

# Art and Gentrification in the Changing Neoliberal Urban Landscape

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For the last four decades, art has been integral to the neoliberal governance and policies for new urban planning: to aid social and economic outcomes, to boost the economic environment of post-industrial cities, to energise communities and neighbourhoods and to raise real estate values. The studies of culture and neoliberal urban planning have acknowledged a straightforward role of the artists in the changing urban landscape, often disregarding the complex relationship of art to power and resistance. They have also often overlooked the actual aesthetic practices and their effects on the public's perceptual, physical and political encounters with the urban space. Rigorous research into art's emancipatory properties in urban struggles for 'right to the city' deployed during campaigns, protests and creative strategies in daily life in the urban 'public' space is urgently needed.

This session will extend the discussion about the complexities of aesthetic disposition in the gentrified urban environment and art's relations to both cultural capital and the bottom-up resistance in the city. The questions we seek answers to are as follows: What kind of political and aesthetic possibilities could emerge in the intersection of the spatial and dialogical premises of art and the ideological and economic processes of the new urban planning? How could artistic expressions in the urban space reveal, delimit, question and resist the complexity of neoliberal urbanisation? How can art produce new narratives of social organization in the gentrified urban space? Discussions will centre on whether, through 'radical urban aesthetics', an alternative collective action can be possible or whether it is a case of political appropriation that only adds to the continued gentrification. The papers in the first part of the panel theoretically analyse how gentrification aesthetics is politicised and capitalised, and whether art could enter the arena of urban politics to effectively engage in the visibility and representation of the excluded social groups by gentrification. In the second part, the focus will be on the artistic examples and aesthetic situations where critical aesthetic interventions facilitate citizen engagement in the political reality of the changing neoliberal urban landscape.

## Speakers and abstracts

### **Gentrification: A Critique of the Contemporary Urban Dream-World**

*Luke Carroll (University of York)*

A frightful hobgoblin stalks throughout urban space. We are haunted by a ghost, the ghost of Gentrification. One is unable to discuss the urban lifeworld without reference to this zeitgeist; it intertwines with seemingly all dynamics of urban political economy and the urban experience. Outside academia one finds this situation replicated. A choir of disparate discourses investigates and debates gentrification, ranging from Black Lives Matter to *The Telegraph*. Nestled within this world we also find the discourse of regeneration, the viewpoint that seeks to champion gentrification in the name of urban progress. Thus, begins a moralistic battle surrounding the benefits and harms of gentrification, and to what extent the former can ever justify the latter. This project aims to highlight that, for a social phenomenon so central to academic and public debate, we seem to have failed to ask a central question: what makes people enjoy gentrified space?

Drawing inspiration from Benjamin's study of the Parisian Arcade, as a tool to distill the 19th-century's regime of desire, this project seeks to put this contradictory subject to the fore in understanding gentrification, while simultaneously revealing the social constitution of this form of subjectivity. It aims to investigate and critique the social forces that produce the structure of feeling that draws the subject to the 'dream', the aesthetic-libidinal promise, which gentrified space exudes. By highlighting the centrality of desire to gentrification, this project hopes to imagine new ways to combat gentrification through the reconstitution of desire – rather than moralistic critique.

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### **Mobilising the Record: Social documents and housing struggles**

*Kirsten Lloyd (The University of Edinburgh)*

In this paper I situate artists' engagement with gentrification and housing struggles in the context of a broader demand to document 'capitalist life'. I focus on two art interventions that respond to attempts to gentrify Glasgow's East End, respectively centring stigma and gender. The first, *In the Shadow of Shadow*

(2010), was led by Strickland Distribution in collaboration with Ultra-Red, a collective who intervene in sites of struggle through sound recording and critical-listening practices. The second is Shona Macnaughton's performance *Progressive* (2017), for which she appropriated official materials produced by regeneration projects, relating their language to her own heavily pregnant body. Following sociologist Kirsteen Paton's account, I consider how these artworks can help us to move beyond displacement narratives to attend to the complexities of gentrification processes by privileging (frequently neglected) working-class perspectives and by tracking attempts to construct neoliberal subjectivities. Furthermore, I contend that both constitute 'social documents', defined as a formation that aspires to chronicle, speak about or contribute to social phenomena. Asking what their portrayals reveal to be caught by the term 'capitalist life', I engage with the expanded view of the economy offered by the revitalised field of social reproduction theory (SRT). While social reproduction has historically been identified with domestic labour, more recent theorisations encompass the resources and infrastructures that brace the formal economy (Bhattacharya, 2017). Permitting a move from housework to housing, SRT brings new perspectives to neoliberal urbanism as well as the experimental social documents which address its contradictions. SRT is used here to prise open the difference between representation and committed, material *implication*.

