Spatial Organisation and the Status of Women in Nineteenth Century Australia

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This article is a study of the complex relationships between spatial organisation and status of working-class and middle-class women in Australia. The period chosen for investigation is 1860 to 1915, a period partly dictated by the availability of raw data. The domestic domain, the material focus of this study, is defined as the basic production unit of the community. The service areas, kitchen, scullery, laundry and pantry, were loci of female labour and were demarcated gender zones. The study is not concerned with detailed analysis of correlations, but is rather an initial broad overview of spatial and social relations, and attempts to address questions in that context. This research was carried out as part of the requirements for a BA Honours degree at the University of Sydney.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most persistently pursued enquiries and issues of theory within archaeology, and one which is fundamental to archaeological enquiry, is the investigation of the complex problem of the relationships between social and material organisation. The predominantly reflective perspective of the New Archaeology, in which objects were observed as ‘passive reflections of the socio-cultural system’, was superseded by the principles of Recursive Theory in the late 1970s. Principles of social and material inertia, and the problem of different rates of social change are now the preoccupation of the Time-Perspectivists. But while the complex nature of the relationships between social organisation and spatial organisation has been recognised and addressed within archaeological theory, there has been no substantial development of a gender perspective, especially not within Australian historical archaeology. The significant body of feminist theory which appeared first in the United States of America during the 1980s went a long way towards establishing a context for historical archaeology into which gender and feminist theories can be integrated. The passive opposition to such an integration within archaeology belies the importance of gender analysis as a potentially rich analytical concept for research which deserves to be rigorously pursued.

INTEGRATING THE MATERIAL AND SOCIAL COMPONENTS OF HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

The potential for investigation of social and spatial organisation and gender relationships, within an historical context, is clear. The following is an overview of the approach taken in this study to the problem of integrating the material and social components of human behaviour within the domestic environment and within the context of the historical resource.

The physical configuration of a dwelling conditions and exerts control on the activities which take place within it, but it is itself an expression of social ideologies, and in any investigation account must be taken of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the social interrelationships involved in both its construction and use, and also of material inertia. The spatial environment signals behavioural messages to its users, at a conscious or unconscious level, because once space has been shaped, material inertia insures that it exerts unintended influence on social organisation. The organisation of space may or may not reflect social intent at any given time, but because organised space constrains the people in it, spatial signals have consequences in relation to the social system. Spatial organisation is therefore a medium which may formulate and reinforce gender relationships, but may also, due to the very significant element of material inertia, contradict and confuse intent associated with particular social messages.

An illustration of this is given by Lake in a study of Australian homes. She contends that architectural changes in housing associated with an increased preoccupation with privacy during the Victorian Age had unforeseen ramifications on gender relations within the home. Consequences of the ideology of privacy associated with the private bedroom and the marital bed effecting increased proximity and more easily enforced sexual access on the part of the husband is perceived as leading to higher levels of marital tensions.

In modern Australia, and in similar industrialised countries, the equation of women with domestic space defines their gender-related status and reflects their subordinate role. Gender is therefore a primary analytical factor in architectural design. When dealing with historical data, however, there is a problem of how to assess the degree of social inertia and identify the correlations and/or non-conformities between the material and the social. Ardener wishes to show that, just as space defines people, people also define space. For instance, the entry of a stranger into a private space turns it into a public space: ‘similarly, the court is where the king is’. But an equally predictable response to a stranger entering a private space could be severe social offence and disruption. The cramped servant’s quarters, often at the top of very narrow stairs in a mid-Victorian middle-class home, denoted the status of its occupant vis-a-vis the overtly ostentatious living quarters of the family. Besides perceived status, actual differences in access to resources such as light, warmth, or a view between identifiable zones in a house also denotes the
status of space and of its occupants. Similarly, spatial and locational characteristics of the service areas of the home defined the status of the workers in them. This premise, however, becomes complicated in the context of social relations when the mistress of the home is forced, for instance by a downturn in the economy, to take her place in the service areas. How true now is the axiom of 'court and king'?

The approach taken in this study is therefore one which recognises gender as a primary factor in architectural design, and one in which special attention is given to the effects of material and social inertia on human behaviour.

METHODOLOGY

Calculations for analysis were made from the measurements of 80 house plans, selected from archival materials on the following criteria: that the dwelling contained no fewer than 4, and no more than 15, rooms; that the plans were original and not associated with any alteration; that room-use was designated, or at least recognisable; that the dwellings were intended for, or built in, suburban Sydney; that there was a scale; and that they dated between 1860 and 1915.

