

From the Archives

“The House and All That Goes on in It”: The Notebook of Frederica Shanks, 1905–6

Annmarie Adams

IN 1882 FEMINIST REFORMER Isabella Beecher Hooker urged women to master the plumbing systems in their own houses. Perhaps encouraged by the diverse interests of her half-sister, Catharine, whose combined interests in technology, feminism, and domestic architecture had inspired her own design of the *American Woman's Home* thirteen years earlier, Hooker saw the relationship between feminism and plumbing quite clearly. It was her own practice, she admitted, to inspect the work of a plumber “until she understood every point of it.”¹

The Beecher sisters were not alone in associating feminist ideals with sanitary fixtures. To illustrate her notion of women's place in sanitary reform, Harriette Plunkett, author of *Women, Plumbers, and Doctors; or, Household Sanitation*, in-

cluded in her book a drawing labeled “A properly plumbed house—Woman's Sphere” (fig. 1). This typical sectional drawing of a house showed its ventilation, water supply, and the exterior connections of the building to the municipal sewer system. Plunkett explained, “her ‘sphere’ begins where the service-pipe for water and the house-drain enter the street-mains, and, as far as sanitary plumbing goes, it ends at the top of the highest ventilating-pipe above the roof.” She even went so far as to suggest that if women and plumbers did “their whole sanitary duty, there will be comparatively little occasion for the services of doctors.”²

The complex relationship of architecture and feminism in turn-of-the-century North America is evidenced in the notebook of a young girl, Frederica Shanks, who studied household arts at Roxbury High School, Boston, in 1905–6. An investigation of this unique source illuminates how the advice offered to women by experts in the home economics movement may have been applied to architectural design. More generally, deciphering the notebook illustrates how the experiences of ordinary individuals might be used to check the assumptions we make about all normative material, including buildings.

Like many other topics in women's history, current understanding of the home economics movement is largely based on the biographies of its pioneers: Catharine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe,

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¹ Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (New York: J. B. Ford, 1869); unattributed notice, *Sanitary Engineer* 7, no. 15 (March 15, 1883): 338.

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² H. M. Plunkett, *Women, Plumbers, and Doctors; or, Household Sanitation* (New York: D. Appleton, 1885), pp. 112, 94, title page.

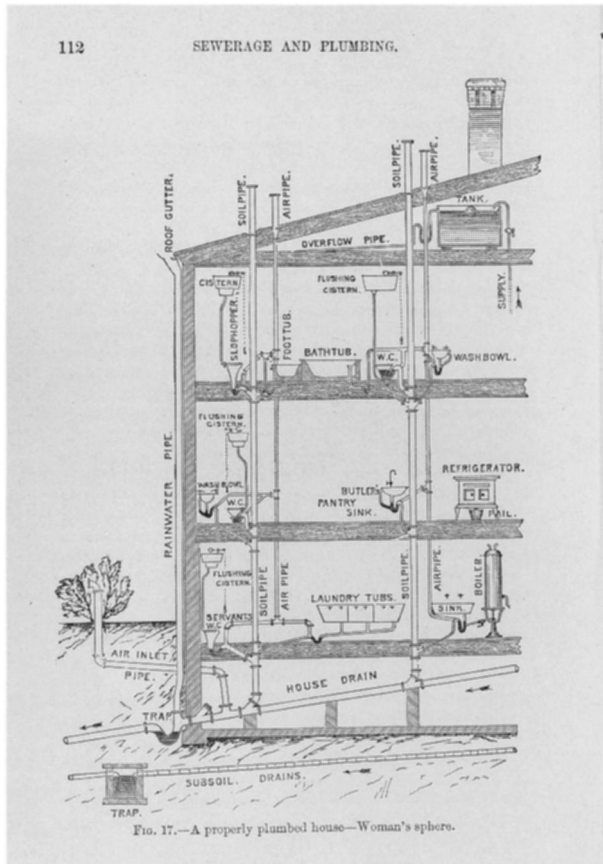


Fig. 1. From Harriette Merrick Hodge Plunkett, *Women, Plumbers, and Doctors; or, Household Sanitation* (New York: D. Appleton, 1885), p. 112. (Photo, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.)

