

2 SPATIALITY IN GENTRIFYING LONDON: THE CASE OF BERMONDSEY

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Introduction

How are socio-economic changes in the contemporary city played out spatially? In particular I am interested in how changes develop in gentrifying areas, where an influx of middle class residents to a working class neighbourhood brings shifts to the social composition, built form and consumption patterns. My research seeks to explore these changes in the urban landscape at a local and everyday scale, at the level of relationships between individuals, and between individuals and the surrounding urban fabric. For the city is not constituted solely at the level of formal maps, statistics and architecture – the ‘conceived space’ of Lefebvre’s ([1974] 1991) description. Rather it is constituted by the interplay between conceived space and the experiences and imaginations of its inhabitants. However, competing narratives seek to produce very different imaginations of the same city, disrupting any unity or cohesion of urban space. In a gentrifying neighbourhood, perceptions of urban space reflected in the built form and eulogised by developers can contrast sharply with the experiences of long-term residents. The potential for tension and conflict over how space is designed and used looms large.

This paper examines the interplay between spatial dimensions in a gentrifying neighbourhood.¹ It starts with a brief outline of gentrification in London with particular attention paid to its effect on the production of urban space. It then discusses how gentrification has changed Bermondsey, a former industrial area in South London. Finally it proposes Lefebvre’s spatial triad as an epistemological framework for analysing how changes to urban form due to gentrification are subject to tension and conflict. Through interviews with long-term residents and social agents involved in developing the area, it is hoped to develop a more interpretive understanding of how gentrification affects the production and experience of urban space.

Gentrification in London

Gentrification can usefully be defined as the ‘production of urban space for progressively more affluent users’ (Hackworth, 2002, p. 815). It typically entails the movement of middle class inhabitants to a predominantly working class area (in cases displacing the original inhabitants), and brings changes to its socio-economic composition as well as to the appearance and uses of its built form. How the process originates and develops differs between countries and cities. Even *within* cities there are local articulations dependent on place, locality and scale.

In London, processes of gentrification can be traced to the city’s fundamental reshaping in the post-War period. The Abercrombie Plan (1943) envisaged the outward movement of London’s population to locations beyond the Green Belt at the cost of a declining inner city population. Large-scale clearances and redevelopments were instigated to remove the persistent spatial concentrations of poverty, unemployment and ill health. By the 1960s urban decay and the threat of clearances saw a widespread depopulation of inner London, hastened by the creation of new towns outside the Green Belt. Those who were left included those unable to afford to move, including new migrants arriving from the Commonwealth who moved into houses once occupied by the middle class, but now subdivided and privately let (Hamnett, 2003).

It was in this context that gentrification later emerged, as working class areas started to ‘upgrade’ socially with the inward migration of middle class groups. Several reasons combined to promote gentrification. Firstly, inner city disinvestment established the economic gap between property values and underlying land values which makes a return to the city financially beneficial (Smith, 1979). Additionally a new cultural outlook among certain segments of the middle class predisposed them to living in inner cities and rejecting the model of suburban living (Ley, 1996). These pioneers saw the inner city as offering a space for them to engage with a kind of social diversity and heterogeneity

unavailable in the suburbs. They were modelling new forms of urban living by restoring townhouses in areas such as Barnsbury once threatened by clearances. Gentrification therefore challenged the foreclosure of inner city living envisaged in the Abercrombie Plan.

More recent manifestations of gentrification should also be seen in the context of globalisation and London's status as a world city. By providing centrally located, architecturally distinct enclaves, London can continue to attract the highly skilled middle classes necessary to promoting its functional role in the global economy (Butler, 1997; Webber, 2007). In one respect, space for the new class fraction has been created from the remnants of London's industrial past. As urban industry has declined in economic significance, so the buildings used for manufacturing have lost their original purpose. They have not become completely redundant however: 'the requirements of post-industrial production and consumption have led to a demand for new types of space, both commercial and residential' (Hamnett, 2003, p. 6). As factories are dismantled and wharves and warehouses disappear, so the industrial built form is refurbished to meet new consumption demands in world cities. These include cafés and boutiques (Savitch, 1988) but also accommodation in the forms of lofts and converted warehouse spaces (Zukin, 1988).

