

## Editorial on the special issue “An International Perspective on the Processes, Patterns, and Outcomes of Reurbanisation”

**Paul Gans, Stefan Siedentop**

Anyone following the ongoing debate in urban research, policy-making and society about “reurbanisation” or the “renaissance” of big cities will find it hard to imagine that not so long ago, urban futures still had largely negative connotations. In light of seemingly limitless mobility, new communication and information technologies, and changing residential and business location preferences, many commentators regarded high density forms of settlement as signs of a bygone era. It seemed that in a globalised and digitally networked world, there was no more need for traditional forms of urban centrality and agglomeration (*Gordon/Cox 2012; Lang/LeFurgy 2003; Dear/Flusty 1998*). The future was rather to be found in an urban society without cities. This assessment was fuelled by flight from cities to suburbs (which had, in some cases, been ongoing for decades), massive losses of industrial jobs combined with the occurrence of concentrated poverty in inner city areas, and derelict building stocks and infrastructure in many places.

In view of this, the population increase that has taken place over the past 20 years in numerous cities of the Global North appears to represent a radical break from these trends. The quantitative dimension of the new urban growth is striking: the five biggest German cities (Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, Cologne, and Frankfurt) – for example – collectively grew by nearly half a million inhabitants between 2011 and 2015; and, since the mid-2000s, numerous smaller cities also find themselves confronted by new population growth (*Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumentwicklung 2017; see also Gans in this issue*). Similar developments can be seen in other European countries and in the US. Reference can be made here to available cross-sectional analyses of demographic developments in European city-regions and cities (*Kabisch/Haase 2010; Turok/Mykhnenko 2008; Wolff/Wiechmann 2017*), as well as to studies that illustrate the phenomenon of new urban growth from a national perspective (*Randolph/Tice 2017; Juday 2015; Glaeser 2013; Rae, 2013; Sturtevant/Jung 2011; Rérat 2012a*) and for individual cities and regions (*Kährlik et al. 2016; Hyra 2015; Haase/Rink 2015; Lilius 2014; Mulherin/Howell 2012; Bromley et al. 2007; Lehrer/Wieditz 2009; Moos 2015*).

In Western and Central Europe, as well as in North America, the phenomenon of reurbanisation is now being considered as an integral part of a more compre-

hensive process of economic and sociodemographic restructuring. The trigger for the corresponding debate was the observation of a re-population and densification of inner-city areas in the US and Canada starting in the 1980s (*Landis* 2016; *Juday* 2015; *Moos* 2015; *Hyra* 2012; *Birch* 2005; *Sohmer/Lang* 2001). With a slight delay, these tendencies have also been noted for Western European countries. Here too, many inner cities had significant population growth (*Rae* 2013; *Herfert/Osterhage* 2012; *Rérat* 2012a; *Koll-Schretzenmayr/Kramp* 2010; *Kabisch/Haase* 2010; *Haase et al.* 2010; *Bromley et al.* 2007; *Bromley et al.* 2005). Since then, numerous observers see signs of a “revitalisation” of inner city areas, which is often regarded as the result of an actively pursued valorisation by urban marketing, the real estate industry and city politics (*Mulherin/Howell* 2012; *Holm* 2012; *Breen/Rigby* 2004; see also *Brombach et al.* in this issue).

This is accompanied by critical voices that point to dynamic processes of displacement of lower income groups (*Hyra* 2015; *Maciag* 2015; *Holm* 2012; *Lambert/Boddy* 2010; *Shaw/Porter* 2009). In many cities, the discussion of reurbanisation is tightly interwoven with debates on the gentrification of inner city residential areas and the approaches of combating it by means of land market and housing policy (*Schipper/Wiegand* 2015; *Holm* 2012; *Shaw/Porter* 2009; *Lees* 2008). Some voices see the historical significance of reurbanisation not so much in the absolute development of the population in inner cities, but rather in the changes of their social composition. According to this view, what is “new” in reurbanisation is to be found in significant socio-demographic changes brought about by the influx of largely younger, well-educated and affluent people into centrally located neighbourhoods (*Juday* 2015; *Moos* 2015; *Siedentop et al.* 2017; *Siebel* 2008). In contrast to the classical and well-established understanding of gentrification, reurbanisation cannot be understood as a spatially limited process that is confined to a comparatively small number of inner-city neighbourhoods and can only be observed in large metropolises with a dynamic service sector and an existing built stock from the pre-war period. Based on the observation of new, economically powerful population groups in inner city areas and the suburbanisation of social disadvantage (*Hochstenbach/Musterd* 2017; *Randolph/Tice* 2017; *Häußermann et al.* 2011; as well as *Dembski et al.* in this issue), some scholars even expect a large scale “inversion” of the social structure of metropolitan regions (*Ehrenhalt* 2012).

