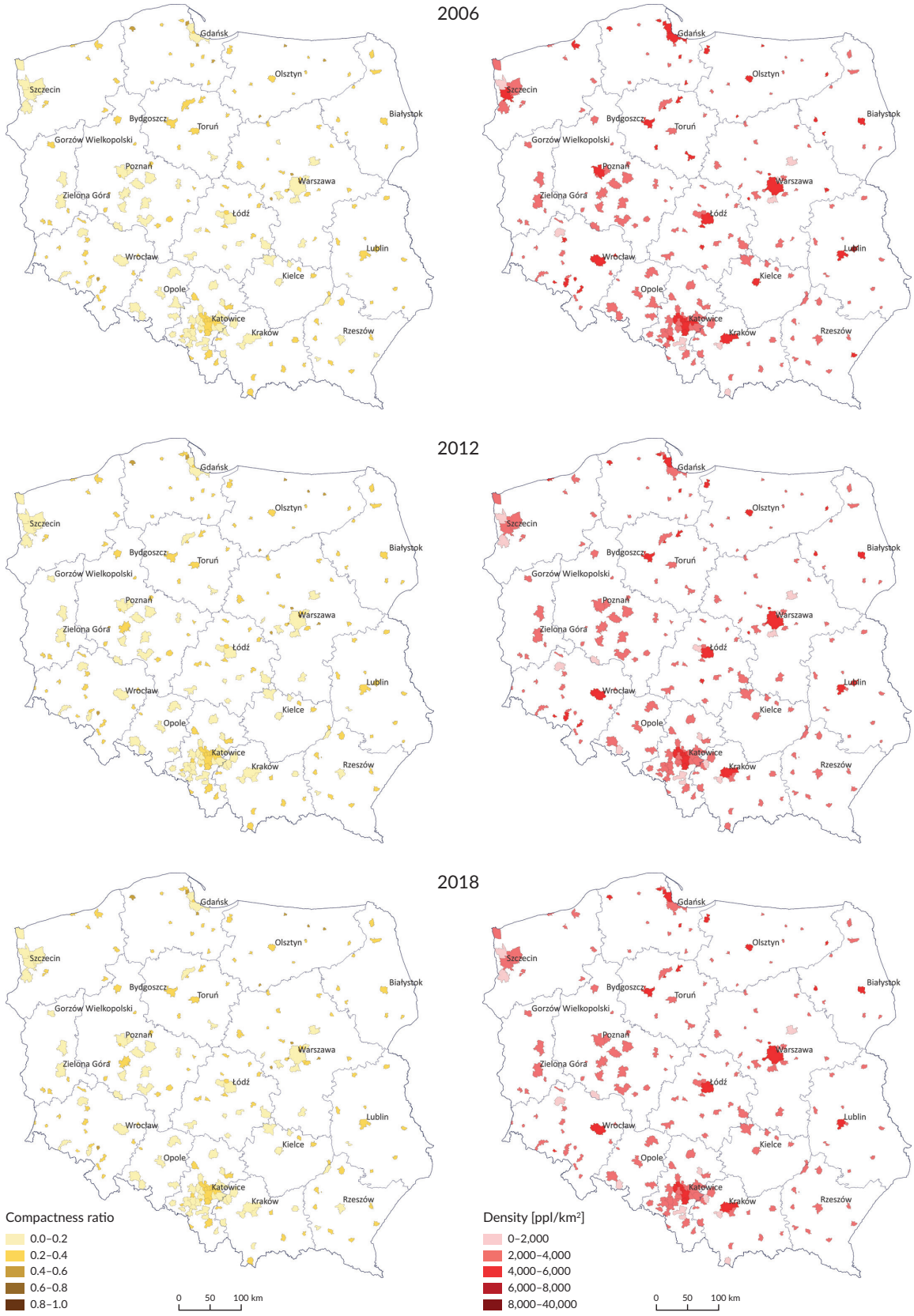

Figure 7. Ci (left) and Pd (right) results for Polish large (>100,000 inhabitants) and MSCs (20,000–100,000 inhabitants). Source: Authors' calculation based on Corine Land Cover (2025).

4.2. Relationship Between Compactness Measures and Sc

This section presents the results of Pearson's correlation analysis between Sc and spatial indicators (Ci and Pd) in Germany and Poland. In the case of Poland, the analysis was further disaggregated to distinguish between "urban" and "urban-rural" municipalities. This differentiation was necessary because "urban-rural" municipalities encompass not only the central town but also surrounding villages and dispersed settlements, which significantly alter the characteristics of the urban form. To ensure comparability with German MSCs, which are strictly urban in administrative classification, only urban municipalities in Poland were included in the final correlation analysis.

4.2.1. Germany

Correlation was analysed across three time periods for both Germany and Poland. The relationship with the shrinkage score is presented in Figure 8 and in two tables: Table 4 for Ci and Table 5 for Pd (both are found in the Supplementary File), including divisions into "urban fabric" and "artificial surfaces."

The results reveal a significant and positive correlation coefficient (*r*) between Sc and Ci across all analysed periods. This indicates that cities with more compact urban forms, whether measured by "urban fabric" or "artificial surfaces," are less likely to experience shrinkage. The strength of this relationship increases over time, with correlation coefficients reaching positive, moderate levels in the later periods.

The correlation reveals a significant, positive coefficient between Sc and Pd across almost all analysed periods except for the first one for "urban fabric." This, in other words, indicates that the denser the urban area, the less likely the city is to shrink. The trend becomes stronger over time, showing positive, moderate/strong values.

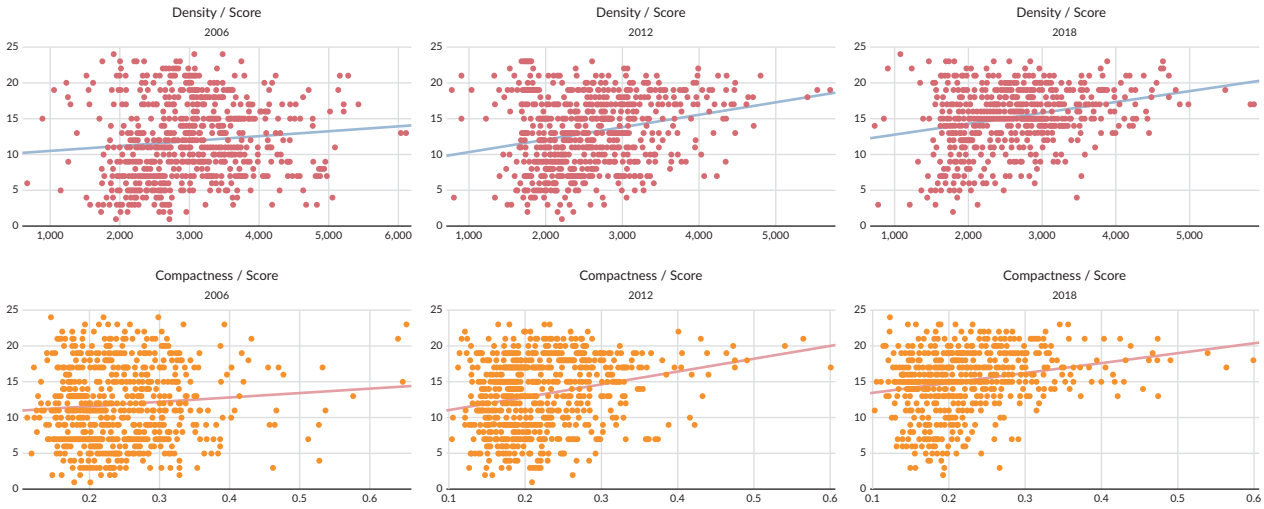

Figure 8. Scatter plots of Sc and urban compactness measures: Pd on top and Ci on the bottom, for MSCs (only urban municipalities) in Germany. Source: Authors.

In addition to Pearson's correlation analysis, a non-parametric Spearman's rank correlation was applied to the full dataset to verify the robustness of the results. Spearman's test was selected because it does not assume linear relationships or normally distributed data, which is particularly relevant when working with

spatial indicators such as Ci and Pd. The results of both correlation methods were consistent, confirming both the direction and statistical significance of the observed associations.

4.2.2. Poland

The results of the correlation analysis for Polish cities are presented in Figure 9 and in two tables: Table 6 shows the relationship between Sc and Ci, while Table 7 presents the correlation between Sc and Pd (both tables are in the Supplementary File). As with the German dataset, both tables distinguish between urban form defined as "urban fabric" and "artificial surfaces."

The results reveal a significant and positive correlation between Sc and Ci across all analysed periods. This indicates that the more compact the shape of an urban area—whether defined by "urban fabric" or "artificial surfaces"—the less likely it is to experience shrinkage. However, in contrast to Germany, where the strength of the correlation increased over time, the trend in Poland weakened: Initially strong coefficients declined to a moderate level in the later periods.

The results show only one significant, negative correlation between Sc and Pd. The later periods show no statistical significance. This, in other words, indicates that temporarily, between 2006 and 2011, more dense urban areas (only "urban fabric") were more likely to experience shrinkage. In contrast to Germany, there is no clear trend, as the coefficient is low, and later results show no statistical significance.

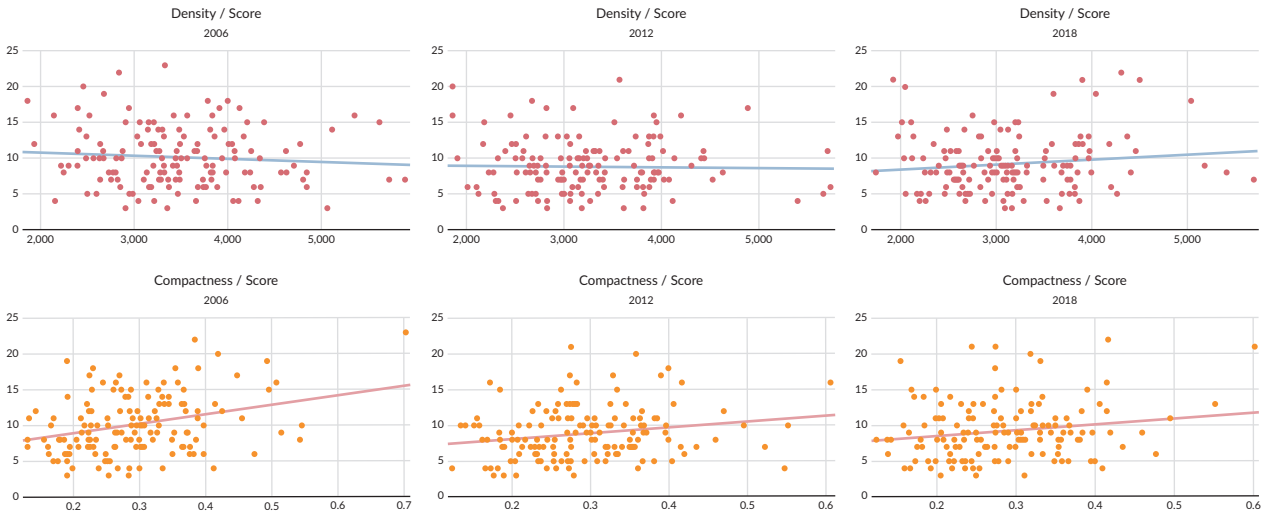

Figure 9. Scatter plots of Sc and urban compactness measures: Pd on top and Ci on the bottom, for MSCs (only urban municipalities) in Poland. Source: Authors.

5. Discussion of Results

Urban shrinkage is increasingly challenging the stability of broader settlement systems worldwide. Understanding its relationship with urban form is essential for developing planning strategies that move beyond growth-centric paradigms (Reis et al., 2016). While most existing research focuses on large metropolitan areas, MSCs (20,000–100,000 inhabitants) remain understudied, despite their critical role in regional networks (Gajewski & Knippschild, 2024; Gao et al., 2024; Terfrüchte & Growe, 2024). This study

addresses this gap by examining how compactness and Pd relate to growth and shrinkage patterns in German and Polish MSCs.

5.1. Relationship Between Urban Shrinkage and Compactness Among MSCs

Analysis of urban shrinkage indicates that MSCs were among the most affected groups during the analysed periods. However, the trajectories and patterns of shrinkage diverged considerably between the two countries. Figure 10 illustrates the classification of MSCs across three time periods, using five categories: A—above-average growth, B–growth, C–stability, D–shrinkage, E–above-average shrinkage. In Germany, the shrinkage strongly affects Eastern cities, but Sc values show that the average MSC score lies closer to the growth range. In Poland, shrinkage is more widespread across different areas of the country, and the mean score is positioned nearer to the shrinking range. Moreover, in the German context, shrinkage was most pronounced in the early 2000s, followed by a gradual reversal towards growth after 2010. By contrast, in Poland, the early 2000s saw shrinkage primarily concentrated in large cities, with the phenomenon subsequently shifting towards MSCs. Consequently, the share of growing MSCs is substantially higher in Germany than in Poland. This divergence is less prominent in the outcomes of the compactness analysis.

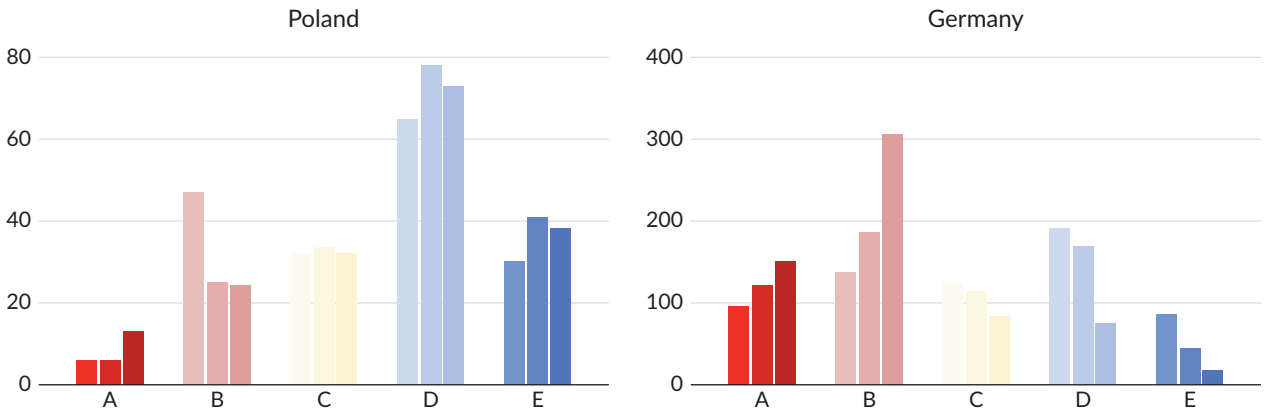

Figure 10. Changes in the numbers of MSCs included in each group in the three five-year periods in Poland (left) and Germany (right). Groups show the following types: A–above-average growth, B–growth, C–stability, D–shrinkage, E–above-average shrinkage. Source: Authors.

Both Pd values and Ci underscore a persistent trend of dispersion across the analysed urban municipalities in both countries. These findings confirm those of Cortinovis et al. (2022), thereby adding to the discourse on urban dispersion in European cities. Notably, the median values of both Ci and Pd are higher in Poland; however, the maximum values are greater in Germany. Especially in the first analysed period, the maximum Ci was 0.65 in Germany. In the last analysed period, the maximum Pd was over 6,100 people per km². Several cities exemplify high scores, compactness, and density, often situated in the southwestern regions. For example, Griesheim, located near Darmstadt (see Figure 11 in the Supplementary File), was experiencing a high population and migration increase in relation to other cities in the country. It remained dense and compact, which is reflected in the diagram showing how the shape of the city fits in the circle with the same area size.

In Poland, the median values of both Ci and Pd were higher than in German MSCs, although numbers have been dropping rapidly. In the most recent analysed period, the maximum Ci was 0.51, and Pd reached only

4,500 people per km². Compared to Germany, Polish MSCs tend to be more compact overall, but there are fewer exceptionally dense and compact examples. Moreover, cities with high compactness and density—such as Gniezno, Koło, or Słupsk—are often located away from major urban centres. Their compactness can be attributed to historical patterns of growth rather than recent planning policies. Słupsk (see Figure 12 in the Supplementary File), for instance, is a compact and dense MSC that has recently experienced low population growth and low migration figures. Despite this, it continues to perform well economically, with low unemployment and moderate levels of own revenue.

5.2. Correlation Results

The correlation analysis reveals two distinct yet complementary trajectories between Germany and Poland in the relationship between urban form and shrinkage dynamics. In Germany, both compactness (Ci) and population density (Pd) exhibit weak to moderate but statistically significant positive associations with urban growth, which strengthen over time—from $r = 0.15$ between 2003 and 2008 to $r = 0.28$ between 2008 and 2013 and $r = 0.26$ between 2013 and 2018. This indicates that, as shrinkage pressures declined, more compact and dense urban forms tended to coincide with less shrinkage. In Poland, by contrast, correlations show an opposite trend: Shrinkage increased overall while compactness declined. The initially strong association between compactness and growth ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.001$ for 2006–2011) weakened over time, falling to $r = 0.22$ ($p = 0.005$) by 2016–2021. The relationship between Pd and growth was weak or negative in Poland, particularly in the early period, suggesting that higher urban population density alone did not translate into shrinkage resilience.

