# THE MIDDLE CLASS GOES TO HEAVEN

Stephan Pascher

*Once upon a time there was an old peasant woman on her way back from the market. She was nearly home when she met a young man on the road who was staring up at the sky. The woman asked, "Say young man, why are you looking up in the air?" The man replied, "Kind Lady, I just fell from Heaven and I cannot find the hole to get back." "Oh, you come from Heaven," she said, "then maybe you know my husband Karl, he passed away last year." "Of course I know him," replied the man, "he lives just next door. He's doing quite well, quite well indeed, but unfortunately his socks and shoes are badly worn, and he has run out of sausage, ham, and butter. Things are so expensive up there, and he hasn't any money to buy food or clothes." The woman was deeply saddened to hear that even in death, her husband was in need. She asked the man if he would do her the great favor of taking some things back for him. He agreed, but begged her to hurry, saying "please be quick, or else I'll get into trouble for being gone so long." She brought the young man to her house and prepared two bundles: a larger one for her husband and a smaller one for him. When finished, she handed over the packages. "Here, please take this to my husband," she said, "and keep the smaller one for yourself. You've been so terribly kind." She also gave him a bag of money and asked if he would take it to her husband as well, so he could buy things in the future. The man promised to follow her instructions. He bid farewell and took off down the road in the direction of where they first met.*

*She never did find out if the packages ever reached her husband. A while back someone said that he spotted the young man wandering about the countryside, and explained that this was because he hadn't yet found the hole through which he had fallen.*[1]

*The Middle Class Goes to Heaven* is the name of a new slide and sound show at Orchard. Nicolás Guagnini – the Argentinean born artist and one-twelfth partner at the co-op gallery – is the work's creator. Guagnini wants to know, if the middle class does go to heaven, does it die along the way? He wants us to think about what happens when a socio-economic condition becomes an aesthetic affect; when an actualized social ambition is transformed into a high-end consumer good; when timely design solutions are repeated as matters of taste. The middle class – those neither at the top nor at the bottom of society (a fuzzy concept at best) – finds its greatest articulation in the welfare state. A central mission of such a state is the availability of affordable housing. The residential works so generated are anything but fuzzy. Their architectural styles can be read as material expressions of social ideology. When a style is co-op(t)ed to fit a decisively non-middle class identity it loses its utopian function, and its legibility. Marketed, packaged, and sold *as* style – like other things solid … it dissolves into image.

Guagnini's installation pitches an historical architectural development alongside a random set of prescriptions for middle class living – one, the disintegration of a determined ideological program (social and spatial engineering in sync); the other, a symptomatic sampler of a post-ideological condition (manufactured needs and desires perpetually in play). Presented as a

kind of directory of "how we live now" droned across a speaker box in a voice too seductive, too narcotic, too inscrutably sinister, we find ourselves sitting alone in a sheetrock box captivated by the absolute redundancy of these "order-word" expressions, while a series of 35mm transparencies flash against the wall.

**Transparencies**

The images come from photographic slides which an automatically advancing carousel projector projects. The machine drops them upside down and backwards into a slot located between the halogen lamp and focusing lens that blows them up. In 1676, the first Magic Lantern – the Sturm – was invented by a Jesuit priest named Athanasius Kircher. Also known as the Sciopticon, the Magic Lantern cast images by beaming light through small plates of glass. The first images were painted directly on. In 1848 in Philadelphia, the Langenheim brothers invented a transparent albumen photographic base that could be applied to the plate. By exposing a sheet of coated glass to a negative (also glass), a positive transparent image was made. Hyalotypes as they were called, soon became widely available. Although the Langenheims conceived them as entertainment (they put on their own public picture shows) glass slides (slides, because they were slid into and out of the projector) came to be used in education, particularly in lectures about art and architectural history. American museums started slide collections as early as 1860. During the 1950s, color positive film – made from the same stock used in the movies – began to replace the black-and-white glass plates. Though mainly employed in photojournalism, the 2" x 2" slides soon became popular with amateurs as an alternative to the more expensive black-and-white process. Kodachrome – the earliest practical method for producing slides – was introduced in 1936. In 1937, George Eastman's Kodak Corporation issued the first 2 "x 2" projector – the KODASLIDE – which was top loading and "gravity fed." Up until the recent move to digital, color transparencies were prevalent in commercial photography, and the most important photographic medium in publishing. They also were the standard for documenting works of art. In general slides are sharper, have better color reproduction and last a lot longer than negative print film. Kodachrome is rated at about 200 years.

