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Empty Spaces and Cold Beds: Modeling the Construction–Demography Gap in Tourist Destinations

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the paradox of rapid urban development in tourist destinations experiencing demographic decline. By developing a new model to calculate the Construction-Demography Gap (CDG) and its tourism-adjusted variant (TCDG), the research explores the case of North Macedonia. The mismatch between housing construction, demographic trends, and tourism activity is quantified, revealing high vacancy rates and unsustainable development that disturb the environment and diminish residents' quality of life. Detailed field observations, allow a discussion on the socio-economic impacts of these trends. The findings reveal that overbuilding exacerbates housing affordability issues and economic inefficiencies while pressuring the urban space. This research contributes to the theory of “urban shrinkage” by showing how speculative tourism development masks demographic decline, creating a false impression of vitality in tourist destinations while simultaneously decreasing local livability. The suggested model can be easily adopted and applied to any tourism destination seeking to balance tourism development with both local economy and community resilience amidst demographic decline.

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Shrinking cities; modeling; construction-demography gap; tourism development; North Macedonia

1. Introduction

The concept of “growing shrinking cities” where housing growth outpaces demographic decline is well-established in urban studies (Fernandez & Hartt, 2022; Guastella et al., 2019; Hartt & Hackworth, 2020; Hollander et al., 2009; Niiazalieva et al., 2024).

In line with international standards, housing is defined as an accommodation unit pre-supposing habitation, whether permanent or temporary, by a household. Rooted in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the United Nations' definition of adequate housing (UN-Habitat, 2009) posits that housing must transcend its role as a mere physical shelter for people; it fundamentally encompasses security of tenure, affordability, habitability, and cultural adequacy. The functional purpose of housing is, therefore, fundamentally inseparable from demographic demand and established settlement patterns. Consequently, the urban development