

# DOES QUEERNESS LUBRICATE THE GENTRIFICATION CRISIS?

## Observing the Effects in Madrid's Urban Space

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### ABSTRACT

This visual essay explores the ability of urban space to communicate the effects of gentrification. The essay is based on field work by walking in Madrid between 2017 and 2024, particularly in the neighbourhood of Lavapiés, known for its large-scale gentrification and queer community. For example, stickers, posters, murals, wall writings, signs of everyday life and even rubbish can represent communication that provides a broader understanding of how gentrification is experienced. The inhabitants of Madrid have faced rising housing and service prices, and changes in the social structure of neighbourhoods due to gentrification that have been observable in the city for the last decade. Some studies have highlighted that queers can be both casualties and accelerators of the gentrification process when the business world attempts to commodify the value of queerness. The author offers a critical perspective on the material and symbolic changes caused by gentrification, along with reflections on how queerness relates to the gentrification process.

**Keywords:** Airbnb, gentrification, Madrid, Lavapiés, photography, queerness, Spain, touristification, urban space, walking

The constant droning sound in the streets, coming from the suitcases people are pulling. It is almost noon in Lavapiés in April 2024, and I confront large masses of tourists checking out from their Airbnb apartments. I cannot help spotting the 'FUCK AIRBNB. SAVE THE BARRIO [NEIGHBOURHOOD]' stickers nor the 'DO NOT DRAG ROLLING LUGGAGE ON THE STAIRS' posters on the doors the tourists close behind them. The sound of rolling suitcases rattling over pavement might be one of the most noticeable auditory signs of gentrification. (Tolonen 2024)

Gentrification has had an impact on the everyday life of people in Lavapiés, a southern neighbourhood of Madrid. Lavapiés used to be a working-class place with old housing, low rent and a large community of immigrants, and was the most multicultural neighbourhood in the city (see e.g. Sequera & Janoschka 2015, 382; Torres Bernier, Vega Hidalgo & Ortega Palomo 2018, 44). When I first visited Lavapiés in 2011, the neighbourhood had about 40,000 inhabitants and was stigmatised as a place of drugs, sex work and crime. I was even told not to go there by myself. Yet I always felt safe there. As I often spent several days in a row taking photographs there from

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the early hours of the morning until late in the evening, I remember how the drug dealers at the *Plaza de Lavapiés* began to recognize me and after a few days stopped asking me if I wanted to buy hash.

Everything changed in Lavapiés after the Spanish financial crisis (2008–2014) that overheated the construction sector and resulted in high levels of debt among households and companies, as well as bank credit losses and falls in house prices (see e.g. Tolonen 2021). Public investment policies and private initiatives began to boost commercial, cultural, and real estate activities in the Lavapiés area (Sequera & Janoschka 2015, 375). Words like “renewal”, “reconstruction”, “reconfiguration”, “revitalisation”, and “reurbanisation” became more frequent in official reports, articles, and the news I read about the neighbourhood (see e.g. Ardura Urquiaga, Lorente-Riverola & Ruiz Sanchez 2020; Torres et al. 2018). Lavapiés turned into – and not just according to Time Out magazine – one of the world’s “coolest” places (El País 2018).

Gentrification can be described as “the process of privatisation and sanitisation through which previously derelict and economically marginal spaces are regenerated and replaced by spaces that are more upscale, consumerist and commercialised” (Burchiellaro 2023, 15–16; see also Sorando & Ardura 2016). In Lavapiés, the shift from a working-class to a hip environment meant pricing out some people. Rents and apartment prices began to rise by approximately 10% yearly (Aunión 2016). Some people were pushed out of their neighbourhood via evictions, rent increases, demolitions, or public housing closures. The poster shown in Figure 1 is encouraging people to help prevent the eviction of Pepi, who had lived in her flat for 20 years. She had been unable to pay her rent since it was suddenly raised by 300%. In addition to women, other vulnerable groups who are often amongst the most affected by the housing crisis are



Figure 1. “WE WILL STOP THE EVICTION OF PEPI”. The poster calls on people in the neighbourhood to come and sleep in tents in front of Pepi’s house to prevent the eviction. Photo by the author (2018).

queers<sup>1</sup> and migrants (Björklund & Dahl 2014, 19), who are at greater risk of homelessness (Carr et al. 2022). According to Madrid’s city council, between 2019 and 2023 the number of homeless people rose from 2,772 to 4,431 (La Vanguardia 2019; Provienda n.d.). As such, the street view in Figure 2 is not uncommon in Madrid.

