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How Civil Society Organizations Drive Innovative Cultural Strategies in Shrinking Cities: A Comparative Case Study of Oberhausen, Germany and Riga, Latvia

Anastasiya Matyushkina 

Research Group of Spatial Planning and Planning Theory, Department of Spatial Planning, TU Dortmund University, 44227 Dortmund, Germany; anastasiya.matyushkina@tu-dortmund.de

Abstract: In a context where planning strategies were conceived to accommodate urban growth, urban shrinkage urges scholars and practitioners to develop innovative approaches. This paper aims to explore the role of culture in qualitative transformations in shrinking cities. The focus of this analysis is governance networks with key actors, their resources, challenges, and mutual dependencies. In this comparative case study, the data was collected in a qualitative way via in-depth interviews with representatives of local governments and cultural NGOs, as well as politicians, private actors, and residents from neighborhood organizations. The results show that municipalities in shrinking cities lack crucial qualities such as creativity, trust, and knowledge of local communities to efficiently govern shrinking cities. Local governments increasingly rely on civil society organizations that utilize culture as a tool to innovate new methods for community development and to provide social services for vulnerable groups. Two approaches to governance through culture are presented which differ significantly between two shrinking cities: the economically prosperous Latvian capital, Riga, and a peripheral German city, Oberhausen, with one of the largest financial debts in the country. This paper debunks the image of shrinking cities as citadels of empty spaces for arts, emphasizes the role of strategic planning, highlights the crucial role of civil society organizations in civic engagement and maintenance of cultural provision, and reflects on their precarious position ‘in the shadow of hierarchy’. Several policy implications for a community-focused cultural development of shrinking cities are provided.

Keywords: shrinking cities; cultural strategy; civil society organizations; third sector; governance



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1. Introduction

“Shrinking cities are here to stay”, suggest future population trajectories of European cities [1]. Yet governance issues in depopulating municipalities are far from being resolved. After decades of industrial growth, urban strategies for declining areas were simply absent. Over the last decade, with the proliferation of shrinking cities research, scholars and urban practitioners developed a few innovative ways to efficiently deal with the negative consequences of urban decline [2–6]. The problem is that those strategies cannot be easily borrowed as one-size-fits-all solutions [7]. Local governments need to modify them to fit unique local conditions [8]. To make strategies locally sensitive, governments require creativity, the ability to experiment, and the knowledge of local resources and residents’ needs. While this knowledge is inherent to inhabitants, for governments alone its allocation is impeded due to the low level of civic engagement and residents’ lack of trust in the governments of shrinking cities [9,10]. Besides, shrinking municipalities often lose innovative capacity [11] and have little financial resources to spend on experiments that do not guarantee feasible results.

In my exploration of how local governments can innovate locally sensitive strategies, I turn to the potential of arts and culture. Culture and arts have been extensively used in

shrinking areas, especially within post-industrial contexts. However, research exploring the possibilities of culture and arts in shrinking cities has not been exhaustive. In the majority of documented strategies, culture is utilized as a marketing and economic tool to reverse urban growth [12,13]. Those publications appeared starting in 1990 and proliferated around 2005. They report on case studies of large metropolises and capital cities such as Manchester [14,15] and Glasgow [16–18], or medium-sized cities such as Bilbao [19], with the involvement of large investments from the market sector and national and European subsidies (such as European Capital of Culture [20]). A number of studies document how growth-oriented culture-led strategies can be hazardous to shrinking cities because they oftentimes gentrify neighborhoods, exacerbate social inequalities, and drain local budgets [15,19,21–25]. Studies also show that it is not the cultural catalyst alone that contributes to the cities' re-growth, but a complexity of contextual conditions such as the active involvement of the private sector, substantial municipal budgets to co-finance, and satisfactory air transport connectivity, among others [19]. When the entirety of factors is not met, cultural strategies fail and reinforce the 'vicious circle' of decline; however, those failed projects rarely appear in the literature [26]. This raises the question: What opportunities exist for using culture in urban and social processes in shrinking cities that do not rely on 'lucky' conditions, or that do not aim for economic growth but for 'smart shrinkage'? [27].

Shrinking cities' scholars promote alternative planning strategies as opposed to traditional economic development strategies [28,29], but not many studies documented examples of alternative cultural strategies in Europe (such as [30]). The few that exist portray single case studies from South Korea [31], Japan [32], and North America [33]. Comparative research on alternative cultural strategies in a European context can provide new insights into the role of culture in shrinking cities' strategies with sensitivity to local conditions. This comparative paper aims to contribute to the debate about the role of culture in shrinking cities, and to explore alternatives to economic growth models of cultural strategies. I ask: To what extent can culture be used to innovate strategies alternative to economic growth? And if those examples can be found, how are they governed in shrinking cities?

In order to investigate the governance of cultural strategies in shrinking cities, I use the theory of network governance as a theoretical lens. According to this theory, the increasing complexity and loosening conditions created by urban shrinkage increase the reliance of governments on other types of actors and opens up opportunities for new methods of functioning. I aim to understand the role of culture in shaping the networks of cooperation (or competition) in shrinking cities. I explore the challenges of the actors involved, their capacities and resources, and how these actors mutually reinforce governance dependencies to deliver alternative cultural strategies. Studies on shrinking cities largely promote the role of civil society. However, shrinking cities' scholars often view civil society as a homogeneous group. While referring to civil society as a heterogeneous entity, this study elaborates on the role of civil society organizations (primarily socio-cultural centers and non-governmental organizations) that have been lacking attention in the literature on shrinking cities.

This research is based on a comparative case study design. I selected two cases—Riga and Oberhausen. Both of these locations represent post-industrial shrinking cities with a long-term population decline, yet they have contrasting characteristics that make their comparison interesting. Riga, the large capital city of Latvia with a municipal budget surplus, is contrasted to the medium-sized peripheral town of Oberhausen, a town possessing one of the largest budget debts in Germany.

The cultural policy of shrinking cities is one of the most 'marginalized' policy areas. As cities shrink, local authorities seek to reduce the costs of public services that are not considered essential (such as healthcare or education) or profitable (such as energy or ICT). Culture is often considered 'nice to have' and not an essential policy area. For example, in some countries such as Germany, cultural policy is a voluntary task for local municipalities. Since it is not legally required, a budget for cultural provision is not secured [34]. Thus, the cultural budget in shrinking cities is usually cut first. It is valuable to explore how the

cultural sector survives in the precarious conditions of shrinking cities, and who maintains this sector.

