**Notions of time in a neighbourhood destined for state-led regeneration**

**ABSTRACT**

The paper deals with temporal aspects of state-led regeneration processes, focusing on a pre-gentrification era in a neighbourhood’s “lifecycle” when things could turn out in various ways. Relying on an ethnographic research in neighbourhood C (“Gimel”) in Beersheba, Israel, the paper joins theorising efforts from southeastern “ordinary” cities, particularly highlighting the significant role of the state in putatively neoliberal processes. The paper argues that unknown temporal spatialisation—the timing, length and location of development—produce different perceptions of time with regard to urban transformation. Different actors develop a temporal perspective based on their subjective memory, imaginaries, and positioning. The paper offers three “timescapes” in a place constructed to be on the verge of change: (1) the “above” perspective of planners and municipal actors, patiently envisioning change based on external imaginaries; (2) the “intermediate” perspective of realtors and developers, seeing redevelopment as a nascent on-going process; and (3) the “below” perspectives of residents, either focusing on the decades-long decay or seeing their residency as a transient solution, with present-time longing for rapid change or fear of displacement.

Keywords: state-led regeneration, gentrification, displacement, temporality, timescapes

**1. Introduction**

The northern entrance to Beersheba, a city of 210,000 residents in Southern Israel, looks dusty, even in winter. Yellow dominates. It is the colour of the crumbling housing blocks and of the desert. Municipal gardening efforts are only a small improvement. I drive past Ben Gurion University and the Soroka Hospital to my left and turn left to enter Neighbourhood C, Gimel in Hebrew. I pass the globe fountain square and enter Wingate Street. To my right are several tall late-1970s buildings, formerly built to house hospital and university staff and currently dominated by students. To my left is a modern looking falafel place and a small supermarket. On foot now, I pass new, old and emerging buildings, including some one-level houses and high-rises. A nice-looking park appears to my right. Named after Iraqi Jewish immigrants, it is the location of the neighbourhood’s first synagogue established in 1951, where my dad’s (Iraqi) family used to pray. Some Ethiopian men sit around, biding their time. Leaving the park, I pass crumbling peeling buildings and a large building project. Some passers-by are identifiably students, some are Arabs. A Haredi looking dad swings his child in a small playground. Down the road, some desperate-looking building blocks and a small commercial centre. I spot many selling and letting signs and turn right to HaShalom (the peace) Street. A strong smell of falafel hits me, coming from an eatery where some men eat an early lunch. A man with a supermarket trolley passes, buses go past, and taxis are honking at me. I pass several low buildings patched with building additions and front yards with shabby sitting areas. An old woman sits in her balcony looking at me. Loud oriental music is coming out of an improvised-looking electric bike repair shop. I pass a real estate shop and a clinic. I continue past a 1990s high-rise and several low buildings and arrive at a particularly shabby “train-block”, where I spot pride and Israeli flags hanging from a fourth-floor flat. I enter the neighbourhood’s dilapidated central open-air commercial centre. Some shops are closed or turned into storage. Luring smells come out of the local bakery. I watch passers-by coming in and out the post office, the gambling shop, the Russian deli and the kiosk doubling as bar. Everything in this place says low-income neighbourhood—from the graffiti covered ruins of the impressive brutalist structure that once housed the local cinema, to the heavy gamblers in the smoke-filled gambling place. The commercial centre and surrounding buildings will be part of a large redevelopment plan, aimed to give Gimel a proper face-lift, after which more redevelopment will follow. But have these people even heard of it? Underneath Gimel’s scruffy surroundings lies a big potential: central location, increasing interests by realtors and investors and a nationally funded regeneration plan in progress. Time is the only thing separating this neighbourhood from the green redeveloped oasis municipal officials, planners, realtors and some savvy residents imagine. Yet time already bore many disillusions. Great uncertainty lies ahead. How do different actors imagine this change and its effects? How long before change comes? How do actors’ temporal perceptions differ?

IMAGE 1 HERE

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This paper deals with temporal aspects of regeneration. It focuses on a pre-gentrification era in a neighbourhood’s “lifecycle” when things could turn out in various ways. While regeneration may lead to full-on gentrification, a continuous state of decline is possible too. It is also very likely that both states co-exist for decades to come. The paper incorporates the construction of urban time as key factor in attracting investments on the one hand and shaping sense of place and displaceability—the potential of being displaced, on the other. It offers three “timescapes” in a place constructed to be on the verge of change: (1) the “above” perspective of planners and municipal actors, patiently envisioning change based on external imaginaries; (2) the “intermediate” perspective of realtors and developers, seeing redevelopment as a nascent on-going process; and (3) the “below” perspectives of residents, either focusing on the decades-long decay or seeing their residency as a transient solution, with present-time longing for rapid change or fear of displacement.

