

THE KITCHENLESS HOUSE REVISITED: A Review of Dolores Hayden's *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 366 pp., \$32.50, paper \$16.95)

Deborah Altus
University of Kansas

Co-housing is a type of cooperative living wherein residents retain private dwellings, but share some common facilities. Although it is frequently referred to as a "new" idea that "began" in Denmark in the 1970s (see McCamant & Durrett, 1988), socialized neighborhood design is anything but new, as Dolores Hayden's book, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (1981), makes strikingly clear. In this highly readable chronicle, Hayden recounts the fascinating story of a two-generation movement of turn-of-the-century American feminists who strived to build neighborhoods with collective services such as common kitchens, dining rooms, laundries, day care centers, and the like. Their efforts, though similar to those of today's co-housing activists, were not motivated by the need to renew a sense of community or increase togetherness. Rather, these early feminists worked to create collective services in order to free women from the chains of domestic servitude.

As Hayden takes us through the waxing and waning of this movement to socialize American neighborhoods, she carefully analyzes everything from the architectural blueprints of kitchenless houses to the philosophical underpinnings of the argument to restructure domestic life. That the kitchenless house movement was ultimately unsuccessful at creating widespread or meaningful changes in domestic life does not diminish the power of the lessons that Hayden draws about the relationships between architecture and behavior, consumer cooperation and economic liberty, or feminism and family life. Those who seek to revitalize the concept of socialized neighborhood design, such as today's co-housing proponents, may find these lessons essential to the success of their enterprise.

Hayden's book, however, is far from a "how to" lesson for those interested in cooperative living. Rather, it gains its significance by offering a new perspective on the history of modern housing by adding the voices of women to the telling of that history. The importance of this addition is not to "even the score" or to equalize head counts, but to broaden our perspective and to allow us to see that even marginalized members of our society, whose daily lives typically have not been the subject of critical inquiry, did engage in behavior as worthy of study as any other group. Indeed, as Hayden shows us, the behavior of

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marginalized groups—groups that overtly lack power—is inextricably interwoven with the behavior of those with official power. Hayden demonstrates that it is only through an analysis of both control and counter control that we can gain a better picture of our cultural antecedents.

The Grand Domestic Revolution outlines the dreams and plans of a group of women Hayden calls “material feminists” because they dared to demand a change in women’s material conditions. These early feminists were horrified and angered by the way in which women were isolated in their homes, toiling individually and strenuously over their spinning wheels and wood-burning cook-stoves in an endless, wasteful, repetitive pattern of drudgery resulting in nothing permanent that they could point to with pride or accomplishment at the end of their workday.

Although they lacked the rights to vote and hold property in their own names, the material feminists pleaded and argued and schemed to find ways to relieve women from their isolation and endless domestic toil. They developed architectural and organizational plans for cooperative facilities. They proposed the idea of houses without kitchens where families were fed in cooperative dining halls from a common kitchen, thereby relieving women of the full responsibility for one of their most demanding chores. They stressed the economic savings of cooperative plans, not only in food, fuel and material goods, but also in labor. Through collectivizing the preparation and delivery of food, women were freed to do other, and hopefully more personally meaningful, things with their time.

The passage of a century has done nothing to diminish the passion and power of the material feminist message. Consider, for example, the almost desperate words of Elizabeth Moss King, written in 1873: If domestic work does not become organized, “all we can then hope and pray for is that there is another and a better world where we shall have no natural protectors to rob us of everything in life that makes life worth having” (King, 1873, p. 85). And, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman dramatically penned in 1903, “back of history, at the bottom of civilization, untouched by a thousand whirling centuries, the primitive woman, in the primitive home, still toils at her primitive tasks” (1903, p. 83).

These words, along with those of Melusina Fay Peirce, Mary Livermore, Marie Stevens Howland, and other material feminists, were not obscure and unknown. Rather, they were printed in popular journals and magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Good Housekeeping*, and were shared with feminists in England who put the writings of the material feminists on the reading lists of the Women’s Cooperative Guild (Thomson, 1988).

