Gentrification TV

Working class communities are culturally devitalized through gentrification as the new middle class scorns the streets in favour of the dining room and bedroom.

—Neil Smith, The New Urban Frontier

Coupled with the omission of the political economy of flipping, the formulaic tilt of HGTV’s narratives presents stories of individual renovators helping individual families find the housing solutions that fit their needs. Such stories seem contained to their subjects and without a broader politics beyond house and family. Yet within the resolution to these stories, there is a politics—a class politics of gentrification wherein symbols of upper-class belonging become salient consideration in the narratives of value. Housing shapes living; its projected value is bound up with class-tinged ideas about family, identity, and place.

My next question concerns the relationship between representations of house flipping and gentrification on HGTV. House flipping is made to seem deterritorialized on HGTV because the stories withhold the geographic coordinates of houses that are being flipped. The houses might be anywhere; they seem to exist in a geography of nowhere. I call HGTV gentrification TV because of its insistence that the houses most suited to profitable renovations and flipping are those that are discounted to the market as a result of age, neglect, style, changing demographics, neighborhood, or other markers of class. Insofar as HGTV shows interrupt their stories of value in a vacuum to consider markets, obtaining a rent-gap discount and renovating is the method that HGTV pitches as a way of getting more house for the money.

To make its rent-gap sales pitch look appealing, HGTV accents the economic appeal of flipping and renovation while averting viewers’ eyes from its social context, its social history, and its social repercussions. Hence
HGTV dwells on remaking upscale-looking interior spaces while erasing the uneven urban development of real estate geographies that seeded rent-gap conditions to begin with (think redlining and white flight). Severed from the institutional forces that shape housing markets, HGTV renovation programs manage to accomplish something that has been otherwise impossible: they visualize the achievement of a color-blind open-concept gentrification by diverting attention from histories of racial discrimination, disinvestment, geographies of poverty, predatory lending, and dispossession that so often correlate with gentrification practices. When we bring these subjects back into consideration, it becomes obvious that HGTV shows give voice to a mythological politics of color-blind opportunities for home ownership that presupposes a self-sustaining flipping bubble. But when that bubble pops again, any wealth redistribution effect will be subject again to the structural forces that revert to reproducing wealth inequality.

Making Entitlement Look Affordable

After learning that a previously unnoticed structural problem will eat into his budget for beautifying a fixer-upper, a home renovation TV client laments that “to spend money on something you don’t see is frustrating.” HGTV clients often strike similar poses, adamantly insisting that “I want what I want.” They display an inflated sense of self-entitlement, an expression of self that insists that the world bend to their desires. From this viewpoint, money spent to restore function should be more properly allocated to creating the ensemble of appearances that goes by the name of the forever dream home. They know cosmetic changes are key to adding value in the TV renovation project, while structural amendments to unseen infrastructure barely seem to budge the value needle. The forever dream home may represent the ideal of living in appearances, but forever won’t last long if it is structurally unsound. This obvious inconsistency between value as appearance and the goal of durable long-term value gets a bit fuzzy in the HGTV universe, where the fastest way to add the value one wants is through a cosmetic makeover.

HGTV models this promise of neoliberal entitlement on a budget at the same time that the U.S. household wealth gap between the top 10 percent and those below has widened substantially since the financial crisis, mainly “at the expense of households in the 50th to 90th percentiles of the wealth distribution.” While the wealthiest households own diversified investments, middle-class households have been overly dependent on home equity as a source of wealth, and thus “were seven times as exposed to the housing bubble and collapse.” Within the 40th to 70th percentiles, the average middle-income household lost two-thirds of its home equity between 2005
and 2011 and has still not recovered that wealth despite rising home prices.\(^3\) Hence HGTV’s mission is to market the dream home in more accessible terms. The Lowe’s chief marketing officer said that the appeal of Property Brothers to advertisers is its “approachability. A focus on the real American home gives people confidence to go into our stores and say, ‘You know what? I can change a home or a room with a reasonable budget.’”\(^4\)

The commodity look of entitlement belongs not just to the rich anymore! Stories about clients seeking their dream homes at prices they can afford envision a quest for amplified value in which “‘aesthetics’ envelopes ‘structure’ and celebrates the definitive wedding of the object to your ‘personality.’”\(^5\) Episodes invariably conclude with clients feeling themselves more fully expressed in the transformed spaces they come to occupy. In this way, HGTV can be viewed as attempting to symbolically remediate the wealth gap.

HGTV shows reproduce a currency of sign-value appearances framed by a visual code of aesthetic finishes. The designers, the realtors, and the buyers all speak in what amounts to a semiotic language of interior design aesthetics. Quartz, we are told, signifies modernity, whereas granite says traditional refined elegance and good taste. Granite was once a preferred countertop on home renovation shows because it signified “a pursuit. An ambition. A glossy, reflective surface that allows us to gaze at ourselves and know where we stand.”\(^6\) Reiterated across its many shows, HGTV’s aesthetic code is unified and tightly branded, offering aspirational but democratized kitchen surfaces. “HGTV is the land that viewers visit when they are trying to cultivate a personal design aesthetic by spying on what everyone else is doing.”\(^7\)

This home remodeling simulacrum turns the home’s interior into a curated sanctuary. Clients state preferences for living in special neighborhoods, but without an impulse towards neighbors or community. They seek respect and recognition, not so much in the realm of the immediately social, but by bathing in the reflection of semiotically coded design spaces. Given that the search for value in the real-world housing market had become clouded by risk, uncertainty, and strangling debt loads, it is not surprising that HGTV’s guided tours in search of value now reference a hyperreal world, a simulacrum of home renovation. TV renovation stories thus appear to resolve the tension between unchecked commodity desires and pocket-books that have not kept pace with the price of their satisfaction.

