Books

Jessica Ellen Sewell

Women and the Everyday City: Public Space in San Francisco 1890–1915


Since the 1980s, urban geography, urban sociology, and architectural studies have fruitfully converged to produce studies of the lived experience of cities. Generalized theoretical approaches to the growth of urban society have ceded place to and have been enriched by “thick descriptions” of particular cities and communities. Jessica Ellen Sewell’s is one such book.

Sewell writes of a period, just before and after the 1906 earthquake, when Progressive Era San Francisco was transforming itself from a Gold Rush town to a sophisticated urban center. Her focus is on the lives of women and the originality of her work is in how she analyzes the role of architecture and design in shaping their lives and their movements around the city. Sewell argues for “a complex relationship between gender ideology and the built environment” (169). She is clear that class positions trumped gender in these women’s experiences. The upper-middle- and middle-class women who frequented the downtown environment of shops and streets were experienced by women of different social status.

Sewell’s five areas of investigation—“sidewalks and sidecars,” “errands” (shopping), “dining out,” “spectacles and amusements,” and “spaces of suffrage”—are set within the framework of the changing protocols of how women were supposed to behave in public. She argues that at the beginning of the period women’s presence in the city was problematic and their comportment had to act as a kind of invisible burka. Etiquette books described the appropriate self-effacing demeanor of respectable women and, while such books on manners represented an ideal—or, as Sewell expresses it, an ideology rather than actuality—they nonetheless give the modern reader an idea of the narrow parameters of female respectability in the late nineteenth century.

Sewell argues that the built environment constitutes direct historical evidence in its own right. She uses this original concept convincingly and in each chapter shows how the actual design and configuration of streets and vehicles represented notions of what was appropriate, yet also molded—and changed—female (and male) behavior. For example, the changing design of streetcars influenced how women managed their bodies in the crowded vehicles. In early designs passengers could sit in rows, but later cars were built with long benches facing each other, which made the avoidance of eye contact and general “invisibility” more problematic. Also, during this period of transition in the late nineteenth century, women traveling about the city not only used public transport more, but were forced to “loiter” at bus stops while waiting for their buses. The result was that gradually norms of respectability altered.

Similar changes were to be found in the downtown environment of shops and shopping. Here, the class position of different women made for radically divergent experiences. The upper-middle- and middle-class women who frequented the new department stores enjoyed luxurious interior spaces, where they were served by young, non-elite women whose experiences of the stores were clearly very different from those of the customers. The world of the department store has been extensively investigated by scholars, but Sewell contrasts these centralized temples of luxury with the more mundane neighborhood shops and streets, including those of immigrant communities, in which women shopping was more likely to be a form of work than pleasure or leisure.1 Shoppers at such places often lacked cash and found cheap, poor quality goods. But neighborhood stores, groceries in particular, were often run by women, constituting a further female advance into the public sphere.

Eating out, like shopping, was influenced by class. As more women worked outside the home and as downtown streets became mixed gender spaces, there was a growing need for eating establishments where women could respectfully go unaccompanied. Many working women, in addition, lived in rented accommodations without access to kitchens, so they were reliant on restaurants. While hotels, department stores, and tearooms functioned largely for the better off, poorer women were increasingly catered to by cafés, lunchrooms, and cafeterias downtown or by family restaurants in their local districts. The hotel restaurants and tearooms were tastefully decorated and provided small tables and light chairs, an arrangement that facilitated a modicum of privacy; the cafes and lunchrooms, on the other hand, might feature potted plants, but were otherwise less decorative and more open, often with large communal tables. In contrast to both were the saloons, where men stood at counters and bars and the decoration,
including louche depictions of nymphae and satyrs, denoted the interior as masculine space.

Increasingly, dining out expanded into entertainment, for example, in “bohemian” restaurants, which featured singers, and this occurred in tandem with the growth of entertainment generally. By the early years of the twentieth century, not only high-end theaters and concert halls but nickelodeons, early cinemas, and vaudeville theaters had become mixed-class and mixed-gender spaces, further normalizing women’s presence in public locations once considered dubious for reputable women.