In order to assess the validity of the sample in terms of number of plans collected, the sample number for each decade was plotted against building investment figures compiled by N.G. Butlin for each decade from 1860 to 1900. Although figures after 1900 were not included, the period to 1900 appears to be well represented in the sample in terms of capital outlay. I am aware that this is an arbitrary check; for instance, after 1900 there may have been more homes built per unit of investment. For a pilot study such as this, however, and given the circumstantial nature of collection, this control would appear adequate.

The process of spatial analysis is best demonstrated by giving examples of two contrasting house plans. Figure 1 shows plans from the sample dating from 1889 and from 1905. Table 1 shows what measurements were taken and how they were recorded. Both houses in these examples were designed with the kitchen located under the skillion roof, but the kitchen in Plan 37 is cut off from the rest of the house by difficult access through the scullery. The 1905 example shows how the kitchen, although located under the skillion, allows easy visual and physical access to the high traffic areas of the house.

Graphs were plotted using area, mean area, number of rooms, mean number of rooms, and standard deviations. On the basis that house size may affect the results, the data set was divided into two size categories: greater than and less than 15 squares (one square = 100 square feet = 9.29 square meters).

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE DATA SET

Insufficiencies in the population statistics make it impossible to determine occupancy over the whole period under study. A two-bedroomed house may have housed anything from three to twelve people at any one time. There are some statistics for population/dwelling ratios for specific decades for some districts, and contemporary literary accounts are general but very useful. Rather than an analysis on an individual level, this study shows aggregate trends over the 65 year period.

Identification and location of essential domestic services such as water and power supply points is not always clear. Most of the plans do not indicate plumbing or gas installations, so that it is necessary to rely on government and council records for this information on a general level. When laundries are not featured on plans, it either means the laundry was a separate structure in the back yard, doubling as a bathroom or scullery, or it consisted of a plank and a tub in the back yard. For this reason there has not been a significant investigation of this component in terms of location, but it is important in the overview, in the context of status of the domestic domain.

Advertisements and trade journals give a good indication of what services were available, and personal accounts give a more accurate indication of what and where new technologies and government services were actually in use. Statistics on domestic servants do not take part-time or day help into account. Again, personal accounts are very useful in determining the extent of casual domestic help.

THE RESULTS

The analysis sought to identify general trends or random changes in room size and location during the period under study. The following trends became clear. In houses of less than 15 squares, there is a slight increase through time in the size but not number of bedrooms. Living areas appear to remain much the same, as do the service areas. In some of the larger houses there might be an additional living space; bedrooms become noticeably smaller. In these the service areas taken as a whole are not significantly larger than in the smaller dwellings.

Because of the near-constant value for the service area as a whole over the study period, internal variability within the service area was first investigated by plotting the mean of the three spaces (kitchen, scullery and pantry) against each other. The graph for the entire sample shows fairly constant values for all three areas (Fig. 2). When values for the smaller and larger houses are calculated separately, the former group shows a slight trend towards larger kitchens and smaller laundry/scullery areas, while larger houses show trends towards smaller kitchens and larger pantries (Figs. 3 and 4).

Change in location of the kitchen presents the greatest change through time. Although still located at the back of the house, by the end of the study period (1910-1915) it is most frequently located within the house proper and not shut...
Fig. 1: Plans for houses 37 (1889) and 64 (1905). Both houses are designed with kitchen located under the skillion roof, but the kitchen in no. 37 is cut off from the rest of the house by difficult access through the scullery. The 1905 example shows how the kitchen, although located under the skillion, allows easy visual and physical access to the high traffic areas in the house.

A further noticeable change is that the function of the washing area (scullery/laundry), becomes differentiated, so that washing basins appear in the kitchen, and the laundry becomes somewhat isolated. The overall space allocation does not change greatly.

out of, or away from, the living and sleeping areas. Locational trends for the period under study are plotted on Figure 5, and Figure 6 demonstrates a clear trend towards locating the kitchen closer to the focus of family activity.
Trends in kitchen location

Of the general suite of changes occurring in domestic dwellings during this period, the most significant are those concerning location of the service areas, and reduction of house size primarily resulting from a reduction in the number of bedrooms. Although the sample time-span is limited as a basis for the prediction of clear trends, there appears to be a general standardisation of house design at the turn of the century, possibly associated with changing building technology and new rates of construction.

