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Book Review: House Life: Space, Place and Family in Europe

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Donna Birdwell-Pheasant and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, eds., *House Life: Space, Place and Family in Europe*. New York: Berg, 1999, pp. xiii + 265. \$U.S. PRICE? (hardcover or paperback).

Has a change of residence ever turned your life upside down? Our family of four has recently moved from a Victorian house in rural Quebec, with its characteristic arrangement of enclosed rooms and specialized spaces, to an urban 1960s bungalow in British Columbia, with an open plan and multipurpose rooms. Nearly all of our domestic routines have changed in the new house. For example, since the British Columbia house offers little acoustic privacy, we all wake up at once; we now tend to watch television during meals, since the dining and living areas are combined; and outdoor activities take place in the backyard, which is isolated from those of our neighbors by tall hedges. Our former home, on the other hand, like so many others of its type, had a generous front porch, providing plenty of opportunities for chance encounters with both neighbors and strangers on the street.

Our recent experience raises a number of important questions for historians of home and family. Does family life produce particular domestic arrangements, or does the design of a house determine the behavior of its inhabitants? Does the modern house presume or determine modern modes of living? How do adults and children contest the spatial norms advanced by their domestic enclosures? These issues are addressed by the authors of ten essays in *House Life: Space, Place and Family in Europe*, edited by Donna Birdwell-Pheasant and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga.

House Life began as a session, organized by the book's editors, at the 1992 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Indeed, most of the twelve authors of the book's chapters are anthropologists (two are architects) and their assumptions, methods, and secondary literature are drawn from anthropology and the social sciences.

To the authors of *House Life*, the house tends to be a cultural, rather than a material, artifact. While nearly all the essays include floor plans of houses and some mention of building materials, these scholars, in general, are more interested in the language of home and the rituals it accommodates than in its design, context, and/or construction. The authors of essays in Part 1, for example, see the house as a rather passive setting for family dynamics. The Portuguese *casa* (by Caroline B. Brettell), the Greek village of Iraklio (by Susan Buck Sutton), and house systems and family systems in rural Ireland from early times to the present (by Birdwell-Pheasant) are the focus of studies which link the house to the history of the family, using traditional (mostly written) sources in historical and anthropological research. These authors approach the house as a symbol of longevity and/or a marker in the landscape rather than as evidence of spatial experience.

In contrast, the second section of the book (chapters 5-8) employs methods in material culture, engaging the buildings themselves as scholarly evidence to be privileged over written records. These essays deal with house types in Sicily (by Sally S. Booth), suburban southern Portugal (by Lawrence-Zúñiga), Serbia (by Judith A. Rasson, Mirjana Stevanovic and Vladimir Ilic), and Chios in Greece (by Alice V. James and Loukas Kalisperis) and assign the house a more active role in determining family dynamics.

The two essays in the book's final section, dealing with a particular room in the Irish house and the experiences of Jewish immigrants in France, pay little attention to the design of their respective houses but rely, instead, on narratives. Houses are just part of the story to authors Lawrence J. Taylor and Joëlle Bahloul.

Themes of cultural transformation, gender roles, modernization, and public versus private space structure most of the chapters and serve to cohere the seemingly disparate case studies that comprise the book. Booth's exploration of social class and gender in post-earthquake Sicily is among the most sophisticated of these analyses and touches on all four of these themes. By studying women's reactions to government-sponsored housing after the 1968 disaster, she found that poorer women renovated the new housing to mirror traditional dwellings, while wealthier women

turned their backs on urban row housing and fled to the suburbs. Booth thus challenges the dichotomous model of traditional and modern European housing that permeates most of the other chapters and much of the literature on this subject.

The strength of *House Life* is its assembly of carefully researched case studies. These almost all include site documentation and, in many cases, personal interviews. The incorporation of many meticulous, hand-drawn plans (in the style of folklorist Henry Glassie, whose work has clearly inspired the volume) is evidence of the painstaking fieldwork undertaken by most of the authors. Elevations, sections, and photographs, also à la Glassie, make these plans come alive for readers. Because of its multiple approaches to fieldwork, *House Life* will be an extremely helpful collection of models to show to graduate students interested in housing research.

James's and Kalisperis's study of housing in Chios is particularly impressive in its use of images and imagery. By reading the house as a series of thresholds, gradually transforming from public to private space, rather than as an exclusively private sphere, the authors challenge the separate spheres theory, first postulated in the 1970s by feminist historians in the United States. At the same time, James and Kalisperis grant women in the home considerable agency, illustrating how they have contested spatial prescriptions. Here they describe the power exerted by a great-grandmother in Chios by sleeping in her kitchen: "By her position, she exerts influence on the family activities. The day begins when she gets up to make coffee, and activity stops when she goes to bed. When she expresses a desire to sleep, everyone must leave the kitchen" (p. 208).

