'NO ONE SEEMS TO GO TO WORK ANYMORE:'

WOMEN REDESIGNATING AND REDESIGNING THE CITY

Suzanne Mackenzie

Dans cet essai spéculatif, l'auteure imagine une ville de l'avenir – conçue pour faciliter le double rôle de la femme comme travailleuse domestique et salariée. Elle nous encourage à considérer l'espace urbain en tant que création humaine, flexible, qui reflète la façon par laquelle nous organisons notre vie. Nos besoins, relatifs à la production et à la reproduction doivent faire partie de notre environnement. Il nous faut une vision d'un espace urbain non-sexiste, et qui ne se divise pas selon les sexes.

There appear to be two ways of talking about the future: extrapolating present trends and making the 'given un-given.' On the whole, the former has been the province of social science, the latter of feminist and utopian fiction. Both seem necessary for feminist social science. We need to see what is going on now and speculate about its extension. We also need to let our imaginations take over, release ourselves from analytic constraints about changes in the all too concrete and 'common sense' forms of cities. This story both extrapolates and imagines. It owes a great deal to the many women I see creating these trends, and to some ideas germinated in Dolores Hayden's stimulating article, "What Would a Non-Sexist City be Like?," *Signs* 5(3)) and Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*.[1] It is also important to remember, as Gerda Wekerle pointed out, that these trends could easily lead to a 'dystopia.'[2] As ever, what happens in the future depends on us.

The woman had said I could interview her at work. The bus dropped me on a shady suburban corner five miles from the city centre, a street of one-storey, non-descript houses with unfenced front yards. Some of the lawns had run slightly to seed and were growing up to steps from which the paint peeled a little – the homes, I suspected, of 'dual career' and single parent families.

The address I'd been given turned out to be a house like the others, except that its front lawn was fenced and was dominated by a large sandbox and wading pool, both evidently homemade and being fully utilized by two toddlers. There were two younger children in the front room my hostess showed me into, as she opened the gate of the waist-high partitions which divided it from the rest of the open plan house.

"You've done a lot of work on the house," I said, looking around. She nodded. "Oh yes, it was entirely unsuitable for children and for the way we live here now."

The woman was an author. In the dining room, adjoining the children's playroom, we had coffee and the kind of conversation I'd now come to expect from mother-workers, one peppered with demands and interruptions from children. She told me one of the children was hers, and one was the son of the woman who shared the house ("it's the only way I could afford to keep the house after the divorce, for her to buy his share"), and two were neighbour's children she babysat for pay on a regular basis ("not much pay, but as I'm here anyway . . . "). The rooms were littered with toys, some the woman had made herself, like the sandbox-wading pool in the yard. She designed them and she and her housemate built them in the garage. "We had to have the garage rewired . . . not now Carolyn . . . for the power tools, and we insulated it. In a few years it should pay for itself. We sell a lot of these toys to local playgroups, some to women's centres. They aren't cheaper than commercial ones, although we don't make much on them. But a lot of people would rather buy from us. There's more and more people like us around here now . . . Pardon me a minute . . . yes Randy?."

The woman was ambivalent about her life. She spoke over an intermittent din, glancing over her shoulder when the timbre of the din altered. Before her child was born she had been a professional. She had stayed at home for five years and then gone 'back to work' after her divorce. "Now I do this," she said, waving her hands. "I've cobbled all this together. I'm not sure if it's a triumph of my ingenuity or a defeated retreat into a woman's world. Its all 'women's things' – the child-care, the toys, even the songs and stories I write now are for and about this community of women and children out here. Some how this neighbourhood is full of people like me. There's playgroups and the food co-op and the health centre – I work there when Monica, my housemate, is home. I get some money but mostly I get paid in donations. No one seems to 'go to work' anymore around here. Excuse me a minute . . . "

"I feel like a prototype," she said when she returned in a few minutes. "I'm 45 years old and I feel as if I've lived through three life times and three lifestyles – the one I was brought up to expect, being a suburban wife and mother; the one we had thrust upon us after we demanded 'equal rights' and acquired instead dual roles; and this. The other two I feel are past, although I know a lot of women still live those ways. This . . . this feels like a future, mine anyway."

