This article investigates the early period of “gentrification” of the inner residential districts of London, when the process was particularly rich in cultural meaning and symbolism. It focuses on the distinctive culture of the gentrifiers, including styles of house refurbishment, interior design, gastronomy, entertaining, networking, and amateur property speculation, and suggests that this culture allowed the middle-class incomers to make sense of their new life choices and social identities. The gentrifiers promoted an idea of the “urban village” that enabled them to be both part of the inner city and separate from it, close to its amenities but cut off from its social problems. As the process developed momentum from the late 1960s onward, they used their influence as cultural producers and opinion formers to comment on the process of gentrification in a way that combined self-promotion, satire, guilt, and exculpation.

**Keywords:** gentrification; middle classes; renovation; urban conservation; lifestyle

**From the early 1950s onward**, the inner residential districts of London began to be transformed by a phenomenon that did not at the time have a name. The capital’s young professional classes, finding themselves priced out of established middle-class areas like Hampstead, Highgate, and Chelsea, began to move into areas with attractive period houses in convenient locations, but often in need of renovation and alongside much poorer areas. This process began in the Canonbury area of Islington; spread to Barnsbury and other parts of Islington, as well as Camden, Notting Hill, Primrose Hill, Kentish Town, Holland Park, and West Greenwich in the 1960s; and reached as far as Hackney in East London and parts of South London like Lambeth, Battersea, Clapham, and Fulham in the 1970s.

The early gentrification of London occurred, to use Alan Warde’s distinction, through the “collective social action” of middle-class pioneers rather than through “organized capital,” as in the later example of the Docklands.1 These pioneers used their educational and cultural capital to identify the telltale signs of so-called “hot spots” and “up-and-coming” areas, and shore up the value of their properties once they had moved in. By the mid-1960s, they had developed their own distinctive culture, including styles of house refurbishment, interior design, cuisine, entertaining, and networking, as a way of making sense of
their new life choices and social identities. Since many of the pioneers were
members of the cultural professions—artists, writers, journalists, academics,
publishers, architects, and advertising and television executives—gentrification
was a media phenomenon as well as a sociological process. A significant pro-
portion of the gentrifiers were left-wing, a politics that they had developed at
university or in their work cultures, and which partly accounted for their will-
ingness to settle in working-class areas. They used their influence as cultural
producers and opinion formers to comment on the process in a way that
uneasily combined self-promotion, satire, guilt, and exculpation.

This cultural work was all the more significant because gentrification only
interspersely emerged as a subject of political controversy. As Ruth Glass
argued in her groundbreaking analysis of the changing social composition of
North London in the early 1960s, it was a largely unplanned, incremental
process that occurred in the political vacuum created by the decline in the
heavily directed municipal planning of the immediate postwar period. It took
time for middle-class house deals, removals, and renovations to be completed,
and if these phenomena were happening simultaneously but independently in
different properties in the same neighborhood, whole areas could be trans-
formed before the process was formally identified. Although Glass had given
this process a name in academic circles, “gentrification” was not a term used
in the British media until the early 1970s. Few of the early middle-class
incomers would have described themselves as “gentrifiers.” This article deals
with this period of early “gentrification” as a specific moment in British cul-
tural history, when the process was particularly rich in meaning and symbol-
ism, partly because it was not always clearly named or defined. The cultural
politics of gentrification took various forms: techniques of house refurbish-
ment and urban conservation; new types of urban lifestyle involving interior
design, gastronomy, and home entertaining; an interest in rising house prices
and the shifting status of residential areas; and textual representations of the
gentrifiers, often involving satire and self-mockery.

HOUSE REFURBISHMENT AND URBAN CONSERVATION

Before the 1950s, the North London borough of Islington was a down-at-
heel area, its once grand Regency and early Victorian houses split into poorly
maintained, multi-occupation tenements. Then, in a process that began slowly
and accelerated rapidly from the early 1960s onward, middle-class incomers
began buying up slum properties and ex-rooming houses and transforming
them into attractive dwellings. Given that much of the impact of this early
gentrification remained unstated, many contemporary commentators sought
to make sense of it through careful attention to the changing visual character
of neighborhoods. At first, the emphasis in these accounts was primarily on
esthetics. One of the earliest media representations of gentrification, a 1953
Good Housekeeping fashion shoot in which models posed in the doorways of restored Georgian houses in Canonbury, focused on “lost beauty discovered, lovely houses salvaged from the past.” "What catches the imagination,” the article stated, “is the grand reconstruction and restoring of the old, fine Georgian places. In the rows of dirty faced, neglected houses, the rebuilt ones stand out like good teeth among bad." But later observers used the changed appearance of particular areas to comment on less visible social processes. Michael Thompson lived in North London between 1966 and 1971, working for a building firm in order to finance his studies in economics and anthropology. In his book Rubbish Theory, he examined the silent power struggle between two groups in Islington around this time: the working-class tenants (whom he calls the “Ron-and-Cliffs,” after two of the most common names he hears in pubs in the area) and the middle-class “knockers-through.”

Thompson understood that, for the gentrifiers, renovation was not simply a case of repointing bulging brickwork, touching up the paintwork, and retiling the roof. It was a statement about a new kind of lifestyle that was recognizably but not ostentatiously middle-class. In place of the hardboard front doors studied with plastic bell pushes of the “Ron-and-Cliffs,” the “frontier middle classes” fitted pseudo-Georgian, paneled doors, restored the fanlights, and added lacquered brass knockers. A blue-and-white enamel number plate served as “a little touch of provincial France proclaiming that the owner drinks Hirondelle Vin Ordinaire with his Quiche Lorraine for his dinner and not Light Ale with his ham-and-egg pie for his tea.” The railed verandas on the first floor were painted with black gloss paint and filled with geraniums; navy-blue Venetian blinds replaced the net curtains favored by the working-class tenants. Through their enlarged basement windows, one could see that the middle classes had knocked through their dividing walls to make the house lighter and more spacious, and laid down quarry-tile floors or simply removed the carpets to reveal the original boards. As central heating was now ameliorating the problem of heating larger rooms, getting rid of interior walls became a familiar middle-class signifier of modernity and freedom. In the mid-1960s, “knocking through” was a euphemism for “gentrification,” perhaps because it identified the process with the creative restoration of individual houses rather than more problematic changes in the social make-up of neighborhoods.