Ellen Richards, Francis Willard, Helen Campbell, and others. In this reliance on the lives of famous people and their works, women's history shares many assumptions with the field of architectural history, the contours of which are generally shaped by the careers of well-known architects. Even the feminist critique of the field has emphasized the achievements of well-known women architects.³

³ See biographies such as Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Caroline Hunt, *The Life of Ellen H. Richards, 1842–1911* (Washington, D.C.: American Home Economics Assoc., 1980); Kathryn Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973). The field of architectural history has been reshaped in the last 2 decades by increased interest in the study of vernacular architecture; see Dell Upton, "Outside the Academy: A Century of Vernacular Architecture Studies, 1890–1990," in Elisabeth Blair MacDougall, ed., *The Architectural Historian in America* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990), pp. 199–213. The role of biography is discussed in Abigail A. Van Slyck, "Women in Architecture and the Problems of Biography," *Design Book Review* 25, no. 25 (Summer 1992): 19–22.

Only scant material survives that illuminates ordinary women's responses to the rationalization of their homes or to the new opportunities resulting from the attempts made around 1900 by home economists to professionalize housework. Historians have tended to assume, therefore, that the huge body of advice literature published by "experts" was widely read and evenly absorbed by middle-class girls and women and that the numerous technologies marketed to women at this time were used as directed.⁴

Most feminist historians who have considered the impact of the home economics movement on housing, such as Dolores Hayden, Gwendolyn Wright, Ann Oakley, and Ruth Schwartz Cowan, have combined biographical material with this sort of advice in an attempt to grant ordinary women agency in the design and control of technology and environments. This presumption shares much with the methodology of traditional architectural history, which assumes that the users of buildings behave/act as architects intended.⁵

Shanks's forty-eight-page notebook, titled "Household Arts," offers a new perspective on this outstanding question of agency in current feminist scholarship in architectural history and material culture. It is an extremely rare primary source in women's history. Apart from diaries and letters printed in women's magazines, there is little surviving evidence of the impact of the home economics movement on girls and women, particular those drawn from the working class. The book contains notes presumably copied during class, a list of required readings, a list of additional reference books, and the application of these lessons in assignments. Ten topics that presumably constituted the course are recorded on the first page of the notebook: planning and building the house, furnishing and decorating, lighting, heating, plumb-

⁴ This assumption is particularly evident in recent exhibitions about women and domestic technology; see Ellen Lupton, *Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993).

⁵ Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981); Ann Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago, 1873–1913* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). I addressed the question of buildings as prescriptive texts in Annmarie Adams, "The Eichler Home: Intention and Experience in Postwar Suburbia," in Elizabeth Collins Cromley and Carter L. Hudgins, eds., *Gender, Class, and Shelter: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture V* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), pp. 164–78.

ing, water supply and disposal of waste, cleaning, cleaning and laundry work, study of foods, and emergency plans. The book includes notes only on the first six topics; perhaps the latter half of the course was recorded in another notebook. Since 1985 the Shanks notebook has been preserved in the Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera at Winterthur Library.

The volume itself consists of typed pages glued into a brown cardboard composition notebook, interspersed with cut-out illustrations taken from popular magazines and Shanks's own drawings. Winterthur Library's estimated date for the notebook (1905) is based on the copyright of one of these clipped images. The publication dates of the required readings range from 1872 to 1903. The notes include numerous references to Boston, Worcester, Lawrence, and other Massachusetts towns. The section on ventilation, in particular, includes a reference to the system used in the Roxbury High School, where "Room 10," cited on the notebook's cover, was most likely located.

The 1900 census lists a Frederica Shanks, ten-year-old daughter of William G. Shanks (an immigrant from Nova Scotia) and his wife, Frederica; a Boston city directory of 1905 lists a William G. Shanks, clerk, at 6 Copeland Place, which was located six to seven blocks from Roxbury High School. A report card from Roxbury High School for a Frederica Shanks, daughter of William G. Shanks, born November 10, 1889, lists a course by the initials "H.A.," presumably Household Arts, during the term 1905–6, and records for it an overall grade of "B." In this illuminating document, Shanks's father's occupation is cited as "meat cutter," and the family's address is given as 20 Copeland Street. The Sanborne Insurance map of 1919 shows this address as an attached, wooden, two-story dwelling just around the corner from 6 Copeland Place.⁶

The photos of interiors in the notebook range from modest middle-class houses to palaces; one page of wood houses and their plans includes a \$2,000 cottage and a \$4,025 house, presumably as built in Massachusetts. Of the nine reference books listed by Shanks at the end of the notebook, only four were checked off, as if read or perhaps checked out of the library (they are followed by call numbers): *The House That Jill Built*, by Eugene C.