Besides its many industrial applications, 35mm slides became the most common way of recording personal and family history. Home slideshows – the vehicle for playing back those histories – were popular up until about 1970 when cheap color print film became available. Eastman had made easy not only the storage and retrieval of our individual pasts, but also their creation. The Brownie and Instamatic cameras "made photographers of us all." They also rendered our lives transparent.

**The Transparent Family**

The family slideshow arrived on the scene of a post-War makeover of family life. Photography assisted in the renovation. During the 1950s, a remodeling of living arrangements and consumption habits transformed the middle class family into one huge market – the primary one – for an unprecedented explosion of consumer goods: an accelerated output of the nonessential that imposed an interminable desire for everything new. Experiencing the world as a succession of instantly outmoded stuff makes every moment distinct, disconnected from the ones preceding it, and the ones which follow. Time falls apart. Photography is the representational analog of that division. It cannot document without dislocating. Turning the family *on* to photography triggered a massive industry. It also turned the family into a subject *for* photography. Along with a renovated image of family life, the photography-for-everybody

movement transformed the family *into* an image; it converted each instant into a Kodak Moment waiting to happen, refiguring the family as a life-long collection of 2-by-2 squares of silver-coated celluloid clanking its way through a projection apparatus one picture after the next. Most significant perhaps, is that by grounding the family *in* image, it provided the family with a means of *self*-image, and instated a tool for self-discipline. The craze to document every aspect of private life took off in the Cold War 50s, a time which saw the crazy yet effective policy of placing everyone under intense scrutiny take hold. A "new" self was invented corresponding to the emerging field of social psychology, a generalized expansion of state policing, and the creation of a spy culture involving the development and normalization of new surveillance and manipulation techniques.

**In the Time of the Image**

Fixing our most intimate experiences onto tiny thermoplastic sheets made possible the assembly of vast personal archives on "total recall." Slideshows became popular along with home movies at a time when Americans were beginning to redefine problems in moral and psychological terms, rather than as consequences of economic or political forces.[2] The personal is *not* political according to such thinking – it's just personal, though not necessarily private. The family becomes not just an economic unit, but an agent and symbol of a moral order. Self-imaging is indispensable to this new moral play. The obsession with inscribing itself in pictures is more than a middle class pastime; it's a ritual of self-identification, a convenient check on the family's moral health, an affirmation of the righteousness of the nuclear family model. It also reflects a particular obsession with ourselves inaugurated in the 1950s that would make Narcissus blush: an outbreak of psychotherapy, psychotropic exploration and psycho-pharmaceutical remedies, self-help guides and self-help gurus, pulp-romances and TV soaps. This turn *in* effectively shattered any sense of class-consciousness welded in the 30s and 40s. In its place, a wonderful world of homemade memories, frozen in the time of the image.

The memory industry of DIY photography has recently shed its materiality, making it now even more sublime. Today it thrives in digital form, where time is a literal contagion of bits, and bad memories are dumped with the slightest depression of a digit. The lure remains the same: a feigned immortality, a user-friendly technology of self-reassurance; and its effect: to send us farther and farther away, while pinning us ever further down.

**What does the middle class want?**

Conceptions of the middle class continue to morph along ad hoc. The term may serve more a political than practical end. But the same question keeps coming back, each time with greater urgency: "What does the middle class want?" And every time the same riposte: a cry for redemption. It wants to be saved right NOW. It wants to make it into heaven without having to die. Ambition is the key – *ambi*, having it both ways, like Christ who is both human and divine, a sort of "undead." The good middle classer is a parishioner of paradise on earth, just (to quote a Dylan track) "tryin' to get to heaven before they close the door" …Cause not everybody gets the penthouse. The ideology upon which the middle class was formed as a capitalist accommodation with liberal democracy imagined a secular redemption through socially progressive measures. With the devolution of the concept, salvation becomes a matter of individual advancement by any means – simply because *I* can. Was the idea of a universal middle class too intractably utopian? How about the notion of a middle class housing style?

**Something Concrete**

Guagnini's 80 snapshots index relics, most of them architectural, most of them cast concrete, most of them in New York. A particular economic division or formation is hypostatized, that is, made concrete, given existence, entombed *in* concrete: monumental towers of hardened slurry designed to embody the very ideology that brought that class about, recast embodiments of its demise.