1 “Queer is a notoriously slippery term that resists precise definitions” (Brown 2015), but the term queer in this essay is utilised to describe the issues of power and normativities beyond the domains of gender and sexuality, thus aligning with those contributions framing queer as a political position of becoming, connecting multiple social and economic issues (Brown 2015).



Figure 2. Beggar's spot outside the entrance of a church. The sign says "PLEASE, I NEED HELP". Passers-by sometimes leave food, water bottles, or coins on top of the box. Photo by the author (2017).



Figure 3. After a traditional local bar that was a popular meeting place for residents was turned into a trendy restaurant for tourists, the residents showed their dislike through stencils reading "POSHERS ARE NOT WELCOME", "CAUTION! [REAL ESTATE] SPECULATORS ON THE LOOSE" and "LAVAPIÉS RESISTS, HIPSTERS OUT", which were painted by the entrance of the new establishment where customers queue to enter. Photo by the author (2018).

For many, gentrification has not simply meant 'just relocating', as gentrification impacts on people's quality of life and their *sense of belonging*. Loss of community can be experienced as neighbours, local businesses and meeting places are lost; even if residents do not have to move, the new built environment means they experience displacement (Kern 2022, 10–11; see also Phillips, Smith, Brooking & Duer 2021, 79; Tolonen 2020). Kern goes as far as arguing that gentrification "is an act of theft: of place, and of social, economic, and cultural resources" (Kern 2022, 63). As a consequence, people tend to protest when they lose their favourite neighbourhood places, as Figure 3 illustrates.

As Lavapiés was rebuilt to meet tourism needs, including multinational coffee chains, smoothie shops, poke bowl and sushi bars and yoga studios, tourism numbers rose. Mostly immigrant-owned hardware stores and small fruit and butcher shops were replaced with art galleries, bookshops and vintage clothing stores. As there were hardly any hotels nor land on which to build them, Lavapiés was in a relatively short time *airbnbified* (see e.g. Ardura Urquiaga et al. 2020, 3105). According to Inside Airbnb statistics, in March 2024 Madrid city centre had 25,543 apartments listed on Airbnb, making it the most visited city in Spain. More than half of the apartments were offered by a host who had more than one apartment listed on Airbnb. Meanwhile Berlin, which has slightly more inhabitants than Madrid, had 13,327 apartments listed during the same period. (Inside Airbnb 2024)

Madrid is full of inequalities and exclusions, like any other big capital. Some members of the queer community have benefitted while some have been displaced or experienced exclusion due to gentrification (Costa & Pires 2019, 6; Ghaziani 2014, 144; Kern 2022, 79; Monaco & Corbisiero 2022, 354). Moskowitz (2017) argues that queer people “have both been victims and perpetrators of gentrification”. According to Moskowitz, this is due to the relationship between queer people and the cities they live in. Historically, queer people have moved from the countryside and suburbs to more open-minded cities, where they could find a safer environment, low rent and queer communities (see Costa & Pires 2019, 11; Monaco & Corbisiero 2022, 352). But during this shift, queer people “have been used as pawns by real estate developers to help kick off the gentrification of neighbourhoods and entire cities” (Moskowitz 2017). Their very presence in these neighbourhoods has transformed them and accelerated gentrification. Also, Costa and Pires (2019, 5) and Monaco and Corbisiero (2022, 352) note that queer people can be seen as promoters of and contributors to deeper gentrification, and that often neighbourhoods which have undergone restyling during a gentrification process are known for their large queer communities.

Madrid is often described as a place that embraces difference, and markets itself as an LGBTQIA+ friendly city (see e.g. Madrid Orgullo 2024). As illegal wall writings and street art pieces are rather frequent and accepted in Spanish walls (see e.g. Tolonen 2016; Tolonen 2021), members of the queer community also tend to leave their marks around the neighbourhood. Wall writings and other street art – often accompanied by symbols – are a form of bottom-up street activism (Tolonen 2021). Wall writings are used as codes that are mostly directed, rather than at the general public, at a small group of people who are able to decode and read them (Tolonen 2016). Pieces on walls, such as that seen in Figure 4, also strengthen the queer community’s presence in the area and transform the urban space so that

queers feel more welcome and safe moving around the neighbourhood (see e.g. Brown 2015; Tolonen 2016).



