



There goes the neighbourhood

Why gentrification isn't for everybody

MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

NEWCOMERS

Gentrification and its discontents

MATTHEW L. SCHUERMAN

320pp. University of Chicago Press. \$30.

US VERSUS THEM

Race, crime, and gentrification in Chicago neighborhoods

JAN DOERING

254pp. Oxford University Press. \$99.

THE AESTHETICS OF NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE

LISA BERGLUND AND SIOBHAN GREGORY, EDITORS

134pp. Routledge. £120 (US \$155).

ALPHA CITY

How London was captured by the super-rich

ROWLAND ATKINSON

256pp. Verso. £16.99.

FOR THE FIRST HALF of the twentieth century, Brooklyn was in disrepair. The area's austere, elegant brown brick, three- and four-storey mansions, once owned by New York's upper class, had either been demolished by the early 1900s, to make room for warehouses serving the docks, or converted into overcrowded boarding rooms for mostly migrant workers. Industry declined not long after thanks to overproduction and underconsumption, and Brooklyn was almost completely abandoned. "The respectable have disappeared and only the vulgar survive", Edmund Wilson wrote in 1925. "I have known a dead horse to be left in the road ... with no effort made to remove it, for nearly three weeks."

Some artists and writers, who could no longer afford to live in Manhattan's Greenwich Village, were settling in Brooklyn Heights, though. During the 1940s, Carson McCullers, W. H. Auden, Benjamin Britten, Jane and Paul Bowles and a chimpanzee shared a dilapidated townhouse in the northern part of the neighbourhood; in the 1950s, Truman Capote rented two basement rooms in a house on Willow Street. For young, professional couples working in the city, Brooklyn offered something interesting and more conveniently located than the expensive, anodyne suburbs. This was a tipping point in the area's gentrification, Matthew L. Schuerman points out, and where he begins *Newcomers: Gentrification and its discontents*. Primarily through a series of interviews with residents, former residents, developers and public officials, his book captures the past and present of gentrification - which Schuerman describes as "the process by which a low-income neighborhood becomes a wealthy neighborhood" - in several areas of New York, San Francisco and Chicago from the mid-twentieth century.

We are first introduced to Martin L. Schneider, a television producer, and his wife Rona, who bought a terraced house in Brooklyn Heights in 1958 for \$57,000. The area was increasingly filled with ambitious, white newly-weds restoring and living in brownstones. But sections of the neighbourhood still suffered from poverty. As part of his urban renewal project, Robert Moses, then the head of the New York City Slum Clearance Committee, came up with the idea to bulldoze four blocks of terraces at the northern edge of the Heights, closest to Manhattan's financial district, and build high-rise buildings in their place; the Cadman Plaza development would be made up of studio and one-bedroom flats aimed at wealthy, single Wall Street employees. The Schneiders formed a local group to oppose the scheme, which, in their view, threatened to destroy the neighbourhood. Cadman Plaza's imposing form and transient renters, they argued, wouldn't contribute to the community's quality of life. Their

The last occupied high-rise in the Cabrini-Green public housing complex, Chicago, Illinois, December 2010

campaign forced Moses to reconsider. Three lower towers were built instead, with shared-ownership units (rather than rentals) big enough for families. The local group also ensured that Brooklyn Heights become a "historic district" - the first in New York - guaranteeing its protection against future demolition and development. This was "an early example of an urban community coming together to determine its fate".

In the long run this historic designation had another corollary: it enhanced the desirability of a neighbourhood whose architecture and density would stay roughly the same. Demand to live there increased, forcing house prices up. In 2012, the townhouse in which Capote once lived sold for \$12.5million. Brooklyn Heights was "no longer a middle-income utopia", Schuerman writes. "It was an upper-income one." A similar pattern occurred in Brooklyn's Park Slope, which became a historic district in 1973. The book's many black-and-white photographs include a revealing scene from 1966 of around forty white people standing on the stoop of a brownstone house in dappled sunlight, waving at the camera. They are new residents. They called themselves "pioneers", Schuerman writes, and believed they were "civilizing the urban frontier". Some of them formed the Park Slope Betterment Committee and encouraged middle-class friends to buy houses in the area.

