

UC BERKELEY

Scholars to consider the shrinking of cities

- Rick DelVecchio, Chronicle Staff Writer
Wednesday, February 7, 2007

Scholars gather at UC Berkeley this week to ponder a trend much-studied in Europe but little-discussed in the United States: the shrinking city.

The phenomenon touches places as varied as Paris; Youngstown, Ohio; Leipzig, Germany; the Taebak Mountain region of South Korea; and parts of the San Francisco and San Jose metropolitan areas, scholars say.

Shrinkage ranges from the cyclical -- one scholar points to San Francisco, Sunnyvale and Daly City after the dot-com bust -- to the devastating, as exemplified by America's Rust Belt and industrial cities in the former East Germany.

There are as many patterns and degrees of decline as there are cities. Scholars are beginning to map the phenomenon internationally, pinpointing common themes as they develop a new discipline for urban planners: the management of shrinkage.

More than 20 scholars from a dozen countries are lined up for the "Future of Shrinking Cities" symposium Thursday and Friday at International House on campus. They'll compare shrinking cities internationally, debate urban retreat in North America and discuss creative approaches for revitalizing the metropolis sliding past its prime.

The event is organized by UC Berkeley's recently formed Center for Global Metropolitan Studies. It's free to the public.

"When I was in planning school in Germany, I only learned to build for new developments on the urban fringes," said UC Berkeley's Karina Pallagst, program director for this week's symposium. "That's what all planners learned. Now, it's what do you do with the remains of buildings? Now, it's more about rebuilding parts of the city than adding new parts to the city."

The shrinking city is not a new phenomenon. What is new is open discussion about it, especially in North America, where such talk may be viewed as alarming and defeatist, said Terry Schwarz, senior planner at the Urban Design Center of Northeast Ohio, part of Kent State University.

"It's been a long time in coming," she said. "We're beginning to acknowledge it and understand it."

The shrinkage forces at play include swift economic change, declining birth rates and smaller households. Add to these the wild cards of environmental change, disease and natural disaster.

Paris is considered a shrinking city because, although its center is vibrant, its outer rings of industrial suburbs are in decline, Pallagst said.

Leipzig is a second type -- the "perforated" type. It's checkered with declining and vibrant districts.

San Francisco, Sunnyvale and Daly City are among 20 American cities that Pallagst says experienced shrinkage from 2000-04. They've rebounded, but for Pallagst, vacant Silicon Valley office buildings remain as reminders of the era's decline and as caution signals.

"High-tech industry might be the old industry of tomorrow, so you have to constantly reinvent yourself," she said.

The classic American shrinking city is the familiar hole-in-the-doughnut: Buffalo, N.Y., Youngstown, Detroit and, in the Bay Area, Richmond. Once-booming industry swiftly retreats, draining the city centers of their economic and social lifeblood.

Something similar happened in East Germany after the Berlin Wall fell. Two million people moved on, vacating large areas of industrial cities once supported by the state.

The response has been deconstruction. A half-million housing units are coming down throughout eastern Germany. They won't be replaced. Officials plan to manage the emptiness as a new urban asset. More space means, potentially, more trees, parks and playgrounds. More breathing room. Less noise and grime.

"You have to really cut down your infrastructure," Pallagst said. "This is really a problem. It can be something that causes an environment of depression almost."

However, she added: "I really don't know of a city that's given up."

Examples of shrinking cities fighting back include Youngstown; Dresden, Germany; and South Korea's Taebak Mountain region.

Dresden is the heart of a region marketing itself as "Silicon Saxony," the recipient of chip fabrication jobs exported from the United States.

When the Korean government closed the mine that supported the Taebak region's economy, residents protested. They weren't about to give up on where they lived. Negotiations resulted in a twofold comeback strategy built around gambling and tourism.

Youngstown officials, adjusting to a reality of radical shrinkage, have formed a land management pool to make room for parks and green space, Pallagst writes in a paper called "The End of the Growth Machine."

"The breach with the growth pattern that can be observed in the Youngstown case is almost revolutionary given U.S. planning traditions," Pallagst writes. "For the first time, a shift in paradigms is about to occur, leading from growth to 'shrinking smart.' "

"The interesting thing about these neighborhoods is the quality of life is really high," Kent State's Schwarz said. "The neighborhoods are very green, almost inadvertently."

"In parts of Cleveland or Youngstown, you really feel you're almost in a rural setting," she said.

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