Right-sizing as spatial austerity in the American Rust Belt

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Abstract:  
Right-sizing is planning paradigm currently being applied to shrinking cities in North America and Europe. The central idea is to avoid the trap of growth-oriented planning by restructuring the urban landscape around mixed-income, mixed-use clusters. By replacing the current sprawling inefficiency, proponents argue that environmental, equity, and infrastructure efficiency goals can be achieved. Some have worried however, that right-sizing is merely a reincarnation of urban renewal. I argue that both framings are misplaced. Through a careful consideration of right-sizing plans in five US cities—Detroit, Flint, Rochester, Saginaw, and Youngstown—I argue that austerity urbanism is the more apt way to characterize actualized versions of the idea. Actualized right-sizing lacks the utopian modernism and Keynesian interventionism of urban renewal, and the progressive equity-oriented environmentalism idealized by its proponents.

Keywords:  
Right-sizing, austerity urbanism, neoliberalism
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1. Introduction

Many post-industrial cities in the American Rust Belt have lost considerable population since the mid-twentieth century. Detroit, East Saint Louis, Cleveland and Gary, for example have all lost more than half of their mid-twentieth century population levels, and the trend appears to have accelerated in the past ten years. This reality has provoked some cities to plan differently—to consider “right-sizing” measures rather than traditional growth-oriented planning. Right-sizing involves the concentration of population into mixed-income, mixed-use clusters rather than a diffuse distribution that currently characterizes many post-industrial cities. Some have expressed hope that this entails a post-growth, pro-environmental shift. Others have expressed concern that this is simply urban renewal reincarnated. My argument is that both framings are misplaced somewhat. Based on a careful reading of five actualized right-sizing plans, I argue that austerity urbanism is the more apt descriptor. Actualized right-sizing lacks the utopianism of urban renewal, and only superficially engages with the greening, housing and participation goals outlined by right-sizing theorists.

2. Right-sizing the abandoned city

For much of the postwar period, growth was the sine qua non of urban policy, particularly, but not exclusively in the United States (Logan and Molotch, 1988; Molotch, 1976; Schatz, 2013). This emphasis permeated local policy and planning decisions of successful and non-successful cities alike. For successful cities, the emphasis was on retaining and accumulating wealth. For unsuccessful ones, the emphasis was on re-triggering growth processes. Numerous scholars have argued that the growth emphasis in declining places is often counter-productive (Hollander and Cahill, 2011; Leo and Anderson, 2006; Schatz, 2013).
Growth-oriented planning often leads to expensive symbolic projects that eventually fail, and further in-debt the desperate communities that are saddled with them (Leo and Anderson, 2006). Even cities where the pattern of decline is well-founded and obvious tend to resist decline-oriented planning (Hall, 2009; Hollander and Cahill, 2011; Mayer and Greenberg, 2001). For this reason, many scholars have celebrated the recent development of planning ideas more suitable and sustainable for such places (Leo and Anderson, 2006; Schatz, 2013). “With an abundance of vacant properties,” write Schilling and Logan (2008, 451), “these shrinking cities provide fertile ground for neighborhood-scale and citywide greening strategies that can revitalize urban environments, empower community residents, and stabilize dysfunctional markets.”

Though no two shrinking cities are identical, right-sizing scholars have attempted to craft ideas that would ameliorate several common characteristics. First, there is the growing acceptance (among academic planners) that conventional market mechanisms will not automatically solve problems of abandonment, isolation and vacancy in shrinking cities (Hackworth, 2014; Schilling and Logan, 2008). Second, many former industrial cities of the North American and European Rust Belts are environmentally polluted and that this pollution is disproportionately concentrated near poor communities of color (Little, 2012). Third, many parcels in shrinking cities already find their way to public authorities through the tax reversion process so options that might not exist for wealthier communities (where the city would have to expropriate and compensate owners of expensive property) might be possible in declining cities (Hackworth and Nowakowski, 2014). Finally, such cities possess infrastructure that was designed for much larger populations. In the American Rust Belt, many cities have shrunk by more than half from their mid-twentieth century peak undermining the tax base needed to pay for
a sprawling infrastructure of utilities, roads, and transportation services (Schilling and Logan, 2008).

Planners have proposed right-sizing them around concentrated, centrally located development cores that would have more adequate, fiscally-affordable services, and transportation network access (Hollander et al, 2009; LaCroix, 2010; LaCroix, 2011; Schilling and Logan, 2008). Residents displaced from demolished zones in the city could be provided opportunities to live in these clustered developments. The potential for affordable housing is theoretically possible because land (even near identified clusters) is so often passed through public hands because of tax reversion, and can be (and often is) transferred to community housing non-profits at nominal or no cost (Hackworth, 2014; Hackworth and Nowakowski, 2014).

Youngstown Ohio was the first to formally adopt some of these ideals in a master plan in 2005. Despite past efforts (elsewhere) to plan for decline that were met with great public resistance (Hall, 2009), the Youngstown effort did not generate significant backlash (Schatz, 2013). Residents were adequately consulted, and many felt it was time to begin thinking strategically rather than ignoring the problems. Partially as a result, other cities began following suit. Within eight years of the release of the Youngstown document, Saginaw, Detroit, Rochester, Cleveland, and Flint, among others have adopted right-sizing principles, or in some cases, built their entire master plan around the idea.

Academic reaction to these efforts has been mixed. Some have celebrated it as a departure from growth-oriented planning. According to Schatz (2013, 88), *Youngstown 2010*, “represented a break from traditional growth-oriented planning…” , but others have celebrated
such efforts for precisely the opposite reason. Glaeser (2011, 66-67) for example, celebrates the value of such plans *precisely* because they give declining cities the potential for future growth:

Parks, open space, and large lots will replace once-dense neighborhoods… The real payoff of these investments in amenities lies not in tourism but in attracting the skilled residents who can make a city rebound, especially if those residents can connect with the world economy.