The distributions (Figures 8 and 9) indicate a more heterogeneous urban form spectrum in Germany, with a sizable core of mid-density/compact cities and a distinct tail of very dense, highly compact outliers that increasingly coincide with higher scores. Polish MSCs are more homogeneously clustered in mid-compactness and mid-density, with fewer extremes and a weaker, less stable urban form–shrinkage link. In both contexts, compactness is positively associated with Sc, but Germany's wider upper tail (very compact/dense cases) and the strengthening slopes over time suggest a clearer emergence of compact-dense growing MSCs, whereas Poland's narrower range and fading slopes point to limited separation by form and a stronger role of other (e.g., institutional or temporal socio-economic) factors.

Germany's long-established compact settlement structure and consistent urban policies (e.g., Stadtumbau Ost, Internationale Bauausstellung Saxony-Anhalt) supported compactness, whereas Poland's post-socialist transformations might have led to periods of unregulated expansion and likely contributed to morphological dispersion. Overall, the results point to a context-dependent but consistent pattern: Urban compactness is associated with less shrinkage in both countries, although its stabilising effect appears more persistent in Germany. It's important to note that these differences should be interpreted as indicative rather than causal, reflecting broader structural and planning contrasts between the two contexts. While the analysis shows that more compact or dense cities are less likely to experience shrinkage, particularly in the German case, the directionality of this relationship remains open to interpretation. It is equally plausible that cities experiencing less shrinkage maintain their density, rather than density being a protective factor against shrinkage. Furthermore, as urban boundaries typically remain fixed, a shrinking population may naturally lead to declining density, even without spatial expansion. This highlights the need for further research and caution when interpreting spatial form as a driver rather than a consequence of urban shrinkage and underlines the importance of future longitudinal and causal studies to better understand these dynamics.

5.3. Policy Implications

In Germany, the trend of urban shrinkage of MSCs is much less prominent than in the early 2000s. However, given demographic projections (fertility rates and an ageing society), planning efforts should persist in promoting compact and dense cities to avoid the increasing costs of extensive land use. In Poland, both measures of urban compactness decline significantly, alongside rising rates of urban shrinkage. Consequently, Polish MSCs continue to face urban dispersion, which, as noted in both the statistical findings and literature (Carruthers & Ulfarsson, 2003; Miyauchi & Setoguchi, 2023), can lead to increased infrastructure cost. Therefore, Polish MSCs could focus on maintaining their urban form compactness by reusing existing infrastructure and consolidating or reinvesting in urban brownfields, which could strengthen fiscal resilience in shrinking cities. Moreover, state planning could support MSCs in finding sustainable development paths without urban growth.

5.4. Research Limitations

While compactness (Ci) in Polish urban municipalities shows a positive relationship with urban growth, density (Pd) demonstrates no significant correlation or, in some cases, a weak negative one. This divergence highlights that compactness and density are not synonymous, supporting the literature that warns against using density as the only indicator of compact urban form (Ahlfeldt & Pietrostefani, 2017). In this study, compactness was measured using only two indicators, which may not fully reflect the complexity of the concept. Important aspects such as proximity to services, efficient mobility networks (especially public transport and cycling), urban morphology (building types), and connectivity of public spaces are also vital for understanding urban compactness. However, due to the scope and methodological limitations of this research, including these additional variables was not possible.

5.5. Future Research

This study adds to the growing literature on the relationship between urban form and socio-economic dynamics. While much of the existing research on the link between compactness and urban shrinkage has been conducted in the Chinese context (Wang et al., 2022), this study presents evidence that compactness is also statistically linked to patterns of urban shrinkage and growth in Europe. Future research could build on these findings to support data-driven planning strategies. In particular, studies could explore different planning contexts and additional variables to define urban compactness more comprehensively. Additionally, research could help identify spatial characteristics relevant to compact city planning. Further investigation is also necessary to better connect these spatial attributes with effective planning policies and strategies.

6. Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between urban form and urban shrinkage in MSCs in Germany and Poland over a 15-year period, addressing a gap in comparative research on spatial resilience. The results confirm that compactness and density relate differently to composite shrinkage score in each country. While the findings suggest that compactness (Ci and Pd) is associated with greater resilience to shrinkage, the direction of causality remains ambiguous and may be context dependent. Shrinking cities may become less dense as a result of depopulation, not necessarily the other way around.

In Germany, higher urban compactness (Ci) and population density (Pd) are consistently negatively correlated with urban shrinkage. In Poland, MSCs show a statistically significant but weakening relationship between compactness and shrinkage. Pd was not a stable predictor of shrinkage, possibly reflecting other factors influencing this phenomenon. While urbanisation trends in the two countries appear to be temporally displaced, with Germany experiencing significant shrinkage in the early 2000s and Poland only entering this phase around 2010, there are also notable differences in the distribution of urban compactness measures between German and Polish MSCs. In Germany, the distributions reflect a more heterogeneous spectrum, characterised by a considerable core of mid-density/compact cities and a distinct tail of very dense, highly compact outliers, which increasingly align with higher scores. Conversely, Polish MSCs tend to cluster more homogeneously in the mid-compactness and mid-density range, featuring fewer extremes.

As seen in international cases such as China (Wang et al., 2022), lower compactness is often associated with reduced land-use efficiency and a higher likelihood of urban shrinkage. However, longitudinal research on this relationship has rarely been conducted at a national comparative scale. While compact and dense urban forms are often promoted as a means to limit the external land-use impacts of sprawl, many environmental costs of land consumption remain difficult to internalise. Instead, the resilience benefits of compactness are more clearly observed in endogenous factors, lower infrastructure maintenance costs, more efficient service provision, and reduced per-capita expenditure on utilities and transport. Overall, compactness contributes to spatial and fiscal resilience, but its effectiveness ultimately depends on governance capacity and integrated planning approaches. Thus, future research should continue to explore how planning policies and spatial strategies can guide MSCs in proactively managing shrinkage, enabling them to adapt to demographic change while maintaining functional and spatial cohesion.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data used and created for this research were made available via a public repository. The following data were used: Bukowski and Szymczyk (2024, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c).

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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ARTICLE

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Negotiating "Left-Behindness" and Migration-Related Diversity in (New) Arrival Spaces

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Abstract

Places "left behind" often face socio-economic downturn, demographic decline, and marginalisation resulting from uneven development. Yet these places are no longer only points of departure; they increasingly function as arrival areas for international migrants. Building on growing work on migrant settlement patterns away from large cities, this article investigates arrival neighbourhoods across Germany through the lens of "left-behindness." Based on 90 interviews from eight German neighbourhoods, we analyse how "left-behindness" shapes and intersects with migrant arrival in everyday life and local governance. Using "left-behindness" as an analytical lens, we explore three interconnected arenas: (1) managing arrival under conditions of scarcity, (2) making sense of place through interpretations of migration and decline, and (3) everyday coexistence and contestation. We show how structural constraints, symbolic representations, and social dynamics reinforce each other, shaping both challenges and possibilities of arrival. The article argues that "left-behindness" is best understood not as a spatial category but as a relational and processual condition highlighting uneven development and how challenges of migration-related diversity are locally negotiated and contested.

Keywords

arrival neighbourhoods; international migration; left-behind places; non-traditional arrival spaces; peripheral places; urban migration

1. Introduction

The literature on "left-behind" places (Pike et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) highlights the socio-economic and emotional effects of territorial inequality, leading to them being perceived as places of departure where structural challenges and territorial stigma drive out-migration. However, places deemed "left behind" are increasingly emerging as places of arrival for international migrants. The differentiation of arrival geographies has sparked academic interest in reception experiences in newer arrival neighbourhoods beyond major urban centres. This simultaneous perception of a neighbourhood as "left behind" and as an arrival space raises important questions about how territorial inequality and migration become intertwined. It draws attention to access to housing, services and opportunities, justifiable allocation of scarce resources, and how residents and institutions negotiate belonging and responsibility under conditions of structural constraints. Emerging research therefore calls for exploring migration in its geographical diversity (see, for example, Doomernik & Glorius, 2016; Herslund, 2021; Jonitz et al., 2024; Kreichauf, 2023), with previous work showing that local conditions and contestations of "left-behindness" can shape arrival and inclusion (Egea & Kreichauf, 2025; Schemschat, 2021). In dialogue with this literature, we use "left-behindness" as a lens for analysing arrival neighbourhoods across Germany.

In academic literature, "left-behind" places are broadly defined as geographical areas facing long-term socio-economic decline, depopulation, and political and/or cultural marginalisation, often as a result of uneven socio-spatial development and globalisation processes (Pike et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). They are characterised by both objective indicators—such as employment or population decline—as well as by subjective experiences of neglect, disconnection, and harmful discourses portraying them as disconnected and dependent (Kühn & Weck, 2012). "Left-behindness" is understood as relational and processual, shaped by multi-scalar economic, political, symbolic, and governance dynamics (Fiorentino et al., 2024; Gansauer, 2025).

We argue that local expressions of "left-behindness"—and the narratives and practices emerging from them—shape arrival and settlement. Specifically, we ask how structural conditions, symbolic framings, and everyday social practices interact in places considered "left behind," and how this intersection shapes the arrival, settlement, and perception of newcomers. We treat migration and "left-behindness" here as mutually shaping frames through which actors interpret local change. Understanding "left-behindness" as an analytical lens on socio-spatial inequality rather than a fixed territorial label, we analyse the interplay of migration and "left-behindness" across eight German municipalities, using three analytical dimensions to structure our findings. First, we examine structural fragilities and governance arrangements shaping the management of arrival, including infrastructural decline, fragmentation, and fiscal scarcity. Second, we analyse interpretive frames through which actors narrate or contest migration in "left-behind" areas, including poverty-driven migration, peripherality stigma, and temporal instability. Third, we explore how these conditions are manifested in everyday social interactions, including routines of coexistence, competition over scarce resources, perceptions of disorder or threat, and local strategies to stabilise social relations.

Our focus responds first to calls for gaining a better understanding of how dominant discourses shape arrival processes in places considered "left behind." Prior research shows that territorial stigma is contested and sometimes redirected towards vulnerable groups, including migrants (Pinkster et al., 2020; Schemschat, 2021). Second, increased arrival rates since 2015—when refugee migration to Germany intensified—have

highlighted municipal strategies and local conditions in German migration debates, raising questions about how "left-behind" arrival neighbourhoods fare in integrating newcomers. Policy framings addressing social inequalities can shape the social positioning of individuals at local level, potentially influencing everyday bordering practices (Bürkner, 2018). By centring migration in various "left-behind" contexts, we highlight how both new and long-established arrival dynamics intersect with uneven development, contributing to the (re)scaling (Baberis & Pavolini, 2015) of socio-spatial hierarchies. The following sections discuss our theoretical framework, methodology, empirical findings, and implications.

2. Theoretical Framework: Intersections of "Left-Behindness" and Migration Dynamics

This section outlines the conceptual foundations of the study, drawing on two key strands of literature: research on so-called "left-behind" places and scholarship on migration-driven spatial (re)configurations examining settlement dynamics in such contexts.

2.1. Introducing the Concept of "Left-Behind" Places

The term "left behind" belongs to the terminology used to describe regional disparities (Fiorentino et al., 2024; Pike et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023; Tomaney et al., 2024; Velthuis et al., 2025). Reflecting the struggles of areas negatively affected by austerity measures, globalisation, or economic and technological transformations (Pike et al., 2024), it can be used as both a term to describe territorial discrepancies and as a spatial imaginary of places and their residents, i.e., as both a condition and a process. "Left-behind" places face several often interconnected economic, social, and political challenges, including economic downturn and lower levels of productivity, education, skills, and wages compared to national averages, as well as higher unemployment rates. These socio-economic characteristics can have negative demographic and social consequences, including high levels of deprivation, selective out-migration, ageing, demographic decline, and high poverty rates.

Similar to other concepts such as "peripheralisation" (Kühn & Weck, 2012), the concept of "left-behindness" underlines the emotional and political dimensions of unequal development, while emphasising more strongly the political consequences of places being "left-behind," as demonstrated by the literature on Brexit (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020) or the electoral success of Donald Trump (Fiorentino et al., 2024). According to this literature, residents in "left-behind" places may suffer from feelings of systemic abandonment and marginalisation, with political discontent and disengagement as possible consequences (see Fiorentino et al., 2024; Pike et al., 2024). The ballot-box manifestations are closely linked to subjective experiences of neglect, disconnection, and harmful discourses portraying "left-behind" places and people as disconnected and dependent (Kühn & Weck, 2012).

The term has shifted attention to how stakeholders talk about places and how such language can reinforce or challenge ideas of "development." While the term has been criticised for implying the possibility of "catching up," thereby shifting responsibility to regions and their inhabitants, some authors employ it precisely to call for a more critical engagement with the often-stigmatising labelling of individuals and/or regions as perpetually "left behind" (Pike et al., 2024). O'Neill (2011) highlights the role of language in conceptualising inequality, with examples like Brexitland (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020), *la France périphérique* ("peripheral France"; Guilluy, 2014), and *abgehängte Regionen* ("lagging regions") in Germany (Deppisch &

Klärner, 2021) illustrating its stigmatising potential. The term's core strength lies in its relational conceptualisation that understands "certain types of people and/or places [to be] in some way disconnected and 'left behind' by other actors, relations, and processes in the dominant and/or 'successful' economy, society, and polity" (Pike et al., 2024, p. 1171). Such an "agency-sensitive understanding of geographically uneven development" (Pike et al., 2024, p. 1168) highlights the persistent and complex nature of spatial inequalities (Pike et al., 2024). Any analysis of the political consequences of territorial inequalities includes notions of being "left behind" by a "globalized political-economic system" (Pike et al., 2024, p. 1170) perceived by some as being run by disconnected elites who neglect "left-behind" places.

The characteristics of "left-behindness" are manifested differently depending on local and temporal configurations (Martin et al., 2021). Indeed, places do not necessarily remain in a state of "left-behindness." Rural regions, post-industrial areas, small towns, and marginalised neighbourhoods experiencing demographic decline, the lack of skilled workforce, and economic struggles can all be and frequently are labelled as "left behind" (Pike et al., 2024; see also Velthuis et al., 2025). This calls for a historically and geographically sensitive analysis of economic and demographic trajectories to grasp both the varieties and complexities of how the phenomenon unfolds (Pike et al., 2024).

As many such regions have also become new immigrant destinations, questions emerge about how narratives of decline interact with migration and shape socio-spatial configurations. The following section reviews the literature on migration to "left-behind" places.

2.2. Migration to "Left-Behind" Places

In light of diversifying migration patterns, research in the European context has begun to focus on "non-traditional migration destinations" (Brill et al., 2025; McAreavey & Argent, 2018; Winders, 2018). While the term captures the spatial shift away from established "immigrant gateway cities" (Ley & Murphy, 2001), they encompass a wide range of settings, including "left-behind," peripheral, post-industrial, or rural regions (El-Kayed et al., 2020; Gerten et al., 2023; Meijer et al., 2023). Some areas have only recently become arrival spaces, while others have long migration histories shaped by industrial labour flows, agricultural work, and more recent refugee movements.

Migrant arrival in "left-behind" places raises questions about access to resources and generates new demands on infrastructures, services, and governance. Migration is both shaped by the spatial context in which it occurs and holds transformative potential for neighbourhoods where migrants can catalyse institutional and social innovation (Çağlar & Schiller, 2011). According to these two authors, the effects of migration must be understood in relation to the "systematic variation in migrants' relationship to cities as these are shaped by the positionality of cities within economic, political and cultural fields of power" (Çağlar & Schiller, 2011, p. 3). This calls for an "embeddedness" perspective (Castles, 2010), viewing migration as deeply interwoven with broader social and economic restructuring. The incorporation of newcomers into local labour markets, institutional frameworks, and communities is linked to historical trajectories of industrial development and class mobility (Baberis & Pavolini, 2015). Urban scale is not static but shaped by capital flows, commuting patterns, and labour centralisation—dynamics that migration actively (re)shapes. Thus, migration into structurally weak regions is not merely a demographic or social event, but part of broader (re)scaling processes.

Understanding why migrants settle in "left-behind" areas is key to grasping their dual role as both a challenge for and driver of transformation. The literature highlights several important factors. First, the availability of affordable housing is crucial. Displacement from gentrified inner-city areas and housing shortages in major cities have made less attractive regions with vacant housing stock accessible destinations or stopovers for migrants (El-Kayed & Keskinkılıc, 2023; Wiedner & Schaeffer, 2025). Second, social networks facilitate settlements. "Chain migration" (Alonso-Pardo et al., 2023), understood as mobility facilitated through existing family and social ties, is increasingly shaping mobility, even in non-traditional arrival areas (Alonso-Pardo et al., 2023; Hierro & Maza, 2024). Third, labour market conditions attract newcomers. In some "left-behind" areas, the presence of job vacancies—particularly in low-wage sectors such as agriculture, care, or logistics—combined with favourable business rents creates opportunities for both employment and self-employment (Bianchi et al., 2023; Cabral & Swerts, 2021). Lastly, policy-driven distribution systems allocate migrants to peripheral regions through quotas aiming to "share the burden" of integration efforts evenly (Fourot et al., 2020).

