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# Urban Shrinkage in Parkstad Limburg

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**ABSTRACT** *Once a flourishing mining area, Parkstad Limburg in the south of the Netherlands is now facing limited economic vitality and structural changes in its demographic composition. In a process of selective migration, young and highly educated people tend to move out of the region, while elderly and less- educated people stay. Shrinkage in Parkstad Limburg has resulted in a declining basis for economic activity, an unbalanced housing market, and policy responses in order to deal with these phenomena. Unfortunately acceptance of the phenomenon is a difficult step and a time-consuming process. While after years of denial most politicians and policy-makers in Parkstad Limburg have finally accepted the decline, the inhabitants of the region have to be confronted with inconvenient decisions like demolishing houses and the closure of public facilities. Based on the findings in Parkstad Limburg, it is concluded that a suitable policy response consists of the acceptance of shrinkage, developing a long-term vision, engaging the inhabitants in the process, restructuring the housing market, and fostering intensive regional collaboration.*

## 1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, demographic decline is in a less advanced stage than in several other European countries. The Dutch population as a whole is expected to continue growing for at least two and perhaps even three decades. However, population growth is already slowing down nationally and in some parts of the country, the first signs of structural stagnation or decline have already become apparent. So far shrinking regions are mainly found in the periphery (as far as one can speak of a periphery in a small country like this), at the borders with Germany and Belgium. While earlier phases of shrinkage did affect large cities as well, recent shrinkage in the Netherlands is mostly a rural affair. The only urbanized area currently facing structural shrinkage is Parkstad Limburg in the south-east of the country. This is a former coal mining region, which grew fast demographically and economically between the late nineteenth century and the mid-1960s. Ever since the

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coal mines have been closed (between 1965 and 1973), the regional economy has stagnated, but population initially still kept growing. Since the late 1990s, however, Parkstad Limburg has faced continuous population decline. This decline has a selective character: young people in particular, leave the region for educational or career reasons.

Just like in many other European countries, the “growth paradigm” has long remained dominant in Dutch urban and regional planning. Growth-oriented planning is still adequate and needed in the largest city-regions of the Netherlands, but has meanwhile become counterproductive in less urbanized areas and in the border regions. Parkstad Limburg was the first region in the Netherlands where shrinkage was not only accepted as a structural trend, but also led to shrinkage-oriented planning policies. This was not a matter of simply switching to new professional approaches; it took several years to go through the “mourning process” and accept that growth could not be brought back with growth-oriented policies, and (even more importantly) that shrinkage is not necessarily a negative process. Moreover, some of the “traditional” planning tools appeared to be unsuited for a shrinkage situation, so a part of the transformation of regional planning in Parkstad Limburg also involves adapting these planning tools and possibly introducing new ones. Meanwhile, a regional collaboration has been set up and a consensus seems to have been reached on how to deal with a future with shrinkage.

In this paper we analyse the causes and effects of the change from growth to shrinkage in the Parkstad Limburg region. Next to demographic and economic factors, political, and socio-cultural factors are also part of the explanation of the region’s current situation. We then explore the planning reactions to this new reality and assess to what extent planners have found the right answer to the challenge of structural shrinkage. Before turning to this analysis, though, we will first briefly discuss the recent international debate on planning in shrinking cities and regions, and the extent to which these insights have changed the Dutch planning debate so far.

## **2. Planning in Shrinking Cities and Regions: The Academic and Political Debate So Far**

In a recent review article, shrinkage was identified as one of the emerging research agendas in planning (Hollander *et al.*, 2009). Meanwhile we can say that shrinkage is a hot topic not only in planning, but also in other disciplines like geography, urban studies, urban sociology, political science and environmental sciences. This upsurge of scientific attention to shrinkage goes along with a growing sense of urgency in several countries that shrinkage needs an adequate planning response. As Hollander *et al.* (2009) point out, so far the “epicentre” of the international shrinkage debate was in Germany, but first efforts to internationalize the debate and promote international academic collaboration have been made in networks like the Shrinking Cities International Research Network and the EU COST Action “Cities Regrowing Smaller”.

Shrinkage can be the result of a multitude of causes and can have different effects in every single case. We do not elaborate on the possible causes for, and possible effects of, shrinkage here (see amongst others Oswald, 2005a, 2005b; Oswald & Rieniets, 2006; Pallagst *et al.*, 2011 for good overviews of causes and effects of shrinkage). Instead, we focus on the international debate on adequate policy responses to shrinkage. As mentioned earlier, the shift from fighting shrinkage to accepting it and adapting policies to this new situation is not easy for politicians and policy-makers. This is connected to the way the

shrinkage process is perceived by them. Farke (2005, p. 179) distinguishes four types of perception:

- (1) The “phase of ignoring” in which decline is perceived as a transitional phenomenon;
- (2) “Observation without acceptance”, in which decline is already seen as a structural phenomenon, but this is not accepted;
- (3) “Certain acceptance with or without limited public communication”, in which public authorities are deliberating on how to cope with decline;
- (4) “Acceptance”: in this type growth is no longer attempted to achieve.

