

# Is art to blame for gentrification?

Change in inner-city areas such as Peckham has been fuelled by the 'cultural creatives' but it is art itself that offers hope of resistance

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Friday 30 August 2013 09.44 EDT

**B**old Tendencies is the art space and cocktail bar standing imperiously on top of a Peckham multi-storey car park. It is charged with so much architectural symbolism it's almost funny: a sky-high contemporary gallery in one of London's poorest districts, packed each evening with painfully well-dressed young white people supping Campari bitters, who gaze down upon the streets of pound shops, mobile phone stalls and cheap clothes stores below.

The Evening Standard loves it, naturally. A recent piece extolling "Peckhamania" was filled with picture after picture of white "creatives" making art or tucking into artisan street food, with Bold Tendencies held up as the "epicentre of new Peckham". Not one black or brown person was featured, despite Peckham being one of the most ethnically diverse areas in Britain. At last, the paper seemed to be saying, we can finally welcome Peckham into our white supremacist fantasyland of a city and we've got art to thank for it.

For those opposed to the so-called "regeneration" of Peckham - and of London generally - Bold Tendencies has unsurprisingly turned into something of a whipping boy. And with it, the question of the relationship between art and gentrification has once more been raised. It seems that wherever artists go, rising property prices, cafes filled with seats from 1940s railway stations and low-level ethnic cleansing appears to follow: is art itself to blame? If so, can the trend be broken?

Gentrification is not a new phenomenon. The term was coined by Ruth Glass in 1964 to signal the displacement of a working-class urban population by the middle class. Early studies of the "return to the city" of middle-class whites suggested that it was down to changes within middle-class "consumer preferences", with a younger generation rejecting the staid suburbanism of their parents in favour of the excitement of the city. There are echoes of this argument today. The opprobrium hurled at anyone who could be called a "hipster" indicates a belief that it is the choices made in consumption by such reprobates: vintage clothing, expensive coffee and a questionable taste in music - that is the driving force behind the spatial transformation of cities.

This view was challenged by the Marxist geographer, Neil Smith. He argued that gentrification was much more to do with capital's search for profit than anyone with an ironic moustache. Capital's incessant need for growth comes up against a barrier in the surrounding built landscape, as most buildings stand in the same place for a long time; capital turnover in architecture is by its nature a long-drawn out affair. The solution in the postwar era was suburbanisation, with swaths of new houses built on the outskirts of cities. This in turn led to a flight of capital from the city centres, apart from the business districts, because there was more money to be made in the new build towns. The land in the cities thus dropped in value.

This created what Smith calls a "rent gap" - the difference between the current ground rent, and what rent the land could potentially yield if it was put to a "better" (more profitable) use. Gentrification takes place, therefore, once the rent gap has grown so big that developers can buy and do up property, pay interest on loans, and still sell the redeveloped property to a "better" user for a profit. Smith does recognise that certain cultural processes, like art studios and galleries, can "smooth the flow of capital" back into these "recycled" areas. But it's capital, not culture, which is driving the process.

But why art in particular? Here we see the first indication of complicity between art and capital. The disdain that "aesthetically minded" people have towards commodified spaces - shopping and eating in "authentic"

boutiques and cafes rather than the crass commercialisation of a Westfield - extends to living spaces too. Middle-class kids who reject the conservatism of the suburbs are drawn to urban areas with "just the right amount of danger" for "meaningful" experiences. And in the same way as artists ever since Duchamp and Schwitters have transformed the detritus of capitalism into art, so too do modern "creatives" see value in areas of cities rejected by traditional bourgeois tastes. This cultural revalorisation thus chimes with capital's own drive to revalorise "unproductive" spaces.

In the 1970s, this process took hold of New York's Lower East Side, with galleries and studios flooding into the warehouses and lofts left empty by the city's industrial decline (and what amounted to the bankruptcy of the city by its financial sector in 1975). Sharon Zukin argued that this amounted to an "artistic mode of production", which forced out the last vestiges of light industry in the city, paving the way for a post-Fordist economy of services, real estate and credit-based finance. The issues of class relations, which had underpinned the decline of New York as an industrial city, were in effect swept away by the arrival of a new "creative" economy - an economy that was based as much on the consumption of the "artistic lifestyle", as it was on the actual production of art.

