

SHRINKING CITIES, GROWING?

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Photo by: Marcos Lomba (FLICKR)

CIUDADES DECRECIENTES, ¿CRECIENTES?

Un estudio reciente constata una realidad incómoda, algunas ciudades en declive poblacional continúan creciendo en superficie construida evidenciando un modelo de crecimiento urbano todavía ligado al desarrollo inmobiliario

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A recent study published in the journal *Regional Studies* shows a worrying asymmetry between population and housing dynamics in some Spanish cities. The study reveals the continuous demographic decline of some of them despite their spatial growth, translated into an increase in the built-up area within the municipal limits. This circumstance, contradictory and disconcerting in equal parts, reveals one of the main characteristics of the Spanish urban model: real estate development as the main engine of local economic development.

It is now common when dealing with the concept of shrinking cities to present the case of Detroit as a paradigm of an increasingly widespread trend in developed countries. Detroit, once a dynamic and thriving industrial center, has suffered a 60% population loss in the last 60 years. Spurred on by the automobile industry, the city reached 1,850,000 inhabitants in the 1950s. Currently, its population only represents 35% of the total registered during its heyday. With 650,000 inhabitants in the year 2020, Detroit is considered the main exponent of the so-called *Shrinking Cities* (decreasing or shrinking cities), a phenomenon that proliferates in the Western world as a consequence, among other reasons, of globalizing currents. and industrial relocation processes.

Abandonment of Michigan Central Station in Detroit

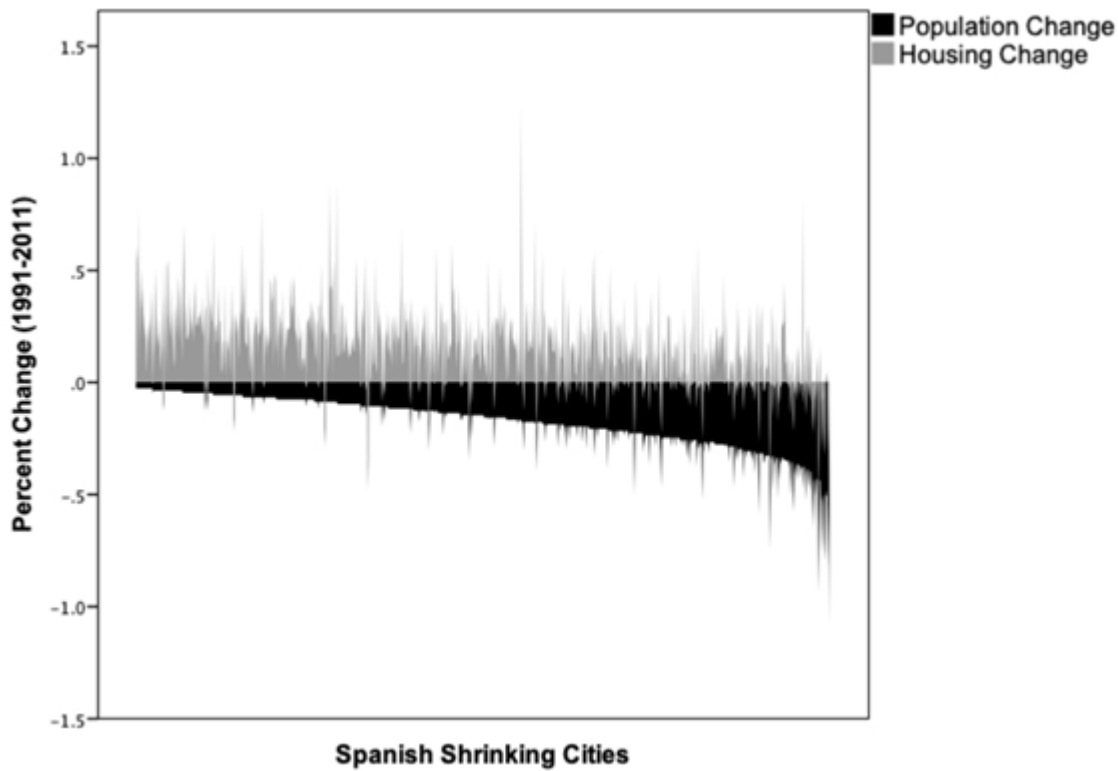


Source: Johnathan Nightingale, Michigan Central Station. Flickr

In Spain, cities like Avilés, Cádiz or Ferrol are often branded as declining cities. In another time considered poles of industrial activity, currently they present negative population dynamics and represent urban environments in a process of decline. However, they are not the only ones. The population concentration around large centers of economic activity such as Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao or Zaragoza; It conditions the demographic evolution of numerous intermediate and small Spanish cities, deepening the population gap between the large poles of economic attraction and the rest of the territory.

Expanding the study of shrinking Spanish cities, the study, titled [Growing Shrinking Cities](#), and carried out by Beatriz Fernández Águeda (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales -EHESS-, Aubervilliers, France) and Maxwell Hartt (Queen's University, Kingston, ON, Canada) , provides new data on the complex relationship between population dynamics and housing for the period 1991-2011, especially in declining or declining urban contexts. Unlike other international cases, declining Spanish cities did not experience a decrease in their housing stock. In fact, the growth of housing was similar in all Spanish cities, regardless of the trajectory of the population.

Relation between housing and population for each Spanish city



Source: Beatriz Fernández & Maxwell Hartt (2021): Growing shrinking cities, Regional Studies.

It could be interpreted, judging by the results of the study, that those cities that lose population will not necessarily require less housing as a consequence of the reduction in the size of households. A city that has lost population might even have a housing shortage if the number of households had increased. However, this is not the case in the Spanish context. The results of the model show how the change in the number of households corresponds very closely to the evolution of the population in the Spanish municipalities. Therefore, excess housing construction was evident both in cities where the population decreased and in those where the number of households decreased.

These results reinforce the idea that housing is less and less used to meet the needs of society and, on the contrary, is more and more a derivative financial instrument and a strategy for capital accumulation. In turn, it provides grounds for ruling out urban policies based on real estate development as a driving and conditioning factor for economic and population growth. According to the Hartt and Fernández study, only 3.6% of shrinking Spanish municipalities that grew in terms of housing between 1991 and 2011 saw a positive population change in the following five years.

The results of this study reinforce the hypothesis that the growth paradigm based on real estate development continues to permeate urban development policies, and that, in turn, the market continues to promote construction as a means to induce growth, without taking into account the demographic reality of many cities in the process of decline. It is, therefore, urgent to reverse these policies by providing territorial competitiveness instruments that are based on the transformation and adaptation of the existing built environment to the new needs of the population and the new environmental demands imposed by the global context.

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There are no comments yet.