The aestheticized culture
of the turn of the millennium
and its implications for the work of architects

Eila Jylkäs

The aestheticization of the contemporary culture
has made style an individual issue.
This cultural process may imply an increase in the demand
for the services of architects and other producers
of images and aesthetic products.
However, this change may also anticipate a limitation
to the "monopoly" that architects have held
in terms of defining good architecture,
when the growing well educated new middle class
becomes involved in the discourse on aesthetics.

In Sweden, the interest in architecture both on a political and civic level seems to have increased during the past decades. Architecture as a specific field was in 1998 for the first time included in the government cultural program[1], mainly due to the growing criticism against modern architecture. It has been argued that the monotonous and dull architecture produced during the 60s and 70s contributed the emergence and concentration of social and economic problems in certain sub-

urban areas. Improvement of the architectural quality of these areas is seen as one important measure in solving these problems. It is also hoped that by focusing on architectural quality, similar developments can be prevented in settlements built in future.

Moreover, it seems that the discourse on architecture, decoration and design have moved from a specific to a public arena. For instance, one of the biggest daily newspapers (Dagens Nyheter) has a new regular theme-page on architecture, which seems to have replaced the ecological issues which were more in focus some years ago. One could say that a discourse on architecture and related issues exists not only on the political level, but in the media.

The interest in the appearance of homes can also be seen on practical level. It is estimated that Nordic people spend more than ever on the restoration and decoration of their dwellings. It seems that the formation and decoration of the dwelling has become an increasingly important way for people to express their own individuality, lifestyle and values, as well as their social and economic status. (Gullestad 1989) Moreover, in the glo-

bal economy the *image* of an individual city, where architecture is a main contributor, has become an important aspect for cities to attract companies and investors (Borja et al. 1997).

The aim

This article has three purposes. Firstly, it has an attempt to place the discourse on aesthetics in the context of contemporary culture in order to understand why quality in architecture is seen to be socially relevant tool to solve social problems and to increase commercial competivity. This question is addressed by giving a brief presentation of the literature on the role and function of aesthetics in contemporary society.

The second aim is to discuss a new type of cultural disposition among the growing new middle class – the 'winners' in the post-industrial society. The third aim is to make a synthesis of these two and to estimate what consequences this cultural phenomena might have on the work of professional architects.

Aestheticization and the capitalist urban life

The fist sociologist to emphasize the importance of visual impression in urban life was Georg Simmel in 1903 (1981). The basis of his '*sociology of vision*' was that the eye has a "uniquely sociological function", that of constituting society without the aid of those objectified forms that are rooted in language. He argued specially that it is more important to see and interpret the visual impressions in an urban environment than it is in a small village, where all people know each other. Further, the possibility to "design" one's own style, which does not need to be coherent with personality[2], became possible and even desirable, when the first visual impressions in the crowd of people was crucial for making social contacts (Weinstein and Weinstein 1984).

The aestheticization of life, i.e. the creation of life as a work of art, started as an artistic counterculture in the end of the 19th century. Featherstone (1991) and Lash (1988) among others, argue that the contemporary aestheticization is the continuation of this heritage, but would never have become so successful without the development of capitalist market dynamics, which are characterized by the constant search for new fashions, styles, sensations, and experiences. In other words, the aestheticization trend of today would not be possible without the development of both **arts** and the **capitalist consumer culture** in big cities like Paris and New York.

After the turn of the century, big cities became sites of "dream-worlds" filled by a constant flow of commodities, images and bodies, where the artistic counterculture sought to capture in various media the range of new, exiting sensations and transform it to their audience. At the same time advertisements and department stores started to use images which created unusual and novel resemblance, by renaming commodities. Everyday consumer goods become associated with luxury, exotica, beauty and romance, and the original, 'functional' use was concealed. Lash states that "in no other culture in history has there been such a overflow and variety of images", making *culture* a dominating element in contemporary urban societies.

The constant recycling of artistical and historical themes in the aestheticized world of commodities has made the city landscape similar to "the half forgotten dreams of childhood". It is the mythical and magic world "where the child discovers the new anew, and the adult the old in the new"[3] (Buck-Morss, 1983:219) This simultaneous pleasure in newness and oldness gives people a strong sense of presentness. Jameson (1984:118) compares the intensity in the figural aesthetics, with schizophrenia, to "vivid powerful experiences charged with affect", which leads to a breakdown of the relationship between signifiers as well as to the fragmentation of time into series of constant presents.

