



**The vulnerable middle class?
Strategies of housing in prospering cities**

Johannes Moser, Simone Egger (eds.)



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Band 29

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Introduction: The Vulnerable Middle Class? Strategies of Housing in Prospering Cities

Simone Egger/Johannes Moser

*the soft swoosh at the back of your head
you've got something to lose
the ghost that climbs the tower
you have the option to choose and falsely choose
Get well soon: (How to Stay) Middle Class*

Konstantin Gropper, one of the most interesting independent musicians of the last decade, sings about the fears of the middle class of insecurity and social decline on the latest album by his band Get Well Soon, tellingly titled "Horror". This goes to show that the "crisis of the middle class" is no longer an exclusive topic of academic discourse but has arrived in the arts sections of leading media, in the arts in general as well as in many other contexts. This volume originates from the panel "The vulnerable Middle Class? Strategies of housing in a prospering city" which was organized by the two editors at the 13th congress of the Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore 2017, titled "Ways of Dwelling. Crisis – Craft – Creativity"¹, in Göttingen. In ten presentations, seven of which are published in this volume, it addressed the question of how the rapidly rising cost of living in prospering cities affects the everyday life and life plans of the middle class. Particularly the depths of focus of a cultural anthropological, ethnographic view of the lived everyday life of people thus facilitates insight and understanding which is missing in certain macro perspectives in the social sciences. Therefore, in the following contributions which are based on examples from Germany and Sweden, colleagues will discuss the question of how members of the middle class deal with residing and living in today's postmodern city, which tactics they develop and which strategies become apparent before the background of the processes sketched above. In her contribution "Dwelling in Postmodern Cities. Middle Class and Social Responsibility", Simone Eggers takes a cultural anthropological approach to the question of which status the middle class currently occupies in the city. Before the backdrop of political, economic and social processes which can be observed worldwide, she focuses on specific practices and discourses in Munich, also using the example of artistic involvement with these. Social and cultural anthropologist Stefan Groth examines the middle class using the example of the Rathenauviertel in Cologne in

1 Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore (SIEF). 2017. "SIEF2017 13th Congress: Göttingen, Germany. 26–30 March 2017. October 16, 2017". Accessed November 10, 2018. Available at: <https://www.siefhome.org/congresses/sief2017/index.shtml>.

his article. Based on the term class, he asks about the lifestyles and aesthetics of the middle to which imaginations of a good life can be attached. European ethnologist and cultural anthropologist Laura Gozzer looks at coalitions which can be observed in Munich as well as in other large cities. Life in a cooperative as a social and spatial organization of society offers a way of opting out of the financial jungle of the urban real estate market, yet at the same time is to be seen in an ambivalent manner because of its exclusivity. Architect Max Ott, in his contribution “Help yourself, but build the right thing. A collaborative housing project in growing Berlin” also deals with the ambivalence of collaboratively designed housing projects. On the one hand, these are about self fulfilment and achieving one’s dream of a good life, on the other, such concepts are indeed intended to offer impulses for a *better* society. European ethnologist and cultural anthropologist Libuše Hannah Vepřek examines the “Stattpark OLGA: An alternative way of dwelling as a critique of the (rental) housing logic” and asks in which ways an *alternative* style of living can be established in an economized city such as Munich and which shifts in meaning go along with such a self-chosen life design at the margins of the city. Cultural anthropologist Susanna Rolfsdotter Eliasson pursues “Strategies for achieving the good life” and focuses on a new generation of Swedes who come to own summer cottages in her text. The limited possibilities in the city can be compensated via the extended space in the country, and inheritance is also a central factor for the social middle class in Stockholm. Based on interviews, European ethnologist Sanda Hubana asks “Who’s the master of the plan?” and discusses what it means when an inner urban area such as the Tempelhof field in Berlin is not built on because citizens have voted against it.

On a final note, we would like to point out that this volume is published in a limited print version and simultaneously as an open access publication.

Dwelling in Postmodern Cities: Middle Class and Social Responsibility

Simone Egger

Abstract

This article deals with increasing rents and their effects on middle-class inhabitants of cities. Munich, the capital of the German *housing market crisis*, serves as an example for developments which can also be observed in many other agglomeration areas. The focus of the research presented here is on practices which aim at access to housing space and, consequently, are linked with representations which repeatedly take recourse to imaginations of a *good life*. The home plays a central role in the lifeworlds of not only individuals, groups and communities, but also societies which, in turn, form themselves as social structures. Individual living is always to be understood as a piece of a widely cast net and is connected primarily to the living of others, is integrated into policies, and dense urban housing particularly is always connected with questions about capital and habitus, about the design of the collective, about belonging, and the negotiation of difference and indifference. Social differences must be considered to arrive at sustainable solutions to the issue of the housing problem and the discussion around participation, however, at the same time, one needs to think beyond classes.

