

Monu

magazine on urbanism

Mc Mansions

The Middle Class
Urbanism Interview with
Thomas Sieverts

Adi, Audi, Aldi

Density, Zoning
and Class in
NYC

and more...

MIDDLE CLASS URBANISM

02 Jan 2005

workshops of the future - successful lobbying effort to preserve abstract notions about urban and suburban neighborhood aesthetics - world's middle-class thermometer - attempts to simulate a village-like fabric - newest homeowners of the Manhattan Beach community, conditions of scarcity, ...

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For the last few decades the middle class has been the driving force behind urban innovation. More than any other, this urban group has both the financial resources and the sheer power of numbers to effectively transform desire into urban reality. Many of the most obvious components of our cities--Row houses, apartment buildings and sports facilities, to name but a few—are in large measure a function of the existence of a broad middle class.

The middle class symbolizes modest urban values, values that seem hopelessly anti-utopian and run counter to the megalomaniac concepts of cities proposed by great architects like LeCorbusier or Hilbersheimer. But in reality the middle class is comprised of some of the boldest urban utopists ever, individuals who have been realizing their utopias for decades. Much less dogmatic and more successful than any imagined utopia, with their power, influence and sheer numbers the middle class has shaped the urban landscapes we inhabit today.

But there is also something paradox about the middle-class when it comes to urbanism: On the one hand the common wisdom is that middle class households are integral to a balanced social structure in a city but at the same time their relation to urban environments seems to be ambivalent to say the least. Beth Lieberman's analysis shows how middle class residents in low density neighborhoods in New York City epitomize that paradox. They fiercely resent any increase in density - in urbanization in their neighborhood. And at the same time the declared policy of the city to hold on to it's middle class and not let it move out to New Jersey or Long Island, gives these homeowners a political clout and ultimately an influence over the zoning process that stands in no relationship to their numbers.

And although the term middle class very blurry it might be exactly the contradictory relation of middle class to cities that could lead to a definition of what is the middle-class. As Johannes Fiedler argues in his text 'Dispersion', in the absence of scarcity of some sort (e.g. economic, security) or top-down regulations, the default choice for living seem to be dispersed, low density environments. Or as Thomas Sieverts in our interview put it: 'people seek the fringes'. It is almost a pioneer-like quality that parts of the middle class exhibit – the constant search for the new fringe, the new land. The relatively new phenomenon of exurbs is the US expression of that impulse. Places that are ever further removed from the population centers almost completely disconnected from any form of civic life. In Europe or Germany this strategy is not an option due to lack of available open space. Instead in Berlin, as documented in the article by Katherine Bourke and Gregor Harbusch, spaces in between old and new cities are the new frontier – the new fringe that the middle-class colonizes.

The complex and contradictory behavior of the middle class in an urban sense begs for an economic definition of middle class. Middle class, broadly defined, are those that have a significant amount of disposable income. This economic status affords them the choice between different styles of housing and one could argue it is part of what distinguishes a middle class lifestyle from those living under strict financial constraints or in poverty.

In most developed market-societies the choice of place is only confined by the resources available (government interventions usually are only feeble attempts to channel those forces and produce more unintended than intended effects). And so, while the presence and the economic stability of the middle class is a social and fiscal necessity for any city, at the same time, their economic equip affords them the option to turn their back on the city, settle in new areas and set up an own counter-reality to old civic forms and traditions. The middle class, one could argue, is thus also

in an almost physical/architectural sense a critical urban component: Unlike lower class households, middle class families have a choice of where they want to settle and, unlike the numerically smaller upper stratum of a society, they are a quantitatively significant entity. And the places they choose to settle are then subject to large-scale transformation. The peripheries of cities were radically changed with the emergence of a large, mobile middle class. The suburb, probably the most important urban invention of the 20th century is arguably a middle class creation. And for a long time the demise of cities, their dissolving in a sea of suburbs was seen as the inevitable conclusion.

However, the option of leaving the city is not always realized, and there is ample evidence that the classical suburb itself is already under siege, from the emergence of exurbs and to some extent also from the old cities itself. Nevertheless the competition is about middle-class residents and that competition between the cities and their periphery. No matter who will win in the end, the results will change the shape of our cities profoundly. Fernando Vegas describes how the reestablishing of the middle-class in central cities in Spain is connected to wide-ranging changes in the morphologies of those centuries old cities. In a similar sense William Alariste's photographs document the architectural dimension of a new immigrant group in Brooklyn establishing itself in the American way of life.

