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Tension at the Heart of a Shifting City

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Decades of population loss, intensified after Germany's reunification, forced de-cision-makers in Leipzig to re-examine their planning approach. This resulted in a paradigm shift away from traditional growth-oriented planning and the adoption of a shrinking cities model. The innovative and participatory approach taken by the local government was recognized and heralded by many, as musicians, art-ists, and students began to migrate to the city. In turn, neighborhoods have begun to gentrify. Leipzig is at once growing, shrinking, developing, and declining. An industrial history, a political revolution, population loss, economic decline, and controversial policy have all contributed to Leipzig's incongruous identity.

1. Introduction

Leipzig is a city in transition and full of tension. Walking through its streets, one can almost feel the strain of conflicting identities. Is the city growing or shrinking? Developing or declining? Is Leipzig spatially perforated or segregated? When speaking with residents, even they seem tense, leaving one to wonder if the city still belongs to longtime inhabitants or if new migrants have displaced them. Is it a city of tourists? Of artists? Of students? An industrial history, a political revolution, population loss, economic decline, and controversial policy have all contributed to Leipzig's incongruous identity. Leipzig has been the focus of many research initiatives and has played a central role in the emergence of shrinking cities academic literature (Bernt et al. 2014; Haase, Lautenbach, and Seppelt 2010; Rink, Haase, Bernt, and Großmann 2011; Shrink Smart 2012). The research field of shrinking cities, originating in Germany, has since spread across the globe and garnered widespread interest (Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, Fol, and Cunningham-Sabot 2012). This photo essay, with images taken in during the summer of 2014, aims to capture a moment in time when Leipzig stood at a crossroads between resurgence, gentrification, and decline.

Figure 1. One of an estimated one million vacant properties in Leipzig.

For years, Leipzig was known as a medium-sized East German industrial center. Demonstrations held in Leipzig in 1989 contributed to the eventual fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the German Democratic Republic, and the celebration of Leipzig as the city of peaceful revolution (Garcia-Zamor 2014). Post-reunification expectations for Leipzig were high and ambitious plans for the newly democratic capitalist city were crafted. However, disillusion soon followed as economic and sociocultural importance waned while the population declined, vacancies soared, and plans were sidelined and abandoned. The shift from a socialist economy to a capitalist one proved difficult, with Leipzig losing no less than 75% of the local industry within a few years of reunification (Doehler and Usbeck 1996). The city's population had been declining since 1966, but the fall of the Berlin Wall spurred a dramatic increase of out-migration. The population fell by roughly 100,000 by the end of the decade and vacancy rates ran as high as 50% in some neighborhoods (Bontje 2004). Figures 1 and 2 show current residential and industrial examples of the widespread abandonment and vacancy still present in Leipzig.

Figure 2. After reunification, Leipzig lost more than 75% of local industry, leaving behind many abandoned industrial buildings such as this former grain refinery.

Juli Zeh, a German author, summed up the local attitude toward the future of the city:

> What does a medium-sized, central-German city do if it has no mountains at its doorstep, no majestically flowing river at its heart, no surrounding forests, no nearby coast, no seat of government, no drug scene, no therapeutic hot springs and otherwise nothing in particular to offer? Naturally, it starts to dream. (Popp 2012)

The decision-makers in Leipzig did exactly that by taking an innovative and largely unprecedented step and welcoming shrinkage rather than continuing attempts to reverse it. Due to its history of population loss, Leipzig, along with Detroit, had become a poster child for urban decline. Yet unlike its American counterpart, Leipzig's political and planning paradigm shift in the early 2000s

