

## **The Gentrification of Venice Beach California**

Across the United States, gentrification is a spreading concern among lower income residents of communities that are being rapidly transformed by newcomers. For context, gentrification is the process by which neighborhoods are transformed through new development that invites an influx of more affluent residents and businesses. For many communities, gentrification has led to the displacement of long-time residents and disruption of communities. Not surprisingly, these effects are often marked along racial lines. While cities often support and enable gentrification, it can have negative consequences for residents who are priced out of their homes, affecting entire communities and ways of life. The process of gentrification not only changes the urban landscape through architecture and the visual appearance of neighborhoods, but affects the shifting demographics caused by newcomers reshaping cities at the street level. As Rivke Jaffe points out in *Introducing Urban Anthropology*, chapter 8, "Planning a City," parts of city seen as desirable are often redeveloped by private contractors to attract "tourists and higher-income gentrifiers" (Jaffe 127). Of course, gentrification can have many positive effects, such as bringing new commercial and local development, improving economic opportunities for residents of the neighborhood, reducing crime rates, and sparking an increase in property values. Many in a position of the elite view gentrification as a nice and welcome addition. However, these benefits of gentrification often come at the cost of forced displacement. In short, gentrification transforms the physical, social, and economic landscape of the community.

Los Angeles is not immune to this process of gentrification. As one of the wealthiest and most prominent cities in the United States, it attracts a wide range of people. As more and more

affluent individuals migrate to Los Angeles, gentrification is the natural result. The wealthier of the four million people who live in Los Angeles want to live in the best homes their money can buy while also standing out from the crowd. This is where the desires of the existing residents and the drivers of development and capitalism collide. The result of this collision is gentrification. By examining the case of Venice Beach, California, one can see the effects of gentrification on a neighborhood over time. From profit-maximizing developers to the wealthy to local officials wanting to make the city more attractive to visitors, a number of different players have gradually made Venice Beach one of the elite neighborhoods in Southern California.

If one were to ask any passerby in Los Angeles for the stereotypical description of Venice Beach, most would likely say “bohemian.” Venice Beach is a diverse and eclectic neighborhood, from its bodybuilders constantly training on the beach to the street artists performing for the tourists. As Spencer explains in an article for *Parachute*, this very vibrant, colorful, bohemian corner of Los Angeles was initially designed in 1905 by Abbot Kinney. Kinney wanted Venice Beach to be a community inspired by the "Renaissance by the Sea." However, financial considerations drove the project’s design even then as Kinney “found visitors were far more interested in” the boardwalk of the community and thus tempted it to be the "Coney Island of California." While the neighborhood did see a decline in the Great Depression years, artists and visionaries were still attracted to this corner of Los Angeles. Venice's creative culture became the perfect place to launch this bohemian-style community that we still observe today through its lingering counterculture. As Oscar Holland from CNN examined in the photos of the life of Venice Beach, it was "the heart of American pop culture" in the 50s and 60s when it was a fashionable and vibrant creative community. By attracting various actors and musicians to streets, the beach front boardwalk town became the place for free-spirited people to create a community. Venice Beach has included many different subcultures, and remains to some degree

still an eclectic neighborhood. However, longtime residents of Venice Beach have seen it change as gentrification takes hold, increasing rental costs and home values. Large technology companies, such as Snapchat, have moved into the area. With them have come young, affluent workers who are reshaping the community. As a result, Venice Beach is vulnerable to losing its rich history and culture as new wealth drives out its long-time residents.

The scale, scope, and pace of gentrification can make analysis seem sometimes overwhelming. Therefore, it is sometimes helpful to look at examples of small-scale gentrification. For example, one can think in terms of “lot by lot” gentrification, which changes the look and feel of neighborhoods one house or storefront at a time. One such example is the “white house” movement underway across Los Angeles (and California more generally). In this context, the reference is not to the White House in Washington, DC, but the modern, open floor plan, five-bedroom, four-bath, all-glass white houses sprinkled across Los Angeles. From Beverly Hills to San Pedro to Chatsworth to our own South Los Angeles, these generically designed boxes are taking over the city's architectural landscape and changing the visual and cultural elements of individual neighborhoods. The unique element of this architectural movement is not its manipulation of space or offering a new take on an old design concept. Instead, what is unique is how "unspecial" these homes look. They are cookie-cutter in design but still command high prices. Their numbers make the modern white box home part of a movement as every new white box changes the local community's visual landscape and ethnography. They are transforming how the city operates and how its people move about their daily lives. In short, the construction of giant white homes acts like plot-by-plot gentrification of the city. The movement is following the traditional path of gentrification by replacing historic and traditional homes in each community with box-like structures costing outrageous amounts. As Mithers writes, the white box home design was not so much "planned" as it was "materialized