Gardner; *Care of a House*, by Theodore M. Clark; *The Home*, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman; and *House Economics*, by Maria Parloa. The notebook text, however, includes no direct references to these authors. Lillie Hamilton French is quoted twice, and there are two initial references to Francis Willard and Ellen Richards. These reflect Shanks's definition of the field of study, which poses a curious dichotomy between science and art: "Household Arts is the science of house-keeping or home-making. It is the science which pertains to the house and all that goes on in it."⁷

The notes on household arts are written in short, choppy sentences with many grammatical and spelling errors. Grades appear throughout the document, perhaps implying that the actual notes were Shanks's own composition and were later graded by a teacher. Indeed, the school report card reveals that household arts was among Shanks's strongest subjects during that school year.⁸

Six pages of handwritten notes on ornaments, utensils, metals, and china and two pages on stains and detergent, which include some shorthand, are tucked in the back of the book, suggesting that Shanks may have taken notes in class and later typed them for inclusion in the notebook. A loose photo of a room interior with Shanks's name written on the reverse was found with these handwritten notes. It seems to have been submitted separately, perhaps as an independent homework assignment or for a composite display of illustrations gathered by all the students in the class. The image was most likely clipped from a popular magazine, as were many of the images in the Shanks notebook. A large number have articulated borders with stylized flowers and/or surrounding curtains; the distinctive magazine from which Shanks clipped many images has yet to be identified (fig. 2).

The first major "lesson" offered by the Shanks notebook is that home economics as taught in Shanks's time and place extended far beyond cleaning, cooking, and sewing. The first section, in fact, comprises detailed information on the process of building construction, house drainage, and ar-

⁷ Frederica Shanks student notebook, n.p., Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library (hereafter Downs collection).

⁸ Higher grades were perhaps a result of an improved attendance record; in the previous year, Shanks missed 92 days of school but only missed 12 in 1905–6. She consistently received A's for conduct throughout her 3 years at the school and recorded the lowest mark in 1905–6 for phonography and "typewriting."

⁶ Although William Shanks's occupation and home address vary between the 2 documents, it is probably the same family since Frederica's name and birthdate are consistent. Also, Shanks's business address appears consistently as 440 Tremont in the directories and on the report card.

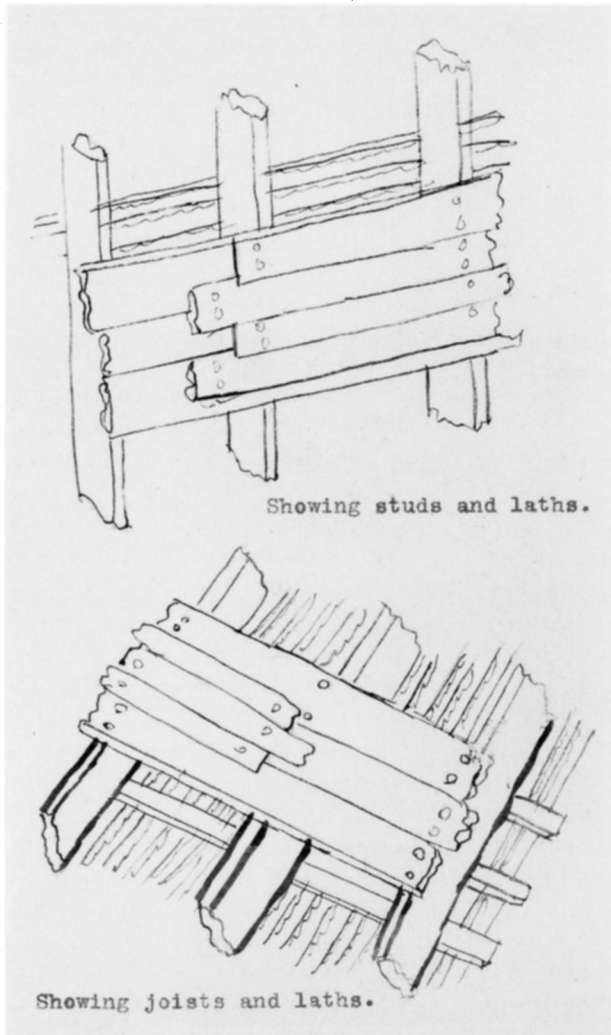


Fig. 2. From Frederica Shanks notebook, ca. 1905. (Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library.)

