Arts-Based Gentrification in Hamilton, ON: A Case Study

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Abstract
This paper offers an in-depth exploration of arts-based gentrification in Hamilton, Ontario, with particular attention to the city’s emerging James Street North Arts District. Although the city is following an economic trajectory similar to that of other post-industrial cities in Canada and the United States, it remains largely outside the scope of contemporary urban studies; a gap in research this paper aims to begin to bridge. Despite the dearth of academic work on gentrification in Hamilton, it is a topic widely acknowledged and debated in colloquial discourse within the city, including in local news media, activist publications, and hardcore punk music; all of which are examined and contextualized within both regional demographic studies and broader theories of post-industrial gentrification. The detriments of gentrification in Hamilton are grouped into three broad categories: economic displacement, cultural shifts, and erosions of civic rights and freedoms. From here, conclusions are drawn that gentrification has disproportionately negative effects on racialized populations, immigrants, and the urban poor, and that further studies, both qualitative and quantitative, should be undertaken with the ultimate goal of proactive policy change.

Keywords
Human Geography — Arts — Demographics — Culture

1. Introduction

To many Ontarians, Hamilton is most associated with its once-booming steel industry, symbolized by the many smokestacks one sees as they pass through the city’s east end on the Queen Elizabeth Way. The city’s industrial heritage is also reflected in its nicknames: “Steeltown” and “The Hammer”. Despite this persistent blue collar image, Hamilton’s current economy can best be described as “mixed” and is largely congruent with similarly sized cities in the region: primarily service-based with some industrial activity and an emerging arts-related or “creative” economy. Much like other North American cities, especially those surrounding the Great Lakes or in the loosely defined area known as the Rust Belt, Hamilton’s transition from an industrial to a post-industrial economy has not been without significant tension, social unrest, and demographic change. Although many areas of the city have seen changes resulting—directly or indirectly—from the lay-offs and factory closures associated with deindustrialization, no neighbourhood has experienced as radical a reinvention as the area of James Street North stretching from King Street in the south to Barton Street in the North. Once a Portuguese and Italian immigrant enclave, James Street North is now best known as the city’s art district, home to numerous galleries, boutiques, and performance spaces. It is also the heart of real estate speculation in the city, with many historic buildings undergoing redevelopment into luxury condominiums. The changes this transition has brought about, being economic, social, cultural, or otherwise, have resulted in both praise and derision from different groups, turning James Street into a local symbol of broader ideological debates pertaining to planning, social justice, and the right to the city.

While there is an emerging body of work on arts-based gentrification in specific neighbourhoods in Canadian cities, particularly in Hamilton’s close neighbour, Toronto, much of this work is limited to the city of Toronto and the area of Parkdale. Much of this work has been qualitative in nature and has focused on the cultural changes associated with gentrification, particularly in relation to the arts. However, there is a lack of research that focuses on the economic, social, and cultural changes that have occurred in Hamilton’s James Street North Arts District.

This paper aims to fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the gentrification process in Hamilton, with particular attention to the city’s emerging James Street North Arts District. The paper will examine the detriments of gentrification in Hamilton and will draw conclusions about the disproportionate negative effects on racialized populations, immigrants, and the urban poor. It will also call for further research to be undertaken with the ultimate goal of proactive policy change.

References


much of this work takes a semi-historical perspective, examining the present conditions of neighbourhoods in which gentrification spurred on by an influx of artists began decades ago. Because of the unique conditions of Hamilton’s economic development—particularly its late transition away from secondary industry—arts-based gentrification has only recently emerged in the city, providing a unique opportunity to study this issue under dynamic and contemporary conditions. Because of the ongoing nature of gentrification in Hamilton, its negative effects may still be mitigated through research leading to intervention in the form of proactive policy and planning alternatives.

These recent social and economic changes in Hamilton, Ontario, particularly relating to development in the city’s downtown core, closely mirror processes of post-industrial, art-based gentrification that have been well documented in other North American cities. Similarly, many of the ill-effects of this type of gentrification, especially economic displacement, unwanted cultural change, and erosion of rights and freedoms, that are noted in contemporary urban studies are also manifested in Hamilton. Although this type of gentrification is rapidly occurring and is both well acknowledged and criticized in colloquial discourse within Hamilton (local news media, activist groups, arts communities), it remains largely outside the scope of Canadian urban studies. This paper aims to document and analyze processes of gentrification in Hamilton in a way that both lends credence to existing critiques of arts-based gentrification and encourages further data collection in the hopes of facilitating more in-depth research moving forward.