Much of the literature on gentrification, regeneration and displacement comes from the Global North, with fewer representation of cities in the Global Southeast. While scholars called to globalise and expand our view of urbanisation (Brenner & Schmid, 2015) and gentrification (Lees, Shin, & López-Morales, 2015, 2016), others, mostly from Global Southeast perspectives, have argued that concepts developed in Global North contexts fail to fit processes occurring in other places (Betancur, 2014; Ghertner, 2014; Lui, 2017; Maloutas, 2012; Potter & Labbé, 2020; Roy & Ong, 2011; Smart & Smart, 2017). Scholars have called to learn from ordinary cities rather than the usual global cities (Robinson, 2006) or to theorise from the southeast (Yiftachel, 2020), in order to reach a more nuanced understanding of urban processes. Yiftachel, for instance, argues that displacement can be propelled by forces other than capital accumulation or class struggle, prevalent in North America and Western Europe—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 (2020, p. 156). The role of the state, he continues, remains central even in putatively “neoliberal” southeastern cities (2020, p. 158). This paper focuses on an “ordinary” “southeastern” city. Little has been written on Beersheba so far (but see Avni, Alfasi, & Bornstein, 2016; Avni & Alfasi, 2018; Shani, 2019) or indeed on ordinary Israeli cities (not Tel Aviv and Jerusalem), although Israeli planning, urbanisation or socio-spatial processes are best understood through such “ordinary” perspectives.

The case-study neighbourhood, Gimel, was established in the early 1950s as one of the city’s core new neighbourhoods built to accommodate large populations of new Jewish immigrants, predominantly from Arab countries, but Europeans too. While social housing tenants dominated, there were always owner-occupiers too. Gradually, many tenants made use of right-to-buy schemes to buy their flats, but the neighbourhood still has one of the highest concentrations of social housing countrywide—around 5% of housing units (Correspondence with local Regeneration Council, 27.3.19).

Gimel exemplifies Neil Smith’s (1982) seesaw hypothesis on recurring investment and disinvestment across the city at different moments to keep up with the opening and closing of rent gaps due to the built environment’s “de-valorisation cycle”. In Gimel too, long processes of decaying housing stock, the construction of new city neighbourhoods and suburbs, population turnover and social decline alongside an attractive central location, brought the rent gap to a maximum. Entrepreneurs, developers and investors stepped in, capitalising on the combination of cheap housing stock and high demands for rentals by university students and junior medical staff, steadily replacing and displacing old-time population. Central and local government (the Ministry of Housing, the municipality) noticed the neighbourhood’s poor physical and social state, its potential and the popping-up of unregulated regeneration projects. In 2014, a planning process followed, aiming to boost the neighbourhood’s desirability and double its housing stock through regeneration. It also aimed to stop speculation by regulating building rights. While the plan is still in the approval process, its spirit is already acted upon. Gentrification is currently “the great unknown”; both hoped for and feared, depending on who you ask.

This case study offers an opportunity to look at a neighbourhood on the verge of gentrification, where gentrification is but one scenario. Precarity, uncertainty and coexistence of regeneration and decline may lead to various forms of displacement, while replacement forms may not immediately lead to the aspired transformation. The paper argues that unknown temporal spatialisation—the timing, length and location of development—produce different perceptions of time with regard to urban transformation. Planners have a patient understanding of a future change as it appears in blueprints. For developers, the transformation has already occurred and continues to take shape. Residents live in the present and worry about the near future. They have everyday decisions to make and their patience is limited. Whether for or against regeneration, precarity and uncertainty are a pestering nuisance, shadowing their lives.

In following sections, I theorise the notion of time in urban transformation, discuss the paper’s methodology, outline the setting in terms of community and investment/disinvestment cycles, analyse the parallel perceptions of temporal specialisations as the different actors present them, and end with concluding remarks.

**2. Time in urban transformation**

Neil Smith’s (1982) notion of repetitive cycle of investment and disinvestment across the city at different moments corresponds well with the Lefebvrian notion of cyclical and linear rhythms, with cyclical rhythm starting and restarting repeatedly (Lefebvre, 2004). Another Lefebvrian concept—“moments of crisis”—discusses significant moments in time, when things have the potential to be overturned or radically altered (Lefebvre, 2004, p. X), so cycles can be restarted when a significant moment arrives. Gimel’s cycle of disinvestment has been overturned and investment has begun, yet gentrification has hardly started, and decline continues simultaneously. How long can a “moment” of change last? How long can a place be “on the verge” of change? Uncertainty regarding the timing and length of the cyclical rhythm of gentrification and displacement is particularly unsettling for residents, who may exist in a precarious state of “permanent temporariness” (Yiftachel, 2009a, 2009b), but also for other actors involved, each holding different time perceptions and expectations.

Urban socio-spatial processes such as displacement and gentrification are not always linear and straightforward. They can take different temporal rhythms, which are often more easily defined and evaluated in retrospect. Phillips, Smith, Brooking, and Duer (2021) discuss temporal aspects of displacement and gentrification processes in rural England using Marcuse’s various terms of displacement, arguing that some processes take decades to formulate, and that gentrification not always precedes displacement, but could happen the other way around. Marcuse’s (1985, Marcuse, Rasmussen, & Engler, 1989) and Grier and Grier’s (1978) displacement terminology—disinvestment displacement, chain displacement, displacement pressure, exclusionary displacement, to name the most relevant—are useful for analysing decades long processes (see Phillips et al., 2021; Slater, 2009). However, our way to make sense of a process and analyse it depends on the point in time we come to study it. Moreover, we rely on the analysis and evaluation of our respondents, and their viewpoint of the process and its phases is subjective, based on their knowledge, history, values, beliefs and positioning.

