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Gentrification is a natural evolution

By regarding cities as natural organisms, we can see what drives gentrification – and perhaps predict the next Brixton or Battersea



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theguardian.com, Wednesday 19 November 2014 08.00 GMT



Research into gentrification has taken place in Brixton, Telegraph Hill, Barnsbury, Dalston and Battersea (pictured above in 1980). Photograph: John Downing/Getty Images

Grumble all you like that Brixton's covered market, once called a "24-hour crack supermarket" by the local police, has been colonised by trendy boutique restaurants. The fact is that the gentrification of what was once an edgy part of London is almost a law of nature.

"Urban gentrification," says Sergio Porta, professor of urban design at Strathclyde University in Glasgow, and his colleagues in London and Italy in a new paper, "is a natural force underpinning the evolution of cities." Their research reveals that Brixton shares features in common with other once down-at-heel London districts that have

recently been invaded by farmers' markets and designer coffee shops, such as Battersea and Telegraph Hill. These characteristics, they say, make such neighbourhoods ripe for gentrification.

Whether it is the Northern Quarter in Manchester, Harlem in New York or pretty much everywhere in central Paris, gentrification is rife in the world's major cities. You know the signs: one minute the local pub gets a facelift, the next minute everyone is reading the Guardian and sipping lattes, and you daren't even look at the property prices.

The implications for demographics, crime, transport and economics make it vital for planners and local authorities to grasp what drives gentrification. Urban theorists have debated it for decades. According to one view, the artists kick it off, as they did in Notting Hill, moving into cheap housing and transforming the area from poor to bohemian – then investors and families follow. Another view is that the developers and public agencies come first, buying up cheap property and then selling it for a profit to the middle classes.

Porta and his colleagues have focused instead on the physical attributes that seem to make an area ripe for – or vulnerable to – gentrification. Do different neighbourhoods share the same features? The team looked at five parts of London that have gone upmarket in the past decade or so: Brixton, Battersea, Telegraph Hill, Barnsbury and Dalston.

All of them are some distance from the city centre. The housing is typically dense but modest: undistinguished terraced houses two or three storeys high, often of Victorian vintage. "This picture is pretty much that of a traditional neighbourhood, far away from the modernist model of big buildings," says Porta.

But the key issue, the researchers say, is how the local street network is arranged, and how it is plugged into the rest of the city. Each street can be assigned a value of the awkwardly named "betweenness centrality": a measure of how likely you are to pass along or across it on the shortest path between any two points in the area. It's a purely geometric quantity that can be calculated directly from a map.

All of the five districts in the study have major roads with high betweenness centrality along their borders, but not through their centres. These roads provide good connections to the rest of the city without disrupting the neighbourhood. Smaller "local main" streets penetrate the district, providing easy access, but not noise or danger. "It's this balance between calmness and urban buzz within easy reach that is one of the conditions for gentrification," says Porta.

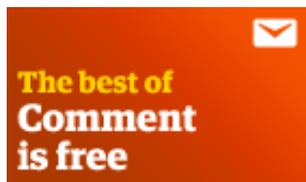
These conclusions rely only on geography: on what anyone can go and measure for themselves, not on the particular history of a neighbourhood or the plans of councillors and developers. Looked at this way, the researchers are studying city evolution much as biologists study natural evolution – almost as if the city itself were a natural organism.

This idea that cities obey laws beyond the reach of planning goes back to the social theorist [Lewis Mumford in the 1930s](#), who described the growth of cities as “amoeboid”. It was developed in the 1950s by the influential urban theorist [Jane Jacobs](#), who argued that the forced redevelopment of American inner cities was destroying their inherent vibrancy.

Jacobs’ views on the spontaneous self-organisation of urban environments anticipated modern work on ecosystems and other natural “complex systems”. Many urban theorists now believe that city growth should be considered a kind of natural history, and be studied scientifically using the tools of complexity theory rather than being forced to conform to some planner’s idea of how growth should occur.

Gentrification is not just “natural”, but also healthy for cities, Porta says: it’s a reflection of their ability to adapt, a facet of their resilience. The alternative for areas that lack the prerequisites – for example, modernist tower blocks – which cannot acquire the magic values of housing density and frontage height – is the wrecker’s ball, like that recently taken to the notorious [Heygate estate](#) in south London.

The new findings could have predicted that fate. By the same token, they might indicate where gentrification will happen next. Porta is wary of forecasting that without proper research, but he says that Lower Tooting is one area with all the right features, and looks set to become the new Balham, just as Balham was the new Clapham.



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