Gentrification of Brooklyn by Brownstoners

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It is important that one should have an understanding about what gentrification is, how it started, who was involved in gentrification, its advantages and disadvantages, and its impact on the modern society. Gentrification of Brooklyn began since 1966 (Osman, p. 3). Ehrenhalt (2012) quoted a song from 1970s about gentrification:

*“I woke up this morning*

*I looked next door*

*There was one family living where there once were four*

*I got the gentrification blues”.*

Ehrenhalt (2012) noted that, “The word gentrification was invented in 1963 by the British sociologist Ruth Glass to describe the “invasion” of working-class urban neighborhoods by the wealthy” (p.233). Gentrification can also be explained as shifting of a neighborhood’s character, a significant over turn of the cultural, residential, and even the business environment. In 1979, New York Times explained that “In America, New York and other cities are starting to go through a time of revival as they pass through a gradual process called as gentrification (Osman, 2011, p. 271).

In the 1940’s people who started to move into the neighborhood of Brooklyn Heights called themselves as “Brownstoners”. This group comprised of artists, lawyers, investors, and other white-collar employees. They began to move into the abandoned tenements and then started to reconstruct the old and forlorn town houses and turned them into clean homes. In the 1960’s and 1970’s brownstoners coined new names for many of the streets and that is “Brownstone neighborhood” (Osman, 2011, p. 5, 7).

In the year of 1971, a survey conducted by local civic group which included 326 new brownstone owners of Brooklyn and Manhattan revealed that majority of those homeowners were whiter, richer, and more educated than an average resident in New York. According to that particular survey about 99 percent of those home owners were white and 98.3 percent of them had higher incomes. Historians have struggled to name this new group of people and they finally called them as the “Brownstoners”; the geographer David Ley quoted this new group as “the new middle class” (Osman, 2011, p. 12).

After the year 1977, the Brownstone Brooklyn began to experience a dramatic economic growth; this was clearly the result of gentrification which is also known as “brownstoning”. Before the emergence of this growth, the City of New York was about to go through bankruptcy. It was only because of gentrification that the city’s economy began to flourish significantly. During the years between 1977 and 1989, surplus numbers of jobs were added in the fields of advertisement, investment banking, legal firms, education, entertainment, tourism, social services and so on. Thus the brownstoning movement of Brooklyn undeniably delivered the New York City from undergoing through bankruptcy in the 1970’s (Osman, 2011, p. 271, 272).

According to Gratz (2010), during the late 1970’s and early 1980’s the Brownstone Revival Movement had begun in Brooklyn. During this time of gentrification changes happened throughout the neighborhood. Some of those changes are: building of new private schools, expansion of existing old schools, opening of new day care centers, planting of new trees by block associations, rebuilding of playgrounds and relandscaping of Broadway malls (p. 196, 200). During this time period, new restaurants multiplied and they remained open during late hours, which triggered the nightlife to pick up. This surprisingly brought in a sense of security into this neighborhood; experiencing security was a reverie that never came true for the former residents of this neighborhood (Gratz, 2010, p. 202).

Displacement, a major disadvantage of the gentrification of Brooklyn forced majority of the old and poor families in this neighborhood to leave this area and to move into places that offered lower and affordable rents. Thus memoirs of this neighborhood form 1970’s and 19080’s were mostly blemished by nostalgia. The introduction of subway system opened doors for new people to come into this neighborhood, which gave rise to new apartments. The construction of the Brooklyn Bridge replaced the ferry service and it reinvigorated the gentrification process of Brooklyn. Thus Brooklyn Heights moved on to become one of the city’s wealthiest real estate areas, with its waterfront playing a major role in all these dramatic changes during the Post-World War II era (Osman, 2011, p. 33-39).

In my opinion, gentrification is great as it brings an order and structure to the area, and it allows better use of the land. It also creates a new community setting along with improvement in economy to benefit the whole city. The increase in taxes and increase in business investments will pave the way for bringing in more government supported services into the area. Most importantly the significant growth in economy aids in eradicating crimes and in providing a much safer environment when compared to the early 70’s.

As witnessed by our class, various parts of the New York City such as Astoria, Coney Island, and Long Island City that are undergoing gentrification process are being occupied by artists and homosexuals today. This type of community is also opening new galleries, restaurants, and stores to create communities with a bohemian atmosphere. Greenwich Village, which is or was America’s bohemia, is a great example for a gentrified area in New York City. In this village majority of the occupants are poets, artists, anarchists, homosexuals and so on. It is now one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in New York. This village still attracts middle class and professional people (Wright, 2008, p. 128, 129). In Brooklyn, Brooklyn Heights and DUMBO are the two major areas that are already gentrified and these places are currently looking extremely vivacious and prosperous (Osman, 2011, p. 275).

Exploring the areas of the New York City that are already gentrified had enabled me to understand that, these places have an established identity of their own, which they achieved through the gentrification process. Like Brooklyn Heights and DUMBO, the other parts of the New York City that are currently undergoing the rough process of gentrification process will surely allow the City of New York to continue to remain as one of the powerful cities of the world.

References

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