

Research Paper

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Public Space Privatization: A Catalyst for Urban Spaces Gentrification

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Abstract

The initiatives adopted by the government to enhance the urban areas and quality of life may catalyze the gentrification phenomenon, which results in significant changes in the economic and demographic activities within a public space, and the replacement of one societal group with another. Involving the private sector in the development processes is one of the strategies the government proposed to satisfy the population's needs and demands for leisure urban facilities. While initially encouraging diversity, privatization of public spaces eventually manifests as a form of segregation that excludes a particular socioeconomic group, affecting the publicness, accessibility, and usability of these spaces. This paper aims to uncover how privatization of public spaces contributes to the gentrification of the public space itself by proposing a model to measure the level of publicness and gentrification of the public spaces. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify the common variables of gentrification and privatization, followed by an analysis of international case studies using these variables to test the model. The results revealed that privatization is a silent gentrifying force that first transforms the public space before influencing the surrounding urban areas.

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Keywords

Gentrification; Gentrification indicators; Privatization; Dimensions of Publicness

1. Introduction

In Egypt, conflict has surfaced between the public's needs and the government's approach to urban public spaces. The government gradually started to involve private investors in the establishment and renovation of these spaces, treating them as commodities for profit. This act of privatization and commercialization contributes to the transformation of these public spaces and the redefinition of their societal values, which eventually results in gentrification in the form of physical and symbolic exclusion of marginalized groups such as the homeless and low-income population.

This transformation has increased the research interest in urban gentrification and privatization of public spaces, especially as the majority of research focuses on how these phenomena affect the housing market rather than the public space itself.

Accordingly, the primary objective of this paper is to investigate the correlation between the privatization of a public space and its gentrification. This objective is divided into two sub-objectives, which are:

- To develop a framework for assessing the level of “publicness” and gentrification of public spaces and test its validity on international case studies to identify if a public space has undergone gentrification.
- To determine the commonalities between the process of gentrification and privatization through a detailed review of existing literature

2. Literature Review

2.1 Urban Spaces Gentrification

The term “Gentrification” was first introduced by Ruth Glass to refer to the eviction and displacement of London’s working class by wealthier residents (Glass, 1964). However, this terminology has undergone substantial change as (Ley, 1978), whose work was influenced by Daniel Bell’s work related to the post industrial society (Bell, 1973), introduced the “consumption-based theory” that emphasizes social and cultural shifts and the “production -based theory” of Neil Smith (1979), that also, on the other hand, concentrated on the economic aspect and explained gentrification as a result of the “rent gap” process, that depends on the declined property values that pave the way for profitable redevelopment (Sýkora, 1993).

Later, the concept of gentrification was broadened to encompass public spaces in addition to the housing market. According to scholars such as Sarah Brouillette (2009) and Benjamin Grant (2003), gentrification entails the renovation and redevelopment of commercial areas, parks, and retail establishments, resulting in the symbolic and physical exclusion of original users (Clark, 2010a). This process, as shown in Figure 1, indicates that public space are now subject to commercialization, commodification, and marketization as a result of population movement, public policy, and the flow of private capital, causing the displacement of the original users, with new users from higher socio-economic backgrounds, who are interested in investing fixed capital into the space and its surroundings (Zuk et al., 2018; Clark, 2010b).

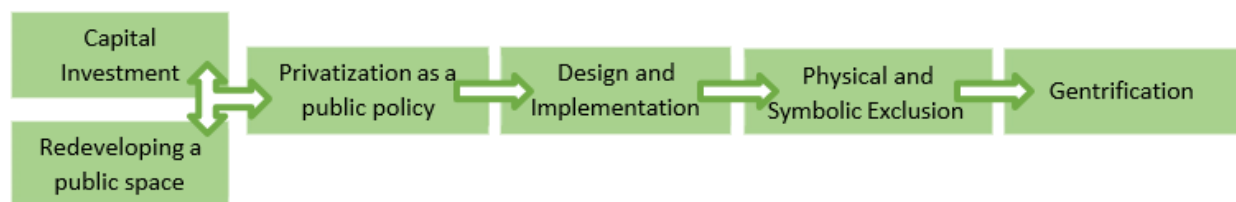


Figure 1: shows the Concept of gentrification (Source: Author).

