

REGENERATION OR GENTRIFICATION

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CARPENTERS ESTATE, STRATFORD



London is known for being rich in diversity, whether that's through its architectural styles or the communities and cultures that live within, it is undeniably an integral part of the city. However, at pace with this increasing diversity is an ever-growing disparity between the wealthiest and most deprived residents within the capital. In the capital, as per Trust for London figures,

'those in the top wealth decile (i.e. the 10% of people with the highest wealth) hold 44.3% of London's total net wealth. Those in the bottom decile (the bottom 10%) hold none of London's total net wealth'. (Trust for London, 2024)

With the implications of Brexit and the COVID-19 Pandemic, this gap is continuing to grow.

While this is a hugely complex issue with no singular answer, the focus on gentrification over sustainable regeneration is a huge factor in the capital's current wealth disparity. First described by sociologist Ruth Glass in the 1960's, gentrification is the process where 'the character of a poor urban area is changed by wealthier people moving in, improving housing, and attracting new businesses, often displacing current inhabitants in the process'. (Oxford Dictionary, 2024) Therefore, it can be argued that such regeneration is "usually carried out in order to restructure the city for the purposes and advantages of a small elite." (Spatial Agency, 2024) In other words, it continues the trend of responding to the needs and desires of the wealthier, rather than those most at risk and in need.

This essay will research and comment on the past, present and future of redevelopment in London through the case study of Stratford's Carpenters Estate. To do this, it will examine the origins of gentrification within the city, examining both positive and negative implications of redevelopment schemes, and provide a study of precedent schemes across the capital. This study will then form the basis for analysing the proposed plans for the current redevelopment scheme of the Stratford estate. It will apply the lessons learnt from previous schemes to analyse the proposals and comment on how best the negative impacts of gentrification can be mitigated going forward. Being one of the largest council estates left in London today, and being one of the east end's cultural hubs it is extremely important that it is preserved as much as possible.

THE HISTORY OF GENTRIFICATION IN LONDON:

The origins of gentrification within London can be traced back to the early 1950's.

Before the term was coined, gentrification was already becoming commonplace across particular areas of the capital, where

“the capital’s young professional classes, finding themselves priced out of established middle-class areas like Hampstead, Highgate and Chelsea, began to move into areas with attractive period houses in convenient locations, but often in need of renovation and alongside much poorer areas” (Moran, 2007)

This initial gentrification is different to nowadays as at the time it was more of a social movement, rather than the organised development programmes that can be seen today. (Warde, 1991)

Simultaneously, in the aftermath of World War II, many parts of the city were severely damaged, requiring massive restoration operations. In order to address the post-war housing crisis and offer reasonably priced housing for a growing population, social housing estates were built. Often made up of brutalist high rise blocks of flats due to the speed of which they could be built, they are now a huge part of London’s culture and identity, despite the often controversial design style. However as time went on, neglect occurred in many of these communities, creating social and economic problems that would eventually fuel the processes of gentrification.

Up until the 1980’s, London’s council estates were usually seen as something to be proud of, which may seem surprising compared to the stereotypes that are linked to social housing nowadays. The tone towards council housing began to change when Margaret Thatcher came into power in 1979. The Right to Buy scheme, which was implemented in 1980 as Thatcher’s signature policy, gave council renters the opportunity to buy their homes at a reduced price. Whilst this seemed empowering for the tenants at first glance, it resulted in a sharp decline in the quantity of council-owned properties. Tenant house purchases reduced the supply of cheap housing, which in turn led to a lack of public housing in London. Low-income families suffered the most from the shortage, which made housing inequality worse and forced many of them to rely on the increasingly expensive private rental market. The availability of social housing in London was significantly impacted by the reduction in council housing stock brought about by the Right to Buy policy. The new laws massively reduced the availability of affordable rental properties even while it gave tenants the chance to become homeowners. This made it difficult for many low-income households to find suitable housing, which resulted in long waiting lists for the remaining council apartments and a sharp increase in homelessness. To summarise, Thatcher’s policies have hugely aided in the gentrification of London’s neighbourhoods. As a result of the decrease in the supply of council housing and the emphasis on market-driven solutions, the demand for affordable housing increased and property prices rose. More affluent people found

former council properties that were put up for sale to be appealing possibilities for investments or purchases. As a result, boroughs like Islington and Camden, as well as large sections of East London, which were formerly made up of majority council housing, saw substantial gentrification. Long-standing communities have been displaced by the influx of wealthier inhabitants, changing the social structure and neighbourhood identity completely.

