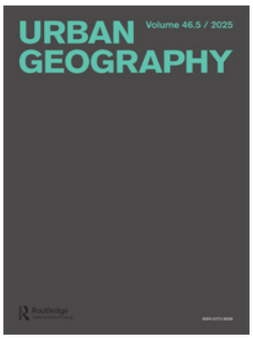

Article:
Ah Goo, D., Hammett, D. and Hoogendoorn, G. (2025) “Woodstock was a ‘lekka’ place”: neighbourhood gentrification and generic-ification in a South African city. Urban Geography, 47 (2). ISSN: 0272-3638

https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2025.2518264



Urban Geography

ISSN: 0272-3638 (Print) 1938-2847 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rurb20

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To cite this article: Delia Ah Goo, Daniel Hammett & Gijsbert Hoogendoorn (27 Jun 2025): “Woodstock was a ‘lekka’ place”: neighbourhood gentrification and generic-ification in a South African city, Urban Geography, DOI: 10.1080/02723638.2025.2518264

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2025.2518264

Published online: 27 Jun 2025.

URBAN GEOGRAPHY
https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2025.2518264

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

"Woodstock was a 'lekka' place": neighbourhood gentrification and generic-ification in a South African city

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ABSTRACT

Gentrification-induced displacement is an increasing concern in South Africa, heightened by memories of and viewed as akin to the social and spatial engineering practices of the apartheid-era. While South African urban geographers were initially optimistic about the prospects of economic growth and job creation linked to gentrification, the reality is proving radically different for many communities – such as Cape Town's inner-city Woodstock neighbourhood. Here, residents face pressures of dual-marginalisation arising from the inflationary pressures of gentrifiers investing in certain areas and resultant exclusionary "generic-ification" of the space, alongside growing in-migration of poorer African migrants and displacement of previous residents into overcrowded areas. These competing processes necessitate an understanding of the hitherto overlooked "micro-geographies" of gentrification and "generic-ifcation", and focus on the street level dynamics of (counter)gentrification that are integral to discussions about the (un)just city.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 11 February 2025
Accepted 4 June 2025

KEYWORDS
Gentrification; generic-ification; neighbourhood; South Africa; city

Introduction

> The new Spar and the new Clicks, and then the Grillfather … Woodstock is going become like Cape Town. (retired female resident)

To some this may sound positive and aspirational, to others a reflection of the gentrification of Cape Town's suburbs and rehearsal of well-established debates on the winners and losers of these processes (e.g. Lees et al., 2013). In this context, though, two particular and crucial dynamics need to be addressed. First, the entwining of gentrification and counter-gentrification that led to a "dual-marginalisation" and displacement of existing communities. The second, is generic-ification – the transformation of a unique and "exciting" neighbourhood with a particular sense of identity and plethora of local businesses, restaurants and other facilities into a bland, homogenised space of modern apartments, chain stores, and branded coffee shops.

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Manifestations of gentrification in cities across the world reflect local economic and political systems, land ownership and development regimes, variations in housing aesthetics and preferences, and histories of urban development (Forrest, 2016). Within the South African context, processes of gentrification are framed by the forced displacement and residential segregation of "non-white" communities during apartheid. Since 1994, neoliberal post-apartheid housing development have led to various manifestations of gentrification in South Africa including the redevelopment of inner-city districts (urban regeneration as gentrification [Visser & Kotze, 2008]) and "hybrid gentrification" in areas of state-subsidised housing (Lemanski, 2014), with many communities experiencing gentrification as a driver of displacement and exclusion (Booyens, 2012; Lemanski, 2014; Wenz, 2013).

These impacts are not universal across a neighbourhood, necessitating a focus on the micro-geographies of gentrification. Cape Town's inner-city neighbourhood of Woodstock provides a microcosm of these processes, where inflationary pressures of gentrification intersect with the in-migration of working-class immigrants living in poorly maintained multiple occupancy housing, resulting in a dual-marginalisation of existing residents. These hybrid processes are not a mix of "downward raiding"[1] and gentrification (Lemanski, 2014). Instead, encroachments into Woodstock by middle-class "investor-invaders" (and resultant "generific-ation" of the neighbourhood) and immigrants from other African countries produce a mosaic of (counter)gentrification processes leading to the exclusion of the long-standing community.

