

# The influence of neoliberalism in the context of population decline: An analysis of planning strategies in Broken Hill, NSW

Dr. Laura Schatz  
Lecturer, School of Social Sciences and Psychology  
University of Western Sydney

**Abstract:** In countries throughout the developed world, including Australia, large cities are growing while hinterland communities (particularly the most remote communities) are shrinking. Uneven population distribution – caused, in part, by neoliberal government policy – is expected to continue. Unfortunately, planners in shrinking communities employ growth-oriented, neoliberal policies that have been found to be ineffective in addressing the effects of population decline. A growing number of “shrinking cities” researchers are calling for the adoption of so-called “decline-oriented” planning (which involves accepting future decline and actively planning for it) in shrinking communities. Using a mix of documents analysis, field observation and open-ended interviews with planners and local policy-makers, I use the case study of Broken Hill, NSW to determine how neoliberalism influences planning policy and to explore the scope for acceptance of a decline-oriented planning approach. Overall, my findings point to the importance of local context and history in influencing the “form” that neoliberal planning policy takes. My findings also highlight that there are challenges for local planners and policy-makers in actively planning for future decline – challenges which, if left unaddressed, will make dealing with the effects of future decline even more difficult.

## 1.0 Introduction

Throughout the developed world, large metropolitan areas are growing while rural and regional communities are shrinking (Beauregard, 2003; Polèse & Shearmur, 2006). This is particularly the case in Australia, where the most remote communities are experiencing the greatest decline (McGuirk & Argent, 2011). The causes of rural and regional population decline include economic restructuring from a primary and manufacturing-based economy towards a service-based economy (the jobs of which tend to be located in large metropolitan areas), low fertility rates, and youth outmigration (Rieniets, 2005; Martinez-Fernandez & Wu, 2007). Population decline presents numerous challenges for planners in shrinking communities, including vacant properties, infrastructure overcapacity, shrinking municipal revenues, chronic unemployment, and high crime rates (Popper & Popper, 2002; Schilling & Logan, 2008; Schatz, 2012).

Rather than reversing in the future, the pattern of uneven population distribution is expected to strengthen (Polèse & Shearmur, 2006). McGuirk and Argent (2011, p.2) explain that in Australia, “...the bulk of population expansion will be captured by the major cities, particularly capital cities.” Despite the likelihood of future population decline, shrinking communities tend to focus on attracting and planning for future growth, even when it is unlikely to occur. However, growth-oriented planning (rooted in the dominant political ideology of neoliberalism) has either failed to improve the negative effects of population decline or made them worse. Researchers in the growing body of “shrinking cities” literature argue that it is imperative for shrinking communities to find alternatives to growth-oriented planning. Popper and Popper (2002), amongst others, have called for planners in shrinking communities to adopt so-called “decline-oriented” planning, which involves accepting future decline and actively planning for it. Using a mix of documents analysis, field observation and interviews with planners and local policy-makers,<sup>1</sup> I use the case study of Broken Hill, NSW to illuminate how growth-oriented neoliberalism has influenced planning policy and to explore whether a decline-oriented planning approach might be possible as an alternative. I begin with a discussion of the planning challenges in Broken Hill. I then outline the literature on the prevalence of neoliberal planning in shrinking cities and discuss that prevalence in Broken Hill. I conclude with some insights into the relevance of this case study for other shrinking communities.

## 2.0 Broken Hill, New South Wales

---

<sup>1</sup> A total of seven interviews with local planners and local councilors were conducted and 28 council planning documents were reviewed. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended and interviewees were identified the so-called “snowball” technique.

The City of Broken Hill is located in the Far Western Region of New South Wales in the Barrier Ranges, about 1110km west of Sydney. Adelaide is the closest capital city and is located 511 kilometres from Broken Hill. The closest regional sized urban settlement is Mildura, situated approximately 300 kilometres south of Broken Hill. As a result of the hot and dry climate, Broken Hill's landscape supports only minimal agriculture and human settlement (Connell Wagner Pty Ltd, 2009). Broken Hill is probably most famous for its economic history, which has been dominated by the mining industry. The city was purpose-built to service that industry after the discovery of rich mineral deposits (silver, zinc and lead) in 1883 (Eklund, 2012). Typical of mining communities throughout the world (Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012), the fortunes of Broken Hill have been determined by the fortunes of the mining companies (Vines, 2010). At its peak in 1952, the mining industry employed 6,500 people, with more than 30,000 people living in the town. However, particularly beginning in the 1970s (when global prices for mineral exports contracted and many mines slowed production or closed and when mining companies began to employ newly-developed labour-saving technology), a gradual exodus from the city took place (Connell Wagner Pty Ltd, 2009). In 2011, the population of Broken Hill was 18,517 (ABS, 2013). Currently, there are two mining companies operating in the City – Perilya and CBH Resources – and mining employs only about 500 people (ABS, 2013). So while mining remains important to Broken Hill's economy in terms of its contribution to local income, the relative importance in terms of the number of people it employs has diminished. Today in Broken Hill, the service sector employs about 45% of the workforce (Connell Wagner Pty Ltd, 2009). Put simply, Broken Hill is a classic example of an Australian mining town that has experienced consistent long-term population and economic decline. This decline – along with the city's mining heritage – has led to several land-use planning challenges.

