

# The directors of urban transformation: The case of Oslo

Local Economy  
2020, Vol. 35(7) 695–713  
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DOI: 10.1177/0269094220988714  
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## Abstract

We investigate the urban transformation strategies of major developers and other key actors in the context of neoliberalism and its influence on politics, including urban development governance. Drawing primarily on interviews with corporate developers operating in the downtown areas of Oslo, Norway, we show how these influential actors with little formal political responsibility not only shape the physical structures but also significantly influence the social, economic and cultural fabric of the city. While they do not have a coordinated strategy, private developers do aim to transform urban areas to fit the preferences of the middle and upper classes. However, the situation is not as negative and predetermined as many critiques of gentrification processes assume. Besides demonstrating some positive outcomes of local transformation processes, our study shows that a fully gentrified downtown, along with the social exclusion mechanisms, has not been implemented yet.

## Keywords

city districts, gentrification, neighbourhoods, private developers, urban transformation

## Introduction

Scholars have pointed out that urban transformations follow an entrepreneurial logic (Dobson, 2015; Harvey, 1989). Such transformations often translate into gentrification

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or ‘threats of gentrification’ (Williams, 2018: 472) – that is, into processes of displacement (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020: 493), which are expected to continue in the post-pandemic urban situation (Alexandri and Janoschka, 2020). In the Nordic countries, well-known for their generous welfare policies, income equality and an assumed ethos of social and cultural egalitarianism (Bergh and Bjørnskov, 2011), gentrification is well underway. In addition to Stockholm, Sweden (Andersson and Turner, 2014) and Copenhagen, Denmark (Larsen and Hansen, 2008), gentrification is also happening in Oslo, the capital of Norway (Turner and Wessel, 2019). In Oslo, the neighbourhoods undergoing gentrification can be found in the Inner East, a large area of downtown Oslo that includes the district named Gamle Oslo (literally ‘Old Oslo’), which has traditionally consisted of ethnically mixed working-class neighbourhoods. Scholars studying how these neighbourhoods are changing, or why they are changing, have emphasised ‘gentrification’ (Holgersen, 2020; Huse, 2014). However, inspired by scholars such as Elliott-Cooper et al. (2020) and Maloutas (2018), we argue that in order to conceptualise the many changes taking place in Oslo’s ‘zones of transition’ (Park et al., 1984), other concepts and theories are also useful. This is not to say that ‘gentrification’ does not fit the empirical reality of the Inner East; rather, we find this catch-all term unwieldy when analysing social, cultural, material and spatial changes.

By gentrification, we refer to the situations or processes whereby middle- and upper-middle-class households settle in, or by other means appropriate, working-class neighbourhoods, which then undergo a sociocultural or socio-material transformation (Atkinson, 2000a, 2000b; Dillon and Fanning, 2018). Although gentrification is often linked to the displacement of working-class or low-income residents (Alkon and Cadji, 2020), ‘unskilled households’

(Atkinson, 2000a: 149) or ‘the vulnerable’ (Alexandri, 2018: 36) – a claim that has been challenged by ‘recent quantitative scholarship’ (Brown-Saracino, 2017: 524–525) – we are primarily interested in the fact that certain actors occupy a strategic position in preparing the ground for the social, cultural and material transformation of a neighbourhood in order to increase or secure a long-term profit. We cannot predict whether or not a change in amenities will result in a greater influx of ‘White, prime-age, and college-educated workers’ (Hwang and Lin, 2016: 17) purchasing a home in Gamle Oslo and thus (potentially) contribute to gentrification. Instead, we aim to examine how changes in amenities can come about. More specifically, we show how private corporations – and their ‘powerful owners’ (Alexandri and Janoschka, 2020: 3211) – plan to transform neighbourhoods and argue that if ‘successful’, these strategies can create an urban space that is more appropriate for the middle classes and less suited for the working class as well as for ethnic and/or racial minority groups (see Huse, 2018). Even though we are particularly interested in the role of private developers, in the Inner East their strategies sometimes overlap with public investments and initiatives (Holgersen, 2020; Kadasia et al., 2020) – for instance, the improvement of a shopping area and its public square may be the result of both private and municipal investments. We claim that such improvements are not necessarily about ‘displacement’ but about benefits for different groups of residents and visitors.

This paper contributes to the urban transformation literature by providing a detailed examination of a privileged group’s role in, or stated aims for, urban development in Oslo. As Oslo’s urban development is strongly dependent on private developers, who decide when and, to a large degree, what (and what not) to build (Andersen and Skrede, 2017), corporations are of particular interest for our study. Describing the situation in Norway,

Mäntysalo and Saglie (2010: 319) explained that '[c]ommonly, the developer owns the land, draws up a planning proposal, and discusses/negotiates/haggles with the planning authorities to make the proposal acceptable to them'. To quote Alexandri (2018: 47), 'private developers occupies centre-stage as key actors orchestrating and driving the whole process'.

