It’s just a question of taste: the neighbourhood and cultural capital

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(please note - work in progress – preliminary and incomplete)

Introduction

The neighbourhood has long been categorised in terms of economic capital. Since the classic work in urban sociology, the Chicago School of urban ecology in the 1920s, economic value has been considered the influence that undermines traditional neighbourhood ties based on tradition, community and kinship. The Chicago urban ecologists argued that economic forces re-ordered the structure of the urban neighbourhood more in terms of the kind of competition that one found in nature, resulting in natural areas or neighbourhoods in which the social complexion was a result of the individuals’ economic success. This resulted in socially homogeneous neighbourhoods with an overall sorting of neighbourhoods across the city with, in the model by Ernest Burgess, a concentric ring structure in which the poorest neighbourhoods were located in the central city and the most affluent on the edge. The socio-spatial divisions amongst neighbourhoods is reflected in a whole wealth of indicators, most notably in house prices, where differentiations are down to neighbourhood and even street level – the hot spots and cold spots in the housing market.

Concern about the socio-economic sorting of neighbourhoods revealed itself in many guises in the literature on cities – as a decline of community, as symptomatic of a divided city, as a loss of public space and the public realm. Some authors have argued, however, that there is more to urban neighbourhoods than the ‘statistical communities’ of similar socio-economic status. Some have discovered community or relationships that are in some sense attributable to the fact that people are sharing the same neighbourhood space. One variant of this debate is rapid expansion of the literature and policy interest in social capital. Is there value to be had from one’s social ties? Policy interest has been especially focussed on those neighbourhood depleted of economic capital but with (potentially) strong neighbourhood bonds, or at the very least existing social ties and skills that could be re-ignited. Robert Putnam suggests a more general social malaise in which there is a depletion of the richness of social ties across all neighbourhoods and social strata. Putnam’s recent work on the US suggests that it is a nation that increasingly goes bowling alone rather than together, rather than in neighbourhood or other civic groups. The work on social capital, social networks and neighbourhood provides a mixed message. Closed social networks are potentially good for fostering social capital based on trust (Coleman 1990). Alternatively more open social networks consisting of weak rather than strong ties, as Granovetter’s classic paper suggested (Granovetter 1973) might be more effective in garnering resources from acquaintances with disparate connections, in contrast to dense networks where resources are quickly exhausted given the high degree of overlap of the social ties.
What has received much less attention in the literature is the links between neighbourhood and cultural capital. The idea of cultural capital was developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to describe embodied dispositions and the resources of the class habitus. Habitus is an array of inherited dispositions that condition bodily movement, tastes and judgements according to class position (Bourdieu 1984). Habitus is both “the ability to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate those practices and products (taste) that the represented social world, i.e. the spaces of lifestyles, is constructed” (Bourdieu 1984: 170). Those with social power have a monopoly over ways of seeing and classifying objects according to their criteria of good taste. The ability to create new systems of discernment is class power. Bourdieu also offers gentrification researchers the conceptual framework to ask whether this residential strategy is part of a new cultural habitus of a putative ‘new middle class’. Gentrification can be seen as one such re-classification (away from the working class city and the traditional desirability of the middle class suburbs) in which inner urban living became once again invested with ideas of status, style and cosmopolitanism. This innovation in taste could be viewed as an act of ‘symbolic violence’ over others, in this case, the working class residents of the inner city. Cultural capital can be incorporated in the form of education and knowledge, or symbolic – “the ability to define and legitimise cultural, moral and aesthetic values, standards and styles” (Butler and Robson 2004, 29).

There are a number of ways in which cultural capital intersects with neighbourhoods. The neighbourhood can be a vital arena for the novel ways in which cultural capital is deployed. Cultural capital can change neighbourhoods in ways that involve social displacement and economic change. I explore the relationship between cultural and economic capital in the neighbourhood context using the example of gentrification in research conducted in Sydney. The paper then goes on to explore the neighbourhood context in a provincial city (Bristol UK) in which elements of cultural capital, rather than consolidating the middle class impact in the central city, potentially leads to a diffuse set of neighbourhood trajectories and aesthetic profiles. This starts to raise questions about the distinctiveness of a new middle class and suggest that it is confined to certain cities at the top of the urban hierarchy.

**Cultural capital consolidated: gentrification and neighbourhood change**

In the early stages of the gentrification of inner urban neighbourhoods, involving lower paid public sector professionals, an air of distinction for the middle classes was established by a lick of paint, in a suitably pastel shade of course. For these first stage gentrifiers the housing was cheap and they themselves had low amounts of economic capital and so class distinction for middle class residents moving into these working class neighbourhoods was through the deployment of cultural capital. The lick of paint in a certain shade, and the gradual restoring of sash windows, stripping floors, restoring cornices were small but highly significant signals of a distinctive housing aesthetic. Low amounts of cultural capital meant that the renovations were often carried out by the owners themselves - in what became known as sweat equity gentrification. Certain cues of the aesthetic in the wider neighbourhood context were
also important to these early gentrifiers. Respondents to Butler’s survey in London suggest how the opening of the first neighbourhood wine bar or delicatessen was a key legitimation of their action in moving to the neighbourhood.

