**Uncertain living: Pestering displaceability in a neighborhood regeneration process**

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of top-down regeneration plans on residents, specifically focusing on the concept of ‘pestering displaceability’. Discussing a case study from the city of Beersheba, Israel, the paper shows how while largescale regeneration plans aim to address national housing needs and revitalise old quarters, they can potentially displace residents. The central argument put forth is that the concept of displaceability engenders a sense of pestering nuisance—a mental state of urban uncertainty—that an increasing number of individuals across various global contexts must navigate. Displaceability is not merely a psychological condition of long-term anxiety. It is the new urban condition, a political condition manifested in a new and deteriorated form of urban citizenship. The study investigates how residents perceive the possibility of being displaced from their neighbourhood, which can evoke both hopeful and fearful sentiments. Residents are concerned about the lengthy process and the uncertainty surrounding the outcomes. The research concentrates on the Gimel neighbourhood in Beersheba, which is undergoing regeneration after experiencing disinvestment. It focuses on the neighbourhood’s pre-gentrification era when regeneration is mainly in blueprints with some physical change and almost no social change. It is a point of great uncertainty regarding the general and individual results of the process: its speed, costs, and benefits. The paper documents this moment of change, using qualitative methods of interviews and participant observation. It explores the perspectives of diverse resident groups, including their trust in the implementation of the plan, emotional responses, expectations, and concerns.

Keywords: urban regeneration, displacement, displaceability, uncertainty, Beersheba, Israel

**Introduction: documenting a moment of change**

In recent years, Israel has promoted a series of largescale regeneration plans aimed at addressing the nation’s housing needs. These top-down initiatives, currently in various stages of implementation, are bound to have a profound impact on urban localities and their residents. Such plans may also generate a sense of ‘pestering displaceability’. The term displaceability encompasses not only the actual act of displacement from one’s living environment but also the potential threat of being pushed out. This paper explores the effects of top-down regeneration plans on residents and examines their perceptions of potential displacement from their neighbourhood.

Displacement is typically associated with negative connotations. However, for some residents, particularly homeowners, it may also hold expectations of improved living conditions and enhanced financial capacities. Regardless of whether residents approach the process with hope or fear, it invariably raises concerns regarding the prolonged period of uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the outcome. The focus of this paper is on a neighbourhood in its pre-gentrification phase, characterized by regeneration plans primarily existing in blueprints, with limited physical changes and minimal social transformations. This phase represents a period of great uncertainty regarding the overall and individual results of the process, including its speed, costs, and benefits.

The context for this study is the Gimel (‘C’) neighbourhood in the city of Beersheba, Israel. The Gimel neighbourhood has experienced a prolonged period of change resulting from disinvestment, culminating in the current regeneration plan, which, at the time of fieldwork (2018-2019), remained largely unknown or understood by most residents. This case study provides an invaluable opportunity to examine a neighbourhood that is on the verge of gentrification, where gentrification is just one possible scenario. The presence of precarity, uncertainty, and the coexistence of regeneration and decline may lead to various forms of displacement, while alternative approaches to replacement may not immediately achieve the desired transformation. The paper aims to document this pivotal moment of change, employing qualitative research methods – interviews and participant observation. By focusing on diverse groups of residents and their perspectives on the regeneration process, this study investigates their levels of trust in its actualization, the emotions it evokes, their hopes, expectations, and concerns.

The central argument put forth in this paper is that the concept of displaceability engenders a sense of pestering nuisance—a mental state of urban uncertainty—that an increasing number of individuals across various global contexts must navigate. Displaceability, I argue, is not merely a psychological condition of long-term anxiety. It is the new urban condition, a political condition manifested in a new and deteriorated form of urban citizenship. By examining the residents’ experiences within the Gimel neighbourhood, this research contributes to our understanding of the psychological and social ramifications of top-down regeneration plans, shedding light on the conditions faced by individuals grappling with the uncertainty surrounding their living environment.
Israeli cities offer intriguing case studies for exploring the issue of displaceability resulting from urban regeneration. What sets them apart is the notable prevalence of homeownership, even within the degenerated housing blocks designated for regeneration. This aspect distinguishes the Israeli scenario from the extensive body of literature on urban regeneration that primarily focuses on Global North cities, where social housing plays a more prominent role.

However, it is important to note that homeownership does not provide absolute protection against the effects of regeneration. Individuals who are uninterested in the process can still face displacement, and they may also experience physical or cultural upheaval within their neighbourhoods during or after regeneration. Most significantly, homeownership cannot shield them from displaceability—the inherent potential of being displaced, the unsettling presence of imminent change, and the necessity to navigate through prolonged periods of uncertainty.

The subsequent sections will delve into an examination of the existing literature concerning regeneration, gentrification, and displacement. This will be followed by an exploration of the concept of displaceability. Subsequently, an analysis of the literature pertaining to urban regeneration in Israel will be presented. A concise overview of the methodology employed will be provided, after which the findings will be presented, commencing with an examination of the local context and the regeneration plan for Gimel. The discussion will culminate with an examination of an interrupted neighbourhood, as perceived through the lens of its longstanding residents. Lastly, concluding remarks will be offered to summarize the key points discussed.

