

# Traditional Retail Markets: The New Gentrification Frontier?

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**Abstract:** This paper presents traditional retail markets in the UK caught between a narrative of decline and revival, on the edge of a gentrification frontier. Traditional indoor and outdoor markets have become somewhat residual in many British cities but essential for many low-income citizens that rely on their affordability. At the same time, the market is being reinvented for a wealthier type of customer interested more in local, environmentally friendly, ethical and “authentic” shopping experience. We take the case of Kirkgate Market in Leeds, the largest of its kind in Britain to analyse the process of disinvestment by the local authority, displacement of traders and customers and rebranding of the market for a new wealthier customer base. The paper is based on an action-research project on which one of the authors is involved alongside traders and other campaigners to defend the public nature of Kirkgate Market in Leeds. Este artículo presenta el mercado tradicional en el Reino Unido atrapado en una doble narrativa de caída y ascenso, al borde de la frontera de la gentrificación. Los mercados tradicionales de abastos han sido relegados a una situación residual en muchas ciudades británicas pero son esenciales para una parte de la población en rentas bajas que depende de sus económicos precios. Al mismo tiempo, el mercado se está reinventando de cara a una clientela con más poder adquisitivo que busca una experiencia local, verde, ética y “auténtica”. Tomando el caso de Kirkgate Market en Leeds, el más grande en el Reino Unido, analizamos el proceso de desinversión municipal, la exclusión de comerciantes y clientes y la reimaginación del mercado para clientes más acaudalados. El artículo está basado en un proyecto de investigación-acción con comerciantes y otros ciudadanos para la defensa del mercado de Kirkgate.

**Keywords:** traditional retail markets, commercial gentrification, displacement, Leeds

## Introduction: the Ambivalent State of Britain’s Retail Markets

Britain’s traditional retail markets—indoor and outdoor markets selling food, household goods, clothing and the like—are at a critical juncture, on the one hand in decline but on the other, a focus for redevelopment along gentrified lines. They are, ironically, becoming shop windows for gentrified authenticity even as some of their longstanding traders and shoppers are being displaced. Crucially, there is also an emerging interest from the state at different levels in markets as a new regenerated commercial space that brings together various policy areas: urban renaissance, healthy living, community cohesion, urban sustainability, re-localization of the economy and tourism (All Party Parliamentary Markets Group 2007; Stunell 2010). A “twin” narrative of decline and revival is being fashioned (Dines 2009). Our concern in this paper is that this renewed focus is in danger of leading to the gentrification of traditional retail markets, putting them beyond the reach of their

predominantly working class clientele and turning them into a new playground for those members of the middle classes who seek authenticity and alternative consumption possibilities. There is some evidence that this is already happening in Britain, particularly in London (Bloomfield 2009; Coles and Crang 2011; Dines 2009; Gould 2008; Percival 2009). In this paper, we take the example of Kirkgate Market in Leeds, which claims to be the largest covered market in Europe, to shed light on the discursive and structural forces that are powering this process. We believe that in Kirkgate Market we see the process of retail gentrification at work, even if only at an early and delicate stage, but it is this specific conjuncture that opens it up to scrutiny and enables us to set out a theoretical framework with the aim of defining retail gentrification.

Today, there are over 2000 markets in Britain directly employing an estimated 96,000 people with an annual turnover of £7.6 billion (Retail Markets Alliance 2009). Recent government and industry reports testify to a declining trend made worse by the recession that began in 2008 (House of Commons 2009; Retail Market Alliance 2009). There are of course exceptions, with some markets thriving, particularly farmers and specialist markets (House of Commons 2009). The reasons for this decline are multiple but according to the policy and trade literature can be summarized as follows: increased competition from supermarkets, higher expectations by consumers of their shopping experience (related to the previous), misguided town planning decisions, neglect of markets by local authorities, the poor state of buildings (again related to the previous), slowness of the market industry to adapt to change and finally a lack of new traders (House of Commons 2009; Jones, Hillier and Comfort 2007; Retail Markets Alliance 2009). The decline of traditional markets is seen therefore as the upshot of poor management, changing tastes and natural retail trends in which independent businesses generally struggle.

Our analysis however is different. We argue that the current situation of traditional retail markets<sup>1</sup> must be seen in terms of neoliberal urban restructuring. Retail change, such as the decline of markets and the general diffusion of supermarkets, is not merely—we insist—the consequence of natural behavioural changes in customer demand but of coordinated state and market strategies. We argue here that there are three facets to retail gentrification. The first and most critical is an ongoing urban restructuring orchestrated by the neoliberal state and designed to create a privatized and commodified city centre space. To this end, the state (generally in this context, local government) has subjected specific areas and facilities to a process of disinvestment. The second facet, closely related to a wider process of gentrification, is displacement, displacement of the habitual customers of markets, many of whom, as in Leeds, are elderly and/or from lower income groups, and/or from minority ethnic populations—and of traders. The third is the promotion of markets as a consumer experience through the fetishization of food and the provision of a sanitized and commodified environment. We will pursue each of these facets in this paper.