Fiona Allon notes that, before the housing bubble burst, “with assets appreciating much faster than incomes, consumers eagerly embraced asset accumulation” in the form of houses “as a primary substitute for employment security and the social wage.”\(^8\) Inflated asset values collapsed and incomes continued to lag during the Great Recession that followed. “In 2013,
the median income of U.S. households was $51,939, down substantially from $55,562 in 2001." But there were also millions of foreclosed properties on the market. HGTV revisited the promise of asset accumulation via the renovated house—this time by playing rent gaps between housing stocks that were worn down or foreclosed off against the envied showcase homes in special neighborhoods with great schools and amenities. Following *Property Brothers*’ lead, HGTV shows make a clear pitch for gentrifying urban and suburban houses as an investment-worthy path to building home equity and becoming enviable yourself. The ideal of atomized, private, and detached households that buttressed the heyday of modernist suburbanization gets a nostalgic revival in the HGTV rendition of home renovation. But on HGTV, the yearning to live encased in midcentury modern styles can be sited anywhere that the rent-gap logic pencils out. In short, the “privatized geography of suburbanization” is not just for suburbia anymore.

**Gentrification, Rent Gaps, and HGTV**

One long-standing political-economic explanation of gentrification focuses on rent gaps. In 1979, Neil Smith defined the rent gap as “the disparity between the potential ground rent level and the actual ground rent capitalized under the present land use.” Back then, the greater the gap between higher suburban land rents and land rents in older inner cities, the more attuned investors became to the disparity between potential and actual ground rent in the undervalued regions of housing markets. An early stage of gentrification began when investors/property owners sought out the comparative economic advantage of renovating properties left behind by prior generations of the bourgeoisie, the value of which had been depreciated by decades of racially motivated disinvestment. Public revenues declined as manufacturing industries moved offshore and the geographic movement of the service sector and consumer businesses followed the path of suburban housing. Portrayed as the consumer ideal during the postwar decades, suburbanization represented the full development of modernity. But the cultural alienation it fed over the years prompted dissipations with suburban lifestyles that propelled a portion of an educated upper middle class to take advantage of rent gaps. Urban planners, eager to find ways to bring business back into cities but strapped for public sector resources, embraced the entrepreneurial capital that developers and bankers were willing to invest when they realized how much money could be made by taking advantage of then-prevailing rent gaps. Eventually, those suburban homes that once seemed the epitome of consumer modernity became, in turn, dated and worn down. As opportunities for gentrification in inner-city neighborhoods exhausted themselves, the logic of the rent gap moved back toward middle-ring suburbs.
where relatively discounted prices became more attractive as opportunities for the gentrifying touch.

By the time HGTV took up the rent-gap sales pitch, the movement to remodel rent capital in the central-city neighborhoods had long since displaced the economically disadvantaged who lived there. HGTV’s endorsement of rent-gap strategies divorces itself from both the preconditions and the consequences of gentrification as urban policy. By treating each episode’s flip as a unique and isolated occurrence unrelated to the history of unequal geographies, HGTV resolutely keeps all social and economic externalities out of sight. The outside world simply disappears, and with it the general preconditions of a flipping economy that has been taking shape over decades of gentrification history. Early stages of gentrification from the late 1970s through the 1990s hollowed out inner-city neighborhoods, displacing and pushing poverty outward into inner- and middle-ring suburbs. Those decaying suburban neighborhoods were also being reshaped by the demographics of aging, retirement, and the death of decades-old white-flight occupants. When the mortgage crisis hit, it hit these already devalued suburban housing stocks particularly hard, flooding the market with heavily discounted foreclosures that investors aggressively targeted and turning a competition to flip the discounts into a new wave of collateral gentrification.

Though gentrification is pictured neither spatially or socially, taking advantage of rent gaps is the fundamental element of the sales pitch that all HGTV renovation shows present. When Property Brothers encourages clients to seek customized open-concept dream scenes in fixer-uppers, it unveils a strategy that boils down to taking advantage of prevailing rent gaps between upscale houses and those that have fallen out of favor but can be aesthetically renovated according to current tastes. By focusing entirely on the aesthetic and budgetary advantages of pursuing the rent-gap strategy, gentrification as the renovation of interior spaces ignores the surrounding streets and neighborhoods, and HGTV renders the wider landscape of gentrification invisible. Thus, whereas Smith wrote about gentrification as the movement of capital obeying the logic of rent gaps, HGTV now packages and sells the logic of the rent gap as a consumer lifestyle choice.

The visual ontology of private space—what we might call interior design porn—is a chief accomplishment of HGTV. A tight camera focus on cloistered interiors frames the value-added home as a self-contained and perfected set of spatial appearances insulated from its immediate surroundings. So doggedly does Property Brothers abstract the ideal of the secluded home from all that surrounds it that its location disappears and with it the dynamic contradictions of urban social life. Private spaces, not city spaces, form the contours of TV gentrification.
Television gentrification molds itself around a neoliberal revision of an embourgeoisement fantasy. Joanna Gaines summarizes this in her voice-over that introduces *Fixer Upper*: “Every town has that neighborhood, the one with the perfect commute, great schools, and amazing homes. It’s the one everyone wants to live in but few can afford. . . . We are Chip and Joanna Gaines, and we’ve made those out-of-reach neighborhoods reachable.” When the sociology of embourgeoisement surfaced in the late 1950s, it examined a premise that working-class individuals could be absorbed into middle-class life by virtue of access to education, independence of one’s work, and home ownership. By contrast, in current home renovation stories of embourgeoisement, the postrecession vision of becoming middle class dwells primarily on HGTV’s maps of the status and value encoded in the interiorized landscapes of home ownership. HGTV dedicates its renovation shows to reproducing, modeling, and validating a system of commodity aesthetics that simulate the coded lifestyle of the magazine bourgeoisie. It’s a Pollyannaish script that continues to exert remarkable hegemonic influence during an era when there is considerable public wailing about the economic erosion of the middle class.

