# Tourism mobilities and urban change.
# Geographies of transnational gentrification

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## Introduction

The relationship between tourism and urban change has recently attracted unprecedented levels of scholarly and public attention. Since the publication of the *Routledge Handbook of Tourism Geographies* in 2012, much debate has been held around the relevance of tourism and its impact on processes of urban transformation, which are frequently motivated by its perceived exclusionary effects (Gravari-Barbas & Guinand, 2017; Yrigoy, 2029; González-Pérez, 2020; Pinkster & Boterman, 2017; Cocola-Gant, 2018). The last ten years have reshaped tourism industries, tourist practices, and also the very cities where tourism takes place. Likewise, the concept of gentrification has advanced beyond academic circles and it is now a key notion around which civil society and activists mobilise to denounce the inequalities produced in contemporary touristic cities. As this chapter shows, debates around the impact of tourism in urban landscapes have converged increasingly with gentrifying processes, signalling their interdependencies and cross-fertilisation.

Airbnb's trajectory in recent years is probably the most remarkable example of how tourism became so deeply entangled with gentrification processes. While a decade ago, Airbnb was still a sharing economy business, where most hosts would offer an extra room to visitors, now the company has become the world's largest accommodation service, with over 6 million active listings in more than 100,000 cities (Airbnb 2022). A large portion of the Airbnb supply caused a withdrawal of millions of apartments from traditional housing markets. This had major impacts across cities, and has become the subject of local political campaigns, social mobilisations, and anti-tourism protests (Novy & Colomb 2019; Garay, Morales & Wilson 2020). Tourism rapidly penetrated remote urban spaces, whether they were working-class neighbourhoods in the Global North (Quaglieri-Domínguez & Scarnato 2017, Cocola-Gant & Gago 2021), or even favelas in the Global South (Freire-Medeiros 2013; Cummings 2015).

Yet, tourism has only recently began to be seen as a conduit for gentrification. Although the concept of gentrification has been used in very different contexts – perhaps stretching well beyond its reach (Maloutas 2012, 2018) – its common concern is the inflow of middle-class

residents into working-class areas, resulting in the displacement and exclusion of original populations. In the case of neighbourhoods dominated by short-term rentals, in which 'new residents' are often tourists or temporary dwellers, gentrification assumes new forms, yet can produce similar displacement processes. Terms such as tourism gentrification (Gotham 2005; Cocola-Gant 2018), touristification (Jover & Díaz-Parra 2020; Salerno, 2022; Tulumello & Allegretti, 2021), or even *Airbnbfication* (Peters 2016; Rozena & Lees 2021) have been coined to shed light on the particular ways transient populations, and the real estate investment opportunities they bring, impact urban neighbourhoods.

In this chapter, we will turn to the recent scholarship addressing the notion of transnational gentrification. First used in Sigler and Wachsmuth (2016) to describe the neighbourhood change generated by the inflow of relatively affluent foreign retirees to Panama's Casco Antíguo, the term transnational gentrification has since encompassed an array of transnational mobilities which constitute gentrifying processes. Besides retired migrants and tourists, certain cities have also been attracting other kinds of lifestyle migrants: 'expats', digital nomads, international students, and second-home owners, among other transient populations whose place consumption patterns may often overlap (Novy, 2018). On the one hand, it is precisely their consumption patterns – their lifestyle preferences, the kinds of restaurants they go to, the local brands they are interested in, the coffee shops they work from – that illustrate how urban space is increasingly adapting to cater for the needs of a globally mobile gentrifier class (Bridge 2007). On the other hand, the arrival of transnational mobile populations opens up investment opportunities in the real estate market. For instance, developers and property owners have been creating accommodations such as short-term rentals, co-living spaces, or luxury student housing. This highlights a convergence of the hospitality and property industries, which significantly exclude local populations.

This chapter focuses mainly on scholarly work published over the last decade. The common thread is the nexus between increasingly mobile lifestyles and urban transformation. First, the chapter looks into the relationship between short-term rentals and gentrification processes. Second, it explores who transnational gentrifiers (usually) are and how their place consumption practices are reshaping urban territories. The chapter's final section briefly presents two promising topics for future urban research.