Derks *et al.* (2006) and several other authors analyse the process of political adaption to structural shrinkage in similar terms and describe it as a “mourning process”.

Once it has become clear that a shrinkage situation in a city or region is structural instead of only short term, “traditional” planning based on growth management should be adapted towards, or replaced by, shrinkage management. The international debate on how to do this exactly is still on-going and so far, most analyses are rather based on one or a small set of case studies rather than systematic international comparisons. The best-suited approach to deal with shrinkage in a city or region is directly connected to the factors causing shrinkage in the city or region involved, and the particular effects shrinkage has on that place. Just like there is no such thing as a general “recipe” for growth, there is no universal approach to dealing with shrinkage. Danielzyk *et al.* (2002) distinguish four types of municipal or regional strategies to cope with shrinkage: an expansive strategy; a maintenance strategy; a planning for decline strategy; and a “decline as a vicious circle” strategy. The first three strategies could be called active in the sense that policy interventions are introduced to influence or steer the shrinkage process; the fourth strategy is rather “laissez-faire” or passive, hoping for a helping hand from outside the city or region. Even when a choice between these four strategy types is made, there will still be considerable differences between locations in what works and what does not. Location-specific factors and characteristics should play an important role when a suited strategy is developed. While “best practices” from elsewhere can certainly be inspiring, simply copying them in another shrinking place will most often not work, since each place shrinks in its own way and is part of its own national and regional context. Aspects to be considered are for example:

- The recent and expected pace and scope of the shrinkage process and its components: is shrinkage mainly the result of natural population decline or out-migration or a combination of both? Is it only a decline in the number of inhabitants or also in the number of households? Is shrinkage expected to continue for a long time or only a few years? etc.
- The local housing market situation: not only quantitative but also qualitative aspects of the available housing stock, and to what extent supply matches demand; the legal and political context (planning law, who owns the land, housing regulations etc.).
- The local economic situation and dynamics: growth and decline of economic sectors, “monostructure” or diverse economy, the unemployment rate, qualifications and skills of the workforce, etc.
- Expected changes in demand for local public services connected to e.g. selective migration and greying of the remaining population, etc.

Moreover, having in-depth insight in the recent history of the city or region may help in assessing its unique qualities that may be used (or rediscovered) to develop a tailor-made shrinkage strategy. While the path dependence of urban and regional socio-economic development is definitely not a one-way street without exits, events, decisions, and processes from the past do matter in the present and probably also for the future perspectives of a place (Musterd & Murie, 2010; Bontje *et al.*, 2011). An important aspect of this is insight into cultural and social traditions and characteristics that may be unique for a city or region and may influence the shrinkage process.

While acknowledging the uniqueness of every single shrinkage situation as elaborated above, there are still some generalising remarks to be made about planning shrinking cities and regions. Hollander *et al.* (2009) identify several questions to be raised for research and policy practice in shrinkage situations that so far have only been answered partially. These questions concern the dimensions of land use; environmental mitigation and ecological restoration; social equity; right-sizing infrastructure; and density. On all these dimensions, planning strategies and considerations are different in a situation of shrinkage than in a situation of growth. On some (if not all) of these dimensions, this may imply that the “traditional” set of planning tools that is mostly developed to manage growth situations may not work or not be enough to deal with shrinkage situations. The current state of the international debate seems to be that this is widely acknowledged, but that the search for possible alternative planning tools for shrinkage situation is still on-going. Acceptance and a change of attitude of planners and politicians, for instance seeing shrinkage as an opportunity instead of a threat, is a good start; but how to move on from there? Oswalt (2005a, 2005b) points at the possibilities of what he calls “weak planning”: using “soft” planning tools like cultural development, communication strategies, and the empowerment of social networks instead of traditional “brick-and-mortar” types of planning. Since the term “weak planning” is an unfortunate choice, implying that it will not have much influence, we prefer to call such types of planning tools “alternative planning”.

### 3. Shrinkage and Planning Response in the Netherlands

The cyclical character that shrinkage often has is clearly illustrated by the urban development of the Netherlands. Amsterdam, for example, is currently known as a growing city with prognoses pointing at further growth for the next decades. Still it should not be forgotten that Amsterdam’s growth stagnated in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and once more from the early 1960s to the mid-1980s as a result of mass suburbanization (Jobse & Musterd, 1992; Bontje, 2001; Latten, 2009). This suburbanization, also affecting the other large cities as well as some of the medium-sized cities, was driven by market forces—depriving city centres versus an attractive housing stock in the suburbs—on the one hand, and was policy-induced—among others through the Dutch “clustered deconcentration” policy—on the other. These market forces and policies also caused the reurbanization trend in the mid-1980s, namely socio-demographic changes like the increasing number of singles and childless couples with a mostly urban living preference (Everaers & Musterd, 1994; Bontje, 2001; Bontje & Latten, 2005; Latten, 2009) together with a national policy shift towards compact city policies. Although Amsterdam and Utrecht recovered economically, Rotterdam never fully recovered from de-industrialization and is the only of the four largest cities with a structurally stagnating population, though forecasts for the next years point at population growth here, too.