Thompson did not conduct systematic ethnographic observation or interviews with informants; his research method was simply to look closely at the exteriors of the houses, and even through their windows. In a sense, his approach mirrored the amateur anthropology being undertaken by the gentrifiers themselves. They looked for these implicit signs of middle-class refurbishment in other houses, as well as more obvious evidence like sand on the sidewalk, cement mixers, Dumpsters, and dump trucks, to reassure themselves that there were “people like us” in the area and that they had made the right decision to move there. In the days before national DIY chains and superstores, refurbishment was time-consuming, involving trips to builders’
merchants to buy materials and negotiations with unregistered, casual labor-ers doing jobs unbeknownst to the Inland Revenue.8 The booming contempo-
rary market for architectural salvage and reclamation materials like old 
fireplaces, floorboards, and bricks was then almost nonexistent. Thompson 
argued that the urban middle classes were successfully transforming dilapi-
dated houses into socially valuable forms through their superior knowledge 
about the housing market and their capacity to determine what constituted 
“good taste” in renovation.

In his 1974 book, Soft City, Jonathan Raban identifies a similar phenome-
non occurring in the late 1960s in a Georgian square on the border of Islington 
and Holloway. As a resident of the square, Raban notes how young couples 
like “Nigel and Pamela, Jeremy and Nicola” (these middle-class names being 
used, as in Thompson’s account, as shorthand for certain kinds of lifestyle and 
attitude) began to visit it on Sunday afternoons. Like Thompson, Raban 
describes the process in visual terms, in this case through the eyes of the 
prospective gentrifiers:

They stared at it squint-eyed and, after their first blank shock at the mean 
disorder of the place, they learned to look at it with affection. They saw a uni-
form line of white fronts, with brass knockers in place of the tangle of electric 
bells; they put leaves on the trees; they stripped the pavements of fish-and-chip 
papers; they looked at the people on the streets, thought for a while, and came 
up with the word cosmopolitan.9

Raban is scathing about these couples who see the purchase of a house as 
“an act of conscience,” and “search out ‘unspoiled’ areas in the city, where 
they can live conspicuously cheek-by-jowl with the polyglot poor.”10 It is 
telling that he focuses less on the renovation of individual houses than on 
urban conservation, an area where the middle classes undoubtedly grouped 
together to promote their own interests:

It was regarded as a small victory for conservation that the wall at the back 
of the garden was kept high, so that the tenants of the new council low-rise 
flats would not be able to watch the sunbathing Brahmins leafing through the 
New York Review of Books on their breakfast patios.11

Middle-class homeowners were certainly more successful than working-
class tenants in promoting their interests locally. The gentrifiers were the 
major force behind the amenity societies, sponsored by the Civic Trust, which 
proliferated in urban areas in the 1960s.12 The Barnsbury Association, formed 
by middle-class Islingtonites in 1964, used professional planners to formulate 
its manifestos and forged valuable links with the local council. The gentrifiers 
used journalists among their number to promote their agenda in the national 
press, and enlisted high-profile patrons like John Betjeman, who became pres-
ident of the Gibson Square [Barnsbury] Protection Society.13 The Barnsbury 
Association persuaded the council to pay for tree-planting, restoring cast-iron
streetlamps and railings, and granite setts to give the roads a cobblestone look. Its most controversial victory was the implementation of a traffic scheme in March 1970 that closed off a middle-class neighborhood to through traffic and redirected cars along streets full of working-class tenement blocks.14

Along with other middle-class pressure groups in gentrifying areas, the association campaigned against the replacement of old terraced houses and squares with new local-authority housing. Richard Crossman, Labour’s housing minister, referred to these pressure groups when he spoke in favor of the demolition of Islington’s Packington Estate in 1965: “These rat-infested slums must be demolished. Old terraced houses may have a certain snob-appeal to members of the middle class but they are not suitable accommodation for working-class tenants.”15 Crossman’s comment shows how much the process of gentrification relied on contested meanings: one’s class position determined whether the same houses should be condemned as slums or admired for their “snob appeal.”

Although the middle-class residents lost the battle to save the Packington Estate, they won the wider war. From the late 1960s onward, planning officers began to halt clearance schemes and put conservation orders on squares, as national government and inner-city councils looked for ways to promote renovation over expensive redevelopment.16 Under the Civic Amenities Act of 1967, local authorities were given the power to create “conservation” areas and award grants for the repair of listed buildings and other period properties.17 Gentrification also contributed to the Greater London Council’s scrapping of its 800-mile urban motorway program in 1973, as middle-class amenity groups opposed the attempts to build new roads through areas like Islington and Notting Hill.18

By the end of the 1960s, the close relationship between urban conservation and property values was widely acknowledged, and middle-class priorities changed from preventing the depreciation of house prices to making sure they rose as quickly as in other gentrifying areas. The “London Property Letter,” a monthly circular sent to estate agents and other property specialists, advised investors in February 1970 that Barnsbury was “a chicken ripe for plucking” because Islington Council had now adopted a policy of environmental improvement.19 The Barnsbury Association was particularly successful in promoting an idea of the area as a self-contained “urban village” with its own special character and needs, when prior to this period it had simply been a historical name with no definite administrative boundaries.20 The much-replicated notion of the “urban village” was a way for the middle classes to be part of the city but separate from it, close to its amenities but cut off from its social problems.

