



School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences

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*Caught Between Decline and Revival; Investigating the Early  
Gentrification of Birmingham's Bullring Markets*

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## Abstract

This dissertation contributes to a growing pool of academic research on gentrification in Western cities. Gentrification has been extensively studied in the context of property speculation, however this dissertation aims to extend the link between retail geographies and urban gentrification.

Combining qualitative techniques, this project examines how gentrification of Birmingham's Bullring markets is unfolding, addressing three core questions. How does Birmingham's political economy contextualise the market's decline? What is causing the displacement of habitual customers? What challenges has the modernisation of retail presented Birmingham and the Bullring markets? Adopting a post-structuralist approach, this dissertation seeks to add complexity to the traditional dichotomous representations of gentrification. Foregrounding the role of the state, this study reconceptualises the ever-changing rhythms of gentrification and displacement in line with the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. Adopting a chronological narrative, the progression of Birmingham's neoliberal governance, from austerity to entrepreneurialism is explored, whilst carefully considering the socio-spatial implications of economic re-orientation. However, the project also opens up to the new global challenges presented by Covid-19 and the globalisation of retail. By critically analysing perceived changes in consumer behaviour, the Bullring markets are conceptualised within a multifaceted process of socio-economic transition. The markets are situated on the global urban margins trapped between an individualised period of decline and revival. This dissertation transcends multiple geographical themes, shining light on the increasingly contested nature of the traditional retail market. The study concludes by suggesting that the Bullring markets have become embedded within wider processes of gentrification and the re-commodification of urban life. The re-territorialisation of the future Bullring markets at Smithfield is then critically evaluated, revealing the contemporary need to re-orient retail space through commodifying 'consumer-experience'.

## 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Traditional Retail Markets in Decline

Since the mediaeval era traditional marketplaces have been integral to Britain's urban fabric, serving as spaces for trade, civic gathering, retailing of news, and the reiteration of cultural traditions (Masschaele, 2002 p.383-421). Contemporary markets continue to provide affordable produce for low-income citizens (Gonzalez, 2019). Often, traders operate intergenerational businesses, working with local restaurants, socialising with the elderly and providing bargaining opportunities. Watson and Studdert (2007 p.16) claim traditional retail markets offer a 'theatre of continental trades', whilst Gonzalez & Waley (2013) highlight the sense of 'rubbing along' of different cultures in the marketplace that contributes to its multifaceted role in urban life.

Factors such as the rise of the UK's 'big four' supermarkets, the effects of globalised and online retail and local demand for more high-end marketplaces have pushed retail markets to the 'global urban margins' (Gonzalez & Waley, 2013). Traditional retail markets have come to a 'critical juncture' (Ibid). From 2009-2014 market stall occupancy dropped down to 46% causing a £1 billion drop in national revenue (Gonzalez & Dawson, 2015)..

Retail gentrification, a common outcome of market decline, is defined as the evolution of the commercial fabric, characterised by displacement of traditional stores by new retail spaces aimed for wealthier clientele (Guimaraes, 2021). Gentrification of Southwark's Borough Market caused prices to soar (Gonzalez and Waley, 2013), and replaced Old Brixton Market's cultural identity with the 'hipster foodie effect' (Ahmed, 2021). At traditional retail markets, gentrification causes a change in physical infrastructure, produce and customer base (Gonzalez, 2019). Disinvested in by local authorities, battered by real estate pressures and competing with global retail modernisations, this dissertation

argues that marketplace redevelopment is focused along the gentrified lines of western entrepreneurial cities (Ibid: Harvey, 1989).

## 1.2 Why Birmingham?

Spatially circumscribed to Birmingham, this dissertation explores gentrification in England's second largest city (Clark, 2021). A post-industrial region with a population of approximately 1.149 million (Eurostat, 2022), Birmingham also holds the accolade for being the most culturally diverse city in Britain (Kennedy, 2020). Furthermore, as a result of Birmingham's major role in accepting asylum seekers, the city has been accredited a 'City of Compassion' (BCC, 2022). As such, Birmingham provides a prime location for investigating contemporary gentrification in a multicultural Western city.

Birmingham's rapidly growing population and economy has faced austerity cuts and historic inter-generational poverty. 40% of Birmingham's population live in the most deprived 10% of local authority areas in England (BCC, 2021). Attracting external investment to the city is more vital than ever. The 'Birmingham Smithfield Masterplan', a public-private enterprise with Australian developers Lendlease is described by Birmingham City Council as a 'once in a generation opportunity' to transform the historic Bullring markets into a sustainable 'outstanding leisure and cultural centre'. Plans claim it will provide 'inclusive growth', providing 'thousands of new homes alongside community facilities' (BCC, 2021).

The £1.9 billion project (set to be complete in 2037) encompasses 17 hectares of the city centre, including Digbeth (BCC, 2021). However, in its promise to provide a 'new home' for the current Bullring markets, the Smithfield regeneration project relies on the demolition of the current market area, threatening the livelihoods of over 400 traders (BCC, 2021). Therefore, the delicate early stage of gentrification underway at this historic retail landscape, provided a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to conduct research before it is irreversibly transformed.

### 1.3 The Bullring Markets

The Bullring markets, composed of the rag market, indoor market and open Market; present one of the remaining traces of Birmingham's historic working-class landscape (BCC, 2022). Dating back to 1154, the markets were constructed under the reign of King Henry II (Birmingham Rag Market, 2022). In 1835, the 600-stalled market hall was built; however, four years later it was demolished over competition with Woolworths, the city's first commercial store (Ibid). Tensions between large corporate businesses and local shops began in the 1980s, after the construction of the Bullring shopping centre, caused the displacement of the marketplace to the other side of St Martins church (Birmingham Rag Market, 2022).





*Figure 1. The Bullring Open Market, looking down towards the Smithfield construction site.*

The Bullring markets are currently owned and managed by Birmingham City Council Labour Party (BCC, 2022). The 130-stall open market offers a huge range of fresh fruit and vegetables (Ibid). The indoor market boasts one of the UK's largest fish markets and the rag market encompasses 350 stalls with an additional 17 perimeter shops (Ibid). The markets provide affordable produce to the diverse population. However, media reports suggest the markets are in a period of decline, disinvested in by Birmingham City Council and the physical infrastructure shows signs of deterioration. Additionally, competition with the Bullring and Grand Central shopping centres, alongside challenges presented by the modernisation of retail and Covid-19 have contributed to a sharp decrease in footfall over the past decade. From 2019 to 2020, footfall decreased by 37% (Young, 2020). Birmingham City Council believe that Smithfield will regenerate market business, however, the obvious desire amongst traders for improved market infrastructure is juxtaposed by simultaneous concerns that the council will want Smithfield to accommodate more 'up-market' stalls. This unease has been worsened by the recent postponement of the Smithfield development due to Birmingham's unplanned hosting of the Commonwealth Games. Consequently, extending the life of the current dilapidated marketplace.

#### **1.4 Gentrification in the Entrepreneurial City**

To understand why local authorities utilise gentrification. one must first contextualise Birmingham's urban governance. In the late 1970s, the neoliberal political approach emerged (Thorsen & Lie, 2006). Neoliberalism gives precedence to the market economy through restricting the power of public institutions and government spending (Ibid). In the UK, neoliberalism manifested during the 1980s era of Thatcherism, and has been commonly relied on during economic crises such as the 2008 recession (Peck, 2012). The impacts of fiscal

crises are buffered by austerity-cuts issued to local authorities, 'downloading' recession to lower levels of authority (Hastings *et al*, 2017).

The adoption of an 'entrepreneurial' form of governance has been viewed as a resolution to austerity (Harvey, 1989 p.7) Entrepreneurialism promotes inter-urban competition, through re-orienting western cities as a place to do business (Gill *et al.*, 2014). This involves the privatisation and gentrification of public services (McNeil, 2017). In 2014, Leeds and Manchester were identified as two of the fastest growing entrepreneurial cities in the UK (Gonzalez, 2014). However, with a 25% growth in businesses between 2016 and 2017, Birmingham was later named 'the most entrepreneurial city outside of London' (Jones, 2017). 'Flagship' constructions such as the Bullring and Grand Central comprise the city's modernising landscape.

Contextualised within Birmingham's wider gentrification, plans to demolish and regenerate the Bullring markets were announced in 2019 (BCC, 2022). Gonzalez & Waley (2013) claim that markets become embedded within wider gentrification and therefore viewed as an 'under-realised economic opportunity'. After 20 years of disinvestment', reports suggest there will be 'few traders left' to move into Smithfield (Jackson, 2019). On the 'gentrification frontier', the Bullring markets have become caught between a twin narrative of decline and revival (Dines, 2009). The objective of this dissertation is to de-conceal the political-economic pressures that have led to the decline and subsequent renewal of the Bullring markets.