Since the 1960s, rural regions like Northeast-Groningen and Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, manufacturing-oriented cities like Enschede, Hengelo and Tilburg, and the mining-oriented region of South Limburg have also declined, first economically, later also demographically. The government has—with varying success—attempted to alleviate regional decline by the deconcentration of government and semi-government institutions to the north, east, and south of the country, founding new universities in these regions, and subsidizing the local remaining or newly founded industries. Recently, demographic shrinkage in the Netherlands is mainly found in the country's periphery, in the areas near the border with Germany and Belgium.

Shrinkage comes in various shapes and sizes in the Netherlands. First, there is the severe shrinkage in the border areas Northeast-Groningen, Zeeuws-Vlaanderen in the south of Zeeland, and the south of Limburg. Here, shrinkage is a regional rather than a local phenomenon, though with considerable local variations within those regions too. The second type are single municipalities with a stagnating or shrinking population which are scattered across the Netherlands, often close to or even adjacent to growing municipalities (van Dam *et al.*, 2006; Derks *et al.*, 2006; van Nimwegen & Heering, 2009). Shrinkage in the Netherlands is so far a more rural than urban phenomenon, with our case study region Parkstad Limburg as the urbanized exception to that rule.

The Netherlands were relatively late compared to several other European countries to put shrinkage on the local, regional, and national policy agendas. Recent publications of researchers and policy consultants and calls for attention (conferences, debates, etc.) from the shrinking cities and regions themselves have given demographic ageing and shrinkage a prominent position in the Dutch national policy agenda (van Dam *et al.*, 2006; Derks *et al.*, 2006; Verwest *et al.*, 2008; Latten & Musterd, 2009a, 2009b). After a period in which shrinkage was either denied or seen as a short-term phenomenon, the difficult process towards political and societal acceptance of structural shrinkage began recently. In 2009, the Dutch national government even developed a “national shrinkage strategy”, and sent two prominent former politicians (a former minister and a former mayor) to several shrinking rural and urban regions to explore the specific policy needs of these regions. Subsequently, the Ministry for Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment joined forces with the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) and the inter-provincial consultation (IPO) to develop the inter-administrative action plan “*Krimpen met kwaliteit*” (“shrinking with quality”) (BZK/WWI/VROM/VNG/IPO, 2009). In this document it is stressed that shrinkage should be accepted and guided and might even offer new opportunities and not only threats (less congestion, a less strained housing market etc.). The municipal level is seen as the proper level to deal with shrinkage, yet in close cooperation with the region and the province. The national government sees its main task in consciousness-raising and interferes only when necessary.

Probably mainly due to the late “discovery” of shrinkage as an urgent policy issue, the Dutch national government is still in a phase of experimenting and discovering the appropriate ways to deal with decline. The first step is that the three declining regions Northeast-Groningen, Zeeuws-Vlaanderen and Parkstad Limburg formulate regional action plans. In a second step, the various sectoral aspects of decline are addressed. These measures include among others that the Dutch government will financially support the redevelopment of the housing stock; the regions will formulate *Gebiedsagenda's* (area agendas), which will focus on alternative land uses but also how to deal with damage-due-to-planning claims; to strengthen the regional labour market, experiments will be organized

to stimulate people to work in health care and to prevent “brain drain”. Besides these sectoral aspects, the government is discussing how to encourage administrative efficiency and inter-municipal cooperation; deal with decreasing municipal revenues; raise consciousness of shrinkage for politicians and policy-makers, but also in the business community; and how to bring together scholars and other interested parties (BZK/WWI/VROM/ VNG/ IPO, 2009). A concrete step regarding the latter was the founding of the Kenniscentrum Bevolkingsdaling (Knowledge Centre Population Decline) in the province of Limburg. All these shrinkage strategies are focused on the alleviation of the consequences of decline and the possible prevention of further decline. Therefore the Dutch strategy can be categorized as *planning for decline* and in some areas *maintenance*.

#### 4. Research Design and Methodology

To answer our research questions, the case of Parkstad Limburg was studied with a diverse set of methodological tools. By means of an extensive literature research of scientific journals and books, policy documents, reports of advisory agencies, and publications of urban projects, a theoretical framework was set up. Statistical information was found in publications of Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and its digital platform CBS StatLine, Eurostat, and the Parkstadmonitor. For predictions of demographic trends in the future, the two most common demographic prognosis models of the Netherlands, Pearl and Primos, were used. Next to this use of secondary sources, empirical research was done during numerous visits of the region plus a fieldwork period of two weeks in January 2010. Interviews with key informants were held in the period from September 2009 until February 2010. The composition of a representative set of key informants led to 28 interviews, plus numerous special meetings, discussions, and shorter conversations. Among the respondents were representatives of housing corporations, private property developers, a development company, research institutes, neighbourhood foundations, the chamber of commerce, entrepreneurs, local inhabitants, and governors and policy-makers of the local, regional, provincial, and national level.

In addition, attending conferences and symposia on shrinkage was also a useful source of information. Besides the speeches and lectures, these events also presented opportunities to have short discussions with professionals who worked in a field of shrinkage related themes.

