

Out of the ashes of economic disaster will emerge a new under-class eager to consume the rhetoric of fascist populism, thriving on anti-intellectualism, sectarianism, conquest abroad and repression at home... Faced with this, how shall we save the values of Enlightenment?



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CRISIS?



SP-4580

Truth or Suburbia

by Ole Bouman

Since the dawn of humanity, truth has only come to life when people have exposed themselves to one another. Exposing truth is predicated upon dialogue and multilateral confrontation. Of course, this process can be painful. This is why individuals attempt not just to find truth, but also to believe in the concept of truth, as an essential social convention for decent and peaceful living. Be honest, and they will be honest to you.

Intrinsic to this concept, is the notion that just getting together is not enough. The concept of truth needs the concept of togetherness. It needs political debate, as the ancient Greeks knew. It needs *civitas*, as the Romans knew. In sum, it needs the city. Truth as a value of civilization can only be maintained as long as people live in cities.

In reverse, when cities begin to dissolve, when people move to the suburbs to pursue their personal happiness, when communities are dispersed in endless sprawl, truth is no longer guaranteed. On the contrary. One can witness the revival of untruth, of myth, of false assumptions, of brainwashing and scapegoating, in the historical typologies of countryside living. Think about the pattern of *Heimatstil* villages that provided the ideological backbone of Nazi Germany. Think of the *sovkos* as the local representations of Soviet power. And think of the susceptibility to any conservative propaganda and the mass production of fear in America's sprawl. Truth needs density, strangers and a competition of ideas. Where there is no density, myths and lies will emerge.

The 18th century philosopher William Cowper said: 'God made the country, and man made the town.' But now we also know:



Credit:
Jeff Wall
An Eviction, 1988 / 2004
Transparency in lightbox
229 x 414 cm

the devil made suburbia.

This may sound all very theoretical and farfetched. Aren't people living in the suburbs usually quite reasonable? Don't they abide by the law and adhere to order? Aren't their perfectly mowed lawns and uniformity of facades the icons of peaceful community? These people are decent fellow citizens, aren't they?

Moreover, is suburbia not the real caretaker of democracy today? A place where people are free to be the consumers they really are? Where they live the life they really want? Haven't suburbanites too often suffered from the condescension of the metropolitan elites, who accused them of being ignorant SUV-driving work slaves, who live their 9 to 5 life from boss to BBQ to baseball field and vice versa? Thank God we now have writers like Robert Bruegmann, who claim suburbia is just a better form of city life. How can this life ever be evil?

However, there is another factor that may convince us that a dark age lies ahead. It is not just the mentality of ignorance and lack of exposure that bedevils the suburban mind, it's much more material and objective. As Joel Hirschhorn convincingly has shown, living in a dispersed city is a permanent threat to your time, your health and your money, the latter making this behavior ultimately unsustainable. It's a fact that the large majority of people living in suburban environments are permanently close to bankruptcy. They borrow, wherever they can, for whatever they want. Mortgages, student loans, credit cards debts, buy now—pay later actions. Only recently have people started to realize that this can not go for ever. Not for the individual, nor for society as a whole. Because it is not just the people who live far above a standard that logically belongs to them, it is also their governments, their generation, their whole society, that's burning the wealth that has been accumulated over millions or hundreds of years; or by foreign investors, but also that still need to be accumulated

by future generations. As Al Gore points out in his book *An Inconvenient Truth*, the ecological footprint of the average suburban dweller in the West is many times higher than the global average, indicating the degree of waste that belongs to sprawl. This unbalanced situation can not last forever. Crisis will come, despite Oprah Winfrey's attempts to quell the disaster by dedicating her talk shows to subjects like the 'Debt Diet'.

Crisis is a manifestation of truth; it exposes a situation to its own underlying contradictions. So, crisis is carefully repressed in the suburban mind, or it is carefully depicted as coming from an outside, alien force. Suburbia cannot survive without the myth of its permanent natural order. It lives from the ignorance it is built of. Here we see the massive engineering of consent and the extended social controls that prevent people from thinking for themselves, with dialogue and challenge. This is a zone where people divide their time between home, office, mall and mega church. The suburb is the arena of the race for prosperity and it will be the arena for the disaster that must follow.

Unless... Unless change is on its way with *Volume* as its herald. We propose three paths out of the quagmire of self-celebration: recognize urgency, organize communality, and create monumental gravity. This means the design of symbols, new forms of organization, and germinating a commitment to sharing time. It must create the public values of trust, legitimacy, solidarity, vision, drama, history, leadership, vigilance and purpose.

Mr. Presidents, Mrs. Mayors, use this issue as your guide to find a way out of the dead end streets of lies and spin that sells the most destructive type of living in the history of mankind as its redemption.

This issue of *Volume* has been produced in close collaboration with MIT School of Architecture. We thank Chair Yung Ho Chang for his support and the members of the New Monumentality studio for their relentless work to make this pre-emptive strike possible. ♣
