

Comprehension

Leslie Kern argues that we are blaming the wrong parties for gentrification.

- 1 On a trip to Mexico City, a bus tour whisks me through neighbourhoods teeming with cool cafes, elegant wine bars and stylish twentysomethings. When I ask my Spanish teacher about these areas, he rolls his eyes and rubs his thumb and fingers together: a universal sign for “too expensive” and “full of unpleasant people”.



PAUSE & REFLECT: Based on the first paragraph, what is the focus of this article? Can you predict how the rest of the article will unfold?

- 2 You do not need to be a gentrification researcher (although I am one) to read these signs and immediately understand what is happening here. Gentrification – a term first coined more than 50 years ago by the German-born British sociologist Ruth Glass to describe changes she observed in north London but is now a phenomenon observed around the world – is a slippery and divisive word. It is vilified by many for the displacement of the poor by the wealthy and the destruction of the authenticity of neighbourhoods; praised by others for the improvement in safety as well as the arrival of bike lanes, street markets and better parks. It is a word that feels, sounds and looks familiar wherever you are: young hipsters transforming neighbourhoods according to a remarkably homogeneous global code of taste and style. As accurate as that narrative might feel, however, the story we tell ourselves about the changing face of our older or poorer neighbourhoods is far too basic. Vilifying the markers of gentrification alone fails to get to the root of the problem – and trust me, it’s not as simple as pour-over coffee – and lacks any useful ideas for countering the larger forces at play that have brought artisanal doughnuts to your community. 5
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- 3 It is true that we can identify gentrification through certain styles and sites of consumption. This has been the case since the slow creep of a neighbourhood “on the up” was first noticed and named in north London in the 1960s. Subsequently, pro-gentrification camps have described blighted neighbourhoods that have been miraculously transformed by incentivising the arrival of the “creative class” of artists and brave bohemians with the guarantee of wealth: those frontline pioneers who would take on rundown buildings and seed the pop-up micro-breweries, artisanal bakeries and farmers’ markets that would encourage the more timid middle classes to follow. Since then, the tastes of gentrifiers – from what they wear, to what they eat – has generated endless commentary. Their preferences have been viewed as the harbingers of doom for working-class communities in cities around the world. Sites that seem to embody these changes are easy targets. The now-closed Cereal Killer cafe in east London is one such example. Viewed as a sign of everything that could go wrong in this low-income, predominantly minority ethnic community, the purveyor of overpriced breakfast grains was targeted by protesters, vandals, and graffiti writers who warned of a takeover that would enrich the already wealthy at the expense of the working class. We love to hate these spaces and their seemingly oblivious owners. After all, they put a face to what seems like an insurmountable problem caused by abstract forces. 20
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- 4 But the question we should be asking is whether closing a coffee shop is going to prevent gentrification. The answer is no, even if we acknowledge that places such as this do play a role. Today, the power of the “avocado toast” class is insignificant compared with the might of the billion-dollar, multi-national, real estate investment and development corporations, and their government partners who control our cities and neighbourhoods. If we truly want to push back against gentrification, we are misplacing our energies by focusing primarily on superficial markers of taste. They are little more than symptoms of much more disruptive forms of urban change that are enriching the 40
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- few at the expense of the many. The destruction or “regeneration” of public housing is one such form; luxury high-rise development is another. Large-scale eviction processes are enabling gentrification, especially in poor neighbourhoods. The rise of short-term renting through platforms such as Airbnb is also pushing housing prices beyond the reach of even the middle classes. These processes are in turn driven by the search for new ways to generate capital and wealth from urban space. The powerful real-estate developers and investment firms that push these changes are able to do so because of government policy that not only allows, but often actively encourages, such developments. Whether it is through tax incentives or government-led “urban renewal” schemes, the state facilitates gentrification on multiple levels. 50
- 5 When your corporate landlord is trying to evict you so that your building’s units can be renovated into luxury suites, a nearby coffee shop serving a ten-dollar flat white certainly adds insult to injury. Don’t get me wrong, the cafe is part of the problem: it is capitalising on and attracting the kind of changes that may be about to boot you from your community for good. However, the seeds that created the conditions for that cafe to take root were planted long before it even opened its doors, by actors with a tremendous amount of power. In other words, that expensive coffee is certainly not helping you but it’s not the entity “renovicting” you, either. Feel free to protest about the cafe, but your energy might be better placed organising the tenants in your building to fight against unfair evictions. This lesson applies more widely to the battle against gentrification. For all of us worried about the changes in our communities that are displacing longtime residents, senior people, low-income families and many others, we must be strategic and focused in our struggle. This means not letting governments and corporations get away with bulldozing (literally and figuratively) our cities, while we’re distracted by annoyingly high-priced breakfast foods. 60
- 6 Admittedly, redirecting our attention to Goliath¹ – indeed, multiple Goliaths – is daunting. However, one of the reasons governments and private corporations succeed with their agenda to remake the city for profit, not people, is that we have come to accept the story that rampant capitalist interests cannot be defeated, or even slowed down. But resistance is possible. It can come through strikes, ground-up campaigns and the growth of community-led models of development. We can push governments to use the regulatory tools at their disposal to limit the power of private corporations and ensure that housing remains affordable for all rather than tools for profit. 65
- 7 You don’t have to like the latest vegan bistro-pub in your neighbourhood, but let’s remember to focus on the nefarious agents at play behind the trendy frontages. These powerful forces are dismantling people’s ability to live and thrive in our cities today. A different kind of future is possible, but only if we demand it and demand it from the right people. 80



