

## **UC Berkeley**

### **Recent Work**

#### **Title**

From Separate Spheres to Gendered Spaces: The Historiography of Women and Gender in 19th Century and Early 20th Century America

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8dd143rj>

#### **Author**

Merrett, Andrea J.

#### **Publication Date**

2010-09-15

**FROM SEPARATE SPHERES TO GENDERED SPACES:  
THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF WOMEN AND GENDER IN 19<sup>TH</sup> AND  
EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AMERICA**

Andrea J. Merrett

Columbia University, USA

**ABSTRACT**

How has the study of the built environment changed the historiography of gender? This paper analyzes the shifts in the historiography of women and gender in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American history. It examines the evolution from a metaphorical concept of spheres to a more complex understanding of the interactions between space and gender. In the 1960s, feminist historians introduced the concept of ‘separate spheres’ as a way to understand the history of women in the nineteenth century. When historians, in the 1970s and 1980s, began to study actual spaces it became clear that the relationship of gender and space was more complex than the dichotomies of public and private, male and female, urban and suburban, which reinforced the idea of separate spheres. The study of actual spaces demonstrates that the boundaries of everyday life were more porous than those idealized by separate spheres and spaces. Further, scholars in the 1990s were able to show how the design, spatial arrangement, and décor of spaces contributed to the construction of masculinity and femininity in relation to each other.

**INTRODUCTION**

To what extent has the examination of actual physical spaces changed the historical understanding of American women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? The larger question at stake in this paper is what the discipline of architecture has to contribute to a more general history of women and gender. Before the 1960s it had occurred to few social and architectural historians that women might be an important topic for study. That changed in the late 1960s and 1970s when the second wave feminist movement led to a new interest in women’s history. Historians – such as Barbara Welter and Gerda Lerner – theorized the concept of

‘separate spheres’ as a way of explaining the historical roles of women. This concept derived from the study of nineteenth-century sources which emphasized women’s position in the domestic realm. Later historians – such as Christine Stansell and Mary P. Ryan – influenced by work in anthropology and geography, challenged this concept by showing that ‘separate spheres’ was a metaphorical idea of space which did not reflect the realities of many women’s lives. By looking at the use of *actual* spaces and women’s roles in public, historians in the 1980s and 1990s offered another approach to women’s history, which showed that women had a more complicated relationship to both the domestic and public realms. In the 1990s, material culture historians examined how the notion of separate sphere influenced the design of public and semi-public spaces such as libraries, hotels, and department stores. This scholarship argued that space is gendered through spatial arrangement, design, and décor. This shift in focus reflects a move away from women’s history to an analysis of gender relations and construction, which looks at all spaces, not just those designed for women.

My paper analyzes these shifts in the historiography of women and gender, showing the evolution from a metaphorical concept of spheres to a more complex understanding of the interactions between space and gender which enriches our study of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American history. The scholarship I looked at covered the period of c.1820 to c.1920. I am not, however, a historian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and am therefore more concerned with the historiography, especially as it concerns the study of the early feminist architectural historians in the 1970s and 1980s.

## SEPARATE SPHERES AND WOMEN'S CULTURE

Writing on the history of separate spheres in 1988, Linda Kerber credited Alexis de Tocqueville as the source of the idea.<sup>1</sup> In *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville identified the confinement of women to the “circle of domestic life” as the source of their position in society.<sup>2</sup> The image of a circle was transformed by historians into the idea of separate spheres. ‘Sphere’ according to Kerber, was “a figure of speech, a trope”, used to explain women’s place in society.<sup>3</sup> In the nineteenth century, this idea of the woman’s sphere permeated writing for and about women, making it an obvious place for historians to begin their work. Two other concepts were tied to the notion of a women’s sphere: domesticity and the division between public and private. Domesticity, as we understand it, is a nineteenth-century construction. The women’s sphere was associated with the home, where women were expected to foster a supportive, pleasant environment. This, of course, was only true for families with the means to live in a single-family house with the wife at home. Through the writing of Fredrick Engels, early historians of women – especially Gerda Lerner and Aileen S. Kraditor – identified the domestic sphere as private.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the urban streets could be considered to be public space. Women occupied the private space of the home and men the public realm of politics and business.<sup>5</sup> However, when historians began to examine actual spaces, these dichotomies of women’s and men’s spheres, domestic and public realms, private and public spaces, become less distinct.