2. Impacts and Critiques of Arts-Based Gentrification

Although the economic significance of art in cities is by no means a new idea, the notion that it can play a significant role in the renewal of post-industrial urban centres is most often attributed to the American urban theorist Richard Florida and his highly influential 2002 book, Rise of the Creative Class. Florida’s creative class thesis and its associated planning model have been major catalysts of criticism, resulting in a significant body of work repudiating his claims. In Toronto, where Florida is a professor at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management, his ideas have proven both influential and divisive, as reflected respectively by their enshrinement in policy and by a growing body of academic work specifically critiquing Florida-style planning as it is manifested in a number of Toronto neighbourhoods. These critiques note that this type of gentrification involves “reinforcing values that promote and benefit some members of the community at the expense and exclusion of working-class, immigrant, and racialized others,” as in the case of Kensington Market, or the inherent displacement of groups according to capitalist logic, as documented in Liberty Village.

An art-centric style of planning has been wholeheartedly embraced by the City of Hamilton, whether officially, through a number of policy documents including the Places to Grow Act, Downtown Secondary Master Plan: Putting People First, and Transforming Hamilton through Culture, or unofficially, as reflected by the city’s de facto motto, “Art is the New Steel”, which can be seen on t-shirts, posters, and public art along James Street North. Despite this, art makes up a significantly smaller part of Hamilton’s economy than industry did in its mid-20th century heyday and has only grown slightly as an employment sector in recent decades (see Figure 1). Perhaps a more accurate slogan would be “Services are the New Steel”. Although the claim “Art is the New Steel” may ultimately prove hyperbolic, the planning theory it represents has shown to have detriments similar to those documented by research on gentrification in other cities, including Toronto. For the purposes of this paper, I have placed these detriments into three broad categories: economic displacement, cultural shifts, and erosion of rights and freedoms.

3. Economic Displacement

The only significant quantitative, demographic study directly relating to gentrification—in this case, framed apolitically as “neighbourhood change”—in Hamilton is a City on the Cusp: Hamilton Since 1970. This report, itself part of a larger University of Toronto report entitled The Neighbourhood Change Report, provides evidence of a number of recent and dramatic shifts in housing costs and inter-city migration patterns that can be used to lend support to both academic theories of gentrification as well as more colloquial criticisms within Hamilton. Despite income being historically homogenous throughout the city, recent decades have brought about

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12Mark McNeil. “Art in a transforming city: A healthy creative class has a role to play in the overall health of the community,” Hamilton Spectator, October 4, 2011.
“a marked segregation of the poor and a steady polarization of neighbourhoods”\textsuperscript{17}. This report quantifies this in part through the use of the GINI coefficient: a standard measure of income inequality that assigns a place (usually a nation) a value between 0 (maximum equality) and 1 (maximum inequality). In 1980, Hamilton had the lowest GINI coefficient, 0.34, among Canada’s 12 largest Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs). By 2001, it had climbed to fourth place with a coefficient of 0.386, growing at a faster rate than any other Canadian city\textsuperscript{18}. Additionally, this report notes that four census tracts in Hamilton have experienced above average housing price increases between 2009 and 2013: three of which are predictably in the city’s outer suburbs and most notably, one of which is Hamilton Centre, which includes the James Street Art District\textsuperscript{19}. The report also notes the recent emergence of a number of low income census tracts in the “upper city”—the portion of the city separated from the downtown by the Niagara Escarpment\textsuperscript{20}. As housing prices soar in the city centre, low-income individuals and families are pushed out of historically working class neighbourhoods and impelled to resettle elsewhere.

Another element of the displacement argument explored in the literature on arts-based gentrification also appears to be relevant in the context of Hamilton: that of the seemingly-paradoxical displacement of artists themselves. In many cases, artists gravitate toward derelict, often post-industrial areas within cities due to the availability of cheap and spacious real-estate for studios or informal performance spaces. This high concentration of art and artists can result in renewed civic interest in these neighbourhoods as well as the renewed interest of real estate speculators, eventually resulting in redevelopment and increased property costs. However, this oftentimes threatens to drive out the artists that initially made the neighbourhood attractive in the first place. Although it may seem that an outmigration of artists would threaten to undermine the success of gentrification, a range of strategies may be deployed in order maintain an arts-centric image regardless of the presence of artists. This has proven to be the case in Toronto’s Yorkville neighbourhood. Once a bohemian area akin to New York’s Greenwich Village, it is now a high-end shopping destination themed as an arts district through the conspicuous presentation of public art, sculpture, and boutique galleries\textsuperscript{21}. This is mirrored along Hamilton’s James Street through the extensive municipal investment in idiosyncratic public furniture and murals\textsuperscript{22}, including some that mimic graffiti.