In part because of such statements, some scholars have been more skeptical. Writing in response to efforts to right-size the city of Detroit, Millington (2013, 293) argues that the planning effort is simply a way to “dismantle the city”. Similarly, Pedroni (2011, 210) argues that it “is essentially an effort to unlock real-estate value currently ‘contaminated’ by a population in need of containment”. Others have questioned why we should view current efforts any differently than we now view repudiated efforts of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s to right-size cities through a “triage” approach (Kirkpatrick, 2014). In the most famous of these instances, Roger Starr, then head of the city planning department for New York City, was tasked by the oversight board in charge of imposing austerity during the city’s 1970s bankruptcy. His suggestion was that the city begin by imposing what he deemed “planned shrinkage”—essentially cutting off (or reducing) services to “already-abandoned” sections of the city in favor of “more viable” ones (Starr, 1976). His suggestion earned him derision from affected communities, and critical academics pounced on the brutal logic of applying “triage”—in particular, of labelling perfectly functional communities as “dead” or “beyond hope” (Kleniewski, 1986; Marcuse, et al, 1982; Wallace and Wallace, 2011).

But the most consequential critique has been the suggestion that right-sizing mimics the urban renewal period (Gratz, 2010; Hollander and Nemeth, 2011). Urban renewal is understood
here as a period in the mid-twentieth century when urban development was guided by high levels of economic growth (Harvey, 1989), and the belief that planners were the “rational scientific” implementers of a new modern order that would replace pre-modern shanty-like poverty with a gleaming modern metropolis (Berman, 1982). These promises never materialized of course (Anderson, 1964). Cities were left with vast vacant areas near their downtowns in anticipation of commercial development that never materialized, expressways that dissected the urban fabric, and poorly built, deliberately under-funded public housing that never fully replaced (quantitatively or qualitatively) the housing that was demolished to make way (Bristol, 1991; Ryan, 2012).

Urban renewal eventually inspired a multi-layered backlash. Poor African Americans were incensed that the few neighborhoods that they were allowed to live in were targeted for clearance and never replaced (Thomas, 2013). Neoliberal property-rights groups grew alarmed at the expansion of governmental power to take private property through eminent domain (Niedt, 2013), as did other less ideological groups who questioned the wisdom and justice of erasing perfectly functional neighborhoods to create expressways (Jacobs, 1961). Planners grew alarmed by what their field had become and the backlash it inspired (Fainstein, 2010). The idea of muscular, top-down planning became, and remains, deeply unpopular. The suggestion that right-sizing has adopted any part of this project is rightly seen as an epithet.

The suggestion has led most who discuss right-sizing to carefully invoke sensitivity to these concerns. As Schilling and Logan (2008, 453) write for example,

Any right-sizing strategy raises issues of social equity, as residents in neighborhoods with high concentrations of vacant properties are often predominately low-income and people of color. The environmental and social scars of urban renewal stand as an unsavory
reminder of past planning efforts used to address decline. Given the legacy of urban renewal, moving forward with a green infrastructure right-sizing model will require politicians and planners to equitably balance residents’ immediate interests with long-term visions of community viability. Planning efforts to ameliorate blight should address resident’s needs and concerns, such as safety, job training, shelter and neighborhood cohesion. Residents must be actively engaged in developing plans and relocation alternatives as some displacement for green infrastructure seems inevitable in those reclamation neighborhoods with significant blight and abandonment.

The urban renewal analogy has also led some proponents of right-sizing to focus on a series of process-based principles that should be part of an such plan to achieve justice and avoid the pitfalls of urban renewal. Hollander and Nemeth (2011), for example, build their “foundational theory for planning shrinking cities” around principles that should “recognize multiple voices” (p. 358) and be “political and deliberative in nature” (p. 359). The authors openly situate these principles not only as a critique of urban renewal but also top-down examples of right-sizing that have been proposed in the past, namely the Roger Starr case discussed earlier. The implied lesson seems to be that the main crime of these past exercises was that of process and not being sensitive to the views of community members. This sensitivity has percolated into actualized right-sizing plans that will be discussed in more depth later.

The desire to avoid the urban renewal epithet is understandable for academics and practitioners alike. And to be sure, there are reasons that make this analogy apt and worrisome for both. But I would suggest that neither urban renewal nor the progressive ideas outlined earlier adequately capture actualized right-sizing. Idealized right-sizing may indeed have many parallels with urban renewal, but actualized right-sizing resembles something more akin to
barely-varnished austerity urbanism. What is austerity urbanism? At the most basic level, it is a reduction in government resources linked to tax revenues that evaporated in the wake of the 2007-2008 global economic crash (Donald, et al, 2014; Peck, 2012). But is it also an actively maintained condition, nurtured by a host of political allies and institutions that seek to divert the policy conversation away from revenue increases (i.e. taxes), Keynesian counter-cyclical investments, and regional revenue sharing, while at the same time focusing the attention of policy-makers on the perceived excesses of municipal labor unions, parasitic-dependency urban residents, and the profligacy of city governments (Davidson and Ward, 2014; Peck, 2013; Peck, 2014; Tabb, 2014). The recent condition is undergirded by a long-wave structural shift away from Keynesian managerialism and toward speculative entrepreneurial urbanism that required, among other things, cities to take greater risk and borrow more money to fund their social economy and placate their growth machine (Davidson and Ward, 2014; Hackworth, 2002; Weber, 2002). When the crash took place in 2008, most cities faced not only the reduction in transfer payments from higher levels of government but also crushing debt schedules derived from their embrace of previously free-flowing credit. Pro-austerity forces used these conditions to successfully set the agenda for what was possible and what was not: taxes and social expenditures were out; belt-tightening and “realistic” spending were in (Peck, 2014).