## Methods

We aim to investigate how major developers explain their strategies and plans. Drawing primarily on interviews (category A) with major corporate developers operating in Oslo, we show how these influential actors with minimal formal political responsibility not only shape the physical structures but significantly influence the social, economic and cultural fabric of the city. We specifically focus on the most 'urban' district of Oslo, Gamle Oslo. Two decades ago, Wessel noted that the 'gentrification' of the larger area locally known as the Inner East, to which Gamle Oslo belongs, 'is not a new phenomenon, but it has never been more visible than now' (Wessel, 2000: 1955). Even if a recent study has found that 'many neighbourhoods in the Inner East have become gentrified' (Turner and Wessel, 2019: 18), we also draw on systematic observations and interviews (category B) with residents, the police, principals at local schools, public planners, realtors and local business owners. To anonymise the interviewees, we have assigned fictional names to all private companies, randomly renaming them after Greek Gods. Although our informants held somewhat different leadership positions in the developer/landowner firms, they have all been assigned the same generic title of manager or director. Moreover, our discussion is informed by descriptive statistics and data collected via surveys of residents from three neighbourhoods in Gamle

Oslo, namely, Grønland (N. 9 877, survey n. 972), Tøyen/Kampen (N. 12 974, survey n. 745) and Sørenga (N. 752, survey n. 218) located in Bjørvika, a newly developed waterfront area primarily inhabited by the more affluent residents compared to Grønland and Tøyen (Mæhle, 2019).

## Urban transformation and relations of power

Cities have always changed, with different groups of people, or cohorts, replacing or displacing each other in certain neighbourhoods. This was also the central argument put forward by the urban sociologists of the Chicago School (e.g. Park et al., 1984). However, it should be noted that cities or neighbourhoods are not in a constant state of flux (e.g. Airgood-Obrycki, 2019), with continuity being a fact as well: 'The persistence of neighbourhood inequality might be considered surprising in light of the massive social transformations that have reshaped [American] cities over the last 50 years' (Sampson, 2019: 10). Sampson's argument regarding gentrification is particularly relevant. Although Sampson (2019: 10–11) acknowledges the concept's fit when studying neighbourhood changes in US cities, his work provides a valuable lesson to not exaggerate the volume and pace of gentrification. Sampson explained that

in a 2016 paper, I examined transition matrices for the income mobility of all neighbourhoods in the USA (over 50,000 (...)) I showed that from 2000 to 2010, over 75% of low-income neighbourhoods at the beginning of the decade remained so at the end. (Sampson, 2019: 10)

What Sampson's argument shows is that the scholarship on gentrification, though correct in many regards, has also overestimated gentrification's speed and impact on

urban development. Interestingly, reviewing the research on gentrification, Brown-Saracino (2017: 515), summarised her findings:

Although neither camp is methodologically homogenous, more qualitative scholars (...) tend to present gentrification as increasingly endemic, advanced, and consequential, whereas more quantitative scholars (...) tend to present it in less dire terms.

We aim to present a nuanced and reserved account as the processes we examine are not unidirectional, and the changes have far from reached their potential end points (see also Brown-Saracino, 2017: 518).

In the gentrification literature, politicians and public officials, such as urban planners, as well as financiers, property developers and landowners are, to borrow Passell's (2013: 10) phrase, assigned the roles of influential 'players in the process', who are sometimes assisted by architects, realtors and, according to Dutton (2003: 2561), 'cultural producers', such as lifestyle magazines (e.g. Andersen and Røe, 2017; Smith, 2002). According to Hita and Gledhill (2019: 285), actors such as developers constitute the most 'privileged group' in the urban development game. In other words, urban space can be seen as 'a shifting landscape upon which [different] forces clash' (Ramírez, 2020: 152), indicating that relations of power are a significant issue. Power is here understood as 'agents' abilities to bring about significant effects, specifically by furthering their own interests and/or affecting the interests of others' (Lukes, 2005: 65). Following Lukes (2005: 67), we argue that it is relevant to study the actors who can choose how to act and to understand the processes that can be labelled as 'exercise[s] of power', seeing that power is characterised by the capacity 'to act differently'. However, even the

'powerful' are part of society and are not omnipotent, as all 'social life can only be properly understood as an interplay of power and structure' – in other words, people do act and influence, but their practices and plans, or they as agents, are 'structured', which limits their choices and strategies (Lukes, 2005: 68–69).

### **Gamle Oslo: Public and private investments in a changing urban landscape**

Gamle Oslo has a long history of bad housing and inferior living conditions (Andersen, 2014). The areas known as Tøyen and Grønland are 'tainted places' (Slater, 2018: 891) that the state and municipal officials have categorised as needing improvement (Andersen, 2014: 151–153). During the 1980s and 1990s, after journalists visited Gamle Oslo, one could read that amongst the new and modern buildings being constructed here, one found 'ramshackle apartment buildings that should have been torn down years ago. (...) This is Oslo's ghetto. Decay. Trash. Sad...' (Hurum, 1989: our translation). The article quoted above listed the characteristics that made the district of Gamle Oslo into a ghetto, pointing out the residents' low income, the share of people on welfare, the small number of people with higher education and the large number of immigrants (Hurum, 1989).