Coincident with the change in kitchen location is an identifiable change in kitchen function. Total service area changes little over the period, and kitchen area remains stable relative to bedrooms and total house size. It is significant in terms of a standardisation of service space that the kitchen area remains stable for the entire sample while distinct changes are taking place in its location and function. Further, changes to the scullery/laundry over the period are important in terms of change in function, and, although in the final tally their standard deviation
correlates well with the standard deviation for the total area, this component of the service area is sometimes absent altogether. Similarly, the pantry is often absent and dimensions vary considerably, but trends over the period within each size category (large and small dwellings), are constant. The important point to make here is that in spite of significant changes and irregularities within the service spaces, and irrespective of house size, the service area as a single unit remains remarkably stable throughout the period.

Fundamental trends for the period can best be characterised as a suite of transformations resulting in smaller houses and a re-organisation of the internal spaces contiguous with the service area. The corollary of these transformations appears to be an increase in the privacy of the family unit and a strengthening of the nuclear family ideology.

**DISCUSSION**

Women’s crucial participation in nineteenth-century Australian public life is undeniably accessible in history for whoever wishes to read between the lines; so also and more readily visible is the association of women’s lives with the domestic domain within the home. Nineteenth-century attitudes linked women solidly with the private sphere while denying them a recognised public profile. This means that an historical perspective of the consolidation of the nuclear family in any patriarchal society is central to an understanding of social structures and, specifically, of the position of women within that structure.

The problem of status identification in the archaeological record raises issues of definition and the many expressions of status recognised in social organisation. There is no simple way to define status for women collectively in relative terms, (that is a task for the sociologists) and without delving more deeply into sociological discourse, the purposes of this type of study are best met by dealing with the issue in terms of gender relations. This approach does not require that ranking among women relative to each other be investigated, but rather that the investigation should focus on the major social dichotomies so prevalent in nineteenth-century society and so lucidly expressed in the literature of the time. Duality in female status is best defined in terms of gender relations in which a woman’s social status was a reflection of a father’s or husband’s status, but was also, by definition, a position of economic impotence and dependence.

The wife of a husband of means was in a position to make about the relationships between social and material organisation. The ideology of ‘out-of-sight, out-of-mind’ is illustrated in the following scenario. The presence of live-in servants required that social distinctions between master/mistress and servant be maintained and communicated within the house environment. Out-of-sight, badly ventilated domestic areas, and narrow stairs leading away to servants’ living quarters signalled and reinforced the appropriate messages of status to the inhabitants of the house. Were the messages signalled by these characteristics any different when, for instance, the service areas became the workplace of the mistress of the house due to economic hardship or a lack of available servants? Low status service areas, with all the connotations of location, structure, and facilities were, by association, the hallmarks of women’s status. One might ask: is space used recursively to negatively define the status of women?

The data set for this study indicates a persistence of the displaced service area in new houses well after 1880 when live-in servants were becoming increasingly difficult to acquire in the rapidly expanding Australian cities. Statistics show that by 1900 only 20 per cent of houses of the order of seven to ten rooms had a live-in servant, while 25 per cent of houses of 11 to 15 rooms had one servant. The literature offers abundant evidence that wives and daughters were involved in domestic duties in households of this size category during the nineteenth century; in view of the fussy, eclectic nature of the Victorian home and the fastidious attitude to cleaning, the prospect of wife/daughter participation in household work is easy to understand. What this situation exemplifies is how the perception of ‘low-level’
consequences to change wrought by economic and other forces operating in the community is blocked by the social inertia factor, which retards the rate at which individuals adjust to, or exploit, change. What are the consequences of this social inertia on the people directly involved with the service areas, and to what degree, if at all, do those consequences become visible in the built environment? These are questions that cannot be answered satisfactorily until inertia perspectives have been more substantially developed within archaeology, but they are questions which need to be asked and which highlight the complexities involved in studies such as these.

Spatial changes to individual spaces within the service area have already been mentioned. While the analysis shows a trend for a slight decline in kitchen space, relative to other trends such as a decline in bedroom space and therefore in house size, the equilibrium is arguably maintained or even increased in relative terms. But it must be remembered that the function of the scullery was being transferred to the kitchen, and that the laundry was becoming separated from the scullery. More tasks needed to be performed in the kitchen, and it was increasingly becoming the focus of family (mother and children) occupancy.

