The House That Jack Built

BY SHELLEY HORNSTEIN-RABINOVITCH

A woman who sits staring into space, into a country that is not her husband's or her children's is likewise known to be an offence against nature. So a house is not the same for a woman. She is not someone who walks into the house, to make use of it, and will walk out again. She is the house; there is no separation possible.

"The Office" — Alice Munro

I thought I would preface this piece by describing how I see my practice as art historian. My general concerns are with architecture, or the ways in which art (architecture included), and our appreciation of it, is conditioned by social factors. In other words, that which is produced by an artist and hence viewed by the public are parts of the same social environment. Further, the creative acts which result in objects are actions that *signify* and the objects themselves are then repositories of meaning. Outside of considering art (architecture) as objects of Beauty, I see these objects as vessels that contain ideas — or the ideology — of a culture. One of these vessels is the shelter.

Shelter — or the house — has enormous historical value for all of us, but in particular ways for women. It is the most important architectural form for our survival: it protects and defends and creates the cocoon for intimacy. But what we know today of the house, or any domestic space (be it apartment, trailer or hotel room) is very different from the shelter as lean-to or tipi. And it seems fitting to address "the house" as it has been addressed, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in texts written by men and women.

Historically, women have not been involved in the professional end of the process. They have not been the architects. Schools of architecture in Europe and North America have recorded a token representation of women. Women who have graduated as architects generally disappeared from history, having either been "written out" and forgotten altogether or have been "de-classified," as it were, to the level of "designer" or "decorator," professions that have been considered, at least in the architectural networks, to be of a lesser rank and file. Women who yearned to practise often felt the overwhelming impossibility of confronting the male population that dominated the profession. By and large, the trickle of "greats" have consistently been given that status and validity by their "association" (be it marriage or other) with a "great" male architect or artist. If women painters and sculptors are only beginning to be written back into history, women architects will still have to wait their turn. My preoccupation here is to review architectural history in order to grasp the shaping of the ideology of the period and be better armed with the tools necessary to shape our own time.[1]

Histories of architecture have been told, for the most part, in ways that address notions of the "look," or the Beauty of a type of built form, accounting, all the while, for a certain chronology. In other words, we have surveys which document houses that meet certain formal criteria and respond to a prescribed period of time. Rarely do they address ways to interpret how we actually use these built forms, or how the articulation of space is an articulation of the way we want *or have learned to want* to use space within a dwelling.

I would like to present some ideas published in architectural pattern books (books which provided models) or treatises (specialized books on the principles of a particular type of architecture) from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, primarily in the United States, because they had immediate and direct consequences on houses in Canada as we know them today. This body of literature was read quite seriously by the North American public and shows that visual presentation (or "Beauty") is a key feature in the finished product. Most architectural drawings of this century indicate a strong emphasis on facade design and styles of the last century, as described by authors such as G. Wheeler and W. F. Pocock.[2] The design of interior spaces — which would be of prime concern for women — lagged far behind.

There is a disciplinary aspect in any architectural form. It can control and even create illusions about the way in which we perform everyday life. With this in mind, we can see that the house was planned (controlled) by (outside/male) professionals. As a result of the imposed environment, women came to derive pleasure from their houses by (re)creating them. What this meant is that a woman would decorate (or assemble on the surface), an image of an ideal interior. In this way, she learned to control the

functions of the household (including herself, her possessions and family members) and could organize them in such a way as to re-create the original architectural form. Although she "mastered" the art of assembling images (in fact these "scenes" are really *tableaux vivants*, or living "still lives" within the house), the viewer, in turn, was stumped into believing in the harmony of house and inhabitants where "the mother is the selfless mediator without her won space, who helps the others find privacy and fulfillment."[3]

We see in *Designs for Rural Residences, Cottages, etc.* (1818) that John Papworth strips this privilege from women by advocating that "peace and contentment" in a labourer's life can only be guaranteed by "neatness and cleanliness" of design.[4] For him, decoration would be "ill associated with the modest claims of this useful class of society." If these basic principles are preserved, then the "morals of the husband are equally preserved." Consequently, "the wife is happy in the presence of her husband, and society rejoices that another of its members is an honour to his humble state."

