

What, Exactly, Is Gentrification?

BY: Alan Ehrenhalt | February 2015

This story is part of a series on gentrification, which appears online and in the February 2015 print issue.

Ask the mayor of any reasonably successful medium-sized American city about his or her dreams for the city's center, and you will nearly always get the same answer: The mayor dreams of a vibrant downtown, blessed with myriad dining and entertainment options; storefronts that attract high-end retail shopping; streets that are well-traveled and safe at all hours of the day and night; in the old neighborhoods just outside the center, long, pleasant blocks filled with stately pre-war houses restored by new owners to their original glory; and in the center, a sprinkling of luxury condominium and market-rate rental buildings attracting young couples lured by all the amenities a thriving city can provide.

This is what mayors dream of. Some have achieved it; the majority are still struggling to get there. But nearly all of them punctuate their fantasies with a warning: It must be done without producing a wave of gentrification. Gentrification signifies displacement of the poor, mostly people of color. "Gentrification" is a word that urban politicians do not like and try hard not to use.

In the past few years, as demographic rearrangement in central cities has become ubiquitous and impossible to ignore, scholars and local activists have struggled to understand just what is happening and which forces bring it about. Vibrant downtowns and safe, placid neighborhoods are the much-admired product of urban social change in the 21st century. Gentrification is the concept onto which all the negative consequences of this change have been loaded. The idea that gentrification and urban revival are essentially the same thing is one that even some of the most sophisticated students of city life prefer not to discuss. But it is the reality that lurks just beneath the surface.

David Kidd

Most people who are willing to talk about gentrification are fairly sure they know it when they see it, but defining it is a bit of a slippery process. It is agreed that the term was invented in 1963 by the British sociologist Ruth Glass to describe events taking place in neighborhoods near the center of London. Glass wrote that gentrification occurs when "working class quarters have been invaded by the middle class ... until all or most of the working class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed."

This definition reflects what most critics of gentrification still believe about the process: It is mostly a matter of forcing poorer people to move. But it doesn't get the phenomenon exactly right. Some of the most impressive and thoroughgoing instances of center city revival in this country have scarcely displaced anyone. The area encompassing the Financial District in Lower Manhattan is a good example. It possesses all of the standard features of gentrification, plus a few extra earmarks of genuine wealth, but it did not require throwing many people out. The population of Lower Manhattan was smaller in 1970 than it had been in 1800 -- fewer than 1,000 people as a matter of fact.

Many of the American gentrifications of the past generation have been like this -- middle-class or upper-middle-class people colonizing urban territory that had few or no residents. The sociologist Robert Sampson has documented that heavily African-American neighborhoods with large poor populations rarely gentrify. So displacement may be part of the problem, but it really doesn't belong as part of the definition.

Something broader, maybe even something simpler, is needed. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention -- perhaps an unlikely source, but in this case a perceptive one -- has contributed the most stripped-down definition. It says that gentrification is merely the transformation of neighborhoods from low value to high value. This is, at the very least, a way around the displacement problem.

But stripping gentrification down to its barest essentials begs a whole raft of other questions. Why does it happen? Who generates it? Who are the ultimate winners and losers? Here the ground underneath us starts to get really soft.

David Kidd

Earlier this year, the alternative Chicago newspaper *In These Times* brought together several close-up observers of gentrification to talk about who or what was responsible for creating it. One of the panelists insisted that gentrification was a scheme launched by developers; one thought it was the direct result of government policy; a third thought it was a bottom-up process ignited by artists, writers and other cultural pioneers willing to live in places the middle class had abandoned.

It's tempting, in any city where construction cranes blot out the sun and rents can double within a couple of years, to believe that large development companies might be behind it all. Indeed, the tall glass condo towers that stand in Brooklyn's Williamsburg, D.C.'s Columbia Heights or Chicago's Near North Side represent a major investment of capital by a relatively small number of private companies. To say that these companies have been important facilitators of gentrification is to say the obvious. But to accuse them of launching the process doesn't fit the reality of how developers think or behave. Housing developers, as any one of them will tell you, are notorious trend-followers. They are not trendsetters. For decades they avoided investing in central cities because they saw no way to make a profit there. Only when these neighborhoods began to show signs of life did developers begin to come forward with serious money. Somebody else had to get things moving. Who was it?

Local governments seem at first to be a plausible suspect. The residential booms of the past decade in Lower Manhattan and Philadelphia's Center City, to cite the most prominent examples, would not have taken place without the generous tax subsidies provided by a continuing series of mayors. Government can do many things to make central neighborhoods attractive to builders and other investors, and it has done just that in some of the most successful American cities. What government cannot do is persuade people to live in the buildings whose construction it has made possible. No amount of tax subsidy can make a successful enterprise out of a residential project that potential residents find unsafe or lacking in the amenities they are seeking. Governments, like private developers, can facilitate an urban revival. They cannot create one.

David Kidd

The theory that gentrification is the work of artists, writers, gays and other adventurous urbanites isn't nearly broad enough to be an adequate answer. There are many gentrified areas in American cities whose revitalization began with an influx of artists and others with Bohemian sensibilities, but there are others that skipped the Bohemian stage and moved straight from neglect to affluence within the space of a couple of years.

Still, the theory of gentrification by artists is useful in one respect: It moves the discussion into the realm of consumer demand, where the most persuasive explanation can be found. The truth is that cities aren't gentrifying because of any master plan. They are gentrifying because a significant percentage of American adults -- especially young people with money to spend -- want to live there. Millennials have consistently told poll takers in recent years that they would prefer to live in a city if they get the chance, and growing numbers of them are following up on that desire.

This doesn't mean that people under 30 are moving to urban neighborhoods en masse. Most middle-class Americans of all ages live in suburbs, and that will continue to be true a decade from now. No matter how many new condominiums and apartments are built in central cities in the next few years, the supply won't be nearly large enough to house a majority of the millennials, or even a majority of those who express a desire for urban living.

But one thing we are learning about gentrification is that it doesn't take huge numbers to produce profound effects. The evidence so far suggests that in any city with a population of half a million, a central city population of 25,000 -- 5 percent of the total -- is enough to create vibrant communities downtown and in the neighborhoods that surround it. The 5 percent threshold is one that dozens of American cities seem certain to cross before the next decade is out.

David Kidd

The question of why so many young people are drawn to urban life is one that does not offer a simple answer. No doubt some have been influenced by the movies and TV shows they watched as teenagers;

some are simply bored with the mall and cul-de-sac culture in which they grew up; some may see urban living as an opportunity for everyday face-to-face contact that has eluded them elsewhere. The debate over just what motivates young gentrifiers is likely to continue until they themselves have reached middle age. What is certain is that they are changing the face of metropolitan areas in every region of the country and generating social consequences that would have seemed far-fetched just a few years ago.

In this series, we examine some of those consequences: the escalation in housing costs that has made in-town living unaffordable for all but the affluent; the rise in suburban poverty caused by the arrival of minorities and immigrants who used to be concentrated in central cities; and the creation of affluent urban communities in which traditional families are largely absent. We also explore the difficulty of attracting retail to urban core areas, and the question of whether cities can make environmental improvements to neighborhoods without ultimately displacing the people who live there.

Whatever the root causes of gentrification -- and whichever definition of the phenomenon you choose -- it's an urban upheaval that will continue to pose challenges for local leaders in the years to come.

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