STUDENT WRITING

The Effects of Gentrification on Artists in Two Vancouver Neighbourhoods

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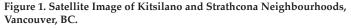Email: a.macdonald@ualberta.ca and schai@ualberta.ca

Gentrification is frequently linked with features including redevelopment, socioeconomic status and displacement in lower-income inner-city neighbourhoods. This paper considers the tenuous place of artists in two Vancouver communities (Kitsilano and Strathcona) at varying stages of the gentrification process. Artists are disproportionately drawn to "authentic" inner-city areas and, at times, have been viewed as progressive innovators by the middle class. Through a critical literature review, seven semi-structured interviews, and two field visits in each neighbourhood, we analyze artists' ability to sustain their livelihoods. The process of gentrification may decrease the economic feasibility, artistic community, artists' inclusion in perceptions of the neighbourhood, and signs of artistic expression. Consequently, the process also disrupts artists' work due to spatial concerns and changes the unique character of the built environment. The gentrification process, as a result, has lessened artists' ability to support their livelihoods in Kitsilano and threatens the sustainability of the livelihoods of artists in Strathcona.[1]

Introduction

This article examines the precarious place of artists in two distinctive Vancouver neighbourhoods experiencing different stages of gentrification: previously gentrified (Kitsilano) and currently gentrifying (Strathcona; see figure 1). Both neighbourhoods have attracted significant numbers of artists as residents, although in the case of Kitsilano this association is now largely historical. In combination, these case study sites provide a valuable opportunity to examine the role of the arts, and artists, in both the causes and effects of gentrification. More specifically, they allow us to reflect on the irony whereby artists help to set in motion the processes of social upgrading and property redevelopment that frequently lead to their own displacement. Our research also reflects on the role played by artists in establishing cities' sense of place and symbolic and economic status (Zukin, 1995).

In this article, we define artists broadly to include dancers, musicians, etc. as well as visual artists. However, much of the information we gathered was taken from interviews with visual artists. Although gentrification affects many social groups more disadvantaged than artists, it is apparent that artists are often

Figure 1. Satellite Image of Kitsilano and Strathcona Neighbourhoods, Vancouver, BC.

among those displaced by the process. With this research, we sought an understanding of gentrification's consequences for artistic communities and the relationship between the built environment and artistic social and economic activity. Our argument proceeds as follows. First, we review the history and literature regarding gentrification and artists. We then elaborate upon the local context of our study, before explaining our objectives and methods. This is followed by a results section. Lastly, we summarize our findings, articulate the limitations of our study, and make recommendations for future research.

History and Literature Review

Although gentrification's characteristics and definitions have been widely debated (Butler, 2007; Zukin, 1987), certain key features are commonly cited. For instance, gentrification is often described in terms of increases in redevelopment and socioeconomic status in run-down inner-city neighbourhoods (Ley, 2003; Zukin, 1987). Displacement is another important feature; lower-income residents must often move to cheaper neighbourhoods as gentrification increases the property values of the area in which they currently reside (Zukin, 1982). However, gentrification is also frequently linked to issues of identity; in contrast to the almost forced displacement of lower-income residents, members of the middle class who move into gentrifying areas (i.e., "gentrifiers") see their neighbourhood choice as an expression of identity and, potentially, uniqueness (Bridge and Dowling, 2001; Butler, 2007). Although gentrification frequently results in the problematic displacement of lower-income populations, among other potentially undesirable outcomes, it must also be acknowledged that it can exert positive effects. For example, the increased attention paid to gentrifying areas can encourage badly needed renovations to old buildings and can increase those areas' property tax bases, "so that local governments can fund improvements to streets and services" (Shaw, 2008, 1700).

Artists often play a significant bridging role in the gentrification process (Ley, 1996; Zukin, 1995). Ley (1996, 189-194) contends that artists are often disproportionately drawn to 'authentic' inner-city areas, which they perceive as distanced from a conformist, suburban middle-class norm that they deem undesirable. Elements of the new middle class, however, revere artists as progressive innovators, and its members often mimic artists' settlement patterns. Consequently,

gentrification becomes apparent as demand rises for space in neighbourhoods perceived as 'artistic' and affordability of that space decreases.