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### **Contemporary Art and the Capitalist City's Socio-Spatial Urgencies: Repurposing 'Situationist space'**

*Amy Melia (Liverpool John Moores University)*

It can be contended that the socio-spatial urgencies of the West's capitalism–urbanism nexus have demonstrably influenced the production of contemporary art. The purpose of this paper is not only to examine such instances of spatial, urban contemporary art, but also, more vitally, to argue that this field of practice currently lacks a qualified framework and lexicon for analysis. The prevalent, yet broad debates of 'public art', 'new genre public art', 'street art' and 'site-specific art', for example, have disputably failed to establish a specialised model and language for examining contemporary art's engagement with capitalist urbanism's socio-spatial tensions.

My presentation will demonstrate how Situationist spatial theories and practices may be repurposed to form a qualified, yet provisional, framework for critically analysing contemporary art's radical, anti-capitalistic approaches to urban spatiality. A majority of secondary source debates on Situationist space have appeared to exist in architectural scholarship, as if its contemporary value is only deemed present in this field. Situationist urbanism (unitary urbanism) was opposed to the conventional narratives of architecture, considering them to be a constituent part of the capitalist city. Therefore, this paper's objective is to counteract architectural scholarship's apparent monopoly over the contemporary repurposing of Situationist spatial theories and practices. It can ultimately be delineated that this paper will utilise a comparative method with a 'most similar' design – a method, it will be demonstrated, which may also prove an effective apparatus for producing new frameworks and lexicon in the interdisciplinary discourses of contemporary urban aesthetics.

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### **Indigenous Cultural Resurgence and Creative City Discourses**

*Michelle Veitch (Mount Royal University)*

This paper uses theories on critical geography and political aesthetics to examine indigenous cultural resurgence and resistance in the context of neo-colonial and neo-liberal urbanism. Focusing on the indigenous art hotel, Skwachàys Lodge in the Downtown Eastside, Vancouver, Canada, I describe the re-adapted building interiors completed by Northern Tutchone artist, Richard Shorty, Tlingit artist, Clifton Fred and Cree artist, Jerry Whitehead. Their architectural redesigns occurred alongside art-led gentrification in the surrounding neighbourhood of East Hastings, an economically depressed city district facing pressures of cultural urban redevelopment.

Municipally based creative city initiatives exacerbate localised struggles and conflicts by perpetuating displacement processes that adversely impact the urban indigenous poor. Relocation schemes further promote frontier and colonial discourses by establishing East Hastings as degenerate space that requires rehabilitation under the civilising influence of the settler nation state. Shorty, Fred and Whitehead re-spatialise and re-historicise culturally driven gentrification through images and texts that incorporate

heraldic crest art, oral traditions and ceremonial practices. Integrating wall murals, poetic writings and wood carvings into their room designs at Skwachàys Lodge, they engage in critical aesthetics by redressing trans-indigenous cultural inheritances, ancestral genealogies, knowledge systems and clan lineages. All three artists reference the ideological frameworks through which band affiliations negotiate treaty agreements, including territorial and governmental jurisdictions within and across urban localities. In re-adapting the hotel building in the Downtown Eastside, they insert indigenous epistemologies and ideologies into government-instituted and corporate-driven cultural capital initiatives, hence remapping and re-imagining creative city discourses.

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### **The Graphic Language of Britain's Seaside Resorts**

*Justin Burns (Leeds Beckett University)*

The specificity of graphic design within coastal, urban environments requires further analysis to interpret its dialogical premise with town planning, architecture, and social and economic mobility. Typography and lettering can be simultaneously prominent and imperceptible within the visual tumult of the seaside resort, yet is often considered as a separate concern when spatial, environment decisions are made. The perceptual experience of the seaside vernacular is assessed, analysing the visual impact of commercial, artistic, political and social visual language.

Public art, incorporating typographic communicative means, can interrelate with the gentrification of resorts, towns and cities, providing a visual, aesthetic backdrop to contemporary regenerative strategies. Graphic language can intentionally or inadvertently inform the personality and identity of an environment. This paper will explore how aesthetical, creative possibilities can emerge from found, disregarded, unintended messages and symbols within public and urban environments. The complex relationship – acceptance and resistance of art – within coastal domains will be evaluated and contextualised. How is the visual language of a place utilised to communicate issues related to tourism, and social and economic concerns? How does a place identify with neon signs of deprivation and neoliberal urbanisation?

