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**PICTURING GENTRIFICATION
REPRESENTATIONS OF URBAN CHANGE, PENDLETON
SALFORD**

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines how visual representations of urban 'regeneration' contribute to the gentrification process. It asks can alternative photographic and textual strategies provide a meaningful counter narrative to resist persuasive corporate discourses on 'urban revitalization'? Focusing on the gentrification of social housing in Pendleton, Salford (Greater Manchester) the paper debates the role of visual imagery in fostering perceptions about urban change by evaluating fieldwork undertaken by the authors in the site since 2004. The paper will question whether such an in-depth longitudinal project and its consequent archive can be utilized as a political tool to highlight the wider processes involved in such regimes of disinvestment and accumulation. Through the combination of photography and site writing in the environment can certain economic and political processes be made legible if not fully visible to highlight causation and effect?

KEYWORDS: Salford, creative destruction, photography, site writing, critical witnessing.

1. PICTURING GENTRIFICATION: REPRESENTATIONS OF URBAN CHANGE, PENDLETON SALFORD

1.1 Starting From The Ground

Pear Tree Court is the first of three 14-storey tower blocks in Pendleton scheduled for demolition this summer. We have joined the small group of onlookers watching the tower block being mangled in the jaws of the high level digger. Steve tells us it is rare to get one this high in the construction industry and it needs to be assembled on site. His bright blue eyes twinkle incongruously out of the bruising façade of a biker. Steve likes his new flat because it is quiet and he has escaped from the noisy teenagers of Pear Tree Court. Nevertheless, he has come to see the destruction of the flat that was his home for six years, on the way to an interview for a warehouse job. Steve retrieves a paper bag with a pasty in it from his pocket. While he relives the day he received his eviction notice I see he is trembling slightly. He talks and chews, pastry flakes floating down his jacket, all the while dividing his gaze between us and the tower block, where the digger is snapping at the red papered walls of his old flat. Steve's conversation vacillates between reminiscences of life in Pear Tree Court and his difficulties finding a job. John, Steve and Macca, another former resident, who has travelled several miles on the bus to photograph the demolition on his phone, exchange stories of falling men in Pendleton. The un-building of the tower block has produced another kind of elision, that of the barriers between strangers on the street. John says it's like an architectural wake. Conversations start with reminiscences of the block, then the surrounding area and ultimately encompass all of life's upheavals and insecurities.

The demolition site smells of the entrails of the building, drains, toilet pipes, stagnant water. Despite the constant stream of dampening water, which is pumped alongside the arm of the digger, everything on the site is coated with pinkish dust. The foul dust isn't visible in the air but coats the back of our throats never the less.

Not far from the fence erected around the demolition site, there are two benches ringed with blue lager cans, their backs to the building gradually transforming into a mound of rubble. Earlier on this morning when we first arrived a delegation of management wreckers and other officials held a photo call behind the benches, just a few feet away from the mess of cans. Homeless people and their friends have gathered around the benches to talk and sun themselves, while they wait for lunch to be prepared in the canteen next to the night shelter.

The sun is beating down on the two benches surrounded by cans and the long forearm of the big digger is hanging limp behind it, while the Forshaw demolition team eat their lunch. More spectators are gathering in anticipation of work resuming on the demolition site. People have brought chairs from inside the night shelter and lined them up against the wall outside. While they digest their lunch, they sit with their heads propped against the 1960's façade of brown brick, following the movements of the hungry digger. The Chaplain from the night shelter comes out to take some pictures. He tells me how worried they are about their roof, which butts up against the fence of the next block awaiting demolition. At night the homeless bed down in the shadow of the empty tower block, their temporary shelter threatened by the demolition of other people's homes.

Figure 1 Pear Tree Court Demolition.



Source: Aitken & Brake (2015).

1.2 The Salford Context

Pendleton is an area of the City of Salford in the Northwest of England, adjacent to its better-known neighbour, the City of Manchester. Pendleton has a population of approximately 8000 and is an area of multiple deprivations: child poverty, low educational attainment and ill health.¹ Formerly a centre of textile production and finishing industries, with easy access to work on the docks of Manchester's Ship Canal, Pendleton today is a place of low pay, precarious labour and welfare subsistence.