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This conversation could have taken place any time in the past ten years and the only real difference would have been my degree of surprise, leaving my precisely organized streamlined-for-work office in the centre of the city and entering this woman's unshaped life, her setting a muddle of functions, her time undifferentiated. I came to meet more and more such women, who, despite the consistent ambivalence they expressed about their lives, all saw themselves as living in self-directed and progressive ways. I also noticed that the shape of the environments around them was changing. More and more often, whole blocks of shady suburban front lawns were fenced to create one long playspace, or backyards were unfenced to join neighbours'. More and more often, a whole house was redesigned and given over to the neighbourhood children, power tools or sewing machines. There were more men around during the day, fewer passed me on the freeways in the evening. Gradually, a disparate series of pictures assumed a shape and pattern. It became evident that women had somehow shaped the 'recession' of the early 1980's, the unwieldy and debt-ridden cities, into new forms.

I begin to realize that for these women, urban space was not a passive form. It was a human creation. It had been created to meet certain needs, partly market needs, but also the basic needs of sustaining a civilization: the need to produce goods and services, and to reproduce, educate, look after people. Urban space provided resources for these activities, sustained and encouraged certain ways of doing them. It reflected the way we organize our lives, and it reinforced this organization. It also reflected and reinforced changes.

I remembered that the cities of the early 1980s had reflected and reinforced a particular kind of relation between producing the things we needed and reproducing people, biologically and socially. Since the industrial system was established, the tendency had been for these two kinds of processes (respectively identified with 'work' and 'home') to become increasingly separate, physically separate, temporally separate, distinct in imagination and distinct in 'appropriate' social behaviour. 'Work' occupied one place and a defined time. We had carried it out in generally well organized and efficiently planned work spaces with specified and socially designated techniques. Often, 'work' produced a specific product; it almost always had a well understood goal. 'Home' was another place, often far away. Time at home was amorphous, space was fluid, goals and activities were fuzzy: emotion, care, love.

This separation reached its fullest expression in the North American suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s. Homes were miles from work. Major urban problems were all structured around the provision of enough resources – enough concrete, steel and person hours – to move millions of men and an indeterminate number of young 'unmarried' women from home to work and back from work to home everyday.

The city became stretched to its limits. The miles of concrete and steel linking home and work were choked and heavily subsidized. The home was further and further from work, and grew more and more expensive, expensive to acquire, to equip, to travel to and from. By the 1970s the cities themselves were choking on their own fumes and families needed two incomes to maintain the home, a 'woman's place.' Still more millions of people began to move to work, this time older women with families.

But unlike men or the young women, these 'family women' brought with them reminders of things previously excluded from work, reminders of children, of fluid, and amorphous time, apparently transhistorical goals. These women did not move from home to work to home, they appeared to move from work-at-home to work-at-work to work-at-home. Every day, twice or five times or a hundred times a day they denied that work and home were distinct. Work was everywhere.

For these women, the space of the city was obsolete. It did not provide resources for them to do their work. While these women's lives had changed, the city had gone on reflecting and depending upon a gendered division of labour which no longer existed. The separation of defined work spaces and time from large and distant homes depended on men having secure and remunerative jobs and living with women and children as an economic unit. It depended on women working in the home, organizing and cleaning and caring. But the very form of the extensive and expensive home denied this gendered division, its maintenance required that women 'bring in some money.' The form of the city, created to meet the needs of one gendered division, had contributed to its demise. Through working for money women had changed this gendered division of activities; at the same time, they had changed the nature of 'work.' These new women worked from a different material base. They had a primary job in the home and their primary responsibility was juggling resources – goods, services, money – in order that the family lived as well as possible. For them, home and work were not distinct. Moving from one to the other was a problem.

For a while these women continued to struggle with an obsolete environment, moving from home to work. They had altered the gendered division of labour in many ways, but they had not yet altered the urban space which reflected the old gendered roles.

But gradually, they began to do this too. Just how this began to happen is not fully clear to us yet. It certainly did not involve the official planners (of which I am one). It seemed, in many ways, to be a change which was "cobbled together," largely unnoticed at first and almost in opposition to the plans.

It had become evident that the restructuring of the economy (which in that period we still called 'the recession') meant that the services women were asking for to meet their dual roles – the daycare, the staggered hours, the improved transportation – were not forthcoming. The short period of time when sole support mothers had been defined as 'doing a job,' and paid a subsistence wage for doing it, was over. The hoped-for extension of this idea into 'wages for housewives' receded. The demands for 'equal pay for work of equal value,' which would have made the dual role more rewarding, were put off indefinitely. We were told, and we repeated over and over, that there simply were not enough public resources to go around.

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Some women continued to push for extended services, although the televised and photographed faces of activists looked more and more weary. This pressure brought some results, with wide media celebration, but many activitists said it was too little, and too late.

