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Marseille: Upgrades and degradation

Gentrification has charmed its way into European cities for the past 35 years and more, promising rehabilitation of buildings and cityscapes, new cultural venues, shops and restaurants, and of course big profits for developers. But what happened to the real citizens?

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The dust outside billowed up from behind metal barriers, cranes were busy, and pneumatic drills hammered away. Eric Foillard, director of Marseille République,¹ was full of enthusiasm in his sales suite: "See what they're doing across the street? It's going to be fabulous: cobblestones, granite pavements, new trees. A user-friendly tramway, not claustrophobic like the metro. There's the Opera House, the second-oldest in France. Luc Besson is opening a cinema complex at the Quai de la Joliette. It'll be like Cannes."

Marseille République is an ambitious project. The rue de la République is a main thoroughfare linking the city's two ports. With its Vietnamese restaurants, 24-hour couscous joints, and cheap hotels, it retains a cosmopolitan, working-class air. But, as Foillard gleefully pointed out, "we are liberating the city centre". His company, owned by the American Lone Star Fund and two French banks, Caisse d'épargne and the Société générale, leads the campaign. "A dozen of France's most prestigious luxury brands will set up in one block. It will be a wonderful opportunity for them. Every year 400 000 cruise passengers stop off at Marseilles: they can just get off the boat and have the latest within walking distance."

Foillard took me round the show apartments, divided into three ranges, "Haussmann", "Design", and "Elegance". The lift had earthenware tiles "like a prestige hotel". The air-conditioned apartments were "airy and bright" with big open spaces. The show table was set for a candlelit dinner, with a white tablecloth and square plates. There was parquet flooring, a choice of oak, beech, or merbau, and an "antique-style cast-iron bath". A bargain at US\$ 3900 to 5200 per sq m, about US\$ 520 000 for a duplex. I wondered if the price would limit potential buyers. Foillard said: "Our first 65 reservations came from executives and professionals. We also have some English buyers who work in London but want to live here."

The decoration of another room, with contemporary art on the walls, seemed targeted at a trendier clientele. Foillard agreed. "The bourgeoisie and the middle-class trendies are two entirely different markets. Some buyers work in television and graphics at the Belle-de-Mai media park."

I asked: "So with trendies, bourgeois, and go-ahead young managers, you're pulling in just about every class?"

"Absolutely. There will be an excellent mix of ages and lifestyles." Foillard didn't see this as gentrification but as the opposite. "We're trying to build a mixed society. Right now, there are only poor and very poor people living in the area. Some of them were in hovels, like something out of Zola's novels. It was ghastly."

Slow off the ground

This ideal city has been slow to rise from the ground, however, and so far the development is just a kilometre-long ghost town. Doors are bricked up at street level. Metal security grilles cover the fronts of what were cafés, snack bars, and grocers' stores, while the development awaits the arrival, which is still not guaranteed, of Dior, Chanel, and the rest of the luxury brands. Hundreds, even thousands, of shutters remain closed on the upper stories of the old buildings in the middle of the day. A potted geranium adorns the only window that is open, on the fifth floor, signalling the presence of some stubborn soul holding out against the invaders.

Some people had lived here for as long as 40 years and didn't leave willingly or cheerfully. A former secretary at the town hall, aged 80, who had been a local resident since 1953, was forced to move out: "They just kicked me out. They told me I had to go. It was inhuman."

When younger householders proved more difficult to dislodge, the developers resorted to radical methods. Bogus squatters moved into the buildings, ripping out wiring and making life impossible for legal tenants. There were allegations of bribes. Fires were started. As soon as an apartment was vacated, wreckers moved in.

One of them admitted to me: "We broke the windows. We broke the pipes and the lavatories, everything in the bathrooms, to make it impossible for anyone to move back in." I asked: "These apartments that you wrecked, were they habitable?"

"Sure. They were like palaces. That's what I was doing: wrecking palaces. It's disgusting, but what am I supposed to do? That's what they paid me to do, US\$ 1550 before tax. The minimum wage."

The process left Marseille with 33 000 empty apartments, which represents about 10 per cent of the city's total housing stock²; 57 per cent of those empty apartments have been vacant for a long time. Marseille has a backlog of 40 000 applications for social housing³.

"They're pushing us out of the way"

Had the blocks been palaces or hovels? Like the port, the "rue de la Rép" had come down in the world since its glory days in the 1960s when sailors and dockers patronized tailors, jewellers, nightclubs, even piano bars and their hostesses. But any emphasis on the seamy aspect of the past helps to justify sweeping it away, and all the poor and very poor people with it. It's supposed to be for their own good and, of course, for the good of the city.

The less vulnerable have formed a cooperative, *Un centre-ville pour tous*, in an attempt to keep the city centre accessible to all. Those who were prepared to resist or who had secure tenancies⁴ were offered accommodation in nearby social housing. But most were relocated to council blocks in more distant northern districts, and even to caravans. One man was moved from a bedsit to the Oliviers estate, where he shares a two-room apartment with two fellow inmates. He said: "They're doing the place up for rich students, creating a European centre of culture for the middle classes. People like us were a blot on the landscape. They're turning a neighbourhood where there were poor people into a luxury part of town, and they don't want us spoiling the view. So they're pushing us out of the way."

