

Retirement Cities: Describing and analysing the opportunities of ageing and urban shrinking in Europe

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Introduction

Urban shrinkage has been accepted as a demographic fact with socio-spatial and economic consequences (Oswalt, 2005). Policy makers and planners have been developing strategies to cope with this new urban condition. The authors advance the idea that retirement migration and health tourism can be part of such strategies and ask the question: What are the opportunities for retirement migration in shrinking European cities?

Ageing may be a crucial catalyst in the economic and ecological revival of shrinking cities. Immigration of elderly people can provide economic opportunities, jobs and a sustainable development perspective for shrinking cities, as they bring their savings and pensions to the city, in search for a place of high living quality with good health care and green recreational space around the corner.

By considering quality of life in the context of people's everyday life, a conceptual framework has been developed based on a place theory (Bonnes et al., 2010) and its related 'affordances' (Gibson, 1979). It is used to examine the recreational potential of open and green spaces in shrinking cities for retirement migration as a major determinant of living quality in urban settings. A hypothesis is that derelict public spaces, vacant lots and properties can be converted to serve the needs of an older population by stressing specific everyday life conditions (Lefebvre, 1974) and offering opportunities for a healthy lifestyle.

Method

The paper makes use of empirical insights of case studies. First, by reviewing previous studies elements of the conceptual framework—environmental features, affordances and resulting quality of life implications are specified. Second, it uses two case study regions—Leipzig (Germany) and Walcheren (The Netherlands)—to exemplify affordances and its related quality of life by use of quantitative data and GIS mapping.

Results

The research provides a first toolkit of indicators and programmatic qualities of urban open spaces to describe conditions for retirement migration in Europe. Early results of the case study regions show that attractive key features or 'affordances' for retirement migration indeed coincide with settlement of elderly in some occasions. Sometimes it does not, which may either point at unknown barriers and lack of demand, or as yet unused or undiscovered potential for retirement migration in the near future. A place-based approach to planning and design of retirement settings is discussed. The paper discusses for the variety of green open space types specific opportunities for aging population and requirements for particular transformation and adaptation strategies.

References

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