## **1.5 Research Objectives**

Epistemologically grounded within critical urban geographies, this dissertation uses the future gentrification of the Bullring markets as a lens to explore the recapitalisation of Birmingham City centre. After initially contextualising the effects of Birmingham's neoliberal political economy, Chapter 4.4 situates the decline of the Bullring markets within Birmingham's entrepreneurial city image.

Following this, the impact of retail modernisation and changing consumer behaviours are explored in relation to the decline and future gentrification of the markets. This dissertation is grounded within a multiplicity of academic literature, allowing for the eventual elaboration of findings in the analysis section. Overall, this dissertation offers a broad introductory investigation of the forces behind the gentrification of the Bullring markets, critically analysing Birmingham's increasingly commodified urban life.

1. How does the structure of Birmingham's political economy contextualise the marketplace decline?
2. How is displacement of habitual market customers occurring?
3. What challenges has the modernisation of retail presented Birmingham and the Bullring markets?

## 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

Gentrification is a complex process as all cities and neighbourhoods are historically bound, and all change is locally experienced (Rose, 1996 p.161). This dissertation explores gentrification as a *continuum* rather than a *phenomenon*, evolving temporally and spatially (Shaw, 2008). Therefore, the breadth and depth of this literature review will be utilised in the analysis of findings to interpret the individual production of gentrification at the Bullring Markets.

### 2.2 What is Gentrification?

Ruth Glass coined the term 'gentrification' in her 1964 book 'London: Aspects of Change' (Smith & Williams, 2007, pp.1–12). The concept relied on the emergence of a new 'urban gentry' transforming the 'working-class quarters of London' into 'elegant and expensive residences' (Glass, 1964: xviii). A plethora of academics reconceptualised the modernising process, often struggling to balance cause and effect. Ley (1980) centralised the uncritical effects of middle-class infusions, whilst others attributed the natural capitalist depreciation of inner-city land, and 'largely irrelevant' gentry cultural preferences (Smith, 1979; Badcock, 1995).

Conversely, Bell's (1973) 'post-industrial city thesis' centralises changing occupational class structures. After the post-war suburban flight of high-income populations, a 'new middle class' of professional, managerial and technical groups outbid existing residents for inner-city housing (Ibid). Smith (1982 p.139) believes gentrification occurred through the rehabilitation process of middle-class homebuyers, land-lords and professional developers; consequently re-capitalising the inner city.

Recent academia suggests modern gentrification follows a similar process. Twigg (2021) believes gentrification begins when middle class renovators are attracted to the 'hip' creative scene of post-industrial cities, high on Florida's (2003 p.13) 'Bohemian Index'. Then, rent competition increases with the number of gentrified houses, media and investors capitalising on this new 'chic' aesthetic (Twigg, 2021: Clay, 1979). Large scale investment consequently displaces local populations. (Ibid) and finally luxury developments eventually surpass middle-class budgets, displacing some of the original gentrifiers (Ibid). However, Moskowitz's 'How to Kill a City' (2017) identifies a further two stages that will be used to form the basis of this dissertation. Stage zero; government willingness for gentrification when public funding is low, and an alternative stage one; foreign investors begin the gentrification process through joining the local real estate early (Ibid). This dissertation uses Moskowitz's (2017) gentrification definition as the physical refurbishment of blighted low-cost areas through urban renewal, leading to an increase in property values and influx of wealthier residents.

### **2.3 Urban Retail Markets on the 'Gentrification Frontier'**

The majority of literature on Global North traditional retail markets encompass theories of public space, community cohesion and mobility (Morales, 2009; Pottie-Sherman, 2011; Watson & Studdert 2007). Whilst the majority of literature on the Global South is concentrated on the counter-modern survival tactics of unregulated markets (Bostic *et al.*, 2016; Evers & Seale, 2015; Gonzalez & Waley, 2013). Therefore, this dissertation offers a unique perspective and the first of its kind conducted in Birmingham.

Gonzalez and Waley (2013) state that real estate pressures, 'urban renaissance' agendas and the globalisation of retail are causing the decline of traditional retail markets. Gonzalez (2020) builds upon this highlighting privatisation, disinvestment, supermarket competition, younger-generation disinterest, consumers desiring more middle-class experiences and a lack of new traders. Gonzalez and Dawson (2015) note how an increase in niche markets selling

artisanal goods has increased competition. However, academic research on the impact of covid-19 is sparse (Van Eck, 2020).

Gonzalez & Waley (2013) believe pressure has mounted for markets to become gentrified, with the state as a principal agent, often viewing them as an economic 'asset' rather than a socio-cultural tool for the city's working-class. This involves 'disinvesting in the markets of today and playing up the potential of gentrified markets tomorrow' (Ibid). Dines (2009) re-conceptualises this as a 'twin narrative of decline and revival', and Smith (1996) believes it is characterised by 'frontier vocabulary', suggesting they should 'catch up with the times' of globalised retail. Gonzalez & Waley (2013) identify three components of retail gentrification; an ongoing state-led neoliberal urban restructuring, the displacement of habitual customers and traders, and the promotion of consumer-experience environments.

Hubbard (2018) defines retail gentrification as the upscaling or 'boutification' of working-class commercial fabrics and the concomitant displacement of the local stores that working-class residents rely on. Hubbard (2018) believes that gentrifiers seek to 'fabricate an aura of authenticity' based on the working-class heritage of the space. Gonzalez & Waley (2013) found a similar process occurs for the gentrification of retail markets, as they are rich in 'cultural capital', thus viewed as an under-realised economic opportunity. Whilst local authorities deem them as 'failing', they also whilst promote 'revitalisation' using middle-class interests such as environmentally friendly, ethical and 'authentic' shopping experiences, promoting the 'time-capsule' like era of pre-globalised consumption (Ibid). Gonzalez & Waley (2013) suggest the initial 'pioneers' discover the unique essence of the marketplace, not yet colonised by corporate values, whilst simultaneously promoting the commodification of the 'market experience'. This resembles Shaw's (2015) 'contradictions of contemporary capitalism'.

## 2.4 Conceptualising Gentrification

Over time academics have sought to re-conceptualise the emerging forms of gentrification. Wyly & Hammel (1999) provide an example of this; claiming that Berry's (1985) concept of gentrification producing 'islands of renewal amongst seas of decay' should be modernised to now reflect the 'islands of decay amongst seas of renewal'. This demonstrates the importance of re-conceptualising gentrification in line with the changing political-economic structure of western cities. However, as a heterogeneous process, no two instances of gentrification are the same. Gentrification is criticised for causing community conflict, displacement and unsustainable property prices and thus creating large inner-city wealth disparities (Frias, 2006). However it also functions to aid controlled-growth and renaissance projects in predominantly dilapidated inner-city areas (Hoffman, 2003), occupied by low-income and minority groups who cannot afford suburban rents or to commute. Jones & Evans (2011) believe this makes gentrification a 'rescue geography' technique, as it improves high-crime, 'undesirable' urban districts. Furthermore, Lees (2008) claims that once complete, gentrification can attract new businesses who increase tax revenue to local authorities, resulting in the 'trickle-down' effect, eventually improving public services and employment for lower-income residents.

The term 'gentrification' itself is a contested subject. Gentrification is concerned with the changing 'identity of place' (Massey, 1993, p.64). Conversely, regeneration refers to the restoration of the existing 'sense of place' between communities and urban space (Jones & Evans, 2011). The Smithfield development plans to create an arena for consumption, business, tourism, and living facilities (Lendlease, 2022), altering the identity of 'place' attached to the Bullring Markets. Therefore, this dissertation utilises gentrification theories over regeneration.

Lees (1996) believes that representations of gentrification frequently rely on binary opposites, such as tradition/modern and rich/poor. Shaw (2015) supports this stating that dichotomous gentrification narratives mask 'the proliferating crisis

tendencies and contradictions of contemporary capitalism'. For example, as many gentrification projects aim to 'modernise' they also seek to commodify historic authenticity. Many academics believe the commodification of 'identity' is a tool of contemporary capitalism (Shaw, 2015; Harvey, 2000 p.270). Therefore, gentrification has been widely evaluated as a process of spatial-social change and economic restructuring (Zukin 1987; Smith 1987; 2002), specifically regarding globalisation, neoliberalism and the changing role of the state (Dilek Özhan Koçak, 2014). This dissertation will therefore explore gentrification within the context of capitalist urban restructuring to extend understandings of gentrification beyond traditional dichotomies.

