GENTRIFICATION: IS IT POSSIBLE TO AVOID IT?

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Abstract

The conservation of urban areas is nowadays part of the urban policies of the majority of cities. The framework of this subsection of the conservation of cultural property is made of a complex structure of principles, guidelines and standards. The production of this basic system is a result of a long discussion that includes the assessment of paradigmatic and/or polemic issues. This paper aims to examine one of these controversial issues: the concept of gentrification, which is regarded as the displacement of indigenous people in urban conservation plans. The focus of this analysis is the effectiveness of what the international conservation documents recommend about this topic.

This work starts with an explanation of gentrification by the specialized conservation literature, which includes the international charters, official guidance, practices, thoughts and views of individuals. Contributions from urban investigations especially related to urban segregation are also analyzed. Afterward, especial attention is dedicated to the antagonisms between two representative experiences: the revitalization of Bologna City Centre and the Marais region (Paris). An analysis of the secondary sources about the persistence of gentrification, even after publication of the international documents correlated with this theme, begins the next section, which also includes the study of Covent Garden (London), SoHo (New York), Pelourinho (Salvador) and Bairro Alto (Lisbon) conservation schemes.

Alternatives to avoid gentrification are approached in the last part of the work. Some proposals are contemplated despite perception of the extent of this problem’s complexity and complications. It is presumed that it is possible to impede displacement by strategies that prioritize solution of the social and economic deficiencies of the places vulnerable to this phenomenon. It is concluded that the theoretical, methodological and practical implications of gentrification demand the elaboration of a specific international document of conservation.

Key words: Conservation, urban areas, gentrification

1. Introduction: Implication of gentrification

Physical, economic and social revitalization have become the main conceptual categories that comprise the theoretical and methodological framework of the conservation of urban areas. However, throughout the discussions that structure the thinking and practice of conservation, certain predominance is perceived of approaches and actions that privilege morphological and technical aspects.

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In the field of physical revitalization, the outstanding investigations approach the insertions of new physical structures (mainly buildings) in protected urban contexts. In 1996, the relevance of this theme motivated organization of an international meeting at the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies of York University, England. The texts presented by Robert Adam, Jukka Jokilehto, Paul Vellut, Sherban Cantacuzino, among others, were revised for the publication, ‘Context New Buildings in Historic Settings’ edited by John Warren, John Worthington and Sue Taylor (1998).

On another plane, the highlight is on the growing literature about the economic aspects of conservation. In this universe, the question of sustainable conservation becomes evident, above all upon optimization of the economic structure of the protected urban areas through enhancement of traditional activities and the inclusion of new ones. One of the basic references on this matter is the book, ‘Economics in urban conservation’ by Nathaniel Lichfield (1988).

The social aspects of urban area conservation occupy a secondary position in the specialized literature. This fact, however, is the object of criticism on the part of some authors, like D. D. Rypkema (cited in Tiesdel, Oc and Heath 1996, 209), who affirms that "people and economic activity, not paint and plumbing fixtures, ultimately add economic value."

In the works that present evidence of the social issue, the concept of gentrification, generically understood as displacement of indigenous people in conservation schemes, is treated without depth. On the other hand, in urban investigation in general, the intra-urban population displacements caused by disputes over privileged locations are more emphasized. Various authors, among whom are Carlos Nelson Ferreira dos Santos (1980), Mauricio Abreu (1987), Adalto Cardoso and Luis César de Queirós Ribeiro (1996), report compulsory displacements, or those induced by residents who are victims of urban renewal triggered by public power and/or the property market.

The revitalization of Marais, a protected 126-hectare region situated in central Paris, has been transformed into the defining point in the discussions on gentrification in urban area conservation. The plan was begun in 1967 and extended till the end of the 70s. The interventions carried out led to profound modifications in the physical, social and economic structures of the place. A vast scheme was undertaken involving resettlement of residents, commercial establishments and service providers, above all those of low income and small scale, settled in the region for several generations. Five hundred and thirty six housing units were affected. On this fact, Roger Kain (1981, 221) comments that "it is inconceivable that restoration work of this type, equally disruptive in social terms as urban renewal, could be carried out without considerable social displacement. The problem is that for the overwhelming majority, the displacement is going to be permanent."