Time as well, is something that we understand subjectively. Our measure and experience of “slow” or “fast”, “long” or “short”, are subjective and social, perceived through our individual positioning, cultural understanding, and social norms. Are ten years in an urban transformation process “fast” or “slow”? Time can refer to a plurality of temporalities and to multiple forms of knowledge (Cipriani, 2013). Time can be social—the everyday experience, when events cannot be predicted but efforts are made to influence them, or it can be monumental—a collective predictability focused on a past constituted by categories and stereotypes (Herzfeld, 1991, p. 10). Our conception of both space and time is relative, depending on the observer who gives them value and meaning (Mannino et al., 2017, p. 286). Moreover, the perception of time and temporal duration is bound up with memory (Le Poidevrin, 2019), and plays a fundamental role in the selection and pursuit of social goals (Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999). This paper discusses urban policy as “social goals”, which actors perceive differently, based on their individual/collective time perception, as defined by memory, values and position. As Zimbardo and Boyd (1999, p. 1272) argue, a decision to take action can be influenced by tendencies to emphasise a particular temporal frame, i.e., recalling analogous prior situations, their costs and benefits. Such memory can be nostalgic and positive or traumatic and negative, accurate or distorted. A focus on past experiences affects current decisions, but so does a focus on the future, with expectations for either payments or rewards. As will be shown, urban planners, developers and residents all have future expectations. However, their different time perceptions, prior experience and imaginaries influence their evaluation of present situations and the decisions they make.

An emerging and novel body of knowledge has dealt with the management of time as key factor in the making of space in general, and displacement in particular. The introduction of “timescapes” (Adam, 2008) highlighted the importance of history, memory, attachment, and future as foundations of urban power relations and spatial control (Sandercock & Lyssiotis, 2003). Following theorists dealing with the politics of time (Jamal, 2008) and timespace (Thrift & May, 2001), urban development can be understood as an arena of “temporal spatialisations”. In this arena, different, and at times conflicting, notions of time negotiate and struggle over “their place” (see Boyle, 2002; Fenster & Misgav, 2014; Greenberg-Raanan & Shoval, 2014; Shoval et al., 2010; Tawil-Souri, 2012; Yuval-Davis, 2012). Displacement itself is a temporal process in the sense that it is never a one-off event but a compilation of micro-events over time, generating emotions and affecting the mental states of those affected (Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, & Lees, 2020, p. 503). This paper incorporates the construction of urban time, and different actors’ perceptions of it, as a key factor in shaping actors’ decisions to plan, to invest, to move.

**3. Methodology**

The paper focuses on understanding temporality of urban transformation “from below”, based on a qualitative ethnographic research in Gimel. While I have never lived in Beersheba, my father grew up in Gimel, a fifth son out of seven siblings and the first in his family to be born in Israel to Jewish-Iraqi parents—a police officer and a housewife—who had immigrated in 1951. He left Beersheba in the mid-1970s, before I was born, but I have vivid early childhood memories of my grandmother’s house and street and of her food. My family heritage was useful in opening doors and hearts of residents, agreeing to share their stories with me.

I conducted 45 interviews between December 2018 and April 2019, with municipal officials, planners, real estate specialists, people whose roles tie them to Gimel, local merchants, and past and current residents of various social groups—low-income old-timers, new immigrants and the young generation (both locals and students). Interviews normally lasted 45–120 minutes, in a place convenient for the interviewees. I usually recorded and later transcribed, but sometimes only took notes during interviews. I asked interviewees about the neighbourhood’s history and present, the communities living there, their knowledge of the plans for the neighbourhood and their perspectives on its future.

**4. The setting: cycles of investment and disinvestment**

Neil Smith’s (1979, 1982) rent gap theory and his theory of cycles of investment and disinvestment are highly relevant for Gimel. The rent gap is widest when a neighbourhood in a bad state of repair is attractively located, indicating great potential and at the same time, low capitalised ground rent. Yet Smith argues that these cycles of de-valorisation and re-valorisation are not “natural” but man-made, and hence his emphasis on the role of state institutions alongside real estate and finance sectors in shaping housing supply at the neighbourhood level (Mendes, 2018).

Gimel is strategically located, near two railway stations, university, hospital, the downtown civic centre, the city’s largest commercial zone and the recently built High-Tech Park. It is home to roughly 11,300 residents (CBS, 2019a) and 5,000 housing units (Municipal Regeneration Agency, 27.3.19). While housing units and households have steadily increased since the 1970s, the overall population is constantly shrinking, indicating aging, growing number of single or sharing student households and fewer families (Municipality of Beersheba, 1979; Stern, 2004). Gimel is one of the city’s most deprived areas, listed 2/10 and 3/10 in Israel’s socio-economic ladder (CBS, 2019b). Like surrounding inner-city neighbourhoods, following its construction in the 1950s, Gimel predominantly accommodated working class residents from the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. Housing units were most often small one-two bedroom flats accommodating large families, owner-occupiers or, most likely, social housing tenants leasing from Amidar, a state-owned housing company. As former residents described, living conditions from 1950s—1970s were rough and people were struggling, but as there were no new neighbourhoods or nouveau-riche people then, struggling was a shared experience leading to solidarity (Z., former resident, born 1950, 20.3.19; A., local activist, 24.12.18). The neighbourhood enjoyed a respectable reputation up until the 1970s and included some “educated and classy” middle class families too (Y., former resident, born 1950, 19.12.18; T., born 1935, 28.1.19). Residents gradually expanded their housing units at the expense of the gardens, to improve living conditions. From the late 1960s, many bought their flats from Amidar. Some buildings, particularly “train-blocks” in the north of the neighbourhood, already were in a poor state of repair in the 1970s, merely a couple of decades after their construction (Bar, 1978). They are still inhabited today.