In 1678, Joseph Moxon – an English hydrographer and printer of mathematical books – wrote about a hidden fire in lime. The reference is to the heat given off when cement is mixed with water. Cement and aggregate together form the composite material generally known as concrete. The cement comes from heating limestone with clay and grinding it with gypsum. It binds, hydrates, absorbs H2O, then makes like stone – a kind of magic act. More prosaically, the aggregate is used as a filler; it resists compressive stress. Typically it's comprised of gravel and sand. But concrete cracks. It also creeps. Creep is the term used to describe the permanent deformation of a material. Creeping relieves internal stress and can lessen the amount of crack. Reinforced concrete, invented around 1850, reduces the amount of shrinkage, creep and cracking, and enables more elaborate construction. The Assyrians used concrete, so did the Babylonians, the Egyptians and Romans too. The Pantheon is made of it. Moxon's observation marks the renewal of an interest in concrete that had been lost during the Middle Ages. Today it's the most widely used man-made material on earth. About a cubic meter is mixed each year for every man, woman, and child on the planet. China uses most of it. Strong, malleable, and cheap, it can take most any form – well suited for endless reproduction. Austere as a WW II bunker. Blank as an assassin's gaze. Can be made to look friendly. The mob runs most of it in the US.

**Heaven is Crawling with Brutes**

The middle class found its architectural equivalence in raw concrete around the middle of the last century. Le Corbusier gave the name "Béton Brut" to a style of building featuring blockish, geometric, repetitive shapes molded out of an admixture of water, gravel and cement, left rough on purpose; buildings that express their functional and structural "truths" on the outside, with facades that follow their interior layouts – a signature transparence matching the liberal democratic ideal they were supposed to enact. The Anglo-American architectural critic Reyner Banham punned the French phrase into English, calling the style "Brutalism" fitting the chilly reception it received in Britain, where nevertheless it gained considerable momentum, particularly in economically depressed bombed-out urban centers, providing inexpensive construction and design methods for low-cost housing, shopping centers and institutional buildings. For the most part, the residential projects did not live up to their good intentions. The Brutalist-style council flats, as well as their French suburban counterparts, soon became over-packed, corroded, crime-ridden tenements serving lower working or out-of-working class, and immigrant populations. The failure of projects like Corbusier's Unité or Allison and Peter Smithson's in the UK ultimately had as much to do with larger social processes as with intrinsic flaws in design**.** Brutalism was an outgrowth of architectural Modernism. It flourished during the 50s and 60s, but crashed along with the very thing that had inspired it – middle class society – right into the 1970s recession.

**Brutalist Chic**

As a style, Brutalism outlived that crash, giving way to a sort of structural expressionism. Already in the 1950s it had found its way into projects with budgets far exceeding those of public works: privatized complexes whose architects could riff on the "honesty" of its materials, exploit its inherent quality for sculptural play, and bank its popularity on the anti-bourgeois set of associations it had for a forward-thinking upwardly-mobile urban class with correct politique. Aesthetics had trumped affordable housing as the primary concern of design, just as moralizing had taken the place of political debate. In short, a taste for Brutalist-style was born, treading a nostalgic line angling ever further back towards that misty and ancient ambition for truth, fairness, and social equality. The result was a Brutalist utopia whose proper realization lied in concrete – the stuff you're fitted into before being tossed in the river. What once was posited as a plan for modern metropolitan housing designed to complement a new social order had become one among the many languages of contemporary architectural aesthetics.[3]

**Don't want to miss out on Heaven because of a technicality**

For the US, socially progressive thinking was a thing of the 30s. In the 1950s, the suburban ideal with its demonization of the urban milieu sent the middle class packing. Publicly owned middle class housing never really existed. Unlike the UK, social housing in the States has always served a predominantly low-income population, and most of it is not truly social, that is, owned by public or not-for-profit organizations, but rather by companies and individuals who receive various public subsidies that reduce rents for tenants while assuring profits for investors. The powerful private rental bloc has long prevented the growth of a substantial social housing industry in the US, ensuring that most housing subsidies be directed to private, for-profit development.[4] By the mid-1960s, cities like New York were bankrupt, leaving little local money for public projects of any kind. It would take at least another decade for things to pick up, and for federally funded social welfare programs to be killed altogether. Under Reagan, attacks on public housing were part of a broader war on the very notion of the welfare state, and carried with them an idealization of individual debt-encumbering homeownership. Brutalist-style architecture in the US was perhaps never more than a mere sign for social progress, and as a sign functioned more genuinely in its institutional applications: government buildings, universities, libraries, hospitals, and museums. Its functional success lies in situations that demand fast, durable, and cheap construction, where choice of form, material and method put practicality before style.