As a corollary to this inward-looking fixation on taste, when prospective buyers tour houses they express a strong preference to *not* be able to see neighbors or, worse, be seen by neighbors. Not only is their preference to be isolated at home, but they never inquire about who the immediate neighbors are. While neighbors might be a no-no, buyers do have preconceived ideas about neighborhoods that appeal to them because of schools or proximity to amenities and the built environment for gentrified consumption—cafés, bakeries, brewpubs, and restaurants. Neighborhoods may be hot, but neighbors are not and should remain out of sight. This fits with the extraordinary social privatism that spills out from these shows—satisfactions are sought from an internally insulated world mediated by the commodification of all possible gratifications. The questions about value that dot the housescapes of these shows are answered with scenes and narratives of value fetishism coupled with testimonials about bringing family together. A recent study of relationships between neighbors concludes that “Americans are left with a sense of isolation from neighbors nearby: we keep ‘inner-ring’ relationships with family and close friends plus ‘outer-ring’ with Facebook friends we see infrequently, but we have lost middle-ring relationships with families down the street and a barber around the corner.”12 Avoiding the social part of everyday life—the unexpected encounters with neighbors and others who exist in social proximity—means interacting only with those whom one voluntarily chooses. Translated by the women and men who speak on home renovation shows, this is expressed as a desire for connected isolation.
Each family, tucked away to its own devices, wishes to avoid engaging neighbors, keeping neighbors as strangers if possible. For all the rhetoric about wanting to live in the midcentury retro modern style, gone is the emphasis on the picture window and what it signified, a desire to play out the social status of one’s living space for the benefit of others: to be seen. In postwar suburbia, the picture window aimed at simulating the conditions of a petite aristocratie—able to look out at an undisturbed picture of nature and desirous of having others gaze in with envy at the scene of domestic comfort inside. Critics of conspicuous consumption took aim at the “overexposure of the domestic interior” as part of the vulgar commercialism spreading across the 1950s’ social landscape. By contrast, if we take seriously contemporary desires to screen off the gaze into domestic space, we see a steady deterioration of the social in validating our domestic identities and well-being. Just as the social-from-without is kept at arm’s length and out of sight, so too renovated spaces tend to be devoid of art—particularly painting and sculpture—but decorated instead with disconnected signifiers pulled from flea markets or ready-made mass-produced kitsch purchased via Wayfair. Such décor is selected to signify a stylish simplicity; far from the status and wealth pretensions of higher art, they supposedly connote “homespun.” In TV real estate land, the desire is to avoid being seen, as if being seen diminishes one’s control over personal space. Given revelations in recent years about the inclination of governments (National Security Agency) and corporations (Facebook) to cyber-electronically gather information on individuals, this obsessive desire to avoid being seen by neighbors seems at first glance a little hysterical, and perhaps misplaced.

From a sociological point of view, it seems implausible to tell a story about the gentrification of housing markets without acknowledging income inequality, the history of redlining, and white supremacy. Visually and ideologically, HGTV’s representation of rent gaps as opportunities for middle-class wealth building requires cordoning off the collateral damage of the financial crisis inflicted on vulnerable populations who have been dispossessed and displaced. HGTV weaves a dialectic of sumptuary vision and blindness—each is necessary to achieving the dream that the generalized rent-gap approach represents a reopening to middle-class wealth accumulation. Structuring the scene by excluding all that surrounds it invites clients and viewers alike to share in the pretense that we can “create a new world with clean hands.”

Ideological Traces of Social Life

Beyond the obvious that everyone wants to retire from society to a secluded sanctuary, a few recurring social accents from these shows deserve mention.
With the exception of the metrosexual Scotts on *Property Brothers*, who choose to bond on-screen with the children of client families by performing as playful uncles, other flipping and renovation shows routinely devote video time to scenes of the hosts’ kids. Renovation and flipping shows typically star a married couple with young children, frequently infants. HGTV envisions mom-and-pop flipping businesses as a dual commitment to entrepreneurialism and the hearth and home of the middle-class nuclear family. The symbolic symmetry of renovation and rebirth marks both the economy and personal life. On flipper shows, transition scenes often include an adorable baby as little more than a prop—held for a moment before dashing off to inspect a house—to buffer the appearance of flippers as cold and calculating. On *Rehab Addict*, Nicole Curtis routinely dispenses her philosophy for raising her son, teaching him to appreciate the virtue of hard work and how to navigate markets. In Waco, where renovation is the game, *Fixer Upper* draws its charm from the Gaineses’ young family—two boys and two girls—on their budding farmstead complete with baby goats and gardens. Their *Fixer Upper* brand embraces the organic incorporation of children into their hectic lives, teaching their children to respect heritage while learning the basics of being little entrepreneurs. In a video trailer for *Fixer Upper*, Chip and Joanna explain why they choose to raise their family in Waco: “We really feel like our hearts connect with the concept of growing what you eat, you know, making what you sell. I mean, it’s a beautiful place and we hope it rubs off on our family a little.”

Whereas *Property Brothers* assumes a landscape of insulated home spaces abstracted from geography and social life, and Orange County’s *Flip or Flop* sees houses as merely fungible commodities devoid of subjective significance, *Fixer Upper* proposes a vision of a world in which families can make choices that reground themselves—either in imagined communities or place. Linking the conditions for raising a family to ideals of growing what you eat and making what you sell references a modest critique of a global economy that functions as an overwhelming system of impersonal commodity circulation and exchange. The Gaines family claims to imagine a place (not a space) where families can participate in shaping the conditions of producing a living, a family, and a faith. As their business empire grows, Joanna reflects on the paramount goal of their home renovation business: “What we do is for the sake of family.”

A recurring theme in HGTV shows presents the home as a site not only for family but also for work. A disproportionate number of clients (especially millennials) claim to need a home office to work from. The home is narrativized as a site for independent work minus the overbearing presence of bosses. Self-motivated work joins itself to an emphasis on the enclosure of nuclear-style family units. HGTV home renovations aim to unify the
conditions of work and family. Client fixations on open-concept interior spaces are not just about aesthetic tastes; they also reveal clients’ social conceptions of living space. Separate formal dining rooms can be folded into living rooms because after-dinner conversation has been supplanted by big-screen TVs. The open concept stresses the kitchen as a set of appearances—hence the outsized desire for factory-new stainless-steel appliances—rather than mere functionality. Moreover, clients routinely express a desire to monitor or surveil young children from the kitchen space via unimpeded sightlines. Because open-concept designs create illusions of spaciousness and freedom, open-concept interior space is the currently preferred architecture of value creation.