**Regeneration, displacement, and displaceability**

***The interplay of regeneration, gentrification, and displacement in urban areas***

Urban regeneration initiatives play a significant role in reshaping cities and neighbourhoods worldwide. Regeneration processes involve physical, social, and economic transformations in urban areas. These initiatives often focus on improving infrastructure, renovating housing stock, attracting investment, and fostering economic growth. Regeneration projects can be motivated by economic development, urban revitalization, and the improvement of living conditions. Urban regeneration typically entails the transformation of urban areas to cater to wealthier residents, involving physical changes like demolishing and rebuilding structures and symbolic alterations through renaming and reimagining. It can, however, have unfair social consequences for local residents, and often lead to the transformation of neighbourhoods, altering their social fabric and spatial configuration (August and Walks, 2016). This transformation is not always beneficial for all residents, as it frequently results in gentrification, and the displacement of vulnerable populations (Gray and Kallin, 2023).

Gentrification, a central aspect of many regeneration processes, involves the influx of wealthier residents into previously disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Smith, 2002). As the socioeconomic composition of the neighbourhood changes, whether buyers are owner-occupiers or buy-to-let, long-term residents, particularly those in lower-income brackets, may face rising housing costs, reduced access to amenities, and a loss of social capital (Paccoud, 2017). As more affluent residents move in, housing costs increase, amenities change, and the social composition of the neighbourhood is transformed. This can lead to the displacement of long-term, lower-income residents who can no longer afford the rising rents and/or other costs or who face other forms of exclusion (Grier and Grier, 1978; Marcuse, 1985).

The displaced individuals face housing precarity, uncertainty about their future living arrangements, and potential disruption to their social networks (Slater, 2009). Studies have shown that displacement can have significant negative impacts on individuals and communities, including increased stress, decreased well-being, and a loss of social capital (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020; Morris, 2019; Wallace, 2015; Watt, 2023). Displacement, argues Yiftachel, can be propelled by forces other than capital accumulation or class struggle, prevalent in North America and Western Europe. It can be driven by infrastructure development, security concerns, legal formalism, national identity, religious or gender domination, or environmental pressures, that at times even work against the interests of capital (Yiftachel, 2020: 156). The role of the state, he continues, remains central even in putatively neoliberal cities (2020: 158).

Yet the state and the market forces are interdependent in successfully accomplishing largescale regeneration projects facing the challenge of creating ‘islands of renewal in seas of decay’. This is particularly relevant when planning to regenerate stigmatised areas, such as the Gimel neighbourhood. Gray and Kallin (2023) highlight the complex dynamics of land valuation, rent gaps, and the influence of territorial stigmatisation in shaping gentrification patterns. Following other scholars addressing the matter (Hammel, 1999; Slater, 2017; Smith, 1996), they show that the interplay between perceptions, neighbourhood context, and economic conditions plays a crucial role in understanding why certain areas are more likely to undergo gentrification than others. While they are building on case studies of failed regeneration projects in Edinburgh and Glasgow, their conclusions could serve as warning to the possible success of the regeneration process of Gimel. Their argument is that counter to Slater’s (2017) explanation that territorial stigmatisation is what distorts land valuation, territorial stigmatisation is often crucial to the creation of rent gaps, but it cannot provide a sufficient answer in itself to the question of rent gap closure (Gray and Kallin, 2023: 1035). The question of whether Gimel will be gentrified in ten or 15 years from now, or will it mostly remain a ‘sea of decay’ is largely dependent on changing its stigma, and not only providing developers, as well as current homeowners, with convenient and profitable investment avenues. People should be willing and eager to live in the new housing units the new plan will deliver.

***The concept of displaceability***

The concept of displaceability captures the notion that residents face not only the actual displacement from their living environment but also the constant potential for displacement (Tzfadia and Yiftachel, 2022; Yiftachel, 2020; Zaban, 2022). Yiftachel (2020) introduces the concept of displaceability as a framework to understand the underlying conditions that make individuals and communities vulnerable to displacement in urban contexts. Displaceability refers to the potential for future displacement rather than the actual occurrence, encompassing various social, economic, and political factors.

This state of displaceability engenders uncertainty and anxiety among residents regarding the future of their homes and communities (Levine and Aharon Gutman, 2022c), or in Wallace’s (2015, 2017) terminology, it means living in ‘limbo-land’. The harm of gentrification, as Wallace (2015: 519) argues, is not only tangible evictions and displacements, but also the absences, limbos, and opportunities occurring within these interruptions. Based on his study on regeneration in Salford, UK, Wallace argues that regeneration places households and communities into limbo, ensuring they have no idea when or whether they will have to move (2017: 8).

