



How Women Saved the City

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The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Vol. 61, No. 2. (Jun., 2002), pp. 244-246.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0037-9808%28200206%2961%3A2%3C244%3AHWSTC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-2>

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city plan, unveiled on 2 February 1907, when Daniel Burnham gave the keynote address. Eventually, a City Plan Commission was approved in 1911, and in 1916 Harland Bartholomew became engineer of the new commission, beginning a career that helped to define the role of the modern city planner. Sandweiss is especially good at unraveling the planning process, rather than simply reciting the grand visions of the planners. He provides a detailed account of Bartholomew's early work in St. Louis, and a measured evaluation: "By emphasizing and praising the natural or organic aspects of urban growth, Bartholomew stressed the role of the city planner as conservator, rather than innovator, and positioned himself firmly in favor of the *status quo* of extant growth patterns and social divisions within St. Louis" (217).

Part Three concludes with an epilogue summarizing the plight of a "Declining City" (231) from 1950 to the present, a period when its population dropped from 800,000 to fewer than 350,000, from more than 60 percent of the region's total to less than 15 percent. This was a time when civic improvement ran headlong into civic decline, and many of the remedies—land clearance, housing projects, urban highways—were hardly successes. Ironically, perhaps, it is the ideal of the fenced-off corner that has most force in the evolution of the urban landscape now, not just in the endless St. Louis suburbs but also in the city. I hope that we will eventually get a close analysis of the process by which all this happened, the sort of analysis that so distinguishes this book for the period up to 1950. Writing with wit and sympathy as well as great learning, Sandweiss has given us an unusually detailed and precise social, economic, and political history of the urban landscape of St. Louis. It should not only be read by historians, it should also become part of the ongoing process of building St. Louis.

OSMUND OVERBY

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Daphne Spain

How Women Saved the City

Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, xvii + 311 pp., 72 b/w illus., 10 figures, 6 maps. \$34.95, ISBN 0-8166-3531-5.

Daphne Spain has studied boarding houses, vocational schools, settlement houses, public baths, and playgrounds built by the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Salvation Army, the College Settlements Association (CSA), and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) during the years between 1870 and 1920. In a spirit of moral uplift, members of these organizations created what Spain calls "voluntary vernacular" architecture, building "redemptive places" that "gave newcomers to the city a fresh start, delivered women volunteers from completely domestic lives, and saved the city from being overwhelmed by strangers" (xii). Her book deals with what many middle-class women reformers called "municipal housekeeping." Because men had failed to bring order to American cities, some women believed that voluntary public work in the city could "make the whole world homelike," as Frances Willard exhorted.

Spain's goal is to strengthen the history of urban planning by identifying the "voluntary vernacular" as an area where women's history and the history of the built environment overlap. She argues that many histories of urban development tend to omit women's contributions, while historians of women and social movements tend to ignore the built environment. This is true, although there are some recent exceptions. Sarah Jane Deutsch's *Gender, Power, and Space in Boston, 1870–1940* (New York, 2000), covers working-class, middle-class, and upper-class women in one city. In contrast to Deutsch, Spain looked at women and the city nationally, but limited the kinds of organizations she would examine, thus narrowing the scope of her book. She did not study institution building by nurses, social workers, or teachers because these women were pro-

fessionals, not volunteers. She did not explore suffrage groups or the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), because "the temperance movement had a overtly political agenda" and she wanted to study "organizations that identified themselves in nonpolitical terms, yet accomplished very real political ends by shaping public discourse through the built environment" (20).

The four voluntary women's organizations Spain did research all had a Protestant, Social Gospel orientation. She examines the roles played by leaders as well as local volunteers. Written in two parts, the book deals first with the sacred and secular strategies of women's voluntary organizations in urban settings. Part Two includes case studies of New York, Boston, and Chicago and a concluding chapter on "How Women Saved the City." Extensive appendices include the organizational charters of the four groups, as well as "Addresses of Redemptive Places for Boston, New York City, and Chicago" (261–268). The addresses are useful because the book's maps, by Geographic Information Services, are difficult to read.