## **2.1 Planning challenges in Broken Hill**

One of the key challenges faced by land-use planners in Broken Hill is the fact that a city built to service the mining industry in the late 1880s does not, in many ways, meet the needs of residents today. Broken Hill was originally built as a temporary town to service the mines. When it became clear that Broken Hill was more than just a temporary settlement, changes were made to improve the built environment as the city. For instance, a green belt (called the "Regeneration Area") was created in the late 1930s to minimize the effects of the constant dust storms. However, the legacy of being built to service the mines poses planning challenges today. As one local official explains, Broken Hill

grew around the mine... Today if you were going to establish a city next to a mine - and particularly a mine where they're mining silver, lead and zinc, and particularly lead - you'd probably have the mine in a location and the city in another location. They wouldn't be in such close proximity.

As a result of its history, incompatible uses are often found in quite close proximity in Broken Hill. Beginning in the late 1960s when the first formal "plan" was introduced in Broken Hill, local officials began to move heavier industry out of residential areas:

[I]n the 1970s, we had fuel depots in the middle of the city and we had a spectacular fire in the 1970s when the local Shell Depot caught alight and nearly took the whole area out. At that particular point, the industrial estate was created so that those potentially hazardous industries could be taken out of the city context and isolated in an industrial area.

However, the close proximity of residential areas to the mines (which for obvious reasons cannot be moved) has led to lasting issues of lead contamination. According to the City's Management of Lead Contamination Development Control Plan (DCP):

as a result of the natural occurrence of lead in the soil, as well as mining activities over the last 100 years, most, if not all, of Broken Hill is potentially contaminated with lead. Lead has been distributed from the ore body through a combination of wind, and water erosion contaminating soils, ceiling spaces, wall cavities and internal areas of homes within Broken Hill... During renovation and demolition works dust that has been accumulating...will be exposed and mobilized. This will result in a high health risk...

The DCP goes on to provide guidelines for the safe development of work practices on land (including dust suppression). Clearly, the historic development of the city so close to the mines has left the city with a number of unique land use planning challenges.

A second planning challenge Broken Hill faces is the fact that infrastructure is too large for current population levels. And because council's revenues are declining due to a declining population, the city is increasingly unable to maintain this oversized infrastructure. This is particularly an issue with the maintenance of uniformly 30-metre wide roads in Broken Hill. A local official commented that the fact that streets are so wide

links into council's ability to maintain those wide streets that are essentially sealed from kerb to kerb. Then there's the nature strips which are within the road reserve and who maintains those? [The] expectation is that council will maintain those nature strips and council doesn't have the resources to do that or in order for it to do that it would need to reallocate resources from other areas that are equally as important... There's some real challenging decisions for the council to make in the next 12 months or so - what services they will provide and at what levels to the community.

Whilst in the past, the mining companies helped to maintain some of this infrastructure – particularly some of the green space in the city – mining companies no longer feel this responsibility. Stated one local official:

In terms of even green space, a lot of those were initially maintained by the mining companies as a part of their desire to make the place attractive. Well, they have withdrawn their support from those sorts of things which means that we've green spaces which are hard to maintain in this climate and what do you do with those spaces if you can no longer grow the grass on it? ...With a shrinking population you could argue that we don't need as many spaces... At one stage we had 15 or 16 ovals, so there's an oval for every 1000 people. It was probably too many.

Another interviewee highlighted the planning challenges associated with the mining companies becoming more multinational and farther "removed" from the local community and thus less concerned with the quality of infrastructure. When asked whether he thought that the mining companies "cared" about quality of life in Broken Hill, he stated that:

No. I think they once did, but I don't think they do now – they're just purely hard-headed. It was always a very paternalistic community... In the old days, the mining companies provided parks and they were very supportive of the community. But I don't think there's anything left of that now. It's just purely a financial arrangement now... People find that a bit hard to accept because it was such a tradition here that they do. You often find people comment on the mining companies won't do that anymore. So they feel a sense of betrayal over it. But [there are] different owners now. The original companies are no longer there. [There are] Chinese and Japanese majority shareholders. What do they care?