The progression of gentrification has been identified through five distinct waves (Aalbers, 2019; Hackworth & Smith, 2001). These waves demonstrate that gentrification is no longer limited to small-scale residential revitalization but also includes the contribution of large-scale financialization and privatization in the process of urban development. This has had an impact on public spaces, introducing new forms of gentrification such as commercial gentrification and green gentrification (Gant, 2016).

Commercial gentrification occurs when upscale retail facilities such as cafes, restaurants, and boutiques replace the neighborhood’s existing stores, leading to the displacement of the existing business owners with others who seek maximum profit from their businesses (Gonzalez and Waley, 2013; Wang, 2011). As for green gentrification, this process involves the transformation of deserted urban areas into parks and green areas to fulfill the residents' demands (Wolch et al., 2014).

To detect gentrification, various methods and techniques have been developed through research. Six variables derived from the Canadian census have been used in studies to evaluate neighborhood gentrification in areas such as

Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal (Walks & Maaranen, 2008). Also, Kennedy and Leonard (2001), as shown in Figure 2 (a), offered a more thorough approach by classifying the indicators into three categories, which are primary, secondary, and leading indicators (Eldaidamony, 2016; Kennedy & Leonard, 2001). Gentrification cannot be applied everywhere similarly, due to cultural and social differences. So, it is important to understand the context where gentrification may occur, as shown in Figure 2 (b).