out of a powerful cultural-economic convergence" (*Los Angeles Magazine*). The reality is that the "modernist" label for these homes is just a marketable nickname for a plain and boring white box design. To its credit, while the geometric neo-modern home design may not match the style of every neighborhood in Los Angeles, the emphasis on simplicity and clean design is somewhat native to California. Today's white box home diverges from that tradition, however, because it takes the original concept and overdoes it. This is where the concept of minimalist simplicity runs directly into developers' financial mindset focused only on maximizing return on investment. Building homes that can be sold for the maximum price is the driving force of the business for most developers. They are far less interested in a home's artistic or aesthetic qualities. Their goal is not to update or replicate historic home designs to maintain the cultural traditions of various Los Angeles communities. Instead, they want to renovate or build a home at the least cost possible, put it on the market for the highest price they can, and maximize their net positive returns. The quicker, the better. The most recent peak prices for these homes is in the low to mid single digit millions, with a recent sale of one such home for \$2.8 million. This compares with more traditional bohemian homes in the area that mostly sell for the high six digits (Zillow). These oversized homes on small plots of land squeeze all the money they can out of the space with their cookie-cutter designs and clean, modern finishes that are promoted through marketing media.

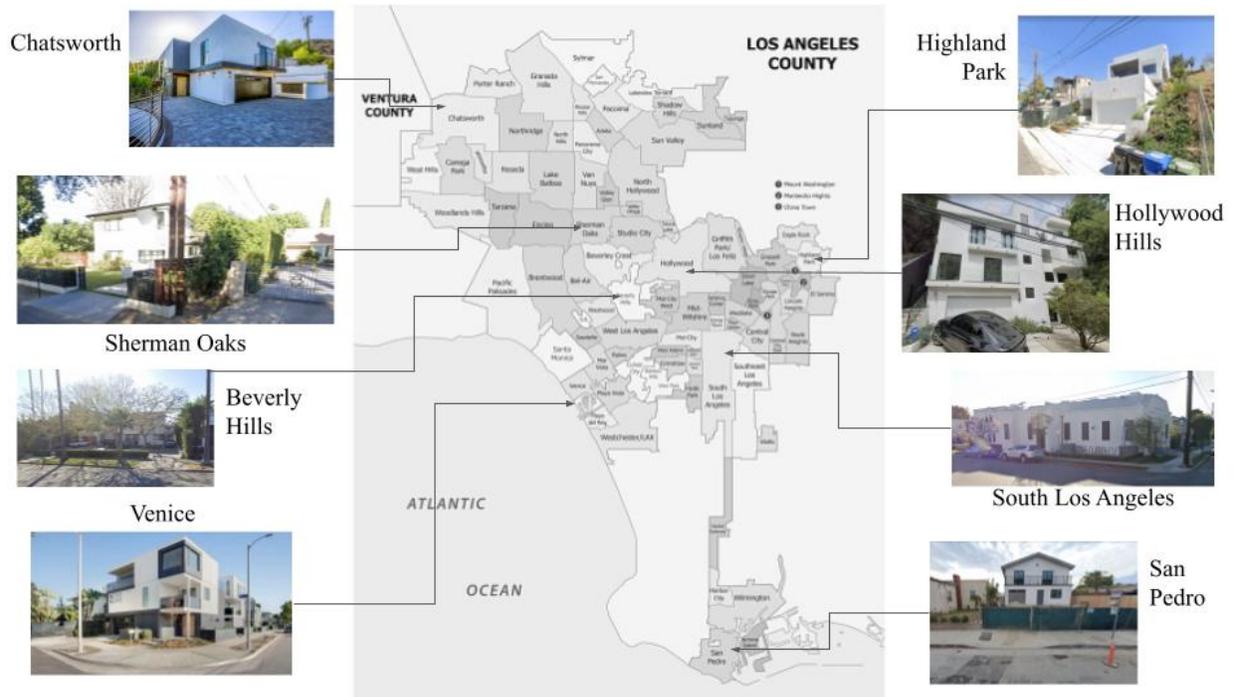
In unique neighborhoods such as Venice Beach, where does the white box home fit in? In fact, can it ever fit in? While they may be marketed as uniquely luxurious homes, but when looking at the home's basic design, it is hard not to be reminded of one of the Levittown precut homes. These are cookie-cutter designs, cost-effective to build, and appealing to wealthier homebuyers trained to see them as somehow unique. Developers are not looking to modify the standard white box to fit into Venice's bohemian style to create a modern version of the