Figure 3. Collage of construction sites that were present throughout Leipzig's historic downtown on June 28, 2014.
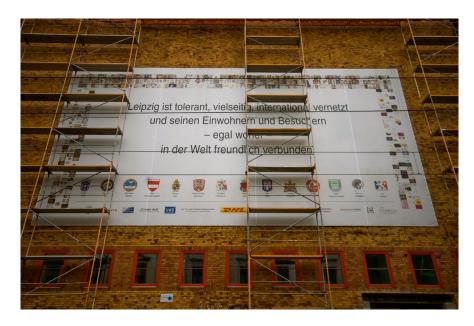
navigated the city onto a new, uncharted course, adopting a shrinking cities approach and advocating an awareness that prosperity is not solely reliant on, and should be uncoupled from, ever-increasing growth (Hollander and Németh 2011). Leipzig refocused its strategies from a growth-centric model to an emphasis on simply stabilizing the population. Demolitions increased dramatically as the city adapted its housing stock and infrastructure to reflect its newly accepted population size. A dichotomous, perforated city emerged. Large infrastructure projects, such as the main railway station's rehabilitation, helped refurbish older, central, tourist-attracting neighborhoods, while in the surrounding areas an estimated one million flats remained vacant (Florentin 2010). A photo collage of construction sites in the downtown area is depicted in Figure 3, while Figure 5 shows the juxtaposition between historical residential buildings and new commercial developments. Many saw the clash of new and old within the historic central neighborhoods, and the contrast between the revitalization of downtown and the widespread abandonment of the rest of the city, as a threat

Figure 4. "I heart Leipzig" car parked near downtown construction.

Figure 5. Juxtaposition of new commercial development and traditional built environment.

Figure 6. Billboard on residential development advocating Leipzig's tolerance, diversity, friendliness, and international networks.

Figure 7. New residential development along Karl-Heine-Kanal.

Figure 8. Postings, posters, and material for activist groups protesting racism and gentrification in the Plagwitz district.

to their cultural identity. This struggle motivated protests and demonstrations, such as the one seen in the Plagwitz district (Figure 8). This former industrial site was vacant for several years, but once it was slated for a high-priced apartment development, it became "occupied" by protesters of Leipzig's burgeoning residential market.

The new strategies adopted in Leipzig stressed the restructuring of vacant and derelict industrial areas, but failed to incorporate job-generating tactics and thus were criticized for an inability to retain, let alone attract, working populations (Bontje 2004). These strategies were, in effect, fundamentally reduced to a marketing campaign built on the conventional rhetoric of urban regeneration (Florentin 2010). Although the new approach to local decision-making caused significant controversy and a paradigm shift that may have been shallower than advertised, the innovative and participatory approach the local government took was recognized and heralded by many, as musicians, artists, and students began to migrate to the city. This resulted in public art such as murals (Figure 10) and cultural events like the outdoor film screening in the Spinnerei district (Figure

Figure 9. "This Site is Always Under Construction" on a heavily graffitied building.

11). Furthermore, it attracted start-up entrepreneurs, who in turn hired well-educated employees (Garcia-Zamor 2014). A successful, diverse music and art scene propelled the city forward, and an expanded airport and even a bid to host the Olympic Games continued in line with the city's prosperity.

For some, Leipzig was able to harmonize planning and equity to create a livable and richly cultured urban center, which has been recently referred to in the international press as "the better Berlin" (Oltermann 2014). Yet for others, Leipzig—or "Hypezig," as it has been dubbed (Raymunt 2014)—has catered to tourists, promoted gentrification, and is quickly losing its authenticity and appeal. As it stands, Leipzig boasts a unique blend of identities as it develops, stagnates, gentrifies, declines, grows, and shrinks all at once. The exceptional mix of derelict housing and industrial space, new residential developments, temporary art space, historic architecture, chain restaurants, and small boutiques reflect the tension in the city's evolution. Regardless of which path it follows, the future of Leipzig will continue to be of interest to planners, academics, and policymakers as the successes and failures of this unique approach continue to unfold.

Figure 10. One example of the many public murals throughout the city.

Figure 11. Film screening in the Spinnerei, a cotton mill converted to art space and galleries.

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Lead Photograph

Sao Geraldo, Porto Alegre, Brazil. This image highlights a current disregard for heritage and the role of memory in constituting a city. The image shows the failure of local authorities and developers to preserve or make use of a historic building, allowing it instead to fall into disrepair, even as the neighborhood faces a serious housing deficit. Photograph by Fernanda Jahn Verri.