

# Gentrification Gone Global<sup>1</sup>

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By Michael D. Crane<sup>2</sup> ©2012

Gentrification is not just an issue in Western cities, it is a global issue. Take the Malaysian cities of George Town and Kuala Lumpur as examples. I met a shop owner, Johnny in the city of George Town. George Town was named as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008 because of its charming combination of colonial heritage and vintage multicultural shops. The streets of George Town are lined with old British buildings and Chinese shop houses built during the Art Deco era. It is the kind of place where one visit family-owned shops selling Indian linens, Chinese tea sets, and Malaysian pewter. Even the back alleys offer culinary treats sold from mobile carts. Once this quaint municipality was dubbed with the World Heritage tag, it entered the business and land speculators. Property prices rose by up to 40% in 2010.<sup>3</sup> A businessman from a neighboring country bought the whole row of shop houses where Johnny has his store and plans to renovate the whole block. This means Johnny's store needs to close for at least a year. Johnny does not have the means to move his business elsewhere and so this means Johnny's store *and* his home are in their final days.

The conversation around the topic of gentrification is happening in Malaysia as it is in America, except the term "gentrification" is rarely used. Instead, more positive terms are used like "urban renewal." A discussion of gentrification around the globe is nearly impossible to encapsulate in this chapter except to aver that gentrification is happening around the world and therefore cannot be written off as a purely western phenomenon. But it also needs to be said that the issues surrounding gentrification will vary considerably from place to place.<sup>4</sup> Land laws, urban policies, and degree of economic development will significantly affect how gentrification plays out in each city in the world.

In this chapter, as we examine issues of gentrification from a global perspective, we hope to achieve three things: push and stretch the definition of gentrification, articulate some of the issues and obstacles related to gentrification in the cities of Malaysia, and address opportunities and challenges facing urban dwellers of Malaysia. An accurate account of gentrification trends and issues around the world is not possible in this chapter. My goal is

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Michael D. Crane, "Gentrification Gone Global," in *Vespas, Cafes, Singlespeed Bikes, and Urban Hipsters*, ed. Sean Benesh (Portland, OR: Urban Loft Publishers, 2014), 111–120.

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<sup>3</sup> Tricia Yeoh, "Not Easy Housing Malaysians," *Penang Monthly*, August 2012, 37.

<sup>4</sup> These works demonstrate the diversity of issues related to gentrification around the world: Neil Smith, "New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy," *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (2002): 427–450; S. Sabri and A. Yakuup, "Multi-Criteria Expert Based Analysis for Ranking the Urban Gentrification Drivers in Developing Countries," in *Built Environment in Developing Countries* (Penang, 2008); Nilgun Ergun, "Gentrification in Istanbul," *Cities* 21, no. 5 (October 2004): 391–405; Laurence Crot, "'Scenographic' and 'Cosmetic' Planning: Globalization and Territorial Restructuring in Buenos Aires," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 28, no. 3 (2006): 227–251.

simply to broaden the conversation on gentrification by highlighting the realities in Malaysia's conurbations (urban areas).

Some say that gentrification is a phenomenon that has occurred primarily in cities of developed nations.<sup>5</sup> It's true that little gentrification has taken place in many cities in developing nations where there has been a presence of wealthy residential communities that never left the city centers.<sup>6</sup> These communities, often gated, are in close proximity to poor communities which provide service-related employees for the wealthy. The wealthy communities continue to change and modernize, but the demographics remain the same.<sup>7</sup> Around the world, even in developing nations, however, there are many cities that are dealing with gentrification issues.<sup>8</sup> As it occurs in cities in the United States, there are some general similarities in patterns and municipal governance. The differences around the world are more pronounced. For example, gentrification in the United States occurs partly as a result of a free market economy, whereas in other countries the totalitarian government might be the root cause of gentrification.<sup>9</sup>

## Stretching the Definition for the Global Context

A simple definition of gentrification is the transformation of a poorer community in the city center into that of a higher class community. This has been the trend in American cities because there was a stage when the urban core of many cities hollowed out due to suburbanization and deindustrialization. In cities around the world, this dynamic of urban communities undergoing dramatic change due to the middle class replacing the lower class is a reality, but the geographical patterns and land-ownership dynamics are different.