## **2.5 'Creative Destruction'**

Neoliberalism, initially a ploy to 'de-collectivise' social democracy (Rodrigues, 2013), entered mainstream successive politics after the 1970s deconstruction of the Keynesian welfare state (Schmidt, 2011). Peck and Tickell (2007) claim neoliberalism is characterised by the 'roll-back' of state forms deemed 'anti-ethical' to market progress; unionism, welfare and collective services. In the UK, despite adopting the 'free economy' approach (Gamble, 2006), the 1980s 'decade of Thatcherism' retained the highly centralised 'strong state' through restraining devolution to local authorities (Peck & Tickell, 2007). Peck (2012) describes the tight control of capital in UK cities as 'austerity urbanism', a consequence of the 'enforced economy' that deprives local authorities of public expenditure, severely impacting low-income, minority and health dependent groups.

Gray & Barford (2018) believe the 2008 economic recession witnessed this 'dumping' of fiscal crises on the local state, as the British government induced austerity to cuts to regional authorities, forcing them to make trade-offs. As a mandatory public service, retail markets were relatively protected, however the scale and quality of maintenance was not (Ibid). The inability of local authorities to provide sufficient funding for maintenance, advertising and functionality caused the decline of urban marketplaces (Gonzalez & Waley, 2013). Streeck & Mertens



(2013) believe that perceptions surrounding the institutional incapacity of the state, result in what Peck (2012) labels the 'responsibilisation' of lower public bodies. Peck (2012) believes this progression of austerity urbanism results in urban development projects arising from crises.

However, vast academia suggests that the roll-back of the state and consequent privatisation of public amenities encourages growth and development. Cochrane (2020) believes the devolution of responsibility to local authorities does not correspond with the devolution of power, decentralised decisions must take place within centrally determined budgetary restraints. Fuller & West (2017) suggest authorities use scalar governance to overcome this, acting as a 'market-broker' to promote multiple public-private urban developments, producing a 'bigger picture' of redevelopment. Annunziata & Lees (2016) label this 'austerity gentrification', as it manifests through 'crisis-related' privatisation of public housing, transforming public spaces into places of 'consumption and tourism'. Peck (2012) supports this, referring to Harvey's (2000, p.270) concept of capitalism 'creative destruction', stating; neoliberal ideology exists in a stage of 'incomplete discursive formation'. Connected to an inconspicuous, and deeply rooted 'diachronic transformation', creative destruction commodifies urban areas and governance (Ibid).

## **2.6 Re-capitalising the City**

In order to understand why local authorities gentrify traditional marketplaces, it is useful to contextualise their decline within wider political-economy discourses. Harvey (1989 p.7) argues that an entrepreneurial form of governance has emerged to re-capitalise Western cities and promote inter-urban competition. Cities must orient themselves as a place to do business by attracting skilled labour and footloose capital (Ibid). Harvey (1989 p.7) believes that mobile capitalists are lured in by highly speculative 'flagship' projects, which Macleod (2002 p.604) suggests 'enhances the imageability of the city'. Eesley *et al.* (2016) claim the use of multiscalar governance promotes the inter-relation of various urban development projects. Molotch (1976) labels this a 'boosterist' urban

renaissance, reliant on the power of external sources of funding to reorganise local urban life to attract 'external sources of funding'.

Many academics highlight the multifaceted approach of urban renaissance. Biddulph (2011) claims that mixed-used development schemes are used to arrange a diversity of functions around a core of retail activity appealing to the likes of tourists. Eder *et al.* (2015) label this the 'neoliberalisation' of the urban landscape, producing; aesthetic malls, gentrified housing, entertainment and leisure sectors. Hobbs *et al.* (2003) build upon this, suggesting that fabricating a night-time economy is integral to entrepreneurial growth. Durand & Wrigley, (2009) believe that transnational investment aids the rise of 'brand power', creating what Corneo & Jeanne (1997) label a 'conspicuous consumption' culture, that generates gravitational customer loyalty. Tallon *et al.* (2006) extend this, suggesting that the commodification of urban 'cultural quarters', predominantly emerging in European cities such as Barcelona and Dublin since the 1980s, also create a unique place 'story'.

However, referencing the reinventions of Liverpool and Glasgow, Harvey (1989 p.7) believes entrepreneurialism prioritises the 'speculative construction of place rather than amelioration of conditions within a particular territory'. Only accommodating 'people of the right sort', the selective image of the city leads to the exclusion of undesirable populations (Ibid). Barber & Hall (2008) support this in their study on Birmingham's urban renaissance, claiming that it does not equally 'trickle-down' to the local economy. This is nuanced by Macleod (2002) who believes this 'deepens socioeconomic polarities' based on 'financial stakeholding'. Some academics attribute this to class resentment (Hubbard, 2018), whilst in North America, Sullivan & Shaw (2011) believe the replacement of ethnic food stores with whole food delis denotes the 'whitening' of retail space. Despite a coherent connection between entrepreneurialism and retail gentrification, there is little academia regarding traditional urban retail markets. Section 4.4 will explore entrepreneurialism in Birmingham and attempt to detangle its relationship with the Bullring markets.

## 2.7 Displacement

Within the entrepreneurial city, the privatisation of public facilities such as housing, transport and retail space, often result in various forms of urban gentrification and thus displacement. Macleod (2002) claims in Glasgow, the privatised construction of 'high-rent, design intensive urban glamour zones' conceal a 'brutalising demarcation' of included and excluded, that filters consumers based on what Mitchell (2001) terms 'financial-stakeholding'.

Macleod (2002) reminds us of how the infiltration of urban areas by exclusive consumption arenas causes indirect financial displacement through increased city rents. However Marcuse (1985) suggests that displacement also manifests culturally. In witnessing the 'liquidation of the shops and pubs they once patronised', alongside friends 'priced-out' of rental accommodation, Marcuse (1985) believes the pressure of financial and social displacement becomes severe. Gonzalez & Waley (2013) inform us that urban marketplaces are frequently viewed as the 'missing piece' in wider urban gentrification, however there is a lack of academia on the inter-relationship between entrepreneurial governance and urban marketplace gentrification. This dissertation will therefore consider stakeholder goals, neoliberal urban policy trends, and displacement, to deduce the forces behind the planned gentrification of the Bullring Markets.

## 2.8 Retail Change

Disinvestment is not the only contributing factor to the decline of urban retail markets. A number of global and regional challenges have resulted in their decline and displacement. Hagberg *et al.* (2017) note how the emergence of e-commerce in 2006 has threatened physical retail environments, however Jones (2021) believes that 'click and collect' and the growth of agglomeration economies, encompassing service retail, hospitality and standard retail, have ensured their continued importance.

More recently Brexit and Covid-19 have threatened physical shops once again. Wright (2021) notes how Brexit caused issues for retail businesses as where tariffs could not be absorbed by the supply chain, businesses owners were forced to pay increased rates. Arguably, research suggests Covid-19 is the biggest challenge to physical retail stores (Cegid, 2021). Naeem *et al.* (2020) claim that Covid-19 not only increased the need for e-commerce, but altered consumer-behaviours, particularly in elderly and health dependent groups, inducing the objective of fear. Wang *et al.* (2020) support this, highlighting the impact on customer personal safety fears whilst grocery shopping. General retail trends therefore suggest Covid-19 has negated the need for physical stores. Looking to the future, Jones (2021) suggests the danger for retail districts lies within local inertia and planning restraints that seek to maintain outdated retail spaces. However, there is sparse academia on how urban marketplaces should respond to Covid-19 consumer behaviours, therefore this dissertation will explore the future 'Smithfield' development in regard to modern retail change.

## 3: Methodology

### 3.1 The Research Location

Recent plans for the redevelopment of the Bullring markets into Smithfield provided a coherent example of retail gentrification (BCC, 2021). 'Big City Plan' developments (Wellings, 2020) such as the City Library (opened: 2013) and Paradise (construction: 2015-now), indicate a city seeking to improve both its regional and national economic image. Spanning over three individual sites, the Bullring markets provided a rich, yet manageable research area. Crucially, the social nature of trader-shopper relationships, and the long-standing historic presence of the markets, allowed for in-depth research, infused by multigenerational first hand experience.

### 3.2 Research Outline

Three phases of research were conducted, using qualitative data triangulation to provide multiple perspectives (Flick *et al.*, 2004, p.50). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the main research method because they generate rich, multi-layered data expressing complexity and contradiction (Flowerdew & Martin, 2005), allowing a widely-ranging conversation, where the respondent can raise issues unanticipated by the researcher (Silverman, 1993). All interviews were digitally voice-recorded, as Markle *et al.* (2011) suggest to produce a more accurate, detailed report of the interview, including nuances such as humour. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, consent forms were given to each interviewee (Flowerdew & Martin, 2005). A field diary aided follow-up questions, updates to the Smithfield development plan, and collated observational data. Material generated from the interviews was contextually rich, providing a 'deeper picture' than standardised forms of data collection. Positivists criticise in-depth interviews as the interviewer cannot refrain from subjectivity or bias, which may cause the researchers to presuppose conversation direction (Schaefer, 2020).