Old Town, a neighbourhood on the Near North Side of Chicago, attracted young, white professional couples around the same time and in the same way as Brooklyn Heights. But, in addition, Chicago's Housing Authority (CHA) razed the majority of the slums in the area, where mostly African American and Italian immigrants were living, to build one of America's most infamous public housing complexes, Cabrini-Green: a mixture of two-storey terraces and high-rise apartment buildings, completed in 1962. The state passed a Bill soon after that capped rents in public housing at 25 per cent of a tenant's income. It was meant to help poor people but ended up isolating the poorest. "Working-class households ... had even less reason to remain in CHA buildings, for their rent increased with every salary hike", Schuerman writes. "As a result, only the very poor tended to remain ... and since their rent was based on their income, the CHA became poor also."

Cabrini-Green turned into an island of decay and poverty amid wealth. In 1992, Anthony Garrett, a gang member in his thirties, broke into an empty apartment on the tenth floor to shoot at a rival gang from the window and, by mistake, killed a seven-year-old boy walking to school with his mother. It caused national uproar. The *Chicago Tribune* called on the city to redevelop the area. Tenants, however, felt that it would be an excuse to remove poor people from one of Chicago's wealthiest neighbourhoods, and then to profit from higher land prices. The CHA decided to demolish part of the high-rise complex and put in low-rise units for people with varying incomes - a partial desegregation - but they tore down faster than they could build, leaving many families homeless or having to sort out their own housing elsewhere. People were displaced and replaced. In 2001, a tenants' group successfully sued the CHA over its treatment of former residents. The CHA still hasn't finished construction on the housing it promised.

Schuerman combines measured academic research with informal reportage. The effect is thorough, yet intimate. He doesn't offer a fix for gentrification, and he doesn't always view it as detrimental. When the physical condition of a neighbourhood and the concentration of poverty are so bad, he argues, there is some logic to demolishing and replacing buildings, or getting wealthier people to live there - as long as original residents are able to stay. But, he admits, suspending a neighbourhood "at a moment exactly between decay and rejuvenation" is impossible. What emerges from the book, then, is the repeated failure of policymakers to address the potential fall-out of gentrification before it's too late.

Race appears almost as a side-note in *Newcomers*, which is in sharp contrast to Jan Doering's *Us Versus Them: Race, crime, and gentrification in Chicago neighborhoods*. "Perceptions of black criminality remain deeply ingrained in American culture," Doering writes, "complicating residential integration." He limits his consideration to Uptown and Rogers Park, two neighbourhoods on Chicago's Far North Side which are more racially mixed than elsewhere in the city. Much like Schuerman, Doering gathers most of his information from interviews with residents and community groups, but with a focus on the period between 2011 and 2014. Those who live in Uptown and Rogers Park fall into two conflicting camps, he finds: the "public safety" groups, who are mostly white and concerned about crime and gang violence (they want more policing and non-subsidized housing to attract wealthier people to the neighbourhoods); and the "social justice" groups, who are mostly black and worry about gentrification and displacement by the first group.

Here, "criminalization and gentrification went hand in hand", Doering writes. Wealthier white residents were frequently using the police to banish black residents from public spaces, in order to make the area feel safer and appeal to white, middle-class buyers, who would then displace even more black people. At one point, he discusses the case of Lawrence House, a once exclusive building in Uptown where Charlie Chaplin lived in the early twentieth century. By 2011, it was a rundown, thirteen-storey rooming house for low-income tenants. Public safety groups, claiming that they feared for the wellbeing of the building's occupants, encouraged neighbours to report gang activity and gatherings of black men outside the building to the police, to create a substantial paper trail. This triggered "a spiral of events", leading to Lawrence House being bought by a developer and turned into upmarket rental units for college graduates, despite social justice groups petitioning for it to be subsidized housing. City officials, the police and public safety groups celebrated the conversion as "decisive progress in the fight against crime". The upshot, Doering argues, was a faster shift towards a larger white population and a smaller, low-income black one.