neighborhood style. Instead, their goal is to build a generic "luxury" home that can be put anywhere that generates top dollars from ready buyers. (After the essay, one will see nine photographs of such white box homes from neighborhoods across Los Angeles, providing a sense of how widespread this residential building practice has become.) Los Angeles comprises 88 different cities covering 502 square miles. Each of these communities has its unique style, traditions, and population. None of the communities are alike, and each draws different people to their streets. However, the spread of these boxy homes is changing the architectural character of these neighborhoods and influencing people's daily lives. They stand in stark contrast to the traditional bohemian architecture of Venice Beach, most noticeable with its craftsman style and detailed exterior, inspired by ornate Venetian-style itself. As shown in the pictures, the urban landscape created by these carefully designed traditional homes is disrupted by the presence of cookie-cutter boxes.

While the white box home movement is gentrifying Venice Beach on a small scale, the same forces are gentrifying the city more broadly by driving changes to local demographics. As Stephanie Farmer explains, the city has an incentive to gentrify places because “businesses gain competitive advantages,” as well as “tourism and cultural consumption” (Farmer 1156). While these gains seem to be negligible on an individual level, gentrification is clearly improving the commercial prospects of Venice Beach. Thus by “configuring infrastructure for the tourist economy,” the area as a whole will see positive economic changes, which, in a capitalist world, inevitably is a central goal (Farmer 1160). Furthermore, as Jaffe suggests, gentrification occurs by “favoring markets, privatization, and the development of business-friendly, globally competitive urban environments,” which transforms the “urban landscapes and produced new social cleavages” (Jaffe 119). When we look at Venice Beach, this playing out as financial interests drive gentrification. Thus, the process of wealthy individuals taking over low-income

neighborhoods, like Venice Beach, is not a new phenomenon but rather driven by the profit-maximizing nature of economic development in the United States. It is also shaped by “anti-growth homeowners” in “small, highly desirable enclaves,” as Conor Friedersdorf from *The Atlantic* explains. In other words, areas that are already seen as desirable take steps to halt further development, driving affluent newcomers to look for more affordable places to live and develop. With gentrification, there is a tradeoff between wealth and community. Even in places like Venice Beach where gentrification is a new development, new residents wear their anti-growth protest shirts to preserve it as their exclusive enclave. Somewhat oddly, this can slow down further gentrification, even if anti-growth movements are not enough to save traditional communities. For example, large scale developments such as The Grove cannot occur because the wealthy new members of the community would not allow for it. But, gentrification continues, albeit on a small scale. Having taken over the community, wealthy residents want to create and preserve as much of a sense of exclusivity as they can.

As in many neighborhoods across the United States, gentrification is rapidly becoming the norm. Thus, developers are racing to design and develop high end properties to appeal to the affluent and generate the highest returns. In the urban landscape, architectural design contributes to making a place unique and creating a sense of community. However, in the case of Venice Beach it did not become famous because of its architectural style but because of the people it attracted. And overtime, this unique community of people became an attraction and a successful place in which developers wanted to tap into. This means gentrification in Venice Beach is about transforming a community. But in doing so, they create a new community that is very different from the bohemian past. Gentrification changes the social and cultural elements, which changes the urban landscape. And while we may not always like losing what was unique, we also cannot easily dismiss the positive economic impact for the overall good of the community.



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