Although it is difficult to parse the displacement of artists from demographic data alone, this phenomenon manifests itself in Hamilton in several other ways. A recent example of this was the closure of Homegrown Hamilton, a local café and venue, adjacent to James Street that was notable as a low-barrier performance space (i.e. available to all performers regardless of genre, age, commercial appeal, etc.) and a hub for activist organizing. The owners of the building chose not to renew Homegrown Hamilton’s lease, instead leasing the space to a brew pub. Homegrown Hamilton has since resorted to crowdfunding in order to finance a relocation within the increasingly costly neighbourhood\textsuperscript{23}. Although the exact reasons for the termination of Homegrown Hamilton’s lease

\textsuperscript{17}Harris, Richard, Jim Dunn, and Sarah Wakefield. Page 3
\textsuperscript{18}Harris, Richard, Jim Dunn, and Sarah Wakefield. Page 9
\textsuperscript{19}Harris, Richard, Jim Dunn, and Sarah Wakefield. Page 28
\textsuperscript{20}Harris, Richard, Jim Dunn, and Sarah Wakefield. Page 20
have not been made public, it is likely related to the greater financial capacity of brew pubs, which have a documented entanglement with gentrification in the nearby Canadian cities of Toronto and Ottawa\textsuperscript{24}. Additionally, artists are increasingly congregating in other, less expensive Hamilton neighbourhoods such as Barton Village. Although mostly known for its many boarded up storefronts (painted to resemble operational businesses during the 2015 Pan-Am Games\textsuperscript{25}) and sex workers, Barton Street has seen a recent proliferation of coffee shops, high-end restaurants, and art spaces; most notably Hamilton Audio Visual Node (HAVN), whose location among empty or abandoned buildings allows for frequent BYOB concerts that would likely be shut down elsewhere. This movement of artists from one neighbourhood to another is perhaps best symbolized by the fledgling Barton Street BARTcrawl event series, in which galleries and businesses stay open later and hold co-ordinated events in an approximation of the popular monthly James Street Art Crawl and annual SuperCrawl\textsuperscript{26}.

4. Cultural Shifts

Although gentrification and displacement among ethno-cultural lines is a well-explored concept in Canadian urban studies, for example in both Montreal’s\textsuperscript{27} and Vancouver’s\textsuperscript{28} Chinatown neighbourhoods, it is seldom part of the conversation surrounding gentrification in Hamilton, even in colloquial discourse. The official website of the James Street Art Crawl notes that “James St North is located in the heart of downtown Hamilton, comprised of the Italian, Portuguese and Vietnamese communities… and most recently a burgeoning arts community”\textsuperscript{29}. Although a small number of Vietnamese, Italian, and Portuguese bars, restaurants, and markets remain, the James Street landscape is increasingly dominated by high-end art galleries, coffee shops, brunch spots, vintage clothing stores, and antiques dealers. The effects of gentrification on ethnic neighbourhoods, including Toronto’s Little Portugal\textsuperscript{30} and relating to feelings of cultural loss and the suburbanization of immigrant populations have been well documented. Although there is preliminary evidence of similar circumstances in Hamilton—a similar historical timeline of immigration, general patterns of the suburbanization of low-income populations, and anecdotal evidence of the economic displacement of ethnic businesses—few insights into the effects of gentrification of ethnic neighbourhoods in Hamilton can be gleaned from the limited demographic data available. The similarities between current conditions in Hamilton and historical patterns of gentrification in ethnic neighbourhoods elsewhere suggests that future qualitative research, including surveys and interviews, may be in order.

In addition to the economic and cultural displacement of ethnic groups from Hamilton’s emerging arts district, there is evidence of another form of cultural displacement that is seldom explored in academic literature. During the mid-to-late 1970s, Hamilton was home some of the earliest and most influential punk bands in both Canada and North America including Teenage Head, Forgotten Rebels, and Simply Saucer, who are often grouped with other “rust belt punk” bands such as MC5 and The Stooges. Many of the early activities of these bands took place downtown Hamilton, including what is now the James Street North art district. This history is reflected in a still vibrant local punk scene which includes a punk label, Schizophrenic Records, a punk record store, Hammer City Records, and several venues that primarily book punk acts, including This Aint Hollywood and Doors Pub. However, a number of visible tensions have arisen between the city’s punk and hardcore communities and the emerging, municipally-encouraged “coffee shop culture” of James Street North and other nearby neighbourhoods. A recent proposal to erect a statue of Frankie Venom, the deceased original vocalist of Teenage Head, was criticized and ultimately abandoned after residents of the recently-gentrified neighbourhood took issue with Venom’s history of drug use\textsuperscript{31}. The animosity between these two clashing communities is also manifested in the music of local punk acts, including the title track from the popular Hamilton hardcore band Born Wrong’s 2014 Art District EP, in which one of the few audible lyrics is “Trapped in an endless gallery/welcome to the art district"\textsuperscript{32}.