Housing precarity becomes a prevailing concern, with residents facing the possibility of losing their homes or being priced out of the area, thus losing their sense of security, social networks, and access to resources (Watt, 2022). Watt (2023) highlights how estate regeneration can be perceived and experienced as a form of psychosocial degeneration, causing anxiety, stress, and a sense of insecurity among affected residents. The psychological and emotional impacts of displaceability are significant, with residents facing the disruption of social networks, loss of belonging, and a sense of uprootedness, which can potentially be felt even before the actual physical moment of ‘un-homing’ (Lees and Hubbard, 2020). Nixon offers the term ‘slow violence’—‘violence that occurs gradually and out of sight… an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’ (2011: 2). Processes of neighbourhood regeneration, gentrification and displacement can be seen as a form of ‘slow violence’ (see Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020), with long-term and hard to measure repercussions on people’s lives. The psychological effects of neighbourhood change can occur even with no physical displacement when residents choose to remain in place. Cocola-Gant (2023), in the context of touristification in Barcelona, introduced the concept of ‘place-based displacement’ to highlight that, for residents, it implies a form of dispossession which is both material and emotional. He argues that place-based displacement is the alteration of a familiar environment that essentially displaces people from places to which they are emotionally and materially attached, in turn causing discontent for the area they reside.

In this paper, I aim to elaborate on the concept of displaceability and develop the notion of ‘pestering displaceability’; the uncertainty entering a person or family’s life once the prospects of regeneration are put forward. Yet this pestering nuisance, encapsulated in the potential of being displaced, is not merely a psychological condition. It is the new urban condition, a political condition manifested in a new and deteriorated form of urban citizenship. In this form of urban citizenship, people’s rights to a home, regardless of tenure and ownership, are compromised. While Beersheba is only a small ‘ordinary city’ (Robinson, 2006) in Southern Israel, the condition I discuss here is much broader. It is applicable to many places, urban or rural, in the Global North, South, East or West. This condition is driven by the logic of a global neoliberal regime, for which housing is no longer a fundamental human right, but a commodity (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). Displaceability is therefore a new form of urban citizenship, defining one’s right (or lack of) to the city. Displaceability relies on the neoliberal logic, but this logic does not mean that the state backs off entirely, letting market forces do its job. The state remains central in steering policies, in planning, and in carving niches for the market to enter and profit, and consequently, to relieve the state from some of its former roles and responsibilities.

In the context of regeneration, the right to the city framework becomes a critical lens for examining the impact of urban transformation on urban citizenship. The right to the city emphasizes the rights of all residents to actively participate in shaping and accessing the benefits of urban life. It calls for inclusive and participatory approaches to urban planning, ensuring that the interests and wellbeing of all residents, particularly the most vulnerable, are prioritized (Darcy and Rogers, 2014).

***Regeneration in the Israeli context***

Israel has undergone three generations of urban renewal policies (Carmon, 1999). The initial phase focused on slum clearance and housing provision to improve the living conditions of low-income residents. The second phase emphasized comprehensive neighbourhood renewal projects, encompassing both physical and social transformations. In recent years, there has been a shift towards entrepreneurial approaches and market-driven policies (Margalit and Kemp, 2019), marking a third phase. Levine and Aharon Gutman (2021) argue that the low interest rates which characterized Israel’s post-2008 crisis recovery strategies marked the beginning of a fourth generation in Israeli urban renewal, which they term the ‘self-leverage’ phase. The low interest rates remained until April 2022, when they were raised to avoid inflation. This policy caused dramatic increases in housing prices and turned them into a commodity.

To address housing needs and revitalize neighbourhoods characterized by disinvestment and neglect (Feitelson, 2018), Israel has implemented various regeneration plans utilizing both top-down and market-driven approaches (Alster and Avni, 2021). These initiatives involve collaboration among developers, homeowners, and government authorities, raising questions about power dynamics and the equitable distribution of benefits (Geva and Rosen, 2018). Since the beginning of the 21st century, Israel’s urban renewal policy has primarily emphasized residential redevelopment, limiting the influence of local authorities in the process (Shamai and Hananel, 2021). The policy mainly prioritizes physical and economic objectives (Rosen and Avni, 2019), with a strong focus on increasing the number of housing units.

Urban regeneration in Israel relies on various mechanisms (Geva and Rosen, 2018). Developers, homeowners, and new competencies play essential roles in the development process. Collaboration and the ability to seize opportunities arising from the combination of affordable housing stock and high demand are crucial factors. Moreover, the influence of a neoliberal toolkit and national rationales shapes the divergent logics of urban regeneration in Israel (Alster and Avni, 2021). Contrary to some other countries, in Israel, homeowners retain ownership, and the introduction of additional housing units and stories is utilized as a means to finance and incentivize regeneration efforts. As part of this process, developers are required to establish a contractual agreement with a majority of apartment owners as a prerequisite for plan submission (Levine and Aharon Gutman, 2022c).

The primary objective of urban regeneration initiatives in Israel is to improve physical and social conditions in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. These initiatives encompass infrastructure upgrades, affordable housing creation, public space enhancement, and promotion of economic growth (Levine and Aharon Gutman, 2022a). The goal is to attract investment, stimulate economic development, and enhance the overall quality of life for residents. And yet, urban regeneration mainly happens in high demand areas, where profitability rates are highest, rather than according to physical and social needs, which are often greater in the geographic periphery (Shamai and Hananel, 2021).

