

# LIVE MUSIC CHALLENGES IN EUROPEAN CITIES

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## The never-ending gentrification process

**Gentrification** is the process in which local communities are gradually displaced from their neighborhoods. This often happens when an area becomes attractive to higher-income groups. Gentrification is also fueled by political decisions and urban planning efforts aimed at «sanitizing» or revitalizing certain parts of a city, a process commonly referred to as **regeneration**. Beyond displacing individuals, gentrification alters the character of an area, leaving it without its traditional community members.

Gentrification is an ongoing issue with a **large range of consequences** for cultural spaces. Respondents mention rising neighborhood costs, higher expenses for concert production, audience changes, and difficulties for local and artistic communities. A testimony from Italy provides a clear example of how these **interconnected issues** impact their work:

Respondent from Italy, Bologna - 99-capacity venue



*For us, for instance, much of our work revolves around engaging with the local community in our neighborhood. The challenges we face are deeply rooted in social issues. Bologna, like Barcelona and other major European cities, is grappling with the impacts of Airbnb proliferation, over-tourism, and similar phenomena. It is undergoing significant transformation due to urban regeneration efforts initiated years ago, which are now affecting rental prices and the overall character of the area.*

*Bologna, once a diverse and vibrant working-class neighborhood with a strong presence of second-generation immigrants, is experiencing rapid gentrification. As is common in many cities worldwide, the process begins with the emergence of upscale bars and trendy establishments like sushi restaurants, gradually altering the cultural fabric of the area. This shift raises questions about potential changes in our audience.*

*Currently, our audience comprises roughly equal parts musicians and local residents who value a sense of normalcy and community. We do not cater extensively to tourists or transient visitors, so the immediate impact on our audience may be limited. However, the broader issue lies within the community itself. As long-time residents of Bologna, we are finding it increasingly difficult to live and work here due to rising costs. For example, accommodating visiting musicians has become a logistical and financial challenge. The cost of hotels in the city has risen to the point where it is almost impossible to secure affordable options.*

*This issue is not unique to us; many other clubs face similar struggles in finding reasonably priced accommodations. These changes are happening at an alarmingly rapid pace, creating a host of challenges for both the cultural scene and the local community.”*

**Real estate speculation** is closely tied to the phenomenon of gentrification. For two venues in the panel (in Germany and Finland), this factor could prove fatal, as the situation has reached a point where opening new cultural spaces is no longer feasible:

### Respondent from Germany, Berlin - 250 capacity-venue

“Berlin has become highly speculative, making it nearly impossible to find a location like we have with the same atmosphere and purpose. Thirteen years ago, it was a different story—there were plenty of vacant spaces and abandoned buildings in the city center that no one wanted. Now, those opportunities are gone. If we were to start looking today, the chances of finding a similar place are slim to none. Recently, several iconic clubs in Berlin have shut down due to investors buying the properties, leaving no prospect of relocating. It’s a tough and uncertain situation for the scene.”

### Respondent from Finland, Tampere - 200-capacity venue

“The last place was losing money for so long that we couldn’t find any other option than this building, which was soon to be demolished. I think that’s a perfect example of gentrification – having to move into a building knowing it’s going to be torn down. The consequences are clear: you can see it in the disappearing small venues. There are only one or two small venues left in the city center of Tampere, besides us, while all the others have moved to the suburbs.»

Part of the irony lies in the fact that **cultural entrepreneurs often find themselves as pioneers of the gentrification process**. Unable to remain in their current locations, they may be compelled to move further and further from city centers, thus inadvertently contributing to the expansion of the phenomenon:

### Respondent from The Netherlands, Amsterdam - 150-capacity venue

“When we first arrived in this neighborhood, we were likely at the forefront of gentrification in the area. To some extent, we contributed to the process, as the neighborhood is traditionally a socially diverse one, with a significant amount of social housing. However, just across the street, a new residential area was emerging, with a focus on homeownership rather than rental properties. This stark division is evident, with social housing on one side of the street and homeowners on the other. When we first moved in, the section occupied by homeowners was largely empty, with vacant buildings and areas devoid of construction activity. Although the plans for development were already in place when we arrived, it’s clear that our presence has played a role in shaping the transformation of this area, whether intentionally or not.”

