

Shrinking Cities in the Netherlands

Building snowmen without snow - an unusual but certain prospective.

Christian Salewski (salewski@arch.ethz.ch)

Institute for Urban Design, Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich, Switzerland

Alexa Bodammer (alexa.bodammer@tu-dresden.de)

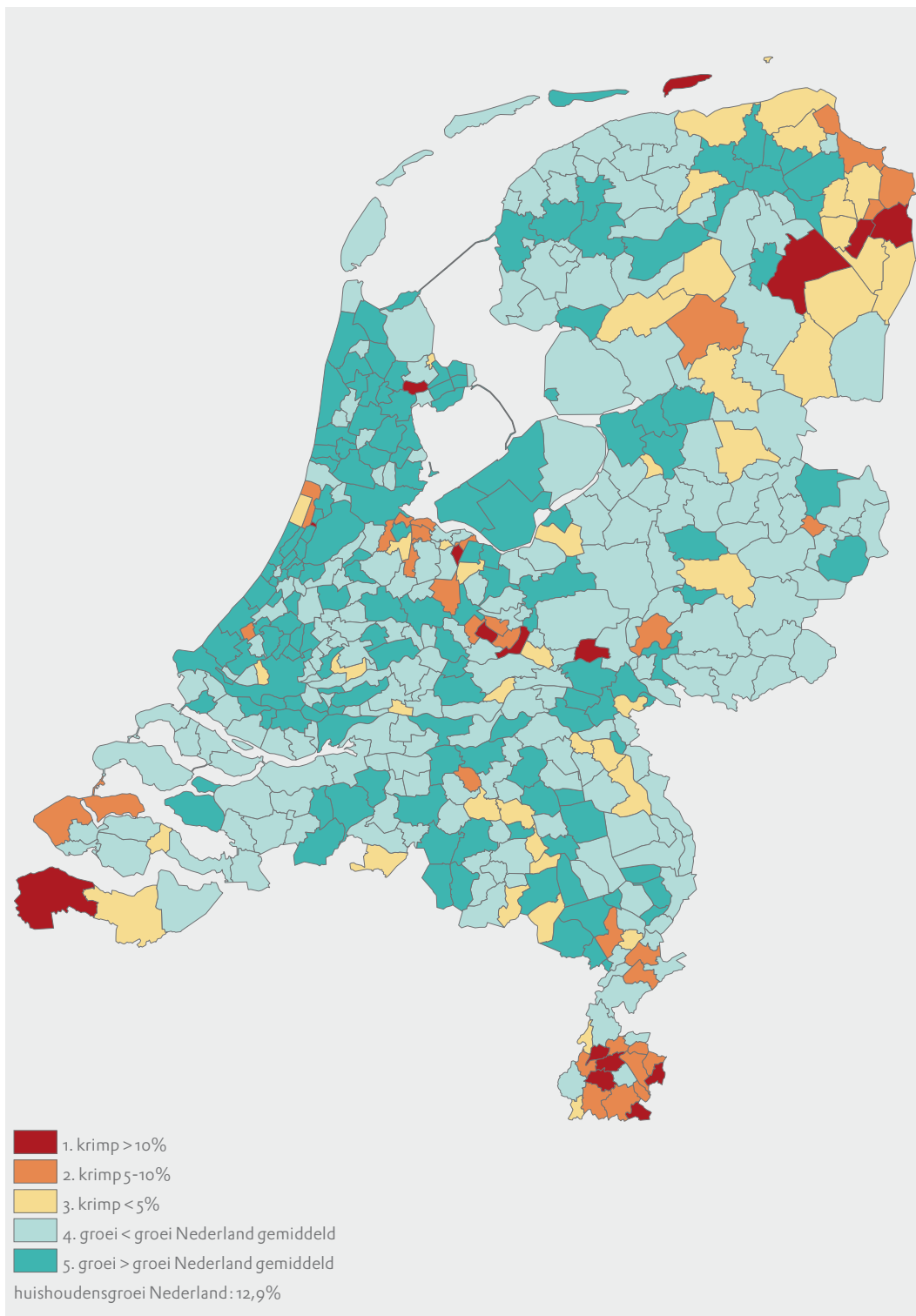
Centre of Competence for Revitalisation and Urban Design Görlitz, Germany

The continuous prospect of growth as the only way for further development and evolution of our society has been in question ever since the postulates of the Club of Rome in the 1970s. However, growth is still the common assumption on which city development is based. The idea of non-, zero-growth or even decline has not yet reached thoroughly the planning staffs of communities. Or as a planner from the government agency Design for London once put it, "you need snow to make a snowman".

