

GENTRIFICATION AND PLACE IDENTITY CHANGE IN GHEORGHENI, CITY OF CLUJ-NAPOCA

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ABSTRACT. *Gentrification and Place Identity Change in Gheorgheni, City of Cluj-Napoca.* The scientific study at hand takes a considerable and representative area of the massive socialist housing estates from the City of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, as a case study area and intends to ascertain, through a series of interviews with members of the local community, the phenomenon of gentrification and its impact on neighbourhood identity change in the last quarter century. The results suggest significant changes at microterritorial level in terms of place identity correlated with substantial gentrification phenomena that took place after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989.

Keywords: *gentrification, place identity, change, socialist housing estates*

INTRODUCTION

Gentrification is a generalized phenomenon, gone global, with the global seen as originating in the West (Lees, Slater and Wyly, 2008, Lees et al., 2016). It is also a phenomenon with countless descriptions due to its now extensive geographic spread and to its substantial “life time”. Leaving behind the vision of Ruth Glass, who first coined the term in 1964, as it is rather territorially limited, some view it as the movement of middle class families into urban areas causing land values to increase and having the side effect of chasing away the have-nots (Oxford American Dictionary, 1980). Similarly, it is the “*restoration of deteriorated urban property, especially and working-class neighbourhoods by the middle and upper classes*” (American Heritage Dictionary, 1982), while the 2004 version of the same dictionary names it the restoration and upgrading of deteriorated urban property by middle class and affluent people, which frequently dislodges the lower-income inhabitants of the area.

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However, the old definitions have become obsolete, while new definitions emerged, such as the one proposed by Clark (2005), who sees gentrification as a *“process involving a change in the population of land-users such that the new users are of a high socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment in fixed capital”*. Nevertheless, one must consider that residential rehabilitation, since gentrification is a residential process at its core, is only one aspect of a more profound economic, social, and spatial restructuring. This mutation, where wealthier displace poorer people and diversity is replaced by social and cultural homogeneity, undermines urbanity and the future of cities as emancipatory places.

In a rather interesting connection with Richard Florida’s creative class concept (2003, 2005), gentrification can also be described by the movement of the creatives, such as artists or writers, alongside other middle class members to areas that encompass affordable housing and, at the same time, are located near cultural venues. Buildings change, new shops open catering for newcomers, while the locals find themselves under threat of displacement or are actually forced by rising prices to leave the area or, if lucky, see their neighbourhood lose/change its distinctiveness, its individuality, its identity (Brown-Saracino, 2017).

In some cases (Ghertner, 2015), gentrification has been criticised as an analytic since it has structurally changed too much to still retain its etymological root – *gentry* – and it has sometimes failed by not having the ability to illuminate the changes that take place, for instance, in post-socialist and post-colonial cities where much of the displacement is taking place. In spite of this critique, its power and omnipresence in the scientific literature makes it the go-to phenomenon when it comes to residential changes in urban areas.

Gentrification may have been described for the first time in London and may have shaped cities across United States and Western Europe, but it has strongly influenced “post-communist” states as well (Sykora, 2005). This phenomenon took place in inner-cities areas and was characterised by the rehabilitation of the living spaces and the change in population, with people with lower income being displaced and affluent newcomers moving in their place, being described in cities such as Budapest, Prague, Moscow, Novi Sad or Tallinn (Kok and Kovacs, 1999, Tosics, 2006, Sykora, 1999, Neducin, Caric and Kubet, 2009, Sykora and Bouzarovski, 2012).

There have been however other problematic changes that gentrification may have brought about, for instance a total or partial loss or change of place identity in many neighbourhoods across the globe. A neighbourhood like Notting Hill, London, has been touched by gentrification and its residents have expressed worries about the transformations that took place over the years. However, this phenomenon took a paradoxical turn, as the loss of working-class

landscapes, represented by independent stores, diversity etc., seems to worry the middle classes much more than others (Martin, 2005). In other places, such as Melbourne, Australia, some have experienced that, even without the core feature of gentrification – displacement – present, this phenomenon still takes its toll on the community, and the transformations in retail and meeting places as well as in the local social structure itself can cause a loss of place identity without any physical displacement (Shaw and Hagemans, 2015). Other examples of the undoing of neighbourhoods by gentrification and its ancillary phenomena include the so-called “Little Portugal” in Toronto, Canada, where, after careful evaluations of neighbourhood change and views of the community towards gentrification, researchers have come to the conclusion that the sense of place in this neighbourhood (an immigrant reception area among others) is quickly vanishing (Murdie and Teixeira, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The main aim of this paper was to examine the phenomenon of the gentrification in a certain part of a well-established urban area and, by applying a set of interviews on some members of the local populace, to determine the impact of said phenomenon, if any, on the identity of the area.