THE POSITIVE INTENTIONS OF REDEVELOPMENT:

Despite its problematic nature, gentrification in London can sometimes stem from well-meaning intentions of enhancing communities and revitalising urban areas. Fundamentally, the procedure aims to revive these run-down neighbourhoods by promoting social liveliness and economic growth.

The revitalization of urban areas is one of the main goals of gentrification. Renovating run down buildings gives decaying places a new lease on life and restores its aesthetic and economic value. These initiatives improve the physical landscape while also making the area safer and more desirable for both locals and tourists. Renovated parks, streets, and other public areas frequently aim to promote community involvement and a sense of pride and belonging among locals.

In addition, the arrival of companies and capital into gentrified neighbourhoods creates jobs and strengthens local economies. Along with satisfying the changing interests of newcomers, the emergence of trendy cafes, stores, and cultural centres provides 'opportunities for employment, self-employment, self-advancement and artistic freedom' (Crowley, 2016). Both new and existing inhabitants may see an improvement in their level of living as a result of this economic stimulus.

Furthermore, gentrification frequently follows the development of new services and infrastructure. Modernised public transportation systems, improved schools and colleges, and improved public services become community hubs that serve all socioeconomic classes. These changes provide access to opportunities and resources that were previously unavailable in these places, with the goal of bridging socioeconomic inequalities.

THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF REDEVELOPMENT:

While acknowledging these often positive ideas, it is also important to look critically as to why so many of these redevelopment projects in the city have been extremely controversial. The most recognisable reason being that despite the seemingly optimistic intentions, there is often a huge disregard for the original communities in the area.

A notable consequence of gentrification in London is the sharp rise in house prices. Property values rise in regenerated regions, and landlords raise rents to take advantage of this trend. This means that many long-term inhabitants are priced out of their own neighbourhoods because they cannot afford the increased cost of living. The final outcome is forced relocation, which forces these people and families to look for more inexpensive housing alternatives in far-off locations, often far from their social networks, places of work, and educational institutions. In the words of Ruth Glass, 'once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district, it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working class occupiers are displaced.' (Glass, 1964)

These reductions in displacement are not always easy to achieve. While many redevelopers promise to have a certain percentage of the development being 'affordable', it is clear that the developers idea of 'affordable' is much different to the working class communities. Also, it is not uncommon for property developers and investors looking for quick profits to avoid laws intended to protect affordable housing or impose rent controls. The complexities of urban development and planning frequently put economic growth ahead of social justice, which worsens the problem of relocation.

Furthermore, the working class neighbourhoods of London tend to be vibrant centres of many ethnicities and cultures. But these particular areas of culture can be eroded by gentrification. The distinct identity and character of these places are in danger of becoming homogenised when the original residents are displaced. The neighbourhood's unique cultural character and sense of community are often diminished due to the removal of local youth clubs and family businesses which are often compromised when redeveloping the area.



FIGURE TWO

PRECEDENT CASES OF LONDON REDEVELOPMENT SCHEMES:

Due to the rapid gentrification of London, there are numerous examples to choose from when looking at estates that have undergone redevelopment programmes. I will give a brief summary of two of the Capital's iconic estates, Robin Hood Gardens and The Heygate Estate, and analyse the consequences of the redevelopments.

Built between 1968 and 1972, the Robin Hood Gardens estate was a social housing development in Poplar, East London. Designed by architects Alison and Peter Smithson, it was a prominent example of Brutalist architecture. A unique "streets in the sky" concept was incorporated into its design, with raised landscaped spaces and interconnecting walkways aimed at promoting social interaction and a sense of community among residents. The Smithsons' architectural vision was to foster a community-oriented and humane living environment.