In her 1966 essay “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” Barbara Welter contrasted the role of men – whom she characterized as builders of “bridges and railroads”<sup>6</sup> – to the position of women as domestic hostages. She identified the four characteristics of the “cult” of womanhood as piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, claiming that the last was the most highly valued. In her research she drew on forty years of women's magazines, advice

books, cookbooks, religious tracts and sermons, and women's diaries and other personal papers to corroborate her findings. Welter recognized that her sources were intentionally trying to promote a particular idea of womanhood but she failed to explain why this ideal was important other than to suggest that it provided stability during a period of disruptive change caused by industrialization. Nor did she acknowledge the class limitations of the material she drew upon, almost entirely the work of middle-class authors for a middle-class audience.

Leftist-Marxist social historians introduced class concerns to the scholarship soon after Welter's article. Two important publications were Aileen S. Kraditor's 1968 book *Up From the Pedestal*, and Gerda Lerner's 1969 essay "The Lady and the Mill Girl."<sup>7</sup> Kraditor proposed that there was a connection between the separation of spheres and the Industrial Revolution, which Lerner carried through with a class analysis. With the transfer of industry from the home to factories, lower class women went out to work, while wealthier women gained leisure time.<sup>8</sup> According to Lerner, the differentiation of the working class from the bourgeois class of owners coincided with the emphasis of the domestic ideal of woman's place in the home. Along with the analysis of class, Marxism provided an idea of the social construction on the public/private dichotomy. Kerber linked Kraditor's and Lerner's work to Friedrich Engels's public/private dichotomy.<sup>9</sup> According to Kerber, Engels connected the ideas of private, home, and woman into a triad where man was still dominant. This understanding of the public- private separation, further clarifying the idea of separate spheres, was very influential on scholars writing from a Marxist-feminist position in the 1960s and 1970s, because it provided a basis for analysis of the historical inequality of the sexes.

In the 1970s, the concept of women's sphere also gave rise to a notion of a unique woman's culture, one distinct from that of men. Historians – such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg

and Nancy F. Cott – argued that the confinement of middle class women in the domestic sphere promoted the creation rich homosocial relationships.<sup>10</sup> This contrasted to the previous scholarship which saw separation as only a negative.<sup>11</sup> The bonds created between women could be understood as a great strength. Estelle Freedman, for example, argued that through “female institution building,” women used separatism to built political support.<sup>12</sup> According to Freedman, the creation of women’s clubs and organizations was the source of power for first wave feminists, a movement which started to fall apart in the 1920s when women joined the men’s sphere.<sup>13</sup> Radical and lesbian feminist returned to a strategy of separatism in the late 1960s and 1970s as a form of resistance.<sup>14</sup>

Among the many studies that emphasized women’s culture was Kathryn Kish Sklar’s 1973 biography of Catharine Beecher. Beecher (1800 to 1878), with her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, was an early advocate of home economics and championed the value of women’s domestic work to society. In 1869 Beecher and Beecher Stowe published *The American Women’s Home*,<sup>15</sup> which called for more rational house designs to facilitate women’s domestic work. The book was a continuation of her earlier work in designing the ideal house. Sklar saw Beecher’s work as having two broader objectives: to personalize the American home and to promote nationalism through the domestic environment.<sup>16</sup> Beecher argued that both of these could be achieved through design, as could the very definition of being a woman. In her introduction Sklar wrote: “Womanhood could be designed to engage all one’s creative energies, yet simultaneously to smooth the edges of one’s regional lineage, or class identities and to articulate the similarities one shared with other women.”<sup>17</sup> The use of women’s culture as a position of strength is evident in Sklar’s interpretation of Beecher’s life. Sklar also used

Beecher's biography to look at some of the influences on the beginning of the women's movement, especially the home economics movement.

Sklar's biography influenced Dolores Hayden's *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, published in 1981.<sup>18</sup> Hayden first wrote about Catherine Beecher in Susana Torre's seminal text *Women in American Architecture*, published in 1977.<sup>19</sup> In *The Grand Domestic Revolution* Hayden expanded the scope of her study to provide an overview of nineteenth century 'material feminist' reformers who proposed alternative domestic arrangements – from utopian communities where housework was shared, to kitchenless apartments and homes. Like Lerner and Kraditor, Hayden worked in a Marxist-feminist vein. Through this framework, she explained the material feminist concern with gaining control over their productive and reproductive labor.