By 2002, the construction of a "creative economy" had become an avowed policy goal of governments across the globe, and one particular book by Richard Florida - a vaguely new-age pseudo-academic - became required reading for city planners everywhere. In *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Florida argued that it was no longer industrial production, but "creativity" which was the source of "new technologies, new industries, new wealth and all other good economic things". The old class distinction between those who owned capital and those forced to sell their labour-power had been superseded by a new division: those blessed with creativity and those poor unfortunates without, who were doomed to "take care of [the creatives] and do their chores". The key to a successful city economy therefore, was to build an environment as attractive to the creative class as possible. Florida's suggestion for a suitably creative environment sounds a lot like the new Peckham celebrated by the *Evening Standard*: "a teeming blend of cafes, side walk musicians, and

small galleries and bistros".

You would be hard-pressed to come up with a more New Labour idea if you tried: industrial decline and class conflict solved by turning the entire country into Islington. It was, therefore, no surprise that *culture*-based attempts at state-sponsored gentrification popped up everywhere during the 90s and pre-crash noughties. "Cultural quarters", "flagship galleries" and huge public works of art appeared everywhere from Gateshead to Margate, each replete with the promise of social inclusion, regeneration and the arrival of those economy-saving creatives.

The same argument is reflected in the recent craze for pop-up galleries and shops, or the Empty Shops Network, in which recession-hit town centres are encouraged to fill their empty stores with temporary galleries. Art here is being used as an inane distraction. It is no coincidence that the founder of the Empty Shops Network was also behind the infamous #riotcleanup, when the white bourgeois joined together to sweep away all traces of the class antagonisms that erupted in the English riots of 2011.

What both Florida and New Labour refused to recognise was that the "creative class" was nothing but a descriptor for a loosely-connected group of workers whose mode of working is extremely well adapted to the demands of post-Fordist flexible capital accumulation. The artist, in effect, is the archetypal post-Fordist worker: never tied down for long, floating from one short-term project to the next, constantly thinking outside of the box, always on the look out for new ideas, with no discernible split between "labour-time" and "leisure-time"; willing to carry the risk of a "creative" life on their own, rather than look to the state or a collective organisation for support. The line between "the artist" and that post-Fordist ideological hero, the entrepreneur, is so slim as to be virtually invisible.

The heroic existence of the artist makes any attempt to critique the relationship between art and gentrification through art itself very difficult. How pressing an issue this actually is to most of the drinkers in Frank's Bar at Bold Tendencies is perhaps a moot point, but there are

plenty of artists for whom this a painful conundrum. In the early 1980s, a New York art collective called Political Art Documentation/Distribution (PAD/D) staged a number of art events which highlighted the transformation of the Lower East Side by displaying critical art on the walls of buildings set to be gentrified. But as one member later admitted: "we recognised that the [anti-gentrification] exhibit itself furthered the process of gentrification by advancing the neighbourhood's artworldliness". Recognising this paradox perhaps, in Hamburg, thousands of artists have signed the Not In Our Name manifesto, signalling a move from artistic statements of protest to direct anti-eviction activist struggles. Other art collectives, such as Bavo in Rotterdam, have followed suit, issuing a Plea for an Uncreative City.

The temptation to conclude that art is useless a mode of critique in a post-Fordist "creative economy" is strong, but must be resisted. While capital certainly benefits from what David Harvey calls the "monopoly rents" produced by gentrification of areas such as Peckham, it cannot completely commodify it without destroying what made it "artworldly" and profitable in the first place. Capital has to leave a space open for the next bout of apparently authentic cultural development, which may open up new opportunities for monopoly rents. It is here that artists can perhaps act as antagonistic grit, exploiting the contradictory space within which they find themselves.

Certainly, attempts at critical practice without a strong self-reflexive tendency - in which the spatial political-economics of art are inscribed within the artwork itself - are doomed to the status of "pseudo-critique", which in many respects is worse than no critique at all. Crucially, it must be a process which spills over from symbolic artistic resistance, to material class solidarity with local political struggles. Just as the contradictions of capital must appear in the artwork and not be papered over or swept away by it, so must the post-Fordist artist appear in the material contradictions of capital. It is, in a sense, New Labour's social inclusion through culture in reverse: an art embedded in class struggle, rather than a means of erasing it.

● First published in OurKingdom, the UK section of openDemocracy

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