Choosing a case study area proved surprisingly straightforward as we intended from the get go to focus on a manageable area that is at the same time a symbol of the classic socialist urban planning practices. The chosen area is located in Cluj-Napoca, Cluj County, Romania, and has been selected as it is a well-demarcated, relatively homogenous block, delineated by four main thoroughfares, predominantly composed of collective housing (either five story or 10 story high apartment buildings), and currently an expression of the “inner city”, in stark contrast with the newly developed, post-1990, suburbs of the city of Cluj-Napoca. It currently hosts a population of roughly 7000 people and it is part of a larger area, named Gheorgheni neighbourhood, the second largest and one of the most representative in Cluj-Napoca, designed and built between 1964-1970 as part of a larger housing estate (three additional blocks were planned and erected during the same period), later populated with factory workers, teachers, and army personnel (Cluj-Napoca General Urban Plan, 2014). The area is also well-known for its ample green areas and playgrounds as well as for its proximity to services and mass transit nodes and routes. The very few individual houses found in the area are either precursors to the collective housing estates built in the 1960s or later additions, as we shall see in a later chapter. Moreover, buildings hosting other uses than housing include a church, one office space and several central heating installations.



Fig. 1. The case study area and its location within Gheorgheni, Cluj-Napoca
 Source: Google Earth; delineation for Gheorgheni neighbourhood based on data from Cluj-Napoca City Hall



Fig. 2. The study area depicting its current collective housing units and their placement

For a period of two weeks, in December 2018, we conducted a total number of 44 interviews in the above mentioned case study area, discussing with the owners or current renters of each individual house as well as with the apartment building managers of each collective housing unit. This later choice was due to the considerable number of residents living in collective housing, which would require substantial resources and extensive periods of time. Out of the total 44, one interview was set up with one of the ministers of the local Orthodox church, the only religious establishment in the study area. The construction of the church began only in 1994 and was finished roughly 15 years later, so despite being a relatively newly-established place of worship, the priest still is a good reference point as he possesses extensive knowledge on the entire community inhabiting and has witnessed many social, economic, and identity changes that took place in the area.

We also based our questions on the “before 1990” and “after 1990” antithesis, with the additional “after 2000” time frame included, as gentrification is considered an expression a restructuring, therefore a facet of the *before 1990* and *after 1990* differences and changes and the shift from communism to capitalism, the market economy and new urban practices.

The general characteristics of gentrification, taken from the series of definitions covered in the introduction, were used to create the queries. The questions comprising the applied interview are as follows (multiple choice or open answers depending on the question). As a side note, the first 12 questions refer to the individual building where the interview was conducted, while the last two refer to the entire case study area. Furthermore, the minister was asked to answer only questions 8 to 14 as we are interested in capturing his view on the area he serves and not the building (church) itself.

1. What type of building is it (its primary function or usage)? a. individual housing; b. collective housing; c. office space, services and ancillary functions;
2. When was the building constructed?
3. Which is the year of the building’s last renovation or rehabilitation?
4. What is the general age of the building’s occupants? a. 20-40 years of age; b. 40-60 years of age; c. over 60 years of age.
5. What is the general education level of the building’s occupants? a. high school; b. bachelor degree; c. postgraduate degree.
6. What is the general income level of the occupants? a. low; b. average; c. high.
7. When did the current occupants move to the building? a. before 1990; b. between 1990-2000; c. after 2000.
8. What is the apartment/land price level? a. low; b. average; c. high.

9. In your opinion, is there social or economic inequality in the building? a. yes; b. no; c. do not know / do not want to answer.

- Was there before 1990? a. yes; b. no; c. do not know / do not want to answer.

10. In your opinion, is there ethnic diversity in the building? a. yes; b. no; c. do not know / do not want to answer.

- Was there before 1990? a. yes; b. no; c. do not know / do not want to answer.

11. In your opinion, are there conflicts between the new and the old occupants? a. yes; b. no; c. do not know / do not want to answer.

12. In your opinion, the population changes after 1990 have been: a. significant; b. insignificant; c. do not know / do not want to answer?

- If frequent and significant changes took place, did it lead to increases in apartment/land prices? a. yes; b. no; c. do not know / do not want to answer.

13. In your opinion, does the area/neighbourhood have its own identity? a. yes; b. no; c. do not know / do not want to answer.

- if yes, what would that identity be?

14. In your opinion, did the already mentioned changes bring about the area's/neighbourhood's identity change in the past quarter century? a. yes; b. no; c. do not know / do not want to answer.

We succeeded in interviewing at least one representative of each house or apartment complex, with the exception of one, 1 Azuga Street, whose manager and residents refused to be questioned.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research, including the interviews and the field work, yielded some interesting results, as follows:

- out of the total of 46 buildings that comprise the case study area, the majority, 38 to be exact, are collective housing units, 28 having 5-storeys while the rest tower at 10 storeys; only six buildings are individual houses, followed by one office space and one church house; despite the fact that some apartment buildings host some services such as butcher shops, pharmacies, barber shops or dentist practices, the collective residential function and character of the area are unmistakable; the area was also not altered by massive demolitions or by infilling like other Cluj-Napoca socialist neighbourhoods (Grigorescu, Mănăştur).