Despite the optimism and determination with which the material feminists worked to restructure domestic life, their efforts ultimately had depressingly little impact on the state of domestic affairs. Although a few cooperative laundries, kitchens, and boarding houses were formed as a direct result of their work, the 20th century brought little hope for those calling for widespread socialized neighborhood design. The single-family home became even more the dominant tradition with the arrival of the automobile and resulting suburbs—so pleasing to the American industrialists eager to meet the ever-increasing need for individual refrigerators, freezers, washers, dryers, and myriad other appliances.

What lessons can we learn from the material feminists? What can they teach us

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about our ability, or, perhaps, inability, to restructure domestic life? The issues they tackled are not issues of a bygone era. Six years shy of the 21st century, we find ourselves facing nearly identical problems, some of which are made even more challenging by demographic and economic changes that bring with them the enormous, and largely unmet, housing needs of single-parent families, the elderly, and the homeless.

Many of our housing problems appear to lend themselves nicely to cooperative solutions. So why, then, does it seem so difficult for user-designed collectivized schemes of domestic life to become popular or maintainable in our culture? Is it likely that today's optimistic and energetic co-housing proponents will meet with the same depressing outcome that befell the kitchenless-house advocates of a century past?

Superficially, at least, the rationales behind cooperative living appear logical. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of consumer cooperation—the idea of user-ownership, where the people who *use* a business are the ones who *own* the business—makes sense from a behavior-analytic perspective. B. F. Skinner argued in both *Walden Two* (1948) and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971) that cultures that design practices under which the designers themselves must live will increase the survival value of those cultures and their practices. In addition, united consumer effort should be very powerful. Beatrice Potter Webb outlined this idea in an elegant early 20th century booklet entitled *The Discovery of the Consumer* (undated) in which she discussed how “little people,” or those without capital, can create big changes—usually only the prerogative of those with economic means—by coordinating their behavior with other consumers.

Although widespread consumer cooperation is not a hallmark of American life, the positive consequences to be had from united consumer effort are not solely theoretical. For example, Mondragon, a city in the Basque region of Spain, serves as the home of a unique cooperative culture whose remarkable growth throughout the past forty years challenges the conventional wisdom about the impracticality of user-ownership. Mondragon grew from an inauspicious village that, in 1956, employed 23 workers in one cooperative, to a thriving industrial center employing, in 1986, nearly 20,000 workers in 100 co-ops (see Whyte & Whyte, 1988). In Mondragon, user-owned cooperatives coordinate nearly every aspect of life, from housing and education to industry and banking. Is the Basque situation so different from ours that a similar scenario is unlikely to occur within our borders, even though the potential economic and social benefits are great? What are some of the conditions that seem to be working against the development of widespread consumer cooperation in this country?

Perhaps the mainstream culture's verbal behavior, with its long history of rhetoric supporting the primacy of freedom and private property, decreases the reinforcing value of socialized plans. Perhaps the consequences of consumer cooperation are too delayed to be effective at maintaining collective behavior without the accompanying supportive verbal behavior to bridge the gap. Perhaps the laws that regulate cooperative businesses prevent co-ops from competing effectively in the marketplace, and therefore keep members from fully experiencing the natural consequences of consumer cooperation. Perhaps the common practice of consumer

cooperatives to pinch pennies by relying on unskilled volunteer workers ultimately backfires by preventing the co-ops from competing with professionally-run organizations. Perhaps the delay in realizing profits for an initially cash-poor organization makes hiring professional management unworkable.

These barriers to the full practice of consumer cooperation do not lend themselves easily to solutions. Perhaps the only thing that will mitigate the effects of such barriers is grinding poverty like that seen in the Great Depression, when pooling resources was necessary for survival. Indeed, the boom in cooperative enterprises during the depression in this country is unequalled.

