

SHRINKAGE IS SEXY: A NEW STRATEGY TO MAKE A SHRINKING URBAN AREA THE MOST VITAL PART OF TOWN

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Shrinkage is globally considered as a negative phenomenon, and shrinking cities are seen as the opposite of growing, successful cities. Psychologically, there's strong coherence between this consideration and the development of our human body and mind. In our lives, shrinkage is the precursor of dying. But when city quarters dealing with a gradually declining population and an emptying housing stock are declared as Free States, these urban areas could become the most vital part of the body, err town. Within Free States, unused space could be exploited for the fulfilment of individual and collective living desires. Create whatever you want!

Because of declaring Free States and striking out several regulations, (local) governments and collective house-owners can focus their gained time and money on small scaled actions. Strict and rigorous interventions are sometimes necessary, especially when too many houses lack occupancy. Overall quality can be increased by effective, inexpensive and fast actions. The tristesse of the former over-regulated shrinking area can slowly disappear, and possibilities for a happy life will attract young people who tend to start their career as independents. In order to shape a socially sustainable space, the idea of all generations living together is implemented in a new concept of state-offered services. To achieve such a thing, keywords are trust, community, solidarity and action.

By showing the example of the post-socialist city of Chemnitz in Eastern Germany, I try to filter general principles that can be applied in other shrinking urban areas in Europe. Chemnitz, once an important industrial centre and the socialist model city Karl-Marx-Stadt, has been struggling with population decline and urban decay since the 1980s. Especially the 'Plattenbausiedlungen', or tower block areas, are in need of alternative answers. The potentials of the empty DDR blocks and the public space are huge.

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HOW TO READ THIS PLEA:

This article is meant to be a pleading story that should be read (chrono)logically. Therefore, I first introduce you to the city of Chemnitz. Secondly, I zoom in on Fritz Heckert, a tower block area with interesting spatial and social potentials. Then you will find a description of my suggestion and its motivation. After demonstrating you the innovative character of the proposed interventions, I will show you the applicability of the idea in other European contexts. A conclusion is terminus station. If you lose track, you can always return to this paragraph.

CHEMNITZ: A POEM

Chemnitz is a poem that could have been written by W.H. Auden or Dylan Thomas. Melancholic, tragic, but with sunny, hopeful streaks, changing its character in such unforgiving and relentless way that one can hardly identify its new image or remember its old image.

Other German cities alike, Chemnitz had its economic and demographic peaks in the 1930s. The city had become an important manufacturing centre in the 19th century as a concentration of textile industry. Chemnitz was known as ‘Manchester of Saxony’. Later, when nationalism arose and war was inevitable, heavy machinery, locomotives, automobiles and other vehicles were produced in Chemnitz.

After the important stronghold of Panzer tank production had been bombed by allied air forces at the end of the second world war, 95% (!) of the city was demolished. Although the new era inspired many to recover the ancient inner city and surroundings, Chemnitz became part of the newly found Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR). Being renamed Karl-Marx-Stadt in 1953, the city was a laboratory; a test case for modernist architects and planners. Inspired by functionalist ideas and following the ‘principles of planning and designing socialist city centres’ the inner city was filled with high-rise apartment blocks. Street patterns were modern and functional, streets were wide and windy. Moreover, the city expanded by building the peripheral Fritz Heckert Area: a new city district with 31.000 model apartments for 90.000 inhabitants. The city was reordered to grow. Because when cities grow and develop, ideologies are justified.

But the heydays of socialism didn’t last. When the ‘two Germanys’ reunited in 1990, a lot of (young) people moved to the west of Germany in search of jobs and a free or better life. However, Chemnitz had already been shrinking demographically since 1982. Today, Chemnitz has fewer inhabitants than in 1945 and the city is still shrinking, while neighbouring cities Leipzig and Dresden are growing steadily. Shrinkage is not just spread out over the city: some parts of the city are desolated places while other parts are inhabited and doing well. Former socialist ‘Plattenbau’ suburbs are specific desolated places nowadays. In these uncool urbs, average income and education are low, while average age and unemployment are high. Chemnitz is now known as the ‘oldest city’ in Germany - not for respectably being the first settlement, but for being the city with the highest average age.