Thus, in the context of declining resources because of a declining population and the removal of mining companies' assistance in maintaining local infrastructure, the standard of infrastructure has suffered.<sup>2</sup>

A third key planning issue in Broken Hill is the large number of vacant and derelict houses. In 2011, 16.9% of private dwellings in Broken Hill were unoccupied (ABS, 2013). A local planner explained that the houses that are vacant – in addition to attracting criminal behaviour – tend to not be attractive to people who are looking for a new house. According to him:

They're the type of houses that I guess long term we'd like to see demolished and houses rebuilt on those blocks, but... a lot of those vacant houses are on small blocks closer to the CBD ... A lot of the people that are in the market for building a new house are not interested in the smaller blocks.

Unfortunately, there is very little the council can do to deal with these vacant houses: it takes at least five years of unpaid taxes for the vacant houses to revert to council ownership but more problematic,

---

<sup>2</sup> Exacerbating Council's financial situation and its ability to maintain infrastructure and services is the fact that one of the mining companies – Perilya – recently won a lawsuit against the New South Wales Valuer General for overpayment of rates. This means that Broken Hill Council must now pay \$6.8 million to the mining company. One local official described the impact this lawsuit has had in this way: "So if you are reducing a budget for this immediate time of \$6.8 million of a budget of \$38 million, that's 5% nearly or over 5% of the budget. Not only that, on top of that, that Perilya are now going to challenge the rating issue for 2010. So it's \$6.8 million we owe them now. It may be another \$6.8 million that we owe them again. So it won't only be the \$6.8 million that we owe them, but we are taking out \$6.8 million basically for every year thereafter."

according to a local planner, is the fact that many of the owners “are still paying the land rates on them and the houses are just sitting there; they’re not doing anything with them.” A further issue related to housing is the fact that many older houses in Broken Hill are in poor condition. A large number of these houses were built as temporary structures from an easily moveable material – galvanized iron (Eklund, 2012). A lack of upkeep and general ageing of these so-called “tinnies” means that many people – in particular, elderly people on fixed incomes who cannot afford housing maintenance costs – are living in poor conditions. Said one local official: “I know for a fact there are houses in Broken Hill where the toilets are outside.”

A fourth key planning issue facing Broken Hill is the inapplicability of broader state policy and legislation. In New South Wales, the content and form of local planning is very much dictated by the State government. According to interviewees, the requirement to adhere to planning policies such as State Environmental Planning Policies and to follow the Standard Template for Local Environmental Plans is problematic because these documents are focused on dealing with issues arising in the high growth context of Metropolitan Sydney. One local official put it this way:

particularly with the State Environmental Planning Policies, a few apply but the vast majority don't and they are for particularly city-centric issues as opposed to the issues that we have.. it's all about the pressure on Sydney. I think they should rename them. Instead of “State Environmental Planning Policies,” we should name them “Sydney Environmental Planning Policies.”

The focus of state documents on dealing with growth in Metropolitan Sydney results not only in a lack of guidance from the state government in how to deal with issues arising from population decline, but it also results in local planners in Broken Hill having to constantly “argue their case” with state officials when asking for flexibility. One interviewee gave the following example relating to the applicability of the Standard Template:

I think we've got 35 private art galleries in the city and it's certainly one of those areas we'd like to promote and have more of... Under the standard provision LEP the definitions really did not allow for the style of art gallery that we have here which is they may work there, they do display art but they also sell it, they may have tea rooms, they may have a whole range of things that go with that and under the standard provisions it would not and you could not fit into a residential area. The initial stance [of the NSW government] was we won't allow you to write a special provision. You need to comply with state provisions, but locally we needed to have that for the future viability of our community...

Thus, Broken Hill faces some serious planning challenges, many of which have been precipitated – or at least exacerbated – by the city’s declining population. The questions arises: How are planners and policy-makers dealing with these issues? Do strategies embody the typical neoliberal growth-attraction focus? Is there evidence of “decline-oriented” planning in Broken Hill?

### **3.0 The prevalence of neoliberal planning in shrinking cities and the alternative of decline-oriented planning**

Many scholars have pointed to the neoliberalization of government policy at all levels, especially since the shift to a post-industrial economy in the 1970s. Since then, there has been what David Harvey calls an “emphatic turn” towards neoliberalism as the dominant political ideology (Harvey, 2007). According to Brenner and Theodore (2002, p.350), “the linchpin of neoliberal ideology is the belief that open, competitive, and unregulated markets, liberated from all forms of state interference, represent the optimal mechanism for economic development.” Gleeson and Low (2000, p.12) further clarify that neoliberalism involves the desire for economic growth taking precedence over social justice and environmental protection.

