



## Gentrification

by Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur

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Gentrification refers to a process by which working-class, old ethnic, industrial, or run-down neighborhoods are converted to middle-class housing and/or chic entertainment districts. It is a highly visible phenomenon, usually resulting in rapidly rising rents and property values that displace long-term residents and neighborhood businesses in favor of higher-income newcomers and trendy shops, bars, restaurants, and service providers.

### Theories of Gentrification

There are a number of theories that attempt to explain the process of gentrification. One is the *rent-gap* theory, which posits that gentrification occurs because developers sense the profits that can be made by acquiring cheap properties and inflating their value by inducing higher-income tenants to pay for them.

Other explanations focus on *consumer demand*, explaining that the rising service class moves to urban neighborhoods to save time on commutes and be close to culture. *Demographic shifts*, such as the postponement of marriage and childbearing, the increased number of single women, and the desire of gay men and lesbians to carve out a space free from oppression, provide a third sort of explanation.

In reality, all of these causes probably interact. After all, the presence of a demographic that demands urban residences relies on developers to find or create such residences.

### Effects of Gentrification

Gentrification often brings about a number of positive effects, including cultural revival in the inner city, the protection and preservation of historical properties, and the enhancement of the quality of life of residents, as well as a rise in property, income, and sales tax revenues for local governments. Gentrification also tends to increase the safety of an area and its desirability as a tourist location. Further, it frequently helps secure safe spaces for sexual minorities and helps foster a sense of glbtq community through gay-friendly businesses and glbtq visibility.

Still, gentrification is not without negative effects. The most important of these is the effect on the individuals who lived or worked in the neighborhood before gentrification began. Many of these individuals find that their rent or property taxes rise above a level that they can afford and are thus forced out.

In some urban areas, these individuals face an increasingly difficult task as they try to find affordable new housing. They are often crowded into less desirable neighborhoods or new, characterless public housing projects.

Additionally, businesses employing local residents in low-skill jobs, such as factories and warehouses, often take gentrification as an opportunity to sell their facilities at a profit for conversion to other uses and then



A decorative sign in Chicago's gentrifying Andersonville neighborhood. Photograph by Arthur Sehn. The image of the Andersonville sign appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License.

move to the suburbs or other areas, thereby depriving local residents of jobs. The low-skilled individuals who once relied on these businesses to make a living are left with no employment prospects, or at least with downward mobility from jobs that paid living wages and benefits to minimum-wage service jobs. The new jobs created by gentrification are often accessible only to educated individuals, and sometimes only to individuals with a cultural background that meshes with that of the gentrifiers.

### **Gay Men and Gentrification**

While glbtq people in general are participants in gentrification, gay men in particular are often at the vanguard of gentrifying neighborhoods. This is because they tend to have a higher percentage of disposable income and often want to live in urban centers that are tolerant and culturally vibrant.

Many of the neighborhoods that gay men move into and gentrify were previously working-class or poor neighborhoods primarily populated by black residents. These areas often have historic homes that the new residents restore while complaining that the old residents have done little to maintain their own. Examples of locations in the United States that have experienced this sort of gentrification in recent years are Asbury Park, New Jersey; German Village and Clintonville, in Columbus, Ohio; Dupont Circle, in Washington, D. C.; Lakeview (known colloquially as Boys Town), in Chicago; and the Oak Lawns/Cedar Springs area of Dallas.

Once gay communities are established in gentrified neighborhoods, however, there is a significant chance of a further wave of gentrification that transforms the neighborhoods from gay centers to high-cost trend centers. As this happens, low-to-middle income gay men, as well as lesbians (who tend to have lower incomes than gay men, as women in general have lower average incomes than men), are priced out of the neighborhood. New wealthy heterosexual residents then replace gay bookstores with high-end boutiques, gay performance spaces with mainstream movie theaters, and political action centers with entrepreneurial startups.

This "second wave" gentrification may also work to control the presence of gay nightclubs and bars, as well as glbtq youth who come into the neighborhoods in the evening and on weekends. Particularly vulnerable are transgender youth, who come to these neighborhoods for safety or to make money as prostitutes or entertainers. As wealthy gay male and lesbian couples, emboldened by recent court decisions and legislative actions in favor of domestic partnerships and adoption, try to create gay neighborhoods strong in "family values," the less mainstream glbtq population may be marginalized in the very neighborhoods that they helped to create and fortify.

Politically mobilized gay communities, which tend to have more access to the means of governance than the communities they have displaced, are sometimes able to pass zoning regulations that stave off some of the changes. However, these sorts of transformations have occurred in such centers of gay urban life as San Francisco's Castro and Manhattan's West Village. In the face of the second wave gentrification of gay neighborhoods, gay residents often move on to gentrify a new neighborhood, as has happened in Manhattan's Meatpacking District and Lower East Side

### **Fighting Gentrification**

The glbtq people who are involved in gentrification often emphasize the positive effects that their presence has on neighborhoods in terms of cultural development, increased property values for residents who want to sell, and reduced litter and crime. However, because of the imagined bond between glbtq people and other oppressed minorities, the gentrifiers are often unwilling to admit that there are also negative aspects to the process, and thus fail to embrace policies that would allow gentrification to occur in a controlled manner, without displacing older residents. Such policies often include rent control, eviction protections, zoning regulations, and the creation of community spaces.

Some glbtq people work to combat the negative effects of gentrification. These include organizations such

as Queer to the Left (Q2L) and Gay Shame. Such organizations attempt to work in coalition with other marginalized groups to maintain the sensitivity to oppression once inherent in gay and lesbian politics.

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