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### **The Urban Pioneers – Place marketing precarity in unified Berlin**

*Nicola Guy (University of Hull, Heritage Consortium)*

This paper looks at the development and differing uses of temporary space in Berlin as sites for cultural activities after unification. In 2007 the Berlin Senate published the book *Urban Pioneers: Temporary use and urban development in Berlin*, which detailed case studies of how temporary spaces were being used, and was proposed as a handbook for developers wishing to take inspiration from countercultural uses of space and raise the value of real estate. Departing from research on the transformations that took place in central Berlin in the early 1990s, I will look at how the state began to utilise both the image of activism and of contemporary art in the place marketing of the city (Colomb, 2012) and how this was countered by socially engaged art events that sought to present a meaningful engagement with communities that were being disrupted by the gentrification process.

I will look at the *Initiative Urbane Kulturen*, a project on the Berlin-Hellersdorf housing estate which was set up in 2014 by members of the nGbK, an institution with a historic engagement with projects that acted against the fast-paced gentrification of the city, including working with the squatting movement in the early 1990s. This project is a case study with which to look at how this monetisation and appropriation of politics and tactics has been countered. Projects including this were important in the creation of a discourse that sought to use arts as a production tool against the gentrification of the city, and through this paper I will explore the possibilities they offer.

## **Queering Cleaning: Cleaning as an act of subversion**

*Marlous van Boldrik (Loughborough University)*

As theorists such as Mary Douglas have shown, cleaning is a way of exercising control over our environment: at home we often clean to establish a sense of order for ourselves (Douglas [1966], 1984. p. 2). Such a 'creative movement' (Douglas. p. 2) can also be seen on a larger scale: for example, after the fall of Hosni Mubarak, many people in Cairo took to the streets to clean – taking back *their* public spaces (Winegar, 2011). This paper will look at the performance of 'cleaning' as a creative strategy used by artists and activists to subvert such state-led acts of 'cleaning', focussing particularly on the work of the Istanbul Queer Art Collective (IQAC).

Since the late 20th-century, the population of Istanbul has grown rapidly. The city has sprouted numerous urban development projects during this period, which have displaced or threatened marginalised groups, including members of the trans community (Kuyucu & Ünsal, 2010; Yetiskul, Kayasü & Ozdemir, 2016. Yetiskul & Demirel, 2018). The IQAC has staged several performances involving acts of cleaning in sites endangered or transformed by such projects: in Istanbul itself (Cihangir, Istiklal Avenue, and Gezi Park) and in the ancient city of Phaselis, about 700 km south of Istanbul (Istanbul Queer Art Collective). I will analyse these two performances in relation to the spaces in which they were staged, paying specific attention to how the IQAC has reinterpreted Fluxus event scores (involving cleaning) to suit their interventions. I will argue that the IQAC comments on past and current processes of gentrification in Turkey.

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## **The Hackers of the Streets: Art, networks and post-crisis urbanity**

*Bill Balaskas (Nottingham Trent University; Leonardo Electronic Almanac (The MIT Press); and Arts Council England)*

One of the most important objectives of the political movements that emerged from the global financial crisis of 2008 was the effort to 'reclaim' and 're-appropriate'. This aspiration referred not only to economic resources, but also to social roles, democratic functions, human rights, and – last, but not least – urban spaces. Syntagma Square in Athens, Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Zuccotti Park in New York, and some of the most iconic public locations around the world saw diverse crowds gather to demand change. Within the reality of neoliberal capital, people felt that they had been deprived of a place both in socioeconomic terms and literally, as public spaces are being rapidly privatised, gentrified and commodified. Inspired by this context, and by the key role of online media in the formation of new movements of dissent, many politically engaged artists adopted the internet as a creative tool capable of contributing to the re-appropriation of public spaces. This paper investigates such efforts by examining web-based artworks that address both the challenges and the opportunities generated by the crisis. More specifically, the paper begins with an analysis of works that have used urban space as a means to project wider social anxieties and struggles, before moving to another group of works that have viewed public space as an active producer of socioeconomic alternatives. The discourses developed around this potentiality have at their core the idea of the 'commons' and its capacity to subvert the neoliberal definition of what constitutes shared economic value in a society.