«They have ruined everything»: Green gentrification in Ghent, Belgium

**Abstract**

In recent years, some critical scholars have started to link urban greening initiatives to processes of gentrification. Up till now, however, much remains to be known about this phenomenon which has been described as green gentrification. Focussing on three greening initiatives that were initiated over a two-decade period in one gentrifying neighbourhood of Ghent (Belgium), this study aims to contribute to the critical literature on green gentrification by highlighting the multi-faceted, dynamic, and symbiotic nature of the process.

Keywords: displacement; ecological gentrification; environmental gentrification; green gentrification; political ecology; urban greening

**Introduction**

Greening initiatives not only have become increasingly prevalent throughout the Western world as city planners and citizens are working toward a sustainable future, but also seem particularly promising by delivering a variety of environmental, economic, and social benefits. From bringing down greenhouse gasses and the installation of green economies to the promotion of public health and urban liveability, at first glance, the greening of our cities appears as an essential and unquestionable good. Recently, however, scholars from a variety of disciplines such as urban geography, sociology, urban planning, political ecology, and environmental science have started to challenge the often apolitical or “post-political discourse” around urban greening (cf., Swyngedouw, 2006; 2009). In particular, there is a concern that the instalment of environmental goods and/or the clean-up of environmental bads that are rolled out under the banner of “sustainability” could make neighbourhoods more appealing, thereby giving rise or exacerbating existing processes of gentrification. The fact that greening initiatives are not necessarily beneficial to everyone under all circumstances but, in fact, can entail social inequities is vividly maintained by Faber and Kimelberg (2014, p. 78):

[g]reen projects that create open space or otherwise aim to improve the environmental profile of a neighborhood can trigger increases in real estate prices, rents and property taxes, leading to economic displacement of the existing residents who had endured the deleterious effects of pollution and ecological degradation.

This phenomenon, which has been described as *green, ecological or environmental gentrification*, has received some empirical support in North-American cities. In fact, gentrification as a result of urban greening initiatives has been observed by scholars in cities such as Atlanta (Immergluck and Balan, 2018), Chicago (McKendry and Janos, 2015), Detroit (Montgomery, 2016), New York (Checker, 2011), Portland (Goodling, Green, and McClintock, 2015), San Francisco (Marche, 2015), Seattle (Dooling, 2009), Toronto (Dale and Newman, 2009), and Vancouver (Dale and Newman, 2009). Bryson (2012), for instance, looked at brownfield riverfront clean-up in Spokane, Washington and found that real estate speculation in the adjacent area followed almost immediately after clean-up efforts began; a process that resulted in property values rising by a quarter within a one-year period. Similarly, Immergluck and Balan (2017) studied the effect of the Atlanta Beltline (i.e., a 22-mile loop of trails and parks that was established through the conversion of abandoned railroad tracks) on housing values. Also here, in the absence of profound precautionary policies, housing values located within a half-mile of the project area soared significantly more than elsewhere in the city, hence, jeopardising the housing opportunities of lower-income residents living near the project area. By bringing the concept of gentrification to the fore, these studies question the view that urban greening initiatives are an unquestionable good that is distributed evenly across class and race (cf., Dooling, 2009). Indeed, as argued by Anguelovski (2016, p. 23):

[T]he caveat in green or ecological gentrification is that under the tenet of an apolitical, technical agenda such as ‘‘greening’’ or ‘‘sustainability’’ (with ecological improvements brought to the urban biophysical environment), municipalities [and I would argue also private and civil society actors] might push for projects that have a potential to be highly inequitable.

Although a growing body of research has started digging into the social effects of urban greening initiatives – and, as such, has started bringing «the political back into the practice of urban greening» (Anguelovski *et al*., 2018a, p. 8) – the topic is still understudied (Anguelovski, 2016). On the one hand, there is a lack of European studies (see Anguelovski *et al.*, 2018b; Beretta, 2018; Cucca, 2012 for notable exceptions in a European context). This gap in the literature is not without importance as Cucca (2012) has shown that due to differences in social welfare arrangements between North-American and European countries – the latter offering higher levels of decommodification – the effects of urban greening initiatives are likely to be different at the other side of the Atlantic. On the other hand, much remains to be understood about «the socio-spatial dynamics and ramifications of green gentrification» (Anguelovski *et al.*, 2018a, p. 3). In this paper, I will try and tease out the relationship between urban greening and gentrification by zooming in on the transformation of Brugse Poort, a gentrifying district of Ghent, Belgium that has been subject to profound greening over the last two decades. Drawing on a variety of data, I aim to contribute to the emerging literature on *environmental gentrification* by highlighting the often multi-faceted, dynamic, and symbiotic nature of the process. However, before presenting the main findings of this study, an overview of the research setting will be provided, followed by a discussion of the methods being used.