Almost a century later, in 1896, consider the question posed by John Wellborn Root that set out to determine what he called the "essential conditions" of any dwelling:

Is the occupant of the house a student? a family man? a public man... one who gives man entertainments? is he a man fond of display, or one who shirks it and rather prefers the simplicity of solid comfort?[5]

These gender-distinct conditions exhibit the discrimination of male planners, who utterly disregard female participation in the housing facility.

To add fuel to the fire, American Emily Post, in her book *The Personality of a House* (1900), says that a woman's ultimate desire is to provide a sense of security, comfort and well-being in an interior environment. It is alarming to read titles of models such as "The Sort of House that Appeals to a Man," or "A Delightful Man's Room" with descriptions as follows:

The type of room the average man likes and feels at home in, should not be easily spoilable. Chairs that look breakable, coverings light and perishable in colour and texture, in short, are more or less unfitted to convey the feeling of "home" to men.[6]

An illusion to domestic simplicity in an environment dedicated to the integration of wholesome materials and craftsmanship was a concept faithful to the doctrines of Englishman William Morris. A North American exponent of his theories, Gustav Stickley, projected a voice of moralizing social philosophy in his magazine, *The Craftsman*. Stickley equates financial gain with moral degeneration and ultimately, self-destruction; simplicity of means is the source of happiness. Honourable, indeed. Yet his principles turn sour when tainted with the following comments:

[The Luxurious house] taxes... the woman who is trying to keep up the appearances which she believes should belong to her station in life.... Boys who are brought up in such homes are taught... to take it for granted that they must not marry until they are able to keep up an establishment of equal pretensions, and girls also take as a matter of course that marriage must mean something quite as luxurious as the home of the childhood or it is not a paying investment for their youth and beauty.... Also we all realize regretfully the extravagance and uselessness of many of our women and admit that one of the gravest evils of our times is the light touch-and-go attitude toward marriage, which breaks up so many homes.[7]

His proposal for the ideal home bears the mark of a "back-to-nature" ideology: outdoor areas, living rooms, dining rooms, many windows and sleeping rooms all overlooking wooded green spaces. Stickley argues that all these features, if tenderly planned, will "have the power to influence family life and the development of character."[8] The inadequately planned kitchen, Stickley says, would be a crushing blow to the harmony and decency of domestic life. Woman, mother and ultimately, "housewife" — she who makes a house a home — must be given the proper principles followed through to their practical realization in the object called "kitchen" lest she falter and detract from her major goal:

THESE GENDER-DISTINCT CONDITIONS EXHIBIT THE DISCRIMINATION OF MALE PLANNERS, WHO UTTERLY DISREGARD FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN THE HOUSING FACILITY.

[W]oman is above all things the homemaker and our grandmothers were not far wrong when they taught their daughters that a woman who could not keep house, and do it well, was not making of her life the success that could reasonably be expected of her.... the idea that housekeeping means drudgery is partly due to our fussy, artificial, overcrowded way of living and partly to our elaborate houses and to inconvenient arrangements. We believe in having the kitchen small, so that extra steps may be avoided and fitted with every kind of convenience and comfort... the wise woman keeps herself equipped to take up the work of her own house at a moment's notice, by being in such close touch with it all the time that she never lays down the reins of personal government.[9]

Architect Catharine E. Beecher, in a treatise of 1841,[10] defends and idealizes female domesticity and its accompanying stereotypical image. A criticism made of Beecher is that her "domestic mythology demands the intellectual, economic, social and political subordination of women."[11] By exalting certain aspects of gender differences, she created a fertile nesting ground for woman's domestic functions. She claims to address her designs to a female audience yet it is to that audience that she directs her fearful and intense reaffirmations of the role of the domestic stereotype. With respect to an economy of labour, a principle she firmly defends, she says that the size and style of the house should respond to the house manager's physical abilities, within the financial structure she is allotted by her husband. Her realism and defence of the female plight focus on pertinent design features:

A house should be so arranged, that the mother and house-

keeper, when she is in feeble health or is without domestics, can have access to her nursery and kitchen, with the fewest steps and least effort.[12]

Beecher had real concerns for health care design, and on any architectural plan, previously labelled zones such as "kitchen," "dining room," and "parlour," become "workroom," "family room," and "home room" respectively, proposed in an article titled: "How to Redeem Woman's Profession from Dishonour." Yet her house designs remain conventional boxes with central fireplaces and few concessions to new planning situations.

