

Housing

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Book Notes/Notes bibliographiques

Housing

Housing flourishes as common interest for geographers, historians, architectural historians, economists, and political scientists. In what has assumed status as a major analytic perspective, popularized by David Harvey, housing is attributed with “use value” and “exchange value.” For land developers, merchant builders, the building trades, financial institutions, real estate agents and many others, the latter dimension is a primary consideration. For families, housing is a consumer durable of a most unusual kind since it is non-portable and very costly. The individuals and, increasingly the corporations that have focused on the housing industry for “exchange value,” have had to read, interpret, and influence the tastes of families and family shelter needs. Such needs or “use value” include much more than raw shelter; pride and status are involved. In sum, the history of housing has been rescued from the static ecological perspective and from the abstractions of land use economics. In fact, much of the current research avoids the ecological form of lifeless description and concerns itself with the people who have been or are involved with houses for either their “use value” or “exchange value.” In an earlier number of the *Urban History Review* [Vol. X, No. 2 (October, 1981)], Michael Doucet reviewed a very important work: Gwendolyn Wright’s *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago, 1873–1913*. The following titles add to the knowledge and to the research questions associated with the topic of housing.

Muthesius, Stefan. *The English Terraced House*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982. Pp. x, 278. 219 black and white plates; 32 colour plates. \$34.95 (Cdn.).

Muthesius’ account of the unique English form of urban residence is the polished result of long study. Indeed, Stefan continues a family tradition, for his great uncle Hermann Muthesius wrote extensively on the English house around 1900 and his works eventually were translated from German in 1979. As an art historian, Stefan Muthesius is sensitive to local materials, brickwork, and street layout; the excellent plates give further evidence of a fine visual sense. But this is far more than a coffee table item. Not since the publication of H.J. Dyos’ *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell* has there been a book raising so many basic social questions about English housing.

What happened before the house was built, who were the developers and builders, what was the financial situation? . . . In addition we want to learn about the influence of the building regulations on the shape of our house. We should then try and find out more about the people who lived in the house when it was first built. What were their

incomes? How many servants did they have? What is the history of some of the main rooms of the house? . . .

Muthesius moves beyond London to answer these and other questions. Running throughout the book is the admiration for the achievement of the Victorian and Edwardian merchant builders. By 1910, they had created a form of dwelling that “still fulfills today’s demands in almost all respects.” Only central heating was missing and this luxury, we are reminded, was not installed generally until about 1960. Moreover, the terrace dwelling became a shelter form that could be afforded by the great majority of the lower middle classes and even by many members of the working classes. Muthesius is not ignorant of the miserable cottages of the poor, nor does he neglect the efforts of terrace builders to insert details that affirmed class distinctions. However, as a European with a knowledge of the continent and England he registers distinctive views on the once unique achievements in British housing. In European cities, the classes were segregated in layers of apartment flats. Until the early twentieth century, England lacked widely spaced and detached homes in the outer suburbs. Muthesius really cannot explain this national housing trait. Critical of modern housing policy that he argues has intensified class segregation, he maintains that the class differentiation of terrace housing of the nineteenth century appears less clear than it did at the time the houses were built. Many of his plates damage this impressionistic conclusion.

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Eichler, Ned. *The Merchant Builders*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982. Pp. xviii, 310. Tables. \$24.95 (U.S.).

Like Muthesius, Eichler comes from a family that studied housing. His father, a merchant builder in the 1940s and 1950s, provided quips at the family table that now enliven this account of the post-war housing industry in the United States. Speaking of the capital supplied by construction loans, Eichler senior would explain to his incredulous wife that he had to continue to build even when the housing market dropped. “If I stop building, how will I pay the bills.” This insider’s account of the industry’s structure, practices, contact with government, finances and construction techniques confirms impressions. Further, it enlivens lessons with the tough-minded humour of men who swim in shark infested waters: “My father . . . had cheques written immediately for vendor and contractor invoices. But the cheques were then put on his desk. He . . . released these cheques largely according to his perception of need (which was often mea-

sured by the frequency and volume of the creditor's cries of woe)." An insider can make the error of assuming that his generation had forced critical breakthroughs. Eichler's portrayal of the merchant builder as playing a game as complex as the producer of a play and as American as Oklahoma elevates the industry and thereby makes it sympathetic and interesting in ways that detached scholars cannot. Nonetheless, in his discussion of construction techniques his enthusiasm for the industry of the 1950s leaves the impression that large scale builders like Bill Levitt and an array of design measures that cut cost had been the era's legacy special to American housing. In fact, large builders and their union busting efforts as well as design trimming probably can be traced to the 1880s and certainly date to 1900. The housing industry is notoriously cyclical (the 20 year cycle remains an accepted but unexplained phenomenon); construction practices as well as number of units have ebbed and flowed.