**Short-term rentals, housing, and tourism-led gentrification**

The initial steps of the vacation rental industry in the 20th century were linked to the leasing of second homes in coastal and rural sites (Nicod, Mungall & Henwood, 2007). In Europe, the leading company Interhome was founded in 1965 and in the United States VRBO (Vacation Rentals by Owner) appeared in 1995. However, the short-term rental (STR) industry has been popularised worldwide in the last decade thanks to the creation of digital platforms such as Airbnb. In a context of low-cost travel and state-led tourism promotion as a strategy for economic growth after the 2008 financial crisis, it was the use of the digital platform business model which became the turning point for the industry spreading ubiquitously. Digital platforms offer, fundamentally, a technological infrastructure through

which property owners can easily list their flats on a global scale and reach international guests. By listing their properties on platforms, owners have free access to services such as marketing, reservation and payment systems, which enable them to effortlessly compete with traditional accommodation enterprises (Guttentag 2015; Shaw 2020). The result has been an exponential rise in the supply of short-term rentals which has reduced the cost of traveling. The period of overtourism registered in the years before COVID-19 (Milano et al. 2019) has much to do with this phenomenon.

The unprecedented growth in the number of visitors who consume urban landscapes and who are willing to pay high prices for short-stays have been paralleled by a growth of research concerning the socio-spatial impacts of the process. In this regard, it is not surprising that gentrification and housing scholars have recently paid attention to the effects of tourism (Gotham 2005; Cocola-Gant 2018, 2016; Jover & Díaz-Parra 2020; Yrigoy 2019; Wachsmuth & Weisler 2018). Gentrification research has long demonstrated how the arrival of new users and capital to certain places drives displacement processes of local communities (Lees et al. 2008), and scholars have applied such a conceptual framework to explain the effects of STRs. In short, by renting on digital platforms such as Airbnb, property owners obtain higher profits than in the long-term rental market, which encourages a process of tenant replacement by visitors (Wachsmuth & Weisler 2018; Cocola-Gant 2016). Although Airbnb claims that hosts are home-sharers earning an additional income, in central urban areas of major tourist destinations, the tendency of the market is toward increased commercialization of entire apartments available all year round. Indeed, most Airbnb revenues are generated through entire homes supplied by multi-listing hosts (Deboosere et al. 2019; Dogru et al. 2020).

The proliferation of STRs has affected places in different geographies, from global cities to rural places, in both core accumulation regions and peripheral economies. In the last decades, many rural and coastal areas have been restructured into having a primarily touristic economic base (Phillips, 2002; Freeman and Cheyne, 2008). Here both recreational facilities and the expansion of second homes played a crucial role (Müller, 1999). These places have become valued as leisure facilities serving both resident and visiting middle-class people, thus driving processes of gentrification. However, this leisure-led gentrification of post-productive rural and coastal landscapes has been widely accelerated by the expansion of short-term rentals predominantly because a part of Airbnb's supply consists of second homes that are offered on the platform while they are not in use (Morales, Garay & Troyano, 2022).

In terms of gentrification dynamics in cities, it is interesting to see how the phenomenon evolved in peripheral places that were not on the global tourism map and that indeed did not experience classical gentrification in previous decades, meaning that central areas were inhabited by working-class populations living in degraded built environments. This is the case for instance in Mediterranean cities such as Naples (Esposito 2020), Porto (Carvalho et al. 2019), Lisbon (Barata-Salgueiro et. al. 2017; Cocola-Gant & Gago 2021), Seville (Jover & Diaz-Parra 2020) and Thessaloniki (Katsinas 2021) among others. On the one hand, STRs offer the sufficient infrastructure required to host visitors. On the other hand, STRs provide an opportunity for investors and property owners to extract profits from

urban spaces and, consequently, real estate capital started to flow in (Montezuma & McGarrigle, 2019). In a very short period, these places moved from a state of 'decline' to a new phase of physical upgrading, escalating property prices and social change. Therefore, in many places, the progression of gentrification has been less related to the consumption power of local middle-classes and more to the effects of the increased local demand that tourism provides.