Anti-crime initiatives are often a pretext for racial discrimination. At one of the public safety meetings Doering attends, the white man chairing the event projects mugshots of alleged black offenders onto the wall. This is questioned by an African American woman, who points out that there is no warrant for the people's arrests and that it's a breach of their privacy. Projections are never used in the meetings again; instead, the chair distributes the images by email to those who ask for them. Later, Doering observes a mostly white safety group in Rogers Park that practises "positive loitering": they patrol the streets, often with a police escort, and stare at huddles of people - usually black adolescents - that they want to disperse. If the huddle moves to another spot, they repeat the process. Doering asks Ben, a member of a social justice group in the neighbourhood, if he is aware of positive loitering: "I know about large groups of white homeowners standing on the corner", he says. "They are loitering the same way that young people do, only the police don't bother them. My black friends tell me, 'When I stand on this corner, that shit ain't positive. It's only positive when they do it.'"

Doering avoids simplifying the conflict to white versus black, though many of the people he speaks to do precisely this. "Race shaped but did not determine residents' political standpoints and relationships", he contends. Margaret, an African American single mother living in subsidized housing in Rogers Park, welcomes aggressive police crackdowns on crime and thinks that if anyone feels unduly mistreated or harassed, they should make better relationships with police officers and the community. Fighting the gangs has nothing to do with race or class, she tells Doering; it's to do with creating a safe, liveable neighbourhood. She sees no connection between that and gentrification.

Upgrading a neighbourhood doesn't always mean it will thrive. In *The Aesthetics of Neighborhood Change*, a dense and somewhat uneven collection edited by Lisa Berglund and Siobhan Gregory, one essay - by Ryan Thomas Devlin - focuses on an isolated area in west Brooklyn called Red Hook, with no Subway station and surrounded by water on three sides. Most of the people living there in the 1970s were Latino immigrants; to survive financially, they cooked and sold tacos, pupusas and empanadas in the local park during the tournament matches of amateur soccer leagues. Over the next thirty years the number of food vendors grew. (They were given temporary permits from the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Department of Health, though these were meant for single-day use rather than for a semi-permanent market.) By 2000, thanks to the internet and creeping gentrification in other areas of Brooklyn, middle-class professionals discovered the food sellers. "It's the kind of experience that reminds you why you live in New York", the *New York Times* wrote in 2006. The following year, city officials formalized the market: sellers had to bid for permits, buy food trucks with approved cooking facilities, and move from inside the park to the streets around it. For many of the vendors, it was no longer economically viable. The park now has only three or four food trucks. "By nearly all accounts, this process represents a failure", Thomas Devlin writes. We should learn from how well some informal, impoverished neighbourhoods function, he argues, instead of seeking to regulate them.

Another essay, by Berglund, depicts the turnaround in Detroit, a historically segregated city that declared bankruptcy in 2013. Between gang-controlled streets, a few majority-black communities pooled resources to repurpose abandoned spaces as public gardens and urban farms, installing works of art and pop-up shops, all of which improved the appearance of otherwise neglected neighbourhoods. Recently, private developers have copied these strategies in downtown Detroit to make new developments seem authentic yet attractive to mostly white, middle-class buyers. The difference here, Berglund points out, is that when the developers did it, the government valued their contribution as an innovative way to revitalize the city and gave them money. Local communities, meanwhile, were unacknowledged, or treated like criminals. Consider graffiti: in 2010, Berglund writes, two pieces were illegally painted by Banksy on Packard Plant, a defunct car factory. The police didn't seek to arrest and fine him for trespass and vandalism, as they did when they came across graffiti in black neighbourhoods. A non-profit gallery in Detroit excavated Banksy's graffiti and sold it at an auction in Beverly Hills in 2015 for \$137,500.