Nevertheless, the data produced a variety of narratives and attitudes on urban redevelopment, embracing the multifaceted continuum and challenging my own presuppositions.

### **3.3 Phase One**

The nature of political-economic change in Birmingham and the challenges faced by Birmingham City Council were initially explored. Two primary methods of research were used in this phase; scrutiny of the 2011 'Big City Plan' (Wellings, 2020) and the 2021 'Our Future City Plan' (BCC, 2021) documents, followed by confirmation of each stage of progression, as well as two (hour-long) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of Birmingham City Council. Both city plans provided rich secondary data, of which was thematically coded in alliance with the interviews.

One interview was conducted with Kasir Ijaz, a member of the Council's Planning and Regeneration Team, and the other with Paul Lankester the Strategic Change Consultant and Interim Manager; both integral to Birmingham's redevelopment. The interviews explored how the attitudes of key political-economic decision makers within Birmingham City Council have become materially embedded within the urban landscape. Hay (2016) states that semi-structured interviews rely on organised but flexible questioning. The semi-structured interviews could 'fill-the-gaps' and affirm the current standing of the Council (over a decade after the 'Big City Plan' publishing/supporting 'Our Future City Plan') using 'clarification' and 'summary' techniques as suggested by Hay (2016). Whilst secondary data is criticised for reflecting 'the aims and attitudes of the people and organisations that collected the data' (Kitchin & Tate, 2013), this largely benefitted the first phase of research, providing factual evidence on Birmingham's contemporary regional economic strategy.

### 3.4 Phase Two

The second phase of research investigated the broader geographies of displacement causing decreased market footfall as Gonzalez & Waley (2013) note that displacement is a fundamental sign of gentrification. 'Markets 4 People' suggested interviewing at least ten 'local actors' for each marketplace investigated (Gonzalez & Dawson, 2018), whilst Watson & Studdert (2006) used eight in-depth interviews, accompanied by photographs. Analysis of previous marketplace gentrification studies enabled the collation of research techniques, deducing the most suitable for the Bullring Markets.

A total of eighteen interviews; three semi-structured interviews with members of the Bullring Market committee, and fifteen randomly chosen interviews with Bullring market traders were conducted on three research dates. Knopp (1997) states that 'personal interviews with key actors in the inner-city' are crucial to uncovering local accounts of gentrification 'scandals and legal proceedings' otherwise not explored by media or in government publishings. The majority of marketplace gentrification studies focus trader interviews on resistance against gentrification, however, this investigation utilised them to construct the 'narrative of decline'. Lees (1996) states that 'minority voices are underrepresented in gentrification studies despite being the best historical witnesses'. The historicity of interviews provided rich insight on how contemporary urban constructions, such as the Bullring shopping centre, as well as global crises, had locally impacted business.

'Achieving and maintaining a productive interpersonal climate can be critical to the success of an interview' (Hay, 2016). Therefore, acknowledging the busy schedules of the traders, and their inability to leave stalls unattended at any point, the interviews were planned over a series of 'repeat sessions' (Ibid). Thus, participants felt at ease, enabling them to generate more valid data. Interviews were recorded in quieter times of the day, predominantly on the least busy market day (Thursday), to reduce background noise. Flowerdew & Martin (2005) state that an 'illustrative sample' is necessary to reflect the varying genders,

racism, classes, nationalities, politics, histories and experiences of the respondent group. In some instances, the positionality of the interviewer gave rise to perceived power relationships regarding demographic differences, sometimes influencing the information disclosed. This was primarily a result of preconceptions, with some traders fearing the information would be reported to the council. Therefore, questions surrounding personal experiences were sensitively constructed (Alsaawi, 2014).

Feminist researchers suggest 'sharing information back' with the respondent is important to make them feel as if they can talk freely and are not simply being used as an 'object' for data exploitation (Flowerdew & Martin, 2005). The importance of research ethics was stressed to respondents, both verbally and through the participant consent form, of which outlined the 'anonymity of informants' (Hay, 2016). Furthermore, to facilitate balanced rapport based on empathy and respect, Minichiello *et al.* (1995 p.80) suggests 'effectively matching the perceptual language' of the informant, which was done through the adoption of a conversational interview style. The inclusion of positionality should thus be critically evaluated within this research to legitimise findings. Using 'researcher reflexivity' this investigation takes a post-structuralist form, following the pretence that 'objectivity' is unobtainable as all research is informed by human experience (Cloke *et al.*, 2000 p.136).

The language barrier with traders of different national and ethnic origins was particularly challenging, often resulting in lengthier interviews to ensure mutual understanding. As a location for social exchange the market traders were well-informed, through daily social intercourse with shoppers, over how displacement had spatially manifested. Despite 'displacement' being the focus of these interviews, they also provided insight into Birmingham's economic restructuring, and retail change.



### 3.5 Phase Three

The final research phase investigated how Birmingham's changing retail geographies have influenced marketplace decline and characterised Smithfield's 'revival'. The globalisation of retail has resulted in highly uneven and variable regional contexts (Coe & Rigley, 2018). Analysis of global retail change should therefore be prefaced by the retail geographies specific to Birmingham's regional context. Consequently, news articles (Birmingham Mail, 2022; BBC, 2022; Birmingham World News, 2022), city plans (Wellings, 2020, BCC, 2022) and interviews with both traders and the council were used to identify spatial, behavioural and global retail change in Birmingham. Observational methodology was also used at the Bullring markets to extend these findings, and photographic evidence supported this. Ethical considerations were considered through consent forms (Cloke *et al.*, 2012, p.11).

Through classifying and correlating observed geographical phenomena with previous research concepts the 'detail and composition of the scene' allowed for the identification of questions, confirmations, and elements that are new and are missing (Sauer, 1956, p. 289). The provision of public services, appearance, heating and ultimately 'atmosphere' of the retail environment was recorded. Heavily reliant on subjectivity, this phase risked reproducing personal assumptions. However, through analysing beyond the 'superficial appearance of things' (Hutchins, 1962, p. 2) my own subjectivity contributed to and reinforced the other layers of research obtained.

### 3.6 Analysis Techniques and Evaluation

The interviews were transcribed and the observational notes, city plan documents and news articles were collated. Findings were then coded according to the three research questions and relevant quotes were selected. This enabled the identification of connections and patterns to construct a data narrative (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). The historical accounts from interviews were not

accepted as 'objective reality' (Onyx & Small, 2001), due to the positionality of participants, however secondary data confirmed specific details.

As suggested by MacKinnon (2011) a post-structuralist approach was adopted to examine political rhetoric, practices and subjectivity that may result in uneven contested practices of urban restructuring. In challenging political 'truths' and representations of culture, the analysis sought to reinforce the dominance of particular actors (Dermawan, 2019); highly applicable to Birmingham's socio-economic change.

There are limitations to this methodology. Conducting research over a longer period of time would have permitted a greater number of interviews. Given the context of covid-19, interviews were not conducted with customers to prevent deterring shoppers. Interviews with Lendlease were also not possible due to the early stage of redevelopment, however this leaves the opportunity for future follow-up research. Finally, the data produced is spatio-temporally bound to Birmingham, meaning it lacks sufficiency for generalisation. However, the data provides a comprehensive snapshot into the complex gentrification narratives, allowing the potential for follow-up research in Birmingham.

## 4: Analysis

### 4.1 Contextual Background

The Bullring Markets, alongside a number of traditional retail markets across the UK, have been squeezed by austerity cuts, real estate pressures and changes in consumer behaviour (Gonzalez & Waley, 2013). The findings of this research emphasise the extent of decline present at the Bullring markets; 'this is the lowest footfall we have ever had' (P5, 16/12/21). Whilst the plans to redevelop the markets into Smithfield have been met by caution, the vast majority of traders interviewed suggested it would have a positive impact on their business.

At the time of research, the planning application for Smithfield had been delayed as a result of Birmingham's unplanned hosting of the 2022 Commonwealth games. Consequently, original plans for the markets to be demolished in April 2022 have been delayed until 2026. Evidence from media outlets (Birmingham Mail, 2022: BBC, 2022: Birmingham World News, 2022), council plans (Wellings, 2020: BCC, 2022) and city councillors (P18, 10/02/22: P19, 22/04/22), suggest that Smithfield will accommodate a similarly sized 'Bullring market'.

