A Review of the Research Trends of Gentrification*

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Abstract: Gentrification is the restoration and upgrading of deteriorated urban properties by upper- and middle-class households and developers, often causing displacement of low-income. Reshaping urban landscape, gentrification has occurred in large cities not only in the Western world but also in Asia. Although gentrification has been identified in a large number of Western cities, a few studies have dealt with the gentrification in Korean cities. In order to increase the supply of urban housing, the Korean central government has put more emphasis on new town construction projects than urban regeneration or revitalization. This paper reviews the theoretical research trends of gentrification from the end of the 1970s until the early 2000s and suggest the importance of gentrification as a way of urban regeneration or revitalization. This paper reviews the definitions of, the theoretical approaches to, the integrative interpretations of, and the avenues for future research on gentrification.

Key Words: gentrification, restoration, upgrading, urban regeneration, revitalization.


주요어: 제트리피케이션, 물리적 복구, 기능개선, 도시재생, 재활성화.

1. Introduction

Korea's urban growth to date has been mainly based on new town construction. In the early 1990s, five new towns (Bundang, Ilsan, Jungdong, Pyeongchon, and Sanbon) were constructed to alleviate the housing shortage in Seoul under the central government planning. These new towns became a typical example of the suburb in which the Korean middle class resides (Jeon, 1997). By focusing on only new town construction that enlarges the urban housing supply, the regeneration and revitalization of the existing cities has never been given careful attention. Especially in the inner city, land use planning is required for it to be redeveloped and improved continuously. If the inner city were a slum area, the country as well as an entire city would suffer in terms of uneven development.

Since the early 1990s, Korea's central government and the Seoul city government have started to realize the importance of redevelopment in the inner city. The

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* This paper was rewritten by reference to the author’s Ph. D. dissertation obtained from Florida State University on Aug 2006.
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alternative methods to revitalize deteriorated inner city areas were housing redevelopment and central city revitalization (Kim et al., 1996; Jeon, 1997). Housing redevelopment in Seoul is similar to gentrification that refers to “the restoration and upgrading of deteriorated urban properties by the middle classes and commercial developers, often causing the displacement of low-income families (Smith and Williams, 1986).” Gentrification is also an alternative method for the regeneration and revitalization of the existing cities in that it can restore and upgrade the deteriorated urban property by displacing low income people. Furthermore, gentrification plays an important role in restoring deteriorated urban areas, improving the profitability of land use, and revitalizing urban economic activity, housing, transportation and culture.

Although gentrification has now been identified in a large number of Western cities, gentrification in Korea has rarely been studied. Smith (2002) argued that gentrification in Seoul was geographically isolated and in its infancy without offering any empirical evidence.

Gentrification is of considerable importance to urban studies, geography, and planning. Gentrification has spilled beyond the traditional confines of cities in the Western world to reshape the landscapes of cities in much of Asia as well. Given the western bias of most social science, little is known about the dynamics of cities in countries such as Korea, however. As the Korean economy and population have been steadily transformed over the last 20 years, gentrification there has become increasingly apparent. Thus, this study reviews the theses surrounding the explanations of gentrification and theoretically considers what forces have driven gentrification. Furthermore, it suggests gentrification as an alternative method to improve the deteriorated inner city.

2. Theoretical Approaches for Explaining Gentrification

1) Definitions of Gentrification

Gentrification originally was a type of revitalization of low rent areas, represented as “Victorian barn and cottage in England,” which were replaced by high class people (Glass, 1964). Yeates (1990) divided the concept of urban revitalization into three sub-concepts composed of redevelopment, incumbent upgrading, and gentrification. He argued that redevelopment, as differentiated from incumbent upgrading and gentrification, was frequently characterized by a combination of changes including land use, structures, types of residential units, per capita income, social status, and stage in the life cycle of the population. For him, redevelopment meant that there was a complete change in the neighborhoods, and the original inhabitants were displaced. Gentrification focused on an influx of upper and middle class households into an area of old homes that were previously occupied by low income individuals and households. Incumbent upgrading does not include the kind of social, income, and residential unit changes that are involved in either gentrification or redevelopment. Since the emergence of the concept of gentrification, the phenomenon has occupied a large amount of attention in scholarly journals over the last 30 years.

Gentrification has now been identified in a large number of cities in North America, Europe and Australia, but despite its expansion during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, it was still regarded as “a relatively small scale and very geographically-concentrated phenomenon (Hamnett, 1991)” compared with post-war suburbanization and inner city decline.

Glass (1964) defined gentrification as a process of class succession and displacement in areas broadly characterized by working class and unskilled households first identified in the East End of London. Smith and Williams (1986) defined gentrification as the rehabilitation of working class and derelict housing and the consequent transformation of an area into a middle class neighborhood. Similarly, gentrification was defined as “the movement of middle class families into urban areas causing property values to increase and having the secondary effect of driving out poorer families (Shaffer and Smith, 1986).”