Despite short recessions, growth in population and economy in the mid- and long term perspective has been the single common and sure characteristic for cities for centuries in our so-called Urban Age. But during the last decade an inconvenient truth has emerged: not all cities are growing, and many face the prospect of a long-term stagnation if not decline in population, household numbers and economic power. A look abroad shows first experiences with this phenomenon. In Germany, large shifts in population and economy took place after reunification, especially in the former East Germany. The symptoms of shrinkage are by now overwhelming and the federal government realised latest in 2001 that planning has to adopt the new perspective fundamentally. Strangely enough, shrinkage seemed to be an unforeseen surprise when it became obvious. Now it appears that the involved institutions can only react to the symptoms and not actively plan in order to turn the decline into an opportunity instead of a threat.

The aim of the „Shrinking Cities“ study (www.shrinkingcities.com) financed by the Bundeskulturstiftung (Federal Culture Foundation, Germany) that ran from 2002 to 2007 was not only to investigate the current spatial and cultural situation of shrinking cities, but also their future and possibilities to react upon these new situations. What can cities do that are facing the prospect of lacking snow to build snowmen in an enduring phase of stagnation, but even the prospect of melting snow: a continuous shrinkage of their population and economic base as warranties for development? Ever since the planning professions conquered the urban realm, they never experienced anything similar to what we are facing now. Even the British experiences with decline of former industrial centers as Manchester produced mainly strategies and regeneration concepts founded on the idea of growth of some kind. Shrinkage is a moment when administrators are confronted with facing an unknown unknown, a fundamentally different prospect for their future. Only now scientific and policy based research is being pursued in Eastern Germany which – years after the processes started – brings light into the 'black hole' of the urban shrinkage phenomenon. New instruments have to be developed and evaluated while the process is continuously advancing.

How can cities adjust their mid- and long-term plans to avoid an increasing discrepancy between a growth-based spending policy and a shrinking population and tax-base? This is not only a problem of East Germany, as the project Shrinking Cities showed with examples like Detroit or Manchester and Liverpool. As in all industrialized nations, it is even a problem in the Netherlands. The birth rate is 1.7 children per woman, well above 1.3 for



Forecast changes in household numbers in the Netherlands 2005-2025, by community, following rpb/cbs (pearl, preliminary numbers).

Source: Ruimtelijk Planbureau: *Krimp en ruimte. Bevolkingsafname, ruimtelijke gevolgen en beleid*. Den Haag 2006

Germany, but still far from the required 2.1 to sustain the current population size. Even the immigration balance that used to buffer this effect has recently turned negative. At the same time, the dominant lifestyle is changing, favouring large cities and metropolises over small and medium cities and rural areas outside urban agglomerations.

Even worse, the mindset of Dutch planning has been focused on problems of growth and over-population ever since the *Nota Westen des Landes* from 1953. Policy makers will face problems for which experience counts little in order to find sound solutions. In short, the reality and the prospect of shrinking cities calls for a new look at the future and its possible unfolding. Here another tradition may help. While Dutch planners might be unexperienced with the outlook on *krimp*, they have been on the forefront of using prospective methods for urban planning and urban design. Since the exhibition *Nederland Nu Als Ontwerp* staged four possible future Netherlands in the year 2050 in Amsterdam's Beurs van Berlage in 1987, scenario thinking has thoroughly changed the way we look upon the future of spatial developments. Other countries have followed the Dutch way and incorporated scenario methods on all levels of planning. This is not about prognostics of demographic change, numbers that the CBS and RPB provide (for a general study of the Dutch situation, see: *Ruimtelijk Planbureau: Krimp en ruimte. Bevolkingsafname, ruimtelijke gevolgen en beleid*. Den Haag 2006). One of the main aims of scenario planning has always been to open up the boundaries of thought, to enable out-of-the-box thinking, and to lead to action. This is precisely what Dutch communities faced by the prospect of shrinkage should do. As the first experiences from Germany show, it might be impossible to build a snowman without snow. But even without snow, many other new opportunities unthought of may arise to build a future-proof, sustainable community.

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Alexa Bodammer is a researcher at the *Görlitz Kompetenzzentrum Revitalisierender Städtebau* in Germany (Centre of Competence for Revitalisation and Urban Design). She has worked as an architect and urban planner in Berlin and is now engaged in post-graduate teaching at the Technical University of Dresden. The focuses of her research are small and mid-sized cities and their inner-city development as well as regeneration strategies in a non-growing environment. Her doctoral thesis in preparation will illuminate urban design strategies based on the ideas of scenario thinking in Germany.

Christian Salewski is an architect and urban designer. He is lecturer for urban design at the Swiss Federal Institute for Technology in Zurich. Christian has worked on international projects in offices in Rotterdam and Berlin and was assistant lecturer at the Technical University of Dresden in East-Germany. His research includes studies on waterfront and airport developments, on the new landscapes of the network society and on rulesets for urban design. Currently he is working on his Ph.D. thesis "Dutch New Worlds – Urban Design and Scenario Thinking" that will trace the influence of scenario methods on the view of the future in urban design and spatial planning that started in the 1980s in the Netherlands.