In the aftermath of World War II and in the context of a European wide housing crisis, Pendleton became subject to a large-scale housing development scheme. By the mid 1960's, the so called slums, created during a phase of rapid urbanisation in the 19th century, were demolished and replaced with 5000 homes, built according to the bio-principles of modernist architecture formulated by CIAM, rimmed with motorways and with a shopping centre for a heart. The development of tower blocks and low-rise maisonettes set in communal open spaces was part of an attempt to produce what were termed 'civilized cities' for working people through rational design.² The newly constructed social housing

¹ Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015. *The English Indices of Deprivation 2015 Statistical Release*. [online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2015> [Accessed April 18, 2016].

² Johnson-Marshall, P., 1966. *Rebuilding Cities*. Chicago: Aldine, p. 349.

was to be a national flagship project that stood in opposition to the ugliness, squalor and deprivation left over from the industrial city of the previous era.

Figure 2 Pendleton Housing Estate (1969)



Source: Courtesy of Salford Library.

By early 2000's Salford's municipal authority, like many English city councils, needed help with maintenance and reinvestment in this extensive publicly owned housing stock. Without adequate funding for core services it had to adopt an 'entrepreneurial' survival strategy by making alliances with private developers through a government backed Private Finance Initiative (PFI), which used private capital in conjunction with public assets such as council houses, but also significant amounts of public funding to lubricate the deals that were struck.³ For councils wanting to create new houses and fund extensive repairs to their existing social housing stock this initiative appeared to offer a way forward.

Another key driver for change was the proximity of Pendleton to MediaCity, formerly Salford Docks, now redeveloped as an emerging global media node, where part of the BBC relocated in 2007. The docks and the surrounding area sprouted signature buildings and exclusive apartment complexes and suddenly the neglected spaces of the nearby housing estate became valuable real estate.

The public narratives used by the City Council and its chosen developers to promote the PFI changes, emphasized the creation of a better housing stock. They advertised their intention to refurbish 1,250 publicly owned homes and build 1,600 new private and affordable homes. A planning leaflet declared that the scheme would "change the area back

³ Harvey, D., 1989. From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: the transformation of urban governance in late capitalism. *Geografiska Annaler, Series B: Human Geography*, 71B(1) pp. 3-17.

to the thriving community it once was – a neighbourhood of choice”.⁴ What the public narratives failed to highlight is that the 1,600 newly built homes would be located on sites where social housing tenants had been evicted. Good quality publicly owned homes would be purposely demolished to clear the area for new private residences. These narratives also failed to account for the large number of poor residents who were displaced by the demolitions, the vastly reduced amount of social housing now available in the new builds and the inability of local people to afford any of the new properties, tantalising labelled as ‘affordable homes’. The new development also failed to adequately address the extensive long-term poverty characteristic of Pendleton, except by eliminating poor people from the area and encouraging more affluent newcomers in.

1.3 Visual Representations & Gentrification

Our work on the estate is responsive, multi-modal, multi-media, and constrained by everyday life, by work practices in the neoliberal university, by caring and even cancer. We have repeatedly, and maybe this is not simply a negative, failed to orchestrate our various activities into something that could be designated an academic research project. We have also resisted positioning our work as art, despite a contemporary context that presents itself as a political turn. We cleave to marginality and tend to collaborate with people with whom we share political common ground, from whatever discipline they might be.

We have undertaken archival research; theoretical study (in spatial theory, geography, anthropology and so on) made repeated walks through the estate and documented our experience in a variety of media. We have produced public and individual walking tours, worked in video, installation, photography, textiles, collage, creative and scholarly writing. We have explored developers and local authority publicity materials and investigated key players in the Pendleton development process. And so on. These materials have coalesced uneasily into an archive, which we are drawing on to make other things such as articles and exhibitions.⁵

We have learned about the housing estate through repeated observations of its minutiae, or what Perec termed the infra ordinary, the micro fragments of life shifting across a terrain-in-anticipation, or the play of pixels in a developers rendering.⁶ In 2013 when the PFI funded housing project in Pendleton was announced we had already observed over a decade of decline, which we came to understand as the process of ruination, the initial phase of creative destruction, which precedes accumulation by dispossession and gentrification.⁷ We make a clear distinction between the fetishization of ruins and our work on the process of ruination, which we record in an attempt to allow the spaces themselves to convey their own knowledge about capitalism, poverty, value and violence.