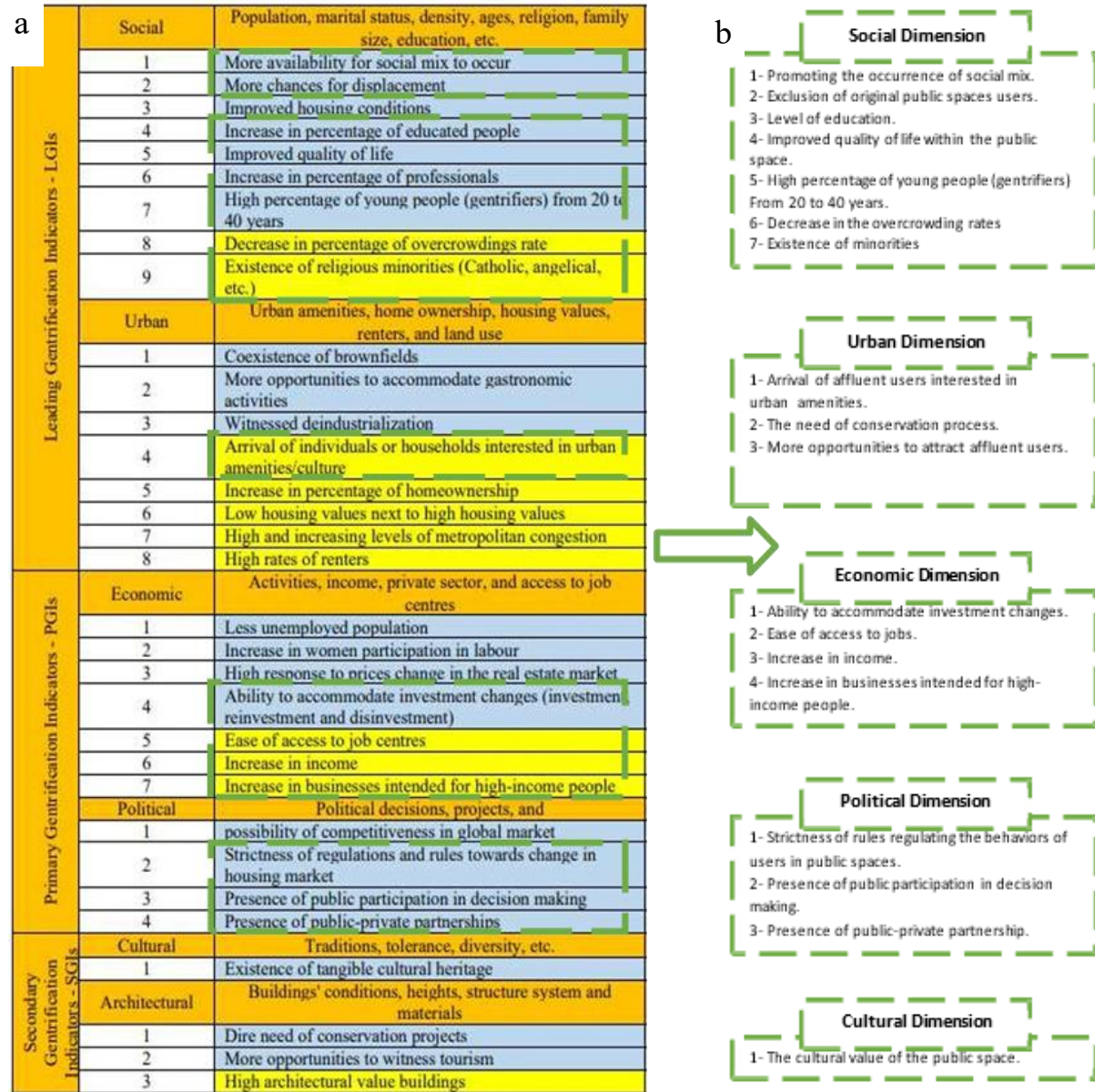


Figure 2. (a): shows gentrification indicators according to Kennedy and Leonard (2001). Source: Eldaidamony, 2016.

Figure 2. (b): shows the extracted gentrification indicators that are suitable for the application on public spaces; Source: Author.

2.2. Public Space Privatization

Commercialization and privatization are posing a growing danger to urban public spaces as a result of the neoliberalization movement in cities (Németh & Schmidt, 2011; Amin, 2008; Genis, 2007; Mitchell, 2003). Since cities are now under the influence of capitalism, the concept of “private cities” has emerged, marking the end of public space (Glasze et al., 2005; Sorkin, 1992).

Privatization is defined as the transfer of public lands to private interests for commodification and securitization purposes, leading to both symbolic and physical exclusion (Low & Smith, 2006; Sorkin, 1992). Governments support

this action to solve challenges such as the collapse of the state welfare (Marcuse, 2009), as well as to reduce management costs (Rosen & Razin, 2009; Genis, 2007).

This issue have been criticized by planners and geographers such as Henri Lefebvre (1968), who in his theory “ the right of the city”, addressed the private cities issue by claimimng that people have a right to be involved in the design and use of public spaces (Harvey, 2008; Lefebvre, 1968) and argued that social, economic, and political aspects influence the nature of public spaces (Lefebvre, 1991).

The shift to privatization transforms public spaces into profit-driven areas that lead to spatial exclusion and segregation, contradicting their initial purpose of being equally accessible to everyone (Fredua, 2017). This act restricts user mobility and access, causing exclusionary practices, such as inaccessibility for people with impairments and racial discrimination, as the government collaborates with the private sector to redesign and police the public space as it fits them (Low, 2006).

2.3. Dimensions of Publicness

The debates on the concept of publicness started with the model proposed by Benn and Gaus (1983), which distinguished public spaces from private ones through three key variables: access, agency, and interest. Access is divided into four sub-dimensions, which are physical access, access to activities, access to information, and access to resources (Akkar, 2005b). Other academics, as shown in Figure 3, have also added to our knowledge of publicness. According to Arendt (1958), a public space needs to be usable and accessible by everyone and last for various generations. Dijkstra (1999) added to this concept by identifying accessibility-affecting elements, including design, pricing, and proximity. Similarly, five spatial rights – accessibility, freedom of action, physical change, and ownership- were identified by Carr et al. (1992) to define publicness (Taskin Erten, 2011). Also, the significance of accessibility, use, ownership, and the capability to promote social interaction are emphasized in other approaches, introduced by Kevin Lynch (1981), Young (1990), and Kohn (2004) (Taskin Erten, 2011).

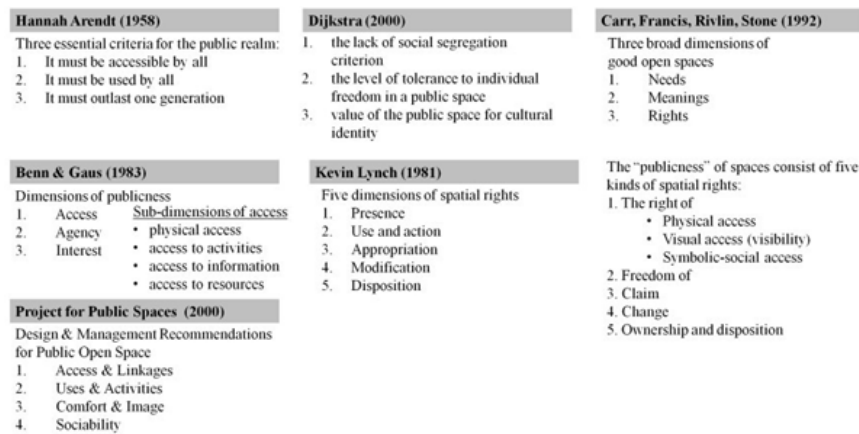


Figure 3: shows the criteria of publicness according to the theoretical background, Source: (Erten, 2011).