In research conducted in Sydney in the late 1990s an estate agent perfectly described the low economic capital high cultural capital neighbourhood:...

... what happens is a lot of the people who live in Glebe, a lot of our clients, whether they be customers, purchasers or owners who have a background or root in Glebe they might, they've been to university, so they have an academic, more sophisticated background, more cultural background, than an average suburb has... [they] ... don’t have a lot of money but they have the knowledge, they also have the ability to convert these old homes which were, 20 years ago turned from beautiful old Victorian homes to just money earning, devoid of character, aluminium windowed properties and they convert them back in to the Victorian home. It's a difference between, it’s a different social class, it’s a gentrification of it. A lot of the people in Glebe aren’t as wealthy as they’d like to be but culturally they’re very wealthy so consequently you ... don’t get well you don’t get, they’re not very expensive homes, a dear home here would be $7000,000, $800,000, that’s a dear house in Glebe. You get the odd home which is worth over a million but they’re spectacular homes and they generally don’t change around. (estate agent quoted in Bridge 2001a: 90).

As gentrification proceeds the balance of economic and cultural capital starts to shift. Whilst overall levels of cultural capital may continue to increase, at least in terms of the education credentials of incoming residents (see Ley 1996) the strategies of deployment of cultural capital begin to change. What were once expressions of class taste become commodified. This captures Bourdieu’s idea that economic and cultural capital can to a certain extent, be exchanged for one another. As the gentrification process consolidates higher paid professionals are attracted. Sweat-equity gentrifiers are replaced by small builders who turn over the properties in the gentrified style. When the neighbourhood is fully ‘established’ large developers might get involved, involving a routinisation of the aesthetic aspects of the process. Cultural capital in the form of the gentrification aesthetic gets absorbed into the overall ‘price’ of the property and the neighbourhood in which it is located. Sharon Zukin has traced this transformation of cultural into economic capital for the Tribeca neighbourhood on Manhattan’s Lower East Side (Zukin 1995, 1982). De-industrialisation of this area of New York from the 1950s onwards meant that these lofts were abandoned by the garment industry. For a while in the 1970s they were occupied by artists who squatted or paid peppercorn rents. Each story was an undivided single loft space with large windows which made for ideal studios. For a while the common entrances of these buildings were daubed with paint spelling AIR (artists in residents). At this point in time the Tribeca neighbourhood was very high on cultural capital and low on economic capital. Yet the very reputation that the deployment of cultural capital produced, that of a creative bohemia, in turn attracted certain members of the professional middle class. Real estate agents picked up on this and market the area in terms of its creative vibrancy and urban edge. Existing landlords sold up and the lofts more and more converted into purely residential spaces. The artists were forced out and their makeshift galleries replaced by the larger commercial galleries. Loft living became a marketing manqué. The significance of Tribeca as a commodified neighbourhood was supported, Zukin suggest, by a “critical infrastructure” of restaurant and art critics writing in New York lifestyle magazines and newspapers.
commenting on the latest restaurant openings or gallery acquisitions in the
neighbourhood.

The intensification of the impact of economic capital in the gentrified neighbourhood
is also evident from the work I conducted in Sydney in the late 1990s. Whereas
distinction in the early stages of the process was represented by certain aesthetic
adaptations by the gentrifiers themselves (and described in the quote above) in the
well established gentrified neighbourhoods of Balmain and Glebe distinction was
achieved only through the investment of large amounts of economic capital. This
took the form of elaborate housing renovations, often architect designed to make the
most of the visual display of the house and the capturing of prestige views of the
Sydney, principally either of the downtown skyline of Sydney harbour bridge.
Describing the structural renovation of a Victorian terrace in Balmain one Sydney
estate agent stated:

... this is a two-storey property and the outlook is from upstairs, living is upstairs,
kitchen, lounge dining and balcony is all upstairs and it’s not fantastic water view but
it’s just a city skyline view, maybe the [Sydney Harbour] bridge or something like
that, so rather than having that given to one or two bedrooms which are not really
going to appreciate it, all the bedrooms are downstairs, there’s a bathroom
downstairs ... bedrooms downstairs and your living upstairs ‘cos it captures the view
- that’s what you impress your visitors with, the view. You don’t say yeah we’ve got a
view come into my bedroom have a look at that, they go into the lounge (in Bridge
2001a: 96).

And elsewhere:

What they will even do is in an old style place ... let’s say for example an old place
down on “Dumont” street where you would have a lounge room, dining room,
kitchen, bathroom, - someone could come in and turn that all around so you have
your kitchen there [front of house] because it’s the closest place to the noise and
normally if you’re in the kitchen you’re not going to be disturbed by traffic noise
because you’re going to be doing something in your kitchen and ... they will open it
up and so rather than having your kitchen and your bathroom at the back ... and then
going past those to your backyard - it’s all reversed ... and lounge and dining is open
plan as much as possible and then opening out on to the courtyard.