Nevertheless, there are bright sides as well. The former image of city of industry has disappeared. Chemnitz has a well-known university of technology, which attracts talent and technology (two important T’s, besides tolerance). Moreover, the university is an important employer. Many German students register at Eastern German universities because of their good reputation and affordable housing and living costs. Young couples move to specific parts of the city, because it is affordable compared to Leipzig or Dresden. Especially the areas built before 1918 are popular (Jugendstil and Gründerzeit architecture era) among youngsters with starters’ income. These individual houses of several floors high are neatly designed and built in blocks, and there are communal gardens where kids can play safely. Except the houses, the attractiveness of the surroundings is considered too. The popular area has bars, restaurants and cultural places, and the inner city is within walking distance. Besides, the municipality is successfully funding the redevelopment of the inner city and the station area. There will be a direct connection between the main railway station and the university, which underlines the importance of the university.

Because of these attractive areas, the number of households in Chemnitz still remains quite steady. The steadiness of Chemnitz’ households could mean that the city is not shrinking physically yet. In fact, the number of houses does not have to change. But as stated before, some

areas in Chemnitz are popular and some not, which means that demands in the housing market shift geographically. Not the amount, but the location of the demanded houses has changed.

FRITZ HECKERT: A NOT SO OLD MAN WITH HIS INCONVENIENCES

In 1973 the Central Comity of the leading party SED declared a housing programme to satisfy demands and to maintain social harmony in the DDR. In order to offer housing and amenities rapidly, industrial technologies were applied. The ideology of standardized, prefab apartment blocks was used in socialist (and also capitalist) countries worldwide. In Chemnitz, socialist planners built the residential area Heckert five to nine kilometres southwest of the inner city. Why there? Because there was space! Comprising 31.000 units, Heckert became the second largest high-rise area in the DDR, after Berlin Marzahn-Hellersdorf.

The standardized model apartments, including the luxury of a bathroom and a private toilet, were designed for standardized model citizens (modern, progressive, collective). Under socialism, people were not just a consuming part of a consuming collective. You didn't own a garden, but there were parks and collective gardens nearby. Housing blocks were located in low-traffic streets. The peripheral location of the residential zones was no problem, because people could go to work via an extensive network of public transport.

The reunion of the 'two Germanys' led to high vacancy levels in houses in Eastern German cities in general and areas like Heckert in particular. From 1998, the city of Chemnitz and collective house-owners have torn down buildings and parts of buildings in the city, especially in Heckert. Apartment blocks were demolished and either replaced by one-family houses and shopping centres or by nothing at all. Other blocks were 'decapitated': brought down to four stories. Some redevelopments (from apartments into one-family houses) took place too. From 31.000 units, 11.000 (or 35%) were gone in 2009. Housing vacancy is still 20 to 30%. Statistics in 2009 show that Heckert has 58% less inhabitants than in 1992. Birth rate is very low and mortality rate is high. The average age is 51, while Chemnitz is the oldest city in Germany with an average age of with 47. Unemployment is 12 to over 20%.

The tower blocks were produced fast, en masse and monotonously. In the 1970s grown-up baby boomers started to form families and settled down in the tower blocks collectively. Within the DDR, people didn't change their place of residence as often as today. Forty years later (today) the tower blocks still accommodate a large group of 'early residents'.

Furthermore, the image of model citizenship has changed. The ideology of the model apartment is diminished to the factual four walls and a roof. Heckert has become a place with a high concentration of socially fragile people. One could call it an internal clash between three main groups: a large group of old natives who have lived there ever since, a small minority of immigrants in search of cheap housing and lower educated youngsters. In places such as Heckert crime, political extremes and social instability aren't rare. Moreover, the peripheral location has turned into a problem. Because of not being an integral part of the city, Heckert can turn into a ghetto if not dealt with properly.

A vast majority of housing units is managed by collective land- and house-owning companies such as the Grundstücks- und Gebäudewirtschafts-Gesellschaft (or GGG). GGG, a fully owned subsidiary of the city of Chemnitz, has a quite simple concept: tenants rent apartments that are maintained by GGG. The formal owner is the city of Chemnitz. Apartments cannot be bought by private individuals or families. GGG only rents its housing stock. Regarding services and shops, Heckert is quite standard. There are kindergartens, primary schools, city services, clinics, sport

grounds and chain supermarkets. As birth rate and children numbers are low, many schools have disappeared since 1990.

HOW HECKERT AND CHEMNITZ CAN BECOME ALIVE AND KICKING AGAIN

It should not be the city's ambition to become like Dresden or Leipzig. These cities are popular because of their cultural values. Dresden is beautifully restored and there are a lot of activities, and Leipzig is a cool, modern city with interesting historical artefacts. Chemnitz is not beautiful. Chemnitz is not classic or charming. Therefore, today's city's slogan 'City of Moderns' is right. It is modern, and it is different than anyone else.