Some of those living in large cities like to feel and to communicate the feeling that they are doing nothing of the kind. They are villagers. Property in an urban village, especially if it can be labeled “twenty minutes West End,” now carries that cant-word of today, prestige, and can be commended as suitable for “gracious living.”21
THE URBAN LIFESTYLE REVOLUTION

As well as transforming the appearance of their neighborhoods, London’s gentrifiers initiated a revolution in home layout and design that accommodated new forms of urban lifestyle. With the decline of domestic service after the First World War, the suburban home came to be associated with the housewife, since middle-class respectability depended on being able to rely on the single income of a male breadwinner. Changes in these gender relations were a significant force driving urban gentrification. As higher education expanded greatly in the postwar period, particularly after the opening of the new “white-tile” campus universities in the early 1960s, increasing numbers of young middle-class women went on to university. Bars on married women entering the professions were relaxed in wartime and made illegal in teaching and the civil service in 1944 and 1946, respectively. The marriage bar had virtually disappeared in other professions by the end of the 1950s, and the expanding public sector also opened up more careers to women. Double-income professional families were drawn to inner London because it promised minimal commuting time, a large pool of labor from which childminders and cleaners could be recruited, and much easier logistics for depositing and collecting school-aged children. At the same time, middle-class career women still bore the brunt of the housework and childrearing. The rearrangement of living space in the gentrified town house was thus about valuing “women’s work” as creative and valuable, without making it as demanding or time-consuming as the daily grind of the suburban housewife.

In the “knocked-through” house, the kitchen was the main eating area as well as the social hub of the home. For middle-class women, cooking could now become a familial activity integrated into the rest of the household, rather than simply a domestic chore. As Steve Jones and Ben Taylor argue, cookery writers popular with the middle classes in this period, like Elizabeth David and Jane Grigson, elevated specific forms of female domesticity while denigrating others (which could perhaps be offloaded to cleaners and au pairs) as mere drudgery. “Intelligent housewives feel they’ve a duty to be bored by domesticity,” Grigson writes in Good Things. “A fair reaction to dusting and bedmaking, perhaps, but not, I think, to cooking.” In French Country Cooking, David similarly addresses “those who actually and positively enjoy the labour involved in entertaining friends and providing their families with first-class food.”

David began publishing cook books in 1950 but their impact was cumulative rather than immediate. They did not start to be published in Penguin paperback until 1955, and were not bestsellers until the 1960s. David has been credited with revolutionizing British middle-class cuisine, but for many years she was primarily a metropolitan taste. Before the 1970s, it was difficult to purchase her more “exotic” ingredients (anchovies, aubergines, chick peas, Mozzarella) outside of Soho delicatessens or the food shops around Tottenham.
Court Road. When David writes about the availability of the ingredients or utensils needed for her recipes, she generally refers to London shops and markets. She also opened her own kitchen shop in Belgravia in 1965, selling rare implements like Parmesan cutters, diables, and bain-maries.

In the 1960s and 1970s, David’s books appealed to the metropolitan middle classes in a number of ways. First, their sensuous descriptions of continental foodstuffs evoked fond memories of the foreign holidays they were beginning to take in places like Provence and Tuscany. Second, her recipes appealed to young, professional couples on a limited budget because they were sophisticated but cheap, finding uses for everything from pigs’ trotters to sheep’s lungs. The novelist Olivia Manning, reviewing *Italian Food* (1954), described its prospective readers as “the New Poor”—those who would have employed housekeepers and cooks before the war, but who now had to look after themselves. In the days before large supermarkets filled with global produce, David’s books suggested that searching for ingredients in small shops and urban markets could be “an entertainment and an education,” as pleasurable as the cooking itself.

Finally and most importantly, David’s stylish but straightforward cuisine fitted in with a new type of casual urban entertaining. In contrast with classic English dinner-party cookery, which involved elaborate preparation and presentation, many of her meals can be described in a few lines and prepared in a matter of minutes. “With la haute cuisine I am not here concerned,” she writes in her most influential book, *French Provincial Cooking*. “Many sins have been committed in its name... The feeling of our time is for simpler food, simply presented.” Although she often criticizes stock cubes, freezers, and food processors in her writing, her middle-class readers were not so fastidious, relying on them to save time and juggle domestic and work commitments. The esprit de corps or sense of “tribal affiliation” that developed among pioneer gentrifiers, and the proximity enforced by the terraced properties in squares and crescents in areas like Islington and Camden, meant that many felt they were “buying neighbourliness as part of their property.” London’s new middle classes had “a few friends round for a meal” rather than the formal dinner party with several courses, and they ate unceremoniously in a knocked-through kitchen-diner rather than a “stuffy” separate dining room. David’s “simple dishes” for the “ordinary middle class” encouraged and embraced this new informality.

The transformation of urban middle-class eating habits went hand-in-hand with a revolution in interior design. In an article in *Town* magazine in January 1963, the journalist Nicholas Tomalin, himself a member of Camden’s frontier middle class, described this new esthetic, after Thorstein Veblen, as “conspicuous thrift.” Tomalin saw conspicuous thrift in a range of lifestyle choices from Mini Cooper cars to denim jeans to the bistro, that “little place round the corner” with bare boards, fishermen’s nets, and blackboard menus. But the true theater of conspicuous thrift was the home, where walls were stripped of
wallpaper and painted minimalist white; kitchens were refurbished in the Scandinavian farmhouse style; floorboards were sanded and left bare, apart perhaps from a goatskin rug; beanbags replaced armchairs; and furniture was made of stripped pine. Tomalin identified conspicuous thrift with gentrifying areas like Islington, Greenwich, and Limehouse, arguing that “the way to make money in real estate is to stamp a slum with the cachet of CT—time will do the rest.” Conspicuous thrift was ostensibly classless, proudly defining itself against chintzy bourgeois convention. But as Tomalin recognized, it was still a badge of class, a way of living in a poor neighborhood while identifying oneself clearly to fellow gentrifiers. Thrifters were “distinguishing themselves, distastefully, from the real proletariat” that in an age of consumer affluence now “guiltlessly enjoy[s] the excesses of Conspicuous Waste.” The adherent of conspicuous thrift was “a would-be aristocrat, seeking by the appearance of plain living to create the impression of high thinking and anti-vulgarity.”

