

Chapter 7

Housing and Gender: Beyond the Public/Private Dichotomy

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Many of the recent feminist housing analyses in the United States (Sarkissian, 1978; Wekerle & Carter, 1978; Saegert, 1985) have focused on the public/private dichotomy as a way to understand the powerful forces behind suburbanization in the experiences of isolation and loneliness for women in the suburbs. This paper critiques the use of the public/private dichotomy as the primary tool of current feminist housing analysis, because it speaks largely to the housing conditions and experiences of white middle-class women. The shelter experiences of women of color and poor white women historically have not lain in the relative privilege of the suburbs, nor have their lives fallen into a neat public/private dichotomy.

The paper will draw upon the housing experiences of women in public housing in both the United States and Britain, and the work of Mimi Abramovitz in the area of social welfare policy. I will suggest that better insights leading to greater understanding of the housing experiences of poor women and women of color can come from examining how these women are designated as either the "deserving" or "undeserving" poor.

The Public/Private Dichotomy

The public/private dichotomy refers ideologically and historically to the development of a male political community and citizenship, with all its attendant rights, within the public sphere of society. The development of the public sphere, with its exclusion of women, demanded the parallel development of the private sphere of the family and home. The private sphere, without rights of citizenship, became women's place and space. These public and private spheres became mutually reinforcing ideological constructs in spite of their irrelevance to the reality of poor women's lives throughout the industrial age. However, this political and ideological construct was translated into the built form so that public buildings and spaces associated with citizenship and power were male-centered, and the home was considered the woman's realm. The development of the suburbs, with the associated cult of domesticity which idealized women as the center of home and hearth, is an excellent example of the way in which housing reinforced women's subordination in society.

The cult of domesticity idealized women as the center of home and hearth, or to put it more realistically, her primary role in social reproduction. The cult also idealized women's isolation from the public world of the formal economy and political power; it promoted the single-family home as an island of tranquillity; and it

reinforced the nuclear family as the primary socializing unit in society. The drive towards suburbanization and the cult of domesticity began in the latter part of the nineteenth century and gained its strongest influence after the second World War. But as writers such as Evelyn Nakano Glen have pointed out, "a definition of womanhood exclusively in terms of domesticity never applied to ethnic women, as it did not to many working-class women." The women referred to by Glen did not have access to the single-family home, either because of low income or discrimination. In addition, they were highly likely to be part of the formal economy, and when the influence of the cult of domesticity had led them to give up work in the formal economy, non-white and poor white women continued their production in the informal economy.

A more useful basis for formulating housing policy for poor and working class women in the United States, and especially female-headed families, is an understanding of how these women are viewed as the "undeserving poor" in our society. This needs to be understood in the context of the role which housing policy plays in strengthening the nuclear family, the cornerstone of a patriarchal society. Mimi Abramovitz's research in social welfare policy is especially valuable in this area.

The "Undeserving" Poor

Abramovitz has shown that, since the Poor Laws of the colonial period, women who have stepped outside of society's narrowly defined role of dependence and nurturing have suffered various levels and forms of opprobrium. This marginalization has been reinforced through social welfare policies used as an instrument of the patriarchal state in regulating the lives of women, and mediating between the demands of patriarchy (i.e., the family ethic) and capitalism (i.e., the work ethic). In her book *Regulating the Lives of Women, Social Welfare Policy from Colonial Times to the Present* Abramovitz has demonstrated that "the rules and regulation of social welfare programs benefit those who live in traditional family structures while penalizing alternative family forms where poor women and women of color tend to predominate."

The deserving female paupers of the colonial period who qualified for aid were widows, the wives of sick, disabled, or temporarily unproductive men, or women who were seen as involuntarily lacking a male breadwinner. They received clothes, firewood, bread, medical care, or possibly a small weekly cash payment. This allowed them to continue both productive and reproduc-

tive tasks in the home, and hold on to colonial society's mark of "a true woman." Undeserving female paupers were single or divorced women, or unwed mothers. They were forced to work in exchange for a place in the poor house, or have their services auctioned off to the highest bidder. With this distinction, colonial poor laws protected the town coffers, as well as the work ethic and the reigning ideology pertaining to women's roles.

