

# Contested planning efforts for the revitalization of small town centres in Finland

MORITZ ALBRECHT AND JARMO KORTELAINE



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Many Finnish small towns have developed revitalization plans for town centres to counter the problems of decline, rebrand the town, and compete for residents and businesses. Accompanied by municipal branding efforts, infrastructure projects provide small towns with an improved appearance. These projects are often designed by national planning firms and consultants and materialised by private investors, yet it remains unclear if the changes suit the needs and socio-spatial peculiarities of the places they are intended for. This article sheds light onto downtown revitalization efforts by case studies in six shrinking Finnish small towns which have moved beyond the draft planning phase in their downtown revitalisation projects. The research is based on a mixed-methods approach, and pairs assemblage conceptualization with the concepts of small town planning and place-making. The relational approach enables us to show the challenges for shrinking small towns to materialise well-intentioned revitalization plans and place-based solutions in a complex place assemblage with conflicting pressure from big commercial actors, consultants, reluctant investors, limited local economies and demographics in decline.

Keywords: small town, shrinkage, centre revitalization, place-making, assemblage

Moritz Albrecht (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5784-7793>) & Jarmo Kortelainen, Department of Geographical and Historical Studies, University of Eastern Finland, Finland. Email: [moritz.albrecht@uef.fi](mailto:moritz.albrecht@uef.fi), [jarmo.kortelainen@uef.fi](mailto:jarmo.kortelainen@uef.fi)

## Introduction

Urban planning has been one of the key topics in shrinking cities literature. Initiated in US context (e.g. Beauregard 2003; Pallagast *et al.* 2017), the research has evolved in a heterogenous set of areas focusing on smart shrinkage, smart innovation in declining regions, and right sizing approaches (Rhodes & Russo 2013; Coppola 2019). Dominated by research with a city or rural focus (e.g. Dax & Fischer 2018; Peters *et al.* 2018), small towns have become a growing interest during recent years. Although declining, small towns still accommodate considerable shares of countries' populations (Leetmaa *et al.* 2015; Peters *et al.* 2018), and in Finland, provide services and jobs to about one-third of the population (LIITERI 2022).

In Europe, the growing interest in declining localities has affected development strategies and ‘smart shrinkage’ has become a buzzword in regional policy (e.g. ESPON 2020). Hence, an increasing concentration of population in the economic cores has raised conceptual and empirical questions on how to revise planning in shrinking localities (Dax & Fischer 2018; Leick & Lang 2018). Despite the increasing European focus on planning and place-making in relation to shrinkage, much of the literature still focuses on large cities or rural areas scrutinizing the issue from regional, institutional, and often strategy framed perspectives (Wolff & Wiechmann 2018). There is much less research focusing on concrete small town planning practices and projects of shrinking localities despite their importance in managing decline and transition (e.g. Hayter & Nieweler 2018; Tunström *et al.* 2018).

Aside from place (re)branding and programmes to attract new economic actors, downtown revitalizations are a widely utilised approach in small towns to tackle shrinkage (Thomas & Bromley 2003; Hospers 2011; Albrecht & Kortelainen 2020). This has also been a clear trend in Finland and other Nordic countries as many small towns and rural municipalities are planning for or embarking on downtown revitalization projects (Tunström *et al.* 2018). Despite growing attention to smart shrinkage approaches in (trans-)national/regional strategies and local realities of decline, much local spatial planning practices seem to remain rooted in objectives for growth (e.g. Schatz 2017; Hynynen & Rantanen 2019; Syssner 2020). This paper aims to assess this paradox and its implications for small town planning by studying the expressive and material elements of downtown revitalization processes in six declining municipalities in Finland. In particular, it scrutinises how these projects integrate the shrinking characteristics of their locality, how they are engaged with or contradict processes of place-making, and examines the challenges and potentials for small towns to plan with shrinkage.

### **Conceptualizing downtown revitalization and place-making**

The need to manage decline has been a pressing issue throughout Europe, and despite stable economies and high living standards, Nordic countries are heavily affected by the need to tackle decline in non-core regions at various geographical scales (Knudsen 2018; Leick & Lang 2018; Kortelainen & Albrecht 2019; Grunfelder *et al.* 2020; Hynynen & Rantanen 2019; Syssner 2020). There are attempts towards right-sizing and smart shrinking that depart from conventional growth-oriented revitalization ambitions (Rhodes & Russo 2013; Sousa & Pinho 2015; Pallagast *et al.* 2017; Özatagan & Eraydin 2020). So far, at least in US context (Coppola 2019), these transformations seem to represent more policy experimentations than concrete shifts in planning paradigms as called upon in shrinkage and planning literature (Fincher *et al.* 2016; Leick & Lang 2018). In Nordic countries, smart specialization approaches to tackle decline have been dominant (e.g. Grunfelder *et al.* 2020), and the introduction of smart shrinkage or right-sizing concepts are rather recent phenomena (e.g. Syssner 2020; ESPON 2020). This raises doubts about the abilities of small towns to embark on policy experimentation in their planning given the uncertainties and potentially higher costs.

Especially the transformative elements of assembling seem to come to the fore in downtown revitalization and place-making. They often include place branding activities, recoding of promoted narratives, or initiating broader local transition by employing various expressive or material elements (Albrecht & Kortelainen 2020). Rooted in assembling concepts and seeing a place as a relational process (e.g. Anderson *et al.* 2012; Woods *et al.* 2021), placemaking entails potential frictions with key paradigms in planning practices. More conventional paradigms are criticised for employing a predominantly positivist legacy of conceptualizing space and place (Davoudi 2012). Similar criticism is raised by White and O’Hare (2014) as they dissect conceptions of equilibrist and evolutionary resilience in relation to spatial planning. The former and most dominant in institutional planning is caught in the positivist legacy as a reactionary planning tool with a technocratic focus. The latter envisions a proactive approach focusing on socio-cultural heterogeneity in local planning (*ibid.*, 944). Dissecting the potentials of local planning strategies in small towns and their ability to integrate aspects of shrinkage in their spatial complexity requires awareness of these frictions for which assemblage conceptualization is well suited (Woods *et al.* 2021).

In planning studies, contrary to the assemblage approach, place-making is mostly treated as an activity of planners and the outcome of the planning process itself (e.g. Cilliers & Timmermans 2012;

Beza 2016; Fincher *et al.* 2016). Consequently, Hospers (2017) describes planning for shrinkage in a particular town part as challenging due to the heterogenous and complex processes that create potential decline. This problematization points directly to the friction between dominant planning paradigms and the heterogenous assemblage of place (e.g. Davoudi 2012; Woods 2016), which should be expected to affect revitalisation plans in small towns. Generally, due to their limited size and reach of 'urban' structure, revitalization processes typically focus on central public spaces and commercial streets characterised by empty shops, outdated buildings and eroding commercial services (e.g. Hospers 2017; Kortelainen & Albrecht 2021).