2. Creativity, Experimentation, and Trust: Essential Resources to Design Locally Sensitive Strategies in Shrinking Cities

Studies on shrinking cities emphasize that local governments need efficient governance methods and planning instruments to deal with the consequences of urban shrinkage. Even though a number of such strategies have been developed by scholars and urban practitioners [2–6], they cannot be borrowed as one-size-fits-all solutions in other contexts. Local governments need to modify existing strategies to fit the local context, with its political, economic, geographical, and social nuances. Haase et al., portray how many different forms urban shrinkages can take and how important it is to understand the context in “determining the outcomes of seemingly similar macro-developments” [7] (p. 14). To make strategies locally sensitive, governments require a local understanding of the needs of the local population and of the resources of the territory and community. While this knowledge is inherent to inhabitants, for governments alone it takes a lot of time and resources to identify. This increases the demand for local governments to engage civil society in policy and planning, and to develop trust and collaborative relations with residents [35].

Besides, innovating or tailoring planning strategies to a local context requires unique skills such as creativity and innovation, as well as resources to experiment (to spend on projects that do not guarantee feasible results). Studies show that governments in shrinking cities lose innovative capacity and knowledge [11]. A lack of qualified personnel is one reason; municipalities in shrinking cities struggle to employ qualified professionals because of budget deficits and a phenomenon called ‘selected outmigration’ [11,36], where more educated and qualified people tend to emigrate. The ability to experiment is also hindered because it requires financial resources and the right to ‘waste’ them on making mistakes to produce new knowledge. Furthermore, creativity and the ability to experiment are generally impeded within a rigid bureaucratic culture even in the governments of growing cities [37]. This constellation of conditions creates a serious challenge for local governance. On the one hand, governance innovations are urgently needed that are low-cost, yet efficient and sensitive to local needs. On the other hand, governments struggle to develop innovative solutions because they lack sufficient resources, knowledge, and capabilities to do it alone. That is why the missing qualities of local administrations need to be allocated elsewhere, which can be done via the other actors in governance networks [38].

3. The Role of Network Governance in Stimulating Innovative Capacity

Network governance can be defined as an increased reliance on social systems outside of bureaucratic structures to mobilize lacking qualities in order to address social problems in uncertain and complex contexts (own definition based on [39]). Network governance leads to new structured patterns of interaction between actors and new flows of resources between them [40]. Structured means that these relations are not random, but intentionally constructed in order to produce feasible solutions. Scholars argue that the complexity and urgency of tasks that governments face today require a “broader array of administrative skills, extending beyond those associated with direct government bureaucracy” [41] (p. 33). Thus, the role of administrators is shifting from neutral non-political actors to coordinators of a complex system of governing actors [42]. In shrinking cities, the new structural conditions and vacuum of ideas create ‘loose spaces’, meaning that there are more opportunities for informal processes and transformative changes to occur [41]. In such ‘loose spaces’, a government can no longer be independent; thus, they enable non-traditional actors to play around with ideas and produce innovations. However, in order for innovations to happen, local governments need to transform their role from bureaucrats to social entrepreneurs who rely on “experimentation, collaboration, openness, imagination, and unconstrained creativity” [41] (p. 37).

3.1. Culture in Shrinking Cities and Cultural Actors in Governance Networks

In shrinking cities, culture and arts are often portrayed as resources that gain power in the hands of the market. Culture-led regeneration has been a common response of public-private partnerships to fight against urban shrinkage, especially in post-industrial cities that lost their identities and functions to a large amount of spaces [16,18,43,44]. After the well-known ‘Bilbao effect’, market actors and local governments have been dazzled by the potential of culture to promote a new economic base and reverse urban growth [11,12]. However, only a few studies showcase alternative examples to economic-based cultural strategies in shrinking contexts [2,30–33]. Those alternative strategies utilize culture and arts as soft tools for civic engagement and empowerment, social cohesion, and identity building; these strategies invite cultural actors as partners that possess creativity, the ability to experiment, and trustful relationships with local communities.

For example, Koizumi [32] documents a Japanese case where the artists were valued not as a creative class that attracts economic growth, but as community facilitators and instigators of creative activity. Another case study on the South Korean city of Busan emphasizes the role of the cultural actors in proposing a new collaborative governance model for urban regeneration involving government, property owners, and artists: “local building owners were asked to lower their rents. Artists were asked to put some investments in for necessary renovation, while their rents were subsidized by the government” [31] (p. 854). A previously failed government’s attempt to develop a cultural district and lack of ideas created a ‘loose space’ for this new model to be accepted. The cultural leaders had the freedom to implement their vision because they proposed a cost-effective way to achieve quick results with low risks for the government. The idea was to promote the intangible values of the district (e.g., history, creativity) in order to bring liveliness into the old downtown through fostering community engagement and social and human capital. Soon after, physical regeneration followed, and cultural policy was transformed. This paper highlights that cultural actors have the capacity to initiate transformative change in policy and urban planning. The author says that the success of this project was based on the “artists’ social network and community engagement,” as well as the government’s position as “a passive supporter” [31].

3.2. Civil Society Organizations in the Governance Network of Shrinking Cities

Researchers document diverse forms of governance collaborations in shrinking cities: public-private partnerships [45], public sector and civil society [46], state-market-civil society collaborations [47], and private-citizen partnerships, which are known as ‘governance without government’ and are considered a common phenomenon in shrinking cities [41]. Shrinking cities scholars speak in agreement that the involvement of civil society in governance, planning, and policy-making is necessary to design solutions to overcome the negative consequences [2,3]. However, studies often perceive civil society as a homogeneous entity, mixing formal civil society organizations and local inhabitants [48].

Local inhabitants have knowledge about local resources and local needs, which is necessary for making efficient urban development strategies. They also possess the time and physical capacity to co-produce public services, which results in low-cost solutions for municipalities [49]. However, existing research found that in shrinking cities, the ability of local inhabitants to participate is hindered by selective outmigration [50,51], declined social capital [10], and a pessimistic vision toward the city’s future [52]. Contrastingly, non-profit and non-governmental organizations (or the third sector [53]) rise in prominence in weak urban economies such as shrinking cities [11,54]. Increased interdependency between these actors leads to the so-called ‘third-party government’ [48] and allows local governments to allocate resources to enhance efficiency, creativity, and innovation [38].