The first section of this work (1945–1959) offers a most insightful account of the inner workings of the merchant builder firm. The subsequent sections (1960–1974; 1975–1979; the 1980s) deals with the author's belief that a flurry of mergers rendered some firms inefficient. Knowledge of local laws and market tastes required, he suggests, a local operation. Lewitt thought that 1,000 units a year was maximum. Relatively low interest rates until the late 1970s provided a brief nirvana, "a market swarming with buyers ready to pay ever increasing prices." Eichler forecast that the high profits disguised fundamental weaknesses attending corporate consolidation. If Muthesius eulogizes the builders of terrace housing, Eichler praises the recent past with small firms run by alert proprietary managers like his "dad." Incidentally, he includes material on the Canadian involvement in American merchant building. *The Merchant Builders* is an enjoyable and useful book that deserves attention. It is a credit to the urban studies publications list of the MIT Press.

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Wright, Gwendolyn. *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981. Pp. xix, 329. Illustrations. \$18.50 (U.S.).

In fourteen historical and critical essays, each about a specific mode of American housing from 1630 to 1980, Gwendolyn Wright examines the culture of America through domestic architecture. She includes the Puritan house, mill-town barracks, company housing, the apartment building, the tenement and the single-family detached dwelling in several epochs. She has written the book with contemporary feminist and radical biases. Certain insights follow, especially with regards to the connections between the idealized versions of the family that held sway in particular eras and the corresponding array of rooms and their defined roles. As

well, her definite viewpoints illuminate the subjects of reformers and environmental control, the union of planning practices and social segregation, and the suburban dream. On the other hand, her approach borders on polemics. The fragmentation of the study into essays imposes limitations too, but the quibbles that can be raised about her unsystematic analysis of such central matters as homeownership stem from her critical perspectives and contemporary concerns.

Contending that Americans repeatedly have sought a proper setting for a great nation by establishing new forms of housing, Wright treats housing as a material expression of ideological systems. She is careful to indicate that there has been no consensus and that conflicting visions have functioned concurrently. Thus, in the early Republic, the concept of equality called for restraint in architecture. In a classless America, all dwellings were to appear similar and homeownership was to have a wide base. In reality, although there was the ordered equality of row housing, there also was great diversity with obvious social distinctions and a spread of residential segregation. Moreover, Wright claims that homeownership was slipping by the 1820s. This example, drawn from chapter 2, indicates Wright's style: the idealized concept as presented in treatises and journals followed by material concerning the imperfect realization.

By the mid-nineteenth century, pattern books and journals accented the detached home in the private setting. Gone were the equality-in-style concerns of the early Republic. In their place came diversity and individualism, supported by technological revolutions in the building materials industry. Here, as in her work *Moralism and the Model Home*, she is extremely effective in combining social history, cultural history and the history of technology. Later in *Building the Dream*, Wright points up what Eichler had recollected about the failure of technology and research to alter dramatically the cost of housing since 1945. From the mid-nineteenth century forward, Wright's main concern is to trace the enduring force of the single-family detached home as the American dream. She is properly critical of this dream's excessive influence on contemporary housing, at a time when the demographic profile of America no longer seems meshed with the traditional vision of the ideal home. For the historian, however, there is the added task of explaining the persistence of the suburban dream. Wright explains and, yet, does not explain. A suspicion lurks that something quite important has been omitted because of a present-minded critical approach; this suspicion is supported by a perusal of the slender data employed to indicate the alleged false promise of home ownership. Wright's data is fragmentary and selective rather than serial and comprehensive. Consequently, she finds what she hopes to find: the limits to the "private dwelling," the failure of the suburban dream. Wright notes, for example, that in 1910 only one third of non-farm homes were owner occupied "and that number dropped to one quarter in Philadelphia and one fifth in Cin-

