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The ugly side of gentrification

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Objectors to the building raised concerns over the protection of the Bo-Kaap's heritage, increased traffic congestion, the severing of pedestrian linkages to Riebeeck and Heritage squares and the gentrification of the area by those who would be able to afford the luxury apartments. Picture: Henk Kruger

TSWELOPELE MAKOE

Johannesburg - Gentrification is a process of development in which an area develops rapidly in a short space of time. It typically entails the erection of new houses, new businesses, and the inevitable displacement of the original inhabitants.

This is a modern phenomenon that has been encapsulating modern societies all over the world. There have been many instances where people have advocated for gentrification in underprivileged communities and dilapidated neighbourhoods. It has popularly been the facilitator of commercial development, improved economic opportunities, and the emergence of more mixed-income neighbourhoods.

It has also been linked to improvements in public safety, increased property values, and the creation and facilitation of job opportunities.

But gentrification is divisive. There have also been many instances where people have spoken out against gentrification, highlighting particularly its exclusionary nature. Gentrification is not only focused on the physical development of an area.

As in apartheid days, it also entails largely the forced removals of people who have previously occupied this area. It oftentimes results in the breakdown of communities, cultures and history. The big question then is: Is gentrification worth it, if it enforces the replacement, nay, displacement of the community, largely of indigenous people, that once lived in their ancestral place? How can we admire a phenomenon that not only displaces entire communities, but also seeks to develop neighbourhoods on the premise that they are occupied by a new set of residents with no historical sentiment to the place? Why should gentrification even exist if it is not developing the area in the interest of its underdeveloped indigenous communities? I have some grave reservations of my own.

Although development is always a positive aspect of the growth and modernisation of our communities, physical development is not necessarily the central factor that affects unmaintained or poorly maintained living areas. Poor socio-economic relations, insufficient resources, and poverty-stricken households are some of the key focuses of profit-driven gentrifying organisations. Gentrification seeks to solve a physical issue; however, the welfare of the people who are affected is hardly a matter of interest.

Development programmes that seek to alleviate the plight of underprivileged neighbourhoods need to be at the forefront of the developmental agenda in nascent democracies such as ours. This should be instilled into the neighbourhoods in the form of feeding schemes, job training programmes, skills development programmes, and many more. The development of the people, on a personal level, should be the focus of the foundation of a brighter future.

Addressing these pertinent issues is the first step in unravelling the secondary issues, which come as a result of this personal underdevelopment. Challenges such as homelessness, crime, school drop-out rates, gender-based violence and high illiteracy rates can be more firmly addressed if we focus on redressing the instigators of these factors. Gentrification should not be unleashed for development that is based on the removal of unsuspecting communities.

It should be a people-centred development, period. It should strive to mitigate the causal factors behind the perpetuation of underprivileged communities, derelict housing and homelessness. The proponents of gentrification should never be allowed to rush to break down historical buildings, but rather seek to remodel what is already there, to improve the lives of people who struggle; giving them lifelong skills, rather than temporary aid. We very often forget that it is the people who make the place, and we cannot claim to care for a place when we disregard its people.

The very notion of development is centred on people, their transformation, and their betterment. A graduate project by a student at California State University proved that homelessness is directly linked to gentrification. It will only be to our advantage to ensure that as many peri-urban areas across South Africa are developed, the people reap the benefits of the development of their communities.

It is not enough to create the habitable spaces that people deserve to live in, as we've seen through RDP housing in the early days of our democracy, but it is integral that we create an enabling environment for people to pull themselves by their bootstraps and contribute to their communities in meaningful, constructive, and intentional ways.

I believe that there should be mandatory programmes that assist people in being reintroduced to society, programmes that motivate citizens to better themselves, to improve themselves in preparation for the next steps in their life journey. We need to stop the cycle of moving underprivileged people from one underdeveloped area to another. This type of development is the first step in the unravelling of a capitalist, classist, and exclusionary system.

Of course, it is not every citizen that desires skill development that yearns for economic transformation, but we need to install systems for those who seek self-improvement, economic empowerment, and access to a set of more diverse opportunities. After all, we, the people, make the neighbourhood.

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