Initial studies of migration in Europe's so-called "left-behind" places paint an ambivalent picture (Cappati & Alonso-Fradejas, 2024; Schemschat, 2024). While migration can revitalise local dynamics, structural constraints continue to shape everyday arrival experiences. A first set of challenges concerns social (arrival) infrastructures. Peripheral or shrinking regions are often characterised by limited resources, whether infrastructure, administrative capacity, or services (Scarpa, 2015). Fiscal pressures resulting from population decline hinder the maintenance of existing facilities and construction of new social infrastructure (Schemschat, 2021). Some areas experience the reduced availability or closure of schools, libraries, and cultural spaces (Meijer et al., 2023), while others rely on unstable DIY or volunteer-based solutions (Cremaschi et al., 2020). Spatial configurations such as monofunctional housing estates may further limit arrival infrastructures (El-Kayed & Keskinkılıc, 2023).

Local governance responses play a decisive mediating role in how local dynamics unfold. The concept of "receptivity" (Glorius et al., 2021) highlights how institutional capacities, social openness, and accessible infrastructures shape whether migration contributes to stabilisation or exacerbates precarity. Some municipalities develop coordinated approaches—such as low-threshold support services, cross-departmental cooperation, or inclusive communication—able to mitigate pressures and foster more inclusive everyday relations (Räuchle & Schmiz, 2019; Sampedro & Camarero, 2018). Others do not, resulting in fragmented governance, overburdened administrations, and increased tensions (Schammann et al., 2024). In such cases, structural deficits and negative narratives become mutually reinforcing, producing feedback loops that deepen marginalisation (Steigemann, 2019).

These structural conditions intersect with local narratives and social dynamics. Ageing populations shape how newcomers are perceived, adding a generational dimension to migration-related tensions (Enßle-Reinhardt et al., 2022). In some municipalities, migrants are framed as "strangers" (Schneider, 2024) and face exclusion, stigmatisation, racism, or anti-migration mobilisation (Garner, 2013). Such narratives can significantly influence social cohesion and community relations.

Taken together, the literature on "left-behindness" and migration to "left-behind" places highlights the deep interlinkage between the two phenomena. Processes of socio-economic decline, peripheralisation, and territorial stigma shape the institutional capacities, infrastructures, and opportunity structures encountered

by newcomers upon arrival. At the same time, migration can alter these very dynamics, stabilise populations and create new forms of social organisation, or, by contrast, amplify existing inequalities and tensions where capacities are lacking. It is this intersection that shapes the analytical lens we use in our empirical analysis (following the presentation of our methodological approach).

3. Methodology and Case Study Selection

This section outlines the methodological approach and situates the selected neighbourhoods—our case studies—within broader patterns of migration-related settlement in Germany. We start by describing the research design, data collection, and analytical strategy (Section 3.1). We go on to provide a concise overview of the national context of migration and territorial inequality, explaining how our case studies are embedded in these dynamics (Section 3.2).

3.1. Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis

The article is based on a qualitative, multi-site case study approach, conducted between June 2024 and March 2025. It forms part of a broader transformation project (2023–2026) on migration-related change and local governance in 12 German neighbourhoods. Case study selection drew on a prior questionnaire survey of 470 municipalities (17.2% response rate), which provided a nationwide overview of migration-related developments and informed the qualitative site selection. Alongside analytical objectives, practical factors—such as access to interview partners, data availability, and municipal willingness to engage (Krehl & Weck, 2020)—also shaped the selection.

Given the project's transformative and practice-oriented nature, active municipal participation was crucial, with interest often arising from neighbourhoods facing socio-spatial marginalisation. We prioritised municipalities experiencing new or evolving migration-related dynamics, including longstanding and more recent contexts, while ensuring representation across Germany's federal states. This article focuses on eight case studies characterised by features commonly associated with "left-behindness."

Empirical data was gathered through 90 semi-structured interviews with people from three main groups: (1) municipal officials, (2) civil-society and welfare actors, and (3) residents with migration biographies, including newly arrived persons and longer-settled migrants (see Supplementary File). Interview topics covered migration-related challenges, (arrival) infrastructures, social cohesion, and governance. Two workshops with municipal representatives complemented the interviews and allowed joint reflection on findings and local challenges. These groups offered insight into local narratives and how they reinforce or challenge interpretations at the intersection of migration and "left-behindness." We highlight contextual and actor-specific differences where they meaningfully shape narratives or practices.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed through inductive, reflexive thematic analysis (Ahmed et al., 2025; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Multiple coding rounds identified recurring themes and site-specific particularities related to marginalisation, local governance, and migration-related change. To ensure analytical rigour, preliminary codes were collaboratively reviewed and refined. Workshop protocols were incorporated to triangulate and validate findings. Rather than adopting a structured comparison, we used a multi-site approach (Falzon, 2009) to identify themes across locations while

acknowledging context-specific particularities. This reflects the need for flexible, context-sensitive comparative approaches, especially in spatially and institutionally diverse settings (Krehl & Weck, 2020).

3.2. Contextualisation and Case Study Selection

In Germany, broader European dynamics of migrant settlement in "left-behind" regions are particularly visible. Migrants and refugees disproportionately settle in disadvantaged areas—especially in eastern, northern, and northwestern Germany—where low rents and high vacancy rates coincide with weak labour markets and limited services (Jähnen & Helbig, 2024; Wiedner & Schaeffer, 2025). These conditions have contributed to a concentration of new arrivals in peripheral and post-industrial areas, many of which are emblematic of Germany's *abgehängte Regionen* (see Section 2.1). "Left-behindness" in Germany is frequently framed through East–West disparities rooted in uneven post-reunification development (Deppisch & Klärner, 2021; Royer & Leibert, 2024). Public debates tend to frame peripheralisation as the legacy of out-migration from the former GDR and the socio-economic disruptions of deindustrialisation, while giving less attention to how in-migration reshapes these regions (Habersack & Wegscheider, 2024; Lang et al., 2024). A rural–urban divide further structures discourses on uneven development, with rural areas portrayed as "left behind" and cities as prosperous and culturally vibrant (Deppisch & Klärner, 2021). Scholars also note that feelings of marginalisation stem from varied narratives—such as infrastructural decline or cultural change—that intersect with migration (Deppisch et al., 2023).

The neighbourhoods examined in this study illustrate how these national dynamics materialise locally. They span varied socio-spatial settings, from growing metropolitan regions to shrinking, structurally disadvantaged cities (see Table 1). All are urban yet embedded in different regional trajectories: some in dynamic city-regions, others in peripheral or post-industrial areas facing long-term decline. Despite differences, they share characteristics associated with "left-behindness" described earlier. Many have experienced population growth through international migration, particularly since 2015, though migration histories differ: some feature longstanding diversity, while others have become home to more recent arrivals, driven by official (refugee) distribution policies and/or the availability of affordable housing. Spatial structures also differ—from inner-city districts to large housing estates or former military bases—shaping everyday experiences and local governance capacities. Politically, several sites display low electoral participation and varying degrees of support for the far-right AfD, reflecting broader patterns of disaffection in marginalised regions.

Because many contexts are socio-economically disadvantaged and subject to stigmatising media narratives, all neighbourhoods were anonymised to avoid boosting stigma and to protect participants.

Table 1. Case study characteristics.

Case study	City characteristics (Typology German context: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung, n.d.)	Characteristics of the case study neighbourhood
A	Large City (≈ 500,000), slightly growing; structural & post-industrial transformation	• Population ~ 21,500 • Peripheral, self-contained district • Working-class, mixed housing stock in a poor condition • Very high migration share (~ 80%); diverse origins

Table 1. (Cont.) Case study characteristics.

Case study	City characteristics (Typology German context: Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung, n.d.)	Characteristics of the case study neighbourhood
B	Medium-sized city (≈ 35,000) slightly growing; structural & post-industrial transformation	• Population ~ 2,500 • Close to city centre • Mixed housing along a main road, some in a poor condition • Longstanding but small-scale migration; arrivals since 2015
C	Large city (≈ 105,000), slightly growing; structural transition	• Population ~ 46,000 • Inner-city district within a fragmented, polycentric city • Post-war planned area with mixed housing, significant vacancy rate before 2015 • Longstanding migration; increased arrivals since 2015
D	Large city (≈ 100,000), slightly growing, structural & post-industrial transition	• Population ~ 9,000 • Near centre but physically cut off and fragmented • Mixed housing in a poor condition • Longstanding migration; increased arrivals since 2015 • High right-wing populist support (> 30%)
E	Large city (≈ 115,000), slightly growing, structural & post-industrial transition	• Population ~ 8,500 • Close to city centre • Working-class district with high vacancy rate and poor housing • Long-standing diversity; new arrivals since 2015
F	Medium-sized city (≈ 30,000) structurally weak area; shrinking; socio-economic challenges	• Population ~ 1,200 • Peripheral neighbourhood • Former military area with industrial surroundings and poor housing • Historically low but diversifying migration; increased migration since 2015 • High right-wing populist support (> 30%)
G	Large city (≈ 3,755,000), rapidly growing; undergoing dynamic structural development	• Population ~ 282,000 • Peripheral inner-suburban district • Large prefabricated housing blocks • Migration and diversity especially since 2015 • High right-wing populist support (> 30%)
H	Large city (≈ 210,000), growing, structural transition with socio-economic challenges	• Population ~ 22,500 • Peripheral, physically cut-off neighbourhood • Large prefabricated housing blocks • Rising migration; shares above city average • High right-wing populist support (> 30%)

4. Findings: Dynamics of Arrival in "Left-Behind" Neighbourhoods

This section examines how structural fragilities and governance arrangements (4.1), interpretive frames (4.2), and everyday social practices (4.3) intersect in the neighbourhoods we studied. Together, the three sections illustrate how "left-behindness" and migration mutually shape one another across institutional, discursive, and social domains.

4.1. Governing Arrival Under Conditions of Scarcity

To understand how migration and "left-behindness" become mutually shaping frames, we first examine the material and institutional conditions that form the backdrop against which local actors make sense of and negotiate diversity and spatial disadvantage.

Across the cases, interviewees describe local governance as shaped by longstanding structural fragility predating recent migration and continuing to define arrival conditions. Schools, childcare centres, youth services, healthcare, and social work all operate under chronic shortages, with many institutions weakened by demographic decline, austerity policies, and privatisation even before migration became a prominent public issue. Newcomers thus enter systems already overstretched. Practitioners highlight the everyday consequences of this fragility: overcrowded schools lacking classrooms, doctors no longer accepting patients, youth facilities unable to meet growing and diversifying needs. At the same time, these pressures are not uniform across our case studies. Some municipalities face acute and comprehensive shortages, while others retain selected areas of robust infrastructure or have benefitted from targeted investments, resulting in a differentiated landscape of local capacities. Housing conditions show similar patterns: migrants often end up in overcrowded and poorly maintained units where rubbish piles up, utilities get cut off, or repairs are ignored. In some cases, these conditions are described as "inhumane" (D13). While the severity of the problems varies, the underlying structures—limited regulation, high residential vacancy rates, speculative ownership—produce similar vulnerabilities across sites.

The local governance structures handling these challenges are marked by fragmentation. Responsibilities for housing, welfare, education, migration, and child protection are dispersed among different departments, often with little coordination. As one official put it, "Jeder möchte sein eigenes Süppchen kochen" ("Everyone wants to do his own thing") (C6). Staff shortages compound these deficits: unfilled positions—sometimes for years—leading to heavy workloads, the departure of long-term employees leading to the loss of expertise and reduced continuity. Frontline staff describe being pulled into crisis management, with little time for preventive or community-oriented work. Voluntary engagement, once key to local support, has declined since 2015. Many longstanding volunteers have stepped back due to burnout or frustration, leaving overstretched municipalities without a buffer. Fiscal constraints remain a persistent challenge. Integration work, being non-mandatory, is often hit by budget cuts, while many services depend on temporary project funding, generating discontinuity and staff turnover. Across sites, local actors therefore navigate scarcity by combining formal structures with ad-hoc solutions, creating governance arrangements that are fragile but adaptable.

At the same time, local governance cultures diverge. Some administrations rely heavily on formal procedures, leading to slow responses and rigid departmental boundaries. Others demonstrate flexibility, adjusting

opening hours, reaching out in everyday spaces, or simplifying bureaucratic requirements. These variations help explain why, despite structural limitations, many interviewees emphasise that everyday life continues to function more effectively than public debates suggest. Practitioners, for example, stress that "a lot of things do work…and in the public debate we too often focus on the bad things…not on everyday life where things work" (D7). (Informal) cooperation often bridges fragmented structures: in some municipalities, short communication channels mean that "everyone knows whom to call" (D5). New services—multilingual counselling, neighbourhood-based support structures, youth projects—have emerged since 2015, frequently supported by committed individuals or the creative use of short-term funding. Municipalities experiment with low-threshold formats, co-design programmes with residents, and build partnerships with associations, foundations, and local businesses. These practices show that governance is shaped not only by scarcity but also by improvisation, innovation, and discretionary labour.

Overall, these accounts demonstrate that "left-behindness" becomes meaningful in the institutional domain as a way of describing the tension between structural fragility and the ongoing work of managing arrival. Local governance operates at the intersection of long-term disinvestment, organisational fragmentation, and the emotional weight of feeling overwhelmed (Schammann et al., 2024). While structural constraints are widely shared, municipalities differ in how they respond—through cooperation, flexibility, creativity, or, at times, resignation. Rather than viewing these neighbourhoods as administrative failures, the findings show a local governance structure marked by both vulnerability and ingenuity, in which actors negotiate daily how to maintain stability under structurally difficult conditions.

4.2. Making Sense of Place: Interpreting Migration and "Left-Behindness"

Building on the structural conditions outlined above, this section focuses on the interpretive and symbolic dimensions of "left-behindness" and migration, using the narratives used to describe place, decline, peripherality, and arrival. Across the case studies, interviewees describe "left-behindness" not simply as a backdrop but as a meaningful frame shaping how migration is understood.

Neighbourhoods become arrival spaces precisely because they offer a combination of affordable housing, high vacancy rates, and landlords willing to accept tenants with an insecure status. As one social worker put it: "The housing companies themselves advertised the housing stock. They realised: wow, a lot of people need a flat right now. They made sure that they [newcomers] came here" (C9). While newcomers are described as being drawn by affordability and availability, their arrival is simultaneously interpreted as a sign of an area's marginality. For many local actors, this link is captured in the notion of "poverty-driven migration," associating newcomers with complex social and economic difficulties such as debt, lack of insurance, or unstable employment. As one interviewee summarised: "The proportion of people with a migrant background is relatively high there, and the neighbourhood has actually undergone a process of socio-economic marginalisation over the last 10 to 20 years. Socio-economically stronger groups have moved away, and weaker ones have moved in" (B1). Locally, migration has become intertwined with urban decline, "migranticising" (Dahinden, 2025) structural disadvantage.

These interpretations are embedded in broader narratives of overstretch and saturation, in which local capacities are portrayed as exhausted. Municipal officials describe reaching or surpassing their limits or being overwhelmed: "It's simply the masses that then spill over onto you…you're overwhelmed because you

don't have the staff, the money, the space or the facilities to manage it" (C6). In some municipalities, this discourse was explicit, as witnessed by official requests to stop the influx of refugees or by statements about "being full." In others, it was more discrete, disguised in concerns about educational standards dropping or discomfort about demographic change. Worries were also articulated that a neighbourhood felt "saturated," that oversight was insufficient, and that local "standards" were being lost.

Spatial and symbolic peripherality further shapes interpretations of decline. While the physical isolation of some neighbourhoods is structural, what concerns actors are the associated meanings. Civil-society organisations describe areas with "a strong dormitory character" or with "very few public spaces" (H2). Residents complain that "you have to go to the city centre for almost everything" (D1), while others portray their area as "on the other side of the U-Bahn line…with few local businesses" (G5). These conditions are interpreted as signs of marginality, reinforcing a sense of being "far from the centre" both physically and symbolically.

These representations are often boosted by long-term territorial stigma which emerged as a consequence of the aforementioned structural conditions (see Section 4.1). Labels such as "problem area," "no-go zone," or "Germany's poorest district" circulate in the media and administrative discourse, negatively affecting everyday life. One district manager recalled that suppliers "didn't want to deliver because of the area's bad reputation" (D5). Residents describe a "postcode penalty" in which their address shapes access to housing, employment, and even deliveries. Peripherality is thus not only spatial but emotional: one respondent described their town as "basically at the very end: East German and rural" (F1), highlighting how peripherality intersects with historical and symbolic marginalisation. Such ascriptions foster feelings of neglect or exclusion, as expressed by one resident who noted that "[s]ome people would like to build a wall around the neighbourhood" (F11).