Studies on urban regeneration in Israel have examined the paradoxical nature of homeowner displacement, wherein homeowners may experience financial benefits but also social and emotional upheaval (Geva and Rosen, 2021). The regeneration process provides an opportunity to explore how residents perceive and navigate the uncertainties associated with displaceability, shedding light on the broader challenges of urban transformation.

Urban regeneration offers numerous advantages for cities. It can enhance the physical infrastructure of neighbourhoods, improve housing conditions, and create new employment opportunities (Hyra, 2012). In Israeli cities, regeneration primarily benefit homeowners, who may witness potential financial gains through increased property values, thus receiving opportunities for social mobility (Levine and Aharon Gutman, 2022b). ראש הטופס

Regeneration stimulates economic development by attracting new businesses and investment, leading to job creation, and increased economic opportunities (Margalit and Alfasi, 2016). Furthermore, it enhances the aesthetic appeal of neighbourhoods, diversifies the housing stock, and upgrades its quality (Levine et al., 2021; Shamai and Hananel, 2021). These changes can improve neighbourhoods’ stigmatization and their desirability.

However, regeneration often results in the displacement of lower-income residents and the loss of affordable housing options (Carmon, 1999). Gentrification and rising housing costs can lead to the exclusion of vulnerable populations, exacerbating existing inequalities (Kim et al., 2018). Moreover, the disruption of social networks, changes in the neighbourhood’s character, and loss of familiar places can adversely affect residents’ well-being and sense of belonging (Lewis, 2017). In Israel, regeneration mostly harms rentiers, who are the first to be displaced, while those renting in the renewed project already pay much higher prices (Brodkin and Mualam, 2022; Kainer-Persov, 2008, 2017). Another critical disadvantage is the potential displacement of homeowners (Geva and Rosen, 2021). Gentrification and rising property values can compel longstanding residents to relocate, resulting in social disruption and loss of community cohesion. Additionally, urban regeneration projects may overlook the needs and perspectives of marginalized communities, further exacerbating existing inequalities (Margalit and Kemp, 2019).

**Methodology**

The study centres on examining the temporal aspects of urban transformation ‘from below’, drawing on qualitative ethnographic research conducted in Gimel. Although I have never personally resided in Beersheba, my father’s upbringing in Gimel provides a familial connection to the area. As the fifth son of Jewish-Iraqi parents who immigrated to Israel in 1951, my father was the first in his family to be born in Israel. He left Beersheba in the mid-1970s, prior to my birth. Nonetheless, I retain vivid early childhood memories of my grandmother’s house, the street, and the flavours of her cuisine. Leveraging my family heritage and partial insider perspective proved valuable in establishing rapport with residents, who graciously shared their stories, while my outsider status enabled me to maintain a critical viewpoint.

Between December 2018 and April 2019, I conducted 45 interviews with a diverse range of individuals connected to Gimel, including municipal officials, planners, real estate specialists, local merchants, people working with neighbourhood communities, and current and former residents from various social groups. The interviews typically lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, taking place in locations convenient for the interviewees. In most instances, I recorded the interviews for later transcription, although in some cases, I relied on notetaking. The interview questions encompassed topics such as the neighbourhood’s history, its present condition, the communities residing there, their awareness of neighbourhood plans, and their perspectives on its future.

One of my primary objectives was to reconstruct the neighbourhood’s past through retrospective interviews, akin to oral history, aimed at preserving overlooked elements of history for future reference (Ritchie, 2014: xv). Indeed, even accounts of the neighbourhood’s current state, recorded during 2018-2019, can be considered a form of oral history, given the neighbourhood’s impending transformation. Past and longstanding residents provided valuable insights into the neighbourhood’s earlier state, its inhabitants, and the changes that have occurred over the years. This first-hand testimony was instrumental in assessing the levels of transformation, decline, and abandonment. However, it is important to acknowledge that this data collection method is not without limitations, particularly when eliciting recollections of the past. As Cándida Smith (2003: 348) notes, ‘interviews contain a mix of true and false, reliable and unreliable, verifiable and unverifiable information. Details of accounts can often be incorrect. Interviews may contradict each other, and, occasionally, interviewees provide inconsistent accounts in different interview situations.’ Therefore, in my analysis, I have prioritized aspects that were consistently reiterated across multiple accounts while acknowledging that individuals’ narrations reflect their unique perspectives and interpretations of reality.

**The local setting: the Gimel neighbourhood in Beersheba**

Scholars have emphasized the importance of studying ordinary cities rather than solely focusing on global cities (Robinson, 2006). This paper focuses on one such city – the Southern Israeli city of Beersheba. The case-study neighbourhood, Gimel, was established in the early 1950s as one of Beersheba’s primary new neighbourhoods, designed to accommodate a large influx of Jewish immigrants, mainly from Arab countries and Europe. While there is limited existing literature on Beersheba and ordinary Israeli cities (excluding Tel Aviv and Jerusalem), understanding Israeli planning, urbanization, and socio-spatial processes requires insights from these ‘ordinary’ perspectives.