When we consider television history’s marginalization of nonwhites and nonheterosexuals, the depiction of social diversity on HGTV might initially seem breathtaking. Long-term migrations from Latin America, East Asia, and South Asia to North America have prompted consumer-oriented corporate marketing to steer toward an imagery of greater consumer diversity, and HGTV’s programmers and advertisers have jumped on board lest they become less competitive in garnering market share. Originally owned by Scripps Networks Interactive, which defined itself as a lifestyle media platform, HGTV’s potential global market is not strictly white or heterosexual or Christian. Its programming includes interracial couples, same-sex couples, African American and Asian couples, and Spanish-speaking families. This nod toward diversity is intentional according to HGTV’s general manager: “We absolutely seek it out. Our goal is to represent our viewing base, and our viewing base is very diverse, so one of the things that we make sure that we do is to have as diverse of a homeowner population as we can. And I’m glad that you notice, because we work hard to do it, and it really is reflective of the American population.”15 HGTV depicts racial, sexual, and ethnic differences becoming integrated into a commodified set of panethnic cultural expressions defined by open-concept demographics. HGTV’s advertisers visualize a color-blind world of commodified home ownership and interior design, tweaked to fit the cosmopolitan tone of commodified tolerance and acceptance of a global society.

HGTV shows come across as unabashed libertarian supporters of the family as a domestic unit independent of the particular liaison that forms it. Socially, this permits an agnostic stance on questions of sexual preference, permitting HGTV to endorse an open-concept approach to the family that can accommodate a range of sociation from same-sex couples to extended kin arrangements. In the renovation narrative model, it is the expert host (an entrepreneur) who guides clients safely through the turbulence of the marketplace and who ensures the negation of former modes of discrimination. According to these stories, equal treatment before the law no longer
requires intrusive, coercive government regulation. Instead, the realtor/designer personalities function as paternalistic, caring, and moral souls able to navigate the market without the heavy hand of the state and who are thus able to serve (at least ideologically) the best interests of her/his/their client.

HGTV sponsors a social universe where signs of diversity and inclusion define the landscape—where home buyers express desires to live freely inside open interior spaces located in unspecifiable communities where they can be as closed off as possible from prying eyes. Perhaps it is easier to tolerate otherness if it stays tightly enclosed and separate in its own privatized spaces? In HGTV’s stories, admission to this universe of home ownership is not dependent on the state—no state presence is required in these stories—and it is not bound up in the extension of traditional conceptions of citizenship. It takes place instead within what appears to be a consensual and non-judgmental marketplace where the integrity and expertise of entrepreneurial heroes steers renovations to their just conclusions. Even though gentrification patterns frequently have deleterious effects on housing affordability for the urban working poor, in the world of TV gentrification nothing happens external to the home.

Michelle Alexander has drawn attention to a supposed era of color blindness surrounding the law. On HGTV, the long-awaited color-blind society is part of the script. In its selection and representations of both clients and entrepreneurial flippers, HGTV signals a prejudice-free home renovation market. But this color blindness is mostly an appearance that renders discrimination invisible. On HGTV, color blindness does less to remedy past racialized inequities than continue to shroud the many ways that the post-2008 housing economy remains structured by the racialized antecedents and consequences of the housing crisis.

The TV version of home renovation offers an inviting vision of neoliberal multiculturalism that substitutes consumer rights over citizenship. In this postcitizenship model, rights appear to materialize through access to an enlightened and responsive entrepreneurial marketplace where discrimination is a thing of the past. The difficulty with this postcitizenship ideology is that just as it excludes the state, it also imagines a world that naturalizes the power of finance capital to ethically pick and choose which demographic categories get to participate in the benefits of home ownership.

At first blush it would seem that the home renovation TV phenomenon seems to run counter to the nationalist politics of Trumpism and the racist populism that it thrives on. The global expansion of commodity lifestyle markets requires an expanding demographic, not a more limited one. While the network must seek to encourage diversity as part of its globalizing market strategy, ideologically its shows feed the base dream that Trumpism pro-
claims: get government out of the way to allow the power of the free market to serve the dream.

Gentrification in Nowhere Land

HGTV shrouds geography’s relation to value in the home by concealing housing geographies in the cities where stories take place. Without location information, we have no sense of variations in specific housing markets. Chip Gaines summarizes the Fixer Upper approach to the housing market in a voice-over that frames each episode: “We look for the worst home on the best streets and turn them into our clients’ dream homes.” Location, as we all know, is a crucial ingredient in real estate pricing. While home renovation shows allude to this mantra, actual information about geographic location generally remains unspoken and off-camera. Speaking in the vaguest of generalities, TV realtors mention differences between “close in” and “farther out” to denote trade-offs in price versus distance from trendy amenities and longer work commutes. Bigger houses farther out cost less money. Relationships between social status, culture, geography, and valuation are so shallow they are not worth mentioning. Only Income Property’s didactic host offers speculative projections about the appreciation of properties based on how established a (once again unidentified) neighborhood is, or where there may be profits in reselling the property to developers.

Neighborhood is a key variable in the subjective calculation of value because, as the real estate agent on Property Brothers points out, trendy neighborhoods offer “a world of amenities at your fingertips,” but still Property Brothers does everything it can to conceal the particular city or neighborhood where the shows are being filmed. This repression of geographic and market specificity seems puzzling until we read Property Brothers’ website explanation: “We don’t emphasize the geographic location of the houses, as we want to focus on the informative aspects that could be applicable to a house in any city,” to encourage viewers to think generically about a house for themselves.17 HGTV is selling the concept of the renovated house in abstracto, where place becomes a space “that is homogeneous yet at the same time broken up into fragments.”18

If we are to believe Property Brothers’ Jonathan and Drew Scott that they intentionally suppress the geography of housing, their effort to abstract the house from its coordinates in place invites viewers to occupy a disembedded housing landscape. In sociology, disembeddedness refers to the way that modern institutions, primarily the market and the state, develop by lifting social relations from their specificity in daily life. For markets to advance and expand requires a uniform canvas rather than a multitude of
specificities. To rebuild the modern demands that the old-fashioned, the antiquated, even the culturally idiosyncratic be pushed aside to accommodate the greater efficiencies of the universal market. Notice the parallel between this sociohistorical dynamic of modernity and the desire for open-concept canvases that break down partitions to create empty space for home renovation—in each case, the past needs to be purged as much as possible to achieve new value.19

*Property Brothers* uses only the briefest establishing shots of the house exteriors the brothers visit. For the Scotts, the visual style of the exterior was largely irrelevant to the articulation of an enhanced home value in their early Canadian shows. By contrast, in Waco the exterior appearance—its curb appeal—receives significant attention in the before-and-after contrast that is the first measure of added value. Still, even in Waco the value of the renovated house must be evaluated entirely against itself, as it remains photographically isolated from that which surrounds it. The pivotal narrative is about reshaping interior spaces, not the surrounding geographic landscape, to excite new value.