A central topic of research has been to decipher how STRs impact housing markets. Authors show that, in central locations of tourist destinations, STRs have severely reduced the supply of apartments available for long-term occupation, potentially driving the increase of rental prices (Barron et al. 2018; Garcia-López et al. 2020). Other authors have estimated how much housing stock has been lost to Airbnb. For instance, Wachsmuth and Weisler (2018) found that there are several neighbourhoods where Airbnb removed more than 3% of all housing off the primary residential market. Other studies have measured the issue at a finer spatial scale in areas under high tourism pressure and found a tacit conversion of the rental market into STRs (Cocola-Gant & Gago, 2021). This is, furthermore, the case in some areas of Berlin, where Schäfer and Braun (2016) found that all of the available flats are let out to tourists. On the one hand, the process has led to the displacement of tenants. On the other hand, the reduction of long-term rentals means that finding affordable rental housing has become extremely difficult in certain places. In conclusion, the growth of STRs substantially reduces housing alternatives for residents due to both price increase and a lack of stock available in the long-term rental market. Although these consequences may be particularly intense in central areas, the process puts pressures on the rest of the city as well. For instance, as it has been noted in Los Angeles (Lee 2016), it creates a gentrifying domino effect because middle-income residents displaced from or unable to find accommodation in central areas tend to move to more affordable neighbourhoods, adding market pressures in other geographies of the city as well.

So far, we have explored literature that focuses on how STRs affect the right to housing and can cause the displacement of residents. Additionally, qualitative research on the impacts of STRs found that the sharing of apartment buildings with tourists causes pronounced disruption for residents (Törnberg, 2022; Rozena & Lees; 2021; Gurran & Phibbs 2017). The most frequent issue is noise and difficulties in terms of resting and sleeping at night. In this regard, closer attention must be paid to changes at a neighbourhood level and how the mutation of residential areas into spaces for visitors and mobile populations affects the daily lives of residents. In cities such as Amsterdam, authors found that residents are moving from tourist areas not only because of the lack of housing alternatives, but because of the daily disruptions that tourism and STRs create (Pinkster & Boterman 2017). In other words, the excessive growth of tourism causes daily disruptions that make everyday life increasingly unpleasant, particularly due to noise, a lack of stores that residents use, the overcrowding of public spaces as well as the loss of community life and social bonds. These changes in the daily lives of residents have implied that some tourist areas experienced a progressive population decline (Celata & Romano 2020; López-Gay, Cocola-Gant, & Russo, 2021). Interestingly, this was already suggested in the Doxey's (1975)

‘irritation index’ model, by which communities living in tourist destinations experience four stages, the final one being an antagonism towards visitors.

Finally, it is worth noting that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the STR market survived by adapting itself to mid-term rentals for floating young professionals. In terms of supply dynamics, Airbnb advised hosts to offer discounts for mid-term stays, and, during the pandemic, Airbnb adopted several measures to allow listings to be available for longer rental periods (Roelofsen & Minca 2021). In addition, professional STR property managers use digital technologies, such as channel managers, to list their portfolio on several platforms (Cocola-Gant et al. 2021). Beyond Airbnb, the pandemic has consolidated an ecosystem of platforms for mid-term rentals, such as AltoVita, SpotaHome, NomadX, and Uniplaces among others. These platforms connect landlords with professionals searching for accommodation, usually for business purpose travels. As such, the process is significantly linked to transnational gentrification. We will develop this point in the next section.

**Gentrifiers on the move**

Picture this: tourists gathering in front of a celebrity architect-designed building. Digital nomads sharing co-working tables at specialty coffee shops. Hipsters browsing for vintage clothes at the newest pop-up store. ‘Expats’ buying organic produce at the corner bodega. International students celebrating the end of exam period at the new hip artisanal brewery, while well-off couples shop for ceramics in a minimalist boutique – the list could go on. This scene is not unknown to anyone having recently visited Berlin, London, New York, Lisbon, or Athens. But the list *should* go on. In all these places, long-term residents face the risk of eviction, elderly residents see their go-to grocery shops disappear, rents skyrocket, and everyday items such as coffee or bread now cost many times what they used to.

The socio-economic change of cities is a matter of complex causality, spanning wider this chapter’s ambition. Yet, the description above conveys the rather familiar image of a gentrified landscape crosscut by various kinds of mobilities. As Gravari-Barbas and Guinand (2017) have pointed out, tourism often follows urban gentrifiers to their ‘trendy’ urban areas, their farmers’ markets, and gourmet shops (see also Opillard 2016). Tourists’ never-ending quest for ‘authentic’ and ‘off-the-beaten-path’ experiences (Maitland & Newman 2009) arguably fuels gentrification processes, as well as takes them further into more remote or peripheral urban neighbourhoods, which, in turn, makes them more desirable and expensive. The dynamics producing the next ‘soon-to-be-hip place’ colonises urban space with amenities and real estate investment, inducing not only residential gentrification, but also commercial gentrification (Atkinson & Bridge 2005).