chitectural design (fig. 3). The lessons concerning architecture were extremely technical; in many instances, the depth of technical information in the notes far surpasses the sort of material typically studied by architecture students in professional programs today. In addition to basic information on building materials, for example, Shanks took notes on the manufacturing of bricks, the various types of soil, the techniques for calculating wall thicknesses based on the heights of buildings, stages of standard house construction, the various parts of windows and doors and their operation, and the chemical composition of lime. The second lesson of the notebook is that home economics students like Shanks were not expected simply to absorb this architectural information passively. They

did not learn about the advantages of mansard roofs or the necessity of airspaces with the assumption that this sort of information would make them better wives, mothers, or housekeepers. Rather, the notebook makes clear that students of home economics were expected to apply this knowledge in the design of buildings. This application of the information to architecture is clear in at least two instances in the notes. Presumably to illustrate her understanding of cost management, Shanks designed a \$2,000 house (fig. 4) and a house with

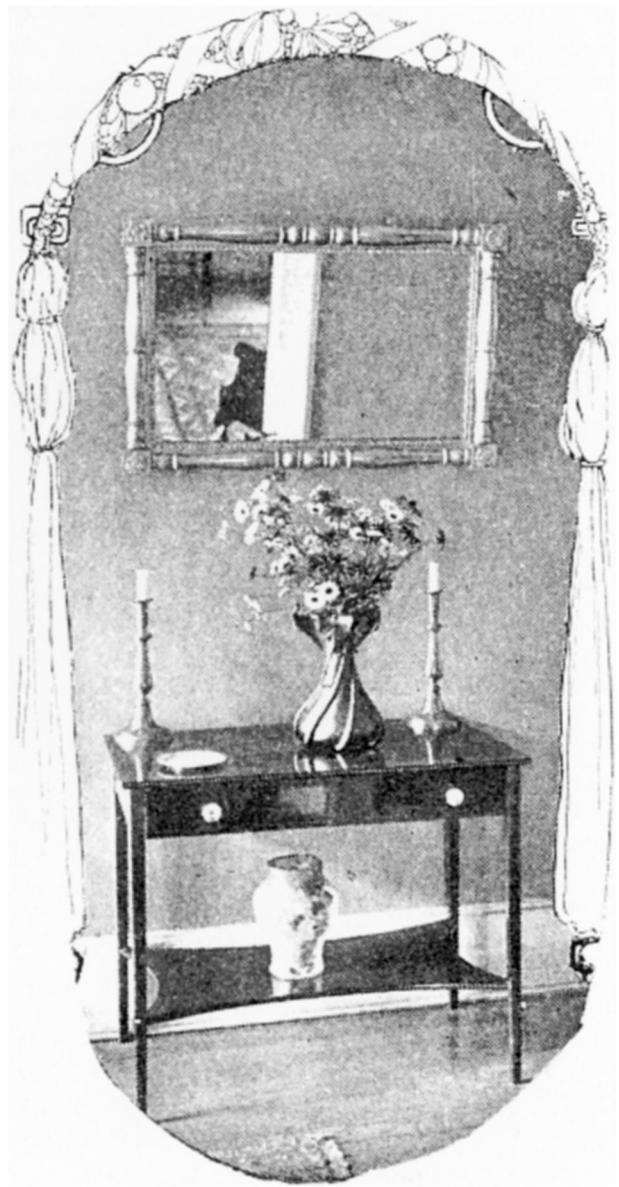


Fig. 3. Foundations. From Frederica Shanks notebook, ca. 1905. (Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library.)