Despite the positive intentions, as time went on, Robin Hood Gardens ran into problems. There was a severe lack of maintenance and investment, meaning the estate and its residents were left neglected, leading to a sharp decline in living conditions. Its design was questioned and criticised due to factors like structural flaws, and a perceived drop in inhabitants' quality of life, partly due to the estate being overcrowded.

The decision to demolish the Robin Hood Gardens estate was part of a huge plan to regenerate the East End of London as a whole - despite campaigns to grant the estate a heritage listing, led by the likes of Zaha Hadid, due to the estate being one of the UK's best precedents of brutalist architecture. (Frearson, 2017) Poplar, where the estate is located, was a key area due to its proximity to Canary Wharf, one of the country's largest financial centres, which led to the redevelopment from 'Robin Hood Gardens' to 'Blackwall Reach'.



FIGURE THREE



FIGURE FOUR

Similarly, In the South London neighbourhood of Elephant and Castle stood the Heygate Estate, another sizable complex of public housing with a similar fate. One of the most notable examples of Brutalist architecture in the city, built between 1968 and 1974. The estate previously housed over a thousand residential apartments and was made up of a number of low-rise and high-rise concrete blocks. It was once viewed as a progressive and audacious reaction to the post-war housing shortages, with the goal of offering working-class families inexpensive homes.

Like Robin Hood Gardens and other Brutalist projects of the era, the Heygate Estate had pathways and common areas in an effort to create a feeling of community among its occupants. However as time passed, the estate dealt with a number of difficulties, such as neglect, poor upkeep, and therefore crime issues.

Redevelopment plans were made for the Heygate Estate as the region changed and the push to move towards gentrification in London grew. Elephant Park, a restoration project, was to be built on the cleared land when the estate's demolition was authorised.

Elephant Park was created by redeveloping the Heygate Estate with the intention of creating a mixed-use development that would combine residential, commercial, and public spaces. The project's goal was to build a thriving, environmentally conscious community by utilising contemporary design ideas.



FIGURE FIVE

The demographics of both Robin Hood Gardens and Heygate alike changed as a result of gentrification. The old population was forced to relocate as new, wealthier residents moved into the rebuilt part of the estates, displacing the previous community. Heygate in particular had a huge amount of controversy surrounding the displacement of its residents, with over 3000 council tenants being displaced to further out areas of the city, or even being moved out of the city completely - with just one in five being allowed to stay in the neighbourhood of SE17. (Lees & White, 2019) Both of the neighbourhood's social structure and cultural identity were significantly impacted by this change. Furthermore, in both examples there is a valid argument that the development has failed to address the needs of the original communities, mainly due to the inadequate amount of social housing - leading to a huge shift in the socio-economic make-up of the area.

To summarise, the transformations of both Robin Hood Gardens and the Heygate Estate stand as iconic symbols of the drastic impacts that gentrification has on London. While the plan is to revitalise the area, it also brings up issues related to the preservation of social housing, community displacement, and the difficulties of preserving the socioeconomic and cultural diversity of these neighbourhoods that are changing so quickly.

In light of this, there are several notable factors which appear to determine the success of a redevelopment scheme. These are:

- Amount of displacement
- Preservation of local character, culture and heritage
- Affordability
- Level of maintenance

As such, these key factors can be used as a matrix for analysing the potential of current development schemes across the capital. In this way, the essay will now look to analyse the proposals for the redevelopment of the Carpenters Estate, in light of the exploration above. However, it is first important to provide the context and history of the development.

THE HISTORY OF THE CARPENTERS ESTATE:

Much like the previously mentioned Heygate Estate and Robin Hood Gardens, the Carpenters Estate was built in the late 1960s as social housing in response to the post-World War II housing crisis. The complex had a range of housing styles, from low-rise maisonettes to high-rise tower blocks, with the goal of giving locals access to affordable accommodation. The estate is made up of 710 homes, with 434 of these being located in the high rise tower blocks, and the rest situated in low rise blocks and terraced houses (majority owned by

Newham Council). Within the estate there is also a primary school, a crafts college, community centre, public house and a convenience store. The estate, much like its surrounding area, is rich in culture, with Newham being statistically one of the most diverse regions in the country - with an ethnic makeup of two thirds being from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups, and over 102 languages spoken throughout the borough. (Newham London, 2024)