Temporalities of migration add another layer to perceived peripherality. In several municipalities, newcomers—especially intra-EU migrants—are seen as inherently mobile populations who "come to try things out, with only a few staying on" (B5). High population turnover, short leases, and circular labour migration fuel feelings of instability. As one teacher observed: "Families are there for six months, then gone again. It's hard to integrate a group that knows it won't stay" (C7). One welfare worker similarly noted that "when people get a better job or a driver's licence, they move away" (D1), reinforcing a sense of social fragility. Frustrations over instability coexist with experiences of discrimination. One social worker described the cumulative nature of these dynamics: "We already have this fluctuation cycle in our structurally weak region…and now on top of that we are faced with xenophobia and racism" (F3). These dynamics differ across cases, with some neighbourhoods experiencing extremely rapid demographic change and others seeing longer-term settlement even in temporary housing.

In light of widespread territorial stigma, actors across municipalities were found to produce counter-narratives highlighting a sense of belonging, value, and everyday normality. Some residents reinterpret remoteness as tranquillity, greenery, or affordability: "I thought it was temporary. It's green, quiet, affordable. I'll stay" (G8). Others express pride and attachment: "People talk badly about [the neighbourhood], but for me, it's home" (A1). Many families choose to stay precisely because of social networks, family proximity, or trust in local institutions: "Many want to stay exactly here because the family ties are here" (E6). Others describe gradual anchoring through everyday routines: "My child is happy here in

the kindergarten, and we know our neighbours now. We'll stay for the moment" (G15). The internal and external views of neighbourhoods often diverge sharply. While many actors from outside describe certain areas as hotspots of conflict or cultural incompatibility, residents and frontline workers frequently emphasise ordinary, undramatic coexistence. One resident succinctly summarised this everyday reality: "We live here, we work here, we belong here just like everyone else" (G15). Such claims of belonging are important counterweights to external narratives of disorder and can be found across municipalities, though their strength varies. In some places, strong family networks or long-term neighbourly relations create a sense of stability; in others, repeated moves, poor housing conditions, or fragmented social structures weaken the foundations for mutual trust. This resonates with the differentiation proposed by Friedrich and Rößler (2026, this issue), who show that long-established residents, socio-economically marginalised groups, and refugees attach different meanings to their neighbourhoods based on distinct life situations and temporal horizons.

Together, these narratives show how symbolic and structural dimensions of "left-behindness" become intertwined. Structural fragilities—weak infrastructures, poor housing quality, limited services—shape the conditions of arrival. But it is through interpretive frames that these conditions get translated into narratives of decline, saturation, or instability. Territorial stigma not only devalues a neighbourhood but also influences investment decisions, housing allocations, and settlement expectations. Counter-narratives of belonging, value, and normality complicate these symbolic–material loops, influencing how coexistence unfolds.

4.3. Everyday Coexistence and Contestation

Across the case studies, everyday social life in the neighbourhoods is described as a mix of routine coexistence, limited interaction, and episodes of tension. Most interviewees emphasise that overt conflict is rare; instead, relations between long-term residents and newcomers are marked by subtle distancing, pragmatic accommodation, and often a quiet acceptance of difference. As one stakeholder put it, "[p]eople simply avoid each other. It's not as if the conflict line runs through the streets every day. There are practically no open conflicts" (B1). This form of "non-conflictual distance" is a common feature across municipalities, albeit with different intensities and meanings. In some places, avoidance serves as a strategy to manage limited resources or cope with language barriers; in others, it reflects deeper feelings of insecurity or distrust that accumulate over time.

Despite the relative absence of overt conflict, concerns about social cohesion are widespread. Negative perceptions of newcomers circulate frequently and tend to bundle perceived everyday nuisances—noise, rubbish, groups of young people hanging around, different parenting practices or gender norms—into moralising narratives. These interpretations often draw on broader public discourses rather than concrete incidents. As one practitioner observed: "I keep hearing that some people feel unsafe when large groups gather on the street, speaking another language. Often, it's men drinking alcohol which creates this sense of threat—and that can quickly lead to assumptions about criminality and reinforce stereotypes" (E4). Such assumptions vary with local history, political climate, and group composition. In some neighbourhoods, particular groups (e.g., Roma families, young men, specific nationalities) become the focus of gendered and racist anxieties; in others, concerns remain diffuse, centred on perceived disorder or unfamiliar practices.

Competition over scarce resources intensifies these perceptions. Residents frequently frame inequalities—real or perceived—in terms of access to childcare, welfare benefits, social housing, or integration

programmes. Across the case studies, interviewees describe a pervasive sense of "social envy" (G2) or fear of loss, articulated by one respondent as worries "about what is there, about the things that somehow have to be shared […], about structures" (C3). For long-term residents facing economic insecurity, the perception that newcomers receive more attention or support is common and can exacerbate feelings of abandonment. Conversely, but in the same vein, recent arrivals express frustration—about bureaucratic hurdles, limited access to services, or discrimination—sometimes believing that other migrant groups receive preferential treatment. These layered grievances show how competition and precarity shape relations between locals and migrants, and between different groups of migrants. In this sense, everyday social life reflects the combined effects of the structural constraints described in Section 4.1 and the interpretive frames outlined in Section 4.2: perceptions of peripherality, stigma, and temporariness fuel social comparison and moralising narratives, shaping how residents interpret nuisances and allocate blame.

Moreover, broader political dynamics increasingly shape everyday interactions. Interviewees in several neighbourhoods report a "hardening of attitudes," the normalisation of xenophobic remarks in public spaces or during administrative encounters, and a growing sense of insecurity among residents with migration backgrounds. Graffiti expressing far-right sympathies—such as "I love AfD" or "fuck Antifa"—are cited as signals that some residents interpret as threats. One resident explained: "I look like an immigrant, and they would hate me just for appearing here" (G8). Electoral gains of the AfD are perceived by some local actors as indicators of the political climate: "The election results have shown that in the districts in question…the AfD received over 28 percent of the vote. This partly reflects the 'welcoming' culture in these districts, so to speak" (H1). While "left-behindness" is manifested differently in the electoral behaviour of residents across municipalities, reflecting local histories, socio-economic profiles, and political cultures, it shows how political debates permeate daily life in nuanced ways.

At the same time, movements fighting against the hardening political climate exist. In several areas, civil society groups, youth workers, or individual residents are mobilising against right-wing narratives, challenging discriminatory remarks or attempting to foster everyday solidarity. However, some municipalities avoid polarising symbols and language in public communications to maintain broad acceptance of local initiatives, with some actors stressing the tension between inclusivity and inadvertently legitimising exclusionary positions emerging from that. Efforts to strengthen migrants' political participation, expand low-threshold advisory services, or build trust in local institutions are seen as crucial strategies for maintaining social cohesion, even under difficult structural conditions.

While many neighbourhoods lack established interaction spaces, local actors are acutely aware of the importance of fostering contact and mutual understanding. Across municipalities, outreach workers, youth teams, and civil society organisations describe efforts to create moments of encounter: shared barbecues, street festivals, sports activities, language cafés, or informal counselling in parks and housing estates. These initiatives differ in scale and intensity depending on local resources. In some cases, street workers actively mediate between groups, address conflicts informally, and try to counter negative portrayals through everyday presence. Elsewhere, attempts to build inclusive spaces face structural hurdles—lack of venues, limited funding, or low participation from residents with little connection to neighbourhood institutions.

In sum, everyday social life in the neighbourhoods studied is best understood not through the lens of conflict or cohesion alone but through the interplay of structural constraints and meaningful practices.

Residents navigate a complex environment shaped by resource scarcity, territorial stigma and political polarisation, yet also by pragmatic routines, quiet solidarity and moments of togetherness. Similar patterns appear across municipalities but in different constellations depending on local political climates, service landscapes, and histories of migration, illustrating that social cohesion is not set in concrete but locally conditioned and negotiated, shaped by how actors interpret difference, navigate precarity, and draw on—or retreat from—local infrastructures. Our analysis thus reveals how "left-behindness" and migration intertwine in the social fabric of everyday life, producing both vulnerabilities and possibilities for belonging.

5. Discussion

This article has examined how migration and "left-behindness" intersect in neighbourhoods marked by long-term socio-economic decline, weak infrastructures, and territorial stigmatisation. Our findings confirm that "left-behindness" is not a fixed descriptor of disadvantaged places but a relational and processual condition (Fiorentino et al., 2024; Pike et al., 2024) produced through the interplay of structural inequalities, symbolic representations, and everyday social practices. In all case studies, migration became part of these dynamics: newcomers arrived in contexts shaped by demographic shrinkage and disinvestment, with their presence becoming entangled with existing narratives of marginality. These dual dynamics reveal what we conceptualise as arrival shaped by marginality, rather than migration "causing" decline. Across the three analytical dimensions, several recurrent mechanisms emerged. First, structural fragility created the conditions directing newcomers towards these neighbourhoods. This aligns with research on arrival spaces and infrastructures which emphasises how bureaucratic systems, housing markets, and welfare institutions jointly structure settlement pathways (Brill et al., 2025; Meeus et al., 2019; Wiedner & Schaeffer, 2025). These infrastructures nonetheless varied across municipalities, with some demonstrating flexibility and others struggling with rigid procedures or fiscal constraints. These variations show that "left-behindness" is shaped not only by structural inequalities but also by institutional cultures and discretionary governance practices. Second, our findings underscore the central role of symbolic place narratives. Territorial stigma (Pinkster et al., 2020; Wacquant, 2007) was pervasive across sites. Labels such as "problem district" or "no-go area" did not merely describe local realities but actively shaped them, influencing investment decisions, municipal attention, and residents' opportunities. In several neighbourhoods, longstanding socio-economic difficulties were reframed through a migration lens, "migranticising" structural problems and reinforcing feelings of saturation or overstretch. Yet stigma was contested: many residents, practitioners, and newcomers came up with counter-narratives emphasising ordinariness, stability, and belonging, echoing findings that stigmatised places can also foster positive identifications and local attachment (Schemschat, 2021) or provide access to resources (Hanhörster & Wessendorf, 2020). The contribution by Friedrich and Rößler (2026, this issue) underscores this point by showing that positive perceptions can be cultivated through spatial atmospheres and everyday encounters, even in stigmatised urban peripheries. Third, everyday social relations were characterised by ambivalence: pragmatic coexistence, selective interaction, and subtle avoidance. Competition over scarce resources intersected with symbolic hierarchies and emotional geographies of abandonment (Tomaney et al., 2024). While overt conflict was rare, insecurity and perceived threats shaped how conflicts were interpreted and attributed. These dynamics were further conditioned by broader political trends, including growing support for right-wing populist parties in some areas and the everyday normalisation of exclusionary discourse—patterns consistent with recent work linking feelings of neglect, local decline, and political alienation (Deppisch et al., 2023; Hannemann et al., 2024; Meijers & van Slageren, 2025).

Taken together, the findings show that the intersection of migration and "left-behindness" produces a configuration of marginality in which symbolic processes and material conditions interact and are mediated by local governance structures. Governance shapes how symbolic valuations translate into material outcomes and how material constraints, in turn, inform local interpretations of place. Within this mediated relationship, everyday practices both respond to and reshape symbolic and material conditions. They can reinforce cycles of marginalisation but also challenge or redirect them, highlighting that these dynamics are not predetermined. Understanding these feedback loops is crucial for explaining how "left-behindness" and migration become mutually shaping processes. Our multi-site design reveals recurring mechanisms across diverse contexts, while also showing how demographic trajectories, political climates, and governance capacities produce distinct local configurations. This approach offers pattern recognition rather than causal attribution, identifying relational dynamics that recur across sites while leaving room for more fine-grained historical and ethnographic work.

Finally, the study underscores the conceptual ambivalence of the term "left behind." While analytically useful for capturing interlocking forms of socio-spatial inequality, it can also reproduce the very stigma it seeks to explain. Our findings therefore call for a reflexive application of the concept (Rhodes et al., 2019), treating "left-behindness" as an emergent, negotiated status rather than a fixed territorial label.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how "left-behindness" is articulated, negotiated, and lived in neighbourhoods shaped by international migration. By tracing intersections of structural constraints, symbolic narratives, and everyday relations, we show that areas labelled as "left behind" are not only sites of out-migration and decline but also key arrival spaces shaped by housing markets, governance capacities, and (refugee) distribution policies. This challenges dominant assumptions about "left-behind" places being static or in decline, revealing instead their role within broader spatial and migration systems.

Our findings demonstrate that "left-behindness" is a relational and contested condition produced through the intersection of territorial stigma, structural disinvestment, and limited institutional capacities. Migration shapes this dynamic in two ways: first, through these very conditions, and second, through how marginality is understood and regulated. In several neighbourhoods, arrival contributed to local stabilisation through demographic renewal, the use of vacant housing, and the revitalisation of everyday infrastructures. The study also highlights the importance of governance: municipalities featuring structured collaboration between local administrations and civil society, institutional openness, and active engagement—supported by city leadership that shapes local discourse—were better positioned to manage pressures and foster more inclusive environments. This suggests that responses to arrival are shaped as much by political and organisational choices as by socio-economic structures. At the same time, the term "left-behindness" remains conceptually ambivalent. While it provides a useful analytical lens for examining uneven development and the conditions shaping arrival, it risks reinforcing territorial stigma if applied without due care. We therefore argue for a reflexive, process-oriented use of the term, highlighting relational mechanisms rather than fixed territorial categories.

Future research should further investigate the historical and institutional trajectories of these neighbourhoods, as well as the governance cultures that sustain or mitigate their marginalisation. Attention

to migrants' longer-term settlement trajectories—whether these neighbourhoods function as temporary stepping stones or places where people choose to stay, shaped by experiences of exclusion or by local solidarities and positive neighbourhood relations—remains crucial for understanding how "left-behind" places and arrival dynamics unfold over time. These questions grow increasingly urgent as demographic change, political polarisation, and uneven development continue to reshape local conditions.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

During the preparation of this manuscript, AI-assisted tools were used to support specific tasks. DeepL was used for translation, the AI functions integrated in MAXQDA were used to assist with structuring and qualitative data analysis, and ChatGPT was used to support structuring as well as linguistic and grammatical refinement. The authors critically reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-generated outputs and assume full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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ARTICLE

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Shrinkage and Marginalisation in Large Housing Estates: Impacts on Atmospheres in Public Spaces

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Abstract

The article focuses on the interplay of built and lived spaces and its impacts on atmospheres in public spaces using the example of large housing estates in East Germany. These neighbourhoods were affected by the demolition of vacant residential buildings and infrastructure due to shrinkage, but have recently experienced an unexpected influx of new residents, accompanied by processes of marginalisation. Thus, the estates remain "left-behind" in terms of both built and socio-economic conditions. Changes in spatial layout, infrastructure provision, and population, in turn, influence the perception of atmospheres in public spaces. Based on theoretical approaches from phenomenology, anthropology, and architecture theory, "atmospheres" as interactions between built and lived space were identified. Map-based walking research with representative groups of residents across all three neighbourhoods provided insights into residents' perceptions of place. The findings reveal how built materiality affects residents, how people give specific meanings to certain places and infrastructures and, accordingly, develop certain feelings, all together forming urban atmospheres. The results reveal case-specific and more general principles of urban atmospheres, enabling conclusions relevant to the adaptation and conversion of large housing estates into liveable and sustainable neighbourhoods.

Keywords

built and lived space; left-behind places; spatial feelings; urban regeneration

1. Introduction

Urban atmospheres play a central role in whether people feel at home and welcome in a place (Richardson, 2019). This study aims to explore urban atmospheres in so-called left-behind places—that is, areas with inadequate built and infrastructural provision where fundamental preconditions for quality of life and social participation are often lacking (Tomaney et al., 2024). Large housing estates in East German cities are exemplary "left-behind" places, as shrinkage and marginalisation were, and continue to be, constituting paradigms of the estates (Kabisch & Pössneck, 2022). Compared to those elsewhere, left-behind places are particularly segregated (Helbig, 2023) and in part stigmatised (Pinkster et al., 2020). In addition, they have challenging ownership structures that have been described as a "segregation machine" (Bernt, 2021). Since 2015, many of these estates have experienced a sudden population increase after years of shrinkage, as their vacant and affordable dwellings provided favourable arrival conditions for refugees (Wiegand & Pilz, 2023).

The research examines how urban atmospheres emerge and what effects they have through their reciprocal relationship with neighbourhood characteristics and residents. The goal is to identify future-proof courses of action for left-behind places that help create liveable conditions conducive to well-being, against the background of limited resources existing and envisaged for the development of these neighbourhoods. Thus, the article concentrates on how shrinkage and marginalisation in large housing estates influence atmospheres in public spaces and what this implies for future development strategies.

Research on urban atmospheres lacks suitable approaches that connect the built and the social. In combination with existing knowledge about the built space of neighbourhoods, the lived space will be examined with a focus on atmospheres. The basis for this is Schmitz's phenomenological concept of atmospheres, which places immediate life experience at its centre and thus differs from traditional-philosophical, neuroscientific, or psychological accounts (Schmitz, 1969).

The Schmitzian atmosphere concept provides an interpretive framework for an exploratory approach. It is grounded in bodily, situational stirrings and includes all experience-related feelings. Urban studies addresses place identity (Antonisch, 2010) and belonging (Pinkster & Loomans, 2025) as highly specific, felt connections to space. Architects use atmospheres as producible stagings (Böhme, 2013); geographers formulate city-specific atmospheres (Hasse, 2008) or the overall impressions of cities (Griffero, 2013). Our focus is on the bodily perception of everyday experiences in urban space and on being affected by them in concrete situations. From perceptions of everyday situations, we attempt to decipher the urban atmospheres they evoke.