Heckert and Chemnitz have certain potentials. Within its own region, the city can become popular again. Instead of trying to achieve the demographic peak from 1930, the ambition should be to offer a comfortable life quality with development possibilities in a safe environment. The university is an important starting point, because it annually attracts new talented youngsters. In addition, the oldest city in Germany can become a centre of old people's homes, social care, healthcare and other amenities. Chemnitz can become or stay a medium-sized, lively city, relatively cheap in its region, attractive for all generations. And more specifically, Heckert is just 40 years old... much too young to die.

A few interventions are needed though. My idea is built on a few suggestions: declaration of Free States, action-oriented government and collective house-owners, new ownership strategy and generation building.

DECLARATION OF FREE STATES

People or suburbs like Heckert were standardized from the moment they were born. Raised in a regulated society, there were procedures, rules, regulations, exemptions in specific cases within strict limiting conditions, etcetera for almost everything. You cannot paint your house red if all the houses next door are yellow. Your hedge can only be maximum 80 centimetres high and in some cases maximum 100 centimetres if transparent and if not thicker than 15 centimetres. Your roof may not be higher than 12 metres. You may not break down walls. These regulations demotivate (prospective) inhabitants. And this makes Heckert uncompetitive to other areas in Chemnitz or eastern Germany that are organized in a traditional Germanic way.

So let's forget about regulations! Let's break out, declare a Free State and make room for initiatives of the inhabitants, the real users of the houses and public space. Free states will attract 90 liveliness. Regulations were made in a psychological context of fear. We need to trust people. We need to trust in people's capability and wish to build up a community.

Within Free States, that can be re-demarcated anytime, unused space could be used for the fulfilment of individual living desires. Except a few agreements on zones that must stay unbuilt, building and zoning regulations are lacking. You can remodel your tower block apartment, including the empty apartments next-door horizontally and vertically. The creative potential of the prefab apartments is huge: tear down walls, build stairways between floors, make an indoor garden... Do you want to open a shop? Please, go ahead. Make it a lively place. Build whatever you want, meet your neighbours and transform the public space inside and outside the way you want to. I hereby would like to note that these so-called Free States merely consist of building and rezoning creativity. These Free States are not party islands.

By introducing Free States, the tragic Plattenbauten become alive and attractive for people in

search of a house in an urban and alternative environment. It is not the outlying ghetto anymore where you live when you don't have any other possibilities. Furthermore, the positive effect of ownership and taking care of the apartment and public space is introduced - instead of having standardized space without any (financial and emotional) ownership or responsibility. Especially this element is a huge potential within suburbs like Heckert.

The first Free State will be declared in one of the high-rise apartment blocks with many empty units, including the unused public space around it. This place will become a laboratory; a test case like the city was in the socialist era. If successful, the concept can be applied in other blocks too.

ACTION-ORIENTED GOVERNMENT AND COLLECTIVE HOUSE-OWNERS

Most cities today, Chemnitz included, tend to have overall policy coverage of their territory in order to keep order. On the other hand, all legislatures have focus areas. Currently, Chemnitz is successfully funding the redevelopment of the inner city by adding shopping malls in buildings designed by modernist architects Hans Kollhoff and Helmut Jahn, recovery of historical buildings, public transport, new public space etcetera. Moreover, the station area is redeveloped in order to make a straight connection to the university and to invite ICE-trains (high-speed trains connecting main cities). It can be an understandable choice to focus on inner cities and stations instead of outlying suburbs. But my proposal would then be to skip the regulations in the outlying suburbs and to forget about overall policy coverage! Uniformity is in my eyes a misinterpretation of constitutional equality.

Striking out building and zoning regulations seems to be an easy thing to do, but it is not. Most probably, the city will receive complaints of upset neighbours or pleads to financially compensate ownership rights. So, the city installs a contact person in the Free State. He/she will gain a lot of bottom-up experience and an extended social network within his/her working area. The contact person will try to find compromises within reasonable terms. The Free State lacks building regulations, but there are still common values agreed on by the residents. To build up a community, certain agreements will have to be made. But anchoring these agreements in regulations is highly unnecessary. It is about freedom and not limiting someone else's freedom. This plea has undoubtedly been done before, but in this era of scarcity, negativism and dogmatism it really might be the right thing to do.

