Urban History Review


Michael J. Doucet

Volume 10, numéro 2, octobre 1981

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019102ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1019102ar

Citer cet article

and household management, religion, and folklife further develops the theme that alley residents led well-integrated and well-adjusted lives. They turned the alley into a commons where children could play at a safe distance from the traffic and where adults could lounge and talk. The community transmitted its values to the young, the children being relatively impervious to the school experience. One child wrote:

For, School, is, Just, A,
Place, For, Fools, and Fools,
Don't Only, Go, I Go,
And I, Am, not, A Fool.

Borchert believes that outsiders exaggerated the extent of juvenile delinquency and adult crime. Many "crimes," like numbers, craps, and drinking, were forms of recreation. Fighting reflected the tough yet proud life of alley dwellers. In alley culture the secular merged with the sacred. Worship, rituals, and the pervasive influence of music were interwoven with folk beliefs and practices.

Borchert’s sources include the 1880 manuscript census, city directories, newspapers, photographs, and, most importantly, social surveys and participant-observer studies. Most of the latter were completed in either the Progressive era from 1896 to 1914 or the New Deal period of the late 1930s. The author disarmingly acknowledges the deficiencies of these source materials, but he cannot altogether dispel the doubt they cast on his conclusions. For example, in the chapter on childhood 80 per cent of the references are to four studies, three of which were completed in 1938 and the other one in 1941. Yet the generalizations apply to alley life from 1850 to 1970.

Borchert has taken the evidence contained in social surveys and used it to testify against the conclusions reached by the authors of those surveys. All of these earlier students of alley life had either obtained or were in the process of obtaining middle-class and professional positions. They looked for social disorder in the alley, and, of course, they found it. Borchert’s criticism of these people, who had the advantage of being able to observe alley life first hand, is reminiscent of the work of Jacques Donzelot and Christopher Lasch. They also take to task do-gooders, social workers, and middle-class reformers. While it may be satisfying to reprimand those who presume to discipline and instruct the poor, it is also possible to romanticize an ugly situation. Borchert knows this. He wants to unearth the “beauty” of alley life without forgetting that the stench of pain is never far away. Some of his comments, however, give one pause. Did alley dwellers really consider fighting a form of recreation and vigorous exercise?

James M. Pitsula
Department of History
University of Regina


Domestic architecture affects everyone, and spurred on no doubt by the recent Canadian Centennial and U.S. Bicentennial celebrations, interest in historical housing styles is on the increase in North America. For the most part, however, books on the subject are elitist in focus — only the “best” architectural specimens are worthy of discussion. Richly illustrated and slickly produced coffee-table volumes abound for both Canada and the United States. Analyses of the ordinary houses of the middle and working classes are rarely encountered. In Moralism and the Model Home Gwendolyn Wright takes great strides to fill this lacuna. This is not simply another picture book of houses, rather it is a careful study of the dynamics of change in ordinary domestic architecture that pays particular attention to the several contexts (philosophical, social, and economic) within which this change occurred. Taken as a whole, this study represents a remarkable synthesis of materials and ideas. There is considerable food for thought here for scholars of many stripes including students of labour history, the women’s movement, economic history, the history of education, urban history, urban reform, and architectural history. Architectural change was not, as Wright shows, the sole preserve of the architectural profession. Style is but one component of a city’s housing stock.

Moralism and the Model Home is a well and imaginatively researched book. Wright’s analysis,

relies primarily on three kinds of media, each dealing with housing as form and as social setting, each written by and for a different group; architectural books and periodicals, or the professional press; builders’ trade journals and pattern books of house designs, or the more resolutely practical press; and domestic guides and home magazines for women, as well as other middle-class family literature, or the popular press (pp.4-5).

Other sources, such as the records of civic clubs and philanthropic organizations are also drawn into the analysis. Documentation, in the form of footnotes, runs to over fifty pages. The more than fifty diagrams and photographs are all used to complement points that are raised in the text, which is itself remarkably free from typographical errors.