Using large housing estates as examples, we analyse how atmospheric conditions can facilitate or impede residents' getting to know one another, the emergence of trust, and a sense of home and togetherness—building on findings that, for instance, show that a lack of places of encounter hinders contact between people (Friedrich & Rößler, 2023). Factors such as high residential turnover, cultural and ethnic diversity, and processes of marginalisation present additional challenges for living together. Moreover, the few existing publicly frequented places in the neighbourhoods are often marked by conflict and racism (El-Kayed et al., 2023).

The study is based on case studies in three neighbourhoods (Mueßer Holz/Neu-Zippendorf in the city of Schwerin, Southern Neustadt in the city of Halle, and Sandow in the city of Cottbus). These case studies

were chosen for an inter- and transdisciplinary research project investigating the challenges for the future development of large housing estates, which addresses urban planning and governance, and integration policies. The selected case studies can be described by indicators of left-behind places, such as weak social infrastructure and low civic or social participation (Royer & Leibert, 2024). Added to this are the unfavourable physical and functional conditions of East German large housing estates, such as vacant sites created by demolition, monofunctionality (Friedrich & Rößler, 2023), and residents' socio-economic situations (Grunze, 2017). Within left-behind places, the neighbourhoods under study represent a specific type characterised by large-scale urban structures, facilities thinned out by shrinkage, and the challenges associated with arrival neighbourhoods. These specificities have already been examined in classical spatial studies (StadtumMig-Projektteam, 2023). In the course of the project, close collaboration was established with local administrations and local civil society partners. In particular, three local initiatives facilitated access to specific groups of residents.

A first analytical step is to understand the perception of public spaces. To this end, various groups of residents are involved, and the entanglement of respondents and their feelings in public situations is examined in a differentiated manner. Narratives of experiences in places make it possible to interpret subjective and collective urban atmospheres. The research design and the interpretation of the data are grounded in a specific understanding of space and of the "situation": first, as the fundamental condition of human existence, and second, as a methodological approach (see Section 2). To capture urban atmospheres, we used "map-based walking research," which combines methods of "promenadology" (Burckhardt, 2006), the narration of subjective, collective, and historical narratives (Schapp, 2012), "participant observation" (Flick, 2019; Spradley, 1980), and "critical cartography" (Harley, 1989). Data collection, adapted to the specifics of groups and places, was carried out in cooperation with civil society partners. A wide range of conversations brought to light atmospheric place attachments and subjective entanglements with the neighbourhood, which were subsequently recorded. Sketches of the situations were made. All data were checked, discussed, and validated by the local partners (see Section 3). The results include both general and case-specific principles of urban atmospheres, beginning with the comparable entanglements and perceptions of the different representative groups (see Section 4). Finally, suggestions for the future development of these neighbourhoods are presented (see Section 5).

2. Theoretical Background

The following describes the study's theoretical foundation.

2.1. The Concept of Space

The concept of space is based on philosophical-anthropological, phenomenological, architectural-theoretical, and experiential-scientific foundations (Graf Dürckheim, 2005; Hahn, 1997, 2008; Plessner, 1928; Rothacker, 1982; Ströker, 1977). According to Schmitz, atmosphere takes centre stage within lived space (Schmitz, 1967, 1969, 2014). Schmitz differentiates three types of lived space:

- Bodily space (*Leibraum*) is the subjectively experienced space. It cannot be measured but can be felt. Bodily experience is situation-bound and is also shaped by a person's life history and disposition.

- Feeling space (*Gefühlsraum*) is the atmospheric space in which feelings expand in a bodily felt way. Spaciousness and constriction are central here; they describe human stirrings of constriction (mostly negative feelings such as fear, shock, disgust, pain) and expansion (mostly positive feelings such as joy, relaxation, cheerfulness).
    - Atmospheres are bodily feelings, yet for Schmitz they are not bodily in the corporeal sense. Thus, a "lump in the throat" does not mean that there is literally a lump in the throat, but only such a feeling. This also makes clear Schmitz's central distinction between *Leib* (the so-called lived body or felt body) and *Körper* (physical body). The "lump" can arise as a bodily feeling, for example, in connection with grief, speechlessness, or fear.
- The dwelling (what we would call the home) is a familiar and well-lived-in place. It is the place of security and safety (Bollnow, 2011) and constitutes the basis for self-location. For Schmitz, a favourite cafe also belongs to the dwelling.
    - The understanding of dwelling as extending beyond a physical apartment or house, and the recognition of a relationship between private and public space, is consistent with the present study. A home (dwelling) constitutes a complex of well-being that may encompass not only the private sphere, but also neighbours, the neighbourhood, and beyond (Friedrich, 2015; Friedrich & Rößler, 2023; Pinkster & Loomans, 2025).
    - Finally, the orientation of this study concerns the appropriation of a home (Friedrich, 2011; Richardson, 2019) and the engagement that results from positive attachment (Bennett, 2014).

According to Schmitz, the built space is the local space (*Ortsraum*); it corresponds to objectively describable and measurable geographical space. Earlier analyses of built or local space (Friedrich & Rößler, 2023) can and have been incorporated and interpreted in the findings presented here. In its qualities (those of its streets, parks, benches, etc.), the built or local space can influence people's everyday lives (Gehl, 1987). This relationship is also confirmed empirically, although the atmospheres in public places exhibit a far more complex logic.

2.2. The Situation: Empirical Access

The "situation" is not merely an empirical starting point; in philosophical anthropology, it is regarded as a constitutive condition of human existence, meaning the bodily, social, and spatio-temporal embeddedness of the human being (Rothacker, 1982). Rentsch describes it as a "lifeworldly ineluctable structure," which includes situationality, locality, linguisticity, spatiality, and temporality (Rentsch, 1990). Locality entails that human beings are located (Janz, 2017), yet must also locate themselves (Plessner, 1928). This includes the task of creating a home in which to stay (Hahn, 2008) and points to the entanglement of the human being with their place. In this context, the significant place stands in contrast to an empty container (Casey, 1998).

For data collection and interpretation, this implies that scholars must develop suitable methods to access feelings in public places (Brill et al., 2026) and to interpret participants' statements about their felt experiences in light of their lived realities and specific situational contexts. The situation in which human beings are affectively, actively, and interpretively entangled (Rothacker, 1982) links place as built space with lived space. It is the locus of bodily affectedness in which feelings arise and take effect as atmospheres (Schmitz, 1969; see Figure 1 in the current article).

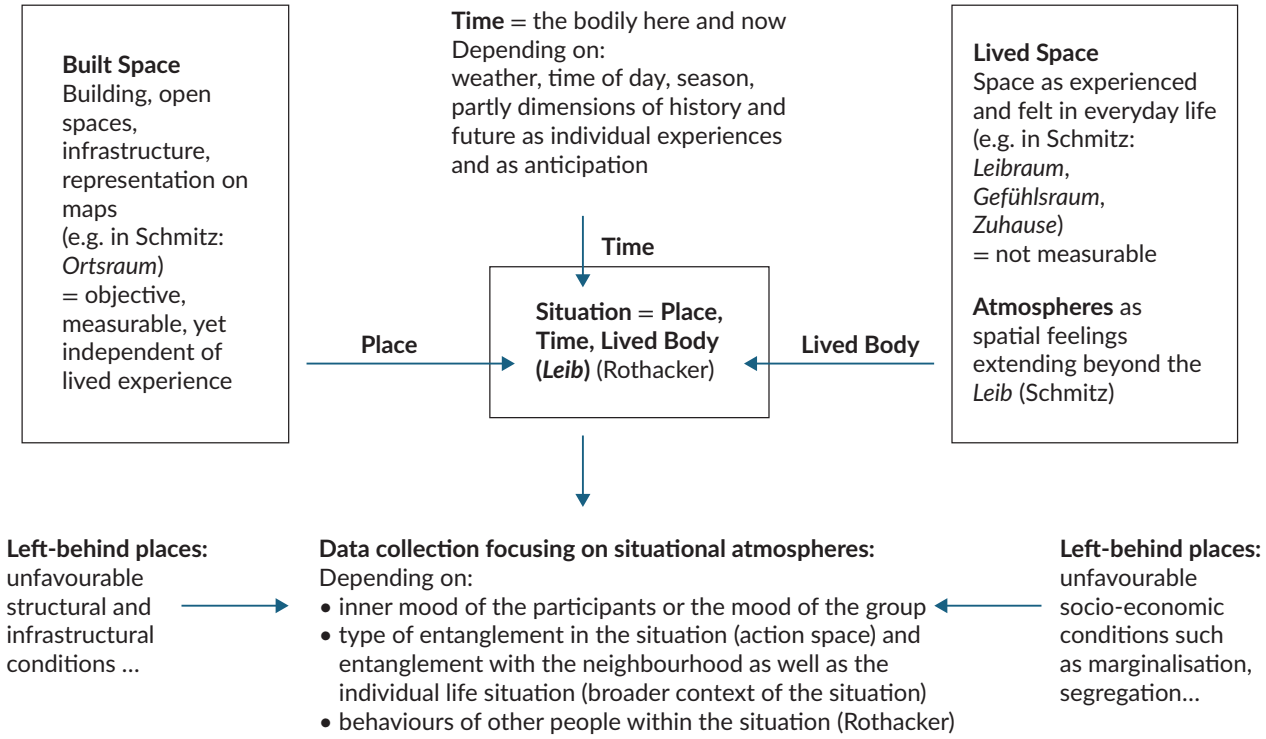

Figure 1. Investigating urban atmospheres: Theoretical framework and empirical access by means of the situation, following Schmitz (1969) and Rothacker (1982). On the relationship between place and space: The place is a part of space; it is the concrete location within the built environment where the situation is experienced.

3. Method

The following section outlines the study areas, the methods, and data collection.

3.1. Three Neighbourhoods as Case Studies

The study is based on three case studies: Mueßer Holz/Neu-Zippendorf in Schwerin, Southern Neustadt in Halle, and Sandow in Cottbus. All three large housing estates are affected by processes of shrinkage, ageing, international migration, and socio-economic disparities, which characterise their status as left-behind places (see Table 1).

In particular, the neighbourhoods in Schwerin and Halle have experienced not only substantial population decline, but also an influx of migrants, and particular refugees. The Cottbus neighbourhood shows a more balanced development, as it is centrally located next to the inner city, and the demolition of surplus buildings was carried out in other large housing estates of the city. Nevertheless, significant social upheaval has been reported due to the influx of refugees (see Table 1).

In all studied neighbourhoods, shrinkage, decay, and void are visible in terms of vacant and dilapidated buildings, demolition sites, and large wastelands (see Figure 2).

Table 1. Overview of the case studies.

City	Schwerin	Halle	Cottbus
Case study	Mueßer Holz/ Neu-Zippendorf	Southern Neustadt	Sandow
Size	2.9 km²	2.4 km²	1.7 km²
Population development	2000: 23,000 2010: 15,000 2017: 16,000 2021: 16,000 –32%	2000: 19,000 2010: 15,000 2017: 16,000 2021: 15,000 –20%	2000: 18,000 2010: 16,000 2017: 16,000 2021: 15,000 –17%
(compared to city-wide population development 2000–2021)	(–3%)	(–3%)	(–9%)
Age development	0–14 yrs: 2000: 14.4% 2020: 18.2% +65 yrs: 2000: 14.5% 2020: 23.5%	0–14 yrs: 2000: 13.8% 2020: 18.9% +65 yrs: 2000: 13.4% 2020: 22.8%	0–14 yrs: 2000: 10.1% 2020: 11.1% +65 yrs: 2000: 20.1% 2020: 36.3%
Proportion of unemployed persons among residents of working age (15–64 yrs)	18.9%	17.2%	11.2%
(compared to city-wide average, 2021)	(8.3%)	(9.1%)	(8.2%)
Percentage of population with non-German citizenship	26.7%	35.3%	10.9%
(compared to city-wide average, 2021)	(8.2%)	(10.7%)	(9.1%)

Note: The selected indicators reveal typical characteristics of left-behind places—population development and age development indicate shrinkage, proportion of unemployed persons indicates socio-economic marginalisation, and percentage of population with non-German citizenship indicates segregation. Sources: StadtumMig-Projektteam (2025); Wiegand and Pilz (2023).

Figure 2. In Schwerin Mueßer Holz/Neu-Zippendorf, entire building blocks were demolished, leaving a vast wasteland (Photo by Katja Friedrich).

3.2. Method: Map-Based Walks

The chosen method responds to the research questions and aligns with the aim of studying atmospheres. Data were collected through "map-based walks" to capture residents' place-related feelings as authentically as possible. The following conditions are relevant to selecting this method:

- Walking in public space (Burckhardt, 2006; Clark & Emmel, 2010) enables shared experience and links movement to participant observation (Flick, 2019). Researchers can directly witness moods and their changes. The research process is thus intended to reveal the entanglement of people, things, and urban space (Hultman & Cooper, 2023).
- While walking or resting, narratives emerge as real unities of meaning about connections to the neighbourhood (Pinkster, 2016; Schapp, 2012). These narratives are supplemented by entries on maps showing everyday routes, places of residence, or notable places. In addition, where participants come from, what occupations they have, whether they have children, and so on, become apparent. Such insights provide the contextualisation of individuals' statements and a "feeling into" the participants' life situations. The public environment thus becomes accessible from the experiences and perspective of those affected—a strategic building block for the later interpretation of the data.

In cooperation with local partners, three map-based walks were developed. The selection of locations and routes was based on initial research on the relationship between built and lived space in the three case study neighbourhoods (Friedrich & Rößler, 2023). Collaboration with intermediaries in the estates enabled contact with specific representative groups. The local partners proposed the specific settings, and the actions were jointly implemented by the researchers and the local partners.

The mappings followed a common scheme. At the beginning, researchers introduced the topic and the guiding questions: Where and when do you feel comfortable in your neighbourhood? Which situations/places do you avoid because you do not feel comfortable? What do you like? What do you not like? In the second part of the exercise, researchers and participants walked together through the neighbourhood. The route, length, and duration were chosen by the participants. Initially supported by maps, sites and situations were identified and collated. These maps served as orientation aids during the walks and were used afterwards to locate specific statements cartographically. The maps helped ensure that, despite language barriers, there was a shared understanding of the issues that were important to the group. Conversations and observations were recorded later. After the map-based walks concluded, local partner institution representatives validated the gathered information.

The shared experience facilitated the building of trust within the group of participants, researchers, and local partners. There is a methodological challenge not only in accessing participants such as the long-term unemployed, migrants, or primary school children, but also in the openness to speak about the sensitive topic of feelings in urban space. To encourage participation, local partners conducted awareness-raising activities and group-specific preliminary discussions before the map-based walks, during which perceptions and experiences of public space were explored.

3.3. Data Collection and Validation

In each of the three large housing estates, we collaborated with locally active civil society associations, which also acted as local partners within the research project:

- In Schwerin, data collection was organised with gardeners in a neighbourhood garden operated by AWO Soziale Dienste GmbH Westmecklenburg, a social agency.
- With the support of the Refugee Network Cottbus—a self-organised migrant association—refugee women exchanged views about life in the neighbourhood, which were collected as a data source.
- The arts-oriented association Mio e. V. enabled primary school children in Halle to participate in data collection as part of a summer academy.

Data collection took place in the partners' premises with tea and homemade biscuits. Everyone was able to say what they wanted to. In the case of children, the conversations were held outdoors in various places. Audio or video recordings were deliberately avoided in order to have an informal, honest conversation about a confidential topic with participants who are reluctant to be involved (Glimmerveen et al., 2022). Instead, notes and impressions were recorded afterwards from memory, together with sketches of the situations (see Figures 4, 5, and 6). The results were supplemented and validated by expert discussions with the local partners, who have closely monitored the groups and neighbourhoods for many years. In some cases, on-site follow-up meetings enabled a deeper engagement with individual topics and impressions.

Towards the end of the project, the results concerning urban atmospheres were presented, discussed, and validated. The events in the three case studies were very well received, with approximately 80 participants in total. Municipal integration officers, representatives from youth, social services, and urban development departments were involved. Researchers from other fields, representatives of local civil society associations, as well as other project-relevant actors, also took part.

The data collection in the three case studies differed in terms of group composition and modes of communication. It became apparent that the responses were strongly influenced by the participants' individual relationships to the settings and neighbourhoods. The three "map-based walks" can be summarised as follows:

- In Schwerin (Mueßer Holz/Neu-Zippendorf), the full day of data collection from different groups of participants took place in the garden run by a project partner and in the project coordinator's office. Information was gathered during walks, visits to local food kiosks, and conversations on the street. The roughly 25 participants—men and women of different origins, ages, and social standings—formed a heterogeneous group. Accordingly, a broad range of experiences played a role, from experiences with racism, being reported by migrants, to concerns about the development of the entire neighbourhood being raised by long-term residents.
- In Cottbus (Sandow), ten mothers and young women from Arab countries, as well as several German project staff members, took part. Conversations took place in a community house, on walks, and during a visit to the Arab market "Sindbad." The need for language translations made the exchange more difficult, but led to more intensive reflection. Due to the shorter residential duration of most of the participants, historical references were lacking. An additional workshop with Arab women took place, during which participants had opportunities to express themselves in more detail.
- The data collection in Halle (Southern Neustadt) took place as part of a two-day summer academy, with 17 child participants from the neighbourhood, and it was characterised by the children's strikingly positive perceptions. This may have been influenced by the question about favourite places. Observations confirmed a basic optimistic mood overall, but some negative topics were also raised during the walks.

