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## ***Commercial Gentrification in a Medium-Sized City: An Ethnographic Look at the Transformation Process of the Historic Centre of A Coruña (Spain).***

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The present article analyses, from ethnographic and visual perspectives, the transformation of the historic neighbourhood of Orzán, in the city of A Coruña (Spain). We propose that this scenario of social, economic and symbolic change, masks its intensive commercial gentrification. Therefore, we suggest that factors such as the substitution of traditional shops for alternative shops, the regeneration of its 'brand image' and the consumption and leisure preferences of the so-called creative classes, as well as the impact of global gentrification help to explain the current stage of reinvestment. We contextualise this commercial restructuring by placing it within the general framework of a macro-project of regeneration of the city's seafront that seeks, among other objectives, to promote tourism in the historic centre for which Orzán plays a key role for nightlife and 'creative' consumption.

**Keywords:** Gentrification, commerce, rent-gap, A Coruña, tourism.

### **Introduction**

This article employs ethnographic and visual perspectives (Krase, 2012) to examine the transformation of the neighbourhood of Orzán (A Coruña - Spain), one of the four that make up the historic centre of the city. A Coruña, with just over 240,000 inhabitants and located in the northwest of the Iberian Peninsula, is a medium-sized city in the Spanish urban system. Therefore, this work should be framed within the set of studies that, gathered under the term 'provincial gentrification' (Lees et al. 2013), focus on the dynamics of gentrification in territories beyond the excessively restricted focus on Anglo-Saxon cities over the last half century.

As a starting point, we look at recent changes in Orzán, which are structured within four interdependent dimensions. The first involves sociological changes in the neighbourhood's composition, with an increase in the number of members of the creative classes (Florida 2010) that led to an alteration of its symbolic image. The second dimension, of an economic nature, is related to the commercial transformation of the area. The third, concerns the physical change of the place itself. The last dimension situates these changes within a broader strategic framework that encompasses the regeneration of the A Coruña seafront that is based on a model of public space management promoting tourism and putting speculative pressures on the historic centre as a whole.

After the main vectors of the model of neighbourhood change are introduced, we take a reflexive look at their socioeconomic evolution. We also discuss how the neighbourhood, in its first phase of devaluation, suffered for years because of the lack of private and public investment, causing its stigmatisation and the proliferation of marginal activities such as prostitution.

Ironically, the current network of alternative and countercultural businesses -which ironically arose thanks to the neighbourhood's negative symbolic capital due to its decadent

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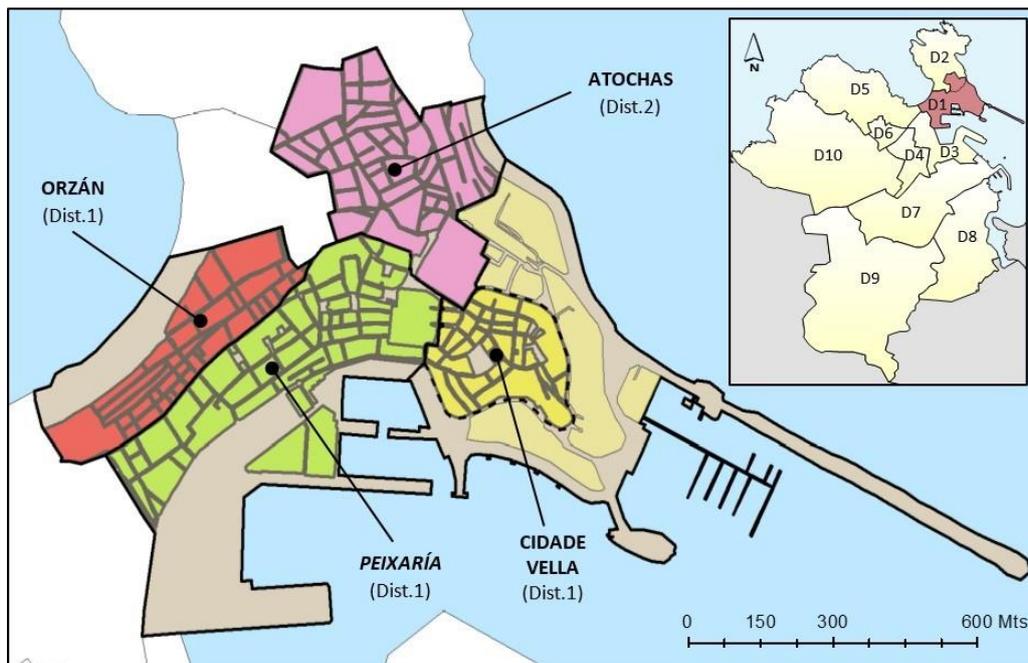
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and bohemian charm- seems to be the key to its recent revitalisation. Presently, the neighbourhood is undergoing a second phase of economic revaluation, which can be seen in the increase in the number of rehabilitated dwellings. Undoubtedly, this situation is linked to the arrival of new social groups in the neighbourhood (creative classes) and the touristic urban regeneration of the historic centre. This article demonstrates how both factors, principally revealed via an exhaustive two-year fieldwork of structured in multiple participant observations, are negatively impacting Orzán's traditional spaces and social networks.

