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How Have Creatives Contributed to Gentrification? A Case Study of London, Hackney

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Abstract

Cities all over the world have used creativity as a tactic to increase social-economic growth, portraying a constructed ideal of what an artistic, bohemian lifestyle needs. Through the investment of cultural commodities such as art galleries, museum and cafés, this suggests a space for networking, cultural inspiration and enlightenment when it comes to innovative thinking. Where some scholars believe that the creative city would attract diverse creative talents (Florida, 2013), it is argued to truly attract the elite middle-class bourgeoisie (Forkert, 2013). This article reinforces the idea that the creative city, while effective, is a romanticised notion which encourages gentrification, as the rich move into urban locations, it raises the prices of housing and the cost of living, driving out the local residing community. An autoethnography is used to provide readers with insight into what it was like growing up in a community in London, Hackney, and the physical changes that can be seen and reflexed on over the years.

Introduction

In this article, I will discuss issues of gentrification as a result of the 'Creative City' in urban settings. As a previous resident of Hackney, London I have first-hand experience with gentrification. It has become a common narrative in the Capital, classified by Lees et al. (2007) as the transformation of a predominantly working-class region, developed for middle-class residency and/or commercial use. Like many areas in London, Hackney has its cultural amenities created by low-income families and immigrants who decided settled down there. Combining cultures, traditions, arts and customs; slowly but surely a diverse integrated community was created. However, like all communities, it had its problems surrounding poverty and crime, appearing as a community in desperate need for regeneration. With the city rapidly going upmarket through investments in the creative industry, it strongly affects the neighbouring regions, making it hard for current families to continue residing in these areas. Whilst Landry identifies the creative city as being "created for people to think, plan and act with imagination in harnessing opportunities or solving seemingly intractable urban problems"(Landry, 2012: 21), in this article I debate Landry and others' (e.g. Florida, 2005) view on of the 'creative city' and the negative implications of gentrification. I focus on the discussion surrounding the gentrification and whether creatives/the creative class are the true contributors to this urban phenomenon happening across the UK (and internationally). Furthermore, I carry out an autoethnography, reflexing on my experience with gentrification as a daughter of African immigrants who made roots in London, Hackney.

Literature Review

In this literature review, I will be reviewing important theoretical concepts of the 'creative cities' and 'gentrification' to allow a thorough analysis of the role the creative class plays in gentrification.

What is a creative city?

Charles Landry (2012) argues that a creative city is a place which creates conditions where people can 'think, plan and act with imagination'(2012:21). Landry talks about the importance of a creative city as a catalyst for economic, political and social growth. He emphasises the need for a concentrated space invested in cultural infrastructure. He advocates 'reassessing the regulations and incentives regime and moving towards a more 'creative bureaucracy'(Landry, 2012) where it puts people and human experience at the heart of the system.

For Landry, there are certain conditions that a city needs to develop and promote to be truly classified as a creative city such as; expression, tolerance, agility, the learning landscape, connectivity, placemaking, liveability and entrepreneurship. (charleslandry.com, 2019) This concept of the 'creative city' provides an almost altruistic approach to solving social and economic problems. He implies that such creative thinking – the use of imagination through qualities including intelligence, innovative assessments and learning – benefits solving 'urban problems' and 'increase urban quality'.

This outlook of a 'creative city' is said to be simplistic in its approach. Whereas, Roberta Comunian (2010), suggests a more complex theory to this concept of the creative city. While conforming to the approach of investment in cultural infrastructure and the creative economy, she believes that there is a complex adaptive system all city undertakes. She suggests that when regeneration takes place in an urban setting and it is important to take into consideration the distinctive aspects of places and circumstances.

Whereas, this suggests an appreciation to present culture of the urban setting, some would argue it is a capitalist and exploitative systematic approach to a creative city (which I further explain when talking about gentrification). Landry *understands that this concept is* 'more likely to attract the highly skilled and flexible labour force that the Creative City needs as, increasingly, people with good skills have choices about where they want to live.'(Landry, 2012:25), it will alter and redefine the urban culture previously used as a creative motivator, while new 'creative thinkers' generate their own culture and identity reshaping what the city becomes.

