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# The Evidence Room: Five Signs You're Gentrifying

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Photography by Rena Kosnett



You've seen THE SIGNS. A high-end restaurant shows up on a block that never had one. An eight-foot fence is erected around a 1920s cottage, making it nearly invisible from the sidewalk. Earth tones spread like a rash through a residential neighborhood, delivering a million shades of green and brown. Gentrification can be a dizzying experience, transforming the look and feel of a neighborhood in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. How can you be sure your neighborhood is experiencing this economic phenomenon? Here are five obvious signs:

**Ornamental grasses.** Nothing sends a message to a community that change is brewing like Xeriscape, the drought-tolerant landscaping that surrounds a newly renovated, newly occupied home. Purple fountain grass, feathery pampas grass and hardy feather reeds show there's a new resident in town, someone not especially captivated by the grassy lawns of the suburban past.

**Subtrim.** When a newly purchased house gets painted, some exacting buyers go the extra mile by adding subtrim — or, in other words, a third color. Here's how it works: While the house gets a base color, the window and door frames receive a second trim color. Then the windows and doors themselves receive a third color, or subtrim. Subtrim is a surefire way to Pimp My Bungalow, giving it a bold shade like brick red or blood orange. Unfortunately, the most common color in a gentrifying neighborhood is the ubiquitous hipster green — a shade of olive slapped onto nearly anything — Spanish-style courtyards, Art Deco apartments, even medical buildings.

**Horsetail.** If grasses are the botanical symbol of residential revitalization, horsetail — the slender reeds that spring from ceramic sidewalk planters — show that a commercial district is being transformed. Horsetail could be seen a decade ago at the Newsroom Café on Robertson Boulevard,

then sprang up in Silver Lake a few years later at the Coffee Table, a business that helped fuel the revitalization of Rowena Avenue (and nearly got forced out itself, when a developer proposed a 64-unit condominium for the site). Horsetail even grows near Skid Row, creating an arc around 626 Reserve, a recently opened wine bar on South Spring Street.

**Artists.** Visual artists are a double-edged symbol of economic transformation. Artists are the proverbial canary in a coal mine, entering low-income corners of the city and testing the difficulty of living in a place with high crime and no amenities. “They go in and take the risks of living in a dangerous neighborhood, where the rents are cheap, then pacify it for the real estate people,” said David Ewing, a community activist in Venice, which many artists have fled as rents skyrocket. Artists send a second message once they start leaving a neighborhood, showing that reasonable rents are vanishing and wealthier tenants are moving in. Witness the loft rentals being converted to condos east of downtown Los Angeles, or the migration of artists and writers from Silver Lake and Echo Park to Highland Park and El Sereno.

**GELATO.** Back in the 1990s, coffeehouses were a pivotal sign of gentrification, showing buyers of means that a neighborhood was ready for its close-up — and a low-fat, no-foam latte. Espresso-based businesses generated street life, the air of Italian sophistication and an addicted customer base willing to pay obscene prices. The glamour began to fade, however, once Starbucks started grafting itself onto laundromats. Gelato shops — which offer a cream-free form of ice cream — are the new hubs of neo-Italian excitement, pushing a neighborhood from middle to upper class. On Sunset Boulevard, Pazzo Gelato completed the Brentwoodization of Silver Lake, where even the local comic book shop looks upscale. And while corporations may have diminished the café’s cache, a well-placed chain coffeehouse can still turn heads. See the arrival of Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf in East Los Angeles, or the presence of Starbucks near Santee Alley.