In the remainder of this paper, we draw links between the literature on traditional markets, regeneration, and gentrification to then harness our hypothesis with some emerging evidence from Kirkgate Market in Leeds. We build our argument around the specific example of Leeds' Kirkgate Market and use material collected from a

longstanding campaign in which one of us is directly involved to rally support for the market as a symbol of the city and space for lower-income citizens of Leeds and to defend the interests of stall holders. We map out how we see previous neglect as paving the way for current retail gentrification, which we view as insidious and symptomatic of a wider state-led urban restructuring. We use the example of Kirkgate Market to comment on the nature of contemporary urban change, in which we see the state as setting the framework through which retail gentrification is occurring with a damaging impact on the life spaces of many urban residents. We see the developments affecting this market in Leeds as being indicative of wider processes apparent not only in Britain but in much of the affluent world.

## **Retail Gentrification and Markets as the New Gentrification Frontier**

The academic literature on the social role that markets play expands across different disciplines and embraces various themes, as outlined by Pottie-Sherman (2011). Notable recent work has focused on markets as social public spaces that can foster social inclusion (Watson 2009; Watson and Studdert, 2006), mobility (Morales 2009, 2011; Project for Public Spaces 2003a 2003b) and a cosmopolitan civic environment (Anderson 2004). There is also an emerging literature that implicates markets in racial and gender tensions (Guano 2006; Slocum 2007). Alongside the rather sparse work on markets in cities of the global North there is plentiful research into informality and modernity and counter-modernity in the context of cities of the global South and their markets and street-side vendors (see, for example, Bromley and Mackie 2009; Cross and Morales 2007).

In Britain, there has been little attention paid by researchers to the current critical situation of traditional retail markets, even though sections of the media and campaigners<sup>2</sup> have been raising the alarm for a few years. The market, a key retail space for affordable produce and low-income families, is in danger of decline and even disappearance, battered by real estate pressures, retail globalisation trends and the “urban renaissance” in British cities. We argue here that the reasons for the decline of the traditional retail market in Britain have to be contextualised within the particular trajectory of recent neoliberal urban political economy rather than any supposedly “natural” trends in retail geography and consumer behaviour. At the same time, we believe that the picture in Britain has revealing echoes of the situation as described in Latin American cities by Swanson (2007) and Bromley and Mackie (2009), as well as elsewhere in the global South, where city centres are being “spruced up” for an increasingly well-off transnational bourgeoisie and a growing international tourist class. In this section of the paper, we extend our analysis by placing the situation of British markets today within a wider context of retail-led regeneration policy. We then go on to sketch out our understanding of what retail gentrification might mean within British cities, and how it is likely to be affecting traditional retail markets.

Faced with the impact on city centres of out-of-town retail parks, the last two decades have seen the retail sector placed at the heart of urban regeneration plans in British cities. There have of course been many strands to this policy—office

developments, city centre living, prestige mixed-function projects—but it is the construction or re-development of large retail complexes in city centres and inner cities such as those in Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Bristol and Southampton that have really driven regeneration in recent years. These “urban” shopping centres with their parking and access to public transport have inevitably impacted on city-centre markets. In parallel, planning regulations to curtail the establishment of out-of-town retail centres have triggered the diversification of big supermarkets, which now have smaller stores in city centres competing directly with independent retailers such as those in traditional markets (Sadun 2008). Research that attempts to assess the impact of new city centre retail developments has varied from the cautiously supportive (Lowe 2005; Thomas, Bromley and Tallon 2004) to the cautiously critical (Raco 2003).

City centre traditional markets have not figured in the narrative of retail-led urban regeneration in Britain and thus the intricate relationship between markets and urban development (in the form of urban planning and policy and real estate trends) has been ignored. Thus, markets may have become urban blind spots, where local authorities have often failed to make the right connections with wider policy agendas, but have tended to limit themselves to a regulatory role, granting licenses and making sure that markets meet health and safety regulations; their management has been the responsibility of inappropriate departments of local government (Kirkgate Market in Leeds, for example, was for years under the control of the council’s asset management team) (House of Commons 2009). As one leading representative of a market federation put it, “few people in the regeneration or development worlds have any direct experience of markets” (Nicholson 2009:np). However, markets have been treated as “cash cows” by local authorities, collecting rents from traders that go into the public budgets with little reinvestment, resulting in a general state of physical decline (House of Commons 2009). Our hypothesis is that this disregard for markets is part of a more general agenda for the neoliberalization of cities and urban policy and the “modernization” of public services, in which markets are seen as secondary services and obstacles for urban renaissance projects. At the same time, markets offer the sort of potential for gentrification that landlords recognized long ago applied to residential buildings, as rent extracting assets. There are clear links here with the wider picture of gentrification that has been built up over the years [see, for example, the papers in Lees Slater and Wyly (2008) for a summary of key points]. A combination of burgeoning middle class customers and landlords conscious of a potential rent gap with a vulnerable low-income clientele provides an almost classic setting for a gentrification process.