Even though Tøyen and Grønland are still associated with immigrants, drugs and violent street crime (e.g. NTB, 2018; Solhøi, 2016; Stolt-Nielsen and Torset, 2019), for several years now various young middle-class residents, such as artists and students, have been engaged in the process of gentrifying Gamle Oslo. The transformation of the local social and material characteristics has also been spurred by investments from private and public institutions (Kadasia et al., 2020).

At least since the 1970s, public authorities have proposed and implemented different area-based strategies in order to ‘improve’ parts of the inner city of Oslo. Writing in 2000, Wessel reported that, ‘over a period of 10 years,’ the government invested approximately £80 million ‘for housing rehabilitation and road-building’ in the Inner East (Wessel, 2000: 1255). In this respect, serious efforts have been made to rid the neighbourhoods of Tøyen and Grønland of their area-based stigmas by means of a social reordering based on aestheticisation (also Pløger, 1995). These areas were also targets of the social mix policy, and politicians stated that it was important to prevent a spatial concentration of disadvantaged groups (Huse, 2014; Kadasia et al., 2020). Social mix continues to be important to Oslo’s urban policy-makers (Holgersen, 2020: 145). Scholars have argued that the gentrification of Gamle Oslo ‘was triggered by a large-scale housing renewal programme that ran from 1979 until 1994’ (Huse, 2014: 24).

### Learning from Grünerløkka

As we aim to show that the transformation of other Inner East neighbourhoods has had an impact on private developers’ interest in Grønland (see also Brown-Saracino, 2017: 518), it is worth noting that scholars claim that Gamle Oslo’s neighbouring district of Grünerløkka has been undergoing gentrification since the 1970s, especially since the 1990s (Hansen, 2004; Hjorthol and Bjørnskau, 2005). Just like Tøyen and Grønland, Grünerløkka was considered a working-class area with significant disadvantages. Today, the middle class has ‘discovered’ Grünerløkka as a place worth inhabiting, and the district is now a leisure space with many bars that have been attracting the middle class for more than two decades. For tourists, Grünerløkka is branded as ‘a popular shopping district, with original

design shops and many vintage and second-hand stores’ (Visit Oslo, 2019). Nonetheless, Grünerløkka has not experienced a total socio-economic conversion. Public housing units predominate in the area (Andersen, 2014: 126; Oslo kommune, 2019b), and the average income in Grünerløkka’s subdistricts are still lower than the city’s average (Oslo kommune, 2019a). However, none of this has altered Grünerløkka’s status as a hip and cool place.

### ‘So, in a year or two, Tøyen will be brand new’

While in 2014 a realtor described Tøyen as a ‘highly unlikely’ residential location for young and single adults from Vinderen, an upper-middle-class neighbourhood in the more exclusive West End (Andersen, 2014: 171), Tøyen has since become – to borrow Lévi-Strauss’s (2004: 8) expression – a ‘proper country’ for the middle class. Tøyen’s main square and commercial centre, often described as empty and unsafe places, have been transformed (Kadasia et al., 2020). In 2009, businesses around the main square started renewing the area. The property owners formed an organisation that coordinated the transformation, with specifically one company, Athena, being given the role of directing the efforts. According to Athena’s representative, the aim was to turn the ‘dark and unsafe’ area into a bustling urban plaza, which would, in turn, transform all of Tøyen. The possibility of increasing rent profits was also important (interview, 13 August 2015). A manager from one of the larger property-owning companies, Hera, explained that they wanted the square to look like ‘the earlier phase’ of the gentrified Grünerløkka, with its independent restaurants and microbreweries (interview, 29 June 2015). This involved replacing some of the existing tenants ‘so [that], in a year or two,

Tøyen will be brand new' (interview, Athena, 13 August 2015).

A few years after Athena's work began, the city and district authorities, together with some of the middle-class residents who organised local voluntary organisations, established contact with the Tøyen Initiative and the Tøyen Campaign. They joined forces and invested a lot of effort into changing Tøyen. These organisations tried, for instance, to make other ethnic majority Norwegian middle-class families choose the local school, instead of letting their children attend private alternatives or public schools outside of Tøyen (interviews with Laura, 11 May 2016 and 0912 September 2019). Thus, Laura and the other volunteering residents tried to make a positive impact on the local school, paralleling the 'Boston-moms' in the study by Billingham and Kimelberg (2013). However, at the time of the second interview, Laura and her family had moved to the suburbs, partially because she was not satisfied with the school that her son had attended for some years. According to Laura, most of the other middle-class families who had children in the same class as her son, had also left the area or pulled their children out of the school. Contrary to the findings from Boston, Laura and the other's involvement had not 'transform[ed] the school in a manner that would allow them to feel comfortable there' (Billingham and Kimelberg, 2013: 98).

