

A Did you see that during a protest against gentrification in the fashionable Shoreditch district of London, protesters targeted a cafe selling breakfast cereals at a high mark -up? The shop window was smashed in, but no one was hurt fortunately.

B A cereal cafe seems a strange choice of target. What got up the protester's noses to the extent that they resorted to such desperate measures?

A The protest was intended to draw attention to the spiralling costs of rented accommodation and the effects of so-called gentrification - when new people willing to pay higher rents move in, that leads to an area becoming more expensive and local residents are often priced out.

B Hardly a phenomenon restricted to London's East End. There have been similar changes in New York's Lower East Side and Berlin's Mitte where younger more professional people move in and new businesses pop up to cater for their needs. The theme was even touched upon in a recent episode of the cartoon South Park.

A Yes, the issue is indeed appearing in popular culture because it's a trend in major cities worldwide. The Shoreditch cafe owners are bearded trendies who charge four pounds for a bowl of cereal, and for the protestors that's symptomatic of the kind of development that means local people can no longer afford to live in the area where they grew up. Trendy cafes have replaced pubs, and whole food and organic food shops have replaced the more traditional outlets.

B Surely if I want to pay four pounds for a bowl of cereal, that's my right. We live in a free country after all. Nobody's forcing you to be a patron of the Cereal Killers cafe - it does sound like a bit of a gimmick to me, but "you pays your money and you takes your choice". These protestors do sound rather smug to me - they want to tell other people how to live their lives.

A The organisers have condemned the violence that led to the window's being smashed in, but they insist that they're genuinely trying to be advocates for a section of the community that's been squeezed out by rising rent.

B That may well be, but I'm afraid it's a free market governed by the law of supply and demand. If you want to influence the housing market you'd be better off lobbying local and central government who plan such services.

A Or perhaps they don't plan them enough, at least that's what I gather to be the view of the marchers. A dearth of social housing has been a feature of the British political and social landscape for some time now. Council housing stocks have been greatly reduced ever since Margaret Thatcher introduced the right-to-buy scheme which allowed tenants to purchase their own local authority property at a reduced rate. Fortunes may have been made as a result, but the properties that have gone into the private sector have never been replaced.

B I think we all appreciate how difficult it is for people to find a place to live, especially young people, but there isn't a magic wand that you can wave to solve this problem. The buzzword gentrification blames people who have moved into an area and who may be fashionable or hip and involved with the creative arts, but those aren't the people making the real money. You'd have to point your finger at landlords and property developers who wield a lot of influence and shape our neighbourhoods.

A Quite right, it's too easy to blame hipsters or trendy young people when in fact there are complex social forces behind the changes in these areas. East London was always a place where immigrants came to settle and the Brick Lane market is a symbol of multiculturalism. The rising cost of housing in other parts of London has driven a new population into the area, but that doesn't mean we should try to start a riot and turn the clock back. We'd do better to try and understand why these changes are taking place in our urban areas.

B Yes, gentrification is a handy catchphrase, but when you look at it more closely, this isn't a simple cultural phenomenon but rather a complex social and economic one.

### **Outline**

A protest against gentrification was organised in the fashionable Shoreditch district of London to draw attention to the effects of so-called gentrification. The rising cost of housing in other parts of London has driven a new population into the area, people willing to pay higher rents, which means the area has become more expensive and local people can no longer afford to live where they grew up. This trend in London's East End can be found in major cities worldwide, such as New York's Lower East Side and Berlin's Mitte. The market for housing is governed by the law of supply and demand, but there has been a dearth of social housing in Britain since Margaret Thatcher introduced the right-to-buy scheme which led to council housing stocks being greatly reduced.

### **Questions**

1 Is gentrification happening in cities in your own country? 2 Should the diversity of the population be maintained in major cities? How could this be achieved? 3 What are the consequences of rising rents and property prices? 4 Does using violence during a demonstration help or hinder the cause?