The concept of the 'compact city' has been employed in a Nordregio report focusing on the potential benefits of urbanization of Nordic small-town centres (Tunström *et al.* 2018). Initiated more than two decades ago to challenge urban sprawl, the concept supports denser, more sustainable, less car dependent and energy efficient livelihoods (see Neuman 2005 for a critical analysis). The report contrasts the conceptual idea with developments in six small towns in the Nordics and provides interesting points of departure for our analysis. The key aspects highlighted for downtown revitalization in the report are: 1) town centres as dynamic entities: need for flexible solutions; 2) town centre developments versus external (shopping) developments; 3) densification with focus on increased housing; 4) challenges to balance the needs of different users; and 5) planners' reliance on hope for positive change (Tunström *et al.* 2018). These aspects pinpoint various frictions between planning paradigms of urbanization and the compact city, including densification and technological optimism versus the socio-spatial complexities of the places to be developed.

Revitalization efforts have a strong emphasis on public areas, and "flexible spaces" have become a buzzword in the planning of shared public spaces. The call for flexibility also draws on the need to depart from an overtly techno-rational paradigm in planning (White & O'Hare 2014). The definitions, however, of what is inferred to when promoting flexible spaces cover a wide array of elements. Flexibility can refer to the potential to adjust to structural changes affecting, for example, demand in housing or commercial needs (e.g. Tunström *et al.* 2018; OECD 2022), or to a focus on the multi-use of public spaces to accommodate interchanging use, such as pop-up sites or events (e.g. Dobson 2015; Carmona 2019). Additionally, flexibility is understood as an emergence of a radical shift within the overall planning paradigm at play. Carr and Dionisio (2017, 74), for instance, describe "flexible spaces as a starting point for envisioning how consciously created environments that integrate alternative approaches to tenancy, use, exclusivity, and imagination might address some of the failures of conventional planning." While it opens up the conceptualization of flexible spaces to break with planning traditions in many ways, like the promotion of spatio-temporal limited tenancies, shared tenancies, minimalist frameworks, requirement of change and design for non-schedule uses as well as minimal cost/free tenancies (for details see Carr & Dionisio 2017), we enter the realm of policy experimentation similar to planning for shrinkage or right sizing (e.g. Coppola 2019).

Finally, planning for revitalization in declining localities is often linked to municipal activities of (re)branding (Hospers 2011). Hence, they are accompanied with recoding efforts to improve the places' spatial imaginary and counter forces of decoding and deterritorialization (Albrecht & Kortelainen 2020). The rebranding efforts of planners have been criticised as "place-masking", rather than a constructive part of place-making open to the heterogenous, and potentially contested discourses and practices by locals (Fincher *et al.* 2016, 534). Furthermore, branding must be understood as a contested process of involved stakeholders to delimit potential futures for their locality and which consequently materialises the visions of certain communities of interest (McCann 2002; Farhat 2019). While place branding is not the focus of this study, it nonetheless provides an important linkage to assess local planning in relation to shrinkage and place-making in small towns. It leads to the question of for whom the downtowns are planned and branded. Hospers (2011), for instance, calls for focus on the current users (e.g. residents) rather than aiming to attract newcomers with branding and planning activities in shrinking places. Hence, nourishing the socio-economic ties and possibilities of current residents to foster engagement rather than potential discontent is considered key (Hospers 2011; Dax & Fischer 2018); especially since outmigration and the accompanying loss of social capital is a key challenge of shrinking municipalities and drains potential stakeholders in local development processes (Raagmaa 2002).

## Assessing centre revitalization efforts in six Finnish small towns

The research is based on a mixed-methods approach including quantitative and qualitative data collected between May 2021 and May 2022. Quantitative data consists of socio-economic indicators drawn from publicly available databases in Finland, such as Statistics Finland (Tilastokeskus 2022), and statistics available from the six municipalities (Fig. 1). Qualitative data contain documents, expert interviews, and onsite observations. The documents analysed include the complete documentation of the respective downtown revitalization projects, including consultant reports, idea plans and the final plans as well as municipal strategies, annual reports, and financial reports. Additionally, an unstructured online search in local news media and social media has been conducted to supplement public opinions.



Fig. 1. Case study locations in Finland.

Expert interviews (60–105 min each) were conducted either as single or group interviews with the responsible planners or planning architects in all six municipalities. Eight planners participated in face-to-face interviews, and one planner (Kuusamo) was interviewed online. In Sastamala and Kitee, interviews included guided walks at the revitalization project areas (Duedahl & Blichfeldt 2020). Due to the key role of commercial services in downtown revitalizations (Hospers 2017), interviews were conducted with representatives of local entrepreneur associations (*Yrittäjät ry*) in all cases except Sastamala. Altogether nine respondents participated in these interviews (30–70 min each).

Onsite observations took place in all downtowns studied. Visits included observational walks lasting 1–3 hours in downtown surroundings and provided researchers with an embedded experience of place and their expressive and material components of decline and development. The ethnographic observation included ‘virtual time travel’ to all six sites via Google Street View based on the initial 2009 photography (Google Street View 2022) providing valuable data of the material and expressive changes over the past decade.

The population size of the selected towns varies from 9,000–25,000 (municipality level), and 4,000–20,000 in their centres. While small town definitions vary widely in literature, we refrain from employing a normative definition to fit our cases. Yet, in the Finnish and Nordic contexts, these localities are small in size, but their centres embody characteristics of a small-scale urban agglomeration. As Table 1 shows, all six municipalities can be considered as shrinking towns because they and their downtowns have suffered from declining populations and jobs for more than ten years (see Makkonen *et al.* 2022).

**Table 1.** The six towns’ socio-economic characteristics and development in a nutshell (Source: Tilastokeskus 2022; TEM 2022).