**Research context**

In this paper, I draw attention to Brugse Poort, one of the 25 city districts of Ghent, located northwest of the city centre. Established in the early 19th century as a result of an industrialization process that Ghent was undergoing, Brugse Poort not only housed some large textile mills and a steel-producing company but also attracted a mass of people willing to work. As urbanization, however, took place mainly in an unplanned and speculative way, this white working-class district soon became characterized by a chaotic urban tissue, poor housing, a high population density, and a lack of green space, some of which remain to this day (Oosterlynck & Debruyne, 2013).

While for decades a showcase for a vibrant community life and a soaring industry, in the period after the Second World War things started to change for the district. Not only did Brugse Poort – as other Ghent districts – faced an unprecedented urban flight of well-off inhabitants but also did it witness a series of factory closures through de-industrialization, leading to a process of neighbourhood decline (Oosterlynck & Debruyne, 2013). From the 1970s onwards Brugse Poort underwent another demographic transiformation as the remaining industry started recruiting labour migrants, mainly from Turkey and Maghreb countries. Also in the following decades, migration to the district firmly continued due to processes of family reunion and family formation and later on the opening up of the European Union which facilitated migration from Central and Eastern Europe. According to 2016 data (Stad Gent, 2019), 9843 out of 19,167 Brugse Poort residents have a foreign background, an incidence of 51.1%, significantly higher than the 32.6% Ghent average. Given problems of drug use, poverty, unemployment, illegal dumping and burglary, Brugse Poort suffered a bad reputation in the past. Yet, in the last two decades, things have started to turn around. Newspaper headlines such as «Everybody wants to live in Ghent (and most preferably in Brugse Poort)» (De Troyer, 2016), demonstrate how in recent years Brugse Poort has become a popular and hip neighbourhood, suitable for family life. In fact, starting in the 1990s and intensifying in the new millennium, Brugse Poort has become subject to processes of gentrification.

Whereas in the beginning gentrification was spurred dominantly by the actions of white middle-class families who started buying and rehabilitating the terraced houses originally populated by the industrial proletariat, soon it also became government-induced. More specifically, as the council felt that the housing stock and the population in neighbourhood did not sufficiently self-regenerate, an urban renewal project was launched (which was implemented in 2002 and ran until 2018). This project, which was named *Oxygen for Brugse Poort*, aimed at the regeneration of Brugse Poort via a broad environmental strategy and comprised two priorities. First, it foresaw in the (re)development of six green spaces, and eventually also in the transformation of a brownfield site into a community park of 61,000 m2 that for decades had been a point of conflict between the city council, project developers and neighbourhood residents. Second, the project also included the establishment of a safe pathway for vulnerable road users running through the neighbourhood. By administering “oxygen” to the neighbourhood, it was hoped to improve the general liveability and the quality of life for longtime residents which for too long had been left to their own. However, by greening Brugse Poort, the council also intended to establish a social mix, this from a belief in its wholesome effects on longtime residents and the city as a whole (cf., Bridge, Butler and Lees, 2012).

The promotion of urban greening, however, has not been restricted to the actions of the city council. In fact, on various occasions over the past few years, a fraction of mostly gentrifying residents has actively advocated for additional greening with two initiatives standing out. First, since 2015, some residents have started to experiment with diverse socionatural configurations through the creation of so-called living streets. The concept of this project, which was launched in 2013, is fairly straightforward: streets are made (partially or fully) car-free for a period of two months and are transformed by neighbourhood residents into a green space comprising things such as raised garden beds, picnic tables, flower beds and French boules courts. In turn, this transformed space allows for encounters between neighbours and social events. To gain local government approval, advocating residents need to inform and consult other street residents via open information sessions and home visits. Living streets are devised by a partnership of loosely organised resident groups, a civil society organisation and the city council. Whereas residents join forces and take the initiative to transform their street, the latter two actors provide the framework and the necessary support to make it all possible. For instance, the civil society organization *Trojan Lab*, who initially came up with the idea, supports advocating street residents by providing both building materials and informational flyers to distribute in the neighbourhood. Moreover, they also provide advocating residents with the opportunity to experiment with sustainable transportation such as electric or cargo bikes for commuting and shopping. In turn, the city council supports *Trojan Lab* through an annual grant of 140,000 euros.[[1]](#footnote-1) The ultimate goal is to gain insights on transportation and street design and how these can be reimagined so as to make the transition to a climate-neutral city. The initiative has especially flourished in Brugse Poort. For instance, during the 2016 edition 18 Ghent streets participated of which no less than 5 rolled out in the neighbourhood. However, the initiative has also been picked up by a dozen other European cities under which also Turin, who view the initiative as a way to rethink the use of public space.