In the 1990s, new suburban neighbourhoods were constructed. This was the city’s response to the prestigious outer suburbs of the 1960s and 1980s draining Beersheba of its wealthiest population. It was also a necessary housing solution for the massive immigration wave from the Former Soviet Union (FSU), which had brought a million new immigrants to Israel over one decade. For Gimel, the newly built neighbourhoods were a death stroke, as many of the more capable residents relocated there. New immigrants had replaced them, and the demand boosted prices by, allegedly, up to 1,000% of what they were prior the immigration wave (A., local activist, 24.12.18).

Social decline reached a peak in the early 2000s, when the Ministry of Defence settled in Gimel many protected Palestinian collaborator families.[[1]](#footnote-1) The local population of Gimel did not appreciate their norms of behaviour and felt particularly intimidated by their teenage children. The police, residents felt, offered no solutions. At the same time, two large absorption centres for new Ethiopian immigrants opened in Gimel and many special needs hostels and institutions moved in, taking over former residents’ properties and public buildings, which had previously served the neighbourhood. Remaining residents tended to be the older and poorer, unwilling or unable to relocate.

While the population stagnated (socio-economically), housing prices did not. The growth of the university and the vicinity of Israel’s third largest hospital meant high demand for small cheap flats for transient populations of students and interns. Yet demands could only be materialised when real estate and finance sectors capitalised on them and created suitable supply. To maximise profits, investors would often buy flats, split them into two-three small units, refurbish and rent them to students. High demands led developers to make planning applications for high-rise redevelopment, seeking maximal building rights, which were often granted by the local planning committee keen to see redevelopment in these old quarters. When the amount of activity increased, with no masterplan regulating desired results, the municipality applied for Ministry of Housing funding to initiate a masterplan for urban regeneration in Gimel. These trends meant Gimel’s housing prices have been steadily rising since the early 2010s, because people were not only pricing their decaying four walls, but also the entailed potential, which the plan aimed to cap. Although on the rise, Gimel’s prices are still lower than average housing prices in Beersheba, and dramatically lower than the rest of Israel. Another result of these trends is a large proportion of rented housing stock in Gimel—66% in 2008 (reaching 88% in the north of the neighbourhood; CBS, 2008), although according to updated university student association data, only 16% of Gimel’s population are students.

The communities living in Gimel have changed over time. It is currently comprised of several generations of working class Mizrahim (Jews from Arab countries), 1970s Georgian Jewish migrants, 1980s and 1990s Ethiopian migrants, 1990s FSU migrants, 2000s Muslim Palestinian collaborator families and two large Ethiopian newcomers Absorption Centres. There is also the large student population. Gimel’s significant Arab population also includes Bedouins relocating to Beersheba from nearby settlements and hospital and university Arab students and staff. In the last population census, Gimel’s population included 19% non-Jews (although not all Arabs), more than most other Beersheba neighbourhoods (CBS, 2008). In 2010, a young religious student couple moved to Gimel intending to start an ideological community of young couples and families. Gathering a group of religious couples, they started working on improving neighbourhood facilities and services. These pioneer gentrifiers currently include 45 families and enjoy close contacts with the municipality, for whom they symbolise the aspired social change.

**5. Parallel worldviews of regeneration and decline**

***5.1 Planners and municipal actors’ perspective: gentrification as an aspired future vision***

The Gimel plan is but one link in a long chain of top-down planning, common in Beersheba since its establishment as an Ottoman city, through the British Mandate (1917–1948), and finally as an Israeli city. Beersheba developed as a national project that required resources and tight supervision (Avni et al., 2016, p. 20). According to the deputy mayor and chair of local planning committee, only recently the local government (municipality) stepped into the planning arena to regain control (Public lecture, 19.12.18; also see Avni et al., 2016, p. 24). When asked about Gimel’s state of neglect, he blamed it on the 1990s top-down planning of suburban neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods attracted resources and population, leaving old neighbourhoods neglected, but not as a deliberate agenda (Interview, 14.1.19). Deliberate or not, neglect, disinvestment and decay were matter of fact.

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 (hereafter IPA) initiated a new masterplan for Beersheba replacing the current 1969 plan, working in full collaboration with the municipality. A core principle was to regenerate the urban core rather than continue sprawling. Regeneration is more than a local interest. By 2040, the IPA aims to plan 2.6 million housing units countrywide, 900,000 of which through urban regeneration (IPA, 2019). The Urban Regeneration Authority (URA)—under the Ministry of Housing—was established to promote this goal by initiating and funding largescale regeneration plans. Beersheba applied for funding to initiate the Gimel plan. Unfortunately, while one central government body plans the regeneration of old quarters, another plans new development in five neighbourhoods to be constructed north of the city, clashing with the new masterplan’s goals, and threatening to recreate the same conditions that led to the current state of neglect.

Work on the Gimel Plan started in 2014 and is now in the final approval process. The deputy mayor and the city planner told me (Interview, 14.1.19), that they had asked the planning team to produce a detailed and feasible plan, “that doesn’t just say, but also do”. According to the architect (Interview, 28.2.19), Gimel’s plan has several aims. Firstly, “restoring old splendour” by forming a viable community: “We need to attract high-income populations, while not driving anybody out, although the low-income population might wander elsewhere.” Secondly, utilising the potential of the neighbourhood’s attractive location: “In Tel Aviv this neighbourhood would have been Manhattan, and here it’s crap.” Thirdly, improving public spaces including walkable and viable streets and commercial spaces. Fourthly, maintaining a diverse supply of housing for social diversity. Finally, creating planning certainty for appropriate pricing of plots. If the plan succeeds, “gentrification is a bi-product” (on policymakers’ view of gentrification as a solution rather than a problem, see Doucet, van Kempen, & van Weesep, 2011; Lees & Ley, 2008), although displacement can be minimised should the municipality offer sufficient welfare support. The sought-after change, said the architect, cannot be based on students (and investor-owners) alone. It needs families.

