

## Political economy and everyday practices behind gentrification in working-class urban neighbourhoods

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### Abstract

This paper explores the synthesis of political-economy perspectives on uneven development with everyday-focused social-theoretical approaches, specifically examining gentrification through the lens of working-class residents' experiences. The study argues that while uneven development imposes rigid structural constraints, it also serves to differentiate the working class and its internal constituents. The research is situated within the Central and Eastern European context, focusing on two Hungarian case study locations: Nagysándortelep in Debrecen and the Zsolnay district in Pécs. The methodology employs a multi-scalar approach, combining historical analysis with qualitative insights from narrative, semi-structured and focus group interviews. The analysis traces the evolution of both districts from their origins as industrial working-class colonies consolidated during the capitalist processes of the late 19th century through subsequent periods of socialist state-led disinvestment and neoliberal urban strategies of capital reinvestment. By studying the current relationship of workers to slow, sporadic, and spontaneous gentrification within this urban-historical context, mutually reinforcing and undermining moments of structure and everyday practices emerge, exposing the dialectical relationship between the causes and consequences of gentrification. By bridging the gap between structural theories and micro-level agency, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how the production of space is negotiated and contested within the specific urban trajectories of the CEE region.

**Keywords:** uneven development, gentrification, political economy, everyday life, CEE, Debrecen, Pécs

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### Introduction

The central aim of this paper is to bring an epistemological question to the fore of the debate on uneven development. Specifically, we contend that integrating the political economy of Marxist uneven development theory (e.g. HARVEY, D. 1982; SMITH, N. 1982, 1990 [1984]) with everyday-oriented social theory offers an approach that provides significant advantages for geographical research (also see BERKI, M. and SÁGI, M. 2026;

MIHÁLY, M. and FABULA, SZ. 2026 in this issue). Providing an instance of this approach, the present study takes gentrification as its object, conceptualising it as an outcome of urban-scale uneven development (SMITH, N. 1996). Centring its drivers and consequences, we investigate this spatial process through the lens of the everyday practices and lived experiences of the affected working-class residents.

That this perspective is suited to our objective is confirmed by an interpretation of gen-

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trification<sup>3</sup> situated within the logic of capital accumulation, which establishes a clear political-economic point of departure. However, it must be noted that while basically absent from uneven development research, an ‘everyday’ perspective has long been present in explanations of gentrification as a cultural and moral approach (CAULFIELD, J. 1994), albeit sparking significant debate. We concur with those who view this typically gentrifier-focused interpretation as the displacement of the working class by researchers themselves (e.g. SMITH, N. 1996), and with those who advocate for re-centring the study of the displaced (e.g. SLATER, T. 2009). Having responded to this call in our previous work, in this paper, we instead build upon the work of PATON, K. (2014), who examined gentrification from a working-class perspective and synthesised structure and agency at the level of the everyday. Yet, unlike PATON, we do not seek to identify class consciousness or a collective identity within the daily practices and strategies of individuals and households. Rather, our research question is how their changing everyday lives reveal various modes of participation in ongoing gentrification and how they attempt to negotiate their relationship to it. We argue that while uneven development imposes rigid structural constraints upon workers, in certain contexts it serves to differentiate not only the class as a whole but also its internal constituents.

We explore this argument through the specific lens of one ECE experience: the working-class quarters of Hungarian cities. Within this context, the traceable memories of those living today enable the retrieval of both old and new individual spatial experiences and

practices. These have been embedded into the modes of production of space (LEFEBVRE, H. 1991 [1974]) under both socialism and neoliberal capitalism, while simultaneously contributing to the preservation of the working-class residential colony character of their respective districts. In particular, we draw upon research exploring these experiences and practices through narrative, semi-structured interviews and focus group research. These were conducted primarily with members of working-class households (31) and, to a lesser extent, with experts (13) who assisted in the long-term political-economic analysis. The empirical research was carried out in two case study locations: Nagysándortelep in Debrecen and the residential neighbourhood surrounding the Zsolnay factory in Pécs.

The paper is organised as follows. The following chapter highlights several key theoretical debates (concerning the nexus of uneven development, gentrification, and everyday life, and the enduring significance of the state socialist legacy), offering an opportunity to elaborate on the relevance of our proposed epistemological focus and to elucidate the conceptual framework of the empirical research presented as an illustration. A primary objective of the methodological chapter is to present the case study sites and highlight key findings from a pilot study that delineates the fundamental characteristics of the gentrification processes unfolding across these locations – the diverse responses to which, as shaped by workers’ experiences, are further examined in a subsequent chapter. Chapter four traces the most significant historical conditions and turning points within the investment–disinvestment–reinvestment cycle of uneven development, leading to the emergence of today’s spontaneous gentrification. The shifting political-economic frameworks illuminated by this approach not only clarify the divergences and commonalities of the everyday experiences and practices discussed thereafter, but also vice versa. Consequently, the concluding discussion provides a more comprehensive interpretation of the results yielded by

<sup>3</sup>Given that a number of scholars researching gentrification in CEE already consider the sheer diversity of gentrification concepts to be elusive (e.g. SÝKORA, L. 1993; KOVÁCS, Z. *et al.* 2015; BERNT, M. 2016), we deem it important to note that we have applied Neil SMITH’s (2000, 294) definition, which we believe best aligns with our aforementioned approach. Accordingly, ‘gentrification is the reinvestment of capital in city centres in order to create space for a social class that is much wealthier than the one that currently occupies the space’.

our proposed dual approach; these findings facilitate a more nuanced understanding of both gentrification and the shifting agency of the working-class residents involved.

### Theoretical considerations

We highlight three main strands of the theoretical considerations and scholarly discourses that have inspired the aims, questions, and claims of this article, justified its relevance, or conceptually framed our empirical investigation.

1) *Our aim to integrate the political economic perspective of uneven development with an ‘everyday’ approach* was motivated by a need for deeper insight and understanding of this spatial process. In the empirical study presented here, this complementary synthesis is employed primarily as an analytical tool, rather than with the intention of testing theory within the realm of everyday life (see YEUNG, H.W. *et al.* 2025). We view everyday life in a manner akin to KATZ, C. and KIRBY, A. (1991, 264): ‘The critical importance of social reproduction and everyday life in both theory and practice is that they are grounds for struggle in which active historical subjects reproduce themselves, their labour power, and the contradictory social relations on which production depends.’

It initially appeared surprising that even a systematic international literature review (FABULA, Sz. *et al.* 2025) found scarcely any trace of a link between the ‘everyday’ and uneven development (as a process interpreted from a Marxist perspective). This is particularly striking given that Neil SMITH (1982, 1990 [1984]) – and others such as David HARVEY (1982), who similarly regarded uneven spatial development as the ‘engine’ of capitalism – drew heavily upon Henri LEFEBVRE’s (1991 [1974]) theory of the production of space. LEFEBVRE, H. (1971 [1968]) was, after all, one of the early pioneers in conceptualising everyday life. However, as MARSTON, S. and SMITH, N. (2001) observed, LEFEBVRE paid relatively

little attention to the theorisation of spatial difference within his interpretation of space – an omission that is all the more remarkable given his clear commitment to the ‘right to difference’. Nevertheless, SMITH, N. (1992a) did highlight a distinction that constitutes a cornerstone of Lefebvrian spatial theory: the differentiation between abstract space and social space. While the former is laid down through the activities of the state and the economic institutions of capital, the latter is constituted by the practices of everyday life.