But there is a limit to the number of actual warehouses available for conversion; once this supply is exhausted, developers offer a simulated (and cheaper) new-build alternative, complete with exposed brickwork and 'industrial' facades (Tonkiss, 2005). As gentrification cycles develop and sweat equity is sidelined, heritage demands higher premiums. A pecking order emerges between those wealthy enough to access the 'genuine' housing aesthetic that reflects the industrial heritage, and those inhabiting 'infill replicas' (Lees et al, 2008, p. 119), a form of 'neo-archaism' as once described by Jager (1986, p. 88). In Britain, this trend has coincided with design policy encouraging new buildings to reflect the appearance of existing ones (English Heritage, 2000), providing support during planning applications for new developments that reference surrounding housing typologies as a kind of pastiche. The housing typology of gentrification has therefore changed: no longer just renovations of existing stock but also new-build developments constructed by major corporate developers (Smith, 2002; Davidson and Lee, 2005).²

Why the appeal of a (faux) industrial aesthetic? Zukin (1988) describes how loft-living is tied to wider processes of post-industrialisation. Partly through economic expediency, artists occupied the abandoned industrial relics and brought aesthetic production to previously manufacturing areas such as SoHo in New York and later Hoxton in London. This captured the imagination of young professionals, not only attracted to the large living spaces of lofts, but also wishing to adopt the bohemian lifestyle they had come to imply. Their migration eventually displaces the artist communities, who become unable to afford the high prices that demand from new residents stimulate. More recent examples of gentrification suggest that the artistic mode of production is no longer a necessary catalyst for changing an area. In the 'third wave' (Hackworth and Smith, 2001) of gentrification, the urban living template is sufficiently established and associated with creativity for developers to expand it into new frontiers without requiring artists' pioneering groundwork. Industrial or faux industrial buildings therefore rely on the positive image of loft living; their occupation associates the inhabitant with the creative frontier of an area. The act of choosing 'loft-lifting' becomes synonymous with a creative, unconventional lifestyle, regardless of the inhabitant's occupation.

If gentrification was initially based on the efforts of a few 'pioneering' individuals willing to mark out new middle class territory (Smith, 1979), it is now a process supported by commercial developers and, it is argued, encouraged by UK government policy (Atkinson, 2002; Lees, 2003). The Urban Task Force's (1999) and the subsequent urban White Paper's (DETR, 2000) vision of an 'urban renaissance' emphasised the increasing liveability of inner cities and the migration of middle classes from the

suburbs. The London Plan, the current spatial development strategy for the city, places considerable importance on housing density and extracting the maximum capacity out of developments as one measure to increase housing supply to the required 30,000 units per year. It also encourages the change of use of industrial and commercial buildings to residential uses, through what it terms 'new concepts of urban living' (GLA, 2004, p. 59). Whether this equates to state-sponsored gentrification is less clear. It could be argued that given the scarcity of available land in London, it represents the most sustainable way to provide additional housing while maintaining the character of an area. Nevertheless it has reinforced a return to the inner city as a space for residence.

It has also been argued that the search for diversity that originally caused gentrifiers to spurn the suburbs has been lost (Butler and Lees, 2006). Perhaps it has been replaced by an architectural aesthetic that visually (rather than behaviourally) marks a break from the norm. Gentrifiers literally and figuratively buy into the physical environment of the neighbourhood, however they frequently do so without practicing local social integration implied in the mixed community ideal sought by pioneer gentrifiers and contemporary policy makers, and instead tend to self-segregate (Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Butler with Robson, 2003).³ The irony then is that in the relentless search for distinctive buildings to convert to residential use, the variety of usage within urban space is threatened (Bentley, 1999). While new and restored warehouses may romanticise the past through their architecture, they may also demonstrate an indifference to the present (Shaw, 2007). They imply an uncontested transition between neighbourhood uses, detracting from local conflicts, whether over change to the spatial composition, or the displacement of long-term residents that gentrification can produce.

Perhaps a useful way to conceptualise the way gentrification processes change urban space is through Lefebvre's analysis of spatial distinctions. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre describes the constituents of space as a triad of what he terms conceived, perceived and lived space ([1974] 1991, pp. 38-39). Conceived space refers to idealised representations of space, encountered in the abstractions of plans, designs and maps. It is the dominant form of space, the realm of planners, architects and the active participants in the transformation of urban space. The result of its hegemony is the prevalence of 'abstract space' in the city: 'it erases distinctions . . . [and] endeavours to mould the spaces it dominates' (1991, p. 49). Perceived space relates to the material spatial practices of the everyday, the routines and experiences of inhabitants that determine how space is used. Finally there is lived space, a complex combination of perceived and conceived space. It is a representational space of subjectivity, where life is directly lived and imagined by its inhabitants and where they make sense of their surroundings. But it is also a 'counter-space' (1991, p. 349), different from, but capable of transforming, material spatial practices. It is potentially a space of resistance in which to think differently about how the city is shaped (Shields, 1999).

