

# **Making living in cities attainable again**

Creating a community based approach to improve the social balance in a neighbourhood

**Architectural design crossovers | Heterogeneous City – London**

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**Research Plan**

## **Problem statement and research questions**

Housing prices in cities like London, New York, Paris and many others rise to a level which most people can't afford. Nowadays, it is not just the poor and less advantaged that are being priced out of the city, it is happening to the middle-class as well. Complete communities are stuck in poverty with little chance of upward mobility. In short, there is a social crisis in our cities manifesting itself in the increasing unattainability of living in these cities for most of the population.

The general problem is that the urban clustering that drives innovation and economic growth — the clustering of industry, economic activity, and talented and ambitious people in cities — also carves deep divides in our cities and our society, resulting in rising housing prices, more inequality, economic and racial segregation and entrenched poverty (Florida, 2017).

Florida (2017) noted that "inequality is not just an occasional bug of urban economies; it is a fundamental feature of them." Minton (2017) concluded that the problem nowadays is that it seems like the effects of gentrification are becoming more extreme, since even residents with middle incomes are being driven out of their neighbourhoods.

The specific problem is that the social imbalance that has emerged as a consequence of the aforementioned contradiction of urban clustering, is resulting in complete communities not just being left behind in the economic growth, but also in access to the city and opportunities for participating in society.

Ideally, living in the city should be attainable for everyone. Especially the people with lower and middle incomes, since they are the people that build the city, the people who keep the city safe and healthy, who teach the city's future resident, the people who run the city. The city is a place where people without power can make their own culture and history (Sassen, 2015). In the ideal situation, those people without power should have the means to build strong and supportive communities in which they can develop a sense of civic pride.

The impact of the crisis and the lack of balance is huge. The middle class is slowly disappearing. The wealthy are getting wealthier, and the poor are getting poorer and entire communities are being left behind. There is a large group of 'hidden homeless people' in London. Many people are sofa-surfing, sleeping on buses, or in hostels and illegal accommodation (Minton, 2017). Others are forced to accept housing that is in a very bad condition. Losing your house can have major implications for your financial and social situation, your opportunities to participate in society, for your (civic) pride, and maybe most important of all, for your health. Therefore, this research aims to answer the following questions:

What does the social imbalance in London look like and how can we create opportunities for those communities that are now being left behind?

1. Which communities are being left behind in the economic growth?
2. What are the possible ways for creating upward mobility, and what are the pros and cons of those?
3. How can architecture attribute to the solution?

# Definition of theoretical framework

## Literature review

The New Urban Crisis by Richard Florida

This book focuses on what the emergence of the creative class, and the decline of the middle class, have done to cities and how the clustering that drives the economic growth of cities also creates great challenges, like gentrification, unaffordability, segregation, and inequality. An important footnote to his theories is that Florida has often been criticised for using the wrong kind of data, whitewashing the negative effects of creative city development and being elitist. "Florida's formula has proven to benefit the already rich, mostly white middle class; fuel rampant property speculation; displace the bohemians he so fetishised; and see the problems that once plagued the inner cities simply move out to the suburbs" (Wainwright, 2020). Despite all the all the allegations that can be made about Florida's bias, the book *The New Urban Crisis* gives a good description of the problems our cities are dealing with. It goes much deeper than just explaining how gentrification works and illustrates the complexity of how what gives cities their greatest strength, simultaneously creates their biggest weakness.

Palaces for the people by Eric Klinenberg

This book attempts to show the importance of social infrastructure and how it improves the life of communities and brings back crime. However, for a book dedicated to sociology; communities; and race, it jumps out that racism isn't mentioned. Furthermore, Klinenberg doesn't touch on the politics behind the absence of social infrastructure. At its core, Klinenbergs research is very insightful, but it is important to keep in mind that it is lacking the perspective of minorities. The most important section of this book is the chapter that described the importance of libraries.

Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State by Samuel Stein

This book explains the function of planners in the Real Estate State and the power of planning in reclaiming urban life. Stein describes how life in cities has become expensive and segregated as a result of urban renewal. Contrary to many authors focussing on the social crisis in cities, Stein doesn't shy away from being specific when it comes to solutions. He calls for "large, disruptive mass movements organised not only to make demands of the state but also to make the status quo untenable" (Stein, 2019). In his theory, Stein ascribes too much power to planners, and too little to grassroots movements. The books focusses completely on New York.