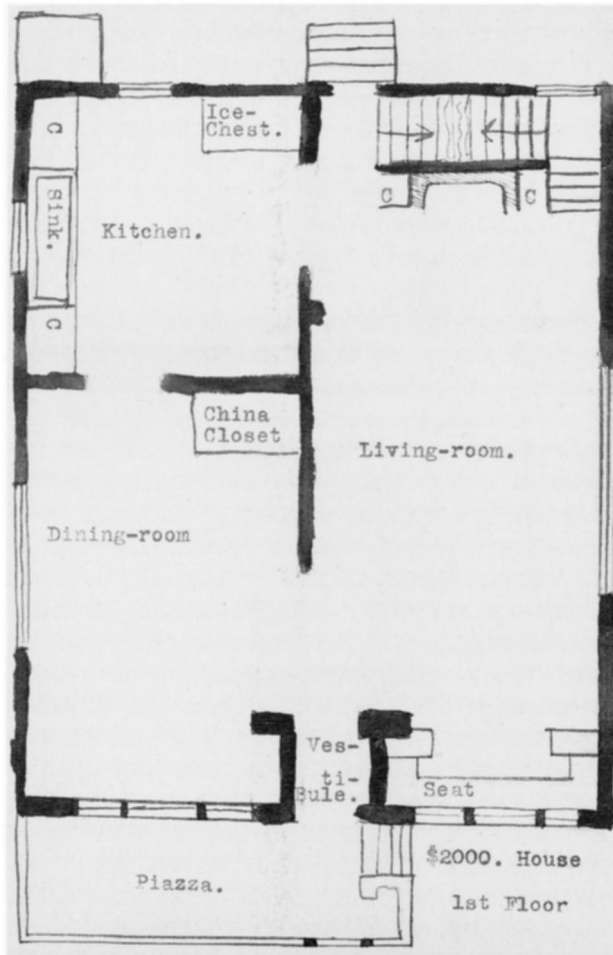


Fig. 4. \$2,000 house. From Frederica Shanks notebook, ca. 1905. (Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library.)

a piazza on three sides. Other illustrations show Shanks's command of sectional, perspective, and axonometric drawing.

It is impossible to know how many opportunities students like Shanks ever had to design real houses. Although there were very few women architects in 1905, women were often employed by architectural firms as draftspersons and housing experts.⁹ Architectural training through home economics classes may also have been intended to help women recognize design flaws before purchasing a house or to suggest how to work more effectively with (male) builders or architects. Advice books written for women at this time, including Shanks's required reading, typically included

detailed instructions on how to select a pre-designed house.

The planning philosophy postulated in the notes was both utilitarian and contextual. "The plan of the house must fit the needs of the household and the ground on which it is to be built. Whatever is done past alteration either in size or quality must be right whatever it cost." Shanks also defined good architecture: "A test of good architecture whether the house is large or small, inexpensive or expensive is whether the exterior is suited to the plan." This same functionalist standard was suggested in the section concerning house decoration, although curiously positioned between desire and feasibility: "There are three things to think of. 1st what you want. 2nd what you need. 3rd what you can have."¹⁰

Section 5, on the relationship of plumbing to sanitation, is particularly interesting. Treated independently from heating and water supply, plumbing, to Shanks, was the "system of pipes in the building for the purpose of supplying water and carrying of the waste."¹¹ The notes reflect modern concepts in sanitary reform, such as the idea that good plumbing was accessible and worked quickly, quietly, and automatically. Thirteen different "parts" were described as to their intended functions and were illustrated with sectional drawings explaining how they worked together as a system (fig. 5).

Indeed, this systematic view of the house, expressed most clearly by the use of the cross section, was also a medical technique popular since about 1870. Physician T. Pridgin Teale included such a systematic drawing (fig. 6) in his classic 1878 book, *Dangers to Health*. Many physicians, like Teale, became in a sense "building-doctors," called upon to diagnose, treat, and heal architecture, as a doctor might traditionally heal a patient. Their use of the sectional drawing as a mode of illustration was one of the ways they attempted to monopolize domestic sanitation by convincing the public of their exclusive ability to check sanitary architecture. Like other areas of expertise contested by various professions, healthy architecture became, momentarily, the responsibility of women.¹² The Shanks notebook is, among other things, evidence of this contention.

It is, of course, difficult (although possible, given the limited reading list) to trace every refer-

¹⁰ Shanks notebook, n.p., Downs collection.

¹¹ Shanks notebook, n.p., Downs collection.

⁹ See Annmarie Adams, "Building Barriers: Images of Women in Canada's Architectural Press, 1924-73," *Resources for Feminist Research* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 11-23.

¹² See Annmarie Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way: Doctors, Houses, and Women, 1870-1900* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), pp. 36-102.