	Population: municipality 2021	Change 2001– 2021	Population: town center 2020	Change 2000– 2020	Jobs in municipality 2019	Jobs change 2007– 2019	Unemployment rate 08/2022	Economic structure: Primar./ Indust./ Services %	Share of population over 64 years (2021)
Eura	11 417	- 11%	6 257	- 6%	4 208	- 24%	7%	8/41/50	29%
Kitee	9 877	- 25%	4 459	- 18%	3 372	- 29%	14,2%	11/25/62	38%
Kuusamo	15 165	- 14%	8 340	- 10%	5 993	- 9%	8,8%	6/16/77	29%
Raahe	24 260	- 9%	18 645	- 6%	10 056	- 15%	11,1%	2/40/56	27%
Saarijärvi	9 117	- 21%	4 926	- 10%	2 888	- 20%	12,8%	12/20/66	34%
Sastamala	23 998	- 8%	9 931	- 4%	8 303	- 14%	6,3%	7/28/62	31%
<b>Finland</b>						<b>+ 1%</b>	<b>10,3%</b>	<b>3/21/75</b>	<b>23%</b>

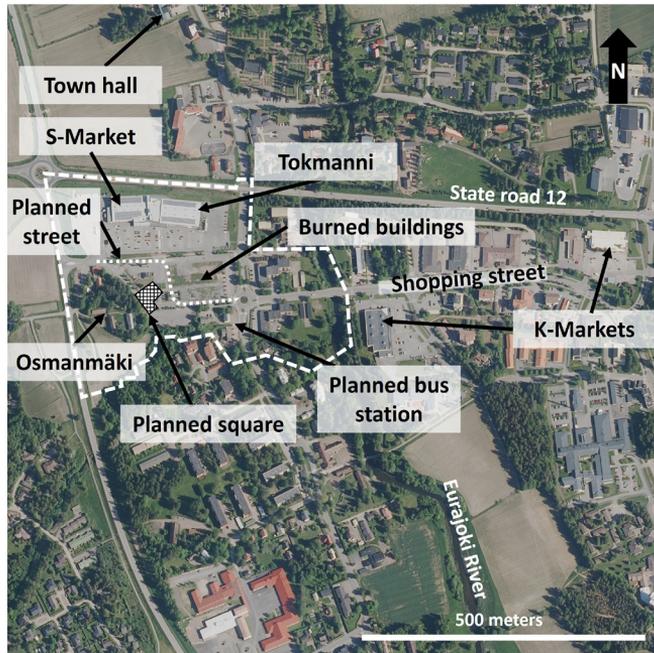
As a detailed description of each case is beyond the scope of this paper, the next section briefly introduces the municipalities and aims of their revitalization projects, their past and current planning and development steps, and their current states. It further presents some key challenges in the respective municipalities. It must be noted that the article focuses on the situation as of spring 2022 and changes thereafter are merely touched upon (e.g. Raahe and Sastamala).

## Six downtown revitalization projects

### *Eura: building a new compact centre*

Not possessing formal city status, Eura’s small town-like centre has a strong position as a regional service centre including several specialised commercial services atypical for comparable rural municipalities. Eura has a strong manufacturing basis, but recently industrial jobs have been declining due to plant closures. The populations of both the centre and the entire municipality have been decreasing (Table 1). The downtown has a rather dispersed urban structure and lacks an identifiable core because the centre consists of two main parts: the service centre (downtown) and the historical mill community (Kauttua) which have gradually coalesced. Furthermore, two shopping malls (S-Market and Tokmanni) have been recently built at the national road junction creating another commercial centre. The town hall and some public and private services located on the opposite side of the State Road 12 (Fig. 2) further contribute to the dispersed downtown setting.

Discussions on building a new centre have been ongoing for some time. In 2017 a fire destroyed an old commercial centre next to the newly built shopping malls and provided an opportunity for downtown renewal. The local government initiated this process by ordering an ‘idea plan’ from a consultant (SWECO). After a resident survey (160 respondents) to collect ideas, SWECO presented three alternative drafts which were discussed in a workshop with local entrepreneurs before developing the final idea plan (SWECO 2018).



**Fig. 2.** Planned area of Eura downtown (Background: Maanmittauslaitos Ortokuva M3323A).

The general goal of the plan was to tackle shrinkage by developing operational preconditions for business and supporting diverse residential developments to increase the new town centre's attraction. At the core of the plan is a so called 'activity square' which is meant to operate as a market square and a public space where people can spend time and events can take place. It was planned to be surrounded by multi-storey (3–6 floors) residential and lower commercial buildings. The idea plan's second focus is on housing and the construction of several blocks of flats which were estimated to bring 500–700 new residents to the area. It further includes extensive traffic infrastructure renewals and rerouting of the main street running through the area, as well as a new bus station/travel centre. Furthermore, the attractiveness of the living environment is planned to be improved by the developments of green/recreational spaces and walkway development along brooks and riversides bordering the planned area.

Based on the main guidelines of the idea plan with the activity square, housing focus, green/recreational spaces and street rerouting, the new town plan was approved in February 2022. The number of storeys of residential buildings is limited to five, however, and business development is focused on small-scale shopfront commercial services on the street level of residential blocks. The next step after the approval of the town plan will be to find investors to materialise the project. In Eura, most of the planned area is owned by the municipality which is expected to facilitate the realisation of the plan.

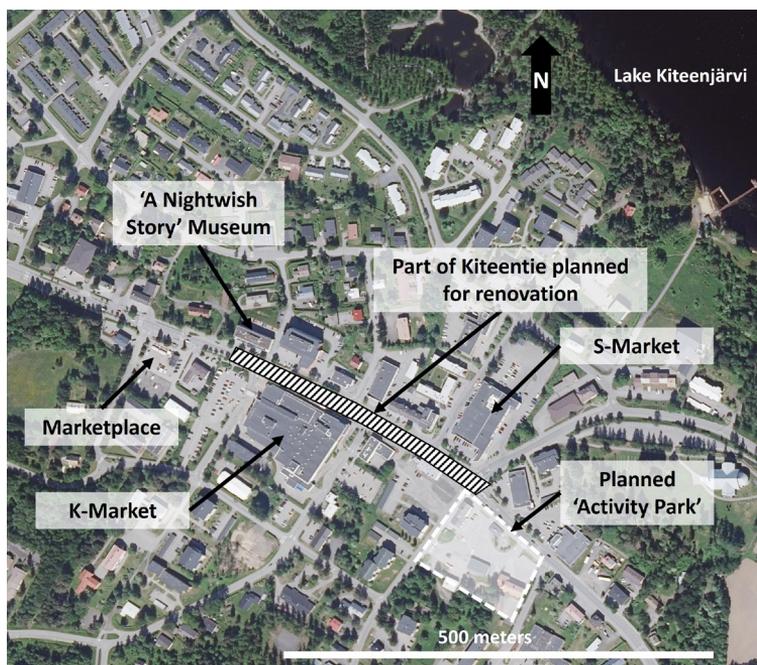
Contrary to the original idea to build a compact new centre, the owners of two large shopping malls (S-market and Tokmanni) located within the planned area have been determined in their demands to maintain their extensive car parks. Additionally, the planned residential areas are intended to support the business of shopping malls and commercial services on the present shopping street nearby (Fig. 2) raising questions on the potential to attract new commercial services to fill the planned premises. The size of the planned large blocks of flats have caused some criticism, and the regional council and regional museum, for instance, have submitted remarks concerning the large-scale buildings' suitability to the rural townscape. Another challenge is a historically valuable farmstead (*Osmanmäki*) located next to the planned square. While integrated into the consultant's idea plans, its actual inclusion into the new developments is challenging due to its private ownership.