Figure 4. As I walk I gather a lot of information and experience not just about the pieces I spot but also about the area around the wall writings (see also Fransberg, Myllylä and Tolonen 2021, 368–369). This phrase, “TODAY IS A GOOD DAY TO BECOME A DYKE”, was painted perhaps just moments before I photographed it, as the spray paint was still dripping and I could smell it. Queer wall writings articulate the queer presence in the area. This can also be referred to as *queerification* of the space (see e.g. Navarro 2014, 84). Photo by the author (2017).

It is not uncommon to spot queer wall writings that are against the gentrification process either. The wall writings in Figures 5 and 6 narrate these anti-gentrification stories. Figure 5 shows a piece by Orgullo Crítico [Critical Pride], an umbrella term for a series of protests organized by queer people as an alternative to the original pride parades and festivals. Orgullo Crítico calls for non-commodification of gay pride and criticises



Figure 5. Queer wall writings in Lavapiés. Photo by the author (2017).



Figure 6. "OUR PRIDE IS NOT MARKETING". Photo by the author (2017).

gentrification, homonormativity and capitalism (Orgullo Crítico Madrid 2024). The same figure (see Figure 5) also shows a well-known symbol of bisexuality and the letters TRW, which refers to transsexual women. These markings on the wall make the queer presence in the area known and work as interactions within the queer community (Tolonen 2016). A similar kind of communication can be seen in a use of a pink triangle below the text in Figure 6.

The assumption that queer residents are somehow synonymous with gentrification has also faced criticism. According to Amin Ghaziani, author of the book "There Goes the Gayborhood?", there is evidence that LGBT residents boost property prices in the US, but it is also worth noting that "despite the myth of gay affluence, LGBT households are actually more likely to be poor. 11.9% of US same-sex households are living in poverty compared to 5.7% of opposite-sex households" (Ghaziani 2016, as cited in O'Sullivan 2016). Ghaziani (2014, 25) also underlines the process of gentrification by stating that queer people are often among the first wave to rebuild the neighbourhood but that the "super-gentrifiers of the second wave are mostly straight people" who transform the area "for retail commerce and realty speculation" (see also Phillips et. al. 2021, 66). This transformation also often results in the disappearance of queer meeting places as chain stores replace them. Burchiellaro (2023, 112) also highlights the dropping numbers of authentic queer spaces and venues in deeply gentrified areas.

Gentrification is always being facilitated by developers, city governments, investors, and speculators (Kern 2022, 8). Queerness too can be harnessed as the "productive potential of diversity" to achieve better business results and can even be "used to lubricate the process of gentrification"

Figure 7. An example of the new daily aesthetics in Lavapiés: rubbish left in the streets by tourists – a small suitcase, a pair of shoes and three plastic bags full of dumped clothes. Photo by the author (2017)

Figure 8. Another example of the new aesthetics. Photo by the author (2018).

as “queerness becomes commodified through the gentrification process” (Burchiellaro 2023, 16). Moskowitz (2017) states that queerness boosts gentrification in cities as the corporate world seeks to extract the productive value of queerness.

According to Burchiellaro (2023, 16), who studied the relationship between queerness and gentrification in London, gentrification should not be seen only as an “an economic process – nor physical closure – it is also productive of new aesthetics”:

The visuals in the urban space in Lavapiés are changing with mass tourism. There are empty beer cans and bottles, piss and vomit stains in the streets in the early hours of the morning, and when you walk outside at noon, there are not many streets without piles and piles of rubbish left behind by tourists. After doing so much shopping in Primark and Zara, etc., their suitcases are too full and they need to leave their old stuff behind. Sometimes they dump their suitcases as well and buy new bigger ones. (Tolonen 2017) (see Figure 7)

As real estate investors sought more apartments in Lavapiés to fulfil the needs of tourists, a lot of old flats in the area were rebuilt:

There are five or six handymen remodelling a small apartment next door. The neighbour told me it will be another Airbnb flat for the “guiris” [tourists]. The men carried all the furniture from the apartment outside to a dumpster they had ordered but I guess it was not big enough, because next morning I find a toilet bowl and a fridge still full of food outside the flat. (Tolonen 2018) (see Figure 8)





Figure 9. “RESPECT THE NEIGHBOURS DO NOT SPEAK LOUDLY THANKS”. Photo by the author (2017).

