

They transform ratty bad-food joints into ratty good-food joints. This first wave produces social more than economic or physical gentrification.

By the time the corner stores are stocking olive oil, the area is noticed by a second wave, characterized as the “risk-aware.” These people are able to invest in renovation not just with sweat equity but financially. They expect to secure loans, and therefore must satisfy the building codes and permits that the first wave probably ignored. The second wave includes a group that is pervasive among baby boomers: individuals who affect the bohemian lifestyle while holding secure jobs. This cohort is an economic but not necessarily a physical gentrifying force. They like the place to look rough and edgy, even as it becomes more expensive.

The third wave, which follows, is “risk-averse.” This group is led by conventional developers who thoroughly smarten up the buildings through conventional real estate operations—physical renovation, improved maintenance, and organized security. Their clientele has been characterized as “dentists from New Jersey.”

Whether induced or spontaneous, once gentrification begins, the chain reaction tends to continue. The difficulty with any attempt to intervene, supposedly on behalf of low-income residents, is that urban gentrification is organic and self-fueling. Its motive force is great urbanism: well-proportioned streets, a good mix of activities in useful types of buildings, a certain architectural quality. These days the allure is all the stronger because good urban areas are rare. And this naturally boosts their market value. What spokesmen for the poor call gentrification is actually the timeless urban cycle of decay and rebirth as a free society naturally adjusts its habitat.

In any case, gentrification usually benefits the present owners. They receive better prices for their homes if they sell. If they remain, there is a general improvement in quality of life as a result of improved consumer services, higher tax bases, and the beneficial effects of middle-class vigilance over municipal services. The only losers may be the local community leaders and poverty advocates who fear their constituency is being diluted. The evidence: It is the leaders who complain of gentrification, rarely the residents themselves, who know they have much to gain.

The question is not whether affordable housing should be available. Of course it should. But it is necessary to distinguish between *creating* affordable housing and *retaining* it. Paradoxically, retaining affordable housing may be more difficult than creating it—which can be accomplished indirectly through subsidies for the private sector, directly through government public works, or gradually through the aging of buildings that cease to fit today’s lifestyles. The market provides affordable housing in the form of older, unfashionable building stock. Cities with such older housing typically serve as portals for immigrants. A “Chinatown” or “Little Havana” is an economic incubator where affordable housing exists in its ideal form: as the “old neighborhood” eventually to be fondly recalled by the foes of gentrification. Such neighborhoods are not

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destined, however, to remain affordable forever. If they were originally built for the middle-class, their inherent quality will ultimately, after a down cycle, attract gentrifiers. Most old neighborhoods experiencing revival are only recovering their intrinsic value and reverting to their origins, not being “taken away” from the poor.

Can anything be done to prevent existing housing from becoming expensive? Yes, but it’s very difficult. To begin with, it’s not easy for people to agree on making affordability a political objective. People sell their property willingly in the open market, and they reap a higher price after gentrification gets under way. If their right to enjoy the fruits of the market is rescinded, owners will react violently. Artificially restraining resale value solely to keep housing low-priced is unfair to poor homeowners. Life is unfair enough for low-income people without their well-intentioned overseers denying them their just profits.

People know this. In one neighborhood of small houses that was supposedly intent on fighting gentrification, our firm was asked to avert a sharp rise in housing prices. So we dutifully proposed limiting the size of buildings, based on their lot size. The measure we recommended would have prevented the existing houses from being enlarged enough to accommodate yuppie expectations. Additional family rooms, megabathrooms, and superclosets would have been impossible. When the price-depressing effect of this limitation became clear, public posturing soon disappeared; the participants in the planning process would have none of it. The proposal suffered rejection by acclamation. Only those who were unaffected—activists from outside the neighborhood—were surprised at the outcome.

To allow some of the existing residents to remain in the neighborhood, we then proposed subtler techniques, such as permitting one or two ancillary units to be built behind an existing small house. These new units could be rented out. We also wrote new codes to allow small-scale services, such as caring for a few elderly persons, taking in laundry, or minding children—the type of income-generating businesses that already crop up throughout poor neighborhoods illegally. Such businesses are part of the mutual support system that was dismantled in the federally sponsored demolition of urban housing in the ’60s and ’70s, and that was eliminated from redevelopment areas when suburban-style zoning codes were imposed—inappropriately—on the traditional city.

But the question remains: Can anything be done to prevent gentrification? Yes, there is one proven technique that holds down prices: Give people bad design. Because gentrification is essentially a process of real estate seeking its proper value, the places that revive are inherently attractive enough to be sought out by the affluent. The places that resist gentrification are those where the housing is poorly designed or the quality of the urban space is mediocre. Thus the most surefire technique for permanently preventing gentrification is to provide dismal architectural and urban design.