Keywords: arts, racism, social segregation, solidarity, collaboration, responsibility

Changing Games. Changing Players

“Joanna Warsza is the curator of Public Art Munich 2018” (Küppers 2018: Foreword), a three-month festival that explores both performative art in the city and the city through performative art. Public Art Munich (PAM) is a biennial art project held by the state capital Munich which takes place in public spaces from May to July and was held under the slogan “game changers” in 2018. Hans-Georg Küppers, director of the department of arts and culture, City of Munich, stated in the Foreword to the program:

[PAM 2018] will carry out an artistic examination of the immense changes currently taking place in politics, economics, and society with particular reference to Munich’s past and present. Joanna Warsza has responded to situations and personalities in Munich who attempted to “change the game” by questioning established routines of thought and action and presenting alternatives (Küppers 2018: Foreword).

The series of performances began in the area of the 1972 Munich Olympic Games with a procession from the East-West Peace Church to the Olympic Stadium, initiated by Anna McCarthy and Gabi Blum, on April 30, 2018. The two female artists conceptualized a “Parade of the W(e/a)k” that invited the audience to participate in the complaint that “[i]n a city like Munich, where housing prices have skyrocketed over the past few years, it has become increasingly difficult for people with modest incomes to subsist” (PAM 2018: Opening Procession). Several hundred people associated with large parts of the city’s art and culture scene took part in the procession. It consisted of actors in dystopic costumes, was equipped with elements of stage sets which were reminiscent of urban buildings and spaces, was accompanied by musicians who superimposed an equally dystopic atmosphere over the scene and was led by the artists themselves who were at the head of the parade, proclaiming their propositions by megaphone. The announcement of this happening stated: “Inspired by ideas about the rejuvenation of space, McCarthy and Blum aim to honor and propagate Väterchen Timofei’s and Natascha’s pride in a procession of the empowered or (so-called) ‘weak’ and ‘outsiders’ of Munich as an appeal to citizens to take matters into their own hands” (PAM 2018: Opening Procession).

Timofei and Natascha are two figures from Munich “city lore”. After the end of the Second World War, these two refugees from Eastern Europe settled not far from a large urban mountain of rubble on the Oberwiesenfeld. Using debris and a variety of other objects collected on the streets of Munich, the couple erected several *Schwarzbauten* (illegal constructions), among them a small church (Egger 2012). When the entire area was to be redesigned in preparation for the Olympic Games in 1972, Timofei and Natascha succeeded in fighting the plans by the responsible politicians and were able to keep their garden in the South of the park. This conflict was accompanied by a reinterpretation. Marginalized city dwellers became highly regarded members of a diverse cityscape under the eyes of an Olympic world public (Egger 2012). The thought of appropriation and a recapture of spaces, of becoming active and not passively waiting, was taken up by Anna McCarthy and Gabi Blum as a starting point for their performance. They aimed to achieve the symbolic occupation of the Olympic stadium with people and flowers, a space which hitherto had not been connected with the question of housing, as was pointed out in a contribution to the cultural magazine *Cappriccio* on Bavarian television. In it, Anna McCarthy could also be heard as she welcomed the visitors to “our new home” in the Olympic Stadium, asking them to lie down, make themselves at ease and stay a while (Cappriccio 2018).

Circles

Urban housing in the early 21st century has become one of the sites in the global postmodern world where the fight for the distribution of capital and sociopolitical participation is being fought. As architect Bettina Götz states, cities shrink or grow depending on the demographic developments and the political circumstances in the world (2017: 55). In the United States, the financial crisis has primarily manifested outside the abstract space of speculation in a tangible real estate crisis, and in Spain, housing is equally tightly linked with a downturn of the markets – which means predominantly the loss of property. Living space in both countries is usually bought and not rented. For a long time, this constituted the basis of a business which, at its core, revolved around material things – real estate – and, simultaneously, combines local credit approval with investments in hedge funds around the globe. In 2006, the US real estate bubble burst and shook the financial sectors throughout the world. Journalist Nikolaus Piper describes that for years, prices on US homes had been rising and many low-income families took part in the boom. Mortgage companies financed their family homes – which they could actually not afford – with mortgages that, because of the borrowers' low credit rating, were particularly expensive for them (Piper 2017: 26). As Piper further discusses in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on the occasion of the ten-year anniversary of the financial crisis, these “subprime loans” were sold on, bundled into packages and traded worldwide. German banks and their investors also participated in housing as a business on a grand scale.

As soon as the prices for economic capital rose and the debtors could no longer repay the money they borrowed, the entire model burst like a soap bubble and the collapse of the structure created high waves far beyond the limits of the actual finance market. The transnational dimension of the business caused effects that were felt around the globe. Not only in Germany did banks encounter existential trouble; the system collapsed, even more people lost their jobs, could no longer service their loans and, thus, were unable to keep their houses. Piper sums up that the finance crisis and the succeeding general world economic crisis have brought a lasting economic, political and social change (Piper 2017: 26). Billions of Euros were shifted from other areas, such as education, to save banks as a matter of course. At the same time, the numbers appear so fictitious that the question about opportunities wasted remains abstract. The loss of a house or an apartment, however, has not been simply abstract for most people, and neither can it be understood as a transaction gone wrong. The loss is harder and can be felt immediately. The home plays a central role in the lifeworlds of not only individuals, groups and communities, but also societies which, in turn, form themselves as social structures. Individual living is always to be understood as a piece of a widely cast net and is primarily connected to the living of others, is integrated into policies,