

Jun-2005

Book Review: Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life

Mary Elizabeth Bezanson

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bezanson, Mary Elizabeth (2005). Book Review: Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 6(2), 160-162.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol6/iss2/12>

Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life. Revised and Expanded. Delores Hayden. 2002. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. 286 pp. Includes illustrations, photographs, appendix, and index. \$15.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Mary Elizabeth Bezanson³

In preparing this review, I read one article on government support for homeownership in a national news magazine, three articles on homelessness in my metropolitan newspaper, I watched home improvement programs for 30 hours on television, and cursed again the design of my kitchen. These seemingly disparate moments coalesce after reading Delores Hayden's newly revised and fascinating book, *Redesigning the American Dream*, which explores the relationship among gender, public and private life, and housing. The book is highly recommended for those interested in the development of housing policy, the influence of gender on housing design, and the rhetoric of space. Hayden focuses on three issues in developing the argument of her book: the evolution of American housing; rethinking private life; and rethinking public life.

In the first section, "Evolution of American Housing," Hayden traces the development of the relationship between housing and gender. The first chapter, "Housing and the American Dream," provides a vivid account of three quite different housing arrangements and the role gender, politics, expectations, economics, and government policy played in their development and success. A reader learns early that there have always been housing arrangements geared to support the needs of working women, but those arrangements have not had the political cache to be easily available.

In the second chapter, "From Ideal City to Dream House," Hayden considers the ramifications of the early American decision to find the house the ideal, rather than the city or nation. This fascinating chapter explores the power of an unexamined idea to alter the living experience of an entire people. Hayden begins with the Puritans and Quakers, moves to Jefferson's conception of the survey grid as the preferred arrangement for family farms, continues to the abysmal conditions of the urban environment and the shift to the isolated suburbs that caused. She then considers the treatment of the relationship between public and private space. There is a fascinating section on the role of the Women's Christian Temperance Union's use of public space in an attempt to alter the conception of private space in the urban environment. Others saw the suburbs, and the housewives that inhabited them, as a great, untapped source of consumer energy separating men's and women's lives. Men went to the city doing recognized work; women stayed in their homes doing unrecognized work.

The final chapter of this section, "Awakening from the Dream," considers the developing critique of housing and special design. Hayden, with unflinching candor, demonstrates that the "dream home" failed to be a dream on a number of levels. Developers ignored architects and evaded planning boards in establishing new housing developments. Architects and planners condemned shoddy construction, racial segregation, a lack of public transportation; few recognized that the individual family

³ Mary Elizabeth Bezanson is an Associate Professor of Speech Communication, University of Minnesota-Morris.

home they loved relied on the unpaid work of untold women. However, feminists realized that the dream house was totally unsuitable for supporting women's dreams of work beyond the home and care for families.

Environmentalists recognized that the dispersed housing developments and the houses contained in them used more energy than any other housing structure in human history. The energy used was not only in driving to and from work, but also in the need for water, electricity, and heat. The consumption of energy drove governmental policy on everything from dependence on foreign oil to the development of nuclear power. While individual homes might be changed, there was no attempt to alter the use of space to promote energy conservation.

In terms of economics, Hayden shows that government policy was designed to support home ownership and provided no support for renters. However, that same government policy supported home ownership by some--white males--while systematically excluding others--white women, white elderly working or lower-middle class people, and persons of color. One might simply dismiss this as the failure of the past, yet Hayden shows that in 2000, homeownership was a reality for 49.1% of female-headed households, 47.2% of African-American households, 46.3% of Hispanic households and 73.8% of white households (p. 75). Finally, the cost of housing has skyrocketed. Hayden demonstrates that from 1970 to 2000 the cost of the average house climbed from \$28,700 to \$177,000. Hayden's evidence and critique fully demonstrate the weaknesses in the conception and construction of the American dream home.

In the second section of her work, Hayden considers the dimensions of private life. In "Nurturing: Home, Mom, and Apple Pie," she first establishes the intricacy of women's nurturing work, and then turns to three quite different models of home life: haven, industrial, and neighborhood. She then describes the historical development of each strategy and their implementation, and concludes with an insightful critique of each strategy. Hayden points here toward her solution to the problems created when cultures fail to appreciate women's work, especially in the home.

Hayden then moves to "Economics: Getting and Spending," and explores the economic dimensions of paid and unpaid work. Her description of how the early decisions regarding female labor and the exclusion of the unpaid labor of "housewives" affects the calculation of the Gross National Product today makes for fascinating and frustrating reading. She further explores issues of economic equity for women including transportation policies, housing construction, and paid employment. Hayden concludes by recounting five guiding principles articulated by economist Nancy Folbre including: "Reject claims that women should be more altruistic than men, either in the home or in society as a whole" (p. 139).

In the final chapter of this section, "Architecture: Roof, Fire, and Center," Hayden returns to the haven, industrial, and neighborhood strategies and explores how each build homes. She describes the historical antecedents and the features that influenced the development of each model. For the novice in home design, the description of the function of a building program and the subsequent analysis of various programs makes for enlightening reading. Especially intriguing is Hayden's critique of home type as a reflection of the occupant's often unexamined cultural preferences. Hayden concludes this chapter by asking a number of insightful questions concerning the alteration and development of more functional housing in the United States.

The final section of her work, "Rethinking Public Life," concerns three features of public space. In "Reconstructing Domestic Space," Hayden explores the reconfiguration of both private and public housing in an attempt to meet the changing needs of residents. Hayden provides thought-provoking descriptions of changes to suburban housing developments in the United States and alterations in city design in European countries. She provides an intriguing critique of public housing in the United States, as well as a critique of efforts taken to make that housing more functional for residents. She concludes with a fascinating look at the development of congregate models of housing to meet the needs of singles, the elderly, and families.

In "Domesticating Urban Space," Hayden provides a powerful examination of the place of women within public urban environments. Her narrative of the paths two women take while commuting to work is particularly harrowing. Her examination is eye opening and often disturbing, enhanced by photographs making her view all the more vivid. Especially haunting is her conclusion that, "worldwide, many cultures have denied women the freedom of the city" (p. 238). Certainly, if one accepts Hayden's view, the city is no safer for our daughters than it was for our mothers. In the final chapter of her work, "Beyond the Architecture of Gender," Hayden urges us to move beyond our narrow conceptions of dream house or ideal city to a vision encompassing both based on views of women's equality that ultimately moves beyond concerns of gender.

This is a wonderful and thought-provoking work. There are moments when reading becomes a challenge, particularly when one realizes just how far public policy needs to develop to support the dream home and the ideal city. There are moments when the wealth of information Hayden provides swamps her argument. But the argument is ultimately captivating and powerful. This book should be read--read by women seeking confirmation for their views about the design of their homes and the designs of their cities; by activists looking for practical ways to alter housing to meet the needs of more people; and by activists otherwise tempted to throw up their hands at the size of the housing problem in the United States. An analysis of that problem and the dimensions of possible solutions are contained in Hayden's transformative work.