The gentrification also affected those who, in some way, resisted and remained in Marais. Rents that had averaged around 200 francs increased to about 1,500 francs. Traditional activities were seriously affected in the same manner, despite the concern of Société d’Economie Mixte pour la Restauration du Marais - SO.RE.MA. to keep them in place. These facts induced A. Dobby (cited in Tiesdel, Oc and Heath 1996, 106) to state that "there has been criticism that conservation in France and, especially in Paris, was having a similar effect to Haussmann’s clearances under the Emperor Louis Napoleon, in that the working classes are again driven to the periphery through loss of accommodation and increased rents."
The rehabilitation of the Bologna city centre, Italy, contrasts with the Marais plan. In Bologna, an array of interventions was used that was more in keeping with the integrity and authenticity of the protected group of buildings and public spaces. Aspects of public health, inhabitability, accessibility, permeability, population density control and improvement in the condition of collective social facilities were also taken into account. However, the innovations were concentrated in the active participation of the local community, administrative decentralization and the social value of urban property which prevail over its market value.

The conservation of Bologna city centre counted on a complex financial structure that involved public grants allocated to conservation of the cultural heritage, housing and agreements with the owners of housing units for rent by means of exemption from taxes, granting rights of use and expropriations. The interdisciplinary scope of these proposals anticipated the concept of integrated conservation that would be formulated afterwards in 1975 in the Amsterdam Declaration, in the Congress of European Architectural Heritage organized by the European Council, in the European Architectural Heritage Year 1975 (see Cury 2000, 199-210). However, according to Adriano La Regina (1982, 50), the full dependence on public subsidies was the object of much criticism on the part of the specialized literature due to the detriment inflicted on the sustainability of the entire scheme.

Marais and Bologna have become paradigmatic experiences of urban area conservation with many quotations and publications in the specialized literature. They have also been transformed into references for plans with respective focuses that are similar, above all, in the social sphere, and especially in relation to the effects of conservation on the quotidian of the protected urban areas.

The results of these discussions served as the basis for the formulation of international documents for conservation of urban areas. The first to approach the theme of gentrification, but without clearly defining this concept, was the Nairobi Recommendation, 1976, of UNESCO, which, in article 46, suggests that "it is most important that safeguarding measures should not lead to a break in the social fabric." The Petrópolis Charter, 1987, of the Brazilian ICOMOS, deals with displacement in an indirect manner as it valorizes the social indicators in the definitions of the conservation strategies via the consolidation of citizenship, reappropriation policy for urban space, community participation and democratic administration of the city. In the Washington Charter, also issued in 1987 by the ICOMOS General Assembly these proposals are limited to preservation of the demands of property owners, residents and those who live and work in historic towns and districts.

In the specialized literature, the basic references of Nathaniel Lichfield (1988) and Peter Larkham (1996) make brief, generic comments on gentrification. On the other hand, Donald Appleyard (1979, 30-31) states that

"Another "solution" to the difficulties of financing historic and physical conservation is to allow the private market to rehabilitate the housing. It usually means a middle or upper class invasion of a lower class neighbourhood. The British

2 - In the view of Françoise Choay (2001, 223), this document "continues to be the presentation of motives and more complex argumentation in favour of non-museum treatment of the contemporary urban tissue"
label this process by the deceptively quaint expression, "gentrification". It is a common phenomenon in European cities and is beginning to spread in the United States.

Tiesdell, Oc and Heath (1996, 42) complement this definition by Appleyard, citing that

Restructuring entails changing the economic functions within the historic quarter. Thus, unless the buildings are empty, restructuring also entails the displacement of the existing functions and users. This is the process known as gentrification. In all instances the mechanism is similar: building owners and other landlords seek to increase or maximize their profits by trying to attract higher value uses and/or tenants able to pay higher rents. Displacement is sometimes regarded as undesirable because part of a historic quarter's sense of place derives from its functional character.

As much the international documents as the approaches of the aforementioned authors, describe the causes and consequences of gentrification in a superficial manner. Donald Appleyard (1979, 31) comments "gentrification has not yet been studied systematically." In reality, gentrification is a consequence of one of various facets of urban segregation in cities, and these are discussed in greater depth in urban investigation works.