Gentrification

Contemporary gentrification and the creative city coincide in the sense that "the creative industries can reveal much about this new conjuncture in political economy and the wider social and cultural forces that have come into play to shape cultural production and participation in Britain."(Newsinger, 2015:303). In the last two decades, creativity has been recognised as an important and powerful instrument in economic and social prosperity. Through well thought out strategic investment in cultural infrastructure and creative economy (Comunian, 2010), it implies gentrification as a negative result of 'the creative city'. Investment in hard infrastructures such as housing developments and office spaces and soft infrastructures, such as 'third space' which are neither home nor work, is significant in representing how such infrastructure advances 'gentrifiers' to settle into these urban spaces.

Atkinson's and Bridge's (2005) research describes gentrification as a form of new urban colonialism, which references "elements of colonialism as a cultural force in its privileging of whiteness, as well as the more class-based identities and preferences in urban living."(2005:2) With a majority of gentrifiers of white middle-class backgrounds taking residence in urban space, the process suggests appropriation of urban history and aesthetic, to use as cultural inspiration. 'Florida's formula has proven to benefit the already rich, mostly white middle-class; fuels rampant property speculation; displace the bohemians he so fetishised and see the problems that once plagued the inner cities simply move out to the suburbs.'(Wainwright, 2017 Neil Smith (2007), however, suggests the emergence of a new middle class. With an increase in 'trendy restaurants, boutiques, clubs and other recreation and retail facilities'…they are…'frequented by the new young professionals' (smith, 2007:7). This proposes a diverse group of artists and creators as the 'gentrifiers'.

Kirsten Forkert's (2013) theory on the bourgeoisie and the bohemian lifestyle further defends criticism of the creative city. She suggests that the creative city and the creative class follows ingenuine clichés of a bohemian lifestyle. What Landry refers to as soft infrastructure and 'third spaces' where creatives can network and interact, are more associated with transitional elites. This further proposes that the notion of a creative city is a romanticised process of capitalism.

Methodology

In this report I use autoethnography as a methodology of qualitative research, to assess the extent to which creatives have impacted the community in question. I use autoethnography to give voice to the personal experience (Wall, 2008) of growing up in Hackney, London compared to how it has changed over the years. Autoethnography is "highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purpose of extending sociological understanding." (Sparkes, cited in França and Vasconcelos, 2011:417)

This method of research allows the researcher to thoroughly reflex and use reflection as a viable data source (França et al, 2011) and challenges typically 'conventional' methods, allowing insightful representations others. Using Autoethnography I was able to recall a detailed account revisiting my hometown. The research thoroughly examines and interprets the neighbourhood, the cultural infrastructure and the residents; overall, offering a comprehensive understanding of what such practices mean to the residing and previous inhibitors.

Nevertheless, the research takes a storytelling approach to invoke evocative writing; a combination of "memories and language devices to create textual snapshots that together form a sample narrative photo album" (França and Vasconcelos, 2011:419) allowing readers to bear witness to personal stories.

Findings

Past – My childhood

I was born in Homerton Hospital, London, Hackney, on the 14th of July in 1998. After spending quite some time in an incubator, it was time for my parents to take me home to our flat in Stoke Newington. In a three-bedroom flat, my two sisters and I were still required to

share a bedroom, while my mum turned the biggest bedroom into her business salon. African 'aunties' would call up my mum, book a hair appointment and be over within the hour. I would walk into the home salon around the age of five and be greeted with a room full of talkative, vibrant black women. One would be waiting for her hair to dry, while another one would be a woman sitting in the salon chair facing the mirror while my mum stood behind her combing out the extensions, while another would be sitting in the 'waiting chair' playing with my younger sister. This sense of family and community was granted to us by the fact mums my clients lived close to us.