Several models, as shown in Figure 4, have been used to evaluate the level of publicness in urban spaces (Mantey, 2017). These models offer an extensive understanding of a space’s accessibility and inclusivity, which is considered crucial for identifying potential gentrification that may occur in a public space due to the privatization and commercialization of this space.

Model	Criteria of publicness
The "cobweb" model of Van Melik, Van Aalst, and Van Weeseep (2007)	Criteria of secured public space: surveillance, restraints on loitering regulation Criteria of themed public spaces: Events, fun shopping, and pavement cafes
The "tri axial" model of Nemeth and Schmidt (2011)	Ownership, Management, Uses/Users
The "star" model of Varna and Tiesdell (2010)	Ownership, Control, Civility, Animation, and Physical configuration
The "OMAI" model of Langstraat and Van Melik (2013)	Ownership, Management, Accessibility, and Inclusiveness
The "spider diagram" of CABE's Space shaper (2007)	Access, Use, Other people, Maintenance, Environment, Design, and Community appearance
"Place diagram" of PPS (2007)	Sociability, Access and linkages, Comfort and Image, and Uses and Activities

Figure 4: shows the models used to evaluate the level of publicness in public spaces. Source: (Mantey, 2017).

For example, Nemeth and Schmidt (2011) propose the "Tri-axial" model to assess by taking into consideration three key factors: ownership, administration, and users/uses. Also, Varna and Tiesdell (2010) proposed five aspects, which are ownership, control, civility, physical configuration, and animation, in their "Star Model". Finally, Mantey (2017), as shown in Figure 5, simplified the publicness indicators into three primary factors, which are diversity, management, and accessibility. This simplified classification is an essential instrument for determining how public a space is.

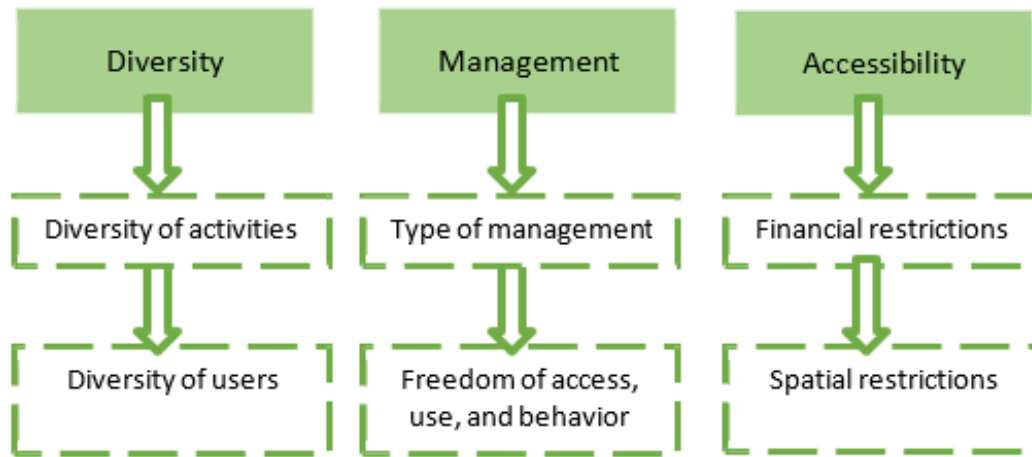


Figure 5: shows the simplified model used to evaluate the level of publicness in public spaces. Source: (Mantey, 2017).

3. Materials and Methods

In the neoliberal era, political and financial forces are the main drivers for strategic investment that transform public spaces into "assets" or commodities that may be rented or sold for commercial purposes (Sassen, 2017; Churchill et al., 2017). These transformations often limit access for lower socio-economic groups as the privatization and commercialization process introduces financial, physical, and behavioral restrictions that affect the publicness of these spaces.

So, to ascertain whether a private space has been gentrified, this paper adopts a comparative, indicator-based analytical approach to evaluate three international case studies: Battersea Park, Gunnersbury Park, and Greenwich Park. These case studies were selected to represent different governance structures, degrees of public-private involvement, and event-led regeneration strategies.