The case study: Woodstock

One of Cape Town's oldest neighbourhoods, Woodstock's history of industrial growth and decline (Wenz, 2012) and persistence as a rare apartheid-era multiracial neighbourhood (Garside, 1993) meant that despite a reputation for criminality during the 1980s (Badham, 1987) it was a poster child for South Africa's "Rainbow Nation" mantra in the 1990s. Various waves of gentrification have followed (Wenz, 2013), beginning with an influx of middle-class whites and "coloureds", from the racially segregated neighbourhoods on the periphery of Cape Town, seeking housing closer to the central business district during the 1990s (Visser, 2019).

Tax breaks and designation of parts of Woodstock as a City Improvement District (CID) triggered a new wave of gentrification in the early 2000s when the renovation and conversion of disused and historic buildings into commercial spaces led to a "revival" of Woodstock,the construction of several new-build, mixed-use developments, and displacement of residents (Booyens, 2012). More recently, the neighbourhood has been rebranded an "art district", becoming a popular tourist destination and Cape Town's "coolest neighbourhood" (Carter, 2022).

These headlines hide the reality of a deep sense of loss and devastation endured by many Woodstock residents resulting from hybrid processes of (counter)gentrification, necessitating a focus on the micro-geographies of gentrification-linked urban change. Utilising data from interviews with nineteen Woodstock residents – aged from early 30s to mid-70s, and all resident in the neighbourhood for over 30 years – as well as observational data, this paper reflects on the everyday micro-geographies of gentrification.

Findings

The processes of urban change in Woodstock are complex and contested, varying from one street to the next, and through the intersection of age, class, and race. These changes embody the simultaneous processes of gentrification – (increased property and other costs that exclude many existing residents) and a counter-gentrification process (some streets becoming focal points for low – and middle-income immigrants from other African countries living in poorly-maintained houses of multiple occupancy). As these processes intersect, they produce mosaics of urban development and competing attitudes regarding changes to the built environment, local economy, and demographics.

These changes are viewed through residents' strong attachment to place: a sense of belonging rooted in "good memories" of living in Woodstock. As one life-long resident explained, "I would not want to stay anywhere else" as Woodstock is a "priceless … emotional … memorable" neighbourhood that "can never be replaced" (female, 61, homeowner). Nonetheless, the pressures of (counter)gentrification loomed large, leaving many residents with displacement anxiety and a pessimism about their future in Woodstock. These concerns were echoed by resident and former neighbourhood small business owner who noted how "Woodstock was a 'lekka[2]' place … It is very sad to talk about Woodstock … It used to be affordable and comfortable. I give it another five years and it's gone" (male, 58, previous homeowner).

Amongst younger residents the impacts of gentrification are more welcome than for older residents. As one male resident in their early-thirties noted, "The older generations don't like the changes … the younger generation do". They continued to describe positive changes from recent developments – including the repurposing of *The Old Biscuit Mill* into a multi-use development catering to the (multi-racial) middle-classes – as reflected in their "hav[ing] white and black friends now … There are many dog parlours in Woodstock now … because of the new people. We also have a Bootleggers [coffee shop] … who would have thought that we'd have a Bootleggers in Woodstock?"

For older generations and those in working class employment, these changes were economically exclusionary and linked with continued inequalities arising from the intersections of race and wealth, "[T]he Biscuit Mill is not for this area … you will see white people there … We can't afford it … We can't afford R30 for a muffin. We are average income earners" (female, 48, homeowner). For many longstanding residents in Woodstock, the restaurants, boutiques, and Saturday market of *The Old Biscuit Mill* are exclusionary processes of gentrification.

