

Less crime, busy streets are bad things?

Yes, people hate the class-war implications of gentrification, but sometimes it's better than the alternative. *Murray Whyte* wrestles with one of the most polarizing words in Toronto's vocabulary

Dec. 4, 2005

The Gladstone Hotel is Christina Zeidler's baby. For three years, Zeidler has stewarded the building from near ruin to pristine, historically precise restoration, pouring money, determination and, on more than one occasion, tears into it. The century-old building was dead when her family bought it in 2000, she says. Now it's alive again.

This weekend, its rebirth was marked with three days of celebrations that finally wind down today. But here on Queen St. W., the Gladstone is just the last to arrive at a long-running party. And what a party it's been.

Since the opening of the Gladstone's neighbour, the Drake Hotel, not quite two years ago, the strip has gone from a gritty extension of Parkdale to an urban playground for moneyed arrivistes. Rhetoric in the neighbourhood is fractured, to say the least. Pre-Drake, the curious melding of the working and artist classes that populate these neighbourhoods "in transition," as the term has evolved, could sense them: Barbarians at the gate, leaning a little harder, day by day.

Today, the barbarians are no longer at the gate. They've broken through, reno'd a semi, and are sipping organic fruit juice-infused cocktails at any one of the posh new locals. The last straw, a pervasive symbol of The End in neighbourhoods like this, arrived last month: A Starbucks, that harbinger of mono-cultural doom, took up residence at the corner of Queen and Dovercourt. Almost immediately, its sign was accompanied by another, scrawled in black spray paint: "DRAKE, YOU HO, THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT."

For some, this is war. If the Drake was the beachhead — a slapdash protest was staged there recently, to minimal effect — then the multicoloured condo model suite across the street is its Vichy government: an indelible symbol of real, rapid, irreversible change.

The rhetoric of invasion is not overstated. There is a word used to describe it: gentrification. Zeidler, for one, doesn't like it.

"The Gladstone is not gentrification," she tells me decisively. "That means something that's not animated by an authentic force. Gentrification is Disneyland, a place where you calcify the culture to the point where it has no salience. That is not what we're doing here."

Truth to tell, the new Gladstone is much like the old Gladstone, only better, with its divergent mix of old regulars and new adventurers. Its hallmark, Zeidler says, quite rightly, is fitting into the community, not creating a new one from scratch.

But her loathing of the G word is telling. It is so much more than a word: It is a divisive economic, social, political and intellectual force that polarizes even within itself. Depending on whom you talk to, it is either a harbinger of salvation or a fifth horseman of the apocalypse, arriving late to the world-razing party but having a damn fine time in his Prada suit, gulping single-malt scotch once he gets there.

It's a word with growing resonance as the city tackles the renewal of neighbourhoods with renewed interest and energies. And its resonance reverberates in the Gladstone/Drake area, perhaps, more than anywhere. As the forces of change trickle inevitably west, into Parkdale — perhaps the most gentrification-resistant zone in the city, and therefore, its most sensitive — the creep westward is welcomed with that same polarity: twin surges of alarm and relief.

Gentrification is a word we love in the media, perhaps for just this reason. It has dramatic tension. It engenders extreme reactions. ~~It gives us a story that writes itself: a neighbourhood is changing. Catalogue the reactions, which~~ are so abundant as to be endless. Vividly describe the ubiquitous images of acute discord — lovingly restored Victorian homes next to crumbling rooming houses; prostitutes on one side of a street, Banana Republic-clad young mothers with baby strollers on the other. Starbucks next to greasy spoons.

Stir into a thick, unresolvable stew, and serve lukewarm. Repeat as needed.

I have been as guilty as any of this practice. It's a pattern, especially in young reporters. We are experts at the cautionary tale of neighbourhood change. Maybe it's the idealistic teachings of journalism school still ringing in our ears — H.L. Mencken's credo to "afflict the comfortable, and comfort the afflicted" comes to mind — but it's a story we repeat generationally.

What we learn from these retreads may be a simple fact — change is constant — but the cautionary tone is revealing of something else, something implicit in the word itself.

Gentry-fication. We have Ruth Glass, a British sociologist, to thank for it. From the beginning, the word described something far from benign, let alone beneficial. This was, after all, about the gentry — the idle rich, in decidedly British terms — transforming places they coveted as they saw fit. Glass's coinage, in 1964, was exclusive, aggressive, and damning.