The popularity of stripped pine was the classic example of the middle-class use of “retrochic” as a way of adopting modest, understated styles while retaining markers of their class. For Peter Halley, who identifies a similar trend in America in the preference of the white middle classes for colonial furniture, this nostalgia for the mundane life of the past functions as “a signifier for the identity of a powerful class” that no longer has to assert its pre-eminence so forcefully, and can embrace simple lifestyles through choice rather than obligation. This reflects “the desire of that class both to hide its existence with an anti-iconography and to claim its connection to an earlier industrial materiality whose reality it has effectively usurped.” In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, stripped pine was used by poor families who could not afford to paint or stain their furniture. But by the 1950s and 1960s, with the working classes now buying furniture made of modern fabrics and plastics on hire purchase, stripped pine was in no danger of being seen as vulgarly proletarian. A London micro-economy developed to service what Tomalin called “a whole new race of what I would call junk misers”: antique stalls in Notting Hill’s Portobello Road, Camden Lock, and Islington’s Camden passage; small craft shops in Greenwich, Primrose Hill, and Kensington; and fashionable new stores with a craft esthetic like David Bagott in South Kensington and Casa Pupo in Belgravia.

Given such a flourishing junk economy, it is not surprising that there was eventually a more systematic commercial exploitation of this new kind of urban lifestyle. In May 1964, Terence Conran opened the first Habitat store on the Fulham Road in South Kensington. Habitat later branched out into the provinces and a flourishing mail-order business, but in the 1960s it was largely a London phenomenon, with other branches opening in Tottenham Court Road (1966), Kingston (1967), and Bromley (1968). One journalist, who worked as the Home and Design writer on the *Sunday Telegraph* in the early 1960s, recalls how the North London middle classes used Habitat to develop a distinctive lifestyle fusing cuisine with interior design:
Elizabeth David’s lucid prose and evocative recipes recalled a richer, more vibrant, culinary tradition that changed the face of metropolitan food. There we all were in our rustic pine kitchens conjuring up our boeuf en daube and our tartes aux abricots wearing our butchers’ aprons and using our wooden spoons. London’s postwar culinary history, I often think, could be traced through a careful study of Habitat catalogues over the years.\textsuperscript{45}

Conran recognized that the servantless middle classes wanted elegant but low-maintenance housewares: cutlery that did not need endless polishing; tables that looked good without tablecloths; earthenware dishes that went straight from the oven to the dinner table; and new cooking utensils like the wok, which allowed meals to be prepared in minutes. One of Habitat’s bestselling items in the 1960s was the duvet, a continental innovation that ended the tedious routine of bedmaking with underblankets and top sheets. Other products, like the boule japonaise or spherical paper lampshade introduced in the mid-1960s, were simply iconic statements of “conspicuous thrift,” cheap but stylish items for young couples on a limited budget.

Habitat sold a complete range for the home, from salt mills to sofas, with the stores arranged in mock living rooms or kitchens to show how items could be combined to produce a “look.”\textsuperscript{46} The store’s first promotional brochure claimed that its “pre-selected shopping programme” offered “instant good taste … for switched-on people.”\textsuperscript{47} This was important because its customers were drawn not only from the established middle classes but also from interlopers who were the first in their families to receive a university education and enter the professions. If urban gentrifiers filled their new homes with Habitat goods, they could avoid any obvious lapses of taste. Habitat combined a domesticated modernism (scooped-out eggshell chairs, modular Olga shelving, Magistretti tables) with rustic authenticity (pine dressers, iron bedsteads, quarry tiles). Its synthesis of urban minimalism and pastoral chic, “bang on the trend for cosy countrified living,”\textsuperscript{48} allowed the new middle classes to live in the modern city while remaining disengaged from its seamier aspects. Like David’s recreation of Mediterranean cuisine in metropolitan kitchens, Habitat offered a kind of domesticated version of the “urban village.” The Habitat style had its roots in the work of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, with their emphasis on simplicity, naturalness, and “fitness to purpose.”\textsuperscript{49} Unlike Morris, however, Conran embraced rather than denied the contradictions inherent in mass marketing such a style to middle-class urbanites.

In London as elsewhere, gentrifiers often defined themselves in relation to other members of the middle classes who had not made the same life choices.\textsuperscript{50} In particular, they embraced the city as an edgy, cosmopolitan alternative to the supposed conformity and homogeneity of the suburbs.\textsuperscript{51} Habitat exploited this ethos, promoting itself as classless and egalitarian in a way that was implicitly anti-suburban, part of an argument between different sections of the middle classes over what constituted the good life. Habitat’s youngish customers liked the conspicuous absence of the furniture and materials they would have
associated with their parents: coffee tables with splayed legs, cocktail cabinets, standard lamps, Blue Willow china, moquette, and linoleum. They could use the distancing effects of time and geography to “slum it” with the southern European peasantry or the below-stairs classes of the Victorian era, without actually losing their middle-class identities. While the store was theoretically open to all in the sense that its products were relatively cheap, it was clearly aimed at the educated, urban middle class. With great commercial acumen, Conran tied this lifestyle revolution to a general aura of social progressivism and ethical consumerism. Habitat’s left-liberal customers could embrace the marketplace without feeling they had “sold out.”

The early 1960s also saw the arrival of color supplements in the *Sunday Times* (1962), *Daily Telegraph* (1964), and *Observer* (1965), which served as lifestyle guides for this new urban middle class. The supplements pioneered a new kind of feature writing about eating out, entertaining, and interior design that soon infiltrated the main sections of newspapers as well. The first Habitat store, located in a then unfashionable part of South Kensington called Brompton Cross, might not have been such an instant success with middle-class North Londoners had it not been extensively trailed and reviewed in the broadsheet newspapers and supplements. The day before its opening, a *Sunday Times* article entitled “What the smart chicks are buying” publicized “a swinging shop called Habitat,” which would present “the pick of the furnishing pops under one roof” and “make shopping for the home an impulsive, gay affair.” The *Scotsman* newspaper referred to this incestuous relationship between lifestyle journalism and retail when it dismissed Habitat’s customers as “colour supplement couples who lived in up-and-coming Islington and gave their children names like Jason and Cinnamon.” Elizabeth David also appeared in magazines and newspapers aimed at a middle-class readership in the 1950s and 1960s, notably the *Spectator*, *Vogue*, and the *Sunday Times*; Jane Grigson wrote for the *Observer* supplement from the late 1960s onward. Their dissemination in these class-specific media rather than through television dissociated them from the fussiness and formality of contemporaries like Fanny and Johnnie Cradock, who appeared in numerous cookery programs, always dressed in evening gown and suit respectively, between the 1950s and 1970s. The implicitly anti-suburban esthetic of gentrification culture focused attention on its rejection of traditional middle-class styles rather than its more problematic relationship to the working classes.