Right-sizing embodies these characteristics more than the optimism of right-sizing theorists of the pessimism of urban renewal critics in a number of ways. First, it is being implemented during the austerity moment. Just as high growth rates and surpluses dictated what was possible during the urban renewal era, so does stagnation and austerity pre-determine the possibilities for right-sizing. Second, actualized right-sizing is more focused on erasure than creation. It seeks not to build; it seeks to destroy. The disproportionate influence on demolition
is plain in all of the reports discussed later. Third, many of the progressive principles outlined by right-sizing theorists—greening in particular—are deployed in superficial and temporary ways. Newly opened green-spaces will be open for investment immediately after they are cleared. Fourth, the desire to avoid being the reincarnation of urban renewal is palpable and understandable but the plans confront this legacy in only superficial ways. The most meaningful questions—about development, demolition, and equity—are pre-determined and top-down. “Community input” consists primarily of an elaborate effort to legitimate such decisions through local assistance in determining what houses should be demolished.¹

³. Reading right-sizing plans

This study consists of a careful reading of plans of five Rust Belt cities currently engaged in a right-sizing exercise: Detroit, Flint, Rochester, Saginaw, and Youngstown. Each has experienced considerable population loss since the mid-twentieth century (Table 1). Other cities are likely involved in similar exercises but these were chosen because they have codified these impulses into official or quasi-official plans that are intended to guide actual future development and demolition efforts. Thus while right-sizing is still an evolving project, these cities offer the most advanced examples of its implementation. Basic summary of these plans is provided in Table 2.

There are, of course, limitations in reading plans in the American context. American planning, like the polity within which is ensconced, is highly diffuse and dissimilar to other models throughout the world where a plan is more likely to lead to a result similar to what was proposed (Fainstein and Campbell, 2012). Laws that favor property owners over public entities, a culture of anti-governmentalism, and the reality of extreme political fragmentation at the
Table 1: Basic demographic in selected Rust Belt cities, 1950-2010 (source: US Census).

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<tr>
<th>City</th>
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<td>Population</td>
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<td>Detroit</td>
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<td>512,414</td>
<td>522,430</td>
<td>713,777</td>
<td>269,445</td>
<td>349,170</td>
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<td>Flint</td>
<td>163,143</td>
<td>48,377</td>
<td>49,258</td>
<td>102,434</td>
<td>40,472</td>
<td>51,321</td>
<td>-37.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saginaw</td>
<td>92,918</td>
<td>26,698</td>
<td>27,321</td>
<td>51,508</td>
<td>19,799</td>
<td>23,574</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rochester</td>
<td>332,488</td>
<td>99,558</td>
<td>101,231</td>
<td>210,565</td>
<td>87,027</td>
<td>97,158</td>
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<td>Youngstown</td>
<td>168,330</td>
<td>45,520</td>
<td>46,066</td>
<td>66,982</td>
<td>26,839</td>
<td>33,123</td>
<td>-60.2%</td>
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<td>City</td>
<td>Right-Sizing Documents</td>
<td>Year Published</td>
<td>Official Master Plan</td>
<td>Official City Participation in Exercise</td>
<td>Downsized Neighborhood Mapped</td>
<td>Blight Removal Funding Named</td>
<td>Green Preservation Funds Named</td>
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<td>Detroit</td>
<td><em>Detroit Future City and Every Neighborhood Has a Future</em></td>
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<td>Flint</td>
<td><em>Imagine Flint</em></td>
<td>2013</td>
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<td><em>Project Green</em></td>
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<td>Saginaw</td>
<td><em>Saginaw Master Plan</em></td>
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<td><em>Youngstown 2010</em></td>
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metropolitan scale all limit the implementation-capacity of planning exercises in the American context. But by the same token, and for many of the reasons discussed earlier, planning exercises are now intricate efforts to provide local legitimacy for a wide range of economic and social realities. They often involve elaborate consultations with thousands of people and stakeholders, and result in a distillation of a variety of concerns and viewpoints. Given the austerity environment, they likely represent a discursive high point for progressive deployments of the state—by that I mean, it is unlikely that an affordable housing program, for example, will emerge if it is not mentioned in the master plan (it is unlikely that it will even if it is mentioned). In a sense, the master plan is the necessary condition for certain development and housing goals to be achieved—whether they are or not, is a very different question. But in this we can read priorities—whether, for example, officials feel obliged to even gesture to certain progressive goals, or how specific are they about funding sources, future ownership, and the like with particular areas identified.

This study consisted of a critical read of the plans produced in the five cities. In most cases, this was distilled into one document but in others it involved several. These texts were supplemented with: 1) ongoing research which includes interviews with 41 officials in Rust Belt cities, land banks, and advocacy organizations; 2) news articles on events surrounding the announcement or implementation of these plans; and 3) a critical review of land banking laws (see Hackworth, 2014). These plans are complicated and multi-faceted and to conform to the guidelines of a journal article, there has been necessary summarization. Several areas were given particular focus in the short descriptions below: 1) details on the planning process; 2) specifics on areas that are proposed for demolition and funding sources that might be used; 3)
details on affordable housing options (if any) that might be available to those whose neighborhood is demolished; and 4) proposed ownership of land after demolition occurs.