**Practice gets in the way**

Guagnini's images provide exterior and interior details of Brutalist buildings, deadpan glimpses that deny any possibility for nostalgic attachment. There's nothing warm or cozy about these fragmentary views of residences, schools, airports and expos collected in North and South America – from Sao Paulo, Montreal, New Haven, and New York – from Chelsea to Kips Bay, Harlem to Houston Street, the Chinese Consulate to Chinatown. Even less assuring is the random mix of familiar phraseology heard chronically reverberating in female voice, in English, French, Spanish, and German: "Perpetual Peace," "Permanent Revolution," "Broadband Connection," "Medium-Term Goals"…… Yet the pictures of these man-made environments are punctuated by other types of shots reporting an occasional trace of a less-orderable humanity that persists in the face of these vast vaults of concrete paradise: a haggard leather chair, a stainless drinking fountain, a bracelet string of pearls, a couple of extended arms, an unruly watering-hose

seemingly out-of-position – pathetic reminders that these places were designed for human habitation, places for bodies that do not necessarily conform to the administered spaces to which they have been assigned or have otherwise come to occupy; bodies that need nourishment, comfort, and the tenderness of other sentient beings – a possible indication of the limitations of any program whose task it is to classify, clarify, or commit people to over-regulated ultra-sanitized individuated spaces.

**The Big House**

As we witness the middle class squashed along an axis of extreme wealth at one end and the miserably poor at the other, we marvel that the phrase can be uttered at all. And yet for a people who seem to believe that history can be shed as a ritual of reinvention, the idea won't go easy. The country with the smallest welfare state in the Western world is also the one with the most prisons. Perhaps ironically, prison architecture in the US is typically Brutalist in design: a style of building inspired by an ambition for social equality finds its most populist application in incarceration. The irony is not lost however in this literality (the pun plays out as justice served). Nor is it lost in the acknowledgement that the most American of aspirations – aspiration itself – is the only attainable utopia. No, the middle class has not gone to heaven. It's gone to jail. As for the rest of us, we continue to shop along the polished concrete floors and mannered cement corridors of tony restaurants, homes and spaces for art, until something better comes along. Or until we find that hole into Heaven.

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1 A tale based on several similar stories found in Northern European folklore.

2 David Brooks, "Cracking The Shells," The New York Times Op-Ed, August 20, 2006. Brooks discusses Grace Metalious' "Peyton Place," the 1950s best-selling novel that became a popular TV series. Brooks correctly points out that today, the "the tradition of moral and cultural commentary … has been swallowed up by politics," which is to say, moralizing has replaced rigorous political debate.

3 A similar development can be seen in he elevation of mass-produced mid-century furniture and recent knock-offs to coveted objects of consumption for an urban elite. But not only at the high-end. Check out any lifestyle publication and you'll find a catalog of retrofitted design products satisfying any price-point.

4 Michael E. Stone, Ph.D., "Social Housing in the UK and US: Evolution, Issues and Prospects," 2003, http://www.cpcs.umb.edu/users/mstone/StoneUK_Soc_Housing_Oct03.pdf

As I write this the New York Times reports that Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village are being put on the auction block, projected to fetch about $5billion. The 80 acres, 110 building, 11,000 apartment complex covering 10 city blocks in Manhattan was built by Metropolitan Life in 1947 for returning veterans (with government subsides) but has become one of the largest projects of affordable housing for middle-income people, protected by the city rent stabilization policy. Due to changes in that policy, apartments can become destabilized and about 27% at the complex already has been. The others are being advertised as "luxury rentals." Once the sale goes through, the entire place will be converted to high-rent apartments or sold individually as condos, effectively chasing away the tenants, some who have lived there more than 50 years. The development is not actually Brutalist in style, but is one of the unique examples of middle-class housing in the US. It was made possible by various state laws and amendments that enabled private companies to enter what was previously a public field of action, forming a new type of public-private partnership.