

TRANSITIONING TO SUSTAINABLE URBAN MOBILITY IN A JUST AND EQUITABLE MANNER: HOW TO PREVENT ENVIRONMENTAL GENTRIFICATION AND ENHANCE SOCIAL EQUITY?

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Social conflicts related to gentrification processes are one of the main challenges facing cities around the world. Typically, they affect neighbourhoods that have suffered from historical under-investment and socioeconomic deprivation that later become desirable to medium and high-income groups because of their central location or architectural style. With the influx of capital linked to new medium- and high-income residents, these neighbourhoods are socially, economically, culturally and physically transformed in ways that cater and are more aesthetically attractive to the new residents. The neighbourhoods are equipped with new cultural and environmental amenities (such as new parks and pedestrianised streets or low-traffic neighbourhoods), new (luxury) housing, new forms of commerce and even new healthcare facilities (Cole et al., 2021), which may accompany and trigger gentrification. Historically, the impacts of gentrification have caused much controversy, but recent research overwhelmingly demonstrates that it increases segregation within neighbourhoods (Cole et al., 2021).

I. Environmental gentrification and low-traffic neighbourhoods

The improvement or construction of environmental amenities such as parks or the implementation of environmental interventions such as Low-Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) may contribute to gentrification, a process that has been called environmental or green gentrification (Cole et al., 2021; Triguero-Mas et al., 2021). In this case, the socio-cultural and physical exclusion and displacement linked to rising rents and housing-related costs is often accompanied by underprivileged (long-term) residents perceiving or experiencing a neighbourhood's new amenities and interventions less positively than new residents – they may even view them negatively (Triguero-Mas et al., 2021). Consequently, the advantages of these environmental interventions, such as health benefits for residents, may be undermined, with new types of social injustices created for some and environmental privilege for others. New environmental amenities and interventions may thus not always contribute to just and sustainable neighbourhoods for all.

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Today there is evidence from cities around the world demonstrating the linkages between sustainable transport amenities and neighbourhood gentrification. Much of this evidence stems from the United States.¹ A particularly relevant case is the transformation of the Albina District in Portland (Oregon, US), where a cycling lane was constructed on one of the main avenues in 2014, causing heated public debates around racism, gentrification, cycling and classism (Hoffmann, 2016). Albina, which has historically been inhabited by African Americans, has been subject to a long history of racial injustices and institutional racism towards its residents related to redlining policies and postwar infrastructure projects that destroyed key African American landmarks, homes and commercial establishments, including what was considered the heart of the community in Albina and Portland. Following the abandonment and decay of the neighbourhood, its revitalisation began in the 1990s when young white Portlanders started to move in. Housing prices increased and, ultimately, most of the African American community was displaced. Against the backdrop of this history, the remaining African American residents viewed the construction of the cycling lane as a strategy to further gentrify and commodify the neighbourhood, which had already been deeply impacted by other “white upper-class” urban and cultural projects to the detriment of black culture and residents (Hoffmann, 2016).

In the European context, similar cases and dynamics can be found, such as evidence on pedestrianisation interventions being linked to gentrification processes in Brussels, Belgium (Kęblowski et al., 2019); Madrid and Barcelona, Spain (Salvador González, 2019); and Istanbul, Turkey (Özdemir & Selçuk, 2017).

II. How can environmental gentrification be prevented?

With the potential interrelationships between urban environmental interventions and gentrification, urban planners and policymakers face the challenge of promoting the transition towards sustainable mobility while also fighting gentrification. There is no single solution to this problem, but it requires a mix of policy tools that take into account the specific history, sociocultural and political contexts of neighbourhoods and how different neighbourhood characteristics are related and create context-specific dynamics (Oscilowicz et al., 2021). A recent toolkit developed by the Barcelona Laboratory for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability (BCNUEJ) in partnership with ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability suggests a promising step in this direction. It provides planners and policymakers with 30 anti-displacement and 20 equitable environmental development tools that can help achieve the right balance between tackling gentrification and promoting environmental interventions that may include sustainable urban mobility improvements (Oscilowicz et al., 2021).