The three spatial forms are not wholly distinct but are interconnected – a 'logical necessity' whereby an individual 'may move from one to another without confusion' (1991, p. 40). However relations between them are not stable; how the three elements interrelate affects both how the material aspects of space are planned and produced, and how the social relations bound up in it are reproduced. What Lefebvre terms 'the right to the city' (1996) involves the reorientating of the production of urban space, with control shifting away from the state and capital and towards the city's inhabitants. It asserts two interrelated rights: the right to the future of the city (that of every social group to be involved in decisions that shape the control and organisation of social space) and the right to appropriation (the physical access and use of urban space, the right not to be excluded from spaces of the city or to be segregated into peripheral residential enclaves). The right to the city is therefore the right to occupy already existing space, and the right to produce urban space so that it meets inhabitants' needs – a 'differential space' (1991, p. 52) of diversity, in contrast to the homogeneity of abstract space.

For Lefebvre then, urban space is not only actively produced, but commodified (Merrifield, 2006). As an example, Lefebvre draws on the transformation of city centres, and while the term is not directly used, the process he describes is akin to gentrification. The city core has become a 'high quality consumption product' (1996, p. 73); an abstract space which once contained a diversity of uses, but from which its working class inhabitants have been isolated. The shift in city centres from production to consumption encapsulates the new forms of urban living that gentrifiers espouse. One result is 'ghettos of wealth' (1996, p. 140) – high status residential enclaves where the affluent can isolate themselves from their surroundings. Abstract space is 'where the middle classes have taken up residence and expanded', where they can find a 'tranquillizing' version of their social reality that conforms to their ideal of social diversity without fully engaging with it (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 309). This reading of Lefebvre implies that gentrification thrives in abstract space, where a new representation of space in the inner city is conceived for middle class residency in distinctive residences and neighbourhoods. It can also be argued that material spatial practices alter as new accommodation and sites of consumption are developed for incoming inhabitants. Similarly gentrification brings changes to the representational spaces in which inhabitants experience and imagine their neighbourhood. I would suggest that applying Lefebvre's spatial dimensions to gentrification can produce a more nuanced understanding of inhabitants' everyday experiences, and demonstrate how urban space becomes subject to increased contention over the right to determine the design of and access to its future form. Before exploring how Lefebvre's spatial dimensions interrelate in the context of a new development in Bermondsey, the contours of gentrification in the area should be outlined. The discussion then focuses on a specific development in the area – the re-design of Bermondsey Square.



Figure 1. Bermondsey within the London Borough of Southwark (Jamie Keddie, 2008).

The development of gentrification in Bermondsey

Located between Borough and Rotherhithe, Bermondsey is at the northern end of the London Borough of Southwark, currently ranked in the top 10% of most deprived boroughs nationally, with a concentration of poverty in the north of the borough (CLG, 2007). Its socio-economic circumstances are in marked contrast to the wealth of the City on the opposite side of the river. However the shortage of residential space in London's financial centre has heightened demand for housing in neighbouring local authorities, including Southwark. Bermondsey's proximity to the City means the results of the overspill are among the most evident in the borough.

Bermondsey has traditionally served as a self-contained and peripheral subsidiary to central London, with a heavily industrial heritage based around the riverside docks and nearby tanneries. With the post-War decline of its economic base, culminating in the last dock closure in 1969, the area followed a typical pattern of inner-city disinvestment, with few employment opportunities and rising deprivation. Bermondsey remained relatively unaffected by post-War migration, with the result that until recently the area retained its insular, white working class identity. It was therefore a rare example of an area containing a single community, using Massey's (1994) definition of its having a coherent social group. Its identity contrasts with Borough to the west, which functions as an office overspill area for the City, and Surrey Quays to the east, subject to transformative regeneration work during the early 1990s (under the auspices of the London Docklands Development Corporation), and which has high levels of new-build private sector housing.