At the same time there are signs that at least in the US, middle class lifestyle is increasingly coming under pressure. Foreclosure rates in suburban America and bankruptcy filings are at record highs, saving rates are at a record low. It seems that the safe haven of the middle class home is becoming a financial risk for more and more homeowners. With mortgages often barely affordable with two incomes in a family – the slightest disruption, a lost job, a sick family member etc. can mean the abrupt end of the dream.

But while the classic suburb in the Western World might be experiencing its own first crisis this model for middle class living seems to be just taking off in other places. Angie Waller reports from China how places from Long Island to Orange County become role models for the burgeoning middle class in urban China.

Although the middle class is difficult to define and it's consequences for urban regions are sometimes contradictory, we think that the existence of the middle class as a social and urban phenomenon cannot be dismissed and is worth careful inquiry as well as wild speculation. Our second issue of Monu is a contribution in that spirit and the bandwidth and extraordinary quality of texts, projects and graphics we received for this issue prove the point.

We would like to thank all authors for their contributions, William Alariste for copyediting some of the English translations and the Center for Urban Architectural Studies at the University of Kassel for its generous support.

The Editors
Thomas Soehl
Bernd Upmeyer

Title photograph:

In the summer of this year the symbol for the German middle class consumer culture filed for bankruptcy. Karstadt/Quelle a brand that operated one of the most popular chains of large multi-department stores and Germany's most successful shopping catalogue had been an architectural institution in German city centers as well as a printed one in rural and suburban living rooms.

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Call for submissions for Monu 3.0
Political Urbanism - the relations of urban form and typology to ideology, power and politics

For our third issue of Monu we invite articles, projects, photographs, artwork, research projects and wild speculations that are engaged in the field power/politics and urban form/typology on any level. Interested contributors should contact the editors ASAP at editors@monu.org. The deadline for contributions will be the **end of April 2005**.

scale 1:1.000.000

The red state – blue state phenomenon became commonplace even in Europe in the last years: Democrats have the upper hand in the coastal states and republicans in the rest of the country. But not only the US have a particular map when it comes to politics – traditionally the two most southern states of Germany have also been the most conservative ones. In Bavaria the conservative party had a hold on executive and legislative for almost 60 years now and achieved that state and the party are virtually synonymous in perception; the political party as a brand for an entire state.

scale 1:10.000

NY Times columnist David Brooks conceptualized exurbia as a place that houses a certain value-system and political convictions. Exurbs are communities that are both spatially and functionally virtually completely detached from urban centers. And they are as Brooks argues, communities of conservative, family value oriented households. In the 2004 presidential election, while Democrats generally did well in urban regions – George Bush and the Republicans generally won overwhelmingly in those new communities on the fringes of urban life.

scale 1:1.000

New urban typologies such as shopping malls, office parks and gated communities or new urbanism towns create their own political microclimate. Classical democratic principles as invented in the polis and developed in democratic cities and regions over centuries seem to be suspended in these environments. In a mall you buy your right to existence with your identity as a consumer and the security guards are enforcing house rules that have been drawn up in corporate boardrooms. The inhabitants of gated communities or other post-modern residential typologies together with the purchase contract generally also sign away part of their civil liberties. Given that these and similar kinds of typologies are becoming more and more parts of our urban environment what are the larger consequences of these perforations of the democratic process and the civic space?

Contents

Dispersion *by Johannes Fiedler* **Page 6 – 10**

Density, Zoning, and Class in New York City *by Beth Lieberman* **Page 11 – 14**

Mc Mansions *by William Alariste* **Page 15 – 20**

Urbanism for the Middle Class in historic city centers *by Fernando Vegas and Camilla Mileto* **Page 21 – 23**

Middle Class Urbanism: Interview with Thomas Sieverts **Page 24 – 29**

IKEA: When Cathedrals were blue *by Manuel Shvartzberg* **Page 30 – 35**

Neu Karow: a new space between berlin's past and its border *by Katherine Bourke and Gregor Harbusch* **Page 36 – 38**

Landscape Urbanism *by Detlev Ipsen and Holger Weichler* **Page 39 – 47**

circuitous *by Leah Beeferman* **Page 48**

Adi, Audi, Aldi *by Theo Deutinger* **Page 49 – 51**

Middle Class Emulations *by Angie Waller* **Page 52 – 54**

The New Middle Class *by Robert Winkel* **Page 55 – 57**

Middle Class Desires *by UAS* **Page 58 – 64**

Book review: Integrated Perspectives on Places of Modernity **Page 65**

by Kai Jonas