CHAPTER 24:

PEOPLE’S CLIMATE IN SHRINKING AREAS:
THE CASE OF HEERLEN, THE NETHERLANDS:
HOW INVESTING IN CULTURE AND SOCIAL NETWORKS
IMPROVES THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN SHRINKING AREAS

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Introduction

This chapter presents a case study of the City of Heerlen, Netherlands, a shrinking city that identifies cultural policy as an important factor in vitalising the city. Heerlen has made significant investments into culture and is experiencing a “cultural spring”. This promotes a positive climate in the city, despite the shrinking and ageing population. This chapter identifies examples of good practice for the revitalisation of the city, in particular how culture and the development of social networks are contributing. It explores: Zachte G Network for Creative Economy: a community of creative individuals in the region of Heerlen, connecting cultural and creative entrepreneurship; and Design for Emptiness-Challenge: a project in which entrepreneurs, artists and project developers build concepts for empty buildings in the town centre. The project mobilises citizens to participate actively in the discussion on shrinking cities. Finally, the chapter ends with conclusions, in which the importance of investing in people’s climate in general and cultural policies in particular, in a shrinking city is emphasised.

Description of the case under study: City of Heerlen

The City of Heerlen is a city of Parkstad Limburg Region in the south of the Netherlands (Figure 24.1). Heerlen has approximately 90 000 inhabitants and its population is decreasing. It is predicted (CBS, 2011) that Heerlen’s population will drop to a bit over 70 000 by 2040 (Table 24.1).

Figure 24.1. Region Parkstad Limburg

Table 24.1. Population projection for the city Heerlen

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>89 757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>86 634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2040</td>
<td>73 303</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Heerlen is a former mining region on the periphery of the Netherlands close to the German and Belgian borders. The mining industry was developed at the beginning of the 20th century, which contributed to fast growth of the city. However, mines were closed in 1970s and consequently had an enormous impact on the social and economic structure, employment and cultural and economic development in Heerlen (Latten and Musterd, 2009).

After the closing of the mines, a process of decay started to unfold in Parkstad with Heerlen as the centre of this region. Since the mines where not only responsible for the economy but also for the social structures, the radical closing of the mines led to problems on the social level such as drug and alcohol abuse, trafficking, high unemployment rates and an image of “one of the worst livable cities in the Netherlands” (de Volkskrant, 2011).

Heerlen has been experiencing population decline since 1997 and became politically active in this field in 2004 due to the increasing problems in the housing market. Since then, many local government actions have been carried out to explore ways of turning a shrinking city into an opportunity for those living and working there. Heerlen is developing strategies in order to deal with its transformation in general and shrinking population in particular.

Strategies for dealing with shrinkage: examples of good practice

The City of Heerlen is investing in a vibrant social and cultural environment – the “people’s climate” of Richard Florida (Florida, 2002) – in order to improve the quality of life. Nowadays, places are becoming more relevant to both the economy and individual lives. The choice of where to live, therefore, is not an arbitrary one. In fact, cities have significant influence over the jobs and careers we have access to, over the people we meet, and our ability to lead meaningful lives (Florida, 2008).

The following two projects, examples of good practices related to population decline, are presented:

- Zachte G Network for Creative Economy;
- Design for Emptiness and crowd sourcing.¹

These projects are examples of Heerlen’s strategy to improve people’s climate in general and in particular the cultural climate, and to deal with the consequences of a declining population.

¹. In this context “crowd sourcing” is seen as outsourcing a task to a large group of people by using an open call. Characteristics are openness and transparency.
**Zachte G Network for Creative Economy**

Zachte G\(^2\) (Figure 24.2) is a virtual, open web platform on which inhabitants can display their talent and work. Its mission is to contribute to a vital climate for creative people in Parkstad Limburg. A climate in which there is room for initiative, experimentation and diversity. Zachte G is shaped by the input of its users and members and collectively the platform provides an image of the talent-richness of Limburg (Zachte G, 2011).

Figure 24.2. **Zachte G Network for Creative Economy**

Zachte G contributes in forming new networks for young talented people making this talent more visible for the outside. To do this it makes use of modern media to overcome physical distance.

Besides a platform for creative talents, Zachte G also promotes engagement and discussion on issues that are relevant for the future of this region (Zachte G, 2011). The challenges that the declining and ageing population pose is one of the important issues. In 2009, three spokespersons within the creative industry in Limburg, M. Hermans, E. v Houtem and M. Tabbers, published the *Krimpmanifest* (2009). The manifest called for a collaborative effort and mobilisation of the creative industry in facing the demographic challenge. Finally, a statement from the more involved young people in the discussion asserted that it is about maintaining a vital, open and creative climate in which young creative people can live and work. Zachte G could play a role in developing strategies to deal with declining population because its members provide the shrinking-process with fresh input.