Neil SMITH, who ultimately formulated his theory of uneven development alongside the ‘production of scale’, raised questions in his 1992 book chapter regarding the intersections of scale, everyday life, and political economy that he considered essential for research. We believe these questions are directly translatable and highly instructive for the study of uneven development: ‘How is scale constructed in everyday life, and how are different scales connected? What different roles do questions of class, gender and race play in the construction of different scales and how are these issues connected to questions of the economic, political and social determination of scale?’ (SMITH, N. 1992a, 78).

Among the empirical studies published since then, Jennifer L. SMITH’s (2022) article perhaps aligns most closely with our own approach, excellently demonstrating its inherent advantages. In her analysis of uneven development in South Africa, she revealed novel spatial configurations of inequality by integrating a political-economic perspective with a livelihoods approach. This framework allows for a deeper understanding of the ways in which individuals negotiate the manifold challenges that permeate their everyday lives.

2) It appears that the everyday-life perspective – and, thus, *the integrated approach we advocate* here – has proved more intuitive in *empirical research on gentrification* occurring at the local scale. Several works aligned with this perspective may inform our investigation (e.g. DAVIDSON, M. and LEES, L. 2005; ALEXANDRI, G. 2015; SUDERMANN, Y. 2015;

DOUCET, B. and KOENDERS, D. 2018), although some of these – by invoking state-led gentrification – tend to focus primarily on the political-(economic) dimension. Studies situated at the intersection of gentrification and everyday life typically seek to uncover the impacts of gentrification on specific aspects of daily life and the experienced realities of various social groups (primarily the newly arriving middle class). It is far less common for researchers to adopt the inverse relation – as seen in THREADGOLD, S. *et al.* (2024) – and consider how this perspective might facilitate a deeper understanding of gentrification itself. However, they too treat gentrification primarily as a geographical context, failing to render visible the underlying economic (re)investment processes that drive it. As THREADGOLD, S. *et al.* (2024, 904) acknowledge in their inspiring work: ‘gentrification emerged as a major theme in our research data but was not the object of study *per se*’.

Regarding *theoretical debates on gentrification*, these are most commonly structured around conceptualisation and the identification of causal drivers. By the 1990s, the initially polarising perspectives had sufficiently matured, such that integrating production-side and consumption-side explanations – or, to frame it differently, the complementary synthesis of economic and social arguments – became a fruitful path for many. In our view, this shift implicitly encompasses the integrated approach we advocate. Here, we highlight only two specific thematic areas that proved instrumental in crystallising our perspective and tailoring our empirical research accordingly.

One such critical point was first articulated by ROSE, D. (1984), who questioned the ‘uneven development’ approach to gentrification (SMITH, N. 1982) itself – a scepticism with which we fundamentally disagree. She noted a lack of investigation into the intersections of employment restructuring and changes in the reproduction of labour power within Marxist works. ROSE argued that gentrifiers cannot necessarily be identified with uniform class positions; instead, she identified ‘marginal

gentrifiers’ (a significant proportion of whom are women) who may possess needs similar to those they displace. In connection with this, she advocated for an analysis of ‘life-style’ alongside the functioning of the land and housing markets and the processes of production. The sphere of everyday life that she examined, in which ‘life-style’ is the key concept, is linked to the consumption habits and needs of residents (essentially gentrifiers). However, we found this to be too narrow for our own research, compared to the interpretation linked to experiences, practices, and struggles that we cited above (KATZ, C. and KIRBY, A. 1991). Furthermore, adopting this lens would have – contrary to our intentions – tilted our proposed integrated approach too far towards consumption-side logic.

In contrast to ROSE, CAULFIELD, J. (1994) adopted an explicit ‘everyday’ focus in his gentrification research, placing weight on cultural factors such as taste, emotion, and aesthetics. In doing so, he interpreted the initiation of ‘gentrification as a postmodern urbanism’ as a consequence of the decisions and choices made by gentrifiers. We agree, however, with SMITH, N. (1996, 43–44) that for CAULFIELD, among others, ‘it is less a question of developing the connections, inherent in gentrification, between economic and cultural shifts, resulting in a new urban geography. Rather, in this vision culture virtually supplants economics ...’. Ultimately, this perspective ensures that ‘postmodern urbanism simply gentrify the working class out of the picture.’

For these reasons, we progressed towards the approach of PATON, K. (2014), who brought the everyday lives of the working class into focus by simultaneously examining structural and agentic perspectives within gentrification. However, we have extended this in two ways. Firstly, we allowed for the possibility that the working class should not be a priori confined to the position of the displaced. Secondly, – in contrast to the many excellent works focusing on collective resistance – we also sought traces of resistance at the individual or household scale. This shift was particularly necessary as our selected

case study sites are not scenes of ‘classic’, large-scale investor-led or state-led gentrification initiated by ‘slum clearance’.

3) As these sites owe their distinct character largely to their *state-socialist past* – specifically the preservation of their working-class character through single-family housing – the third strand of scholarly discourse central to our analysis is the body of research on gentrification in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. Since the primary focus of these studies generally does not align with the integrated approach advocated here (works based on somewhat similar logic are, e.g. CSANÁDI, G. *et al.* 2007; JELINEK, Cs. 2011; GENTILE, M. *et al.* 2015), we have identified the most relevant contributions for our empirical investigation at different intersections. Due to the sheer volume of this literature (see e.g. in BERÉNYI, B.E. 2016), rather than providing an exhaustive list, we categorise these works by their research trajectories.

A key resource for this is the systematic literature review on urban regeneration and gentrification in CEE cities by KUBEŠ, J. and KOVÁCS, Z. (2020), which synthesises the findings of nearly 80 (primarily English-language) publications. Within their classification, the studies examining the ‘preconditions and driving forces of gentrification’ are of particular importance to our work – specifically those employing *historical analysis* to understand the impact of economic interventions (investment, real estate markets) and state-led developments. These studies have facilitated the placement of our empirical findings within a broader spatio-temporal context. In the typology established by KUBEŠ, J. and KOVÁCS, Z. (2020), the extensive literature on ‘*early-stage gentrification*’ provided the primary parallels, even if the studies they referenced were fundamentally gentrifier-focused. Although their identified ‘*specific forms*’ did not explicitly categorise gentrification linked to detached housing areas rooted in the (pre-) socialist past – which often involves partial social mixing – its characteristics remain significant for our analysis (e.g. RUOPPILA, S. and

KÄHRİK, A. 2003; FELDMAN, M. 2000 in SÝKORA, L. 2005). Finally, the *non-metropolitan character of gentrification* in Pécs and Debrecen – can also be defined by features such as ‘delayed’ or ‘less dynamic and often incomplete’ development (KUBEŠ, J. and KOVÁCS, Z. 2020) – gains CEE-wide interpretability. This is further contextualised by the ‘significance of EU funding’ and the ‘pivotal role of historic city cores in urban regeneration’. Insightful details on these processes are provided by the scholarly discourses compiled by KUBEŠ, J. and KOVÁCS, Z. (2025) in their subsequent literature review, which specifically focuses on the gentrification of provincial cities.