This type of gentrification, which we refer to here as retail gentrification, has tended to be analysed as part of a process of residential gentrification (Davidson and Lees 2010:406) and only occasionally as part of what Bridge and Dowling (2001:95) call the “retail landscapes of gentrification”. The most thoroughgoing analysis of the process of retail gentrification is probably that undertaken by Sharon Zukin in New York, principally within Brooklyn. In describing the process whereby the tastes of gentrifiers are expressed in terms of consumption that finds its berth in retail outlets, she warns of the consequences of “shopping for authenticity” (Zukin 2008:745). The

quest for authenticity, expressed through consumption (of place as of commodities), leads ineluctably to gentrification. A process of “boutiquing” takes place, in which chain stores transform neighbourhoods, displacing in the process local stores, with government failing to protect them despite their importance to long-time residents (Zukin *et al.* 2009). In Europe, retail gentrification has been observed in Barcelona, in a project of urban regeneration involving a traditional market, but the city authorities there retained half of the retail outlets in a regenerated part of the Old City at affordable rents (Pascual-Molinas and Ribera-Fumaz 2009). More generally, Spanish markets have remained relatively healthy, but often only through compromises such as incorporating supermarkets or promoting their “authenticity” for touristic purposes (Medina and Alvarez 2009).

In Britain, where issues around urban regeneration and the neo-liberalization of city centres are particularly pressing, we know from emerging research, media accounts and activist campaigns that gentrification of traditional retail markets is taking place, particularly in London (Bloomfield 2009; Gould 2008; Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea 2009), but also in Manchester (Massey 2005) and Leeds (Gonzalez and Percival 2010). Borough Market in Southwark has already been gentrified, its products for the main part elevated into a different world of price and provenance (Coles and Crang 2011). Queens Market in the borough of Newham, however, has been the subject of a long and so far successful campaign against a redevelopment plan that would, it is argued, have led to it becoming a corporatized and “sanitized” space unresponsive to the needs of the diverse local population (Dines 2009; Percival 2009). In Manchester, Massey (2005) sees a process of retail gentrification underway in the conversion of the city centre Corn Exchange into the upmarket Triangle.

Throughout Britain, markets are being pushed towards the gentrification frontier in a process that is not merely a consequence of residential gentrification. This is happening in the first place because many of them find themselves in the way of, or surrounded by, big regeneration projects. This is the case with Kirkgate Market in Leeds, as it is with a number of markets in London (London Assembly 2008). Secondly, there is a sort of discursive operation underway that uses the type of “frontier vocabulary” identified by Smith (1996) in New York. British markets, echoing a discourse of (Western) modernity frequently heard in cities of the global South, are said to be stuck in the past and told they must adapt to reflect changes in consumer behaviour and retail trends. Markets tend to be seen as mainly working class spaces, cheap, unruly, wild, dirty, backwards; traders are regarded as being loud, rude, whingeing. Looking at several of the already cited government and industry documents on markets, as well as local authority and news reports, one finds regular reference to sentiments such as, “the market has to adapt”, “has been ready for the 21st century”, “has to catch up with the times”, or that the traders are “stuck in their ways”. Dines and Cattel (2006:35) recount how, in order to promote a redevelopment project for Queens Market, the market was portrayed as an “unsafe and dirty place where prostitution and petty crime took place”. This helps to create an image of the market as a kind of “time capsule”, still belonging to a previous era before the globalisation of retail trade. The incorporation of traditional markets into the twenty-first century has often meant new market halls relocated

inside shopping centres, Blackburn being a case in point (BBC 2010a). A distinction is often made between those “traditional” retail markets, generally seen as declining, and new emerging “niche” or “specialty” markets, such as farmers’ markets, which according to various reports are in the ascendancy (Retail Markets Alliance 2009) and are more “effective at attracting affluent consumers—the AB socio-economic class—who may otherwise be less likely to frequent markets (House of Commons 2009:28). In the US context farmers’ markets have also been reported as attracting more white consumers (Slocum 2007). As local authorities and market providers put more energy into the organisation of these “successful” markets, non-white and lower-income customers can potentially be displaced from “traditional” market shopping.

Markets are being gentrified in a number of ways. Increasingly they incorporate a hint of the exotic. They are seen by some members of the middle classes as being—indeed increasingly they locate themselves—on the frontiers of daily lived experience as spaces to explore. Paraphrasing Smith’s analysis of the frontier myth in New York, one could envisage “pioneers” discovering the “quirky” side of markets, venturing into this space, and enjoying the “mixing” and the rubbing-along effect described by Sophie Watson.<sup>3</sup> These pioneers like the feeling of being in a different space not yet colonised by corporate values; they enjoy the fact that they have “discovered” a place that is still not frequented by people like them (ie middle and upper classes).

In a variety of ways, then, the whole experience of shopping in markets is being gentrified. Market practice itself has always been about something more than just shopping, as Watson’s and Anderson’s studies demonstrate—meeting friends, nurturing networks. Now this experience is being enclosed by the logic of capital, packaged and sold to a new audience. Central to this commodification of the “market experience” is the particular British connection between class and food where often appreciation for the quality and origin (“provenance” as it is now called) of food, a taste for the “exotic” and home cooking are regarded as a middle class trait while working class food habits are stereotyped as being driven by price and convenience (Hollows and Jones 2010). In this class-food landscape, markets again perform this “frontier” space in which to acquire and perform new foodie practices (Coles and Crang 2011) and culinary cultural capital (Bell 2002).<sup>4</sup> But the worry is that this emphasis on gourmet food can jeopardize the supply of low-cost staple produce for people on low incomes. This market gentrification can also have an ethnic dimension. In Britain, markets are among the public spaces where migrant communities are most visible, and in some cases migrants are said to be sustaining their economic viability (House of Commons 2009). But there is also the potential consumerist commodification of the ethnic other (Cook 2008) where “ethnic” stalls (food, fabrics, or arts and crafts) become a way to “spice up” the market experience for “food adventurers” (Heldke 2003)