In Europe, unlike the US, reurbanisation is also being discussed on the city-regional level. In some countries – such as Germany or the UK – a weakening of suburbanisation or even its reversion towards intra-regional concentration has been observed (*Geppert/Gornig* 2010; *Siedentop* 2008; *Rérat* 2012a; see also *Dembski et al.*, as well as *Brombach et al.*, in this issue). In more than a few German city-regions, current population growth in the city centres even exceeds that of the suburban belt (*Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung* 2017; *Herfert/Osterhage* 2012). In the US, on the other hand, observers point to an ongoing intra-regional deconcentration of the population (*Siedentop et al.* 2017; *Wilson et al.* 2012; *Brookings Institution* 2010). Inner city population growth is regarded here as merely one spatial facet of an overall regional growth process.

From the observation of both convergent and divergent developments in city-regions and cities, it can be concluded that reurbanisation is to be explained by forces of different spatial scope. Firstly, place-independent effective changes in the economy and in society alter the framework conditions within which actors make location decisions. Secondly, endogenous local factors embed the above-mentioned forces and developments in a strongly path-dependent, historical context and thus give rise to place-dependent outcomes. Accordingly, higher level social and economic developments are “filtered” in a locally specific way, such that both the process of reurbanisation and its material outcome differ from country to country and from city to city (on this subject, see also *Beauregard* 1990). Such an understanding also explains why new growth has not occurred in certain cities up to now, or has occurred only to a limited extent.

On the one hand, the higher level – ubiquitously effective – forces include the transition from an industrial to a service economy, a neoliberal political climate that emphasises competition and growth, the internationalisation of the real estate sector, and, last but not least, processes of demographic change and socio-cultural differentiation as drivers of reurbanisation (*Krätke* 2014; *Gerhard* 2012; *Geppert/Gornig* 2010; *Siebel* 2010). On the other hand, context-related forces include regional, strongly path-dependent economic and demographic developments, topographic and demographic conditions, and the local milieus of urban politics, each with their peculiar actor networks, institutional patterns and planning cultures (see *Brombach et al.* in this issue). The latter aspect in particular has been the subject of intense debates in recent years. According to the predominant view, public and municipal investment in city centres and inner cities has favoured reurbanisation and gentrification processes, either as an explicitly pursued strategy of renewal and social mixing (*Porter/Shaw* 2009; *Lees* 2008; see also *Dembski et al.* in this issue) or as a more or less unintended side-effect of the valorisation of public spaces and housing stock renovation programmes (*Rérat* 2012b).

Overall, however, it must be admitted that assessments of the causal background of population growth and socio-demographic change continue to be widely divergent. Despite empirical research that has been conducted in recent years, “reurbanisation” in no way gives the impression of being a robust scientific concept. So far, there are no convincing predictive theories which can claim validity for differing economic, social or urban political contexts and across national borders. Reurbanisation appears, in part, to be an overly complex phenomenon, which can only be grasped in a coherent theoretical framework to a limited extent.

The evident absence of a “grand theory” for explaining reurbanisation underscores the value of an inductive research design. By way of a spatially highly differentiated description of socio-demographic, economic and political processes, as well as by way of international comparisons, an inductive design allows us to draw conclusions about what is generalisable and what is case-specific. Such a research strategy has, above all, to be oriented toward grasping heterogeneity and diversity, instead of only focussing on generalisable causal mechanisms.

This is precisely where this special issue comes in, inasmuch as it offers an overview of demographic trends in selected city-regions of the global North which

have been discussed under the heading of “reurbanisation”. The four contributions are devoted to developments in city-regions in Germany (see the article by *Gans* and *Brombach et al.*), England (see the article by *Dembski et al.*), Eastern Europe (see the article by *Haase et al.*), and the US (see the article by *Brombach et al.*). In addition to providing empirical evidence of the changes in population numbers and structures that are observable in each case, the contributions also inquire into the causal backgrounds of reurbanisation phenomena.

