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A Euro-American perspective on urban renewal, social upgrading and the role of upper-middle class self-segregation: the case of refounded neighborhoods

Recent studies on high-standing residential complexes, composed of hundreds or thousands of housings in high-rise buildings and close to the new business centers of London-Docklands (Tim Butler, 2007), Paris-La Défense and Milan-Segrate (Cousin, 2008), have shown specific dwellers’ residential choices and representations of the urban space: they cannot be described with the analytical categories commonly mobilized to explain the role of upper and middle classes in social segregation (and social upgrading of spaces) within European cities.

In my PhD dissertation, I have shown that they correspond neither to the preservation of a traditional bourgeois homogeneity (“entre-soi”), nor to a process of suburban secession, nor to a gradual gentrification, and not even to a combination of these other forms. The neighborhoods of refoundation involve on the contrary complete physical leveling of an area and the quick eviction of former residents followed by the construction of brand new condominiums, no class mixing, no interest in it by the new residents, nor any emphasis or glamorization of the historically working-class flavor of the neighborhood (but, at the opposite, an erasing of the local memory).

Extending these researches, the project I am currently starting is an attempt to reframe their results among the American literature about urban renewal and self-segregation, and to draw on a Euro-American comparison. I will address the possibility of identifying refounded neighborhoods in the Chicago (and the New York) metropoles, the differences with their European counterparts, and the parameters that may explain these differences.

More widely, I will try to test the heuristic dimension of my typology of socio-spatial upgrading in the context of US global cities, where capital-driven processes of rebuilding are usually considered much more common than in Europe.