Beyond the Instagram Filter: The Role of City Museums in Countering Overtourism and the 'touristification' of Urban Life

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In our post-pandemic world marked by existential disillusionment and the intensification of global inequalities, a curious phenomenon has taken root: the renewed obsession with idealised cities. As people re-emerged from lockdowns and isolation, they sought escape, not only physically, but symbolically. Cities such as Paris, London, Amsterdam, New York, Barcelona and Lisbon, among others, became more than destinations; they became proxies for hope, desire and reinvention. This revival, however, was mediated through the same platforms that had shaped much of our pandemic-era sociality: social media.

Rather than encountering cities as lived, complex entities, tourists and travellers (or digital nomads) increasingly consume them through the lens of a fantasy version of urban life, curated in 60-second reels and filtered snapshots. This phenomenon is not new, but it has taken on new cultural urgency in the face of collective exhaustion, ecological anxiety and a widespread sense of political fragmentation. What are we truly looking for when we travel in this age? Is it connection, understanding, or simply content?

In the face of aesthetic standardisation and overtourism, city museums can offer an essential counterpoint. Rather than presenting a romanticised or sanitised version of the urban past, they have the potential to ground visitors (and residents) in the real, lived histories of the city. By centring narratives of migration, labour, protest, housing and everyday life, city museums can resist the tourist gaze that flattens complexity in favour of spectacle. They can illuminate how cities are made by conflict as much as by culture, and how the local is always a product of entangled global forces. A museum that shows the impact of gentrification, or tells the stories of displaced communities, becomes a space not just of education, but of political consciousness.

City museums can also reconnect inhabitants with their own environments, helping them see their neighbourhoods not as commodities but as shared histories in constant negotiation. Through participatory exhibitions, oral history projects, or partnerships with local groups, these institutions can amplify voices often left out of the dominant urban narrative. In doing so, they can help people feel seen in their own cities, especially in areas where gentrification has rendered them invisible. Rather than chasing foot traffic by mimicking tourist trends, museums can foster belonging by serving as civic spaces: spaces to reflect, to question, to remember and to imagine alternatives to the commercial city.

In this way, city museums might reclaim their role as *urban commons*[1]: not neutral archives of the past, but living institutions actively shaping how cities understand themselves. By doing so, they can help resist the aesthetic or even glitzy trap of hipster capitalism[2], offering in its place something far more valuable: a chance to see the city, and one's place in it, with clarity and care.

Overtourism and the flattening of urban experience

The cities most overexposed on social media (Barcelona, New York, Amsterdam, Paris, Lisbon) are also those struggling with overtourism. Tourists flock to a handful of aestheticised sites, reinforcing cycles of congestion, rising rents and cultural displacement. The myth of the 'authentic' experience is perpetuated by influencers and lifestyle content creators, yet paradoxically undermined by the very practices it encourages. Travellers are drawn to specific cafés, streets and murals not because of their urban significance, but because they align with a globally recognised aesthetic script.

This flattening of experience produces cities that are increasingly interchangeable. The same coffee shops, creative markets and co-working spaces appear across continents, often in gentrified districts marketed as 'local' and 'authentic'. In reality, these spaces are expressions of what has been termed 'hipster capitalism': an entrepreneurial mode that commodifies nostalgia, thrift and 'taste' while contributing to social exclusion and spatial homogenisation.

Tourism gentrification is a critical shaping force of socio-economic and contemporary urban landscapes. A prime example of this phenomenon is the Marais neighbourhood in Paris, where the gentrification and 'tourismification' processes were intense and completely transformed the face of this central Parisian district . As Maria Gravari-Barbas (2017) suggests:

> 'The Le Marais district is one of Paris's most dynamic tourist areas. Tourists were one of the last populations to arrive in Le Marais, but today, tourism characteristics, visitor numbers and impact play a crucial role in the district's urban morphology. Le Marais has also inspired the most academic works in France on residential gentrification and to a lesser extent, on commercial gentrification.'[3]

Maria Gravari-Barbas links the tourismification of Le Marais to processes of heritagisation, as well as to commercial and residential gentrification, highlighting in particular the relationship between tourism development and super-gentrification. She introduces the concept of 'hyper-tourismification' as a second stage of tourism development characterised by the consolidation of an equally sophisticated, exclusive and high-end tourism product.

