GENTRIFICATOUR: A JOURNEY TO DISCOVER THE FACE OF GENTRIFIERS

"Capitalism is a gentleman who doesn't like to be called by his name."
Bertolt Brecht

Skirting the issue

Quite often we hear about gentrification as a phenomenon which seems to be faceless and nameless. This arouses suspicions and leads us to wonder, where is the enemy lurking?

In the first instance, it seems pertinent to understand that *Gentrification* is an Anglo-Saxon term which explains the phenomenon of the elitization of English and North American cities. Their urban planning models in the 1960s were characterised by the differentiation between the central area of the city or downtown and the suburban and residential areas on the outskirts. It was in the 1970s when the real estate market began to shift away from this trend and started to develop a special interest in city centres, places where, coincidentally, the working class lived and/or which contained buildings intended for administrative activities. This speculative phenomenon, which entailed the expulsion of the residents of the neighbourhoods for the purposes of developing areas of interest, was called gentrification or "gentrification of the cities", which is its literal translation.

In European cities, this phenomenon commenced differently. Their historical models had very little in common with the Anglo-Saxon model due to the poor development of suburbs in them. This is the case of certain Spanish cities, where it can be perceived how the bourgeois city coexists with the suburbs. And it is precisely in these cases where gentrification acts, from the same logic, but with different strategies, where housing typologies and urban fabric imply other complexities. In the case of the U.S.A., the industrial loft occupied by artists is replaced by costly luxury lofts. In the Spanish case, the transformation is from the pre-capitalist guild house to luxury apartments for white executives and middle-aged bachelors. Attics become penthouses, and apartments must be compartmentalized into small-scale studios. In other words, a thorough transformation of housing and neighbourhood communal living is required to accommodate the new real estate market products.

These gentrification processes are at their core an exercise of material and symbolic dispossession. Their end results entail the expulsion of a population that has particular lifestyles, relationships and ways of inhabiting the social space of the city, to be replaced by something completely opposite and in an absolute manner. The new city agent who occupies these places has a class status and a lifestyle that supersedes what existed before, from a kind of romanticised resignification that is nothing more than a commercial cynicism. This is the reason why we are not only speaking of a material appropriation of their dwellings, but likewise of a replacement of the cultural and symbolic capital of the previous residents, incorporating other values associated with the new ones. This is currently known as a *hipsterfied* neighbourhood, namely, an urban space whose supposedly alternative cultural and consumption habits are based on aesthetic tastes that construct a forced and fictional otherness. This so-called "creative class", which benefits the system by proposing an idealisation of autonomy and freedom of employment, is actually justifying the precariousness of work and lifestyles in general. This new class is a post-Fordist evolution of the former figure of the artist, who functioned as a hinge for the entry of markets which, by generating this special desire for a cultural way of life in certain populations, facilitated a process of gentrification. Yet it is important to distinguish and point out that, at the outset of this type of urban transformations, the artist played rather a transitory role towards this type of process. In its consolidation, when the change of the neighbourhood was already concluded, these agents disappeared and were replaced by the

galleries, which is something symptomatic from the commercial perspective of art. Nowadays, it is the hipster with good taste who comes to consolidate these processes. This useful agent is incorporated into the already gentrified neighbourhood with his/her class and capital status that defines a way of life related to a model of city consumption. Therefore, the hipsterfication of a neighbourhood, namely, its contemporary gentrification, supersedes the more traditional gentrification where the art scene was the vehicle to meet the desires of the system.

However, if we take a broader view, we can confirm that gentrification adds several agents which render it possible and function as engines of change towards hegemony. There is no doubt that art and culture are the most visible and identifiable ones, but there are likewise other parameters such as the commercial character of a neighbourhood that leverage and validate this type of process.

What should always be borne in mind is that most of these urban procedures rely on the complicity of the institutions, which play an accelerating role in urban, real estate and social speculation. It is a clear example of the creed of neoliberalism, which is sustained thanks to the aid of all authorities. In this case, the administration discloses its real interest in urban planning, where the citizen is unprotected and preference is given to urban capital gains over the right of the city. The deterioration of public infrastructures, the elimination of services for senior citizens and/or for children or the suspension of basic social services facilitates gentrification to take shape and form. It is there that the material dispossession of a territory ensues. The urban mobbing to which city dwellers are subjected facilitates the exertion of pressure while making a success of the formula of buying cheap to upsell. This is the ABC of neoliberalism. An ideology based on the consecration of forms of domination, depredation and segregation based on basic concepts such as accumulation and inequality. In this formula, administrations function as guarantors of the system and gentrification is a clear example of their domination. And these are the reasons that lead us to having an interest in knowing who is behind these processes, as this enables us to identify the enemy and generate an effective and radical resistance against the monster the current social and economic model has become, to which we are subjected. To do so, it is essential to characterise it in a specific, not abstract manner, given the fact that it specialises precisely in generating opacities that conceal the true names of power. For that purpose, it is important to know, for example, that in pursuit of a speculative process such as gentrification there are investment funds that have their registered offices in tax havens and undertake investments in offshore credits. A "feat" in engineering aimed at not disclosing who generates these violent practices of expulsion and dispossession.