Whether pertaining to the shifting or displacement of cultures—along lines of ethnicity, religion, or even artistic heritage—a line must be drawn between that which happens without coercion, by will of mutual association, and that which is enforced through municipal planning initiatives, by-laws, or market forces. When art and culture become part of a city’s official agenda, the possibility of the abuse of power for the purposes of economic or political gain becomes significant. The American geographer Neil Smith, focusing primarily on New York City, characterizes this political trend as revan-
chicity, referring to the use of policy to enact revenge upon minorities, the poor, and other groups rather than as an emancipatory tool by drawing parallels to reactions of the French government to the Paris Commune.

5. Erosion of Rights and Freedoms

Built into the economic displacement of Hamilton’s poor from the downtown core to the upper-city is an inherent spatial form of exclusion by virtue of both planning choices and regional physical geography. Lack of public transit options, especially late at night, coupled with the physical limitations presented by the Niagara Escarpment make it extremely difficult for those living without an automobile in the upper-city to access downtown. This is especially true for those with mobility issues or other physical disabilities, as a limited number of outdoor staircases, some with more than 500 steps, serve as the sole pedestrian link between these two areas of the city. With the urban poor pushed increasingly to the periphery, areas where city officials are willing to invest not only in cultural initiatives but also infrastructure and policing are turned into recreational enclaves for the rich.

The role of policing in the exclusion of undesirable populations from these areas, most notably James Street, Locke Street, Hess Village, and Gore Park, is a central aspect to the implementation and success of gentrification in Hamilton and beyond and must not be ignored. In Hamilton, much of this involves the ACTION team, a division of the Hamilton Police Service operating primarily in the downtown core dealing largely in low level street crimes including vagrancy, public drinking, and panhandling. They have been widely criticized for the use of carding, a practice that involves officers stopping and demanding identification from individuals without the need of probable cause as well as issuing false tickets. These practices have been found to disproportionately target racialized, homeless, and mentally-ill citizens and have resulted in accusations of racism directed at Hamilton’s former police chief (and current director of security at McMaster University) Glenn De Caire. De Caire has replied to these allegations in an internal email by stating it is “time for these black kids to stop blaming the police.” These practices are similar to the widely criticized policing tactic known as “stop-and-frisk”, which has been denounced as the policing of poverty. These policing tactics stem from the Broken Windows theory of policing, which emphasizes the policing of “quality of life” crimes. These theories are reflected in Hamilton through a recent municipal initiative to introduce a nuisance by-law, which seeks to punish behavior deemed to be indicative of public nuisance, including loitering on public streets, spitting, profanity, and picking through garbage. This initiative was the result of a presentation given in city council by the owner of The Right House, a former department store turned redevelopment project, who believed this type of behavior was dissuading potential investors. This initiative resulted in protests from both the Hamilton Coalition Against Poverty and the Hamilton chapter of Food not Bombs, whose nearby free food service had seen an increased police presence after complaints from the owner of the Right House.

This increasing antagonism between parties primarily concerned with development and investment, including city council, Hamilton Police Service, and property owners, as well as those who stand in the way of these goals has boiled over into frequent and highly visible social unrest. This can be seen in everything from anti-gentrification posters wheat-pasted to windows and light posts throughout the city or numerous protest actions, including the disruption of real estate tours and the annual march against police brutality. Additionally, a growing number of organizations in Hamilton directly address social issues relating to gentrification, including the Hamilton Coalition Against Poverty, the Hamilton Tenants Solidarity Network, Steel City Solidarity, The Hamilton Institute, OPIRG McMaster, and Common Cause.

6. Conclusion

Gentrification through the arts in Hamilton bears the hallmarks of gentrification as studied and documented in other cities in Canada and beyond. Ultimately, this is the product of deep antagonisms between class, race, political ends, and conceptions of justice and fairness in cities. In Hamilton, much of this relates to the division between those who make...
casual use of the city (as a place for occasional entertainment, as a commuted-to workplace, etc.) and those for whom the city is the background to their day-to-day activities. In some ways, this is a product of the 2001 amalgamation of a number of affluent satellite communities, including Ancaster, Dundas, and Flamborough, into the city proper, resulting in a broadening of Hamilton’s tax base as well as resentment from those whose taxes were increased for the sake of issues that seem distant or unrelated to their lives (i.e. urban social programs). This division, which can be loosely characterized as urban-suburban, and is borne out in council, where councilors from these outer areas of the city often outnumber and outvote downtown councilors, defeating initiatives relating to transit, bike lanes, and other urban-focused social expenditures. In many ways, this mirrors the divisive state of municipal politics in Toronto which many attribute to the election of Rob Ford. Ultimately, the unique conditions of Hamilton’s economic development, in addition to characteristics of its social, political, and even physical geography, make it a leading example of arts-based gentrification in the 21st century that not only warrants academic investigation but also community organizing and intervention in the interest of preserving justice in the city.

7. Works Cited


Mark McNeil, "Art in a transforming city: A healthy creative class has a role to play in the overall health of the community," Hamilton Spectator, October 4, 2011.