With the advent of industrial capitalism and the development of the focus of production away from the family household and into the public or market sphere, women's roles in the social order became increasingly problematic. Abramovitz points out:

By the end of the colonial period, capital's need for cheap market labor had combined with the impoverishment of the working class to draw increasingly large numbers of women into the wage labor market. Paradoxically, their entry conflicted with the benefits received by capital from women's unpaid domestic labor. Combined with fewer marriages and more female-headed households, the growing labor force participation of women, which held the possibility of greater economic independence, also contained a challenge to male dominance and patriarchal family patterns.

Social welfare programs have had to deal with these contradictory pulls. They did this largely by channeling "deserving" poor women into the home to devote full time to reproducing and maintaining the labor force, and the "undeserving" poor into the labor market. The development of patriarchal social thought, which held that gender roles were biologically determined rather than socially assigned, helped clarify who was deserving. The emergence of the "cult of domesticity" or "cult of true womanhood," which was to convince women that their place was in the home, rationalized giving working women largely low-paid, low-status jobs.

In 1875 the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that "the law of nature destines and qualifies the female sex for the bearing and nurture of the children of our race and for the custody of the homes of the world in love and honor." However, in the same decade nearly 15 percent (1.8 million women) of the adult female population worked for wages—mostly unmarried, widowed, or deserted women. But concerns about working mothers and the quality of the future labor force gave rise to the campaign for Mothers' Pension. The Pension was accorded to those women who were deemed "suitable" to raise their children at home, yet was not enough to substitute for full-time work. Thus the program encouraged the economic dependence of women on men and

defined child-rearing as exclusively women's responsibility. In an address to congress in February, 1909, Theodore Roosevelt reinforced society's identification of the deserving poor. He explained that the proposed Mothers' Pension was for:

parents of good character suffering from temporary misfortune and above all deserving mothers fairly well able to work but deprived of the support of the normal breadwinner...so that they could maintain suitable homes for the rearing of their children.

The eligibility rules, which varied from state to state, distinguished among women according to their marital status and the Mothers' Pension was largely given to white, widowed women.

During the Depression of the 1930's the growth of female-headed families (3.7 million in 1930) deepened the sense of crisis within the family system. The Aid to Dependent Children (ADC, forerunner to the AFDC) was introduced in 1935 and was purely for the support of children in the care of single mothers. The formula for payment did not include any aid for the mother herself, which was in marked contrast to the pensions for widows of veterans. Both received \$18 a month for the first child and \$12 for the second, but the veteran's widow received an additional \$30 for herself.

The ambivalence about supporting female-headed families was widespread, and by 1940 there were ten states which still had not adopted the program. The program eligibility rules continued to distinguish between the deserving and undeserving women by using the criteria of "suitable homes" established under the Mothers' Pension program. In states where women's low-paid labor was used extensively, rules governing "employable mothers" disqualified able-bodied women with school-age children. This rule was applied especially to Black women. In the late 1930's one southern public assistance field supervisor reported that:

The number of Negro cases is few due to the unanimous feeling on the part of the staff and board that there are more work opportunities for Negro women and to their intense desire not to interfere with local labor conditions. The attitude that they have always gotten along, and that "all they'll do is have more children" is definite.... There is hesitancy on the part of lay boards to advance too rapidly over the thinking of their own communities, which see no reason why the employable Negro mother should not continue her usual sketchy seasonal labor or indefinite domestic service rather than receive a public assistance grant.

The contradictions for society of women's role in production and reproduction continued through the 1950's. Questions of women's "moral fitness" to receive ADC continued throughout this period, and the "rediscovery" of poverty in the early 1960's fueled concerns about the reproductive capacity of poor families and the role of welfare. As welfare rolls grew, the percentage of AFDC families headed by unwed mothers rose from 21.3 to 28.4 percent. Abramovitz argues that the state perceived that it had failed in "normalizing" the female-headed household by substituting itself for the missing breadwinner and, threatened by the increase in female-headed families, began to treat the entire AFDC case load as "undeserving."