## **4.2 Overview**

The tripartite data collection process revealed three fundamental processes that have contributed to the gentrification of the Bullring Markets;

1. A series of austerity trade-offs made by local authorities have resulted in the decline of the marketplace.
2. Rapid gentrification under the cities 'entrepreneurial' initiative has increased competitive city rents, displacing local businesses and communities.
3. Changing retail patterns have contributed to the market decline and characterised properties of its revival.

The analysis will follow this structure as it provides the most coherent chronological narrative for the findings. Overall, the analysis demonstrates a multi-faceted process of decline and revival occurring at the market, adding complexity to typical dichotomous representations of gentrification.

## **4.3 Economic Restructuring**

### **4.3.1 Austerity Trade-offs**

Neoliberalism refers to market-oriented reform policies aimed at deregulating trade and reducing the rise of the state through austerity and privatisation (Palley, 2004). In the UK neoliberalism entered mainstream politics in the 1980s during the rise of Thatcherism (Farnsworth & Irving, 2021). The 'roll-back' of the state involved reductions to local authority budgets, termed austerity cuts (Ibid). Peck (2012) labels this 'centrally orchestrated localism'. During times of fiscal crises, the 'strong state' (Farnsworth & Irving, 2021) tightens local authority spending allocations, which reduces council funding for public services. The data collected

displayed significant evidence for the damaging role of austerity on public service funding. The City Councillor stated;

*'I think the main challenge...number one, will be the government's programme of reducing money to local authorities, it's a national issue. We're trying to put in place the Commonwealth Games in half the time and with half the number of people we had ten years ago' (BCC, 2022)*

Following the 2008 financial crash, the largest austerity cuts to British governments occurred between 2010 and 2015 (Gray & Barford, 2018). Under this local reconfiguration, the spatially uneven distribution of public resources was found to disproportionately affect non-southern cities in England. Birmingham City Council has faced a £730 million budget cut to public services (BCC, 2022) in the past decade, experiencing *'around a ten thousand employee reduction within the city council'* (Paul Lankester). This budget deficit resulted in Birmingham's labelling as a 'local government in crisis' (Gray & Barford, 2018). Referring to council's service failings, such as a number of high-profile child abuse cases in 2013 (Fuller & West, 2017). With inadequate public services, the central government intervened (Elkes, 2014). This extends Gray & Barford's (2018) suggestion that 'public finance is politics hidden in accounting columns', as the neoliberal method of governance could have contributed to these service failings.

With reduced budgets and redundancies, such as the compulsory £3.5 million reduction to the planning and regeneration team (BCC, 2022), the council have engaged with budget trade-offs prioritising high importance public services. 'It's not easy, I can't say the councils always got the balance right, but we're working on it', Paul Lankester claimed difficult budgeting decisions have to be made.

*'So we prioritise, prioritising means you're not always gonna be mentioned [in the media].. but it's about recognising the importance of*

*the role, publicising that we're still doing things, but not necessarily something extraordinary'*

Local councils use a budgeting formula, allocating spending according to need, as recommended by the Local Government Association (LGA, 2018; Gray & Barford, 2018). Across the UK, discretionary funding such as collective public amenities and non-mandatory services such as planning, housing and transport have suffered the severest cuts (Gray & Barford, 2018). One can speculate that Birmingham has adopted a similar approach, as the Bullring marketplace appears to have borne the brunt of regional disinvestment.

#### **4.3.2 Areas of Disinvestment**

Findings from interviews revealed that austerity trade-offs at the city council have greatly contributed to their decline. A lack of investment in the market's physical infrastructure, marketing and financial response to Covid-19 have caused traders to feel *'totally, totally unsupported'* (P3, 30/11/21).

Traders claimed that the lack of investment from Birmingham City Council has caused the physical deterioration of the market buildings. Observational analysis supported this, revealing poor maintenance and waste collection in the open market, vandalism and canopy rotting of the exterior rag market building, the market's two outdoor cashpoints were broken for the duration of the research period, and a vast difference in the quality of amenities such as bins was identified between the Bullring market area and the adjacent Bullring shopping centre.



*Figure 2. A broken cash machine adjacent to the open-air market.*

Interviews with the market committee revealed that around 75% of market traders only accepted cash (P6, 16/12/21), therefore the two broken cash points surrounding the market indicated how the wider city infrastructure supporting the markets has also been neglected. Gonzalez & Waley (2013) suggest that local authorities 'disinvest in the markets of today' to pretextualise the 'potential of gentrified markets tomorrow'.

*'This particular market has a lack of investment... the toilets have been left broken for months on end... there's been several light bulbs off without being changed for nine months, they've let the place go to rot'*  
(P7, 16/12/21)

Government and industry reports suggest the decline of traditional retail markets was made significantly worse by the 2008 recession (House of Commons, 2009). Decreased footfall could therefore be attributed to the unpleasant retail environment. Several traders indicated that the council was '*deliberately disinvesting in the markets*' (P13, 13/02/22) to justify the development of

Smithfield. Despite the council denying this, Gonzalez & Waley (2013) suggest a similar pattern of disinvestment has characterised numerous markets in the delicate early stage of gentrification. For example, deliberate disinvestment by Transport for London was identified as a justification for the demolition of Queens Market in Newham. Wider transport disruptions have also impacted the Bullring markets, as will be later explored.

The responsabilisation of the market committee for the social media and advertising of all three markets, demonstrates how austerity trade-offs have resulted in the 'downloading' of the fiscal crisis to lower-income populations Peck (2012). *'We have been left completely to our own devices' (P6, 16,12,21)*. Streeck & Merten's (2013) suggest that the institutional capacity of local authorities causes the degradation of citizen's expectations of the state. Therefore, in adopting the role in social media and advertising, it can be inferred that the market committee can no longer expect or rely on the council to provide the service. The Bullring market committee now operate their own social media pages as the council *'don't do any promotions or advertising' (P4, 30/11/2021)*.

*'We have a tiktok account now and a facebook account and the videos are a bit.. but they're going everywhere and we have had interest from the media about them which are a bit cringey I think but at least people are talking about them, Im told, even bad publicity is good publicity, oh god that's awful but people like it, people are talking about it, people like Joe Lycett, the BBC, have I got news for you...'* (P7, 16/12/21)

This resembles Peck's (2012) 'austerity urbanism' model, as local communities engage with small scale 'urban development projects arising from crises'. The 'responsibilisation' of the market traders and committee for the public welfare, pushes austerity impacts further down the city scale (Hastings *et al.*, 2017). In the UK, austerity urbanism was found to embody a dual mechanism; 'targeting cities' that leads to 'targeting the poor' (Ibid). Therefore, the lack of marketing provided by Birmingham City Council has facilitated the neoliberal method of governance, through devolving the austerity pressures to the market committee.



Despite the positive social media outcomes, the research findings suggest that Covid-19 has exacerbated the market decline. Unable to afford stall rents, a number of traders did not return after the second lockdown, with stall occupancy dropping from 'around 85% to 75%' (P6, 16/12/2021). With less commerce on offer, market footfall has continued to decrease. Traders had to pay full rents during the second lockdown whilst they were unable to make an income.

*'It has been difficult certainly during covid, footfall has decreased significantly, so market traders would argue that if they can't make as much return they should pay less rent. That's a fair comment to make, however the city still has its basic business rates to pay so rents can't get down below a certain level' (BCC, 2022)*

Austerity is a two-pronged process, meaning whilst councils must react to budget-cuts they must also increase local revenue. In 2020, during the pandemic, GDP decreased 9.7%, the steepest drop since 1948 (Harari, Keep and Brien, 2021). Consequently, Peck's (2012) concept of the 'dumping' of the fiscal crisis onto the local state is embodied through the inability of Birmingham City Council to financially support the market traders. With public healthcare under extreme financial pressures, Birmingham City Council could not subsidise the Bullring market traders as much as they would have liked to. Trade-offs between high and low priority areas of public servicing have therefore contributed to the decline of the Bullring Markets. With Birmingham City Council's 'few alternatives but to download austerity to the urban poor', the neoliberalism project is made further perceptible (Hastings *et al.*, 2017), validating the contingent public-private gentrification narratives.



*Figure 3. Empty stalls in the indoor market.*

## **4.4 Between Decline and Revival**

### **4.4.1 Entrepreneurialism in Birmingham**

In an effort to conceal the vast neoliberal divides in Western cities, Harvey (1989 p.7) claims an entrepreneurial form of governance is adopted. With a reduced role in civic leadership, local authorities prioritise place-based marketing to attract private investors and prime cities for inter-urban competition (Macleod, 2002).

