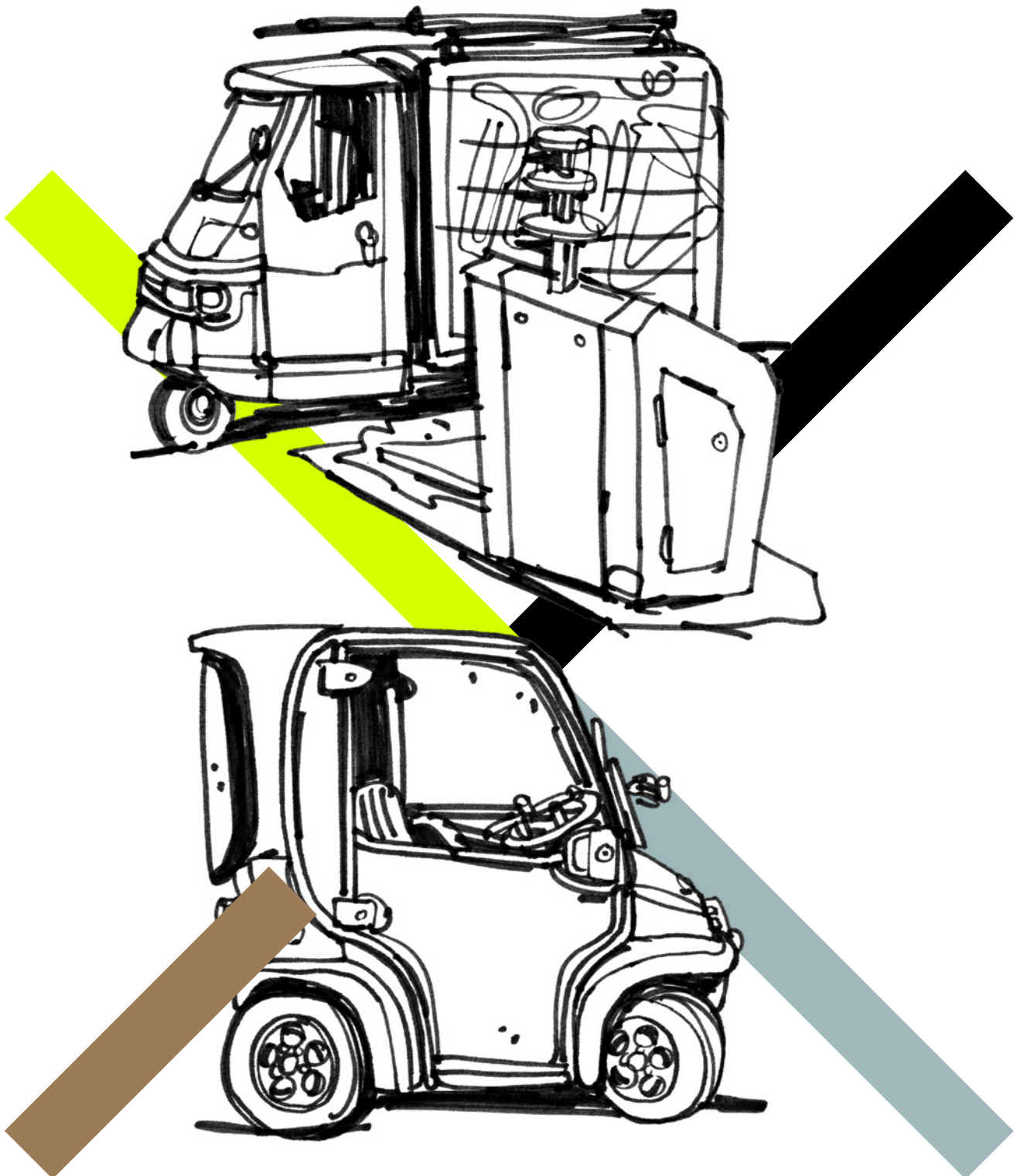


# The Polylogue



Amsterdam Museum Journal

Issue #2 Summer 2024

# Tayfun Balçik

Journalist, historian and activist born in Amsterdam. Balçik is specialized in Turkish history and part of 'The Hague Peace Projects', which aims to improve discours between opposing groups of people. Through knowledge and personal experience, he is vocal about racism and institutional discrimination in the Dutch housing system.