We can therefore say that within a wider picture of ongoing retail gentrification, the transformation of traditional retail markets stands at that early but crucial stage of gentrification that Smith (1996) characterized as the “gentrification frontier”, a term that bears temporal connotations as much as it does spatial ones. Smith drew attention to the symbolism wrapped up in gentrification and to the material

expression of the images of frontier. In the case of traditional retail markets the process follows a similar cycle of disinvestment (by local authorities) and displacement (of longstanding market stall holders and customers) followed by rediscovery of the commercial and real estate value of markets and plans to rejuvenate and regenerate through the insertion into the market of stalls selling upmarket products, the relocation of markets to shopping centres or their complete “boutiquing”. Some of these processes are clearly underway at markets in London like Spitafields and Borough. Leeds Kirkgate Market, which we turn to in the next section, stands at the “temporal frontier” of gentrification.

## **Leeds Kirkgate Market, between Decline and Renewal**

Leeds Kirkgate Market is one of the biggest covered markets in Europe. It can be traced back as an open market to the early nineteenth century and in its current form is composed of an indoor and outdoor market at the centre of Leeds, a city in northern England. Currently the market hosts around 400 businesses and provides over 2000 jobs, about 22% of retail employees in the city centre (LCC 2010a). The market’s stalls sell everything from groceries, flowers, fish, fruit and vegetables to drapery, clothing, home ware and stationery, making the market the biggest and most varied retail outlet in Leeds. It is owned by Leeds City Council and is visited weekly by about 170,000 people (LCC 2010a). Footfall has been on the decline in the last 10 years (LCC 2010a), and the number of empty stalls has increased in the last decade, with some longstanding traders feeling forced to leave and a high turnover of stalls in some parts of the market.

Since April 2010 a group of members of the public called Friends of Leeds Kirkgate Market (FOLKM) has been campaigning to see the market improve but retain its character, affordability and diversity and involvement of traders and members of the public in its management (FOLKM blog; [kirkgatemarket.wordpress.com](http://kirkgatemarket.wordpress.com)). One of the authors of this paper has been a core activist in this group and so most of the data gathered for this paper comes from an action-research project with other campaigners and traders involving multiple methods within a broad ethnographic approach.<sup>5</sup>

The most significant event in the market’s recent history is the fire that destroyed about two-thirds of the market in 1975, which led to the construction of two new buildings of lower quality (Burt and Grady 1993). For many this was the start of the current trend of decline and neglect by the local authority, and is a key event in the collective memory of people in Leeds (Hudson 2010). Since this fire, plans for the redevelopment of the market have always been conceptualized as a venture in partnership with private developers, with the council consistently claiming that it would not be able to afford the repairs on its own. This is linked to a shift to redefine the market as an asset in need of commercial revalorization rather than a public service. The first plan, in the mid 1980s, involved the marginalisation of the market inside a shopping complex and was eventually abandoned after a public inquiry (Lytton 1988) and vigorous opposition from traders, members of the public and civic organizations. More recently, in 2008 major redevelopment plans were again considered under a public–private partnership arrangement but abandoned with

the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis. At the time of writing (March 2012) there are some minor investment plans but also a backlog of £2.2 million worth of repairs, with the council now actively again looking for a commercial partner for the “modernization” of the market. The future of the market seems also critically tied to the development of a big shopping centre that will be built next door, as we explain below.

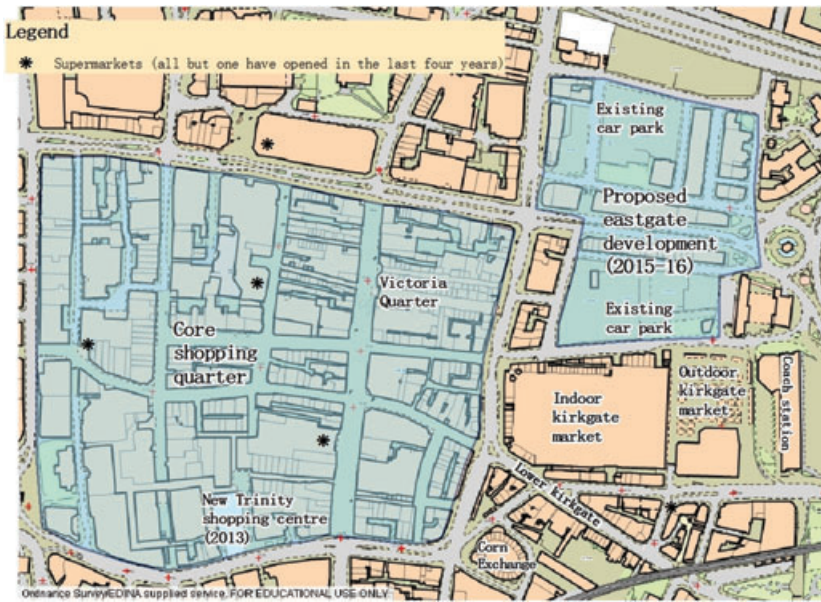
Traders have often argued that Leeds City Council’s historical neglect of the market is linked to the broken relationships between traders and the market management (see, for example, YEP 2005a, 2005b, 2009). Indeed, there is a widely held opinion amongst traders that the council has deliberately run the market down in order to sell it off or develop it into a more profitable enterprise. Leeds City Council has in turn generally explained the decline by citing wider national and international changes in retail trends and customer expectations and trends (LCC 1996, 2010a).