The sense of social display is clear:

You don’t need the kitchen at the back of the house. Why were kitchens at the back of
the house, probably because they were busy working areas and if you’re having
guests in they didn’t come to the kitchen .... but now kitchens are on display ... aromas
or whatever, it doesn’t matter if they fill the house now, that’s part of it” (quoted in
Bridge 2001a: 95).

The competitive aspects of this form of distinction I have called the gentrification
premium. It suggests levels of investment of economic capital that exceed what is
rational in utilitarian terms. Gentrification in these elite neighbourhoods resembles a
form of conspicuous consumption: the overconsumption of prestige commodities to
confer social status in a way defined by Veblen (1912). Jager has noted this in the
context of Victoriania in Melbourne in an earlier period of gentrification (the mid 1980s). Jager sees gentrifiers at that time caught between “a former gentry ethic of social representation being an end in itself, and more traditional bourgeois ethic of economic valorisation’ (Jager 1986: 83). In Sydney in the late 1990s the social display was demanding ever more economic investment to a degree that exceeded economic valorisation in a way that brings into question Jager’s claim that “the Victorian esthetic had its limits: it legitimates but cannot be allowed to compromise the economic investment” (Jager 1986: 85).

This is indicated in several ways. In the inner Sydney housing market in the late 1990s there was a price distinction between properties that had been structurally converted in ways considered appropriate to modern living but had unfashionable cosmetics in their fixtures and fittings, and totally unrenovated Victorian properties (ie no structural alterations), usually deceased estates. As one Sydney agent put it:

Well the one you should buy is the dated [1970s] one. People look at the kitchen and bathroom and go ‘yuk, that’s awful eh yuk’ but structurally the house is very sound. It’s very easy to just to pull that kitchen out and put a new kitchen back in, as opposed to moving kitchens and bathrooms and plumbing. (MB) (Bridge 97) ….

“I know one in "Rudolph" St which was by all means derelict … a deceased estate, and we were looking at selling that at $260,000 and we achieved 350 at auction. Now at that time if that same property had been renovated we would have probably sold it for 350, 360 … it made the same price … yet to get there the person who bought it said he was going to spend $150,000 on it and having spent 350 on it. It wasn’t a $500,000 property and it wouldn't be a $5000,000 property now.” (Bridge 2001a 95).

This concern with social display in the gentrification aesthetic even extends to investment properties in surrounding neighbourhoods. The need for gentrifier landlords to be associated with tasteful renovations, fixtures and fittings starts to compromise the value of their economic investments.

Another Sydney agent makes this case:

Certainly the condition of the house will reflect the quality of your tenant. But if I’ve got a three bedroom, two storey house with a 1970s kitchen and bathroom in it that’s clean and tidy it will rent for probably ten dollars a week less than the three bedroom that has the immaculate, state-of-the-art kitchen and bathroom, but the cost between the two might be fifty to eighty thousand dollars difference. (MB) … They can’t get through this mentality that it’s purely an investment property and there to give them a return. (Birdge 2001a 95)

The idea of the gentrification premium captures the dynamic nature of the aesthetic and its impact on housing and neighbourhood. Distinction in the early stages of gentrification is defined by inner city living itself. An important part of the gentrification aesthetic is defined against the implied homogeneity of the suburbs. The inner urban neighbourhoods are defined as historic and housing renovation is attuned to an aestheticised version of that authentic past. It also involves the development of a housing aesthetic that contrasts with working class residents. The power of symbolic capital is this redefinition of the inner urban slum in poorer neighbourhoods as valuable historic property in desirable neighbourhoods. This
yields economic returns as the process consolidates. In this sense cultural capital (the power to define and legitimise) captures material capital. As the process advances the balance changes and economic capital starts to capture cultural capital, both in terms of the standardisation of the entry level requirements for a gentrified neighbourhood but also in internal competition within the aesthetic for renewed distinction and social status.

Although certain individual innovations are permitted in the way that houses are adapted within the gentrification aesthetic other forms of economic investment outside that aesthetic are severely discounted in terms of economic capital. Properties can be too thoroughly authenticated, or ‘overgentrified’:

I did do a house about four or five years ago which had been faithfully restored and unfortunately it was dark because in, you know, Victorian London, light was not a feature that was looked for ... So when you married that with smaller windows and rich tapestries and darks on the colourings, a lot of people loved the home and they could appreciate the detailed work that had gone into it but it was just not what they were looking for in terms of turning around and decorating, which would be sacrilege.

... this house I sold - the two bedroom two storey that was immaculately done and had all antique furniture in it and I achieved three hundred and sixty thousand [dollars] - it took me three months to get that. Anybody could say yes they’d buy it - everybody would walk through the house and say ‘Oh I really like it but it’s not me, it’s too over the top’. He had heaps of Victorian wallpaper all over the walls.

The taste boundaries are also bounded by a dominant white, Anglo-Australian aesthetic. Economic investments that transgress the dominant manifestation of cultural capital are severely penalised in terms of economic return.