Although Hayden's work was ground-breaking in its focus on spatial arrangements and planning, it is important to situate her work within the context of the contemporary argument of women's sphere and women's culture.<sup>20</sup> The women she studied rarely questioned the primacy of the home or acknowledged the class implications of their proposals. Hayden called them material feminists because they were proposing change to the physical organization of homes. For example, Hayden observes that they were trying to gain power by placing women in charge of the domestic sphere and extending its influence through movements such as 'municipal housekeeping.'<sup>21</sup> She was clearly working within an understanding that women were limited to the domestic sphere in the nineteenth-century, even as they were trying to challenge its boundaries. Her study focuses on the ideals and aspirations of a select group of women rather than an overall picture of the period. In Hayden's text, sphere and space overlap without an examination of where women were actually living their everyday lives.

Hayden's work differed from that of other historians working within a methodology of separate spheres because she comes to the topic from an architectural background. The *Grand Domestic Revolution* is a social history but it also has to be understood within feminist architectural scholarship of the period. During the 1970s and early 1980s, most work by feminist historians in architecture focused on the work of women architects, as a reaction to a history of "great men and great buildings."<sup>22</sup> Hayden's work expanded this to include non-professional architects and women writers on the home. Hayden's background in architecture explains her interest in the material feminists' concerns with the physical planning of the home and other buildings they were proposing.

Hayden's next book, *Redesigning the American Dream*, published in 1984, looked at the move to suburbanization in the twentieth century. The second chapter "From Ideal City to Dream House" specifically deals with the period under consideration. Although gender hardly entered the discussion in *Grand Domestic Revolution*, in *Redesigning the American Dream* it emerges as a significant theme:

One can describe suburban housing as an architecture of gender, since houses provide settings for women and girls to be effective social status achievers, desirable sex objects, and skillful domestic servants, and for men and boys to be executive breadwinners, successful home handy men, and adept car mechanics.<sup>23</sup>

Hayden was concerned in this book with the development of the suburban ideal as an escape to the chaos and dirt of growing industrial cities. She presented a growing support for women to have a public role, through the characters of Walt Whitman and the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. Olmsted, in particular, saw the city as a place for liberation for women.<sup>24</sup> As in *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, Hayden showed how activists promoted a more public life for women through extending the idea of the domestic sphere into the world. This idea was behind



the ‘municipal housekeeping’ movement in the late nineteenth century. Ultimately, the story Hayden told is one of defeat. She ended the chapter by outlining how the image of the suburban home was used to promote stable social order by providing a safe place for women and children. This ideal was promoted through consumerism and the introduction of a ‘family wage’ for men. In both books Hayden was interested in the physical realm of the built environment, but in neither did she provide an analysis of existing spaces and their impact on the construction of gender. This suggests that she was more interested in writing a social history. As the above quote shows, gender was related to skills and status and not a social construction influenced by spatial arrangements and design.

Other feminist historians in architecture have focused on the implications of physical spaces. For example, Gwendolyn Wright’s book *Moralism and the Model Home*, published in 1980, made an implicit connection between buildings and social norms. While Wright warned that buildings do not determine behavior and values, she discussed the nineteenth-century belief that they could.<sup>25</sup> Drawing on print media of the period, Wright studied the history of American homes from the perspective of architects, builders, writers for women and the popular press. She discussed how suburbanization created a greater separation between the daily lives of men and women. Wright’s discussion of aesthetics diverges from the approach taken by Hayden. She identified the aesthetic differences in the world of men and women – the world of skyscrapers juxtaposed to that of Queen Anne suburban houses.<sup>26</sup> Wright also explained how spaces in Victorian homes were separated into the presentation spaces in the front of homes, and production areas in the back. Explicit in this was the separation of public and private spaces within the home. This changed as the Victorian ideals transformed to accommodate lower cost construction making single family homes accessible to a larger portion of the population. The

lower cost homes were smaller and did not afford the same designation of spaces. The concept of home, however, remained the realm of women and a retreat for men.

Hayden and Wright were not the only feminist architectural historians in the late 1970s and 1980s working on the period in question. As well as chapters by Hayden and Wright in Susana Torre's 1977 book, there were articles by Judith Paine, Susan Fondiler Berkon and Sara Holmes Boutelle. In 1981, *Heresies* magazine published several articles in an issue dedicated to women and architecture.<sup>27</sup> The issue included an article by Wright on a nineteenth-century communitarian settlement for women, and one by Hayden on the history of the Feminist Alliance's attempt to build the Feminist Paradise Palace – a specialized apartment building – in New York City early in the twentieth century. Another piece gave a history of nineteenth-century women's clubs and the buildings they built.<sup>28</sup> Other articles include more straightforward biographies of women architects around the turn of the twentieth century. One of these, "Women's Networks: Julia Morgan and Her Clients" by Boutelle, attributed the architect's success to the personal relationships she cultivated with her clients.<sup>29</sup> Although the idea of separate spheres or women's place in the domestic sphere was rarely referred to directly in these articles, the focus on women's organizations and the distinct spatial environments of women makes it possible to classify their work along with that of social historian working more self-consciously under a methodology of separate spheres.