3.4. Interpretation of the Data Using Example Hermeneutics

As a link between theory and method, and to derive both case-specific and generalisable principles of urban atmospheres, we use "example hermeneutics" (Hahn, 1994, 2022). This constitutes a methodological procedure that proceeds directly from concrete, vivid examples to gain general insights. Unlike abstract theory-building, moments of experience, concrete situations, descriptions, and narratives are central. Such hermeneutic examples are not mere illustrations but function as vehicles for identifying principles, in this case, of human experience. With the help of "example hermeneutics," facets of urban atmospheres and their potential for living together in neighbourhoods are worked out. The data analysis was guided by the following sequential steps:

1. Orientation on sensitising concepts: The analysis focused on specific phenomena, terms, descriptions of feelings, and spatial situations.
2. Identification of relevant terms and places: Terms such as "shame" or "fear," as well as other descriptions of emotions, were recorded. At the same time, specific places were noted—for example, places associated with well-being or unease, places longed for, or locations with special atmospheric qualities, including those situated outside the neighbourhood.
3. Identification of atmospheric indicators: Expressions that could indicate atmospheric experiences were further coded and analysed.
4. Category formation and pattern recognition: Based on the coding, categories were developed, patterns identified, and relationships revealed.

5. Analysis of public situations: In parallel with the text analysis, selected public situations were examined, which often became apparent as particularly relevant during the walks, sometimes depending on the participating groups.
6. Typology of public spaces: Within the relevant locations, specific types of public spaces were identified, reflecting different urban planning contexts.
7. Overall interpretation and pattern derivation: Drawing on urban planning foundations (from an earlier research project: Friedrich & Rößler, 2023), the qualitative data from the "map-based walks," participant observations, and documentation through sketches and photographs, relationships between places, participants, their entanglements, and atmospheric experiences were revealed according to individual and collective patterns.
8. Exemplary hermeneutics and case selection: Using exemplary hermeneutics and taking into account the particularities of the data from the three case studies and their specific conditions, representative resident groups were identified, and specific case examples were selected for an in-depth analysis.
9. Derivation of principles: After further interpretative iterations, it was possible to derive both case-specific and general principles of urban atmospheres.

4. Results: General and Case-Specific Principles of Urban Atmospheres

General as well as case-specific principles of urban atmospheres are revealed through different depths of data. The first layer of data is taken from three case studies—three large housing estates—in which, among other findings, three groups of residents can be empirically identified. People within each group are similarly entangled with their neighbourhoods as a whole and with various public situations, and thus experience them in comparable ways.

The second layer of data describes three case examples located in two different neighbourhoods. These three examples represent concrete situations and, at the same time, three urban spatial types. This article focuses on the following selection of case examples, which differ in their urbanistic features:

- a centrally located urban square (Keplerplatz in Schwerin);
- a pedestrian zone functioning as a district centre with shops, with a focus on an Arab market (in Cottbus);
- a fenced neighbourhood garden (in Schwerin).

Within these examples, a third layer of data is examined as individual cases that reveal personal entanglements. An individual case may be person-related, that is, individual or subjective, but it may also be intersubjective and point to initial group-specific findings. In this way, various interactions become apparent between perceivers and the conditions and situations of their perceptions.

4.1. Groups of Residents and Their Comparable Entanglement and Perception

The following three representative groups can be found in all three neighbourhoods:

- Long-established residents who perceive their quarter as home because of their long residential duration. They are generally positively disposed towards life there. However, they are experiencing changes: Demolition measures and increasing social segregation are perceived as burdens. Their life

situation is stable, which means their attitude towards the neighbourhood remains predominantly positive. Due to long-term entanglement, there is a close biographical connection with the entire residential area.

- Marginalised residents who primarily include German persons who have moved to the neighbourhood because of low rents or who grew up there. Many work in the low-wage sector or receive social benefits. The group is marked by multiple concerns and, in part, dissatisfaction due to, for example, unemployment, illness, poverty, or single parenthood. In comparison to other groups, they are more sensitive to negative external factors, as these intersect more strongly with their stressful life situations.
- Migrants, and in particular refugees, often live in affordable housing within the neighbourhood and usually perceive their environment positively, as they have not experienced its decay. Despite their own burdensome life circumstances, they often see the neighbourhoods as an opportunity for a new beginning. This positive feeling is, however, partly overshadowed by experiences of racism, which have varying effects depending on personal exposure.

Depending on how residents are entangled in a situation, their experience of urban atmospheres may differ markedly, as examined in greater depth in the individual cases below. Migrants are affected by racism, and among them, particularly migrant women who wear the hijab. They especially live in fear of racist attacks in public spaces and in residential buildings (El-Kayed et al., 2023). Children perceive public spaces primarily as positive spaces of movement and discovery, as they carry an inner cheerfulness and are still little aware of external stigmatisation. An important general finding is that all groups perceive nature positively and as beneficial, even though it is used in varied ways.

4.2. Effects of Left-Behind-Place Conditions on Atmospheres

With the exception of the children, all residents address the inadequate infrastructure—some directly, others more indirectly. Migrants note that large-scale demolition without subsequent new construction does not occur elsewhere. Long-established residents sense emptiness as cherished amenities have gradually disappeared over the past 25 years. Marginalised residents feel losses in the neighbourhood particularly acutely and sometimes develop feelings of envy and anger. Their individual strains amplify the effects of negative developments. When, for example, the last familiar restaurant closes, this is often experienced as a personal loss. Such changes intensify the feeling of not being valued. For people living alone, the lack of meeting places reinforces isolation and loneliness. Even if they express it differently, all adults long for appreciation. Negative quotes describing the neighbourhood include “desert, emptiness, nothing, bad path” (see Figure 3). Only the garden (see Section 4.3.3) is described positively as an “oasis,” and a kiosk for Arab food as a “home kiosk” (see Section 4.3.2). Mostly, the places of well-being mentioned lie exclusively outside the neighbourhoods.

Figure 3. A central demolition site in Schwerin is called a "desert" that cannot be filled with life (Photo by Katja Friedrich).

4.3. Case Examples That Characterise the Emergence of Urban Atmospheres

The following presents concrete situations in greater detail. Due to the limited comparable data regarding the children in Halle, descriptions below are of examples in Schwerin and Cottbus. The case examples are deliberately described from different perspectives in order to highlight the group specificity and the diversity of perceptions depending on entanglement.

4.3.1. Case Example: Keplerplatz in Schwerin

Keplerplatz in Schwerin stands for the type "square," although without the typical built density and enclosure of a classical urban square (see Figure 4). A bottleneck (there is only a single crossing over the main road to a tram stop) shapes the way it is used and perceived by the public. Kiosks and different user groups form diverse situations, and perceptions of them can be different. Examples below describe a mother and an older couple, and the situation at a kiosk that sells Arab food. The situation at the kiosk is comparable to that at the Arab market "Sindbad" in Cottbus, also described below.

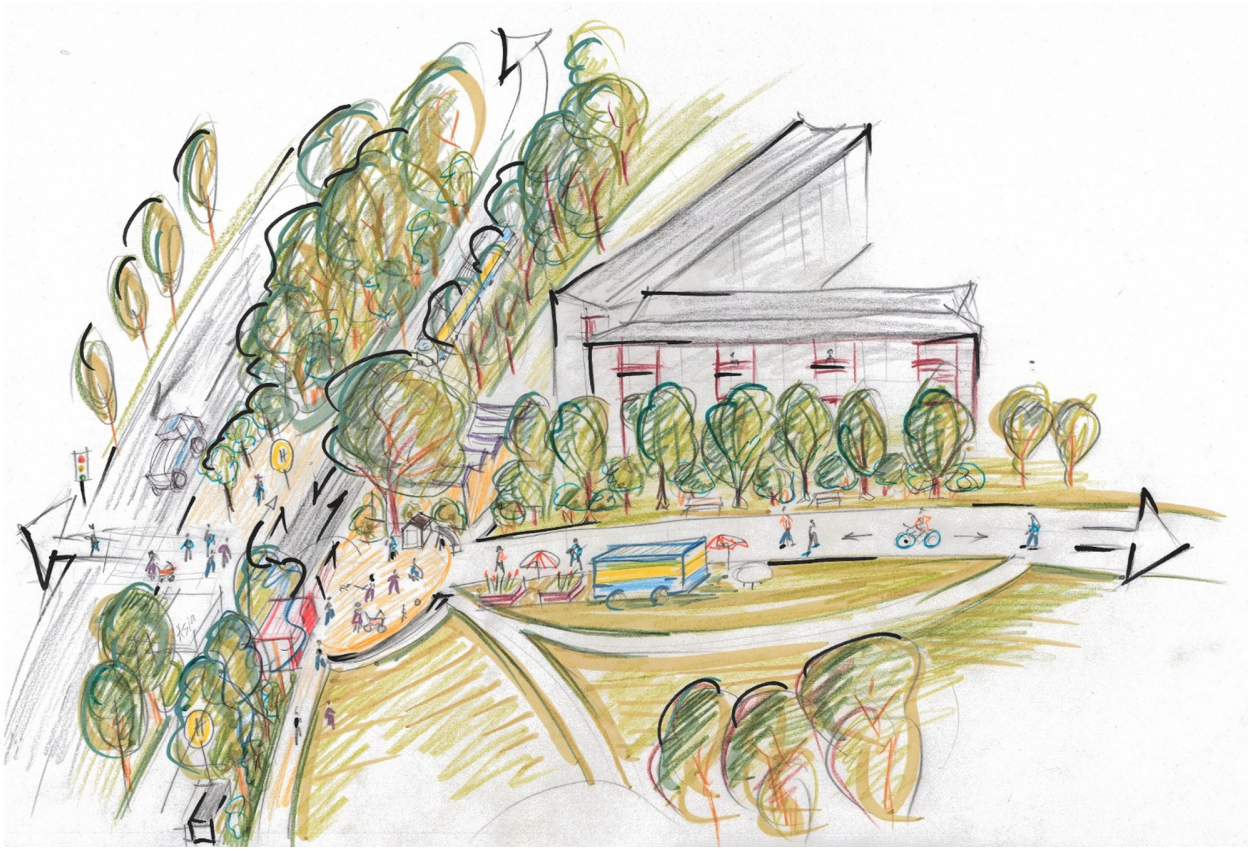

Figure 4. Keplerplatz in Schwerin Mueßer Holz: The central pedestrian zone connects a shopping centre, a tram stop, residential blocks, and a neighbourhood garden. Additional facilities such as kiosks take advantage of passing trade. Many residents use the square as a central meeting point. Different groups occupy it, and sometimes dominate it with their behaviour—such as alcohol consumption or drug use. The square is at times littered, and the police are regularly on site (Sketch by Katja Friedrich, created as part of the data collection).

4.3.1.1. Individual Case: "Disgust" of a Single Mother

This case description refers to a single mother who grew up in the neighbourhood and has experienced its development over the years. In conversation, she appears empathetic and emphasises the needs of families, in particular the provision of educational and leisure amenities. At the same time, she voices criticism of urban development, especially the disappearance of leisure facilities, which for her is linked to a feeling of cultural estrangement. For example, of a restaurant, she speaks of the loss of German dishes and of having "felt understood in that place."

The mother crosses Keplerplatz several times a day on the way to shops, the nursery, etc. When doing so, she says she is confronted with people consuming alcohol or drugs, sometimes in the presence of small children. These observations literally elicit "disgust" in her. As a result, she avoids the square, takes detours, and uses alternative tram stops, although this takes more time.

Interpretation of an urban atmosphere—situational and beyond: The mother's repeated experience of discomfort leads to a rejecting attitude towards the place. Her interpretation of the place aligns with her perception of the entire neighbourhood. Moving away seems desirable to her, but it is not feasible due to

limited resources. Insofar as the insights from data collection allow, there is currently no way to change this woman's mind; she perceives places positively only outside the neighbourhood.

4.3.1.2. Individual Case: "Shame" of an Older Couple

This case describes the view of a long-established older couple. They have lived in the neighbourhood for many years and reside in the immediate vicinity of the square, which they use regularly on the way to shops or the tram. Due to their long residential history, both feel deeply rooted in the neighbourhood and identify with their living environment. However, they are not willing to become accustomed to the nightly police operations and their flashing lights. They emphasise that the problems mostly involve German persons.

They feel shame when visitors walk through the square from the tram stop to their flat and are confronted with litter or intoxicated people. In such situations, the ambivalent side of their belonging becomes apparent: On the one hand, they identify with their neighbourhood; on the other, they clearly distance themselves from what happens in the square and from the noisy, intoxicated people there. This development saddens them and fills them with concern for the future of the quarter, whose change they perceive with increasing anxiety.

The negative effects of the square result less from its physical design than from groups of intoxicated people. Seating, shadowy corners, and busy pedestrian traffic might make such spatial appropriation easy, but they are not the main cause. Comparable problems are evident in the other case studies. In Cottbus-Sandow, for example, all three pedestrian zones are affected by harassment and racist incidents.

4.3.2. Case Example Infrastructure: Arab Markets as an Expression of "Home" in Cottbus-Sandow

The Arab food markets "Sindbad" in Sandow and the "home kiosk" at Keplerplatz in Schwerin display fresh fruit and vegetables outdoors, enlivening public space (see Figure 5). They improve local supply to the neighbourhood overall, but are particularly significant for migrant residents.

The markets are considered here from a migrant perspective. Refugee women describe the pedestrian zone in Sandow near where the market "Sindbad" is located as a "bad path," as they frequently experience racism and insults there, both within shops and outside. According to their statements, refugee women feel hated, and criticise their experiences as "hate poison for living together in the neighbourhood." This makes clear that feelings can effectively shape urban atmospheres and that this effect is group-specific.

How do infrastructures of provision become places of identification and community? At places such as markets, Arabic and Persian are spoken; products from the old country are available; people meet acquaintances or meet new people with similar backgrounds and get help. Although these provisions are not intended as places for lingering, customers make use of them as meeting areas, inside and outside.

The shop operators are engaged and supportive of the Arab community. Memories, familiar smells, and other sensory cues provide a sense of belonging. While observing participants, shifts in atmosphere were evident. Only moments earlier, on the "bad path," and then, just around the corner, the atmosphere at the Arab market "Sindbad" suddenly brightened; there was laughter, and the women felt free. One could sense that this is their everyday meeting place and part of their "home."

Figure 5. The sketch shows the centre of Sandow. The "bad path" is located between the orange arrows. Here, women feel afraid due to insults and racist attacks. The Arab market "Sindbad" is just around the corner (Sketch by Katja Friedrich, created as part of the data collection).

Interpretation of an urban atmosphere—situational and beyond: Even points of infrastructure can be atmospherically effective. This case illustrates the spatial boundaries of atmospheres, as well as of biographical references and group specificity. Bodily communication, like smiling and helpfulness, foster positive perceptions. The market in Sandow provides a protected place in which a friendly atmosphere unfolds through reciprocal communication. For the women, the Arab market functions like an island of well-being in the midst of fear.

4.3.3. Case Example: Neighbourhood Garden in Schwerin

The neighbourhood garden was initiated by a local social organisation (AWO Soziale Dienste GmbH Westmecklenburg). It represents a special type of public open space that offers diverse opportunities for use and encounter (see Figure 6).

The garden coordinator organises the allocation of plots, construction activities, and events, and is the main contact person. She helps resolve disagreements and works to build trust and stable relationships among those involved in the garden, as well as with other associations in the neighbourhood. All people feel comfortable in the neighbourhood garden and call it an "oasis."

The garden site is highly visible and, in principle, open to all interested parties. The gardeners represent a broad spectrum of the resident population—families, older people, migrants, and single persons. In addition to individual plots, areas are cultivated collectively by school classes, cooking clubs, and members of language courses. Guests are regularly welcome on open garden days, at film evenings, or harvest festivals (Rathsmann, 2025).