**Design for Emptiness Challenge: as an example of crowd sourcing**

In 2010, Zachte G proposed to the city of Heerlen, to organise a challenge called “Design for Emptiness” (Figure 24.3). It was a strategy to increase the involvement of creative professionals in the issues of vacancy. Since Zachte G consisted of a community of more than 400 creative individuals, it was

\[^2\] *Zachte G-creative energie uit Limburg* in Dutch is translated into Soft G-creative energy from Limburg. “Soft G” refers to the way G is pronounced in Limburg (as opposed to hard G from the north of the Netherlands). Pronunciation of G (“Zachte G”) is seen as a part of Limburg’s identity. For the purpose of this chapter “Zachte G” will be used.
proposed to activate them. With a prize of EUR 10,000, the Zachte G community was challenged to hand in concepts, ideas or strategies that provided creative solutions for vacant buildings in the city centre of Heerlen. There was, however, one important condition: if the contribution was voted winner then it had to be brought into practice in 2010.

Processes of shrinking and ageing population have increased the vacancy rate in the city centre of Heerlen. Within the Parkstad-Limburg region there is a vacancy of more than 100,000 square metres of shopping space, while at the same time plans exist to build 60,000 square metres of new shopping space.

However, there is a need for payable office space in the city centre of Heerlen. Young professionals, artists or cultural producers are often not able to pay the market value of inner city space. But it needs a change of mindset by authorities and recognition that young professionals, artists or cultural producers bring financial, creative and social capital to the inner city. “Design for Emptiness” was intended to bring this particular point to attention (Design for Emptiness, 2011). By staging a public vote during the i_beta/2010 event and by setting up a vacant lot in the inner city of Heerlen as the domain for the exhibition of the prize winners, it drew a lot of attention by the press and visitors to the city of Heerlen.

![Design for emptiness advertisement in Heerlen](image)

In December of 2010 the “Design for Emptiness” winners opened their fashion and art shops. Besides providing this opportunity for the winner, it also provided the municipality of Heerlen with the richness of some 30 practical ideas and plans on how to deal with vacancy. Often these were “out-of-the-box” and sometimes even too abstract to bring into practice. In conclusion, it can be stated that on a small scale the principle of crowd sourcing has been successful in bringing ideas to the surface that probably would not have been thought of otherwise.
Discussion

Shrinking areas are often associated with economic decline and mental regression – they are areas without growth and thus lack ideas, creativity and innovation (Reverda, 2010). However, shrinking places are places in transition and transformation, challenging people to come up with and invent new ways of thinking and acting, in order to maintain proper standards for the quality of life. Shrinking areas are thus inviting people to energise their innovative capacities. In this context, culture and creativity play a central role and contribute significantly to standards of life, especially in shrinking areas (Reverda, 2010).

Investing in people’s climate is as important as investing in the local and regional economy (Florida, 2002). The City of Heerlen has recognised this and is investing in its culture in particular. The establishment of a creative people’s climate as a stimulus for a better social and economic future is a core part of the city’s urban strategy. Marlet (2009) states that investments in culture have a positive impact on the attractiveness and economic performance of the city.

Heerlen recognises that modern citizens, and especially the members of the creative class, search for places of free thinking and acting, for an open public space in which they share their thoughts with people, who are alike and different. They are attracted to jobs that are offered in a vibrant social cultural environment: the “people’s climate”. An open public space, a vibrant network, is fundamental for both the regional quality of life and the regional economy (Florida, 2010). Heerlen offers that urban climate, in which talent and technology can prosper in a tolerant environment – shrinking cities as the spaces by excellence for creativity and innovation. Namely, shrinking cities, being the places of transition and transformation, form in this respect the ideal laboratories to facilitate these basic ambitions.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the importance of investing in people’s climate in a shrinking area. Investing in people’s climate is as important as investing in the local and regional economy (Florida, 2002). The basic idea is that old industrial cities, such as Heerlen, do not need to grow in order to improve. Focus should be on people, not (just) places or industries, when it comes to public policies. Also, community, grass roots initiatives should be recognised as crucial aspects in raising the economic metabolism of an area. Together with the development of physical, virtual and social networks, a vibrant public space with vital and meaningful interactions will lead to a people’s climate, enabling quality of life and prosperity of the area (Florida, 2010).

In order to achieve this level of quality of life, culture needs to play a significant role. The transition from an agricultural to an industrial age, which is visible in the history of the city of Heerlen (Figure 24.4), was based on natural resources: from landownership to a mining industry. Nowadays, the transition is moving away towards a knowledge-based area, founded on culture, human intelligence and creativity. Furthermore, when looking at the socio-economic situation of Heerlen, the key to prepare for the future lies not only in the provision of welfare programmes and the creation of low-paid jobs in the service sector, but in promoting the creativity of people. Thus, the city of Heerlen is well-known for its “cultural spring”.

Further on, as a result of the discussion, some policy objectives can be recommended.

1. Policy makers must recognise the importance of the vibrant social and cultural climate3 in the city in order to promote quality of life and economic prosperity of the city. When it comes to public policy, the focus should be on people, not (just) places or industries.

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3. In this paper referred to as people’s climate.
2. Policy makers must create opportunities where people can exercise their creativity by using shrinking (e.g. by allowing young people to use vacant properties for their business, etc.).

3. Policy makers have to use shrinkage as an opportunity to stimulate creative and innovative activities in order to counteract economic downsizing.

Figure 24.4. City of Heerlen
REFERENCES


Marlet, G.A. (2009), De aantrekkelijke stad, VOC Uitgevers, Nijmegen.


de Volkskrant (2008), De lelijkste stad van Nederland, 1 March 2008.