
This thesis examines the role that historic preservation can play at the neighborhood level in shrinking cities. Shrinking cities, located primarily along the Rust Belt, have suffered significant population losses and economic disinvestment over the last few decades. As a result, they face myriad problems associated with numerous vacant and abandoned buildings, many of which are considered historic. These cities have been responding to this surplus with aggressive, ad hoc demolition campaigns, which are eroding the historic context of neighborhoods.

Shrinking cities have been at the center of an emerging discussion among urban planning practitioners and scholars who are creatively addressing ways these cities can “rightsize” to become smaller, healthier places. However, the historic preservation perspective is absent from this conversation, though it is the preservation field that is most concerned with the loss of historic buildings and the effects of these losses on neighborhoods.

Using Cleveland and Buffalo as case studies, this thesis examines how historic preservation can contribute to the “rightsizing” of shrinking neighborhoods in shrinking cities. Furthermore, it analyzes what the preservation community is currently doing to address rightsizing and the possible roles historic preservation can play in shaping the future of shrinking cities. Finally, it offers recommendations to inform future preservation efforts and research on the role of historic preservation in shrinking cities.