Historically established in the 17th century on the Right Bank of the Seine as an aristocratic district of private mansions, Le Marais later experienced decline; by the mid-nineteenth century, small industrial activities had occupied former courtyards and gardens, contributing to the densification of urban blocks. Situating these historical transformations within a broader analytical framework, the article demonstrates how overtourism and tourism-led urban change

intersect with processes of gentrification, neoliberal urban governance, and wider patterns of socio-spatial restructuring.

Although the Musée Carnavalet, the oldest municipal museum in the City of Paris, opened to the public in 1880, was established long before the emergence of mass tourism and the contemporary challenges of overtourism, it may nevertheless constitute an important response to these issues. By foregrounding the social, political and everyday histories of the city, the museum has the potential to counter reductive, consumption-driven representations of urban space and to re-anchor the experience of Paris within a deeper historical and civic framework.

Overtourism undermines the multifunctionality of urban centres (Minoia 2017) by prioritising tourism-related uses over residential, commercial and community functions. This contributes to processes such as 'touristification', museumification and Disneyfication (Gravari-Barbas and Guinand 2017), in which everyday urban life is reshaped to cater to visitors. As a result, socio-cultural cohesion weakens, traditional social fabrics are disrupted (Peeters *et al.* 2018), and tensions emerge between residents and visitors, sometimes escalating into tourism-phobia and organised anti-tourism movements (Colomb and Novy 2017; Milano 2018).

This reflection situates these developments within the broader literature on gentrification. Since Ruth Glass first coined the term *gentrification* in the introduction to *London: Aspects of Change* (1964) to describe the displacement of working-class residents by middle-class newcomers in London, the concept has evolved considerably, expanding both conceptually and geographically to encompass a wide range of urban transformation processes. It has become closely associated with urban regeneration policies (Lees *et al.* 2008; Smith 2002), which were initially framed as efforts to revitalise declining inner cities through housing and redevelopment initiatives (Cameron 1992; Couch 2003). However, critics soon argued that such policies often redirected public resources towards wealthier groups rather than the most vulnerable populations.

From the 1990s onwards, urban regeneration became embedded in global inter-urban competition (Smith 2002). Under neoliberal governance, cities increasingly pursued entrepreneurial strategies to attract investment, tourism and capital. As analysed by David Harvey (2007), the neoliberal turn expanded opportunities for capital accumulation and real estate speculation, extending the 'urban frontier' (Smith 1996). At the same time, shrinking public budgets and declining industrial bases pushed local authorities to rely more heavily on private investors and tourism revenues, reshaping governance arrangements and urban agendas (Mosedale 2014).

Within this context, tourism gentrification has emerged as a distinct yet interconnected process. Literature explores how tourism both accelerates and transforms gentrification dynamics by altering housing markets (e.g. short-term rentals), commercial landscapes (replacement of local shops with tourist-oriented businesses), and public space design. Tourism gentrification is thus embedded in broader processes of globalisation and (neo)liberal restructuring (Harvey 2007), involving new actors such as platform companies, global investors and destination marketers, as well as new beneficiaries.

The question ‘When did tourism become a gentrifying process?’ does not lend itself to a simple answer. Tourism has always reshaped places through infrastructure development, service provision and changing representations. As highlighted by John Urry in *The Tourist Gaze* (2002), tourism introduces new ways of seeing and valuing landscapes and urban spaces. However, tourism becomes distinctly gentrifying when it contributes to rising property values, residential displacement, commodification of everyday life, and the reorientation of neighbourhoods towards external consumption rather than local production. In contemporary metropolises, especially under neoliberal urbanism, tourism increasingly operates not merely as an economic sector but as a structural driver of socio-spatial transformation.

The role of city museums: Sites of resistance and reconnection

In this context, city museums offer a critical intervention. Rather than reproducing idealised images of the city, they can expose the tensions, contradictions and diverse voices that constitute urban life. By telling stories of working-class struggles, migrant communities, housing movements and local resistances, city museums can serve as spaces of memory and critical engagement: counteracting the romanticised fantasies projected by tourism and media.