One characteristic of this culture is the image of a timeless present combined with playful mixing of codes in everyday life, high art and popular culture, music television (MTV) is the most commonly used example. Today, the media is everywhere, surrounding us like an endless flow of fascinating images, so that "TV is the world", transforming reality into "hyperreality", with the same characteristics as surrealism in art. According to Baudrillard the difference is that while surrealists realized that the most banal reality could become surreal for short moments in artistic images, the entire everyday reality today has become a quotidian reality. That means,

the surreal is not longer limited to artistic impressions but involves, through media, also politics, social aspects and history as well as the economy, which together form a simulating form of hyperrealism. The consequence of this is that art is today everywhere and nowhere.

> And so art is everywhere, since artifice is at the very heart of reality. And so art is dead, not only because its critical transcendence is gone, but because reality itself, entirely impregnated by an aesthetic which is inseparably from its own structure, has been confused with its own image.
>
> (Baudrillard, 1983: 151)

Although the arts are the origin of aestheticized culture, the power of art which was based on originality and authority, has become a mere illusion in industrialism. The aura of art has been "stolen" by industry which produces commodities for mass culture: it has transformed painting to advertising, architecture to engineering, handicraft to industrial design, and so on.

> One could say that the dynamics of capitalist industrialism had caused a curious reversal in which 'reality' and 'art' switch places. Reality becomes artificial, a phantasmagoria of commodities and architectural construction made possible by the new industrial processes. The modern city was nothing but the proliferation of such objects, the density of which created an artificial landscape of buildings and consumer items as totally encompassing as the earlier, natural one. In fact for children [...] born into an urban environment, they appeared to be nature itself. [...]
>
> (Buck-Morss, 1983:213)

Featherstone (1991) emphasized that the world of goods and the principles of structuration in that world are the very central elements in understanding contemporary society. According to him, the cultural dimensions of the economy and the symbolization and use of material goods are not only aspects in handling utilities, but function as communicators in society, within different lifestyles. In other words, goods are not seen merely as utilities with exchange- and use-values, related to a fixed system of human needs, but are used in theorization of the commodities as socio-cultural signs.

Here Featherstone refers to Baudrillard (1983), who states that capitalistic mass production has demolished the original, 'natural' use value of goods, and the dominating value of goods has become to be that of the exchange, making the commodities 'signs' in the Saussurean sense. This means that the value of a commodity has become arbitrarily determined by its position in a self-referential system of signifiers. From this standpoint, consumption is to be understood primarily as the consumption of signs, and therefore, as something belonging to the realm of culture, and not as the consumption of use-values in economic meaning (Featherstone 1991).

Aestheticization of all spheres of life

The place of *aesthetics* in the social world, and its relationship to the social world, has been a controversial question for a long time within philosophy, psychology, cultural sociology and arts. From a historical point of view, the problematization of aesthetics stems from the Age of Enlightenment, the most influential thinker being Immanuel Kant. He distinguished aesthetics "which pleases" from that "which gratifies". The former, popular aesthetics, produced mainly for social purposes, was labelt by him as "barbarian" aesthetics, and the latter, which was produced by a charismatic artist for contemplation only, as the "pure" aesthetics. The pure aesthetics is free of the interest of senses, and therefore "the Good" (Bourdieu, 1996: 41). The experience of "the real" aesthetics became a goal itself, from being a tool for something else, or connected to functions in everyday life. Aesthetics and the legitimated and consecrated art had became closely woven into each other, becoming synonymous as "Arts", while the non-legitimated aesthetics serve the senses of "uncultivated masses".

Welsch (1996) argues that in contemporary societies more and more elements of reality, especially in the urban environment, are aesthetically covered, so that reality as a whole appears to us increasingly as an aesthetic construction. Facades are becoming prettier, shops more exciting, noses more perfect. But his argument goes even deeper: the aestheticization process does not only take place as a physical phenomenon, on a surface level, but

has also a deep-seated, immaterial side, affecting our conception of reality.

