



Trendy cafes have popped up in older estates, such as Tiong Bahru. Gentrification need not be a zero-sum game that pits “winners” (gentrified newcomers) against “losers” (older residents and business owners). With proactive planning and careful management, inclusive forms of gentrification may be possible. ST FILE PHOTO

Do S’pore neighbourhoods risk death by cappuccino?

By POW CHOON PIEW
FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

BY ALL accounts, gentrification should not exist in Singapore, at least not in the conventional sense of the term, which refers to the displacement of a lower-income population from a neighbourhood by new groups of middle and upper class residents.

With an often-lauded public housing programme that accommodates more than 80 per cent of the population in Singapore, the story of residential displacement and eviction due to the vagaries of gentrification “turf wars” seems remote in the city-state.

It is not surprising, then, that gentrification as a term has seldom been invoked in the context of Singapore, be it in official planning documents or academic literature. State housing provision, it is assumed, has provided an effective buffer that keeps gentrification at bay.

But is this starting to change?

In recent years, gentrification has begun to find its way into public discussions, driven by the buoyant real estate market that has seen property prices in some neighbourhoods rising by leaps and bounds.

Last July, the My Community heritage group organised a public symposium on “Queenstown Dilemma: Gentrification Inevitable?”, with the aim of fostering debate on how “to improve the community in a way that does not force people out”.

Arguably, whether gentrification is occurring in Singapore depends on how the term is defined.

To be sure, the meaning of gentrification itself has evolved over time to reflect changing urban dynamics and different property regimes around the world.

For example, distinctions may be drawn between residential and commercial forms of gentrification, the latter referring to the displacement of “traditional” businesses from an urban area due to rent increases.

More recently, the definition of gentrification has also been extended to include upscale office and residential complexes that are built on formerly vacant land and brownfield sites.

So, does this mean that Singapore is facing gentrification?

Going by the broadened definition of gentrification, urban renewal in Singapore during the 1960s undertaken by state agencies, such as the Urban Redevelopment Authority, can be considered as a form of state-led “new build gentrification” that has entailed the relocation of urban populations away from the inner city to new suburban housing estates.

In a similar vein, the “en bloc fever” in many prime neighbourhoods over the past decade can also be seen as a form of property market-led gentrification.

In recent years, commercial forms of gentrification have also made inroads into suburban areas and the HDB heartland such as Jalan Besar, Tiong Bahru and Kampong Glam, where new cafes offering speciality coffees, upmarket bakeries and “indie” shops have rapidly taken over old business establishments, in the process transforming the social-spatial fabric of these places.

A Knight Frank report on “up-

scale” gentrified neighbourhoods around the world lists Tiong Bahru as one of the top 10 urban markets to watch this year, alongside places such as London’s Victoria Park, Hong Kong’s Kowloon West and Williamsburg in New York.

Will Singapore’s neighbourhoods suffer “death by cappuccino” as more and more such yuppie establishments take root?

Already, we are seeing signs of gentrification fatigue in some of these neighbourhoods. In Tiong Bahru, for example, a walk around the estate readily reveals trendy cafes and chic eateries offering more or less the same fare popping up at the turn of every corner, making one wonder just how many more of such businesses the neighbourhood needs. Even many of these cafe owners are now complaining of “gentrification” by newcomers.

While it is true some of these establishments have injected new life into ageing estates, and some residents may even welcome such changes as they may lead to appreciation in property values, we need to be cautious that these new developments do not excessively drive up the daily cost of living or alter the local identity and heritage of these neighbourhoods to the point that they yield negative net effects in the long run.

Having said that, gentrification need not be a zero-sum game that pits “winners” (gentrified newcomers) against “losers” (older residents and business owners).

With proactive planning and careful management, inclusive forms of gentrification may be possible.

Research has shown that gentri-

fication does not always lead to dismal outcomes, but may, in some cases, improve the living environment and increase employment opportunities.

In a study on New York City, where gentrification forces have been considered to be especially rife, it was found that poor households residing in gentrifying neighbourhoods, such as Harlem, were actually less likely to move away, and that gentrification per se did not cause displacement any more than other factors that result in “normal” residential turnover; though it has to be qualified that proactive planning interventions such as rent regulation are necessary for this to happen.

As Singapore becomes increasingly globalised and cosmopolitan, with neighbourhoods being rapidly transformed in tandem, debates on gentrification are no longer academic but will, in many ways, reflect the kinds of city and urban environment that we want to live in. It is, perhaps, a timely reminder for planners not to place unbridled faith in relying on market forces to find the “right” social mix by allocating spaces only to the highest bidders.

Planners will need to be more interventionist in creating more inclusive forms of urban development. This can be done only if they take seriously the needs and lifestyle aspirations of diverse groups of residents on the ground and consider the building of vibrant local neighbourhoods and communities at the core of their planning mission.

✉ stopinion@sph.com.sg

The writer is an associate professor of geography at the National University of Singapore.