# René Boer

Critic, curator and organizer in and beyond the fields of architecture, design, heritage and the arts. He is a founding partner of *Loom* – practice for cultural transformation, and author of *Smooth City*.

# Sophia Holst

Architect and researcher, active within the architecture fields of Belgium and the Netherlands. She currently works on the foundations of an independent architecture- and research practice, in which critical urban theory and applied design are interwoven.

# Melissa Koutouzis

Housing activist and co-founder of 'Woonprotest'. She also works at the Transnational Institute where her work includes citizen collectives, campaigners, researchers, social movements and local governments working globally on democratization, deprivatization and a just energy transition.

# Elaine Michon

Independent literary agent and a member of the residents committee 'Kleine Die'. For over five years, she has been working to keep the garden village in Nieuwendam livable, humane and quirky, despite the demolition plans of the company Ymere. And with success. Michon is also affiliated with 'Woonprotest' and the working group of 'Lokaal FNV Amsterdam'.

# A Polylogue on Deconstructing Gentrification

Amsterdam Museum Journal

In this roundtable, five speakers from various disciplines and perspectives talk about the process of gentrification in Amsterdam. In this engaging polylogue, Tayfun Balçık, René Boer, Sophia Holst, Melissa Koutouzis, and Elaine Michon, reflect on the term 'gentrification' and how it is used, the relationship between gentrification and racism, the political and economic elements of gentrification, and the question of agency and activism.

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# Gentrification is Displacement

SH: When talking about gentrification, it is important to talk about the label itself as well. The term gentrification is often used in a hollow way, both overused and misused. I try to avoid using it because we are not getting to the crux of what we want to talk about, which is the effects of gentrification: The creation of unequal urban environments, where not everybody has the same rights to housing or access to the centers of cities. It is important to ask the question: *What happens before these processes become visible?* And then we start to understand that urban planning, urban politics, housing politics, and all these issues on local, urban, regional, and even national levels affect how we live.

RB: The term became hollowed out because it came to stand for neighborhoods being renewed. So, what happened in Amsterdam is that right-wing council members<sup>1</sup>, for example, said gentrification is something good because things were going to look nicer. I think we should use the term, but we should emphasize that gentrification is about displacing people and for that reason it is a problematic phenomenon that we should oppose.

So, I would suggest being very clear in defining gentrification. Because what

you often see is that gentrification is used for a lot of different things and this broad term is being applied to things that people roughly associate with gentrification. Because what we are actually talking about is the active displacement of lower income groups by higher income groups, as well as the active displacement of businesses that make less money by businesses that make more money.

EM: I prefer not to use terms like gentrification that are general, because my situation is personal. But I do think it is helpful to know how people use it in order to reappropriate it and make it more activist and talk about the real issues it brings with it. And then it is important to question the officials who use terms like these: *What do they mean when they talk about gentrification?*

MK: I agree, gentrification is a difficult term because the process of gentrification is so often framed as a positive thing, in local politics as well as real estate. In politics, both right- and left-wing politicians can frame rejuvenating neighborhoods as a good thing. So, I consider it our task to make sure that it can never be mentioned in a non-problematic way, ever again.

RB: I wonder if it has ever been a good thing. I think it has—by right-wing politics—been used as something positive, but I think gentrification has always been a class war against people with lower incomes. So, I do not think there has ever been a good time of gentrification; I think it has always been problematic.

EM: For me, the problem with the term gentrification lies in the idea that gentrification is a natural and not a consciously institutionalized process. The people from the municipality who put gentrification into practice do not live in the neighborhoods that they decide over, they also have no connection to the people living in these places. And this blind spot brings with it a dehumanization of the people living there. The distance between the people making policy and the people living in social housing and living in these neighborhoods is so big and it is getting bigger. That is something that really cannot be problematized enough.