The findings of this research suggest that Birmingham has become an entrepreneurial city. A 2013 study on Birmingham's response to austerity revealed;

*'The council is unable to be a broad-ranging community leader and provider of services anymore, but it can be an effective player through targeted place-based action and networked partnership' (Fuller and West, 2017).*

Entrepreneurial strategic-thinking utilises multi-scalar governance (Eesley, Yang and Wu, 2016). This refers to the interplay of various public-private institutions to produce contemporary urban redevelopment. Paul Lankester supports this- *'we now focus on the individual deliverables within a wider delivery plan'*. The 'Big City Plan' (2011) and the 'Our Future City Plan' (2021), also indicate this pro-market thinking. Both city plans involve a number of individual location projects, aimed at delivering a 'bigger picture' strategy (Fuller and West, 2017).

Findings also suggest that Birmingham is attempting to improve its global image. Harvey (1989, p.7) claims that entrepreneurial governance seeks to attract global attention in order to obtain transnational investment. Kasir Ijaz supported this;

*'We want to be seen as the European regional capital, so just as say Paris is and Berlin, and other parts of the European continent, we want to be the same status as them'*

Harvey (1989 p.7) also states that 'flagship' projects are constructed to enhance the city-image. The Paradise development in Birmingham exemplifies this, comprising the Main Library, Chamberlain Square, the Town Hall and a number of other mixed-use projects (Paradise Circus, 2020). *'Where Birmingham Meets The World' (Ibid)*, the Paradise development is advertised as lying at the heart of the connected city. Kasir Ijaz claims Paradise has been a *'huge success'* so far in attracting corporate investment. Birmingham's Grand Central station also demonstrates the 'peacocking' of 'design-intensive' urban architecture (Macleod, 2002). Annunziata & Lees (2016) claim this post-recession urban renewal produces 'austerity gentrification', often resulting in the eviction and displacement of existing urban communities. Findings from trader interviews indicate a socio-

economic change in Birmingham's residents has contributed to the market decline;

*'A lot of young people are moving into the city centre now to work, so we don't get a lot of our old customers anymore' (P6, 16/12/21)*

This resembles Gonzalez & Waley's (2013) suggestion that marketplace becomes embedded within wider gentrification. Therefore, one can speculate that Birmingham City Council's adoption of entrepreneurial governance has contributed to the decline of the Bullring markets.



*Figure 4. Grand Central Station, Birmingham.*

#### **4.4.2 Customer Displacement and Decline**

The findings of this research suggest Birmingham's entrepreneurial governance has indirectly contributed to the decline of the Bullring Markets. Three factors were identified; the displacement of local communities, reduced transport accessibility and imperative strategic development.

The findings suggest an increase in demand for high-quality living in Birmingham has contributed to the displacement of lower-income populations. The 'Our Future City Plan' (BCC, 2021) states that to retain 'skilled graduates' Birmingham must provide more '*high quality housing*'. This has been met by a number of contested public-private redevelopments, such as the gentrification of Saxelby House in Druids Heath (BBC, 2019). Amongst several others, the council-owned residential tower-block is being transformed into '*sustainable living quarters*', whilst Birmingham City Council have struggled to appropriately rehouse several former tenants (Balloo, 2022). Paul Lankester claimed a '*seven percent shift from owner occupation to private rented housing in the past decade*' (P20, 22/04/22) is a result of young people moving into Birmingham who are unable to pay a mortgage yet, alongside entrepreneurs seeking to make a business from letting. This indicates that Birmingham City Council's aim to retain skilled graduates and attract young workers has materialised. Trader interview findings suggested that changes to Birmingham's socio-economic profile have contributed to the displacement of habitual market customers;

*'The cost of living in Birmingham has become a lot more expensive, so naturally we're not gonna get the same customers we did twenty years ago'* (P16, 13/02/22)

This quote resembles Marcuse's (1985) claim that gentrification displaces communities who are 'priced-out' of their neighbourhood. Therefore, Wylie & Hammel's (1999) 'islands of decay amongst seas of renewal' is more applicable than Berry's (1985) 'islands of renewal amongst seas of decay' as the design intensive gentrified areas require higher rents, eventually displacing lower-income populations. Research supports this as a 'surge in demand' for rental properties in Birmingham has caused monthly rents to rise by over three percent in a year (Howarth, 2021). Porter & Barber's (2006) study on gentrification in Birmingham's Eastside enhances these findings; suggesting that if not financially displaced, local communities who witness the public acquisition of shops and bars they used to patronise begin to lose their 'sense of place' in the city. Therefore, as Marcuse (1985) suggests the socio-economic pressure of

displacement becomes very severe. Retail markets typically provide staple-produce for people on low-income (Gonzalez & Waley, 2013). Therefore, the residential displacement of working-class communities in Birmingham poses a major threat to the Bullring markets

Interview findings suggested that reduced accessibility of the marketplaces has contributed to its decline. Several inner-city car parks have been transformed into public housing, causing the cost of existing car parks to increase - *'Thirteen pound a day for car parking in Arcadian, it's ridiculous'* (P6, 13/02/22).

Accessibility issues have been amplified by the City Council's *'statutory duty to improve air quality'* (Paul Lankester), utilising *'the route to zero carbon initiative'* (Our Future City Plan, 2021). Therefore, any car not meeting the emission standards when driving through the city centre's 'clean air zone' must pay £8 daily (Ibid) *'It certainly made life a lot more difficult'* - one trader claimed they have had to get public transport with *'suitcases full of stock'* (P17, 13/02/22) every day to avoid the charge.

The reduced mobility of lower-income customers resembles Macleod's (2002) concept of deepening socioeconomic polarities in entrepreneurial cities. The increased costs of transport suggest that the entrepreneurial city is exclusive of those with lesser 'financial stake-holding', supporting Macleod's (2002) evidence of revanchist socio-spatial governance in Glasgow, UK. Traders emphasised how regular customers from suburban areas like Wolverhampton and Sutton Coldfield are now less likely to drive into the city to shop at the markets;

*'I really do know because I speak to my customers all the time, public transport around here has come to a standstill, the only customers we have now are people who live round the city centre, years ago we had people coming from all over the West Country, but it would be really hard to reverse the damage now because all the bus stops are gone'*

(P1, 30/11/21).

Three bus stops surrounding the markets have been removed due to the extension of Birmingham Eastside Metro and to increase public transport to Birmingham City Airport. The works are part of the council's scheme to promote 'inclusive growth' (Our Future City Plan, 2021), and improve transport to the Smithfield area and HS2 (BCC, 2022). However, contradictorily they have reduced market accessibility for people who rely on public transport. This supports Gonzalez & Waley's (2013) claim that urban markets become embedded within wider processes of gentrification and urban renewal. Paul Lankester stated *'we make a small surplus on the markets, but not as much as much return as we would want'*. Gonzalez & Waley (2013) suggest that the gentrification of Leeds' Kirkgate Market could largely be attributed to its central location of potential real estate value. The strategic location of the Bullring Markets between the Digbeth, where the new HS2 station will be located on Curzon Street and between Grand central and the Bullring (BCC, 2021), suggests the Bullring market area is now seen as the 'missing piece' in the city's entrepreneurial renewal (Gonzalez & Waley, 2013).

In adopting a market-oriented form of governance, Birmingham City Council's desire to maximise funding opportunities has caused the Bullring Markets to become situated in a narrative of 'decline and revival' (Dines, 2009). Future plans for the development of Smithfield have been postponed due to Birmingham's hosting of the Commonwealth Games. Paul Lankester claims that disinvestment decisions were made in 2017 that reflected on Smithfield and the markets closing in April 2022. However, Birmingham City Council took on the challenge of planning and hosting the Commonwealth games in six months, as it is perceived to be a great opportunity for tourists to 'see what's already changed in Birmingham', resembling Macleod's (2002) suggested benefits of 'flagship' projects, as enhancing the city image and attracting global and regional attention.

Those *'major expenditure decisions have now proved to be questionable'* (Paul Lankester), as the current market building is operating longer than expected. *'Shops are now turning their backs on that part of the city'*, (Kasir Ijaz), as *'no one*

*wants to invest in the markets if they are going to be torn down soon'* (Paul Lankester). The use of 'frontier language' characterising the decline of the markets, whilst simultaneously justifying their future renewal (Gonzalez & Waley, 2013). Dines (2009) states that many urban retail markets are caught between this period of 'decline and revival'. However, delays to the renewal and a lack of attractive investment opportunities mean *'it's a catch twenty-two'* (Paul Lankester) as if no one invests in the markets then their survival over the next four years is compromised. Therefore, Birmingham City Council's entrepreneurial governance can be identified as a contributing factor to the period of decline currently faced by the Bullring Markets.