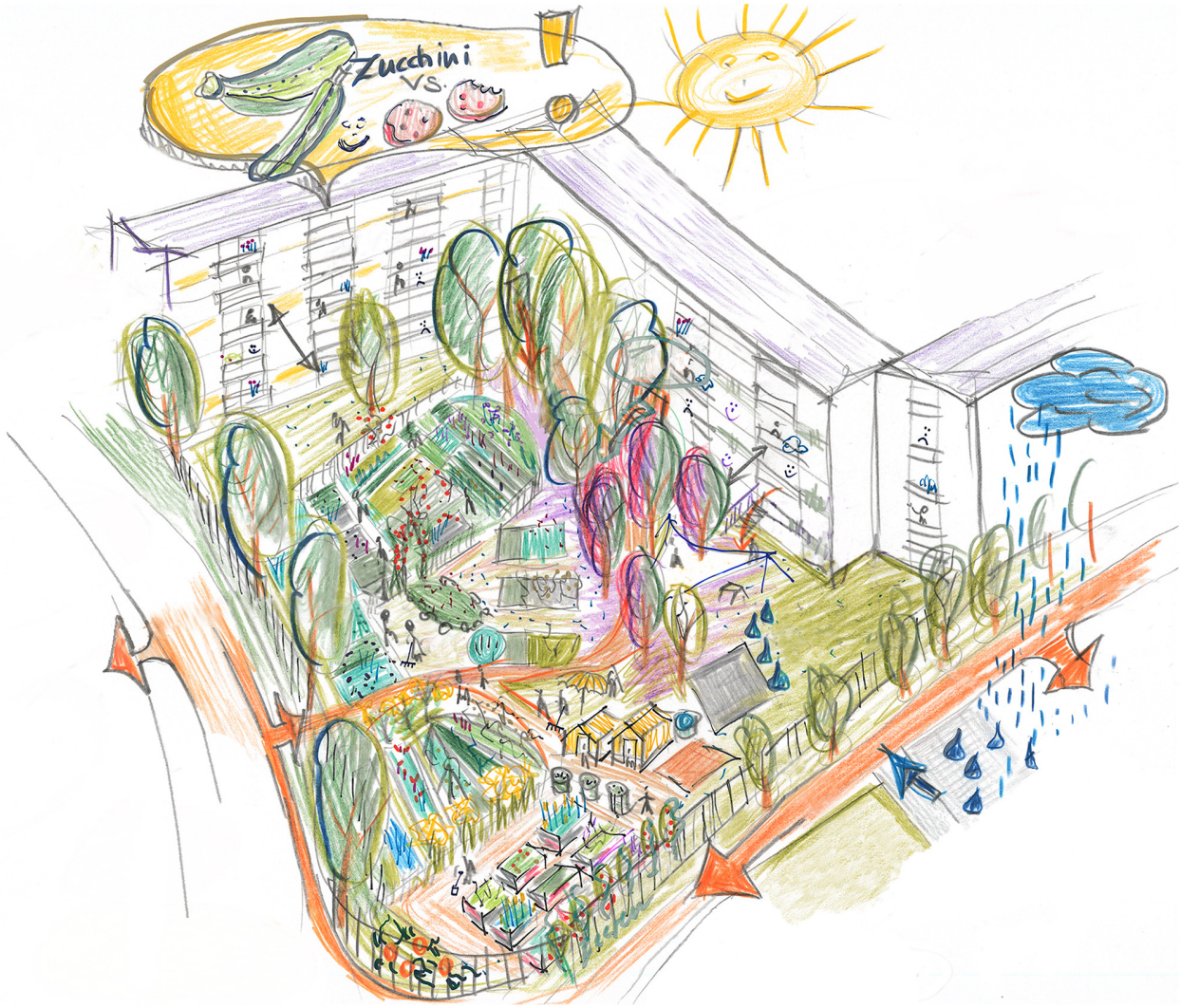

Figure 6. Neighbourhood garden in Schwerin Mueßer Holz. The sketch illustrates the diverse activities and linkages. Rainwater is collected from the roof of the neighbouring building and directed into the garden (Sketch by Katja Friedrich, created as part of the data collection).

The following sections describe how the garden is experienced and perceived by the three representative groups of residents.

4.3.3.1. Long-Established Residents

Often, older residents come to do gardening near their homes. Many previously had a distant allotment garden with a small shed, but in other cases, they had no means, strength, or willingness to travel so far. All older

gardeners are therefore glad to have a small plot and to remain meaningfully active, and people living alone are grateful for the company. Long-established residents often volunteer contributions to the garden community, such as building a children's outdoor kitchen or planting trellises for themselves or for everyone.

Everyone contributes. People appreciate one another. Some of the long-established are involved in integration tasks. They give voluntary courses for refugees. Through involvement via "temporary community work placement," close and trustful connections arise; people speak in confidence about life stories.

A particularly strong need is evident among the long-established to contribute meaningfully. After all, this is the group that is rooted here, and many are retirees with free time. Their private life situations are good apart from age-related frailty. They are warm-hearted and open towards everyone. Racism is not to be found here.

4.3.3.2. Marginalised Residents

This group uses the garden to grow fruit and vegetables and to let the children play safely (thanks to the fence). They are open and friendly towards migrants when they know them personally, e.g., through gardening together. Alongside engagement with families and children, envy of state subsidies or frustration over missing job opportunities and economic advancement can indeed be observed in this group. Everyday life in the garden makes it clear how mis- and disinformation is unmasked and prejudices against migrants are reduced. Shared activities almost incidentally create felt connections among all groups.

Initially mistrustful residents who looked down on the garden from the upper storeys of their high-rise apartment buildings became benevolent neighbours through, for example, exchanging "zucchini for cookies." Invitations to garden festivals and friendly everyday communication help foster a positive atmosphere.

4.3.3.3. Migrants and Refugees

Migrants and refugees' integration succeeds via language courses or as part of the gardening community. Once involved, most stay and use the garden. In addition to cultivation or learning, there is, above all, the opportunity to meet and converse with German people. The garden is a meeting place for residents of Arab origin, a place of well-being within the garden community, and—during festivals—an atmosphere that can radiate into the whole neighbourhood.

The garden coordinator plays a central role in building bridges and solving private as well as institutional problems. She organises water for irrigation, finds jobs for some users, connects people who might help one another, and so on. Despite all the problems that a gardening community typically has, she is appreciated for her work. Over time, she has received support as other persons take on responsibility, mediate between groups, and organise events. New capacities among residents grow, but they are not self-propelling, and volunteering alone cannot accomplish these tasks (Friedrich & Rößler, in press).

Interpretation of an urban atmosphere—situational and beyond: The garden has succeeded in bringing people out of isolation and integrating migrants. The place functions as a hub of integration, community, friendship, meaningful activity, social encounters, and conflict resolution. It is a space where nearly everything succeeds in fostering social cohesion and engagement. Nevertheless, it was on the verge of disappearing and was saved

only at the last minute. This shows that the relevance of such places is not sufficiently recognised and that places of positive identification and community are not understood as a core municipal provision, including their funding (StadtumMig-Projektteam, 2025). A utilised left-behind place such as this can encounter its limits particularly quickly because resources are scarce and the municipality has no room for manoeuvre.

The garden, as an oasis, is an important place in the neighbourhood. It succeeds in generating positive atmospheres and—through the trust, self-sufficiency, and experiences of individual gardeners and groups—in changing the urban atmosphere in the neighbourhood. A larger temporal and spatial scale is opened up, allowing further potentials to present themselves. This requires additional places that also enable encounters in winter or bad weather.

4.4. General Principles of Urban Atmospheres

Common to atmospheres is that they are palpable and partly visible (as confirmed in participant observation), they can be contagious (affective contagion), and they are pre-reflective—i.e., involuntary, non-linguistic, and often prior to any conscious interpretation. Although the operative principles are dynamic, complex, and usually non-linear, urban atmospheres are effective for living together. The following unravels some relationships; these are sketch-like insights into the specific operative forces:

- Belonging manifests at different levels—within groups (e.g., among gardeners or refugee women), in relation to infrastructures such as restaurants or shops, and to the neighbourhood itself, whether the private home, specific places such as gardens, or the entire district.
- Time acts on urban space in different ways: according to the duration of residence in the neighbourhood; according to the lifetime and personal experiences in housing history and origin; and according to the seasons and time of day. Despite the brevity of feelings at certain moments (Massumi, 2002), longer-lasting atmospheres are discernible that relate to individual places, the entire neighbourhood, and typical public situations.
- The context and locality of residents are expressed both in the concrete here-and-now and against the backdrop of long-term, multi-layered entanglement with the neighbourhood. Felt relationships to individual places, as well as deep individual or collective embeddedness in the neighbourhood, are possible.
- Inner and outer atmospheres operate on different spatial and temporal levels (see Figure 7). A person's mood, the immediate atmosphere at the study site, and the longer-term perceived neighbourhood mood influence one another. The latter can be understood as an atmosphere of a left-behind place, and as a feeling of being left behind that extends beyond concrete situations or places (Hertrich & Brenner, 2024).
- Atmospheres unfold at different speeds: Shocks often act immediately and intensely, while identity linkages or the sense of safety in a place or group usually arise through more enduring positive experiences. For example, feelings with an ambush-like character, such as anger, are different from slow feelings, such as love (Schmitz, 2019).
- Belonging, as a felt bond, is a focus of urban studies. Its ambivalence (Wright, 2015) is evident in its positive and negative effects. The feeling "we do not belong there"—as in one example concerning a visit to a theatre in the historical centre of Schwerin—can be understood as simultaneous feelings of self-exclusion and of being stigmatised. Spatial delineation and group belonging overlap.

- The perception of urban atmosphere arises through an interplay of the individual and the collective, of the private and public, and of active and passive roles. Like the appropriation of private living spaces, identification with a place does not necessarily presuppose active intervention. Habit, passive participation, or merely benevolent observation can also generate a sense of belonging (Friedrich, 2011). In private space, individual scope for design is greater, while public spaces require coordination with others and are therefore more prone to conflict.
- The importance of bodily communication is particularly evident in public space, as in "the look of another that can strike to the core" or "evil looks" (Schmitz, 1969) in connection with xenophobia. "Sharing cheerfulness" illustrates the positive potentials of affective contagion. This form of communication can influence both fear and trust. Here, the particularities of places that are bodily experienced, enabling community, identity, etc., become apparent. Bodily communication in public spaces can, however, be inhibiting as well as enabling.
- The loss of familiar places (Reckwitz, 2024)—such as the disappearance of an established restaurant—can trigger collective experiences of loss and serve as an emotional point of reference for certain groups, e.g., long-established residents or citizens of the former East Germany. Such places or infrastructures can become symbols of collective experiences, such as the East German transformation (Mau, 2019), and may evoke nostalgia for former ways of life, as well as a form of group identity.

4.5. Graphical Summary of Findings About Urban Atmospheres

Following, the findings regarding urban atmospheres are graphically summarised. The sketches were created within the framework of the data analysis and the sharpening of the findings.

Atmospheres are spatial feelings that extend beyond the boundaries of the body and display different ranges and modes of effect. A person's inner mood (whether being in love or fearful) shapes perception, yet it is more than a private, internal feeling. Joy or hate form part of embodied communication, influencing both individual well-being and social interaction (Figure 7, left side).

The urban atmospheres discussed in this article represent a further development of Schmitz's concept of atmospheres. In addition to the built environment, nature, and embodied communication between people, perception—and, in particular, the mode of entanglement with the situation at a given place—plays a crucial role. Publicness is more complex than the situation of a private dwelling. A public situation is shaped by stable conditions, such as a transport stop, as well as by temporary/unstable influences, such as the behaviour of other people (Figure 7, right side).

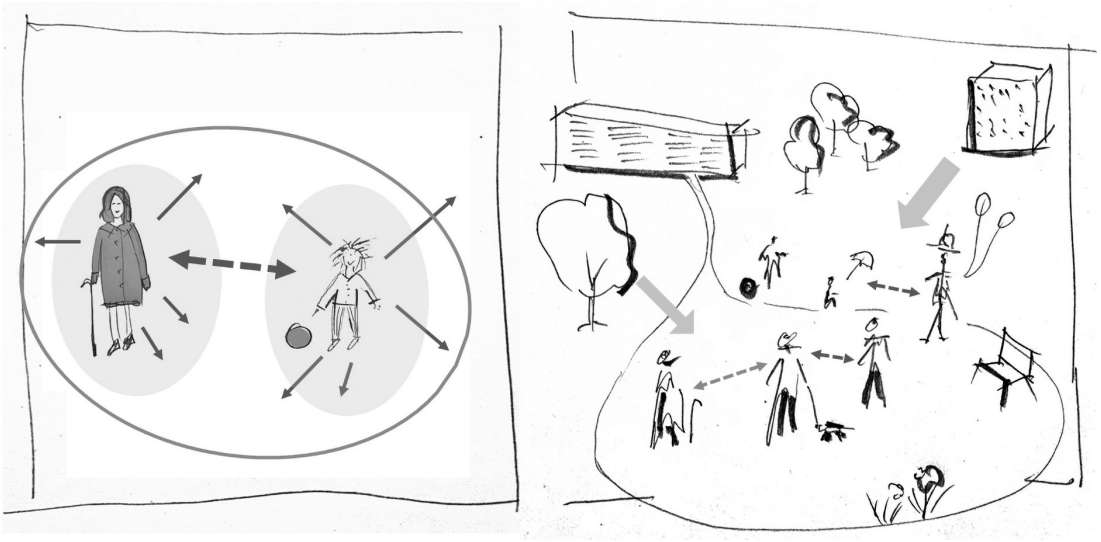

Figure 7. Left: inner individual moods influence perception; right: embodied communication in the built space (Sketches by Katja Friedrich).

Keplerplatz, as perceived by a mother, is characterised by drug use, intoxication, and litter. She experiences disgust, giving rise to a subjective negative atmosphere. She seeks to protect her children from the behaviour of certain individuals (Figure 8, left side).

At Keplerplatz, the elderly couple experiences shame in relation to friends who live elsewhere. The police are constantly called; blue lights, sirens, etc., are observed regularly. As various residents repeatedly perceive the atmosphere at the square negatively, the atmosphere solidifies into an interpretation of the place. When different people share the same feelings, a subjective atmosphere becomes intersubjective, and over time, a collective urban atmosphere emerges—perceived, however, only by those similarly entangled in it (Figure 8, right side).

Figure 8. At Keplerplatz, it becomes clear how people with similar forms of entanglement feel negative urban atmospheres (Sketches by Katja Friedrich).

In Sandow, refugee women are exposed to a particularly hostile atmosphere. Fear of racism affects refugee women and shapes their feeling of urban atmosphere. Yet even for them, there exists an island of positive feelings of home, solidarity, and friendliness (Figure 9, left side).

In Schwerin, everyone perceives the garden as an oasis. Positive experiences foster a connection to the place and to the people. Feelings of belonging, such as identity and community, develop. Such a public place creates a sense of belonging and has the potential to radiate a positive atmosphere throughout the neighbourhood (Figure 9, right side).

Figure 9. Left: group-specific urban atmospheres; right: a collectively experienced positive urban atmosphere (Sketches by Katja Friedrich).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In our study, urban atmospheres, and the multi-layered feelings they evoke, showed their effectiveness in describing how people live together. Although they are fragile and can quickly tip or even disappear, engaging with them is worthwhile, especially in left-behind places. In East German neighbourhoods, there is often astonishment that dissatisfaction persists despite investments (Faus et al., 2023). When people long for dignity and recognition, this is not necessarily tied to material prosperity (Großmann et al., 2021). Yet, a central insight is that atmospheres and appreciation can be positively influenced.

By considering the conditions for the emergence of atmospheres and identifying places of conflict as well as of positive potential, places of well-being, such as the neighbourhood garden in Schwerin Mueßer Holz, can be fostered, and spaces of fear, such as the "bad path" in Cottbus Sandow, can be countered by supporting civil society engagement.

For the generation of positive urban atmospheres, the following is central:

- bodily experienced places where well-being—as well as the experience of community or identity—is possible;
- actors such as business operators, associations, or neighbourhood managers in their functions of organising, moderating, and motivating residents.

The engagement of artists' collectives, migrant self-organisations, or coordinators of neighbourhood gardens enables places of well-being, because such actors work to moderate conflicts and oppositions, and convey confidence and hope (Friedrich & Rößler, in press). In disadvantaged areas, their work requires consistent support from the state, municipality, or private sector (e.g., property owners). The capacities and competences of residents in left-behind places are not sufficient for the magnitude of the challenges. Financial resources are needed to provide social support for migrants, and to meet the costs of the appropriation, maintenance, and use moderation of the many unused or misused sites, to avoid further disparaging feelings and disappointment (Pilz et al., 2024).

Urban spaces where fear dominates require more comprehensive and targeted responses. To combat racism and violence, a dedicated community association is currently seeking to build a resilient civil society through "community organising." So far, actors have faced much rejection and resignation (Pagel, 2025). However, considerably greater capacity is needed here to build civic courage through political education.

In places of well-being, built and lived spaces intertwine. Solutions are context- and target-group-dependent. Empirically, it was found that only experiences of nature are experienced as positive atmospheres by everyone. Belonging can be strengthened through small-scale built interventions, such as kiosks (especially in urban configurations such as large-scale housing estates), and through diverse infrastructures that enable the experience of cultural identity. Such places—even at a single point—can be starting points for collective cohesion.

In Schwerin, it became apparent that an "oasis" can grow out of "emptiness," yet turning a wasteland into a successful neighbourhood garden required multiple preconditions (Friedrich & Rößler, in press). Not every garden will become a place of cross-group community, but in this case, it is a hopeful story which demonstrates how narratives can spread positive feelings by fostering pride in what has been achieved communally.