Despite the Carpenters Estate being home to so many over the past fifty years, the ongoing battle to regenerate the estate is slowly eating away at the community, with only 5% of the flats in the three 22-storey high rises still occupied. With plans ever changing, many locals are left confused as to why their community has been displaced, leaving 400 council homes empty when the need for social housing at this time is extremely high. University College London had originally agreed on a reported £1 billion regeneration of the estate, converting the space into a brand new east London based 'Olympic Campus'. However, after displacement of the current community had already begun, UCL dropped the plan due to talks with Newham Council breaking down. The plan was also being branded heavily 'unethical' by UCL's own Students Union, who sided with the current residents in campaigning against the plans.



FIGURE SIX



FIGURE SEVEN

Since the 'Olympic Campus' plans have been dropped, the tower blocks have been emptying for a further decade, with no redevelopment having begun. The current plan is another £1 billion regeneration plan, this time by Populo Living, Newham's housing company. From first glance, this current plan seems much more ethical and considerate of the current community, with Populo themselves acknowledging they need to 're-establish connection and trust within the community'. (Populo, 2024) They claim they will deliver an estate with over 2,000 homes, half

of which will be at social rent. Furthermore, 314 of the existing homes on the site will be refurbished, ensuring that 'all existing council tenants, homeowners and those with a right to return can remain on the estate'. (Populo, 2024) With two of the three existing high rises intended to be kept, as well as the right to return for existing tenants, there will hopefully be an essence of the existing atmosphere and community in the regenerated estate - unlike the lifeless new build estates we see too often.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2012 OLYMPICS:

In the past decade, specifically Stratford, and east London as a whole, has gone under huge changes following the regeneration plan for the London 2012 Olympics. While the Olympics brought various improvements to the east end, in terms of transportation links and a boom in commercial and retail development, there was still a huge controversy surrounding the impact on the local community. Concerns over relocation, the decline of affordable housing, and changes in the socioeconomic makeup of the community were voiced by many locals.

When London won the bid to host the Olympics in summer of 2005, Sebastian Coe, the chair of London's organising committee promised that thirty to forty thousand homes would be built in and around Stratford's olympic park, and "much of which will be 'affordable housing' available to key workers such as nurses or teachers". However, 17 years later in 2022, there had been a total of thirteen thousand homes built on the olympic park, of which only 11% are genuinely affordable to people on an average local wage. (Wainwright, 2022) This is a huge difference to what had been promised to the local community, especially when the need for affordable and social housing is so high in the borough, with 36% of residents living below the poverty line. (Lawrence, 2022) Furthermore, the waiting list for council housing in the boroughs surrounding the Olympic Park - Newham, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest and Hackney - has reached 75,000 households.

LEARNING FROM PRIOR MISTAKES:

Moving forward with the Carpenters Estate, it is important to analyse what has happened so far, and compare with past estates in order to determine the best course of action.

To begin, it should be acknowledged that despite the new plan for the estate looking much improved, it could be argued that the damage has already been done. To have 400 council flats sat unoccupied during a time where they are needed most is unacceptable, especially while there are 75,000 families in the surrounding boroughs on a waiting list for housing. In addition, the borough of Newham alone has the

highest homelessness rate in the country, with 1 in 21 people without a home (Shelter, 2023), as well as over 5,500 families with children living in temporary accommodation as of 2020. (FocusE15, 2021) Furthermore, to displace 400 families from their homes with the promise of regeneration to their area, and then for their homes to be empty for almost two decades is something that can't simply be looked over.

Despite the new plans for the regeneration of the east end estate looking much more accepting of the existing community, there are some consequences of gentrification that are almost unavoidable. As stated previously, communities may become more homogeneous as wealthy people replace the diversity that once made a neighbourhood unique. This change has the potential to erase the region's history and cultural legacy by weakening the socioeconomic and cultural fabric that gave it its identity. This is especially relevant to the carpenters estate due to east London's diverse community, as seen in the youth culture and music scene that can be seen in the figures below (both shot on the carpenters), which is slowly falling victim to the displacement and gentrification of London's cultural estates.