In the case of shrinking rural and regional communities, the shift to neoliberalism as the dominant government ideology has directly caused or at least greatly exacerbated economic and population decline (Leadbeater, 2008; Dabinett, 2004). The “rolling back” of social welfare measures and the “rolling out” of policies to facilitate economic growth has been particularly detrimental for “boom and bust” resource communities such as mining communities (Polèse and Shearmur, 2006). The deregulation of international markets, liberalization of global trade and increasing concentration of ownership of mines in a few large, multinational mining corporations has meant that mining communities are increasingly vulnerable to global forces, most significantly the ebbs and flows of

global markets. While these communities traditionally relied on public sector employment and social welfare programs to moderate the negative effects of economic downturns, the turn to neoliberalism has meant that this social safety net is getting increasingly smaller (Schatz et al., 2013).

Ironically, despite the fact that neoliberalism has played a large role in the decline of many mining communities, there is a trend in all communities (growing and shrinking) towards the adoption of neoliberal planning policies (see, for instance, Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Gleeson & Low, 2000; Harvey 2007; Peck 2001; Hackworth, 2007; Ruming, 2005). Perhaps not surprisingly, neoliberalism, with its desire for limited government intervention in markets and “small government,” takes a more “anti-planning” perspective that “devalues” planning and portrays it as a brake on economic development and competitiveness (Hackworth, 2012). Neoliberal planning policies prioritize facilitating any kind of development over social and environmental goals (Gleeson & Low, 2000; Harvey, 2007). Furthermore, neoliberal planning involves the adoption of “entrepreneurial” planning strategies whereby communities engage in place-competition to attract jobs and investment and, ultimately, population (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Peck & Tickell, 2002). According to Gleeson and Low (2000, p.124): “...strategic planning has been redeployed, in a reduced form with new objectives as a central element of the ‘game plan’ which place competition has made ‘indispensible’ to every city-region.” Shrinking hinterland communities are not immune from this trend, readily adopting growth-focused neoliberal planning strategies aimed at selling the city to outsiders. Unfortunately, in focusing on attracting economic activity and residents, the focus of planning becomes “external” and “internal” issues affecting local residents – such as crumbling infrastructure and vacant houses – go largely unaddressed (Schatz, 2010).

Of course, neoliberalism has not been implemented uniformly in all places and its local manifestations are filtered through local culture. Indeed critical scholarship on neoliberalism points out that while neoliberalism has an overarching influence on planning discourse and practice, the picture is much more complex (Gibson, 2013; O’Neill and Weller, 2013; Lerner, 2003; McGuirk, 2005; Hackworth, 2007). Brenner and Theodore (2002, p.362), in explaining the need to examine what they call “actually existing neoliberalism” state that “...neoliberal programs of capitalist restructuring are rarely, if ever, imposed in a pure form, for they are always introduced within politico-institutionalized contexts that have been molded significantly by earlier regulatory arrangements, institutionalized practices, and political compromises.” Brenner and Theodore go on to state that the notion of actually existing neoliberalism presents cracks where alternative approaches might squeeze through.

One of these alternative approaches in shrinking communities might be “decline-oriented planning” – an approach gaining support in North America and Europe. Proposed by shrinking cities researchers such as Popper and Popper (2002), Polèse and Shearmur (2006), and Schilling and Logan (2008), in contrast to growth-oriented, neoliberal planning, decline-oriented planning leaves behind the assumption of the likelihood of, and indeed need for, future population growth. In its place, planners and policy-makers are urged to “right-size” the city to current population levels (by, for instance, removing infrastructure and directing any development to already built-up areas of the city) and to plan for future population decline while maintaining a good quality of life for the remaining residents (by, for example, turning vacant properties into greenspace). Decline-oriented planning is more “inward-focused” than neoliberal planning, in that maintaining a good quality of life for existing residents is the main priority; the focus is not trying to attract new growth. Indeed, cities such as Youngstown, Ohio, have begun to adopt a decline-oriented approach (Schatz, 2012). Might there be room for such an approach to be adopted in Broken Hill through the “cracks” in neoliberal planning?

#### **4.0 The focus of strategic planning documents in Broken Hill**

When one examines various strategic planning documents relating to Broken Hill’s future, one finds that the emphasis on “selling” the city and planning for how to accommodate a growing population (despite the trend of long-term population decline) is rampant. Discussion of how to improve quality of life in the city for remaining residents is largely absent. Three documents in particular provide good examples of the growth-oriented, neoliberal discourse: the Local Profile and Issues Paper, the Community Strategic Plan (Broken Hill 2030), and the Far West Regional Strategy. In 2009, Sydney-based planning consultants Connell Wagner Pty Ltd, funded by Broken Hill City Council and the NSW Department of Planning, released a “**Local Profile and Issues Paper**” (LPIP) meant to inform the creation of a new Land Use Strategy and Local Environmental Plan for the City of Broken Hill. Upon

reading the LPIP, it becomes clear that it is mainly concerned with growing the city in the future. While admitting the population has declined consistently since the 1950s, there is only optimism that the population will increase in the future: “The population of NSW is expected to grow by an estimated 20% between 2001 and 2013, and although it is unclear whether this will occur in Broken Hill, there will doubtless be growth” (p.51). What is unclear, in fact, is upon what evidence this prediction of future growth is based.

