

INTRODUCTION

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MIDDLE-CLASS HOUSING AS A CROSS-CULTURAL AND MULTI-DISCIPLINARY PROJECT: RETHINKING CRITICAL, INTERPRETATIVE, AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

The history of the modernization processes of post-WWII European cities could be observed through the lens of the emerging middle classes between the 1950s and the 1970s when housing significantly contributed to establishing and defining new social identities. Middle classes were the main protagonists of the rapid urban development and massive expansion that profoundly influenced the production of new estates, neighborhoods, and urban sectors, leaving relevant traces on the contemporary built environment of the European cities. In a sense, Europe, in its various civic configurations and cultural representations, became the symbol of progress and prosperity for the middle classes, an international formation restored and restructured by the middle classes which was meant to serve and protect according to a new post-war social contract.

During the three decades, the middle classes' political and cultural project was predominantly implemented through access to housing. A newly built environment emerged as a response to the new expectations, residential aspirations, comfort desires, consumption cultures, and living habits of the middle classes, and their mobility, residential choices, architectural preferences, and ideologies profoundly influenced the codification of new models, ideas of domesticity, building types, and housing schemes (from the single-family house to high-density residential estate). Middle classes influenced the definition of new planning and housing policies. They were at the center stage of a real estate market that sought to address the demands of middle-class customers, while architecture and planning solutions—from the finishing to the amenities—became distinctive features aimed at distinguishing the newly built middle-class estates from the working neighborhoods.

Across countries, and regardless of cultural particularities, political circumstances, and patterns of economic growth, the typical apartment of the European middle class mass housing complexes turned into a powerful center of gravity for the hyper-modern citizens that could shelter their polyvalent lifestyles, their private hopes and aspirations, in an environment that was becoming more fragmented, commodified, and uncertain than ever (Giddens, 1991). Although often controlled, boring or restrictive, everyday life in these generic middle-class mass housing apartments was successfully adapted to the new demands of self-actualization by becoming more caring and conscious but also more consuming, individualized, and narcissistic (Lipovetsky and Charles,

2005). Faster and faster, the irreversible process of postmodern mass individualization provided the seeds of the middle classes' self-destruction (Vidich, 1995); the more the European middle classes progressed via transcending their prescribed identities, the more they were dissolving.

After a period of intense investigation of middle classes in multiple different fields (Ford, 1978; Simson-Llyod, 1977; Boltanski, 1987), renewed attention to the study of middle classes was raised during the last decade in Europe and beyond. The increasing "fragilization" and re-definition of this stratified social group raised significant challenges for studying the spatial patterns of this phenomenon and questioning the relationship between middle classes and the space they inhabited, where they built their identity (Bouffartigue, 2001; Chauvel, 2006, and Sullivan, 2000). However, rather than describing an emergent phenomenon, current studies on the European middle classes seem to explain the decline of this future-less class to articulate a theory of what may possibly follow.

During the last decades, this residential environment of neighborhoods and estates originally conceived for the emerging middle classes has been affected by unprecedented transformation processes produced by profound societal, generational, and economic changes, processes of technological obsolescence, new homeownership patterns, and modes of inhabiting. Growing attention was devoted to the inquiry on middle-class housing offering local and monographic angles (Isenstadt, 2006; Sarquis, 2010, Eleb and Bendimerad, 2011). And although the challenges that each country faces are dynamic, contextual, and diverging across Europe—from Germany to Greece, from Portugal to Turkey—what is common is a shared feeling of lack of perspective; the difficulty, if not impossibility, of European citizens, self-identified as middle class, to imagine a better future for themselves and their loved ones. Beyond the social generative procedures and mechanisms of economic reproduction, which are particular to each country, one can acknowledge a common European 'space' of perceptions and memories formed by similar experiences of risks and dangers, disappointments, and defeats. Reflected in the aging exteriors of the mass housing complexes, the retreat of the Welfare State puts "the promise of democracy" (Croteau, 1995) under threat.

This issue offers a cross-cultural approach to studying middle-class mass housing and proposes a transcultural reading of the phenomenon. Crossing different political, cultural, and semantic areas, the issue reveals the need to sketch a transnational portrait and the potentialities of a transnational interpretative framework for the study of middle-class mass housing and the role that the estates played in the processes of development, growth, and transformation of European cities. By focusing on case studies from Europe, this issue does not ignore the fact that the decline of what used to be the symbol of a modern community is not just a European phenomenon. Following the discussion developed in the recent "Housing for All" issue (Tostões, 2021), we highlight Europe as a geographical area—certainly a representative one—in which aspects of a global phenomenon are still under evolution; a phenomenon that one may also study in the United States, in North Africa and the Middle-East, even in countries of the Global South. Moreover, we do not ignore the fact that the European middle class crisis is not independent of the emergence of new middle classes in countries like China, India, and other super-powers of late capitalism. In this case, the explosive socioeconomic transformation of the societies of one continent activates a tectonic movement that hits the socioeconomic foundations of another.

While different definitions and conceptions of mass housing arise when observed through the lens of middle classes, according to situations and countries representing divergent political and cultural conditions and systems of values, some common traits appear when looking at the practices behind its design and construction (Caramellino and Zanfi, 2015). Analogies can be found in the set of shared policies, professional practices, financial systems, regulatory frameworks, visions of society, ideologies, tastes, and living habits related to the production of housing for the middle classes, but also in its forms of use over the years and trajectories of changes that affect the most recent history of these housing estates.

However, the perceived differences in Europe, even when perceived in a historical time, can help draw new perspectives for action on these residential estates, especially if combined. Cyclically, Europe experiences housing supply crises leaving the middle class vulnerable to not being a priority group. In the past, architects did not consider the design of middle-class housing particularly challenging, typically enjoying more creative freedom when designing for more extreme societal groups.

Today, however, these clusters have been looked at more closely precisely because they constitute large-scale building masses in European cities designed by competent and influential professionals deeply engaged in their societies. The historiography of European architecture has changed with the study of these estates, providing tools for the actual act of designing itself.

Designing for the middle class is challenging because it is a group with expectations in the public domain. These expectations spill over into the layouts of housing units and extend into public spaces, demands for comfort that shape their lifestyle, and access to quality cultural, educational, and health facilities. The European middle classes have demanded architectural quality, having asserted themselves as the bearer of an extremely high set of expectations. This is why studying these past processes is vital to understand their projection into the present and, eventually, generate tools to understand their significance in the future.

Contrary to what was predicted a few decades ago, these mass housing estates have shaped Europe and constitute a heritage that reinforces European identity through the social differences that shape this social group. This residential environment shares many of the problems of preservation that post-war architecture presents today. There is a real danger that its heritage and cultural significance in the disciplinary field may be compromised by the practices of environmental comfort and safety that most European legislation now demands. Reflections on preservation models are more urgent now precisely because the original character of these estates is being altered so rapidly (Allan, 2021). A reflection on what we want for their future in terms of architectural significance must therefore be opened alongside reflections on their social, economic, and urban nature.

Studying this built environment reveals the need to define a new conceptual apparatus and theoretical framework. It raises methodological challenges and requires a multi-disciplinary perspective, crossing research strategies, tools, practices, and methods from different fields: architecture, urban studies, interior design, material culture, technology, social sciences, ethnography, and anthropology.

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