ning van Eyck was to address himself to a whole set of issues which most of the members of Team 10 were scarcely capable of formulating. . . . No other member seemed to be able to attack the alienating abstraction of modern architecture on such fundamental grounds."

During the last three decades of his life, van Eyck came to question the assumption that the modern movement was past, and that we had entered a period that could be called “postmodern.” Van Eyck instead believed that it was not modernism as a whole but architecture itself that required thoughtful redefinition and reengagement. More recently, van Eyck has been characterized as one of the most important representatives of “the other tradition of modern architecture,” those modern architects whose work was determined not by universal formal styles, technical or functional formula, or purely conceptual theories, but rather by the everyday lives and experiences of those who inhabit architecture.6 Yet van Eyck was also one of the only architects of his generation to question whether contemporary culture and society were not themselves becoming disconnected from the concepts of modern life that had inspired the early modernists in all the arts—the ideal that living and experiencing the places and occasions of the modern world should be as enriching, expanding, engaging, and liberating as humanly possible. Holding that good architecture has always been the counterform of society’s form, he asked, “If society has no form, how can architects build the counterform?” (2:325).

Van Eyck’s deeply disquieting question, first asked shortly after the midpoint of the twentieth century, still haunts us today.

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Notes

Wendy Gambar
The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America

Betsy Klimasmith
At Home in the City: Urban Domesticity in American Literature and Culture, 1850–1930

These two books answer the question, posed in the March 2006 JSAH by editor Nancy Stieber, how might architectural history inform the work of adjacent disciplines? On the one hand, the historian Wendy Gambar’s The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America hardly mentions physical buildings. On the other, literature specialist Betsy Klimasmith’s At Home in the City is fully invested in architecture’s representation in nineteenth-century American fiction.

Gamber’s book on boardinghouses is full of fascinating information about this type of dwelling practice in nineteenth-century America, making much use of primary material like newspaper advertisements and especially boarders’ diaries and letters. Bostonian Susan Brown recounts how her pleasant boarding experience led her to characterize her landlady and the other boarders as family. Brown went shopping or to church with one or another of them; she shared a bedroom with the landlady when the house had extra boarders. She taught a class in the boardinghouse and the boarders all attended parties and holiday celebrations together. Later, she became engaged to a fellow boarder, married him and returned to the boardinghouse to set up their life together. Before about 1840 boarding was a common way to live and accepted along with any other dwelling choice.

However, by the 1850s the ideal of “home” began to be framed as a cultural icon surrounded with sentiments promoting the privacy, moral values, and sanctity of the family. The various forms of dwelling that could be seen as diluting or working against these sentiments were demonized. Critics pointed out that when boardinghouse owners rented out their homes, they turned “every square inch into a commodity; boardinghouse keepers transgressed the imaginary border that separated home from marketplace” (42). Gamber’s aim as a historian is to explore the boundaries between “home and marketplace, boardinghouse and home” that landladies and their boarders had to negotiate (10).

Food, for instance, was a constant subject of humor in magazine columns and cartoons. Writers complained of being served “antediluvian pies” or “the fossil remains of an omnibus horse” (78). Landladies, always concerned to make money, skimmed on the quality of food and its quantity. Boardinghouse eats were contrasted to the “delectable meals” found in true homes, although the phrase “home cooking” was not common until the twentieth century (78). Along with meal preparation for their boarders, landladies and their employees also had to clean chambers, wash and iron linens, and sweep floors. The income from boarders allowed landladies to hire servants, and some thought this was amply reward, although hiring and training new servants when the old ones left was always a problem (126).

The lack of privacy in crowded boardinghouses always was foregrounded by critics; conversations passed easily through thin partitions. Moreover, boardinghouse sociability played out among strangers who acted parts instead of experiencing honest interactions. People gossiped about petty matters rather
than having “noble and amiable” exchanges (128). Children observed behaviors and overheard gossip unfit for their understanding. Promiscuity and moral dangers lurked in the mixed-age and mixed-gender boardinghouse where little girls might be “petted and kissed and fed with bonbons by successive generations of boarders” (129). In Sarah Josepha Hale’s 1855 novel Boarding Out, the four-year-old daughter dies from the diseased air of the boardinghouse.

As suburbs grew and became more accessible via streetcar systems in the later nineteenth century, more prosperous working- and middle-class families moved into private houses and the demand for boardinghouses diminished. Toward the end of the century lodging houses, in which meals were taken in restaurants or clubs outside the dwelling, tended to replace boarding for those who needed a temporary residence. By about 1900 anti-boardinghouse rhetoric faded as dwellers chose many kinds of new single- and multiple-family dwellings that could satisfy the need for a home.

Gamber’s book is grounded in social history and does not develop architectural arguments about the designs, spaces, or formal character of boardinghouses. The author’s concern is with the cultural meanings of home; houses as architectural objects do not find a place in her analysis. Still, interesting information can be gleaned regarding the way boardinghouse architecture might have worked. Parlors, we learn, contained the socializing of all the boarders as they entertained their friends, and sometimes also beds to sleep extra boarders in high-demand seasons—contrary to the preferred single usage of the Victorian-era private home (40). Boardinghouse bedrooms had dedicated functions but compromised privacy with multiple beds shared among two or more boarders, especially young men. In the literature, boarders are described as “going down” to a common dining room, although we don’t know whether these dining rooms tended to be on the entrance floor or in the basement. From Gamber’s book architectural historians can learn a great deal about how boardinghouses were used and the cultural meanings they projected.