3.1 Detroit, Michigan

Detroit is arguably the most prominent case of urban decline in the United States, perhaps the world. Detroit’s right-sizing vision is spelled out with two ostensibly-unofficial, but influential, documents: Detroit Future City (Detroit Works, 2012) and Every Neighborhood has a Future (Detroit Blight Removal Task Force, 2014). Within the current context of Detroit—a city under “emergency management” and if the bankruptcy deal is approved will be under state supervision for at least 13 years—it is likely that such documents have more influence on the city’s future than ostensibly official ones. Detroit Future City (DFC) is a comprehensive planning document organized by a variety of foundations in the city. The more recent Every Neighborhood (2014) is more narrowly focused on the demolition side of right-sizing but was authored by a powerful board whose efforts are backed with very specific funding sources.

Released in December 2012, Detroit Future City was the culmination of a two-year process that involved “hundreds of meetings, 30,000 conversations, connecting with people over 163,000 times, over 70,000 survey responses and comments from participants, and countless hours spent dissecting and examining critical data about our city” (Detroit Works, 2012, 3). The plan was financed and managed by a number of local foundations (in particular the Kresge Foundation), and assisted by non-profits like Data Driven Detroit. It involved participation by city officials but is not an official master planning document. The plan seeks to address the fact that “Detroit’s population has been in decline for decades and this trend is expected to continue” (Detroit Works, 2012, 11). One particular emphasis is the cost of maintaining street, sewer, and
utility infrastructures that sprawl across the city’s vast landscape for a population that is less than half its mid-twentieth century size:

- Detroit has large, centralized infrastructure systems that were designed to support a population of at least 2 million, with large areas of heavy industry. As a result, today’s Detroit has systems that are oversized for the current population and are no longer aligned with where people and businesses now reside or will likely be in the future. (Detroit Works, 2012, 11)

To ameliorate this challenge, *Detroit Future City* outlines a number of right-sizing land use ideas, none more provocative than the naming of vast sections of the city, “innovation productive” and “innovation ecological”. Innovation productive landscapes will be used for large scale commercial farming, while innovation ecological will be areas that will be allowed to return to nature—urban forests and prairies. Approximately 20% of the city’s land area has been mapped in *Detroit Future City* as innovation ecological, and one estimate suggests that as many as 88,000 people still live in the areas affected (Kirkpatrick, 2014). Evidently worried about the optics of this idea, the plan directly confronts the legacy of urban renewal with optimistic promises that every resident who wants to stay, can:

- In the spirit of innovation that has made the city great, Detroit will lead the world in developing landscape as 21st century infrastructure to transform vacant land areas into community assets that remediate contaminated land, manage storm water and highway runoff, and create passive recreational amenities to improve human health and elevate adjacent land values—all without residential displacement, a big change from the urban renewal efforts of the 1960s and 1970s. (Detroit Works, 2012, 13)
But as Kirkpatrick (2014) has argued, it is difficult to understand how the goal of infrastructure downsizing might be achieved without displacement or forced removal. If, for example, they were able to demolish seven of ten remaining houses on a given street, they city’s utilities would still have to serve the same length of pipe, wire, and road for the remaining three houses. Without moving the remaining three “off of the grid” or inducing them to move, it is difficult to understand where the infrastructure cost savings would be realized. *Detroit Future City* is light on details of how this would be possible. The plan is more concrete about affordable housing opportunities:

> Residents who choose to stay in the highest-vacancy areas of the city will continue to receive services, while residents who formerly had no choices will have opportunities to move to different neighborhoods if they wish, with new incentives such as “house swap” programs and progressive efforts that help increase family wealth and access to affordable homes throughout Detroit. (Detroit Works, 2012, 13)

This is the only mention of this program (which does not formally exist as of this writing). The details and financing for the putative “house swap” program are not developed further than this.

*Detroit Future City* is arguably the most discussed document in the city’s planning circles right now but the city’s subsequent emergency management, then bankruptcy, have ratcheted up the urgency to achieve certain goals. One outgrowth of this context is the recent release of the *Every Neighborhood Has a Future* report released by the Detroit Blight Removal Task Force (DBRTF) in May of 2014. The Task Force was co-chaired by Glenda Rice of the Detroit Public Schools Foundation, Linda Smith of U-SNAP-BAC³, and most famously Dan Gilbert, owner of Quicken Loans and numerous commercial buildings in downtown Detroit. The larger committee involved participants from the city, emergency manager, the state, various non-profits, and
foundations. The name derives from the campaign slogan of the current Mayor Mike Duggan who wanted to distance himself from the perception (provoked by the previous mayor Dave Bing) that certain neighborhoods would simply be erased. Though the scope is different, in many ways *Every Neighborhood* picks up where *Detroit Future City* left off. In fact, the Detroit Blight Removal Task Force an entire chapter to spelling out how cohesive and integral their vision is with *DFC* and the Mayor’s plan. Whatever their similarities however, the Blight Report is different in a number of respects, most pertinently that it is solely focused on demolition, and that it specifies how these will be paid for.

*Every Neighborhood* is built on an impressive data gathering exercise wherein community members, organized by Data Driven Detroit, were given digital tablets to comb through neighborhoods in search of blighted housing (which is defined specifically in the report). Their numbers are staggering. They found that 30% of the city currently consists of vacant lots, and that over 80,000 parcels will either require demolition or remediation of some sort. The plan boldly suggests demolishing these structures, about half of which are currently privately owned, as soon as possible. The DBRTF (2014) openly invoke the language of “triage” (p. 101, among others) and specify certain neighborhoods where current efforts to demolish would be best focused (p. 94). Beyond this, the Report suggests involving community members to identify blighted houses in their neighborhood for demolition and identify specific pots of money to execute this vision. The Report’s authors estimate that the task will cost approximately $850 million and that they already have about half of this on hand (DBRTF, 2014, 235). The report lacks the sentimentality and “greening” themes of the *DFC* and the other reports, but does seem to understand the importance of local input. Elaborate protocols are created to solicit help to find the houses to demolish. The Report also features a more specific (than the others presented here)
vision for what should happen to the parcels after the structure is demolished. The Report is explicit that they should be auctioned with clear title as soon as possible and confident that once “cancerous blight” has been removed such interest will exist. In total, the right-sizing vision outlined by Detroit Future City and Every Neighborhood is arguably the boldest, and certainly the largest-scale of the plans being discussed here.