Second, since 2011, some neighbourhood residents have come together in a neighbourhood committee named *FC the neighbourhood* to oppose the plans of a project developer who acquired a plot of 8000m2 in the middle of Brugse Poort (i.e., a site in Meibloem street) and who aimed to build 45 residential units on the grounds. The core members of the committee, mainly gentrifying residents, have contended that Brugse Poort is already densely populated and instead has urged for local shops (such as a repair shop for clothes and bicycles) and additional greenery. Although the developer’s plans were initially supported by the city council, the efforts of the committee have not been without success. In the result section, I will examine how greening has been entangled with the gentrification of Brugse Poort, by drawing attention to three urban greening initiatives that have characterized the neighbourhood, namely (i) the urban renewal project, (ii) the living streets initiative, and (iii) the struggle over Meibloem site.

**Methods**

The research reported here was carried out as part of a publicly funded six-year PhD project on gentrification in the context of Brugse Poort. In this attention was also given to the relationship between urban greening and gentrification. In order to examine this phenomenon, 42 interviews were conducted with actors involved in the neighbourhood. Interviews fall into one of three categories. First of all, 37 neighbourhood residents were interviewed, 20 of which were longtime residents and 17 were gentrifying residents. The longtime residents all lived in Brugse Poort as a child or have been living in the district for at least 25 years. Longtime residents had a mean age of 45 and some had a migration background (8/20). Most were occupying working-class or intermediate positions (16/20)[[2]](#footnote-2) and held high school degrees (16/20). In contrast, gentrifying residents had no connection to Brugse Poort as a child and had moved to the district in the past 25 years. Gentrifying residents had a mean age of 40 and none has a migration background. Most had a acquired salariat positions (14/17) and held bachelor degrees or higher (15/17). Second, I also interviewed 3 members of the action group *Stop the Demolition* that contested the urban renewal project. Finally, 2 community workers were interviewed, one of which who worked in the context of the urban renewal project. All interviews were conducted at a location of the interviewee’s preference, lasted between 40 and 180 minutes and followed a semi-structured protocol. Community workers and members of the action group were asked to go over greening initiatives in the neighbourhood and to discuss their role within and views on these initiatives. Furthermore, these actors were also encouraged to elaborate on broader dynamics and developments in Brugse Poort together with their views on these issues. The interview guide for neighbourhood residents followed a similar structure. Next to questions on broader dynamics and developments in Brugse Poort, neighbourhood residents were also invited to discuss their ties in and with the neighbourhood in the past and present. With regard to urban greening, residents were asked to talk over greening initiatives in the neighbourhood and the politics at play in and the impacts of such initiatives as well as the configuration of actors perceived to be pursuing these politics. Later on, all interviews were transcribed orthographically. Transcripts were read multiple times and complemented with memos and already existing notes that were taken during and/or immediately after interviews. Finally, a thematic analysis was carried out using the qualitative data analysis software package *Nvivo*. In addition, interviews were supplemented with data coming from policy documents, media coverage, and blogs on greening initiatives taken in the neighbourhood. Finally, an appeal was made also to relevant statistical data of neighbourhood census tracts so as to complement the analysis.