THE CULTURAL ECONOMY OF THE HOUSING MARKET

From the mid-1960s onward, the broadsheet newspapers and color supplements cultivated a new middle-class appetite for amateur property speculation, which drew on this interest in “lifestyle.” Throughout the 1960s there was a steady rise in house prices in the inner London area, particularly in the desirable
squares and crescents of Islington and Camden, as the incoming professional classes stimulated demand. In 1961, 64 percent of all homes in inner London were privately rented, but by the end of the decade home ownership had risen there by 8 percent. In articles in their lifestyle pages claiming to predict which down-at-heel areas of London were “on the up,” the broadsheet newspapers saw the inner city as a place “where deprivation and opportunity were exotically confused,” and gentrification as a phenomenon of middle-class entrepreneurialism and self-betterment. The incomers were referred to benignly as the “frontier middle classes,” “pioneers,” or “cultivators” who “make money out of the place but keep a calculatingly protective eye on its character.”

This is not to say that the idea of a brave, pioneering class of gentrifiers was simply a myth. The groups colonizing the poorer areas of inner London in the 1960s were less risk averse than average homeowners, buying and renovating their houses in the face of skeptical bank managers and building societies in an era when getting a mortgage was a lengthy and difficult process. But the appeal to frontier imagery in these gentrification narratives meant that the focus was almost invariably on the middle classes rather than the displaced tenants. As Neil Smith puts it, the term “urban pioneer” suggests “a city that is not yet socially inhabited . . . the contemporary urban working class is seen as less than social, simply a part of the physical environment.” In the celebrations of urban style and fashion in 1960s newspapers and color supplements, the fashionable young Islingtonites doing up decayed terraces were viewed as part of the inevitable march of modernity and progress.

The estate agent Roy Brooks’s humorous descriptions of dilapidated properties in unfashionable locations, which appeared in the Times, Sunday Times, and Observer and became one of the favorite sections of these newspapers for their readers, provided the gentrifiers with more subtle validations. They admired these advertisements for their apparent honesty about properties: “glum attic flat for midgets”; “décor repulsive”; “so-called garden.” Underneath their blithe veneer, however, they were finely attuned to the changing London property market. Brooks’s advertisements often suggested the importance of location and the potential for renovation: “It really means something socially to live in a filthy old Georgian house in fash [fashionable] Islington.” Many of them offered thumbnail sketches of the subtly shifting demography of an area:

As the artists have already moved into Peckham it is only a matter of time before they are followed by the fringe professions, Stage, Tely [television] and Advertising—with the Chelsea type of monied intellectual snob breathing on their necks—then a dump like this will be worth well over £10,000.

Islington was described as “fashionable but slightly sordid” and Camberwell “up coming,” but some parts of the inner city, such as “Darkest Pimlico,” were still beyond the pale, and suburban Penge was a “ghastly place.” The advertisements flattered the self-image of the urban middle classes by suggesting that their restoration of rundown houses was a romantic, foolhardy gesture.
rather than a hard, financial calculation. Brooks’s agency was one of the most successful in London, suggesting that his apparent candor may actually have attracted rather than repelled clients.

In *Soft City*, Raban’s discussion of the shifting symbolism of London postcodes encapsulates this tension between middle-class bohemianism and economic self-interest. He points out that in London, there are established middle-class areas with stable property values, and deprived areas where no one wants to live. But there is also “a great deal of soft territory where people buy houses to announce something distinctive about themselves.”61 This “soft territory” tended to exist on the edges of more desirable areas. House prices rose sharply in London in the early 1970s, as building societies became more willing to offer mortgages on inner-city properties and more private landlords sold off houses for owner occupation. Between 1970 and 1979, homeownership in inner London grew by 21 percent. As property prices rose, gentrification spread rapidly throughout the inner areas of North and West London.62 The question of “boundaries” or “borders,” largely an invention of estate agents who wanted to transfer the good reputation of certain postcodes to adjoining areas, became significant. For example, Stoke Newington and De Beauvoir Town began to attract those who could no longer afford Islington, their advantage being that they were next to already gentrified areas.

Raban gives the example of the recent (in the early 1970s) gentrification of Kentish Town, which had moved the NW5 postal district into “the pantheon of style.”63 He notes that London postcodes are “endowed with curiously absoluist values”; like talismans they are “magical guarantees of a certain kind of identity.”64 Postcodes are unstable, contentious signifiers because they have a collectively agreed meaning that is mysterious and authorless, and hence difficult to predict or control. Moving into a postcode area that is “on the up” is a riskier but potentially more lucrative enterprise than settling in a traditional middle-class area, as there is more scope for house prices to rise dramatically. If the gentrifiers liked to see themselves as brave pioneers with a social conscience, this postcode symbolism was a reminder of their dependence on the traditional logic of class and capital. The relationship between certain types of urban lifestyle and rising house prices could be seen as an example of what Pierre Bourdieu calls a “bad faith economy” in symbolic capital, this being “economic or political capital that is disavowed, misrecognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, a ‘credit’ which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees ‘economic’ profits.”65

The radicalism of some of the gentrifiers, however, was not simply rhetorical. There was a short-lived “London Free School” in Notting Hill in the late 1960s, where the middle-class intelligentsia (academics, teachers, writers, students) would teach classes open to all.66 The gentrifiers often sent their children to flagship inner-city comprehensives, such as Islington Green or William Ellis School in Camden, rather than fee-paying or selective grammar schools. Community action groups like the Holloway Housing Aid Centre,
Friends Neighbourhood House, and the Barnsbury Action Group had a largely middle-class leadership but aimed to support tenants who were being harassed by landlords to leave their premises, and campaigned for public money to be spent on improving public housing rather than environmental “tarting up.” As these middle-class radicals were aware, though, their politics sat uneasily with the larger process through which, as new arrivals to the inner city, they were forcing tenants out of their homes and driving up house prices.