Yet, scholars have argued that such wide-ranging processes of urban transformation may hardly be attributed to the impact of tourism alone. Writing in 2014 about Berlin, Fuller and Michel (2014, 1306) anticipated that ‘the effects of tourism on urban neighbourhoods will be quite difficult to distinguish from general processes of urban change and commodification’. Indeed, four years later Novy (2018) argued precisely that in order to understand recent socio-spatial change in Berlin, we would need to account for the many

mobilities intersecting with tourism which also result in place transformation. He evokes the growing presence of 'temporary city users' (Martinotti 1993) whose middle-class lifestyles and consumption practices cannot be easily distinguished from those of local gentrifiers. Novy (2018) suggests that the relationship between (tourism) mobilities and place consumption should account for the following five interrelated dimensions: (1) (urban) tourism; (2) (temporary) 'lifestyle' migration; (3) (temporary) migration for work/education; (4) residents exploring places in their own cities 'as if tourists'; and (5), leisure and place consumption as a practice of everyday life.

In practice, scholars have noticed that several kinds of mobile populations also consume and live (albeit temporarily) in gentrified neighbourhoods. International students (Malet-Calvo 2018), digital nomads (Polson 2020), residential tourists (Domínguez-Mujica, McGarrigle & Parreño-Castellano 2021), 'expats' (Kunz 2016), young migrants (King 2018), and lifestyle migrants (Hayes 2020) increasingly participate in the visitor economy, while simultaneously contributing to the expansion of the leisure-led restructuring of urban space. In their study about the Gothic quarter in Barcelona, López-Gay and colleagues (2021) found that tourist areas are also deemed to be attractive to young transnational gentrifiers, who prefer to live in more 'cosmopolitan' environments. The authors call for urban research 'to move from the implicitly assumed distinction between residents and visitors to consider instead how the population restructuring of central areas in contemporary cities could be the result of an assemblage of emerging forms of temporary dwelling, among which tourism is a powerful driver' (López-Gay, Cocola-Gant & Russo 2021, 2).

The recognition of the various kinds of mobilities and mobile life practices intersecting with tourism largely stems from urban scholarship's increasing engagement with the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry 2006). The 'mobilities turn' (Sheller 2017) in social sciences drew attention to the ways in which everyday life is inherently mobile, to varying extents and at different scales (Urry 2000). As Duncan (2012) points out, through the lens of mobilities, scholars have been able to address specific practices that obscure conventional definitions of travel, migration, and dwelling. Studies about lifestyle migration are exemplary of that. Usually depicted as retirees from richer countries moving somewhere sunny in lower latitudes, lifestyle migrants often carry out a 'poly-topical' existence (Stock 2006), as (temporary) residents of multiple places, and infusing everyday life with leisure and tourism-related activities.

Beyond migrant retirees, lifestyle migration literature has looked at an array of transnational mobilities performed by the relatively privileged, from business 'expatriates' to bohemian migration (Korpela 2020). When revisiting their original contribution to the field (Benson & O'Reilly 2009), Benson and O'Reilly concluded that lifestyle as a concept offers a way of introducing both choice and consumption into discussions about migration (Benson & O'Reilly 2015, 14). This is crucial as lifestyle migrants are often able to maximise their purchase power by resettling in lower-cost destinations – what Hayes (2014) calls 'geoarbitrage' –, thus impacting local destinations with their higher spendable income and consumption practices. In this sense, the convergence of various kinds of place-consumption practices by tourists, lifestyle migrants, and other transient populations, has

helped reshape the notion of transnational gentrification (Cocola-Gant & López-Gay, 2020). Scholars now argue that transnational gentrification currently encompasses more than only the socio-spatial transformation caused by foreign home-buyers, but also by those resulting from new place consumption patterns by a wider, more global, mobile class (Sigler & Wachsmuth 2020).