Segregation is derived from a dispute over locations to be fought among social groups or among social classes - dispute over the best place to live, work and have fun, besides overall privilege of enjoying better services (Sampaio 2002, 68). Dispute regarding residential places is one of the main factors inducing urban segregation. Demand for housing also distinguishes locational advantages determined by greater or less access to transport, sewage systems, running water, lighting and electricity grids, etc. Dispute for these locations generate property speculation the favours the better-off, which are able to afford housing of a satisfactory standard. This situation is also replicated in the case of properties to let. According to Singer (cited in Sampaio 2002, 69), the element "prestige" tends to segregate the rich from the middle classes.

Urban Space is characterized by Adauto Cardoso and Luiz Cesar de Queiroz Ribeiro (1996, 82) as ‘an arena where differentiated interests are confronted in a struggle for appropriation of benefits in terms of income generation as well as gains of a commercial or productive nature, and also in terms of better living standards - both material and symbolic ones.’ In this struggle for space, these authors identify the following agents: property owners; estate agents, developers, investors, construction professionals; concessionaires of public services (mainly transport) and middle class individuals who seek to maintain or to improve the standards of these dwellings, reproducing and amplifying social distancing between them and the poorer stratum. Cardoso and Ribeiro also stress that poorer strata, which are victims of their insertion into the process of production and distribution of social wealth, are placed amongst these agents. They also highlight that the idea of a city as an arena and object of struggle should not be confused with the liberal vision that conceives society as a result of dispute processes amongst groups of diverse interests, but equal in origin, and the State as arbiter of conflicts. Cardoso and Ribeiro (1996, 82), in fact, stress that the social field is divided among agents, who, by retaining differentiated positions in the production and distribution of social wealth amalgamated in the city, express the polarization of society in a more or less explicit or immediate way.
Evaluation of works on urban investigation identifies two main agents of change: the State and the real estate sector, represented by developers, investors, estate agents, construction and design professionals, etc. Their role in defining urban spaces is a central theme in several investigations. Jean Lojkine (1981) and Mauricio Abreu (1987), for instance, explore aspects of the preponderant role of the State in defining urban policies, and in direct or indirect interventions on urban space. Both propose that States had allied themselves to financial and industrial groups in order to express their interests and to legitimize their actions. Their presence and distribution among city urban structures is a direct consequence of both State action as well as State omission (i.e. by favouring investments and developments in areas where a financial return on capital invested was guaranteed). Other distinctive features of State action highlighted by Abreu and Lojkine are distribution policies for urban infrastructure and collective facilities, as well as rigid mechanisms for controlling production of urban space (projects of urban renewal and urban regeneration regulated by elitist urban policies).

These disputes for urban space, driven by the actions of the agents discussed above, cause significant alterations in the physical, social and economic structure of protected urban areas, which are inserted into the urban context described. In particular, they adversely affect the social diversity, whose preservation is emphatically defended by the cited international documents on urban area conservation.

2. Persistence of gentrification

The revitalization of Marais is the first case of international repercussion of gentrification in the conservation of urban areas. Bologna is also a pioneer in the references contrary to gentrification, despite subsequently presenting this problem, as will be approached below. Both experiences influenced subsequent plans. Marais is replicated in the revitalization of the Pelourinho, in the city of Salvador, Brazil, and Bologna is used as source of inspiration in the conservation of Bairro Alto in Lisbon, Portugal, in accordance with the analyses below.

After publication of the Nairobi Recommendation by UNESCO in 1976, the persistence of gentrification was perceived in the renowned experiences of conservation in Covent Garden (London), SoHo (Nova York), Venice, Pelourinho (Brazil) and even in Bologna. It is opportune to highlight that documents approved in the general assemblies of UNESCO, according to Jokilehto (1996, 64) "result from a consultation of experts and Member States, and, therefore, they reflect the needs identified by the States themselves. Each time a convention or recommendation is prepared it is adopted by a representational organ of the institution concerned." However, below, Jokilehto states that "recommendations and/or charters remain rather moral guidelines or an invitation to implement corresponding measures in national legislations and norms. At the practical level, such documents should be taken as guidelines when defining standards for conservation treatment." Therefore, it can be correctly enquired as to why gentrification has persisted in these experiences, as England, the United States, Italy and Brazil are Member States of UNESCO.