### *Kitee: urbanizing main street*

Kitee is a relatively important service centre for the surrounding rural areas. The municipality experienced an industrial boom in the 1960s and 1970s but since the 1990s the town has faced several plant closures and job loss. The relatively diverse services are concentrated along a kilometre long section of the main road (*Kiteentie*) surrounded by sparse and mostly low-built residential areas (Fig. 3). The population grew until the beginning of the 2000s but has decreased drastically ever since (Table 1). Empty commercial and public buildings, vacant lots, extensive car parks of shopping malls and some dismantled buildings characterise the fragmented townscape.

The plans to revitalise the downtown were initiated in 2014 when the main road's legal status was transferred from state to municipal ownership. The goal was to transform the 'country road' to an urban street. There were several reasons that motivated the local government to put forward the plans; empty buildings and outdoor spaces needed new activities, the town hall and library required renovation, and attractive leisure areas were missing from the centre.

In 2015, Kitee ordered a visionary plan called *Kitee's Downtown Vision 2030* (SITO 2015) from a consultant (SITO), which drew up outlines for the downtown renewal. SITO also prepared an urban design plan (SITO 2016) which presented more concrete suggestions for the visual and functional changes. These plans aimed to inspire and provide guidelines for more detailed plans. As a start, SITO organised a workshop for local officials and organisations (14 participants) to discuss ideas and the goals of the plan.



**Fig. 3.** Planned downtown area in Kitee (Background: Maanmittauslaitos Ortokuva 5341H).

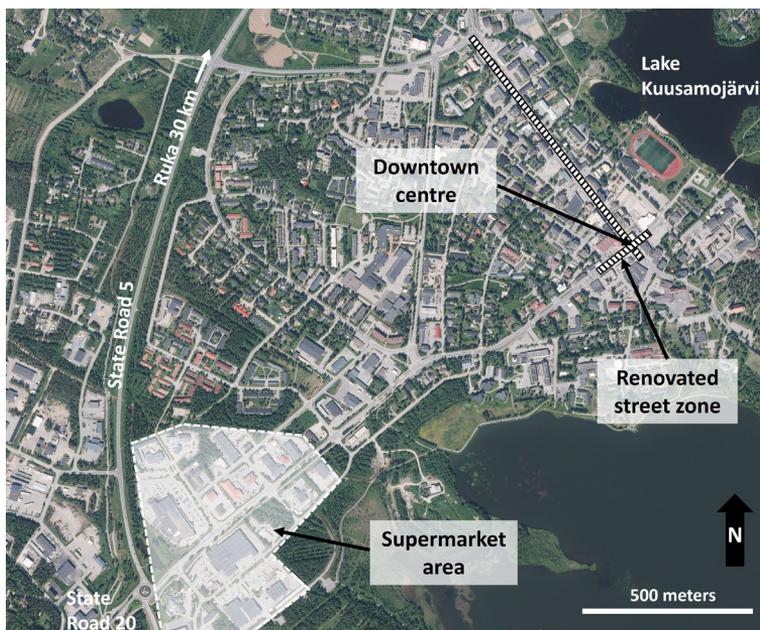
A general goal of the vision was to turn the decline of the downtown's population to a slight growth (10%) during the 2020s. First, a major objective was to make the downtown more urban and attract new residents to make it livelier and support service provision. Emphasis was put on complementary buildings, constructing 2–4 storey tall blocks of flats for housing and commerce along *Kiteentie* for a more urban appearance. Also, pedestrian traffic was favoured by extending the sidewalks and improving street crossing possibilities. Second, the downtown visions stressed localness, referring mostly to scenic aspects of nature and traditional landscape including the use of wood in construction.

However, the most important aspect of localness was the objective to open views to Lake *Kiteenjärvi*. The lake scenery from the higher elevated downtown is regarded as a potential but non-utilised visual resource. Third, the attractiveness of the downtown is planned to be further improved by making it a “vibrant, healthy and safe meeting place” (Kiteen kaupunki 2017) by building places for meeting and spaces for public events and a network of leisure trails and sites. It is envisioned, for instance, that the pedestrian-centred core area could be closed to car traffic during some public events or festivals.

Kitee has taken downtown renewal as one of its main targets for development. In its municipal strategy, the local government mentions revitalization of the core centre as a major means to tackle population decline (Kiteen kaupunki 2017). The realisation of the downtown vision started when the same consultant (now SITOWISE) produced a master plan. In 2021, the town council decided to start the process by investing in the development of the visual townscape, traffic arrangements, and leisure environments. These include new parking and bus stop arrangements on the main street, of which some local politicians have addressed their concerns. Another investment focus is a new ‘activity park’ just next to Kiteentie (Fig. 3) which will include sports facilities (e.g. parkour track, minigolf and outdoor gym), a playground for children and a bandstand for performances. The investment decision also includes the establishment of an interior exhibition space in 2022. According to the town mayor, these planned facilities, together with the earlier established ‘A Nightwish story’-centre presenting the history of a Kitee-based and internationally known music group, are intended to become a major attraction in Kitee’s downtown (Karjalainen 2021).

#### *Kuusamo: the problem of a bipolar centre*

Kuusamo is a traditional regional service centre of remote areas in northeast Finland, but more recently, it has become one of the most visited tourism areas in the country. The ski resort Ruka, 30 kilometres from the centre, is the main destination for more than 1 million tourists annually. Despite the growth of tourism, population decline has been evident in both the entire municipality and downtown area (Table 1). Additionally, tourism flow bypasses the town centre along the national roads 5 and 20. Their junction has attracted an extensive cluster of shopping malls and other large



**Fig. 4.** ‘Dual centre’ of Kuusamo (Background: Maanmittauslaitos Ortokuva S5421A).

markets almost 2 kilometres from downtown (Fig. 4). Hence, a large array of commercial services is available in this 'supermarket area' and service provision is increasing in Ruka also, resulting in the loss of many of the downtowns' former business functions.

Recent revitalization plans aim to tackle the 'dual centre' problem by increasing the viability of the downtown. In 2014, ten years after a previous plan, the municipal-owned regional development company Naturpolis Oy published a plan which set detailed guidelines for the downtown's physical, commercial, and functional development. It was based on questionnaires and interviews about local development needs with local entrepreneurs carried out in 2004 who described the downtown area then as gloomy and uninviting (Naturpolis 2014).