### Methods and areas of empirical research

Drawing upon the synthesis of uneven development and approaches to everyday life, our empirical study utilises a case-based method to further unpack the complexities of gentrification. The aim of the study was not the analysis of gentrification per se; rather, it sought to uncover its structural drivers, as well as its impacts and repercussions as expressed through everyday lived experiences and practices. For our neighbourhood-scale investigation, we selected Debrecen (202,130 inhabitants), and Pécs (139,412 inhabitants in 2025). These cities can serve as appropriate reference points for one another to understand the generalisable and specific characteristics of the political-economic background of gentrification. Despite their shared status as traditional regional centres and ‘twin cities’ within the national urban hierarchy (RECHNITZER, J. *et al.* 2004), their current developmental trajectories diverge significantly: Debrecen is experiencing a period of prosperity, whereas Pécs is in a phase of decline (MOLNÁR, E. *et al.* 2018). These differences are rooted in local responses to post-socialist transformation, specifically the intensity of relations between local and central state actors (PÓLA, P. *et al.* 2023). As medium-sized Central and Eastern European cities, they provide a critical lens through which to examine the multi-scalar dynamics of uneven development.

Aligned with our goals, the selected field sites are both compact, former working-class districts situated on the inner-city fringe. Brick manufacturing in Nagysándortelep (Debrecen) and the pottery and porcelain industry in Zsolnay district (Pécs) played key roles in shaping their neighbourhoods. Unlike areas undergoing ‘classic’ urban regeneration, these neighbourhoods are defined by their specific industrial heritage, with the majority of the housing stock consisting of workers’ family houses built in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, the two districts reflect the broader structural specificities of their respective cities. Debrecen is dominated by a semi-rural, detached built form with relatively larger plots (typically 300–400 m<sup>2</sup>), while Pécs exhibits a denser, small-town urban fabric with smaller plots (200–300 m<sup>2</sup>). In the latter, state-socialist and post-2000 interventions have introduced apartment blocks, increasing urban heterogeneity while maintaining the overall dominance of single-family housing.

To better understand the transformation of the selected sites for our research – which uncovers both drivers and impacts – we conducted preliminary studies prior to the investigation presented here. We supplemented fundamental statistical data with intensive site walk-overs, during which the specificities of localised gentrification were clearly discernible in both districts. Regarding our study areas, the 2011 and 2022 census datasets for Debrecen provided empirical evidence that validated our field observations<sup>4</sup>. In the absence of such data for Pécs, we employed a comparative stock condition survey, utilising our prior field surveys (2008) conducted before the European Capital of Culture developments as a baseline for a 2024 follow-up.

<sup>4</sup> Using data from the last two censuses (2011, 2022) for Nagysándortelep, we constructed two separate measures: a Social Upgrading Index (SUI) based on variables illustrating social status, and a Housing Upgrading Index (HUI) based on housing quality indicators. These two indices were then combined using a standardised z-score method to create a comprehensive Gentrification Likely Index (GLI), along which specific gentrification categories were defined.

We documented the building stock adjacent to the Zsolnay factory by photographing technical and visual amenities<sup>5</sup>, mapping the observed processes, and categorising the subsequent morphological changes.

The transformation of Nagysándortelep research area (0.8 km<sup>2</sup>) is defined not by uniform gentrification, but as a mosaic of asynchronous spatial processes (Figure 1). In the northern and central areas, physical and social appreciation reinforce one another, evidenced by the dual rise in university graduates and housing quality. However, this correspondence is inconsistent across the territory. In the central core, physical renewal outpaces social restructuring, suggesting a process of ‘*in situ*’ gentrification where original residents could act as ‘occupier-developers’. Conversely, the western margins exhibit social displacement or generational shifts that precede capital investment, with rising educational attainment lagging behind physical improvements. Despite these hotspots, much of the district experiences ‘quiet appreciation’ – a subtle, sporadic upgrading of the urban fabric without significant spatial disruption. Ultimately, in this initial stage of spontaneous gentrification, the area functions as a fragmented townscape of dynamic transformation, stagnant enclaves, and transitional spaces, rather than a monolithic gentrifying front<sup>6</sup>.

We conducted the survey in the central, most emblematic core of the Zsolnay district<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> A similar method was used by LICHTENBERGER, E. *et al.* (1995) for Budapest neighbourhoods.

<sup>6</sup> Features of several gentrification types delineated within the CEE context can now be recognised in certain parts of Nagysándortelep. These include, for instance, ‘incumbent upgrading’ and ‘stealth gentrification’ (KOVÁCS, Z. *et al.* 2015; KUBEŠ, J. and KOVÁCS, Z. 2020). For our purposes here, however, the decisive factor remains the unequivocal presence of gentrification as applied in our own conceptual framework.

<sup>7</sup> The designation ‘Zsolnay district’ refers to a former working-class quarter spanning approximately 1 km<sup>2</sup>, whose spatial development and demographic growth were intrinsically tied to the factory’s presence. For the purposes of this study, however, the most distinctive neighbourhood is the empirically surveyed area delineated on the map, where the spatial imprints of 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-century urban processes exist in immediate proximity to one another.

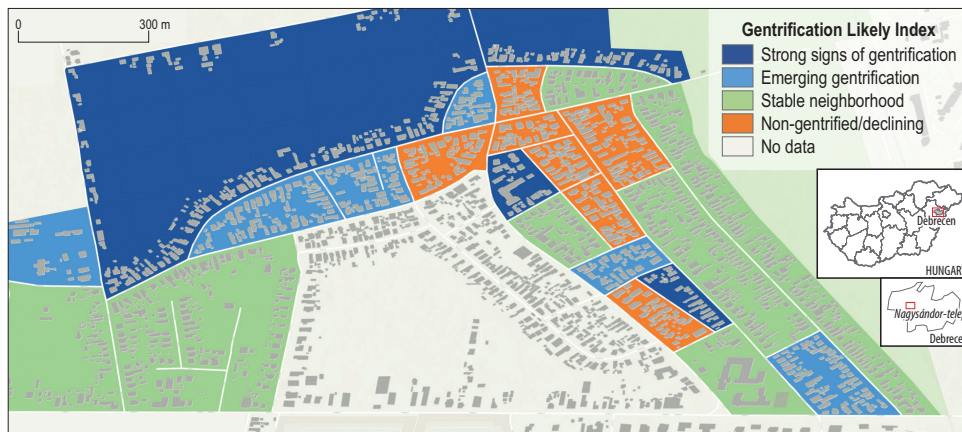


Fig. 1. Gentrification in Debrecen, Nagysándortelep district (2011–2022). Source: Authors' own edition based on field surveys and data from the 2011 and 2022 censuses.

(approximately 1 km<sup>2</sup>; Figure 2). This analysis emphasises building-level transformations as a reflection of social change. Similar to Debrecen, renewal is highly fragmented; contiguous improvements are limited to public infrastructure (road surfacing and cycle paths), while property renovation remains concentrated along the axis connecting the city centre to the Zsolnay Cultural Quarter. Beyond investor-led infill projects – primarily small-scale, high-quality apartment blocks – the area exhibits a ‘neighbourhood effect’ of modest, sporadic renewals<sup>8</sup>. However, the persistent presence of severely dilapidated, near-uninhabitable housing in immediate proximity to the revitalised Zsolnay Cultural Quarter – a site of significant state-led investment – seemingly contradicts classic rent-gap-driven gentrification (SMITH, N. 1982).

Ultimately, Pécs presents an even more polarised mosaic than Debrecen. Although measurable data on social transformation are unavailable here, if we consider housing market shifts, which suggest that population turnover is characterised by a rise in social status, then

this process can undoubtedly be regarded as gentrification.

Within the empirical research of this article, the components adopting a political-economic approach to investigate the drivers of gentrification primarily involved secondary analysis of local historical and cartographic sources, urban development documents, and local newspaper articles, complemented by expert interviews. These interviews with 7 in Debrecen and 6 in Pécs, which aimed to examine socio-economic changes and development characteristics in the areas under study, enriched our understanding with insights from local politicians, institutional leaders, social workers, and local historians.