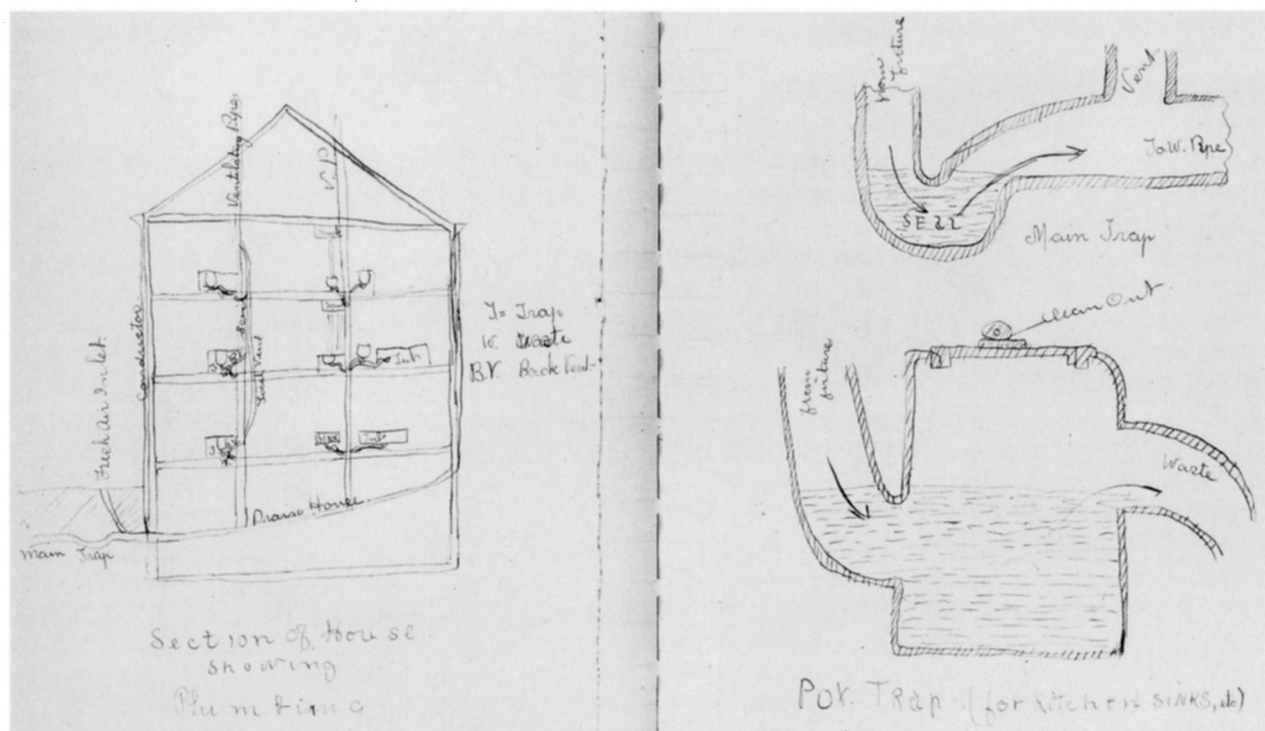


Fig. 5. House section with traps. From Frederica Shanks notebook, ca. 1905. (Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library.)

ence to home economics literature in Shanks's notes. It is more important to note, however, that all of these books were critical of buildings and architects. Even the most conservative authors of women's books, which tended to be decorators writing architectural literature, were contemptuous of professional design.¹³

British decorating literature of the time is full of equally derogatory statements aimed at the architectural profession. Jane Ellen Panton, author of more than thirty advice books for women, was quick to blame (male) architects for what she considered the poor design of typical houses: "I would strongly suggest that female architects for domestic architecture solely would be a great help to all who have to live in houses planned and executed by men who have no idea of comfort, and but small appreciation for the trifles light as air that make all the difference between that and great discomfort."¹⁴

¹³ For example, the caption "The majority of us must content ourselves with those which the bricklayer has erected" appears with a photograph of a cluttered, narrow hallway in Lillie Hamilton French, *Homes and Their Decoration* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1903), pp. 239.

¹⁴ J. E. Panton, *From Kitchen to Garret: Hints for Young Householders* (London: Ward and Downey, 1888), p. 4.