Underground spaces that foster cultural diversity and inclusion can initiate the phenomenon that will ultimately kill them. By drawing attention and revitalizing an area, these venues attract commercial interests that prioritize profit over community values:

### Respondent from Estonia, Tallinn - 300-capacity venue

“At that point, it was located next to the old city of Tallinn, just on its outskirts, and was the only club in the area. In the first years, Sveta was quite popular because it was also the first openly LGBT-friendly venue in Tallinn, something the city didn’t have before. So, the first few years were quite successful with parties, gigs, and events, which naturally influenced the area. More bars and mainstream clubs started opening nearby, which ultimately had a negative impact on us. Fast forward five years, and it became the main party area in Tallinn, with a lot of restaurants, clubs, and bars. In short, gentrification happened.”



Credit: Kaie Kiil, Svetaa Bar (Tallinn, EE)

The Sveta club in Tallinn had to close its doors in 2023. The shift toward mainstream nightlife diluted the unique identity that initially made the area appealing, marginalizing the very community it sought to uplift. This highlights a recurring challenge in urban development—preserving the authenticity and inclusivity of cultural spaces amidst the pressures of economic growth.

## What can venues do?

Three primary strategies emerge from testimonies in response to this gentrification phenomenon. A first important factor is **the support from public authorities** in preserving these spaces despite ongoing changes. It is challenging to speak of a strategy solely implemented by the venues themselves, rather a dynamic between the venues and public authorities, largely influenced by the vision and policies established by local governments.

### Respondent from Denmark, Aalborg - 110-capacity venue

“Gentrification happens around our place all the time. We’re 200 meters from the harbor, where they’ve built all these beautiful buildings, though I wouldn’t necessarily call them beautiful. I think the people who built them believe they are beautiful. So, there’s this contrast between our small, unique venue in the midst of all this mainstream development. (...) We have political support, even though they’ve built everything around us... I would say that all venues in Aalborg enjoy significant political support. I think we receive it because we perfectly fit into what they want to be as a university city that needs a space like this.”

A second effective strategy is **building a strong and recognizable project identity, or «DNA», that fosters a loyal and engaged community**. This approach helps secure an audience even if they don’t live near the venue. It also attracts individuals willing to work and invest their time in the space, despite the increasing difficulty of living in the surrounding neighborhoods.

### Respondent from The Netherlands, Amsterdam - 2000-capacity venue

“I think our position in the industry places us at the top in the Netherlands for venues of our capacity. We operate professionally, but at the same time, there’s a strong non-profit, DIY ethos that shapes our approach. (...) Our autonomy is crucial. It’s a significant part of our legacy and one of the reasons we’re popular among bigger artists. Sometimes, an artist who could easily sell out a 5,000-capacity venue chooses us explicitly because of how we operate, as well as our history and legacy. In some cases, it’s also because we supported those artists when they were still emerging, which fosters a sense of loyalty.”

The third one is **embracing mobility and incorporating the exploration of new territories into the venue's core identity**. In this approach, extreme gentrification serves as a signal for operators to shift their focus toward emerging areas. This dynamic of displacement can be interpreted through two opposed perspectives. On one side, cultural operators risk being perceived negatively as «active» agents of gentrification, contributing to the transformation of previously affordable neighborhoods into highly desirable areas, thereby causing the displacement of existing communities. This critical view highlights the potentially destructive role of cultural initiatives in urban transformation. On the other side, gentrification as an almost inevitable phenomenon that would develop as neighborhood revitalization is planned by local authorities. From this perspective, these operators play an essential role in rehabilitating neglected urban areas and transforming them into dynamic and attractive districts. In this context, public authorities should recognize their significant contribution, and integrate specific measures into urban policies to preserve and support these cultural actors.

### Respondent from France, Lyon - 800-capacity venue and 100 000-capacity festival



*We are often welcomed by some people who tell us they're glad we're finally bringing attention to their neighborhood. They hope that now, garbage collection will be more regular or that public restrooms might be installed. For example, I recently received an email forwarded by the city from a local resident. She complained about public restrooms being installed, arguing that during events people urinated outdoors. But the truth is, this happens every day, not just during events. There's a canal nearby, and fishermen frequently visit the area. Isn't it the city's responsibility to install public restrooms? It's not up to us to manage public spaces or set up perennial facilities. But we have to do it as far as possible and with our means, even in public spaces, during our events. What we realize is that by using transitional spaces, we highlight existing issues in these neighborhoods. Initiatives like ours inadvertently pave the way for gentrification—though I find the term a bit negative. Still, they help address problems that stem from a lack of municipal investment.*

This dual perspective illuminates the complex interactions between urban planning, cultural involvement, and the broader social and economic impacts of gentrification, which are often inadequately addressed by protective public policies. Urban planning is one of the key tools available to public authorities in mitigating these effects. A good example of poor urban planning mixed with gentrification is the rise in noise complaints, which often happens when cultural venues aren't taken into account in strategies to maintain lively urban spaces.

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