There are several reasons for local governments to collaborate with the third sector. The first one is the inability of local authorities to ensure the provision of public services, in which case the civil society organizations become “an extension of a local authority” [38] (p. 11) to satisfy the unmet demands of public services [55]. Another reason to rely

on the third sector is to reinforce civic participation and enhance civil society. Research shows that the nonprofit sector often possesses a higher level of public trust [55], and has extensive knowledge of the social and cultural characteristics of the place where they work, which strengthens their relationships with local communities. Besides having the necessary skills and human resources, non-governmental actors can bring in financial resources such as private capital, leading to the so-called ‘public-private-philanthropic partnerships’ [56]. The non-political status of non-governmental organizations is valuable because they provide services “that [otherwise] would encounter tough political resistance were they offered through governmental agencies” [54] (p. 30). The above-mentioned capital of the third sector provides substantial support for governments in austerity, like shrinking municipalities. In return, local governments often play a crucial role in promoting and supporting the innovative activity of the third sector [57] by offering “staff secondments and training, accommodation, equipment, low-interest loans, legal and administrative advice, or tax relief” [38] (p. 11).

4. Methods and Study Setting

4.1. Study Setting

4.1.1. Oberhausen

Oberhausen is a medium-sized city in the Ruhr Metropolitan region—a polycentric urban area in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. Historically, it is an unusual city because it developed only in the modern day around coal mines and steel mills, with the construction of the Cologne-Minden railway station. During industrial times, Oberhausen experienced high economic growth and reached its economic peak in 1959, accumulating the production of 8.4% of all German steel [58]. In 1963, the city reached its demographic peak with 261,500 inhabitants [58]. In 1968, the closure of the Concordia colliery indicated the beginning of the coal, steel, and mining crises. Economic restructuring, together with declining birth rates, led to persistent urban shrinkage (Figure 1). The withdrawal of industries was perceived as a loss of Oberhausen’s economic core function. Since 1985, Oberhausen has had one of the highest financial debts in Germany. Financial debt is typical for old industrial regions due to high social spending and low tax revenues, and can hardly be counteracted without assistance [59]. The share of population over 65 in Oberhausen is 21% (in 2019). Additionally, Oberhausen is the city with the highest national unemployment rate—10.4% in 2021, compared to the national average of 5.7% [60]; since 2018, the city has had one of the highest percentages of population with migration background (over 30%) [61].

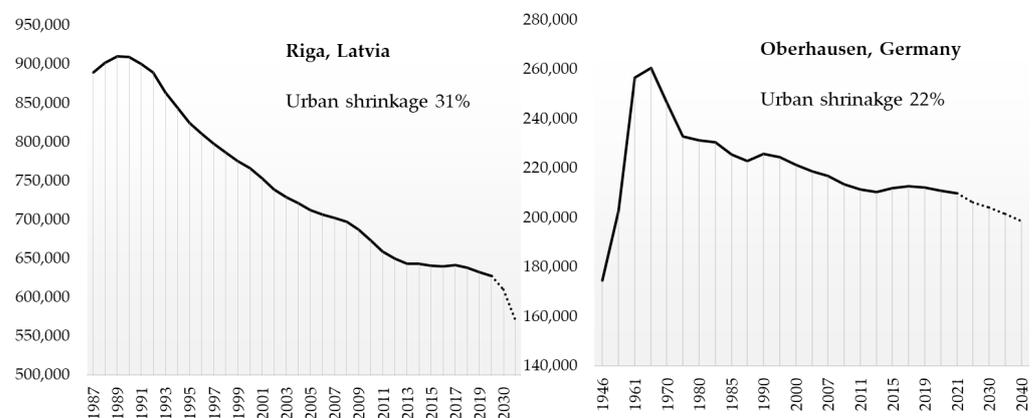


Figure 1. Population trajectory in Riga (left) and Oberhausen (right). Source Riga: Own representation based on Official Statistics of Latvia & ref. [62]. Source Oberhausen: Own representation based on Landesbetrieb für Information und Technik, NRW; RVR-Datenbank [RVR-Database of State Office for Information and Technology, North Rhine-Westphalia] & ref. [61].

4.1.2. Riga

Riga is the capital of Latvia and was founded in 1201. Riga is a primate city of Latvia, meaning that it is disproportionately larger than any other city in Latvia [63]. At the beginning of 2022, 671.9 thousand people lived in Riga, which is almost one-third of the total Latvian population [64]. In Riga, 21% of the inhabitants are people aged 65 and older [65]. The unemployment rate in Riga is 4.5%, which is lower than the national average of 6.7% [64]. The city plays a tremendous role in the Latvian economy, employment market, and investments. In 2021, municipal budget revenue amounted to 984.8 million euros, while budget expense was 960.2 million euros [64]. Due to its capital status, Riga is home to important state, municipal, and private cultural institutions, with the city center being a UNESCO World Heritage site [2]. In the 19th century, Riga experienced rapid industrialization and urbanization with the formation of industrial areas around the city center and intensive residential construction caused by the significant population growth. During the Soviet era, industries expanded. During the first half of the 1990s, Latvia passed through a transitional period from a totalitarian to a democratic society that brought crucial political, economic, social, and demographic changes. Since 1989, the city has been steadily shrinking and lost almost 31% of its population (Figure 1). The population decline in Riga occurred in 3 waves: the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 2004 EU accession and the free movement of workers, and the 2009 economic crisis [62]. Today, Riga is the main Latvian destination for international migrants; in 2020, the index of migration balance in the city was 4.5—significantly higher than the national average of 1.8. Still, the largest national groups in Riga are Latvians (48%) and ethnic Russians (35%) [64,66,67].

4.2. Research Design

This research is based on a comparative case study methodology within the interpretive epistemology [68], which is based on intersubjectivity and the assumption that social reality is not objective but is shaped by the complexity of social contexts, human experiences, and knowledge systems. Within this epistemological paradigm, I follow the holistic strategy of comparative analysis proposed by Pickvance [69] rather than the variable-oriented strategy. Instead of viewing cultural strategy-making as a set of variables, I see it as a whole, yet acknowledge nuanced and intricate details.

I acknowledge that two case studies have similarities and contrasting characteristics. In terms of similarities, the cases are post-industrial cities, whose loss of core economic function might have triggered loss of urban identity. For such cities, culture presents a valuable resource [70,71], and is used more commonly than in shrinking cities triggered by, for instance, natural disasters. Additionally, I focus on cities with long-term demographic decline in the past and expected continued decline in the future. These conditions might indicate that urban shrinkage is more likely to be accepted as a new planning model in official discourse and lead to innovative strategies focused specifically on urban shrinkage. Figure 1 illustrates past and future trajectories of population change in Riga and Oberhausen.