Our analysis suggests, however, that neglect and mismanagement of Kirkgate Market and recent new expressions of interest are not merely a consequence of the particular shop floor politics of Kirkgate Market but need to be contextualized within wider trends in neoliberal urban policy that have transformed Leeds and its local authority in recent years. In the next paragraphs we tell the story of Leeds Kirkgate Market interweaving the three factors outlined above: disinvestment, displacement and revaluation of the market’s commercial and real estate significance.

The neglect has been a long-term process and is linked to the residualization of the market as a core municipal service and the reimagining of Leeds City centre. In the 1980s a mechanism to reinvest the market surplus back into the building was abolished. Already in 1996, a strategy document described the market as a “viable retail offer under threat” and proposed to refurbish those buildings that it agreed were in poor condition (LCC 2005:544). Although there has been some investment (LCC 2005), the buildings at present are in need of £2.4 million (LCC 2011a) to repair a leaking roof, dangerously slippery floors and poor insulation. Crucially, this is despite the surplus of around £2 million a year that the market makes from traders’ rents and service charges, money that goes to fund Leeds City Council’s budget (Gonzalez and Percival 2010; Lazenby 2008; LCC 2010a). Indeed rents at Kirkgate Market are the highest of any market in northern England and among the highest nationally (Murray 2011). After a long period of stable rents, in 2002 there was a rent review that put many established traders out of business (YEP 2003). Traders organized and fought the review in the courts without much success. The council offered some financial help but only in exchange for giving up important tenant rights (BBC 2004).

This long-term neglect of the market has run in parallel with the city centre’s urban renaissance and a city living real estate boom which has in turn made Kirkgate Market’s central location of potential real estate value and at risk of gentrification. Kirkgate Market occupies a strategic and critical place in the centre of the city. It lies opposite the regenerated and pedestrianized Core Shopping Quarter (see Figure 1), where £11 million has recently been spent on repaving work and street furniture (Baron 2010a). Directly across the road stands the Victoria Quarter, a luxury shopping arcade, home to the first branch of the expensive department store

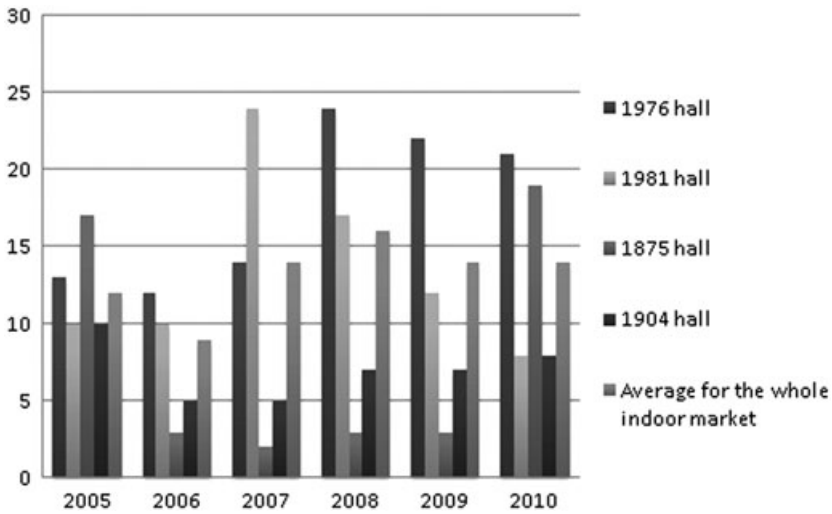




**Figure 1:** Kirkgate Market and its surroundings in central Leeds (source: Authors and Yanpeng Jiang)

Harvey Nichols. This luxury store acts as a symbol of the council's vision for the urban renaissance of Leeds, heavily based on speculative city centre apartment building (Unsworth 2010) and retail development. Many of these plans for a "skyscraper Leeds" (Chatterton and Hodkinson 2007) though collapsed with the start of the global financial crisis in 2007/08 but the local authority is proud to still have some major retail developments under construction or in the pipeline that will help the city climb up in the UK retail rankings, crucially above Manchester (Locate in Leeds 2011). This ambition is consistent with Leeds City Council's accommodating policy to Britain's "big four" supermarkets (BBC 2010b), and areas around the market have seen the opening of several supermarkets in the last few years (see Figure 1). Finally Leeds has heavily promoted itself as the second centre for financial services in England after London.