Still, radical ideas were available in microscopic doses. One of the most intriguing was a solution to the problem of traditional single-family housing where the female serves as household executive, legal advisor, home-spun analyst and full-time, live-in cleaner. It was the imaginative new twist of cooperative housing introduced by the "material feminists" whose visions were exemplary of a socialist political framework. Melusina Fay Pierce campaigned for architects to design new house types and house-associated communities in conjunction with communal participation facilities. She suggested movable walls to allow for more flexible distribution of functional zones within the house. But above all, she proposed the innovative kitchenless house:

I am sure women would succeed in planning the loveliest and completest of homes. Houses without any kitchens... in them.[13]

Here, as in much of the literature by the "material feminists," the single-family dwelling model is shattered in order to produce new strategies in the domestic environment.

This kind of radical departure in planning has been silenced for too long. In the past, architectural programs for houses and housing projects were drawn up largely by male architects and designers. Unavoidably, those particular selections and combinations emanated from a range of possibilities made available to male-oriented societies. Engineering and architecture have persistently been top-heavy in male enrollments, and this extends to counselling for potential students. We have only to remember the bitter images of the 14 engineering students, all women, savagely murdered by a deranged man obsessed by the presence of women in a space, an architectural space, that is visibly and historically not theirs. In these male-dominated, if not uniquely male disciplines, it is easy to see how the concerns of women have not necessarily been taken into consideration.

Given the opportunity, the female perspective will provide not only adjuncts, corrections and renovations of houses and other built forms, but, based on potentially unprecedented criteria and increasing numbers of female graduates, new selections and combinations will come to the fore to provide novel prototypes for future investigations. Already projects for single-parent housing designed for and by women have produced striking results based on different approaches to the concept of "shelter." Grassroots projects are beginning to find favour in many communities.[14] Architectural history will then be guaranteed a wider representation of ideas for suitable — as seen through the eyes of women — and ever more enriching debate.[15]

IN THE PAST, ARCHITECTURAL PROGRAMS FOR HOUSES AND HOUSING PROJECTS WERE DRAWN UP LARGELY BY MALE ARCHITECTS AND DESIGNERS.

[1] Lamia Doumato's *Architecture and Women: A Bibliography* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988) has produced an invaluable tool for research. By compiling bibliographic information she documents (specifically American) landscape architects, critics, writers and other related architectural professional positions held by women.

[2] Gervase Wheeler, in *Homes for the People in Suburb and Country* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1855) alludes to the desirability of various stylistic modes of architecture. W.F. Pocock, in *Architectural Designs for Rustic Cottages, Picturesque Dwellings, Villas, etc.* (London, 1806) refers to the importance visual appearance should have over practical function.

[3] Gwendolyn Wright, "The Model Domestic Environment: Icon or Option" in *Women in American Architecture: a Historic and Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Susanna Torre (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1977), p. 25.

[4] John B. Papworth, *Rural Residence, Consisting of a series of designs for cottage, decorated cottages, small villas and other ornamental buildings, etc.* (London, 1818).

[5] John Wellborn Root, "The Equipment of the Architect" in *John Wellborn Root: A Study of his Life and Work* by Harriet Monroe (Boston, 1896), pp. 65-75.

[6] Consult Torre for a wide selection of penetrating commentaries on women and domestic architecture.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (Boston: Marsh, Capen, Lyon and Webb). Witold Rybcznski, in his recently published *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, confirms that Beecher, in spite of her efforts, never sought to relinquish her role as "housewife" and planner of the functional requirements necessary to achieve that end: "Beecher did not dispute that the home was not a particularly well-thought-out place for her to be." (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), p. 160.

[11] Wright in D. Hayden, "Catharine Beecher and the Politics of Housework" in Torre, p. 40.

[12] Beecher, p. 270.

[13] Melusina Fay Pierce, *Cooperative Housekeeping — How Not to Do It and How to Do It, A Study in Sociology* (Boston, 1884), above all in D. Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1981), p. 69, and further in Hayden's *Redesigning the American Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984).

[14] See Gerda Werkele, ed. *New Space for Women* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1980), and *Heresies*, special issue, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1981.

[15] See also Doris Cole, *From Tipi to Skyscraper* (Boston: I Press, 1973) and Natalie Kampen and Elizabeth Grossman, *Feminism and Methodology: Dynamics and Change in the History of Art and Architecture* (Wellesley, Mass: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, 1983).