The area escaped many of the worst effects of the 1960s approach to developmental planning. In marked contrast to neighbouring Elephant & Castle, Bermondsey contains few examples of run-down housing estates or car-dominated streetscapes. A significant amount of its housing stock comprises London County Council balcony blocks from the 1940s and 1950s, dispersed among former warehouses, factories and other remnants of its industrial past. It is these architectural remnants that, in the late 1980s, first attracted a certain stratum of the middle class to move into one of London's less salubrious areas. In many ways, Bermondsey conforms to the ideal-type process of gentrification. 'Urban pioneers' noticed the architectural potential of converting vacant warehouses into their own living space. Once the area had been sufficiently 'tamed' by such pioneering forays into a solidly working-class area, the second wave started with wealthier individuals eager to buy pre-converted warehouses and adopt the loft-living lifestyle in an area convenient for City-based jobs. Finally the area has recently seen more orchestrated involvement from developers whose large-scale conversions and new build schemes are targeted at the high end of the housing market. In common with many gentrifying areas, where industrial buildings have been converted, traces of their past are kept and indeed fetishised, whether as remnants adorning the building's façade, or in the new developments' names (The Jam Factory, Leathermarket Place). What was formerly a marginal urban space has been reimagined as exotic and chic in developers' invitations to gentrifiers; a 'frontier mythology' that can disguise any conflict with existing inhabitants over the shaping of space (Reid and Smith, 1993).

The result of Bermondsey's reinvention as a desirable location for residence is that it has received and is continuing to receive unprecedented interest from small and large scale developers in increasing the supply of residential properties. This can be seen in an analysis of Southwark Council's planning application register. Figure 2 shows the number of applications received in 2007 indexed to the population of each Southwark ward (the Bermondsey case study area is outlined in bold). It shows a concentration of applications in the north of Southwark at Borough and Bermondsey, as well as in the south, around the traditionally prosperous area of Dulwich. When only major dwelling applications (of ten or more units) over the past five years are considered, again indexed to the population size of each ward, figure 3 shows that Bermondsey and Borough received the most applications.

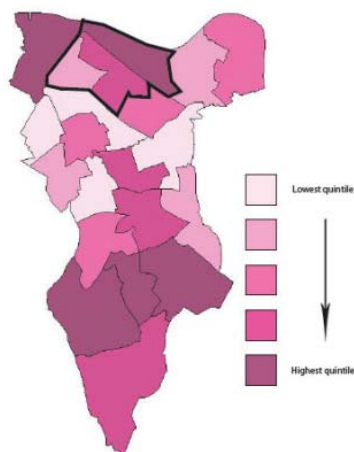


Figure 2. Number of planning applications per 1,000 people in Southwark, 2007

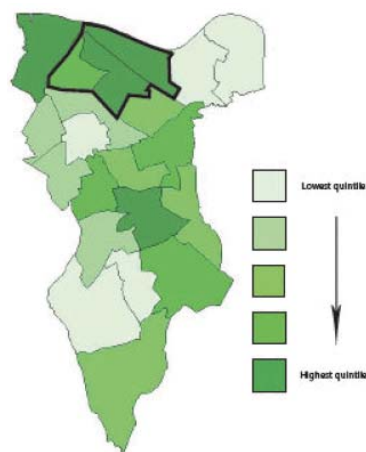


Figure 3. Major dwelling planning applications per 1,000 people in Southwark, 2002-07.

Data taken from Southwark Council Planning Register (2008).

The area's changes are neatly embodied in Bermondsey Street. A once bustling high street and a centre for leather tanning, during Bermondsey's post-industrial decline it mainly served as a location for small industries (including print works and distribution centres) and as an undistinguished thoroughfare for service vehicles between London Bridge and the Old Kent Road. In the mid-1990s small-scale property developers and professionals in the creative industries moved to the area, attracted by the cheap available space to create 'live-work' lofts for themselves, both in former warehouses and in the mansard-roofed houses where leather trade by-products were once manufactured. The trend was accelerated when, following lobbying from a newly founded community group, Southwark Council removed the classification of Bermondsey Street as an employment area and allowed new developments to have a 'live-work' element in building conversion. Previously empty industrial buildings were given a new lease of life as residential conversions.

