

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

*Homeplace: The Making of the  
Canadian Dwelling over Three Centuries*

Peter Ennals and Deryck W. Holdsworth

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998. 305 pp. Illus. \$24.95 paper.

*A History of Domestic Space:  
Privacy and the Canadian Home*

Peter Ward

Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999. 182 pp. Illus. \$39.95 cloth.

By Joy Parr

*Simon Fraser University*

I ENJOY reading books about houses, and, if the capacious house and home sections of bookstores are any guide, I'm not alone. We dawdlers in this section are eager amateurs. Rarely do readers (or authors) of housing histories not have housing histories of their own. Thus, whether they write about big houses or little houses (perhaps, for contrast Marc Girouard, *Life in the English Country House* [1978], and Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* [1994]), from sprightly postmodern or dourly modernist perspectives (think of Witold Rybczynski, *Home* [1986] in contrast to Nicholas Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design* [1949]), the challenge for historians in the field has been to turn the little knowledge of their many readers into that delighted perplexity and surprise that makes them yearn to know more.

It is easy to underestimate the task. To assert that the spaces of everyday life have a history contradicts the eternal pieties of hearth and home and

the time-refusing assertions of those imaginative confectors of authenticity. Paradoxically, it is no mean trick to find good and convincingly answerable questions about topics for which the mass of artefactual and print evidence is so daunting and the incursion of "common-sense" reasoning so insidious. The authors of these two books have dealt with these welcome and wearying dilemmas in starkly different ways.

Much makes *Homeplaces* charming. Peter Ennals has graced their book with his own sketches of houses and housing types, the detail clearer from his drawing pen than it would be from photos, the images crafted to attend proximately to the textual discussion in which he and Holdsworth are engaged. And this is a book on housing in which the door is not closed. In their introduction the authors call attention to their retrospective regrets. Oh that the book were more "socially-focussed and archivally-based" (xii); I agree. And they are right that there

are more questions here than can be easily answered about how antecedents, ethnicity, economy, and social aspiration make and are remade in dwelling places. But, as they note, "therein lies the fun of placing the dwelling into the intellectual calculus" (xiii).

Ennals and Holdsworth begin with a taxonomy. This has the merit of suggesting from the start that housing comes in different forms, but also gives precedence to one analytical variable, the economic mode of production. To better comprehend the Canadian condition they add "gang" (a mode they usefully explore) and "aboriginal" (which they leave unaddressed) to the commonly used categories of folk, vernacular, and polite. They graph the incidence of these forms over time, thus gainsaying from the outset the commonplace that homeplaces always do the same thing and that, over time, privacy and domestic space are a common experience and goal. They keep wanting to be inclusive, to worry about spaces as gendered, classed, and ethnically informed; to tell us what was particular about the inspirations that informed the people who built the houses they study. Yet right from the beginning, there on the St. Lawrence in the polite houses of the seventeenth century, they accept the mode of economic production as the prime influence on style and housing form, and they note, regarding local sociability, only that it was less grandiose than it was in France. Whether the texture of sociability in these more modest homes would have been different is a question over which Raphael Samuel would have lingered and Rybcznski would have lyrically mused. We're left to wonder.

This orientation does drive Ennals and Holdsworth to follow the money

and track the pseudo-baronial masonry piles that washed up, often very far away from the accumulating wreckage of the resource extraction that sustained them. The juxtaposition is illuminating and we can hope for more social and cultural histories of Canadian housing which refuse contemporaries' separation of the sites where extraordinary wealth was displayed from the sites where it was accumulated. Parks interpreters long have linked workers' housing to their work and plainer migrants' housing preferences to their folk lineage. Re-fusing the coal and retail moguls with the pits and the shops where their wealth was made, and explicitly linking the built environment of the remittance men with the economic circumstances that propelled their departures and funded their remittances, is indispensable to a well made social and economic history of housing. The start that Ennals and Holdsworth make is tentative; their chapter on this phase, what they call the self-conscious house, is a nearly tedious list of names of houses, owners, neighbours, architects, and styles. There are gestures towards situating the panelled smoking rooms as comforting masculine markers during one of the periodic crises to which "manliness" has been prone, and to featuring the sheer bulk of the mansion as a weighty anchor against the contemporary currents of social uncertainty. But these are fleeting interludes. The authors acknowledge this limitation, reminding us that their real interest in the bombast of the big house is as an interpretive context for the vernacular and the folk.