Its use as a weapon in inner-city class warfare should be no surprise. "Gentrification is indeed a dirty word, and should stay a dirty word," Tom Slater, an urban geographer in the U.K., says via email. Slater spent several years in Toronto studying what he called "municipally managed gentrification" in Parkdale.

"It was a hard-fought political victory for those opposed to the process, so that now, people are squeamish about using the term," he writes. "Very, very rarely do you hear politicians use 'gentrification' — more positive terms like 'revitalization,' 'regeneration' and 'renaissance' (the three R's, I call them) are preferred, and for a reason: to legitimize and gloss over a middle-class invasion."

Slater's observation bears weight on the City of Toronto website. A search for the term among all the city's voluminous archives yields but three hits: one, a footnote to the Parkdale study penned by Slater himself; another reference to Slater's study, this time in a much-pretified, graphically rendered form; and a brief, near-apologetic reference on a page called *Your Home, Our City* that gives a nod to the city's housing issues for the 21st century and allows that "debates have arisen" around "the gentrification of neighbourhoods."

No kidding. The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty offers this definition of the (slightly altered) term: "Gent-de-fecation: 1. The upper classes shitting on the lower classes by forcing them from their neighbourhoods through a system of increased property value. 2. The bleaching of a racially and ethnically diverse community 3. Someone else's reality."

OCAP was part of a riotous anti-gentrification protest in Parkdale in 1998, when the city proposed de-zoning rooming houses in the neighbourhood. Tensions were running high; a run-down illegal rooming house, many of whose residents were poor or mentally disabled, had just burned down, killing two people. A group calling itself the Parkdale Common Front had called the proposed re-zoning tantamount to "social cleansing."

"From the beginning it had a connotation that was, itself, for 'better people' — not those that were already there," says Larry Bourne, a social geographer at the University of Toronto. He doesn't like the word much, but a research project he's involved with — nothing less than a managed plan to help Parkdale's transition through gentrification be an equitable one — has it in its title, "so I have to live with it," he shrugs. (Tom Slater is also involved in the project.)

Another urban intellectual in the U.K., Neil Smith, takes the class-warfare notion further, terming a gentrifying centre the "revanchist" city. The word is nearly as loaded as gentrification itself: The revanchists were a middle-class force that opposed the working-class uprising of the Paris Commune in the 19th century, whose goal was to take revenge — *la revanche* — on those that had "stolen" the city from them.

This is stern stuff, so when I speak to Lawrence Solomon at The Urban Renaissance Institute — an advocate for, among other things, increased immigration and a lower tax burden for the inner cities — I'm a little surprised. Solomon is flummoxed that gentrification could ever be seen as anything other than constructive.

"It is now, and always has been, a very positive process," Solomon says. "The fact that a neighbourhood is improving should not be a cause for despair."

I had started to think that, too — and, of course, immediately felt guilty for it. This is the thing about gentrification, and not just the word itself: "Improvement" is a relative term. Improvement for whom?

Valuable building stock is reconditioned and preserved; that stock, now of higher value, spells eviction for the long-time low-income residents. Rotting streetscapes resurge with a diversity of businesses and services that help bring it to life; those same streetscapes feature businesses out of financial reach for the neighbourhood's previous residents. Diversity of residents and building types helps de-concentrate poverty; new middle-class residents force poverty to concentrate in even denser pockets.

One study suggested that a seemingly bulletproof effect of gentrification — lower crime rates, based on more stable residents moving into an area — produced just the opposite: higher crime rates, because the new wealth provided a target.

A British researcher, Rowland Atkinson, did a study in 2002 with the sole purpose of parsing this very polemic on the subject in academia.

"Gentrification has regularly divided the opinions of policy-makers, researchers and commentators," he says in his introduction.

Surveying 114 studies on the subject, Atkinson came up with a handful of conclusions that show how fractious a realm it can be. Each point has a counterpoint; no argument escapes without being beaten down by another.

A little beaten himself, perhaps — "the move away from a black and white portrayal of the process as simply good or bad will inevitably be an improvement," he says in his conclusion — Atkinson nonetheless states that the "positive ramifications have been under-explored" by serious research, and that the "overwhelming" amount of negative impact studies he reviewed may have to do with academics being "drawn to the subject because of its relationship to social justice."