Compounding matters, the securitisation of the premises has led both to a physical and psychological divide from the local community, with "coloured" residents talking of the *Mill* as a *de facto* space for (wealthy) whites.[3] Associated with these changes was a concern that the soul of Woodstock was being stripped away, as longstanding businesses and restaurants (such as the Golden Plate Takeaways) were replaced by more expensive boutiques and chain restaurants. With the arrival of chain stores like, and, and franchise venues, the fear for one of the residents was that "Woodstock is going to become like Cape Town" (female, 70, homeowner) – that the neighbourhood is undergoing a process of generic-ification through gentrification. While gentrification began with small shops selling individualised, handmade products and organic food, this is now driven by chain stores selling mass-produced products. These processes, alongside

efforts to promote a "street art" scene (viewed by some locals as an effort to make Woodstock "look like Bo-Kaap[4]" (long-standing male residents, 58)) and alongside other developments such as the renovation of the swimming pool (and much-increased entry price), were seen as fundamentally altering the neighbourhood.

While property-owning residents have become asset-rich they are cash-poor as costs of groceries, and rates and taxes have risen. As one resident explained,

> The valuation of the house is going up drastically. It was R 700 000, two or three years ago … it's R 1 million now. The council valuation is going according to the upliftment of the area … water and sewerage also increases. (female, 60, homeowner)

The pressures on household finances are compounded by repeated cold calling from real estate agents and investors to sell their properties, as one participant explained, "I get messages on the phone … from Pam Golding … They tell me to think about it … you can get R3 million for your house. I don't know where they got my phone number from" (female, 48, homeowner).

Such pressures are felt by long-standing renters in Woodstock – many of whom have informal lease agreements with landlords and thus limited recourse to protection. Stories of unscrupulous landlords and developers abounded as properties were bought and rents increased while the physical condition of the property deteriorated. As one participant outlined, "They [landlords] buy properties then push up the rent. Some people have no water and no electricity, but they had to pay rent [despite living] with holes in the roof" (female, 48, homeowner), with increasing rents resulting in a growing prevalence of multi-family households due to the need to share rental costs, "Two or three families live in a house … some don't have enough money". These changes were felt most by renters, with one participant saying that "The older generations are not so keen on the change. They lived here for generations. The rent used to be R3,000. Now it is R10,000", while he also noted the potential for increased rent via the subdivision of properties, "At Gympie Street's row houses … Foreigners and students rent rooms for R5,000" (male, early 30s). Many of these foreigners are low and low-middle income migrants from African states, and while welcomed by some as adding to the diversity of the neighbourhood, issues of housing and overcrowding resulted in some hostility or wariness towards "The Africans or 'Bongos' or whatever nation they are" (female, 70).

These dynamics are driven by (counter)gentrification, with landlords and investors allowing rental properties to deteriorate – while extracting rent – to such an extent that properties are deemed unsafe and requiring demolition. The site is then redeveloped into properties or apartments, which are rented or sold on at a premium. In one example recounted by a male resident in his early 30s, whose family had lived for generations in Woodstock, the neighbouring house was bought by investors, who then "threw it down [demolished it]" and the new-build property "sold for R3.4 million".

Further compounding the challenges of rising living costs has been lack of employment opportunities, created by the process of gentrification and the extraction of money from the area as profits for developers who are seen as "just plain greedy … they are not going to share the money" (female, 61, homeowner). These dynamics feed into concerns with displacement from the neighbourhood as part of the process of gentrification such that "If you are not a homeowner, there is no guarantee that your grandchildren will see a house" (female, 48). These dynamics were seen as a

threat to the ethos and history of the neighbourhood – part of processes erasing the individuality, and heritage of the area. These demographic shifts, alongside changes in architecture, businesses, and social amenities that are "regressing" to a homogenised norm are reflected in a generic-ified urban landscape.

Simultaneously, many longstanding residents acknowledged that these processes had led to a reduction in crime and improved the security of some parts of the neighbourhood. While one participant talked of Woodstock as "actually getting much better and better" (female, 70, homeowner), these improvements were identified as occurring within some areas of the neighbourhood – in particular the previously notorious Gympie Street. Identified as a crime hot spot with a reputation for serious criminal activities in the early 2000s, Gympie Street and Woodstock are now positively contrasted with other historically "coloured" group areas for its safety and growth in tourism (female, 70s). Other spaces, often associated with increased overcrowding of multiple-occupancy housing or with areas of high crime are still concentrated, and continue to be viewed as more dangerous.