- out of the 38 apartment blocks, only one was built after 1990 and the fall of the communist regime, as it was erected in 2011; the remaining 37 were built between 1964 and 1970 as part of the socialist public housing policies that

created four more similar housing estates in the immediate vicinity during the same period; in the case of the individual houses, one was built in 2001, replacing an older, decrepit dwelling, while the remaining five have construction dates unknown, probably in the 1940s or 1950s; the church house was started in 1994 and completed roughly 15 years later, while the office building replaced an earlier house in 2016; it is clear that the area hosts an aging housing infrastructure with very few new additions; this might constitute a problem in the long run as building maintenance is not implemented properly for all structures; examples (photographs) of the types of dwellings mentioned above can be found in Figure 3.



Fig. 3. a. individual houses built prior to collective housing (year unknown);
b. 10-storey collective housing erected between 1964-1970; c. post-2000 insertion –
collective housing unit built in 2001, replacing former house

Source: photos by Bogdan Păcurar

- with the exception of the buildings built after the year 2000, 35 apartment blocks were renovated recently, between 2000 and 2017, while in the case of the older houses, pre-1990, only 5 went through major rehabilitation, the remaining one having its last renovation before 1990; we would like to point out that the major rehabilitations or renovations imply mostly full or partial thermal insulation, new roof insulation or interior painting; smaller repairs do not count; none of the old buildings got their entire plumbing or electrical wiring changed, only minor repairs were conducted for such systems over the years;

- the average age group of the inhabitants of the area proved to be between 40 and 60 years, with 8 interviewees declaring their fellow inhabitants to be over 60 years of age, 11 between 20-40 years of age, while the remaining 24 interviewees stated that the buildings they own or manage are inhabited by people with ages between 40 and 60; this marks a clear departure from the

"Gheorgheni is a pensioner haven", that even some of its inhabitants still proclaim, and proves that the demographics of the area has changed profoundly in the last years;

- in terms of education level, the balance is in favour of higher-educated people, since only 5 interviewees said that the building's tenants have only secondary education; this means that 38 declared that their cohabitants are highly educated (bachelor studies or higher), implying that the case study area is stronghold for well educated individuals; however, this is not a new event as the area has always been home to highly educated people (this was mentioned by 20 of the people we interviewed, without them being explicitly asked);

- 29 of the people interviewed mentioned a well paid population living in this area, either mentioning high or very high salaries or income; 5 stated that its population has an average income while 9 people said that the inhabitants survive on minimum wage or are impoverished; all people interviewed refused to divulge an estimate of the average income of the people inhabiting the collective or individual dwellings in the case study area, declaring high, medium or low incomes; nevertheless, the case study area proves to be inhabited by many people with lucrative jobs; this was not always the case, since this was mostly a "blue collar" neighbourhood before 1990, according to 35 interviewees, again without them being specifically asked this question;

- according to our interviewed subjects, most current occupants of the residential buildings have been living there since the period between 1990-2000 - 19 people indicated this period when asked about the timeline of the inhabitants; 18 indicated the period prior to 1990 and only 6 the period after 2000; conclusively, the population of the area has been residing here for a relative short amount of time;

- all but two interviewees complained about the high price of land and/or living quarters in the case study area, while the other two indicated an average value; this is consistent with the fact that the area at hand and Gheorgheni neighbourhood as a whole remain some of the most expensive real estate properties in the City of Cluj-Napoca, with an average price of more than 1100 euros/square meter in 2016 (Vascu et al., 2017);

- the presence of inequality in the study area was mentioned by 39 of the interviewees, while 4 did not know or did not wish to answer this question; the same 39 people attested or at least stated with a certain degree of certainty that, prior to 1990 and even between 1990-2000, inequality was considerably less striking;

- surprisingly, 30 interviewees asserted a lack of ethnic diversity in the area, 9 did not know or did not wish to answer, while only 4 people mentioned a distinct ethnic diversity, even now, almost 30 years after the fall of the "less-permeable" border policies of the communist regime;

- however, this phenomenon did not stifle conflicts between the newcomers (1990-2017) and the ones that have been inhabiting the area for more than 30 years; 21 people mentioned some sort of conflict (nature unknown unfortunately) between the two groups, 15 did not know or did not want to answer the question and 7 of the subjects did not report any conflict whatsoever; due to the significant changes in population that have taken place in the area over the years, the risk of conflict increased considerably and may pose a threat to any sort of peaceful habitation;

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, despite being a geographically limited study of the phenomenon that is gentrification, we believe this study has managed to capture what went down socially as well as economically, in the last 25 plus years in a typical socialist collective housing estate such as Gheorgheni, Cluj-Napoca Municipality. According to the answers provided by the interviewees, the status quo of the area changed considerably, while gentrification, with all its characteristics present, contributed to the steady transformations of the place identity of the case study area. Nonetheless, questions still remain unanswered. Specific identities for the case study area and the neighbourhood it belongs to were not defined properly and neither were the gentrification phenomena that swept the area. Thus, we believe that better scientific outcome will surface from geographically expanding the case study area to entire neighbourhoods and interviewing not only a larger group of people, but also more diverse sets of individuals.

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