At the core of our qualitative methodology were narrative interviews, integrated with a semi-structured approach: 13 in Debrecen, and 18 in Pécs. These interviews aimed to explore everyday life, spatial experiences, and practices in the context of gentrification. Consequently, after gaining insight into the participants' life histories, we discussed in greater detail their migration trajectories, their use of space, and their assessments and perceptions of changes in their housing and neighbourhood. Furthermore, we examined their lived experiences of conflict, views on urban development policies, and the potential forms and opportunities for resist-

<sup>8</sup> Gentrification limited to a few streets and working-class enclaves is a well-known phenomenon in both Western and CEE contexts (MARCUSE, P. 1986; SMITH, N. 1996; CHELCEA, L. 2006).

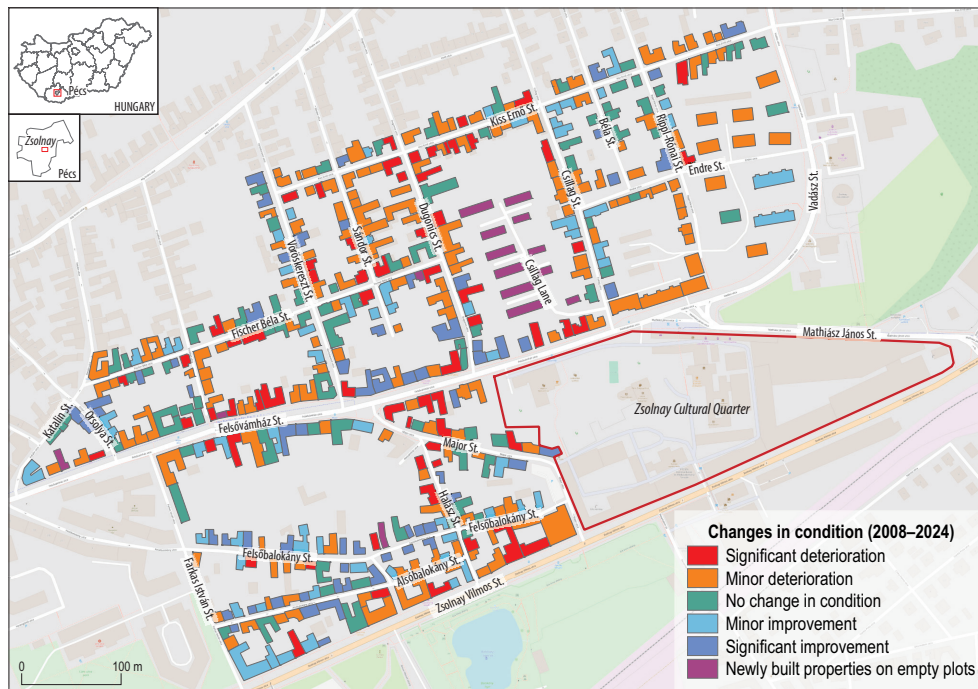


Fig. 2. Gentrification in Pécs, Zsolnay district (2008–2024), based on the changing technical state of housing. *Source:* Authors' own edition based on 2008 and 2024 field surveys.

ance. These dialogues were conducted among a fundamentally working-class and precarious population that varied in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, and ability. With a few exceptions, these 1–2.5-hour interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes between August 2023 and October 2025, significantly enriching our fieldwork experience. A focus group interview with 13 marginalised residents in the former location provided an opportunity to discuss local livelihood, financial hardship, and community development issues.

### The backgrounds and driving forces of gentrification – from a political-economic perspective

By examining the key features and changing dynamics of development and underdevelopment, as well as investment and disin-

vestment – central concerns of the political-economic approach to uneven development – we can better understand the gentrification currently occurring in our sample areas. Our study places particular emphasis on exploring the role of workers in this spatial process, which necessitates tracing their contemporary presence back to its genealogies in the initial formation of working-class districts.

#### *Pre-capitalist – capitalist period: the birth of 'working-class neighbourhoods'*

Nagysándortelep originated in the late 18th century as a result of Debrecen's historically significant brickmaking industry (BALOGH, L. 2020). The 19th-century capitalisation of Debrecen – hitherto a predominantly agrarian regional hub – precipitated the consolidation of industrial capital. However, the munic-

pal leadership only tacitly tolerated even the permanent settlement of brickyard workers within this territory until 1909 (PAPP, J. 2017). The ownership of these exceptionally small building plots – and, thus, the mechanism of control – has been retained to this day (SÁPI, L. 1972). Their residential neighbourhood in Nagysándortelep suffered from disinvestment by the local government, as evidenced by the complete lack of basic public utilities and institutions until the 1930s (SÁPI, L. 1972).

The development of our investigated area in Pécs, the Zsolnay district, into a distinctive ‘industrial/working-class neighbourhood’, is, similarly to Debrecen, closely linked to the city’s first significant wave of industrialisation in the second half of the 19th century. The more diversified industrial character of the city is – comprising mining, light industry, and food processing (FARAGÓ, L. 2010) – found its most globally renowned representative in the Zsolnay Porcelain Manufacture. Employing 900 people by 1910, the factory acted as the most powerful agent in the spatial production of the district (PILKHOFFER, M. 2021). The company’s management invested significantly in urban infrastructure and also contributed to education, healthcare, and public welfare. Furthermore, the company commissioned the construction of brick houses for a portion of its workforce, offering rental units that exceeded the prevailing standards of the era. However, much like in Nagysándortelep, the majority of the modest dwellings were self-built by the labouring class; yet here, they produced a small-town, terraced spatial structure rather than a rural morphology. As a result, the Zsolnay district developed a unique building stock that, while primarily consisting of family houses, was more diverse in terms of quality and ownership compared to Nagysándortelep.

*State socialist era: partial investment, disinvestment leading to slumification*

The preceding wars and economic crises eventually transitioned the studied districts,

bearing the marks of disinvestment, into a new mode of production of space (LEFEBVRE, H. 1991 [1974]) in state socialism. However, the industrialisation that played a central role in the socialist state’s party politics generally favoured the development of Pécs. State investments, concentrated dominantly in heavy industry, primarily targeted other districts of the city, causing the Zsolnay factory and its environs to lose their former primacy. Consequently, in the urban planning and development schemes of the early 1970s – much like in the 1961 plan for Nagysándortelep – the predominantly low-density residential fabric and underdeveloped infrastructure served as a rationale for ‘de-development’ and the visionary prospect of total slum clearance (KOZMA, G. 1994). The official justification in Pécs clearly reveals an inability to intervene, covered up by the dominant ideology: the explanation for executing the plan – which ultimately failed to materialise here at the neighbourhood level either – would have been ‘living conditions unworthy of the socialist way of life’ (SÍPOS, B. 2024). Both cities preferred mass housing construction, but most of this took place outside the areas under study. Even the 300 dwellings constructed on the fringe of the Zsolnay district during the 1980s – financed through coordinated council, party, and state-bank investment – failed to meet the residential demand generated by a porcelain factory workforce that had, by then, reached 1,800 employees.

One consequence of the state-led production of space process in Hungary – conceptualised as ‘under-urbanisation’ (KONRÁD, GY. and SZELÉNYI, I. 1971) – was the private construction of single-family houses, which ‘retained’ the population in villages. This serves as a prime example of how individual responses to spatial inequalities became a mass phenomenon. The studied districts were no exception: with or without company or state subsidies, people continuously built or renovated their often still-dilapidated houses themselves (who could be considered the first working-class ‘occupier developers’).