**Results**

Urban regeneration through greening

When in 2000 the city council started drawing up the specifics of the planned urban renewal project in Brugse Poort, one of its main challenges was to find support in the neighbourhood. This was mostly due to the fact that, in order to make room for the planned (re)development of six green spaces, the project stipulated, inter alia, in the demolition of 89 terraced houses (see Figure 1, top left). A long standing struggle of a local task group, named *Green Valley Green*, to turn the neighbourhood’s largest brownfield site into an urban park provided an opportunity for the city council to demonstrate it was serious about urban renewal and to gain the necessary support (Oosterlynck and Debruyne, 2013). More precisely, after a period of two decades in which the council left the door half-open for real estate development on large parts of the site and in which the task group successfully fought off a dozen proposals by multiple developers, the council took the drastic and costly decision to buy the land and earmark 90 per cent of it for park development. As such, the 61,000 m2 brownfield site, which throughout the years gradually had transformed into an “informal urban green space” (cf., Rupprecht and Byrne, 2017), was now officially being marked as a formal green space being part of the urban renewal project. Although this decision was highly welcomed, the urban renewal project still met with some opposition. Especially far-left activists living in the neighbourhood took issue with the project. These residents argued that urban greening was only a means for capital accumulation and gentrification and thus not an end in itself (see Figure 1, top right). Moreover, they criticized the fact that the project foresaw in expropriation through the demolition of the aforementioned terraced houses. In fact, a Marxist grouping who in 2002 formed the action group *Stop the Demolition* (i.e., a group that called for urban renewal without any evictions), referred to *Oxygen for Brugse Poort* as an «urban *displacement* project». Although the city council argued that displacement should be prevented and offered social housing in the neighbourhood to some expropriated residents, it is questionable whether the process was in fact forestalled. This is not only because the social housing offered by the city was at times unsuitable (e.g., dog owners could not take their dogs with them) but also, and more importantly, because of the council’s narrow conception of displacement (i.e., solely defined as physical dislocation as a consequence of expropriation). Even leaving aside forms of social, political, and cultural displacement, it is not unthinkable that *Oxygen for Brugse Poort* also contributed to other forms of physical dislocation, certainly when taking into account the absence of preventive measures. This is, in fact, what is suggested by a former community worker. In her experience, the urban renewal project unleashed a sales boom among landlords holding properties adjacent to areas announced for development into new green spaces. Searching to extract the capital gains that ensued a vision of a green neighbourhood – and thus endeavouring to close the green gap (Anguelovski et al., 2018b; cf., with the rent gap theory developed by Smith, 1979) – this gave rise to a displacement process of vulnerable tenants through illicit evictions.

I still remember when the project was launched. Streets were red of ‘for sale’ signs because a lot of owners had waited until the park, where their house was next to, was presented to push up the price. I saw it happening in front of my own eyes. Tenants lived there. (…) There were people who have been evicted from their home after a week. [The owners said] “You don’t have a rental agreement, so you need to move within a week”. (…) Those rental properties that have not been maintained for years were suddenly put up for sale en masse. (…) There was no way that people who lived in those rental properties would also be able to buy them. (…) So there has been displacement and it went really fast.[[3]](#footnote-3) (Former community worker in Brugse Poort)

Moreover, greening projects seemed to have attracted a fraction of the white middle class. Indeed, during interviews multiple gentrifying residents mentioned to have moved to Brugse Poort not only because it was an «affordable» district but also as they perceived the district as more «liveable» and «green» compared to other former industrial and affordable districts of Ghent. As such, the city council’s plan to entice “young two-income households” to the district via an urban greening strategy played out successfully (Van Bouchaute, 2013, p. 40). This was also proclaimed by the former Ghent mayor who argued in an interview that *Oxygen for Brugse Poort* “was very successful, for you can see that we [i.e., the city council] attracted a whole lot of new, young families” (Dutry, 2013, p. 24). The influx of middle-class gentrifiers into the neighbourhood is also reflected in census data on the financial situation of residents. In fact, whereas in 1999 the average annual net income of Brugse Poort residents living in census tracts located within the urban renewal project area amounted to 8905 euros, a decade later it soared by 69.71% to 15,113 euros. This is a staggering number given the fact that, in the same period, the average annual net income of residents in Ghent only rose by 16.36%, respectively from 16,623 euros to 19,342 euros. As the neighbourhood became popular with a fraction of the white middle-class, housing costs also went up. Although no official numbers do exist on evolutions in the rental market, there are numbers on housing prices. For instance, in the period 2010-2014 average housing prices in Brugse Poort rose no less than 36.99%, respectively from 152,367 euros to 208,735 euros. In contrast, average housing prices in Ghent in general increased only by 13.94%, respectively from 217,514 euros to 247,828 euros. This was also observed by longtime residents, some of whom were experiencing displacement pressures:

It is expensive now. I have heard that houses in Brugse Poort are increasing in value because the better sort wants to come and live here. Before Brugse Poort was the “Dirty Poort”, the “Poor Poort”. But now a better class wants to live here and they try to somewhat displace us. (Nicole, longtime resident)