#### 5. Causes of Shrinkage in Parkstad Limburg

##### 5.1 Introduction

Our case study region is situated in the south-east of the province of Limburg, the southernmost province of the Netherlands, on the border with Germany and Belgium. The name Parkstad Limburg has been given to this region only recently, in relation to efforts to intensify inter-municipal collaboration. The eight municipalities now working together in the region Parkstad Limburg are Brunssum, Heerlen, Kerkrade, Landgraaf, Nuth, Onderbanken, Simepveld, and Voerendaal. Until the late nineteenth century, it was a mostly agricultural region. Mining had already started much earlier, but on a very modest scale. Around 1900, the region transformed rapidly connected to the rise of the mining industry. Several large mines were opened and some of the villages in the region started to grow into

urban and suburban environments. Between 1900 and 1965, the region was growing fast economically and demographically. This blossoming period was suddenly stopped in the mid-1960s when the Dutch national government decided to close the coal mines. This was the start of a period of economic stagnation that in fact has continued until today. Several national and regional government measures to compensate for the loss of jobs and wealth and stimulate a new economic future for the region have only had limited success so far. More recently, since the mid-1990s, economic stagnation has been accompanied by population loss and selective migration of young people in particular. Predictions of the CBS and PBL say that the population of the city region of Parkstad Limburg will decrease further from 238,684 at the 1 January 2008 to about 223,000 in 2025 (De Jong & Van Duin, 2010, p. 10; Parkstadmonitor, 2010). The underlying causes of this development can be classified in economic, demographic, political, and socio-cultural factors, which are elucidated below.

### 5.2 *Economic Factors*

After oil and gas became more important in the provision of energy, the Dutch state mines started making substantial losses. Because the sector lost its significance for the national economy, Minister of Economic Affairs Joop den Uyl decided to dismantle the mining industry. The mines were closed between 1966 and 1973. Parkstad Limburg was left with about 45,000 unemployed and a mental setback of the lost mining identity (Andere Tijden, 2005; De Graaf, 2005; Verhoeven, interview 2010).

In an attempt to provide jobs, employment-generating institutes like Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and the pension fund Algemeen Burgerlijk Pensioenfonds were relocated to Heerlen. However, the mismatch between the white-collar employment and the blue-collar labour force contributed to the continuation of the problem of unemployment. Although the Dutch national policy in the 1970s was focussed on providing jobs in the peripheral regions, this approach eventually failed in good intentions. Looking for a job or higher education, people started moving to other parts of the Netherlands (Smeulders & Latten 2009; Verhoeven, interview 2010).

Parkstad Limburg's mono-sectoral economic heritage was and is still a crucial obstacle in making the shift to a more diverse economic structure. This is a phenomenon that also appeared in many other de-industrialising cities around the world (Hall, 1998, pp. 291–309).

### 5.3 *Demographic Factors*

Demographic developments are the main cause of shrinkage in Parkstad Limburg. Key terms in this respect are ageing, relatively low birth rates and high death rates, decreasing household size and economically driven selective out-migration.

With the post-World War II baby boom generation coming into seniority in the coming decades, a general trend of ageing is noticed in the Netherlands. The Dutch national average of senior citizens (65 years and older) in 2005 was 14.0%, but statistics of the regional differences show that Parkstad Limburg faces substantially higher percentages. The province of Limburg (15.9%), COROP (Coördinatie Commissie Regionaal Onderzoeks Programma) region South Limburg (17.0%), and Parkstad Limburg (22.0%) have much higher rates of seniority, which are comparable with the ageing rates in Germany and Belgium (De Witte, 2009; Thissen & Poelman, 2009; CBS StatLine, 2010). Next to

the trend of an ageing population, the relatively low birth rates and high death rates in comparison with other Dutch regions also show that Parkstad Limburg's demographic situation is better comparable to nearby regions in Germany and Belgium. The Dutch average birth rate in 2005 was 11.5 in every 1000 people, but again there are clear regional differences. In contrast with the highest birth rate in Flevoland (14.4), COROP region South Limburg (8.1) and Parkstad Limburg (7.9) belong to the regions with lowest birth rates of the Netherlands (Thissen & Poelman, 2009). This is combined with a relatively high death rate: while the Dutch average death rate in 2005 was 8.4 in every 1000 people, South Limburg (10.2) and Parkstad Limburg (11.0) belong to the regions with the highest death rates of the Netherlands (Thissen & Poelman, 2009). Looking at the Euregio Meuse-Rhine,<sup>1</sup> the demographic trends seem to be comparable, but in the context of urban developments, it must be noticed that the nearby cities of Hasselt and Aachen have growing economies and populations (Reverda, interview 2010). Another cause of the demographic decline in Parkstad Limburg is also related to the region's economic situation. Young and higher-educated people, looking for education at university level or high-skilled jobs, leave Parkstad Limburg with its decreasing potential for the labour force. Especially students who have left the region for higher education find their jobs elsewhere in the Netherlands (Latten & Musterd 2009b; Smeulders & Latten 2009). This selective out-migration of young people reinforces demographic tendencies like greying, decreasing birth rates and rising death rates that affect Parkstad Limburg more than most other Dutch regions.