Unfortunately, this “optimism” means that issues associated with future population decline, such as infrastructure overcapacity and the large number of vacant houses, go unaddressed. In fact, while it would seem prudent for there to be some sort of discussion in the LPIP on making sure that any new development happens in already built-up areas of the city, according to the LPIP, “in practical terms, urban consolidation is not an issue...” (p.17). Instead, there is quite extensive discussion about facilitating future development by expanding the city into new land release areas since the “skilled workers” which the city wants to attract with require “large and high quality properties,” which cannot be provided in the already built-up areas of the city (p.40). Perhaps most problematically, there is mention of the possibility of developing a “couple of rows of houses” in the regeneration area, reflecting the neoliberal emphasis on growth over environmental concerns. While the large number of vacant commercial sites are mentioned, the documents speaks not of their reuse or demolition, but of the need to create a new Business Precinct in order to meet the “shortfall of supply” that will happen with increased population and business activity (p.72). Furthermore, because the focus throughout the LPIP seems to be on “selling” the city, the limitations of increased settlement in Broken Hill – including the health effects of environmental damage from the mining industry and water scarcity issues – are minimized. The environmental damage done by the mining industry – significant especially in terms of issues of the lead contamination existing in most of the city – is barely mentioned. Furthermore, although the LPIP concedes that Broken Hill exists in a “climate and a landscape only capable of supporting minimal agriculture and human settlement” (p.6), there is no consideration as to how an increasing population would actually worsen current water scarcity issues. In all, the LPIP remains clearly focused on attracting people and businesses and facilitating the expansion of the footprint of the city.

In 2010, it became a legislative requirement in New South Wales for each local council to prepare a Community Strategic Plan (CSP) that would be based on community consultation and that would provide a vision for community development over a period of at least 10 years. **Broken Hill 2030** is such a Community Strategic Plan. Compared to the Local Profile and Issues Paper, there is at least some mention of quality of life issues for local residents. For instance, according to the CSP, “[d]uring the consultation program the community expressed the desire for a healthy, active, engaged and tolerant community that maintained its unique local identity and friendliness into the future” (Broken Hill City Council, 2010, p.10). Although infrastructure overcapacity is not specifically mentioned, the CSP states that in terms of “meeting the needs of all age groups,” the city must “develop, implement and evaluate strategies to address the impact of a changing population on local facilities and services” (p.11). All of these seem to be very “inward-focused” planning goals. However, there is still an emphasis in other parts of the document on attracting population. For example, one of the “aspirations” of Broken Hill’s Community Strategic Plan is having an “increasing population” (p.5). Indeed, the CSP discusses the need to “develop a marketing strategy to position Broken Hill as an attractive place for business and investment” (p.13). Many of the key indicators suggested to measure the “success” of the city are growth-oriented, including: movement in population; value of development applications approved; and number of new residential dwellings (p.25). So while the Community Strategic Plan does make some mention of the quality of life of existing residents, the bulk of the document focuses on how to make the city attractive for newcomers and tourists.

A further strategic planning document that illustrates this growth-oriented, neoliberal focus is **Far West Regional Plan**, completed by Regional Development Australia in 2010. Despite acknowledgement that an important issue for the RDA is to “ensure strategies were designed to suit specific requirements, noting that in some cases local statistical trends opposed national trends, eg local population decline versus national growth trends” (Regional Development Australia, 2011, p.6), it seems the only strategy for dealing with this decline and its associated issues is to achieve population growth. Indeed, the “mission” of the RDA in Far West NSW is about promoting growth, “while ensuring the region has the appropriate infrastructure” (p.10) to accommodate this growth. Whilst the document talks about the local climate, there is no mention of water shortages and how this might be dealt if the population grows. In fact, according to the Far West Regional Plan, “the unique features of the Far

West NSW landscape present a significant competitive advantage for the region” (p.23). Indeed, throughout the document, aspects of the region – such as indigenous and cultural heritage – are portrayed as commodities to attract tourists and future residents. Furthermore, much of the document is focused on “removing barriers to investment” in order to attract businesses (p.43). The Far West Regional Plan highlights the need to present “a consistent buoyant image of the region and its opportunities” (p.50). Indeed, this seems to be a goal of the majority of the strategic plans examined for this research: present the city and the region as “doing well” and “the place to be” in order to attract new businesses and residents. However, this “outward” focus on attracting growth and facilitating development again means that the pressing issues of population decline are going unaddressed. Is this focus reflected in the thinking of local planners and policy-makers?