Beersheba has a historical background dating back to the Ottoman rule in Palestine and further development during the British Mandate (1917-1948) as a Muslim town. Following Israel’s establishment in 1948, it transformed into a Jewish-Israeli city, becoming a national project that necessitated resources and close oversight (Avni et al., 2016: 20).

Gimel is strategically located near various amenities such as railway stations, a university, a hospital, the downtown civic centre, the city’s largest commercial zone, and the High-Tech Park. The neighbourhood is home to approximately 11,300 residents and consists of 5,000 housing units. Despite a steady increase in housing units and households since the 1970s, the overall population is declining, indicating an aging population, a rise in single or shared student households, and fewer families (Municipality of Beersheba, 1979; Stern, 2004). Gimel is considered one of the most deprived areas in the city, ranked 2/10 and 3/10 on Israel’s socio-economic ladder (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Initially, Gimel predominantly housed working-class residents from the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. Housing units were typically small, one or two-bedroom flats accommodating large families, either owned or leased by social housing tenants from Amidar, a state-owned housing company. Former residents recall challenging living conditions during the 1950s-1970s, but as there were no wealthy residents or new neighbourhoods at the time, the shared struggle fostered solidarity (Z., former resident, born 1950, 20.3.19; A., local activist, 24.12.18). The neighbourhood enjoyed a respectable reputation until the 1970s, including some middle-class families (Y., former resident, born 1950, 19.12.18; T., born 1935, 28.1.19). Some buildings were already badly deteriorating within a few decades of their construction (Bar, 1978), yet they remain inhabited today.

In the 1990s, new suburban neighbourhoods were developed in response to wealthier populations moving to prestigious outer suburbs, causing a decline in Gimel, as capable residents relocated. These new neighbourhoods were also necessary due to the massive immigration wave from the Former Soviet Union (FSU). The new immigrants replaced Gimel’s relocated capable residents, and housing prices in Gimel allegedly surged up to 1,000% (A., local activist, 24.12.18). In the early 2000s, social decline escalated with the settlement of many protected Palestinian collaborator families by the Ministry of Defence.[[1]](#footnote-1) Local residents felt uneasy with their behaviour. Simultaneously, two large absorption centres for Ethiopian immigrants were established in Gimel, and numerous special needs hostels and institutions occupied properties and public buildings that formerly served the neighbourhood. The remaining residents were predominantly older and poorer, either unwilling or unable to relocate.

Although the population in Gimel experienced socio-economic stagnation, housing prices continued to rise. The growth of the university and proximity to Israel’s third-largest hospital created high demand for affordable small flats for transient populations such as students and interns. Real estate and finance sectors capitalized on this demand by splitting flats into smaller units, refurbishing them, and renting them to students. Developers also sought planning applications for high-rise redevelopment, often granted by the local planning committee eager to see redevelopment in the older quarters. These trends resulted in steadily rising housing prices in Gimel since the early 2010s. However, prices in Gimel remain lower than the average housing prices in Beersheba and significantly lower than the rest of Israel. Additionally, a significant portion of housing stock in Gimel is rented, reaching 66% in 2008 (and 88% in the areas closest to the university; Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008). However, updated data from the university student association indicates that only 16% of Gimel’s population are students.

The communities residing in Gimel have changed over time, comprising multiple generations of working-class Mizrahim (Jews from Arab countries), Georgian Jewish migrants from the 1970s, Ethiopian migrants from the 1980s and 1990s, FSU migrants from the 1990s, Muslim Palestinian collaborator families from the 2000s, and two large Ethiopian newcomer absorption centres. The neighbourhood also has a significant student population. In 2010, a young religious student couple moved to Gimel with the intention of creating an ideological community for young couples and families. These pioneer, or marginal gentrifiers (Rose, 1984, 1996) now consist of 45 families and maintain close ties with the municipality, symbolizing the desired social change.

**The regeneration plan for Gimel**

Israel is a centralised state with centralised planning apparatus and Beersheba’s top-down planning is within this context. In 2011, the Israel Planning Administration (IPA) collaborated closely with the municipality to introduce a new masterplan for Beersheba, replacing the outdated 1969 plan. The key objective was to revitalize the urban core rather than perpetuate urban sprawl. Urban regeneration goes beyond local interests, as IPA aims to plan 2.6 million housing units nationwide by 2040, with 900,000 units through urban regeneration. To advance this objective, the Urban Regeneration Authority (URA), operating under the Ministry of Housing, was established to initiate and finance largescale regeneration projects. Beersheba sought funding to implement the Gimel plan. However, the clash between one government body overseeing the regeneration of old quarters and another planning new developments in five neighbourhoods north of the city poses a threat to the new masterplan’s goals and the potential recreation of the existing neglected conditions.