The cases also have contrasting characteristics. Riga is a capital ‘prosperous shrinking city’ [72] with a budget surplus, and Oberhausen is a peripheral city that accumulated one of the largest financial debts in Germany [73]. Riga represents a post-socialist city in the country with young democracy [74] and contrasts against a western European city with a so-called ‘mature’ democracy and a comparatively long history of a social democratic regime. Post-socialist cities are often characterized by the weak agency of local authorities in planning decisions and strong agency of private interests [23,75], which might lead to cultural strategy being more influenced by private sector. Contrarily, in a social democratic context with strong welfare state support, the approach to culture might be more likely public- and non-profit-led. Research by Burksiene et al. [74] reveals that in young democracies, non-governmental actors constitute the base for cultural and economic development because local municipalities often “lack important skills in project activities in fostering trade and investments” (p. 326).

4.3. Data Collection Method

I collected data through in-depth interviews in both cities over the course of three years. In-depth interviews were used to get deeper understanding of the role of culture in urban development of shrinking cities and grasp the nuanced perspectives of different types of stakeholders on their role in governance networks. In Riga, I conducted 21 interviews between October 2019 and September 2020. In Oberhausen, I conducted 15 interviews between May and August 2021 and June and August 2022. The types of interview stakeholders are presented in Table A1 in Appendix A. The core interviewees were identified via the desk research as actors who have been actively involved in cultural and urban activities. Further interviewees were recruited via the networking technique where the interviewed actors suggested other actors who they think are crucial in cultural and urban development in the city. The interviews were semi-structured. The pre-defined questions clustered around the following topics: the perception of urban shrinkage through experiences of individuals or organizations; the challenges that actors experience in achieving their individual or organizational goals; the strengths that help them overcome the challenges; their experiences in collaborating with other actors; and their ideas on the role of culture in urban development of the city.

The second source of data was strategic and policy documents from both cities (see Table A2 in Appendix A). In Riga, I analyzed urban planning long-term and mid-term strategies, and cultural strategies. In Oberhausen, not many formal planning strategies exist. I analyzed one long-term planning strategy. Oberhausen does not currently have a separate cultural strategy or policy. A helpful data source about the cultural development of Oberhausen was the open access online system (ALLRIS) with published reports from the City Council's Cultural Committee. They usually took place six times a year and contained minutes, discussions, and decisions for the period from 2003 to 2022.

4.4. Data Analysis Method

I analyzed the interviews using Atlas.ti. I used pre-determined code categories (such as actors, resources, and governance challenges). Additionally, I used the open coding technique to identify subcodes of the predefined categories and other code categories. After coding, I built coding networks around the two actors that emerged to be the main players who utilized culture in urban and community development in shrinking cities: the NGO sector and the local municipality. I used the function 'code co-occurrence table', which shows the co-occurrence coefficient between the codes which indicates the strength of the relation between them. I included only the codes with co-occurrence coefficients of 0.03 and higher. After conducting multiple co-occurrence tests, I subjectively chose this threshold because it best represents the data.

5. Results

5.1. Exploring Governance Capacities of Municipalities and Non-Governmental Actors in the Cultural Field

In this section, I describe the results of the networks of governance in the cultural field in two cities, Riga and Oberhausen. The main result of my analysis is that NGOs and the municipality are the key stakeholders who contribute to urban and community development via the utilization of cultural elements such as theatre, music, cuisine, dance, literature, murals, and sculpture. The networks show that both the municipality and the NGO sector collaborate with the same set of actors including each other, citizens, and the private sector. The only difference is that the municipality also collaborates with (in this case financially supports) formal cultural institutions, which include theatres, museums, libraries, opera houses, music halls, and other institutions financed from local, regional, or state funds. It must be mentioned that this analysis considers only co-occurrences between the two codes, but does not allow for analysis of multivariate relations, and thus does not consider mediation between codes. However, from the data, it is evident that the NGO

sector is an important mediator between a municipality and its citizens. I elaborate on this in the next section.

NGOs and municipalities face quite a different set of governance challenges. NGOs struggle with the lack of space and stable financial resources, which causes high uncertainty for their existence:

“The situation is all the time very precarious for all my colleagues. We probably at one moment have to shrink, then we can grow. We don’t have these permanent job agreements, we have these yearly agreement, and then we can see... All of them, it could be, will be interrupted in one moment but that’s how we live for 20 years.” (Riga, Interview 2019)

Additionally, following bureaucratic procedures is a difficult task for cultural NGOs: for example, developing funding applications or filing financial reports after receiving municipal funding. In the interview below, the leader of a neighborhood association in Riga explains how a lack of financial resources led to a shortage of human resources who can invest in time-consuming bureaucratic tasks. This vulnerable situation of third-sector organizations, associated with scarcity of funding and shortage of volunteers, has been previously documented in young democracies such as Baltic states [38]:

“We don’t have a stable [financial] source, and [. . .] mainly it depends on the human resources to do the application process. It’s somewhat exhausting and you need to have time to work on your computer and write these project application letters and fill in forms afterwards, financial management and response to municipality that explains how you spend the money and so on. And people, if they have jobs, they don’t have much time, and also not everyone has this experience and knowledge how to do it. [. . .] For the last two years we didn’t apply [for a funding tender], because it was just me who was doing these applications, and since I was having a baby and also had a lot of professional work, I didn’t have time, and there wasn’t a person who could take it on.” (Riga, Interview 2020)

Municipal employees in shrinking cities have an even higher number of challenges compared to the NGO sector. These are the lack of civic participation and lack of collaborations (between organizations and between the department within the municipality), legal constraints, and strategic challenges. The lack of financial resources and lack of creativity were the biggest challenges for Oberhausen. According to German law, a municipality cannot go bankrupt. However, in the situation of a long-lasting debt, they can go ‘quasi-bankrupt’, which means that the municipality becomes controlled by the state authority [in German: Bezirksregierung], and receives only the money they need to fulfill their legal tasks such as social care, education, or housing. As a result, the municipality hires only the minimum staff they need to fulfill the legally required tasks. Because cultural policy is a non-mandatory task for German municipalities, personnel in the cultural sector is in shortage. In Oberhausen, the challenge is also in the particular social structure which resulted from urban shrinkage with a ‘huge lack of young people, students, creative people, urban planners’; ‘high number of immigrants, which is difficult to work with many different cultural backgrounds they have’; ‘increasing number of older people’; and a ‘high number of unemployed for a long time’. In Riga, the municipality employees are more concerned with the lack of trust between the inhabitants and the municipality. Interestingly, the bureaucratic system and the red tape were commonly mentioned as barriers by municipal employees because they constrain collaborations with organizations and inhabitants.