Paramount to HGTV’s production of space is the open-concept architecture of lived space that eliminates as many partitions as possible. So knee jerk is HGTV’s pursuit of taking out walls to create the open-concept appearance that Chip Gaines pokes fun at his designer wife about it: “If we could open up a couple of those big rooms into a couple of those other big rooms, you’d have one big, big room. And that’s what everyone’s looking for, you know. I mean that.” A key ideological trope as well as a spatial figuration that holds special appeal for consumers, open-concept architecture speaks to a dialectical dance between homogeneity and customization. The story goes that within this fully hollowed-out space, each individual household can find, with the aid of HGTV’s designers, its own true identity—its own special look. This is the social promise of value that HGTV makes.

**Distributed Gentrification**

The Scotts are sometimes wont to remind clients whose taste for bling exceeds their checkbooks that if they are willing to go a little farther out, a fixer-upper in the suburbs will get them more square footage and the renovated look-alike they covet in already gentrified neighborhoods. When put into practice, their pitch to renovate discounted (by age, neglect, or foreclosure) properties in inner- and middle-ring suburbs endorses a spatially diffused gentrification that spiders outward from the center of cities. This corresponds to what Smith and Jason Hackworth observed in the early 2000s about a “generalization of gentrification” spreading across the “urban landscape.”20 The vectors of distributed flipping patterns are no longer faith-
ful to neighborhood-centric gentrification, instead leapfrogging unevenly across the urban map, seeking opportunity wherever it presents itself. If we could superimpose a map of the geography of flips and home renovations over a map of gentrification from the 2007 crisis till now, what might it show? Has the geography of gentrification morphed since the mortgage crisis of 2007? Has the stage of gentrification that Hackworth and Smith identified as “diffused gentrification” in the early 2000s changed in the wake of the financial crisis? Smith observed in 2002 that the “impulse behind gentrification is now generalized; its incidence is global, and it is densely connected into the circuits of global capital and cultural circulation.”

To encourage viewers/consumers to consider renovations as commodity abstractions, Property Brothers shrewdly abstracts home renovations from their fixity in urban landscapes. On HGTV, the house being renovated could exist anywhere, its geographic location defined by the coordinates of absence. Abstracted from place, instead, the houses meaningfully exist in a geography of nowhere defined by TV space. Is this television’s mimicry of the stage of diffused gentrification as it has become structured by the entry of financialization that provoked the 2007 financial crisis? In this warped fashion, HGTV unintentionally gives expression to the deterritorialization of housing finance in the age of securitization. The crisis consolidated a shift in gentrification “characterized by the emergence of corporate landlords, highly leveraged housing, platform capitalism (e.g. Airbnb), transnational wealth elites using cities as ‘safe deposit boxes’, and a further ‘naturalization’ of state-sponsored gentrification.” With distributed gentrification, the patterns of rent-gap opportunities have become further scattered, generalized, and disengaged from the clusters of fashionable commodification that identify gentrification hubs as hubs.

On HGTV, picking the worst house and recalculating its post-renovation value invariably seems to bear positive returns on investment. On Flip or Flop, Tarek El Moussa pushes the rent-gap envelope as far as he can. His methodology for evaluating potential profits relies on measuring the difference between the list price for a deteriorated or neglected property and recent comps (comparative sales) for similarly sized and featured properties in the surrounding geographic area. Hence he prefers properties that look the worst because these kinds of properties generate the greatest leverage in realizing the potential of rent gaps and because visually on television the before-and-after contrast is that much more vivid as an indicator of swollen value. Flip or Flop’s strategy is indifferent to neighborhoods, except insofar as the real estate neighborhood designations that Tarek consults carry with them a quantitative multiplier for valuation purposes, meaning that real-estate defined geographic areas carry variable multiples of value. In these kinds of TV calculations, neighborhoods are stripped of social and cultural
relationships, their value compressed into the abstraction of the comp. The house is not judged by the houses situated to the left or the right, instead its value is judged in comparison with other houses that home shoppers have visited, and, of course, the asking price is set by the abstracted measure of comps for the area, which are geographically absent.

In a monologue that opened the second season of *Flip or Flop* in the fall of 2014, Tarek shared his philosophy of flipping in response to the diminishing availability of foreclosed properties in the Los Angeles real estate market:

> In my opinion, real estate is real estate, and values are there just based on the numbers. Foreclosures are getting harder to come by, so expanding our search into new areas is necessary to stay competitive. Real estate is a numbers game; a good buy is a good buy no matter where the house is.

This geography-indifferent methodology of flipping suggests a significant historical transition in the relationship between flipping and gentrification. Tarek’s approach to flipping contributes to a geographically distributed gentrification pattern that relies less directly on neighborhood locations than on a radically abstracted, property-by-property, model of rent-gap opportunities.

Smith’s thesis about gentrification and rent gaps points to a purely economic logic that motivates the movement of capital investment to take advantage of uneven development patterns.

> Gentrification occurs when the gap is wide enough that developers can purchase shells cheaply, can pay the builders’ costs and profit for rehabilitation, can pay interest on mortgage and construction loans, and can then sell the end product for a sale price that leaves a satisfactory return to the developer. The entire ground rent, or a large portion of it, is now capitalized; the neighborhood has been “recycled” and begins a new cycle of use.²⁴

Smith’s definition of gentrification as rent-gap economics fits HGTV too well. HGTV’s exaggerated rent-gap sales pitch leaves no room to consider gentrification’s sometimes messy social consequences. Of course, it’s the social definition of gentrification that rightly concerns those with a public policy focus—especially when a crisis of affordable housing follows the displacement of lower-income, disproportionately minority populations from neighborhoods characterized by long-standing discrimination practices of disinvestment. Gentrification has been visible to the lay public since the
1970s as a pattern of economically forcing out low-income residents from central-city districts to make way for a social invasion of higher-income residents. After decades of these processes, poverty has been pushed into decaying inner- and middle-ring suburbs.