Anyway, both the authorities and the two local organisations tried to change Tøyen, especially by getting rid of Tøyen's stigma and by establishing new public amenities, such as libraries, including one exclusively for children. The police also played a role by intensifying their work in Tøyen, in large part due to the visible presence of drug dealers (interview with the Oslo Police District, 12 August 2015). In our Tøyen survey (distributed to residents in 2018), the views on whether or not Tøyen had changed (much) differed. For instance, while a Norwegian-Somali mother living in

a public housing apartment said that there is still too much criminal activity at Tøyen, she did not want to leave the area. She also reported that her children used some of the new establishments such as the children's library. However, other public housing tenants complained that an upgraded playground attracted users who made a lot of noise late at night that made it difficult for children to fall asleep. Another Somali mother and public housing tenant claimed that the public area-based strategy made it impossible for her family to 'stay put' (Huse, 2014) and said that she had gotten an eviction notice. There were also respondents who stressed that the area had improved, and some of the survey respondents credited the public efforts for strengthening the local community. A middle-class ethnic majority Norwegian, who owned his own apartment and who said he thought he would move out from Tøyen in a couple of years, was satisfied with 'how things are going, but for some of the youths, things aren't that good.' In an interview in January 2019, a woman from Tøyen explained that she was very sceptical about letting her child play outside their building 'as it was a lot of crap here, such as male youths dealing drugs and so on' (interview, 22 January 2019). In our survey, people who had recently moved out of Tøyen reported that they were dissatisfied with the levels of crime, drugs and 'social issues' at Tøyen (also Kadasia et al., 2020). Other middle-class interviewees from both Tøyen and Grønland had similar perceptions or experiences, indicating that a transition towards 'homogenous [middle-class] enclaves' (Van Crieking and Decroly, 2003: 2460) seemed unlikely. Indeed, warnings of 'displacement' (Holgersen, 2020: 146), should, perhaps, be made with more reservations as the stability of poverty levels and the numbers of 'ethnic minority' residents did not indicate radical transformations of Tøyen and Grønland (Andersen et al., 2017b; Kadasia et al., 2020). To

summarise, these areas have not undergone a total metamorphosis.

However, the private and public efforts have resulted in some material and, to use Dutton's (2003) concept, 'cultural' changes, evidenced by the fact that the media began publishing more neutral and even positive stories about Tøyen. One of the first restaurant owners to open their business in the 'new' Tøyen Plaza explained that 'earlier, people moved here because it was affordable, now it is becoming more hip' (interview, 11 August 2015). Asked about the future, he said that 'in a five years' time, there will be a lot more restaurants and coffee shops, and it will be more expensive'. Reflecting upon his own impact, he said that his restaurant would probably contribute to gentrifying Tøyen. During the 2015 fieldwork in Tøyen, other interviewees expressed similar 'visions' – for instance, a coffee shop manager said that she hoped Tøyen Plaza would become more like Grünerløkka. Subsequent developments show that these predictions and wishes of the owners and managers were not completely off the mark (Andersen et al., 2017a; Brandvold, 2019) as the middle class now has many places to drink cocktails and craft beer at Tøyen (Tøyen Torgforening, 2019). In addition, the Tøyen Startup Village (TSV) has also been established at the Tøyen Plaza; in their own words, 'TSV seeks to "make Tøyen a real, innovative and enriching start up venue for Oslo, both locally, regionally and nationally"' (quoted in Holgersen, 2020: 142).

So, though poverty and ethnic minorities are still present in Tøyen, middle-class residents and their ways of life have clearly left a mark.

### **'We've always thought that there would come a day when Grønland would bloom'**

Having participated in the privately led renewal efforts of Tøyen's main square

since 2009, a director at Hera looked beyond the confines of the square, explaining that they

had chosen to invest heavily in the axis between Bjørvika [an up-scale waterfront development, see below and Figure 1] and Tøyen because we believe that this part of town will improve a lot during the next ten years. Yes, it will be a positive development for us as investors, but also for our [tenants] (...) We also have this property where we're making something for young creative people. This is near a park, where people are shooting up [using drugs] and other elements that you typically do not want around, but the creatives will [take control of that park], I'll promise you that. We do these things that bring with them something positive into an area, which can cause really big changes. (Interview, 29 June 2015)

Their 'axis' included Grønland, and Hera was not the only developer to express an interest in Grønland over the following years. As a director from Ares, one of the most influential real estate-developers in Oslo – comparable to the Two Trees Development Corporation orchestrating the gentrification of DUMBO, a neighbourhood in New York City (Hackworth, 2002: 835) – stated in a 2017 interview with us, the timing was right for developing and improving Grønland:

Grønland has been in a sort of a pit. [We have a few properties but] haven't spent a lot of money there yet. We've always thought that there would come a day when Grønland would bloom, so we have been waiting to do something with our projects. Until now, we have only been maintaining them. Just as we speak, however, the facades of our buildings lining the High Street are being



**Figure 1.** Bjørnli's main street. Photo: Bengt Andersen, 31 January 2020.

refurbished, so that they will be truly sparkling. (Interview, 19 May 2017)

The self-designated 'property developer' Hades was another Oslo-based company that had plans for Grønland. On their website, Hades, which owns several properties in Oslo and other cities, presents itself as 'a responsible' company that wants to make a positive contribution to 'urban development'. However, 'urban development' was not primarily about improving the city as a society, as one of Hades's directors explained:

We mainly depend on rental income, as well as the urban development part, that is, the property development part. I should be careful using the term 'urban development' as it is really all about property development. However, we have now started to talk about urban development in order to tell people that we take responsibility for more than just our property.