⁴ Creating a New Pendleton Planning Leaflet. June, 2012, p. 2.

⁵ Brake, J. and Aitken, J.V., 2012. Fragments from a Housing Estate. In Certoma, C., Clewer, N. and Elsey, D., ed. 2012. *The Politics of Space and Place*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars. Ch. 8.

⁶ Sheringham, M. 2006. *Everyday Life: Theories and practices from Surrealism to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Harvey, D., 2007. Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 610 pp. 21 – 44. DOI: 10.1177/0002716206296780.

Figure 3 Holcombe Close, Pendleton



Source: Aitken & Brake (2014).

From the start of our work we documented the estate and later recorded the changes through text, video and photography. In terms of the photographic imagery we adopted a descriptive technique to create an on-going inventory of environments, structures and objects in the spaces we walked and lived in. There is of course an on-going discussion on photography and legibility in relation to the social and economic world it re-presents.⁸ Strategies of construction, abstraction and naturalism have all offered practitioners a tactic in dealing with the enormity of the task of making visible the drivers behind the physical and social terrains we produce and are produced by. We have no illusions that the naturalism of our photographic practice isn't open to all the criticisms that have thwarted social documentary practices in their quest for some type of realism or truth. As Rosler notes, naturalism runs the risk of locking us into an uncritical engagement with learnt cultural narratives and interpretations.⁹ We are susceptible to falling into 'commonsensical interpretations' that fail to challenge the 'seamless envelope of ideology' that stitches together everyday life.¹⁰

Visual representations of the city, nonetheless, play a vital role in the perception and experience of the urban environment. Balshaw and Kennedy however caution that "the city

⁸ Sassen, S., 2011. Strategic Geographies, Challenge of their Visualisation. In *Mutations, Perspectives on Photography*, ed. 2011. Chantal Pontbriand, Steidl, Göttingen, Germany, 2011, p.36. [online] Available at: <http://www.saskiasassen.com/PDFs/publications/strategic-geographies-challenge-of-their-visualization.pdf> [Accessed April 3, 2016].

⁹ Rosler, M., 2004a. For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life. In Rosler, M., *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975 – 2001*. London: October Books, p.8.

¹⁰ *Ibid* p.3.

is inseparable from its representations, but it is neither identical with nor reducible to them".¹¹ Shields comments that as an object of research, the concept of 'the city' is "always aporetic, a 'crisis-object' that destabilizes our certainty about the real".¹² Representations stabilise the heterogeneous and unfixed nature of urban sites by what they include and exclude. What these cultural productions do articulate however is deeply political. The positioning and use of such visualisations as well as what they render as visible and invisible all ask us to consider issues of power and ideology. To evaluate any visual practice therefore we need to understand its context, uses and the publics it is directed to or used by. As Tagg notes, in the case of photography as a medium it has no inherent identity or status outside its 'historical specifications'. "Its nature as a practice depends on the institutions and agents which define it and set it to work".¹³

We can see the manipulation of visual practices by property developers in the process of gentrification. Their practices aim to shape the perceptions of a range of participants in the process about the nature and desirability of the intended changes. Parker and Long, in their work on Birmingham, note how contemporary urban redevelopment is animated by a particularly intense 'politics of vision'.¹⁴ In their analysis of Birmingham's on-going transformation it is 'visual markers' that are key to communicating the new narrative of the coming 'urban renaissance'.¹⁵ Here, visions of the city are contrasted in the differing skylines and buildings being presented. In this process they are particularly interested in the use of computer-generated imagery (CGI) to depict yet unconstructed sites for political and commercial ends. The research of Rose, Degen & Melhuish note how such computer generated images are utilized to frame construction projects as aesthetic objects or experiences, governed by the same process of commodity aggrandizement as in any other advertising process. Like advertisements, their function on one level is to seduce and to persuade the likes of investors by showing them idealized projections of how the completed projects 'will look and feel' in order to secure their financial cooperation.¹⁶

