



# Royal Holloway Geography for Schools Lecture Series

## Contemporary Urban Environments.

Changing city spaces, contesting place, gentrification, governance and community.

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### Summary points from the lecture.

#### Introduction.

The lecture starts by acknowledging that cities are shaped by flows and shifts. Students can be asked to think about what these might be e.g. people, industries and commerce, money, culture, technology, climate, politics and power.

Students can think about, and look out for, evidence of these flows and shifts during the lecture through the key urban processes of regeneration and gentrification.

#### Regeneration.

The constant state of flux outlined here leads to cities constantly evolving across time and space. A key way in which parts of our cities are visibly changing is through the remoulding of the fabric of locales such as the transformation of post-industrial, often brown field, sites into spaces for retail, leisure and homes... a process described as 'regeneration'.

The form and purpose of regeneration can have a dramatic effect in a number of ways. When examining a regeneration case study, think about the following factors;

- **Function.** How is land use changing and who is it for? What are the social, economic and environmental positive / negative impacts of regeneration?
- **Governance.** Who has the power to decide how urban spaces should be regenerated? Who does not? Who should? Why?
- **Ownership.** Who owns the land and why does this matter?
- **Land value.** Regeneration normally increases the value of land. What impact might changing land values have on people who live and work in, and beyond, the locale being regenerated?

The questions above will help students think through a more nuanced understanding of regeneration as a process. The lecture will discuss how (often unseen) power relations can influence the outcomes of particular regeneration projects. Local authorities, for are key players in regeneration as they have the powers to grant  
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planning permission and try to use regeneration to fit in with their plans such as addressing housing shortages or economic stagnation. Global finance is increasingly involved at the local level. For example, Malaysian finance institutions now own the Battersea Power Station Development in South London; Permodalan Nasional Berhad (a government owned asset management company) and the Employers Provident Fund of Malaysia. Local communities are also often involved, to some degree, in the planning process.

Perhaps the key players in deciding what form regeneration will take, and who the regeneration is for, are property developers. They provide the finance, plans, materials and labour and are consequently able to increasingly determine the form and functions of regeneration – otherwise known here as **'place-making'**. Effectively, property developers have a major, potentially dominant, role in deciding how our urban cities are shaped – in other words they have a major role in the governing of urban development despite not having any electoral mandate. One argument is that their democratic legitimacy is gained through their collaboration with local authorities whose political representatives (known as councillors) are elected through local elections.

### **Gentrification.**

Perhaps the most prevalent outcome of regeneration that we see across our towns and cities is gentrification. The term 'gentrification' was coined by the sociologist, Ruth Glass, to describe the demographic changes that research uncovered across London in places such as Notting Hill in the 1950s and 60s. In her studies, she observed that professional, middle class, people were moving into traditionally working-class areas, renovating housing stock and consequently driving up land values and the cost of housing. As a result, the original working-class communities were increasingly displaced over time.

The original use of the term 'gentrification' maybe seen as a relatively organic process as different communities move in and out of locales over time (think of the various communities that have settled in the East End of London for example). Contemporary regeneration, however, increasingly leads to more rapid and extreme change with poorer communities and businesses often being replaced, frequently with the threat of force if they do not comply, by wealthier people and more 'upmarket' businesses. Local authorities have often been key actors, along with property developers, with the resulting processes such as displacement, dispossession and demolition being described as 'state-led' and 'super' gentrification.

### **Community and Contested Spaces.**

The lecture will use examples such as the Heygate Estate to explore contemporary gentrification. The lecture will also introduce the Cressingham Gardens Estate in Tulse Hill, South London. Both illustrate the active role of the state in working with property developers to physically remove and replace communities and their homes with higher value housing and wealthier residents. These actions are not uncontested. The lecture will illustrate how communities organise and resist these processes.

- Students can be asked to think through **function, governance, ownership** and **land value** when viewing these case studies in the lecture.
- What role should communities, local authorities, developers and other actors such as central government, have in deciding the fate of communities such as those in Cressingham Gardens and the urban spaces that they populate?

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