Qualitative data were transformed into an ordinal numerical scale ranging from 1 to 5 for each indicator, as presented in Figure 6. Each score corresponds to predefined qualitative criteria derived from the literature. In the assessment of gentrification level, higher scores (4-5) signify a strong relative presence of gentrification pressures, while lower scores (1-2) signify a weak or limited presence of gentrification. On the other hand, in evaluating the level of publicness, higher scores (4-5) indicate greater accessibility, inclusivity, and openness, while lower score (1-2) indicates a decline in the level of publicness. These scores represent relative intensity rather than absolute measurement, and all indicators are equally weighted (see Appendix B).

The qualitative data were obtained through desk-based research, including comprehensive internet searches of academic databases, official reports and policy documents, books, news articles, project websites, and any publicly available materials that provided insights into the selected case studies. The collected data were then classified, coded, and organized according to the indicators identified in the literature review, using Microsoft Excel as a data management and comparative analysis tool.

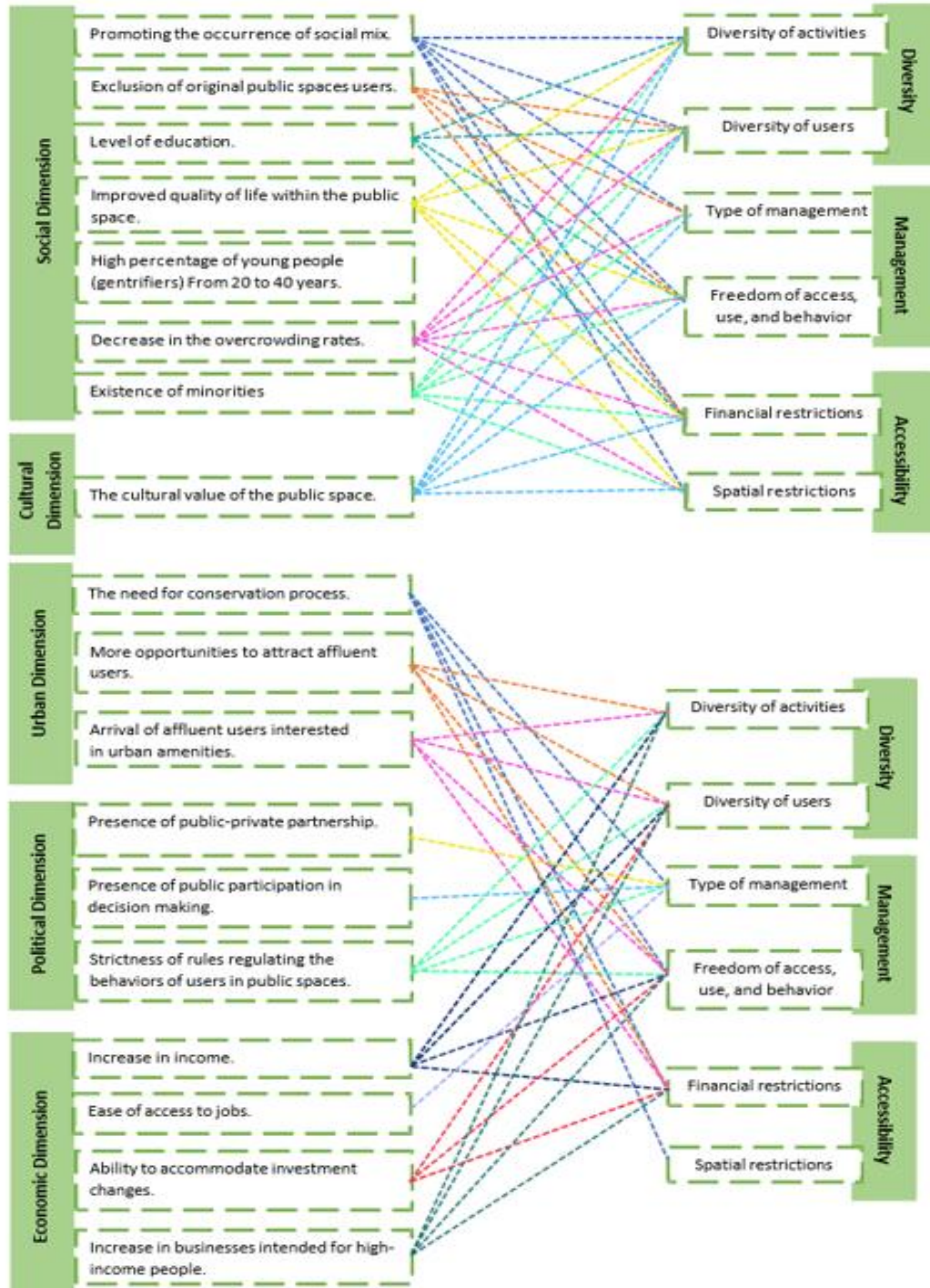


Figure 6: shows the commonality between privatization and gentrification indicators. Source: Author.