Significant investments by the local state and the state-owned companies neglected not only the housing stock but also the development of infrastructure and public utilities. Furthermore, alongside the existing working-class and precariat layers, impoverished families – a significant proportion of whom were Roma – were relocated: in the Zsolnay district, into deteriorating council housing, and in the case of Nagysándortelep, towards the end of the era (partly as a result of historic city centre rehabilitation programmes), into the district and its immediate surroundings. As a consequence, slumification intensified in these areas, increasing the stigmatisation of the districts in question. In the final decade of state socialism, the Pécs City Council eventually launched an early urban regeneration project (EGEDY, T. 2009). This intervention introduced an outpatient clinic, a retirement home, modern apartment blocks, and a starter housing block consisting of 120 (19–30 m<sup>2</sup> each) apartments were built on the periphery of the district in Lánc Street; while this partially renewed the area, it also sowed the seeds for subsequent problems.

*Post-socialist – (new) capitalist period:  
moderate gentrification*

The period since the regime change cannot be regarded as uniform either. During the 1990s, the systemic crisis linked to the industrial sector left discernible imprints on both study areas, reflecting a broader process of deindustrialisation. In 1999, the last brick factory in Nagysándortelep closed its doors (HOROG, M. 2022). The local authority remained absent from residential property development, maintaining only a limited stock of emergency housing within the study area. However, in the early 2000s, by clearing both local and adjacent Roma settlements – described by one expert interviewee as a ‘series of evictions’ and a form of ‘cleansing’ – it acted as the catalyst for a reinvestment process that had a perceptible impact on Nagysándortelep. We believe that this mode

of intervention clearly fits into the conceptual framework that regards 20th and 21st-century gentrification as a global urban strategy (SMITH, N. 2002). This strategy of neoliberal capitalism – documented in numerous other Central and Eastern European cities (e.g. JELINEK, Cs. 2011; NAGY, E. and TIMÁR, J. 2012) – is most evident in the transformation of the area separated from Nagysándortelep only by a busy main road. The municipality cleared the city’s most stigmatised residential site, the so-called ‘Citromsziget’ (Lemon Island), to facilitate the entry of private capital, subsequently replacing it with the new ‘Fészek’ (Nest) middle-class residential complex, which is an illustrative example of new-built gentrification (see e.g. GENTILE, M. *et al.* 2015; HOLM, A. *et al.* 2015).

Industrial estates and shopping centres were developed on the fringes and in the vicinity of Nagysándortelep through largely similar collaborations. As a result, during the 2000s, the settlement gradually became ‘wedged into a renewing environment’ (HOROG, M. 2022, 32). The development phase anticipated under these conditions could have been realised through a process of social urban regeneration – an approach clearly discernible within the local authority’s strategic planning documents (Debrecen MJV 2008, 2014, 2022). In the absence of the anticipated EU and central state subsidies, the steering of local housing market dynamics – and the resulting reinvestment – has been devolved, at least for the time being, to small-scale investors and occupier developers<sup>9</sup>. Indicators of educational attainment and housing quality already showed marginal improvements between 2001 and 2011, however, these trends intensified over the following decade, signalling the onset of a spontaneous process of gentrification (a phe-

<sup>9</sup>Given that capitalist relations of production of space had become dominant by this period – whereas such terminology may have been contested under state socialism – it is our view that Neil SMITH’s (1996, 69) definition of ‘occupier developers’ can now be unequivocally adopted: namely, those ‘who buy and redevelop property and inhabit it after completion’.

nomenon previously identified in earlier research of HOROG, M. 2022).

Alongside numerous similarities – partly due to the ‘wait-and-see’ approach of both municipal and private investors – our study area in Pécs experienced a similar process of decline (underdevelopment), reaching a potential turning point in the 2010s. Its historical assets and dilapidated state (PIRISI, G. *et al.* 2008) presented such a contrast that the civil initiative ‘European Capital of Culture 2010 – ECoC’ project designated it as a core area for urban renewal ([www.pecs2010.hu](http://www.pecs2010.hu)). The functional conversion of the Zsolnay factory into a cultural hub attracted an unprecedented scale of EU investment to the city 140 million EUR) and specifically to the study area (40 million EUR) (TRÓCSÁNYI, A. 2011). Development commenced in 2009. However, due to local political instability and the 2008–2009 global financial crisis, investors (local, national, and foreign alike) purchased several plots but withheld development, awaiting the success or failure of the flagship project. Except for the central Zsolnay Cultural Quarter and its related minor infrastructural improvements, the planned major investments either materialised outside the studied area or were abandoned altogether. Nevertheless, the ECoC project did deliver infrastructural upgrades (e.g. cycle paths, bus routes) that somewhat appreciated the area’s value. Consequently, a degree of development has been perceptible since 2010; however, it remains sporadic and slow.

The intensification of gentrification is further constrained by the fact that many residents were unable to take advantage of the right-to-buy schemes following the transition; consequently, the proportion of municipal housing remains relatively high (reaching up to one-third). Neither the owner nor the tenants possess the capital required for the modernisation of this stock. While urban policy identifies issues of ‘punctiform segregates’ and ‘blocks at risk of segregation’ (Pécs MJV 2022), it remains a vital research question as to how the policy responses to these classifications will steer the trajectory of gentrifica-

tion. Indeed, the left-wing municipal leadership – which eschewed urban rehabilitation based on public-private partnerships – was ultimately unable to prevent the total erosion of the aforementioned 120-unit municipal block. Built on the cusp of the regime change, the building’s decay forced the council to resolve upon its evacuation in 2022.

Ultimately, through the political economy perspective applied in these case studies, we have sought to contextualise the circumstances surrounding the onset of currently observable gentrification within a historical framework. It was not our objective to take a definitive stance in the debate regarding whether a sufficient rent gap (SMITH, N. 1982, 1996; NAGY, E. and TIMÁR, J. 2012; HOLM, A. *et al.* 2015) or indeed a value gap (HAMNETT, C. and RANDOLPH, W. 1984; CLARK, E. 1991; KOVÁCS, Z. *et al.* 2013) has emerged in the given areas, or which of these might be inducing gentrification in the districts under investigation. For our purposes, the central question is how the workers whose significant presence to this day has been presented by these case studies align with the structural conditions that facilitate reinvestment. The situation in which, due to specific shifts in tenure relations, they may be present not only as the victims of underdevelopment struggling with the most severe hardships but also as current or potential occupier developers, renders the study of their spatial experiences and practices highly justified.

### **Working-class residents’ daily lived experiences of gentrification**

*The relationship of working-class residents to state-led gentrification resulting from ‘classical’ displacement*

The working-class and marginalised groups, whose members are known as the classical subjects of displacement in ‘Western’ gentrification, have primarily been studied in Hungarian literature within the context of large-scale revitalisation and rehabilitation

programmes of neoliberal urbanism (e.g. CSANÁDI, G. *et al.* 2007; JELINEK, Cs. 2011; NAGY, E. and TIMÁR, J. 2012; CZIRFUSZ, M. *et al.* 2015; TIMÁR, J. 2019). In the Zsolnay district, the municipality is continually vacating its buildings – most of which have already become uninhabitable – yet large-scale interventions here, much like in Nagysándortelep, have fundamentally taken place in neighbouring areas (such as the Lác Street block, ‘Citromsziget’, and certain Roma settlements). Nevertheless, their impact is undoubtedly palpable in the everyday lives of working-class households in the districts under transition.