3.2 Flint, Michigan

Flint Michigan was once one of the wealthiest cities in the country, and remains the symbolic home of the American labor movement. Like many Rust Belt cities, however, the city’s manufacturing employers followed by the population fled in the second half of the twentieth century. City officials began the process of planning around a smaller city in 2012 because, “a population decrease of the magnitude experienced by Flint, places challenging stresses on every system, from infrastructure and government services, to education and economic development” (City of Flint, 2013, 3). The 18-month process culminated in a document entitled Imagine Flint, an official master plan that would guide future development or shrinkage in the city. The process took place in multiple stages, involved over 5,000 city residents and officials, and involved numerous stakeholders with an interest in the city (City of Flint, 2013, 5). A supremely-optimistic document, it sought to use non-growth principles to rethink the city, first by reframing the decline. “Flint’s population decline”, they write (City of Flint, 2013, 35), “presents an opportunity to reorganize the community, transforming the city from an outward sprawling community to a compact, mixed use city situated along dense, urban corridors with a vibrant city core.” The plan unveils a variety of strategies including a number that fall in line with right-sizing principles. Throughout the city there will be more attention to demolishing
vacant structures, working with adjacent owners to acquire the properties, and encouraging provisional uses like community gardens. The plan identifies six cluster areas where different strategies will be more intense than others (City of Flint, 2013, 73). Area six, northeast of the downtown, adjacent to the Flint River has already experience a great deal of housing abandonment and depopulation. The plan identifies this area as most appropriate for “green innovation”, open space, and urban agriculture, but stops short of codifying this into the zoning map or even suggesting intensified demolition as is the case in the other plans.

This mention is the most spatially specific target in the plan, but it invokes the language of right-sizing throughout. The plan suggest that a goal will be to “work with the Land Bank to acquire properties around parks for limited park expansion, particularly along waterways” (City of Flint, 2013, 45) but does not specify exactly where this would be. It then suggests that it may be necessary to “transition green neighborhoods that experience steep population decline to Community Open Space” (City of Flint, 2013, 45). But later, in an evident attempt to reassure residents currently living in such places that, “in instances where an existing use is not permitted within a place type, and therefore not recommended in the Place-Based Land Use Plan, that should be grandfathered in” (City of Flint, 2013, 68). Though it does not yet attach this to a particular neighborhood, the plan is obviously very concerned with the neighborhoods north of the downtown area where decline has already been the most severe. Here it seeks to create “green neighborhoods” defined by “large lots, community gardens, and well-maintained open space” (City of Flint, 2013, 83). Should growth return to Flint, the city might allow continued development, but the main goal of large lot living will be to create “self-sufficient households” (City of Flint, 2013, 103). Should decline accelerate however, the plan warns that it may be necessary to transition these spaces to “community open space”. The details of who would own
such open spaces remain vague in the report. There is a promise to consult with neighborhood
official to decide on matters of this sort, but promises about converting land to some public use
such as a park remain speculative. They write that it would be beneficial to “aggressively pursue
funding opportunities from a range of sources including Federal, State, and local grants to assist
with parkland acquisition and maintenance” (City of Flint, 2013, 167), but offer little more than
this in terms of potential public land. Other gestures include ongoing efforts to sell vacated side
lots to adjacent owners, and vague calls to work with the county land bank. The implication is
that much of this land would still technically be available for private purchase should legitimate
development interest occur in the future. The need for demolition is less equivocal and framed
in more direct language. With federal funds available for demolition it is likely that this will take
place at an accelerated pace shortly.

Affordable housing opportunities in intensified clusters downtown were not mentioned
explicitly. In fact, housing in general was given little attention the report perhaps because the
city appears to be overbuilt. They do write however that:

    Once the city’s population has been stabilized, the city should turn its sights on growth.
    The city should seek to add a combined 15,000 housing units to the Downtown and
    Innovation District areas, and provide additional new housing in Flint’s Traditional
    Neighborhood and Mixed Residential areas (City of Flint, 2013, 92).

It remains unclear as to whether any of this housing would be subsided. Overall, the Flint plan
embodies a number of features that are similar to the other plans including an emphasis on
restraining unmoored development, building “green infrastructure”, and targeting neighborhoods
that have already experienced a great deal of population loss. The document stands out in its
gestures to creating publicly-owned open space, but is very vague about how that would be
funded or where exactly it would be. Also unique (among this set), it seems to openly use a sliding scale—e.g. “development can occur under the following conditions”; “naturalization will occur under these conditions”.

