

Understanding and Co-creating New Solutions around

Gentrification

An initial exploration

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Introduction

Few words in urban planning generate as many different, tangled meanings as gentrification. We all know what a roundabout, or a zoning code, or a multifamily housing unit are. But what does it mean when someone says a place is gentrifying, or is at risk of gentrification?

In many cases, we do not mean the same thing at all.

Technically, gentrification was defined in the 1960s in Great Britain to mean the replacement of an established working-class community of residents in a place with more affluent people as a result of changes in location preference among the second group. But like many concepts that have to do with group identity and place, gentrification in common use has accrued a range of meanings, inferences, implications, and unchallenged assumptions, to the point where two people from different backgrounds can use the term to imply that they view the change they are witnessing as either a positive or a deeply negative development.

As a result, it is no wonder that conflicts over gentrification become the most angry, exhausting, time-consuming and often bad-for-almost-everyone urban debates we have.

One deep challenge of gentrification is that those who are part of the conflict often don't accurately understand what is driving the other side. This is particularly the case for the

“gentrifying” forces, who are working from within a specific market-driven world view, but it can also impact gentrification resisters, who may over-simplify the motivations of developers and other gentrifying powers in a way that can block their ability to get the support their communities need.

Because the two sides are coming to the questions from two very distinct paradigms, they do not start from a point of view of readily seeing their mutual interest. And because one side is accustomed to positions of privilege, and the other side justifiably sees themselves as fighting for their human rights, conflict becomes the default.

Conflict blocks changes that everyone wants at the same time as it tries to prevent loss. It drains time and energy that could be better used. And it creates a legacy of anger, fear and distrust that will have repercussions for decades to come.

Gentrification and community preservation have no simple answers. Not changing is not an option for human communities -- either growth or entropy seem likely to happen. And gentrification does not lend itself to easy causes and effects.

Econogy finds that the best possible solution for any place and time will be best discovered through broadly and deeply inclusive co-creation. Rather than seeing through only the lens of physical design, or class conflict, or economics, need to understand all of these issues and how they interact with each other.

If we can collaborate across the lines that we historically have let divide us, we may find less conflict-ridden, more productive solutions to gentrification and other urban challenges. Perhaps more importantly, we will increase our capacity to find productive solutions in the future.

But doing so requires that we engage with people who are not like us in radically different ways than we have in the past. Urban planners, city officials and developers who find themselves facing protest over gentrifying efforts are lying in a bed of their own making, thanks to decades of insincere, lip-service, ignored and often confrontational public engagement. If “gentrifiers” truly wish to be of benefit to their communities, and not create more of the damaging consequences that bedevil our urban populations, we have to move from imposition to co-creation, from turf-guarding to transparency, and from “that’s the way it works” to “let us find a way that will work for all.”

We won’t get it all right, and we won’t erase a legacy of distrust overnight.

But we can start.

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| What is Gentrification?

One by one, many of the working class neighbourhoods of London have been invaded by the middle-classes—upper and lower. Shabby, modest mews and cottages—two rooms up and two down—have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences ... Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district it goes on rapidly, until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed.

-- Ruth Glass, 1964.

Gentrification definitions, whether informal or academic, revolve around physical and social changes to a local area. They may identify this change based on people, buildings, public policy, investment and private capital, and that definition may be informed by an perspective on race, class, place and scale. In all cases, however, gentrification deals with trends that make a place more valuable to the market-driven economy.

Common things that happen in gentrifying places include:

- Existing buildings renovated
- Smaller buildings demolished and replaced with bigger buildings, often with more dense residential units
- New stores and restaurants, particularly oriented to products and services that appeal to new population groups
- Race and class composition changes

For persons who view the place through a **physical improvement lens**, gentrification can include both positive developments, such as rehabilitation of deteriorated historic buildings or investment in public spaces, and negative developments, such as loss of historic resources or traffic congestion. For persons who view the place through an **economic lens**, the increase in jobs, sales tax revenues, etc. presents few down sides.