At the end of the 60s and the beginning of the 70s, Covent Garden, situated in central London, had urban renewal proposals with implications detrimental to the integrity of the whole region. In that period, Covent Garden was mainly occupied by low class to lower middle class residents, and small shopkeepers. These inhabitants, along with amenity societies and conservationists, started to mobilize to remain in that place through protection of the architectural heritage, amply documented in the book, 'I'll Fight you for it! Behind the Struggle for Covent Garden', by Brian Anson (1981). In the mid-70s,
this movement had its first victory upon the listing of around 100 buildings. The final battle was won with the creation of the Covent Garden Action Plan, in 1978, which transformed the place into a conservation area. However, as of the 80s, Covent Garden was transformed into a "tourist district", which gradually promoted the gentrification of those who had mobilized for the creation of this conservation area. Goldman (cited in Tiesdell, Oc and Heath 1996, 211), a developer in both New York's SoHo and Miami's Art Deco District, comments that Covent Garden "is not interesting to me. It's the Walt Disney route. It's got not smell, no authenticity. It's the colour of beige, and I don't like that colour. There needs to be grit."

SoHo, whose denomination means "South of Houston Street", in Manhattan, New York, resembles the trajectory of Covent Garden. Featuring a significant industrial architectural heritage, the place was also the object of urban renewal proposals between the 50s and 60s. This threat stimulated the exodus of various commercial establishments, jeopardizing the urban dynamics of the region. Gradually, as of the early 70s, the warehouses were converted into alternative art galleries and lofts that were transformed into models for reconversion of this nature. The area, previously underutilized, gained urban vitality as of the mid-70s, attracting the attention of tourists and the property market, which then began to act in the region by means of speculative mechanisms. According to Tiesdell, Oc and Heath, (1996, 113), the pioneers of the SoHo revitalization were gradually replaced by more sophisticated art galleries and residents with greater purchasing power, which, together, began to vigorously attract bars, restaurants, cafés and tourists.

Of the Brazilian areas designated as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO, the project for the revitalization of Pelourinho (Salvador’s Historic Centre) proved to be the most controversial. The project plan was drawn up in 1991 and financed by the State of Bahia’s Government. The Bahia State Government’s objective was to encourage the restoration of the Pelourinho’s group of buildings. The project also sought the enhancement of public spaces and the improvement of the urban infrastructure. The plan was justified by the advanced physical, economic and social state of deterioration of the area which was occupied by low-income families who lived within areas associated with delinquency and prostitution.

Work started in 1992 and concentrated initially on Pelourinho’s oldest area (Maciel), which was also the area of the largest concentration of listed buildings. However, the most controversial aspect of the project was the displacement of the indigenous population, who were financially compensated but forced to leave the area without being offered an alternative rehousing scheme. As result, Pelourinho became a commercial and tourist centre, at the expense of the complete disruption of the traditional everyday life of the area. According to Ana Fernandes et al. (1995, 51) 91 per cent of buildings were adapted for commercial usage, but only nine per cent remained as residential units.

Francesco Bandarin (1979, 192) indicates that, at the end of the 70s, "gentrification was at work with different intensity in most Italian cities, including Bologna." Bandarin proceeds by affirming that "there has not been enough time to achieve such an ambitious goal as the renovation of the urban centre of Bologna and the reversal of the gentrification trend." Later, in the 90s, Tiesdell, Oc and Heath, (1996, 106-109) prove the effects of gentrification in Bologna through substitution of the population benefited in the 1969 conservation plan by another, more affluent, comprising, mainly, students, single persons and childless couples. The residential use, previously privileged, from this moment on, began to live with an abusive increase in service providers, Bologna University activities and commercial establishments aimed at tourism.
In the city of Venice, Paolo Ceccarelli (1979, 59) cites that throughout the second half of the 70s and beyond "landlords rehabilitate their buildings piecemeal. Through evicting residents or just raising rents, they first vacate houses, then fix up and re-rent them at higher rents. A slow process of gentrification is going on in Venice, while tensions and conflicts are rapidly rising among lower-income groups."