These same designations of "deserving" and "undeserving," and the attempts to support the nuclear family, can be seen clearly in even a cursory examination of public housing policy in the United States.

Public Housing

United States

The public housing program in the 1930's was created to alleviate the poor housing conditions which had led to social unrest, as well as concerns about the inefficiencies of social reproduction. In addition, there was the need to create employment for the millions of unemployed men. But despite the high-minded rhetoric of the 1937 Housing Act which stated as its goal "to provide a decent home and suitable living environment for every American family," it was never the intention of the public housing officials to provide decent housing as a right to all who needed it. Rather, as Rachel Bratt has stated, public housing was for the deserving, temporarily poor, the "submerged middle class." The program therefore targeted those who could not find decent, affordable housing on the private market, but not the so-called unworthy poor and those with no means to pay rent.

And indeed despite the fact that its early tenants were the deserving poor, public housing was designed to be distinctive in appearance from private housing, and thus stigmatized, in order not to become an attractive housing alternative for people. As Gwendolyn Wright noted, public housing was sturdy and functional but also cheap and austere.

In line with its mission of restoring social order, public housing also served to reinforce the primacy of the nuclear family. Most housing authorities accepted what

they termed "complete" families, in other words, two parents with several children. Applicants had interviews with social workers, employment verifications, and home visits to ensure that the families conformed to the prevailing norms of the day. These officials would rate both the families, existing living conditions and their readiness to change in their new surroundings, both of which were rated according to middle-class ideas of the way the poor should live. Thus thrift and nuclear family values were supported through design. The design of the apartments contained no storage space as large purchases represented a more comfortable life than the tenants were supposed to enjoy in this transition period. Cupboard doors were left off to encourage neatness.

These early public housing tenants were the deserving poor, the submerged middle class. However, the economic boom of the 1950's saw a change in policy approaches to public housing tenants as the white, working class benefited from the economic upturn and moved out of the public housing and into the suburbs. People on welfare only now became eligible to apply for public housing, and a new kind of tenant emerged, largely African-American families and those on welfare: namely, the undeserving poor, as well as an increasing number of retired people.

Public housing for poor women in the United States in the 1950's and 60's was characterized by large-scale dwellings in the inner cities, in contrast to the suburban lives and experiences of white, middle-class women. Indeed the reality of the lack of state support for low-income housing is brought into stark relief not only by the massive 82 percent cut in the housing budget under the Reagan Administration. It is also illustrated more subtly by the greater allocation of resources, and attention to architectural detail, paid to the deserving poor public housing tenants, namely, the elderly. Senior housing is designed with ramps and safety rails, clinics and community rooms—all features which would also be appropriate to housing for the bulk of the rest of the public housing projects, largely female-headed families.

Britain

In contrast, public housing in Britain, or council housing as it is referred to, is perhaps paradoxically more easily understood within the framework of the public/private dichotomy. However, adding the "deserving/undeserving poor" analysis as a layer of study adds significantly to our understanding of women's housing situation. It is interesting to note that in reviewing the literature on housing in Britain, there is a significant difference

between the analyses by scholars in both countries. While both agree that housing cannot be simply looked at as an issue of shelter, there are certain *a priori* assumptions in British literature about the universal subordination of women, and the utmost significance of women's contribution to the maintenance and reproduction of the social order (McDowell; Watson). And while it is apparent that feminist housing theory is still in its infancy, as in this country, there is a greater emphasis on understanding the organization and function of women's domestic work in capitalist societies. This is in turn of course related to the social and sexual division of residential space, and the isolation of women in single-family housing. All the feminist scholars in Britain refer to or discuss patriarchy. However, there is little discussion of the centrality of the nuclear family. This is connected to the fact that there are fewer numbers and forms of alternative family structures developing in that society. In the 1980 census figures, 80 percent of all families in Britain were identified as "traditional male-headed family units."