The nineteenth-century folk house discussions, Ennals's illustrations apart, have much in common with Harris and Warkentin's *Canada Before Confederation* (1974). People and the cultural capital

that results in building practice migrate together, form following function. Refreshing as is their reminder of how the current status and material readings of housing forms divert our eye from the small, plain, run-down, and unconventional, their promised differentiation amongst the inhabitants of these folk dwellings is only episodically realized. They do not tarry interpretively over symbolic values. It is useful to be shown that modest economic resources lead to excised forms. It would be wonderful to know more about the other cultural resources inhabitants brought to their subsequent modest or racy work and play with these lean received enclosures.

The study of vernacular houses is based on pattern books, the commercial successor to the multiply informed initiatives of earlier owner-built dwellings. Pattern books are bountiful in Canadian repositories, as numerous as published sermons, which they disarmingly resemble. We learn about the regional dispersion of the Craftsman, the Four-Square and the Bay-N-Gables, but not about why which forms appeal where or to whom. The sheer mass of the pattern books seems to have overwhelmed the authors, amplifying the production-side emphasis of earlier chapters. I began to hanker to know more about residents' vernacular disruptions of the house-book patterns, their physical retrofitting and transgressive everyday performances within the patterned walls.

Apart from one mention of painterly variations in the facades of miners' cottages, industrial housing, too, is treated as inalienable, as produced once and for all by a specialized producer. The class variants are notable. Employers offer highly skilled immigrants sound housing that reminds them of home, and they offer marginal workers little

shelter at all. Though the authors reach for the influences of culture, tradition, family form, sexual orientation, and place, mostly these remain outside their grasp. Were there no material accommodations to the homoerotic practices we know about in the work camps? What would an aesthetic analysis of the Fraser Valley industrial village of Clayburn yield, this being the place of work and residence for the brick-making McLure, whose employees and neighbours were literally making the material of his architect brother Samuel's dreams? How do we read the distinctive self-built workshops and residences of Victoria's Chinatown, only now, as restored backbuildings, emerging from their prudent occlusion behind racially mediating commercial fronts?

What is plain to me at the end of this satisfying book, and probably more plain still to the self-questioning authors, is that an inhabitants' history of housing must be next on the agenda. We need a history of the house as a continuing indigenous project rather than as a builder's *fait accompli*. To do this, the source base must broaden to include evidence from novels and other literary forms, among them autobiographies. Henceforth an adequate social and cultural history of housing must look past what was built to what was renovated and remade, and to the performances of everyday life that symbolically reconfigured the houseroom.

Peter Ward's *A History of Domestic Space: Privacy and the Canadian Home* is a lean, short book, geographically focused on examples from southern Alberta and eastern Ontario, and interpretively foreclosed. Ward begins with the assertion that domestic privacy is one of the fundamental elements of daily life "for individuals and

families, past and present alike" (4). Like the phenomenologist geographers of the 1970s, he is preoccupied with the pursuit of transhistorical essences. Here he frames his study to explore the nature, meaning, and experience of privacy and "their implications for family and social life, past and present," seeking out privacy and domestic space as a common experience over time. In these days, when the social and cultural construction of daily life widely (if contentiously) intrigues, holding fast to so idealist a premise is brazenly unfashionable. But Ward, whose earlier books on race and courtship have drawn querulous criticism for previous elaborations based on this stance, holds to his contrarian ground. He offers his readers a book comprised of two chapters, the first consisting of eighty pages on interiors, the second consisting of fifty pages on the setting of the house. Chapter 1 shows how the dwelling interior affects the relations of household members; Chapter 2 charts how location shapes interactions between the residents of the house and their neighbours. His thesis, which concerns the distinction between inside and outside, is built resolutely into the structure of the volume.

I expect that Ward is addressing readers of popular books on housing,

among whom I am an unabashed but perhaps uncharacteristic representative. The prose is accessible. He shares family recollections and lapses into a familiar tone in winking asides about kids' bedrooms, young libidos constrained on the front verandah swing, and the folly of certain architectural experiments. The professional historian will be irked that so many topic sentences write out vital protagonists through passive prose constructions, that photos from one time are used to buttress interpretations of another, and that prescriptive images pose as documents of common practice. When the legal and institutional histories of privacy are so convincingly documented to diverge at the 49th parallel, to those in the trade the casual use of American instances to forward arguments about Canadian patterns surely will seem ill-advised. General readers, I'd wager, will be more disappointed that the book has so few questions and, thus, so few trick answers that yield the engaging "whys" of good coffee-room banter. These are the forté of Rybczynski, Samuel, Girouard, and even Pevnser, foreclosed here by Ward's conviction that the experiences of privacy and domestic space endure resolutely across time.