## **SPACES FOR WOMEN**

Moving away from architecture again, in the 1980s, cultural historians shifted from studying separate spheres to actual spaces. They were influenced by the work of anthropologists and geographers who studied gender relationships through the physical and symbolic use of

space. The study of space resulted in a variety of approaches and conclusions. For example, an array of studies focused on spaces occupied by women, some of them created by women. These include commercial spaces, such as department stores, educational spaces, such as women's colleges, recreational spaces, such as public parks, and buildings created for women's associations<sup>30</sup> such as Hull House and the YWCA. Few of these early studies provided analysis of the spaces themselves. Instead they focus on the social relations of the women involved with them. The study of how women used those spaces, and the social interactions that developed eroded the sharp division between the domestic sphere and public space: historians could no longer claim the women's sphere as being exclusively domestic.

Some historians saw the potential in physical separation as a strength in the development of the feminist movement. Much as Nancy F. Cott concluded, in *The Bonds of Womanhood* (1977), that the consciousness of 'womanhood' which led to the feminist activities in the nineteenth century grew out of the separation of spheres,<sup>31</sup> some feminist historians argued that the creation of separate spaces, such as women's clubs, allowed for women to develop their own public sphere.<sup>32</sup> The study of spaces occupied by women has provided a history of women outside the home through the formation of women's clubs and associations, and through inception of commercial spaces targeting female consumers. This approach continued to reinforce the idea of separation.

Many of the institutions that provided a place for women outside of traditional homes were created by women. One such was Hull House, a settlement house founded in Chicago in 1889 by Jane Addams. The settlement was created with the double mission to provide a space for college educated women and to do outreach in a lower-class community heavily populated with new immigrants. Kerber included Sklar's 1985 article on Hull House in her section on space.

Sklar focuses her study on Florence Kelley who came to reside at Hull House in 1891. After her marriage failed, Kelley found there a supportive community that allowed her to continue her work in social reform. While it is evident in Sklar's article that the community was made possible by a physical place where women lived together, she hardly mentions the building itself other than emphasizing the importance of communal spaces over private rooms.<sup>33</sup> The space of the Hull House remained for the most part abstract. Kerber, referring to Jane Addams recollections of the association, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, also emphasized the symbolic importance of crossing the threshold into a community of women.<sup>34</sup> In her chapter on social settlements, Dolores Hayden did include some description of the facilities at Hull House and provided a plan. She described the complex, designed by Allen B. Pond, as: "aesthetically dreary and socially innovative, heavy red brick buildings of an institutional mien surrounding an urban block."<sup>35</sup> Her analysis is, however, again focused on social issues. She made no comment on the fact that the institution was built up around an existing house, which is indicated in the plan. Nor did she discuss the significance of the aesthetics of the new construction. Was a domestic aesthetic purposefully rejected by the members of the Hull House? How did the new buildings reflect the desire to provide an alternative to women, both from affluent and lower classes? Did class differences impact the organization of space, and if so, how? These are the types of questions that might lead to an analysis of the physical spaces.

The use of an aesthetic borrowed from Victorian houses was often used by women's associations. While she did not provide a conclusion, Cynthia Rock speculated about the domestic aesthetics used by many nineteenth-century women's clubs, in her article "Building the Women's Club in Nineteenth-Century America." She wrote:

Croly's clubwomen reported that one motivation for building clubhouses was 'to have greater influence'. They saw the building itself as a manifestation of their strength and ability to shape forces in their community. However, the architectural forms of the buildings do not reflect this power-seeking – they remain delicate and rather domestic [...] The use of domestic imagery may be seen as an attempt to blend in with surrounding houses – a kind of camouflage to avoid threatening the status quo with an all-woman institution that was visibly different, as well. Or perhaps woman's internalization of the home as her place accounts for the house image.<sup>36</sup>

Rock goes on to contrast the women's club buildings to that of men's clubs, which she described as massive and dominating.<sup>37</sup> This stereotyped distinction between women's buildings and men's buildings showed up regularly in the literature, as we saw in Gwendolyn Wright's observation.