There were sporadic protests against the middle-class incomers among the existing working-class residents. They wrote letters to local newspapers such as the *Islington Gazette* and the *North London Press* complaining about “the new Chelseaites.” (To add to the confusion, this pejorative term was also used semi-ironically in property adverts: “Bijou gem for Chelseaites.”) There were campaigns against the so-called “winkling” of sitting tenants out of their properties, which culminated in a march of 300 tenants through Islington and the picketing of estate agents in March 1974. Alf Townsend, a London taxi driver, achieved brief notoriety in the early 1970s by using his column in the trade newspaper, *The Taxi*, to rail against the colonization of cockney London by “middle-class ghettos”:

> Not content with buying up houses in working-class areas, they even invent a new name for the district. Battersea is now referred to as “south Chelsea.” Around The Angel, Islington, becomes “Barnsbury Village,” with another “village” rearing its middle-class head around Stockwell … Ask for a pint of mild and bitter in some of these pubs and they say: “We don’t have pint glasses in here, old chap. This is a half-bitter pub.” They’re all full of people called Nigel.

As this isolated example suggests, however, the working classes were largely locked out of more powerful media and cultural circuits. The cross-London and national newspapers did not pick up on these controversies until about 1970, by which time many areas had been thoroughly transformed.

The eviction of tenants from up-and-coming areas so that the properties could be sold on, made much easier by the 1957 Rent Act, which decontrolled tenancies, was brutal but often invisible. Some landlords reported their own houses to the council as uninhabitable, or offered bribes to persuade tenants to leave; the less scrupulous locked their tenants out of their bathrooms, or hired thugs to intimidate them. But landlords and estate agents kept these dealings quiet from the incoming residents. Many of the gentrifiers saw living on “the front line” as a way of combining their left-liberal political credentials with a certain bohemian cachet, and professed to relish encounters with “the locals.” This meant that the coercive aspects of gentrification had to be concealed from many of its participants. To use Raban’s language, gentrification was a “soft” phenomenon that inspired disparate resentments rather than coherent opposition. Ian Martin, in his 1966 BBC2 documentary series, *Six Sides of a Square*, interviewed the homeowners and sitting tenants of Islington’s Gibson Square and found not so much class warfare as mutual incomprehension about vastly
differing lifestyles and cultures. One journalist, Jeremy Bugler, who conducted extensive interviews in Islington in 1968, found that, even though the working-class residents were suspicious of the middle-class gentrifiers, they at least preferred them to another incoming group: West Indian tenants.

GENTRIFICATION SATIRES

In the absence of any organized anti-gentrification movement, it was largely left to the middle classes to provide their own self-promoting or self-satirizing commentaries. The early cultural politics of gentrification involved a series of (often unstated or understated) lifestyle choices. Once the process had developed momentum and was increasingly identified in the media from the late 1960s onward, even if it was not yet described as “gentrification,” then it began to be more explicitly articulated, often in fictional forms that explored the tension between left-wing rhetoric and middle-class self-absorption. Of course, satirical attacks on the bad faith of well-heeled urban radicals in Britain predate the phenomenon of gentrification. In the 1950s, the much-derided figure of the “Hampstead leftie” was embodied in the supposed cliquishness of the “Frognal set,” named after the exclusive street where the Labour party leader Hugh Gaitskell lived. In his column in the right-wing Daily Telegraph from the 1960s onward, the comic writer Peter Simple ridiculed the voguish left-wing causes of fictional Hampstead intellectuals such as Deirdre Dutt-Pauker. According to this caricature, Hampstead lefties were people with fashionably progressive opinions that rarely impinged on their comfortable lifestyles. By the 1960s, Hampstead was becoming too expensive for many members of the young, professional classes and the caricature was beginning to date.

Unlike the stereotype of the Hampstead leftie, though, satirical treatments of the early gentrifiers were self-directed, often produced by participants in the process and appearing in media likely to be consumed by the urban middle classes themselves. Alan Bennett’s 1966 BBC2 sketch show, “On the Margin,” incorporated a quasi-soap opera, “Streets Ahead” or “Life and Times in NW1,” a postcode that included the then rapidly gentrifying area of Camden. Bennett’s characters are young, left-wing media couples newly settled in the area, such as Joanna and Simon Stringalong, and Nigel and Jane Knocker-Threw. Their lives consist of a series of self-generated ethical dilemmas, such as whether to send their children to the state primary or a private school, and what to do when their Swedish au pair becomes pregnant.

Mark Boxer adapted Bennett’s characters for a cartoon strip, “The Stringalongs,” which appeared first in The Listener magazine in 1967 and later in his collection The Trendy Ape (1968). The title was a take on Desmond Morris’s best-selling anthropological study, The Naked Ape, published the previous year. Boxer wrote in the foreword that it was a study of “the upward strivers of the Communications Industry” who “have become central figures
of our time.” Bennett’s sketches are self-contained playlets, by the end of which his characters have resolved their quandaries to their own satisfaction, with a tortuous mix of moral posturing and self-justification. Boxer’s cartoons are more fragmentary. His characters do not so much converse with each other as exchange quotations about their self-regarding media lifestyles. The Stringalongs suggest to their neighbors that they all tear down the fences in their back gardens to create “our own little kibbutz”; they proudly nickname their son “le rouge” after he leads an infants’ revolt at his primary school in May 1968; and they plan a television documentary about gentrification entitled “Harrowing Contrast of a Crescent?,” which will focus on “a super old couple across the road who look rivetingly photogenic when you see them silently drinking their Bengers” [a drink to aid digestion].