In support of this theory, Ley identifies an established artistic presence as one of five key variables coinciding with gentrification in Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver in the 1970s, which suggests artists' importance in paving the way for further gentrification. Despite their role in attracting middle class gentrifiers to certain areas, artists' needs, particularly for artistic spaces such as studios and venues, are often inadequately addressed as gentrification occurs. This is unsurprising, as office towers and condominiums typically yield higher returns than arts-oriented use of space (Zukin, 1995). Furthermore, artists who live in gentrifying areas are frequently displaced by rising costs and must find new areas, or even new cities, in which to settle (Ley, 2003, 2540).

Lees, Slater, and Wyly (2008) provide a specific and informative example of the link between artists and gentrification in their discussion of the Mission, an inner-city San Francisco neighbourhood. Attempting to fulfill their needs for artistic space, artists were successful in gaining a live-work ordinance that included "exemption from affordable housing quotas … and a lower rate of contribution to school taxes" (Lees et al., 2008, 260). However, these advantages applied not only to the artists who fought to gain them, but also to developers who were keen to gain access to these valuable spaces. Indeed, the interest from developers led to the eventual eviction of the artists from the live-work spaces they pioneered, and formerly affordable buildings were converted into "a high-end form of live-work" (Lees et al., 2008, 260). Following these events, "the Mission in the 1990s was characterized by frighteningly rapid commercial and residential gentrification, with a flood of evictions and displacement of small businesses, artists, and predominantly Latino low-income tenants" (Lees et al., 2008, 261). The Mission thus provides a classic example of the role of artists as catalysts for gentrification of inner-city areas.

In addition to the discussions mentioned above, Rose (1996, 132; as cited in Shaw, 2008, 1704) places artists with the group of "well-educated but economically struggling avant-garde" who co-exist with already established residents of neighbourhoods that have not quite undergone gentrification. Although the presence of artists in this context does not inevitably lead to gentrification, it is frequently a significant precursor. This link between artists and gentrification is not applicable to every situation (Ley, 2003);

however, the literature clearly indicates that it merits serious consideration.

Local Context

Kitsilano is characterized by its proximity to downtown Vancouver, as well as two institutions of higher education (the University of British Columbia, and the Emily Carr University of Art and Design), and contains a significant stock of attractive older houses, as well as a busy commercial strip (West Fourth Ave). Unsurprisingly, given this combination of characteristics, it has undergone extensive gentrification, with the conversion of student housing and old apartments into luxury homes and condominiums (Ley, 1996). This process can be traced to the influx of youthful and countercultural communities from the 1960s, both of which had an interest in artistic production and aesthetics. However, as the process of gentrification proceeded, the countercultural character of the neighbourhood was largely lost (Ley, 1996); it now demonstrates a strongly 'yuppie' flavour. Among other changes, artists have largely relocated to cheaper areas in Vancouver (Ley, 2003). As indicated in Table 1, Kitsilano's average gross rent is relatively high, as is its average family income; suggestive of a 'mature' stage of gentrification.

Table 1. Demographics of Kitsilano and Strathcona

	Kitsilano	Strathcona
Population	39 620	8 040
Area (hectares)	551	271
Avg. gross rent	$905	$466
Avg. gross rent (% of Vancouver's avg. gross rent)	113.7%	58.5%
Avg. family income	$66 093	$35 830
Avg. family income (% of Vancouver's avg. family income)	114.1%	51.7%
Population in low income households	19%	58.8%
Rented dwellings	60.2%	84.3%
Owned dwellings	21 980	4135
Age of dwellings	26.6% before 1946	45% before 1946

(Source: Adapted from City of Vancouver, n.d.a and City of Vancouver, n.d.b, drawn from 2001 census data)

Table 2 compares 2001 and 2006 census data on the percentage of the labour force aged 15+ in Kitsilano and Strathcona, in addition to the percentage of the total population of each neighbourhood, that is classified under Statistics Canada's occupational code F (occupations in arts, culture, recreation, and sport). While these figures must be interpreted with caution given the inclusion of recreation and sport, which may be only indirectly linked to the focus of this paper on artists, a slight drop in the percentage of both the total population and the labour force aged 15+ is visible in Kitsilano.