However the loosening of planning regulations, combined with the new creative kudos leant by the incomers, soon attracted established property developers who transformed the area with larger residential developments at higher densities. Their interest was particularly spurred following the granting of planning permission for the gated residential complex, Leathermarket Court. The new, larger population around Bermondsey Street sustains a range of sites for gentrifiers' consumption: galleries, restaurants, gastro-pubs and boutiques. It is an area where the process of gentrification is producing highly visible contrasts between its former function as a working class area and its new role as an aspirational location for gentrifiers. In terms of the built form, this can be seen in the contrast between the social housing blocks bordering the street, and the warehouse conversions and new-build homes for the top end of the market. There appears to be little middle-ground in terms of the housing typologies available (Figure 4).

A further effect of gentrification in Bermondsey has been the requirement for (preferably distinctive) residential spaces, leading to a decreased variety of usage of space. This is readily apparent in the number of pubs that have closed and have been converted into residences. In the period since 1995, the number of pubs has halved, falling from 43 to 21, with change of use to residential being one of the main drivers (figure 5). While the signage and names are invariably kept, they demonstrate how what was effectively public space has become privatised by commercial pressures (Zukin, 1995; Madanipour, 1998).



Figure 4: Contrasts between housing types, Bermondsey Street (Jamie Keddie, 2008).

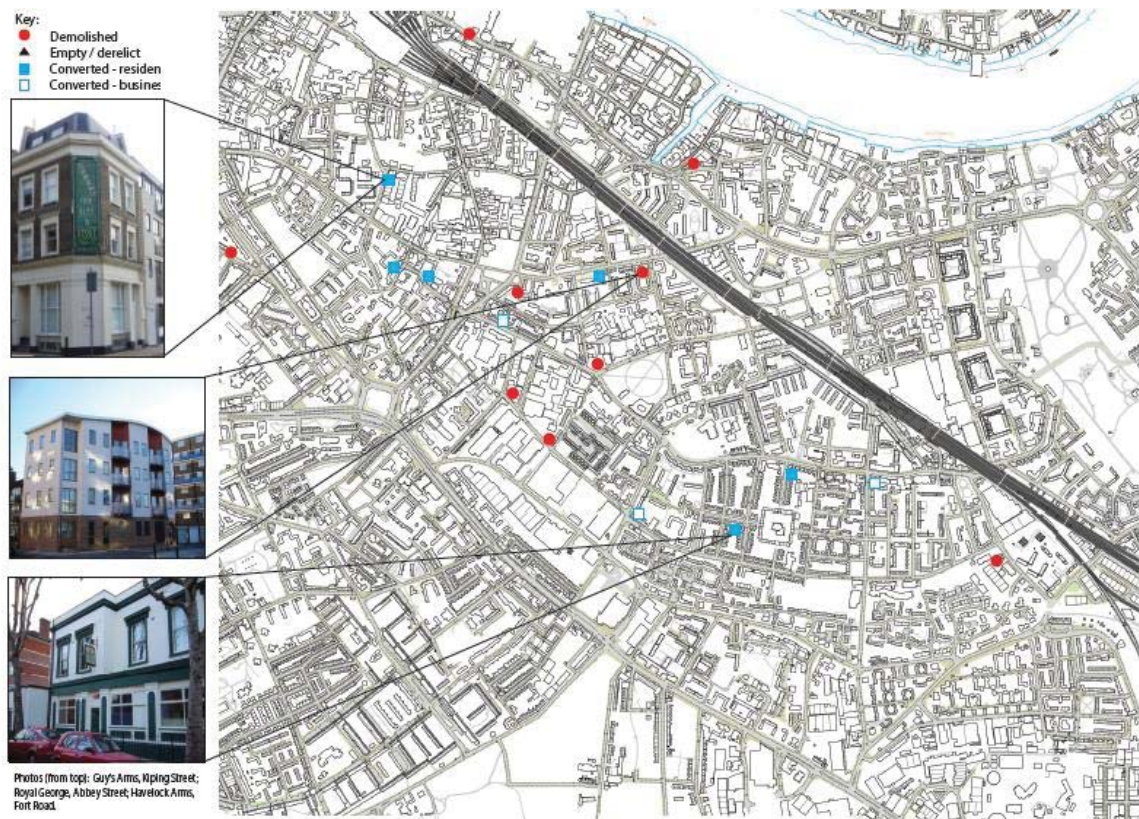


Figure 5. Closure of pubs in Bermondsey since 1995 and use in October 2008, compiled by Jamie Keddie, 2008 (Ordnance Survey data reproduced with permission of Ordnance Survey © Crown Copyright/database right 2008 An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service).