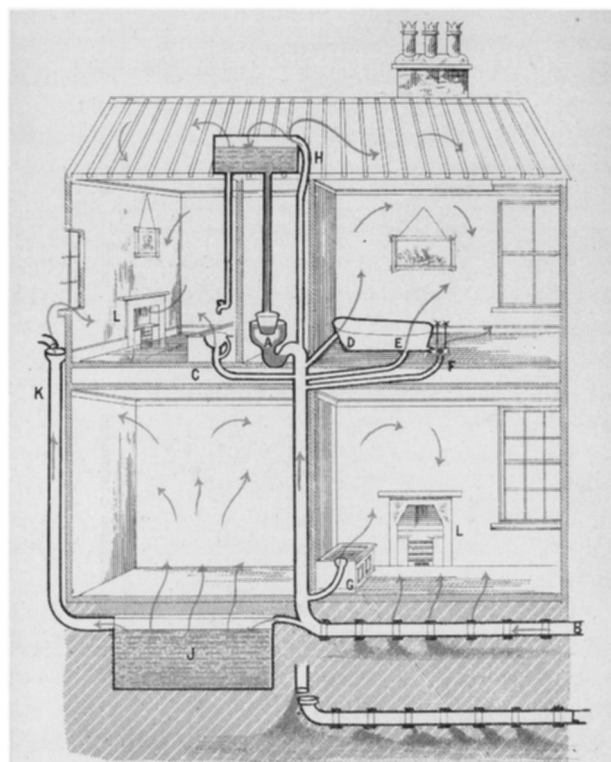


Fig. 6. From Thomas Pridgin Teale, *Dangers to Health: A Pictorial Guide to Domestic Sanitary Defects* (3d ed., London: J. and A. Churchill, 1881), pl. 1. (Photo, McGill University Libraries, Montréal.)

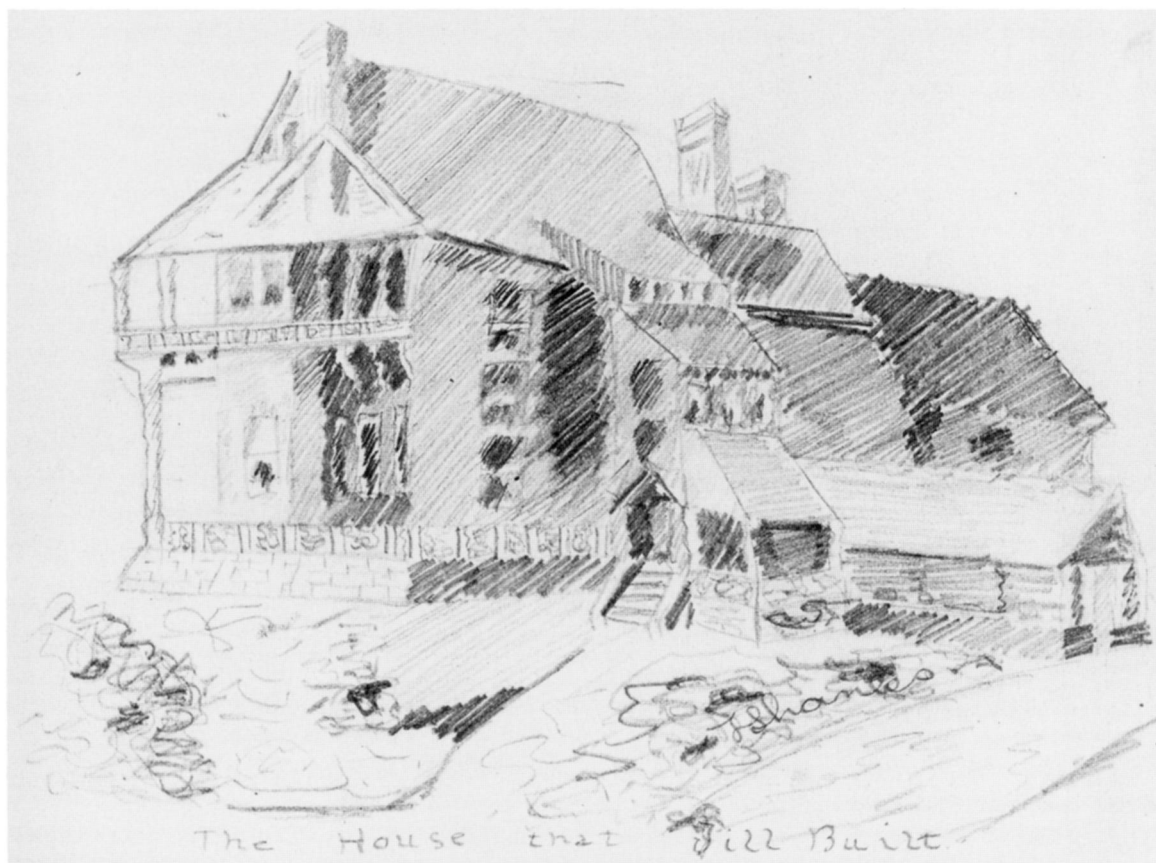


Fig. 7. Perspective drawing. From Frederica Shanks notebook, ca. 1905. (Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Library.)