I started hanging out with the other children in my estate around the age of 5, running up and down the road, riding our bikes, and crashing about in the shared back garden of our flat. As a social kid, I had multiple options of who to hang out with. Right below us was the biracial couple with a daughter, Olivia, above us was another African family with a son and daughter, Serena and Dickson. Further below was a single Jamaican mum, with a son called Sheldon. Down the road, across from the flat was a row of houses, full of families. An Irish family with an older son called Stuart. On the other side was a new Portuguese family who had two daughters, Sarah and her older sister. There were more houses and more flats, full of more children and family friends, who I could name all individually, as they were an immense part of my childhood experience. I remember our neighbours being so supportive of one another. Sarah's Portuguese grandmother, who barely spoke a word of English, would pick me and my sisters up from school, while my dad worked full time and my mum would be studying at college. My estate really embodied the word community.

Present – Returning home

December 4th, 2019, 4:03 p.m. I stand still at a traffic light, staring down the street I've strolled down many times. Stoke Newington high st, the road that leads to either Stanford hill Stoke Newington Church street, or Dalston. All places I'm familiar with, having spent my whole life roaming these streets to get to familiar places; home, school, friend's house, even after we could no longer afford to live here.

I start down the high street passing Dixy's Chicken shop. I remember all the times on the way home from school, my dad would pop into this chicken shop and have energetic banter with the shop owner. Just asking for fresh wings, I would watch in awe as an instant relation unfolds before me and then pop right back out, the smell of freshly fried chicken wings engulfing the car. The joy I felt in this moment pure, in its simplicity. While I continue to walk down the street, I see quite a few, long-standing stores; betting shops, dry cleaners, pubs, corner shops and sport direct. However, one thing I do notice is that the further I walked down toward Dalston the more characterised and 'unique' the cafes and restaurants are.

The owners are creativewith their exterior and interior design. A restaurant with wooden panelling for the shop's headboard design, with a funky blue and pink shop sign. I pass another café with the matte black painted exterior with wall to wall windows. I step inside and see glossy wooden floors and the menu etched on a black chalkboard stuck high up on the wall. I look around and notice the broad number of young adults sitting by themselves, in front of a Mac Book typing away. I catch eye contact with a biracial woman sitting next to one of the plants set up to create ambience. She has a low platinum blonde, buzz cut with tattoos on her neck disappearing underneath her denim jack. She continues to type away at her laptop. I am tempted to buy a coconut mocha, and take a seat at the window, loving the work atmosphere emanating from the cafe, instead, I head down to my regular café spot. I step out of the cafe and pass vintage denim shop that prices a pair of jeans for over £80 and I am shocked to see a wave of customers inside. I passed chain stores such as Sainsbury's, Costa, Harrold's, Suttons and sons and more, to get to my favourite café, Café Z Bar, and take my regular seat at the wall. I tend to travel 2 hours from where I currently live, to come

here with my best friend when we have a little extra cash to spare. I sit at a table next to a bigger table, stacked with books. This cafe differs in atmosphere, from the previous cafe. It portrays a cosy, chill vibe, with indie posters on the board near the door and light wooden interior, that brings in light. There is SMALL chit chat in background, that is comforting.

I constructed this autoethnography with a few goals in mind. To be reflective and provide a little insight into my background/community growing up and allow the reader to understand the importance of home. Growing up where I did, everyone knew and supported everyone. Where you grow up, holds a special place in your heart and even being forced to leave around ten years ago, the thought of living anywhere else still pains and saddens me. Where gentrification may not have completely taken over every shop and resident on the streets of hackney, a majority of cafes and restaurants are created to cater to the middle-class families, or the artists looking to live an aesthetically pleasing life, which is tempting in itself. However, it places the gentrifiers and the original locals as the consumers of this lifestyle, increase such businesses and encouraging the notion of a creative city.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have come to realise, that growing up in a diverse urban community is special, unique and can be taken for granted. With an increase in investments in creative education and infrastructure, culture and history are used to drive 'aesthetically pleasing' agendas. While factually creativity does increase economic growth, it can be said to hinder, social and political advancement. This is shown through the decrease in diversity throughout the years on the streets of hackney, as it subjects the citizens to diluted, one-sided political and social views. Whereas gentrification has and is blatantly taking places on the streets of hackney, not all original, local residents have been pushed out, however, for the borough to be considered culturally acceptable they would still need for certain aspect of old hackney to stay the same. This reinforces gentrification as a capitalist structure.

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