SH: Yes, as an architect, what I often notice is during the process of urban development the building becomes personified, the building becomes the person instead of the people in the building. And I find it very important when talking about architecture to always include: *What does it mean for the people living there?*

MK: Yes, gentrification is a process of policy meant to drive out certain people. In the age of austerity, municipalities increasingly see people with lower incomes as a problem. Municipalities make previously disadvantaged neighborhoods more attractive for companies, investors, and people on higher incomes. Then the original inhabitants become displaced. Either they are forced to move out or they are priced out of their own neighborhoods.<sup>2</sup>

TB: For me, it is a bit of a luxurious and deceptive term for displacement. The act of gentrification is developed, defended and institutionalized by city-planners and lawmakers who would never use the term '*displacement*', but use euphemistic terms like development, mixing and even diversification instead. My definition of gentrification is a group of trapped, packed, and disadvantaged people surrounded by a changing city. When they look out their windows, they see a city that was not and is not built for them.

“The term gentrification is often used in a hollow way, both overused and misused. I try to avoid using it because we are not getting to the crux of what we want to talk about, which is the *effects* of gentrification.”



Sophia Holst



# Gentrification is Racism

EM: There is another issue in gentrification and that is *racism*. In Amsterdam, and other European cities, you have these neighborhoods that were reserved for immigrants in the 70s and 80s. Now, these neighborhoods are subject to urban renewal and gentrification and these original inhabitants have to make space for others. Again, there is no relation between the people organizing the gentrification and the people having to live it.

TB: The gentrification of Amsterdam Nieuw-West, my neighborhood, is racist. We were placed here because of our migration background and the reason we are evicted from our homes is also our migration background. And therefore, we should have a broader definition of gentrification and not reduce it to class only.<sup>1</sup> Because it is not only class, but also about race and a political discourse which uses terms like 'conquering back our cities' and 'giving the Netherlands back to our own citizens'. Dutch citizens with a migration background, especially of Turkish and Moroccan descent, are not included in that 'our' or 'we'. So, yes, when we talk about gentrification it is about racism, it is about replacing migrants and people with a migration background with

middle class white citizens. And I think that discussion is important, that we talk acknowledge it is a class thing, yes, *but it is also a race thing*.

SH: Yes, often it is easier for people to talk about class as to avoid the conversation about race. Within the urban development of Amsterdam, there were spreading policies put in place in the 70s and they have an effect on what the city looks like today. Meaning people coming to the city as guest-workers or from former Dutch colonies like Suriname or De Antillen first often lived in the city center but later ended up in areas on the edge of Amsterdam. If you look at the urban policies of city renewal you see politicians started in the center and expanded out. From here, you can start questioning: *Are these things related? Does urban renewal affect similar groups?*

TB: I think it is also important to say that a lot of policy was based on the divide between *autochtonen* and *allochtonen*,<sup>2</sup> these terms were used to refer to respectively, people without and people with a migration background. In 2016 the Dutch government stopped using the terms because they were deemed too broad, and they had gained a strong negative association adding to discrimination. The fact that

policies were based on this division is in its essence a racist thing. Whole generations are influenced by this divide. It is no coincidence that Turks and Moroccans live segregated in Amsterdam Nieuw West and that there are 'little Turkeys' and 'little Morroccos' in Amsterdam neighborhoods like Slotermeer, Geuzenveld, and Osdorp. Consequently, other places in Amsterdam (and other cities) remain or become white.

RB: Yes, because this history of gentrification continues today. It has this history of the past few decades, but I think disadvantaged groups are still being displaced from the city. People with migration backgrounds are predominantly living in specific neighborhoods in Amsterdam, like Nieuw-West, as Tayfun mentioned; they were forced into these neighborhoods and now they are also being pushed out of these places. This process of social cleansing with an ethnic component is still happening in the city today. And if we do not change our policies, it will continue to happen.