Roots to this contemporary aestheticization process are to be found in the developments in technology, and has according to Welsch not so much to do with beauty, as with virtuality and modelability. Reality, which has until recently been thought to be solid, appears to us as something changeable, combinable and open for the realization of aesthetic wishes. The aestheticized reality is constituted and mediated through media, particularly through TV. He argues, that especially for the young people, who have grown up with the media and therefore easily establish themselves in artificial worlds, "reality is barely real". Styling of bodies, souls and minds in beauty salons, fitness centers or in meditation courses has become a natural part of everyday life. Even individual's interactions with each others are increasingly aestheticized. For instance, good conduct and table manners are still considered to be honorable.

Aestheticization and postmodern culture

While aestheticization is a process which many researchers consider to belong to the development of postmodern culture, it is seen by Welsch (and Bourdieu) as inherent in modernity. The theme of aestheticization as part of modernity is further developed by Richard Wolin (1993), who connects aestheticism to Weberian social theory. He argues, that only under the modern condition can an area like aesthetics succeed in differentiating itself from other spheres of life, i.e. religion and everyday life, and begin to develop its own inner logic.

As a differentiated sphere, aestheticization creates an independent realm of value as well as elevates itself above the reality. It is one of the many unintended consequences of modernity. Aestheticism refers, thus, to a belief in the aesthetic sphere as "a vehicle of inner-worldly salvation", and represents, in part, a sublimated response to the historical decline of the world religions. Consequently, it is believed that aesthetics can help people to live better life. This could be an explanation for why quality in architecture is seen today as a way to solve social problems.

Whether contemporary culture can be characterized as postmodern or modern, is a much debated issue in sociological and cultural theory, and my aim is not to contribute to this debate. Rather, it is the cultural phenomena itself that is of interest, not what label it is given, depending on the researcher's theoretical standpoint. While some perceive the postmodern qualities to be only one part of the modernism, others, like myself, see postmodern culture as the evolution of the culture towards a synthesis of the modern and other cultural influence, including not only older European cultures but cultures around the world. Hence, my interpretation about the being or non-being of postmodernism is that there exists a consensus about what is meant by postmodern qualities in both camps, while the conflict is about which relationship it has to modernism. Therefore, the use of the concept 'postmodernism' in this paper is used to denote those qualities that are generally understood as postmodern.

One of the social scientist who sees postmodern culture as fundamentally different compared to the modern, is Lash (1988). He, and many others, describe language and structured discourse as the basis of modernity, while postmodernity is based upon perceptual memories and on subconsciousness and images which signify through their resemblance and iconicity. According to Lash, due to its figurative character, postmodern culture is by definition more open to the aestheticization process than is the modern culture.

The concept of "postmodern" was first used by architects and literary historians, as a way to contrast the latest architecture and literature with earlier modern architecture and literature. The common feature for both of them was the aim to 'read' both the architecture and literature, as language or text. In architecture postmodernism refers to new neoclassical buildings and mixing of historical quotations in architecture in general, but comprises even a wider range of phenomena, including the building and rebuilding of downtown and waterfronts into exclusive residences, as well as the historical preservation of buildings and settlement areas. The gentrification process and the growing number of simulational environments, as malls, shopping centers, theme parks, fairs, and museums, can also be seen as contribu-

tions to the postmodern phenomena in the contemporary urban areas. (Zukin 1988)

As a general concept, postmodernism is defined as a cultural phenomenon, which blurs boundaries between everyday life, high, art and popular culture, and which is characterized by "stylistic promiscuity and playful mixing of codes". While the engine for modernism was science and rationality, it is science together with sensuality and ironic humor for postmodernism.[4] Theories on postmodern culture emphasize the equalization and leveling out of symbolic hierarchies.

Postmodern lifestyle and social power

Postmodernity can also be understood as cultural disposition and taste in individuals. Traditionally, lifestyle is a concept build on individuals socio-economic class and status in society. But in postmodern theory lifestyle refers to taste, where a sense of style is something distinctive to every individual, without being determinated by individuals socio-economic background. Consequently, in a future postmodern society, lifestyles, taste and the sense of style can not be classified and hierarchisized. While the taste of an individual traditionally can be 'read' and used to help map the individual in the social hierarchy of class structure, in the postmodern society the consumer goods are to be used by individuals as cultural signs in a free-association manner and temporarily. This is both the effect of and a contribution to the development of a society, where the division into socio-economic classes loses its relevance.