4. Study Area

4.1 Battersea Park in London

Battersea Park, as shown in Figure 7, is a large Victorian park that has faced a series of attempts to commercialize and privatize the public space. In 1951, under the supervision of the Greater London Council, the park, which includes a zoo and sports facilities, was put to commercial use for the first time with the Festival of Britain pleasure gardens, which attracted public criticism due to the charged admission fees.

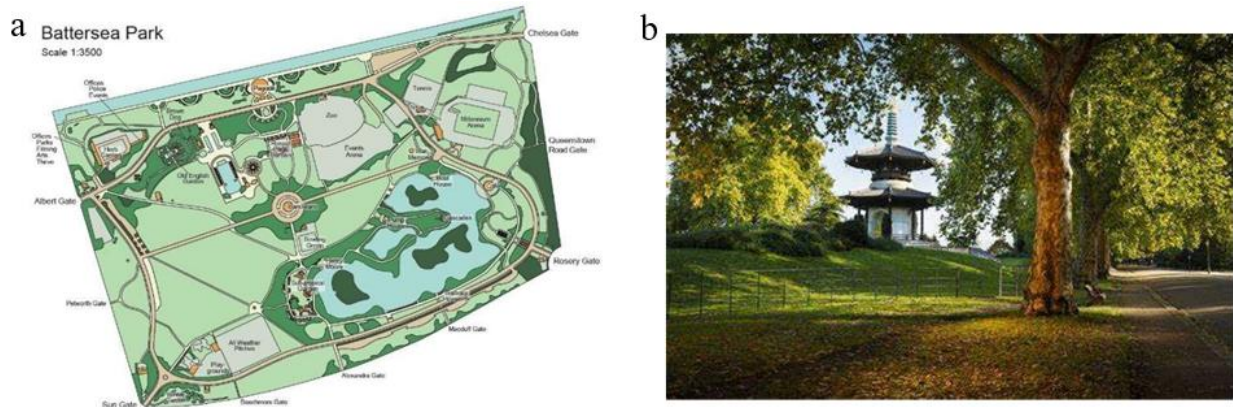


Figure 7 (a): shows the activities facilities within Battersea Park; (b) the green scenery within the park.

Source: (Battersea Park: Enable Leisure and Culture, 2024).

The act of commercialization, as shown in Figure 8, has continued as proposals for a theatre and cinemas were made, as well as hosting the event of Formula E races from 2014 to 2016. Only ten percent of the park was open to the public during these races, which required the installation of temporary structures and metal fencing.

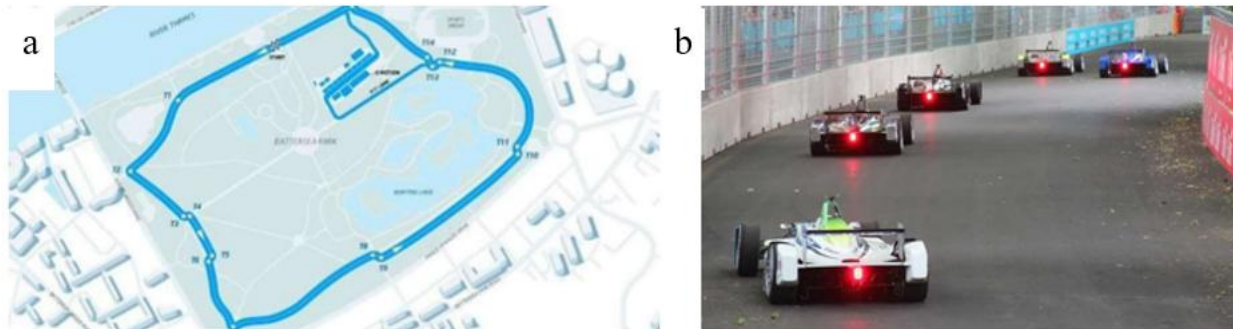


Figure 8: shows the racetrack of the Formula E event; (b) the Formula E race hosted within the park,

Source: (Edwards, 2015).