Interviewer: So, the term 'urban development' has entered the vocabulary over these last few years?

Yes, definitely. We had to be careful when using it a couple of years back. It does sound rather pretentious, but it is justified in the sense that when you define yourself as an urban developer, you also admit to having a great responsibility. (Interview, 09 May 2017)

The director explained that they employed a company that provided analyses of the office market and that this company observed that 'for the first time', one could make a profit 'on urban space' – that is, the areas outside of the buildings. He went on, 'good-quality urban space is a driver (...) the value of good-quality urban space is invaluable'. Moreover, 'our only strategy is to create projects that are not monocultural; instead, we are city constructors. In that sense, our Grønland property



**Figure 2.** Storefront of pre-gentrification shop, Grønlandsleiret. Photo: Bengt Andersen, May 29, 2017.

is spot on'. However, they did not want a frictionless city: 'If you want gentrification, then you only need to employ a lot of white people, then the drug dealers and others find it less interesting to be there. We want to keep the existing urban energy' (interview, 09 May 2017). Having said this, the director stated that such 'frictions' would be temporary. In another part of the city, some artists were allowed to use one of Hades' buildings, 'but only until we tear it down and replace it with residential units'. As he told us, 'every property owner wants to make as much money as possible (...). You cannot rent it out for less just because they are artists'. When asked what Hades

wanted to do with the property they had in Grønland, the manager said that 'they wanted offices, housing, maybe some sort of school, restaurants and a hotel (...). The space between the buildings will be regulated as "public space" but will be privately owned' (interview, 9 May 2017). Hades owning the 'public space' meant that organisations and other actors had to ask the company for permission if they wanted, for instance, to distribute leaflets. Although we cannot know whether the Grønland project would encourage or arrange for friction to happen when finished (construction was planned to start in 2020), bearing in mind that the overall aim



**Figure 3.** A microbrewery about to open along the high street. Photo: Bengt Andersen, May 11, 2017.

was maximum profit, it is reasonable to assume that preferable tenants, buyers or customers would come from the middle or upper classes rather than the poor or the working class. The possibility of attracting customers with the desired purchasing power to the area also increased with the construction of the Bjørvika neighbourhood, located close to Grønland along Gamle Oslo's waterfront. Here, highways and port functions have been replaced by 'an iconic opera house, shopping centres, restaurants, museums, high-end residential developments and, not least, "high-rise" office buildings for financial corporations and transnational producer services' (Andersen and Røe, 2017: 305).

Prior to the neighbourhood's construction, politicians and planners explained that Bjørvika would be a diverse place 'in terms of class, ethnicity, household composition, and age' (Andersen and Røe, 2017: 10). However, it turned out to be a place mainly for the middle class as well as the

more affluent (Agency for Planning and Building Services, 2017). Moreover, in contrast to the nearby Grønland and Tøyen neighbourhoods, none of the residential units in Bjørvika were set aside for social or public housing, and unlike Grønland and Tøyen, Bjørvika has no institutions meant for the poor, the disadvantaged or ethnic/religious minorities along the waterfront (Andersen and Røe, 2017). When Bjørvika was still just a concept or a plan, it was expected that the transformation of the waterfront would 'contribute to its neighboring parts' (Andersen and Røe, 2017: 314). Whereas some may have expected that the renovated area would contribute to making Oslo a 'just city' (Andersen and Røe, 2017: 305), Bjørvika's influence seems to have been the opposite as Gamle Oslo can be said to have been increasingly socio-economically segregated. Moreover, areas like Grønland may become more gentrified as well and thereby, perhaps paradoxically, decreasing local

segregation. As Hades's manager told us, 'the city is coming together [in Gamle Oslo], the young professionals of the white middle-class working in Bjørvika will probably consider the nearby areas when they are purchasing an apartment' (interview, 9 May 2017).

Using the terminology of Davidson and Lees (2005), today's Bjørvika can be classified as an example of 'new-build gentrification' (Andersen and Røe, 2017). As indicated by the directors of both Hera and Hades, the Bjørvika development can be used as a compass to mark the course for socio-material changes taking place further inland. Indeed, according to the director from Ares, the waterfront development is the main reason why many property developers and owners have recently become particularly interested in Grønland. The director described Grønland as 'a premium location in Oslo – a location people haven't realised is a premium property' (interview, 19 May 2017).

### The axis of gentrification

However, the model for changing Grønland can also be found in other (partially) gentrified areas in the vicinity, especially Grünerløkka and Tøyen as well as the nearby street Torggata. In collaboration with the municipality, Ares, a major property owner in Torggata, has been a major driving force in changing this street from 'shady to trendy' (NTBinfo, 2015). In order to give the street a suitable makeover, Ares and the city paid for the asphalt to be replaced with cobblestone and for the street to become more bike-friendly (interview, 19 May 2017). Whereas parts of Torggata used to be 'very dark and sad' (interview, 19 May 2017) and full of empty storefronts (Braaten, 2015), Torggata is now filled with craft beer bars, small fashion shops and hip restaurants as well as Starbucks and Burger King. Based on their

experiences in Torggata, Ares wanted to apply the same strategy in Grønland.