Organizations can overcome existing challenges if they possess the relevant set of resources. NGOs overcome high instability by learning how to win competitions for sub-national funding. NGOs also have social capital; they rely on volunteers who support their organizational goals, or close friends with intrinsic motivation. For example, one leader of a cultural NGO shared: *“We always had friends around us, in every field. If we needed a static and electric engineer, we had friends. We had a very strong network, even without paying they were going with us.”* Another important resource of the NGOs is their ability to come up

with creative and innovative ideas, which is often a crucial resource for winning external funding, as explained by the employee of a cultural center in Oberhausen:

“At the end we have many quite innovative projects, and that’s what they [funding bodies] are looking for at the end. Because they want to do pilot projects. And each of these 10 different projects [within the international consortium they are part of] are pilot projects, so they’re looking ‘okay what is new, what can you replicate in other cities’. And it’s often what is wanted.” (Oberhausen, Interview 2022)

For municipalities, their strengths are based on their legitimate status and access to space and finances (yet with certain constraints, which are discussed in the next section). The following quote from the employer of the cultural department illustrates this:

“[...] If you’re not getting money from the city and you’re [name of the cultural NGO] going on your own, [you need to] find your place, open some doors, then you’re like ‘ah, those crazy artists’. When we started to finance them from Riga city, from cultural department, everybody have to think ‘ah, financed by Riga city—cultural department’, and then it’s different category.” (Riga, Interview 2019)

In Riga, the municipality also benefits from access to financial resources that they attract through supra-national funding.

When the actors cannot address their challenges with internal resources, they seek them from external actors and form a governance network. In the next section, I discuss the processes of entering into a collaboration between civil society organizations and municipalities in Riga and Oberhausen.

5.2. Overcoming Governance Challenges through Networks in the Cultural Field

5.2.1. Oberhausen

Riga and Oberhausen show different approaches to urban and community development through cultural participation and to forming governance networks with cultural actors. In Oberhausen, the main governance challenge is the lack of financial resources. When local government does not have internal financial resources, the main task becomes attracting external funding from regional, national, or supra-national bodies, which makes them dependent upon external agendas [3,76]. Oberhausen shows an extreme example of this case; in such a precarious economic situation, the city has no resources to develop a new urban strategy to guide urban development (the urban strategy that the city has now is outdated and expired in 2020). In the absence of a comprehensive urban strategy, the urban development department applies for any potential funding opportunity despite many not fitting the city’s needs.

“Department of urban renewal are writing proposals for funding. All the time. [...] we are very dependent on funding. [...] That makes it hard to bring all those projects together. I think it makes it hard for strategic projects. If there is money from external [funding], we have to get these” (Oberhausen, Interview 2022)

Seeking external funding without a comprehensive strategic vision in Oberhausen has resulted in a paradoxical situation—the successfully obtained funds set further priorities for the city strategy (not the other way around), *“the only funding that we’re getting right now is the national and state funding for smart cities. We’re getting a lot of money for smart city, there is also a strategy we worked on, the development in the next years in the context of smart city”* (Oberhausen, Interview 2022). Besides, strategic planners in Oberhausen do not recognize culture as a resource for urban planning or community building. In fact, the employees I interviewed were unaware of the activities of the cultural non-governmental organizations active in urban development on the grassroots level in their own city.

While the Strategic Team of Urban Development Department is not collaborating with cultural actors, the Department of Culture of the Oberhausen City Council actively engages with them. In fact, the employees of the Department of Culture admit their lack of finances and personnel to provide cultural services; thus, they rely on non-governmental

organizations to take over the municipality's functions to address shrinking problems, such as a lack of resources and residents' outmigration:

"The only hope is work from the NGOs to build networks to attract people from other cities. Municipality has almost nothing for culture. [. . .] We are the only middle-sized city without university. Really, the only one here in this Ruhr area. This means we have a huge lack of young people, students, creative people, urban planners, people who would come here and do something. So, the only hope is actually the work from NGOs. To get these people here, because there is no other way to get them here, why would they come here? There is no offer for them to work here. [. . .] What the municipality has is super low, actually, it's almost nothing. The only hope is from EU projects. The dilemma is that I'm the only person working in one of these [external] projects, half-time. We need so many more people, in other like city planning department, for instance, they have none." (Oberhausen, Interview 2021)

With many local problems and the government's inability to resolve them, local cultural NGOs step in. They work with civil society to accommodate their needs. Cultural NGOs in Oberhausen allocate external resources from national and European bodies to invest in policy priorities related to the integration of migrants, education, re-skilling and training refugees, and the assistance of the long-term unemployed. For example, the foundation Kunsthau Mitte works in the intersection of arts and social work. Their two main long-term projects are the Arbeitslosen-Ballett [the Ballet of the Unemployed] and "Brauchse Jobb? Wir machen Kunst!" [Need a job? We make art!]. These projects aim to offer temporary jobs for unemployed people, providing them with official contacts, salaries, and social security. It is open not only to artists but to anyone wishing to participate and contribute in their own way.

Another project from the cultural NGO 'Kitev', called Free University, is a citizen-to-citizen university platform funded by the state program. Oberhausen is the only middle-sized city in the Ruhr region that does not have a university. Kitev recognized the need for one and decided to organize their own faculties, where citizens offer courses to others in something they have expertise in; for example, street art, theatre improvisation, song-writing, calligraphy, or gardening. It is free and open to everyone. The teachers of the courses can receive remuneration in the amount of 1000 euros. The project contributes to education and re-skilling, as well as social bonding in the community. Additionally, it strengthens civic empowerment by providing opportunities and financial, professional, and moral support for those who want to become a teacher. Often, these roles are taken by migrants, refugees, unemployed, or elderly people.

The municipality forms good informal relations with NGOs and tries to support them by different means. The municipality offers assistance with bureaucratic processes and co-financing to compete for external funding, *"sometimes you have to pay 10 or 20 percent to get the money from the state, we help them by that 10 or 20 percent, so that they can make things and can finance them"* (Oberhausen, Interview 2021). The municipality is also able to provide space to cultural NGOs, but such cases are rare because empty properties in ownership of the municipality are scarce. The problem is well-illustrated by one of the leaders of a cultural NGO in Oberhausen:

"Even if the city wants to initiate something that helps the city to develop, or not to die, they need the cooperation with private people or companies, to do it in these places. And that's very tricky. The city doesn't own anything here, where we could do projects, which helped the city to develop in one or another way. Most of the houses here are owned by companies that are not in Oberhausen, they [are] sometimes not even in Europe, so they don't care at all what's going on in the city. [. . .]. They just own it [the buildings] because they can make Abschreibung [German for tax write-off]. They have a house, it doesn't bring profit, it only makes minus and it's good for their taxes." (Oberhausen, Interview 2021)

However, the municipality tries to mobilize its informal connections to access spaces through market actors: “if they are searching for a place, the municipality can go and talk to the owner, make connections, this is what works very well” (Oberhausen, Interview 2021). Formal municipal support to NGOs consists of small amounts of regular yearly funding; in 2022 each of the cultural NGOs received between 20,000 and 30,000 euros.