Consider also the barriers faced by the material feminists. As consumers, their collective power was diluted because they had no money, property, or voting privileges. Hayden (1981) argues that the material feminists made the mistake of relinquishing men from their share of the responsibility for domestic life. By in large, the women felt that domestic problems were their own problems and accepted the conclusion that men were unwilling to become involved—even though men alone had the resources and political power to help cooperative enterprises succeed. Even when men approved of the idea of cooperative housekeeping, women were still seen as the responsible party. For example, Edward Bellamy wrote in 1889 that socialized services would “revolutionize housework in America.” However, he left the responsibility for that revolution to women. In Bellamy’s words, “the matter is an exceedingly simple one. All the ladies have to do is to call a meeting, appoint managers, draw up plans and solicit pledges of patronage and funds” (Bellamy, 1889, p. 75). But, as Thomson (1988) concluded in his recent analysis of the cooperative housekeeping movement, “to realize their domestic dreams, women needed power as well as conviction” (p. 122).

Hayden (1981) also suggests that social and religious norms of the day worked against the material feminists. She notes that “unpaid domestic work performed by housewives in the private home was promoted as a social and religious duty” (p. 301).

By the 1920s, Red-baiting by manufacturers did in what was left of the cooperative housekeeping movement, although Hayden is quick to note that the problems faced by the material feminists were not entirely external. There were serious internal problems as well, among them, ironically, racism and classism. While the material feminists were eager to work for the improvement of middle or upper middle class white women like themselves, they did not see the incongruity of relying on a typically poor, minority, female labor force to run their cooperative dining rooms, kitchens, and laundries. Hayden (1981) concludes that “women can never gain their own liberation from stereotypes of gender at the expense of other women of a lower economic class or another race whom they exploit by paying them low wages to do sex-stereotyped work” (p. 299).

Another serious issue faced by the material feminists was the problem of not being taken seriously when discussing an area as superficially mundane as housework. This concern was one that dogged Charlotte Perkins Gilman throughout her life (see Allen, 1988). Gilman thought of herself as an intellectual and wanted to be seen as equal to the great thinkers of her era. She knew if she focused only on topics such as how food should be prepared, or who should be doing the ironing

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and vacuuming, she would be scoffed at for addressing the trivial. As a result, she often neglected her domestic views to speak and write on topics of grander scope which she hoped would gain her respect and admiration in intellectual circles.

Over a century later, feminists face the same concern, and possibly as a result, they have not articulated a comprehensive domestic vision like that of the material feminists. Today's feminists are involved with issues such as sexual harassment in the workplace, violence against women, and reproductive rights. Like Gilman, they appear hesitant to devote their energies to the reorganization of the home and housework for fear that by doing so they will identify themselves with the home and will again be evoking the view of innately determined separate spheres for men and women, where women are the natural spokespersons for the home.

But if nothing else, Hayden's book, *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, emphasizes the point that discussing how domestic work is organized is far from trivial or mundane. Who does the vacuuming is not merely a housekeeping question but a serious political issue with consequences that range far beyond the domestic arena. In the book *Diet for a Small Planet*, Frances More Lappe (1971) taught us that what we put on our dinner table affects not only our bodies but also our land, our natural resources, people around the globe, and future generations. Dolores Hayden teaches us that the repercussions of how we clean our dinner table are just as grave.

In conclusion, Hayden leaves us with a richly detailed, alternately triumphant and tragic tale of an attempt to reform domestic life through cooperative means. Although this work recounts a century-old movement that was ultimately unsuccessful at producing widespread change, knowledge of this movement is nevertheless relevant to the myriad domestic problems we face today. From this movement we learn lessons about the sexism, racism, and classism that continue to blind us in our quest to produce social change that benefits all people. We learn how architectural changes may be necessary but are clearly insufficient to restructure domestic life. We learn that consumer cooperation may be a step towards economic liberty but that marginalized groups cannot alone be expected to change the machinery of society that keeps them disenfranchised. That those of us interested in social change study the lessons of this movement to restructure domestic life, with *all* its voices, may be a prerequisite to our being successful change agents.

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