Contested futures of Bermondsey Square

The production of another form of urban public space, the Bermondsey Square antiques market, has been subject to protracted negotiation and contention. The Square is a £60m mixed-use regeneration project centred around a public square. It is located at the southern end of Bermondsey Street, and was completed in autumn 2008. In the context of gentrification it is significant both in terms of how the space is conceived by its developers, and how the local community responded to the development proposals with their own conception of the square's future.

Since the first plans for the development were submitted, it has taken almost ten years for Bermondsey Square to be completed. Partly this relates to the square's sensitive location within the Bermondsey Street Conservation Area, with listed housing along one boundary and a listed church along another. The Square is also the site of the remains of Bermondsey Abbey, a Scheduled Ancient Monument and home to the antiques market since 1948. The site was owned by Southwark Council and, when not used for the morning market on Fridays, the square served as a car park. Proposals to redevelop the market site extend back to the mid-1990s when the Council ran a series of public exhibitions on future uses for the site. Based on a development brief, a preferred scheme was selected in March 1999, with support from local community groups, from a consortium of Urban Catalyst, ARUP Associates and Atlantic Estates (the landlord to antiques traders at the market). The scheme was predominantly five storey and included a small cinema, as an example of a community facility bringing benefits to the wider locality, as well as a hotel and restaurants. The inclusion of Atlantic Estates was important in winning traders' support for the redevelopment. Their involvement in the successful redevelopment of the King's Road antique market mitigated traders' concerns that fewer stalls would be accommodated in a redesigned Bermondsey Square.



Figure 6. Bermondsey Square (Jamie Keddie, 2009).

Soon after the scheme was selected as preferred developer, Atlantic Estates dropped out and Urban Catalyst significantly revised the scheme, prior to submitting a planning application in October 2001. No consultation took place in the interim and the revised scheme caused considerable rancour among local communities. The height of the development had increased from five to eight storeys, the cinema had been removed, and the market traders would not all be accommodated on the site, requiring some of the 300 traders to locate their stalls on the roads surrounding the square. In their place were increased ground floor service and leisure units.

The scheme was objected to by English Heritage, which criticised the scale and massing of the development, and the fact that it made no significant contribution to the appearance of the Conservation Area. At a local level, opposition to the scheme was based on a perception that the proposal would overdevelop the site, literally overshadowing the Conservation Area and adding to the sense that the neighbourhood was being redesigned to serve the needs of incoming gentrifiers.⁴ As a member of the local area partnership explained:

We weren't against the idea of developing the site, it's unrealistic given the location and obviously the council has to protect their [financial] interests when disposing of a site. The problem is that you've got this going on in a very deprived community, with people struggling on benefits, when there's also very wealthy newcomers coming in, and you've got a real risk with a key site at the centre of the neighbourhood, that what happens is it adds to a sense of polarisation of the community, that's there's nothing in it for them in terms of improving the place.

A member of a neighbouring residents' association compared how past wealth in the area was used to benefit inhabitants through civic buildings:

If you look at buildings like the old [Bermondsey] Town Hall, or the Library, then there was a time when you got buildings that had a real purpose for the local community, that were well designed and people got a proper sense of pride from them.

Following a petition and lobbying of councillors by the traders' association, area partnership and local neighbourhood forum, Urban Catalyst conducted a renewed round of consultations. New architects were appointed and changes were made to reduce the scheme's impact on the Conservation Area and listed buildings surrounding the square. The height of the three blocks was reduced by one storey each, and the overall width and bulk of the building facing the market square was decreased. The community cinema returned to the plans and, in a concession to the heritage lobby, archaeological remains of the abbey would be kept visible through a glass floor in one of the restaurants, with access requirements written into the lease. It remains to be seen whether, following Gieryn (2002), the politics and interests that clashed during the design stage of Bermondsey Square will disappear now the building is complete. Most interview participants were reserving judgement until the building was fully occupied but some felt the changes levered by their opposition were fairly piecemeal; none of the concessions fundamentally alter the form of the scheme, for example, by providing social housing accessible to local residents.