To make an area more attractive, and to raise rental and property values, Ares used certain commercial tenants as 'triggers' to prompt transformation. Ares's director explained that Starbucks was such a trigger in Torggata. As it was initially difficult to attract tenants here, Ares first got Starbucks to set up shop, which then prompted other commercial tenants to rent Ares's properties in Torggata. The director explained their plans for Grønland as follows: 'so now we are doing the same thing again. Starbucks and Siste Sang [a craft beer brewery, bar and shop] is opening in Grønlandsleiret [Grønland street]. This is meant to attract people to the area' (interview, 09 May 2017). When outlining their strategies, the director showed us a map of the downtown districts with all their properties. Using his finger, he drew what we term – here, we are also drawing on the axis idea proposed by Hera's director (discussed earlier) – *an axis of gentrification*:

The axis Brugata to Grønland is very busy. We saw this, and it enticed us. What happened in Bjørvika (...) it is very nice there. A lot has also happened at Tøyen and down towards Grønland. So, the area between Tøyen and Bjørvika [holding his hand over Grønland on the map] – we will do something here. Yes, a great deal is already taking place at Grønland, for instance [Hades's project], that'll be nice (...). Yes, we wouldn't mind having more properties at Grønland. (Interview, 09 May 2017)

As Grønland was not Ares's most profitable location in Oslo – they could demand higher rents in Torggata – their plan was to make Grønland more popular. Then, Ares could charge higher rents in Grønland as well. In short, Ares wanted 'the same profile' for an area that included Torggata,

Brugata and Grønland (along the high street). In addition, the workers and residents of Bjørvika would also ‘use’ Grønland, meaning that ‘it will be a very good area stretching from Bjørvika into Grønland’. In other words, ‘Grønland will become an extension of Bjørvika’ (interview, 09 May 2017). The fact that Ares wanted the relatively disadvantaged Grønland to be moulded after the far more up-scale Bjørvika had social and material consequences – for instance, some of the existing tenants had to go.

In the words of the director, ‘we need to respect the businesses that’ve been here for many years, but we want to replace them’ (interview, 09 May 2017). Illustrating the kind of businesses that they wanted to replace (see Figure 2), the manager referred to shops providing more affordable services, especially to ethnic minorities. Instead, they wanted more restaurants, coffee shops and craft beer bars, such as Siste Sang (see Figure 3).

### **Making space for proper diversity and the eligible consumer**

Unlike the many smaller property owners, who owned one or two buildings in Grønland, Ares’s director explained that his company did not rent out commercial spaces to the highest bidder. Instead, they saw the different commercial concepts as pieces of a larger puzzle and strategically chose the individual concept that contributed to creating the right kind of diversity in the area (interview, 09 May 2017). According to the manager, Ares wanted the stores and services that would attract ‘the young and urban people to the area’ (interview, 19 May 2017). The young, urban and trendy consumer is a well-known target group in the real-estate developer-led (partial) gentrification processes that we are examining here (see also Zukin,

2010). During the last few years, several craft beer bars, breweries and innovative cocktail bars have opened in Ares-owned properties in Brugata and along the high street.

Such trendy cafés, bars and restaurants had also been central in the developer’s strategy for ‘revitalising’ Torggata and Tøyen’s main square because they made these urban spaces safer and more attractive for the urban middle classes.

As other scholars have argued, the popularity of craft beer (Mathews and Picton, 2014) as well as *healthy* (Anguelovski, 2015) or *gourmet* food (Bridge and Dowling, 2001) has been linked to gentrification. Such conspicuous consumption of distinct edibles – as Veblen (1992) and Bourdieu (1984) would have called it – is clearly observable among the middle classes in Oslo. Based on our field-work observations, it is evident that it is, indeed, the ‘white’ middle classes that frequent these commercial leisure arenas. In passing, it should be noted that several of these arenas were also dominated by relatively young adults, and in our Tøyen survey, a middle-class woman in her sixties wrote that she felt ‘alienated among the hipsters’ at the local cafés. Such experiences demonstrate that the ‘improvements’ should be analysed not only as classed-based or ethnoracial phenomena. At any rate, the consumer willing to pay for relatively expensive food and drinks was an important target group in the real-estate developers’ projects in our selected sites, as we have shown in the earlier discussion on Tøyen. Abelone, one of the new bars in an Ares-owned property in Brugata, was the topic of a feature article in a local newspaper. According to the journalist, Abelone was one of Oslo’s most ‘Instagram-friendly locations’, with the description of the beverages served at Abelone clearly indicating that this bar was by and for the hip urban *feinschmecker*:

The peach soda is surprisingly complex, with vinegar added to balance out its

sweetness. Crisp, acidic and fruity flavours permeate the beverages at Abelone – stigmatised flavours that the people running Abelone want to overcome. Asking for a fruity drink will no longer be synonymous with something cloyingly sweet. ‘We carbonate and bottle the sodas ourselves’, says one of the owners. (Larsen, 2017: our translation)