Atkinson stops short of suggesting a bias — the same one, perhaps, that spawns the cautionary tales of gentrification in the media — but only just.

Indeed, challenging convention on gentrification is a dangerous practice. My colleague at the *Star*, Christopher Hutsul, did just that, in a column of 2003. After living in the neighbourhood for a few months and becoming frustrated with the crime and disorder, he wrote with conviction that Parkdale "was a place in need of as much gentrification as it could get. And quickly." [\[The 2003 Hutsul column is attached below\]](#)

The response was rapid, massive and not altogether unexpected.

"It's easier to just be 'against gentrification' as a rule," he tells me. "Some people were really upset and confronted me. But there were a lot of people who were just quietly indignant. Those people, I believe, realized that I was on to something."

I couldn't help but think he was on to something, too.

City centres all over North America were hollowed out in the postwar era of mass-suburbanization. Inner cities, bereft of tax bases and community services, were left to rot. Toronto's fate was altered in the 1970s when a return from the suburbs kick-started the early regeneration of the vibrant city core we have today. It's hard to see how that mix is the black heart of evil that gentrification seems so often to describe: less crime, populated streets and preserved housing stock. These are bad things?

Jon Caulfield, a renowned urban theorist at York University, was one who didn't shy away from some of the positives. In a 1989 paper that evolved into his 1994 book *City Form and Everyday Life: Toronto's Gentrification and Critical Social Practice*, he described the Toronto experience as hopeful, even ebullient. Caulfield's term "emancipatory gentrification" suggested that the return to the city freed the new arrivals of the bland homogeneity of the suburbs from which they'd come.

To many scholars, Caulfield's view suggests an idealism where gentrification is the city's saviour, a rising tide that lifts all boats, from the poorest to the arrivistes.

"Old city places offer difference and freedom, privacy and fantasy, possibilities for carnival," Caulfield wrote in his 1989 essay, quoting modern philosopher Walter Benjamin: "The city is 'the place of our meeting with the other.'"

Caulfield's notion is one of diversity and integration, not invasion and displacement. Sounds good, but not to everyone. (This, perhaps, is part of the reason Caulfield no longer speaks to the media. I asked; he graciously declined.)

Slater is one of the critics. In his study of last year, *Municipally Managed Gentrification in South Parkdale*, his interpretation of Caulfield's thesis is damning.

"It is anything but emancipatory for those already in the neighbourhood," he writes. The activity itself is, in fact, sinister, offering freedom not from the suburbs but the very people who precede the gentrifiers themselves. Because of this, Slater writes, "gentrification is not an instigator of social action" — the "meeting with the other" that Caulfield describes — "but of social tension."

In other words, it all depends on your point of view. Which is the maddening, fractious, divisive, double-edged world of gentrification — and a duality that the word itself, with its deep undertone of classist aggression, seems completely to ignore. If we could stop arguing about what it means, engage it as a process and help shape its outcome, I can't help but think we'd be better off.

Frustrated with the lack of resolution, I go for a drive to clear my head. It's Wednesday, around 10 p.m., and a tangle of contradictory thoughts clot my brain.

I drift west along Queen St., where I live, past the Gladstone, which had just removed the wooden battens from its façade, and down under the railroad bridge at Dufferin that serves as the final barricade to the barbarians, some of whom have slipped under and through, trickling westward as far as Brock St.

That's where it stops — for now — as Brock shudders and submits to Parkdale as it has always been: empty storefronts and cheap, all-night eateries, dollar stores and half-lit cafes.

Outside a pizza joint, two greying men in scruffy workwear grapple half-heartedly before submitting simultaneously, stumbling, and crumple to the sidewalk together in a weary heap. They lie for a moment, exhausted, before gathering themselves up and trudging onward in the darkness.

It is a very Parkdale moment: bottled frustration spurting out, finding no real target or purpose, then dissipating; negative energy without place or focus. It's a metaphor for the gentrifiers as well as, in the eyes of someone like Slater, their victims. Parkdale is changing. Into what, everyone seems to care, but no one really knows.