In 2017, a new actor emerged—the Municipal Regeneration Agency (MRA). Funded partly by the URA and partly by the municipality, they mediate between the municipality, developers and residents to promote urban regeneration in Beersheba’s old quarters. While their work focuses on residential regeneration, they also promote “soft regeneration” to improve quality of life in terms of commercial activity and community building, which they hope would increase land values. While improvements are bound to increase prices and cause gentrification, they will enable sustainable redevelopment in the least attractive areas too (interviews with council employees, 27.3.19 & 31.3.19). This is because Israel’s current urban renewal mechanisms rely on private investment (Alster & Avni, forthcoming; Carmon, 1999), incentivising developers with tax breaks and building rights (Geva & Rosen, 2018; Rosen, 2016). This means that for redevelopment in Gimel’s most deprived areas to be economically viable, each existing housing unit needs to be replaced by eight, exceeding the area’s carrying capacity (on changing concepts of viability and value capture see Catney and Henneberry, 2019). These areas are currently excluded from the masterplan, awaiting nearby change, higher land prices and a comprehensive redevelopment plan. In the meantime, they may only receive external renovations through the Ministry of Housing Neighbourhood Regeneration Scheme, an intervention that has already been tried in the 1980s.

The keystone project, planners agree, will be the regeneration of the Orot centre. Orot was the local cinema from 1960–1989. Built in a brutalist architectural style and located centrally, this unique building had stood abandoned for the past 32 years (see Images 1 and 2). The municipality sold it to a private developer, who planned to raze it and build a high-rise, shopping centre and park instead (Interview, 24.12.18). Public uproar, alongside Gimel’s planning process, led the municipality to cancel the sale and issue a call for a redevelopment plan for the Orot area. This plan, in 2021 still in the planning process, will preserve the building for public purposes, apply “Raze and Rebuild” regeneration mechanism for surrounding buildings and the commercial centre and construct new buildings on empty lots. While years will pass before it materialises, it will lead the way for the next phases.

IMAGES 2 & 3 HERE

Architects, planners and developers with whom I spoke often used examples from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem to illustrate the type of change for which they are hoping. Tel Aviv’s gentrified Neveh Tzedek, Florentin and Bitzaron were frequently mentioned, as well as Jerusalem’s redeveloped Railway Park. In their vision, Soroka Hospital doctors and university faculty will live in detached homes in Gimel, redeveloped in the bourgeois Bitzaron villa style, while students and young creatives will live in chic Florentin-style buildings. For them, gentrification is an aspired solution with minimal costs: “It’s a win-win situation. No one forces people out; if they want to sell, they sell” (City planner, 14.1.19). The city planner referred to financially motivated voluntary mobility. Yet, displacement literature sees such “voluntary mobility” as displacement following neighbourhood reinvestment (Grier & Grier, 1978). However, displacement literature predominantly considers people in rented or social housing (Darcy & Rogers, 2014; Schill, Nathan, & Persaud, 1983) seeing homeowners as financially able and politically powerful (Forrest & Hirayama, 2015; Shlay, 2006), thus less susceptible to displacement under urban regeneration (Shin, 2009). Israel challenges this view, as most people in regeneration-designated areas are either owner-occupiers or investor-owners, profiting from redevelopment (Geva & Rosen, forthcoming). It is a “culture of property”, similar to Hong Kong (Ley & Teo, 2014) or Singapore (Haila, 2017). While Israeli literature on urban renewal addresses the benefits of these schemes to residents (Geva & Rosen, 2018; Kainer-Persov, 2008, 2017), it is also clear that urban renewal displaces renters (the flip side of investor-owners) and the elderly—who move to nursing homes or die during the lengthy process. Some owners are pushed to sign regeneration contracts against their will and interests. Others are tempted to sell and move out prior or during the process, causing what Marcuse et al. (1989, p. 1357) termed “anticipatory displacement”—people who move because of an “anticipated action and its reasonably expected consequences”. It is also clear that following redevelopment, new units are only affordable to higher-income people, causing “exclusionary displacement” (Marcuse, 1985; Slater, 2009). As a state-led process, gentrification, for Beersheba’s planners and municipal actors, is thus not a “dirty word” (Smith, 1996), but an aspiration which they are patiently working toward.

***5.2 The realtors’ viewpoint: the past progressive of neighbourhood change***

For developers and real estate agents, Gimel is already deep into its regeneration process. Gimel’s strong rentier market—over 80% in the areas closest to the university where prices are highest (Realtors, 27.2.19)—demonstrates it. Avni and Alfasi’s (2018) paper refers to Beersheba’s off-campus “student bubbles” as studentification, which is not necessarily beneficial for residents in deprived neighbourhoods.

