“Pushing Women to the Margins in the Patriarchal City: Chicago, Toronto, Dublin, and London, 1870s-1940s”

**This presentation is a piece of a much larger project. It focuses only on the early twentieth century in each of these cities, and on a few specific examples.

Urban margins or boundaries can be physical – manifestly visible in the concrete, steel, and macadam of the built environment. Yet, they can also be social/psychological – the invisible but powerful ideas restricting equal access to the uses of urban spaces and opportunities.¹ My presentation today explores how gender ideals underlay both the physical and social constructions of these four cities. In short, it argues that one key factor reshaping the industrial city of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries to accommodate changing economic needs and confront growing social problems, was the willingness to push women to the margins of urban life. It examines how the work and ideas of town/city planners, private developers, and municipal officials envisioned women as marginal actors in an urban environment that was to be dedicated to profit-making capitalism and to creating patterns of orderly growth that would enhance the economic possibilities of men in the city. These professionals, political figures, and economic leaders saw the city as a male world of work, order, and control over the spaces of the city. Women, on the other hand, they viewed as marginal to the city’s economic realm, yet vital to creating a well-ordered family life to support economic progress, so that the good, well-ordered city was one that controlled women’s place in, uses and experiences of, urban space. As public policy decisions were made with these aims in mind, the physical shape and infrastructure

¹For an extensive explanation of this concept, see Kristine B. Miranne and Alma H. Young, “Introduction,” *Gendering the City: Women, Boundaries, and Visions of Urban Life*, Miranne and Young, eds. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
development of the Anglo-Atlantic city created boundaries – physical and ideological – that
women were not supposed to transgress. The result was the consolidation of a Patriarchal city in
which men were to be public, productive actors while women were confined largely to the
reproductive sphere of the private home and thereby excluded from the productive public sphere
of the city.

The history of planning has already documented the links between the earliest town
planners throughout the Anglo-Atlantic world. It is well-known, for example, that Patrick
Geddes, John Nolen, Thomas Adams, and Patrick Abercrombie (Scots, American, Scots, and
English respectively) traveled among the four countries examined here, proposing new town
plans, and addressing male-dominated organizations who attempted to apply their ideas and plans
in these four cities. Yet, far less work has been done – except by feminist planners – to
investigate the gendered assumptions that underlay the ideas and proposals of these men and how
they were attempting, often successfully, to push women into the margins of the city. Since each
of the 4 cities that I investigate was also enmeshed in its individual circumstances, observing
commonalities of experience and activities in these cities can enable us to draw conclusions
about the gendered nature of the urban built environment that transcend national boundaries.

Applying a gender analysis to the historical development of cities requires that we define
gender in a way that recognizes the specificity of cities as both place and space. I use the
following definition: that gender is a social construction that in cities has resulted in a ranking of

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“values and behaviors. . .so that those associated with men are normally given greater value”; a situation that has been historically embedded in urban institutions in ways that structure access to urban resources “generating male privilege and domination and female subordination.” In other words, as feminist urban scholars argue, every city is constructed as a gender regime: that is, a city has a “distinctive relationship between its political, economic, and familial systems that constructs its gender regime, its particular version of patriarchy.”

The specific contours of that gender regime may differ, but historically, male political power allowed implementation of specifically gendered ideas about a city and urban life. To understand the connection of gender to the construction of the built environment in English cities between 1870 and 1939, and the virtual exclusion of women’s voices and visions from these processes, historian Helen Meller has suggested we ask two vital questions: “[H]ow did the ideal of modern urban life get defined and by whom?” and “Why were the social consequences of new developments not part of the brief of the architects and planners who created the new urban environments?” Her answer to the latter question is that women’s visions of the city were generally “people centred” and concerned with the practical issues of daily life; that is with the immediate social experiences of finding a place to live or how even to cross the road in the face of new technologies. The earliest professionals male planning enthusiasts, on the other hand, promoted a “vision of the modern cities of the future,” through a “primarily physical and


interventionist approach to planning.” Immediate social consequences of such visions were a general disregard for the daily lives of many of the people who constituted that society in favor of planning urban environments as successful economic and profit-making enterprises. In the process, the needs, ideas, voices, and experiences of women were physically and socially pushed to the margins of urban life. When viewed from this perspective, the Patriarchal City is, thus, ideological, physical, and social. Whether town plans were adopted either partially or in total, whether garden cities or model suburbs were built in the early decades of the 20th century, the early 20th century beginnings of the planning profession both reflected earlier concerns about the place of women in the city which have carried through the century.