In a suggestive concluding chapter Sewell contrasts the unsuccessful 1896 campaign for women’s voting rights in the state of California with the successful 1911 campaign, demonstrating how differently women used space in each. Whereas in 1896 most suffrage meetings had been held in private houses, by 1911 women made use of department store windows, street corners, entertainment spaces, public parades, and automobiles as well as running suffrage cafeterias and tearooms.

The value of this book resides in its detailed application of general analyses of gendered urban spaces to one city. Sewell’s discussion of design and of the layout of streets and districts (for example exactly where the nickelodeons were found, or where cafeterias first sprang up) is especially insightful. There is perhaps too much reliance on diary material of a very few women, yet this material is interesting and suggestive.

Overall, the book paints a vivid and accessible portrait of a particular place and time. Its analysis sheds new light on urban configurations of gender and class and will interest scholars. Its style and content should attract more general readers.

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Wanda M. Corn
Women Building History: Public Art at the 1893 Columbian Exposition
Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011, xi + 266 pages, 9 color and 144 b/w illus. $49.95, ISBN 9780520241114

The 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition requires little introduction for readers of this journal. What Wanda Corn accomplishes with her marvelous study is to shift the emphasis away from Daniel Burnham, the exposition’s formidable Director of Works, to the women who designed and decorated its Woman’s Building. The result is an important reinterpretation of the fair and of the importance of gender for understanding public art and architecture.

Women Building History is divided into four parts that address the history of the exposition, the history of the Woman’s Building, the history and content of the mural decorations, and the critical responses to the design and decorations of the building. Two additional features of this book are notable. First, it includes short biographical entries about the women who contributed to designing the Woman’s Building. Second, it includes sidebars to tell parallel and alternative stories about topics ranging from “the feminization of the banjo” to the “skirt dance,” subjects that shed light on the content of the building’s decorations where, Corn contends, there is more to the story than meets the eye.

Designed by Sophia Hayden, the Woman’s Building was situated at the intersection of the forces of “civilization,” represented by the White City, and the forces of “savagery,” arranged into ethnological and commercial exhibits along the mile-long Midway Plaisance. Both contemporary observers and later historians have noted that the Woman’s Building represented women as agents of “civilization” and bulwarks against roiling waters of “otherness” that constantly threatened to overwhelm Burnham’s well-ordered ideal city. What distinguishes Corn’s book is that it examines the interior world of the Woman’s Building and presents one of the finest analyses of the decorative arts yet published about any exposition.

For Corn, the chief value of the decorations is that they reveal “how some women used art to visually express their politics at the same time others were using words to register theirs” (10). With demands increasing for women’s political and economic rights, Corn writes, “[t]he decorations by women artists at the 1893 Fair offer a stunning case study of what female artists had to say on the rare occasion when they were asked to ‘speak’ in public.” Unlike male artists who depicted women in terms of “virtue and perfection, youth, and beauty,” female artists endeavored “to wrest the female body from the male gaze and make it speak to woman’s work, intelligence, and emancipation” (10).

Examples of these claims abound in Women Building History. Corn’s interpretation of Mary Cassatt’s Modern Woman is a case in point. For one portion of this mural, which depicted three “Girls of Hope” (as Corn describes them) chasing a symbolic representation of “Fame,” Cassatt reworked an older allegorical form to convey the possibilities held out by women reformers in the Progressive Era, namely that women could “desire to be as famous and accomplished as men in the public sphere” (142). Artists such as Mary MacMonnies and Lydian Field Emmet gave expression to other contemporary concerns: women’s labor (in the case of MacMonnies’s mural Primitive Woman) and women’s pursuit of knowledge (in the instance of Emmet’s oil painting Art, Science, and Literature). Far from being simply ornamental, these decorations were instrumental in encouraging new ways of seeing women and the categories that had defined them.

How should we think about the Woman’s Building and its decorations? Corn notes that contemporary art and architectural critics gave the building’s design and decorations decidedly mixed reviews. Male architectural critics were generally dismissive of Hayden’s design and less than encouraging of women joining the ranks of male architects. Art critics judged the building’s decorative arts more positively, but measured women’s works of art against a standard of “femininity.” Allegedly, good art, like Primitive Woman, passed muster because it was read as embracing pastoral

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