Another type of space studies by historians were women's colleges created for and by women in the nineteenth century. The first of which was Mount Holyoke, founded as a seminary in 1837. In 1984 Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz published *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* on the history of American women's colleges. In her preface she expressed her interest in "the relation between material objects and their contexts." She tried to bring this to her work as cultural historian of women.<sup>38</sup> To that end, she included the story of the various buildings designed and constructed for the colleges. The first colleges, Mount Holyoke, Vassar and Wellesley, were mostly designed with all the program elements – residences, classrooms, dining hall, library, chapel, etc. – planned in a single building. This was in contrast to men's colleges which generally made up 'academical villages' consisting of many building on a campus.<sup>39</sup> Smith College was the first of the women's college designed as a campus, and students lived in 'cottages.' While architecture was a central character in Horowitz's study, her discussion of it was mostly descriptive.

Historians also studied department stores, a typology created in the second half of the nineteenth century by entrepreneurial businessmen. Susan Porter Benson's 1986 study *Counter*

*Culture: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*

can be categorized in terms of women's culture. Rather than seeing the decline of the domestic sphere as the end of a women's culture, she interpreted it as a shift. Like most of the studies of space discussed here, Benson also deals with the spaces of the department store by listing the types of spaces provided, such as toilets, lounges and lunchrooms, and then asserting the idea of the department store as a realm for women. Her analysis focuses on issues of class and not on the physical spaces. As acceptable places for women to spend time, department stores acted to promote middle- and upper-class values and ideas of "good taste, gentility, and propriety."<sup>40</sup> The working-class women behind the counters were also groomed to fit the acceptable comportment expected by the higher classes. Of course department stores also promoted the growing consumer culture, which was closely linked to a change in women's role as consumer for the family, buying all the necessary items to furnish a comfortable home.

Historians argued that urban parks, such as New York's Central Park, were another type of space created in the nineteenth century which provided an acceptable place for women to be in public. In her 1980 article, "Women in Urban Parks," Galen Cranz categorized the history of American parks into four periods: pleasure gardens (1850-1900), reform parks (1900-1930), recreational facilities (1930-1965), open-space systems (1965 to 1980). The first two periods are relevant here. Parks were designed as an antidote to the perceived ills of the industrial cities. Cranz recounted how the reformers behind the creation of parks saw strong families as a "cushion" against the stresses caused by the many changes brought on by industrialization. Women's presence in the parks was thus needed to reinforce the family unit. In Cranz's words: "If the home was the fortress of morality, why should the woman be brought into the public sphere at all? Park advocates thought that a respectable setting where a woman could appear in

public with her husband would contribute to a family's sense of itself."<sup>41</sup> The presence of middle-class women was also thought to contribute to the respectability of the parks, and they were to have a calming effect on other users. The reform parks were linked to the settlement movement, for example at the Hull House in Chicago. These were small parks in slum areas, most of them with playgrounds for working-class children. The reform parks were seen as a wholesome alternative to movies, dance halls and saloons, all thought to be corrupting the youth of the lower classes. During this period women became users in their own right and activities were segregated by age and sex. Segregation was meant to promote proper development and to be safer. According to Cranz, the different programming for males and females of different ages both reinforced stereotypes and challenged them: "The sheer fact of accommodating females, separate or not, suggested that women's needs for recreation were similar to males. Furthermore, the vigor with which females pursued activities must have laid many ideals about female passivity to rest."<sup>42</sup> By studying the intentions behind the creation of parks and their use, Cranz also showed the ambiguities of the idea of a women's sphere and their place. While parks in the pleasure garden era reinforced the idea of women's domestic role, they provided a place for women in public space. Likewise segregated activities in reform era parks allowed women and girls a place to pursue physical activity, while keeping them separate from men and boys.

## **CHALLENGING SEPARATE SPHERES**

The breakdown of the idea of separate spheres complicated efforts to understand the use of space in nineteenth-century American cities. For example, Christine Stansell looked at the relationship of women to the city of New York in *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860*, published in 1986. Class played an essential role in Stansell's study and helped her

to examine how working-class women did not experience the same spatial boundaries as middle- and upper-class women, namely restriction to the domestic sphere. For Stansell, the existence of female workers contradicted the idealized conception of womanhood that was forming in the nineteenth century. The cult of domesticity overlooked the crowded living conditions of working-class tenement buildings. According to Stansell, the middle-class conception of home was “absent from the lives of urban laboring women, who observed no sharp distinctions between public and private.”<sup>43</sup> Instead, working-class women’s lives were lived in the neighborhoods and streets of the cities.