In any case, there were fewer jobs to 'leave home' for, and these were less and less rewarding. There were also fewer jobs for men. They 'left home' for long periods, often permanently, or they began to 'stay home' as well. The city was full of isolated families dependent upon a dwindling level of public resources.

In the meantime, while they waited, women had had to find alternatives. It was not possible to put off caring for the children until economic conditions improved, to put off feeding your husband or talking out your problems until the political conditions looked right. Women themselves began to create the services they needed. They looked after each other's children. They sewed each other's drapes. They cooked freezable food for others. (It was about this time that I noticed, even among those who had jobs, the most popular form of entertainment had changed from sit down dinners to potlucks).

Much of what women were doing remained invisible, as did its cumulative effect on the city. Women had always worked at home, unpaid, invisibly and unceasingly, as well as living there. But as the maintenance of this home required that women be paid, as men's wages became inadequate, or the men left, women began to find ways of earning money in the traditional female workshop, the home and the community. In many ways, women were adopting their grandmother's solution to 'making ends meet' – using the resources of the home in gainful ways – rather than their mother's solutions – 'finding a 'job.' Women began to adapt this traditional workshop to their needs, discovering that resources for earning money had always been there, or could be created when they needed them. Women began to redesignate the home as both living and working space. Whereas before they had brought reminders of their 'other jobs' to the workplace, now they brought tools, services, community networks to their aid in making the home overlap with the workplace.

Gradually, these 'stop gap' services became more and more important, often the only collective services. And as the unemployment rates of 40-50% which had been confined to rural areas became common in cities, these 'little jobs' became more and more important, many people's only jobs. As fewer and fewer men went 'out to work,' more and more of them became involved in 'women's work,' the petty, mundane, common sense details of maintaining human life and creating small geographic enclaves to contain and reflect the immediate needs of human life.