Contrary to this, data from the beginning of the 90s indicates that the experience of conservation in Bairro Alto, Lisbon, had obtained until that moment, positive results in relation to keeping the original low-income population in place, as reported by António Reis Cabrita, José Aguiar and João Appleton (1993). The conservation plan has similarities with that of Bologna, especially in the large scale utilization of subsidies for conservation programs for the Portuguese cultural heritage, as well as funds from the European Union, which covered around 65% of the cost of the works. However, recent information reveals that the gentrification in Bairro Alto has been taking place gradually, in a manner similar to that in Bologna, as cited by Luís Mendes (2007).

3. Conclusion: Is it possible to avoid gentrification?

This title could also be worded as follows: Is it possible to heed the Nairobi Recommendation, the Petrópolis and Washington Charters with regard to gentrification? In the former title, it is observed that, even after promulgation of these main documents concerning urban area conservation, some gentrification practices were still observed, and despite the commitment of the UNESCO Member States to adopting their guidelines. But, one wonders, are there gaps in these that stimulate gentrification? Tiesdell, Oc and Heath, (1996, 204-205) state that "in the process of revitalization, the functional character is often threatened by gentrification." Following this line of reasoning, these authors complement that:

Arguably, gentrification is an inevitable outcome of the revitalization of historic urban quarters that have deteriorated and experience obsolescence. Unless the existing buildings are vacant, there will usually be an element of displacement and gentrification, because as an area is revitalized it begins to experience higher property value uses and attracts users willing and able to pay higher rents. Gentrification is a term usually used pejoratively. What is important is the degree of gentrification and displacement.

Is the "inevitable substitution" of the native population, or part of it, by another with greater purchasing power in the revitalization processes, as cited by Tiesdell, Oc and Heath, really irreversible? Were the measures opposing gentrification proposed by the cited conservation documents, really put into practice in the plans for Covent Garden, SoHo, Pelourinho, Venice and Bologna, the latter as of the 70s? If not, why not? Are they feasible?

The issues raised above are, in fact, correlated with the urban segregation factors assessed in the preceding heading. In the conservation plans examined, conflicts of interest can be observed in two antagonic social segments: the haves and the have-nots. The second group is normally excluded and marginalized in the development models and respective urban policies. They cannot afford to bear the aggregation of value determined by the conservation because of the social disparities present in the cities, as indicated by Jean Lojkine, Paul Singer, Mauricio Abreu, Adauto Cardoso and Luiz Cesar de Queiroz Ribeiro. This problem is structural and of
difficult solution. It could be minimized if the UNESCO Member States assumed political and social commitments that would allow implementation of the recommendations in the heritage charters. Regarding these aspects, Francesco Bandarin (1979, 201) comments as follows:

It is possible to initiate and carry out a program of physical, cultural and social conservation if there are a political will to fight land speculation; a capacity for organizing the democratic participation of citizens; and an understanding of the historical, economic and social process that have shaped the city's structure. And it is possible to do it without special power, using only available financial resources.

However, the Bologna experience demonstrated that proposals fully founded on public subsidies are not sustained for a long time. It is important to also highlight the role of governments in the promotion of the welfare state, which has been revised since the 80s with neo-liberal models that have been dominating the economies of the main developed countries, as well as those of the developing world. Privatization of public services, expenditure curtailment for the setting up of social programs, drastic reductions in subsidies for housing, education, conservation of cultural heritage, etc., hinder the introduction of measures of a social character that could avoid gentrification. Theses restraints confirm the approach of Henri Lefebvre (cited in Sampaio 1992, 23) towards the incapacity of urban plans [and those of urban area conservation] to solve social disparities. According to Lefebvre, such problems are not eliminated by technical solutions. In fact, they could be overcome by a historic revolutionary process that would permit citizens, without distinction as to social class, to have access to the vital urban amenities (housing, public transport, leisure, collective social facilities, etc.), that is, to cater for the needs of everyday life.

In view of this article, will gentrification only be entirely controlled in the conservation of urban areas after elimination of social disparities? Probably, the answer is affirmative, but when will cities be free of urban segregation? Due to the current antagonic social scenario, should it be admitted that gentrification, as a whole or in part, is inevitable?