cinnati.” In fact, the national non-farm homeownership data describes a steady increase: 36.9% in 1890; 38.4% (not one third) in 1910; 46.0% in 1930; 53.4% in 1950; 62.0% in 1970. Admittedly, the homeownership percentages may have dropped in many major centres, but even this conclusion is challenged by John Bodnar, Roger Simon and Michael Weber in their study of Pittsburgh (1900–1960): “in the first thirty years of the twentieth century homeownership among Pittsburg households increased substantially as it did in all large cities.” Perhaps the dream functioned more effectively than Wright wishes to concede. Nevertheless, the book has so much valuable information that I am convinced that it was not all written with smoke and mirrors. Passion and commitment merely guided the sometimes reckless research in problematic and contentious directions.

Uncertainty about Wright’s use of history to understand housing “crises” (a term that is never defined and for good reason as it is exceedingly slippery) extends to the question of why there has been a “preoccupation with the private dwelling.” She is too fair to proclaim that industry advertising, home journals and pattern book compilers duped the middle class — and the working class too, for Olivier Zunz’s Detroit study points to class as a minor variable in explaining homeownership. But that impression of manipulation is the one she leaves by default. It seems to be an uncomfortable thought for social critics, writing as historians, to suggest that patterns of the past might have conferred benefits and satisfaction to large numbers. Isn’t it conceivable that the detached home and the segregated neighbourhood had institutional support because of popularity? As Pogo once said in another context, “I have seen the enemy and he is us.”

This provocative and occasionally irritating book must be admired for its scope and for its value as a stimulus.

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Levine, Gregory, Richard Harris and Brian Osborne. *The Housing Question in Kingston, Ontario, 1881–1901*. Kingston, Ontario: Queen’s University, Department of Geography, 1982. Pp. 142. Tables.

This “report on an investigation” is an unpolished account of a pioneering research effort that set about to place an empirical and quantitative approach (based on assessment rolls) within a Marxist theoretical framework. The two finished papers that resulted from the project present solid and revealing information, but they are something of a disappointment when they follow a bold claim that earlier Canadian studies “are deficient in that theory is often left implicit and is often inappropriate for the questions considered and much of the empirical work is of a preliminary nature.” Such a critique presented in this volume definitely amounts to giving a hostage to fortune.

Nevertheless, “Housing in Kingston in 1881” presents sound observations. Fourteen freeholders owned 16 per cent of the city’s total rental stock; several appeared “to be concerned with renting (sic) low value accommodation to the working class.” More generally, the paper’s discussion of space, tenancy, and class is a sensible list of questions and conjecture. One hardly needs to have dipped into Marxist theory, an exercise much promoted, to have arrived at the clear observations and calls for much research. “The Single Tax Movement in Kingston, 1881 to 1901” serves as a reminder that the control of housing by a bourgeoisie did not pass without the criticism of a structuralist argument about the origins of wealth and poverty nor without political movements that took up the theoretical attack. The imposition of class analysis is not as crude as this summary, for, as the paper honestly points out, the adherents of the Single Tax were varied and the debate “was largely carried out by members of the bourgeoisie and the petty bourgeoisie.”

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Bibliographies

Shumsky, Neil L. and Timothy Crimmins, editors. *Urban America: A Historical Bibliography*. Clio Bibliography Series, Santa Barbara: America Bibliographical Center - Clio Press, 1983. Pp. xi, 422. \$55.00 (U.S.).

This volume contains 4,068 abstracts of articles concerned with the development of, and life in, American cities from prehistoric times to the present. The abstracts originally appeared in volumes eleven through seventeen of *America: History and Life* published by ABC - Clio Information Services of Santa Barbara, California.

The database of *America: History and Life* contains abstracts of articles appearing in more than 2,000 journals printed in 42 languages. Of these, about 700 are published in the United States and Canada, and they include journals of local historical societies, as well as those dealing with history in general, the humanities and the social sciences.

Urban America contains several sections of particular interest to Canadians. Most notably there is a distinct section devoted to “Canadian Urban History and Life” that includes 299 entries, but one other major section is also very useful since it covers “Historiography, Methodology, Bibliography and Teaching.” This helpful volume also includes extensive author and subject indexes and a list of periodicals.

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