# **Methodological positioning and description of research methods**

The primary aim of this research is to determine what the social imbalance in London looks like and how to create opportunities for those communities that are now being left behind, therefore this is explanatory research. This research uses both qualitative and quantitative data, in the form of a literature review and case study; and demographic analysis respectively.

## **Research methods**

### Literature review

In order to gain a better insight into the processes that led to the social crisis in our cities today and what the consequences of the crisis are, a literature review was conducted. The review mainly consists of three books. *The New Urban Crisis* by Richard Florida, for a better understanding of the complexity of the urban crisis. This book will give a more generic view on the problems. *Palaces For The People* by Eric Klinenberg, will give an insight into the importance of social infrastructure and provide ideas concerning possible bottom-up solutions. Lastly, *Capital City* by Samuel Stein helps to understand the role of urban planners in the process of urban renewal.

### Demographic analysis

The aim of the demographic analysis, is to gain better insight into the differences between London's neighbourhoods. In order to give the best possible overview of which communities are being left behind, the most important data used in this research are the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's indices of deprivation. The main index that the ministry uses is the IMD (Index of Multiple Deprivation), which combines and appropriately weighs seven domains: income; employment; health deprivation and disability; education, skills training; crime; barriers to housing and services; and living environment (MHCLG, 2019).

### Case Study

The clothing label Community Clothing will serve as a case study of a bottom up solution for creating upward mobility. The company provides a good example because its goals perfectly fit the theory behind Klinenberg's social infrastructure.

## **Validity**

The used literature consists of subjective theories that derived from interpreting numbers, therefore the information is not very valid on its own. The validity of this part of the research is increased by taking into account this subjectiveness when using the theories and in some cases data triangulation. The used data for the demographic analysis is of high quality. Furthermore, the indices of deprivation provide a comprehensive representation of social imbalances, thus this part of the research is valid. The addition of a glossary prevents different interpretations of certain terms, and therefore adds to the validity.

## **Argument on relevance**

There has been a lot of attention for gentrification and its effects on the housing prices in big cities such as London, New York and Amsterdam. There are however many other problems that these cities face: growing inequality; polarisation; segregation; and distrust, and the disappearance of a sense of community and of civic pride. Left unattended, these problems could eventually lead to the disruption of our democratic society. Despite the severity of the situation, these problems are talked and written about much less than gentrification and the housing crisis. The literature that does address these problems focusses either only on the financial, or the political, or the social aspects. The solution, however, lies in the middle of these disciplines. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to jump into that void and find a solution for upward mobility that is more substantial than just creating a community, pays more attention to the human aspect of the story than simple looking at the economics of the problem, and is faster than politics.

## Bibliographical references

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Klinenberg, E. (2018). *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*. Crown Publishing Group (NY).

In *Palaces for the People*, sociologist Eric Klinenberg shows that properly designing and maintaining 'social infrastructure' (both physical and social) might be our single best strategy for a more equal and united society.

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Minton, A. (2017). *Big Capital: Who is London For?* Penguin Books.

Journalist and academic Anna Minton demonstrates how policy decisions in the past decades and the behaviour of developers and investors have led to London's current housing crisis. She describes how housing is no longer considered a public good and how, instead, only market solutions are considered. These market solutions respond to the needs of global capital, rather than the needs of ordinary people. Minton concludes that the housing crisis has become a key driver creating and fuelling the inequalities of a divided nation.

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## **Personal glossary of key terms**

*Social balance* — within society, everyone comes from a different background. The idea of social balance is that, in the end, everyone has the same opportunities to create the life they want. It means that people from poor neighbourhoods aren't stuck in poverty but have the possibility for upward mobility.

*Civic pride* — pride is a sense of self-worth or self-respect. In a bigger sense it could be described as value or praise for your community. Pride also has an aspirational aspect. "It is aspirational to the extent that people with pride tend to place high value on self-improvement and achieving the best for oneself or for society" (Collins, 2016). The civic aspect adds a new dimension to the sense of pride. Civic pride is not just self-worth or self-respect, but having respect for, and aspiring to achieving the best for your neighbourhood, city or country.

*Attainability* — in the most simple terms, a city is attainable when people don't have to choose between basic necessities like housing, food, transportation, and health care. Therefore, attainability can only exist when households either earn enough to pay for all these necessities, or when the necessities are made available for everyone, for example by lowering the prices or increasing availability of affordable options.