Introduction to City Debates 2015

Good afternoon everyone and welcome to City Debates 2015. It’s a great pleasure for me to introduce “Other Gentrifications: Urban Change Beyond the Core” – the main topic of this year’s edition of City Debates.

As my colleague Robert Saliba mentioned, the conference has been jointly organized by The Graduate Programs in Urban Planning, Policy and Design at the Department of Architecture and Design at AUB and the AUB Neighborhood Initiative.

Allow me to say a few words about the Neighborhood Initiative, and a few thank yous, before moving to the conference topic.

The AUB Neighborhood Initiative was established in 2007 with the objective of mobilizing AUB faculty, staff and students for the public good in Ras Beirut, mainly the area around AUB campus walls. In that, it is a model of place-based engagement for universities in Lebanon and the region. With a particular concern about the rapid transformations of Ras Beirut, away from its mixed use and socially diverse character to a high-end residential area, Cynthia Myntti, founder and leader of the Initiative, pursued the idea of a research and outreach project on the gentrification of the neighborhood, to be carried in conjunction with student workshops and an international conference on the topic. I would like to thank her for her invaluable efforts in making this ambitious project happen and for entrusting me with directing the research and co-organizing the conference.

Fran Tonkiss, director of the Cities Programme at the London School of Economics, is our main collaborator in this academic endeavor, thanks to an Academic Collaboration Grant by the Middle East Center at LSE. We are proud and honored to work with Fran whose contribution to defining the themes and questions of the conference was instrumental. On behalf of my conference co-organizers at AUB, I would like to thank her for enriching our perspective on the topic and for supporting us in identifying and contacting some of the conference speakers.

And on behalf of the Neighborhood Initiative, I would like to express sincere gratitude to our colleagues at the Department of Architecture and Design (namely Mona Fawaz, Mona Harb and Robert Saliba) for collaborating with us and hosting the conference under the umbrella of City Debates. I would especially like to acknowledge the efforts of Robert Saliba who assumed a lead role in conference planning.

City Debates 2015 questions contemporary processes of urban change associated with gentrification in cities facing regional insecurities, communal and political tensions, and (post-) conflict and (post-) crisis reconstructions. It particularly focuses on Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cities, exploring how current patterns of investment, development and renewal are transforming them spatially and socially.

The title of the conference (Other Gentrifications: Urban Change Beyond the Core) highlights, on the one hand, gentrification as an expanding plural phenomenon. On the other hand, it stresses the fact that geography matters. Indeed, as Loretta Lees,
Tom Slater and Elvin Wyly underscore, the phenomenon, now global, involves multiple processes that materialize and interlink in different ways in distinct geographic settings. These processes are neither specific to inner cities and residential areas nor to the major cities of the Global North.

As well known, scholarship on gentrification has evolved significantly since Ruth Glass conceptualized the term in the 1960s. Many scholars agree today that early interpretations and definitions derived from Glass’ description are those of “classical gentrification”. As opposed to classical forms led by individual investments in the existing built fabric, contemporary forms are usually instigated by officially sanctioned urban redevelopment plans and/or regulatory frameworks, and are often connected to global capital flows and to broader processes of urban restructuring.

Although very important, the physical changes associated with gentrification are not the central aspect of the process. As Peter Marcuse has explained, gentrification hinges on more profound economic, social, and demographic transformations. It is an ethical issue and a question of social justice. In fact, Glass’ conception of gentrification, as Tom Slater has elaborated, was motivated by social justice concerns. Following on from her work, the notion of gentrification can be understood as a political cry against class-based displacement, the speculative commodification of space, and turning city centers, and other areas, into exclusive social enclaves for the rich. This is how we are framing the term.

The conference brings together scholars and practitioners working on Beirut, Istanbul, Cairo and other cities in the Middle East and Mediterranean region and across the global. Through a comparative urbanism perspective, it seeks to draw connections between disparate urban contexts that have different histories, governance structures; security conditions; and political, legal, economic and social settings.

We anticipate that conference participants and audience will engage in rich and enriching inter-disciplinary discussions that would help us in relating what is happening in Beirut and Ras Beirut to “planetary” processes of urban restructuring. Our ultimate aim is to come up with practical intervention strategies and ways that allow us to influence policy direction in more socially inclusive ways.

Thank you for being with us this evening and through out the conference. I wish you a stimulating debate.