## **4.5 Urban Retail Change**

### **4.5.1 Retail Change in Birmingham**

Retail change in western economies has undergone a series of transformations since the 1980s, after the growth of motor transport enabled more convenient forms of consumption (Jones, 2021). The data collected suggests retail modernisation and changing consumer behaviour in Birmingham has contributed to the decline of the Bullring markets alongside other consumer areas in the city centre. This section explores the retail challenges Birmingham faces and how the council believes Smithfield will overcome this.

The research findings suggest that the decline of the Bullring markets can be dated back to the construction of the Bullring shopping centre in 2003 (BCC, 2022). The Bullring shopping centre is privately owned by Hammerson PLC, a major British property developer (City AM, 2021). Several of the trader interviews indicated that the type and design of consumption at the Bullring shopping centre signalled a change in Birmingham's consumer behaviour.



*'It was as if they built a wall in front of us and everyone was encouraged to go there and with all the publicity we just weren't included' (P6, 13/02/22).*

Paul Lankester supported this stating *'When the Bullring came in, it meant there were less visitors going down Edgbaston road'*. Observational analysis validated this spatial segregation as no signage indicated the direction of the Bullring markets from the Bullring shopping area. Furthermore, several large bollards were situated on the border between the two retail environments, where a clear difference between the quality of maintenance could be identified. Kasir Ijaz stated that the 'linkage' between the markets and the Bullring shopping centre needed to be improved to encourage more 'foot traffic' toward Edgbaston road. The spatial planning of the Bullring shopping centre in comparison to the markets indicates an antagonistic relationship between the realm of privately-owned and council-owned consumption areas. This resembled the dichotomy of Peck's (2012) austerity urbanism, characterised by disinvested areas and privately-owned consumer landscapes. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of both retail landscapes emphasises Wyly & Hammel's (1999) concept of 'islands of decay amongst seas of renewal', suggesting that competition with the Bullring Shopping centre has deprived the marketplace of customers.

*'I've just got a feeling Birmingham City Council want to lose what's different and stick to the same repetitive shops' (P1, 30/11/21)*

The construction of the Bullring shopping centre indicated a shift in Birmingham's consumer behaviour, contributing to the decline of the markets. With a number of international brands such as Burger King, Costa Coffee and Topshop, the Bullring and Grand Central shopping centres harnessed 'brand power' (Durand & Wrigley, 2009), generating gravitational loyalty amongst customers. Corneo & Jeanne (1997) state that the rise of 'conspicuous consumption' has marked the end of shopping as a purely task-related utilitarian experience. Trader interviews highlighted the lack of independent shops as a sign that the city centre is no longer marketed towards supporting traditional retail. The new arena for

commercial consumption provided more flexible forms of consumption. The Bullring centre is open until 8pm most evenings, therefore consumers can fit shopping around work schedules (Bullring & Grand Central, 2022). Returns policies and the ability to check stock online has facilitated the consumer's experience (Ibid). Gonzalez & Waley (2013) state that supermarket competition and shoppers desiring more middle-class experiences characterises the decline of urban retail markets.

The research findings indicated that Birmingham is experiencing a period of retail disinvestment as a result of global challenges. The first challenge posed by Brexit in 2020, Paul Lankester claimed, specifically impacted the wholesale markets in Birmingham.

*'It is now cheaper for market stallholders to buy from some of those low-cost supermarkets than it is to buy wholesale, like Lidl they all have the ability to undercut wholesale prices' (Paul Lankester)*

The closure and demolition of the wholesale market occurred in 2018 (Young, 2018). The area will now provide the focal community point for the Smithfield development, after serving the Commonwealth games. The second and far more prevalent challenge to Birmingham's retail was the emergence and spread of Covid-19 in 2020 (World Health Organisation, 2022). Ten trader interviews indicated that the primary impact of Covid-19 on the marketplace was the change to consumer behaviour it induced.

The research findings suggest that the growth of online retail, amplified by the pandemic, has damaged Birmingham's retail landscape and necessitated new forms of consumption. Research suggests e-commerce has threatened physical stores since its rise in 2006 (Hagberg *et al.*, 2017). Jones & Livingstone (2015) highlight the benefits of the 'non-store' as it is more convenient for the shopper and cheaper for the retailer. Kasir Ijaz claims that *'retail has had a very tough decade'*;

*'We've had the big players move out so John Lewis, Debenhams and parts of central are now left vacant'*

This is validated through observational analysis, which revealed the closure of several shops such as Sports Direct. However, trader interview findings indicate that changes to consumer behaviours since Covid-19 have enhanced retail decline in Birmingham. Traders revealed that a large portion of elderly customers have not returned since the emergence of Covid-19. *'A really elderly lady who comes here on Thursdays said I've come out today but I'm really scared'* (P5, 30/11/21). This supports Naeem *et al.* (2020) who claim that the objective of fear displaced a large portion of physical store customers during the pandemic. Around 50% of market traders interviewed claimed to operate an online service, highlighting the benefits of it during the lockdown market closures. However, Kovalenko (2021) found that as older generations have become more accustomed to the ease of buying through online retail, the need for physical stores is negated. These findings suggest that Covid-19 has escalated the transition to online retail preference, contributing to the decline of Birmingham's retail landscape.

#### **4.5.2 The Smithfield Vision**

Analysis of news articles, the 'Our Future City Plan' and the two interviews with members of the council have demonstrated how Smithfield will accommodate retail modernisations. To combat the deterritorialization of retail by e-commerce, city councillors indicated that Smithfield will offer a *'consumer-experience'*. The 'Our Future City Plan' (2021) states that Smithfield will be a mixed-use development over 14 hectares, providing housing, offices, hospitality, leisure, service retail, standard retail and a 'new home' for the Bullring Markets. This supports Biddulph's (2011) theory that entrepreneurial cities use mixed-use developments to arrange a variety of functions around a core retail activity. The CGI image of the future Smithfield development accurately depicts this.



*Figure 5. A CGI image of the future Smithfield development (Image: Birmingham City Council/Lendlease)*

Smithfield is planned to have ‘a day and night feel’ (Lendlease, 2022), as Paul Lankester states *‘Birmingham has a 24-hour economy everywhere else, so it makes sense to bring this to Smithfield’*. Hobbs *et al*, (2003) suggest that a night time economy functions for local provision as well as tourism, and is therefore central to the facilitation of economic growth. Smithfield is planned to boast a festival square accommodating 20,000 people (Lendlease, 2022) *‘We want to host religious festivals like Eid’ (Paul Lankester)*- through creating an atmosphere of social diversity Smithfield will provide an experience unavailable through online retail. This represents Harvey’s (1989) idea of ‘place-marketing’ in the entrepreneurial city. Kasir Ijaz claimed that to combat declining retail in the city centre, Smithfield will provide a retail space *‘that does not purely serve as a retail spot’*, suggesting that *‘an arcade, a bowling rink, somewhere that you can acquire an experience’* will reterritorialise retail in Birmingham. This reflects the findings of Baghaee *et al*, (2021), that suggest provision of leisure and recreational activities motivates customers to attend retail centres. Smithfield will therefore operate an agglomeration economy (Jones, 2021).

The promotion of Smithfield as a site of culture and heritage contributes to its 'place-making'. Glaeser (2011) states fabricating an 'organic ethos' is vital for recapitalising urban centres. *'The Bullring markets have been here since Birmingham first existed so of course we want to include them'* (Kasir Ijaz). The incorporation of the markets as a historic asset correlates with Tallon *et al.* (2006) who states that 'cultural quarters' have been emerging in predominantly European Cities such as Barcelona to create a 'place story'. However, changes to the original composition of the market can risk producing a top-down gaze on the cultural heritage of the market as an 'object of contemplation' (Delgadillo, 2017). Paul Lankester stated *'There will definitely be some changes, like separating the meat and fish areas because people don't like the smell'*. Hubbard (2018) suggests that the selective retention of certain cultural aspects whilst filtering out others, risks 'fabricating an aura of authenticity' based on the commodification of the market experience. Therefore, research findings convey how Birmingham City Council and Lendlease plan on creating a hub for socio-cultural interaction, providing a new selling point for Birmingham City Council and enhancing traditional retail. However, as suggested by Shaw (2015) one must not allow 'urban triumphalism' to mask the 'contradictions of contemporary capitalism', these findings therefore open up the possibility for future follow-up research to critically analyse the type of retail present at the future Bullring markets.

