

London's world status and house price boom is now hurting the middle class

**Gentrification has adopted an exaggerated and accelerated form in London, hurting communities from Brixton to Belgravia**

Peter Walker - **Friday 2 August 2013**

[Link to video: Alex Wheatle on the gentrification of Brixton](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/video/2013/aug/02/alex-wheatle-gentrification-brixton-video)

It's a balmy summer evening in Brixton, south London, and Jody Boehnert is pondering recent changes to the quiet street below from her flat in a rundown Victorian mansion block. In five days' time, police and bailiffs will evict her and several dozen householders, some of whom have squatted the property for more than 30 years. "That block across the road was cleared last year and sold to private landlords," says Boehnert, until recently a PhD student. "The people living there now complain about the reggae from the music shops across the road. You ask them, 'Well, why did you move to Brixton?' They say, 'because of the tube'. It used to be really vibrant. Now it's a bit of a sterile space."

Ten miles north-east in Walthamstow, at the other end of the tube line, Anna, a charity worker, explains why she and her lawyer husband moved to the still-deprived area 18 months ago, when she was pregnant with their first child: "We were living in a one-bed flat in Islington. I was a bit reluctant to come here, but we could afford a three-bedroom house with a garden. We moved just in time – we paid £330,000 and it's probably worth more than £400,000 now."

In Belgravia, central London, Helene Oratore describes her family's life in their six-storey Regency house amid seemingly endless expansion work by neighbours seeking to eke out extra space now valued at £2,500 per sq ft. At one point last year, a third of the 23 homes in her street were covered in scaffolding and hoardings: "Next door is digging out a double basement and the noise is endless. We get skip lorries beeping outside from 7am. My daughter had to study for her exams wearing earplugs and headphones. "I accept some people will say, 'They've got money, why are they complaining?' But it doesn't matter how big or small your house is, if you can't enjoy living in it, then it's not really your home."

Despite their differing circumstances, all three are being buffeted by the same phenomenon. Known for decades as **gentrification**, it has now adopted an accelerated, exaggerated form in London.

The migration of higher-income households into poorer areas is not new, but it has always brought mixed feelings. While some long-term residents eyed newcomers with suspicion, others opened businesses catering for them. And it is helping to lift some desperately poor areas out of deprivation.

While led by private investment, government often encouraged the process with schemes such as the popular home improvement grants of the 1960s and 70s, hoping to slow what seemed at the time the inexorable decline of the inner cities. But now, particularly in London, the reverse is the problem.

Danny Dorling, professor of human geography at Sheffield University, says the capital is arguably changing more quickly than at any time since the era of [Charles Booth's pioneering "poverty maps"](http://booth.lse.ac.uk/cgi-bin/do.pl?sub=view_booth_and_barth&args=531000,180400,6,large,5) of late 19th century slums. "We've come nowhere near the densities we had in the Booth era, but we are, again, seeing rising overcrowding of children, and the multiple use of bedrooms," he said.

Now, regeneration and changing fashion have combined to hugely expand the proportion of London viewed as desirable, according to Yolande Barnes, head of research at estate agent Savills. For about a century, into the 1950s, "prime" London was limited to Belgravia, Knightsbridge and Mayfair. Now the "prime" area – average prices of £700,000 – covers a third of the capital. London's perceived desirability has undergone a major change, Barnes says: "What's happened is London is becoming not just the national capital, but a major international capital, a world city. It's that change of status which makes the difference. It's like going from the first division to the Premier League."

All this combines to one, inescapable, effect: for all but the notably wealthy, life in London is increasingly hard to maintain. While average UK house prices remain below the pre-crash 2007 peak, in the capital they are already 5% or so higher. Rents are increasing faster, up an estimated 7% year on year.

"It's fair to call it a housing crisis," says Roger Harding, head of policy for [Shelter](http://www.shelter.org.uk/). "It's been affecting people on low incomes for quite a while, but now it's really starting to bite with people on middling, even upper-middling incomes. You can be on a very good income, working very hard and saving very hard, and still find that home ownership is significantly out of reach." Private rents are so outstripping wages, the charity says, it has seen a big increase in overcrowding as well as more desperate measures, the "beds in sheds" phenomenon.

At the vanguard are places such as Brixton and Walthamstow. Still hugely deprived by most definitions, – several of Brixton's districts rank among the poorest 10% in the country – they are nonetheless experiencing an influx of well-off arrivals, many themselves priced out of more gentrified nearby areas such as Clapham and Hackney.

The resultant changes often bring resentment, not least from the earlier waves of incomers, traditionally artists, café owners and the like, who fear being priced out of an area they helped revitalise.

Brixton is typical. After the 1981 riots many businesses fled, young people could not find any work and some properties were almost unsellable. Now its main street is thronged with well-known retail names.

If anything, Walthamstow is even more extreme. One of the most culturally diverse parts of London, it has for some years experienced a slow trickle of middle-class incomers drawn by streets of Victorian houses and a fast tube link to the centre, again bringing welcome new money and businesses to the area. But the local property market has recently acquired, says one local man, "an atmosphere of hysteria".

Edited from: <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/aug/02/london-inequality-house-prices>