Table 2. Selected Labour Force Indicators for Kitsilano and Strathcona

Kitsilano	2001	2006
Labour force 15+ as % of total population	70.93	69.69
Code F (occ. in art, culture, rec. and sport) as % of labour force 15+	10.13	9.79
Code F (occ. in art, culture, rec. and sport) as % of total population	7.19	6.82
Strathcona	**2001**	**2006**
Labour force 15+ as % of total population	40.41	43.08
Code F (occ. in art, culture, rec. and sport) as % of labour force 15+	7.19	9.47
Code F (occ. in art, culture, rec. and sport) as % of total population	2.90	4.08

(Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada, Profile for Census Metropolitan Areas, Tracted Census Agglomerations and Census Tracts, 2001 Census and 2006 Census)

In contrast to Kitsilano, Strathcona has only recently begun to display signs of gentrification (Blomley, 2005). Table 2 shows that there has been a rise in the percentage of Strathcona's total population and labour force aged 15+ that is classified under code F in recent years, which could potentially point to an increased proportion of people in arts-related professions moving to the area (although, as mentioned above, the figures should be interpreted with caution). As suggested by its low average family income and large proportion of low-income households (see Table 1), its residents are generally less wealthy than those in Kitsilano. Strathcona has a history of ethnic diversity and shared industrial and residential land uses (Hardwick, 1974). As Vancouver's first residential area (Blomley, 2005, 286), it features historic and varied architecture, and its diverse built environment reflects and helps to

underpin its reputation as a strong but eclectic community. Part of this 'eclecticism' is the artistic reputation of its neighbourhood, as evidenced by the presence of myriad studios and galleries. Notably, the neighbourhood hosts the Eastside Culture Crawl, a mainly visual arts festival, each November. These features give Strathcona the kind of distinctiveness that attracts artists—but perhaps also middle class gentrifiers.

Methods

The purpose of this research was to explore how the process of gentrification affects artists' ability to sustain their livelihoods in two Vancouver neighbourhoods with reputations for artistic character. Gentrification may undermine these livelihoods, and the associated character, in various ways, of which we identify four. *First*, it may reduce the availability, affordability, and quality of artistic spaces (e.g., music venues, studios, and rehearsal spaces). *Second*, and closely related to the first point, it may reduce the ability of artists, most of whom are on low-to-modest incomes, to afford residential space in (or near) the neighbourhoods in which they work. We recognize that in some cases residential and studio space may be combined. *Third*, it may undermine the sense of community which attracts and sustains artists (including, e.g., local artistic events and festivals). *Fourth*, it may alter the aesthetic qualities of the built environment that helped to attract an artistic community in the first instance.

To identify the significance of each of these factors, we collected data from several sources. First, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with people falling into one or more of the following categories: artists, people connected to Vancouver's arts community, and neighbourhood residents. Our respondents were "Marilyn," a Strathcona resident and artist involved with the Eastside Culture Crawl festival; "Megan," a photographer living in Strathcona; "Madison," a writer who lives in Strathcona; "Amber" and "Emma", both Emily Carr design students living near Kitsilano; "Sara," an arts and culture magazine employee, and "Casper," an employee of a locally based music distribution and production company. All interviews were conducted in person, except that with Megan which was conducted by phone. We took written notes during each interview, and digitally recorded our conversations with Marilyn, and Sara and Casper, allowing complete transcripts to be produced

for these interviewees. Attempts to interview several artistic organi-
zations, and municipal officials, were unfortunately unsuccessful.

Second, we conducted two field visits in each neighbourhood,
taking photographs and video footage while passing through. Our
first visit to Strathcona involved extending our journey to and from
our interview with Marilyn. We photographed and observed the
built environment's characteristics, particularly artistic features and
signs of gentrification such as older houses under renovation. Having
examined this evidence, we returned four days later to participate
in an educational walk led by Madison. On our initial Kitsilano visit
we explored residential areas around Macdonald Street, and walked
down West Fourth from Macdonald to Burrard Streets. We collected
photographs and attended to the same features (artistic touches
and signs of gentrification), paying particular attention to the retail
and built environment aesthetic of West Fourth, and visited some
businesses to sense their connection to Kitsilano's identity. During
our second visit two days later, we photographed and observed
artistic and gentrification-related characteristics in residential areas
around Arbutus Street.