We sold a house in ‘Cranston’ Avenue once which was absolutely a Mediterranean home. When I say Mediterranean it was owned by an Italian chap who spent an absolute fortune, maybe $300,000 on this beautiful home, and he’d ruined it. He’d taken the timber floors out, he’d fully tiled the property completely throughout, he’d taken all the timber windows and put aluminium windows in, he’d put fountains and made it look just out of character with Glebe - if it was Balkan Hills or if it was in Fairfield he would have sold it thirty times a day but because of the type of people who are buying - they said it’s unrenovated - we’ve got to restore it - we’ve got to get it back to the Victorian style.

GB: They saw it as an unrenovated property.

KW: Unrenovated home. And my problem with him was talking to him and saying ... unfortunately the people who buy your house have to rip it out and start again. And he found it very hard to come to grips with that because he’d spent a fortune in time doing it up to his own taste, which wasn’t the taste of the local people.

This ethnic and aesthetic patterning of neighbourhoods is evident at the mass auctions of property that routinely take place in hotels throughout Sydney with different ethnic
groups dominating the audience at different times as houses in different
eighbourhoods came up for auction.

The way that different mixes of economic social and cultural capital result in different
neighbourhood milieu is most evident in the global city of London (Butler 1997;
Butler and Robson 2001; Butler with Robson 2004). The main distinction is between
those gentrifiers in private sector occupations who consume their housing and
neighbourhood as a ready made aesthetic product, and public sector professionals
with lower incomes but higher investments of social and cultural capital in their
neighbourhoods. These also relate to schooling strategies where there are contrasting
levels of investment in local primary schools and a range of secondary circuits of
schooling that operate in a larger sub-area of London and involve well defined private
and state circuits of schooling (to use Ball and Rheay’s terminology). In the UK
strategies of schooling have become more intense with the advent of an education
market and parental choice. For the middle classes the scale of London permits a
number of different strategies to be pursued. Although the standards of secondary
schools in London are particularly poor the scale of the metropolitan area means that
the range of middle class strategies to find suitable secondary schools (including
buying into the private sector, strategies to gain entry to state selective schools, local
school capture, moving house) can all be accommodated within the capital, and within
neighbourhoods where the housing stock is consistent with the gentrification
aesthetic, namely the inner Victorian districts. The size of London enables middle
class residents to keep all social fields (in a Bourdieun sense) in play at the same time.

**Cultural capital diffused? The case of provincial neighbourhoods**

In contrast to the geography of cultural capital in London is the provincial city of
Bristol UK. Bristol is a provincial centre of some 400,000 residents in the west of
England (110 miles from London). Bristol has a comparable occupational structure to
London, with a strong emphasis on financial services. Previous research on
gentrification has concentrated on changes within neighbourhoods over time (such as
the stage model of gentrification) or on contrasts between gentrified neighbourhoods
(both within the same city – Butler 2004 or between neighbourhoods in different
cities and countries – Ley 1996 Lees 2000). The research I report here seeks to look
at the lifecourse of gentrifiers passing through the gentrified neighbourhood. It
investigates the degree to which the gentrification aesthetic is sustained in the
subsequent move out of the gentrified area. The research comprised in depth
interviews with middle class residents who had their property for sale in a single
gentrifying neighbourhood of Bristol in the period 2002-3. Interviews were
conducted either with individuals or where there were partners in the household, with
both partners. The interview divided into three main parts: a reconstruction of the
housing history for each individual from birth up to current residence; experience of
the neighbourhood and renovation activity in the home; reasons for wanting to move,
search strategies and target destinations. The housing history approach proved
particularly useful in gleaning additional information about parents’ occupations, and
the educational and occupational history of the interviewees. Where possible we
conducted repeat interviews with those households that successfully moved house.
Interviews were conducted in the new house and neighbourhood, where the move
occurred within the region (Bristol and surrounding counties). Repeat interviews
discussed search strategies and reasons for choosing the particular dwelling and intentions in terms of alterations, renovations etc, as well as perceptions of the new neighbourhood.

Whereas previous neighbourhood change research highlighted the importance of space in the deployments of cultural capital, the housing history research suggested that the mix of fields is significant over time and space. Different deployments of cultural capital in the different fields might well characterise the lifecourse of gentrifiers. I argue that there is a spatial and a temporal deployment of cultural capital. The spatial deployment is classic gentrification involving overt housing aesthetics, neighbourhood politics and distinctive consumption in public - as part of a symbolic re-ordering of the central city. "Temporal" deployment involves capital accumulation that is not so rapidly materialised (or convertible into economic capital). It is less visible and aligns much more with traditional middle class strategies of distinction through education. Whereas for Robson and Butler this starts to disaggregate gentrification into different socio-spatial neighbourhood types, preliminary results of the current research in Bristol suggest that it may also start to mark out the relative diffuseness of gentrification as force consolidating a new middle class.