There is nothing new in a city looking to grow richer. Nor can the British wag their fingers at the US. For the past few years London has cultivated an extreme and "particular meanness", writes Rowland Atkinson in *Alpha City: How London was captured by the super-rich*. He looks at the top 1 per cent of the world's population (those holding over £5million in investable wealth, which is around 88,000 people in London) and the top 0.0005 per cent (those holding £30million and above, which is around 5,000 people in London), who are buying property in neighbourhoods such as Mayfair, Knightsbridge, Notting Hill, Highgate and St John's Wood. Most live in their London homes for a few months of the year and take advantage of the country's non-domicile rules to avoid, or at least minimize, their UK tax bill. The government's lack of regulation and under-policing of financial crime (including money laundering and fraud) means that property can be bought through offshore companies that conceal illicit money. There is, therefore, no incentive for buyers to be frugal. The house is "capital 'storage'", Atkinson writes, "like a bank deposit box". The only question asked by the government, developers and estate agencies has been "how to create the right conditions to let the city's economy accelerate still

“

further", without any concern for the consequences: an over-priced housing market, disinvestment in local neighbourhoods, demolished council estates, evictions and rising homelessness.

Over the past forty years, Atkinson tells us, London's public buildings, public housing and land have been sold off to private developers by local councils needing to create new homes without the money to do it themselves. In return, most developers - who prioritize building for wealthy buyers and investors in order to maximize their profits - are asked to provide a small quota of affordable housing within the luxury developments or redevelopments. This usually means pricing a handful of properties at up to 80 per cent of the market rate, which is still - deliberately - out of reach for most. Atkinson points out how some survivors of the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, who were rehoused in Kensington Row, a grand block of flats (each costing between £1.3 million and £7.2 million), were forced to use an access door next to the storage bins instead of the main entrance. "This urgent attempt at tackling human need had the effect of revealing deeper attitudes to social diversity", he writes. "Residents and commentators questioned why low-income tenants were being placed in such an expensive development."

Gated streets, hidden basement extensions, fortress-like apartment blocks, private planes and boats, form controlled spaces, insulated from broader social interaction and responsibility. "This is not a cityscape of open pathways, cohesive neighbourhoods or happy communities", Atkinson says. "Wealth has yielded a city that operates as a kind of unfeeling and multiplying disaster zone for the poor and even for those on relatively good incomes." If the super-rich send their children to private schools, have their own security guards, don't use the NHS or public transport, why would they care about supporting social services? Atkinson has a weakness for sardonic stereotypes (the founders of technology start-ups are "apparent geniuses", the rich are "parasitic non-contributors"), but on the whole, he writes with flair. The long-term result of the pressures he charts is starting to be felt; knife crime in London, for instance, has gone up by a third in the past ten years, and Atkinson attributes this in large part to the lack of funding for, and often subsequent closure of, state schools, libraries, playing fields and swimming pools, all of which help to create stability, opportunity and a sense of inclusion.

That the way we organize our cities reflects how we order and divide our societies resonates louder still in the wake of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis in May. In an article published in the *Atlantic* on June 9, Justin Ellis wrote about how inequity has been entrenched in the city for decades. Growing up there as a black person, "I just took it as a fact that [we] lived only in specific slices". When you're born into such an environment, he says, "it has a way of making you believe that neighborhoods are the natural outcome of residents having a job and paying bills on time, not racism built through governments and banks and developers acting hand in hand". Census data from 2015 shows homeownership rates for black people in Minneapolis and Saint Paul to be about 23 per cent; for whites it is 75 per cent, among the highest in the country. "Living side by side", Ellis adds, "is not the same as living in solidarity". In American and European cities, most ethnic minorities still live in areas with the worst public housing, schools, jobs and healthcare. "The reason we could never be who we wanted and dreamed to be", the Revd Al Sharpton said at Floyd's memorial service, "is because you kept your knee on our neck. We were smarter than the underfunded schools you put us in, but you had your knee on our neck. We could run corporations and not hustle in the street, but you had your knee on our neck. We had creative skills, we could do whatever anybody else could do, but we couldn't get your knee off our neck." Responsible governments could derail the cycle. The trouble is that, so often, they don't. ■

Mika Ross-Southall is a freelance writer and artist. Her articles appear in the *Sunday Times*, *Financial Times* and *Hyperallergic*, among other publications