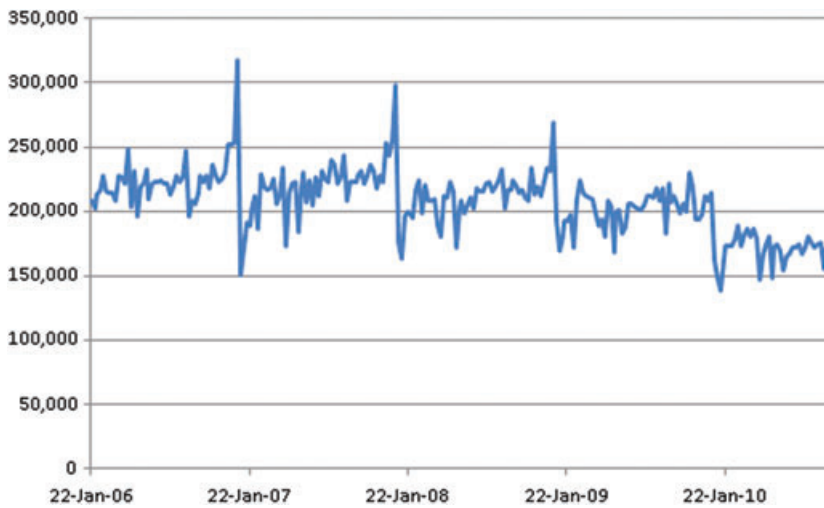
In contrast, a *frontier* language is used by Leeds City Council to describe the area occupied by the market and its vicinity as "the missing piece in the rejuvenation of the city centre" (LCC 2011b). A process of gentrification of this area already started in 2007 when the independent traders of one of the most loved and few alternative spaces in Leeds, the Corn Exchange, were evicted by their landlord, the global insurance company Zurich (Leeming 2008). The building subsequently lay almost empty for about 2 years until new more upmarket occupiers started to move in, paying much higher rents. There are also plans for another of the "missing pieces", on the other side of the market, by the real estate developer Hammerson, who had approved plans to build a mega shopping centre with over new 100 shops called Eastgate (Figure 1). At the centre of all these recently and soon to be developed spaces, Kirkgate Market stands out as a rundown building which does not necessarily attract the sleek, young, pin-striped city dwellers and professionals. The analysis of



**Figure 2:** Percentage of empty stalls by different areas/halls of Kirkgate Market (source: Leeds City Council, 2011c)

recent regeneration policies reveals the same classic cycle of disinvestment and regeneration “encroachment” that we find in housing gentrification (Davidson and Lees 2010).

Due to these disinvestment processes and the accompanying neglect there has been displacement both of traders and customers from Kirkgate Market. In the 1990s the average annual percentage of traders leaving the indoor market was 6.5%, comparable to national closure rates of small businesses (LCC 1996) but this has increased in the last decade and, as we can see in Figure 2, the proportion of empty stalls in some parts of the market is very high (almost a quarter) (LCC 2011c). Some of these empty units had been occupied by long-term traders; in 2010, 20% of traders who left had been working in the market for 15 years or more (LCC 2010b). The loss of stalls has been uneven across different sectors, with fresh fruit and vegetables being the worst affected (LCC 1996). This is damaging as it means the market shifts from being the place for basic everyday shopping to an occasional destination. The displacement affects in particular poorer traders and customers. Conversations with traders and media reports (YEP 2009) show that the main reason for leaving is the unaffordability of rents, which points to the modest and fragile nature of the businesses. At the same time, as we note below, the council has a strategy of attracting traders selling higher value added goods, which taken together means that there is a potential shift or at least desired shift for a different kind of trader. In terms of customer displacement, as we can see in Figure 3, the number of people coming into the market (footfall) has been in decline since 2006. There is strong evidence to suggest that the customer base is in a large part made up of poor residents in Leeds. Recent data obtained by FOLKM<sup>6</sup> show that the majority of customers from Leeds come from the most deprived areas of the city and hence it is fair to conclude that those will be amongst the customers abandoning the market. Sure, a progressive abandonment by these customers is



**Figure 3:** Kirkgate Market footfall since 2006 (source: Leeds City Council, 2010b (FOI request REF 4600))

linked to the appearance of other low-cost alternatives such as online shopping or the spread of supermarkets and discount shops, but this again, we insist, is part of the neoliberalization of our cities. Once regarded as a public service, the role of the market as a key resource for the poorest in society is now openly questioned by Leeds City Council in a recent report: “the question has to be asked whether Kirkgate Market is actually the best place for people on low incomes to shop. Would low income families be better served through the discount and value sector?” (LCC 2010a:22). In contrast, traders have publicly recognised the essential role that the market plays in servicing those from low-income families.

We should not, however, think of Kirkgate Market as a static space where one type of customer, produce and trader is replaced by another. The market is an incredibly flexible social space where produce and price change according to season, demand, overflow from supermarkets and social relations. The ethnic composition of traders and customers has also changed in recent decades, reflecting wider demographic shifts in the population in Leeds. Most notably in the last few years there has been an arrival of Polish produce and stalls, Caribbean food and hairdressers and Chinese-run nail bars and accessories shops. Asian traders have been well established in the market for a longer time. In her research on asylum seekers and refugees in Leeds, Lewis noted that “shopping at the market has become habitual practice for many people who have come to Leeds as asylum seekers” (Lewis 2009:7), becoming for them a social space. The market management has identified that in the future they would expect to increase the presence of “ethnic lines” (LCC 2011c:253) and indeed the council has recently licensed out a Wednesday outdoor market with an “Asian” theme. A presence of more traders from “minorities” was seen as a “unique selling point” by the previous manager in an interview in 2008<sup>7</sup> who also mentioned the advantage of making the market into an extension of people’s holiday experiences reinforcing our previous point about the “othering” of ethnic foods for consumption.