The Bristol research suggests a tension between the two elements of cultural capital - incorporation and symbolic display. Education strategies relate to incorporation – the acquisition of ‘appropriate’ knowledge and skills by the children of the middle classes to permit class reproduction through the children’s achievement in the education and subsequent labour market. On the other hand, as I have argued elsewhere, the distinctiveness of middle class gentrification of inner urban neighbourhoods and the accompanying housing and retail aesthetic does seem to represent a particular middle-class habitus. This tension between symbolic and incorporated cultural capital is played out through the neighbourhood. Bristol, like London, has a paucity of high performing state secondary schools. In London education strategies in the state sector might be pursued at large but sub-metropolitan scale permitting the maintenance of the aesthetic in terms of gentrified or gentrifiable neighbourhoods of Victorian housing. The scale and character of the housing market in Bristol presents a starker trade-off between symbolic and incorporated cultural capital for middle class families. This is reflected in the range of intended or achieved destinations in terms of neighbourhood and housing type suggested by the Bristol research. I provide some examples as illustrations of the trade off between the aesthetics of gentrification and more traditional middle class concerns with education, between symbolic and incorporated cultural capital.

**Dan and Pip: trading aesthetics for education**

“Balamory” is a large village 10 miles outside Bristol that has a highly rated state secondary school. “Dan” and “Pip” had lived for two years in one of the larger two bedroom villas in Westville. Dan is a computer consultant who works from home. They have a 3 year old child. Dan and Pip were moving to Balamory principally because of schooling. They had consulted all the junior and secondary school league table results for Bristol and neighbouring counties and noted the high ranking of Balamory state schools. They explained that, although Westville junior school
performed well on these indicators, it came down to a decision about whether to move before their child went to primary school or between primary and secondary. They decided for the sake of continuity of education and social life of their child, the former was more desirable.

"… well we both have slight reservations about whether or not it's [Westville] really the place that we want to bring up our children. And whilst I think we were still happy with the primaries here there is a problem with the secondary school ... so we had a discussion should we stay in Westville for the primary years and then move out to somewhere there the secondary schools are better. Or should we try and get them into the school system that we want them to stay from primary through to secondary. And the reason why we’re leaving is because we felt that we should rather get them into the school system from the start so that they don’t have to make a traumatic transition (Bridge 2003: 2554)

They had looked for property exclusively in Balamory and had chosen a 1970s dormer bungalow. This was not to their taste. They would have preferred one of the older Victorian houses. There was the compensation that the property was in the heart of the village, close to the church. This seemed to capture the symbolic capital of living in the historic core of the village, even if the house they occupied did not match those historical resonance. Dan and Pip both had the requisite stock of incorporated cultural capital. Pip studied at Portsmouth polytechnic and then took an MSc at Royal Holloway. Dan studied for a degree and PGCE at Southampton University. Pip was a part time teacher in a further education college, Dan was a self-employed computer consultant and ex- maths teacher who got “fed up with teaching in state schools”. However their connection and commitment to the gentrification aesthetic was very slight. Both, but Pip especially, loved the Westville house (a large 4 bedroom villa) for its space and the fact that it had already been renovated and Pip liked the fact that her sister lived around the corner. Both fit Ley’s idea of the gentrification aesthetic involving an anti-suburban element. Pip went to Royal Holloway to study for an MSc and as she explains “actually I moved to Surrey and really didn’t like it, for a term. So it’s just so horribly flat and suburban ... so lived there for a term and then actually moved back to Portsmouth and commuted”. For a while Dan taught at a school in Hampshire “In no man’s land really ... in a very boring area, suburban I guess”. Yet the Westville neighbourhood was always questionable, especially for Dan:

Dan And in the end ... I mean I did go off for a walk at one point and I was quite anxious about it just thinking ‘This doesn’t feel like the right thing for the kids’, it logically didn’t feel right. But then we discussed that this would get us here.

Pip We did look as well at the OFSTED reports for the primaries didn’t we?

Dan What before we moved here?

Pip Yeah we did yeah. And we looked at their most recent SATS results. The primaries, although their history was a bit chequered are actually now very good.
Dan  This is Westville Primary.

Pip  Westville Primary and Audley Primary, they’re both easy walking distance. And we did look at those before we moved here, I think that was part of the reason why we sort of felt that we could come here and possibly live here for the primary years.

And they elaborate:

Pip  Okay, I like the neighbourhood, I think we’ve been very lucky with our neighbours. I think if we needed a favour they would be there for us. I, again through the NCT, have sort of met other mums who I have found to be basically very similar to me in their outlook and … educated, I don’t want to …

Pip  But people who’ve got the same kind of concerns as me and who do the same kind of work as me in the category of work. So I like it and it’s been … having just had a second baby, who’s now 5 months old, I have found it incredibly useful having my sister round the corner because she’s got a baby as well so we kind of reciprocate with looking after each other’s babies, which is really really handy. So I like it, I like the Westville Deli and we like the [local theatespace and bar] and the fact that New Street seems to be improving a lot. And I love the house still. I think I’d … well we both have slight reservations about whether or not it’s really the place that we want to bring up our children. And whilst I think we were still happy with the primaries here there is a problem with the secondary school and we sort of thought can we afford to educate them privately, and we don’t really feel that we can. So we had a discussion should we stay in Westville for the primary years and then move out to somewhere where the secondary schools are better. Or should we try and get them into the school system that we want them to stay in from primary through to secondary. And the reason why we’re now leaving is because we felt that we would rather get them into the school system from the start so that they don’t have to make a traumatic transition.