For developers, however, students are a goldmine. For instance, two young developers from Central Israel, who got to know the city’s rental market in their student days started buying flats cheaply from investor-owners, refurbishing and selling more expensively to other investors. Over a decade, they made about 100 transactions in Gimel, gradually copied by other realtors, before entering the urban regeneration business of rental flats for taxation reasons. Their business model gradually increased property prices, as owners and estate agents started capitalising on the potential (the rent gap). The two young developers completed their first urban renewal project in Beersheba in 2018, knocking down a four flats two-level building in the centre of Gimel, further from the university, replacing it with a chic 16 flats building, all rented out to students using a community building business model, resembling purpose-built student accommodation of UK university cities (Hubbard, 2009). In another project, currently under construction, 24 flats will replace four, following the same concept. They showed me a neighbourhood map dotted with buildings they are in various stages of purchasing and redeveloping. As “families do not come to Gimel just yet”, because the services (particularly schools) and general appearance are not attractive enough, their modular plan sees students are the first step (Interview with D., 10.2.19). According to classic gentrification stage model, this is typical for first-stage gentrification. It starts with “pioneers”—highly educated but economically struggling professionals and pre-professionals (students), who rent and share decaying inner-city areas with long-term working-class residents (Shaw, 2008). This stage is also referred to as marginal gentrification (Rose, 1984, 1996), a process said to involve the arrival of a “well-educated but economically struggling avant-garde of artists, graduate students and assorted bohemian and counter-cultural types” (Rose, 1996, p. 132). While marginal gentrification is typically not associated with displacement, it is a potential trigger for later waves of gentrification (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020).

Developers see Gimel’s location as highly attractive: “The university is the equivalent of Tel Aviv’s beachfront; it’s a strong anchor for realtors” (D., 10.2.19). Yet, Gimel’s regeneration requires significant population turnover: “You cannot create change with people who don’t want it and these people want to stay exactly as they are”. Developers want old-timers to get enough money to enable them to “be gentrified and improve their living arrangements elsewhere”. After a brief discussion on gentrification, D. curiously asked, “Is gentrification a bad word for you?” When I responded that the problem is that gentrification leads to displacement, he acknowledged: “So basically I’m a significant part of this process, I help produce it” (D., 10.2.19).

The municipality sees these developers’ model as an example for successful social and spatial regeneration, the kind it would like to reproduce (City planner, 14.1.19; tour in Gimel, 8.3.19). The opposite example the municipality gives, is the 366 flats project, divided in two projects—in Gush Etzyon (206 flats) and in Wingate Streets (160 flats, under construction), replacing several old buildings, mostly standing empty for twenty years (Tour, 8.3.19). The owners of the last 17 flats—predominantly elderly people—were displaced following extremely generous compensations: over 30 million NIS divided between them (Y., developer, 13.3.19). Other residents think they too could receive similar sums for their properties, failing to realise the deal was unique and unlikely repeated. In the Gush Etzyon project, populated in 2018, about 20-30% of the flats were sold to Amidar, to house social tenants, mainly concentrated in one entrance. Most other flats were sold to investors. Low rates of owner-occupiers and the stigma on social housing created a negative image for the project, as “replacing slums with slums” (D., 10.2.19).

Developers and realtors see Gimel’s regeneration as old news, as it has been on the radar of rentiers for nearly a decade. As new buildings fail to attract families, they compete with older properties on the pool of students, which has dwindled down recently due to changing accommodation trends and the possibilities of online learning during COVID-19. However, as the masterplan’s implications sink in, regeneration will accelerate and potentially attract more diverse population (Y., developer, 13.3.19). Future neighbourhood composition will depend on population turnover, physical transformation, and a dissipating stigma (Realtors, 27.2.19 & 28.2.19).

***5.3 Old-time residents’ perspective: fear and hope in Beersheba***

In 2019, when I finished my fieldwork, hardly any old-timers with whom I spoke have heard of Gimel’s regeneration plan. This is despite the public participation process that planners pride themselves to have done (a planning obligation) and the work of the MRA. While the plan was unknown, social and physical changes were certainly noticed. Old-timers spoke about the neighbourhood’s long-going decline, their neighbours gradually leaving replaced by transient population, and the frequent offers to sell their properties, which despite rising are never enough for decent alternative city housing. One man said, for instance: “They offered 900,000 NIS, but I can’t buy anything with that without mortgage. If they offer 1.2 million, I’m out of here” (A., born 1965, 21.1.19). According to Israel Tax Authority data, prices per square meter in his decaying block of flats increased by more than 300% between 2001-2019, indicating the kind of speculation that often leads residents to regard their properties as real estate rather than homes (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Such process of decades long displacement, starting with people relocating to better places, result in slow desertification as there is no longer an incentive to improve the neighbourhood. This leaves remaining residents’ lives in suspense, trapped in the present and displaced before the event (Baeten, Westin, Pull, & Molina, 2017; Eliott-Cooper et al., 2020, pp. 502-3). As earlier mentioned, this part of Gimel, with its decaying “train-blocks”, will likely remain in suspense long after the redevelopment of the rest of the neighbourhood.

Old-timers generally spoke warmly of their neighbourhood, where they had lived for decades or even a lifetime. They are accustomed to it, have a community to rely on and enjoy the benefits of central location. Contrarily, outsiders—real estate agents for instance (27.2.19)—said anyone who could, left, and those who could not, stayed out of habit more than free choice. Many said Gimel used to be a good neighbourhood, socially deteriorating from the 1970s, with crime, prostitution and drugs. Some argued it has improved, although these phenomena still exist. Physical deterioration followed with the gradual departure of owner-occupiers. At the same time, the neighbourhood kept developing, but new construction has so far failed to achieve social change. Gimel suffers from bad reputation, even among the Ethiopian population, who are highly underprivileged. Ethiopian families leaving the local absorption centres for private accommodation move out of the neighbourhood and if entitled to social housing, some even decline housing offers in Gimel (Interviews with absorption centres employees, 4.3.19 & 13.3.19).