PAUSE & REFLECT: Was there any part of the article that you found surprising or thought-provoking? Can you connect any part to your own experiences?

(Adapted from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/sep/04/coffee-shops-hipsters-gentrification-communities/> / <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/sep/29/gentrification-global-problem-better-solution-oliver-wainwright>)

¹ In the story of David and Goliath, Goliath is a giant who was defeated by a young boy named David using only a slingshot.

Leslie Kern argues that we are blaming the wrong parties for gentrification and shares her ideas about how we can fight against gentrification instead. How applicable do you find his observations to you and your society? [10]

Point #1: It is a word that feels, sounds and looks familiar wherever you are: young hipsters transforming neighbourhoods according to a remarkably homogeneous global code of taste and style. (lines 12-15)

Sample response:

Point:	The writer states that gentrification is something that feels, sounds and looks familiar where we are, namely young hipsters transforming neighbourhoods according to a homogenous global code of taste and style.
Stand/ position:	While gentrified neighbourhoods in Singapore might not adhere strictly to a homogenous global code of taste and style, they do tend to share certain similarities that tend to echo global trends in taste and style rather than showcase local tradition. Hence, I largely agree with the writer's views on this.
Example from Sg context:	In Singapore, efforts to modernise and rejuvenate certain areas with rich heritage do bear similarities with gentrification efforts in other parts of the world. On one hand, such efforts have not displaced traditional businesses entirely. In the Joo Chiat area, for instance, one can still find traditional businesses like businesses who specialise in upholstery, birds' nests and hand-made rattan chairs alongside newer businesses. Such businesses have been in operation for a long time and remain a fixture among new and trendier establishments. Yet it is undeniable that the marks of gentrification remain recognisable, and does seem to transform spaces into more homogeneous spaces that adhere to a global code in taste and style. In Joo Chiat, for instance, newer businesses include gourmet grocers and bakeries that specialise in products from European countries like France and Italy. Similarly, Singaporeans have lamented the loss of heritage and identity as old neighbourhoods like Kampong Glam and Chinatown have been sanitised and commercialised , replacing the old landscape with restaurants, boutiques, "hipster" cafes and pubs. Such establishments are not representative of Singapore's heritage or tradition, but are rather reflective of more global trends as they are establishments that can easily be found in other parts of the world like the U.S. or Japan.
Evaluation:	From this, it is evident that while gentrification may not transform a neighbourhood entirely to one that adheres to