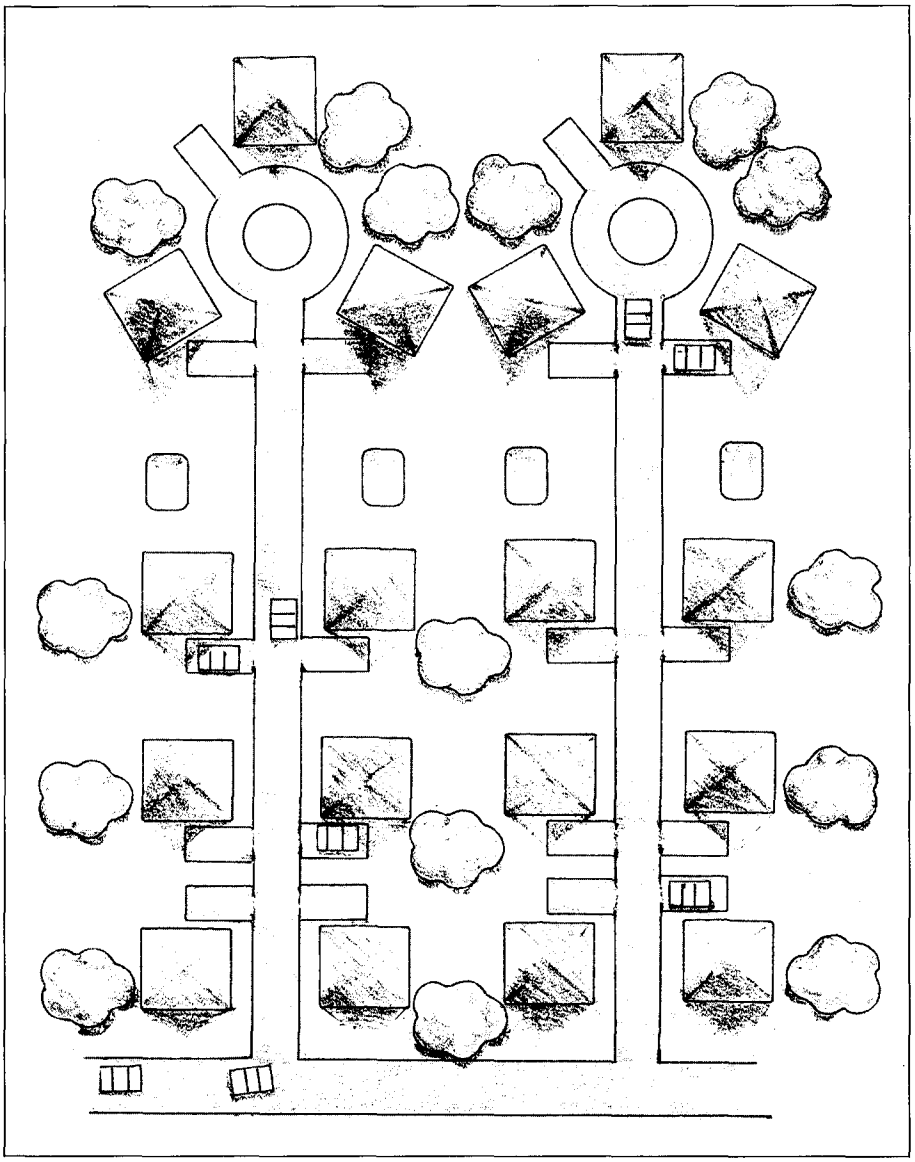

Illustration: Jane Northey

The use, and then the shape of the city changed. It appeared to have lost its core. Some areas were gradually deserted. People seemed to spend less time moving around town.

Of course it was necessary for some people to work outside the community, and to move back and forth every day. But while some continued to commute 'full time,' more and more did so on a 'part time' or intermittent basis. They brought money into the community, directly to their famillies and friends, indirectly in exchange for services.

Many things became a little ragged or worn out (most notably the freeways). Some things were hard to find, some things were unobtainable. Supermarkets closed. Sometimes they were reopened as workshops; more often they were just left, angular and increasingly overgrown. Everyone worked harder, but for some reason spent fewer hours 'at work.' Each community became a little isolated and more full of its own life.

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I met the woman again the other day for the first time in nearly a decade. It was the same day I had put my last pair of high-heeled shoes into the neighbourhood children's 'dress up box.' I, too, had moved back to the 'suburbs.' I was still

working for the planning office a few days a week, but mostly I worked 'at home.' I'd helped redesign the local park system; now we were talking about planting gardens together and trying to generate energy locally, although none of us knew much about gardens or windmills.

The woman was carrying a bag of wooden puzzles, delivering them to a play school near my neighbourhood. Afterwards, we walked our bikes along the paths through the houses to the future gardens.

"You were a pioneer," I told her. She shook her head. "No. I did what I had to do. It was difficult sometimes, we had to work so hard. But it was never hard to figure out what to do. There didn't seem to be any choices . . . then." She sighed. "I'm older now. I get tired. Now I wonder if I was wrong. Maybe there were choices. Maybe we should have got together and camped on Parliament Hill with the children instead of renovating the houses. Maybe we should have elected women and taken over newspapers and demanded resources, demanded that society produce the things we needed. Maybe we should have created a political movement, supported those women who did, instead of 'going home.' "

"But we've changed things this way," I replied, waving my arms to include the boarded-off street used as a basketball court, the neighbourhood 'laundry house,' the four neighbourhood cars beside the 'machine shop house.' "You can actually see it. We are producing the things we need . . . well, some of them. We've made a new world here. We can't go back to the way we were."

The woman looked around, nodded, adjusted her frayed jacket. "No," she said.

[1]Dolores Hayden, "What Would a Non-Sexist City be Like?," *Signs*, Vol. 5, No. 3; and Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

[2]See Gerda R. Wekerle and Suzanne Mackenzie, "Reshaping the Neighbourhood of the Future as We Age in Place," published in this issue of *CWS/cf.*

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DISCOURSE

learning to trust me
took you years
still
I touch a nervous
and silent body

another caffeine high
reveals shadowns beneath your eyes
as you read
the breakfast paper

you split
the orange just so
"the sun orders everything" you say
I bounce
racket balls
across the kitchen

I say
the universe is nothing:
you cling to that flute
ears bleed
a 2/4 vibrato

we explore sunday streets
you delight
in discovery
yet another bookshop
the quiet you say
helps you think
linearly

Robin Potter
Montreal, Quebec

CONDITIONING

What could I know of horses
when the only ones I recalled
were the mare that pulled the milk wagon,
or the fruitman's filly,
or that poor nag
blanketed with wretched patchwork,
stopped shame-faced before our door
and door of neighbours,
while aproned housewives from cold flats
came to pick and choose the largest
sawdust-covered block
of ice on which to seat
their milk and meat
for comfortable freshness,
or that Belgian stud, rich-muscled,
heavy-penised,
which advertised the Beer of Men.

What could I know other than
that a horse could draw a load,
was patient for an apple or a carrot
or a pat between the blinkers,
weathering all seasons,
and enriching newly-fallen snow
with hot and gleaming sparrow-fare,

or the unreal image
of that powerful and potent satisfier
of a shameful thirst . . . .

Shulamis Yelin
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