#### *5.4 Political and Socio-Cultural Factors*

Political factors that play a role in the context of the stagnating regional development are to be found in the region's geographic location. From the perspective of the Randstad, the economic core of the Netherlands, Parkstad Limburg is a peripheral border region. In Parkstad Limburg, the policy-makers of the Dutch national government find less potential to contribute to the economic development and the international competitiveness of the Randstad, which is the central focus region of the national economic policy (Ministerie ez, 2006, pp. 25–31; Verhoeven, interview 2010). However, in the context of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine, Parkstad Limburg's geographic location is anything but peripheral. With an eye on South Limburg and neighbours Germany and Belgium, the mental map of the inhabitants of Parkstad Limburg is completely different from that of people from the Randstad. While it takes about three hours to get to Randstad cities like Amsterdam and The Hague, travelling to Brussels or Cologne just takes about an hour. Within half an hour the cities of Liege, Genk, and Hasselt can be reached, and the agglomeration of Aachen has almost literally grown across Parkstad Limburg's borders. It is this European context that is potentially of high value for the development of Parkstad Limburg. For example, the RWTH Aachen University is one of the most appreciated technical universities in Germany and it expects to grow with thousands of new students in the coming years. Knowing that the city of Aachen is now facing the limits of its spatial expansion, while nearby Parkstad Limburg has many affordable houses available, an opportunity may be grasped. An example of international collaboration that is already in development is the border-crossing business park Avantis. Institutional barriers related to national borders like differences in tax regimes and planning systems still frustrate the development of initiatives like Avantis, and it remains to be seen whether the opportunities seen by the Parkstad

Limburg policy-makers are equally recognized in the Aachen region. However, the first hopeful signs of fruitful cross-border collaboration are already visible, like the recent initiative to improve border-crossing rail infrastructure between Heerlen and Aachen.

While collaboration opportunities may arise across the national borders, it is already difficult enough to stimulate and facilitate inter-municipal collaboration within the Parkstad Limburg region itself. Socio-cultural factors play a significant role in the regional political debates and initiatives and can sometimes cause tensions between, but also within municipalities. Regional fragmentation of cultural backgrounds is a contextual factor that may not be underestimated when talking about politics and regional collaboration. The mining settlements had always been mini-societies, with their own churches, sports clubs, brass bands, and other facilities attached to the local mining site. Mine and church tended to have a large influence in these settlements, and the identity of the people is deeply rooted in these communities. A local politician can still count on support from the mining settlement he or she comes from, which has a large influence on behaviour in the political arena. Who dares to defend solutions that benefit the regional interest, but damage the local facility level? Due to a high level of chauvinism, it is very hard to realize mergers of schools, sports, and leisure clubs, or other institutions that are part of the strong local identities (Bronckers, discussion 2010; Cremers, discussion 2010; Vos, discussion 2010). Next to the fragmented structure of the former mining settlements, there is also a diverse set of local dialects that strengthen feelings of local alignment. Taking all of these socio-cultural factors together, there are strong feelings of local identity and competitiveness to deal with when making policy for the Parkstad Limburg region.

Nowadays, the absence of the mines and the decreasing role of the church have another side-effect, which indirectly affects the local economy. According to several of our interview respondents, because people have always been used to the greater institutions, mine and church, to assign people to jobs and social functions, a wait-and-see attitude did slowly become manifest among parts of the inhabitants. Meanwhile there has been a low stimulus for entrepreneurship for decades, but since the mines closed down, the regional economy is desperately in need of entrepreneurs to take up new initiatives (Krasovec, interview 2010; Verhoeven, interview 2010). It is likely that the lack of entrepreneurs is caused at least partly by the selective out-migration of young and higher educated people mentioned earlier, but further research would be needed to explore this possible relationship.

## **6. Policy Response in Parkstad Limburg (1): Traditional Planning Tools**

### *6.1 Economic Profile and a Future Perspective*

Nowadays, the motto “shrinkage as opportunity” is frequently heard in both governmental as well as research publications. After going through a time-consuming mourning process of denial, condemnation, and resistance, shrinkage is now finally accepted by most of the policy-makers in Parkstad Limburg. The region’s demographic changes play a central role in the development of a future perspective for the region. Although a too-naïve positivism should be judged critically, shrinking regions need a positive narrative on the chances and opportunities for a long-term future perspective. On the one hand, Parkstad Limburg is losing many young and high educated people (Das & De Feijter, 2009); on the other hand, Parkstad Limburg still appears to be attractive for returning migrants (Smeulders & Latten, 2009). It is unrealistic to stop the demographic trends, but it is essential to

give the current and future inhabitants of Parkstad Limburg opportunities to find jobs, start enterprises, and live in liveable neighbourhoods. In order to realize this, it is important to revitalize the regional economy and to strengthen the regional identity.

### *6.2 Public–Private Partnerships and Entrepreneurship*

Redeveloping the regional economy cannot be done without making use of all relevant actors in the field. This means that also the strengths of market players must be used in strategic public–private partnerships. Specific know-how, financial assets, and extensive networks of the market players are essential features in the stimulation of economic development and diversity. Weaker economies in combination with a shrinking population require intelligent coalitions, based on a good relationship between public and private partners. This last point is, however, highly contested because of the tendency of governmental institutions to act in a prescriptive way, within and without the reach of their capabilities and responsibilities (Drijkoningen, interview 2010).