The production of urban space is not favourable to elimination of gentrification. Throughout the history of humanity, it has been detected that hegemonic groups do not usually relinquish their privileges. In some cases, they make concessions to some marginalized groups that are not always maintained, as can be observed in the conservation of Covent Garden and SoHo. Besides this, as highlighted by Jean Lojkine and Mauricio Abreu, traditionally, the State had allied itself to ruling groups in order to express their interests and to legitimate their actions in direct or indirect interventions in urban space. It is also appropriate to stress that the recent attributions of the State in the management and finance of social programs has been gradually reduced.

In this pessimistic scenario, is it still possible to think of avoiding gentrification through application of the international conservation documents? In the long term, those involved in the conservation of urban areas and the other social segments must mobilize for revision of the present socio-economic development model. The greater objective of this proposal is the reduction of social disparities that impede all citizens from benefiting from the city, and that hinder the local population, especially those of low income, in remaining after implementation of conservation schemes.
As an alternative, in areas with a social context propitious to gentrification processes, and of a social profile similar to the former situations of Marais, Covent Garden and Pelourinho, at this moment, it suggested that plans be adopted that prioritize social revitalization in detriment to the physical revitalization predominant in the conservation scenario. This strategy, however, cannot adversely affect the integrity and authenticity of the cultural properties according to the determinations of the Venice Charter. In this case, in physical terms, they would be privileged interventions of consolidation, maintenance and prevention that, at this moment, would enable habitability improvement for the groups of buildings, urban infrastructure and collective social facilities. Restorations, reconstructions and reconstructions would be carried out in the medium to long term in propitious social and economic contexts that could sustain them.

In the social priority approach, special attention would be dispensed to the projects that generate income on the lines of the proposals of the Rio de Janeiro City Council and the Interamerican Development Bank - IDB for the Favela-Bairro Programme (Shantytown-to-Neighbourhood Programme) - (see Prefeitura da Cidade do Rio de Janeiro 1995).

These ventures undertaken by the local populations would also be stimulated by occupational training programs and incentives to small scale enterprise, using as parameters the experiences of the Serviço Brasileiro de Apoio às Micros e Pequenas Empresas – SEBRAE (Brazilian Micro and Small Business Support Service). These Brazilian experiences would be compared and complemented by similar business ventures from other countries. They are mainly aimed at improving subsistence conditions for these residents and small businessmen so that they can sustain themselves and maintain the established conservation schemes. These plans would be improved by heritage educational programmes in accordance with suggestions from Horta, Grunberg and Monteiro (1999), and also by projects for social assistance specially aimed at strengthening the concept of citizenship in the quotidien of these people.

These areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve and enhance, as stated by Town and Country Amenities Act 1974 (Scottish Development Department 1987, 32), that present problems of a physical nature, and, principally, of a social and economic order, could also be classified as "areas of special social interest", in accordance with the diverse denominations of master plans for Brazilian cities that establish for these places social programmes and physical interventions for improvement in their quality of life (see Prefeitura da Cidade do Rio de Janeiro 1993).

The social pacts proposed by the Nairobi Recommendation, Petrópolis and Washington Charters, by Francesco Bandarin, Adauto Cardoso and Luiz Cesar de Queiroz Ribeiro (1996, 83) must not be abandoned because of the social polarization in cities and the predominantly intransigent posture of certain social segments. The moderate and administrable presence of new, affluent residents in the conserved urban areas must not be seen, in principle, as a threat or the onset of the gentrification process. Differentiated finance mechanisms for housing, commercial establishments and services would stimulate social diversity in these areas, as occurred with relative success in the case of the Merchant City, a conservation area situated in central Glasgow, Scotland (Jones, Colin and Patrick, Jim 1992, 124-144). It is opportune to remind that the costs of conservation must be shared by everyone, both inside and outside these places, as they constitute, according to the Petrópolis Charter, cultural heritage formed by a social production process.
The alternatives presented previously could be tested and assessed in protected urban areas vulnerable to the gentrification processes. If they are effective, they will be integrated into the current criteria of the international documents concerning conservation. However, the complexity of the theoretical, methodological and practical implications of these proposals, as set forth in this work, perhaps demand the creation of a new document aimed exclusively at the theme of gentrification, in the same way that the Washington Charter and the Nara Conference, in accordance with their preambles, complement the approaches of the Venice Charter on urban areas and the concept of authenticity, respectively.

References


