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The Middle-Class City: Transforming Space and Time in
Philadelphia, 1876-1926 (review)

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(Review)

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The Middle-Class City: Transforming Space and Time in Philadelphia, 1876–1926. By John Henry Hepp, IV (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. ix plus 278 pp.).

The Middle-Class City offers a ‘case study’ in middle-class Philadelphians’ efforts to order their city according to Victorian ideas of rationality, and to maintain their physical and cultural spaces in the face of challenges created by growth, an increasingly diverse population, and the erosion of the borders between classes. Hepp contributes to the literature on suburbanization, on the culture of consumption, and on the effect of unregulated capitalism and big business on individual industries like newspaper publishing, by examining Philadelphians’ shared sense of themselves as members of a particular kind of culture: one ordered along rational principles, with appropriate divisions according to nature and function, and with a common faith in progress. In Hepp’s view, the primary characteristic of the Victorian middle class was not a search for order as a defense against social change, but faith in rationalization and progress, embodied in both public and private spaces.

Hepp focuses on three kinds of public spaces to explore Victorian ideas of classification according to function, class, and audience: public transportation, department stores, and newspapers. Using a range of primary and secondary sources including the obvious (diaries, advertisements, maps) and the innovative (railroad timetables), Hepp attempts to show how middle-class Philadelphians constructed an increasingly compartmentalized urban environment in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Victorian enthusiasm for classification produced lively business and cultural districts in Center City, and a growing ring of bedroom communities inhabited by a middle class that was able to live with, but not among, the working classes and elites with which they shared the city.

Hepp examines the development of a public transportation system in Philadelphia in the second half of the nineteenth century, and especially in the period between 1880–1900, as a creation of a system of “bourgeois corridors” that connected middle-class residences in the suburbs to middle-class enclaves in the downtown area where residents worked, shopped, and attended cultural events. Transportation companies made decisions about routes, rates, and development of new technologies based on a complex calculus of increasingly sophisticated ideas about ridership, ‘unregulated capitalism,’ and boosterism (Philadelphia hosted the Centennial Exposition in 1876). The fares charged required that riders be almost exclusively middle-class and elite, and helped ensure that recreational spaces like Willow Grove Park were safe places for the middle class (especially young women). Riders in Hepp’s study recognized that their environment insulated them to a significant extent from the working classes, and appreciated it: one of Hepp’s diarists described the entire greater Philadelphia area as “one great big stretch of middle class (168),” and another recorded visits to South Philadelphia’s Italian community and to Chinatown as though they were tourist excursions. In the early twentieth century, economic concerns such as quick movement of freight, desire to increase ridership and to move workers to jobs more efficiently, and to reduce traffic congestion and accidents, eventually resulted in the creation of the subway-surface and elevated train lines through Center City, which promoted use by the working classes through cheaper fares,

and made possible for them the separation of home from business that had promoted middle-class suburbanization.

As train companies learned to shape routes and times according to the needs of suburban riders, they attempted to shape riders and outperform the competition with more precise timetables and increasingly compartmentalized stations offering a growing array of services to specific groups (from separate waiting rooms, to restaurants, bathing facilities, and post offices). At the same time, department stores enjoyed dramatic growth, and attempted to shape the market through specialization of departments, and a 'retail calendar' that had only occasional connection to the calendar year. Just as transportation spaces recognized and promoted class and cultural divisions, retail giants like Gimbels, Wanamakers, and Strawbridge and Clothier offered opportunities to purchase goods like suits or dresses according to the shopper's income and taste. Even as transportation became increasingly 'multi-classed' at the end of the nineteenth century, department stores opened 'bargain basements' to appeal to working class shoppers and shaped other services to respond to a range of incomes and backgrounds. The genteel metropolitan press of the late nineteenth century, which appealed to a middle-class audience by gradually refining both content (more news, a concern with accuracy) and layout (creation of subject sections) was joined by an array of newspapers that competed briskly for circulation by posting latest news and sports scores on exterior bulletin boards, producing multiple editions, increasing advertising, and lowering prices. Hepp is careful to note that in broad outline these changes were occurring in cities throughout America and have been described by other historians; his contribution here is to document the relationships between particular Philadelphia institutions and their audiences through individuals' testimonials of their shared belief in progress.

The book would have benefited from more specific connection to the secondary literature on Progressive reform and to the political history Hepp seeks to supplement. Hepp's argument about rationality and science as fundamental values for the reorganization he describes, and his attempts to provide a view of the process through participants' eyes, would have been greatly enriched by fuller use of excerpts from primary sources. Faith in progress is implicit in the first-person accounts Hepp uses, and other historians have explored the role of science in Victorian and Progressive culture and policy; more explicit examples of individuals discussing the values Hepp attributes to them would have strengthened the book. Since Philadelphia had a fairly well documented black middle class in the period Hepp covers, further development of African Americans' sense of their role in a changing Philadelphia would have been particularly valuable. These are relatively minor quibbles, and there is much to value in Hepp's explication of the spaces the middle class established for themselves and the 'personal geographies' of individual Philadelphians, particularly in their reactions to early twentieth century changes in urban geography.

Finally, Hepp offers an plea for the "unification of social and political history" (208), and further study of the cultural underpinnings of the Progressive Era. His book is a promising step in that direction.