### A Socioeconomic and Ethnographic Approach to Orzán

Orzán is located in the upper part of the isthmus that gives shape to the city of A Coruña. The lower part contains the neighbourhood of Peixarúa, where the Central Business District and all its financial, touristic, institutional and, to a large extent commercial, activities are located (see Map 1). In this sense, since the ninth century, Orzán developed as its counterpoint. Traditionally, it contained many of the less attractive functions of the city, such as port warehouses and the municipal slaughterhouse. However, unlike Peixarúa, Orzán maintained its dynamic network of small local businesses.



Map 1. Location of the neighbourhood of Orzán in the historic centre of A Coruña. Source: Alberto Rodríguez Barcón.

Orzán's architecture, unlike the bourgeois character of Peixarúa, is irregular and reveals poor planning, as well as a lack of city services and facilities. As we ascend perpendicularly on Map 1. from the tourist district of Peixarúa through its interior streets, we can see how the environment is progressively degraded, revealing a lower economic and social profile that merges into a visual landscape full of graffiti, abandoned or dilapidated buildings, damaged roads and many closed traditional shops (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Visual contrasts between Orzán and Peixarúa (A Coruña).

Caption: Top Row: Degraded buildings on an Orzán street alongside a recently renovated one.

Bottom Row of the most emblematic and tourist areas of the neighbourhood of Peixarúa.

Source: Alberto Rodríguez Barcón.

In Orzán, the few public interventions carried out in recent years have barely promoted the physical and social revitalization of the neighbourhood. On the contrary, there are clear signs of vandalism in the area as well as the proliferation of abandoned buildings that coexist with the rehabilitation of some other buildings (see Figure 1). These are visual representations of the recent social and, most importantly, commercial changes in Orzán.

### **Sociodemographic Change**

The sociodemographic evolution of the neighbourhood of Orzán shows a series of clearly different dynamics with respect to the general trend of the old town. For instance, Orzán's annual average growth rate of 2.67% during the 2007-2017 interval is much higher than the rest of the areas in the historic centre (0,06%). This indicates the attractiveness of the neighbourhood and the changed image it has developed in recent years. These data also suggest that many who arrived in the last decade are childless. This is consistent with the findings of Ley (1983), Beauregard (1986) and Bondi (1991), who point out that single-parent families, or those without children, are a distinctive feature of the creative classes. This group acts, from our perspective, as an engine of change in Orzán through the importation of related patterns of cultural consumption and leisure. Social change is also evident in the educational levels of new residents. Based on the latest census data, between 2001 and 2011, the number of university

students living in Orzán increased by 7.21%, as opposed to the rest of the historic centre with an increase of this group of only 0.07%.

Intimately related to the rise in their educational level, the socioeconomic status of Orzán residents has also risen. By applying a similar methodology to that used by Navarro and Mateos (2010), Rodríguez (2016) located a remarkable concentration of the creative classes in the historic centre of A Coruña. Rodríguez also has highlighted the proliferation of new global lifestyles that, framed under the logic of cultural consumption, also involve new spatial behaviours. Specifically, this concentration of higher status residents rose to 26.11% of all employed people for District 1, which includes Orzán and three of the four neighbourhoods in the historic centre, compared to only 21.76% of the city of A Coruña as a whole.

### **Commercial Gentrification in Orzán**

The degraded environment of Orzán gives rise to alternative and countercultural commercial activities, interspersed with pockets of poverty and brothels that is oriented to a model of consumption and leisure characterised by Florida (2010) as ‘neo-bohemian’. The strengthening of the symbolic capital of the neighbourhood around the emergence of alternative leisure activities is reflected in its branding as ‘SoHo Orzán’, and in the popular name of ‘Hipsters Square’ given to the main nightlife area (see Figure 2). As a result, new businesses are replacing traditional local businesses.