City museums can also help residents reconnect with their own neighbourhoods. Through participatory programming, oral history and community collaboration, these institutions can empower people to see themselves as part of the city’s unfolding story, not just as consumers of its heritage, but as its co-authors. This is especially vital in cities where gentrification and displacement have made long-time residents feel invisible or alienated from places they once called home.

When they embrace this civic function, city museums become more than cultural repositories; they become *urban commons*: spaces where the lived, the local and the contested can be acknowledged and debated. In doing so, they help counteract the trap of inauthentic spectacle created for tourism purposes and reinstate the political depth of the urban experience.

City museums may function as critical spaces for dialogue concerning processes of urban transformation and their multifaceted consequences. Contemporary urban change profoundly affects housing markets, commercial activities and patterns of mobility. In cities marked by overtourism, for instance, dense numbers of visitors can render everyday movement within the city burdensome, producing congestion in public spaces and intensifying road traffic. Such dynamics reshape not only the material fabric of the city but also the lived experience of its inhabitants. Within this framework, city museums assume an additional responsibility as custodians of urban memory, particularly in neighbourhoods that have undergone extensive redevelopment and gentrification.

A pertinent example can be found in the Museu d’Història de Barcelona (MUHBA), which in 2023 inaugurated a new branch in the Bon Pastor neighbourhood, an area experiencing rapid real estate development and the attendant pressures of gentrification. Developed in partnership with local resident communities, the project involved the restoration of the *Cases Barates*, a social housing initiative dating from the early 20th century. Four of these so-called ‘Cheap

Houses' were converted into a museum space, thereby embedding the institution within a historically and socially significant site. Bon Pastor was among the first public housing estates constructed in Barcelona to accommodate residents displaced from informal settlements during preparations for the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition. For many families, access to such housing signified a transition from what might be described as the 'informal city' to the 'regulated city', marking an important moment in the consolidation of modern urban governance.

MUHBA proposes multiple interpretative perspectives on Barcelona's evolution over more than two millennia, from the Roman period to the present. Having celebrated its 80th anniversary in 2023, the museum is conceived as a polycentric network comprising 55 urban sites distributed throughout the city. Over time, its curatorial narrative has expanded beyond a traditional focus on urban elites to incorporate the experiences of broader urban majorities, particularly during the period in which Barcelona emerged as a major industrial centre. This transformation attracted significant flows of capital, resources and labour, generating far-reaching social and spatial changes. Several of MUHBA's permanent and temporary exhibitions address the formation of Barcelona as an industrial metropolis through thematic lenses such as labour, demography, migration, social conflict, territory, technology and economic development. In doing so, the museum raises critical questions about the contemporary city, its prospective future as a global metropolis, and its role as the capital of Catalonia (Pérez Rubiales and Sustersic 2024).

These reflections are particularly salient in light of mounting social tensions surrounding tourism in Barcelona. The city has become emblematic of anti-overtourism mobilisations, including public demonstrations in which local residents have expressed frustration with the scale and management of visitor influxes. In July 2024, approximately 3,000 individuals participated in a protest that included symbolic actions targeting hotels, restaurants and other tourism-oriented businesses. Similar demonstrations recurred in 2025, reflecting sustained discontent among segments of the population.

Tourism constitutes a central pillar of Spain's national economy, and Barcelona ranks among Europe's leading urban destinations. Nevertheless, the rapid growth in visitor numbers, exceeding 15 million annually – nearly ten times the resident population – has generated significant pressures on housing affordability and urban infrastructure. Many residents contend that escalating rents, short-term rental platforms, and the influx of higher-income expatriates have contributed to residents' displacement from long-established neighbourhoods. The resulting housing crisis affects diverse demographic groups. Younger residents frequently report an inability to secure affordable accommodation or to meet rising living costs, while elderly individuals on fixed incomes face eviction and limited housing alternatives. In some cases, rental prices have increased dramatically over the past decade, intensifying socio-economic vulnerability.