Mary Ryan also challenged the rigidity of the public/private dichotomy. In *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880*, published in 1990, she claimed that women in the Victorian period could be found in public.<sup>44</sup> In contrast to much of the earlier scholarship, Ryan used the public sphere as her starting point to study the history of women in nineteenth-century New Orleans, New York and San Francisco. The study of public space blurred the boundaries between the male and female spheres.<sup>45</sup> Ryan included streets, public squares and parks as public space. To that she added to category of semipublic spaces such as department stores, theaters, and other places of commercial entertainment. Ryan reported that early in the nineteenth century “informal socializing” in public was not strictly defined by boundaries between the sexes, which only became imposed as the nineteenth century progressed.<sup>46</sup> Streets became places of danger, for men as well as for women. Department stores and other semipublic spaces allowed women a respectable place outside the home. Women’s presence in public, however, always came at a cost: women in public were under scrutiny and at risk of being objectified. Overall, the picture Ryan painted was a complex one, where ideals about separation and appropriate integration rarely created orderly realities.



In 2001, Daphne Spain published *How Women Saved the City*. Besides showing women's historical role in public, Spain argued that women played an important role in shaping cities. In complement to the City Beautiful movement of the end of the nineteenth century, she defined a City Social movement. The men behind the City Beautiful movement hoped to create order in the city by beautifying it through the creation of large boulevards and public monuments. Through volunteer associations, women built spaces that helped integrate strangers into the social fabric. Spain identified four types of strangers whose entry into cities contributed to the perceived chaos of growing industrial cities: working women, European immigrants, black migrants, and female volunteers. According to Spain: "Women's voluntary associations created actual spaces in which problems associated with race relations, immigration, and women's status were worked out."<sup>47</sup> She names those spaces "redemptive places," because they provided a place for the assimilation of strangers and because of the religious overtones of the work.<sup>48</sup> The voluntary associations she identified are the Young Woman's Christian Association (1858), the Salvation Army (1879), the College Settlements Association (1887), and the National Association of Colored Women (1896). Spain categorized redemptive places as liminal – "consisting of *both* this *and* that, or conversely, consisting of *neither* this *nor* that" – because they had characteristics of both public and private space.<sup>49</sup> They were liminal also because of their brief existence at a crucial period in the development of cities, and because they "filled the gap between private charity and the welfare state."<sup>50</sup> While Spain acknowledged the classification of the work of women's voluntary associations as municipal housekeeping, she shifted the discourse away from its domestic implications into the parochial space of neighborhoods, the world that negotiated and overlapped "the totally private world of the household and the completely public realm of strangers."<sup>51</sup> By focusing on the associations Spain

sidestepped the discussion of separate spheres, showing how porous the boundaries between public and private were.

## **GENDERED SPACES**

Beginning in the late 1980s and early 90s, material culture offered another approach to space which articulated the construction of gender through design and décor. This scholarship took up the theory of gender as a relational category, as articulated by Joan W. Scott<sup>52</sup> and examined spaces occupied by men and women. Rather than looking at the woman's sphere separately from other spaces, this approach shows how conceptions of femininity and masculinity were constructed in relation to each other. Like Ryan's chapter, there is a particular focus on the everyday, but unlike most of the scholarship that I have examined here, material culture looks at the tangible properties of spaces, including spatial arrangements and décor.

There is not enough space here to do a survey of the literature in material culture, so I will focus on one edition of *Winterthur Portfolio: Gendered Spaces and Aesthetics*, published in 1996. Of particular interest are two articles in the issue. The first is "In the Public Eye: Women and the American Luxury Hotel" by Carolyn Brucken. By studying the development of luxury hotels, in antebellum America, and their catering to women, Brucken discerned some connections between the organization of spaces and "an aesthetic based on the specialization and commodification of middle-class ideas of 'ladyhood'."<sup>53</sup> In particular she looked at "the hotel's relationship to the street, the design and layout of the hotel, and the ladies' parlor within the hotel."<sup>54</sup> Hotels in America had their origins in taverns and coffeehouses that were the domain of men. With the creation of luxury hotels, women were allowed a place in what Brucken qualified

as public spaces. Taking the example of the Tremont House in Boston, Brucken provided a detailed analysis of the layout and spaces in relation to gender:

While the hotel's exterior proclaimed its connection to a male, business world, the hotel's interior quietly aligned with the private, familiar model of the home. Like private residences of this period, the Tremont divided space into areas for public, private, and work activities. [...] Unlike the middle-class private dwelling, each of these specialized rooms in the luxury hotel was further divided by gender.<sup>55</sup>