In the narratives of our interview partners (except for one or two accounts from professionals trying to protect Roma families from eviction), solidarity regarding displacement was not markedly expressed. Some voiced their former fears, stemming from both the proliferation of drug use and crime in Pécs’s Lác Street before its eviction, and the deep poverty of the Roma and non-Roma residents of the ‘Citromsziget’ in Debrecen. We encountered an interview partner who had so deeply internalised the stigmatisation of ‘Citromsziget’ that she never even entered the area. We could assume that this is consistent with the gendered nature of urban fear (see in SÁGI, M. 2022). However, this same person sharply criticised the stigmatisation of Nagysándortelep by other city dwellers. In contrast, an elderly interview partner, a former female brick factory worker, holds different memories of ‘Citromsziget’, through which they used to walk to work during the socialist era:

There were times I’d be off [to work] for midnight, and I’d just go on me bike. And... even at 11 at night, we’d be coming home, singing away. Well... it never even crossed our minds to be scared. ... Here, in ‘Citromsziget’: well... I don’t remember there being that many bad people about, so where’s this [stigma] coming from? I reckon it’s more that they were just poorer, or I don’t know what it’s from.’

Even if carried out beyond the boundaries of the working-class districts under

investigation, redevelopment may have contributed to an improvement in the urban image of the areas in question (CSOBA, J. 2020) and to their appreciation on the real estate market. However, those belonging to the working-class or marginalised strata of Nagysándortelep typically did not perceive the new-built gentrification of ‘Citromsziget’ as a positive change – for instance, as the elimination of the source of their fears (for the international debate on its positive and negative impacts, see ATKINSON, R. 2004; SZIRMAI, V. 2019). Instead, their narratives brought to the fore social conflicts that had never been experienced before. In the development of the middle-class ‘Fészek’ residential complex, they experienced their own segregation and exclusion:

‘Proper rich folks live over there,’ ‘proper houses just sprung up overnight.’

This development brought the reality of uneven spatial development into their daily lived experience. One middle-aged female worker, perceiving the roles of both capital and the local state, resented the ‘unjust’ and vast discrepancy in property prices (mentioning house prices of 5 million versus 50 million HUF) on opposite sides of the dividing road. Furthermore, she took issue with the fact that a local political actor only had the side of the road facing the residential complex ‘cleaned up’.

Even more distressing for the residents of both districts studied is the closure of their local primary schools, cited as being due to a lack of funding and a declining pupil population. Although we have not studied the details of these closures, given the current levels of nursery-stage segregation, it can be assumed that the state – alongside the disparate mobility options available to low-status and new, high-status residents – acts to reinforce the reproduction of educational spatial inequality and exclusion (e.g. VELKEY, G. 2022; BÉRES, A. 2025; BÉRES, A. *et al.* 2025).

Ultimately, while the social group under scrutiny has not been a casualty of the afore-

mentioned large-scale, displacement-led regeneration projects, there are no guarantees of their future protection. Alongside the imperatives of capital accumulation and urban policies that deploy gentrification as a strategic tool of urbanism (SMITH, N. 2002; NAGY, E. and TIMÁR, J. 2012), their very working-class positionality constitutes a source of potential vulnerability.

*The role of former and current working-class residents in contemporary spontaneous gentrification*

The reserve army of displacement – tenants

A segment of the residents who hold or formerly held working-class status can be categorised within the group of tenants described in classical gentrification studies and may be regarded as a ‘reserve army of displacement’ that facilitates the process of gentrification. During our research, we encountered numerous interview partners who were born into markedly poor working-class families during the socialist era – often in sub-standard, multi-generational, or overcrowded housing, or within Roma neighbourhoods – and it is not uncommon for them to still lack homeownership today. Alongside them are those who have experienced more fortunate periods in the past, but who now struggle with chronic illness or disability, or must care for a disabled family member; those who have lost their jobs, or who, following divorce or bereavement, must raise children alone; and those subsisting on extremely low pensions. This social position, in turn, makes it impossible for them to break out of their status as tenants.

Some *rent their flat or house from private landlords*. In Pécs, we interviewed a tenant of a renovated apartment who has been unsuccessfully attempting to relocate. Within the newly gentrifying environment, there is a lack of housing supply that accommodates both their income level and their requirements as a person with a disability. However, the tenants in our study are more typically char-

acterised by the fact that, to survive, they accept – or are forced to accept – extremely poor housing conditions. Some attempt to endure these circumstances, and from this perspective, they appear as ‘passive’ actors in district-scale spatial processes. This is not true of their own lives, however, as this endurance often requires significant attitudinal and, above all, physical effort. Our Roma male interview partner from Nagysándortelep hoped for a better fate for his child than the one he had. He complained that:

We’ve got no water in the house, and that means we’re trekking down [to the end of the street] for the well water.’

Registered as disabled due to a spinal disc herniation and suffering from severe heart disease, this is a daily practice he is forced to undertake. Having lost faith in the possibility of mobility, some seek a better bargaining position with their landlord to retain their rented home and, ultimately, remain in the slumified space. We learned of one tenant, for instance, who has so far managed to avoid eviction by appealing to their landlord’s ‘social conscience’. However, such individual bargains are only possible until the rent gap/value gap ultimately incentivises the owner to renovate or sell, or until plot speculation ‘bears fruit’ due to a municipal development or revitalisation plan (such as a proposed road construction in Debrecen) and the resulting expropriation.

Alongside these strategies, the possibility of payment in kind (reciprocity) can also be deployed. This is precisely what the aforementioned disabled man does: by assisting the owner with daily shopping and administrative tasks, the tenant is currently exempt from paying rent – though, of course, this remains a very precarious success. Several others attempt to improve their income through casual labour, even while ill, though accounts suggest that substance abuse and self-destruction can also emerge as a form of reaction. Based on our experiences, submitting an application for social housing was

seen as the only viable option for relocation among these tenants. Their narratives regarding the years spent on waiting lists reveal a sense of paternalism – an expectation of state care carried over from the socialist period. Ultimately, for those tenants who attempt to preserve or improve their home – the most vital micro-space of their daily lives – any delay in their displacement is merely a superficial achievement. In reality, they are contributing to the disinvestment and slumification that precedes reinvestment, thereby further widening the rent gap.

The situation and prospects of *those who already rent from the municipality* (a possibility only available at our Pécs site) are not significantly different, as the local authority currently fails to invest in or renovate these properties. According to one interviewed expert, this housing policy is no longer sustainable; he argues that the cost of current ‘social sensitivity’ is being borne by ‘Pécs taxpayers’, while the dilapidation of the properties in question has become untenable. This situation divides the tenant group as a whole. While those on the waiting list demand social provision, they are often impatient with those whom the municipality tolerates despite non-payment of rent, believing this diminishes their own chances. For instance, a Roma worker living with his wife and teenage child in a single-room flat in the Zsolnay district – which is in very poor condition – seeks to use this very tactic to acquire a larger home:

‘I’ll tell you straight, I’ve already been down to the council; I want them to write this place off as unfit to live in.’

His life trajectory is, among other things, a history of the struggle to create a home. Highlighting just a few moments: during the period of higher Roma employment, he worked in the uranium mines for 15 years and later served as a social worker; he has also experienced homelessness and even squatting in a vacant municipal flat. After officially reporting his occupancy and con-

sistently paying for utilities and rent, the municipality eventually granted him a formal tenancy agreement. His case illustrates that while certain strategies in the individual–municipality relationship can prove effective and successful in the short term, the large-scale arrival of private capital may still displace this stratum through gentrification – even if they merely wish to move within the same district rather than leave it.