This is in fact less a goal than a *fait accompli*. In 1985, long before his election as the city's mayor, Jean-Claude Gaudin promised: "The Porte d'Aix is an Arab neighbourhood. If I ever get the chance to do something about it at the town hall, I will"⁵. He kept his word. "Look at those cranes," said Gaudin's campaign director in 2001. "The apartments they are building will cost 20 000 francs a square metre. At that price, the Left is done for."

His housing assistant, Danièle Servant, hailed the synergy with the developers: "I don't want 600 families rehoused here. It looks like the developer is going to do what we want." Other districts, such as Noailles and Belsunce, are being treated the same way, abandoned by the public sector the better to justify private property speculation.

Although the rue de la République is a textbook case, it does have atypical features. The violence and abruptness of the development revealed a deliberate policy of breakneck gentrification, with mass expulsions to the edge of the city. In other towns, the law of the market has been enough to effect the smooth, almost "natural" transformation of neighbourhoods and their populations.

Even in Marseille, the rise of property values by 15–20 per cent a year and the doubling of rents by the private equity firm Eurazeo have made a more consistent and discreet contribution to modernization than the wreckers. All the old working class areas of Europe's major cities — Bastille in Paris, Croix-Rousse in Lyon, Marolles in Brussels — have undergone or are undergoing the same transformation. It is not so much a sudden metamorphosis, with high earners from upper socio-economic groups flooding out the working classes, as a gradual evolution effected by intermediary agencies.

A fun place to live

Two geographers, Christophe Guilluy and Christophe Noyé, break down the process of successful gentrification as follows: "1: Self-employed workers are displaced by employees; the pioneers arrive — artists, students, and alternative squats. 2: The neighbourhood's status increases with the development of cultural facilities: trendy bars, art galleries, and performance spaces. 3: Senior executives come in, hastening the departure of the self-employed and displacing the employed workers. 4: As the number of senior executives increases rapidly, the working-class population collapses and the pioneers are evicted. 5: Property developers move in and carry out urban regeneration: pedestrian precincts, gardens, cycle paths"⁶.

Working class neighbourhoods become middle class⁷ and develop, as the sociologist Jacques Donzelot has said, "a lifestyle that encourages the arrival of ethnic cafes and restaurants", concert halls and galleries selling exotic art, all "symbols of prestige that developers have learned to encourage in order to bestow upon certain areas the global brand that will attract those aspiring to membership of this global community"⁸. According to the historian Alèssi Dell'Umbria, this in turn helps create a fun image of a city: "As services and service-providers drive out manual work and workers, culture and tourism gradually take over and the town centre becomes a particular kind of commercial zone dedicated to the amusement of the middle classes, for whom restaurants, trendy bars, and exhibitions mark it out as friendly territory"⁹.

Culture, with its prevailing mythology of cosmopolitan commitment, provides an alibi. There is a risk that the glorification of its shrines may hinder the implantation of a new theatre or library, although the new Paris opera house and the Vieille Charité museum in Marseille actually acted as spearheads for the property industry's reconquest of the Bastille and Panier neighbourhoods. The culture mythology usually serves to hide the social forces at work, disguising financial ambitions beneath an attractive mask.

The holders of financial capital are not the only people who profit materially from these renovations; holders of intellectual capital such as university degrees do very nicely too. Cultural players from "the world of architecture and photography, of the cinema and the theatre"¹⁰ are the first to benefit from the proximity of service industries, high-speed rail links, and other facilities to renovated areas. The involvement of those who work in the performing arts in the process of urban transformation helps explain the weakness of the opposition.

There is a general silence on the subject, even though the phenomenon is accelerating and is no longer confined to Paris, Lyons, and Marseille. Property prices have been skyrocketing across France: during 2005 they rose by 12.2 per cent in Tours, 16.7 per cent in Angers, and 14.5 per cent in Besançon. Values have doubled in 10 years, particularly because of the proliferation of student accommodation in the towns and second homes in the countryside.

Above all, local councils have embraced gentrification for fear of appearing backward-looking or marginal. Politicians are more likely to encourage and support the property market than to try to restrain it.

Bringing in the professionals

The imperative for local councillors is to attract professionals to move to their cities. Communities countryside plug away at this. In Nancy, "businesses are calling for a trendy neighbourhood that will attract professionals"; in Amiens a "dedicated reception unit" has claimed success with "the arrival of 600 professionals every year"¹¹.

Most of Nancy's population are still self-employed or salaried workers. But in areas that were once polluted by dye-works and inhabited by unskilled and semi-skilled workers, hoardings (on buildings under construction, or embedded in ground about to disappear beneath concrete) announce prestige developments of apartments furnished with videophone, lift, balcony, and satellite television. The developers benefit from tax breaks for investors in property for rent. Meanwhile, the construction of social housing in the city has stagnated, despite a backlog of 6000 applicants; the housing office advises

couples with children to look for emergency accommodation if they want a roof over their heads within a year¹².