The women's parlor and dining room were to one side of the main entrance, facing a wing of private rooms, with a secondary entrance for women. The men's parlor and reading room were on the other side of the main entrance, facing the public dining room. The connection between women and private space and between men and public space was reinforced by these separations within the hotel. At the same time, women were also on display to the extent that their spaces were on the public front of the building and visible from the street. Brucken read this placement as both "performance as well as exposure."<sup>56</sup> Like the influence middle-class women were meant to have in public parks, the visibility of women in hotels was meant to promote their respectability. Brucken continued her study by looking at the ladies' parlor. The parlors usually had large windows and were elegantly decorated. Mirrors were often part of the décor. While the windows put women inside on display to a certain degree, they also gave them a privileged view out. Brucken wrote:

The ability of women simply to look at the passing show of life was a luxury. On the street, respectable women were dangerously exposed to the male gaze; within the ladies' parlor, however, women's position shifted enough to give them authority as the observing eye.<sup>57</sup>

The consumer aspect of luxury hotels was a forerunner to other places of consumption, such as department stores. Similar to department stores, the hotels used the spectacle of display to promote themselves. In the case of hotels, the rich furnishings and the display of women patrons

contributed to the spectacle, as was probably true of the early department stores as well. Brucken argued that the domestic references of the hotel parlor also promoted the hotels by legitimizing them through an attachment to the cult of domesticity. Bruchen's analysis of the material aspect of hotels connected the rise of consumerism and the domestic ideal to the development of a particular type of femininity: the ladylike middle-class womanhood perpetrated by consumer culture.

The second article of interest from the *Winterthur Portfolio* issue is Abigail van Slyck's "The Lady and the Library Loafer: Gender and Public Space in Victorian America". As with Brucken's article, van Slyck looked at how spaces gained gender connotations through organization and décor, and how in turn the spaces impacted the gendering of the subjects using them. She also used the study of ladies' reading rooms to challenge the reality of separate spheres. Separate reading rooms for women were a common feature in American libraries starting around the 1870s. Libraries, while theoretically open to all, required certain behavior of their clients. Women's presence in the library was seen to promote good behavior – like the role they were recruited to play in public parks – but it was also thought that they needed to be protected from the less savory clientele. The ladies' reading rooms were often stocked with reading material that was deemed appropriate for women, for example fashion and home advice magazines. The rooms were intentionally decorated differently than the men's reading rooms, often in a more domestic manner. A hearth, upholstered furniture, carpeting and drapes, plants, and art works were common features. In contrast, the men's rooms were usually more institutional with large tables and straight-back chairs. Unlike the domestic parlors that the ladies' reading rooms were mimicking, they were not central but placed in less public corners of the libraries, usually with direct access to the women's toilets. They were rarely, however,

completely sheltered from public view. The male gaze, perceived as threatening, also could reinforce social order. In van Slyck's words:

On the one hand, it reinforced female virtue by policing behavior of women. On the other, it encouraged male morality by exposing men to the uplifting image of female respectability. In this sense, the goal of the ladies' reading room was never the total physical segregation of the sexes. Instead, the ladies' reading room provided a carefully constructed stage on which female readers were encouraged to enact an ongoing spectacle of respectable femininity, perusing light literature, in relaxing postures, surrounded by material symbols of their essentially domestic nature.<sup>58</sup>

The material culture analysis of places shared by men and women provided a much more nuanced and complex understanding of gender construction than was possible with a simple understanding of separate spheres or separate spaces.

In conclusion I return to my initial question: how has studying actual spaces - as opposed to the metaphorical idea of spheres - changed how historians study women's role and place in American society of the period? It is clear that the study of actual spaces complicates our understanding of the historical role of women. Historians have been able to show how the idea of separate spheres was a social construct used to try to create a stable social order. But the boundaries of everyday life have been shown to be considerably more porous than those idealized by separate spheres and spaces. Further, studying the design and use of actual spaces has shifted the focus away from the idea of women's culture and their place in society to an analysis of gender relations and construction.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

My thanks to Alice Kessler-Harris for allowing an architectural historian into her class and forcing me to articulate how we understand space differently. Thanks also to Ken Murata for his help editing the presentation down to the conference format. Finally, thanks to my advisor Mary McLeod for her rigorous edit of the final paper and her insight into the material.