Furthermore, the city can cooperate with the university, city-run housing associations and private companies to create a job and building programme to stimulate students to work and live in Chemnitz after their studies. The University of Chemnitz is known for its mechanical engineering, mathematics and computer science, as well as philosophy and social science. Linking study programmes and work together can make sure that talented graduates do not leave Chemnitz right away after their studies.

The campus is located south of the city centre. The city or university can buy units in Heckert to hire them to students. It is cheap, students have a lot of freedom in Heckert (compared to standardized model apartments somewhere else) and it is not far from the campus. During and as part of their studies, students can start rebuilding their apartment in the Free State into something of personal value.

An encouragement to set up local shops and services can be done too. For example, many independent merchants and entrepreneurs spend a lot of time and money on permit and tax regulations. The city can stimulate small business people by taking away administrative discomforts.

The city's main focus will be to encourage private developments. On the other hand, gained time and money can be used by the city and house-owners to redevelop parts of Heckert. If it turns out to be necessary to tear down (parts of) apartment blocks, the quality of space and the future function should be considered. It is a matter of balance: if there are too many buildings, the quality of the public space is endangered. If there are too few buildings, the place can become desolate, unattractive and unsafe. The local government and collective house-owners can react by punctual interventions: swift actions on a small scale in order to eliminate problems. Temporal use of space is possible if it does not obstruct future redevelopment.

GENERATION BUILDING

Heckert has demographic and spatial potentials to become 'senior city': a residential area for elderly people with their minds on stability and quietness. But this would not form a socially sustainable choice, because this would lead to isolation of individuals. Furthermore, a homogenous society does not exist and therefore it should not be aspired. In my eyes, social sustainability is driven by integration of generations, income classes, languages, races and nationalities. A melting pot, indeed. Therefore, a social and generational mix is intended. By implementing building freedom and taking the tristesse of the former over-regulated shrinking area away, young people who tend to start their career as independents can be attracted (students, young couples with or without kids). But trying to create a young trendy quarter is not a socially sustainable solution either. Many examples have shown that 'gentrification'²⁷ has many negative sides that overshadow positive effects on the longer term. So: how to overcome a generation gap?

A simple answer would be to separate generations: Block A, Free State, is for youngsters, while B, still under building regulations, is for elderly. However, in order to shape a socially sustainable space, the idea of all people living together is implemented in a new concept of trust, community and solidarity. A Free State is a house of generations. Several generations living together is a positive condition for all inhabitants, because on the one hand people grow up fast and worldly while on the other hand people stay young longer. No isolation, but involvement and integration. Within a local economy of a Free State, senior care will be an important economic pillar in the near future. The Free States are small worlds in which a community can be formed. There are many non-disturbing activities such as shops, bars, restaurants and services. People know each other and there are common values. The anonymous life in the high-rise blocks can change into new social contacts on a human scale. And there's a lot of freedom to build or create what individuals or collectives want, elderly people included. This also means that people are free to refuse to use this freedom. But limiting someone else's creativity or desire is considered negative, and it therefore should not be possible. We live together on this planet, so let's live together!

It is like a dance floor. Space is limited, but people are free to dance. You can be timid and some basic steps, but you can also swing round boldly. The floor is made for people to communicate and play together, not to curtail someone else. It is a collective individual happening in search of some happiness. The spatial planner is a background musician, bringing the beat and defining the pace.

OWNERSHIP

Besides planning principles for a new strategy for shrinking urban zones, bringing together different kinds of ownership is an important question that should be answered to really realize ideas. Today the housing companies are shared corporations, and that seems to be a good start. The corporation/cooperation can keep housing affordable, because it can get relatively favourable

mortgages. However, apartments are not sold to individuals yet. This leads to the classic gap between corporation (owner) and tenant (user). The lack of financial and emotional association with the apartment or public space leads to general disinterest by tenants. Public space is for everybody - and nobody. Therefore it would be an improvement if tenants can also buy shares or parts of houses and public space.

Indeed, if housing association/city sell apartments to individuals or collectives, it will be more difficult to break down a tower block if vacancy is too high. Private/collective development in Free States and strong government action form a combination of overlapping interventions. Both are possible at the same time and in the same space. As housing companies are subsidiaries of the city, it can be comprehensively involved in interventions by the local government. A small and effective intervention team can be formed to take away obstacles. Housing units can be used for other non-disturbing daytime and evening purposes too. If hope is really given up, a tower block can only be dismantled if housing company/city buy back the units or offer the owners an alternative unit. On the other hand, building and zoning freedom will lead to interconnected units, larger units, collective units, new purposes of units and less vacancy of units. Temporary student housing or other activities are possible too. If housing company/city are unsure about future occupancy, they can first try to sell parts of apartment blocks to people's collectives as they form a steadier base than individuals. If housing company/city persists on not selling apartments, more and more units will have to be broken down - and this would lead to a fatal decrease of finances as well.