What is the relationship between gentrification, rehabbing, upscaling, and flipping? Each historical moment of gentrification has consequences for successive moments of gentrification that follow. Earlier waves of gentrification drove rising rents and population displacement that put upward pricing pressures on real estate in adjoining neighborhoods. As the attractiveness of urban amenities goes up, the restless search for lower rents draws other neighborhoods into the logic of gentrification and upscaling. So when Chip Gaines talks about transforming the worst house on the best street, he is addressing upscaling rather than gentrification per se. Upscaling occurs typically in middle-class neighborhoods where the housing stock may have been rehabbed in prior decades and the median income of the area is too high to consider the area eligible for gentrification. Upscaling means rehabbing homes in those neighborhoods to bring them equal to or above the existing median home valuations there.

While flipping and home renovation strategies are not necessarily the same as gentrification, for obvious reasons flippers look for overlaps where neighborhoods are gentrifying. In HGTV’s narratives, flipping and home renovation depend heavily on constricted applications of rent-gap thinking, with one significant qualification: HGTV performs rent-gap calculations exclusively at the level of the single-family residence, as opposed to the form of “corporatized gentrification” that dominates core cities. Tunnel vision on the home steers viewers away from the geography of neighborhoods, away from the upscaling of tastes and amenities in reinvented neighborhoods. Once again, HGTV’s visual strategy is oddly indifferent to the trajectory of neighborhoods as a source of value.

There are two exceptions to this rule on the HGTV and DIY channels, each featuring women who renovate and flip distressed older properties in core urban areas. Good Bones stars a mother and daughter team, Karen Laine and Mina Starsiak, who renovate houses in transitional districts in Indianapolis. They frequently repeat their motivation to restore the vitality of not just the houses but the neighborhoods as a whole, though there are no wide-angle shots of the neighborhoods. So too Rehab Addict’s Curtis focuses on restoring the still older, and once elegant, homes of the early modern Minneapolis bourgeoisie, working in areas that are undergoing early-stage gentrifying processes. These hosts voice concern about the future of neighborhoods in which they have chosen to work while their definition of neighborhood revitalization screens out questions regarding the displacement of poor populations. Good Bones buys profoundly distressed
homes in central-city districts that have suffered decades of disinvestment and performs minor miracles on the bones of these structures. Hipsters brought an energy to neighborhoods such as Fountain Square, and then more upscale cafés and boutiques displaced the artist pioneers and became a draw to the next wave of gentrifiers. Once renovated, the transformed homes court a multiracial clientele of more educated and relatively more affluent millennials that include lesbian and gay couples, racially mixed couples, and African American singles; the poor white Appalachian renters who previously inhabited these homes have already been eased out of the picture before the show even starts filming. Though the initial condition of these houses screams poverty, Good Bones manages to screen out the historical antecedents of anonymous urban poverty rooted in race and class relations, just as it screens out the poor themselves. Good Bones stories inadvertently remind us that gentrification of housing is fundamentally about spatial relations of class inequality. It often involves the displacement and erasure of African American communities, but here poor whites are also vulnerable to dispossession and loss. We see only one side of the value proposition, the salvage of material artifacts, while the human costs are left blank in the concluding tally of value. For all the good feeling that Good Bones tries to engender in these now less-blemished districts, there is no mention of the structural crisis of affordability that even well-intentioned flippers contribute to.

Bubble Pushers across the Hidden Geography of Dispossession

Good Bones seems to represent HGTV’s conscience of gentrification. The mother-daughter team renovates and flips, but without seeking outsized returns on their finished houses. In a typical episode, they buy a neglected property for $35,000, spend $190,000 to renovate it, and then sell it for $239,000 for a $14,000 profit. A modest profit, to be sure, but even so, these costs place this house beyond the reach of a majority of the Indianapolis middle class.

By contrast, Tarek and Christina of Flip or Flop fame are explicitly bubble pushers, always looking to push comps in a neighborhood to their very top. They are indifferent to the social consequences of their actions. Similarly, in the real world of real estate these days, each new resale of rehabbed properties seeks to push up to, or past, the most recent top. And yet the greater this inflationary spiral, the more difficult it becomes to continue finding homes dirt cheap compared to the market. The gap between potential and capitalized ground rent shrinks to the extent that too many in-
vestors compete to exploit that gap, pushing some investors further out, looking for the next area where discounted properties may again fit their strategy.27

In its early seasons, Flip or Flop chased foreclosures bought at bank auctions. But the doctored stories of chasing risk to make money diverted attention from the more significant story about bubbles and housing affordability in the wake of the financial meltdown. Lenders foreclosed on ten million home mortgages in the years following the housing crisis, vastly multiplying the inventory of devalued properties throughout inner- and middle-ring suburbs, as well as the exurbs. Foreclosures and evictions were not limited to the predatory subprime loans that targeted poor people, especially poor people of color, but also encompassed conventional prime mortgages that became vulnerable to the vortex of devaluation that swept housing markets. As the recession deepened, the burgeoning tally of vacant and blighted houses played havoc with plummeting market valuations of homes across urban and suburban geographies. Combined with rising rates of unemployment, many families found themselves under water on their loans. Thirty-five percent devaluations in housing markets paved the way to the next phase of accumulation via dispossession.