1. I would like to acknowledge the importance of Kerber's text as a starting point for my paper. Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Women's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no.1 (June 1988): 9-39.
2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (2 vols., New York, 1945). Quoted in Kerber, 10.
3. Kerber, 10.
4. *Ibid.*, 13.
5. This overlaps with the idea of the public sphere put forward by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public*, translated by Thomas Burger, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989) and Richard Sennett in *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).
6. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no.2 Part 1 (Summer 1966): 151-174. 151.
7. Aileen S. Kraditor, ed., *Up from the Pedestal: Selected Writings in the History of American Feminism* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1968).  
Gerda Lerner, "The Lady and the Mill Girl: Changes in the Status of Women in the Age of Jackson," *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 10 (Spring 1969): 5-15.
8. Lerner, 11.
9. Kerber, 13. Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, ed. Eleanor Burke Leacock (New York: International Publishers, 1972).
10. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1 (Autumn 1975): 1-29. Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977)
11. Kerber, 14.
12. Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930," *Feminist Studies* 5, no. 3, *Toward a New Feminism for the Eighties* (Autumn, 1979): 512-529.
13. Freeman, 514.
14. See Dana R. Shugar, *Separatism and Women's Community* (Lincoln, NE.: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).
15. Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (New York: J.B. Ford, 1869).
16. Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1973): xii.
17. Sklar, xii.

- 
18. Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1982). This work followed her book on utopian communities: *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-197* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976).
  19. Susana Torre, ed., *Women in American Architecture* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1977). The book was the catalogue of a touring exhibition of the same name.
  20. Kerber placed Hayden's work in her section on studies of space.
  21. Hayden, 4-5.
  22. The earliest book was Doris Cole, *From Tipi to Skyscraper* (Boston: i Press inc., 1973), followed by Susana Torre's *Women in American Architecture*, in 1977. For an overview of the literature at the time see Dolores Hayden and Gwendolyn Wright's 1976 review article: "Architecture and Urban Planning," *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer, 1976): 923-933.
  23. Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work and Family Life* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984): 17.
  24. *Ibid.*, 27.
  25. Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
  26. "Yet, the two worlds of Victorian men and women did have their own distinct aesthetics now, representing symbolically their opposite, symbiotic systems: the skyscraper and the Queen Anne cottage; one soaring and high, of stone, plain and functional; the other low to the ground, of wood, and ornately decorated. Each kind of architecture relied upon advances in American industry, and each its turn, was a reaction to the pressures of the industrial, capitalist city." Wright, 98. The discussion of aesthetics was an important part of the feminist debates in architecture, as is evident in publication such as *Heresies 11 - Women and Architecture* vol. 3 no. 3, (1981).
  27. *Heresies 11*.
  28. Cynthia Rock, "Building the Women's Club in Nineteenth-Century America," *Heresies 11*: 87-90.
  29. Julia Morgan was the first woman to complete a course in the Beaux-Arts School in Paris, and had a prolific career. Most of the work she did was housing for private clients and buildings for women's organizations such as the YWCA. Sara Holmes Boutelle, *Julia Morgan, Architect* (New York : Abbeville Press, 1988).
  30. For example see: Maureen A. Flanagan, "Gender and Urban Political Reform: The City Club and the Woman's City Club of Chicago in the Progressive Era," *The American Historical Review* 95, no.4 (October 1990): 1032-1050.
  31. Kerber, 36.
  32. This was part of Freedman's argument in "Separation as Strategy."
  33. Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Hull House in the 1890s: A Community of Women Reformers," *Signs* 10 no.4 (Summer 1985): 685-677. 661.
  34. Kerber, 52.
  35. Hayden (1981), 164.
  36. Rock, 89.
  37. *Ibid.*
  38. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984): xv.

39. Horowitz, 3.
40. Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986): 4.
41. Galen Cranz, "Women in Urban Parks," *Signs* 5, No.3, Supplement – *Women and the American City* (Spring 1980). S80.
42. Cranz, S89.
43. Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860* (New York: Illini Books ed., 1986): 41.
44. Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990): 3.
45. "between the male and female spheres" Ryan, 59.
46. *Ibid.*, 66.
47. Daphne Spain, *How Women Saved the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001): 5.
48. *Ibid.*, 14.
49. *Ibid.*, 26.
50. *Ibid.*, 26.
51. *Ibid.*, 6.
52. Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986).
53. Carolyn Brucken, "In the Public Eye: Women and the American Luxury Hotel," *Winterthur Portfolio* 31, no.4, *Gendered Spaces and Aesthetics* (Winter, 1996): 203-220. 204.
54. Brucken, 203-4.
55. *Ibid.*, 211.
56. *Ibid.*, 213.
57. *Ibid.*, 217.
58. Abigail A. van Slyck, "The Lady and the Library Loafer: Gender and Public Space in Victorian America," *Winterthur Portfolio* 31, no.4, *Gendered Spaces and Aesthetics* (Winter, 1996): 221-242. 239.