CGI's also play a vital role in depicting these urban developments to prospective buyers and to communicate the effect of such changes to those living already in the area. Jansson and Lagerkvist in their study comment on how this type of corporate image uses fantasy and affect to convert the real into a "sign value", which creates what they term "emotive geographies" that are seductive to viewers.¹⁷ These manipulated images become "condensed narratives" that make legible the proposed changes. They stabilize the perception of the contested neighbourhood area and provide a clear teleology through the creation of a new "space of futurity" or a "future gaze" of what is to come.¹⁸ As Parker and

¹¹ Balshaw, M. & Kennedy, L., 2000. *Urban Space and Representation*. London: Pluto, p.3.

¹² Shields, R., 1996. A Guide to Urban Representation and What to Do About It: Alternative Traditions of Urban Theory. In King, A., ed., 1996. *Re-Presenting The City*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd, p.227.

¹³ Tagg, J., 1993. *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, p.118.

¹⁴ Parker, D. and Long, P., 2004. The mistakes of the past? Visual narratives of urban decline and regeneration. *Visual Culture in Britain*, 5(1) p.51.

¹⁵ Ibid. 39.

¹⁶ Rose, G., Degen, M. and Melhuish, C., 2016. Looking at digital visualizations of urban redevelopment projects: dimming the scintillating glow of unwork. In Jordan, S. & Lindner, C., ed. 2016. *Cities Interrupted: Visual Culture and Urban Space*. London: Bloomsbury, p.107.

¹⁷ Jansson, A. and Lagerkvist, A., 2009. The future gaze: city panoramas as politico-emotive geographies. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 8(1) p.26.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Long note, “how a city is comprehended by its inhabitants is an important factor in making sense of change, and in either promoting or resisting it”.¹⁹ Working as a coherent repertoire with other depictions such as plans, models, newspaper articles, web pages, animations and brochures these images make legible the new spatial configurations of regeneration for their intended publics by creating a new “urban imaginary”.²⁰

Figure 4 Advertisement Hoarding, Salford Quays



Source: Aitken & Brake (2016).

In the case of Salford CGI's have been utilized in the marketing of the creative destruction of the area. With the transformation of Salford Quays from disused dock space to a global media hub and waterside development, the property values in the area have risen faster than in any other area in Britain. In 2014 the value of the average Salford home increased by 12% compared to 8.2% in London.²¹ In 2015 Salford topped “the hotspot table” with a 23% increase in property sales in the space of a year despite a drop in sales of 4.5% throughout most of the country.²² Predictably slick images of yet to be constructed

¹⁹ Parker, D. and Long, P., 2004. The mistakes of the past? Visual narratives of urban decline and regeneration. *Visual Culture in Britain*, 5(1) p.39.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Osborne, H., 2014. MediaCity leads to Salford becoming the UK's property hotspot in *The Guardian* 22.7.2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jul/22/salford-mediacity-property-prices-boom> Accessed April 3, 2016.

²² Jones, R., 2015. Number of UK house sales down, but prices up by 4.5% in *The Guardian* 31.12.2015. www.theguardian.com/money/2015/dec/31/uk-house-sales-down-prices-up-shortage-properties Accessed April 18, 2016.

apartment complexes direct the curious to the newly established Quayside marketing suites. What has also been of interest however is the use of similar CGI variations to mediate the estates own regeneration plans to the local community. They have also been employed in a less spectacular form to market new builds on the redeveloped estate to the marginally more affluent newcomers seeking a residence in the upcoming locale.

Figure 5 CGI Rendering, Sp+



Source: Pendleton Estate (2009).