By 1915 the kitchen had virtually moved into the house proper, a significant change in its locational status. Is this one of the expected adjustments — an increase in size might be another — to the built environment compatible with an improvement in women’s status? In other words, does a perceived improvement in status of a particular suite of spaces reflect directly on the people associated with it? By the same token, in the nineteenth century did the presence of the mistress in the service areas raise the status of those areas? What was women’s role in these changes?

Ardener notes: ‘The fact that women do not control physical or social space directly does not necessarily preclude them from being determinants of, or mediators in, the allocation of space.’ When applied to the nineteenth-century Australian example this premise would appear to lose credibility. Some Australian women were given the franchise in 1902. In theory, because they represented more than 50 per cent of the electorate, women had the power to determine who was to wield political authority, and potentially to choose those who might best represent women’s interests. Theoretically, women gained administrative and decision-making power, albeit by proxy. But the anticipated consequences of voting power for women did not materialise: and within this context of inertia, it seems therefore unlikely that changes to domestic space were instigated by women in any other capacity than as mediators of male ideologies.

Industrialisation of the home meant that the public, male world of technology, and significantly, the promotion of conspicuous consumerism, were entering the private domain, and beginning to play a fundamental role in the process of change to women’s spaces.

A key component of conspicuous consumerism in the home was the advent of domestic science in the early twentieth century. The new ideology was associated with significant improvements to domestic technology which, although delayed in relation to the advance and application of non-domestic technology, had considerably lightened the heavy toll associated with housework by the early twentieth century. The need for specialised servants was significantly reduced by modern installations and equipment, which simultaneously became markers of wealth and status. The now more visible kitchen (in terms of location) displayed the latest advances in technology and was well on the way to becoming the showplace of the new domestic science ideology. Domestic technology in the home was an extension of male intellectual endeavour and featured conspicuously in male entrepreneurial enterprise.

The contradiction was that it was never intended that time saved in the home would free women for paid work. But the consequences were in fact that women were freed to take on (low-wage) paid work. Again, it could be said that the consequence of this situation was that women’s social position worsened rather than improved because they became locked into the condition of menial wage-earner and unpaid housewife.

What then were the social ramifications of a more visible kitchen? Did its function change? Was its use intensified? What did this mean in terms of the nuclear family ideology? As the kitchen became more prominent by location, it became the focal point of the home and the gathering-place of the family. From this focal point one person could, and indeed was required to, administer to several duties at once, and on several different skill levels. It was the principal location in the home in which social relations were learned and in which the family was held as a cohesive unit, a place from which the housewife was responsible for bridging the gap between private and public space.

Several changes were taking place in the lives of Australian women after the turn of the century — small improvements to legal status, better access to tertiary education, and rights of franchise. Simultaneously the concept of the nuclear family was strengthening and becoming more of a reality for middle-class women than it had ever been. Relocation of emphasis to the kitchen signalled an intensification of the nuclear family concept, because the internal organisation of the home was such that a single person could administer the needs of a family. The kitchen was a (sometimes) efficient workspace for one person in which the increasing occurrence of closed cupboard space (in the interests of efficiency and cleanliness) obscured the location of items and did not promote family participation in service tasks. Cupboards became stacked to the ceiling, limiting access for children and the less mobile. Thus the kitchen design effected isolation from public life for its female workers, an isolation which was not commensurate with privacy.

Privacy is increasingly the theme brought to focus by the house plans. Privy and bathroom, as a direct result of improvements in technology, move into the house. Houses become more compact, hallways narrower, rooms smaller. Insulation from the outside world was effected by these changes, but privacy for the individual housewife in fact decreased. There is no private space for women commensurate with an increase in familial and visual access to the kitchen area. The administrative focal point of the house could not be seen as a sanctuary into which the housewife could retreat from the needs and demands of those around her. Needless to say, women were most affected by trends which effected a decrease in privacy in the home, because it is they who were most closely identified with it.

**SOCIAL ORGANISATION AND SPATIAL ORGANISATION: THE COMPLEX INTERRELATIONSHIPS**

My intent has been to demonstrate that spatial organisation is not simply a reflection of social organisation, and that a far more complex set of interrelationships is involved. The crucial observations to be made are those
of contradictions within ideology, and the complex nature of social interaction. It cannot be claimed that housewives' status was the result of social intent, but rather that the aggregate circumstances associated with women's lives had certain consequences for them. That is not to say that these consequences were not dynamic in the structuring of women's lives, or that certain circumstances were not used by men to perpetuate particular power strategies.