Another emerging target group for the developers in the area consisted of large companies and their employees (who may also be part of the urban *feinshmeckers* group). In contrast to the newly built Bjørvika, the neighbourhoods of Grønland and Tøyen did not use to be attractive areas for the upper-class consumers or for the offices of global companies. However, in recent years, IBM and Apollo, a major international construction and development company, have moved their Norwegian headquarters to Grønland, and the Norwegian innovation branch of the international media company, Schibsted, has moved to Tøyen’s main square. Prestigious architect offices and real-estate developers have started working on several large office-space projects in the area, and, as a journalist reported in 2019 (Saltnes, 2019b), the office segment has become one of the most lucrative property segments in Oslo. According to a director of the Norwegian branch of Apollo, many of their employees had felt a ‘light fear’ regarding the move to Grønland, but most of the employees seemed to be adjusting to the place (interview, 03 August 2017). This company has engaged with architects and the local government to make the area safer and more attractive and has proposed an area development project that would bring Bjørvika closer to Grønland. However, the visions of the private ‘planners’ raised some concerns for the public planners.

In an interview with Oslo municipality’s Agency for Planning and Building Services, we asked the representative about the private developers’ plans for Grønland and what they thought Grønland would look like 10 years from now. The representative responded as follows:

It is both interesting and incredibly challenging, as we have certain parts of the city, like here at Grønland, consisting of these specific businesses, such as workshops. Buildings of sub-standard quality may provide lower rents, making it possible for small firms to survive and who contribute to creating a great urban milieu. But then come the regulations and renewals and suddenly they are all gone – then you have just another generic urban neighbourhood. We don’t know how we can keep the genuine [character of Grønland]. (Interview, 01 July 2017)

For the municipal planners, trying to maintain diversity was framed as a wicked problem that they did not know how to deal with. The municipal planners did not want every downtown area to look the same; at the same time, they did not have the tools to make diversity, or affordability, happen. As indicated above, private companies are, to a large extent, the de facto urban planners in Norway (Andersen and Skrede, 2017). At the beginning of 2019, one and a half years after the interview with the municipal planners, an analyst from ‘Norway’s largest professional commercial property manager’ (Malling & Co, 2019) said in a magazine interview that rent prices for office properties in Oslo would increase overall by about 10% in 2019. The story continued: ‘if one were to look for an area that is particularly “hot”, one would have to go for the eastern parts of downtown, such as Tøyen and Grønland. These are exciting areas that are already becoming more popular in correlation with the developers’ efforts to

renew them, and the tenants seem to like it' (Satlnes, 2019a, p. 89).

However, in 2020, Grønland, just as Tøyen, is far from being a 'generic' neighbourhood designed exclusively for the middle or upper classes.

## A resistant place

Although parts of Gamle Oslo have been undergoing gentrification for more than two decades, gentrification has not been an omnipotent force or an all-encompassing process. First, large-scale displacement of the working class or disadvantaged groups has not occurred (Andersen et al., 2017a). Second, even if new middle-class or upper-class establishments, offices and residential buildings are to be found in Gamle Oslo, so too are areas and residences for the less affluent. As previously noted, along Gamle Oslo's waterfront, the private and public investments worth billions are physically evident. Different worlds exist on either side of the railway tracks separating Bjørvika from Grønland and Tøyen. At Tøyen and Grønland, one can still frequently encounter relatively new middle-class establishments and apartment buildings, but one can also find social housing and several institutions catering to the 'truly disadvantaged' (Wilson, 1987), such as individuals with substance-abuse problems, homeless people and other poor and marginalised groups (see also Brown-Saracino, 2017: 520–521).

In a previous study of Tøyen, we documented the many new cafés and bars as well as public investments in parks and libraries, showing that the area was increasingly becoming more popular for young middle-class adults (Andersen et al., 2017a: 195–196). Simultaneously, the share of ethnic minority residents was (slowly) increasing – a trend that might be a 'gentrification buffer' (see Brown-Saracino, 2017: 523;

Hwang and Sampson, 2014). For some, like Laura (see above), the local Tøyen school initially 'served', to borrow a phrase from Billingham and Kimelberg (2013: 99), 'as a neighborhood anchor'. However, this anchor was not as heavy as they first hoped for; instead, unrest among the students, other school-related factors as well as perceptions of neighbourhood insecurity contributed to middle-class parents' decisions to move out of the neighbourhood. Although our observations between August 2017 and February 2019, reveal more bars, cafés and other middle-class services along Gamle Oslo's high street running through Grønland than in 2017, the street remains lined with shops, nail salons, kebab restaurants and coffee houses catered to the needs of the area's pre-gentrification residents and visitors.

Although the conversations, interviews and statements from respondents participating in our surveys indicated strong feelings of place-attachment for many middle-class and working-class adults and children alike, many residents were also worried about local criminal activities, the quality of local schools and kindergartens and the sub-standard quality of many public spaces. In short, as of 2020, Gamle Oslo is poorer than many other neighbourhoods and is still undergoing a bumpy gentrification process.