3.3 Rochester, New York

In 2009, the City of Rochester published *Project Green* a right-sizing report that has been used to guide spending and development priorities since. The report begins with a gesture to the need to plan for a smaller city:

Rochester is at a critical point in its evolution as a city. Faced with limited resources and a decreasing population, the city must take bold steps to ensure that Rochester remains a vital, successful, and thriving community. Growing smaller does not have to mean declining. (City of Rochester, 2009, 8)

The report parleys this premise into a necessitarian argument about the city’s future:

“Project Green” is matching the footprint of Rochester’s built environment with its existing and anticipated future population. This effort is *necessary* for the long-term viability of the city and the region. (emphasis added) (City of Rochester, 2009, 8)

As the title implies the approach is to invest in greening approaches for the city of Rochester but fiscal realities of infrastructure provision are foregrounded. It seeks to break the ad hoc pattern of past demolitions with something more focused on certain troubled areas:

The current trend of random, opportunity-based demolition does little to stabilize large areas of Rochester. Significant stabilization measures can be taken on a site by site basis but the “broken teeth” of the neighborhood is perpetuated. Coinciding with the administration’s Priority Investment Strategy, the Project Green strategy focuses
Specific neighborhoods north of downtown are identified and mapped as potential targets for this activity. With a gesture to the troubling urban renewal analogy they attempt to convey sensitivity:

No redevelopment strategy that has a significant demolition component can proceed in the United States without the humbling reminder of the consequences of “slum clearance” in the 1960s and early 1970s. Crucial concerns for social equity, citizen involvement, environmental sustainability, and historic preservation must be reflected in any Project Green effort. (City of Rochester, 2009, 8)

Only this portion of urban renewal’s legacy, not the more problematic destruction and non-replacement of housing, is invoked. A number of citizen participation methods are invoked to “overcome” these legacies—to utilize community input in deciding what structures to demolish. The document spends time trying to allay concerns with a sort of green optimism. The language of “opportunity”, similar to the other reports, is rife throughout Project Green. “Project Green” notes the report (2009, 20), “will enable a link between natural and built systems within the city in ways that improve the quality of life and the long term health of residents and the environment.” Specific “opportunities” include the possibility of “mining” vacated housing for nice fixtures that might be sold to wealthier residents in the region (City of Rochester, 2009, 13).

The report identifies a $3 million budget for demolitions, but when it comes to identifying money that might be used to create and maintain parks or recreation space with the parcels the language becomes more circumspect. To achieve these goals, “capital and grant funding can be pursued for park development” (City of Rochester, 2009, 20). Moreover,
gestures to park development (or some other green infrastructure permanence) are overshadowed by the proposal that vacated land will simply be warehoused until growth returns to the city. Writing in reference to land that might be temporarily leased for private parks, and urban agriculture, the report suggests that, “the city may wish to lease this land on a medium to long-term basis, rather than selling outright, in order to retain control of the land should market conditions change in the long term and the residential market returns” (City of Rochester, 2009, 20).

*Project Green* mentions the hypothetical possibility that relocation of affected communities may need to take place in the future. One of its main recommendations is to establish the institutional capacity to execute such a plan:

Establish and fund a multi-purpose city of Rochester land-bank program that strategically decommissions surplus public infrastructure, acquiring abandoned properties (e.g., tax-delinquent or seriously blighted sites), and relocating of households within distressed neighborhoods by removing from the housing inventory 2,988 dwelling units in a strategic block by block clearance of all structures in order to re-establish a functioning housing market. (City of Rochester, 2009, 26)

*Project Green* does invoke the possibility of generating affordable housing elsewhere in the city but seems more concerned with controlling this supply than building it near established nodes:

The current affordable housing development program draws almost exclusively from existing city residents. Those affordable projects, in effect, exacerbate the neighborhood vacancy rate. On the plus side, they provide safe and healthy habitable shelter. On the negative, they increase the number of vacant units. In order to mitigate the negative impacts of newly constructed affordable housing developments, the city should be
removing three to five existing substandard vacant units for every one new affordable housing unit constructed. (City of Rochester, 2009, 12-13)

While *Project Green* is not a master planning document, and thus does not have the legal authority of some of the other exercises, it does have significant buy-in from a variety of elected officials and community members. Like the other plans *Project Green* identifies specific neighborhoods with specific funds for blight removal, but does not provide much specificity on affordable housing options that might be needed for those displaced or how greening might be achieved in a permanent way if the land will simply be available for development afterwards.

### 3.4 Saginaw, Michigan

Saginaw is a small Rust Belt city of just over 50,000 that experienced the pressures of deindustrialization like others of its kind. In 2011, the city embraced the principles of right-sizing in a master plan (City of Saginaw, 2011). More recently it reaffirmed some of the right-sizing plans in an *Action Plan* that spells out spending priorities for 2014 and 2015 (City of Saginaw, 2014). The *Master Plan* begins by setting the context of population loss like the others reported here, but it also invokes the larger financial crisis affecting the city:

> Fueled by the recent national collapse of the housing market, the subsequent credit crunch, the ensuing economic crisis, and the overall population decline in Michigan, homeowners for various reasons have decided to abandon their homes and leave the city. This has left the city further scarred with an abundance of vacant housing, and subsequently, a lack of demand for this housing stock. (City of Saginaw, 2011, 12)

With this in mind, the plan goes on to explain how right-sizing can help the city: “As a mature urban center, the city of Saginaw was at one time fully built-out. But over time, there has been
population loss, building demolitions, and growing rates of vacancies, all of which presents a unique opportunity today for the City of Saginaw to begin right-sizing” (City of Saginaw, 2011, 43).

The plan outlines several goals to achieve this but none more directly than the creation of a new land use category called “green reserve opportunity areas”. As the plan’s authors explain “this category includes lands that are envisioned to be converted to attractive low-maintenance natural areas intended to beautify and enhance key areas in the city through parkways, landscaped roadway buffers, gateways, landscaped open areas, and open meadows” (City of Saginaw, 2011, 74). They note that blight is widespread throughout the city but they take particular aim at one neighborhood northeast of downtown along the Saginaw River. This area, currently home to about 1,000 people and has been subject to decades of disinvestment was deemed the “Green Zone”. Here they will focus exclusively on demolition to create a green reserve opportunity area: “This area will only receive funds for blight elimination”, writes the city in its recent Action Plan (City of Saginaw, 2014, 3). Funding sources are then identified for the demolitions that will take place.

