

The Middle-Class City: Transforming Space and Time in Philadelphia, 1876–1926. By John Henry Hepp IV. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. ix + 278 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, appendix, illustrations, maps. \$Cloth, \$36.50. ISBN: 0-8122-3723-4.

Reviewed by Scott Miltenberger

For nearly four decades, Robert Wiebe's *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (1967) has defined the historiography of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century America. Simply put, Wiebe argued that the fear of social chaos—prompted by turn-of-the-century immigration, urbanization, and industrialization—drove a new “middle class” of largely urban professionals to remake American life to reflect an ethos of efficiency and systemization. Yet, as John Henry Hepp notes in his new study, *The Middle-Class City: Transforming Space and Time in Philadelphia, 1876–1926*, “a new synthesis [was] just beginning to be sketched out”—and Hepp's work is a vital contribution to comprehending this “new synthesis” (p. 224). Drawing on cultural, urban, and business history and working from a variety of sources, Hepp aims to understand the “broader cultural search for order” by turn-of-the-century, middle-class Philadelphians. He rejects Wiebe's contention that middle-class reform was “a simple reaction to the effect of industrialization and urbanization, [maintaining that] . . . it was more than a fearful drive for paternalistic control.” Hepp argues, a “faith in continued progress,” borne of a “scientific worldview,” animated middle-class efforts to transform everyday life in Philadelphia and beyond (pp. 1, 2).

Hepp begins his study by justifying his choice of locale. He notes that in the fifty years between the centennial celebration of 1876 and the sesquicentennial celebration of 1926, Philadelphia experienced its greatest period of “sustained growth,” expanding outward as well as upward—a period that clearly affords him an opportunity to investigate the impact of rapid urbanization (p. 1). Yet Hepp eschews any claims of exceptionality for the city, claiming that its “true value . . . lay in its typicality,” and indeed, in its “exemplary” display “of Victorian bourgeois culture” (pp. 3, 4). In Philadelphia, as in “New York or Baltimore or Glasgow or Berlin or Melbourne,” the

middle classes “consistently reshaped their world and thrived in a society that was transformed along rational lines starting in the late nineteenth century” and continuing into the twentieth (pp. 2, 8).

Analyzing diaries, memoirs, oral histories, newspapers, illustrations, city maps, and guide books, Hepp focuses on this transformation as it transpired in “three quintessentially bourgeois commercial enterprises”: “department stores, newspapers, and urban transit (street cars and commuter railroads).” In each, he discerns “a consistent reorganization of space and time,” with “space and time becoming more precisely organized and increasing[ly] subject to human definition and control” (p. 8). Undergirding this change was a Victorian understanding of “science” that embraced classification as the equal of “experimentation” (p. 10). Thus, in the late nineteenth century, railroad schedules became more systematized, catering to the desire of a rational-minded middle class with the necessary disposable income to live outside of Philadelphia’s business district, Center City, and to enjoy the recreations offered at Willow Grove and the Jersey shore. In turn, the railroad redefined the nature of urban space, creating specialized, distinct areas of commerce and recreation. These same middle-class Philadelphians also embraced the highly organized “interior layout” of a department store like John Wanamaker’s and the internal organization of newspapers like the *Philadelphia Examiner* as reflective of their desires for order and efficiency in social life (pp. 82, 83).

In the twentieth century, Hepp observes, these three institutions expanded in character and clientele with significant consequences. Department stores, newspapers, and urban-transit systems, as refashioned by the late-nineteenth-century middle class, became more efficient, facilitating Philadelphia’s economic growth at the turn of the century. This growth ultimately redounded to the city’s working class in the form of rising wages, and beginning in the early twentieth century, this social group began to partake of the benefits of the “middle-class city.” Working-class families could now move into previously middle-class neighborhoods, gaining access to Atlantic City; they could also shop at department stores and read newspapers that in the nineteenth century had catered exclusively to the city’s middle class. Increasingly, to Philadelphia’s middle class, this threatened to upset the careful taxonomy of space that its members had

championed and embraced in the late nineteenth century. Consequently, they turned to municipal politics, enacting zoning provisions that defined “‘conforming’ and ‘non-conforming’ space,” measures that amounted “to the bourgeoisie’s scientific classification of space enacted into law” (p. 203). Hepp argues that this shift toward political activism suggests that “members of the middle class were not searching for order—for it was already there for them—but instead [were] seeking to convince others to retain that order” (p. 204).

Hepp’s insightful study offers much material for many scholars. Business historians will find his discussion of the “middle class” and the evolving economics of newspapers and urban transit to be of particular interest. Cultural historians will appreciate not only Hepp’s treatment of the “middle class,” but also his success at melding culture and politics. Most important, though, *The Middle-Class City* encourages historians to rethink the assumptions that underlie Wiebe’s “search-for-order” thesis. Hepp’s attention to turn-of-the-century Philadelphia, to its everyday life, and ultimately to its politics, inverts Wiebe’s argument and offers a more compelling interpretation of the middle-class role in the Progressive Era. Hepp thus joins with a new generation of scholars—including Daniel Rodgers (*Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* [1998]) and Eric Rauchway (*The Refuge of Affections: The Family in American Reform Politics, 1900–1920* [1998])—who are sensitive to the nuances that Wiebe’s interpretation is not fully attuned to. From their work, it seems clear that more than anxieties of a singular social group shaped “progressivism”: transatlantic influences and the family life of reformers played crucial roles as well. Hepp offers yet another layer of complexity, and still greater depth to our understanding of this period. Now, with the publication of *The Middle-Class City*, a “new synthesis” would appear to be at hand.

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