Streetsweeper

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The English 'middle-classes' flock to France and Italy for their annual vacations and their 'short' or 'city breaks'. They return with tales of civilization and the worldly booty that is at least a souvenir of this: real food and drink. The most popular of the television series from the USA broadcast in England focus on friendship, discussion (however inane) bar culture and sharing: experiences, food, drink and so on.

New wave New Urbanism promotes the European street, café, bar, restaurant; the pleasures of the *flâneur*, and the resident of the urban apartment; or within its own, North American setting, the mainstreet and the stoop.

There is a real danger that these activities and preoccupations diverge increasingly in their romantic way, not so much from the realities of place, as the realities of our lives. Our lives, I would suggest are on the whole, nasty, brutish and increasingly long. We eat industrially prepared convenience food; we do not lunch; we work late, or not at all; and within less than a decade we have gone from the benign ageism (for some) of comfortable early retirement to the prospects of working our full biblical span with an uncertain pension at the end.

It may be that in this pattern we are returning to a pattern of urban life not dissimilar for the working and middle classes to that which prevailed around two centuries ago. Balanced on a knife-edge between all-consuming work and no work at all, between (monthly) financial security and rapid decline into poverty, between an aggressive public life and a cosy and sustaining private life, we are once again joining the developing world.

Viewed dispassionately, this is a good thing, which will undoubtedly lead to a levelling of standards of living across the globe, even for elites

who will need bodyguards and fortress homes to protect their special lifestyle.

Several analysts have commented on the retreat into private life of the middle classes in the European and North American urban expansion periods of the 19th century. The difference now, is that we have technology that already makes face-to-face human exchange functionally redundant. So what future for the public realm, the substance of urban design? In England at present this looks bleak. Our freedom to challenge each other in this public realm is under legal attack; our confidence in taking all but the busiest metropolitan public transport is daily eroded by our fear of terrorism fomented by government and our reluctance to engage with what, shockingly in the home counties, are still described as 'the great unwashed'; finally our need, or the utility of our venturing out, is eroded by the supermarket delivery systems, out of town shopping centres; telephone and internet banking and so on and on.

We can maunder on about mixed-use, permeability, eyes on the street and more – and I am sure we must continue in this, but ultimately we must look to our lifestyles and decide where our values lie – and where they must lie in terms of survival for the majority. Slow food and *citta slow*, the French lunch and mixed-use high street are disappearing in Europe: France and Italy will resist this, while in England we have scarcely rediscovered it. Heaven forbid that good urban design should be regarded as civilization, but at least good lively lifestyles cradled in the products of good urban design may be seen as a sign of civilization. And while signs have a limited capacity to sustain, without them, an urban renaissance will be very difficult.