The author has done detailed archival research and scoured photographic archives. She includes about seventy views of redemptive places and people in them—nurses, social workers, settlement workers, kindergarten teachers, and volunteers. A shot of a visiting nurse taking a shortcut over sooty tenement roofs in New York is wonderful (137). Many of the images are familiar views by muckrakers of filthy conditions in neighborhoods such as Mulberry Bend or photos of the façades of redemptive places. Among the more unusual photographs are images of fresh-air tents set up by visiting nurses to treat sick babies in urban open spaces and of floating baths placed in rivers in the summer (a combination swimming pool and public bath house). Architectural historians will find relatively few plans shown. Discussion of architects involved with these voluntary organizations is slight, although Julia Morgan designed many YWCAs as part of her pioneering practice as a solo



A visiting nurse from New York City's Henry Street Settlement House takes a shortcut over tenement roofs, c. 1900

woman practitioner in California. She could have been an interesting figure to include.

With the exception of a few of the settlement houses, the organizations Spain traces held traditional views of gender roles and domesticity. For example, one group working to protect “poor motherless daughters” called themselves the “Slum Sisters” (14). They were more conservative than women’s suffrage, temperance, or trade union groups of the same era. The most effective of the settlement workers, such as Jane Addams, Florence Kelly, Mary Simkovitch, and Mary Kenny O’Sullivan soon took up political issues directly, but many of the volunteers were more interested in philanthropy than in expanding women’s legal and political rights. The organizers of “voluntary vernacular” had building in common with the material feminists of that era, but material feminists constructed community kitchens and child care centers, organized housewives cooperatives, and looked for economic compensation for women’s domestic work.

Some of Spain’s “redemptive” building efforts could be situated within a different American tradition. A strong strain of architectural determinism characterized antebellum reformers who built asylums, penitentiaries, and orphanages. Many argued that the right environment could produce a superior human being, a person never again susceptible to mental illness, criminal behavior, or idleness. They drew on Jeremy Bentham’s “Panopticon,” designed to function as workhouse, jail, or schoolhouse, as well as on the designs promoted by Charles Fourier and Robert Owen for model communitarian settlements. After 1870, when social reformers turned their attention to the American city, the urge to build new institutions to house, purify, and educate working-class people continued this earlier vein of architectural determinism. When women began to suggest that a “redemptive” building could make a better Christian citizen, they often made the same kinds of claims as the earlier builders of asylums and orphanages, but when they extended these ideas to

“municipal” housekeeping, they talked about architectural determinism on an urban scale.

At a time when millions of immigrants were flooding into American cities and industrial capitalism demanded millions of new workers, it must have been very tempting for middle-class and upper-class women to believe that Christian philanthropy could “save” urban places. Their campaigns to build lodging houses, settlements, playgrounds, and public baths were helpful to young women workers receiving starvation wages and to immigrant mothers trying to raise healthy children under tenement conditions. Spain’s book sometimes exaggerates the importance of these efforts because she does not always put them in context. Reformers creating safe water supplies and sanitary sewers did as much as the women volunteers to create a clean city in the Progressive era. (See Martin Melosi, *The Sanitary City* [Baltimore, 2000]). However, engineers did not usually claim that drainage could perfect the soul.

To criticize Spain’s claims for “voluntary vernacular” is not to say that women’s places were trivial. Claiming territory could support political organizing. When strong connections were forged between voluntary groups and working women’s trade unions or suffrage groups, as they were at Hull House, women’s place-based, cross-class connections challenged male power. When the WCTU built shelters for battered women, they were also directly confronting male violence against women. But when charitable organizations promoted the orderly assimilation of “strangers” (poor immigrant working families), little was accomplished for women’s rights. Usually the “voluntary vernacular” meant racially segregated facilities and programs. Often Protestants, Catholics, and Jews also had separate projects. Some women activists of this era identified race, class, and gender as intertwined forms of economic oppression, but the advocates of “redemptive” building projects usually did not.

Spain concludes, “Women volunteers saved the American city at the turn

of the twentieth century by converting religious doctrine and domestic ideology into redemptive places that produced social order at a critical moment in the nation's development" (237). This is too sweeping. Her book shows that women volunteers attempted to mitigate the harshest physical and economic consequences of industrial capitalism, developing American versions of urban building types such as the settlement house and the public bath house that had already been introduced in Europe. She demonstrates that municipal housekeeping contributed to the rise of urban planning in the early twentieth century, complementing City Beautiful efforts by grounding urban planning in social issues as well as in design. But just as the City Beautiful movement could not fully implement architectural order, so the municipal housekeeping movement could not fully implement social order.