INNOVATION AS KEY ANSWER TO OLD QUESTIONS

I believe that a concept of Free States, punctual government action, generation building and collective ownership is an innovative proposal, especially in former DDR Plattenbau areas. This statement is based on the following motivation.

- * Total building liberalism in Free States is special and innovative within regulated Germany in general and overregulated Eastern Germany in particular. If more space is offered, Chemnitz can really make a difference and attract young people who tend to start their 'living career' in an alternative, urban environment.
- * An active and light instead of a reactive and heavy city administration is new too. To solve problems and to maintain order, no overall policy coverage is needed. The local government can allow a lot more than today without getting complications. Instead of heavily regulating every square metre of its territory, the city can invest in punctual actions within a certain framework. After all, pure liberalism will not lead to an improvement of space.
- * Community and generation building is an alternative to narrow individualism. After becoming part of the western, capitalist society, Eastern Germany quickly transformed and tried to catch up on the developments in the west. The new ideal was an old one: to own a detached house and a garden and to buy your goods in shopping centres and huge D.I.Y. markets. By doing this, the society followed mainstream - which is reasonable, but it does not distinguish itself from the grey mass. By building a community of different generations, classes and nationalities (combining old and young, foreign and native, poor and rich) it can become a special place.
- * The positive elements of (partial) ownership aren't really implemented yet. In order to stimulate people's responsibility and financial and emotional bond with a certain space, people can be shares of houses (grow plan) and public, collective space. This too is innovative in Chemnitz, where the model apartments cannot be bought yet and where public space does

not belong to anyone.

Of course, this is why the proposal is innovative within its context. But the ideas itself are innovative too, in my eyes. I propose two extremes: on the one hand a far-going liberalism within unregulated Free States and on the other hand strong government intervention when the government announces it is required - if necessary also in Free States. I believe in a combination of these too extremes, instead of covering everything with the same, single coloured sauce. Too often we try to smooth innovative and rough (sides of) ideas until there is an agreement, or consensus. The pureness of ideas gets clouded when certain key brains need to be convinced. But to really enforce potentials of a certain space, the pureness needs to be kept.

IS THIS IDEA APPLICABLE TO OTHER EUROPEAN CITIES?

By showing the example of Chemnitz, my proposal might only seem applicable in relatively dense urban areas where ownership is limited to a few collectives. Shrinkage in for example rural France, Spain or Finland and towns in England or peripheral regions in the Netherlands and Belgium seems to be another story, because it is not city-like and there are many owners.

But on the other hand, collectives of ownership can be formed anywhere to buy vacant houses and land. The positive part of collectives is that they can get a mortgage cheaper and that people can buy shares and feel responsible for and proud of something. Free states can be declared on all scales (from regional level to a single house) and generation building can be done within all contexts (rural, townish, urban, metropolitan). If there is no initiative on the short term, the local government can start to use its network and motivate people by creating and communicating a lack of, for example, building regulations, and by stimulating private and collective initiatives.

TERMINUS

The tower block areas in the 1970s and 1980s were made to accommodate citizens in a growing city in a society characterized by mass production and employment programmes. Today's reality is that these specific areas are subject to demographic shrinkage. While on-going consumption is questioned by more and more people, alternatives are being sought. In times of financial scarcity political extremes can repossess people's minds. Populist politicians conceptualise totalitarian states with strong government influence. Another extreme reaction is total liberalism: to lower government costs, people are responsible for their own well-being. In my proposal I combine the positive elements of both extremes: on the one hand strong government intervention and on the other hand zoning and building liberalism. When we build communities and collectives, we can find an alternative to narrow (and expensive!) individualism. Local governments use their local knowledge and networks to take up a more lean and stimulating role. Private and collective development is stimulated to realize 'healthy growth' - without quantitative goals. Especially within the context of Chemnitz collective Free States and collective action can lead to improvement. Individual action can support reaching collective aims. The world is plural, multicultural, colourful and beautiful. Not uniform, grey and dull.

If we, hominessapients, do not multiply as much as our grandparents did, it could become a survival of the fittest among cities and countries in the end. A war for every living soul could be inevitable! But in that case, the most modern and innovative cities and countries, inhabited by the most modern and innovative people and ran by the most modern and innovative officials, are then prepared and know what to do.