Kuala Lumpur (called KL by the locals) is a decentralized metro area with multiple central business districts (CBDs).<sup>10</sup> This collection of municipalities connected by freeways has earned it a comparison with Los Angeles (LA).<sup>11</sup> This more postmodern urban geography of LA and KL means that gentrification can occur in communities that are not close to a traditional city center but become gentrified for other reasons.

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<sup>5</sup> Neil Smith, "Gentrification, the Frontier, and the Restructuring of Urban Space," in *Readings in Urban Theory*, ed. Susan S. Fainstein and Scott Campbell, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 260.

<sup>6</sup> Peter M. Ward, "Mexico City in an Era of Globalization and Demographic Downturn," in *World Cities Beyond the West: Globalization, Development and Inequality*, ed. Josef Gugler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 179.

<sup>7</sup> The Southeast Asian megacities of Manila and Jakarta both demonstrate this phenomenon.

<sup>8</sup> By way of example, the following cities are experiencing gentrification: Cape Town in South Africa, Mumbai in India, and Shanghai in China. This representation just skims the surface, but demonstrates the diversity of global cities undergoing gentrification. A quick study of each of these cities reveals the unique contextual issues in each city. Cf. Gustav Visser and Nico Kotze, "The State and New-Build Gentrification in Central Cape Town, South Africa," *Urban Studies* 45, no. 12 (November 1, 2008): 2565–2593; Andrew Harris, "From London to Mumbai and Back Again: Gentrification and Public Policy in Comparative Perspective," *Urban Studies* 45, no. 12 (November 1, 2008): 2407–2428; Shenjing He, "State-Sponsored Gentrification Under Market Transition The Case of Shanghai," *Urban Affairs Review* 43, no. 2 (November 2007): 171–198.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. He, "State-Sponsored Gentrification Under Market Transition The Case of Shanghai."

<sup>10</sup> Ziauddin Sardar, *The Consumption of Kuala Lumpur* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 75.

<sup>11</sup> Peter J. Rimmer and Howard Dick, *The City in Southeast Asia: Patterns, Process and Policy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), xviii.

As cities stretch into urban agglomerations growth can occur along corridors that connect these pivotal points. The KL metro area has connected KL to the port city of Klang in the west and to the airport, twenty miles to the south. These corridors have witnessed considerable growth, which has displaced working class communities once on the periphery of the city, and now finding themselves in prime real estate.<sup>12</sup>

The same thing is happening in the southern tip of the Malaysian peninsula. Johor Bahru is a large city directly across from the island nation-state of Singapore. Due to limited land, the whole city of Singapore has experienced some of the characteristics of gentrification.<sup>13</sup> Enterprising Malaysians have recognized an opportunity to build a new development right across from Singapore that will offer international standard healthcare, education, entertainment, and housing for a lower price. A lower price than the Singaporean market is an exorbitant price for the local of Johor Bahru, thus they are getting priced out of their own communities. In both KL and Johor Bahru, gentrification is not impacting the old city centers as much as the urban growth corridors.

## Issues and Trends with Gentrification in Malaysia

### The Upside of Gentrification

The renewal of communities is generally a positive sign for the well-being of the city. As each community in a city ages, there is a need for old buildings to be replaced by newer buildings and old infrastructure to be replaced by newer infrastructure. Dilapidated and neglected buildings and blocks become nesting grounds for unsavoury activities. In KL, the old rubber plantation estate of Bangsar has gone through a lot of change over the last twenty years. It has changed for good reason. Bangsar's proximity to the business districts of KL makes it prime real estate for working professionals. The old rubber plantation is long gone and anyone depending on that industry for their livelihood has likely relocated. The need for nicer housing near the business districts is a positive sign for the economy of the city. Rebuilding higher density housing close to the urban core places less strain on the infrastructure of the city. Today Bangsar is the paragon of trendy in KL with thriving boutique shops, eateries and housing lots of artists and activists.