The article by *Paul Gans* explores the question of what factors could be responsible for the sometimes sharply diverging demographic developments in larger German cities. The point of departure is the observation of a general trend toward reurbanisation, whereby the great majority of cities with at least 100,000 inhabitants have seen population increases since the year 2000. At the same time, however, it is shown that substantial variance exists within the urban system with respect to the intensity of growth and its composition in terms of age and origins. Using regression analysis, the author identifies the size, heterogeneity and dynamics of regional labour markets, as well as higher educational infrastructure, as key drivers of reurbanisation.

The article by *Sebastian Dembski, Andreas Schulze Bäing* and *Olivier Sykes* discusses the effects of the national “urban renaissance” policy pursued by New Labour in the 1990s on city-regions in the structurally weaker North of England. The Manchester/Liverpool case study shows that the “urban renaissance” largely remained limited to the inner cities, whereas municipalities in the suburban periphery are affected by ongoing structural problems and demographic shrinkage. This is particularly the case for highly industrialised municipalities and those that have evolved into mono-functional dormitory towns. The article argues that demographic and socio-economic developments in city centres and suburbs interact and hence have to be considered comprehensively. The authors conclude that it cannot be taken for granted that a reurbanisation policy focussed on city centres has a positive spill-over effect on suburban areas.

The article by *Karoline Brombach, Johann Jessen, Stefan Siedentop* and *Philipp Zakrzewski* intends to identify similarities and differences between reurbanisation in city-regions in Germany and the US. It becomes clear that, beyond the re-population and increasing density of inner cities on both sides of the Atlantic, sharp divergences are apparent with regard to spatial patterns and dynamics, as well as socio-structural changes and built-physical forms. Using the case studies of Stuttgart and Portland, the authors show, however, that the valorisation of inner cities represents a planning strategy which was pursued in both cities over the course of decades and whose negative side effects in the form of gentrification have lately created enormous political pressure for action to be taken.

The article by *Annegret Haase, Manuel Wolff, Petra Špačková* and *Adam Radzinski* enquires into the evidence for reurbanisation processes in Eastern European city-regions, which, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, were first affected by a dynamic suburbanisation. The authors currently see few signs of a reurbanisation trend and, at the same time, point to highly heterogeneous developmental trajectories, both between the countries and/or regions considered (Eastern Germany, Poland and the

Czech Republic) and within them. There is no specific “post-Socialist type” of reurbanisation, they argue. For Poland and the Czech Republic, an inner city population growth such as that which has been observed in Eastern Germany is also not very likely in the future. As explanations, they identify, among other factors, differing housing preferences and differences in the real estate markets, but also diverging public policies on both the national and municipal levels. According to the authors, the reurbanisation of Eastern German cities is the result of broad public support for urban redevelopment and renovation, whereas neoliberal policy models have accelerated suburbanisation in post-Socialist states.

Taken as a whole, all four contributions suggest that the new growth of urban cores can be interpreted as “universal” to the extent that such growth began to occur in Western European and US cities at more or less the same time, despite the differing contextual conditions. But reurbanisation takes place in specific spatial-temporal forms and is embedded in highly different regional structures and developmental contexts. Whether and how population growth occurs, what social groups participate in it, and how it gets manifested in land-economic and social structural changes – as well as built-physical ones – depends on numerous factors whose interaction we have hitherto only begun to be understand. The interaction of place-independent changes in the economy and society and locally and regionally specific contextual factors needs to be explored more deeply in future research. The relevance, in particular, of public (and especially fiscal) policies on the federal and municipal levels is a topic which has yet to be sufficiently investigated.

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Prof. Dr. Paul Gans (✉). Department of Economics, University of Mannheim. Mannheim, Germany. E-mail: paulgans@uni-mannheim.de  
URL: <http://gans.vwl.uni-mannheim.de/1461.0.html>

Prof. Dr. Stefan Siedentop. Research Institute for Regional and Urban Development (ILS). Dortmund, Germany. E-mail: stefan.siedentop@ils-forschung.de  
URL: <https://www.ils-forschung.de/index.php?lang=de&s=siedentop>



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