The federal government inadvertently tested and proved this

principle in two periods of the twentieth century. During World War I the U.S. Housing Corporation built 55 projects in cities where the defense industry needed more workers. The housing, though inexpensive, consisted of traditional houses and rowhouses skillfully designed by first-rate architects. Today, most of that housing is still in good shape, much of it having gentrified over the years. In stark contrast, in the 1960s the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) produced housing designed in accordance with then-fashionable socialist models, which our modernist architects admired in Europe. Most of that housing rapidly decayed, and it persists in its decay despite multiple renovations over the years. (For the record, this brand of housing has fared just as badly in Europe.)

A side-by-side comparison of this phenomenon can be seen in a pair of housing projects in Bridgeport, Connecticut. One project, Seaside Village, is a delightful little community, now more than 80 years old and in perfect condition. The other, barracks-like Marina Village, was built a few decades later and most of it is trashed. Modernist design, sadly, has become a proven technique for keeping housing in the hands of the poor.

"Affordable" housing has been more successful when constructed in traditional forms—the very opposite of the experimental 1960 "projects" that self-destructed and are now being demolished by public housing authorities. But provision of even this kind of affordable housing is vehemently opposed today by the middle-class. Is this simple prejudice? Is it reasonable fear of crime? Statistics do show a relationship between crime and poverty; so it's difficult to argue that opposition to low-income housing is simply prejudiced.

To begin to solve this, we have to recognize that the manner in which affordable housing is provided can cause problems. If low-income housing is built in large groupings, as it usually is, people are not wrong in fearing it. To be socially sustainable, housing for low-income people must come in small increments. Ten percent is a good rule: imagine two townhouses among a row of 20 and you can deduce that this is imperceptible—particularly if the buildings are architecturally indistinguishable from middle-class housing.

In Montgomery County, Maryland, the county gives builders strong incentives to sprinkle affordable units among new middle-class subdivisions. The subsidized housing is kept to a low ratio of the overall development, and it looks like the market-rate housing nearby. This program seems to work well; we designed one such project, Wyndcrest, in Sandy Spring, Maryland, and can attest to its success.

You might wonder why, if there is such a strong need for it, our market-driven economy is not providing affordable housing. One answer is that America's housing market is not free. It is trammled by building and planning bureaucracies that obstruct its smooth operation.

In the past, people would build for themselves. There was a self-

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help system that created housing through sweat equity; by this method the continent was colonized. But there are now myriad regulations that, in the name of eliminating bad housing, have inadvertently eliminated the supply of inexpensive housing. Today only licensed professionals can design, permit, and build housing. Bureaucratic friction thus makes housing for the poor available only with artificial supports. The possibility of housing oneself has been taken away from the individual and has become the responsibility of government or charitable organizations—another instance of government solving a problem that was created by government itself.

It's worth noting that there do exist certain "code-free" zones, where government looks aside while regular people make underused places habitable for themselves. That's how the "risk-oblivious" broke into the housing market in SoHo in the '60s. A similar method could be followed in many older American cities where the upper stories of commercial buildings are underused or abandoned. Those floors are empty because, to renovate them, the building codes require a thorough upgrading to current code standards.

Much would-be affordable housing is illegal because it lacks a few inches of stair width or fails to conform to some other ideal. A more sensible application of building codes would stipulate that if a building satisfies the code that was in force when the building was originally constructed, the building cannot be forced to meet new code requirements when renovated. This simple rule change would facilitate renovation of old housing stock at reasonable prices by eliminating unnecessary and expensive "upgrading to code." New Jersey has such a law, and it has contributed to the spectacular comebacks of Jersey City and Hoboken.

So what is the fuss over gentrification about? Many times it's just the squawking of old neighborhood bosses who can't bear the self-reliance of the incoming middle-class, and can't accept the dilution of their political base. But theirs is a swan song. Middle-class Americans are choosing to live in many inner-city neighborhoods because these places possess urbane attributes not found in newer residential areas, and this flow cannot be regulated away.

The only permanent solution to overpricing as a result of gentrification is to build new urban development in the time-tested forms, so that our older neighborhoods don't become overvalued through scarcity. We must create more traditional neighborhoods, and less sprawling modernism. Forget a narrow focus on affordability. We can make room for people of modest means by avoiding rigid rules and controls which make it harder for them to house themselves. And finally, people should not be prevented from profiting on the natural appreciation of their neighborhoods. Not in America.



# Sick Sisters

How feminist politics is warping medicine

By Sally Satel