Along the almost 700-meter length of Orzán Street, the main artery that gave the neighborhood its name, traditional shops have given way to new types of business embedded in a very deteriorated, and once economically devalued, urban vernacular landscape. There are, however, some ordinary food shops, hairdressers and traditional business such as printers, and hardware stores. Abandoned premises, mixed with dilapidated houses, contrast with newer establishments such as fashionable pubs, hipster coffee shops and hairdressers, specialised comic book shops, creative workshops, vintage bicycle shops, organic produce markets, vegetarian restaurants, and co-working spaces, etc. (see Figure 2). While for traditional neighbourhood residents they go quite unnoticed during their own local consumption routines, this new set of establishments, is especially valued by the invading creative classes (Moledo 2018). As noted by Krase (2005), visually, these new shops and businesses are replacing the vernacular landscape based on what Bourdieu (1984) referred to as the ‘Taste of Necessity’ with one dominated by the ‘Taste of Luxury’.



Figure 2. Examples of Local Businesses — ‘Hipsters square’ surrounded by trendy establishments (above left); vintage bicycle repair shop and barbershop/hipster tattoos (above right); Scandinavian design furniture shop (below left); vintage bicycle shop (below right). Source: Alberto Rodríguez Barcón.

Modern facilities coexist with brothels in decline (see Figure 3). These survive in some inner alleys between Orzán Street and San Andrés Street. This visual clash between affluence and mixed commercial activity delimits the border between Orzán and Peixarria. Despite being besieged by trendy and ‘creative’ establishments, brothels remain somehow invisible to the pedestrian and vehicular traffic along both streets.



Figure 3. Brothels in Orzán. Source: Alberto Rodríguez Barcón.

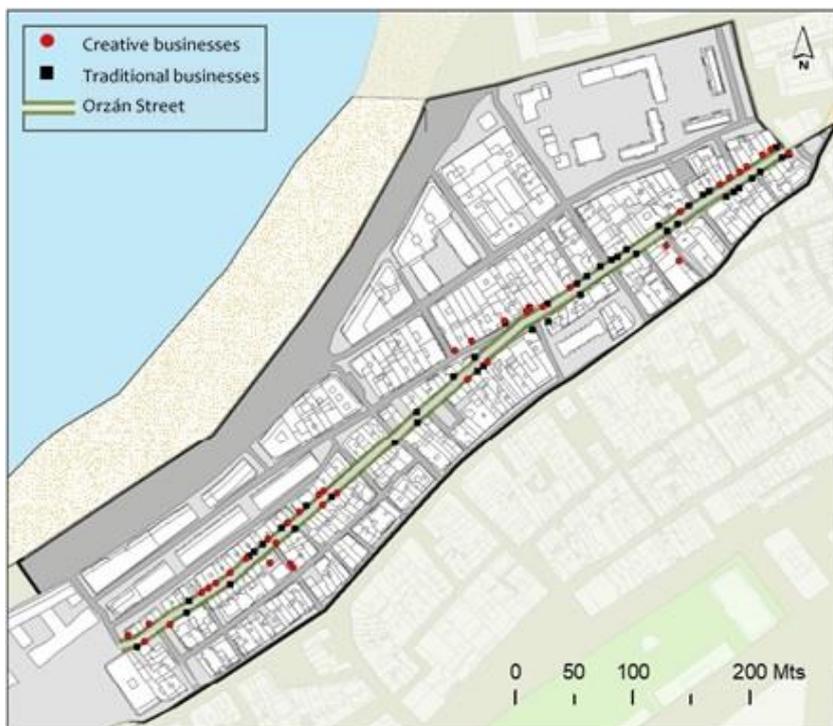
To conclude, we will territorially locate and identify the commercial establishments that form Orzán Street, the neighbourhood’s main artery, and its direct area of influence (see Map

2). The elaboration of this mapping was carried out from the beginning of 2016 until the end of 2017.

There are two major commercial types. The first are ‘traditional’ businesses and the second are establishments that we have classified as ‘creative’. The distinction was made by using subjective criteria based on parameters derived through direct observation or conversations with business owners. They include: year of opening; appearance; commodity or service type; average price of offerings; and explicit and implicit touristic strategies.

Logically, it is not possible to establish a simple delimitation between ‘traditional’ and ‘creative’ businesses based only on their opening date. Some recent establishments serve new functions but sport a ‘neighbourhood shop’ appearance, and are defined in our study as creative, as for instance some hairdressers or bars were so defined by DeSena and Krase in their study of gentrification in Brooklyn (2015). Similarly, some longstanding establishments act as leisure and entertainment venues for ‘creative’ groups and ‘protogentrifiers’, despite being fully integrated into the older commercial neighbourhood, as in the case of vinyl record shops, jazz venues, and pubs.

In addition to suffering pronounced residential deterioration, the neighbourhood has lost many of its old local businesses. The generational segmentation reproduced in both spaces is very clear: ‘opposite the young neighbour, who is a ‘consumer’ of creative business and bars of the ‘active’ area, there is the old neighbour who walks the ‘passive’ area and who does not participate in the gentrifying process’ (Moledo 2018: 36). Locals are less likely to patronise traditional shops because they are disappearing. (see Figure 2).