The plan's major goal was to develop the town centre as one entity instead of two separate centres (downtown vs. the supermarket area) and create a distinctive townscape where local nature is an important element. It also aimed to support the city's place branding which had been built around the concept of 'Nature Town Kuusamo'. Lake *Kuusamojärvi*, for instance, was suggested to be developed as a visual and functional component of downtown. The plan put forward three major areas of improvements. First, it suggested enhancements in the visual and functional attractiveness of the townscape, which was to be carried out by investments in green spaces, visual refurbishment of street scenes and lights, and the development of pedestrian zones. Second, the plan highlighted the support of commercial services including construction of a big shopping centre and increasing purchasing power through new housing. Third, the plan aimed for extensive changes in the downtown's traffic infrastructure (Naturpolis 2014).

The renewal started with a profound renovation of the traffic environment. In 2015, the regional governmental body *ELY-keskus* (Centre for Business, Transport and the Environment) presented a plan for the street renewal, intending to create a more downtown-like and appealing urban space to attract customers and new services (ELY-keskus 2015). The actual planning work was carried out by consultants. Ramboll Finland was responsible for planning infrastructure, traffic and streets, while the seasonal lights were designed by SITOWISE. After a two-year construction process, the renovated streets opened in Autumn 2021. The main intersection with traffic lights was replaced by a pedestrian area and roundabout with paving stone surface, trees were planted, and parking spaces rearranged. The biggest visual change was that the formerly wide and open main street was changed into a boulevard with a tree-lined sides and median which divides the street into two lanes. Also, seasonal lights imitating the aurora borealis were hung up over the main streets aiming to express an original local 'northern touch'.

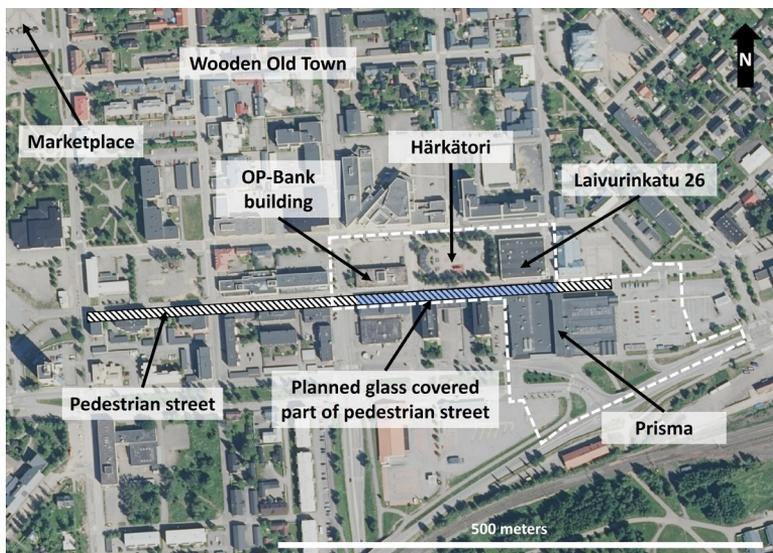
Comments after the street renovation have been predominantly positive. A facebook commentator's characterization, "Jump from a cart track to modern times" (Facebook 2021), seems to describe a broadly shared opinion. Car parking has been the main target of criticism because on-street parking possibilities were diminished. It remains questionable, however, if the changes attract visitors and new business to the downtown core and ease the problem of bipolar structure of the centre. While the first new multistorey residential building is under construction along the renovated road, another building project has been put on hold and it remains unclear if the place is attractive enough for investors to fill the many remaining empty spots or implement the plans to build a large shopping centre. This is even more questionable due to dispersed ownership along the main road including many deteriorating buildings. Additionally, the planned connection to the novel beachfront recreational infrastructure has not been improved.

### *Raahe: big plans and powerful actors*

Raahe is an old coastal town established in 1649, and its present downtown is a combination of marine history and modern architecture. Centuries-long livelihoods were changed by the arrival of a large-scale steel factory in 1961. In tribute to the new growth, the city planned to replace the entire historical wooden townscape with modern architecture. Old buildings in the southern part of the grid plan were replaced by a concrete commercial centre before a conservation plan made in 1977 preserved most parts of the old town. Today, Raahe is known as one of the best examples of traditional wooden townscapes in Finland. The town's population has decreased steadily since the mid-90s (Table 1) although the steel plant still employs 2700 people (SSAB 2022).

The aim of the current renewal plan is to revitalise the commercial centre built in the 1970s and especially its pedestrian street, which was built in 1975 and is the second oldest in Finland. Renovation plans were on the agenda for years but the quick decline of commercial services at the formerly busy shopping street revived the plans in the 2010s. In 2015, the city of Raahen published an interim town plan draft for the downtown which established a framework for later development. The renewal plan intended to concentrate and harmonise the townscape, support downtown businesses and housing, and create outdoor spaces for leisure activities and urban living. It included suggestions to build three 12-storey buildings along the pedestrian street, transform *Härkätori* (Fig. 5) into an 'event square', and extend an underground garage under the north side of the pedestrian street (Raahen kaupunki 2015). The main emphasis was on increasing the construction mass and building a dense identifiable downtown to contrast the old town's small-scale townscape.

The scope of the first phase of downtown redevelopment was restricted to a few central properties. The city announced a term sheet signed with the future developers of the pedestrian street in 2019; namely: the regional retail co-operative Arina, headquartered in Oulu, which pledged to extend the Prisma shopping mall (Fig. 5). The regional co-operative bank (OP-Bank) also agreed to sell its property to the real estate developer Lehto, which would carry out the construction and find entrepreneurs for facilities. The City and Lehto would develop a cultural and event centre at the *Härkätori* square. The agreement also included plans to cover and heat the pedestrian street between Prisma and OP-Bank. The development project was joined by DEAS Asset Management, a Copenhagen headquartered company, which took over ownership of Laivurinkatu 26 and its commercial building as part of its acquisition of the Nordic Real Estate business from Scottish abrdn (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** Planned area in the commercial centre of Raahen. (Background: Maanmittauslaitos Ortokuva R4141G/R4143A).

The preparation of a new town plan started immediately by the consultant FCG in guidance with the major property owners. An online public event and workshop were organised, and a survey carried out to get input from citizens. A draft plan published in 2021 was revised in 2022 and enabled most of the wishes presented by the property owners. The revision reduced the building height from 12 to 8 floors and underground parking possibilities were increased elsewhere but parking under *Härkätori* was removed from the plan and the square will become an event square. Additionally, the pedestrian street is planned to be covered by a glass roof (Raahen kaupunki 2022).