The weaknesses of the book are its organization and its disciplinary focus. The format of *House Life* does little to link the chapters, except for the introductory essay by the editors and passing references by authors to other chapters in the book. Each contribution is followed by notes and its own bibliography. *House Life* thus gives the appearance of an academic journal devoted to a special theme, rather than a coherent volume. Why not provide a single, integrated bibliography? And why not include brief editorial pieces introducing each section or chapter?

A much more serious problem is the false assumption, first implied in the editors' introduction and corroborated in the essays, that the house has not received much scholarly attention. Since the early 1980s, scholars in architectural history, material culture, and a number of related disciplines have analyzed the house as a key to family history. Although many of these studies focus on North American and British house types, the methods of analysis are relevant to any domestic situation. Among the most important early works in this genre are Gwendolyn Wright's *Moralism and the Model Home* (1980) and Mark Girouard's *Life in the English Country House* (1978). These influential books were quickly followed by more specialized studies of regional house types, many by feminist scholars, such as Elizabeth Cromley's *Alone Together* (1990), which analyzes New York apartments. And articles in specialized journals, such as *Places and Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, are devoted almost entirely to the study of dwellings and their inhabitants. There are also several collections of relevant papers, such as Dell Upton and John Michael Vlach's *Common Places* (1986), which not only include important pieces for the study of families and houses but might also have been useful as a model for how to make a collection of case studies read as a coherent book.

The editors and authors of *House Life*, with the exception of passing references to the work of historians Sally McMurry and Katherine Grier, seem completely unaware of this well-established world of house studies. In fact, the only references made to architectural history or vernacular architecture studies in *House Life* are to rather outdated works of the 1970s, like Amos Rapoport's, or to writers, such as Witold Rybczynski and Daphne Spain, whose books are intended for a more popular (or undergraduate) audience. Taylor, in the most theoretical essay of the collection, attributes this "inattention" to secular space among anthropologists before about 1990 to their penchant for religious and political symbols, which he explains in the context of Catholic and Protestant dissonance in the nineteenth century (p. 231).

Perhaps this disciplinary myopia also stems from the fact that nearly a decade has passed since the papers included in *House Life* were written, and in the meantime, scholars in a number of disciplines have advanced our understanding of family and home. Or is it home and family?

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Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson, eds., *On the Case: Explorations in Social History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998, pp. vii + 369. **Can. or U.S.?**\$29.95 (paperback).

This is a collection of cautionary tales on the historical use of case files. Although the case file is defined fairly broadly, the burden of the evidence naturally relates to people with problems. Hence, criminal court cases and psychiatric and hospital patient records predominate. To capture the voices of the subjects, quantitative analysis is not prominent, but it is addressed. Whereas Eric Sager defends the quantification of nineteenth-century merchant seamen's voyage agreements in his studies derived from the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project, Marlene Epp exposes the shortcomings of post-World War II Mennonite refugee immigration registers by demonstrating how qualitative sources provide more reliable insights into the features of family life during and after the crisis of wartime.

Five of the authors reveal the strengths and weaknesses of records of the criminal justice system. Carolyn Strange concentrates on the 1,533 case files of Canada's convicted murderers between 1867 and 1976 and argues that "examining specific cases is the only way to place a finer mesh over the statistical matrix of general tendencies" (p. 33). Through a reconstruction of the trial, appeal, reprieve, and parole of a woman convicted of infanticide in 1910, together with those of her lover-accomplice, Strange reveals the interplay of class, gender, marriage, and power in judicial decisions.

Angus McLaren's essay also focuses on murder—of men by men in British Columbia between 1900 and 1923—as a way of assessing popular notions of early-twentieth-century masculinity. He too provides details on one case by way of illustration. McLaren's analysis of the way reputation, status, and degrees of provocation informed trial juries and the wider community suggests that the western man, in contrast to his eastern, urban, middle-class counterpart, remained as example of "rugged masculinity," "a real man" who resorted with impunity to "violence against those who attacked his honour or violated his home" (pp. 175-76).

Annalee Golz also deals with violence—this time in the family context—based on criminal case files of the hierarchy of courts in Ontario. Wife battering, neglect of wife and children, and wife murder at the turn of the twentieth century provide her major focus. Drunkenness as a cause or an excuse was as prevalent in Ontario as in other jurisdictions. Although Golz concludes that "these criminal records are as close as feminist historians are going to get to the 'voices' and 'experiences' of battered and neglected wives" (p. 307), the records of protection and anticruelty agencies such as children's aid societies are also informative on this subject.

Family is also the focus for Franca Iacovetta's essay on the 114 cases of girls younger than sixteen brought before the York County, Ontario, Family and Juvenile Court to face delinquency charges between 1945 and 1956. In all cases, deteriorating relations between parents and daughters were central. Often, the case files reveal that the parents who took their children to court were also identified as problems by legal, medical, and social work "experts."

Quong Wing's trial and appeals arising out of his employment of white waitresses in his Moose Jaw restaurant are used by James Walker as a way of introducing the subject of Canadian racism