Some theorizing claims that this kind of movement towards a society without fixed socio-economic status groups, each with distinctive lifestyles, in the end implies the very end of the social. If culture uses images which no longer function as stable social signs, the social division itself is questioned and this will ultimately lead to the *end of the social as a significant referent point* (Jameson 1984). Others, like Featherstone (1991), are not willing to go that far, but believe that the lifestyle and consumption culture becomes "relatively autonomous and playful spaces" in the future postmodern society. In Featherstone's scenario, the central actors are the new petite bourgeoisie (a concept taken from Bourdieu), as a new and strongly expanding class. People in this class fraction are today the central actors in both production and consumption of the imaginary culture. As a new group, they are concerned with the expansion and legitimization of their own particular dispositions

Tattoos are an example of an aesthetic way to express one's identity
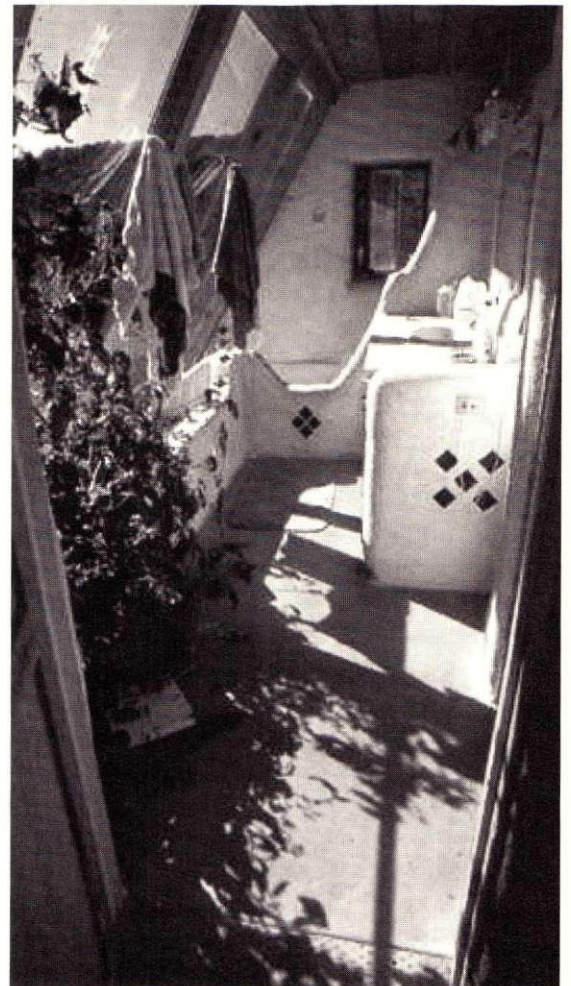
An example of alternative architecture, called "earthship", built using old car tires and tin cans

and lifestyles. It all is about a competitive social struggle between various substrata within the middle class over a definition of culture.

According to Bourdieu, taste in cultural goods and the feeling of what is aesthetic, function as markers of class. The oppositions and relational determinations of taste are constituted by both lifestyle and of the class/occupational structure, where the basic structuring principle is the composition of capital, either economic or cultural, or both, that these groups posses. Taste for lifestyle and cultural goods can therefore be generated both by the individual and social stratum possession of cultural or/and economic capital.

The dominant groups in society seek to possess or establish 'positional goods', that is goods which are prestigious because an artificial scarcity of supply is imposed on them. One problem in consumer culture is the inflation which is constantly introduced as scarce and restricted goods become marketed to the wider population, causing a social race to maintain recognizable distinctions. For instance, when classical music became sold on the mass market it lost its status as high art. In order to maintain the distance, the internal avant-garde dynamics creates a new supply of accredited cultural goods, while the external dynamics of the consumer market generates a popular demand for rare artistic goods. In this way, constant inflation and instability in the cultural realm have become the norm. In this process, the role of the new petite bourgeoisie is to stimulate the demand for the lifestyle of "aestheticization of life", as well as to provide the new products.

Bourdieu's (1976/1996) definition of the new petite bourgeoisie is a proletarian "who make himself small to become a bourgeois". Generally she is young and possesses little economic or cultural capital, but works hard for acquiring more of them, investing in culture or education. In order to do that she adopts the learning mode to life, consciously educating himself in the field of taste, style and lifestyle. She stands apart both from the old bourgeoisie and the working classes and distinguishes herself by his attraction for the most naive aristocratic qualities (style, distinction, refinement) in the pursuit of expressive and liberated lifestyles. She is a pretender, aspiring to more than she is. She loves both security and

adventure, and is a narcissistic, maximizing experiences and sensations. She is fascinated with identity, presentation of self and appearance, and is therefore a natural consumer (Featherstone 1991).