### Difficulties Presented by Gentrification

Near Bangsar is an area called Brickfields. It is the old train yard from the British colonial era. Over time, Brickfields became home to a bustling Indian population which provided labor for the train industry. Today, a walk down the streets of Brickfields can be a sensory overload with pulsating beats of techno Indian music, wafts of strong curries, and overwhelmingly colourful sari shops and Hindu temples. But this only tells half the story. Directly across from Brickfields is the enormous hyper-modern KL Sentral complex, the transportation hub of KL where buses, trains, and monorails come and go at all hours. This ever-expanding complex has luxury hotels, corporate office buildings, and enough coffee shops to give the whole city a caffeine buzz. Large-scale construction projects surround KL Sentral, on every side building luxury condominiums, shopping complexes, and more office

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<sup>12</sup> T Bunnell, PA Barter, and S Morshidi, "Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Area: A Globalizing City-Region," *Cities* 19, no. 5 (October 2002): 357-370; Ross King, *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya: Negotiating Urban Space in Malaysia* (Singapore: Asian Studies Association of Australia, 2008), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Singapore as a nation is only 687 square kilometers. By way of comparison, it is roughly half the size of London.

buildings. At first glimpse, this seems like a positive development. Underneath the sparkly new development is the reality that KL Sentral's development is bursting over into Brickfields. The old Indian enclave in Brickfields can no longer afford to stay there, and they are moving to cheaper areas in the suburban belt. The fallout is twofold: 1) the urban poor are getting pushed out; 2) the vibrant cultural production of the ethnic enclave is disappearing.

Most of the conversation surrounding gentrification in Malaysia is concerned with the potential benefits gentrification brings.<sup>14</sup> If negative consequences are considered, it is more often about the loss of character of the community or the potential of making the whole city generic. Rarely have I heard much concern over the displacement of the poor that happens as a result of gentrification. There is even sometimes an optimism that the poorer residents rise with their changing community. Research shows, however, that gentrification rarely improves poverty.<sup>15</sup> The poor simply move to other places. In the case of Brickfields, the poor have had little choice but to move to communities farther away. This means they are moving away from the job opportunities, public transportation, and a supportive cultural community. As a minority ethnic group, Indian families can benefit from living in a community that supports their language, culture, and religious needs. What remains of Brickfields is a "Little India" made for tourists but lacking authenticity and a vibrant Indian community.

## Responses to Gentrification by Community Advocates

The smell of fresh baked chocolate chip cookies is breaking down my willpower to watch what I eat as I sit in the café of Harvest Centre talking with Elisha Satvinder. Harvest Centre is in the middle of a part of KL known as Sentul. Elisha tells me that thirty years ago Sentul was infamous with a reputation for violent gangs, drugs, and alcoholism. Once a community built around a railway factory built by the British, it became a squatter community where mafia bosses were in charge.

Sentul is another KL neighbourhood that is undergoing drastic changes now. Elisha Satvinder and his wife Petrina are in Sentul precisely to help the poor and oppressed of KL. They discovered teenagers who were illiterate and had no drive to learn.<sup>16</sup> The people of Sentul have never had control over their land. Since it is now in the hands of developers, the old squatter communities have been torn down and large, low-cost apartments have been built. At first this might seem like a positive step for the people. But the process of moving this traditional community into impersonal concrete towers had a damaging impact. Even though a squatter community may have appeared tattered and unreliable, they had control over their space. Their community, on ground level, provided for community, safety, and opportunities for informal businesses (micro-enterprise). The high-rise apartments gave them private spaces separate from each other and public space that was no longer their own. Nearby vacant land disappeared, taking away cow pastures, vegetable gardens, and fields on which the kids

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<sup>14</sup> Emma Chong, "The Gentrification of KL - Around Town," *Timeout KL*, July 24, 2012, <http://www.timeoutkl.com/aroundtown/articles/The-gentrification-of-KL> (accessed September 7, 2012); Even as former Brickfields resident, Balan Moses, laments the changes of Brickfields, he says the KL Sentral development "augers well" for Brickfields. Balan Moses, *Brickfields: A Place, A Time, A Memory* (Kuala Lumpur: BN Communications, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Gregory D. Squires, "Partnership and the Pursuit of the Private City," in *Readings in Urban Theory*, ed. Susan S. Fainstein and Scott Campbell, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 244.