Klimasmith’s At Home in the City explores later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary works to discover the properties of an “urban home” and analyze the relationship between “urban spaces and the development of an unsettled and unsettling modern subjectivity” (5). In focusing on the architectural spaces used by novels’ characters, Klimasmith presents domestic space as dynamic and her characters as connected to space in diverse ways. “Characters are identified with settings, represent and echo settings, but also disrupt, disturb, and become disoriented by the settings they inhabit” (9). Klimasmith finds that architecture is a crucial protagonist in the novels she analyzes: it frames scenes, conveys qualities of personality and status, and enables or prevents specific kinds of interactions.

Klimasmith starts with the mid-nineteenth century’s worship of the home’s virtues and then traces the ways that tenements, apartments, and hotel living undermined, complicated, or challenged received ideas about the virtues of the private home. In contrast to Gamber, Klimasmith’s analysis places architectural form and space at the core of her argument.

Klimasmith’s close reading of several novels is paired with her exploration of architectural and urban planning books and period domestic-advice texts. Grounding her analysis in twentieth-century theory, she uses Michel de Certeau’s ideas about urban space to identify contradictions inherent in the idea that one can separate public from private. Geographer David Harvey’s observations about capitalism and city formation help the author shape an economic perspective on her characters and their homes. She establishes a period of “architectural determinism” in the mid-nineteenth century, showing how Catherine Beecher and A. J. Downing believed that improving the architecture of houses would produce physically and morally healthy family members.

The architectural determinism of the era argued that a good home should be in natural surroundings where peace and quiet would restore health to those ground down by the dirt and conflicts of the city. Some novelists followed this deterministic model but others challenged it. So in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Blythevale Romance (1852) the protagonists begin in an urban boardinghouse characterized by loss of privacy and permeable spaces, and then end up as a married couple residing in a secluded rural cottage intended to signal a happy ending to the vicissitudes of their urban lives. Conversely, author Fanny Fern, in her 1854 novel Ruth Hall, inverts this pattern and finds her heroine happy at last in a city dwelling. Eschewing marriage and male protection, Ruth Hall lives in a hotel that enables her to pursue her many urban contacts and “nets her personal, artistic, and financial profit” (17).

In addition to novels, Klimasmith examines the writing of designers for domestic references, observing that Olmsted described Central Park as the city’s drawing room and the trees as “the permanent furniture of the city” (56). Klimasmith also considers Calvert Vaux’s description of his unbuilt 1850s Parisian Buildings apartment house, designed with concern for competing claims of publicity and privacy. In apartments, residents always preferred a parlor that overlooked the street in order to remain connected to the life of public space while in the seclusion of their own rooms. While a good reader of texts, Klimasmith is not as adept at reading architectural form. A more trained eye would have noticed how the façade composition of this apartment house projects the public stair and front entrance forward in a taller, centered pavilion, making the shared part of the building the most architecturally prominent. This visual information would have reinforced her textual reading.

Henry James’s The Bostonians (1886) provides a row house as the setting for Olive Chancellor’s life and Klimasmith’s analysis. At the base of Beacon Hill in Boston, Olive lives in rooms furnished with her many personal possessions. Her privacy and seclusion are strongly
expressed by a “corridor-shaped drawing room” (68). Klimasmith subtly analyzes that ways that this row house, at first so private in contrast to the publicity of boardinghouses, slowly opens its doors to public gatherings and transforms Olive’s life. Klimasmith quotes folklorist Henry Glassie who wrote about the arrangement of rooms and their proportions: “in these volumes . . . psyche develops” (69). But Glassie is an odd reference in this context, since his research identifies timeless folk building principles in contrast with the developer-driven economics of Olive’s recently built narrow urban row house. Indeed, James’s novel demonstrates the impossibility of preserving timeless qualities in the streetcar bustle of the modernizing city.

The two books under review take quite different approaches to the way nineteenth-century characters lived out their domestic ideas and ideals. Gamber’s characters wanted the social security that an idealized home would confer, yet experienced the failures of boarding-houses to live up to the ideal. Her evidence in the experiences of people who tried boarding conveys the vivid, daily-life textures of this form of multiple dwelling. Further, we glimpse the experience of boardinghouse keepers and the ways they responded to the drudgeries and pleasures of making money from their homes. Klimasmith’s book is the more theoretically grounded and intellectually nuanced. She steps back from what her novels’ characters desire to reflect on the ways that urban architecture presented them with multiple choices and conflicting meanings. These characters grew and changed in unexpected ways as they negotiated the properties of their permanent and transient dwellings.

Though neither author is a trained observer of architecture, both provide expanded views of the meanings and performance of their dwelling types, taking up issues that architectural historians more committed to formal analysis might never see. Both books remind us that the history of architecture is as much a history of how buildings performed for their users as it is a history of aesthetic choices or stylistic qualities.

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Andrew Dolkart
Biography of a Tenement House in New York City: An Architectural History of 97 Orchard Street

Jan Jennings
Cheap and Tasteful Dwellings

Both the promise and difficulty of the study of vernacular architecture lie in the source material. Where plans, working drawings, designers’ sketches, and notes have formed the heart of architectural historians’ archival resources, scholars of vernacular architecture must turn to other evidence to examine the making and meaning of the daily landscape. In studying the ordinary environment—the accumulation of buildings, additions, and renovations of owner-builders or speculative developers—a scholar may have to do without such evidence and rely on more quotidian sources, such as building permits, probate inventories, and deed transfers, or may have only the site itself to investigate.

Andrew Dolkart’s Biography of a Tenement House in New York City, published in conjunction with the 2006 annual meeting of the Vernacular Architecture Forum, starts with a single building: 97 Orchard Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, which now serves as home of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. From its construction in 1863 until 1935, the five-story building with a raised basement housed up to 111 residents, largely recent European immigrants, in cramped, dark, mean, and utilitarian confines. Dolkart’s work begins and ends with the tenement itself, one of thousands like it built in postbel-