Results

The Availability, Affordability, and Quality of Artistic Spaces

Our respondents were generally of the view that whatever artistic
space is available in Kitsilano is expensive (but well-managed); as a
result, it was generally agreed upon that Kitsilano's artistic spaces
exceed most artists' financial reach. Amber remarked that Kitsilano
is "all done," referring to the limited availability of artistic space.
Emma felt that Kitsilano's galleries are "yuppie" and not very
approachable for artists. In terms of quality, Emma identified a lack
of "interesting" studios.

As gentrification decreased the affordability and availability of
spaces in Kitsilano, Strathcona received an influx of artists seeking
cheaper alternatives (Ley, 2003). However, this availability is
decreasing. For instance, a building at 190 Prior Street (formally 901
Main Street) that has been an artists' studio space for 25 years is
slated for condominium development (Rossi, 2007). According to
Marilyn, this studio space, although situated just on the western
border of the Strathcona neighbourhood, is a landmark for many
artists and events in the community. Marilyn predicts that similar
situations, indicating a decrease in availability of artistic space in
addition to rising demand for living space, will arise as gentrification

continues. The aged buildings in Strathcona have advantages and disadvantages in terms of quality. Structures that were built before the implementation of uniform building standards can provide unique features that facilitate creative production; Megan's studio, for instance, features 12-foot ceilings that allow her to install proper lighting for her photographs. However, old buildings may also feature inadequate infrastructure (e.g. old wiring and deteriorating ceilings), and may require repairs that most artists cannot afford.

Affordability of Residential Space

Space availability became a concern as the perceived artistic and hippie character of Kitsilano drew people to the area in the late 1960s (Ley, 1996). Gentrification in the next decade saw the loss of rental space to demolition and condominium development (Ley, 1996). These factors are likely implicated in Kitsilano's current high housing prices (see Table 1). Overall, our respondents conveyed that Kitsilano is largely neither affordable nor accessible to artists (except commercially successful ones), and that its gentrified yuppie quality makes its atmosphere undesirable for many artists.

Although Strathcona is quite affordable by comparison, our respondents indicated that gentrification is threatening this. Cathy estimated that an artist currently paying $500 rent for an apartment would likely pay $700 in a new space in the neighbourhood if he or she were to move. In terms of ownership, a three-bedroom house on a Strathcona lot 25 feet wide would have sold for $900 000 as of July 2007 (Gold, 2007). Megan purchased her home studio in Strathcona in 1986 for $100 000, and estimates its current worth at $1.75 million.

One local realtor and booster has estimated that Strathcona's housing prices will come to match or exceed those of wealthy west side areas of Vancouver (Gold, 2007). Considering the old age of many dwellings in the area (see Table 1), these high prices suggest a rising interest in renovating older properties, which as noted above is associated with gentrification. These rising prices are prohibitive for most artists, whose mean annual income lies 26% below the Canadian average (City of Vancouver, 2007).

The Sense of Community as Perceived by Artists and Other Residents

Most of our interviewees agreed that Kitsilano's artistic community is not particularly vibrant. They tended to feel that gentrification in the area has caused Strathcona and areas around Main and Cambie

Streets and Commercial Drive to attract more artistic activity than does Kitsilano. Emma and Amber admitted a love/hate relationship with Kitsilano as a yuppie community and perceived it as a place to start a family rather than attend art festivals or gallery openings.

In fact, several artistic festivals do take place in Kitsilano, including Artists in our Midst and the Bard on the Beach (City of Vancouver, 2008a), but awareness of such festivals among our respondents, including those who live in or near the area, was low. Casper conveyed a feeling that certain artistic festivals held in and near Kitsilano are somewhat artificial and undesirable, perhaps even over-commercialized. However, according to one of its organizers, the Kitsilano activities of the Artists in Our Midst festival (Kitsilano is one of three participating neighbourhoods in this festival; the others are West Point Grey and Dunbar/Kerrisdale [Rossi, 2008]) represent an attempt to create community ties similar to those in Strathcona and to expose unknown artistic activity in Kitsilano (Rossi, 2008).