Working-class homeowners – old and new occupier developers

Due to the unique nature of their situation, we consider it important to highlight the specific working-class group whose members, at first glance, appear to be participants in the ongoing gentrification who cannot be displaced, as they live in their own family homes. One characteristic period of their emergence as occupier developers was the first two decades of state socialism; during this time, they purchased small, inexpensive houses or plots close to their workplace. Driven by growing households, they gradually built, extended, or modernised their properties. In the absence of state investment or professional developers, they were effectively the only developers of that era. Others may have purchased property during the subsequent period of slumification, or even inherited homes or parts of houses from their working-class parents during the initial gentrification after the 2000s, becoming contemporary occupier developers by gradually upgrading these units.

Examining their everyday lives and spatial practices reveals that their relationship with contemporary gentrification is by no means unidirectional; thus, we can study more than just the impacts of uneven development upon them. Given their position, which can be characterised as that of occupier developers, the relevance of examining a reverse effect also arises. From the perspective of their direct influence on gentrification, we have identified at least two distinct patterns of action.

One of the observed life trajectories belongs to those who (or whose parents) were active producers of urban space during the state socialist era, but who, *despite remaining homeowners, can no longer be considered developers today*. Neither they, nor their parents ‘blended in’ with the prevailing mechanisms of spatial production, either under state socialism or today. In the former period, they indeed assumed the role of occupier developers. However, in rebellion against the alternative of housing estate life, which was available to some, they actively contributed to the development of the studied districts by building detached houses with gardens. In doing so, they also perpetuated practices dating back to pre-socialist spatial production: they kept pigs and poultry to supplement their livelihoods, thereby preserving the rural character of the area. They followed the Central and Eastern European (CEE) pattern of everyday life that Gerald CREED (1998) termed the ‘domestication of socialism’. Some who followed this path can no longer maintain their former role as agents, having been dragged down by the crisis of the post-socialist transition, deindustrialisation, and unemployment. Unable to break free from their declining social status, they themselves reinforce disinvestment and have become the sufferers of slumification. However, their position as homeowners currently protects them and their families from total displacement – at least as long as gentrification remains patchwork-like and slow, or until the municipality and capital enter these districts more forcefully as professional developers. For the time being, therefore, the members of *this group act as a slow-down gentrification*.

The same applies to those who, even if they no longer wish to upgrade, could theoretically sell their houses, which are sometimes in remarkably good condition and of high quality, but choose not to. As several participants emphasised in the focus group interview, they would not move for any amount of money from the house that is the fruit of their own two hands (and sometimes the labour of dozens of people helping in informal

mutual aid, known as ‘kaláka’). They are accustomed to and fond of their homes and/or the district. Thus, they do not conform to the market logic offered by uneven development, yet their often valuable property also protects them. In their case, change will only come when their children take their place – that is, through an intra-family generational shift. As one expert interview partner in Pécs aptly remarked:

‘Here, gentrification is age-based; it happens on a “one-out, one-in” basis through natural wastage.’

An example of this is a former brickyard worker couple in Debrecen, now in their 80s, who came from a background of settlement poverty. With hard work and some assistance from both their family and the factory, they built their first small house in the early 1960s; two decades later, they progressed from there to build a large, more modern home. They, too, voiced their strong attachment to their house:

‘We’re always talking about it, saying, “Well, maybe we should sell up...” “Aye, sell up.” And that’s as far as it goes.... “I tell my son, look, son, it doesn’t work like that – just having a thought and then handing it over! But where would we go?” [Quoting her son:] “Oh, you can buy somewhere else and just think what this place is worth now!” Well, of course, maybe they think a bit of cash would be nice... But my old man, he won’t have it, ‘causes us in a block of flats? Never us! That’s not for the likes of us, ‘causes this is what we’re used to.’

Such attachment, however, is by no means exclusively characteristic of the elderly when weighing up shifting real estate market opportunities. In Pécs, a middle-aged mother of two argued critically against the attitude of the young people she sees around her, who sell their inherited homes; in her view, this further fuels the process of alienation within the transforming district:

‘They don’t want to be tied to the spot. ... So, those connections aren’t there anymore, that feeling of “this is my childhood home”; instead, people just go wherever the work is, and they don’t bond with the place.’

... Maybe that's good in one sense, because they go where they can earn more or where there's opportunity, but I don't know... I feel like I'm not giving my children any values that way. If they can't form a bond with this, how are they ever going to bond with a person, or a partner?

The type of change in ownership she describes produces a stratum of *people who suddenly act as accelerators of a gentrification* that their parents had previously slowed down. Even if property prices in the neighbourhood remain below the city average, they are high enough to attract buyers or developers of a higher social status than the original residents. Alternatively, if they choose to move into the inherited home themselves, they frequently extend and renovate it.

Finally, there are those who, as occupier developers, 'blended in' with the process of contemporary gentrification; that is to say, their everyday practices and decisions actively fuel it. Take, for example, the couple in Pécs who, during the decline of their workplace – the Zsolnay factory – sought a livelihood in Austria for 20 years. Using the higher income earned there (informally), they have been continuously extending their house since 1987. Having retired, they are away from considering large-scale relocation; however, the return of their divorced entrepreneur daughter and grandchildren has introduced 'gentrifiers' into their home.

Taking all our interviewees into account alongside the homeowners, their attitude toward their broader lived space – the working-class district – is strongly thematised by a sense of 'neighbourhood identity' in Debrecen, and a nostalgia for belonging to the Zsolnay factory in Pécs. In judging the severity of negative changes, differences in their class position and their identities – defined by ethnicity, gender, age, and ability – as well as variations in their individual spatial experiences, all play a role. Among the residents of Nagysándortelep, a significant change is voiced in the form of a Roma/non-Roma divide, which was not previously characteristic of the area (HOROG, M. 2022). Meanwhile, in the Zsolnay district, the primary concern is

the 'occupation of space' by homeless people and 'all sorts of characters' in slumified areas (and around homeless shelters). When searching for those 'responsible', evaluations of the post-socialist transition or, in Pécs, shifts in local politics surfaced – often differing completely depending on the worldviews and experiences gained under socialism.

However, gentrification as a recent everyday experience of social relation shows clear similarities across the board: for many of our interviewees, it manifests either in deteriorated neighbourhood relations or alienation ('*we don't even say hello to each other*'), conflicts over differing lifestyles ('*they're always building, they're noisy*'), or, for example, a sense of being looked down upon. We found no trace of collective resistance against this situation. One might assume that such experiences would lead to a form of displacement (and, thus, accelerate gentrification) even among working-class homeowners – meaning they would react by selling their property. However, we encountered only two couples in Debrecen who are considering this option of leaving the quarter. However, the current conditions of the city's real estate market make it difficult for them to preserve one of the primary joys of their daily lives: the detached house lifestyle.

## Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we aimed primarily to highlight the advantages of our proposed dual approach to the study of uneven spatial development – specifically gentrification – which integrates political economy with a focus on everyday life.