For example, in the case of the city of Barcelona, potential key tools for fighting gentrification in areas where sustainable urban mobility interventions have been made could include: property tax support for long-term underprivileged residents in the form of subsidies or through mechanisms of taxing only land value in lieu of property

1. For example, gentrification processes initiated by the rapid transit stations in the San Francisco Bay Area (California), the cycling lane created on Valencia Street in San Francisco's Mission District, as well as examples in Chicago (Illinois), Portland (Oregon), Los Angeles (California), Milwaukee (Wisconsin) and Seattle (Washington).

value; investment incentives in specific areas of high socio-economic need; stronger affordable and social housing requirements for new construction and major housing rehabilitation; restrictions against further tourism development; municipality-controlled redevelopment of large areas with priority given to housing stability; regulation of short-term rental apartments; moratoriums on new businesses and hotels catering to tourists; channelling revenue from luxury property taxes towards affordable and social housing projects; taxes on foreign housing ownership; or taxes on vacant housing units. Moreover, other tools to promote a sustainable and just urban mobility transition could include funding for small-scale neighbourhood transport infrastructure (such as transformation towards LTNs), both permanent and temporary (Oscilowicz et al., 2021), as well as fees for developers that target environmental interventions and amenity funding.

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III. What else is needed to transition to sustainable urban mobility in a just and equitable manner?

Apart from preventing environmental gentrification, any interventions, plans and policies that aim to contribute to the transition towards sustainable urban mobility should prioritise justness and equity to ensure a sustainable future for all. To achieve this, there is a need for resident-led city-making and bottom-up policies, also called “procedural justice” (Anguelovski et al., 2020). But participatory processes alone are not enough. It is also important to ensure what Anguelovski et al. (2020) have called “hermeneutical and epistemic and testimonial justice”. This relates to whether all participant groups receive the credibility they deserve; and whether they are provided with the right conditions to reflect on, make sense of and share their distinctive experiences. For example, are childcare services provided so parents can participate? Are facilitation dynamics made available to ensure that conflicting and traditionally invisible experiences can be expressed? Do participatory processes account for the fact that the most vocal residents may not represent the majority (Hoffmann, 2016)?

As well as providing the right methods and conditions for citizens’ participation, there are other things to consider. In the case of cycling lanes or LTNs, policymakers and planners need to ensure that the varying norms of use, behaviours, values, identities, needs and preferences of different population groups (and their members at different life stages such as childhood, parenthood, etc.) are taken into account, as well as how the different groups may be differently impacted (objectively and subjectively) by the interventions, and how historical privilege may affect these factors (Anguelovski et al., 2020). As Barcelona’s LTNs – the so-called superblocs – have demonstrated, the success of such interventions greatly depends on adapting them to the neighbourhood context and the preferences of long-term residents.

Only by working in a context-specific manner that recognises the specific history, needs, interests, intervention impacts and perceived risks for long-term residents can we work towards justice (Anguelovski et al., 2020). Low-Emission Zones (LEZs) and associated congestion charges also illustrate the need for ensuring “distributional justice” (Anguelovski

et al., 2020). While the reduction in traffic and air pollution benefits all citizens' health, LEZ congestion charges tend to discriminate against poorer households. A pricing system that takes into account household incomes could rectify this.

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IV. Conclusions

In their effort to transition towards sustainable mobility city governments and other urban stakeholders need to ensure equity and environmental justice in ways that mitigate potential unwanted impacts from sustainable mobility projects, such as green gentrification. For urban environmental transformations to be publicly accepted, just and beneficial to *all* residents the needs, experiences and perceptions of all socioeconomic groups and generations need to be considered, as well as the specific histories of neighbourhoods. In short, a just and equitable mobility transition goes far beyond transport policy. It must take a systemic approach that weighs up the impacts of environmental interventions and amenities on the varying lived realities and contexts of a city's residents.

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