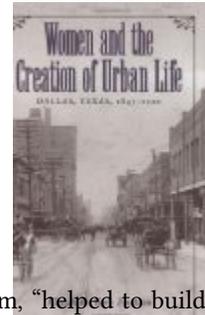


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth York Enstam. *Women and the Creation of Urban Life: Dallas, Texas, 1843-1920*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998. xx + 284 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89096-799-7.

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In the 1980s, historians such as Christine Stansell, Kathy Peiss, and Joanne Meyerowitz began examining the day-to-day experiences of city women, focusing primarily on the ways that the urban environment shaped the lives of working-class women. While these studies did much to correct a narrative of urban history that largely overlooked the experiences of women, they did little to change our conceptualization of women's role in shaping the cities in which they lived. More recent historiography, however, has built on this earlier work by seeking to include women's lives and labors as key components in urban development. Elizabeth York Enstam's *Women and the Creation of Urban Life* is one such study which follows the history of Dallas from its pioneer days as an agricultural village through to its emergence as a modern metropolis in the early twentieth century, all the while forefronting the private and public contributions of the city's women to that development.

Enstam focuses her study on five different arenas through which Dallas women shaped, and were in turn shaped by, urban development. Enstam stresses the importance of women's contributions to the urban economy, through both their labors in and around the home and, later, through their participation in the wage economy. Women also, according to Enstam, "did much to establish the fundamental elements of the social structure" of Dallas, shoring up families, schools, and churches during the city's pioneer days (p. xvii). Many of the organizations which would come to signify modern urban life in Dallas were founded and led by the city's women. Women, through voluntary organizations and club work, connected their city to national cultural and social trends. Finally, women shifted the boundaries between private and public life in Dallas by pushing their way into politics in the name of social issues. Through these various

avenues, women, according to Enstam, "helped to build the definitive forms of urban life by establishing organizations and agencies that altered the responsibilities and functions of Dallas government, amended the public conception of political issues, and changed the city's physical structure" (p. xix).

During Dallas' early days as a trading center on the Trinity River, the home existed as the primary social institution. In this environment, women's labors were central elements in the processes of production as well as reproduction. While they held few legal rights, the women who helped to pioneer the settlement of mid-nineteenth century Dallas occupied central positions in developing the economic, social, educational, and spiritual networks of the town.

As Dallas developed from a market town to a urban settlement in the later decades of the nineteenth century, women's role in the city also shifted. Home production and labors remained important into the next century, but some women pushed on the boundaries between public and private life in the growing city, most notably by participating in the emerging marketplace as seamstresses, milliners, and educators. Ironically, it was in these years after the Civil War that Dallas, like much of the country, came to embrace "separate spheres" for the genders, reserving the realm of the domestic for women alone and thereby restricting acceptable roles for women in the city's public life.

The boom years brought on by the introduction of the railroad in the 1870s greatly accelerated the growth of Dallas while exacerbating class and ethnic stratification among the city's population. For working-class women, these decades of growth opened economic opportunities in wage economy. For elite women and those in the

emerging middle class, these years heralded the introduction of voluntary organizations which would later lead to the club women's movement. Through these organizations women defined many of the characteristics of a middle-class lifestyle, including etiquette and manners.

The years surrounding the turn of the century witnessed two dramatic changes in the lives of Dallas' women, both of which had enormous consequences for the city as a whole. First, women moved in ever increasing numbers into the wage economy in the years following 1880. While this trend challenged traditional conceptions of gender roles, it also served as a measurement of urban development. Enstam argues that "women's employment in Dallas indicated, more clearly than men's the economic trends under way in the city" including an expanding service sector and the introduction of modern business methods (p. 76).

The second major change for Dallas women came with the emergence of club work. Dominated by the growing numbers of the middle class, clubwomen "first took up community tasks that male leaders could no longer accept, then turned their energies to problems usually left for private solutions" (p. 97). Despite racial blinders that prevented white clubwomen from attacking problems in the Black and Hispanic communities with equal verve, the efforts of these women and their organizations laid the foundation for many of Dallas' social welfare programs, art and cultural projects, expanded city services including clean food and water, crime prevention practices, recreational facilities, a growing educational system, and good government campaigns (including woman suffrage). In general, clubwomen brought the national Progressive movement to Dallas and crafted the city's response to those who suffered under the process of urbanization, softening the impact, at least for whites, of urban growth. Along the way, these women pushed the city to redefine political discussions to include issues formerly thought of as part of the private realm. They also carved out a place for themselves in the city's public life and shifted the standards of acceptable behavior.

The last three chapters, which cover Dallas' club work and its larger influences, are the strongest of the book. Here Enstam seems most in her element as she re-values voluntary organizations not merely as women's church or charity work but as vital and particularly urban in-

stitutions. It is also in this realm the Enstam can draw the most clear connections between Dallas' development and national urban trends in the decades surrounding the turn of the century. Because the work of clubwomen (and the distinct yet related suffrage movement) clearly crossed the line between women's traditional and largely private contributions to Dallas' growth, Enstam is most forceful in making her argument that women did indeed have a far ranging impact on the shape of urban development, building the social institutions of the city while their husbands focused on the economic ones.

The strengths of Enstam's study are also the source of the work's main weaknesses. While the early chapters' focus on the household labors of women includes the lives of most Dallas women, the increasing segmentation of the city near the end of the nineteenth century presents conceptual problems on the issues of class and especially race that Enstam does not overcome. Hispanic women are dismissed entirely with a paragraph in the introduction. African-American women appear sporadically throughout the text (mostly in their capacity as domestic workers and through glimpses of their separate club work), but their inclusion adds little to the conceptualization or interpretation presented in the book, largely because race relations appear as a static background to Dallas' development. Working-class white women lack individual identities in *Women and the Creation of Urban Life*. They provide the numbers for women moving into the workforce and they are the objects (along with their children) for the middle-class club women's reform and welfare efforts, but rarely are their experiences factored into the telling of the emergence of modern Dallas.

Despite these shortcomings, *Women and the Creation of Urban Life* stays true to Enstam's goal to integrate women into the story of urban development. Social institutions, the emergence of a political culture focused on social as well as economic issues, and even elements of the built environment are ably and aptly connected to the individual and collective efforts of many of Dallas' women.

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