Our field visits and interviews indicate that Strathcona's artists have established a vibrant community. In the 1980s, a group of artists initiated the Strathcona Community Gardens, now used by the City as a model of community involvement (Madison; see Figure 2). In the early 1990s, artists helped begin a volunteer patrol to reduce drug debris and prostitution in a now-popular park (Marilyn); this initiative recalls Ley's assertion that artists make run-down areas palatable for middle class gentrifiers (2003, 191). The Eastside Culture Crawl is also a point of pride for the residents we interviewed. The festival features public viewings of local artists' studios, as well as a recently added concert spotlighting musicians, dancers, and poets. However, with 10 000 attendees, the increased attention the festival brings to Strathcona may create backlash; during a visit to the neighbourhood, we overheard one person express a distaste for the festival's popularity that recalled Casper's impression of the inauthenticity of certain festivals connected to Kitsilano.

Interestingly, gentrification pressures may actually have strengthened this already-vibrant artistic community. Facilitated by the Eastside Culture Crawl's advocacy, the artists who have studio space in 901 Main have worked to secure an alternate building and an offer to use the ground floor of the 'new' 901 Main for artistic space (Marilyn). In addition, the Eastside Culture Crawl is focusing on increasing ownership of living and working space among artists to prevent displacement. In Marilyn's assessment, gentrifiers tend to be "swept along" and embrace Strathcona's artistic atmosphere.

Figure 2. Strathcona Community Gardens

(Source: authors)

The Aesthetic Qualities of the Built Environment

Despite the effects of gentrification, Kitsilano's built environment has retained a certain aesthetic quality that is reminiscent of the neighbourhood's countercultural roots. As a result, Kitsilano's residential areas demonstrate an interaction between its old artistic identity and its newer yuppie status. Low-rise condominiums, apartment buildings, and luxury condominiums are common, and their presence points towards the mature state of gentrification in the area. However, we also found evidence of distinctive, artistically painted "character" homes (see Figure 3) with personalized creative touches such as prayer flags and sculptures. These findings could indicate that, despite gentrification, certain residents still value expression of an artistic or counter-cultural identity through the built environment.

Changes in Kitsilano's built environment following gentrification are particularly evident on West Fourth Ave. In decades previous, as Kitsilano began to attract more 'mainstream' attention with the progression of gentrification, Fourth Ave quickly became an important landmark as businesses were increasingly drawn to the area (Ley, 1996, 186). Only 20% of goods and services outlets on the

strip in 1968—which included many counter-cultural retailers—survived to 1988 (Ley, 1996, 302). These important external markers of retail change influence the cultural identity and character of the community (Bridge and Dowling, 2001, 94).

Vestiges of hippie or artistic services remain in stores such as Zulu Records, consignment shops, and the Wired Monk café, which features Kitsilano-based musicians as performers. The well-known Naam restaurant is one of the few storefronts from the 1960s to survive this period of change, which is perhaps indicative of the extent to which the evolution of Kitsilano's built environment has evolved along with the social character of the neighbourhood[2]. However, our field visits revealed that athletic wear stores, ethnic restaurants, and personal health services such as gyms are dominant. These kinds of shops and services are important markers of an identity that middle class gentrifiers often aspire to reach through consumption—that of a person who values cosmopolitanism, physical and mental health, and trendy fashions (Bridge and Dowling, 2001, 100-105).

Figure 3. Houses in Kitsilano

(Source: authors)

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[2] We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to our attention.

Our interviewees suggested that many artists do not appreciate this sophisticated yuppie aesthetic, which is evident in the neon signs of West Fourth Ave storefronts. The frequent appearance of motherhood/maternity and children's wear shops on and near the street lends support to Amber's assessment that Kitsilano is a place for families rather than artists. Gentrification in Kitsilano has changed the neighbourhood's built environment to reflect yuppie values of personal care and trendsetting consumption—values which many artists may feel do not reflect their individual outlooks. This post-gentrification "yuppie" quality seems to make its spaces undesirable for many artists.