Bennett’s and Boxer’s caricatures served to simplify difficult issues that may have been uncomfortably close to home for their creators. Bennett had lived in Camden since the mid-1960s, and in 1969 moved to Gloucester Crescent, a gentrified street populated by other writers, journalists, academics, and artists (including Mark Boxer), and situated near Arlington House, a shelter for homeless men. In his book *Writing Home*, Bennett writes:

> These days the process is called gentrification and involves no soul-searching (few troubled consciences in Docklands, I imagine) but we were genuinely uneasy about it—or there would have been no need for jokes—and, though our unease could be handily recycled into resentment of those who bought into the area later than we had, there was a definite sense that we were shoving the indigenous population out.

Bennett then relates the story of attending a dinner party in a knocked-through house in 1965. An old man, “not quite a tramp,” rang the door asking for the landlady of the rooming house that the address once was. The dinner-party guests felt guilty enough to abandon their meal and drive the man around Camden Town looking for somewhere else to stay. Another gentrifier’s dilemma forms the basis for Bennett’s book and play *The Lady in the Van* (1990/1999). Bennett let a cantankerous old woman with a history of mental illness, Miss Shepherd, camp out in a dilapidated van in his front yard in Gloucester Crescent for fifteen years until her death in 1989, getting light and heating for free by means of an electricity cable leading from his house. Commenting that “one seldom was able to do her a good turn without some thoughts of strangulation,” he explores the blurred boundaries between genuine kindness and the self-interested desire to salve one’s liberal conscience. Bennett’s account of life in Gloucester Crescent suggests that its middle-class residents, far from being obsessed with radical-chic affectation like his characters, were keenly aware of the ironies and compromises of gentrification, allowing people like Miss Shepherd to live in the “gap between our social position and our social obligations.”
In his 1967 comic novel, *Towards the End of the Morning*, Michael Frayn also satirizes these middle-class confusions, while exploring a more complex relationship between individual agency and broader social forces. His central character, a 39-year-old Fleet Street journalist named John Dyson, is, unusually, a middle-class loser in the London property market. When he and his wife Jannie first look for a house, they hope to combine their liberal-intellectual credentials with sound commercial sense:

They did not want to live in the suburbs, in an ugly suburban house with uncongenial suburban neighbours, miles from town. They decided to find a cheap Georgian or Regency house in some down-at-heel district near the centre. However depressed the district, if it was Georgian or Regency, and reasonably central, it would soon be colonized by the middle classes. In this way they would secure an attractive and potentially fashionable house in the heart of London, at a price they could afford; be given credit by their friends for going to live among the working classes; acquire very shortly congenial middle-class neighbours of a similarly adventurous and intellectual outlook to themselves; and see their investment undergo a satisfactory and reassuring rise in value in the process.

In the early years of their marriage, when they were happy to live in rented accommodation, the Dysons saw “innumerable Georgian and Regency terraces which needed only a lick of pastel-shaded paint to make them habitable.” But when they begin looking for a house it is “like trying to return to a place one remembered from one’s childhood; the innumerable terraces could not be found—the appearance of the world had subtly altered.” The Georgian and Regency houses now seem to be occupied by the already rich, and even the Victorian and Edwardian slums are rising in price in anticipation of the middle-class influx. The Dysons have failed to understand the always elusive, constantly mutable nature of gentrification: “The houses they had seen belonged not to the real world at all, but to the world one glimpses out of the corner of one’s eye, which vanishes when one turns to look.”

The Dysons eventually end up in a decrepit, late-Victorian house in the (fictional but obviously suburban) postcode of SW23, vainly hoping that other members of the intellectual middle classes will soon follow them. They project their frustrated property ambitions on to John’s junior colleague, Bob, and his fiancée Tessa. Dyson advises Bob to read Brooks’s property ads and “get on the escalator” as soon as possible. With a mixture of altruism and self-interest, Jannie shows Tessa around SW23 properties with sitting tenants ("it’s just a matter of agreeing compensation with them"), advising her where she can knock the walls through or put in a room for an au pair. Bob, who is actually trying to break off his engagement with Tessa, is drawn into the housing market by the force of middle-class networking and his own fear of being left behind by inexorable social change. For Frayn, gentrification has developed its own self-sustaining ideas and culture, which his characters cannot wholly control or understand.
Posy Simmonds’s strip cartoon about middle-class life, which appeared on the Guardian women’s page between 1977 and 1987, offered a more sympathetic but still incisive representation of the gentrifiers at a later stage in the process. It was warmly received by the newspaper’s readership, not least because its characters were archetypal “Guardian readers,” by then a recognizable shorthand for the well-intentioned, ethically bemused middle classes. Simmonds’s principal characters were George Weber, a senior lecturer in Liberal Studies at a technical college, and his wife Wendy, an ex-nurse and writer of children’s books. While the location of the series was unnamed, it was evidently meant to be North London, with the characters traveling to work by Tube and living in Georgian townhouses. Their domestic lives are made up of school runs, looking after their own and their friends’ children, trips to “Bivouac” (an obvious imitation of Habitat), and dinner parties where they discuss their distaste of suburban vulgarity and commercialism.

The Webers and their friends combine painstaking self-questioning with subtle assertions of their class identities. They have a friendly but awkward relationship with their working-class neighbors, the Heeps; engage in difficult conversations at the school gates with parents who have potentially racist opinions about “coloured” children; and hold street parties where they try to get to know “the locals.” But Simmonds’s creations are less self-confident than those satirized by Bennett, Boxer, and Frayn, often looking back nostalgically to their radical student days and fearing that they will soon be historical relics. Belinda, the Webers’ proto-Thatcherite daughter, dismisses her parents as “peasants” because of their liking for lentils, denim, Batik prints, and “urban villages.” With a mixture of middle-class self-pity and social concern, Wendy worries that “the lights are going out all over the Welfare State” and that “woolly liberals” like herself will suffer “an agonisingly slow death … we get moth-eaten.” Simmonds’s portrayals of these well-meaning but self-regarding left-liberals, which have a more valedictory tone than earlier fictions about gentrification, reflect a significant historical shift. She suggests that the gentrifiers’ incessant commentary on their own lives is double-edged, fostering a certain smug insularity but also an openness to wider social and political narratives that is now being threatened by the less apologetic commercial logic of Thatcherism.