Our analysis of internal policy documents, conversations with traders and involvement in a recent public inquiry on the future of the market testify to an emergent strategy for gentrification on the part of Leeds City Council.

This strategy by stealth takes the form of a set of regulations not always open and explicit, designed to “clean up” the market, giving rise to a relatively confrontational relationship with traders. A general perception is said to exist that, “some stall holders do not keep their stalls and surrounds clean and tidy” (LCC 2005:552). Since 1999 tenancy agreements have included clauses on improving “poor displays” and general improvement of the stalls; the council claims that these agreements have often had to be “enforced” (LCC 2005:550). Recently some of this has been addressed by giving traders business support grants. An insight into what the council considers “poor displays” came at a meeting between traders and management in October 2009 at which photographs of stalls were shown in terms of “strengths” and “challenges”. The challenging stalls were those selling cosmetics and CDs, two of the products that are considered cheap and low value added, while the strong stalls were shown selling neatly arranged olives, fruit, flowers and nuts (LCC 2009). An interview with a former market manager also revealed a particular dislike for traders who did not display their products in an orderly fashion. This sanitization strategy has been translated into a highly regulated environment where traders are fined if they “encroach”, that is, extend their displays or leave objects outside their stalls, and there has even been a ban on shouting at certain times of the day, a measure replete with irony for any market let alone a large covered one like Kirkgate Market (Baron 2010b). These strategies to sanitize the market contrast with a description in the 1988 planning inquiry mentioned above, in which the market was pictured as a place:

devoid of frills and pretence, the displays are haphazard and the search for a bargain is part of the experience ... The less well off citizens of Leeds for whom the Market specifically caters are not unduly concerned about their surroundings when goods at bargain prices are to be had (Lytton 1988:20).

This corresponds with our recent conversations with customers, particularly the older ones, who often mention a general “lack of atmosphere” as one of the reasons why they tend to come less frequently to the Market. We would argue that, whether by design or not, these policies and general management pressure to clean up the market results in the alienation and potentially the displacement of existing market customers as well as contributing to a covert strategy of retail gentrification.

The recent re-branding and marketing strategy of the market management also shows attempts to reach out to wealthier customers and traders. There has been a particular emphasis on arts and crafts produce and “quality” food involving “food demonstrations, links with food experts and chefs, a permanent presence in Kirkgate market and a range of events and promotions aimed at food connoisseurs” (LCC 2011d:7). The council is now working with a company to promote Kirkgate Market as the “foodie destination of the North” (LCC 2011d<sup>8</sup>). Nor has the council been able to resist the inevitable aspirational comparisons with Barcelona’s biggest market, La Boquería, a truly global tourist attraction, or the fine foods market of Borough in London (LCC 2010a). The Leeds “creative class” blogosphere has embraced the

debate with some in these circles arguing that the market needs a “good dose of gentrification” (Oyster 2011).

This strategy for gentrifying the market has accelerated in the last few years for a series of reasons. The poor state of the market buildings and years of disinvestment has produced a “rent gap” only to become bigger with the proposed regeneration projects on alternate sides of the market. According to Leeds City Council rental income is falling and is not expected to grow; the asset value of the building has fallen from £16.7 million in 1994 to £15.4 million in 2009 (LCC 2010a:16). The council is clearly worried about the decreasing income in years to come if the decline continues.

The latest suggestion by Leeds City Council is that the market should be smaller, open for longer and managed by a commercial partnership (LCC 2012). A private consultant has been engaged who has suggested that replacing one of the less attractive halls in the market would “command[s] higher rental values and [be] more attractive to private investors” (Quarterbridge 2011:6). Although managers and senior councillors have denied that this recent suggestion implies a gentrifying and “boutiquing” strategy (Baron 2010b), other councillors have publicly said that they think it is too big and that it might not survive in its present form (FOLKM blog). The representative body for the indoor traders has voiced concerns over these plans, arguing that they “would turn the market into an expensive food hall and traders would have to pass rising costs on to customers ... alienating poorer customers” (BBC 2012). The plans would also mean moving and partly covering the outdoor market with a potential increase in rents. A representative of the outdoor traders told FOLKM<sup>9</sup> recently that, “Everything that the outdoor market is about would disappear. What we have always done, what we are here for is to feed and clothe those who have the least in this city.” The traders therefore do recognize the gentrifying effect of the recent proposal.

## **Conclusions: Disinvestment, Displacement and the Gentrification Frontier**

In the paragraphs above, we discussed the waves of gentrified regeneration swirling around Leeds Kirkgate Market and contrasted these with the neglect and mismanagement that has afflicted the market itself. Our analysis falls broadly under the headings that we see as being constituent of retail gentrification in Britain today—state-orchestrated urban restructuring and its attendant initial period of disinvestment, the displacement of existing shoppers and the creation of a commodified and gentrified shopping experience.