Perhaps recognizing the political complications of so specifically targeting one neighborhood, the Master Plan makes a number of recommendations that gesture to a troubled urban renewal past. For example it notes that “this general area has been identified in prior planning efforts by the city as maintaining separate yet competing uses – residential and industrial – and by acknowledging how prior planning decisions have affected this area, it is important to not recommend displacement of residents” (City of Saginaw, 2011, 78). But by the same token, the plan does not mention potential housing options elsewhere in the city for those currently living in the Green Zone. There is also a palpable attempt to sell the green benefits of
this strategy: “For the long-term, these areas will be returned to a natural state, but are still connected to the urban fabric through green space, landscaped gateways, community gardens, and can be used for passive outdoor recreational uses” (City of Saginaw, 2011, 74). But while “green” is prominent in the report, the suggestion that the larger motive is a temporary warehousing strategy for future development also occurs in numerous places. “For the Green Zone portion of the grant”, writes the plan’s authors (City of Saginaw, 2011, 75), “grant funds are directed toward blight removal through demolition, with vacant properties then placed in the Saginaw County Land Bank for future redevelopment considerations”. The Saginaw Plan is the most direct at invoking the language of right-sizing and by identifying one particular neighborhood one of the most specific in terms of what might actually happen. But in the end, there are still many questions left open that might trouble residents of the green zone or other similar section of the city. In particular, if “displacement is to be avoided”, how would the city actually save money on infrastructure costs if residents are allowed to stay? This question is left open but the plan gestures to a future that might involve the removal of services or perhaps some relocation:

Based on the level of decline described earlier in this plan, the city will need to re-examine what infrastructure is important and how to provide it. In some cases, because of reduced revenue streams, there may be a need to right-size some services. (City of Saginaw, 2011, 85)

How this plan would be managed, and where the residents would go are left as open questions. Less ambiguous however is the city’s desire to emphasize demolition (with funding sources identified), their lack of interest in developing affordable housing near growth clusters, and the fact that “greened” land should remain available for development in some form.
3.5 Youngstown, Ohio

Published in 2005, the Youngstown 2010 Citywide Plan is considered a path-breaking exercise by shrinking city scholars (Schatz, 2013; Hollander et al, 2009). It spends a great deal of attention (more than other plans) to convincing the reader of the necessity to begin thinking about planning for a smaller city. As the plan’s authors write (City of Youngstown, 2005, 7), “The Youngstown 2010 Citywide Plan is based on a new vision for the new reality that accepts we are a smaller city that will stabilize at 80,000 people”. It also includes more gestures to social investments than the other four plans.

Youngstown 2010 identified a multi-faceted strategy that is centered on “making the city competitive again” (City of Youngstown, 2005, 7). Key among these strategies is confronting the physical blight that years of disinvestment brought to the city:

Youngstown must become a healthier and better place to live and work. Over time people have grown accustomed to seeing rundown buildings and streets. Urban decay is a constant and demoralizing reminder of Youngstown’s decline. It is important that Youngstown begin to “fix its broken windows” and support initiatives to improve neighborhoods, the downtown, the river, and the education system. (City of Youngstown, 2005, 18)

A key problem writes the plan’s authors are the infrastructure costs associated with a city where such abandonment has occurred. They write that,

There are too many abandoned properties and too many underutilized sites. Many difficult choices will have to be made as Youngstown recreates itself as a sustainable mid-sized city. A strategic program is required to rationalize and consolidate the urban
infrastructure in a socially responsible and financially sustainable manner. (City of Youngstown, 2011, 18)

They outline a number of right-sizing principles that will be applied city-wide including reducing the city’s residential land by 30% (City of Youngstown, 2005, 50), but the most focused efforts at downsizing will be focused on the city’s south side where disinvestment is most severe. In the Lower Gibson area in particular, the city will divert resources away and inhibit development:

The city will not consider Lower Gibson a priority area for the allocation of housing rehabilitation funds and will resist any requests for future housing development. There are other places on the South Side where such endeavors are more viable. (City of Youngstown, 2005, 79)

Similar to the other plans, the Youngstown plan is quick to assert that existing residents will not be forced to leave: “It must be reiterated that this does not mean existing residences will be forced out; under nonconforming use regulations, they can stay as long as the existing use continues without interruption” (City of Youngstown, 2005, 79). But it is also unclear how exactly the city would save on infrastructure costs unless remaining houses still connected to existing systems were forced or incentivized to leave. Also like the other plans right-sizing is framed as an “opportunity” and “greening” themes are promoted. The plan does however, differ in a number of emphases from the others studied here. First, the city appears to be using a newly formed zoning category called “Industrial Green” to deal with vacated areas. Industrial Green is “characterized by office uses, research, business support services, warehouses, distributors, and light manufacturing uses which do not produce any levels of noise, vibration, dust, smoke or pollution and do not include outdoor storage” (City of Youngstown, 2005, 148). Elsewhere in the report they gesture to applying to the state of Ohio for funds to permanently conserve some
land, though this remains speculative and unlikely within the current funding climate. Some land
may be theoretically available for sale after demolition, it will not be simply auctioned to the
lowest bidder through the tax reversion system as is the proposal of other cities. A second
distinguishing feature involves the mention of affordable housing development. The
Youngstown right-sizing approach does not specifically mention affordable housing options as
replacement housing for downsized neighborhoods but it does mention the importance of
developing it in organized ways. None of the other plans was as explicit about affordable
housing. By the same token, the plan leaves open the same possibilities as the other plans.
Funding and commitments to “remove blight” are far more specific than plans to create publicly-
owned recreation space. Infrastructure savings are raised but so is the insistence that existing
residents of downsized neighborhoods will be allowed to stay—with existing water, sewer, and
street systems, it is difficult to imagine how both of those goals could be achievable at once.
And the permanency of green, while more imaginative and less open to the auction than other
plans seems uncertain and dependent on funds that will likely not materialize.