London:

Garden Cities and Suburbs

Historian Elizabeth Wilson theorizes that the garden city movement was a response in large measure to women’s increasing presence and freedom in the industrial city. It “represented

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6I have done previous work on Chicago exploring this in terms of environmental concerns over the city’s lakefront development and smoke pollution, as well as for housing. See, for example, Flanagan, “The City Profitable, the City Livable: Environmental Policy, Gender, and Power in 1910s Chicago,” Journal of Urban History 22 (January 1996): 163-190 and Seeing with Their Hearts: Chicago Women and the Vision of the Good City, 1870-1933(Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002).
one answer to the threat of female independence. . . constituted an attempt to gain control over women, although this was rarely if ever explicitly stated as a goal.” This last phrase is very important, since it warns us that we must look for this in the ideas and plans that were proposed and implemented, and to interpret the rhetoric from a different than usual perspective.

When male planning figures such as Patrick Abercrombie enthused over “the building of new towns in country districts,” or extolled the virtues of Raymond Unwin’s planned the Hampstead Garden suburb on the “outskirts of London” – both schemes that would remove thousands of people from urbanized areas – they implicitly pushed the women among them to the city’s margins. Men would be expected to keep playing an important role in the central city’s economic growth by commuting to their jobs and appearing in the city’s public spaces while women would remain on the “outskirts” of London. Thus Thomas Adams noted that Welwyn, one of the early such schemes outside of London proper, by the early 1930s had a “large resident population that travels daily to and from work in London.” Unwin’s plan for Hampstead similarly marginalized its female residents, both within and in relation to the central city: the area marked out for shops was quite a distance from some of the housing and the distance and

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difficulty of reaching the transit station at Golders Green would definitely hamper women’s ability to travel out, especially with children in tow.\textsuperscript{10}

**Town Planning as Intervention**

The ideas of town planning that took hold in England offer another example of how an interventionist perspective became the guiding force of the new profession. In 1910, the Royal Institute of British Architects suggested 11 principal guidelines for town planning – not incidentally promoting a prominent role for architects. Five of the 11 focused on roads, streets, and traffic centers; one stressed that the “[E]xact position for business and commercial areas is perhaps of more importance than for any others”; while another advocated designing “appropriate centres for governmental, administrative, commercial of educational purposes.” No mention was made of housing or everyday living needs, such as convenient access to shopping or neighborhood parks and playgrounds for children.\textsuperscript{11} When Thomas Adams addressed the Town Planning Institute in 1914 to advocate a comprehensive plan for London, seven of his nine essential elements for formulating such a plan involved roads. [“There is much inter-relation between the economic questions connected with the development of land and those relating to the provision of various classes of highway, ranging from the wide arterial road to the narrow domestic cul-ce-sac; between questions relating to modes of transit and those relating to the


\textsuperscript{11}Town Planning Committee of the Royal Institute of British Architects, “Suggestions to Promoters of Town Planning Schemes,” *Royal Institute of British Architects Journal* 3rd ser. (August 26, 1911): 661-668, quotes from 666 and 663.
Dublin: Planning Competition and the Abercrombie Plan

In 1914, several Irish groups brought the leading Anglo-Atlantic proponents of planning to that city. Raymond Unwin and Patrick Geddes were invited to consult with the Dublin Corporation and its City Architect about the best schemes for slum clearance and comprehensive planning. Then, a £500 award was offered for the best town planning scheme submitted. The guidance for the competition specified three areas: communication, housing, and metropolitan development. I cannot give a complete description here of these guidelines, but the vast bulk of these focused on roads, railways, traffic schemes, location of industries, parkways and boulevards, improving existing parks and gardens, and locating new public buildings. The plan of Patrick Abercrombie and his associates won, and they declared that they had “not hesitated to produce a drastic Town Plan. . .to provide for [Dublin’s] anticipated shipping and industrial development.” Central city housing was not only to be torn down, but wide streets slashed through neighborhoods, with almost 60,000 people removed from their current dwellings to “extra-urban land,” so that their former residences could “be rebuilt or remodelled for commercial purposes.”


competition.)