The concept of transnational gentrification thus elucidates the ways urban landscapes are transformed in order to cater for the consumption habits of a mobile clientele (Alexandri & Janoschka 2020) and, as a consequence, lead to the social and spatial dispossession and displacement of long-term residents. In particular, it shows that what is usually called gentrification in touristic cities seems to be produced by a global collection of privileged mobile dwellers, tourists, short-term residents of different profiles, and both transnational and local gentrifiers. The worldwide proliferation of consumptionscapes, such as the 'global Brooklyn' (Halawa & Parasecoli 2021), including the pop-up of specialty coffee shops (Bantman-Masum 2020), brunch eateries, and design boutiques (Zukin, Kasinitz & Chen 2016) are testament to how the old 'ABC' of gentrification (Art galleries, Boutiques, and Cafés) (Zukin 1998) are now crosscut by and embedded in global mobilities.

**Pathways for future research**

The last decade witnessed both the most international tourist arrivals in the world's history (1.459 billion in 2019) and its most drastic halt, due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak and its ensuing travel restrictions. The pandemic exposed some of the urban fragilities of cities which are (overly) dependent on tourism, and renewed the urgency for a constant examination of its impacts over local livelihoods, housing markets, and sustainability (Sheller 2021). In the following paragraphs, we highlight two emerging phenomena that seem to have been accelerated by the pandemic and which have not yet received enough scholarly attention.

The first phenomenon is the growing professionalisation of the STR market and how it can further extend the reach of transnational gentrification. As Cocola-Gant et al. (2021) found, amateur hosts have progressively outsourced the management of their properties to 'corporate hosts', that is, property managers who carry out all the aspects of running a STR, from interior design and responding to guests' enquiries, to changing linen and doing check-ins. By making the STR business more efficient, these commercial operators have become key players and have initiated a phenomenon of market concentration as they have the ability to secure high occupancy rates and, thus, profitability. In the US, companies, such as Vacasa, manage more than 30,000 properties. The success of 'corporate hosts' testify to the definitive end of a so-called 'sharing economy' model, and to its replacement by what authors have called 'platform real estate' (Field & Rogers 2019; Shaw 2018); characterised by the use of digital innovation and platform business models to ensure even more profitable real estate investment. The proliferation of listings managed by 'corporate hosts' has implications which remain to be explored. In particular, by using digital technology such as channel managers to commercialise the listings on different platforms, corporate hosts have made the STR market more resilient during the pandemic. While many

hotels closed down, STRs have been able to adapt to other forms of rentals, particularly to mid-term rentals for professionals who were able to work remotely. In terms of demand, the pandemic accelerated an emerging phenomenon, that is, the increased mobility of well-paid childless professionals working from home and able to change location as they wish. The result is the blurring of work and leisure activities which has the potential to further drive a process of gentrification in which some destinations experience an increase in transnational mobile populations.

In relation to this, the second phenomenon is the increasing importance of digital nomads among mobile populations. Digital nomads are professionals who work while travelling. Motivated by the possibility to combine travel, leisure, and work, this new class of transnational workers is composed by relatively privileged individuals who are able to decide their next location choice based on lifestyle criteria (Thompson 2018). Given that the pandemic has generalised and intensified practices of remote work, it is likely that larger cohorts of remote freelance workers will turn to digital nomadism as a possible lifestyle. Indeed, countries such as Greece, Costa Rica, Croatia, and Portugal among others, have established visa or fiscal regimes aiming to attract international remote workers.

In contrast with many of the populations analysed by lifestyle migration scholarship, work/production is as central to digital nomads as leisure/consumption. This entails a very specific need to secure work and business infrastructures, making remote/collaborative work viable, such as coworking spaces (Grazian 2020; Merkel 2019) or specialty coffee shops (Jung & Buhr 2021). In this sense, digital nomads' impact over urban landscapes may partially overlap with that of tourists, other lifestyle migrants, and global gentrifiers in terms of consumption, but it may also reach other infrastructures related to the provision of work-related support and professional sociability. In addition, understanding how cities accommodate digital nomads' work practices is also relevant as some of the spaces catering for privileged remote workers may increasingly impact less privileged, non-mobile, and precarious local remote workers, thus channelling urban transformation even further.

Whether in terms of housing or commercial landscape transformation, urban infrastructures seem to increasingly respond to a broad spectrum of mobile life practices and (more or less) temporary forms of dwelling, which cannot be neatly disaggregated. A challenge ahead is to take stock of those short/mid-term mobilities in terms of urban planning, which entails making them visible in formal records and official statistics.

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