The Gimel Regeneration Plan, initiated in 2014, has several goals, according to the architect (Interview, 28.2.19). It aims to restore the neighbourhood’s ‘old splendour’ and form a viable community. It seeks to leverage the neighbourhood’s attractive location: ‘In Tel Aviv this neighbourhood would have been Manhattan, and here it’s crap’. The plan also focuses on improving public spaces and commercial areas, while maintaining a diverse housing supply for social diversity. Furthermore, it aims to establish clear planning guidelines to stop property speculation. The architect stated that if the plan succeeds, ‘gentrification is a bi-product’ (on policymakers’ view of gentrification as a solution rather than a problem, see Doucet et al., 2011; Lees and Ley, 2008). The architect emphasized that displacement can be minimized by providing sufficient welfare support and that the desired change should not rely solely on students and investor-owners but involve families as well.

In 2017, the Municipal Regeneration Agency (MRA) emerged as a new actor. The MRA is funded by both the URA and the municipality and plays a mediating role between the municipality, developers, and residents to promote urban regeneration in Beersheba’s old quarters. While improvements are expected to raise prices and potentially lead to gentrification, they also enable sustainable redevelopment in the less attractive areas (interviews with MRA employees, 27.3.19 & 31.3.19). This is because Israel’s current urban renewal mechanisms rely on private investment, incentivizing developers through tax breaks and building rights (Alster and Avni, 2021; Carmon, 1999; Geva and Rosen, 2018; Rosen, 2016). Currently, for economically viable redevelopment in Gimel’s most deprived areas, each existing housing unit needs to be replaced by eight, exceeding the area’s capacity.

Planners agree that the key focus will be the revitalization of the Orot center, which used to serve as the local cinema between 1960 and 1989. This distinctive building, characterized by its brutalist architectural style and central location, has remained abandoned for decades. Initially, the municipality sold it to a private developer with intentions to demolish it and construct a high-rise building instead. However, due to public outcry and the intervention of Gimel’s planning process, the municipality decided to cancel the sale and issue a call for redevelopment proposals for the entire area. Although it will take years to materialize, this plan will pave the way for subsequent phases of the project.

Architects, planners, and developers I spoke with often refer to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem as examples of the desired change they seek. They view gentrification as an ideal solution with minimal costs, leading to voluntary relocation of long-term residents rather than forced displacement (city planner, 14.1.19). However, the literature on displacement considers this ‘voluntary mobility’ as a form of displacement resulting from neighbourhood reinvestment (Grier and Grier, 1978). This literature primarily focuses on people living in rented or social housing, perceiving homeowners as financially secure and politically influential (Forrest and Hirayama, 2015; Shlay, 2006), and therefore less vulnerable to displacement during urban regeneration (Shin, 2009). Israel challenges this perspective, as most residents in regeneration-designated areas are either owner-occupiers or investor-owners who profit from redevelopment (Geva and Rosen, 2021). It is a ‘culture of property’, similar to Hong Kong (Ley and Teo, 2014), Singapore (Haila, 2017), or Australia (Morris, 2023). While Israeli literature on urban renewal highlights the benefits for residents (Geva and Rosen, 2018; Levine and Aharon Gutman, 2022b), it is also evident that renters (the counterpart to investor-owners) are displaced and that most elderly residents will either move to nursing homes or pass away during the lengthy process. Some owners are coerced into signing regeneration contracts against their will and best interests, while others are tempted to sell and relocate before or during the process, resulting in what Marcuse et al. (1989: 1357) refer to as ‘anticipatory displacement’—people who move due to expected consequences of an impending action. Furthermore, it is clear that after redevelopment, the new housing units become affordable only for higher-income individuals, leading to ‘exclusionary displacement’ (Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009).

**Neighbourhood, interrupted: dealing with housing uncertainty**

In 2019, upon completing my fieldwork, hardly any longstanding residents I interviewed have heard of Gimel’s regeneration plan. Despite the planners’ claims of engaging in a public participation process and the efforts of the Municipal Regeneration Agency, the plan remained largely obscure. Only new residents, belonging to the young religious group of 45 middle class families, have heard of the plan. However, amidst this lack of awareness, unmistakable social and physical transformations unfolded within the neighbourhood.

Conversations with longstanding residents revealed a continuous decline, as their once-steadfast neighbours gradually departed, replaced by a transient population. The persistent offers to purchase their properties, although increasing in value, failed to provide adequate funds for securing alternative housing in the city. One disheartened longstanding resident lamented, ‘They offered me 900,000 NIS, but without a mortgage, it’s impossible to buy anything worthwhile. If they were to offer 1.2 million, I would gladly leave this place’ (A., born 1965, 21.1.19). Notably, data from the Israel Tax Authority illustrated a staggering 300% increase in square meter prices within his deteriorating apartment complex between 2001 and 2019, a clear indication of the rampant speculation that transforms homes into real estate (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). This protracted process of displacement, initiated by individuals seeking better opportunities elsewhere, ultimately led to the gradual abandonment of the neighbourhood. The remaining residents found themselves trapped in an unsettling state of limbo, their lives suspended and their displacement impending even before any concrete plans materialized (Baeten et al., 2017; Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020).