In part, this overcrowding is seen as a byproduct of the evictions, demolition, and rebuilding of properties due to gentrification. Various residents complained that these processes were meant "to be upliftment … but none of the people in the area benefitted … If you live within the community, you don't get benefits" (female, 46, homeowner). Instead, raids and evictions were seen as deliberately targeting existing residents – especially renters and working-class residents – to clear space for new buildings. While some of those displaced relocated to a temporary relocation area (TRA) in Delft, locally known as Blikkiesdorp ("tin can town") or other settlements, many sought to remain in the neighbourhood – either moving to Cissie Gool House (the old Woodstock hospital) or into other overcrowded housing. For residents, the focus on new housing and developments came at the cost of the existing community – particularly working-class residents – and prioritised short-term economic benefits for external developers at the expense of the longer-term future of the community and neighbourhood,

> What about the working-class people? The developments are reducing the affordable housing in the area. What about their children when they grow up? Where do they go to? The future needs of the community also need to be looked at and not only the present.

These processes resulted in growing fear that "if you not going to uplift the community, it will become a slum area" (female, 60, homeowner) with side streets already suffering from overcrowded, poor-quality housing, and becoming "a haven for criminals" (female, 46, homeowner). Illustrating these concerns, residents pointed to the emergence of a "shanty-town" within northern Woodstock that has become a hub of overcrowded housing and the construction of "Wendy houses" (wood and iron "houses" in back yards or empty space), violence, shebeens (informal drinking establishments), and gang-related activity.

The intersection of these processes has been complex, resulting in a mosaic of urban change requiring consideration of the street-level – or micro-geographies – of (counter)-gentrification. One of the most profound and devastating impacts of these processes in Woodstock has, nonetheless, been the physical displacement of pre-existing residents. Direct or indirect displacement from Woodstock – whether due to rising economic costs, termination of rental agreements, or shifting dynamics of social marginalisation

– revives memories of apartheid-era evictions and spatial segregation policies for many (older) residents. The deaths of elderly displacees were linked by respondents to the sudden disconnection and isolation from the community. One previous long-standing resident, who still worked in Woodstock, recalled,

> My dad was 78 and my mum was 77. My mother told me: "if we move out here, we going [to die]". I did not understand at the time what they meant. It took a month for them apart for them to die. (male, 58)

The relocation of displaced Woodstock residents to settlements on of Cape Town's periphery in TRAs like Blikkiesdorp, distant from places of work, schooling, and health provision, clearly echoing (pre)apartheid racialised displacement policies – but this time driven by economics rather than racist politics.

Conclusion

The stories shared by longstanding Woodstock residents highlight the ongoing and contested outcomes of hybrid processes of gentrification at a micro-scale. The current wave of gentrification, driven by a combination of the state, private investors, existing residents, and in-migrants, is resulting in a micro-scale mosaic of (counter)gentrification and generic-ification. A landscape marked by smart new buildings but also increasing overcrowding of pre-existing housing stock, of improved security in some areas of the neighbourhood and worsening conditions in others. The outcomes of these changes are entwined with direct and indirect pressures on community members to relocate as the soul and identity of the neighbourhood is lost to "generic-ification" and living costs increase. These dynamics remain informed by memories and histories of apartheid-era spatial planning and highlight the importance not only of critically engaging with the multiple drivers and varied outcomes of gentrification and generic-ification *within* a neighbourhood.

Notes

1. A process where companies and middle-class individuals buy state-subsidised property which was meant for the lower-income market in South Africa (Lemanski, 2014).
2. A slang word in South Africa, meaning "nice", "great" or "good" in Afrikaans.
3. These dynamics reflect continued struggles to overcome the legacies of apartheid-era racial segregation and conjure memories of the impacts of the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953.
4. Bo-Kaap is another suburb in Cape Town, famous for its colourful houses and steep streets. It is a long standing tourist attraction and – for many – an aspirational inner-city neighbourhood.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Delia Ah Goo would like to thank the National Research Foundation Thuthuka grant number 117904.

Data availability statement

There is no publicly available data for this study.

Research ethics and consent

Institutional ethical protocols were followed which included verbal consent was provided by interviewees for this study. Ethics number: NWU-01171-19-S9

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