The new petite bourgeoisie of today are, according to Featherstone the new intellectuals who are inventing an art of living which provides them with the gratification and prestige of the intellectual at the least cost. They often adopt the most external and easily borrowed aspects of the intellectual lifestyle, liberated manners and emancipated poses. At the same time they fight against taboos, having cultivated disposition to not-yet-legitimate culture, as cinema, cartoons, the underground. They are the cultural entrepreneurs who seek to legitimate the intellectualization of new areas of expertise (pop music, fashion etc.). They often do not promote a particular style but *a general interest in style itself*, feeling nostalgia for past styles, but being at the same time interested in all the latest, imposing constant interpretation and reinterpretation on both of them. Therefore, compared to the old bourgeoisie narrow asceticism, they are hedonistic and expressive in their consumption.

The new middle class and post-industrial society

Betz's (1992) analysis of recent developments in Germany confirms Featherstone's analysis of the carriers of postmodern culture, and suggests that the rise of postmodern culture is intimately connected to the material and social reorganization, associated with what has come to be known as the post-industrial, information or consumer society. Central to this reorganization has been the growth of the new middle class, "class travelers"[5]. Betz shares Bourdieu's view, and sees consumption and taste even in the future as important instruments in the struggle between different classes and class fractions.

Post-industrial[6] society is generally been defined as a new system of production dominated by theoretical knowledge and services. It is also associated with the spread of a social system that assigns increasing priority to self expression, equality, participation and the general quality of life. It is a society where centralized mass

production is transformed into decentralized and individualized production, and integrated mass culture into a myriad of 'taste cultures'. In other words, it forms the material basis for the postmodern culture, and the result is a society where cultural sphere has expanded everywhere, leading to the growing aestheticization of everyday life via signs, symbols, and images of pleasure in consumption. Consequently, people who can handle these images and symbols, people who are able to create, manipulate and develop them, have better life chances than others.

This new class of white-collar workers are engaged with the generation, management and control of information, with the provision of soft services, processing of symbols and/or symbolic objects, as well as with leisure and personal development based on cooperative use of resources. The real differences in terms of wages, leisure time and consumption level between blue-collar and white-collar workers are, however, disappearing. But, following Bourdieu, the difference, distinction, 'must' exists between different social groups, and is now based on culture. The new middle class can reinstate the social differentiation by creating new cultural spheres and styles.

Besides the distinction between blue-collar and white-collar workers, there is also a fragmentation in the middle class itself, between various groups within it. In his German data. Betz (1992) has found at least three different groupings: the modern, the postmodern and the postmodern anti consumerism. The modern represent the old, established middle class, while the two others can be defined as the new middle class, the difference between them being mainly age. Although the social environment in Germany differs in many ways from Sweden, in that the conflicts between different generations and ideologies may be sharper, Betz' analysis may help to clarify the differences between those groups which are the most "visible" (not necessary dominant in political sense) at the moment. The following classification should therefore be seen as a caricature, whilst the reality is more complicated and nuanced. All the "older" lifestyles are still to be found among the younger generations, and are still more common than the new ones.

The moderns in Betz' analysis represents the dominant culture in Germany. The central value for this group is *the social democratic consensus*, and in true modern spirit, the critical discourse and communicative rationality are central to the promotion of this idea. This group, represented among others by the 68-generation, is 'politically correct' with its normative core of an emancipated consciousness, and embraces party politician, public servants and critical intellectuals.

The postmodern group want to differ from the earlier culturally dominant groups, among others the moderns. In this grouping the *quality of life* is the central issue, and the promotion of new forms of culture and taste. People in this group are typically social and cultural specialists, professionals and semi-professionals in teaching, social and medical services, arts, journalism and related social and cultural occupations. Their existence is possible because of the big bureaucracies and institutions of the welfare state.

The third group, postmodern anti consumerism, consists in Germany mainly of those young people who are 'too late', according to Betz. They are the young unemployed with higher education, most often in humanities and social sciences. They have been forced to find *alternative ways of life* and to support themselves by working with alternative newspapers, journals and magazines, in bookstores, cafés, in advertising, and as consultants and counselors. Their lifestyle includes "a new cult" of subjectivity, consisting of a mixture of anarchism, mysticism, new sensibility, macrobiotics, post-structuralism and environmentalism. For this group, the so called illegitimate culture is an instrument in struggle for recognition against establishment.