## 5: Conclusion

Using the Bullring markets as a lens to study the neoliberal commodification of urban life, this dissertation extends literature that specifically critiques the role of the state in retail and marketplace gentrification (Gonzalez & Waley, 2012). This dissertation also contributes to academic correlation between retail gentrification and entrepreneurial governance (Harvey, 1989 p.7), through detangling the progression of neoliberalism in British cities (Peck & Tickell, 2007).

However, there were a number of limitations to this study. The available time and resources only permitted a limited number of interviews, whilst challenges presented by Covid-19 also restricted the type of interviews conducted. Furthermore, the available word count restricted the quantity of data that could be discussed. The methodology for this dissertation was influenced by Gonzalez & Waley's (2013) tripartite process; ongoing economic restructuring, displacement and consumer experience promotion. Therefore an alternative structure of methodology, perhaps taking a more quantitative approach, may have produced different concepts or more coherent results. Spatially circumscribed to the unique location of the Bullring markets the findings of this study do not provide sufficiency for generalization of retail trends in Birmingham. However, this dissertation does provide a balanced conceptualisation of the early stage of gentrification underway at the Bullring markets, conceptualising the inter-play of various national and global geographical forces. The breadth and depth of this dissertation therefore leaves room for future follow-up research, to challenge the evaluation of Smithfield's response to retail change.

This dissertation answers Gonzalez & Waley's (2013) call for academics to centralise the state within marketplace gentrification research. The 'ongoing state-led neoliberal urban restructuring' can be identified through the impact of centrally orchestrated 'austerity-cuts' on Birmingham. The city's use of austerity

trade-offs, prioritising areas of high importance (LGA, 2022), contextualised the decline and deterioration of the Bullring markets.

Using a chronological narrative this dissertation detangles Birmingham's role as an 'effective player' in public-private networking. Outlining how wider investment has caused indirect displacement trends, this dissertation considers the relationship between displacement in Birmingham and the decline of the Bullring markets Supporting Harvey's (1989,p.7) concept of the entrepreneurial city, the findings suggest Birmingham is attempting to recover and boost its political-economy through attracting private investment. The Smithfield development plans embody this imperative, alongside the crucial role that consumer behaviour is playing in urban landscapes, particularly since the emergence of Covid-19. This dissertation has therefore detangled the 'necessitation' of gentrification in Birmingham, and offered insight into similar processes occurring in Western cities.

However, through seeking to detangle typical dichotomous representations of gentrification, as an antagonism between two fixed sites (e.g. traditional/modern), this dissertation investigated beyond superficial appearance. The commodification of urban life can be viewed as a concealed objective of neoliberal governance, but is also found to be a survival response to financial crises, changing consumer behaviours and modernisations to retail. Birmingham City Councils plans for Smithfield to be focussed on consumer-experience and place-making, support Harvey's (1989 p.7) concept of entrepreneurial governance. Despite this, evidence of reducing class mobility has suggested elements of Macleod's (2002) concept of exclusionary citizenship based on 'financial stake-holding' (Macleod, 2002). Caught between a narrative of decline and revival, the Bullring markets have become embedded within wider city gentrification. Therefore, follow-up research to assess the future nature of commodification at the Smithfield development has the potential to solidify the suggestions and claims made in this dissertation regarding the future of the Bullring Markets.

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## 7: Appendices

### 7.1 Interview Record

Participant number	Research Method	Participant (s)	Research Location	Research Date	Description of Research
1	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Open Market	30/11/2021	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
2	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Open Market	30/11/2021	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
3	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Open Market	30/11/2021	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
4	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Open Market	30/11/2021	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
5	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Open Market	30/11/2021	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
6	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Committee Leader	Birmingham Rag Market	16/12/2021	Semi-structured Interview with Bullring Market Committee Leader

7	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Committee member	Birmingham Rag Market	16/12/2021	Semi-structured Interview with Bullring Market Committee member
8	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Rag Market	16/12/2021	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
9	Semi-structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Rag Market	16/12/2021	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
10	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Rag Market	16/12/2021	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
11	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Rag Market	16/12/2021	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
12	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Rag Market	16/12/2021	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
13	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Rag Market	13/01/2022	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
14	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Rag Market	13/01/2022	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
15	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Rag Market	13/01/2022	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader

16	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Rag Market	13/01/2022	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
17	Semi-Structured Interview	Bullring Market Trader	Birmingham Rag Market	13/01/2022	Semi-structured interview with Bullring Market Trader
18	Semi-Structured Interview	Birmingham Councillor- Kasir Ijaz (Labour-Planning and Regeneration Team)	Video chat (Zoom)	10/02/2022	Semi- structured interview with Birmingham Councillor
19	Semi-Structured interview	Birmingham Councillor-Paul Lankester (Strategic Change Consultant and Interim Manager)	Video chat (zoom)	22/04/2022	Semi-structured interview with Birmingham Councillor

## 7.2 Interview Consent Form

### Information/Consent Form:

#### Title of Research Project

"Between decline and revival; Investigating early gentrification at the Bullring markets"

#### Debrief

The purpose of this interview is to analyse the forces of gentrification present at the Bullring markets. The interview is semi-structured and will focus on three primary themes, it should take no longer than 20 minutes.

You may withdraw from the interview at any point or choose not to answer some questions. Data from this interview will be used in a Geography Dissertation Research project and will be kept strictly confidential and your identity will remain anonymous. If you wish for your data to be withdrawn from the study you can do so until 01/05/22 by contacting the researcher. The information will be processed by the University of Birmingham in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1998. Once the project is completed the data will be destroyed.

#### Consent to take part in research

- I ..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can refuse to answer any question or withdraw from participation at any time, without any consequences.
- I understand the purpose and nature of the study and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I understand that I have the option for my interview to be audio-recorded for transcription purposes, which will be clarified by the researcher.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially, and my identity will remain anonymous.
- I understand that I can have my data withdrawn from the study until 01/05/22 should I wish to.
- I understand that signed consent forms, original audio recordings and interview transcripts will be retained by the Researcher until May 2022, and that after this they will be destroyed.
- I understand that under the freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact the researcher to seek further clarification and information.

**Researcher contact details:**

**Lily Patience (University of Birmingham Geography Ba)**

**Email address:** [lxp922@student.bham.ac.uk](mailto:lxp922@student.bham.ac.uk)

**Supervisor contact details:**

**Dr Fraser Sugden (University of Birmingham, Senior Lecturer in Human Geography in the School of Earth and Environmental Sciences)**

**Email address:** [F.sugden@bham.ac.uk](mailto:F.sugden@bham.ac.uk)

*Signature of research participant*

.....

*Date*

.....

*Signature of researcher*

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

.....

*Date*

.....

### **7.3 Interview Transcript Example**

Interview Excerpt: City Councillor

Location: University of Birmingham

Date: 10/02/2022

Me) On the 'Big City Plan' document it says that one of the goals is to strengthen the global position as an attractive place for investment, so what is this the sort of image that you [the council] are trying to create for the city internationally?

Councillor) Yeah I mean I think we've always wanted to be seen as the European regional capital so just as say Paris is and Berlin and other parts of the European continent, we want to be the same status as them, we're not gonna be rivals with London its not gonna happen but we feel we have our own character our own unique selling points and I mean this I mean when we talk about our international position not just about tourism or some attractiveness to the private sector we're also talking about our old people how are we going to sort of level them up to compete with it an international source job market I mean we've talked a lot about around digital sector and how we're gonna upscale a populations to compete in that kind of market itself... it's not just helping us as an international destination and providing international opportunities help international so then they did your market there that sector can move in to a place where the population is skilled enough to take on those jobs so...I think we want to be in a position saying 10/15 years time where we are a global player we are global city we we have we we have that sort of attraction for investors for tourism and also sort of investment in into our local places and our local people yeah.

Me) so in terms of local places and local people what sort of businesses retail specifically are you looking to incorporate?

Councillor) I mean as you know retails had a very tough decade... I mean some parts have suffered and I mean luckily the city... Birmingham city centre hasn't seen a massive shortfall in kind of retail we still are a regional capital destination to retail but as you know alongside that we've had the big players move out so John Lewis Debenhams and parts of central now are left vacant and as the city how will we go to respond how is it...and we have to be more flexible, flexible around... that retail space so it doesn't purely serve as a retail spot it could also perform as an arcade, a bowling rink... something where you can acquire an experience I think we're already seeing that with so if you if you go to bullring right now yeah... you can go bowling but you can also shop for clothes and so I think it's providing a much wider experience when you come out to Birmingham and when you come to Birmingham it's not just purely buying clothes is also going to the restaurant having a nice coffee also potential activities like bowling, break dancing or or something similar so it's it's a full experience that you get from there coming to Birmingham.