5.2.2. Riga

In Riga, the situation is different because the city has a budget surplus, as well as a comprehensive and regularly updated urban development strategy. In 2022, the Riga City Council has approved a new mid-term strategy for 2022–2027, which anchors the new approach to cultural development. There, culture is the main tool for strengthening the identity of the city and its neighborhoods in order to enhance community development and civic participation. To understand the place, the municipality relies on the knowledge of local communities. This understanding exists within the different departments of the city council, in the department of strategic planning: “... *they understand better than us, what they need in neighborhoods*” (Riga, Interview 2019), as well as in the department of culture: “*we wanted to promote people feeling belonging to the neighborhood, because they [locals] see the problems and solutions better*” (Riga, Interview 2019).

In 2019, Riga has become a participant in a Baltic States project based on testing the methods of cultural planning. The project was led by the department of strategic planning. The strategic department became the main proponent of culture as a tool for urban and community development. They see culture as:

“A process, which helps us to understand the local specific characteristics, to better know people, the area, and to build future developments, both infrastructure and social developments related to those local resources. [...] if we look at culture as a process then usually it helps us to bring to the front some challenges or some important issues.” (Riga, Interview 2020)

In this project, the strategic planning department collaborates with artists and cultural NGOs because they see them as community drivers: “... *they are part of a geographical community in neighborhoods, they make social work and make identity for neighborhood*”, and as experts within the specific local area: “*they are very into their own community, they are professionals, but to the specific [Name omitted] community*” (Riga, Interview 2020). The main idea to work with artists and cultural NGOs was to develop new governance methods of how to engage with neighborhood communities. For developing such methods, experimentation and flexibility are crucial because this allows for the discovery of relevant forms to work with diverse target groups, such as the unemployed, socially isolated, and elderly people. Besides, experimenting allows for adaptation to the fast-changing environmental, social, economic, and demographic conditions that shrinking cities face.

One project where the municipality invited artists to collaborate took place in the Sarkandaugava neighborhood, which struggled with a post-industrial stigma, lack of identity, spatial and social segregation, as well as deteriorating industrial sites in need of new functions. The leader of the project was the cultural NGO ‘Free Riga’ because they had previous experience with the regeneration of empty properties into cultural temporary-use spaces. Initially, Free Riga and the municipality aimed for an ambitious project to not only strengthen community building but also find a function for a privately-owned industrial site and transform it into spaces where citizens gather, meet, and organize social events. Quickly after the start, Free Riga found that the industrial land was contaminated, and the resources available for the project were not enough to clean the territory. As a result, the project was moved to a different smaller building; however, after the COVID-19 outbreak, it had to be changed again into a contactless event. ‘Free Riga’ decided to produce a newspaper about local residents and their hobbies in order to organize local hobby groups for neighbors to get to know each other, and meet to practice hobbies together. Even though the initial idea was not realized, the strategic planning department showed a positive attitude to the unexpected changes because they prioritized the value of building trust

with neighbors and cultural actors and learned from their experiments about innovative community-activation methods:

“[. . .] when we didn’t get this [industrial] building, then Oscar [the leader of cultural NGO, name changed] said “but I have idea. I will do that”. I was like yes. What else could I say to him? No? Of course, we’re experimenting, we’re going further, and that’s the way. That’s how I am personally looking at both of these projects, and it’s how I’m communicating it to my colleagues. That’s it is experimentation, that it is innovation, and we don’t have to be scared of not reaching the results, cause we don’t know what the result is. And that’s the process.” (Riga, Interview 2020)

This attitude of trust, flexibility, and prioritizing intangible over feasible results is not common for shrinking cities. What stimulated it in Riga was the capacity of the urban planners to be open to new ways of work, but also the opportunity of the city to participate in an international project of cultural planning, which gave access to a wide international network of experts, and to the external EU funding to be able to implement these experiments.

The municipality in Riga established formal tools to support cultural NGOs. One of these is funding tenders to provide direct subsidies. Among other financial tenders for festivals, amateur groups, or private actors, the city developed a special tender for the support of Riga’s creative quarters and territories. An employee from the Cultural Department explains: *“this program is more to help NGOs administratively, because in most competitions it is impossible for them to receive a salary or funding for rent of their premises. But we conceived this program for them, and for an interesting cultural program [of the city]”* (Riga, Interview 2020 [Translated into English by author]). Within this tender, the NGOs could get a small amount of funding—up to 10,000 euros per year. To support non-governmental organizations and neighborhood associations, the city of Riga has established an NGO house. It provides physical space for organizations to meet colleagues, work, and organize events:

“NGOs can come [. . .] to organize different activities for people, or even just to ensure that they can work, for example have a place for meetings, for people who want to establish NGO, or for NGO who is small and doesn’t have a place to work with computers. Also to have a place to organize different activities for inhabitants. [. . .] Till now there are different rooms for work, for example, a computer room, a meeting room with a table and chairs, different seminar/conference rooms with equipment, and also hall for bigger events, like concerts or forums, with all equipment. All this equipment is free for NGOs to use. Other parts of NGO house work is to provide informative and consultative support, for example there are regular seminars on different topics like accounting, project management. Also NGOs can get some consultation from our workers, for example, how the City Council work, or how competition work.” (Riga, Interview 2020)

The NGO house is popular among NGOs, but it doesn’t meet the high demand. Additionally, the interviews revealed that not all NGOs use it because for some it is inconveniently located and is difficult to find availability within the ‘fully booked’ capacity.

Similar to Oberhausen, access to affordable spaces is constrained for NGOs in Riga, but due to legal reasons. The municipality does not own spaces that can be occupied by cultural NGOs. According to Latvian privatization policy, the municipality is not allowed to keep long-term ownership of empty buildings that are not in the direct use of public institutions. This law impedes the local government’s ability to help cultural NGOs gain access to affordable or free spaces. This law creates a situation where a large share of abandoned properties belongs to private actors, which impedes the municipality’s ability to address the problem.

