

# A suburban dreamscape battling plans for densification: The case of housing advertisements

## Abstract

In recent decades, densification, as an urban development strategy, has achieved a rather hegemonic position in many European cities. This is also the case in Oslo, the capital of Norway. However, in contrast to the prevailing policy of developing a more compact city, there are also actors counteracting the policy of densifying Oslo. Norway's largest housing developer, OBOS, has recently launched a campaign promoting the benefits of dispersed suburban settlements. This is said to resolve several of the disadvantages of living in dense urban environments.

Using concepts adopted from 'social semiotics', this paper demonstrates how a series of images used in a housing advertisement campaign operate ideologically to suggest that the good life is found in the countryside, rather than in a dense urban settlement. We argue that there is no straight line from political decisions to their implementation and acceptance by the public.

## Background

In Oslo, developing a more compact city is a key strategy being used to meet the anticipated sustainability challenges of a growing population. The proponents of "the compact city" share a view that urban development should take place within the existing boundaries of built structures, and suburban growth should be restricted; however, questions concerning potential obstacles to the prevailing policy have not achieved a prominent position in public debate. This was our concern in this study.



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## Methods

In this study we have introduced a method rarely used in urban studies, namely a "social semiotic" (e.g. Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; Abousnougga and Machin 2011) approach to analyse a housing advertisement campaign counteracting the adopted densification policy in Oslo.

- A social semiotic approach is concerned with what people do with semiotic resources, what they use them for. The aim is to explore the kinds of ideas, moods, attitudes, values and identities that can be signified with these resources
- We can study choices of visual representations to reveal discourses not necessarily apparent to the casual viewer. A social semiotic approach is concerned with describing the repertoire of meaning potentials that are available to communicators

## Discussion

Because visualisations cannot represent all the aspects of a case, it is important to ask what and who has been deleted, for instance; people, actions, settings, backgrounds, contexts, and so forth. Visualisations also often add, foreground or subordinate elements to communicate certain aspects of a case at the expense of others. Pictures are bearers of ideologies, and Kress (2010) makes a point about the unnoticed and nearly invisible social and ideological effects of images, which are often unremarkable and banal. In order to identify how images inculcate certain world views at the expense of others, we can look for several 'modality cues' (Hodge and Kress 1988).

### Illustration 1

It depicts playfulness and a 'happy world of positive thinking favoured by contemporary corporate ideology' (Machin 2004, 320). The girls are foregrounded and engage in effortless play after having moved out from the city. We come to believe that if we also choose to move out from the city, we will enjoy as much fun and playfulness as these girls. The background is rather decontextualized and we see some pine trees, which connote the Norwegian countryside (Illustration 1 & 2).

### Illustration 2

The groups of people sitting are looking toward the males, who display their strength and balance. Vertical angles are associated with power. The females are taking care of their children while the male virtues are exercised.



## The images



### Illustration 3

The city dwellers – the target group – view two kids, a boy and a girl, sitting on a fallen tree in the woods smiling towards us – alluding to what we can achieve if we move out from the city. The caption reads: 'This could have been your kids.' On the right, we witness a different situation: A scene from a kindergarten in which a boy is screaming at a girl, as it is assumed that we know that all (urban) boys are noisy troublemakers. The girl is placed below the boy, which can be interpreted to indicate uneven levels of social power. The girl is powerless and seeks comfort in a soft, round toy, suggesting femininity, harmlessness and innocence.

These images reproduce a nostalgic discourse concerning ways of life that we recognise from popular culture representations of 1950s and 1960s US suburbia. We claim that the campaign is anti-urbanist and suggests an incompatibility between family and children and urban living. For instance, compared to illustration 2, looking at illustration 3 we can assume that if we move out of the city, we will not have to place our kids in 'awful' urban kindergartens, because they can spend more time with their nuclear families in the peaceful and healthy environments of suburbia. Moreover, the images refer to stereotypical gender roles in which the females take care of the children and somewhat passively look up to the male ideals of strength and balance.

## Conclusion

By means of concepts from social semiotics, our study has demonstrated that the housing advertisement campaign foregrounds certain semiotic elements, while suppressing and removing others. The campaign reproduces a master narrative about urban discomfort, and as such the campaign is anti-urbanist and suggests an incompatibility between families with children and living in a compact urban environment. We argue that one cannot simply implement a densification strategy, because there may be interests emphasising more suburban and nostalgic lifestyles: Even if we doubt that the developer's suburban dreamscape will be realised, the marketing of a dispersed and sprawling suburban landscape may appeal to people invested in the dream of a suburban way of life. Therefore, we may benefit from developing a critical 'semiotic awareness', as this will allow us to identify the many counteracting forces involved in urban planning.

## References

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