Decline and Sprawl in European Urban Development

Decline and sprawl, as observed in Liverpool and Leipzig, seem to represent an evolving type of urban development in European cities with important consequences on urban planning and policy.

One of the major problems in urban management is related to the adverse effects of the “urban sprawl” phenomena. The term refers to the expansive, often explosive and sometimes reckless, growth of a metropolitan area over a large area that entails social inequities, land use stresses, reduction of natural habitats, overdependence on the automobile and superhighways resulting in increased noise pollution and reduced air and water quality.

The majority of the empirical research and theoretical studies on urban sprawl has been carried out in expanding urban areas mainly in North America. Nevertheless, urban sprawl has increasingly been observed across the world in smaller cities that face economic and demographic decline.

Within the framework of the URBS PANDES EU funded research project, German and English researchers investigated the sprawling development in two declining European cities - Liverpool (England) and Leipzig (Germany) - that together represent the traditionally industrial European cities of around 500,000 inhabitants that face the problems of decline and sprawl at the same time. The aim of their study was to explore the outcomes of sprawl processes from urban structure and policy perspectives.

With regard to urban policy their main conclusion is that in situation of urban decline it becomes easier for the planning system to control residential sprawl because of a low demand of housing and less vigorous attempts of developers to seek sites or planning permissions.

On the other hand in a decline context, the economic, rather than sustainable development goals become far more important and the planning system is obliged to play a role in simulating employment sprawl. Thus when economic growth is lacking, although there is limited pressure from industry or commerce for the development of peripheral sites, it tends to be more difficult to restrict employment sprawl because the political pressure to allow investors’ demands is particularly strong.

Furthermore, given that little general demographic growth is to be expected in Europe, declining cities should not foresee a return to their former importance and place in the urban hierarchy. The case of both Liverpool and Leipzig has shown that efforts to attract industrial investors and to develop publicly funded industrial facilities could not stop nor reverse the decline. Hence urban policy making and planning will have to concentrate on the organisation of “withdrawal” and redevelopment. In this regard, major challenges will be to rationalise the infrastructures and manage the housing stock to the changing needs of a declining but increasingly demanding population.

Source: Couch, C; Karecha, J; Nuissl, H; Rink, D (2005) Decline and sprawl: an evolving type of urban development - observed in Liverpool and Leipzig, European Planning Studies 13 (1), 117-136

Contact: henning.nuissl@ufz.de

Theme(s): Urban management