Old-time residents feel angry, abandoned and looked over, heading their anger in multiple directions: the mayor and municipality, who “don’t look at weaker classes like us” (S., born 1969, 21.1.19), “Ruvik (the mayor) grew up in Gimel, but he doesn’t know Gimel” (B., born 1969, 28.1.19); the Ashkenazi (Jews of European decent) elite and left-wing parties attracting antagonism despite losing political power in 1977: “Do you know who’s in power? Not the government, but the Supreme Court. Those self-righteous ones who tell you off for beating an Arab” (G., born 1945, 11.2.19); transient students who do not care about their surroundings: “Students care about nothing other than their studies, drinking Arak and taking drugs” (A., born 1965, 21.1.19); the local Arab population: “Collaborators moved underneath my son’s flat, each day fights, rubbish, mess… he ended up selling his flat” (G., born 1945, 11.2.19); and the investors. One angry former resident, whose elderly mother still lives there, gave me a private tour of the neighbourhood, and talked about how things were when she grew up there (well-kept, communal) compared to how they are today (neglected, transient). “The investors don’t care,” she said. “They treat the neighbourhood like a dairy cow, not realising that even a cow sometimes needs a vet” (T., born 1969, 28.1.19). They spoke of neglect in services and infrastructure: lighting, sidewalks and roads, parks and playgrounds, schools, general maintenance and sewage pipes. They also worry about security as most neighbourhood buildings were built prior to 1980 and thus have no residential secure spaces for missile protection. As Beersheba had been targeted multiple times from Gaza in recent years, residents feel at risk. Residents mostly prefer to stay in Gimel, but long for improvements in their homes and public spaces, which regeneration might solve.

While the grand plan was unknown, many old-timers were aware of regeneration prospects for their individual homes. Some have received offers from developers or expect offers to come. Responses vary from seeing regeneration as a blessing for enabling them to stay while improving their living conditions or for creating economic opportunities, to seeing it as a threat on their lifestyle and their ability to remain in place. Some residents have expanded and refurbished their homes over the years. They are comfortable in their homes and neighbourhood and fear the unknown. Indeed, much is unknown: the timing and length of the process, where and for how long they would temporarily relocate, the quality of the end-result, the identity and number of new neighbours and the daily costs of maintenance and council tax that are expected to be higher. At the time of the research, most respondents did not know whether their building was a candidate for regeneration, the kind of regeneration or the timing and length of the process. Research on Raze and Rebuild regeneration in Israel shows that these are justified concerns. The process is lengthy (10-15 years) and the planning focuses on new buyers and does not consider old-time residents’ needs. New buildings reduce good neighbourly relations and privacy, and increase loneliness, monthly bills, noise level and neighbours’ quarrels. Moreover, in Israel’s first completed project, only 50% of owner-occupiers returned to the redeveloped building, while all renters were displaced (Kainer-Persov, 2008, 2017).

Precarity and uncertainty affect everyday decisions: “I wanted to invest in my flat, do some refurbishments but the developer told me: Don’t invest because we might work it out with you, so I’m holding off” (B., born 1965, 27.3.19; also see Kainer-Persov, 2008). Uncertainty in regeneration prospects often leads to disinvestment in private and public spaces, causing further decline: “Once people sense a cloud of eviction, they stop caring for shared spaces, but this process will take years, and in the meantime the quality of life deteriorates” (MRA, 27.3.19). Regeneration prospects might also cause fear and anxiety, particularly by the elderly and non-Hebrew speakers who are often susceptible to pressure and end up signing consents against their will. People also fear being last to sign consents, due to the 2006 Raze and Rebuild Compensation Law (known as the Refuser Tenant Law), enabling to sue damages from tenants refusing regeneration when there is an 80% majority for it. Some also fear that signing last might mean a worse deal. While most regard future regeneration with hope, fear or a combination of both, there are also those who remain sceptical altogether: “Regeneration? we heard it twenty years ago already. This plan has existed all this time and nothing happened but talk” (E., born 1950, 14.1.19; see similar account in Rosen and Avni, 2019). As Lefebvre has put it (2004, p. 74), “Time divides and splits itself into use and use-value on the one hand, and exchange and exchange-value on the other. On the one hand it is sold and on the other it is lived.” This causes a dilemma, as for those who live and who wish to remain in Gimel, time is of essence, affecting daily decisions, while those who are vested in the neighbourhood but do not live there (planners, investors, developers), can be more patient. Planners and municipal actors have patience for future change, developers think that change is well on its way, but residents cope with the pestering presence of present-time uncertainty regarding change that either expected or rejected, will affect them.