FIGURE EIGHT



FIGURE NINE

The promise that Populo and Newham Council have made to have half of the regenerated estate at 'affordable' rent is a great aspect of the regeneration, however the locals' trust for the council is at an all time low. It is evident that despite the 'promises' that have been made by various London councils in the past, many of them weren't actually delivered. Take for example the promise of affordable housing surrounding the olympic park in 2005, where only 10% was actually delivered - two decades on and just over a quarter of the amount of promised housing has been built. This has been incredibly damaging for the relationship with existing communities, as there is a huge lack of trust that the community will actually get the positives that they are promised.

In the years to come, after the regeneration has happened and the estate is thriving, the government has a responsibility to maintain the

estate to a high standard. We've seen time and time again that estates with a working class community often get neglected until it gets to the point of no return and demolition is seen as the only solution. We can see this clearly in both Robin Hood Gardens and the Heygate Estate, where to begin with they were seen as successful estates with green space, affordable homes and a strong community - however after years of neglect and no investment into working class communities, the estates were at a point of no return, and were eventually demolished.

To conclude, this essay has looked to form a critical analysis of the proposed redevelopment plans for the Carpenters Estate, Stratford. More widely, it has aimed to form an understanding of the impacts of redevelopment and gentrification across the capital. Redevelopment is always going to have its almost unavoidable consequences in terms of the risk of homogenization of existing communities, as well as the rise in house prices in the local area etc. However, through an analysis of existing literature on this topic, and through looking at past estates within London, it is clear that there are some main points that if done correctly can help mitigate negative consequences. These main points were used to assess the current proposals put forward for the Carpenters Estate.

Firstly, and most importantly, it was found that it is key to minimise the displacement of the original community as much as possible. For instance, including the 'right to return' policies for existing residents and preserving local businesses can help to keep the community alive despite the process of redevelopment. This is one of the few positives from the Carpenters Estate plan, as it will protect the diverse community that the area is renowned for.

Post-regeneration, the most significant aspect is the up-keep of the estate, as we see time and time again a lack of investment into working class communities - which builds up over time until the cycle of demolition and regeneration happens again. However, if the estate is kept well, it will live on. The maintenance and investment must be planned and budgeted from the beginning of the redevelopment to - which will be a key factor in maintaining the Carpenters Estate.

Despite the prior mistakes, there is potential for the redevelopment of the Carpenters Estate to be very successful. Moving forward, it is essential the council focuses on regaining the communities trust and works closely with them to develop their proposals. In the long term they must deliver on the promises of the right to return schemes and high percentages of affordable housing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The distribution of wealth (no date) Trust for London. Available at: <https://trustforlondon.org.uk/data/wealth-distribution/#:~:text=Wealth%20is%20very%20unequally%20distributed> (Accessed: December 30, 2023)

'gentrification, n. meanings, etymology and more | Oxford English Dictionary' (2023) Oed.com [Preprint]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED//7808339508> (Accessed: December 20, 2023)

Spatial Agency: The London Particular (no date) www.spatialagency.net. Available at: <https://www.spatialagency.net/database/why/political/the-london> (Accessed: January 1, 2024).

Moran, J. (2007) 'Early Cultures of Gentrification in London, 1955–1980', *Journal of Urban History*, 34(1), pp. 101–121. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144207306611> (Accessed: December 29, 2023)

Warde, A. (1991) Gentrification as consumption: issues of class and gender. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 9, p. 224

In defence of gentrification (2016) www.spiked-online.com. Available at: <https://www.spiked-online.com/2016/03/16/in-defence-of-gentrification/> (Accessed: December 29, 2023).

Glass, R. (1964). *London: Aspects of Change*. London: MacGibbon & Kee.