MK: We need to look into the specific institutionalized racism within government-driven gentrification. Racism is denied as a part of policy. Often, it is implicit, so, it is important to call it out when it occurs. Additionally, we need more research into processes in which it appears that the white Dutchman is the standard and anyone who deviates from that is a problem. Years ago, the *Leefbaarometer* (measuring and monitoring how pleasant and livable neighborhoods are)<sup>3</sup> had the indicator 'non-Western' as a *negative score*. This indicator has since been removed because it is discriminatory. Could they

have not thought of that earlier? This also shows that the instruments used by the state or in science are not always perfect and are also subject to, and determined by, cultural assumptions that may be racist, as well as social debate, because it can also change.

EM: There is a constant denial of these policies being racist. While it is this cleansing aspect of gentrification that is central to the issue of gentrification. Now we are seeing the repercussions of treating certain people as moveable or dispensable to a city.



“There is a constant denial of these policies being *racist*. While it is this cleansing aspect of gentrification that is central to the issue of gentrification. Now we are seeing the repercussions of treating certain people as moveable or dispensable to a city.”



Elaine Michon

# Gentrification is Political

SH: Within the discussion about gentrification processes in the Netherlands, I think it is important to split up gentrification into two parts: (1) the part that happens within the free market; and (2) the part that happens through social housing and renovations. Often, politicians refer to the social housing arrangements as a protection against gentrification. But it is interesting to look at how renovations and demolishing projects, organized by the public housing sector, affect neighborhoods. I think you can say that in the Netherlands, gentrification is now also happening through the transformation of public housing.

EM: That goes along with the privatization of the corporations that used to provide social housing. Basically, they have been asked by the government to act like landlords and to build new projects that are not social housing, and in some cases to even sell buildings that used to be social housing. Therefore, I think this term of public housing or social housing in the Netherlands should be redefined in a quite large way, because the corporations are not actually fulfilling only a social agenda right

now. Consequently, the original idea of public housing and a public sector that organizes housing for all people, whoever they are and wherever they come from, is something that I do not recognize as a social construction in the Netherlands at the moment.

MK: The underlying value in this whole process is the idea of home ownership being better than public housing or renting. And that is not only an economic thing it is also very much a cultural phenomenon where home ownership has been very well promoted as something that is better than renting. And this has been internalized by us and by an increasingly larger part of the population; everyone wants to be a homeowner eventually. And this adds to the assumption that renting a house or living in public housing should just be a temporary thing which also forces a temporariness and flexibility on tenants that is not part of what we consider to be normal for homeowners. Owners can stay, tenants should be flexible. The laws are organized in such a way that you can demolish a public house much easier than you can demolish a house that somebody has bought. And this adds

to the process of pushing out certain people and keeping other people in.

RB: I think what you are all referring to is that in the Netherlands specifically, gentrification is, to a large extent, a *state led project*. It is not like in the States for example, where gentrification is just a result of an unregulated free market. In the case of The Netherlands, it is the active policy of the state, how they organize these housing corporations, how they organize the tax systems, how they formulate the laws, that is really making an impact on how gentrification plays out. Maybe the bright side is then that these policies can be opposed.

“In the Netherlands specifically, gentrification is, to a large extent, a state led project. [...] Maybe the bright side is then that these policies can be opposed.”



René Boer

# Gentrification is Stoppable

SH: Coming from architecture and urban planning, I can see that within that field issues like the agency of existing residents are not always recognized. Within urban planning it is important to hear alternative voices so you can weigh all sides of a debate. What I try to do is visualize these voices towards the public and towards politics. When making publications or lectures, I try to visualize other approaches, other urban strategies, and taking the existing environment and existing residents as a starting point for urban design and transformation.

TB: Gentrification is an attack on our privacy, our freedom, and our liberties. I believe that telling our personal stories of how this affects us is a form of activism. For example, I am now 39 years old, and I only got my first house two and a half years ago. When I talked about living at my parents', there was a lot of shaming by peers and other people. But I think we should talk shamelessly about humiliating anecdotes, about our problems, and about what is happening to us and our cities. Our lives are on hold because of gentrification because social and public housing is being destroyed. By telling these stories, we can say to every struggling individual: *No, it is not your fault that you do not have a house.*

It is a structural problem, caused by decisions of politicians disconnected from our reality. It is not shameful to talk about these social failures. No, we should shame *them* for attacking our liberties by selling and destroying our social houses to the market.