These concerns are behind Dan and Pip’s decision to move out of Westville.

Pip  The main criteria were the schools, weren’t they?

Dan  Yeah I mean my … I don’t know whether it’s worth just throwing it in … my approach, or thoughts on moving started before yours because I drove through Balamory a little while ago …

Pip  Yeah you did yeah.
Dan  And I happened to drive through. I don’t know why, I was going to the dump or to get a Christmas tree or something, but I drove through as the kids were coming out of school, it was about half three, and they were all in their uniforms and they all looked really quite smart. I just thought that’s the sort of environment I want my daughter to go to school in. And so from that moment I sort of … and I’d never been to Balamory before I just thought ‘This looks a really nice place and so it was sort of in my mind. And I did mention it to you then and you said ‘Well maybe in a few years.

Pip  Yeah.

Dan  Then we went out for a drink when my parents were here babysitting and you said ‘I think we do need to move,’ you said, for schooling, and you said either we do it now or in the next year or we do it in about 3 years when Millie’s finished nursery and ready to go to school. And I said well if we’re going to do it let’s just get on with it.

Pip  Yeah.

Dan  And so Balamory was, because of that, a place that I wanted to look at. And we started then with this checklist which is sort of what you’re … which was similar to before wasn’t it?

Pip  Mm.

Dan  Needed to be near the city, ideally needed to still be near your family, your mother’s in Neston. It had a mainline station 2 hours to London, and I’m in London now and again. And so then if I change jobs it’s another option with the railway station. And the schools, we subsequently, not done in great depth, but we have looked at lot of OFSTED reports and school league table type measures, and Balamory seems to have the best secondary school in the county, state school, and the best infants and junior. So that has always … we’ve sort of gone from there and … cos we couldn’t find anything could we that we liked.

Pip  Mm, we started looking, we decided on Balamory and started looking at houses, but the houses we were looking at in the budget that we had set ourselves just didn’t come close to this house. A lot smaller, a lot scruffier. There’s a lot of 1930s bungalows in Balamory. So we were looking at sort of 1930s bungalows for a lot of money, which didn’t come close to this house. So we …

Dan  Started looking further afield.

Pip  … started looking at other places. We looked at OFSTED reports for some of the villages up in the Mendips, Churchill and Wrington, and we had a look at Portishead.

Dan  That was our latest wasn’t it?
Pip  Had a look at some properties in Portishead, had a look at the OFSTED reports for Portisead.

Dan  It got very confusing didn’t it? Balamory was simple in that there’s only one school system there you choose and it’s a good one.

I  Right.

Dan  With one infant, one junior, middle (?). Portishead was quite confusing because there are lots of primary schools, it’s growing very rapidly and they’re moving schools as well. There is only one secondary but it always … and then we started actually looking inside some of the houses and they were no better than Balamory for the price were they?

Pip  No.

Dan  And then we sold this place didn’t we? Because we put this on the market.

[...]  … And we have now found a place in Balamory actually. Having been to Portishead and lots of other places, we came back to Balamory and we have now found a property there that we have had an offer accepted on.

...  And are you getting the same for you money out there or is it …

Pip  Oh nowhere near.

Dan  We’re going up, we’re just stretching and stretching and stretching aren’t we?

Pip  What we’ve bought there is a 1960s 5 bedroom bungalow which is probably half the size of this.

Dan  Dormer bungalow.

Pip  It’s got two bedrooms in the roof. It’s very small it’s in a right state.

Dan  It’s not very small, for a dormer bungalow the bedrooms are bigger than anywhere else we looked at.

Pip  Yeah. It’s not very small but it’s much smaller than this.

...  And we will need to build an extension on it and completely gut the inside.
Pip: Well the reason that we bought is that it’s in the most beautiful part of Balamory.

Dan: It’s probably the best location in Balamory I would say.

... Dan: Our mortgage will essentially go up by about £100,000 with everything to do, the move and extension and that.

Pip: But it’s next door to the junior school, the infant’s school is walking distance and so is the secondary, so it completely overcomes the schooling problem until they’re 18.

Dan: There was nothing that we looked at ... if there’d been something that was perfect up to the absolute limit financially we would have gone for it, but there was nothing. Everything was either wrong location or would have needed loads of work.

Dan and Pip’s strategy was to compromise and the aesthetics of the housing to gain a prestige location within the village that, as they saw it, guaranteed high quality state education for their children. They were also aware of other strategies at work, as Pip describes:

Pip: I think there are quite a lot of people who I know who are staying in Westville because they think they like it very much now and they think it’s getting better and better. And there are people now who have got children who are the same age as ours, very very young, who are going to stay in Westville because they think that the secondary by the time they get there will improve as well.