For persons who view the place through a **community-oriented or social justice lens**, gentrification can bring some benefits, but their community's ability to enjoy those benefits may be limited. For example:

- The community post-gentrification may offer more jobs, but these may be jobs that existing residents do not have the skills to do (or local businesses resist hiring them).
- The community may enjoy better parks and transportation systems, but existing residents may not feel welcome using them because they perceive that new norms of acceptable public behavior have been imposed.
- Available housing may become safer and cleaner, but it may also have increased in cost to a point where they cannot afford to live there anymore



Whether a single individual or group views a gentrifying project as positive or negative depends on who they think will bear the burden and who will reap the benefits.

I Fundamental conflicts

Much of the conflict over gentrification seems to arise from a series of unexamined or glossed-over assumptions about how communities change. Here are a few of those assumptions:

- We assume that the way private sector real estate development unfolds is “natural” and thus it cannot be done differently
- We conflate physical change with social impacts, and assume that physical improvements will benefit everyone equally.
- We fail to understand that the dominant culture is not the only culture, and that very routine assumptions about behavior or appearance can lead to people being excluded.
- We fear change, especially when the future is uncertain and the present, while problematic, is known.
- We fail, fundamentally and repeatedly, to understand and hold as valid others’ points of view.

Gentrification embodies conflict between two of our cost value systems in western countries. Private sector development is primarily (although by no means exclusively) driven by market mechanisms and market forces: rehabilitation becomes possible when the cost of fixing a building will be offset by what the owner can charge for its use.

But people’s basic needs for housing and employment do not go away when the market fails to meet them adequately, and their attachment to a place that they have called home is framed not exclusively in terms of money, but in terms of rights and attachment. Relying on the first and ignoring the second creates profound levels of conflict, while emphasizing the first to the exclusion of the second risks leaving the place to gradually deterioration, which does not benefit anyone.

Real estate developers and investors have power, but communities have power to block or delay or change a development as well. And increasing community organizing sophistication means that the potential power of the community has increased in the last half century.

As a result, gentrification debates too often devolve to the representatives shouting past each other, leveraging whatever power and stamina they can muster to block the other side from “winning.” It’s understandable that disadvantaged communities may doubt that they can trust the market-driven side to actually play fair, and to conclude that they have no choice but to fight. But that does not, fundamentally, have to be the case.

Unconstructive, zero-sum conflict wastes those powers and prevents using them for anything constructive. It lays a groundwork of distrust that makes future collaboration all the more difficult. It closes off the possibilities of finding a way to make a proposed improvement better for both existing residents and new residents.

| The big question

Could we change the dynamic around gentrification for more mutual benefit if we lessened conflict and focused on mutual understanding, shared priorities and co-creation? How would we do that?

Two methods for creating these kinds of discussions are described at the end of this paper. But any successful strategy will include these five elements:

1. **Start early.** The week before a development proposal is unveiled is far too late to begin the conversation with the community. Developers who enjoy a collaborative relationship with a community have invested in building those relationships for a long time before they propose anything. And a community that has created a land use plan with strong support from the neighborhood's residents has a stronger leg to stand on when its leadership claims that they represent the community.
2. **Be clear about real-world needs.** For developers, this might mean laying out the financials of the project to put to sleep any allegations that the costs are inflated or that they will make a crazy level of profit. It is worth remembering that most communities that are facing gentrification pressures have had developers lie to them before, so you may need to demonstrate an extraordinary level of transparency to overcome that distrust. Similarly, community members may find it useful to talk in very concrete terms about the cost of housing, food, transportation, etc. in the community. Having that discussion may make it possible to find a way to change the development to help address those issues.
3. **Create an intentional structure that treats every person involved with equality and respect.** Many of the conventional structures of public engagement around urban improvements -- from the microphone in the middle of the room to the placement of the chairs -- sends subtle messages about who is expected to have power and who is not -- and since those power structures don't reflect reality, they only exacerbate distrust. Collaborative activities, unconventional physical arrangements, emphasis on engaging voices that don't get heard in typical meetings... these intentional choices in designing the approach can make a profound difference in the experience for everyone.

4. **Use a shared, transparent priority-setting process.** Everyone knows that not everything can be Most Important. But too often, public engagement creates a list of topics to address that are not prioritized, and that means that nothing is explicitly important. If the planning process establishes priorities -- and does so in a way that allows anyone to understand how the priorities were selected -- then we have much clearer direction and a clear means of evaluating whether the development lives up to what was intended.