War and rebellion, and what seemed to members of the Dublin Corporation as exorbitant costs, kept the city from implementing immediately any of Abercrombie’s proposals, but this plan set the tone for future discussions of Dublin’s future built environment. Central city housing was to be torn down and its residents removed to the peripheries. Work and residence were segregated in new developments that were “conceived of as catering for individuals who would find employment and seek services in the city centre.” The daily lives of women in these areas, most of whom were undoubtedly taking care of children, were thereby bounded geographically into the city’s margins. Abercrombie’s plan for Dublin had paid no attention to women’s potential transit needs as they were moved out of the city center; his primary concern was to assure that male workers would have transportation back to that area, where he presumed most would still go to work. He also declared that tenements were “not desirable for the better class of workman, who prefers a self-contained cottage.” As Urban Planning Professor Clara Greed put it, such new developments created gendered realities: “[T]own planning, especially zoning of industry and the creation of separate, residential neighbourhoods, was one means of enforcing divisions spatially between male and female, and of preventing women combining work inside and outside the home in their daily lives.”

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The Other Side of the Atlantic

Chicago’s City Vision

In 1910, at the second national planning conference in the U.S, John Nolen declared that “Of all the features of City Planning, streets are the most important.” Chicago’s businessmen had already this idea as their central focus when the constituted their Chicago Plan Commission in 1907 and commissioned architect Daniel Burnham to draw up a city plan. The purpose of the plan was clearly articulated by the then Mayor who trumpeted it as designed by “hard-headed businessmen” whose purpose was to enhance commercial assets and real estate values through major street interventions, new bridges, harbor plans, and transportation and communication networks. The Commission’s chairman confidently declared that “[T]he rise in [property values] will be stronger, it is true, adjacent to the immediate improvements, but the benefits will radiate and penetrate every noon and corner of the city. . . . Any thinking person, who is unbiased, knows that that is true.” Both statements as well as the plan itself reflected these male visions of modern city as foremost an orderly economic growth machine whose financial benefits would trickle down to the rest of the city’s residents. “Good order is essential to material advancement,” the Plan’s first chapter proclaimed.\(^{17}\)

Unlike in London and Dublin, the Chicago plan made few suggestions for housing: the

\(^{16}\)For Nolen, see *Proceedings of the Second National Conference on City Planning and the Problems of Congestion* (Boston, 1910), p. 147.

U.S. preoccupation with private property precluded any public responsibility in this area. But a competition sponsored by the men of the City Club of Chicago to plan subdivisions, or “model suburbs” as they were also called, provide ample evidence of the gendered visions that underlay further residential development. All the submissions gave detailed attention to street layout and traffic flow, to separating business and residential buildings, and to making the subdivision into a “self-sufficient” suburb with the private family home removed from the social life of the street and larger entity. Frank Lloyd Wright expressed his vision that such separation would make life “quiet and clean.” This latter emphasis on the “private family home” places the visions embodied in these plans squarely into the theory of cities as gender regimes by building details to family systems into that constructs a city as a gender regime. Such planning ideas were predicated on upholding a public/private dichotomy that could only work to marginalize women from the public spaces of the city.

It is striking, therefore, that architect Anna P. Schenck’s ideas for workers’ flats differed significantly from all those plans that had been submitted to the competition. Speaking to the City Club in 1915, she focused on the content of the buildings themselves. various sized apartments to accommodate different sized families, laundry, library, hospital facilities, day nurseries and playgrounds were all to be services easily accessible to the people who lived in the

buildings. In her vision, families were not to be separated from one another, but actually joined together in their daily lives, although having choices as to how to much social, public, interaction they would avail themselves of.