One major source of criticism has concerned the renewal of *Härkätori* and the removal of the old and rare trees (white fir) framing the square. Residents have also complained that while the city is

cutting expenses in sports services it invests in these ‘less important’ purposes. Furthermore, some of the shopkeepers on the pedestrian street, not involved in the project, have criticised the lack of information and poor opportunities to participate in the planning process despite being heavily affected by the project. This feeling is aggravated by the shopkeepers’ fear of poor visibility and accessibility of their businesses during a lengthy construction period. Critics claim that decisions, such as the choice of a construction company, have been made behind closed doors by a small group of strong actors. Additionally, the western part of the pedestrian street, where most of empty shops are located, is not included in present plans raising questions on their short to mid-term prospects.

### *Saarijärvi: flexible planning*

Saarijärvi is a shrinking rural town where the primary sector is a relatively strong field of economy (Table 1), and the local government has emphasised bioeconomy development in its strategy. It also hosts the Tarvaala Bioeconomy Campus, a joint institution of the regional vocational college and university of applied science, with 500 students and 100 staff members located 6 kilometres from the downtown. Saarijärvi is a service centre for the region, and the tertiary sector comprises two-thirds of local jobs. Most governmental offices and public services are still located in the downtown core but its role as a commercial centre has declined during the recent decade. The main reason for the decline has been the new construction of three large stores (Lidl, HalpaHalli, Tokmanni) between 2014 and 2015 along the state road 13. This created a new commercial area about 1.5 kilometres from the centre (Fig. 6). Two downtown supermarkets (K- and S-markets) and a department store (Tokmanni) remain in the centre, but several specialised shops, restaurants, and banks, for instance, have closed their doors. Two local trade centres, *Ostokeskus* (“Shopping centre”) and a formerly lively *Säästökeskus* (“Saving Centre”), currently have extensive empty spaces.



**Fig. 6.** Downtown Saarijärvi. (Background: Maanmittauslaitos Ortokuva P4311C/P4311A/N4422B/N4422D).

One of the major topics of a recent municipal strategy is the revitalization of downtown and attracting passers-by on state road 13 to stop for a visit. A draft of a new town plan for the downtown area was made by the city’s planning office in 2020. It is based on several preceding plans, of which the most important was an “Idea Plan for Downtown”, prepared by a consultant (A-Arkitehdit) in 2011 and

updated in 2015. The idea plan suggested, for instance, complementary construction and higher buildings for housing and commerce as well as rearrangement of parking spaces and a pedestrian area. The aim is to create a vivid downtown with attractive residential neighbourhoods that would support the existing services. It suggests building new houses but also transforming top floors of empty service and office buildings to housing. The marketplace, a shared part of K-supermarket parking lot, is planned to remain at its present place. *Paavonaukio*, another centrally located square (Fig. 6), is proposed to be renovated as a 'communal living room' but only to a degree not in conflict with current levels of car parking because of shopkeepers' demands.

A key problem in Saarijärvi is a lack of active stakeholders to implement the plan as the downtown area does not attract commercial investors contrary to the commercial strip along state road 13, which attracts purchasing power from within and beyond the town. Additionally, since the town does not own nor is it planning to purchase much property in the centre, development rests on current property owners leaving the town with little leeway to attract investors. A heterogenous, small-scale ownership structure of the centre provides further challenges to comprehensive downtown development. To counter this problem the town has taken a flexible approach, using building codes that leave various possibilities open for property owners and developers (e.g. housing, service, commerce). Finally, restructuring the downtown area towards a more compact space is hampered by the commercial actors' insistence to maintain extensive parking lots and street parking. This creates a feeling of unused space for most of the year in downtown and has been a major obstacle for developing a more pedestrian-oriented centre as the idea plans suggested.

### *Sastamala: attracting urban dwellers*

The town of Sastamala was established in 2009 after an amalgamation of three municipalities (Vammala, Mouhijärvi, Äetsä), resulting in a relatively dispersed settlement structure. The main strategic goal of Sastamala is to balance the declining demographic trend by attracting urban dwellers seeking rural and small-town living alternatives, as well as more affordable and spacious residencies. The municipality's location with its downtown (formerly Vammala) about 50 kilometres (by train and national road) and its eastern parts less than 30 kilometres from the growing Tampere metropolitan area (almost 400,000 inhabitants) is considered suitable for this endeavour. To this end, Sastamala brands itself as a "rural city for a good life", and in the same municipal strategy it sets an objective to develop and enliven the downtown through new buildings, public infrastructure and a revision of existing constructions as well as highlighting the natural environment. Also, in Sastamala large shopping malls are located on the outskirts of the centre 1.5–3 kilometres from downtown which has decreased business opportunities of traditionally strong and versatile commercial services in the centre.

In 2018, Sastamala arranged an architectural competition for ideas to renew the downtown area. The winner was a plan called *Promenadi* (Promenade) made by a Helsinki-based architecture firm. Its core idea was to open views to the surrounding aquatic landscape and link the two underused waterfronts on opposite sides of downtown by a pedestrian-oriented zone. Based on this idea, the same agency prepared a general plan drawing guidelines for future detailed plans. The overall goal is to make the downtown a more attractive place and turn declining population figures into growth. On the one hand, the city emphasises its character as a rural town and highlights the downtown's small-scale townscape as a strong asset to attract new residents. On the other hand, however, one of the starting points of planning was that the planned building masses should strengthen the urban and efficient appearance of the downtown.

The plan proposes a profound facelift for the town centre. Major suggestions include the displacement of the marketplace, a new event square, rebuilding and addition of green spaces, a new location for the bus station, construction of a public swimming pool, and broad pedestrian zones connecting the waterfronts (Fig. 7). It envisions new residential and commercial buildings adjacent to the pedestrian area and blocks of flats up to five storeys in attractive but still unbuilt places inside the townscape and close to the southwest waterfront. The plan aims to bring more life to downtown and provide people with urban-style public spaces.



**Fig. 7.** Planned downtown area in Sastamala (Background: Maanmittauslaitos Ortokuva M3342H).

A new town plan was prepared by the city's planning office in 2022. In the revised version, some of the original ideas shown above were profoundly changed, moving the location of the planned swimming pool from the downtown to a greenfield site at the outskirts and removing the planned event square. The next steps of the process include construction of the new marketplace and major parts of the pedestrian zone in a four-phase process from 2022–2025. As one planning official stated, local politicians seem to be determined to support the renewal process, but it will take time, and plans might change along the course of events. There has been some criticism concerning the moving of marketplace and transformation of some parts of a present park to a parking lot. The insistence of entrepreneurs and local politicians for more parking possibilities has raised criticism. Finally, among the challenges not addressed in the current planning documents, are the future of the outdated *Torikeskus* shopping centre and governmental office block which have lost many of their former functions.