Gentrification is no miracle cure, but nor is it a disease. As Larry Bourne tells me, in diplomatic fashion, "it certainly seems better than the alternative" of constant, pervasive, apocalyptic decay.

As a process and an end result, it's the best we've got. But it's the G-word — as a label and a stigma — that remains the most daunting barricade of all.

Gentrified neighbourhoods suit me fine

Christopher Hutsul, Toronto Star, 11 March 2003

Everyone's an expert on Parkdale.

I discovered that a year and a half ago when I told my friends I'd rented a place on the corner of Queen West and Fuller St., in the heart of the west-end neighbourhood.

Some people said I'd love the community, that it was full of artists and dollar stores and roti shops. Some called it a colourful, edgy place, full of life and culture.

And the common refrain, and you hear it all the time in the realm of the young and socially conscious, was that tragically, this great haven for artists was changing.

"It's being gentrified," they'd sputter, as if some great evil was descending on this decent village.

But on my first morning in Parkdale, I made it only as far as my front door before I was introduced to the local flavour. A large man wearing only tighty-whities was relaxing on the step with a tube of modelling glue shoved halfway up his nose.

That's okay, I thought, stepping over my new neighbour. I get a kick from coffee, he prefers the dull pang of solvents.

But a few nights later, a crack dealer had his spleen whupped out of him by some police on that same front doorstep.

Not only that, my girlfriend has been harassed nightly on her walk home.

And I began to think about all the times people cursed the gentrification of this community.

This was a place in need of as much gentrification as it could possibly get. And quickly.

Because from my vantage point, this place was an armpit - a place you'd rather avoid than come home to.

It's an opinion that invites a lot of opposition. I'd written a review of the Cadillac Lounge on Queen St. W., and described it as a clean, stylish respite from the unsettling haunts of the beady-eyed.

I got a call from a member of a community group who lambasted me for implying Parkdale wasn't the cheerful oasis he loved so dearly. But he clammed up and scurried off the phone when I asked him if he'd feel totally comfortable about his wife getting off the streetcar at Queen and Lansdowne at 2 on a Saturday morning.

Well, yeah, what neighbourhood isn't peachy when you park your Lexus in a private garage?

Look, this is nothing against Parkdale. It's fine, and it's getting better. I'm just saying that the reason it isn't as vile as they say it was years ago, is specifically because of gentrification.

Dissidents say the arrival of higher-income families and professionals raises housing costs, bulldozing artists and low-income people out of the area, crushing longstanding family businesses along the way.

I agree that the issue of affordable housing needs to be addressed, but that's the responsibility of our elected officials. Government policies won't and shouldn't hinder a community's ability to expand and evolve.

And no one should lose sleep over the fact that artists will have to scurry to a new part of town when yuppies stake their claim to the studio spaces. In my own experience as an artist, I noted the nomadic lifestyle of the creative community. Seeking out affordable studio space is not only a part of the tradition of being an urban artist, but part of the fun as well.

And who owes artists a cheap place to live anyway?

The businesses in changing neighbourhoods certainly face challenges with gentrification, but they also face tremendous opportunities. The galleries that embrace the transition will be rewarded by the incoming residents. And the restaurants willing to raise the bar in terms of service, quality and cleanliness will be embraced.

The imminent arrival of a Starbucks in Parkdale spells doom only for coffee shops that serve sludge and charred milk and call it a cappuccino.

People say gentrification in Bloor West Village shut down a handful of eastern European restaurants, but unless you regularly find yourself craving tripe soup and dark rye, that's not a hard pill to swallow.

I don't presume to be an expert on Parkdale, but I do on other parts of town. The parts that some call gentrified are safe, progressive, urban destinations whose residents take pride in their communities. They're places you'd take your mother when she comes to visit.

And consider the alternative. There's no shortage of cheap housing in downtown Buffalo. Evil yuppies aren't ruining all the fun the poor people are having down there. There's plenty of quiet, devalued land for the disadvantaged to roam during the night.

Well, thank God, we're not Buffalo. And thank God we live in a city that has the resiliency to evolve and emerge from within, whose neighbourhoods can transform from repellent to attractive.

Yet people seethe when they say the g-word.

To them, I say, wake up and smell the glue.

Reach Christopher Hutsul at [chutsul @ thestar.ca](mailto:chutsul@thestar.ca).