Atmospheres are not something built, but they are essential to the feelings humans have about the places they inhabit. Empirically, it becomes evident that interpersonal feelings—whether joy or fear—clearly outweigh the effects of the built environment. Thus, pleasant experiences can make unrenovated buildings feel positive, and attractive pedestrian zones can be marked by negative urban atmospheres.

What is the potential of urban atmospheres? They offer future-oriented courses of action for the left-behind places discussed in this article and can help improve living conditions there in terms of well-being and social participation. A multi-layered, ongoing interdependence can be identified between feelings of comfort in the home and neighbourhood, belonging to places (Pinkster & Loomans, 2025) and groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), engagement with the neighbourhood (Bennett, 2014) and the community, willingness to solve challenges and problems collectively (Blokland, 2023), and personal development in the process (Bandura, 1997).

Only those who stay long-term can appropriate a home and a neighbourhood, settle in, and establish their place of belonging. Positive urban atmospheres are linked to concrete places that enable and simultaneously generate the experiences described above. The places of community—termed "thick places" (Duff, 2010)—through sport, gardening, music, etc., or of learning and integration, increase the motivation to remain in the neighbourhood and to become involved. Thus, the will to stay and the capacities among residents grow.

The garden is exemplary of a bodily experienced place that makes positive atmospheres palpable. At the same time, it provides preconditions for diverse practices, such as communication and moderation between civil society actors and residents, as well as for active engagement or simple enjoyment. Places like the Schwerin garden show how a positive force (Duff, 2010) can unfold through joint appropriation. Left-behind neighbourhoods need such places since, as the examples show, they possess different operative potentials. These are places of resonance that, in their "unavailability" and non-planability, enable successful relationships and evoke social energy (Rosa, 2016, 2020).

Large housing estates constitute a considerable proportion of the housing stock in German cities and beyond. They are therefore relevant to questions of sustainable and just urban development. These stocks are a built resource that must continue to be used—this requires the estates to be liveable, and knowledge of atmospheres can contribute to this. Beyond the left-behind places discussed here, there is a need for further research that develops a deeper spatial understanding of urban atmospheres, social energies, and places that productively engender community. Such knowledge could help improve the quality of life in all cities while helping revive available underused urban resources.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

LLMs Disclosure

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COMMENTARY

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Not Just Shrinkage: Left-Behind Places, the Polycrisis, and Populist Politics

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Abstract

While the existence of marginalized or left-behind places is not a new phenomenon, both marginalization and socio-economic, spatial, and political polarization have accelerated over the past decades as a central effect of neoliberal globalization, and in the case of eastern Germany, the process of German unification in that context. Economic marginalization, widely seen by those marginalized as driven by national and transnational elites, has led to the growth of anti-elite or populist perspectives, reinforced by the financial crisis and subsequent austerity of 2007–2009. For many reasons, the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, which we see as a societal or cultural trauma, became a catalyst for spreading those perspectives and driving a more overt political expression of them. In this commentary, we trace the conjoined history of economic marginalization, left-behind places, the effects of the pandemic in the context of the polycrisis, and the growth of anti-elite populist movements. We further explore how recent developments can enrich the debate on shrinkage and decline, discuss the implications of this history for future possibilities and challenges for democratic rule, public policy, and society, and suggest directions for further investigation.

Keywords

left-behindness; marginalization; polycrisis; populism; shrinkage

1. Introduction

The rise of populist movements across Europe and the United States over the past decade has prompted many efforts to understand the reasons for this phenomenon and the ways it has redefined the once

seemingly settled political landscape of post-World War II—or in Eastern Europe, post-1991—liberal democracy (Dijkstra et al., 2019). While the term is far from clearly defined, populist movements have been characterized as those which reject elites and established parties, distrust globalization, emphasize national sovereignty and interests, define the nation in ethnic terms, exclude outsiders, and present themselves as guarantors of order and security (Lazar, 2021).

This commentary will explore one strand of this question, the relationship between "left-behind place" status and the role of the polycrisis with support for populism. We suggest that left-behind status may be a more useful lens through which to examine these issues than shrinkage *per se*. At the end of this commentary, we will address that question and how it might inform shrinking city research in the future.

2. The Salience of Being Left Behind

The term "left-behind" first appeared in the UK in the 2010s to describe places, rather than people, facing economic stagnation or decline, especially post-industrial and rural areas. It is thus related to marginalization and peripheralization as they are used in geographic contexts. Indeed, one can plausibly see "left-behindness" as a product of marginalization, rather than as a distinct condition (MacKinnon, 2021). While population shrinkage is not intrinsic to left-behind places, the two categories share considerable overlap. Left-behind conditions are most strongly associated with smaller, particularly post-industrial, peripheral cities and with marginalized rural areas, both most likely to be shrinking as well. While shrinking places need not be left-behind places and vice versa, when the two factors coincide—as they often do—they reinforce one another.

Left-behind places are found to varying extents in nearly all industrialized/developed nations in the Global North, where populations are either shrinking or growing slowly and unevenly. Significant variation between countries exists, however, both in the extent of left-behind conditions and their economic, social, and political implications, reflecting demographic, cultural, and spatial differences between countries. These differences have yet to be fully explored in the literature.

Some of the factors which vary from country to country and increase the likelihood and number of left-behind places may include (1) the extent to which economic, political, and cultural activity is concentrated in a single city or region, such as in the UK or South Korea; (2) where peripheralization overlaps with ethnic, societal, or political "otherness," as in predominately ethnic Russian areas in the Baltic states, but arguably also in eastern Germany; and (3) spatially uneven population trajectories, especially where a country's population is simultaneously shrinking and concentrating in one dominant area, as in Bulgaria or Hungary.

The state of being left-behind, or "left-behindness," however, should not be seen solely or even principally in economic, demographic, or spatial terms. As others have observed, the economic conditions leading to left-behindness have powerful social, cultural, and political implications. Indeed, the term is often used to describe the social and political dimension of marginalization, or shrinkage. Left-behind places have been dubbed "geographies of discontent" (Dijkstra et al., 2019). That discontent, as we explore in the next section of this commentary, makes these places particularly sensitive to polycrisis effects.

3. Mobilizing "Left-Behindness": The Role of the Polycrisis

Marginalization leading to left-behindness is a long-term cumulative process, punctuated by local marginalizing events, such as a factory closing. Marginalized communities are simultaneously affected by multiple exogenous crisis events or long-acting exogenous processes reinforcing their marginalization. The phenomenon of multiple crises, taking place simultaneously or sequentially with overlapping and cumulative impacts, has been dubbed the polycrisis (Tooze, 2022). As Mallach et al. (in press) discuss, the world has faced overlapping polycrises since 1990, notably the global financial crisis and Covid-19, while Europe has also experienced post-socialist transition, migration shocks, Brexit, and the war in Ukraine. In post-socialist countries, the collapse of state socialism and the painful transition to a market economy remain a lasting trauma, with the effects of that transition still widely felt. More recently, while the direct economic effects of the global financial crisis of 2007 and subsequent austerity policies may have passed, the social trauma it generated is still very much present. The full extent to which that crisis has affected political, cultural, and social behavior has yet to be adequately investigated.

As the cumulative effect of overlapping crises has grown, trust in political and social elites has declined, leading to increasing hostility to perceived elite control, attitudes that were particularly widespread during and immediately after the Covid-19 pandemic, and which prompted strong resistance to expert-driven pandemic measures. The effect of the pandemic on social and political behavior, however, would most probably have been much less had it not taken place at a time when the social trauma of the global financial crisis was still intensely present.

This reaction was not only to the measures *per se*, but to the absence of communication and the perceived lack of respect by elite decision-makers for their opinions and for their autonomy as individuals or members of a community. This reaction, taking place in the context of their communities' demographic shrinkage and aging, reflects the underlying dynamic of marginalization. As those regions and communities have gradually fallen further behind their nation's dominant central regions, feelings of distrust and the rejection of the authority of elite institutions grow.

The outcome is polarization of political opinions and positions, diminished credibility of traditional mainstream (elite) political parties, and their replacement by new, explicitly anti-elite, or so-called populist, political movements. These movements, while operating within the democratic political system, are typically hostile to the principles and values of liberal democracy, and seek implicitly or explicitly to undermine the system from within, as can be seen in the behavior of Orbán in Hungary or Trump in the United States. While other anti-system and non-mainstream parties have emerged, such as regional parties rooted in sub-national cultural or political identities and often stronger in affluent regions, and left-wing populist movements, they play a far more limited role in their countries' politics.

The effects of the polycrisis are likely to be most pronounced among those who see themselves as alienated from the centers of political or economic power, and without power to respond to or influence the public response to crises. Thus, we would argue that the *actual* or *objective* crisis—an economic shock, a sudden influx of refugees—is not so much the trigger as is how the objective crisis is *perceived*, which is driven by an amalgam of how the crisis is being handled by elite decision-makers and the pervasive effect of left-behind conditions. That in turn reinforces the individual's sense of being left behind, creating a vicious cycle of further

alienation from established authorities and a more pronounced shift toward alternative leaders, who may not offer concrete solutions but at least convey a sense that they understand and relate to the left-behind community's conditions.

Covid was a powerful trigger. Conditions dictated that governments take action, while the combination of uncertainty about the behavior of the pathogen and the need for urgency led governments to bypass public discussion and democratic processes, imposing stringent and widely-resented burdens on the public with little communication or explanation. Political and scientific leaders offered inadequate and inconsistent rationales for the measures they imposed, or modified or reversed those measures without apparent justification. While pandemic restrictions triggered some overt resistance, for most the response was less resistance as it was an intensification of a trauma that was already deeply embedded in the body public from years of the polycrisis, further reinforcing already widely present anti-elite attitudes. The aftermath of the pandemic also saw a pronounced increase in the share of votes going to populist parties in major European countries (Figure 1).

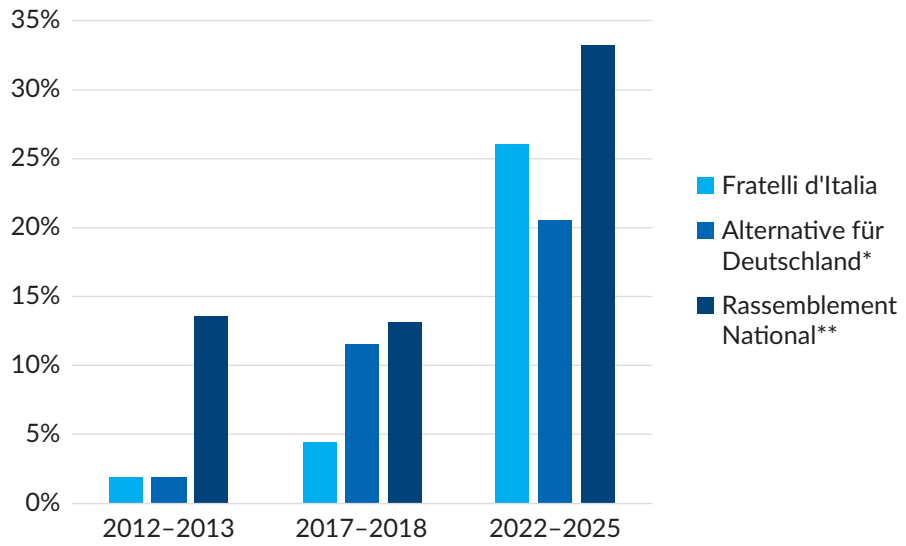

Figure 1. Support for populist parties in national elections, 2012–2025. Notes: * % of constituency votes; ** 2024 Elections.

4. The Politics of "Left-Behindness"

Defining the politics of left-behindness is complicated. Multi-level relationships exist between personal or spatial left-behind status, the cumulative effects of the polycrisis, the trauma of the pandemic, the loss of trust in mainstream institutions and politics, and the growth in support for right-wing populist parties that promise to Make (insert name of country) Great Again, through a return to an unspecified earlier and better time. Hannemann et al. (2024) describe a four-step process that leads to the *chronification and emotional lock-in of regional embitterment*, which populist actors exploit by providing arenas for expressing and reinforcing collective resentment.

A collective identity grounded in marginalization emerges, rooted in resentment and anger toward those seen as responsible for their having been left behind. This can reflect an individual's geographic identity of

living in a left-behind place, or their personal identity, reflected in underlying attitudes or values and status anxieties, not necessarily defined by economic marginality. It is important to distinguish the individual and the geographic states of left-behindness. While support for populist movements is strongest in left-behind *places*, their strongest supporters are not necessarily left-behind *people*, in the sense of actual material deprivation or downward mobility.

Engagement with populist movements valorizing their marginality relative to the political mainstream not only offers people an opportunity to express their resentment but also builds social identity around the movement they see as articulating that resentment. The positions adopted by populist movements, which blend legitimate critiques of established political systems, the inherent contradictions of the meritocratic state, and the alienation of marginalized communities from institutions and the state, with invented narratives about the deep state and global elites, reinforce and buttress that identity. Populist movements reject key features of modern society with its growing ethnic diversity, its rapidly changing technology, and its shifting social, sexual, and cultural mores, and promise a return to a familiar past, echoing aspects of early 20th-century fascism (Gultasli, 2021).

While the politics of left-behindness are in some respects better analyzed through the lens of psychology than the conventional tools of political science, it is important to remember that whatever its cultural and psychological manifestations, *left-behindness is rooted in concrete economic disparities*.

5. Conclusion: The Implications of Populist Politics for the Study of "Left-Behindness" and Shrinking Cities

For those like the authors who value liberal democracy, the rise of populist politics, with its disdain for democratic values and its echoes of pre-World War II fascism, prompts deep apprehension and unease. The rise of Erdoğan in Turkey and Orbán in Hungary, the growing support for the AfD in Germany and similar movements elsewhere, and above all, Trump's presidency in the United States, have raised deep concerns about the fragility of liberal democracy and its ability to survive this changing political environment. This is particularly true in the United States, where a system that has long been seen as paradigmatic of a stable, resilient although flawed democracy has been exposed as fragile by the success of Trump's attack on its central institutions.

While the parliamentary model of multi-party coalition government in many European countries may allow mainstream parties to create so-called "firewalls" to keep populism out of power and render a Trumpist takeover less likely, such firewalls are inherently unstable. The question of how elite-driven parties can and should address the challenge of populism has become a burning concern, made particularly problematic by the reality that many of the inequities that are driving populist movements were the direct result of the policies of those same mainstream parties since the neoliberal shift of the 1980s.

Efforts by mainstream parties to formulate political platforms that focus on the material inequities of left-behind status by proposing various measures of "levelling-up" are unlikely to be effective counters to movements grounded much more in symbolic representation than literal amelioration of material conditions. The possibility should not be underestimated that much of the world, not only Europe and North America, is going through a systemic political realignment whose consequences cannot be predicted.

An extended discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this commentary. What is relevant here, however, is how little discussion of these issues, or the underlying questions of anti-elite discontent or resentment, is to be found in the by-now extensive body of shrinking city literature. The same is somewhat less true of the literature of left-behind places, where scholars such as Rodriguez-Posé and MacKinnon have called attention to the cultural and political dimensions of left-behindness. That in turn prompts a second question, which is the relationship of the shrinkage and left-behind frameworks to one another. Clearly, they are not identical, but are they closely enough related so that they can be considered a single literature?

One obstacle is that the concept of being "left behind" is inherently vague and subjective; thus, as Fiorentino et al. (2024, p. 1) point out:

> The term has quickly taken on an almost generic quality, in that it is used to denote any place—a region, a city, a town, a local community, a neighborhood—that is deemed to suffer from one or more economic, social or cultural disadvantages, especially when compared to other places—regions, cities, towns, local communities, neighborhoods—that do not suffer from such disadvantages.

Taken to its extreme, almost any place other than the most elite enclaves could perceive itself to be left behind, at least relative to *somebody* else. While some writers have defined left-behindness in relative terms, i.e., areas that are *falling further behind* other areas over time, that definition is equally problematic. Fiorentino et al. (2024, p. 2) add, "It is perhaps because of this very 'fuzziness' that the idea has appealed to politicians and policymakers," to which we would add, "and scholars." By contrast, shrinkage is a reasonably objective category, if unclear about where to draw the line.

Part of the problem is that, unlike shrinkage, being "left-behind" is less a geographic or economic concept than a term that reflects subjective emotions and feelings rather than objective conditions. As such, it works well as a shorthand term for the particular cluster of conditions, attitudes, and values that, as we have discussed above, appear to trigger support for populist movements. It is those attitudes and values that form the connective tissue between the long-standing economic conditions of small Pennsylvania counties and their support for Trump's presidential campaigns, or those of eastern Germany and its support for the AfD.

At the same time, the polycrisis framework can add a meaningful dimension to our understanding of marginalized cities and regions, whether shrinking, left-behind, or otherwise, as we try to gain an understanding of how attitudes have shifted and support for populist movements grown, and how economic conditions or trends are transformed into political attitudes. We would suggest that scholars studying shrinking cities pay more attention to the social, cultural, and political dimensions of the cities they study, and that the concept of left-behindness can be a useful way to frame that work. It is, after all, the social and cultural dimension that gives human meaning to otherwise abstract, often bloodless, economic and demographic statistics.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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