## **5.0 The focus of Broken Hill’s planners and policy-makers in strategic planning and development assessment**

Interviews with local planners and policy-makers reveal that their approach – while containing some elements of neoliberal growth-oriented thinking – is much more pragmatic and reflective of the reality of a declining population. For instance, when asked to characterize population trends in Broken Hill, most interviewees acknowledged that Broken Hill’s population is in a state of long-term decline. Said one local official: “...the dynamics for us at the moment are a stable to declining population projected to decline.” Another interviewee characterized population “more a general decline. It tends to stabilise, if anything, and then a gradual decline again.” In contrast to the growth-oriented nature of the strategic planning documents, all of the interviewees spoke about the need to keep any new development within the existing footprint of the city. Said one interviewee, talking about the challenges of dealing with infrastructure overcapacity in the context of declining Council revenue:

It's really necessitated...a significant review of services and facilities that council will provide for the community in the near future and the fact that we've essentially got under-utilised infrastructure and land...We're focusing really on [new development] to occur wherever possible within the existing footprint of the city. So we're more around urban renewal, close to services and infrastructure as opposed to further development on the outskirts.

According to another interviewee, above all “...it's about maintaining the existing footprint. Not going into the regeneration areas... minimising the impact on infrastructure...” Several interviewees discussed Council’s desire to direct people to buy vacant lots before building on the outskirts:

there's still a lot of interest with particularly local residents who still want half acre, acre sized block on the edge of town with a bit of a view, that type of thing... However, we generally are wanting to promote more infill development. We don't necessarily want to encourage things to go too far outside the existing built up area. A lot of that area is not serviced... So we're quite keen on trying to promote infill development. There's quite a significant number of vacant houses in town.

When asked if local planners and policy-makers have overtly adopted a decline-oriented approach, one local council member commented that planning for decline has “...sort of happened, but we haven’t actually given up on getting more people.” Indeed, interviewees did talk express the desire to attract people and economic activity. However, compared to strategic planning documents that seem to call for population and economic growth regardless of its impact on the existing residents, interviewees were much more concerned making sure that new development benefited the existing community. When asked how he weighed the various social, economic and environmental issues when assessing development applications, another local official responded: “I don’t think that I have ever made a decision based on the economic development. That doesn’t interest me. It’s about how is it going to impact on the community? What is the benefit? ... Everybody tells you they are going to employ 1000 people. They are never going to. It’s not going to happen.” Another interviewee specifically mentioned the need for Broken Hill Council to be “entrepreneurial”, but only if it contributed to the quality of life of current residents. She went on to state that:

...a little bit of growth would be fabulous but at the end of the day what we want to see is the community having an opportunity to work, an opportunity for education, an opportunity for a lifestyle. If they take that opportunity, that's great. If they don't, well at least as leaders in the city we have provided that opportunity.

A key barrier for interviewees in terms of admitting the likelihood of future population decline seemed to be the fact that if the population dropped further, funding from the state and federal governments for services and infrastructure would suffer: “you don’t want to lose anymore [people] because then you could lose a whole range of other services. We have a hospital, we have good nursing homes.” In fact, there have been instances of services been withdrawn by the New South Wales government already because of predictions of population decline:

they've built a new hospital here for a declining population which probably really doesn't suit the current population. The New South Wales government made that decision based on population projections but then there's not necessarily enough beds in the hospital to cater for this population. We can probably find other examples where the New South Wales government uses its predictions to say well we're going to withdraw this service, withdraw that service because you're not big enough anymore.

The danger of reducing services available in Broken Hill is compounded by its role of Broken Hill as a regional service centre which means that regardless of the absolute population numbers of Broken Hill, services still need to be provided for people either living in or travelling through the Far Western region:

Broken Hill is and will always be a major regional centre in this part of the world, so without services provided out of this regional city, the nearest options are Mildura which is in another state or Dubbo which is seven hours from there. They're not realistic options so Broken Hill needs to be sustained from a service provision point of view.