The impetus for building council housing in Britain came in the aftermath of wars, both the First and Second World Wars, which obviously had brought destruction, as well as the rising marriage and birth rates which came after, and the fear of social disorder. The type of housing built after both wars was predominantly single-family housing, on "greenfield" peripheral sites, exacerbating the separation of home and work, and the isolation of women. As Linda McDowell, a British scholar, noted:

Peripheral location combined with the single family dwellings confirmed the wish not only to preserve the integrity of the nuclear family, but also to keep it as separate as possible from other families and any outside intrusion. During the 1930's flats were commonly regarded, in England and Wales at least, as violating individual privacy. In a debate in the House of Commons in 1938 the member for Argyllshire argued that 'flats are an abomination... never meant for human beings... flats make Communists while cottages make individuals, and incidentally make good Conservatives.'

McDowell pointed out that this nicely combined the desire for privacy with the recognition of the links between housing policy and social quiescence.

Policy makers and local authority officials were not only concerned with strengthening the nuclear family but also ensuring that the mother and homemaker was doing a good job, by distributing leaflets on efficient methods of domestic work and inspecting tenants' homes in

unannounced visits. This was part of the legacy of the private charity workers of the late nineteenth century, many of whom believed that any household that violated the prescribed gender division of labor would quickly become a "breeding ground of sin and social disorder." Indeed, the Charity Organization Society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries instructed its "friendly visitors" to strengthen "true" home life among the poor, to "dissuade restless wives from seeking outside employment," and to introduce messy housekeepers to the "pleasures of clean, well-ordered homes."

However, it was clear from the housing policies that while poor, white, nuclear families needed to be educated, and were indeed seen as educable, minority and female-headed families did not receive the same attention. Tenants were segregated according to the social norms of the day; thus in Britain, female-headed families and families of color were most likely to receive the poorest dwellings in the lowest status areas. Up until the 1960's, single mothers were included in a housing authority pamphlet entitled "Unsatisfactory Tenants;" and only 24 percent of women with children seeking emergency shelter from spousal abuse were admitted to public housing rolls as officials did not want to encourage the break-up of families.

Clearly, distinctions along the lines of deserving/undeserving poor were made in the allocation of council housing and the treatment of council house tenants, with female-headed families the obvious designees of the status of "undeserving" poor. And while a feminist analysis of public housing has not yet been carried out, in both Britain and the United States it is clear that, like other welfare programs, the state attempted to use housing policy during the 1940's and 1950's to "normalize" poor families. As the make-up of public housing in the United States changed during the 1960's to include increasing numbers of African-American and female-headed families, the state gave up attempts to enforce middle-class, nuclear family norms and designated all public housing tenants as the "undeserving" poor. Thus the 82 percent cut in low-income housing programs during the Reagan era was implemented without significant protest.

Conclusion

The current focus of feminist housing analyses is on understanding women's housing in terms of the public/private dichotomy. However, a closer examination of this analysis indicates that it largely excludes non-white and poor white women from its frame of reference.

These women have historically been denied the very status of women (characterized largely in this patriarchal society by the cult of domesticity) which imprisoned white, middle-class women in the spatially distinct private arena of their homes.

As the structure of society changes to include more single-parent families, and as the feminization of poverty becomes a reality for ever-increasing numbers of women, it is important to understand why housing design still reflects the needs of the nuclear family. The work carried out by Abramovitz regarding the way in which poor women are designated either "deserving" or "undeserving" in social welfare policy provides especially valuable insights in this regard, and its relevance becomes immediately apparent when one applies the analysis to public housing.

However, a postmodern understanding of feminism may have much to contribute to the larger discussion of the housing needs of women. Postmodern feminist theorists have pointed out that large-scale theories, what they refer to as "metanarratives," are inappropriate to such heterogeneous and complex modern societies as ours. Theory must be culturally and historically specific and take into account what Linda Nicholson has called "complexly constructed conceptions of social identity." Having said that, I think that one of the most important things we can learn from the recent public housing experiences of poor women in both Britain and the United States is that the state will use housing policy to promote strongly the nuclear family. As we formulate shelter policies for women, we have to recognize that the nuclear family is the cornerstone of patriarchy and non-nuclear family forms are considered a threat to that system. Therefore we must first challenge housing policies specifically, and social policies generally, which denote non-nuclear families as the undeserving poor.

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