	a homogenous global code of taste and lifestyle, it definitely does erode a neighbourhood's original or traditional identity to a large extent and replace it with an identity that would cater to the tastes of a much more globalised audience.
Link:	Hence, I find the writer's views applicable to a large extent in Singapore's context.
Relevant resources:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/heritage-and-gentrification-there-win-win-neighbourhoods-1029601 • https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/do-singapore-neighbourhoods-risk-death-by-cappuccino • https://www.ricemedia.co/gentrification-katong-joo-chiat/

Point #2: ..One of the reasons governments and private corporations succeed with their agenda to remake the city for profit, not people, is that we have come to accept the story that rampant capitalist interests cannot be defeated, or even slowed down. (lines 72-75)

Point:	The writer states that governments and private corporations have succeeded with their agenda to remake the city for profit and not people because we have come to accept that rampant capitalist interests cannot be defeated or slowed down.
Stand/ position:	While it is true that Singapore's government, in collaboration with private companies, have succeeded in commercialising certain areas to Singapore to make them more globalised and tourist-friendly, it is highly improbable that they do it solely for profit and without regard for people. Furthermore, the gentrification of old neighbourhoods was allowed to occur not because Singaporeans feel helpless against "rampant capitalist interests" but because many do also see the benefits of gentrification. Hence, I do not really agree with the writer's views in this case.
Example from Sg context:	In Singapore, it is true that on the surface, it does appear that parts of the city have been given a makeover with profit in mind rather than people. For instance, the commercialisation of areas like Kampong Glam and Chinatown have left some former residents aggrieved as they feel that their familial heritage and stories have been sacrificed in exchange for a more globalised version of their old neighbourhood, targeted at tourists. However, to say that the government's agenda was entirely for profit and not people is not accurate. This is evidenced

	<p>by how changes to zoning rules for food and beverage establishments were implemented to stem the setting up of new pubs and nightclubs, which has allowed for neighbourhoods to retain parts of their original identities and functions, such as the old businesses in Joo Chiat. The government has also put in place policies to regulate private corporations rather than aid them to earn profit, such as controls aimed at preventing public flats in central locations from becoming exclusive neighbourhoods meant only for the wealthy, and reserving spaces for HDB estates even in affluent neighbourhoods. In addition, Singaporeans definitely do not feel helpless against rampant capitalist interests. Residents have been vocal in terms of sharing their concerns over gentrification and proactive in asking for commercial regulations, and the government also has an interest in heeding their concerns so as to maintain citizens' trust in them. Others have voiced support for such efforts, seeing them as necessary for rejuvenating and enlivening places that might otherwise have died out completely, and the mix of old and new businesses as a positive thing as it allows an exchange of expertise and knowledge.</p>
<p>Evaluation:</p>	<p>This shows that while some places in Singapore may seem to have been commercialised to attract more tourism and profit at the expense of residents' concerns, there are still ultimately measures put in place by the government to protect people's interests and to prevent private corporations from profiting at the expense of residents. Furthermore, Singaporeans have not come to blindly accept that "rampant capitalist interests" cannot be stopped but do actively voice out their concerns, while also acknowledging the efforts that such commercialisation has brought about.</p>
<p>Link:</p>	<p>Therefore, I find the writer's views applicable only to a small extent in Singapore in this case.</p>
<p>Relevant resources:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/ministry-national-development-desmond-lee-forward-singapore-session-gentrification-public-housing-free-market-sources-2964136 • https://www.99.co/singapore/insider/gentrification-new-norm-singapore/ • https://heartlanderoverseas.wordpress.com/2018/02/13/tiong-bahru-in-singapore-the-gentrification-of-a-nation/