Thus, contrary to the external, growth-oriented focus of strategic planning documents, planners and policy-makers in Broken Hill are much more pragmatic about proactively dealing with the effects of population decline. Admittedly, none of the interviewees spoke about an overt policy of “accepting” future population decline and for various reasons, most of them commented that either maintaining the current population or seeing a certain amount of population growth was seen as being a good thing. However it was not, for these interviewees, about simply “going for growth” for the sake of growth. Interviewees clearly had more of an “internal” focus on the quality of life of existing residents than that presented in strategic planning documents:

## **6.0 Discussion and Conclusions**

Broken Hill is a city that has consistently lost population since the 1950s. It is a quintessential example of a “shrinking city” with all of the accompanying planning issues, including infrastructure overcapacity, vacant houses and declining revenue. On top of this, Broken Hill is a mining city that was purpose-built to service the mining industry, which brings with it its own set of planning challenges. In the face of consistent population decline, at first glance, planning policy in Broken Hill reflects the neoliberal emphasis on attracting growth, facilitating development and “selling” the city to outsiders. Strategic planning documents in Broken Hill – instead of dealing proactively with the issues associated with population decline (issues that acutely affect the quality of life of existing residents) more closely resemble marketing brochures, aimed at promoting the city to potential residents. Instead of focusing on consolidating the urban structure for a shrinking population, the documents speak about the ability of the city to expand – even into the city’s regeneration area – to accommodate future population growth. The issues of how this growth can be accommodated in the context of water scarcity issues and environmental damage (particularly lead contamination) is not addressed. The policies are firmly growth oriented and “externally” focused. In that way, it confirms Gleeson and Low’s (2000) assertion that strategic planning in cities has become a key tool in the every-increasing game of place competition.

However, deeper analysis of planning in Broken Hill reveals that this “external” focus of neoliberalism is much more present in planning documents (many of which were written by consultants from outside of Broken Hill) than it is in the thought and actions of local officials. This confirms the argument in critical neoliberal scholarship that the local manifestations of neoliberalism are in fact different from place to place, “filtered” through local circumstances. Interviews with local planners and policy-makers reveal a much more pragmatic adaptation to the reality of continuing population decline. While none of the planners seemed to be intentionally adopting a “decline-oriented” strategy, they were in fact implementing elements of it by, for instance, consolidating urban infrastructure and directing settlement to already built-up areas. Rather than prioritizing economic development above all else –

the hallmark of neoliberal planning – most of the interviewees spoke about the need to attract economic development that would most help the existing community. Perhaps the keen focus on the well-being of residents comes from the tradition of unionism and the expectation on the part of residents that their needs in times of economic downturn will be looked after. This may lead local officials to be more mindful of the impact that any kind of development will have on the local community than in communities where this tradition has never existed. Whatever the cause, it is clear that planners and policy-makers in Broken Hill are more realistic about the prospects of future population growth than the city's policy documents suggest.

In the end, it seems unlikely that local planners and policy-makers in Broken Hill will wholeheartedly adopt a “decline-oriented” approach, but indeed this research has found “cracks” in neoliberalism where elements of this approach have seeped through. This should provide hope for shrinking cities researchers that decline-oriented planning might “seep through” in other shrinking communities. The fact that decline-oriented planning has not become an overall strategy in Broken Hill has as much to do with the broader institutional structure around infrastructure funding as it does with the hegemony of growth-oriented neoliberalism. Put simply, less population in Broken Hill – and other shrinking communities throughout Australia – means less funding for infrastructure and services. Broader institutional structures are likely more straightforward to change than hegemonic philosophies; again, this provides an “entry point” for other shrinking cities in terms of adopting a decline-oriented approach.