Beth and Harry: aesthetics and education

The contrasting case of working from the neighbourhood by investing high amounts of cultural (and social capital) in the area is provided by the case of Beth and Harry. Here there is a strong emphasis on the symbolic elements of cultural capital (in terms of the neighbourhood and house renovation) and a lower level of concern about the children’s acquisition of incorporated cultural capital. Beth and Harry had lived in Westville for 16 years and had moved within the neighbourhood once in that time to acquire a larger property. When interviewed they were just about to move again to purchase a 5 bedroom Georgian property, the largest in the area. Both Beth and Harry had degrees. She worked as an educational consultant and he made instruments. Beth and Harry conform to what I call community gentrifiers. They had lived in the area for 16 years and invested large amounts of effort in both social and artistic activities in Westville. When searching for their current house (the one they were about to leave when interviewed) they had looked in Long Ashton, a village on the edge of Bristol but didn’t like its “suburban culture”
Beth I mean we looked at quite a few houses and the houses are great, really nice houses and affordable, but it was just like it didn’t feel friendly and I thought I don’t want to be in this culture, you know, very different. I mean the kids go to school in Neston, and yet I would hate to live there, it’s a very different way of living. I either want to be smack in the middle of the city or in real country. I don’t like the bits in between.

Beth argues that schools were not an issue for them. Their children (now 14 and 17 at the time of the first interview) went to the local junior school and then to Neston school (Neston is a small town some 10 miles south of Bristol).

Beth Yeah. And again we were clueless about the secondary schools in Bristol. I think when George was going up we looked at about nine different schools, and let him choose really. And what swung it was they’re both musicians and they’ve got a superb music department.

Beth and Harry were clear that they did not want to move out towards the school.

Beth Yeah. When George first chose to go we said ‘Look, you know you’re going to have get up really early,’ ... they leave the house at 7.30 ... ‘get a bus, think about this.’ You know and also making a group of friends out there. It’s not difficult to get to but it was something that he had to think through. And he was actually clued up enough to do it at that age. And it hasn’t been a problem. Because the nice thing is Joe, the younger one, particularly has retained his friends from around here and got a whole load more from there.

Beth Well we sort of said to the boys half jokingly ‘Do you want to move to Neston?’ and they both said no.

It is clear that the attraction of the neighbourhood was in part explicable in terms of social capital.

Beth Really supportive community, especially when the kids were little ... we’ve both always worked so there was a lot of swapping of kids after school and you know doing the childminding. It was very easy from that point of view.

The commitment to the neighbourhood was reflected in the amount of sweat equity and commissioned renovation of the property.

Beth Oh yeah it was also ... I mean we’ve done a lot to it ... like it hadn’t really been butchered, like the staircase is there and all the original doors and the sashes. All that kind of thing, it’s got a lot of character. I think that’s what ... the space, and it’s very light as well, which is quite unusual for a Victorian house. And also it’s just so friendly around here.

Beth Yes, we have done everything. It was actually ... well the floors were stripped and that room was as is apart from what I’ve had done. And we’ve done a loft conversion, which is wonderful ...And we’ve knocked down the kitchen and rebuilt it and opened it up onto the garden ... We’ve redone the heating, renovated every sash window in the house apart from that one.
Beth and Harry demonstrate a case of gentrifiers where the symbolic aspects of cultural capital and social capital figure strongly. They appear to be less focused on incorporated aspects of cultural capital. How the school choices were narrowed down was never revealed, although Neston is a strongly performing school (66 percent A-C in 2003) and the home environment was clearly one in which there was substantial transmission of incorporated capital. What Beth and Harry have managed to do is keep all social fields in play (maintaining the gentrification aesthetic and the educational capital). Their commitment to Westville is confirmed by their third move in the neighbourhood for one of the prestige properties.

**Diffused cultural capital: compromises over aesthetics and education**

The Bristol research discovered several cases where trade-offs of both housing and education were being made, potentially diffusing the impact of cultural capital in particular neighbourhoods.

Sue and Dan were leaving Westville to move to a village suburb of Bristol and a 1930s semi-detached house. The reason for their move was the fact that Dan, a university educated graphic designer worked from home and they were about to have a second child, so they needed an extra room. Sue was a university-educated nurse. Both would have preferred to stay in Westville because of the type of housing but also because as Dan stated “It’s the friendliest place I’ve ever lived in”. Nevertheless the shortage of space was forcing them to move. They had looked into having a loft conversion but their landing was too narrow to have one installed. In the prior search that brought them to Westville Sue and Dan had looked at a range of locations including several rural towns surrounding Bristol. As they describe it, and reflecting it to their current move:

*Sue*  Although it [rural town] was cheaper, you know, we thought about the commuting hassle and just what would we do in a kind of little kind of rural town (INAUDIBLE) You know Boden do you?

*I*  I do yeah, I don’t know it very well but I’ve been through yeah.