For example, developers used such computer-generated images for example in their marketing campaign to outline what the regeneration plans would mean to local residents. In a council pamphlet from 2009 entitled *Finding out about the plans for Pendleton* the inhabitants of Pendleton were presented with a CGI and a brief outline of the proposed changes to come. The image shows an aerial perspective of the housing estate illuminated by streetlights. Its warm glow and refreshed environment acted as a counterpoint to the actual Pendleton estate ravaged by its long-term cycle of disinvestment and ruination. In this depiction the viewer is privileged with an alleged overview of the complete scheme, but in reality the angle of the shot centres our gaze on two signature buildings, ones that will remain as social housing. Reclad in futuristic shells, security gating evaporated; they epitomize a reinvigorated estate, literally stripped of their council house connotations for the eyes of the current inhabitants. From this view one could be forgiven for mistaking the changes as actual regeneration where the local community stays put and benefits from the new investment. This perspective privileges a conclusion to the redevelopment in which existing residents remain but in better conditions, and conceals from the viewer the larger proportion of the estate where social housing has been raised to the ground, residents dispersed and new private accommodation for sale or rent will predominate. The style of imagery cleverly projects a new attractive vision of what the area will become once it has

undergone its next stage of creative destruction. It is a vision that removes contestation and renders aesthetic the political and economic reality of its drive for accumulation by dispossessing a sizable proportion of the estates residents. By presenting a new urban imaginary the rendering conveys the coming change as possible, desirable and without negative social connotation.

1.4 Slow Violence / Slow Research

Now we want to consider, briefly, some of the key themes of our work in Pendleton. We will focus primarily on the materials generated in the process of repeated observations of everyday life on the housing estate, which tend to emerge as image text pieces or readings. Our ideas and methods of investigation have a long lineage, and influences include amongst others George Perec and the infra-ordinary; Henri Lefebvre's enquiry into the insignificant and overlooked aspects of everyday life in order to understand the reality of social and political existence; Francois Augoyard's grounded work on walking a planned housing estate (if less so its entanglement with rhetorical figures of speech).

We have discussed previously the way developers materials effectively erase the interests and even the bodies of pre-development estate dwellers. We have seen how the persuasiveness of gentrifying visuals, completely conceal the financial imperative behind these schemes, which asset stripping public housing in order to revitalize private capital. The utopian script of the developers - *home ownership for all* - is cheaply and shoddily executed in the advertising of the new spaces, but appears nevertheless a cut above the current offer of the ruined estate, as it rewrites the land grab into a social benefit.

We need to consider how our work resists dispossession by development and how it might propose a potent counter narrative. As well as the spectacle of the gentrified future we must counter the intentional slowness, and stealth of accumulation by dispossession. The concept of slow violence has helped provide a vocabulary appropriate to the gravity of the situation. Rob Nixon makes operative the contradictions within the term, calling for representational and narrative strategies capable of challenging a "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all".²³ Whilst Nixon's work relates specifically to the violence of environmental contamination, degradation and exploitation in the southern hemisphere, we believe his ideas can usefully be redeployed to the social and environmental landscape of Salford, where we could speak about a war on a social class, an attrition both physical and psychological, which is part of the induction phase of gentrification. David Harvey also connects slowness and violence with the process of creative destruction in the urban environment, and draws attention to the way in which this "perpetual reshaping of the geographical landscape of capitalism is a process of violence and pain".²⁴

Since the mid 1970's photographer Camilo Jose Vergara has been making an extensive inventory of declining American neighbourhoods and areas of deindustrialization. He believes that people in the future will want evidence about this monumental urban transformation, which brings about class neglect, segregation and unevenness. "I have pulled together disconnected ways of seeing, made an inventory of declining

²³ Nixon, R., 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. London: Harvard University Press, p.2.

²⁴ Harvey, D., 1985. *Consciousness and the Urban Experience*. Oxford: John Hopkins University Press, p.29.

neighbourhoods, 'zones', wastelands', and 'enclaves', and assessed their significance. I have consistently documented how things end".²⁵

By revisiting places over many decades Vergara produces photographic sequences that articulate simply and with quiet irony the gradual processes of ruination that precede gentrification. He eschews the single image, seeing photographs as building blocks. We see parallels between our work and Vergara's. Like us, Vergara is also making a slow record, an extended archive of the monumental changes that the urban landscape is undergoing, which mirror the contemporary ebbs, and flow of capital.