Wright’s book is no mere parochial study of domestic architecture, even though it is set in Chicago. The author pays particular attention to the influences exerted on Chicago housing by architectural and planning trends in other U.S. cities and in Britain and Europe. Important subjects such as furniture styles, house ornamentation, and
both the City Beautiful and Garden City movements are
given full coverage. Moreover, the influence of many fa­
mous Chicago architects, such as Frank Lloyd Wright and
Daniel Burnham, on the architectural world is explored.

As a temporal focus for her analysis Wright selected the
years between 1873 and 1913. The former marked the
year in which a grand Inter-State Exposition devoted to
"Home Culture" was held in Chicago. In 1913 the Chi­
cago City Club, a local progressive group "organized a com­
petition for an entire model suburb in which individual
dwelling 'units' were considered less important than a ra­
tional, balanced plan for the whole" (p.4). This was a time
of great change in attitudes towards both the home and ar­chitectural styles. It was during these four decades that

the form of the ideal middle-class dwelling under­
went a major transformation: from an exuberant,
highly personalized display of irregular shapes,
picturesque contrasts, and varieties of ornament,
supposedly symbolizing the uniqueness of the fam­
ily, to a restrained and simple dwelling, with inter­
est focused on its scientifically arranged kitchen
(p.3).

To fully comprehend these changes Wright had to come
to grips with everything that served to influence popular
images of the home and its role in society, as well as all the
important changes in house building and the economics of
home construction and furnishing. Structurally, the book
is divided into three sections, each of which examines
these issues for parts of the study period; namely, the Vic­
torian Cultural of Domesticity, 1873-1893; Reorienta­
tion, 1893-1903; and a New Order, 1903-1913.

A prominent theme throughout the book relates to the
role of architects in the entire field of housing and the con­
stant tension between these professionals and ordinary
builders of homes. As Wright notes,

builders' pattern books of the nineteenth century
celebrated the eccentricities of middle-class Ameri­
can dwellings with great pride. Professional archi­
tectural journals and texts, with equal fervor, con­
edemned the exuberant display and complex variety
of the untrained builders (p.79).

For much of the study period the architects paid little at­
tention to the homes of the middle and working classes,
preferring the larger commission associated with homes
for the elite or for non-residential projects. Later, the scale
of development for more modest dwellings increased as
subdivisions came to be "planned" and "a few large devel­
opers … hired architects to design their basic model
houses and help with site planning, hoping to attract
more customers with quality design" (p.280). The role
of comprehensive planners for large metropolitan and subur­
ban areas appealed to many architects by the end of the
study period. This change in scale from the design of one

house to the creation of entire neighbourhoods was
brought about by the shift towards simpler, often smaller,
houses for all classes. In fact,

the shared aesthetic of the early twentieth-century
minimalist house relied on five principles…. The
 technological system became more complex, more
costly, and more important as a criterion in house
design. The kitchen became a central focus for the
designer, and a different kind of room. Houses be­
came simpler in outline and ornament, inside and out.
Square-footage was dramatically reduced and,
as the number of rooms and partitions declined, the
floor plan opened up. Finally, houses became more
alike in their plans and their general appearance, as
the individuality of each dwelling (and, supposed­
ly, that of the occupant) became less frantically em­
phasized (pp.234-35).

Many of these features have lived on into the post-1945
era.

Wright provides considerable insight into the chang­
ing nature of dwelling construction during her study peri­
od. Technological breakthroughs resulted in the “indus­
trialization of home-making” (p.8) during these decades.
Factories began to mass produce decorative trim, window
sash, doors, and plumbing and heating fixtures of increas­
ing variety and sophistication. New processes for produc­
ing bricks, plaster, and plate glass also emerged at this
time. These changes all helped to increase the speed at
which houses were erected and eventually contributed to
the emergence of large-scale development companies that
were able almost instantly to convert vacant fields to new
and complete subdivisions. By 1900 prefabricated houses
could be ordered from the Sears catalogue. All of this
served to erode greatly the skills and standing of residen­
tial construction workers. The sheer cost of the new tech­
ology almost dictated that houses had to be smaller if
they were to remain affordable.