Strathcona's built environment is richly varied, with architectural styles dating largely from the early 1900s (Madison). The uniqueness of Strathcona's built environment, a major selling point for artists, is preserved in the face of gentrification by resident-written zoning that discourages the destruction of older, quirkier buildings in favour of restoring them (Madison). Furthermore, the high number of designated heritage homes in the area protects its individuality. Zoning and heritage designation have prevented large-scale construction of luxury homes and condominiums, such as that which occurred in Kitsilano (Madison).

Strathcona's eclectic buildings mirror its artistic identity with vibrant colours and displays. Artistic touches are common; for instance, one artist has created an installation outside her home that features household appliances converted to planters (see Figure 4) with the same installation referred to and analyzed by Blomley (2005). Despite these rich features of the built environment in Strathcona, Megan felt that its built environment has become less diverse, and its colour palette "trendier," as new residents arrive. However, the Strathcona Business Improvement Association and small businesses have approached artists to contribute to development projects (Cathy), perhaps indicating an advantage of gentrification caused by increased investment, from those artists' point of view.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has considered the tenuous place of artists in two Vancouver neighbourhoods at different stages in the gentrification process. Although Kitsilano displays certain artistic characteristics, gentrification has generally lessened artists' ability to support their livelihoods there. In Strathcona, gentrification has begun to threaten

Figure 4. Bathtub Installation in Strathcona

(Source: authors)

artists' ability to sustain their livelihoods, although community ties have been created through residents' efforts to prevent displacement. Our key findings are summarized in Table 3.

Whereas the built environment of Kitsilano has been transformed by some three decades of gentrification, Strathcona retains an eclectic stock of older houses that both attract, and help to support, artists. These houses are protected, in part, by heritage designations. However, such designations may ultimately support gentrification by attracting the interest of middle class homebuyers, and underpinning property value increases (Zukin, 1995), likely leading to the displacement of lower-income residents, including artists. Indeed, Shaw argues that "[p]reservation of heritage can be used as a deliberate gentrification strategy … with the 'cultural sensibilities' of middle class gentrifiers selectively shaping the resulting interpretations of heritage neighbourhoods" cultural character (2008, 1700).

Our research necessarily had limitations. The complexity and depth of the issue, and the geographical size of Kitsilano and Strathcona, restricted our ability to provide a thorough account of the effects of gentrification on these neighbourhoods' artists and artistic communities. Some of our sources also define each neighbourhood

Table 3. Summary of Findings

	Kitsilano	Strathcona
Economically feasible for artists to maintain presence	No – some exceptions	Yes – but declining
Artists' work disrupted by space concerns	Yes	Yes – increasing
Artistic community presence widely recognized	No – some exceptions	Yes
Artists included in perceptions of neighbourhood	Yes – past influence	Yes
Signs of artistic expression in built environment	Yes – subtle past influence	Yes
Unique character in built environment	Yes – selective places	Yes
Artists able to sustain livelihood	No – some exceptions	Yes – with concern

(Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada, Profile for Census Metropolitan Areas, Tracted Census Agglomerations and Census Tracts, 2001 Census and 2006 Census)

with slightly different borders, making it difficult to carry out direct comparisons. Finally, the scope of our research was limited due to the relatively short timeframe of the project.

We recommend that future research involve a broader variety of perspectives, including those of municipal officials, Kitsilano artists, and neighbourhood residents who are not artists. An up-to-date study comparing similar neighbourhoods in major cities such as Toronto and New York might shed new insight onto the experiences of Kitsilano and Strathcona, perhaps offering solutions for protecting artists' livelihoods from negative effects of gentrification. Inspired in particular by our interviews with Strathcona artists, we also recommend that artistic communities be directly included in policy planning for growth and change caused by gentrification. In an economy in which culture plays a vital role, particularly in urban areas (Zukin, 1995, 12-14), this topic certainly deserves deeper practical and theoretical consideration.

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