5.3. The Ambivalent Role of the Private Sector

The substantial share of studies on culture in shrinking cities emphasize the important role of the private sector in urban governance networks [4,45]; however, my analysis shows

that even though private actors appear in the collaboration networks of both municipalities and NGOs, their role within the cultural sector is rather weak. In relation to the municipality, both case studies show that public-private partnerships are not active in the cultural field in shrinking cities. In Oberhausen, private actors are rarely involved in collaborations with the municipality: *“It [collaborations with private sector] is not so easy like in towns with a big economy, and with many people with much money.”* (Oberhausen, Interview 2021). In Riga, however, private actors used to be important philanthropic sponsors for civil society organizations. However, interviews reveal that in recent years, the role of private philanthropists has been declining due to economic and legal reasons:

“Actually at one moment there were many of those private mecenats and supporters like ABLV bank, which collapsed, then Teterev foundation, which has also collapsed, and Boris Teterev just passed away, just a month ago. And then, for example, Zuzāns, who is running this gambling company and is one of the main supporter of art in Latvia, like private supporter. But his business is now reduced because of new legal system, so he also I think will stop to do it. So all these private players, which at one moment were quite many in the scene, they’re dropping out for different reasons.” (Riga, Interview 2019)

On the other hand, as illustrated earlier, private actors impede the accessibility of spaces necessary for the operation of cultural civil society organizations. According to the study results, the privatization of urban spaces is one of the main challenges of the NGO sector in the cultural field, both in Riga and Oberhausen.

6. Discussion

Applying the theoretical framework of network governance, I explored governance networks of actors that tackle urban shrinkage challenges with cultural and artistic tools. The collaboration between civil society organizations and municipalities differs in the two cities (see Figure 2): in Riga, culture appears to be the ‘soft’ governance tool for empowering local communities and involving them in urban processes, and leads to novel methods of community development. However, in Oberhausen, culture is recognized by a part of a municipality as a tool for social and cultural service provision.

Riga and Oberhausen differ in recognition of culture as a strategic resource in urban planning. In Riga, culture is recognized by the department of strategic planning as the main tool for improving the capacity of civil society. The strategic planning department communicates with other departments during the development of urban strategy, and this is how knowledge about culture as a ‘soft’ tool for urban development disseminates within the whole municipality. Civil society organizations are recognized as mediators between municipalities and local communities, as well as holders of creativity and local knowledge. Because culture is one of the priorities in the urban development strategy, civil society organizations enter formal governance networks by being official partners in international projects, receiving local subsidies (although small amounts), and having access to formal municipal spaces, such as the NGO house.

In Oberhausen, where urban strategy formation is hindered by long-term budget debt, strategic approaches to culture are absent. Culture is not recognized as an effective tool for urban or community development within the strategic planning department. However, culture is recognized by the cultural department, who relies on actively present cultural NGOs in addressing urban shrinkage problems such as unemployment and weakening social ties, and in supporting vulnerable social groups such as refugees and unemployed residents in integration into the city or at the labor market. Their collaboration in Oberhausen is largely based on informal ‘socially-binding’ relations, which cannot guarantee stability. The current governance context in Oberhausen allows for limited access to decision making and power shifts. The position of cultural NGOs can be defined as “governing in the shadow of hierarchy” [77] (p. 247). This finding is in line with Bockmeyer’s critical study on community nonprofit organizations in Cleveland, USA, which argues that they “will need to gain access and create a role for themselves before the processes of path dependence

are established without their secure place at the decision making table in order to serve neighborhood residents and the territories they occupy” [54] (p. 47).

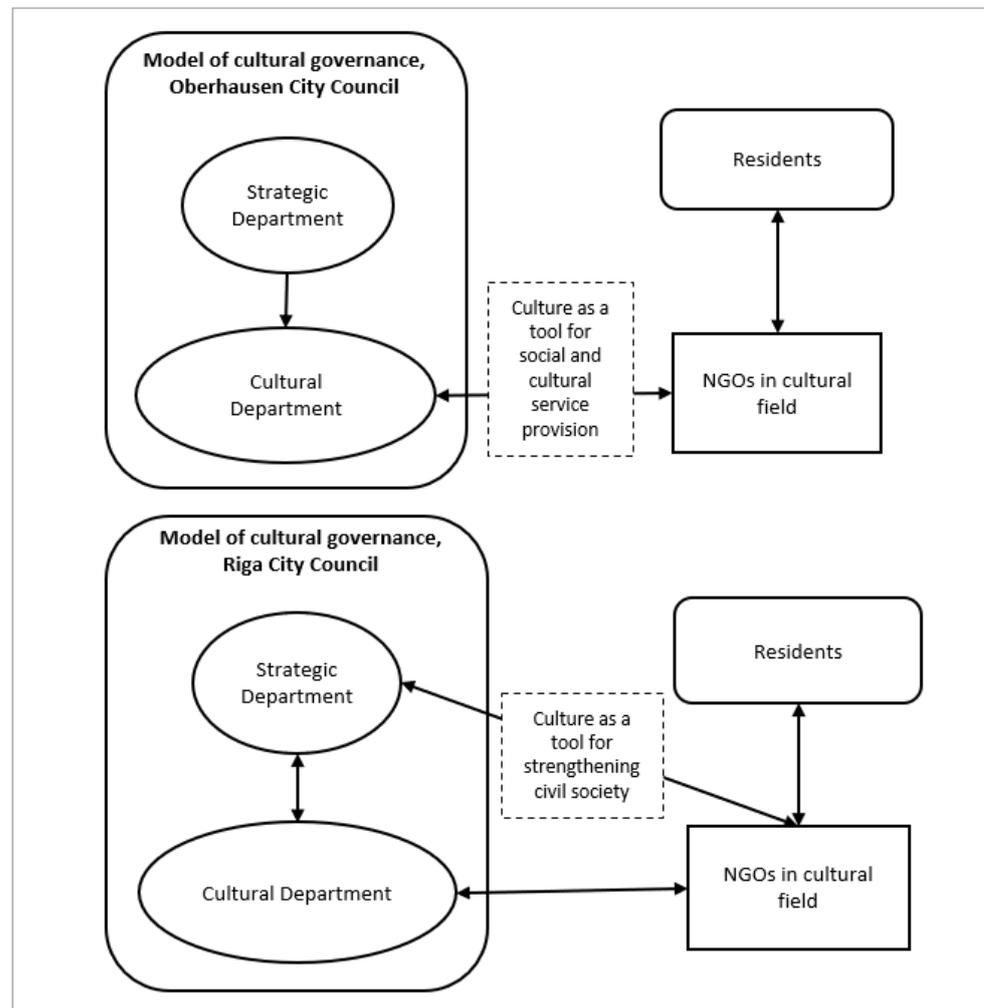


Figure 2. Schematic illustration of cultural governance models in Riga and Oberhausen.