If Moralism and the Model Home has any shortcomings, at
least from the reviewer’s perspective as an historical geog­
raper, they relate to the lack of spatial context in the
analysis. No clear sense of what happened to the shape and
expanse of Chicago is presented here. To note that "at­
tracted by lower insurance rates, more tolerant building
codes, and cheap, undeveloped land, real estate develop­
ment had focused on the outlying areas, rather than on the
central city for some thirty years" is not sufficient (p.259).
More attention could have been paid to the locations and
environmental aesthetics of particular suburban areas. In
fact, a few detailed case studies of actual subdivisions
might have provided useful examples for many of the
themes explored in this volume. At the very least the book
should have contained two maps, one to provide an ori­
tentation for Chicago and the other to illustrate those areas
that were developed during the study period. These, how­
ever, are rather minor criticisms.
Space has not allowed me to mention all of the themes in Moralism and the Model Home. Perhaps its greatest contribution to our understanding of urban housing is the analysis of public perception of the roles to be played by homes and housing in society. It is here that Wright is at her synthetic best, skillfully interweaving the images and attitudes of workers, professionals, reformers, and others to uncover the dynamics of popular opinion. While the image of the role of the home, indeed even of household management, changed dramatically between 1873 and 1913, some of the attitudes formulated then remain important today. Victorian builders, suggested a vision of America filled with independent, attractive homes, each economical enough to be owned by its occupants. That vision had been an integral part of the American dream for countless immigrants from many countries. It would continue its hold for future generations (p.45).

Not only was this image important, but housing also came to be viewed as "a direct way to stabilize the society" (p.294).

Moralism and the Model Home is a first-rate book. It deserves a wide readership. A similar study for Canada would be useful, since it could shed considerable light upon the Canadian identity. In our country too, housing is deeply entrenched in middle-class dreams. We like to believe that our experience has been different from that of our American neighbours. A detailed study of Canadian images concerning housing could be very revealing in this regard.

Michael J. Doucet
Department of Geography
Ryerson Polytechnical Institute

Book Notes/Notes bibliographiques


Discovery and conservation of heritage is a government-al growth industry. Some of its product is revealed in this 144 page volume, itself an outcome of a town and gown festival in the heart of the Ottawa Valley. The volume is not urban. Nor is it professional from cover to cover. Nor was it intended to be. Town and country; professional and amateur met in Arnprior in 1978 and meet in this collection. Of interest to urban historians or to professional historians or to both might be the following among the 33 articles:

Marilyn Miller, "The Opeongo Road: A Unique Historical Resource;" Julian Gwyn, "The Irish in Eastern Ontario: The Social Structure of Huntley Township in Carleton County, 1851-71;" Gaétan Vallières, "Franco-Ontariens in the Ottawa Valley;" C. Grant Head, "Nineteenth Century Timbering and Sawlogging in the Ottawa Valley...;" David Knight, "The Ottawa Valley and the Selection of Canada's Capital City;" and Carol Sheedy, "Aspects Professionnels et Socio-culturels de la Population de la Côte-de-Sable [Ottawa]."

John Taylor
Department of History
Carleton University


This book is rapidly becoming a popular guide for the proponents of re-creating communities from the bottom up. It describes and recommends a variety of actions to be taken to re-establish human scale organization through building a community’s sense of identity and returning political and economic power to the neighbourhood level: block parties, local ownership of neighbourhood media, co-operative businesses and housing, urban food production, etc. It recognizes limits to neighbourhood self-sufficiency, but the discussion of the inter-neighbourhood cooperation necessary to overcome these limits is weak and detracts from the general plausibility of the rest of the book.

Joy Woolfrey
Ottawa


At the turn of the century corporate growth and capital reorganization precipitated and at the same time provided models for new forms of municipal organization. This book is about the efforts of British local governments to respond to the crises created by the most recent wave of capital reorganization through the implementation of modern corporate management techniques. Popular scepticism about electoral politics has led to an increase in extra-parliamentary militancy. Local governments have expanded their corporate management strategy to try and encompass this through community development programmes and the creation of neighbourhood councils. Although it has too limited an historical perspective, this book is valuable for its insights into the role of the local state and for its attention to the efforts of workers to combat the reduction of the social wage (public expenditures on housing and collective services) through struggles at