**Toronto**

Toronto’s path toward consolidating the Patriarchal City resembled that of Chicago. By 1906, its businessmen were promoting a comprehensive plan that would bring “orderly” growth to the city, with new wide thoroughfares, new harbor facilities, and radial streets (a feature of the proposed plans for all four cities considered here) facilitating transportation throughout the central city featured prominently in their vision. One of the men making this case very specifically put planning in gender language: “Before we can hope to have any plan for the benefit of the city realized we must secure the interest of the young men.” The plan proposed three years later by the 400-member Toronto Civic Guild had as its centerpiece street widening and “a pair of avenues ripping diagonally across the city’s grid from the northeast and the northwest to converge near the business centre.”

In dealing with housing, however, Toronto in many ways resembled its cross-Atlantic

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19 City Club of Chicago, “Minutes of Committee on Housing Conditions,” March 8, 1915, City Club of Chicago Ms. Collection, Box 16, folder 3, at Chicago History Museum.

counterparts. The two such schemes built before WWI by the Toronto Housing Company (a private enterprise with government backing) both focused on the garden suburb model of moving people to the periphery of the city. The design of both areas was modeled on the cottage model of Hampstead Garden suburb: women were to focus their daily lives inside the area, while working men were to have the means for commuting to their jobs. Yet, a Chicago-style rhetoric of the private home also echoed across the discussion of how to order the city of Toronto. Toronto Medical Office Charles Hastings asserted that all cities “must have a keen sense of the social and national significance of the term ‘home’ as being of one-family dwellings. In 1912, Toronto began to forbid building of apartments and tenements in what were classified as “residential” areas. While mainstream urban historians and planners (whom Clara Greed labels as “malestream”) have contended that this was done principally to protect property values, feminist scholars see it differently. They argue that we must see that in constructing the built environment, “[W]omen are invisible, subsumed within a framework of ‘family,’ and the particular family form in housing policy is that of the patriarchal, privatized nuclear family.”

The focus on the private family and women’s place in it has resulted in both the visible


and invisible marginalization of women in these four cities. The city has been segregated into productive and reproductive spheres, with men supposedly occupying the former and women confined to the latter. Because so many of the men who controlled cities and thereby defined the vision of the modern (at least western city in these examples), as one in which economic profitability in the form of paid work was the purpose of the city. All reshaping and planning of the build environment, thus, was dedicated to that end. These men saw the city primarily as a network of transportation devices as revealed in their schemes for constructing arterial streets, ring roads, and railroads systems, all of which were visibly represented in their plans and drawings, for example. They also envisioned commerce (in the form of a woman) sprinkling wealth across the landscape as they pursued (sub)urban development, as a cartoon in Punch satirized.\(^\text{23}\)

Urban designer and planner Dolores Hayden has recently claimed that in the U.S. one of the premier principles of urban planning has been the slogan “A woman’s place is in the home.” As Helen Meller noted for English cities, Hayden also notes that this is nowhere written but rather has been simply assumed by the men of the profession – although John Nolen did promote post World War I housing schemes in the U.S. as needed to “redomesticate women workers after the war.”\(^\text{24}\) Even when the grand plans that were proposed for these four cities were never fully

\(^{23}\)\textit{Punch, May 22, 1946. While this cartoon goes beyond the chronological range of this presentation, the sentiment was exactly the same earlier in the century. In 1902, the English Garden Cities movement was illustrated as a woman sitting on a throne, surrounded by foliage, and holding aloft a new town. Reprinted in Dennis Hardy, \textit{From Garden Cities to New Towns: Campaigning for town and country planning, 1899-1946} (London: Chapman and Hall, 1991), p. 17.}

\(^{24}\)Hayden, “What Would a Nonsexist City Be Like?: Speculations on Housing, Urban Design, and Human Work, in \textit{Gender and Planning: A Reader}, Susan Fainstein and Lisa Servon,
implemented, the underlying principles upon which the build environment was reshaped remained intact. The historical result has been the consolidation over the rest of the 20th century of the Patriarchal City that has worked to segregate home and work and to limit women’s access to, uses of, and opportunities to enjoy or benefit from its public spaces.

Let me conclude with one more example displaying the depth of women’s understanding of the reach and impact of the Patriarchal City over women’s lives. In 1994, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, held an international conference titled “Women in the City.” One report of the conference, on the issue of gender and public safety, excoriated the male vision of the city that had refused to give attention to constructing cities to protect women in public. The report declared that the lack of attention to women’s public safety “can prove as effective as purdah in restricting women’s mobility.”

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