A lot of people are leaving because rental prices are very high. This is horrible. They exaggerate enormously with the rents. (…) Consequently, most just flee from here. (…) For an apartment with two bedrooms you pay 800 euros. For 800 euros, you have a villa in Sint-Amandsberg or Drongen [i.e., two other city districts of Ghent]. (Imane, longtime resident)

Here [in Brugse Poort], they are asking at least 200,000 euro for a terraced house without making much of fuss. (…) If you don’t have two incomes, it is no longer possible to acquire property. We’re lucky to be able to live with my mother-in-law and to have no costs. My wife only earns 600 euros and I too only have a modest salary. If we would live independently, we would be paying a 1000-euros rent and 200 euros on utilities. Combined with cable and internet, we would easily pay 1300 euros. (Jack, longtime resident)

Up till now, I have demonstrated how the Ghent city council used greening as a conscious strategy in its search for a “social mix”, a concept which has been argued to be euphemism of gentrification (cf., Lees, Butler and Bridge, 2012). I have also shown that this greening strategy has resulted in actual (pressures of) physical displacement, making us question the often assumed apolitical nature of greening (i.e., a view in which greening is framed as an unquestionable good). In the next section, I will further tease out the complicated relationship between urban greening on the one hand and gentrification on the other hand by zooming in on two practices that were not explicitly aimed at changing neighbourhood demographics.

Before going into this, however, I do want to focus attention on the translation of greening initiatives that were included in the urban renewal project into actual socionatural configurations. I want to argue that, apart from soaring housing costs, these greening initiatives entailed other perils. More precisely, whereas gentrifying residents saw the greening of Brugse Poort as a factor that pulled them toward the neighbourhood, some longtime residents initially took issue with park development due to historically grown associations that parks evoked. This became very clear when discussing the park development within the urban renewal project in an interview with Marilyn, a longtime resident:

Marilyn: The first moment that it was announced (…), I felt like “lads, a park… this will become a garbage dump”.

Interviewer: And why did you thought so?

Marilyn: Because there is a lot of litter in Brugse Poort. (…) The first moment I wasn’t dying for it. No, frankly I thought “lads, again a park”. (…) Here you had the *Luizengevecht* [i.e., an already existing park with few entrances]. (…) We knew, everyone knew, drugs was being traded there, that it was being used there, that it was injected there. (…) And with that we got a negative image of a park.

As the few existing parks in the neighbourhood were linked to decade-long practices of fly tipping, drug use and drug trading, many longtime residents were all but excited when the development of new parks was announced in the neighbourhood. It is important to note, however, that this opposition was not to park development or greening in itself but rather to a specific socionatural configuration of parks, namely as uncontrolled, unorganized and unsecured spaces. This was, for instance, evident in the design phase of the aforementioned brownfield site into a community park. In fact, when the city council decided to buy the land it also decided to involve the task group *Green Valley Green* in the design phase. The task group, that mainly comprised middle-class residents from the local area, was happy to assent and quickly proposed a design for Green Valley that preserved what was deemed to be a “natural environment”. As one task group member declared in the newspaper:

I am in favour of an ecological park. That is also more or less promised, but it is not yet clear. There is already an intense plant growth that we need to cherish. It should not be a nature reserve in the city, but it should be a public-friendly park where children can play sports and romp. It also cannot be a nice looking pond park. You have to be able to see nature.

By stressing the fact that the land should not become «a nice looking pond park», the task group opposed an ostentatiously constructed and delineated environment that was felt to be “unnatural”. In the same vein, the task group took issue with other elements that were perceived to go against or disturb “nature”. Although most other neighbourhood residents also supported the development of a park, their vision on what it should look like (i.e., the wished socionatural configuration) did often not coincide with that of the task group. This is eloquently discussed by a former community worker who tried to get the voice out of the inhabitants of some social housing tower blocks adjacent to the site:

[Residents of the social housing tower blocks said] “Please, enough lighting! Because otherwise we do not dare to enter that park". In contrast, the task group had something like “No lighting because the birds will not be able to brood”. As such, I really thought like “I have to get out the voice of the entire neighbourhood and the voice of the task group, but these are completely opposed interests”.

While both groups proposed a configuration that is equally ‘natural’ (cf., Swyngedouw, 2006), this did not prevent that the voice of the residents of the social housing tower blocks was excluded.This is because the city council decided to only include members of *Green Valley Green* in the design phase of the park due to their long lasting advocacy for park development. As a consequence, certain practices were facilitated while others were complicated or excluded. The question what the park should look was thus a political one and the answer to it was all but socially neutral**.** As this question was not tackled in a democratic manner (e.g. because the debate was dominated by one), the resulting socionatural configuration privileged members of the task group while at the same time marginalizing inhabitants of the social housing tower blocks.