 5. **Do not leave it to chance.** The term “intentional” in #3 above was....intentional. Rather than following conventional patterns, conventional assumptions, or the usual methods and hoping for a different result, avoiding the unproductive and damaging conflicts that too often accompany gentrification means that participants have to actively design and use methods that break conventional power assumptions and enable genuine collaborative problem-solving. With so much at stake, it’s crucial that participants from all sides use intentional efforts, and strive to not just gentrify, but to create community change that benefits everyone.
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| How the Econogy Network Can Help You

Econogy supports a network of businesses and programs that empower people and communities to become future-ready. We build innovators and innovate solutions with businesses, organizations and communities. We give you the power and the insight to find new markets, new funding, new trends, new tools and new solutions. We transform what we touch by taking away the blinders that have kept all of us stuck, and we help you discover the best emerging potentials.

We employ young professional-driven, experience-managed teams of innovators in fields from product design to business strategy, and from community planning to crowdfunding. Our methods allow these teams to capitalize on their new insights, and their powers of collaboration open possibilities that old methods of advising cannot uncover.

Here are a few ways we can help you. Find out more at www.econogy.co

K2 Diagnosis and Co-Creation

Reaching the heights is easier when we do it together

K2 Diagnosis and Co-Creation process builds on new research about complex problem-solving: we do it better when we do it together.

K2 discards the usual public participation process and creates a better approach for the 21st century. Using a process that brings in everyone's voices, K2 uses structured discussion, role-playing and collaborative priority-setting to create a strategy for moving forward that everyone can support. We do K2 with our partners at Kratos Experiences, an award-winning international leader in experiential learning. Send a note to connect@econogy.co to learn more about bringing a K2 workshop to your community.

Crowdsourcing Wisdom

Unlock the wisdom of the whole community

Conventional public engagement has a problem. Part of our problem is very visible: combative public meetings. Boring and ignored presentations. Incendiary statements.

Angry people.

Combative public meetings because we designed them to be confrontational. Ignored facts because we didn't design their conveyance to stick. Incendiary statements because one minute at a mic doesn't allow you to be nuanced, considerate, or increase your understanding of things you don't understand.

Angry people because they know this doesn't work.

Add to that the thousands that we don't hear from. Who may see and understand things that we, the Insiders, are missing. Who have expertise and insights and experience of their own that could show us a way through the concrete walls of the tough problems that we the Insiders have been slamming our heads against for decades.

People are not failing to participate constructively because they don't care about the places where they live. They're failing to participate because we've given them a pretty clear message that we don't want them to have a meaningful role in the process.

But none of that has to happen. We can borrow a few tricks from businesses and from educators to turn that dysfunctional situation around, giving us not only happier residents, but more useful participation that makes our plans and decisions better.

Crowdsourcing Wisdom: A guide to doing public meetings that actually make your community better (and won't make people wish you hadn't come) is available on Amazon, Lulu and Gumroad from Econogy partner Wise Fool Press. For information on Crowdsourcing Wisdom in your community, send a note to connect@econogy.co.

Leader Boot Camp

We learn, we do, we connect

Leader Boot Camp equips business owners, department heads and aspiring managers to lead their teams to real success. While most leadership programs rely on classroom-style teaching that often alienates energetic people, Leader Boot Camp mixes short bursts of information with "dynamics" that challenge people to put what they've learned into action, together. Participants internalize what they've learned better than in conventional leadership classes, and they see immediately how what they're learning applies to their real life. And they build relationships with their team members that can last a lifetime. Topics include team management, active listening, emotional intelligence and more.

We do K2 with our partners at Kratos Experiences, an award-winning international leader in experiential learning. [Click here](#) to learn more about how Leader Boot Camp can kick-start your group's growth.

About the Author

Della G. Rucker, AICP CEcD has consulted, written and trained people nationwide in entrepreneurship, economic revitalization, urban planning and fostering meaningful public participation. She is one of about 10 persons in the U.S. to hold professional certifications in both planning and economic development. She is a regular plenary speaker for entrepreneurship, economic development and downtown revitalization conferences nationwide.

Della is the author of *Crowdsourcing Wisdom: A guide to doing public meetings that actually make your community better (and won't make people wish they hadn't come)* and *The Local Economy Revolution: What's Changed and How You Can Help*, among others. She is a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners and a Certified Economic Developer.