The longstanding inhabitants, who had spent decades, if not their entire lives, within the neighbourhood, spoke fondly of their surroundings. They had grown accustomed to the familiarity it offered, relied on the community bonds they had forged, and enjoyed the benefits of a central location. Conversely, external perspectives, such as those of real estate agents (Interview, 27.2.19), painted a bleaker picture, asserting that those with the means had already departed, while the remaining individuals lingered out of habit rather than genuine choice. Many reminisced about Gimel’s past, once a vibrant community that had deteriorated socially since the 1970s, plagued by crime, prostitution, and drug-related issues. As owner-occupiers gradually departed, the physical condition of the neighbourhood also deteriorated. Simultaneously, the area underwent some developments, but these failed to bring about any substantial social change, mainly due to the neighbourhood’s unfavourable reputation.

While longstanding residents may not have known about the new plan in details, many could already sense change coming, causing immediate mixed reactions of fear, hope, or disbelief. While some felt that this might be a way out for them, as A’s quote above illustrates, others thought that they could best leverage it into better living conditions within the neighbourhood. B., a 54-years-old longstanding resident explained (27.3.19) why this is the best option:

Those who think about taking the money and leaving are stupid. Why burden yourself with a mortgage again? People in this area don’t have money to buy a more expensive apartment. Whoever doesn’t accept the apartment and asks for money, they’ll end up homeless. They just don’t understand… I don’t want money. I want a key in exchange for a key, in the neighbourhood. I’m not a pig. I just want him (the developer) to give me an apartment without neighbours above me.

What drives his thinking is the logical understanding that any housing upgrade will necessarily involve a new mortgage, which he wants to refrain from doing. He believes that it is better taking a new apartment without getting into more expenses. Yet, his words encapsulate great misunderstandings too. He believes that he can ask for *any* alternative housing in the neighbourhood, including a rather scarce, detached home. In reality, people can only get another apartment of similar characteristics in their renewed building. The misinformation derives from the one example of completed raze and rebuilt project in Gimel. In this unique case, a governmental body wanted to realize a stuck 20-year plan, using a contractor to vacate the remaining 17 families. The contractor received hefty funds for generous compensations. The rumour spread widely, forming the wrongful information of many residents I spoke with, who did not realize this was a one-off.

Although the broader regeneration plan remained shrouded in uncertainty, many of the longstanding residents were aware of the potential for regeneration in their individual homes. Some had already received offers from developers, while others anticipated similar proposals. Reactions to these prospects varied greatly, ranging from perceiving regeneration as a blessing that could enhance their quality of life or create economic opportunities for them or their heirs, to viewing it as a threat to their established way of life and their ability to remain in their homes.

Addressing longstanding residents’ fears, a Municipal Regeneration Agency employee explained (27.3.19):

Most residents in this area are elderly or non-Hebrew speakers, or they have a lesser understanding of the programme. They fear that a developer will evict them from their homes. They feel they have no choice and must sign deals with developers. Some developers pressure them greatly and threaten them, which instills anxiety and fear.

This was further elaborated by two young volunteers working in Gimel (Interview, 31.3.19). One of them mentioned: ‘The elderly women are afraid. They don’t want to be vacated for construction, but the regular families don’t mind’. Her friend helped her distinguish between younger families, who might see regeneration as an opportunity, to the elderly women they work with: ‘It’s not easy to leave the home they’ve invested in for years. They have the people they know and the proximity to places, so they don’t want to leave’.

Some expressed hopes that regeneration in their building might improve their living standards, and hoped for a developer to come with a good offer that would enable them to return to a renewed apartment. Yet this hope is not devoid of fears: ‘It depends on the number of tenants, that’s the problem. A building with 40-50 apartments is a bit of an issue because living with this many people... it’s a bit scary’ (M., resident in her 60s, 17.2.19).

The pervasive fear of the unknown loomed large, primarily due to the lack of information regarding the timing, duration, temporary relocation plans, the quality of the end result, the identity and number of new neighbours, as well as the anticipated increase in maintenance costs and council taxes. At the time of the research, most respondents were unaware of whether their buildings were even under consideration for regeneration, let alone the specific details of the process. Extensive research on raze and rebuild projects in Israel demonstrated the validity of these concerns. The regeneration process is protracted, spanning 10-15 years, and predominantly caters to new buyers, failing to address the needs of longstanding residents. The introduction of new buildings often disrupts neighbourly relations, privacy, and increases feelings of isolation, monthly expenses, noise pollution, and conflicts among neighbours. Alarmingly, in Israel’s initial completed regeneration project, only 50% of owner-occupiers returned to the redeveloped building, while all rentiers were forcibly displaced (Kainer-Persov, 2008, 2017). One interviewee, a woman in her 50s who left the neighbourhood, but her elderly mother still lives there, summed up these sentiments: ‘They (the municipality, the planners) really don’t care about the residents. They are interested in how they can create a beautiful neighbourhood to attract new people. To have young couples come and change the population... Where will longstanding residents go? God knows’ (21.1.19).