I highlight the heterogeneity of actors within civil society and local governments. I argue that scholars advocating for more involvement of civil society should be more precise about what type of civil society actors are meant. My findings reveal that cultural civil society organizations can take the role of mediators between inhabitants and governments. This finding is in line with another contribution to this special issue by Matoga, whose study emphasizes the importance of independent brokers between citizens and local administrations [46]. Cultural actors will not be able to consult citizens in bureaucratic procedures as seen in the paper by Matoga [46], but can utilize their strengths in innovating community engagement tools and facilitating knowledge transfer between local inhabitants and governments.

Local government is also a heterogeneous entity, where different departments often resemble different organizations with their own goals, organizational culture, and set of actors they collaborate with. Internal communication between different departments within the municipality is a governance challenge. The process of strategy-making is an opportunity to share knowledge and improve inter-departmental and external communication. However, for impoverished shrinking cities such as Oberhausen, strategy-making can be a difficult task to implement because it requires substantial financial resources. This finding echoes the paper by Hartt, who first studied ‘prosperous shrinking cities’, and highlighted that even within a shrinking cities group, cities have considerably different opportunities

and policy options [72]. Thus, more research exploring strategies for non-prosperous shrinking cities is needed.

Last but not least, my study foregrounds that provision of public services and development of planning methods are disseminated among different actors outside the formal government network, and non-governmental cultural institutions have a critical role due to their knowledge of and close relations with local communities, their creativity, and access to external networks and funding. However, non-governmental cultural actors operate in precarious conditions. One of the main challenges that impedes the activities of civil society organizations in both case studies is the lack of physical spaces to perform their activities. The privatization of urban spaces appears to be a problem not only for growing cities, but also for shrinking cities. This finding contradicts the common narrative that shrinking cities are citadels of accessible and affordable spaces for artists [78]. My results show that even though empty properties are available, artists and cultural NGOs struggle to get access to affordable spaces, which hinders their sustainable operation and weakens their opportunity to contribute to urban governance. This finding is in line with studies emphasizing the weakening position of local governments in shrinking cities [54].

7. Conclusions

Urban strategies that utilize culture to achieve solely economic growth have been largely criticized; however, alternative cultural strategies are underexplored. Such strategies, however, are valuable to identify because they have the potential to contribute to the sustainable development of shrinking cities, as they capitalize on local resources, and center around the acute needs of local communities. This paper highlights the role of culture as a 'soft' tool for urban governance and public service provision in shrinking cities. By focusing on governance networks in the cultural field, it becomes apparent how local governments are unable to deal with governance issues alone, which increases their reliance on other actors, primarily civil society organizations. Civil society organizations possess additional personnel and financial resources, knowledge of local territories, and trustful relationships with local communities, which allows them to innovate methods for civic participation and maintain the provision of cultural and social services that municipalities are not able to ensure. The approaches differ between the 'prosperous' shrinking city of Riga and the financially-struggling shrinking city of Oberhausen. The recognition of culture by the strategic department in shrinking cities is important for fostering governance networks and ensuring more stable support for cultural civil society organizations.

The research outcomes suggest several policy implications. First, strategic planners in shrinking cities should consider integrating culture into urban strategies for strengthening civil society, as well as inter-municipal and external collaborations. Second, while developing urban and cultural strategies, planners and policy-makers should consider working closely with civil society stakeholders in order to develop sensitive strategies that reflect the needs and values of communities. This could include engaging local artists, cultural NGOs, and community leaders in the planning and implementation of cultural and urban strategies. Policy-makers should investigate opportunities to provide stable sources of funding for cultural programs and events, affordable or free spaces for cultural and community initiatives, and they should invest in capacity building for non-governmental organizations to promote community-focused cultural development in shrinking cities.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Types of interview stakeholders.

Type of Interview Stakeholders, Oberhausen	Type of Interview Stakeholders, Riga
1. Representative local leading political party	1. Representative Riga City Council–Education, Culture, and Sports Department
2. Representative Oberhausen City Council–Cultural Department	2. Representative Riga City Council–Education, Culture, and Sports Department
3. Representative Oberhausen City Council–Cultural Department	3. Representative Riga City Council–Education, Culture, and Sports Department
4. Representative Oberhausen City Council–Urban Development Department	4. Representative Riga City Council–City Development Department
5. Representatives Oberhausen City Council–Urban Development Department	5. Representative Riga City Council–City Development Department
6. Representative private urban planning organization working on a project where cultural development is planned	6. Representative Riga City Council–Property Department
7. Representative former employee of the Mayor’s office working on the strategy for the Ruhr European Capital of Culture	7. Representative Riga City Council (former employee), also representative European Capital of Culture Board
8. Representative research institute working on urban cultural project	8. Representative Private Investor
9. Representative Cultural NGO [A]	9. Representative local neighborhood association [A], also a resident
10. Representative Cultural NGO [A]	10. Representative of a local neighborhood association [B], also a resident
11. Representative Cultural NGO [A]	11. Representative local neighborhood association [C], also a local activist
12. Representative Cultural NGO [B]	12. Representative Cultural NGO [A], also representative European Capital of Culture Board
13. Representative Cultural NGO [B], also a resident	13. Independent artist, who collaborates with a local NGO
14. Representative Cultural NGO [C], also an artist and a resident	14. Representative Latvian National Tourism Board
	15. Representative international cultural institute, located in Riga
	16. Representative local NGO
15. Representative Cultural NGO [D]	17. Representative local cultural NGO [A]
	18. Representative of a local cultural NGO [B]
	19. Representative of a local cultural NGO [B]
	20. Representative of a local cultural NGO [C]
	21. Representative local urban design firm

Table A2. Strategic documents included in the analysis.

Document Title
1. Riga Long-term Development Strategy until 2025
2. Sustainable Development Strategy of Riga until 2030
3. Riga Development Programme 2006–2012
4. Riga Development Programme 2010–2013
5. Riga Development Programme 2014–2020
6. Riga City Cultural Strategy for 2008–2025
7. Riga City Municipal Cultural Strategy for 2017–2030
8. Urban Development Concept Oberhausen 2020 (STEK2020)

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