1.5 Walking Athole Street

The following passage of site writing synthesizes observations from the Athole Street area of Salford, which we returned to repeatedly during the summer of 2014, as residents vacated homes awaiting demolition.

The Athole street area is a thin wedge lodged between busy roads, this is a place that could easily be, and frequently is, passed by. Signs outside the Show Homes Marketing Suite welcome you to:

"the heart and soul of Salford"

"discover urban innovation surrounded by green open spaces"

and

"own your own home for £87,000".

Continuing down Athole Street, beyond the fence draped with green mesh, is a view of the new housing development's pointy red roofs. Most of the original houses in the Athole street area are through terraces, two up two down, with yards. The yards of the vacant homes contain the parting accumulation of rubbish, things unwanted in the new home, broken toys, drinks cans, stacks of mushy magazines, torn clothes.

²⁵ Vergara, C., 1997. *The New American Ghetto*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, p.XII.

Figure 6 Athole Street, Pendleton



Source: Aitken & Brake (2014).

In the absence of gardeners the small front gardens, which you can still see were once stocked with flowering plants, vines and cypress shrubs are overgrown, running to seed and dank. Between the homes are pedestrianized areas with benches and mature trees, like the tilia with their intoxicating foliage. ALL MATERIALS OF VALUE HAVE BEEN REMOVED is stencilled on the boarded up windows. I listen to Athole Street ventriloquizing value and worthlessness.

Rose comes out of her house, walking in our direction. We have previously only ever observed each other from a distance. She is telling us about her immanent move, pointing towards the new flats at the top of the road. She will be moving to a one bedroom flat soon, not far from her daughter, who will move “over there” says Rose, pointing to one of the unfinished houses on the building site. “I don’t know why they wanted to get rid of these houses, there’s nothing wrong with them. The council have really let the outside go, so it needs a bit of work, but inside I have everything I want...they never listened to us.”

Rose is anxious about her six grand children who frequently stay the night all together in her three bedroomed house. A victim of the bedroom tax, Rose cannot pay for, and will not be allocated more than one bedroom. She acknowledges that she is lucky to remain near her family. Some elderly neighbours have not been so fortunate. Re-housed in an unfamiliar place, one of them was robbed and others mourn the loss of neighbourly support and familiarity. These are the unremarkable losses of regeneration: incalculable for the victims, they will never figure in any official reckoning.

Figure 7 Athole Street, Pendleton



Source: Aitken & Brake (2015).

The streets surrounding Athole have already disappeared from the developer's maps, and gradually the residents leave too. Sometimes when we don't have time to walk around the estate we drive, and so we discover that the week Rose moves out a film crew moves in. Unexpected activity alerts us: black clad figures, motorbikes, security guards, a huddle of special police. For a brief moment we believe we are witnessing a police raid on one of the remaining tenants. Then we see large vans spewing out cables, tripods and lighting stands, young people with clip and clapper boards, and an ARMED RESPONSE VEHICLE, faked with the help of outsized vinyl lettering. A small front garden is illuminated by a large silver umbrella, as if an extra terrestrial abduction is taking place. The drabness, the weedy,

Figure 8 Athole Street, Pendleton



Source: Aitken & Brake (2016).

Figure 9 Athole Street, Pendleton.



Source: Aitken & Brake (2016).

flaking, empty grey streets are momentarily spectacular. The boxy pebble-dashed homes are briefly valued as a location for an urban crime series.

The lots nearest the Hodge Lane wall have already been cleared, levelled and enclosed within the shin high 'prairie' fences. Hardcore reveals the mangled micro-fragments of a life. On this sea of crumbled matter float objects not yet broken down: a child's scooter, takeaway boxes, empty lager cans.

Figure 10 Accumulation by Dispossession, Pendleton



Source: Aitken & Brake (2014).

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