Map 2. Distribution of ‘creative’ businesses versus ‘traditional’ businesses in Orzán Street. Source: Alberto Rodríguez Barcón.

The preferred commercial alternative for the non-creative classes of Orzán are the many large shopping centres in the city (see Figure 4). These ‘temples of consumption’ encourage globalized standardisation of the shopping habits of the poor-, working-, and middle-classes.

In short, the commercial gentrification of Orzán, as in other large Spanish cities<sup>4</sup>, mimics the neoliberal patterns of the city as an ‘entertainment machine’ (Lloyd and Clark 2001), which thematises the urban centre for two large global audiences: the creative classes and tourists.



Figure 4. News from the Newspaper *El Mundo*. Source: [www.elmundo.es](http://www.elmundo.es) (09/07/2010 and on 04/14/2011). Caption: Left: ‘Shops in San Andrés refuse to disappear’ Right: ‘Opening in A Coruña of ‘Marineda City’, the commercial centre of the record figures’. Since the beginning of the decade, while the traditional shops in Orzán disappeared, on the outskirts of A Coruña and its metropolitan area, important networks of shopping centres were built.

### The Transformation of Orzán as Part of Touristification in the Historical Centre

The transformative dynamics converging on Orzán form a scenario of change at three levels (social, commercial and visual), and must be contextualised within a broader process of intervention in the historic centre of A Coruña. In any case, the four neighbourhoods that make up the historic centre (Orzán, Cidade Vella, Peixaría and Atochas) share a common history and future. The increase in touristic pressure in the historic area is subordinated to the redesign of its seafront (called A Mariña) with one expectation: converting A Coruña into an attractive site for large cruise ship operators (Rodríguez et al. 2018) (see Illustration 5). Selective rehabilitation processes were also activated that focused on the young who had higher purchasing power who wanted to live in urban centre.

<sup>4</sup> See the contributions of Justo (2014) on the gentrification process in the neighbourhood of Malasaña (Madrid), and Hernández (2016) on the commercial gentrification of the Casc Antic in Barcelona.



Figure 5. Coastline and seafront of the historic centre of A Coruña. Source: <http://clusterturismogalicia.com> (left); <https://www.pinterest.es/pin/589479038698228133/> (right).  
Caption: General view of the city with six anchored cruises (left) and comparison between A Mariña before (upper right) and after (bottom right).

Privatisation of the coastal area has increased touristic pressure on the historic centre and consolidated the current processes of upscale development and gentrification. Although the most direct impact occurred in the neighbourhoods of Peixaría and Cidade Vella, which largely shape the affected coastline of A Coruña, Orzán is also changing due to the real estate speculation generated by the transformation of the entire southern coast of the city.

## Conclusions

Throughout this paper we have attempted to show how commercial gentrification in Orzán is the epicentre around which a series of strongly interrelated phenomena revolve. The commercial revitalisation of the area also acted as a driving force behind its transformation in social, economic, visual and symbolic terms. The new businesses adapted, in terms of offerings and appearance, to the consumption and leisure preferences of the incoming creative classes. These newcomers have found, in the depressed and counter-cultural environment, a welcoming space for their recreational and entertainment preferences. In this last regard, we have tried to show how ‘creative’ establishments that emerged from this dynamic have replaced the traditional network of small neighbourhood businesses.

The processes of economic change in Orzán should be framed within the parameters of Neil Smith’s rent-gap theory by which the ‘disinvestment-reinvestment’ logics of certain economic agents seek to increase the price differential between the devaluation and revaluation of property for economic gains (1987). Thusly, after a phase of disinvestment and abandonment, Orzán gave the first signs of social and economic revitalisation. In this context, the process of commercial gentrification marks the point of inflection and begins the transition from one stage to another. The consolidation of the neighborhood’s ‘neo-bohemia’ brand (Florida 2010), also

helps to explain the progressive housing rehabilitation activities and sociodemographic improvement. It should be noted that Orzán's attraction to the creative classes would not have been possible without changing the public's perception of the historically stigmatised neighbourhood.

We must emphasize the importance of studies such as this one in redirecting research interests to medium-sized cities, because in them, more so than in large cities, the processes of neighborhood decline are more dramatic. We have looked at Orzán by employing ethnographic, especially participant observation, and visual methods. In this sense, our work is critically reflective. We suggest the contemporaneity of the phenomenon, with its multiple edges, requires future researches that contextualise gentrification at the neighbourhood level while also placing them within the context of global strategies for urban transformation and social change.

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