In this context, city museums such as MUHBA occupy a strategically significant position. By documenting and interpreting the historical trajectories of urban development, including industrialisation, migration, housing policy and social conflict, they provide a framework

through which contemporary challenges, including gentrification and overtourism, can be critically examined. As institutions embedded within the urban fabric, they not only preserve collective memory but also foster informed public debate about the future of the city and the rights of its inhabitants.[4]

Attributing these transformations solely to the tourism industry would, however, risk oversimplifying the situation. Historical experience demonstrates that investment in local culture, products and heritage sites can stimulate economic vitality and generate employment, contributing to urban prosperity. As Gotham (2005) suggests, the nexus between global forces and local development in tourism is structurally intertwined and cannot easily be disentangled. The relationship between tourism and gentrification is therefore complex and heterogeneous: tourists are often drawn precisely to neighbourhoods that have undergone, or are undergoing, processes of gentrification, attracted by their perceived authenticity, aesthetic appeal and cultural capital.

Within this intricate landscape, city museums occupy a potentially significant, albeit ambivalent position. As cultural institutions embedded in highly touristic and gentrified districts, they both benefit from and contribute to visitor economies. At the same time, they possess the intellectual and civic capacity to critically interpret these transformations, foreground local voices, and contextualise contemporary urban tensions within longer historical trajectories. The question remains, however, to what extent city museums can actively reshape these dynamics. Can they move beyond representation to become mediating actors in debates over urban sustainability, housing justice and the right to the city? Or are they inevitably implicated in the very processes they seek to analyse?

Such questions underscore the need to reconsider the role of city museums not merely as custodians of heritage, but as active participants in ongoing negotiations over urban identity, memory and social equity.

Notes

[1] Urban commons are shared urban resources that are collectively governed and managed by communities through participatory, collaborative, and non-profit-oriented practices, with the objective of ensuring equitable access, collective stewardship, and the production of social value. In museum and heritage studies, the concept has been extended to cultural institutions. Museums can be understood as urban commons when they move beyond being repositories of collections to become spaces of shared governance, community participation, co-creation of knowledge, and collective care. In this perspective, museums contribute to the common good by enabling citizens to participate actively in shaping cultural memory, public debate and urban life.

[2] Hipster capitalism refers to a form of contemporary capitalism in which authenticity, artisanal production, creativity, and local identity are commodified and transformed into profitable market ventures. It is characterised by the opening of small-scale entrepreneurial businesses, such as craft breweries, specialty coffee shops and vintage stores, that combine anti-corporate aesthetics with market-oriented economic practices. See Michael Scott, '"Hipster Capitalism" in the Age of Austerity? Polanyi Meets Bourdieu's New Petite Bourgeoisie', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2018.

[3] Quote from the abstract of Maria Gravari-Barbas' chapter.

[4] In December 2021, MUHBA and ICOM Cities (formerly CAMOC) jointly organised the international conference "Connecting Cities, Connecting Citizens: Towards a Shared Sustainability". The three-day event brought together museum professionals, researchers and practitioners to reflect on the foundations of a new urban museology for the 21st century. The conference explored how city museums can evolve into 'citizens' museums' grounded in research on urban history, heritage management and civic participation. The programme was structured around three main themes: museum practice, narrating the city, and strengthening citizenship and included a workshop on the role of city museums in rapidly growing metropolitan areas.

Building on this collaboration, I participated in the organisation of the 2022 seminar 'Immigration, Housing and the Right to the City: Life in Parisian Social Housing Estates (HLMs) and Barcelona's Housing Estates, and Their Representation in Museums'. The seminar examined the post-war expansion of social housing in Europe, inspired by the principles of the *Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM), while highlighting the diverse ways in which these urban developments were implemented in different contexts. Through a comparative discussion of Paris and Barcelona, the seminar explored how museums can interpret the histories of social housing, migration and urban transformation. It considered the role of new museum approaches in presenting these complex histories and argued that any rethinking of the city museum must also address, from a historical perspective, the fundamental question of what it means to inhabit the city. A recording of the workshop is available here.

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