

CITIES FOR ALL CONFERENCE: STOCKHOLM: 12 & 13 APRIL 2018

Report on the Session on Gentrification and Liveliness of Small Cities and Towns

Moderated by Wessel Badenhorst

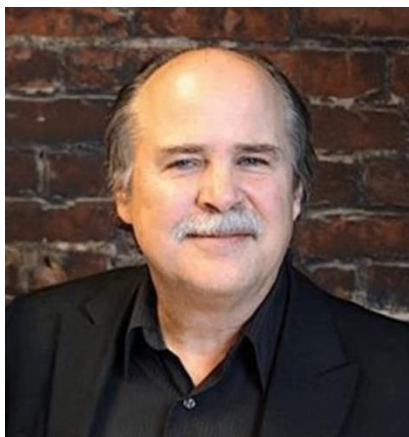
Overview

The session focused on three trends namely:

- The crisis in affordable housing and displacement exacerbated by gentrification of city neighbourhoods especially in larger cities;
- The emigration from smaller cities to larger cities especially in the case of young people seeking better opportunities; and
- The value of community-led placemaking to create local attachment and promote social cohesion both in large and small cities.

Three presentations were followed by an 'Ideas Café' where participants shared their ideas on these topics and specifically on Placemaking to support attachment to place in towns and neighbourhoods.

Short bios of presenters



Michael Mehaffy is the Executive Director of the [Sustasis Foundation](#). In the title of his presentation, he asked the question: *In an era of rapid urbanisation, how does placemaking address gentrification? What are the tools?*



Juliet Kahne is the Education and Events Manager of the [Project for Public Spaces](#). Her presentation focused on: *Placemaking, gentrification and small towns.*



Tina Vilfan is an architect originally from Slovenia, now based in Copenhagen. Her presentation is titled: *Revitalisation of old town cores with the introduction of temporary usage of space* and is based on her research in four large towns in Slovenia.



Peter Moskowitz is a journalist and the author of *How to Kill a City*. He wrapped up the session with his comments on the presentations and the ideas from participants.

Key points raised by presenters

Michael Mehaffy emphasised in his presentation the attainment of optimal diversity in the development of a place or neighbourhood, as advocated by Jane Jacobs. A situation where new wealth displaces existing communities to create new enclaves is the outcome of unrestrained gentrification.

He raised the question if the focus on the revitalisation of the city centre/downtown diverts attention from the need for a networked city where there are secondary nodes of urban development in suburbs, thus creating a poly-centric city which he argues is more sustainable on different levels and a way to alleviate gentrification pressures on the city.

Juliet Kahne explained in her presentation the insidiousness of gentrification which is only evidenced after several stages of new developments over a long period of time. The first stage often is perceived justifiable as an 'injection' of capital in a neighbourhood with a history of low investment and decaying infrastructure. The process however continues with stages where the neighbourhood changes to meet the needs of the new high-income groups and where more and more old buildings are demolished for new build at a much larger scale, making economic sense but destroying social and cultural fabric.

Her contention is that placemaking contributes to the place attachment of the incumbent communities and should support their efforts to maintain the social fabric of the neighbourhood. She also questions if smaller towns can escape the effects of gentrification and states that to her

knowledge there is no evidence to suggest that welcoming urban renewal in town centres will stop/turnaround emigration trends.

In her research **Tina Vilfan** showed the high levels of empty shops and buildings in the old cores of the towns she investigated. She proposed that in stead of inviting large scale gentrification in these town cores, a process of incremental change should be the prevalent strategy. Some of the interventions that she believes can turn around the town centres are to improve the facades of buildings by designing more active frontages, good rhythms and finer details. She also advocates for gradual investment in selected building activities that will improve the 'eye-catching' ability of the town centre.

Her main thesis is however to be more flexible in the usage of buildings and to allow experimentation with temporary usage, which through a process of trail-and-error will allow the local stakeholders to find new meaning for the buildings in their town centres. Empty spaces should be seen as an opportunity for the quest to make modest interventions with high impacts.

Responses of participants regarding roles of placemaking to reduce gentrification effects

During the Ideas Café part of the session, five tables were 'served' where participants formulated key questions based on the content of the presentations (aka the menu) and proceeded in discussing these questions. The ideas of participants were captured on Post-Its and posted onto an Ideas Wall (see picture below). Five participants were randomly selected to each develop a thematic response from the ideas on the Wall (See bottom half of Wall).



The five thematic responses based on the ideas from participants can be summarised as follows:

- Placemakers should be activists and see education of the local community on the effects of gentrification as a high priority. Their actions should include holding workshops in schools and advocating for rent control in affected neighbourhoods.
- Placemaking activities should help residents to re-discover the local history of their neighbourhood and should actively help those residents who want to defend the heritage elements of their neighbourhood that can be destroyed with unsympathetic new developments.
- Placemaking should embrace several initiatives to revitalise the town centres/cores such as creating cycle lanes and park & ride facilities to improve the walkability of the centre and to increase the attraction of retail with more specialty and independent shops.

- Placemaking should be about building the capacity of local communities, especially to learn through experience and sharing with others as well as to regularly communicate about challenges and solutions for neighbourhood development in local newspapers/radio.
- Placemaking is about activating spaces and therefore making locations more attractive. The type of activities should however be focused on the needs of local communities for example with the organising of public markets and local festivals.

Conclusion

In his concluding remarks, Peter Moskovitz re-iterated the importance of local activism and continuous civic education processes. The fact that it is difficult to turnaround the situation once a gentrification process has taken its course, means that these communicative actions should be about what priorities residents can agree will improve a neighbourhood without the need for wholesale new developments. Placemaking activities should create the framework for residents to discuss and plan the future of their neighbourhood.

Report prepared by the moderator of the Session: Wessel Badenhorst, 2nd May 2018.