A central question to be asked of the data when considering the status of individual spaces is: what are the relationships between the space, the activities carried out in that space, and the people that carry out those activities? For instance, is the relationship one of simple correlation, or do other factors need to be considered? In this particular Australian case-study, public spaces were usually at the fore of the house, often accessed in middle-class homes by a spacious lobby. As a rule, the master bedroom is at least as big as the largest public room, and is sometimes larger. This characteristic seems to persist throughout the study period. Children's bedrooms are significantly smaller than the master bedroom and there is no playroom for children in houses of this size range. Balconies and verandahs are potential play areas but an investigation into that issue was beyond the scope of this study. Kitchen, laundry and often bathroom remain at the back of the house, although by the end of the study period they are located within the main structure. If room size and location are direct indicators of room status as suggested by the Matrix group, if one accepts the current theoretical concepts of social inertia and the regulatory function of the built environment, then the assignment of status to the persons most strongly associated with these spaces is indicated. But not quite. Change in kitchen location was coincident with change, the ramifications of which were multifaceted.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored some implications of the complex relationships between the physical organisation of space and social organisation, using the nineteenth-century Australian domestic dwelling as the specific case-study. In archaeology, the variety of theoretical approaches to this issue illustrate the nature of the complexities associated with social reconstruction. The emergence of feminist gender-oriented archaeology in the last decade has broadened the potential of archaeological enquiry and raised further questions about the adequacy of current theory. Current trends in archaeological theory integrate environmental perspectives and cognitive disciplines such as sociology and history, potentially expanding the alternatives for social reconstruction in both prehistoric and historical archaeology.

A concern which became a focus of the investigation arose from the contradictions inherent in social ideology which make an analysis of social and spatial relationships extremely complicated. A related concern was the degree to which, if at all, the intricacies of social interactions are visible in the physical record. Contrasts between the improved legal status of women at the beginning of the twentieth century and a slight decline in real terms of kitchen space, exemplifies the concept of material inertia while highlighting the complexities of social issues. It might be said that in relative terms kitchen size increased because houses were getting smaller. But the laundry lost its scullery function, which was transferred to the kitchen, so that more tasks needed to be carried out in the kitchen, for which no additional space was allocated.

Further, as kitchens became increasingly the central focus of the home, demands on its chief occupant, the housewife, grew. If status is conveyed through room size, then the process of social inertia can be clearly recognised in the lack of conformity between improved social status and a retarded social perception of it.

This account demonstrates that the home is an active constitutive agent in the forging of gender and status relations. The beginnings of 'industrialisation' in the home signalled the trend towards consumerism which was to characterise the post First World War years and which had particular social ramifications on women's public and private lives.

The emergence of gender as an interpretive category in historical and archaeological research has not only posed new methodological and epistemological problems, but is significantly changing the questions asked and the answers accepted about our past. Coupled with the gender approach is an emerging insistence on the part of feminist practitioners that social theory is particularly germane to archaeology, and that a commitment to the development of social theory will further validate enquiries into the complex processes of social change which have been a major focus of archaeology over the last century.

NOTES

2. Bourdieu (1977) and Giddens (1979) developed explanations of social theory in which there is a recursive relationship between structure and action. Structures are involved in the generation of meaning and action, and are the medium for the reintegration of social intent and action.
3. Fletcher (1992) identifies material patterning as the slowest human cultural message system, so that the built environment has not only a recursive role, but also acts as a regulator or constraint on human action.
5. Wylie, in her most recent study of the implications of feminist theory (1991) states that archaeologists continue to make explicit claims about the status of women, and gender structures, based on projections of common western examples, while ignoring gender as a direct focus of inquiry.
9. The powerful influence of women's magazines and journals in shaping popular images of women's lifestyles was constantly exploited, asserting firmly the model of motherhood and duty to the patriarchal state.
10. Here too is a further example of the conflict between social intent and the physical world: Saegert and Werkele (1980: 41-63) note that isolation in the suburbs was intense as consolidation of class-conscious attitudes prohibited cross-class interaction.
11. In her study of the Marakwet in East Africa, Moore notes that the female self-evaluation is an attempt by women to identify themselves within the (male) cultural structures which confront them. This accounts for the contradiction in which many actions might appear to represent female ideology, but simultaneously reinforce male values. Moore 1986:183.
15. For an excellent appraisal of the status of domestic technology in
the latter half of the nineteenth century, see Kingston 1975: 41-44.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