Foreclosures triggered by the crisis prompted significant demographic displacements that reshaped the geography of opportunity for flipping and gentrification. The abrupt housing market meltdown turned into a new phase of bank-imposed structural violence that created the possibilities for widely dispersed rent gaps. Structural violence and gentrification have gone hand in hand since the 1970s’ displacement of the poor to enable gentrifying neighborhoods. The “shells” developers sought to renovate “do not simply appear as part of some naturally occurring neighborhood obsolescence and decay,” they were “actively produced” via tactics that have historically included redlining, disinvestment, eminent domain, discriminatory policing, lack of property maintenance, obscene rent spikes, evictions, and predatory lending practices.28 The 2007 mortgage market collapse was hardly a tactic, but the recession that ensued proved to be strategically opportune for speculators armed with cash. A few years later, a leading Arizona realtor confirmed that “institutional investors are siphoning the wealth and the ability for wealth accumulation out of underserved communities.”29

Following the 2007 mortgage crisis, the groundswell of defaults, foreclosures, and evictions reshaped the spatial redistribution of opportunities for profitable rent streams, for large scale developments, flipping, and renovation. The sudden surplus of foreclosed properties contributed to new opportunities for flipping, but these opportunities were differentially scattered throughout the urban core and postwar inner-ring suburbs, and out into the exurbs. REO designates foreclosed properties that became bank or lender
owned. In Los Angeles after the mortgage market collapse, “one-third of REOs purchased by investors were flipped. . . . Flipped properties were more common in poorer neighborhoods with relatively lower foreclosure rates, more renters, poorer schools, and, most strikingly, much larger non-white populations.”

Investors and investing strategies in the REO marketplace varied from buy-to-rent investors, including milkers, who purchased the poorest quality houses and rented them as is, to buy-to-sell investors, who ranged from rehabbers to flippers who purchased houses in reasonably good condition and turned them over quickly, to predatory flippers, who purchased houses in poor condition and turned them over without improvement within a year. Emily Molina’s study of foreclosure investments in the Los Angeles area found that investing strategies varied with the scale of capital. Individuals classified as owner-occupants were more likely to purchase REOs in the exurban fringe, while corporate capital that circulated at a national and global scale concentrated on urban and inner-ring suburbs characterized by less-concentrated foreclosure rates. Large investors were “significantly more likely to flip REOs in neighborhoods with relatively fewer white residents” and lower poverty rates, as they sought properties in suburban neighborhoods with a reputation for better elementary schools because such neighborhoods contributed to higher flipping profits. Suburbs “that were once sources of mass wealth-building for homeowners of color shifted to places of mass wealth-building for financial institutions during the subprime boom and then for real estate investors via the purchases of REO properties during the Recession.”

The young and attractive Christina and Tarek portray themselves as mom-and-pop investors who have been savvy and successful in exploiting the REO market in the midst of the recession. The fact that they usually invested with cash to acquire REO properties suggests they had backing from deep-pocketed speculative investors. Such mom-and-pop investors were incentivized to perform as bubble pushers while playing a role in the transfer of wealth that began with the upsurge of subprime mortgages and intensified with the value-added flipping of REO properties.

The Return of the Repressed (the Class Character of Gentrification)

Shielding neighbors and neighborhoods from view is not only a matter for prospective homeowners who do not wish to see or be seen by their neighbors; on HGTV people who live and work nearby are given neither voice nor corporal form. However, a 2017 vehicular accident in Waco involving a
**Fixer Upper** home opened a window (so to speak) on the conflictual relationships that derive from gentrification but are repressed from the reality of the spectacle. A drunk driver crashed his car through the front wall of a house that Chip and Joanna Gaines had renovated during the show’s third season. The homeowners (the Downs) then accused the city of Waco and the Gaineses of “deceiving” them about the social character of the neighborhood they bought into. They complained that the neighborhood “is loud and filled with a seedy element due to nearby bars.” They also criticized what they saw as inadequate police response to their noise complaints and concerns about “safety.” Perhaps having watched too many HGTV shows, the homeowners apparently never imagined their fixer-upper cocoon might have to contend with urban space defined by regional cultural forms that cater to working-class whites, Hispanics, and blacks. The neighborhoods of North Waco where the home is located had a median income of $33,000, a relatively low education profile, and a predominantly white working-class population.

The couple bought the shabby, run-down remains of a 1905 Craftsman house well past its prime at a bargain-basement price of $35,000. It was sharply discounted because it needed a lot of work and was located in an area labeled as “unimproved.” The couple did not deny their status as gentrifiers—perhaps they were just counting on gentrification taking a speedier course through their neighborhood. Were they led to believe there would be a quicker pace to the replacement of working-class cultural establishments with the infill of cafés, boutiques, restaurants, yoga salons, and a grocery rather than a convenience store? The Downses grabbed for the promise of a deep-discount upper-middle-class residence, but they evidenced little appetite for any of the social risks of gentrification: noise, safety concerns, resentment, and cultural discomforts in a possibly gentrifying neighborhood that still lies in the orbit of a poorer habitus. They appear to have been so eager to cash in on the rent gap between Dallas (where they moved from) and Waco real estate opportunities, especially with Joanna Gaines factored in as a value multiplier, that they looked past the nitty-gritty of living in a transitional neighborhood. Perhaps they overestimated their political clout as gentrifiers to quickly reshape the neighborhood infrastructure and culture—after all, they had just purchased one of the highest value homes in the neighborhood.

Suppose they had done their due diligence. They would have learned that this was an aging working-class neighborhood where more people than not live close to poverty. With median incomes 40 percent below the national median, 41 percent of residents in the neighborhood are renters. The neighborhood’s Hispanic-Latino population is growing, while white and African American populations, especially the latter, have been shrinking
Figure 4.1 A “seedy” working-class convenience store that sits across the street from the Downss’s house offended their vision of the proper environmental habitus for their gentrification experience. (Photo from Google Street View. © 2017 Google.)

slightly over the last fifteen years. Despite this neighborhood diversity, the closest elementary school is a model of segregated schooling with almost no white children enrolled.\textsuperscript{35} Despite the usual biases against poor people, poverty does not necessarily translate into an unsafe neighborhood. The Downss’s complaints about crime were not born out by the data. The crime rate—both violence on people and theft—is comparable with the rest of Waco. The couple’s primary complaint seems to focus on the convenience store across the street, where young men play loud music and sometimes gun their engines.

The accident prompted the Downses to go public with their perspective of entitlement that we routinely see manifested on HGTV in the “I will not compromise” attitude that clients display regarding must-have interior amenities. Outside of HGTV, gentrifiers such as the Downses extend their attitude of entitlement to that which has otherwise been sliced away by HGTV, the neighborhood. The Downses expected that the city of Waco should, through public expenditure and regulatory activity, sweep out the culture of working-class poverty and facilitate transformation of the built environment to accommodate the sort of amenities that would draw more of their cultural kin to the neighborhood. This accident revealed that the jurisdiction of their entitlement extends to the outdoor spaces where they really
don’t want to spend time in the neighborhood among their neighbors. One of their unspoken must-haves seems to have been that the neighborhood should look more like them, and not like their poorer neighbors.

