



Cultural Transformation in the Face of Climate Change: Monaco's Path to Redefining Luxury and Embracing Sustainable Comfort

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Redefining Affluence: Monaco's Environmental Paradigm Shift

In recent years, an environmental paradigm shift has been observed in Monaco. This shift, particularly noticeable in the Monegasque communities' altered attitudes towards energy consumption and adaptation to climate exigencies, signals a possible broader cultural transition.

Monaco is renowned for its ties to the luxury industry, making it an interesting case study for understanding current global shifts in attitudes within the context of ecological transition. The very essence of luxury can potentially clash with the principles of environmental conservation, as it often entails excess and, consequently, a larger carbon footprint. Alongside Monaco's visible opulence lies a layer of society composed of nationals and natives who, with rare exceptions, do not belong to the privileged class and are not direct consumers of the luxury services offered. These individuals are mostly involved in administration, the service sector, and small business operations. In this article, we refer to these individuals as the "Monegasque community". Two possible hypotheses emerge: 1) ecological transition may be hindered by the fact that Monaco residents are accustomed to luxury and comfort, or 2) the transition could be facilitated because the Monegasque community is more informed and capable of implementing technical solutions than those in less developed regions.

This work adopts an ethnographic approach to investigate these opposing hypotheses, taking Monaco's situation as a quintessential example that can illuminate broader environmental and societal dynamics. The study's focus on such a hyper-urbanized context (L'Atlas sociologique mondial 2022) enhances understanding, offering insights that can be generalized to consider ecological transitions in less developed areas and to provide a comprehensive perspective at the global level. We propose that a redefinition of "comfort" may emerge as a necessary cultural shift, serving as a bridge between these hypotheses. This reevaluation is not merely a compromise but a transformative concept that reflects an evolving global consciousness and a willingness to renegotiate standards of luxury in the face of ecological imperatives.

Our methods have included participant observations and qualitative interviews, conducted within the Monegasque community over 3 years, providing an immersive understanding of local behavioral changes. We have captured the nuanced evolution of "comfort" in response to growing environmental concerns. We assume that the response from Monaco's nationals and residents towards environmental initiatives is not homogeneous. Societal views are fragmented and diverse. This work does not address potential resistance within the community. Our argument is based on specific cases, but we consider these examples to illustrative and representative of trends in the shift in the perception of comfort.

Traditional notions of comfort, closely tied to consumption and ease, are now being re-evaluated. Data indicates a voluntary shift towards enduring higher temperatures during the summer months, reducing the reliance on air conditioning. This practice, stemming from increased environmental awareness, suggests a redefinition of comfort that incorporates adaptive and resilient behaviors, contributing to lower carbon footprints. We recall an interview in sweltering August midday heat where a 78-year-old man, dressed in a tie and jacket, declared his intention to avoid air conditioning "as long as physically possible".

Inside the Transition: Generational Perspectives on Sustainable Living

Interviews with members of the Millennial generation reveal a moral dialectic influencing sustainable practices, where individuals express guilt associated with energy excess. This psychological shift underpins the behavioral changes observed, as participants navigate the discomfort of adaptation while acknowledging their environmental impact.

Here is the response from a 32-year-old, third generation Monaco-born local resident: "For my part, I have felt a bit ashamed, I must say, because I make very few efforts: I pay attention mainly to my electricity consumption, a bit to water, I try to favor walking or public transport, but overall, I waste a lot. And having traveled a lot this year, I barely dare to imagine my carbon footprint. To come back to your question without really answering it, I believe people are afraid of losing comfort, even at the margins, perhaps because the very definition of comfort has been biased by our consumption standards."

Here's an excerpt from a qualitative interview with a 28-year-old Monégasque woman: "Of course, I am more conscientious about electricity and water. Whenever my boyfriend leaves the water running, I hysterically say, 'you have to turn it off.' It's silly, but in the past, I threw my cigarette butts on the ground. I don't know if it's because I was stupid, or I thought someone would clean up after me since we are in Monaco.... /.../ So, you see, it's important to continue the fight to make people realize that, in fact, every little thing they do has an impact on the environment, on nature."

Two individuals are choosing accessible forms of sustainability, such as reducing electricity and/or water consumption. These practices transcend the conventional boundaries of comfort and are associated with qualitative changes in habits that start on an individual level. There's also an acknowledgment of the positive influence of narratives, making these individuals reflect on how consumption standards have been imposed in a world accustomed to excess over necessity.

Policy and Advocacy: Navigating Change in the Public Sphere

Monaco's government has introduced guidelines advocating for reduced energy consumption, reflective of the broader cultural shift (Energy Management), which is in line with broader international climate goals (United Nations 2015). These suggest a mandated temperature of 25°C (77°F) for air conditioning and recommend lights be switched off on facades and in business premises and spaces by 11pm. However, societal/commercial adherence varies, indicating an ongoing negotiation between ingrained luxury consumption habits and emerging environmental ethics.

In this matter, social media platforms reveal instances of horizontal activism, such as the use of a "name and shame" strategy to promote social accountability. These digital movements, while not widespread, indicate a burgeoning public sphere of environmental advocacy within Monaco.

Several local businesses and institutions are aligning with shifting norms1, publicly demonstrating their commitment to the priorities announced by H.S.H. Prince Albert II.

Our observations confirmed our first hypothesis, that the entrenched comfort and luxury lifestyle exerts a conservative force, maintaining certain unsustainable practices. However, a cultural shift towards sustainability, influenced by the global environmental discourse, is causing a reevaluation of "luxury" and "comfort."

In contrast to the first hypothesis, our second hypothesis posited that well-informed local groups, less engaged in traditional luxury consumption, could advocate change using methods accessible to them. We have observed that the Monegasque community's actions are indeed influencing a broad spectrum of consumers, initiating a broader cultural transition.

Future Trajectories: Implications for Sustainable Urban Living

The observed cultural shift suggests a complex interplay between individual agency and structural forces. The redefinition of comfort is part of a global environmental discourse, in which local practices in Monaco resonate with broader, transnational climate concerns. Furthermore, the emergence of eco-guilt among residents signifies an internalized environmental consciousness, catalyzing a cultural shift that potentially challenges Monaco's established social norms/image.

What we also observe through the lens of anthropology, is the active role of peer-to-peer control within this microstate. Daily choices, whether related to air conditioning settings, lighting, or transportation preferences, are not only reflecting the evolving sense of comfort (a concept that proves to be neither static nor universal), but are shaping new dynamics of sustainable urban living.

We recommend further research to explore mechanisms for facilitating broader cultural acceptance of sustainable practices. Additionally, policy development should consider these cultural nuances, ensuring that regulatory measures support the organic societal transition toward environmental consciousness.

References:

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