Urban restructuring is being facilitated through a failure to consider lowering rents even as the value of land in the immediate vicinity has declined as a result of disinvestment in the market. This is part of a wider pattern of disinvestment in the market, which is not seen to fit into the desired image for this part of central Leeds as the Knightsbridge of the North. Coupled with this is an attitude to the market that sees it as an asset value and not as a community space. The completion of the Eastgate shopping centre, scheduled for 2015, as well as the heritage-led regeneration of Lower Kirkgate will intensify the pressure on the market

to become gentrified so as to suit the customers for whom these developments are designed. As Davidson and Lees (2010) argued, drawing on the work of humanist geographers such as Yi-fu Tuan, the problem here is one of “displacement” (their emphasis), whereby people feel the loss of a sense of identity with a place. This leads to a gradual movement away rather than a once-and-for-all decision to go and never return. The commodification of the shopping experience, with its attendant fetishization of taste and provenance, is still in its early phase in Kirkgate Market, as indeed it is in other British markets. In this sense, Kirkgate and other similar markets are on the gentrification frontier. Part of the intent of this paper is to sound a warning. Too often, academics mobilize too late in the process, or watch on and reflect as events take their course (Slater 2006). We are concerned, not only about what is happening in Kirkgate Market in Leeds, but we also fear that this heralds more widespread developments in traditional retail markets around Britain. Evidence particularly from markets in London suggests that the process of gentrification through commodification of the shopping experience is already underway, with predictably serious consequences for the existing strong base of working class market shoppers.

In this paper, we have set markets within the wider compass of retail gentrification and retail-led urban regeneration. We remain surprised that the gentrification of shopping streets and consumption practices has been little commented on in the academic literature, with Zukin’s work being a prominent exception. We believe that the passing reflections of authors who have written about gentrification from the setting of London—from Butler and Robson (2001) to Davidson and Lees (2010)—suggest that this represents a highly important but little-studied aspect of the class-based urban restructuring process, and we suggest that our understanding of this process would benefit from more work on retail gentrification. Finally, we believe that any such research should foreground the role of the state as a principal agent in contemporary gentrification. The state’s ambivalence towards markets reflects the opportunist role that it is playing in British cities like Leeds, both disinvesting in the markets of today even as it plays up the potential of gentrified markets tomorrow.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In referring to them as traditional retail markets, we are not making a judgement about self-ascribed traditional English or British values [and we heed Michèle de la Pradelle’s warning not to delineate a purer, “better”, more authentic market set against the “modern” market (2006:234)]. We use the term “traditional” for clarity’s sake to distinguish retail markets from other, often newer forms of market such as farmers’ markets and also to clarify the ambiguity of the term “market” which has many other meanings.

<sup>2</sup> A series of market campaign groups have been active in the UK for a few years: Friends of Queens Market, Wards Corner Community Coalition and Friends of Brixton Market in London, Friends of Kirkgate Market in Leeds, and more recently, Friends of Bullring Market in Birmingham.

<sup>3</sup> We are aware that as academics and market users our position is compromised. Whilst acknowledging this, we believe that silence is not a good option, and that academic work can and should be engaged, critical and concerned. And our concern here is for the future of Leeds market and similar establishments, which have long served as focal points of daily sociability and unvoiced resistance to the corporatization of our life-worlds.

<sup>4</sup> Ironically, a contemporaneous trend is for supermarkets to present themselves as markets. Morrisons has for many years now adopted a “market” imagery, and on their website there is a section called “This week at Market street”. Tesco has now a “market value” range. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2008/sep/17/tesco.asda>.

<sup>5</sup> The data presented in this paper have been gathered in multiple ways and in collaboration with other activists and traders. Members of FOLKM had been involved in regular discussions with traders even before the official launch of this group in the capacity of concerned customers of the market. Since 2010 and with the official launch of the campaign, FOLKM has developed a collaborative relationship with the National Market Traders Federation Leeds branch, exchanging information and collectively developing an analysis of the situation. FOLKM has had meetings with council officers and councillors and from December 2010 to April 2011 FOLKM was formally invited to be a witness at an enquiry into the future of the Market launched by a Scrutiny Committee of Leeds City Council. Participation in this inquiry and generally day-to-day following of Leeds City Council’s policy has involved reading in detail dozens of public documents as well as attending council public meetings when the Market was discussed. FOLKM has also organised events at the Market and has had stalls at events and festivals which have involved talking informally to dozens of market customers and members of the public. Many of these encounters have been recorded in some way in the campaign’s meetings minutes, public blog post, emails to its members and press releases but no formal research interviews have been carried out apart from one interview with the Market manager in 2008 before the author of the present article became an active campaigner. The campaign has made requests under Freedom of Information law to gather data, all of which are searchable and available here: website <http://www.whatdotheyknow.com>. For more information, see FOLKM blog ([kirkgatemarket.wordpress.com](http://kirkgatemarket.wordpress.com)).

<sup>6</sup> In April 2009 FOLKM launched a petition and collected 10,000 signatures. The petition asked members of the public to include their postcode and it was almost exclusively circulated in the Market. Students from the MA in Activism and Social Change at the School of Geography (University of Leeds) inputted and analysed 3647 postcodes.

<sup>7</sup> This interview was carried out in March 2008 by Sara Gonzalez before this action research project started in the context of an event organized by the School of Geography titled “Is Leeds going in the right direction?”.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly a draft of this document included a reference to the “Borough of the North”. We understand that this was changed after this company showed unease about the comparison.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a representative of the outdoor market by Megan Waugh in preparation for a FOLKM gazette conducted at the Market on the 14 March 2012.

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