Writing about this story, Richard Lawson set the accident in a broader context that reveals a schism set in motion by the fixer-upper effect. Gentrification carries with it conflicts shaped by palpable class inequalities, but it can also set off tensions with surrounding middle-class businesses and homeowners who blame the gentrifiers for tax hikes that follow inflated property values. Lawson writes that “Fixer Upper has riven a town in two, ushering in a new flood of upstart home renovators looking to score dilapidated houses in dodgier parts of town so they can make them shiplaidated instead. There’s always an assumption on these colonizers’ part that they will be greeted warmly, because they’re adding value to the neighborhood, beautifying it some.”

Waco’s recent economic prosperity received a boost from the Fixer Upper brand, and this has contributed (though it’s certainly not the only factor) to a general upward pressure on property tax assessments. The TV show’s popularity has translated into heavy media coverage that attracts investors from outside Waco “who are willing to put far more money into older homes than was once thought prudent” because the home prices seen on Fixer Upper are substantially more affordable than those in other refurbishing hot spots. Indeed, the Downses moved to Waco from Dallas, motivated by a desire to cash in on the gentrification possibilities that came with a Joanna Gaines–designed house. Of course, locals are going to feel some antipathy toward outsiders, whom they blame for driving up the cost of housing in Waco. While some Waco locals have been encouraged by the tide of development that has visited Waco, others feel as if they are losing their place. It makes sense that the Downses might have heard harsh sentiments from longtime Waco residents who are unhappy about escalating property taxes: “People have complained about their taxes going up because we moved here. Store owners have complained about taxes.”

Whether the homes renovated by the Gaineses are responsible for the spike in appraisals or not, the perception itself is a crucial piece of the valuation coin. A fixer-upper effect extends well beyond the specific properties they’ve worked on. The Gaines’s influence, dubbed by many “the Magnolia effect,” is also responsible for a dramatic influx of tourists—a threefold increase, from 789,000 in 2015 to 2.5 million in 2017—in a city whose economy now depends more on tourism than the agricultural commodities of lumber, cotton, and cottonseed oil that once anchored the Waco economy. Already famous for their TV show, the Gaineses moved from home renovation to the renovation of Waco’s abandoned cottonseed silos, making them the anchor for their expanding retail empire—the Magnolia Market at the
Silos is now the city’s prime tourist destination, drawing three-fifths of total Waco tourists, or 30,000 per week.\textsuperscript{40} In turn, the presence of the Magnolia Market has attracted enough capital investment to build out an additional one thousand hotel rooms, along with a cottage industry of amenities, ranging from food trucks and cafés to art and antique boutiques. The Gaineses are themselves a major contributor, along with Baylor University football mania, to Waco’s story of postindustrial transformation, a motor driving something akin to a generalized process of gentrification. It seems fitting that the rusted iconic shells of Waco’s industrial past have become the marker of Waco’s revitalized brand identity—a built environment that shares a primary feature of Joanna Gaines’s interior design look—an aesthetic of salvage modernism rooted in hybridizing rustic with industrial.

Like numerous other \textit{Fixer Upper} alumni, the Downses also sought to capitalize on Waco’s growing tourist trade, renting their home through the short-term home rental sites of Airbnb and Vrbo. The Gaineses themselves devoted an episode of their show to transforming an older home into a bed-and-breakfast vacation rental that they named the Magnolia House.\textsuperscript{41} The Downns’s listing on Vrbo eagerly identifies their “HGTV Fixer Upper house,” while in a previous version acknowledging, with some cultural circumspection, that their fixer-upper is located in an area “undergo[ing] the growing pains of neighborhood revitalization. We are working with the City of Waco, council members and planners in hopes of adding improvements to this part of town.”\textsuperscript{42} This admission that they are without the cultural amenities that visitors may relish confirms their status as colonizers intent on “bring[ing] up the neighborhood” so that it conforms to their own cultural self-image while promising to command higher tourist rents in the future.\textsuperscript{43}

Along with other owners of \textit{Fixer Upper} pedigree homes, the Downses count on the show’s fans being willing to pay a premium short-term rent to say that they stayed in an original Joanna Gaines design. That they do not yet reside in a gentrified neighborhood is not a barrier to the owners still seeking to realize the potential ground rent that comes with gentrification, since each Gaines-renovated home is perceived as the perfected incarnation of gentrification unto itself. In Waco as elsewhere, the owners of these renovations complete the gentrification loop by seeking to capture a piece of the lucrative Airbnb and Vrbo short-term rental cash streams. While the Downses bemoan noise and the lack of friendliness in their neighborhood, they are continuing to benefit from the Gaines effect that has transformed their TV home renovations into something akin to art pieces whose value shoots up commensurately with the celebrity of Joanna.

Efforts to reap the financial benefits of the value generated by the \textit{Fixer Upper} franchise extend into the resale of houses at extravagant markups to the renovation prices paid. A tiny shotgun house salvaged from a teardown
lot that represented a total investment of $130,000 is asking $950,000, while the owners of season three's "barndominium" (a barn makeover) want to flip it for $1.2 million. Another virtual teardown swathed in emotion and sentimentality was the Paw Paw's house episode in which a young woman committed $250,000 to transforming her grandfather's abandoned ranch house inhabited by squirrels. Her grandfather's memory notwithstanding, the house went on the market for a "whopping" $1.45 million, a 580 percent markup.44

The irony, of course, is that none of this really respects the Gaineses' spiel about renovating these houses for families to dwell forever in their dream home. Their ideological pitch about devotion to the sanctity of family and place, however reassuring it may be, has difficulty competing with the lure of "callous 'cash payment,'" which, gently tweaking Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "has drowned" [familial] "ecstasies" of [middle-class] "sentimentalism in the icy water of egotistical calculation."45 The deeper HGTV message is the one that is heard and acted on: commodification of lifestyle comes before family; these homes represent a new engine of valuation. Per HGTV, renovation and gentrification comprise a personal investment strategy.