While our empirical research – aimed at illustrating these advantages – sought to understand the spontaneous gentrification of Hungarian urban districts (Debrecen, Pécs) that retain traces of working-class garden estates, specifically from a working-class perspective, we have arrived at new findings that invite further reflection on both epistemological and ontological questions:

1. Through studying the multifaceted relationship of the working class to uneven development and gentrification, a broad spectrum of their space-producing roles has come to light – ranging from the displaced to (potential) developers or even gentrifiers – some of which remain unknown or under-researched in many medium-sized and large cities.
2. By approaching workers as historical subjects – whose everyday experiences and practices we studied within a broader historical context (under both state socialism and capitalism) and through their own life histories – mutually constitutive correlations between structure and everyday life, and the dynamics of capital investment–disinvestment–reinvestment and individual/familial decision-making shifts have been revealed. These dynamics demonstrate the causes and consequences of gentrification in their dialectical relationship.

The further details of these findings are presented in the following discussion:

By exploring the patterns of roles played in ongoing gentrification through the everyday practices and strategies of both former and contemporary workers, we found that during the process of equalisation-differentiation – a hallmark of uneven development (SMITH, N. 1990 [1984], 1996; and see also TAGAI, G. and KRONSTEIN, B. [2026] in this issue) – spatial differentiation occurs not only along class, ethnic, or age-based lines, but the working class itself undergoes a process of internal differentiation. Beyond their direct or indirect displacement (MARCUSE, P. 1986; PATON, K. 2014; ELLIOTT-COOPER, A. *et al.* 2019), workers may assume a variety of roles in the production of gentrifying space.

However, it must be emphasised that the different patterns of everyday practices related to various groups of the studied working-class and precarious populations, which are historically contextualised and geographically situated (in space and scale), are also partial and fluid. In our study, the patterns of everyday practices of individuals and households, examined through the lens of gentrifi-

cation, were disentangled solely as an analytical method. These patterns are not fixed to income levels, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, or moral values. This is because the subjects of everyday life – and the perspectives from which it is experienced – are themselves in a state of constant flux, embedded within a space continuously constructed through social interactions: that is, within ‘space-time’ (MASSEY, D. 1994).

The integrated approach of our case study has shed light on this fluidity, temporality, and partiality, as well as the trajectories that give rise to the specificities of contemporary gentrification. The revealed system of correlations is well-illustrated by the fact that, when the local state, during the *era of state socialism*, left the studied underdeveloped neighbourhoods (or the greater part of them) in a state of disinvestment, it failed to ‘cleanse’ them despite its intentions. At the same time, following central state housing policy – as seen elsewhere in the CEE region (SZELÉNYI, I. 1983) – it generally did not support (unskilled) workers either. Furthermore, within a system proclaiming ‘proletarian power’, it would have been difficult under such circumstances to prevent workers from engaging in self-built housing (as its predecessors had done in Debrecen during the pre-capitalist period). In this historical context, the transformation of a segment of the working class into occupier developers can be seen as a form of resistance. They were able to achieve this within the framework of socialist redistribution by ‘domesticating’ it (CREED, G. 1998) through the second economy, informal labour, and mutual self-help construction. Consequently, those sections of the working class who were in a position to do so (due to their income and family circumstances) contributed to the survival of their micro- and meso-spaces and the preservation of the neighbourhood’s family-house character, thereby refusing to ‘blend into’ the spatial processes typical of state disinvestment. Meanwhile, those who belonged to the marginalised layers of the working class, particularly Roma communities living in ex-

tremely poor housing conditions, became participants in the slumification exacerbated by disinvestment, which foreshadowed their subsequent displacement by gentrification.

At the onset of *post-1990 capitalist spatial production*, however, it was the economic crisis of the post-socialist transition that most conspicuously differentiated the studied working-class strata. These structural changes, stretching from national and international scales down to the level of everyday life, specifically the domain of social reproduction, were interwoven with family relations and individual life circumstances. As observed in other gentrifying CEE neighbourhoods (see in KUBEŠ, J. and KOVÁCS, Z. 2020), it can be argued that the property markets of these overall underdeveloped spaces were shaped by the fact that socialist disinvestment established the very conditions for capitalist investment (NAGY, E. and TIMÁR, J. 2012). It was through this specificity (among others) that the mechanisms of capitalist uneven development were set in motion.

Due to the dynamics of urban-scale uneven development, the studied neighbourhoods have so far experienced only sporadic, spontaneous gentrification, in which workers participate through a shifting array of old and new roles and everyday practices. The reserve army of displacement (tenant households) indirectly fuels gentrification by deepening the rent gap or value gap. Some workers, who were once able to act as developers of their own homes within the socialist space-time, may by now have 'descended' into this group; while they might have retained their status as house owners, capitalist conditions no longer allow them to resist the now capital-driven reinvestment and gentrification. As a means of 'domesticating' neoliberal capitalism (SMITH, A. and ROCHOVSKÁ, A. 2007), they can primarily deploy only their detached houses and domestic food production. Conversely, those who have managed to maintain a position – sometimes even elevating their social status – that enables them to act as occupier developers in today's gentrification do not necessarily ex-

ploit this opportunity; not everyone chooses to 'blend into' the logic of the local real estate market. As we have demonstrated, this may stem from moral motivations (e.g. place attachment), which can also be rooted in their practices of the production of space during socialism. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for 'old age', which has since become a dominant facet of their identities, to have altered their everyday practices and strategies. Highlighting another example of fluidity and temporality: shifts between 'blendedness into' and 'resistance' within or against the process of gentrification are often influenced by changes in an individual's gender-dependent position within the household. By placing our integrated approach within the perspective of the production of scale, we align ourselves with those who argue that the household (the home) and the body are integral parts of the fluid and dynamic process of the production of space. Consequently, these scales play a crucial role in the study of spatial differentiation and inequalities (SMITH, N. 1992b; MARSTON, S. and SMITH, N. 2001).

Finally, it cannot be overemphasised that, alongside differentiation, the interests of capital do not cease to push the diversity of workers identified here towards equalisation (see, for instance, the expansion of the reserve army of displacement at the expense of homeowners). There is no reason to assume that specific urban structures, such as detached housing character, can permanently prevent the abstract space of capital and the state, in its drive toward homogenisation, from colonising everyday life and concrete space (LEFEBVRE, H. 1991 [1974]). Indeed, this has already been substantiated by empirical research into gentrification driven by the alliance of state and capital in other major Hungarian cities (TIMÁR, J. 2019). In the neighbourhoods examined here, the existing built form may hinder this process; however, a shift in municipal policy in Pécs or the territorial demands of newly arrived large-scale capital in Debrecen (NAGY, E. *et al.* 2026) could easily trigger a dispossession and 'takeover' in peripheral areas, specific streets, or around municipal housing.

The question remains: to what extent do the specific characteristics of the studied spaces and their gentrification contribute to the absence of collective resistance to the process? Our findings regarding individual and household-level everyday practices, however, suggest that no matter how differentiated the group of workers may be, the working-class social position itself constitutes a common denominator, leaving them ill-equipped to organise community resistance against collective capital.

However, it must be acknowledged that exploring everyday life through in-depth interviews entails certain methodological limitations, without which an even broader repertoire of lived experiences and practices could have been uncovered. While urban spaces characterised by detached family housing are not the conventional sites of classical gentrification, their study may facilitate the search for parallels with small- or medium-town and/or rural gentrification (e.g. NAGY, E. and TIMÁR, J. 2012; HOLM, A. *et al.* 2015; JÁMBOR, V.E. and VEDRÉDI, K. 2016; TOMAY, K. and BERGER, V. 2024); furthermore, it provides an opportunity to identify additional CEE specificities. Beyond these points, the integrated approach applied here may open a new platform within international scholarly discourses on gentrification and uneven development.

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