Liveable for whom?

Since 2015, some neighbourhood gentrifiers have started to promote additional greening in Brugse Poort through the creation of living streets (see Figure 1, bottom left). This initiative in which residents transform their street into a place for greenery and social living with the help of a civil society organization, has been endorsed by the city council. For instance, the alderman of Mobility has argued the following:

Living streets are a great example of how people can reconquer their city and street. Residents take matters into their own hands to improve the quality of life in their street. The initiative comes from Ghentians themselves. We find this very important and as such want to stimulate it as much as we can. (City of Ghent, 2015)

Although framed as an initiative in which the «people» can «reconquer» their street so as to improve the general «quality of life», also the living street project stirred up commotion. As became clear, interviewees who spoke out against the living streets were often longtime residents. Due to the history of the neighbourhood, these residents were, when economically active, often employed in low-skilled jobs and did or did not have a migration background. Opponents felt that they were being displaced through this initiative on a *cultural*, *political* and *social* level. On a *cultural* level, it is clear that living streets not only intervene on a physical scale but also urge residents to move in a more sustainable way. Opponents indicated that it is not always possible for them to meet this standard. Employed in low-skilled jobs – jobs that more often are (i) located in remote areas with few public transport options available, (ii) characterized by shift or night work, and (iii) car-related – this group argued that, in contrast to urban professionals, they did not have the same amount of freedom to decide *whether*, *when*, and *how* to move. As such, opponents, just as the yellow vest movement more recently, tried to re-politicize an apolitical discourse by pointing to the social consequences of environmental initiatives and the unequal distribution of these between groups.

The problem is that now people have come to live in the neighbourhood and have acquired a cheap house. And what is happening? They have started making the rules. (…) They are changing your way of living. Not everyone is lucky enough to sit there with a glass of wine for the entire day. Not everyone is lucky enough to have the opportunity to work from home. We need to work. We need to earn our bread (…) I am encountering difficulties because I am a cabdriver (…) We always try to reach a client within 15 minutes. When I need to walk 15 minutes to my car alone, I will get into trouble. (Mourad, longtime resident)

Taken together with the urban renewal project that had a profound impact on Brugse Poort’s identity and demography, opponents increasingly wondered whether there is still a place for residents who cannot maintain a way of life that is in line with the new image of a hip and green neighbourhood. In addition, as greening initiatives are rebranding Brugse Poort into a “healthy,” “green,” and “sustainable” place, bodies and practices that do not meet this image are coming under scrutiny. Several longtime residents felt (as if) they were being labelled by advocating residents as «asocial» or «embittered». Some interviewees felt «bullied» and «pushed out» by gentrifying residents who wanted «them and their cars gone» (see Authors Anonymized, 2019). In their view, rather than a working-class or migrant neighbourhood, Brugse Poort is increasingly a playground for highly-educated white gentrifiers to shape and use according to their wishes. To make matters worse, longtime residents felt there was not much they could do about the living streets as the initiative is in line with the city’s ambitions to become climate neutral in 2050. As such, on a *political* level, many longtime residents indicated that their concerns are ignored, both by gentrifiers (who they percieve to be untouchable) and by the city council, something which results in feelings of powerlessness.

I think they’re laughing at us. (…) Because what is the point? It does not matter [whether you make your voice heard or not]. I just find it really annoying that they haven’t thought about anybody else. It is like “it is this way and you have to accept it”. (…) I am seeking to sell everything here and move to Mariakerke [i.e., another district of Ghent]. (Cynthia, longtime resident)

All in all, this gave rise to feelings of *social* displacement. A significant group of longtime residents stated feeling less and less at home in the neighbourhood. They argued no longer recognizing or identifying with Brugse Poort and showed a tendency to withdraw from the neighbourhood.

I just keep calm now because I know that from the moment I find something, I’m out of here. (…) I’m telling you, I’m seeing this, in the last year it has changed rapidly around here and this is because of these young families, Belgian young families, particular those hipsters. They have ruined everything, out of self-interest. I really am a stranger in my own neighborhood. We have the impression that we aren’t getting a say on a thing around here. This creates a situation in which you come home, get in, close the door and don’t want to have anything to do with what is going on outside. … I always used to say “Brugse Poort is great, I like living here,” but that they have taken away. (Bilal, incumbent resident)

[PLACE FIGURE 1 HERE]

**Figure 1.** Top left, demolition of 89 terraced houses; Top right, graffiti quote on the urban renewal project saying «They’re not aiming at greening but at shekels!!»; Bottom left, living street in Meibloem Street; Bottom right, 31 houses in the process of renovation. Top pictures by Fixatief vzw. Bottom pictures by the city of Ghent (left) and by the author (right).