4. Actualized right-sizing as spatial austerity

Right-sizing theorists have attempted to frame the practice as a post-growth opportunity
for struggling cities. At an abstract level, their arguments are compelling. The ethos and logic of
growth have dominated municipal politics, leading to various economic development schemes
that more often lead to further debt than prosperity. On its face, the idea of clustering
development, creating permanent or semi-permanent green zones, and offering less
contaminated, segregated and dilapidated possibilities to the city’s poorest are not regressive or
misguided goals. Despite these hopes, others have expressed skepticism, arguing that right-
sizing seems quite similar to top-down urban renewal schemes of the 1950s and 1960s. Ultimately, however, both of these framings fail to capture actualized right-sizing as it is expressed in these plans.

First, the language of greening is omnipresent, but each of the plans is only superficially committed to a permanent or semi-permanent pathway for implementation. The language of greening is actively deployed to sell the virtues of demolition but disappears from the narrative when the question turns to the future of such spaces. Plans to create something permanent or semi-permanent open space are either rejected outright or made contingent on writing a grant proposal to the state park’s department—a dubious pathway for success during the austerity moment. In most cases, land that is cleared for green space will immediately, or eventually, be made available to some sort of private development. In some cases, the proposal is to auction it to the highest bidder immediately.

Second, there is a mismatch between the scale of the sprawling-infrastructure problem (i.e. too big for current population) and the scale of the solution. It is undoubtedly true that infrastructure—water lines, electrical transmission, sewer systems—sprawl for dozens of square miles and could be concentrated around tax-paying population nodes for a more sustainable system. But relatively small areas of each city are being targeted—only the poorest and most disinvested neighborhoods. Even if successful the cost-savings would likely be minimal by erasing such a small part of each city. And in all cases, the current plan is to let residents of even those communities stay in place should they desire. This makes the prospect of infrastructure savings dubious. If there is an effort to save money on infrastructure, it is difficult to imagine that there will not be pressure to remove the remaining users of that infrastructure.
This is problematic not least because many of the residents who remain in such neighborhoods do so because their prospects for alternative housing options are extremely limited. The idea that they could just move elsewhere is dubious—many are on fixed incomes and inherited their house (that would be difficult or impossible to sell) so finding an equivalently-valued unit elsewhere in the city is a complicated prospect at best. And yet, the plans all possess a third common characteristic—the lack of interest in building affordable housing near one of the putative clusters. In some cases the necessity for this is dismissed using the logic of neoliberal economists who suggest that affordable housing is the last thing that such communities need—there is already too much (e.g. Glaeser and Gyourko, 2005). Or if it is addressed, it is invoked in very contingent ways—i.e. “building housing will take place after growth has returned”. The contingent, or vague funding sources and plans for permanent greening options or affordable housing stand in stark contrast to the specificity of plans to demolish housing. While the former goals are contingent on “getting a grant”, demolition goals (and means) are very specific. Neighborhoods have been mapped, methods have been established for selecting particular houses, and money sources have been identified. Blight elimination it seems is the only thing that the federal and state governments are keen to subsidize in American cities today.

Concerns about the striking similarity that right-sizing plans of this sort bear to repudiated urban renewal appear to be in the minds of each plan’s authors. All of the reports gesture to, or directly invoke, the urban renewal era. But the chief lesson seems to be process-based, namely to make sure there is local input on which houses will be demolished and promises that displacement will not occur: whether demolition should take place, what affordable options will be created elsewhere, whether demolished property should be made
available (and in what way) to investors do not appear to be negotiable items. Beyond the cherry-picked “lessons learned” from urban renewal, I would suggest that the analogy is misapplied in any case. For all of its flaws, urban renewal sought to replace one order with a utopian one: pre-modern shanty-slums with a modern metropolis created by rational-scientific planners. Urban renewal never, of course, delivered, and did much damage trying, but actualized right-sizing does not even bother to make the promise. The scale of demolition is equally vast (as urban renewal), but the vision of what will replace it is piecemeal, speculative, and linked to funding sources that will likely never materialize. Even if they did, issues of ownership and stewardship are still vague and likely to favor future investors more than future residents. Actualized right-sizing is not urban renewal redux; in many ways, it is worse.

Austerity urbanism is the more apt way to understand right-sizing. These plans are not only occurring during the austerity moment; they are adopting many of the features, namely the lack of state support for a social economy. Right-sizing without a redistributive state is just austerity, with green packaging and more recent plans do not even bother to hide it. The laudable principles outlined by proponents of right-sizing have little relevance in this context. The forces and funding sources under-writing blight removal and neighborhood erasure are specific, in place, and ready to be deployed. More progressive possibilities to greening the urban environment or concentrating the population are vague and unlikely to change in favor of the poorest residents. This does not make proponents of right-sizing shills for austerity, but it should lead practicing planners and affected residents to be skeptical of plans that invoke this language optimistically. Actualized right-sizing is not a post-growth epiphany; it is an attempt to reset growth by converting the most expensive parts of the territorial social economy into a new investment opportunity.
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Endnotes

1 Ehrenfeucht and Nelson (2011) make a similar point about how funds to plan post-Katrina New Orleans were riddled with pre-determined parameters that limited the authenticity of community input.
2 A longer, working paper of this article is available at: (URL concealed to anonymize this manuscript)
3 U-SNAP-BAC is a consortium of community organizations in the city’s east side. The acronym stands for “United Streets Networking and Planning; Building A Community”.