Next to public–private partnerships, the stimulation of entrepreneurship is another essential part of economic revitalization. In a global world with endless information technology possibilities, every entrepreneur can potentially act on an international level. On the other side, the existence of borders still determines important differences in juridical, fiscal, and insurance legislation. Especially in the Euregio Meuse-Rhine, international borders hinder regional entrepreneurs who want to operate their businesses on the other side of the border. The differences in legislation plus the bureaucracy of import and export rules make it unattractive to participate in a border-crossing market. Easing or removing these obstructing bureaucracy and legislation barriers is an essential but complex element of the recreation of a vital economy in Parkstad Limburg (Hermans, interview 2010; Verhoeven, interview 2010).

### *6.3 Housing Market and Spatial Planning*

The core of the problem on the housing market is an overcapacity of houses and the outdated state of maintenance that are both causing a decrease of real-estate values. The situation in the housing market requires short-term actions that are, in an ideal scenario, embedded in a long-term regional strategy (Aarnoudse, interview 2009; Laudy, interview 2010; Vinken, interview 2010).

The essence of a dynamic housing market is scarcity, and in case of overstrained housing markets, a decline in population does not have to be a problem. On the contrary, it enables buyers to have higher demands and negotiate a cheaper price. Private developers are forced to deliver quality rather than quantity (Wagenaar, interview 2010). In Parkstad Limburg, however, the overcapacity of houses, a mismatch between demand and supply, and the decay of many houses make it hard to sell a house and make a housing career. While a vacancy rate of about 2% is necessary to ensure people keep on moving on the housing market, on 1 January Parkstad Limburg had an average vacancy rate of 5.2% (Parkstad Limburg, 2009a, p. 18).

An example in Parkstad Limburg where all of the housing market-related problems come together is the neighbourhood of Vrieheide in Heerlen, which was former property of housing corporations, but was put on the market at a time that maintenance was needed. Former tenants got the chance to buy a house, but were not used to the responsibilities of

owning a house. On top of that, the relatively tight budgets of these people had the result that many of them neglected the maintenance on their houses as well. Now, weeds and plants are literally growing on the rooftops, while the roots are ruining the ceilings and make the upper levels of several houses unliveable (Aarnoudse, interview 2009; Graus, interview 2010; Wagenaar, interview 2010). What happens to these houses is a steep fall in their real-estate value, which makes it impossible to sell them for the price that the homeowners expected to get when they bought their houses (Eichholtz & Lindenthal, 2009).

Vrieheide is also suffering from socio-economic problems like crime and unemployment, and a rising number of its inhabitants deal with increasing debts that result in problems with paying the mortgage. With rising execution sales, social problems will only increase by a rising pressure on social housing and social services of the welfare state (Kleyn, interview 2010; Schuitemaker, interview 2010). Another social problem is that of individual homeowners that are not able to sell their house, even though they do not have direct economic problems. When a house is part of the pension savings and if the price of their house is too low, they will not be able to afford a new house, especially not in more expensive regions. Because of the outdated state of many houses in Vrieheide and similar neighbourhoods, demolition would be a logical choice. Intervening in private property, however, is a difficult, expensive, and time-consuming process, and buying up houses in neighbourhoods that suffer a substantial price-fall of the real-estate values also brings up an ethical discussion. The longer you wait, the cheaper the houses will be, causing even larger financial losses. Social problems will rise, which is a negative factor for a neighbourhood's liveability (Aarnoudse, interview 2009; Graus, interview 2010).

Until now, there has been little public debate about these social aspects and the responsibilities of the different actors in these situations. Which actors should pay for the restructuring of the housing market? Is there a responsibility towards individual homeowners regarding the negative social effects of decreasing real-estate values and increasing individual bankruptcies? How can these people be included in the development of a future perspective for their own region?

#### 6.4 *Financial Bottleneck*

The local and regional governments in Parkstad Limburg have recently developed a strategy to adapt the housing stock. A restructuring envelope is defined, which must lead to a stable regional housing market in 2020. In short, it is estimated that 6245 houses must be taken out of the market, 5110 houses must be built because of already granted building permissions, and 1802 care houses will be added to cope with the housing preferences of an ageing society. In terms of the qualitative transformation task, 12,748 houses are indicated as not meeting the demands of modern housing. Of another 2400 houses it is expected that they will be built in different segments of the housing market, but it is not completely sure if they will be actually submitted (Parkstad Limburg, 2009a, pp. 18–19).

The numbers mentioned in these plans largely consist of housing corporations' property, but as was illustrated above, the core of the restructuring problem lies in the private property, which covers about 67% of the regional housing market (Parkstad Limburg, 2009a, p. 18). According to several actors, this is a suboptimal way of

dealing with the restructuring task, which ignores the challenge to include the private sector in the restructuring agenda. This will result in postponing a more structural solution (Palmen, interview 2010; Vinken, interview 2010). Although this is a sound critique, it must be noted that it is very difficult to integrate the numerous different homeowners in an overarching regional housing market restructuring programme. Moreover, detailed information on demolition plans is attractive to speculators, which forces the actors to apply a subtle strategy (Severeijns, interview 2010; Smeets, interview 2010).