When other actors come around

According to a community worker, actors such as property developers, realtors and other investors have, as a result of an on-going gentrification process, come to perceive Brugse Poort as a “gold mine”. This became very clear in 2011 when a furniture factory and an adjacent bowling alley located in the middle of the neighbourhood closed doors. The lot of 8000m2 was acquired by a developer who aimed to build 45 residential units on the grounds; a plan that was supported by the city council. Yet, this was not to the liking of some neighbourhood residents. In fact, in November 2011, a group of (mainly gentrifying) residents allied in a neighbourhood committee, named *FC the neighbourhood*, to oppose the developer’s plans. The committee contended that Brugse Poort was already densely populated and instead urged for local shops (such as a repair shop for clothes and bicycles) and additional greenery. Under neighbourhood pressure, in early 2012, the city council already had bought a piece of 1400m2 from the project developer so as to make room for a neighbourhood facility. This compensation, however, was considered insufficient by the committee who in January 2013 mobilised other neighbourhood residents to issue statements of objections (*N*= 75). However, even before a decision could be made on the development application, it was withdrawn by the developer in March 2013 as it became clear that in its current form would in no circumstances be positively evaluated due to issues of safety. What followed was a repetition of this scenario. More precisely, the developer somewhat changed its plans and issued another development application in the summer of 2015. In turn, the committee again mobilised neighbourhood residents and issued 379 statements of objections and publicly declared they «preferred a park». This strategy proved fruitful as the city council, in a change of heart, also began opposing the development.[[4]](#footnote-4) More specifically, in December 2015, the council refused the developer’s application to construct a new road, hence plummeting the chances that a development application would ever be approved. Finally, in September 2017, a land exchange agreement was signed between the city council and the property developer. In exchange for the lot in Brugse Poort, the developer was granted a lot in another district of Ghent that is currently object of urban renewal and waterfront redevelopment. Rather than subjected to gentrification, the regained lot now will be developed according to the initial wishes of the neighbourhood committee. While part of the surface area is reserved for the development of neighbourhood facilities, the biggest part will become a new green area. As such, this example shows that calls for greening can also be used in attempt to forestall gentrification.

In the last year, however, realtors have started to rapidly buy up property in the vicinity of the lot. For instance, when 31 contiguous rental houses located in Meibloem Street and one of its side streets were put up for sale, they were bought by two realtors who renovated the houses (see Figure 1, bottom right). At this moment, the 31 houses are partly being sold, partly being rented out. Whereas rents used to fluctuate between 450 and 600 euros per month, after renovations rents now go as high as 1050 euros per month. Houses that are not rented out are listed for 359,000 euros, a staggering number when taking into account that in 2015 the median annual net income of residents in Brugse Poort amounted to 15,256 euros. Also in other side streets of the lot realtors have succeeded in acquiring multiple former rental houses that after renovation were put up for sale. Although it is uncertain to what extent the prospect of a new park has played a role in the decision of realtors to buy property in the vicinity of the lot, it is nevertheless clear that these actors are trying to capitalize on this new green space by appropriating it as a unique selling point. This is evident when analysing the descriptions of property listings in the vicinity of the park. Even though the new green space has not been realized, descriptions almost always begin or end with a reference to the future green space as is evident from the examples below.

Next to the new park Meibloem (Meibloemstraat) you find this renovated property in Ooievaarstraat. With the bicycle you can immediately enter the terrace. (…)

In Zonnebloemstraat you find this nice town house with two spacious bedrooms (+- 16m2) – completely stripped and given a new look. (…) Moreover, On walking distance, in Meibloemstraat – at the old bowlingsite, there will be a park of no less than 9000 square meters!

**Conclusion**

In a recent article, Anguelovski *et al.* (2018b, p. 16) have argued that there is a need «to better understand processes and outcomes of green gentrification and inequalities». Indeed, although in recent years there have been an increasing number of critical studies on urban greening, fact of the matter is that as a field of investigation green gentrification has only started to emerge. This study, focussing on three greening initiatives that were initiated over a two-decade period in one gentrifying neighbourhood of Ghent (Belgium), has elaborated our understanding on green gentrification in three ways.