The prevailing sense of precarity and uncertainty surrounding the regeneration prospects seeped into the fabric of everyday decision-making. One interviewee shared his hesitancy, stating, ‘I had plans to refurbish the kitchen, but the developer advised me against investing, as they hinted at the possibility of working something out in the future. Hence, I’m holding off for now’ (B., born 1965, 27.3.19; also see Kainer-Persov, 2008). This pervasive uncertainty often resulted in disinvestment in both private and public spaces, exacerbating the neighbourhood’s decline. A Municipal Regeneration Agency employee provided an overview of the matter (27.3.19): ‘Residents call and ask how’s the raze and rebuild progressing, saying “I want to refurbish my kitchen, and I’m holding off”. It starts with the deterioration of shared spaces. Once the cloud of raze and rebuild hovers above, people already care less, and that’s problematic because it takes time’.

Furthermore, people were apprehensive about being the last to consent, as they could potentially face legal repercussions due to the ‘Refuser Tenant Law’ of 2006, which enabled lawsuits and compensation claims against tenants refusing regeneration when an 80% majority supported it (lowered to 66% in 2021). There was also a prevailing fear that signing on later might result in less favourable terms: ‘If I don’t agree to sell and the other three will, I will be the last one remaining and might be left barefoot’ (B., born 1965, 27.3.19).

While many individuals approached the prospect of future regeneration with a mix of hope and fear, there were also those who remained wholly sceptical, dismissing the idea by saying, ‘Regeneration? We’ve heard that same promise twenty years ago. This plan has been around for ages, but all we’ve seen is empty talk’ (E., born 1950, 14.1.19); ‘There are buildings here that are slated for demolition, and nothing happens, it remains the same. They say, “yes, we’ll do it”, but it doesn’t happen (longstanding resident in her 20s, 21.1.19; similar accounts can be found in Rosen and Avni, 2019).

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored the impacts of top-down regeneration plans on residents and their perceptions of potential displacement from their neighbourhood in the context of the Gimel neighbourhood in Beersheba, Israel. The argument put forth here, was that these top-down initiatives create a sense of ‘pestering displaceability’, an ongoing nuisance set in motion as soon as the talk of upcoming change begins. I incline to explain this sentiment as the constant buzz of an annoying fly refusing to move on, pestering us with its presence and leaving little attention for much else. Displaceability is this buzzing fly. The term encompasses both the actual displacement from one’s living environment and the potential threat of being pushed out. While displacement is often associated with negative connotations, some residents, especially homeowners, may see regeneration as an opportunity for improved living conditions and financial capacities, even if they end up moving elsewhere. Importantly, for the small group of marginal gentrifiers, regeneration is a major hope, able to push the neighbourhood in what would be the right direction for them. The question is, will it happen fast enough to enable them to stay. Regardless of residents’ perspectives—be it fear or hope of regeneration—the process raises concerns about prolonged uncertainty and ambiguity.

Through qualitative ethnographic research, I offered a look ‘from below’ at a pre-gentrification phase in a neighbourhood’s lifecycle, characterized by uncertainty regarding the timing, duration, and outcomes of the process. The studied neighbourhood experienced many changes since its establishment in the early 1950s. Following a long period of disinvestment and population turnover, leading to its negative reputation, it started seeing bottom-up reinvestment by developers and investors taking advantage of its central location near a university and hospital and the demands by transient populations for housing in the area. This has then led to a top-down regeneration plan, which at the time of writing (July 2023) is yet to be formally approved, but already acted upon. The main proposition presented in this paper is that displaceability gives rise to a bothersome inconvenience—an urban state of uncertainty—that is being faced by a growing number of individuals in different global contexts. Displaceability is not solely a long-term psychological condition characterized by anxiety. It represents a new urban condition, a political state manifested in a fresh and deteriorated form of urban citizenship. This precarious condition, I would stress, is valid for people of all forms of tenure. Homeownership, even outright, cannot protect people uninterested in regeneration in their buildings, if their neighbours are keen. Change is (potentially) coming for all, whether they want it or not, and it is coming in its own timing. The research thus contributes to our understanding of the psychological and social impacts of top-down regeneration plans on urban residents’ lives.

The findings of this study suggest that while regeneration plans may offer some benefits, such as improved living conditions and financial capacities, they also pose significant challenges, including the threat of displacement and loss of community identity. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of engaging with residents and their perspectives in the planning process to ensure that their needs and concerns are adequately addressed. The implications of this study extend beyond Gimel and have relevance for urban regeneration projects in other global contexts. The findings hold significance for urban planners, policymakers, and community stakeholders. They provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of residents during moments of transformation and shed light on the challenges and complexities of contemporary urban development processes. Understanding the multifaceted dimensions of displaceability and the accompanying sense of urban uncertainty is crucial for addressing the needs and concerns of individuals in changing urban environments.

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1. Palestinians who assisted Israeli defence authorities with sensitive information, risking their lives if caught and demanding Israeli protection. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)