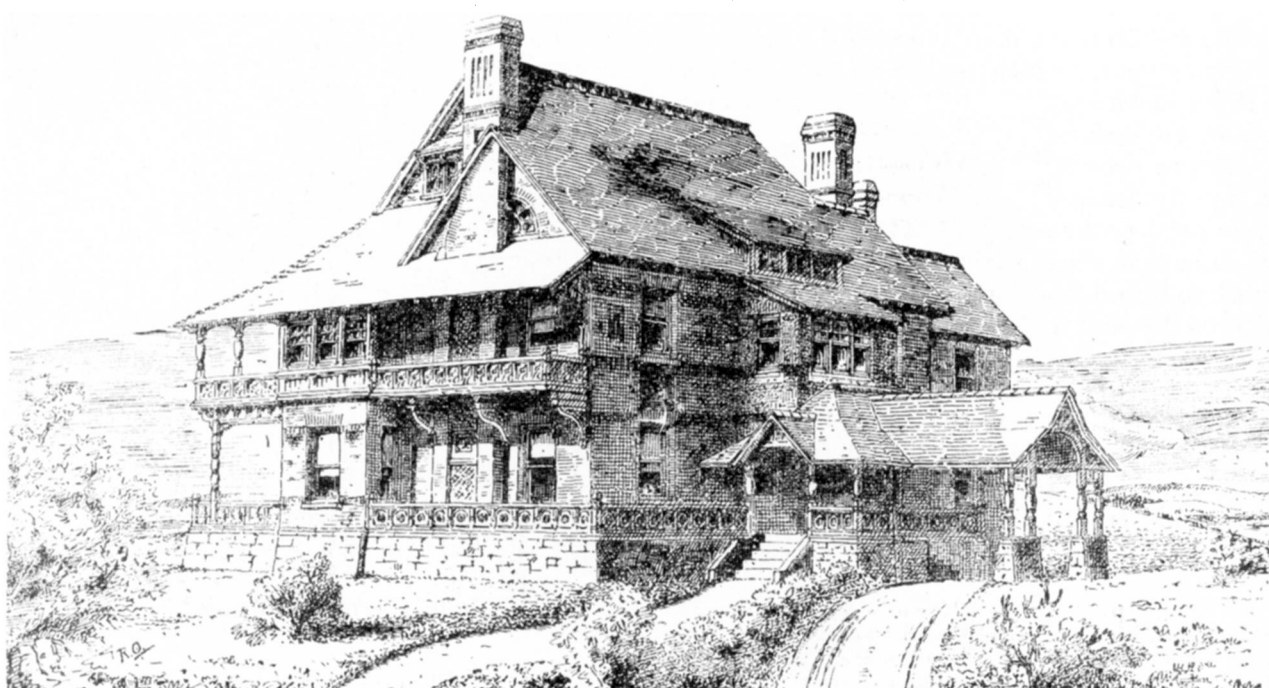


Fig. 8. From Eugene C. Gardner, *The House That Jill Built after Jack's Had Proved a Failure* (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1882), p. 234. (Photo, Winterthur Library.)

American author Eugene C. Gardner, included twice on Shanks's list, couched his distrust of architects in a humorous story. In *The House That Jill Built after Jack's Had Proved a Failure* (1882), Gardner, through the narrative of a young married couple considering various arrangements of houses, encouraged American women to modify their own houses. In this fictional context, Gardner conveyed to women standard architectural information on room composition, sanitary drainage, and decoration. Intended for three groups of people—those contemplating the purchase of a home, those wishing to improve their homes, and those who had suffered from living in homes with errors in design—the book's title revealed the author's confidence in the design abilities of women. It is certain that Shanks perused Gardner's lively narrative: the final image in her notebook is copied from Gardner's own perspective (figs. 7, 8).

Our current understanding of the early years of the home economics movement, particularly in America, is highly romanticized. Beyond its lessons in the movement, the notebook provides evidence of at least three larger issues in women's history

and architecture: 1) in the early years of the home economics movement, architecture was an arena for feminist reform, even though women were largely excluded from the architectural profession; 2) the link between plumbing and feminism extended beyond the words of famous reformers, such as the Beechers, and was explicitly taught in home economics classrooms and absorbed by ordinary students, such as Shanks; and 3) the advice literature written for women, on which so much of early feminist scholarship was based, was actually read.

Sources like Shanks's notebook allow historians to grant agency to ordinary women, rather than positing them as passive recipients of prescriptive literature. The pages of Shanks's notebook speak volumes about a young girl's response to the world around her. Let us hope that more sources like these are uncovered and analyzed, for it is in the reverberation of ideas and ideals—rather than in their initial projection as prescriptive words—that women's true experience of the built environment is expressed.