*Sue*  Yeah. Plus like with the children we were looking at primary schools and the school was doing quite badly.

*I*  Right.

*Sue*  And that was a consideration as well wasn’t it?

*Roger*  That was a big restraining factor this time round.

*I*  Oh really? Yeah, yeah

*Roger*  The primary school, because they’re coming up to primary school age shortly.
I Yeah.

Roger There are a lot of bad ones in the city of Bristol, a lot of bad ones. Yeah. Aren’t that many good ones, and Southville’s one of the good ones.

I Yeah it is yeah.

Sue Yeah it is.

Roger And where we’re going isn’t too bad is it? I don’t think it’s as good as Southville in terms of …

Sue Well only on points but …

Roger In terms of points anyway.

I League tables yeah.

Sue It’s got a very caring ethos.

Roger Yeah yeah. So yeah.

They again looked at villages and towns surrounding Bristol.

Roger Although we did put an offer in on a house in Balamory because they’ve got an excellent school there. They’ve also got an excellent comprehensive there.

I Yeah.

Roger Which would mean when they come to comprehensive age we wouldn’t necessarily have to move again.

I Right.

Roger Which was a big attraction. But the drawback was it was (LAUGHTER) … it was a new house and I don’t like new houses (LAUGHTER) But I think you agreed in the end it wouldn’t have been a great move would it?

Sue No I think no probably not.

Roger Cos it was such a …

I What sort of house was it?

Roger Brand new. One of these you know Barrett jobs, wasn’t it?

Sue (LAUGHTER)
Roger Bryant home.

Roger and Sue’s need for space and their desire for an older property, as well as their available economic capital meant that they decided to change their housing aesthetic and compromise a little on schools.

Sue We came to the conclusion … I mean Victorians are so overpriced.

Changing the housing aesthetic and moving from a Victorian terraced neighbourhood to a new build estate can be a painful experience. Describing their search in Balamory prompted by the impending birth of twins (to make 3 children in all) Scot and Amy put space and schools as their priorities. They were now prepared to move from Westville to a new build estate on the edge of Balamory that six months previously they had strongly discounted (and the same one that Sue and Roger pulled back from moving to).

Amy I mean, I don’t really think…. I would have chosen to live there if we didn’t have three children – or when we’re about to have three children. It’s certainly not a home that we would have ever considered living in … The funny thing is we looked at this estate six months ago- more than that. For some reason, I had it in my mind that I wanted to move out to sort of countryhood … and we drove through the estate. And we just said to each other “This is horrible. No. This is grim. Can’t do this”.

Scot It was really Stepford Wives, sort of Twinkle Town.

Amy And we both said, “No, there’s just no way”.

Peter and Jane also had to compromise on their aesthetic.

Peter Ideally we would have liked to stay in Westville.

Jane But it’s so difficult to get four bedrooms

They were moving to a town house on an estate on the edge of Bristol that they too had rejected a year before. The new build town house at least had a slightly different aesthetic from the “usual” suburban new build:

Jane It’s a town house on three floors. Not the usual detached samey-looking house with a garage.

Peter and Jane described themselves as:

Jane City, city, city. We’re city people really

Peter And this [location of new house] is sort of city
Conclusions

The significance of deployments of cultural capital for the fate of neighbourhoods is suggested strongly by research on gentrification. This paper has suggested how the catalyst of symbolic cultural capital deployed in urban neighbourhoods can result in concentrations of economic capital involving displacement of working class residents and whole geography of gentrification in the inner districts of key metropolitan centres. In cities lower down the urban hierarchy the elements of cultural capital start to fragment and there is emerging evidence of tradeoffs between the symbolic aspects of the gentrification aesthetic and incorporated cultural capital via circuits of schooling. Whereas in metropolitan areas these tensions can be accommodated within the aesthetically appropriate housing types in a provincial city such as Bristol there is the possibility of the loss of the gentrification aesthetic to satisfy the need for schooling. This can mean a move to the suburbs, to new build housing, or out of the city altogether. This suggests that Butler’s claim for a ‘metropolitan habitus’ of gentrification (in his case London) is plausible. The Bristol research also suggests that gentrification may be a more diffuse process than hitherto assumed. All the residents in the Bristol study possessed the requisite cultural capital through education but that was very differently deployed in a neighbourhood context (form high investment via housing renovation, cultural activities and social capital) to very low levels of commitment of some residents who were just “passing through” and for whom the aesthetic was largely irrelevant. This leads to a further theoretical issue that the neighbourhood research points up. Bourdieu’s idea of habitus would suggest that cultural capital involves the unconscious reproduction of a class habitus via neighbourhood. The deployments of both symbolic and incorporated cultural capital are, in the case of gentrification, now very conscious processes. But again that degree of consciousness might be a result of a metropolitan environment of the new middle class. In other locations gentrification might be hollowed out, both by the range of socio-economic and housing trajectories through the neighbourhood, and by the traditional middle class imperative of quality schooling for the children.

Selective bibliography