The community groups who opposed the development clearly felt that the new space was not produced with their interests in mind. For what type of inhabitant then was the development conceived? One view is that new developments in gentrifying neighbourhoods are characterised by self-imposed isolation from the surroundings, indicating that urban identity is less important to gentrifiers drawn to new-build housing (Davidson, 2007). This is less applicable to Bermondsey Square: a degree of openness is maintained by the square being accessible from the three surrounding streets. Certainly as regards the marketing material on the scheme's website, frequent reference is made to the attractions of the wider urban space and neighbourhood. It suggests how the residential landscape is being produced to appeal to a specific inhabitant, one for whom the character of the area itself

seems of critical importance. The perceived vibrancy and creativity of the area is frequently referred to in promotional literature, whilst also reassuring prospective inhabitants that it has been rescued from its less salubrious past, 'Once the home of Dickensian villains, Bermondsey has reinvented itself and become the epicentre of an explosion of mouth watering culture.' The rhetoric of community looms large, 'Bermondsey Square won't be "the new" anything. Bermondsey Square is defined by its residents and businesses to create a real sense of community.' Nevertheless the new developments seem to offer a lifestyle based on an only partial immersion into the area's apparent vibrancy and edginess; the sites of consumption that are mentioned ('bars next to museums . . . a boutique hotel nestling next to a cinema') are, like the development itself, designed to appeal to gentrifiers' cultural mores. More traditional neighbourhood amenities that are unlikely to service the new residents are re-imagined as sites of local colour (including an eel & pie shop 'that has been trading for over 100 years!').

The representation of Bermondsey in this context reveals an imaginary of an urban village, with values and beliefs assumed to be common to a gentrifying social group. Just as living in a former industrial building attracts because of the imaginaries of loft living and its design advantages, so new development is marketed through the appeal of living in an area with the attractive features associated with gentrification. While area's diversity is promoted to enhance a development's appeal, this is in many ways an appearance of diversity. While 15 of the 57 residential units are designated for key worker, intermediate housing, they are contained in a separate block on the development (on 'an island set apart from the rest of it', as one architect involved with the scheme described it), limiting the potential for social mixing and suggesting that, at least within the development, the rhetoric of diversity conceals homogeneity. The new urban imaginings created by gentrification are detached from urban reality in what has been termed an 'architecture of denial of human diversity' (Shaw, 2007, p. 95). While the development's inhabitants are apparently drawn to the character and diversity of the local area, engagement with it is on their own terms, as another consumable that enhances their social distinctiveness.

The image of Bermondsey as a vibrant area with a strong sense of community is not necessarily one that would be recognised by some long-term residents, who in interviews were more likely to associate it with decline and polarisation. A clear sense of frustration emerged over how the neighbourhood was changing, particularly from participants who had lived their whole lives there. The frustration was not over the fact that change was taking place – and older residents readily recalled their childhood poverty – but was born of the lack of perceived benefits for long-term inhabitants. This was particularly true for conversions of industrial buildings, such as the Hartley's Jam Factory, occasionally former sites of employment:

Most of the women in Bermondsey have worked there at some point and now it's all flats but far too expensive for people round here to afford.

The loss of pubs through conversions to residential use was also keenly felt. As well as serving as the centre for communal activity and working class leisure, they also operated as spatial markers, delineating the neighbourhood and making it navigable. Along with former industrial buildings, they represented a symbolic link to the past; they also underlined how this past seemed excluded from the area's emerging future.

As well as lacking the economic resources to access the new housing, interview participants pointed to their exclusion from the services included in new developments or that had accompanied the changing housing profile of the area. New retail space was seen as targeted at gentrifiers with little of use for

long-term residents: 'no shops for us or anything we want to use'. This is an example of the type of cultural exclusion described by Madanipour (1998), as long-term residents become marginalised from the dominant discourse of change in the area. So while there are no physical barriers to accessing new shops and spaces accompanying gentrification, the deterrents are more subtle as lower-income and older residents do not have access to the requisite cultural and economic capital. Long-term residents pointed to how neighbourhood space is increasingly closed in terms of access, and so is limiting their spatial practices. Along with pubs, shops and markets had served as working class leisure spaces; their loss meant that leisure had transferred to the privatised spaces or out of the neighbourhood. The exclusion these interviewees described therefore has a clear spatial manifestation.

Research participants routinely engaged in a narrative of urban decline (Watt, 2006) in which the easy conviviality and neighbourliness of the working class community of their past has been lost. However their attitudes towards neighbourhood change are complex and prone to inconsistencies. To an extent, the narrative is intertwined with nostalgia for a lost 'golden age' of community (Blokland, 2003). Through selective remembering, it serves to impose a coherent order on the past and support a negative evaluation of the present. Occasionally as interviews progressed, participants were able to recall positive changes that had occurred to the lives of the neighbourhood's inhabitants:

The poverty – there's that, you don't see so much of that, most people have enough and it never used to be like that.