<sup>16</sup> King Wai Wong, "A Heart for the Poor," *Asian Beacon*, March 2011, 25.

could play soccer. What remains is a population with fewer economic opportunities and children with fewer recreational opportunities.

Now, Sentul is moving into a new phase. As I entered Sentul to meet Elisha, I passed brand new luxury condominiums and towering cranes building yet more. A sign on one new development said: “This is the new Sentul.” Just north of the financial center of KL, Sentul is now prime real estate for developers. The inclusion of a new creative arts center, swanky condominiums and new boutique shops spells trouble for the already troubled residents of Sentul. Just like those in Brickfields, many of the poor have moved to areas further on the periphery of the city. But not all of the poor have left. Many refugees from surrounding nations have taken up residence there.

Harvest Centre has remained through all of the changes. During such difficult times for people in the community, Elisha and Petrina have been able to provide help, encouragement, and even advocacy when needed. Harvest Centre has a school for the underprivileged children with a goal of breaking the vicious cycle of poverty in that community. Their vision is not a short-term drop-in and drop-out vision; rather, they are in it for the long haul. They are educating a new generation of leaders with strong moral character who can shape their communities for the better.

I asked Elisha about the changing demographics of Sentul and how it would affect their work. My question did not catch him off-guard; he has already been wrestling with these realities. Their school will need to provide transportation for those children getting pushed further out. They are also looking at new communities of the poor in which to invest. In this, they remain committed to investing in the least of these. But he also recognized that the wealthier, trendier new arrivals were troubled in other ways, particularly emotionally. Harvest Centre has started a counselling center in order to minister to everyone in their changing community.

### Community Responses to Gentrification

How do communities respond to gentrification? Elisha and Petrina demonstrate this well by their willingness to serve everyone in their community. Because of their long-term sacrificial presence, their relationship with the community is irreplaceable. People in communities that are enduring such transitions have few who they can trust. By staying, Elisha and Petrina become a source of trust and stability for those who need it. But staying is not the same thing as maintaining the status quo. Change is a reality of life amplified by the urban context.<sup>17</sup> Elisha and Petrina understand this and continue to adapt and adjust the ways in which they help the people of Sentul. Organizations like theirs must rely on an active citizenry of the city to provide continuous support so they can be most effective.

Second, community advocates need new initiatives in changing neighborhoods. It is during these points of transition that new and innovative community organizations can bring genuine help. Cities are centers of innovation, and, as such, community organizations must experiment and innovate as it reaches an ever-changing urban context.<sup>18</sup> These new initiatives will be most effective at engaging those moving into the neighborhood. In Sentul, for example, a creative arts center has been attracting artists and appreciators of art to the area.

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<sup>17</sup> Claude Fischer, *The Urban Experience*, 2nd ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 256.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilisation* (Orion Publishing, 2006); Joel Kotkin, *The City: A Global History* (New York: Modern Library, 2005).

Third, community organizations and social workers need to be ready to work with those who are being displaced into their new locations. This will involve organizing and establishing new organizations working together for the sake of those arriving in each neighborhood. Other organizations will be needed in order to help those displaced by gentrification begin a healthy life in the new community. And, just like the reasoning for the new initiatives in the gentrifying neighborhood, the displaced urban poor will experience a loss of social structure and community. These organizations need to be ready to welcome and help those who have been pushed out.

## Conclusion

Gentrification is a reality. The vibrancy of urban communities will ebb and flow. Around the world, neighborhoods undergo types of renewal that end up pushing out the poor and the marginalized. Community organizations and advocacy groups cannot necessarily stop gentrification, but it can and must help everyone affected by such changes to thrive holistically (spiritually, socially, and economically).

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