In a cost–benefit analysis of the regional housing market, it was concluded that intervention is needed, because a *laissez-faire* policy will result in a loss of real-estate values of about 20–30% in the cheaper segments of the private sector (Parkstad Limburg, 2010, p. 63; Severeijns, interview 2010). In the five most urgent neighbourhoods, it is proposed by the city region to make use of unorthodox and experimental tools, in terms of technical renovation, combination of houses, and alternative methods of financing. These neighbourhoods are Brunssum Centre-North, Kerkrade West, Landgraaf Nieuwenhagen, Heerlen Hoensbroek, and Heerlen Vrieheide-Passart, which are also called the “Parkstad five” (Parkstad Limburg, 2010, pp. 9–32). The costs for restructuring these five neighbourhoods are estimated to be about €285,310,000. In total, a restructuring programme that stabilizes the entire regional housing market of Parkstad Limburg costs about €2,600,000,000, in which the social housing sector and the private sector are each responsible for about 50% of these costs (Parkstad Limburg, 2010, pp. 9–12; Merks, interview 2010; Severeijns, interview 2010). To cope with the high costs of this restructuring programme, it is required to make an inventory for each case of the actors, their responsibilities and their assets, after which the strongest parties take the lead in the investments in return for more influence on the determination of the actual process. The wealthiest and probably most influential actor in the field is the province of Limburg (van Essen, interview 2010; Visser, interview 2010). A disadvantage of this approach is the fact that the actors with the weakest financial assets end up with the weakest negotiation position in the arena. The municipalities have to make concessions in order to serve the regional interest, and are thus likely to get into conflict about the local spatial outcomes of the restructuring programme. The actual weakest players, however, are the individual homeowners, who are not involved in the negotiations at all (Schuitemaker, interview 2010).

Another relatively powerful group of actors are the housing corporations. Although not as rich as they have been before, the corporations still have relatively large financial assets. Even in the awareness of a prisoners’ dilemma concerning investments in the housing market, several housing corporations already started working with the realistic perspective of demographic changes, years before this trend was accepted by the local politicians (Laudy, interview 2010; Vinken, interview 2010). The private developers, normally striving to maximize their profit, are dealing with decreasing profits and the cancellation of several building permissions. Because they cannot afford themselves to go any further in their financial contributions, this is the line the developers will hold in the negotiations (Graus, interview 2010; Meijers, interview 2010; Wagenaar, interview 2010).

Although a decline in the number of households indeed causes a rising vacancy rate, it is too simple to state that “shrinkage leads to an unbalanced housing market”. If the demographic predictions had been taken seriously at the time Wim Derks gave his warning in 1997, and if the transformation task had been included in policy at that time, many problems could have been avoided and the transformation costs would

have been much lower. It is the responsibility of municipalities, housing corporations, and private developers to take the demographic trends into account, but inadequacy and unrealistic policy have aggravated the instability of the regional housing market in Parkstad Limburg.

### 6.5 Governmental Strength and Complex Local Relations

In an urban region in which the political mandates are divided among several municipalities with different interests, it is difficult to formulate a policy that in first instance serves the regional interest (Ostrom *et al.*, 1961). In Parkstad Limburg, however, the regional cooperation has been intensified from the WGR+ status<sup>2</sup> towards a regional board that decides over spatial planning and housing policies. To continue the intensification of regional cooperation, the eight municipalities signed the “Pact of Parkstad” (Parkstad Limburg, 2009b), which is a step towards the provision of more political mandates for the regional board. In comparison with other regions in the province of Limburg, the policy-making in Parkstad Limburg is by far the most integrated approach and the most advanced in terms of accepting shrinkage. In other regions, the mourning process of accepting shrinkage (Derks *et al.*, 2007, pp. 25–31) is not yet completed and many governors there still deny the developments and plea for growth or maintenance of the population (van Essen, interview 2010).

Despite the ratification of the “Pact of Parkstad” (Parkstad Limburg, 2009b), the complex local relations and the fragmentation of identities in the region still make it hard for local politicians to prioritise regional interests over local sentiments (Dunsbergen, interview 2009; Reverda, interview 2010). In the local elections of March 2010, shrinkage was hardly discussed realistically, which is rooted in the fear of losing electoral support. Although this is a logical reaction, it is worrying that short-term local political interests delay the formulation of long-term strategies on which Parkstad Limburg can build a sustainable future plan that, in the end, serves all of its municipalities. Dijkstal and Mans (2009) advocate the installation of a new “triumvirate” at the regional level, composed out of an independent chair and two people appointed by the Parkstad Limburg Regional Board. In fact this is a plea for strengthening regional governance, partly at the expense of local autonomy of the municipalities. However, since regional decisions would still need to be ratified by the local municipalities, and since another regional institution would be added to an already quite complex multi-layered governance structure, the “triumvirate” does in fact not solve the problem of delayed political action. Most of the respondents actually suggested that municipal mergers would be an essential step towards better collaboration in Parkstad Limburg. This process takes time and energy as well, which is not favourable in a time that urges all actors to focus on the actual contents of making policy. The disadvantages of different municipalities defending their own municipal islands, however, obstructs the development of a long-term future perspective, which is very damaging for the region (Krasovec, interview 2010; Meijers, interview 2010; Smeets, interview 2010).