The Park's transformation from an open public space to a more private and commercial space was further highlighted, as shown in Figure 9, by the opening of a new facility called "Go Ape", which offered distinct play spaces for those who could afford to pay.



Figure 9: (a) the new facility “GoApe”; (b) example of the ticketed activities within the park, Source: (Chudy, E, 2016).

4.2 Gunnersbury Park in London

West London’s ancient Gunnersbury Park (as shown in Figure 10) has changed from a privately held estate to a public space that faces commercialization. TFigure 11he park was purchased by the nation and, under the supervision of Hounslow and Ealing borough councils, was made public after serving as a vacation residence for royalty and prestigious families.



Figure 10 (a): shows the context of Gunnersbury Park, Source: (OpenStreetMap, 2024)

Figure 10.(b): The green scenery within the park, Source: (Wignall, 2021)

However, because of poor maintenance, the Gunnersbury Park Community Interest Company (CIC) was established in 2018 as a new governance approach. A noticeable commercial trend (as shown in Figure 11) appeared within the park premises, including the establishment of ticketed cinema, screenings, and music festivals. Public access was restricted for extended periods of time due to the occurrences, which necessitated the installation of fences and other temporary structures. Also, as shown in Figure 11, the opening of a new café, operated by a commercial chain, has raised concerns over social exclusion due to physical and financial obstacles.



Figure 11 (a): shows the London Mela festival hosted in Gunnersbury Park, Source: (Visit Gunnersbury Park, 2021).

Figure 11 (b): shows the ‘Super Fortress’ fences used to secure the Lovebox music festival in the Park, Source: (Smith, 2020).

Figure 11 (c): shows the DnB Allstars Festival held in the Park, Source: (Concerts & Outdoor Events, Gunnersbury, 2024).

4.3 Greenwich Park in London

Greenwich Park, as shown in Figure 12, is a historically green public space that has undergone a temporary, high-profile privatization event. Due to its proximity to the main Olympic sites, the park was chosen to host the equestrian events during the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. This necessitated the construction of a sizable arena and other related facilities, which the public opposed (as shown in Figure 13), because of access limitations and environmental concerns. The park was closed to the public for several months during the events, with tickets only sold to wealthy equestrian enthusiasts.



Figure 12 (a): shows the context of Gunnersbury Park, Source: (OpenStreetMap, 2024)

Figure 12 (b): The green scenery within the park, Source: (Ross,2024)

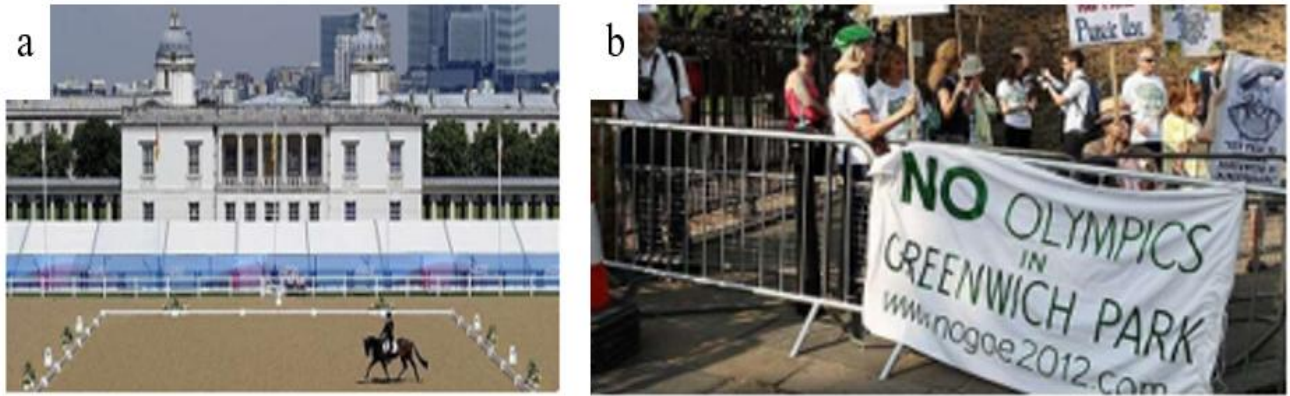


Figure 13 (a): shows the equestrian events held during the 2012 Olympics in Greenwich Park;

Figure 13 (b): shows the opposition movements to these events, Source: (Hymas, 2011).