CONCLUSION

The period covered in this article marks a specific era in the history of gentrification in London. By the early 1980s, it had entered a new phase with the beginnings of the Thatcherite property boom; the more sustained impact of large-scale developers and regeneration companies like the London Docklands Development Corporation; the spread of middle-class settlement into almost every area of inner London; and the subsequent decline in the
sense of a “pioneer” class. At the same time, the cultural politics of the early gentrifiers have proved highly influential. London’s urban middle classes inaugurated a revolution in British cuisine, as formerly exotic items like olive oil and balsamic vinegar have become common items in supermarkets, while organic and free-range products are sold in farmers’ markets set up in urban car parks and squares; they pioneered an investment in “sweat equity,” which combined the creative pleasures of house renovation with hard-edged property speculation; their taste in home layout and interior design has influenced the contemporary preference for non-hierarchical, open-plan living spaces, and the “bourgeois–bohemian” melding of retro and contemporary styles; and their campaigns to preserve the historical character of their neighborhoods marked the beginnings of the urban conservation movement.

More generally, the cultural politics of the early London gentrifiers anticipated global trends in the gentrification of major cities in Europe, North America, and Australia. Scholars such as Sharon Zukin, Neil Smith, and David Ley have all explored the relationship between gentrification and the changing tastes of the “new middle class” since the 1980s. In these later manifestations, however, such lifestyle choices are more directly related to the actions of developers, governments, and global capital, so that “gentrification—a process that seems to reassert a purely local identity—represents downtown’s social and cultural transformation in terms of an international market culture.”

In spite, or perhaps because, of their cultural significance, the North London middle classes have been increasingly demonized in national media. This cultural backlash is encapsulated in the term, “the chattering classes,” invented in the early 1980s by the right-wing journalist, Frank Johnson, and popularized by his friend Alan Watkins. It was meant to signify a certain type of Londoner who had first moved into Islington, Camden, and Clapham but by the 1980s had colonized Battersea, Stoke Newington, and Hackney. The phrase suggests a cadre of metropolitan, left-liberal professionals, spouting off about the country’s problems at dinner parties in urban villages, detached from both the realities of political power and the uncomplicated aspirations of ordinary people. The anti-urban myth of the chattering classes was partly the product of a Thatcherite populism that aimed to short-circuit traditional elites, speaking directly to the people of “middle England”—the lower middle-class, suburban voters who were now seen as the key swing voters in elections.

From the early 1990s onward, the chattering classes were more specifically embodied in the caricature of “Islington Person,” a fashionable left-liberal who wore Armani suits, ate in expensive restaurants, and bought exotic foodstuffs in supermarkets. Knife and Packer’s cartoon strip, “It’s grim up North London,” serialized in the satirical magazine *Private Eye* in the 1990s, lam- pooned the archetypal Islingtonite. Before and immediately after his election as Prime Minister in May 1997, Tony Blair was widely identified as an Islington Person, known for dining at the Granita restaurant on Upper Street, and contributing a recipe of “fresh fettucine garnished with an exotic sauce of...
olive oil, sun-dried tomatoes and capers” to the charity fund-raising Islington Cookbook. Once in office, however, New Labour sought to avoid these associations with urban gentrification. Before the 2005 general election, cabinet minister Peter Hain attacked Labour’s “dinner-party critics” who “quaff Shiraz and Chardonnay” while criticizing the war against Iraq. In a Fabian Society paper published later that year on “why Labour won,” the new MP Liam Byrne gave this group the pejorative label of “urban intellectuals.” They were “good people” who read the Guardian and were “well-informed, big-hearted—but small in number” (which is to say, not worth courting for votes).

The trope of inconsequential “chattering” suggested that the gentrifiers were culturally influential but politically irrelevant, hypocritically combining a comfortable lifestyle with radical politics. These symbolic struggles are a reminder that the cultures of gentrification have always been insistently, if only implicitly, political. The contemporary stereotype of the chattering classes clearly originates in the self-satirizing treatments of Camden’s new media classes in the 1960s. If it is an unfair caricature, it owes its persuasiveness to the fact that gentrification in London has always been a cultural as well as a socioeconomic process. Since the first middle-class invasion of Islington in the 1950s, the politics of lifestyle, esthetics, and self-reflexive social comment have played a central role in cementing these “cultures of gentrification.”

NOTES

4. The first reference to this word in the Times, for example, is Pat Healy, “Powers for Councils to Compel Improvements by Landlords,” Times, June 13, 1973, 1.
11. Raban, Soft City, 188.
15. Thompson, Rubbish Theory, 35.
43. Tomalin, “Conspicuous Thrift,” 252; see also Raban, *Soft City*, 82.
63. Raban, Soft City, 102.
64. Raban, Soft City, 162.
68. Raban, Soft City, 187; Ferris, Participation in Urban Planning, 44.
74. This six-part programme was broadcast on BBC2 between March 8 and April 12, 1966.
78. Alan Bennett, Writing Home (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 390.
79. Bennett, Writing Home, 391.
82. Frayn, Towards the End of the Morning, 135–6.
83. Frayn, Towards the End of the Morning, 166.
84. Posy Simmonds, Mrs Weber’s Diary (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), no pagination; Posy Simmonds, Pick of Posy (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), no pagination.

Joe Moran is Reader in Cultural History at Liverpool John Moores University, UK. He is the author of Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America (Pluto 2000), Interdisciplinarity (Routledge 2002), and Reading the Everyday (Routledge 2005). He has published various articles on the everyday in journals such as History Workshop Journal, Cultural Studies, Rethinking History, and Twentieth-Century British History. He is a frequent contributor to the New Statesman and the Guardian, and his latest book is Queuing for Beginners: The Story of Daily Life from Breakfast to Bedtime (Profile 2007).