Frearson, A. (2017) Footage reveals demolition of Robin Hood Gardens, Dezeen. Dezeen. Available at: <https://www.dezeen.com/2017/12/13/video-movie-footage-demolition-robin-hood-gardens-brutalist-smithsons/> (Accessed: December 20, 2023)

Lees, L. & White, H. (2019): The social cleansing of London council estates: everyday experiences of 'accumulative dispossession', *Housing Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/02673037.2019.1680814

Haque, I. (no date) Newham Sparks, Newham Council. Available at: <https://www.newham.gov.uk/NewhamSparks#:~:text=Newham%20is%20one%20of%20the> (Accessed: 1 January 2024).

Limited, F.S. (no date) Populo Living - About the Project, Populo Living. Available at: <https://www.populoliving.co.uk/the-carpenters/about-the-project/>. (Accessed: December 21, 2023)

Limited, F.S. (no date) Populo Living - The Masterplan, Populo Living. Available at: <https://www.populoliving.co.uk/the-carpenters/about-the-project/the-masterplan/>. (Accessed: December 21, 2023)

Wainwright, O. (2022) 'A massive betrayal': how London's Olympic legacy was sold out, *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jun/30/a-massive-betrayal-how-londons-olympic-legacy-was-sold-out> (Accessed: December 22, 2023)

Lawrence, I. (2022) This new map shows London's most deprived areas, *Time Out London*. Available at: <https://www.timeout.com/london/news/this-new-map-shows-londons-most-deprived-areas-120522> (Accessed: December 28, 2023)

Shelter (2023) At least 271,000 people are homeless in England today, Shelter England. Available at: https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_release/at_least_271000_people_are_homeless_in_england_today (Accessed: December 30, 2023)

Campaign, F.E. (2021) VOTE NO to demolition! Save the Carpenters Estate in Newham., Focus E15 Campaign. Available at: https://focuse15.org/2021/10/23/vote-no-to-demolition-save-the-carpenters-estate-in-newham/#_ftn2 (Accessed: December 20, 2023)

ILLUSTRATION LIST:

FIGURE ONE - Kinsman, G. (2016) Carpenters Estate. Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gazkinz/27109473991/in/photolist-Hiz98Z-2oKm1BX-2oKePRe-2oKadLT-2oKe3Bi-MVaMAM-XUpp23-DS8fe1-SZaMnC-e3jSip-e3jS6T-e3qXk5-e3jSve-e3jS22-Dmwhvy-qWM2cu-hJ94H9-TUs8PD-hJ8uwm-hJ7FQz-hJ8sJ3-hJ7isi-hJ93LP-2oKe3By-riUq8u-2oxKQRK-hJ8F6A-hJ7TrS-hJ7RwZ-U2sbCa-hJ8dYf-hJ96ic-hJ8BxT-hJ9dSF-hJ8hJo-hJ7S3u-hJ8GGb-dLeYob-hJ7qTk-hJ8uUo-hJ8xhu-hJ8g1J-dL9urF-hJ7C7x-hJ7DLV-hJ8ssE-9G1eBk-rwZSZQ-2m6frPQ-2n2Dsar/> (Accessed: 2 January 2024).

FIGURE TWO - Gronkjaer, L. (2016). Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/sink-estates-demolition/>.

FIGURE THREE - Merin, G. (2016). Available at: <https://divisare.com/projects/394702-alison-and-peter-smithson-gili-merin-robin-hood-gardens> (Accessed: 2 January 2024).

FIGURE FOUR - Beyer & Dorschner Filmproduktion (2023). Available at: <https://london.architecture diary.org/event/architecture-on-film-robin-hood-gardens-uk-premiere-the-smithsons-on-housing-qa/> (Accessed: 2 January 2024).

FIGURE FIVE - unknown (2015) Heygate Estate Elephant and Castle. Available at: <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/report-london-loses-8000-social-homes-in-a-decade> (Accessed: 2 January 2024).

FIGURE SIX - Stowell, D. (2014). Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/danstowell/15370752532/> (Accessed: 2 January 2024).

FIGURE SEVEN - Pearce, J. (2020).

FIGURE EIGHT - dmochase (2023) Dennison Point, June 2023. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CvSrWd7N7V4/> (Accessed: 2 January 2024).

FIGURE NINE - mellozwrld (2023) @peaktelevision cypher, London 2023. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/Cza_dnZMG0-/?img_index=2 (Accessed: 2 January 2024).