## 7. Policy Response in Parkstad Limburg (2): Alternative Planning Tools

As was concluded by Brouwers (2008) and Oswalt (2005b), it is important to include a cultural agenda in an urban restructuring programme. Oswalt (2005b) formulated three

types of “soft” planning tools that are essential in improving the liveability of restructured neighbourhoods in shrinking cities: art and culture, communication strategies, and empowering social networks (Oswalt, 2005b). These soft planning tools were emphatically applied in the *Internationale Bauausstellung* (IBA) projects in Saxony-Anhalt (Beeck, special meeting 2009; IBA, 2007, pp. 3–22) and the “Welcome In My Backyard” (WIMBY) project in Rotterdam Hoogvliet (Reinders, 2005; Provoost *et al.*, 2008; Vanstiphout, 2008).

The IBA was initially introduced in Germany in the early twentieth century with the purpose to frequently showcase the latest trends in construction, urban design and architecture. Since the 1950s, however, the IBA concept has moved towards ambitious urban and regional restructuring incentives, projects, and programmes. Examples include the IBA in West-Berlin (1977–1987) focusing on urban renewal and “critical reconstruction”; the IBA Emscher Park in the Ruhr region (1989–1999), contributing to the economic, social, and ecological transformation of the Ruhr region (Shaw, 2002; Danielzyk & Wood, 2004); and more recently the IBA in Saxony-Anhalt (2003–2010), themed “new perspectives for cities in transformation” in the post-socialist context of East-Germany. The IBA concept has meanwhile become much more than only physical building and renovation projects; recent IBAs like the ones mentioned here have also included publications, meetings, marketing campaigns and other ways to raise public awareness within and outside the city or region involved.

After years of making policy with traditional planning tools as described in the previous section, the strengths of the IBA approach are also recognized by the city region of Parkstad Limburg as a possible alternative planning framework. By using the IBA concept, Parkstad Limburg wants to reach several goals.

- Catalysing the restructuring programme.
- Reaching synergy between the different policy sectors.
- Focussing on quality, creativity, and innovation.
- Positive communication to the inhabitants and improving civil participation.
- Improving the regional image, and enlarging the regional publicity and identification with the region.
- Stimulating the investment climate.
- Binding the different actors in the field

It is planned to start the IBA Parkstad Limburg in 2012 (Parkstad Limburg, 2010, pp. 63–66).

Although the process of the IBA Parkstad Limburg has only recently started with a feasibility study in 2010, the adaptation of the IBA concept in addition to the existing restructuring programmes looks promising. Of course, the success of this approach depends on several factors. Especially important are the willingness of the actors to conform themselves to the concept, and to leave the traditional way of top-down behaviour behind.

## 8. Conclusion and Recommendations

A suitable policy response to shrinkage consists of a broad set of both traditional and alternative planning tools. In short, these tools should concentrate on the acceptance of

shrinkage, the development of a long term and regional vision, the inclusion of inhabitants, restructuring the housing market, and intense governance coalitions in the arena of public and private actors.

Coping with an unbalanced regional housing market and high vacancy rates requires a regional restructuring programme that is supported by all the relevant actors in this field. In order to realize intelligent financial constructions, it is important that all the different interests are heard and represented in such a vision. Governments of all scale levels, housing corporations, private developers, and other possible stakeholders can deliver financial input and practical know-how that cannot be missed in aiming for optimal planning solutions.

Traditional planning tools alone are not enough. It takes more inventiveness and creativity to realize a successful implementation of urban transformation programmes. Engaging the inhabitants in the redevelopment process of shrinking cities and regions is essential for the public support of difficult decisions. Since they are living in those cities and have to deal with the consequences of shrinkage in their daily lives, they should engage in the process.

Alternative planning tools like art and culture, communication, and social empowerment are useful in creating public awareness, civil involvement, and micro economic activities. This can form the basis of a new identity that shrinking cities and regions are often in search of. In the end, the aim of urban policy in shrinking cities and regions must be to create a future perspective for their inhabitants, which is the shared responsibility of all the stakeholders in the region. The plans of Parkstad Limburg to develop an IBA programme may well contribute to a more positive future perspective for the region and to prevent a possible vicious circle of further decline.

## Notes

1. The Euregio Meuse-Rhine consists of parts of the Dutch province of Limburg, the Belgian provinces of Limburg and Liege, and the German region of Aachen.
2. WGR+ is the acronym of *Wet Gemeenschappelijke Regelingen* +, a Dutch law on inter-municipal collaboration in city-regions. Parkstad Limburg acquired this WGR+ status in 2006. The tasks of this city-regional public body include developing a regional economic development vision, coordinating spatial planning, regional land policy and regional promotion- and acquisition policy. At the moment of writing this article (autumn 2011), however, the Dutch national government is developing plans to abolish the WGR+ law.

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