## Discussion

Tackling shrinkage and decline seems to be the common motivation and starting point for all downtown renewals in this study. Deterritorialising forces such as out-migration and decline of central services have had both material (e.g. less residents, empty commercial spaces and run-down townscapes) and expressive (e.g. image and atmosphere of decline) consequences in all six towns. However, the officially expressed goal of each of these projects has not been to adapt to shrinkage but to stop it or turn it to growth. This aspect was also raised during interviews although with a partial reference to the town centres of the municipalities. In other words, the growth-oriented planning paradigm still dominates planning.

However, there are some practises that can be seen as implicitly emphasising aspects of shrinkage (e.g. Schatz 2017) and put under the rubric of 'smart shrinking'. One of them is the objective to make the centres materially more compact and attract more people to live in downtowns. Although their expressed objective is to attract new residents to the municipality, many of the plans align with Hospers' (2011) suggestion to focus on current residents and the plans strongly emphasised local people, especially the elderly. This means that the focus is on concentrating the local population of the larger municipalities increasingly in their centres, which would support services and create a livelier downtown area (e.g. Hospers 2017; Tunström *et al.* 2018; OECD 2022). Sastamala is an

exception because it has the goal of attracting new inhabitants due to its proximity to the Tampere metropolitan area. Yet, considering the idea that spacious domiciles and small-town atmosphere close to nature attracts urban residents from Tampere, it remains questionable if newcomers will choose a dense, urbanised environment in the centre instead of the widely available, often cheaper single houses in the suburbs.

Another common feature raised by Tunström, Lidmo and Bogason (2018) is large shopping malls separated from traditional downtowns. Except Kitee, all of the studied downtowns are located close to highways which have attracted national or international supermarket chains at their junctions. Municipalities are trying to tackle this problem in different ways but in all of these cases they have had to reactively adapt to these decisions and express economic dependencies on these commercial actors. For instance, Eura aims to connect the old shopping street and supermarket area by building a new residential area between them, and Kuusamo is trying to develop the two centres as one unified whole. However, the common plan is to create a division of labour with large supermarkets forming the centre of large-scale commerce and downtowns being developed as centres of communal life, social encounters, public events and small-scale services (e.g. Hospers 2017; Tunström *et al.* 2018).

Place-making efforts, in the planners' sense (e.g. Fincher *et al.* 2016), of all six towns repeat many of the ideas suggested by planning literature and identified by research (e.g. Hospers 2017; Friedman 2018; Tunström *et al.* 2018; Carmona 2019). Hence, there are few concrete signs of the municipalities engaging with direct forms of planning/policy experimentation related to smart shrinking or right sizing as indicated by Coppola (2019) or by challenging the overall planning paradigm to engage with place-making as a socio-spatial process (White & O'Hare 2014; Fincher *et al.* 2016; Woods 2016; Leick & Lang 2018), at least from a formal perspective. As mentioned, housing and especially blocks of flats have been core elements in all of the plans to bring more people and expressive urbanity to the townscapes. Pedestrian emphasis is another element present in all of the studied rejuvenation plans. Some of the downtown plans, especially in larger small towns like Sastamala and Raahe, are based on relatively extensive existing or planned pedestrian zones. In smaller centres, such as Kitee, Saarijärvi and Kuusamo, the pedestrian focused suggestions of consultants and planners have faced criticism from shop keepers and shopping malls for inadequate parking possibilities.

Car parking has been an important and problematic issue in all of the cases leading to compromises in managing the car/pedestrian conflict. This has also led to increased planning for "flexible spaces" as mentioned by Carmona (2019), designs that allow for temporary varying use of streets, such as markets, in all of the case studies. Especially large commercial chains have been persistent in maintaining their extensive car parks, sized to fit annual Christmas shopping while being otherwise predominantly empty. Highlighting the frictions between place-making within the current planning paradigm and the relational assembling of places (Woods 2016; Kortelainen & Albrecht 2019) this continues to frequently give small-town environments a criticised expressive character of empty and unfinished spaces. It works against planners' suggestions of making downtowns more compact (e.g. Hospers 2017; Tunström *et al.* 2018; OECD 2022) while simultaneously highlights the apparent inability of planning to merge the contesting community of interests and their visions for suitable development (McCann 2002).

Another common aspect linked to the same definition of flexible spaces in the rejuvenation projects relates to creating public spaces of which the pedestrian areas form the key parts. In planning literature, so called communal or common living rooms consisting of public squares surrounded by cafes and other services are frequently mentioned as centres of small towns' communal life (Friedman 2018). This idea was easy to identify in all studied rejuvenation projects. The present marketplaces and other outdoor public areas are considered problematic spaces. They possess unfavourable expressive and material components in relation to the aims of revitalization-based re-coding such as their location, poor infrastructure, 'emptiness' or unintended use (e.g. drinking). An important goal of all the plans in this study is to either redesign the existing marketplace or construct a new square connected with new pedestrian zones. The plans for material shifts are accompanied by a change of rhetoric from marketplace towards 'activity-', 'event-' or 'multi-purpose squares' implying their flexible nature but also implicitly pointing to a lively space. Hence, there is a very strong emphasis on creating a communal heart for peoples' encounters and urban events (e.g. Dobson 2015; Hospers 2017).

Finnish small-town centres are typically located close to waterfronts but, as frequently criticised, they have been neglected in local planning. Employing a variety of material components, town plans actively aim to link the attractive aquatic landscapes to re-territorialise the expressive features of downtowns. This is an expressive feature of contemporary planning in all cases except Raahe where the focus is strictly on the pedestrian street, its urbanization and commercialization, and sea views and aquatic connections are reserved for old town planning (Raahen kaupunki 2022). The main goal of Sastamala is to connect two lake fronts as integral parts of the downtown, and in Kitee the objective is to open the expressive lake scenery. Eura aims to develop riverbanks as recreational areas, and other towns have varying plans for similar purposes. Being expressive elements in planners' attempts for place-making, forces of de-territorialization (Woods 2016) such as private ownership of large parts of water fronts or preferences to develop them as private property (potential quick income for municipalities) jeopardises their materialization and re-coding efforts in most instances.

