

Annmarie Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way: Doctors, Houses and Women, 1870-1900*

MARION ROBERTS

Annmarie Adams, *Architecture in the Family Way: Doctors, Houses and Women, 1870-1900*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996. 227 pp., illus., Cloth \$39.95, ISBN 0773513868.

The Victorian architect, Norman Shaw, was reputed to have said when responding to a question about his stylistic sensibilities that he was just a soil stack man himself. For those who have been puzzled by that remark, this book holds the answer.

Annmarie Adams has prepared a scholarly account of the influence of the relationship between middle-class women, the sanitary movement and domestic architecture. In this she has indicated the subtle shifts of power, between doctors and architects, doctors and women and women and the household. At first sight these shifts seem too minor to merit such detailed attention; however, as the tale unfolds their importance becomes clear.

The book is organized into five essays dealing with the International Health Exhibition of 1884, doctors' interventions into domestic architecture, women's contribution to the maintenance of healthy homes, arrangements for childbirth, and feminism and domestic architecture. The focus of the research is on England and particularly London and a variety of sources are used, ranging from women's magazines to medical directories as well as more conventional architectural sources.

Adams makes the point that the sanitary movement, which was responsible for so many of the public health reforms in mid-Victorian Britain, focused its attention initially on working-class homes. It was only as the century drew to a close that the middle-class home became a source of anxiety. This was due, in part, to the slow acceptance of germ theory and Victorian horror of the "miasma," which, it was argued, could penetrate through walls and floors. Further concerns were raised by the inclusion in homes of the new forms of sanitary appliances, such as water closets and baths, which accommodated functions formerly separated from the main fabric of the house.

One of the most intriguing parts of the book demonstrates the way in which architects were marginalized in the debate about the "healthy" house, relegated to aesthetic concerns while the doctors got on with the real business of specifying drain runs and ventilation requirements. This chapter fleshes out a chapter in the history of the architectural profession, which is useful in itself.

More importantly though, Adams suggests that our view of the reform styles of late nineteenth-century architecture, such as the Queen Anne style, the Arts and Crafts movement and the Aesthetics movement, may be based on a misapprehension. The appropriation of such matters as clothing, textiles and furniture design by architects removed a responsibility that had been women's, decades earlier.

The notion of "separate spheres" is firmly contested by Adams. Rather she argues that in these brief three decades, women acquired more power in the home, as inspectors and regulators of the new domestic order. Freed from the immediate demands of their children by a new fashion that separated children's quarters from adults, women were able to inhabit a number of spaces within the home. Paradoxically, the suffrage movement was located within this sphere, many of the first suffrage meetings being held in drawing rooms. A wonderful picture is painted of Mrs Pankhurst's drawing room filled with thirty or forty suffragists with her husband and children emerging from the double connecting doors after the meeting to lend their support.

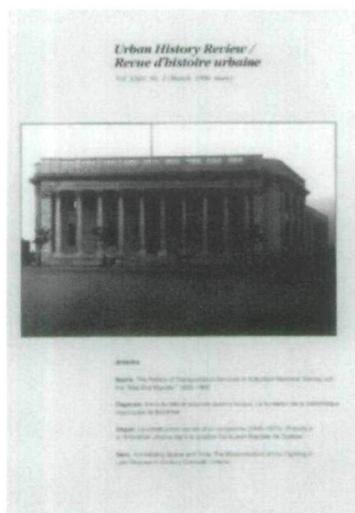
One further new item of interest, which enthused this reviewer at least, is the account of three specialist blocks of flats which were built for women in London. A recognition of the "spinster problem," in which women greatly outnumbered men, led to the acceptance of a new form of housing for women. The first two women to become members of the Royal Institute of British Architects, Ethel and Bessie Charles, lived in one of these buildings, York Street Chambers.

This book is valuable in the questions that it raises about women, architecture and the

medical profession. Unfortunately the first chapter is the least convincing in that the author's stance on the descriptions of the wonderful devices whose virtues were extolled by the medical profession is not made clear. Is the reader meant to laugh at the doctors' extravagant fear of 'sewer gas'? Given that many of the building regulations that are still in force today were based on these nineteenth-century preoccupations, it would have been useful to know if the author was gently mocking, or applauding.

This last observation should not deter anyone who is teaching a course on the history of domestic architecture or on gender studies and the built environment from placing it on their reading lists. The illustrations, from the proof copy at least, are illuminating and entertaining and the book is eminently accessible to a range of students. One can only hope that Dr Adams will pursue her interests further, perhaps drawing out the connections between women and the origins of the Modern movement.

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