

The McMansions of Manhattan Beach

By William Alatrisme America is a country of dizzying extremes, a place where theatrical extravagance is the norm and people are won over by the gargantuan. Bank accounts, stretch limos, houses, egos, breasts the size of beach-balls: to be American means to ply contradiction, embrace the 'nth degree' of all things, give life to the lie that bigger is always better. The American way is to scorn moderation and revolt against the idea that there's virtue in being average.

For some, moderation is unholy because in it one sees a decidedly un-American lack of ambition. How successful can a man be, the argument goes, if he limits himself to pursuing only what's within his reach? In order to succeed he must purge himself of small-mindedness and become a megalomaniac. His appetite, his passions, his desire for wealth and fame and glory must be reckless, operatic, Pharaohnic. And he must constantly seek out ways to improve upon and enlarge the scope of his world, even if this means spending all day at the All-You-Can-Eat salad bar or "supersizing" whenever asked, no matter how recent his last meal. Supersizing is the American way.

What's lost in all this is the importance of scale. In the rush to be the biggest and the best, perspective gets magnified all out of focus. What we wind up with is a pixellated version of life, one that blurs as it expands. And the more it expands, the more details go unnoticed, and with them goes the subtle, cumulative effect they have on vision--an effect that can make life meaningful, if not utterly coherent.

What we lack is an aesthetics of the diminutive, the ability to prize smallness or accept the forlorn proposition that petit is not just a size but an art form. Other cultures are light years ahead of us in this respect. Consider the Japanese bonsai: a little world made meaningful through cultivation, lavish attention and care. Or the Persian miniature--a magnificently detailed account of a life painted on a piece of ivory no bigger than half a bar of soap. These things are beautiful despite their size, and our appreciation of them grows as we begin to see how beautifully they resolve contradiction; how ambition and imaginative vision are compressed into finite amounts of space. We marvel in the way meaning is reduced to a simple clarity of form. We admire the restraint that orders and organizes; the precision and whittling down to specifics and the abandoning of generalities.

The newest homeowners of the Manhattan Beach community of Brooklyn have rejected the diminutive in ways that are profoundly American. These immigrants from the former Soviet Union have scrubbed all reference to the small from their lives and replaced it with a whopping, oversized view of their own importance.

Most are a view of bypassed the need to be middle-class and gone straight to the top --- or right over the top.



Order is everywhere on display in the Manhattan Beach community of south Brooklyn: from its streets, which are arranged alphabetically, to the names of its streets--sturdy English names like Dover, Exeter, Kensington, Norfolk and Oxford which point to the pastoral geography of Britain. The houses in Manhattan Beach are paragons of modesty and middle-class restraint. Many were built decades ago and are today inhabited by residents whose families have lived in them for a generation or two. Recently however, the principles of balance, order and conformity that have helped organize this community have come under siege from its newest residents--immigrants from the former Soviet Union--who are buying up houses and tearing them to the ground in order to erect their own urban utopias.









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