Developments like this tell us who towns are being built for today, and also who is being excluded¹³. They tell us who Gilles de Robien, the education minister, was targeting in a speech he delivered in his other role as mayor of Amiens, when he hailed the "new professionals", and only them, as "human material" waiting to be shaped; and when he imitated Paris's "nuits blanches" entertainments by organizing avant-garde all-night techno raves in his city.

Any town seeking to sell itself to the new bourgeoisie must put its failures behind it, smarten itself up, reduce noise, traffic, and bad smells, and make its streets safe. It must also introduce the prestige indicators thought to be synonymous with leisure, style, and consumption. Hubert Henno, an assistant town planner for Amiens, confirmed this concept of citizenship: "Pharmaceutical laboratories want to set up here, so we will welcome researchers. But we'll have to build comfortable homes for them, because people like these need peace and quiet and decent housing." Presumably other people don't have any such needs.

Middle class of course

Advertisers target professionals. Radio stations, newspapers, and magazines fight for their attention. When Lionel Jospin stood as the socialist candidate for the presidency in 2002, he did not dare risk using the word "worker" and preferred to concentrate on the "middle classes". Socialist Dominique Strauss-Kahn described the latter as "a middle group, mostly made up of salaried employees, sensible, well-informed, and educated, and constituting the backbone of French society". He continued: "Sadly, we cannot always expect the most disadvantaged to participate calmly in the parliamentary democratic process. It's not that they are detached from the process; simply that their contribution sometimes takes the form of violence"¹⁴. France's towns, and those who govern and plan them, subscribe to that ideology.

The urban landscape reflects relationships of production. During the nineteenth century, mine-owners built pit cottages to immobilize an otherwise vagrant workforce. During the 30-year boom after the Second World War, social housing was built to accommodate the influx from rural areas and position workers within easy distance of factories. Now, with a Europe-wide labour market and manufacturing outsourced worldwide, the proletariat no longer seem so necessary to any country's economic prosperity. With (official) French unemployment at 9 per cent and more democratic access to education, businesses find it easy to recruit non-managerial white-collar staff: there is no need to offer inducements, or the promise of a lifestyle to which they aspire, to people for whom any job is enough. The people who matter are the elite, the wealth-generators.

Why this desperation to attract new residents from the higher social and professional classes? There is a trickle-down effect whereby they generate less-skilled jobs. But there is also what I think is a more important element of social tropism and class politics; municipal officials seek the company of people like themselves and their children: insurers, surgeons, lawyers, IT specialists.

The resulting residential segregation is widening the educational, professional, and ethnic divide, and fragmenting democratic debate. An endogamous,

incestuous elect, working in media, economics, culture, and politics, is monopolizing urban centres and the places where decisions are made. Beneath the shadow of these autistic, omnipresent, omnipotent rich, a whole section of the population is unnoticed and unheard. Working households, excluded from the political parties, trade unions, and voluntary organizations that have their headquarters in or near urban centres, are "more and more isolated from the public arena"¹⁵. Significantly, there is a geographic correlation between electoral abstention and the voiceless periphery out at the edges of French society.

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¹ See www.marseille-republique.com.

² Data published by the public building weekly *TPBM*, Marseilles, November 2003, quoted in a leaflet distributed by the unemployment pressure group, CGT chômeurs.

³ Figure for 1 July 2004, according to the *Observatoire de la demande en logement social des Bouches-du-Rhône*.

⁴ In France, legislation passed in 1948 keeps rents down and protects tenants against excessive rises.

⁵ Quotes in this paragraph are from *Le Matin*, 9 November 1985, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 22 February 2001, *Le Figaro*, 18 November 2003, and *Libération*, 30 September 2004; collected by Bruno Le Dantec, in *Psychogéographie*, Le Point du Jour Éditeur, Paris, 2005.

⁶ Guilluy and Noyé, *Atlas des nouvelles fractures sociales en France*, Autrement, Paris, 2004.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jacques Donzelot, "La ville à trois vitesses", *Esprit*, Paris, March–April 2004. French has adopted "gentrification" from English, the Esperanto of globalization.

⁹ Alèssi Dell'Umbria, *Histoire universelle de Marseille*, Agone, Marseilles, 2006.

¹⁰ Anne Clerval, "Le logement et l'habitat, éléments-clés du processus de gentrification", presented at the conference *Le logement et l'habitat comme objets de recherche*, 20 May 2005. She questioned property-buyers in the Saint-Antoine district in Paris.

¹¹ *Le Point*, Paris, 5 February 2004.

¹² *Fakir*, Amiens, May 2006.

¹³ The excluded are those whose jobs have disappeared and whose purchasing power has been undermined.

¹⁴ Dominique Strauss-Kahn, *La Flamme et la Cendre*, Grasset, Paris, 2002.

¹⁵ Guilluy and Noyé, op. cit.

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