## Concluding remarks

In our discussion above, four main points have been stressed. First, the trajectory of the gentrification process is not unidirectional. Second, there are beneficial and undesirable aspects of the gentrification process (displacement vs. new amenities). Third, the actual shape of the gentrification process is shaped by the profit motive of developers. Finally, city authorities appear relatively powerless to (a) either guide or direct the activities of developers and (b) remediate the 'problems' of these inner city areas.

To elaborate, developers are influencing demographic, material, social and cultural changes through their investments and are consciously and strategically reshaping places to increase profits. The profitable ‘rent gap’ – that is, the gap between the current income earned by a property and possible future income (Smith, 1987) at Tøyen and Grønland – seems to be the driving force for the developers investing in these areas. However, some of the processes that are designated as the ‘gentrification’ of the Inner East (Holgersen, 2020) may be viewed more neutrally as socio-material changes or transformation processes. Crime statistics show that the Inner East is still a troubled area (Oslo politidistrikt, 2019: 26). Nonetheless, residents can enjoy refurbished urban spaces and new libraries – public amenities that are not only valued by the middle-class residents or visitors but also by ethnic minorities and the working class. Developers’ desire to gentrify – without necessarily using that concept or idea – may also improve the urban material fabric, for instance, by replacing asphalt with cobblestones. Such improvements have been said to ‘influence gentrification’ as ‘the beautification of public space’ potentially contribute to ‘shift the amenity value of neighborhoods’ (Hwang and Lin, 2016: 19).

Public planners and local politicians claim that they value socially and culturally mixed urban areas. Although the share of minority groups is (slowly) increasing in Gamle Oslo – contrary to the postulates of many gentrification theories – municipal planners and city politicians seem to lack the effective tools of the highly goal-oriented and internally coordinated private companies in the strategic production of space. While we have claimed that Grønland and Tøyen have not undergone a total metamorphosis, the developers are, in fact, following their non-coordinated masterplan to create neighbourhoods that would be even more appropriate for the middle and upper classes’ leisure and work.

Whereas (some) residents and public officials may want to retain parts of ‘the old’ Gamle Oslo, or at least make sure the development has ‘social aims’ (Ander, 2017: 75), the developers sit in the director’s chair, overseeing the course of the cultural, social, spatial and material developments. Again, we need to stress that the outcomes of the developers’ strategies are far from certain – also the more ‘impending change’ (Brown-Saracino, 2017: 532) of Grønland – and we warn against presenting the ongoing changes only in ‘dire terms’ (Brown-Saracino, 2017: 516).

We believe that our study has demonstrated that transformation processes, which some scholars prefer to speak of as ‘gentrifying the area’ (e.g. Holgersen, 2020: 144), generate both positive and negative consequences – materially, socially, culturally and economically. Indeed, there is a need to stress the ‘the empirical heterogeneity (...) of gentrification’ (Brown-Saracino, 2017: 517). The concept itself, gentrification, may carry negative connotations, such as undemocratic social processes or that a neighbourhood has lost its ‘soul’ (Brown-Saracino, 2017: 517–518; Zukin, 2010). Gentrification processes have been described both as ‘urgent threats’ to urban environments (Williams, 2018: 473) and as ‘violence’ (Alexandri and Janoschka, 2020: 3209–3212). Such claims may be warranted; however, there is also a perceived positive new ‘reality’ among the residents and users of the urban spaces that scholars say have been gentrified – perhaps most pertinently, residents of supposed gentrified areas report safer and more attractive locations. Gentrification processes can also improve tourism (thus bringing more jobs), and ‘in the case of the gentrification of an inner city neighbourhood, the residents can reap some benefits, for instance, by an increase in real estate value’ (Dente, 2014: 679). In a study of urban unrest, it was asserted that ‘it is expedient to refrain from reducing the phenomenon to one final explanation’

(Andersen, 2019: 1133). Extending this logic, we are hesitant to reduce our attempts at understanding the conditions and effects of what we have observed to that of ‘gentrification’ – also given the ‘collective uncertainty about how to define and operationalize gentrification’ (Brown-Saracino, 2017: 527). Urban regeneration (e.g. Yiannakou, 2020), urban change (e.g. Pugalis and Bentley, 2014), urban transformation (e.g. Andersen and Røe, 2017), but also neighbourhood stability (e.g. Chuang et al., 2017; Kinney and Winter, 2006; Sampson and Graif, 2009) and neighbourhood stasis (Brown-Saracino, 2017: 533), as well as urban planning and development strategies (e.g. Andersen and Skrede, 2017; Borggren and Ström, 2014), may be less value-laden (see Brown-Saracino, 2017: 530), but nonetheless fitting concepts in our case.

To conclude, the inability to cater to *all* interests in local development seems to be as related to the powerlessness of the local government as to the ascribed causal powers of the transformation processes as such. As the elected politicians have given over the director’s chair to private urban developers, the force of the politicians’ critique has weakened. If urban developers strive after financial gain, and the politicians let them do so, criticising urban development projects for not being diverse and inclusive enough is somewhat self-contradictory.

### Acknowledgements

Our gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for valuable comments.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship,

and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Research Council of Norway (project number 259888).

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