Figure 10. 2024 was a time of nationwide anti-tourism protests in Spain. There were marches against e.g. mass tourism, the rise in housing prices, and the use of natural resources for tourism needs. Also, hostility towards tourists rose. (See e.g. El Salto 2024) Photo by the author (2024).



Gentrification is not only producing new aesthetics in the city, as can be seen from the examples above (see Figures 7 & 8), but also a new soundscape. Back in 2017 I remember seeing the first, still quite polite notes to tourists asking them to consider the permanent residents of the area. These notes were usually attached to the doors or entrances of buildings (see Figure 9).

As gentrification proceeded the number of tourists grew every year, and as there were more people singing, talking, sometimes fighting and urinating drunk under their windows, the tone of the messages from the permanent residents changed from politeness to irritation, even hostility towards tourists. Nowadays, it is not surprising to hear locals confronting the tourists verbally, imploring them to “go home”, “go back to your country”, saying “this used to be my home” or calling them “terrorists”, as illustrated in Figure 10 (Tolonen 2024, see also Euronews 2024).

Perhaps one of the most famous anti-gentrification pieces in Lavapiés was created by Madrid-based artist *El Rey de la Ruina*, who painted a series of heart-shaped works between 2016 and 2018 stating “LAVAPIÉS INGENTRIFICABLE...YA PUNTO” [LAVAPIÉS IS IMPOSSIBLE TO GENTRIFY...FULL STOP] (see Figure 11). The pieces were widely used in media news and even appeared on a book cover about gentrification (see Sorando & Ardura 2016). I talked to the artist himself in June 2024, who shared some of his ideas on how to fight the gentrification process in Lavapiés:

Well, it is a structural problem. There should be a law to control touristification, to help residents who have lived there for a long time, especially families and elderly people, and to keep rents down. Investment in health, public spaces and sports and cultural centres can generate attractiveness for the people of Madrid, help the local population organise and generate a strong and resilient social and commercial group [of people] capable of confronting the large private investments that have always tried to concentrate on properties in the [city] centre for speculation or tourism. (El Rey de la Ruina 2024)

Today the profile of the inhabitants of Lavapiés is different from that at the beginning of the 2000s. Due to gentrification, the population is now younger, with fewer children but more education and from wealthier economic backgrounds, living in more expensive apartments (Torres et al. 2018, 64; Ardura Urquiaga et al. 2020, 3104; Ardura Urquiaga, Lorente-Riverola, & Sorando 2021, 69–76). It is important to remember, as Kern (2022, 80–81) underlines, that “we ought to keep the focus on what gentrification means for the most vulnerable members of the queer community”. In the Lavapiés area, for example, it has meant relocation for many trans women who are often single parents and cannot afford the rising rent and house prices. Upscaling the profile of the neighbourhood for the needs of mass tourism has increased police visibility in the area as the city council wants to highlight the safety of the area for tourists. This has resulted in queer youth being ticketed for being a nuisance or loitering and increased the amount of racial profiling of people of colour (see e.g. XLavapiés 2024). In May 2024 the Madrid Tenants’ Union reported that more than one thousand buildings were about to be turned into tourist apartments and it was therefore estimated that over 21,000 people were in danger of being evicted. One of the most affected areas will be Lavapiés. (El Público 2024)



Figure 11. Anti-gentrification piece by artist El Rey de la Ruina [King of the Ruins] in Madrid. He uses the alias because of his love for abandoned places and particularly ruins (Tolonen 2016). Photo by the author (2018).

Post-dictatorship Spain has put a lot of effort into the tourism economy (see e.g. Holleran 2017), and in 2023 a new record was set in international tourism: more than 85 million tourists arrived in the country, making Spain the second-most visited country in the world (Statista 2024), with tourism contributing 13% of GDP (Álvarez Ondina 2024). Despite the restrictions the city council has put in place to reduce the effects of gentrification in Lavapiés (e.g. restricting the number of Airbnb apartments and sanctioning illegal tourist apartments), gentrification does not seem likely to cease. It will not be an easy task for Madrid’s city council to balance the economics of mass tourism and the quality of life of permanent residents.



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