First, on a more general level, the results of this study demonstrate that processes of green gentrification can be *dynamic*. By this I mean that urban greening initiatives not only can facilitate and kick-start processes of gentrification – something which is increasingly demonstrated by critical scholars – but also that things can work the other way around, namely that gentrification processes (once these are in play) can give rise to calls for (additional) greening. Indeed, as our three cases make clear, gentrification and greening have contributed both to each other and have functioned as a feedback loop. More precisely, it is clear how the urban renewal project has contributed to processes of gentrification. Following this, many of the newly arrived residents attracted by this project have started to advocate for additional green space via the creation of living streets and the struggle over Meibloem site. In turn, these initiatives have contributed to the image of a hip, green and liveable neighbourhood which is currently being sold by project developers who are pushing processes of gentrification one step further. This observation is important not only as it hints that processes of green gentrification could be self-reinforcing but also because, and this has been argued by Gould and Lewis (2017), both casual directions have distributional implications.

Second, and following on the previous comment, this study shows that greening initiatives entail social consequences. More specifically, whereas greening initiatives allow, give rise to or facilitate certain practices, processes, discourses and people, at the same time it is marginalizing, hindering or excluding others. As the first two cases make clear, these consequences are not necessarily evenly distributed (certainly when discussions do not take place in a democratic manner). This means that questions over urban greening are essentially political. As such, this study buttresses the growing body of research that challenges the assumption, prevalent in the discourse around greening initiatives, that urban greening is an unquestionable good. However, while most studies have predominantly signalled soaring housing costs and, hence, physical displacement as a risk, this study has shown the risks associated with green gentrification are *multi-faceted*. Indeed, next to physical displacement this research reveals that vulnerable residents also run risk of being culturally, politically, and socially displaced as a result of greening initiatives in general and the socionatural configurations that are installed through these initiatives in particular.

Third, the current study shows that the process of green gentrification can easily emerge without the actors calling for urban greening also working toward gentrification. In fact, as the third case makes clear, gentrification can be the net result of urban greening initiatives even when the actors initiating these are explicitly focussed at forestalling gentrification. This is because processes of green gentrification can unroll via a complex course of *symbiosis*, in which one actor responds to the initiatives taken by another. Indeed, while we can try and encourage actors initiating urban greening initiatives to do so in a democratic manner, this will not automatically prevent gentrification as, at the same time, other actors (such as property developers or city councils) can capitalize on these initiatives in their search for profit or urban growth, thereby pushing processes of gentrification one step further.

By stressing the often *dynamic*, *multi-faceted*, and *symbiotic* nature of green gentrification, I hope to have painted a more complex picture of the process. This picture also entails some policy and research implications. With regard to research, this study points toward the importance of taking into account long-term dynamics, multiple actors and multiple forms of displacement into analyses on green gentrification as otherwise important issues of the process could easily be overlooked. With regard to policy, it is suggested that it is necessary for policy leaders to abandon an often apolitical discourse on urban greening as this could foreclose important discussions on the distributional effects of greening initiatives. Moreover, it is essential to make sure that greening initiatives are discussed and initiated in a democratic manner and, if necessary, are accompanied by precautionary measures that forestall other actors exploiting these initiatives. In essence, the latter comes down to intervening in the free market as within an uncontrolled market environmental goods and bads not only are unevenly distributed but every attempt to correct such injustice explicitly (i.e., in contrast to an informal urban green strategy) and fully (i.e., in contrast to a partially greening strategy) is bound to bring into being new injustices (e.g., processes of displacement as the well-to-do can easily occupy these new environments while project developers and realtors can easily capitalize on these). What is necessary is thus a radical politics in which the order of things is disrupted through a rejection of the prevailing social distribution in the name of equality (Swyngedouw, 2009).

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1. Since 2018, the city’s Department of Living Together, Well-being and Health took over the tasks of *Trojan Lab*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Categories of occupational status are based on the European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC). This classification is the EU variant of the International Standard Classification of Occupations 1988 (ISCO88). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Although in Flanders property owners are only allowed to terminate a lease early under specific conditions (e.g., when renovations are planned or when the owner or one of its family members are planning to move in) and with a notice of six months, at the bottom of the market, properties are often rented to tenants without any formal agreement making the latter especially vulnerable. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This turnaround was first noticeable in October 2014, when the city council proposed to buy the lot from the developper at the original purchase price, something the developer declined. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)