Municipal housekeeping failed because advocates did not seek and exercise political power to challenge economic inequality. It was not until the New Deal that reformers with strong ties to the labor movement, Catherine Bauer and Edith Elmer Wood, gained enough political clout to draft and pass the Wagner Public Housing Act in 1937. Their accomplishments met with strong resistance in the 1940s and 1950s, as the growth lobby pushed for housing supports of a different kind. Today Americans subsidize affluent residents' suburban mortgages with federal tax deductions while the poor—including the working poor—may still depend on soup kitchens and shelters. The front page of the *New York Times* on 5 January 2002 described a church-run shelter in Minneapolis holding a lottery to allocate a small number of beds among seventy homeless people on a night when the temperature was 9 degrees above zero. The founders of "redemptive places" in the nineteenth century, steeped in Christianity and domesticity, believed women could take a "nonpolitical" position on hunger and homelessness and still be effective. A century and a half later, a fifth of American children live in

poverty, and millions of Americans lack decent housing. Then as now, the historical record does not support the claim that nonpolitical charitable building efforts can, by themselves, solve urban problems. They are likely to be more effective in the context of strong movements for social and political change.

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Carl R. Lounsbury
**From Statehouse to Courthouse:
An Architectural History of South
Carolina's Colonial Capitol and
Charleston County Courthouse**

Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina
Press, 2001, x + 113 pp., 73 b/w illus.
\$19.95, ISBN 1-57003-378-1.

Even for a city ravaged frequently by catastrophes of wind, fire, flood, and earthquake, the damage Hurricane Hugo inflicted on Charleston, South Carolina, in 1989 was extraordinary. Nearly every building in every one of the city's historic neighborhoods, thousands of houses, and hundreds of civic, commercial, and religious edifices bore significant wounds. High or low, brick or frame, civic or commercial, consecrated or common, Hugo's 140-mile-per-hour winds attacked them all. Among the casualties was one of the city's oldest, and one of its most significant, civic buildings. Hugo literally blew the roof off the Charleston County Courthouse, opening it, its contents, and the civic functions it housed to torrents of rain that made the building unusable. Court functions housed for more than two centuries in the building were hurried to temporary quarters in Charleston's decaying industrial perimeter, and, that done, the county council began to consider the fate of its historic courthouse. This book, "a concise architectural history of one of South Carolina's most important but least understood buildings" (1), grew out of those deliberations.

Carl Lounsbury is an architectural historian with Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and an expert on the civic and ecclesiastical architecture of eigh-

teenth-century America. For more than a decade, he was a member of a team that provided Charleston County officials with information and advice applicable to the chain of decisions the county ultimately made to restore the building and return it to active public use. The county council readily agreed that unraveling the history of the courthouse was necessary to the restoration process, but they also came to understand that knowing the building's historical significance might help them gain broad public support once people understood the role the building had filled over its 250 years at the center of Charleston's civic and judicial life.

Lounsbury and his colleagues quickly discovered as they began their investigation that the building indeed did suffer from a chronic lack of public awareness of its history. The courthouse suffered, too, from a lack of appreciation for the connections it provided to pivotal moments in the nation's history. There was even less understanding of its architectural significance. Built in 1753 as South Carolina's colonial statehouse on Charleston's "civic square," the building was "perhaps the most ambitious civic structure erected in the American colonies in the eighteenth century" (1). It was certainly a manifestation of the lofty aspirations Charlestonians had for themselves and their city and of the wealth that flowed from slave labor and "Carolina gold," the colony's fabled, and immensely profitable, rice crop. While he was governor of South Carolina, James Glen remarked that the colony was "perhaps more valuable to our Mother Country than any other Province on this Continent" (7).

In its massive scale and its classical proportions, the statehouse whose cornerstone Glen laid was a clear reflection of Charleston's cosmopolitan aspirations. Constructed to house the functions of colonial government, the statehouse was part of a conscious effort to "establish a physical coherence" (15) for Charleston by placing a conspicuous building on a conspicuous site. Dramatic events, including the reading from a sec-