Considering the importance of aligning stakeholder needs/challenges (Tunström *et al.* 2018) and the role of potentially contested communities and their visions for place-making (McCann 2002), the strong influence or power relations of large national commercial chains is evident in all of the studied small towns. Additionally, national consulting agencies, involved in one way or another in all of the studied towns, clearly delineate the plans and practices (Carmona 2019) and thereby co-produce material and expressive elements of placemaking (Woods 2016). Some of the towns have delegated almost all planning work to consultants while others rely on their own planners giving some tasks to private agencies. The combination of standard design and unified construction principles of supermarkets with flat, box-like facilities and empty parking spaces, and the consultants' input using standard ideas and practices which are circulated among and adjusted to towns of different sizes creates townscapes supporting the long criticised placeless character of Finnish small towns (e.g. Albrecht & Kortelainen 2020). The integration of shopkeepers in the planning processes varies strongly between cases but only in a few cases (Saarijärvi & Kuusamo) does it take a participatory role in planning (e.g. Carr & Dionisio 2017) beyond scheduled workshops in formal planning processes contrary to their importance in centre revitalization processes (Hospers 2017; Tunström *et al.* 2018). Similarly, residents' participation, largely realised through online surveys with varying, but generally low response rates (~ 400 Raahe and ~160 Eura), diminishes the potential to create a unique, locally embedded, inclusive and continuous planning process (e.g. Fincher *et al.* 2016).

Finally, plans need realisers to materialise. Local governments have the responsibility to provide and maintain infrastructure, and typically they focus on their own buildings, service provision and office development in downtowns while the major task of realizing the planned changes for housing and commerce are given to private investors. Raahe is an example where big, external actors and local government leaders have taken over the project and reduced the first phase to only a few properties and stakeholders. Neglecting inclusiveness facilitates realization in Raahe while in the other cases attracting developers for downtown premises is challenging. This causes problems for the planners as even with extensive public infrastructure investments (e.g. new streets & squares) empty plots or unattractive building stock might remain, acting as forces of deterritorialization to the towns' recoding efforts. This uncertainty also pushes them to develop flexible planning procedures. A striking example of this is Saarijärvi where the town plan leaves many sites open as to what kinds of activities/purposes each plot of land is reserved for. Portraying an extreme flexibility rooted within the strict framework of planning regulations, it represents a different flexibility than envisioned by Carr and Dionisio (2017). Providing more room for action limits the local governments' and planners' possibilities to delineate the direction of downtown development.

## Conclusions

The towns studied are declining to varying degrees and stopping shrinkage has been the triggering factor for all six projects. All of the plans address various suggestions for small-town development advocated by Tunström, Lidmo and Bogason (2018). Not formally engaging with shrinkage they nonetheless contain many elements emphasizing the same features. But at their present stage none of the studied planning efforts can be attributed with the concrete credentials of a renewed planning

paradigm as demanded by Leick and Lang (2018), be it 'smart shrinking' or 'right sizing' (e.g. Coppola 2019). Yet, while challenging for municipalities with budget restrictions and local politicians in need of providing visions of concrete development, there are several aspects which should be considered when embarking on local planning processes.

First, the reluctance of external investors raises the need to create an inclusive, communal planning sphere for property owners, residents, and commerce which demands novel approaches and potentially policy/planning experimentation. For this, participatory activation and assuring the inclusiveness of local stakeholders must be the first step prior to the creation of concrete plans.

Opening up to more flexibility within the entire process of planning (e.g. Carr & Dionisio 2017) could provide such integration and also align competing communities of interest in a sustained way and in tribute to the continuous process and relational constitution of the place-making of local assemblages. Current place-making attempts of planners seem ill equipped to tackle the complex forces of de-territorialization. The main reasons are the imported reliance on urban models by planning bodies and consultants, limited focus on certain interest/target groups and the accompanying optimistic visionary approach to fit these models into any type of locality with only minor adjustments. For example, the focus to attract elderly residents to the core paired with planned high rise apartment buildings and a belief in the creation of vibrant event squares adjacent to these developments entails a problematic array of assumptive benefits in the planner's place-making efforts. These assumptions are especially problematic because investors are critical of large and costly projects due to questionable returns but also in relation to the preferences of various target groups to attract for downtown revitalization, be they external or internal.

Second, the focus needs to be on developing a locally embedded kind of 'small town urbanization', based on existing features of the locality and less on ideas transferred from planning large cities (c.f. Hynynen & Rantanen 2019). While this might reduce the expressive capacity of a town's re-coding efforts to attract target groups in search of modern urban character and potential investors or public grants, it consequently requires a reconsideration of local branding practices/focus.

The urbanization attempts visible in all of the cases focused on densification, increased housing mass and lively event squares, all of which are aligned with wider trends of urban living. Yet paradoxically, small towns employ largely counter trends of rural, small-town living to re-code their image and publicise their attractiveness. This contradiction highlights the challenging situation of (shrinking) localities and their administrations to provide an attractive place for the current residents, potential new residents, investors, and commercial service providers alike. Predominantly, the result seems to be a hybrid with difficulties to connect the demands and de-territorialization forces in a mutually beneficial and equitable manner. Sastamala's example above clearly shows how external planning ideas turn out to be unrealistic and require profound changes when facing the complex socio-spatial realities. The place-based, evolutionary creation of a distinct urbanity could avoid developments that are ill fit or foster placelessness in small-town planning.

Third, a more critical, yet mutually beneficial engagement towards the power relations and local activities of large commercial chains is needed as they have established a positionality as drivers of downtown decline, but also as a lifeline to keep their (last) commercial attractiveness in Finnish small towns.

In all of the cases municipal planners and decision makers confined themselves to adapting their planning to the demands and actions of these chains, currently resulting in material and expressive features that contradict key ideas of the revitalization projects through the non-negotiable existence of large, predominantly empty car parks. This consequently strengthens the call by other commercial service providers for a car centred development. These local power relations seem strongly engrained in Finnish small towns and, in addition to financial and administrative restrictions and the challenges noted above, provide an even more challenging framework for municipalities to embark on alternative planning approaches.

In summary, the research points out that many of the challenging aspects encountered by planning for the revitalization of shrinking small-town centres would benefit from a more inclusive, and potentially more locally sensitive approach. Planning/policy experimentation with a focus on more innovative participatory processes and the employment of ideas beyond the toolbox of the dominant

urban planning paradigm, predominantly consisting of externally designed idea plans and periodical surveys/workshops, could create a closer alignment with overall spatial processes of local assembling. This does not mean that planning for shrinkage or the employment of smart shrinkage terminology should be the standard, as the direction of planning aims is created along the process and consequently the question of planning for growth, shrinkage or right sizing will stem from local spatial potentials. Nonetheless, this requires a flexible approach that through its inclusiveness and long-term character reduces not only contradictory and questionable developments, but also creates a higher dedication of participants to the process and consequently willingness and engagement to support place-making beyond a hybrid urban planning paradigm. While such an approach would be ambitious to say the least regarding the complexities of planning regulations, local power structures and contested communities of interest, small towns have the advantage of size, proximity and personal networks which facilitate such an intimate approach to local planning.

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