RB: I think this idea of story-building is very crucial. Listening to the stories of pain and trauma caused by the process of gentrification is an important step in understanding the effects of gentrification. We should include in that all the unseen and unheard stories, so the people who have already been pushed out of the city and who are excluded from the current conversation because they are not part of the city anymore. They do not even have a say in these policies anymore because they can no longer vote in the city they were pushed out of. We should also include young students and young migrants who really need a city to grow and develop, and who, through this process of gentrification, will never be able to access the city. They will remain excluded and will remain invisible because of gentrification.

And adding to that, I think it is also important to combine local knowledge and activism with nationwide protests

such as the 'Woonprotest'.<sup>1</sup> Smaller forms of activism have so much knowledge about local rights, whereas nationwide movements address these larger tax policy systems that result in gentrification. If these movements manage to scale up and go in tandem, that would be very powerful.

EM: For me, organizing on a local level, I believe we have to inform each other about our rights. Because there are rights for tenants, and too often those rights are denied by landlords and housing corporations. There are two strands of knowledge that I think are of importance now. (1) Tenants and inhabitants need to develop their own narratives about their housing or neighborhoods. This will make them resilient to what either the municipality or the corporations write or say about where they live. By building these stories, we can take control of how these places are understood. (2) We need to talk about the reality of social housing and housing in Amsterdam to the people behind these policies. More and more I see how badly informed they are about the current situation and fundamental things like the rights we have. In turn, they frame stories or underpin policy based on these assumptions and that just does not reflect the actuality.

MK: It is important to talk about this agency and the role of activism. First of all, as a main point we should not deny the fact that it is really hard. It is a struggle to identify and find enough capacity to build this counterpower, which is necessary to fight the bigger capitalist structures, like the power of the state, the power of the municipalities, and the power of money. They are much more powerful than we are, but we do have

power, we *have collective power*. For this we need to find a way to get more people involved on a neighborhood level and on a national level. Through collectivity and finding cooperative spaces, we can find new ways of negotiating this imbalance with the state and with housing corporations. It is not something we can do in a year or in a day, but through this kind of resistance, such as the organization of rent strikes, and alternative thinking you can bring about change.



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Tayfun Balçık

Amsterdam Museum Journal

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but we do have power,  
we have collective power.”

Melissa Koutouzis

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## Endnotes

## Gentrification is Displacement

- 1 The city of Amsterdam is a municipality which is governed by the mayor and nine *wethouders* [translation: 'deputy mayors'], who are monitored by the a municipal council.
- 2 For more on displacement read '*The Dialogue*' between this editions guest editor Tim Verlaan and Associate Professor Suleiman Osman [link naar artikel].

## Gentrification is racism

- 1 The term gentrification was coined by the sociologist Ruth Glass in the 1960s. It refers to the process whereby the 'Gentry' move into working class neighborhoods. For more on this definition read '*The Dialogue*' in this edition.
- 2 In the 1990s, the term '*allochtoon*' was coined to reference a person of whom at least one parent was born abroad. The antonym of *allochtoon* was '*autochtoon*', referring to someone of whom both parents were born in The Netherlands. Over the years, '*allochtoon*' gained a negative connotation, the term was often mentioned in negative reporting on people with a migration background, whereas the term '*autochtoon*' was never mentioned in the same context. In addition, people with a western migration background were never called '*allochtonen*', which made it a discriminating term. Therefore, in 2016, the Dutch government decided to refrain from using the words '*allochtoon*' and '*autochtoon*' and the description 'person with a migration background' became the norm. For more on the decision to end use of the term see: [migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/news/netherlands-government-re-examines-use-term-allochtoon-alien\\_en](https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/news/netherlands-government-re-examines-use-term-allochtoon-alien_en)
- 3 For more on the '*leefbaarometer*', see: [leefbaarometer.nl](https://leefbaarometer.nl)

## Gentrification is Stoppable

- 1 The '*Woonprotest*' is a demonstration on the housing crisis in the Netherlands. For more on the '*woonprotest*', see: [woonprotest.nl/english?lang=en](https://woonprotest.nl/english?lang=en)