For now, decline-oriented planning in Broken Hill – and indeed in most other shrinking cities – is likely to remain “under the surface,” reflected in the day-to-day actions of local officials if not in strategic planning documents. But this raises a key question: what is the usefulness of strategic plans if they are not really reflecting the reality of local circumstances? Currently the NSW government is reforming the planning system to place more emphasis on long-term strategic planning and it can be foreseen that considerable resources will go in to producing these plans. If these documents end up simply being – in neoliberal tradition – externally-focused marketing documents, then perhaps they are a waste of resources for existing residents, especially in shrinking cities where the likelihood of attracting population is low, the quality of life of remaining residents is declining and resources are becoming increasingly scarce.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013, 2011 Census Quickstats. Retrieved August 8, 2013 from [http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census\\_services/getproduct/census/2011/quickstat/LGA11250](http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/quickstat/LGA11250)
- Beauregard, R 2003, 'Aberrant cities: Urban population loss in the United States, 1820-1930', *Urban Geography*, vol.24, no.8, pp. 672-690.
- Brenner, N & Theodore, N 2002, 'Cities and the geographies of "actually existing neoliberalism"', *Antipode*, vol.34, pp.350-379.
- Brian Turner & Associates 1983, *City of Broken Hill Strategy Plan, May 1983*, Brian Turner & Associates, Adelaide.
- Broken Hill City Council n.d., *Broken Hill Development Control Plan No. 11 – Management of Lead Contamination*.
- Broken Hill City Council 2010, *Broken Hill 2030: Community Strategic Plan*, Broken Hill: Broken Hill City Council.
- Connell Wagner Pty Ltd 2009, *Broken Hill: Local Profile and Issues Paper 2009*, Connell Wagner Pty Ltd, Neutral Bay, NSW.
- Dabinett, G 2004, 'Uneven spatial development regeneration outcomes in the UK: Reversing decline in the northern city of Sheffield?' *Magazin Städte im Umbruch*, Ausgabe II, pp.18-22.
- Eklund, E 2012, *Mining towns: Making a living, making a life*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- Gibson, C 2013, "'Muting" neoliberalism? Class and colonial legacies in Australia', *Human Geography*, vol.6, no.2, pp.54-68.
- Gleeson, B & Low, N 2000, 'Revaluing planning: Rolling back neo-liberalism in Australia', *Progress in Planning*, vol.53, no.2, pp.83-164.
- Hackworth, J 2007, *The Neoliberal city: Governance, ideology, and development in American urbanism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.
- Hackworth, J 2012, A critical examination of market-centred land abandonment policies in shrinking American cities, Working Paper: Geography and Program in Planning, University of Toronto.
- Harvey, D 2007, 'Neo-liberalism as creative destruction', *Interfacehs – A Journal on Integrated Management of Occupational Health and the Environment*, vol.2, no.4. Retrieved March 11, 2011 from [www.interfacehs.sp.senac.br](http://www.interfacehs.sp.senac.br)
- Larner, W 2003, 'Neoliberalism?' *Environment and Planning A*, vol.21, pp.509-512.
- Leadbeater, D 2008, 'Introduction', in D Leadbeater (ed), *Mining town crisis: Globalization, labour and resistance in Sudbury*, Fernwood Publishing, Halifax, NS, pp.11-48.
- Martinez-Fernandez, C & Wu, T 2007, 'Stadtentwicklung in einer differenten Wirklichkeit. Schrumpfende Städte in Australien', *Berliner Debatte Initial*, vol.1, pp. 45–61.
- Martinez-Fernandez, C, Wu, CT, Schatz, LK, Taira, N., & Vargas-Hernández, JG 2012, 'The shrinking mining city: Urban dynamics and contested territory', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* vol.36, no.2, pp.245-260.
- McGuirk, PM 2005, 'Planning the Sydney metropolitan region: Neoliberalism and after-neoliberalism in practice?' *Geographical Research*, vol.43, pp.59-70.

McGuirk, PM & Argent, N 2011, 'Population growth and change: Implications for Australia's cities and regions', *Geographical Research*, pp.1-19.

O'Neill, P & Weller, S 2013, 'To what extent has Australia's development trajectory been neoliberalist?' *Human Geography*, vol.6, no.2, pp.69-84.

Peck, J 2001, 'Neoliberalizing states: Thin policies/hard outcomes', *Progress in Human Geography*, vol.25, no.3, pp.445-455.

Peck, J & Tickell, A 2002, 'Neoliberalizing space', *Antipode*, vol.34, pp.380-404.

Polèse, M & Shearmur, R 2006, 'Why some regions will decline: A Canadian case study with thoughts on local development strategies', *Papers in Regional Science*, vol.85, no.1, pp.23-46.

Popper, D & Popper, F 2002, 'Small can be beautiful', *Planning*, vol.68, no.7, p.20.

Regional Development Australia 2011, *RDA Far West NSW Regional Plan 2011-2021: Geography is no barrier*, Regional Development Australia Far West NSW, Broken Hill.

Rieniets, T 2005, 'Global Shrinkage', in P Oswalt (ed), *Shrinking Cities Volume 1: International Research*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, Germany, p.20.

Ruming, K 2005, 'Partnership, Master Planning and State Provision: a Case Study of 'Actually Existing Neoliberalism' on the Central Coast of New South Wales', *Geographical Research*, vol.43, no.1, pp.82-92.

Schatz, 2010 'What helps or hinders the adoption of "good planning" principles in shrinking cities? A comparison of recent planning exercises in Sudbury, Ontario and Youngstown, Ohio', Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Waterloo, Canada.

Schatz, 2012, 'Decline-oriented urban governance in Youngstown, Ohio', in M Dewar & JM Thomas (eds), *The City After Abandonment*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

Schatz, L, Leadbeater, D, Martinez-Fernandez, C, & Weyman, T 2013, 'From "up north" to "down under:" Dynamics of shrinkage in mining communities in Canada and Australia', in K Pallagst & T Wiechmann (eds), *Stories of Tough Times: International perspectives and policy implications in shrinking cities*, Routledge, New York, pp.381-416.

Schilling, J & Logan, J 2008, 'Greening the Rust Belt: A green infrastructure model for right sizing America's shrinking cities', *Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol.74, no.4, pp. 451-466.

Vines, E 2010, *Broken Hill: A guide to the Silver City*, Broken Hill City Council, Adelaide.