

A WARNING TO BARCELONA ABOUT THE DISPLACEMENT OF COMMUNITIES - ROCA JUNYENT

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One recently published article in the press had the thought-provoking title *“Super millionaires drive millionaires out of the best neighbourhoods”*.

It described the phenomenon affecting certain districts in London, such as Chelsea or Mayfair, where the 'traditional' elite are being replaced by a 'new' elite, made up of foreign millionaires who have moved to the British capital. Although the phenomenon of gentrification has been discussed at

length by town planners and social psychologists, this additional step towards what we might call 'cool gentrification' is surprising.

The traditional model of gentrification is generally characterised by a dual effect. Firstly, the regeneration of areas or neighbourhoods in a city that had suffered a process of degradation – this could be for many reasons, from the obsolescence of the buildings to a lack of basic services, including the transfer of business and trade hubs to new and more modern areas of the city that have the infrastructure required to meet their needs. Secondly, the ensuing departure of the area's residents, whose income proves insufficient to handle the price increase that often happens to real estate in the affected area.

In the city of Barcelona, neighbourhoods such as La Ribera or Ciutat Vella are a clear example of such processes, which are often criticised for their impact on the indigenous, lower-income social communities for whom gentrification means, in practice, their exile to other areas of the city that ordinarily display a level of degradation even greater than that of their district of origin. However, the phenomenon described in the aforementioned article includes new and unique connotations. There is no doubt that the districts of Chelsea or Hampstead boast their own particular urban and social characteristics, but being rundown neighbourhoods does not seem to be one of them. This is, therefore, a 4.0 gentrification model, where the traditional urban and real estate regeneration seems to have been cast aside and replaced with one single effect: that of class replacement, that is, the replacement of local upper and middle classes by multimillionaire immigrants.

From among the many discussions this situation might give rise to, two issues are of particular interest. The first has to do with the concept of identity and perception of belonging, and the impact that the entire gentrification process has thereon. Taking into account that one of the attractions for such super-millionaire immigrants when taking up residence in the districts of Hampstead, Chelsea or Mayfair is the possibility of becoming part of London 'society' (in short, to acquire status by reason of residence and be identified and recognised as one more member thereof), the very "success" of the process creates a boomerang effect, as the mass replacement of local residents by foreign investors ends up thwarting that initial aim, so that the desired immersion into high society ends up creating a ghetto of wealthy immigrants who are kept at arm's length and viewed with a certain reserve by the establishment.

The second issue that is worth highlighting is related to what we might call "the domino effect". Naturally, the local residents who are being "displaced" towards outlying neighbourhoods bring change and improvement to their new residential locations, as they seek to bring about the conditions they enjoyed in their original districts that are absent (or insufficient) in the destination neighbourhoods. Consequently, what we have called 'cool gentrification' (or of simple substitution of social classes) triggers a subsequent process of traditional gentrification, each one being driven by those who have been forced to migrate due to the pressure of classes that are financially more powerful. Nevertheless, in most of these cases the effect associated with the regeneration of rundown areas is attenuated, or directly replaced, by simple improvement or extension of services already in place.

Those committed to keeping a close watch on this new phenomenon would be advised to consider the suggestion made by Ildefons Cerdà, for whom the interrelation of different social classes not only in same area, but in same building (from the bourgeoisie residing on the main floor to the concierge of the building in the loft) was a value to be protected rather than an abnormality to be avoided.

Roger Pla Madrid is a lawyer at Roca Junyent. He can be contacted at r.pla@rocajunyent.com