The postmodern lifestyle in this group rebels against the rationalization of the life-world by the state and those who serve it, and against the domination of life by critical discourse and discussants. They reject all totalizing ideologies, and especially the notion of progress, and support personal politics, based on individualist, subjectivist experiences and emotion.

Betz concludes that *within the middle class* there is struggle between these three groups: those who are dominating via state positions, those who have made success in legitimate culture and education, and those

who are unemployed, but engaged in alternative life strategies and alternative culture. Moreover, there exists the struggle *in the postmodern group* between those who have established themselves (in the legitimate culture) and those who are still fighting for recognition (in the illegitimate culture).

Betz sees the latest group, the postmodern anti consumerism, as the real postmodern resistance and as counter-practice to the official culture of modernism as well as to 'the false normativity of reactionary postmodern consumerism'. Betz argues that this 'ideology' appeals not only to the young people themselves but to the wider population as "a resistance against the threatening invasion of rational, enlightened, intellectual discourse into every aspect of life" (Betz, 1992: 108). While self-understanding was the core in modernism, the postmodern anti consumerism emphasizes self-creation, giving the individual the possibility to make her own choices to follow her own rules, ethics and aesthetics.

Consequences for producers of aesthetics

So far, this article has discussed how aesthetics has become an deep rooted phenomena in contemporary western societies and a central issue in peoples lives. Especially in the metropolitan areas, communication between strangers happens increasingly through design of clothing, hairstyle, body, jewelry, make-up and of the design of the things one chooses to buy. The design of your car shows who you want of be, as do the area where you live and the architectural style of your home. Design is perhaps more important than ever before, and consequently, the work opportunities for designers should be good. This is certainly true for industrial designers, but what about architects?

Buildings are relatively persistent products. When the population growth as well as the growth of the wealth in a society is low, as the situation is now in Sweden, the need to build is low while the need to renovate and rebuild is high. On other hand, the bigger cities continues to grow in the globalized economy (Borja et. al. 1997), and the need to build attractive buildings increases locally, as a part of the global competition about economical and human capital. However, it seems that the time of big scale serial products of similar flats and houses is over. The growing, well educated middle class is likely to demand more individually custom made products. It is also likely, that they demand their own right to define good architecture.

In the post-industrial society, people working with theoretical knowledge and services are the winners. This new class of successful white-collar workers are the innovative cultural force in the postmodern society, demanding new, innovative and exiting cultural products. As the winners in the society they also have the economical resources to get what they want. As customers, this new class is likely to challenge the creativity of architects.

There are also losers in the post-industrial society: those who have no education and those who have got the wrong education. However, the well-educated group is less likely to be satisfied with the passive role of a receiver and an unemployed, but create alternatives ways to live and express themselves. This is the group in society that wish to challenge both the cultural and economical hegemony in the society of consumerism. They are the true post-modern people, who emphasize self-creation and individualism both in ethics and aesthetics. They may perhaps not to have the money to employ a professional architect to build for them, but even if they had, would they want to?

Notes

1. Framtidsformer – Handlingsprogram för arkitektur, form-givning och design. *Prop. 1997/98:117*, Kulturdepartementet, Stockholm 1998
2. This freedom to create ones own image is even bigger in the virtual contacts made through Internet, where one can become whoever she/he wants to.
3. This phenomena is also recognizable in fashion, where the old trends becomes 'new' again and again.
4. This difference can be seen in comparison of advertisements from the 60s and 90s. Moreover, the young generation, people born in the 60s, is sometimes referred to as the ironic generation, or 'the generation X'.
5. By "class travelers" is generally meant people who change their class position in society upwards or downwards. The most common mobility is upwards, for instance from working class background to middle class, often with the help of education.
6. While the concept "postmodern" refers to culture in a so-ciety, the concept "post-industrial" refers to the structural change in economy and production. They are analytically separated phenomena, but coexist and mutually influence each other.

Eila Jylkäs is a doctorate student in sociology at Department of Sociology and Institute of Housing Research at Uppsala University. Her thesis (in progress), *Taste in Architecture among Swedish High School Students*, is about the differences in architectural preferences amongst young people from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

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