From praxis

In January 2010, the Madrid City Council undertook an advertising campaign that consisted of the publication of maps highlighting the various commercial activities in certain neighbourhoods. Nine of the ten posters published corresponded to nine Madrid neighbourhoods and one to the commercial area of Triball, in the central neighbourhood of Malasaña (Fig. No.1). To our thorough surprise was the fact that a virtual area created by a group of entrepreneurs acquired the supposed category of neighbourhood, even if it was only for the purposes of this advertising campaign. This initiative shows the clear gentrification interests which the Triball company was promoting in the neighbourhood, in complicity with the city council. On that premise, we carried out several actions, one of which was a counter campaign based on the drawing up of a new fake map which replaced the Triball one with the same aesthetics, with another map that included the entire University district where Malasaña is located (Fig. No. 2). The substitution was undertaken specifically in several illuminated signs of the sector that included the original map (Fig. No. 3). In this reedition not only did we highlight the points

linked to the commercial activity of the neighbourhood, but we likewise showed different activities that existed there such as services establishments and stores, showcasing its diversity. These spaces were consulted beforehand as regards their inclusion in this alternative map, which reflected what the neighbourhood really was and not what the company wanted it to be.

This work served as the basis for the creation, some years later, of "Gentrificatour" (Fig. No. 4). Using the means of tourism, the story was subverted to take a walk with various agents through all the stores, housing and socialisation that had been lost in the Malasaña neighbourhood due to this progressive phenomenon of gentrification. The intention was to recognise this problem as a leitmotif for a collaborative documentation work which would create an archive or image bank of posters, signage and illuminated signs related to existing commercial and productive activities in the neighbourhoods, prior to their replacement. The aim was to create a time capsule that would enable an assessment of the transformations undergone in the neighbourhood and establish a comparative analysis of the effects experienced after the implementation of a gentrification process, to render them visible.

In the itinerary these substitutions were identified and truly experienced, beyond the discourse (Fig. No. 5). Their activation was a way of identifying this apparently invisible enemy, these agents which are there, disguised as transformers for the benefit of an urban space, affecting the life of a neighbourhood. Discussing what these devastating gestures entail in the city is a way to identify the neoliberal system head on, giving a face to our adversary. On this tour we saw how an old fishmonger's shop, which at that moment had already closed down, was transformed into a restaurant designed for hipsters and tourists, reusing the name "fishmonger's shop" as an exercise of symbolic appropriation (Fig. No. 6). This phony nostalgia is nothing more than the uncovered face of the gentrification procedure in all its aggression towards the memory of a neighbourhood.

Finally, we consider it relevant to carry out this type of action because our role as artistic and cultural agents, who take a stand against gentrification, is to identify those who take advantage and consolidate their forms of speculation, and denounce their methods of operation. We consider this path as the only possible way to visualise, from an aesthetic-political perspective, those responsible, their intentions and how they construct our subjectivities (Fig. No. 7). Furthermore, this type of exercise enables us to assume and be aware of our complicity with these processes and the contradictions dwelt therein. For *when muffins become known as cupcakes in your neighbourhood,* you will have to react and act.

Fig. No. 1: Madrid City Council. Triball commercial district map. Madrid 2010

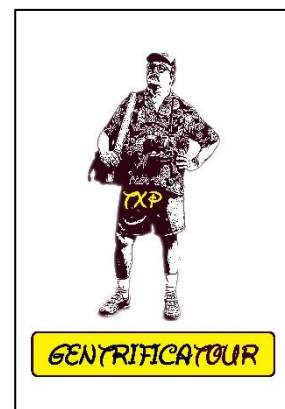Fig. No. 2: Todo por la praxis. Alternative map. Madrid 2010

Fig. No. 5: *Todo por la Praxis.* Gentrificatour. Madrid 2013

Fig. No. 4: *Todo por la Praxis.* Gentrificatour. Madrid 2013

Fig. Nº6: *Todo por la Praxis.* Gentrificatour. Madrid 2013

Fig. No. 7: *Todo por la Praxis.* Gentrificatour. Madrid 2013

Fig. No. 3: *Todo por la Praxis.* The original map is substituted for the new one. Madrid 2010

TODO POR LA PRAXIS:

TXP TODO POR LA PRAXIS is an artistic collective formed by the visual artist, researcher and educator Jo Muñoz (CL) and both architect and artist Diego Peris López (ESP). Their interests focus on dissidence as political forms of resistance which construct other possible imaginaries. They use collaborative practices to install spaces for critical thinking and agitprop, counter-advertising and visibilisation or *guerrilla* communication as aesthetic/political counter-narratives. In doing so, they seek to stimulate new transcultural subjectivities, as forms of emancipation and decolonisation of dominant thinking, based on research/production/action processes in both geographical as well as symbolic territories.
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