

Middle Class Emulations

By Angie Waller There is no standard definition of middle class. The gap between the poorest and the wealthiest is a wide canyon, and the area in between – the “middle” is usually defined by what it is not. For instance, in the second 2004 presidential debate, John Kerry repeated his campaign promise to fight for the middle class meaning his tax hikes would only affect himself, the president, and the moderator, Charlie Gibson of ABC news. A more concrete definition was set by factcheck.org who chose a family income between \$25,000 to \$75,000 a year as middle class– the mid range of latest census data..

Aesthetics of the middle class that no one knows how to define are somehow clinched in television sitcoms. A recent example is *The OC* on Fox. The show’s web site uses the synopsis: “The O.C., also known as Orange County, California, is an idyllic paradise – a wealthy, harbor-front community where everything and everyone appears to be perfect...”

If *The OC* classifies one attempt to pinpoint middle class aesthetics, the real world example of this cookie cutter community model is in the makings in Beijing, where Chinese consumer aspirations are increasingly Western and 70% of developers are emphasizing Western styles as a marketing tool. This influence goes beyond names which include among Orange County the likes of Long Island, SoHO, and Museum of Modern



Art. Not only are familiar names crudely attached, so are the aesthetics. From a snapshot, you might feel you have entered the set of *The OC* or *The Long Island* (if there was such a show). Both require a shallow level of engagement to be understood. To walk among these show rooms and recently built developments in Beijing, culturally removed from their historical precedents (i.e. orange groves and avocados or the first Disney theme park) is the same feeling the characters of the movie *Galaxy Quest* must have felt when they entered a “real” alien space craft modeled after the space craft in their spoof *Star Trek* series.



The plot of *The OC*, deception behind the perfect facade is a familiar theme to American TV dramas. It is hard to foresee if the Beijing version will play out in the same way. However, perhaps its lack of plot and removal from television clichés allow it to be the best way to conclude the affects of middle class culture on urban planning – when all aesthetics are removed from their original Western contexts and placed in a Beijing Petri dish for microscopic examination.



Long Island If I were old enough to have had the experience of walking in to a Chevrolet showroom in 1957, I imagine the lobby of the Long Island Beijing showroom would have given me a sense of a *deja vu*. The cardboard models of the new Long Island homes were painstakingly constructed to sample every mid-century American suburban cliché. The catalogs for Long Island have the heading “Back to the Future” – a slogan commonly used by New Urbanism in the United States. What new urbanism in America and China have in common is nostalgia for a past that never was. However, for the Chinese, new urbanism is the American middle class suburb of the 50’s.



The Long Island homes will be series of duplexes with small brick porches and private back yards. The model had eclectic decoration that fused cow print pillows and snake skin lounges with oversized stuffed polar bears lying next to long stem roses on Santa Fe colored plaid comforters. Not only did the choice in fabrics look like clip art packaged with 3D software, the layout of the house provided isometric viewing options of the living room from the upstairs hallway – similar to SIM city.

Convenient traffic at The Home of Tycoons A common companion to urban sprawl, is the car and the freeway. The building of a new freeway implies traffic jams, more commuting time, and the demise of public transportation. In the Chinese real estate offices, the freeway is the focal point to sales literature, models and virtual fly-throughs.

An example of the fetishization of the freeway is at the Home of Tycoons - a luxury high rise site on the Third Ring Road. In addition to resembling an Ethan Allen furniture showroom, the lobby has a plasma screen displaying a flythrough of the future development as well as the freeway. The animations were not just airplane perspectives of soon to come saunas, but an action-packed explosion of the future city. The freeways are depicted emerging from the ground just in time to meet the growing



overpass they supported. Smoke emerges from the intersecting coordinates met with force. The epic scene concludes with real cars stuck in traffic.

A sales brochure describing the freeway was followed by a caption in English that read “Convenient Traffic.”

The Museum of Modern Art – Middle Class Culture Like a sphinx rising from the ashes, the site for MOMA Beijing housing development and its flashy lobby sit on a large city block of former shabby village shops and courtyard residences. These relics of “old Beijing” have all been torn down or are marked for destruction. The signage for the development is similar to the signage that advertises major art shows in Western cities, long banners bearing the MOMA name on light posts in a 4 block radius of the site. However, these signs do not stir municipal pride or beckon tourist dollars, for in this place, the building is the show. In the words of Jack Chang, a kind MOMA sales representative, “the building is the art.”



I asked the MOMA realtor, Jack Chang, if MOMA Beijing had anything to do with MoMA, New York, or if the development MOMA Beijing had any areas designated for art exhibition. After all, one of the interiors appeared to be an artist’s bedroom with paints and an easel and one of the sales brochures pictured MoMA’s founders with the caption “Performance art.” I could tell by Jack’s expression that clients do not ask this question. During an awkward silence, he struggled to find an answer that would please me, the potential buyer. Finally, he responded that MoMA’s lower level would feature the Alexandra Gym, rated #1 in Asia for the past three years.

Angie Waller is an artist and lives in New York.