5. Results

The indicators mentioned in section (3) were used in the analysis of the case studies, as indicated in Table 1. It was found that the privatization of public spaces through public-private partnerships is a significant catalyst for gentrification, as the three case studies have demonstrated a strong correlation between gentrification and the decline in the level of publicness. Greenwich Park scored the highest total gentrification score by 61 points and the lowest total publicness score by 13 points.

Battersea Park comes in second with a total gentrification score of 58 points and a total publicness score of 15 points. Finally, Gunnersbury Park has scored 54 points on the scale of gentrification score and 15 points on the scale of publicness score. Noting that, Greenwich Park may have been exposed to a temporary gentrification process resulting from hosting the Olympic Games in 2012.

Table 1: shows the results of the comparative analysis between the chosen international case studies. (Source: Author).

Public Spaces	Battersea Park	Gunnersbury Park	Greenwich Park
Gentrification Indicators			
Gentrification catalyst	5	4	5
Need for conservation strategies	5	3	4
Presence of Public-Private Partnership	5	5	4
Socio-economic characteristics of its surrounding context	4	5	5
Existence of ethnic minorities	3	3	4
Promoting the occurrence of social mix	3	3	5
More activities to attract affluent users	5	4	5
Age range of users	3	3	4
Overcrowding rates	4	4	4
Exclusion of the original users of the public space	5	4	5
Existence of rules regulating behavior within the space	3	3	3
Increase in the space's financial resources	5	4	5
Ease access to job opportunities	3	4	3
Ability to accommodate the changes within the space	5	5	5
Total Gentrification Score (out of 75 points)	58	54	61
Level of Publicness Indicators			
Diversity of activities	4	4	4
Diversity of users	3	3	4
Type of management	2	2	2
Freedom of access, use, and behavior	2	2	1
Financial restrictions	2	2	1
Physical restrictions	2	2	1
Total Publicness Score (out of 35 points)	15	15	13

This indicates that events, business ventures, and private investment are transforming these parks in an effort to attract affluent visitors regardless of the parks' historical and cultural significance. This was demonstrated by the introduction of upscale commercial spaces like cafes and retail stores, as well as the holding of major, ticketed events like music festivals and sports events. This shift toward a commercial and entertainment-focused approach is facilitated by the collaboration between local governments, private companies, and community interest companies, causing a decline in the level of publicness of these spaces.

The case studies have shown that even with the diverse range of activities offered by the park's managerial authority to attract a diverse range of visitors, they still impose physical and financial restrictions that exclude original users and lower socio-economic groups. The data also shows that opposition from residents and community groups often arises due to concerns about noise, disruption, and social exclusion, but this resistance has generally declined in the recent gentrification wave.

The case studies confirm that they are no longer public amenities but assets to generate profit, aligning with the waves of gentrification that are characterized by intensified capital accumulation, government-supported private sector involvement, and the financialization of public spaces.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study's findings provide a strong foundation regarding the relationship between gentrification and privatization in urban public spaces, as the quantitative indicator-based approach applied to the chosen case studies indicates that the commercialization and private management of these public spaces are associated with increased gentrification pressure.

The analysis demonstrated an inverse relationship between the level of publicness and the gentrification process, indicating that the public space's distinctive character, which is characterized by inclusivity, accessibility, and freedom of use, is progressively constrained as private interests influence the public space, based on relative patterns observed across the case studies rather than claims of statistical significance.

Also, one of the key findings is that gentrification is actively driven by events and policies rather than being a passive result of urban change. Temporary but significant financial and physical obstacles were generated by organizing and hosting major commercial events, which produce lasting impacts on everyday access and patterns of use.

Finally, this paper lends credibility to the hypothesis that privatization contributes to gentrification in urban public spaces, as the results highlight how public parks have evolved from valuable community assets to commercialized, exclusive areas. In addition, this process poses a threat to the democratic and social values that are connected to the public sphere.

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Ethics approval.

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The author declares that there is no competing interest

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Appendix 1:

This link refers to the table in which the data is collected by the Author:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1LEbh6YKT7WtluPEqVydJmyZMIBU>

Appendix 2:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/13AkFy-kxXO9pVWg201dHz->