They also revealed an enduring sense of belonging and the strengths of the extended ties available in the neighbourhood:

I wouldn't live elsewhere, not at my age. I know people round here, people you see down the shops and can say hello to.

The qualities of neighbourliness are still apparent, even if it does not compare to the reconstructed past. Such inconsistencies point to the degree of ambivalence felt over change in the neighbourhood.

Conclusions

The new representation of space at Bermondsey Square was one contested by some inhabitants whose spatial practices differ from those conceived for its new inhabitants. For the architects and developers behind the scheme it represents a landmark residential site whose new inhabitants would reflect and contribute to the perceived vibrancy of the area. In contrast, those who opposed the scheme saw it as an abstract space that excluded working class inhabitants and negated diversity. In turn they offered a counter-discourse for the site's future, based on maintaining the historic attributes of the area and the square's location as a working market, and leveraging benefits to existing inhabitants. While a sense of community featured strongly in the developers' commercial representation of the space, long-term inhabitants described its erosion within a wider narrative of urban decline and disorientation in space. The relatively limited changes to the scheme's design that local community opposition instigated suggest that power over how space is produced lies primarily at its abstract, conceived dimension, while the lived and perceived dimensions of existing inhabitants are subjugated. So while the development makes much play of its own distinctiveness in being situated in a diverse and marginal area, it is itself an abstract space and a manifestation of how space is commodified; 'The space that homogenizes thus has nothing homogeneous about it' (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 308).

This paper has drawn on Lefebvre's distinction between conceived, perceived and lived space and applied it to the production of space in a gentrifying neighbourhood. The aim is to develop a more interpretive account of how urban space is represented in a new development, how it is experienced and alternatively imagined by long-term inhabitants. It is suggested that strong parallels exist between Lefebvre's description of abstract space's growing dominance in the city and the process by which gentrification redesigns urban space for new inhabitants. The example of Bermondsey Square also shows how the three dimensions are at times contradictory and that their interrelations create a source of tension over how space is produced. Finally it is intended that the spatial distinctions offer a potential epistemological frame for researching gentrification, linking wider social processes to the inhabitant's everyday experiences.

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Endnotes

¹ The discussion is based on ongoing fieldwork in Bermondsey as part of my doctoral research into gentrification in the area. Particular elements of the research used here include two focus groups with long-term residents and 32 semi-structured interviews with long-term residents, neighbourhood actors and agents involved in the Bermondsey Square scheme.

² Indeed, recent increases in property prices suggest that refurbishment of single houses is unviable for all but a wealthy elite of gentrifiers, meaning a return to subdividing Victorian terraced properties into flats. Multiple-occupancy (one of the ills that had originally spurred urban disinvestment) has returned to the inner city in a new guise. This reimagining of housing forms has seen a reversal of traditional middle class aspirations which privileged (semi-)detached houses over terraces and flats.

³ The concept of socially mixed communities has been heavily criticised in recent debates on gentrification (e.g. Davidson and Lees, 2005; Cheshire, 2006; Slater, 2006; Lees et al, 2008; Lees, 2008; Lees and Ley, 2008). It is argued that gentrification is increasingly being promoted in public policy on the assumption that it leads to socially mixed and less segregated communities, but without specifying how social mixing can actually take place. There is little evidence to suggest gentrification engenders socially cohesive communities, with a juxtaposition of social groups occupying different urban spaces a more likely scenario. In response, Atkinson (2008) suggests the critiques can overlook how there can be some beneficial outcomes to social and tenurial diversification, such as helping to stabilise population turnover in areas of unpopular social housing. There is a 'tendency to write off social mix policies as simply a mantra for gentrification' in place of localised analysis of which types of neighbourhood change are problematic and which are helpful (Atkinson, 2008, p. 2634).

⁴ It is interesting that many of those who opposed the original plans could be termed 'first wave' gentrifiers, having moved to the area in the previous fifteen years, working in alliance with long-term residents. Their concerns were principally based on fears that the area's character is threatened by the rush to provide new housing, even though it might be expected that the new retail outlets in the scheme would appeal to their class fraction. This supports findings from other research (Lees, 2000; Butler, 2003) that pioneering gentrifiers are more likely than their successors to be willing to invest social capital in their neighbourhood.