***5.4 New kids on the block: will gentrification happen fast enough?***

Gvanim started in 2010 with one young religious couple from Central Israel who for ideological reasons were searching to live in a place where their residency could make a difference. They bought a flat in one of the most run-down “train-blocks” in Gimel, and while studying at the university, started grouping other couples around them, to form a community. The original group had five couples and soon enough, children too. They contacted a community fund, accompanying and funding national mission communities throughout the country, which had supported them in their first years. The religious youth movement Bnei Akiva provided professional support on how to run a religious community and in collaboration, they formed a function for 30 national service women volunteers (alternative to obligatory military service) to do two-year social service in the neighbourhood. While they may not see themselves as such, they are pioneer, or marginal gentrifiers (Rose, 1984, 1996), characterised by high cultural capital, modest means and willingness to live in a deprived working-class neighbourhood with great potential (Gale, 1984; Zaban, 2016; on the links between national mission communities and gentrification, see Shmaryahu-Yeshurun and Ben-Porat, 2020).

The community fund conditioned funding on promoting a community project in Gimel, and Gvanim decided to get involved with a service they use themselves—a nursery. With municipal and Ministry of Education assistance, they turned the neighbourhood’s most failing nursery into its most desired. So popular that not all members of their growing community—currently 45 families—got a place for their children (Interviews 6.1.19, 28.1.19, 17.2.19 & 4.3.19). Other projects included a playroom for young families and the mapping of local infrastructure needs.

Their current project is the local religious school. As most of the original group members left Gimel when their children reached school age, the need became acute: “To last long here and enable more families to come and stay, we need to care for our needs here and now as families” (G., community CEO, 28.1.19). As Gimel’s population aged, local primary schools shrank constantly. One school closed, another became a Jewish-Arab school, predominantly serving non-local population, and the two remaining schools—one secular and the other religious—were facing closure, reaching year groups of one digit pupil numbers. Declining physical state, violence and poor schooling led anyone who could to school their children elsewhere. Gvanim, in collaboration with the school and authorities, came up with an improvement plan and convinced nursery parents to register their children there. While the headmaster sounded hopeful at this intervention (Interview, 11.2.19), Gvanim members doubted the school’s ability to achieve a significant turning point in time for them to send their own children there. They are aware that the primary school level will determine the next phase of neighbourhood change and their own decision to stay or leave (on the links between gentrification and education see Quarles and Butler, 2018). Time is pressing. Most families from the original group had already left due to education concerns and lack of suitable housing for middle-class professionals with growing families, in a neighbourhood with a student-oriented housing market (Interviews, 28.1.19 & 31.3.19).

Gvanim members believe in active citizenship and their persistence led the municipality to perform several works—new parks, sidewalks, playground lighting. They have an “open door” to the mayor and are frequently consulted in matters and processes involving Gimel, including the new masterplan. As they see it, their status with the municipality is because “on the personal level, we connect, and we tick a municipal interest” (S., 28.1.19). Being students and young professionals, idealistic and energetic, and yes—Ashkenazi too, the Gvanim community is a dream-come-true for a mayor trying to regenerate a rough neighbourhood. When they ask for something, he listens, which is easier than listening to angry, frustrated old-timers with supposedly lesser higher-education and manners. Gvanim members are aware of their responsibility to represent other residents’ interests too because their chances of being heard are higher (G., CEO, 28.1.19). While not embracing the gentrifiers tag, they feel they have a role in positively affecting neighbourhood change, believing they do not threaten anyone due to their small numbers (Founder, 17.1.19 & S., 28.1.19). For the municipality and MRA, Gvanim members represent new possibilities, knowing that for change to happen, social improvement and families are needed. However, these are young people, busy starting careers and families. Most members did not choose to live in a national mission community but ended up living in Gimel and socially linked with the community. Should Gimel not live up to their expectations and needs, they will move on. For them, gentrification could not come fast enough.

**6. Conclusion**

In March 2021 I revisited Gimel, two years after I finished my fieldwork. Change was more apparent. Building projects in early construction stages then, were now finished and more were emerging. Infrastructure works took place in Gimel’s major roads, as part of the regeneration process. I noticed many to let/sell signs. No signs of renewal appeared at the Orot centre, but many businesses already closed—possibly a result of news of planned redevelopment and possibly due to COVID lockdowns. I have heard that the MRA made progress in notifying locals on the masterplan and the MRA’s work and that they opened a local office.

State-led processes in neoliberal democracies with public-Private mechanisms may seem limited in their ability to create change or control its timing, but the state is nonetheless influential. Through planning, taxation, financialization or welfare interventions, the state is ever more present in initiating change through housing supply and social interventions. However, as the case of top-down planning of Beersheba demonstrates, the state may be incoherent in its goals and directions, debunking its own purposes with conflicting policies.

Gimel is a neighbourhood on the verge of gentrification. But will gentrification remain an aspired vision for decades, as planners assume, is it already mid-way, as developers and realtors believe, or is it not happening fast enough as some residents and marginal gentrifiers feel? These temporal perspectives reflect actors’ positioning. Time will tell who remains in the neighbourhood following transformation and who is displaced. While change is certainly coming, it remains unclear what image Gimel will adopt in 10-20 years—the Bitzaron-style neighbourhood planners imagine or the rough, shabby and transient neighbourhood it is today. Current constructions might be another cycle in the rhythm of investment and disinvestment thus far failing to create social change, or it could be nascent gentrification. Different actors, holding different time perspectives, interpret the “evidence” differently, based on their memory, imaginaries, and positioning. As this paper has argued, there are diverging ideas on what it means to *wait* and what is worth waiting for—improved and attractive urban image, the hollowing out of undesired community elements, profit, better schools? A longitudinal retrospective might provide the answers. In the meantime, let us wait and see.

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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)