

Betsy Klimasmith. *At Home in the City: Urban Domesticity in American Literature and Culture, 1850-1930.* Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2005. xii + 293 pp. \$26.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-58465-497-1.



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New Subjects, New Urban Space: Making Homes in Boarding Houses, Tenements, Apartment Buildings, and Luxury Hotels

In *At Home in the City*, Betsy Klimasmith explores the changing form and functions of the urban home from the mid-nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth through close readings of selected contemporary American novels and nonfiction. In a roughly chronological narrative, she investigates the role of environmental determinism, the evolution of the modern subject, and the transformation of the urban landscape. By combining literary criticism with urban theory, geography, sociology, and history, she brings new insights into the lived experiences of urban dwellers, challenging both contemporary accounts as well as more recent scholarship. As I will discuss, this interdisciplinary approach, ambitious and exciting, complicates and enriches our understanding of domesticity in this period, and thus adds substantially to urban scholarship. And the epilogue, which recounts a local land-use struggle in her own community, underlines the persuasive power of storytelling that planning

theorists and practitioners have more recently championed.[1]

The power of interdisciplinary work comes through strongly in this book. Although literary criticism is the central approach, urban scholars will recognize a welcome shift to spatial analysis in many of the theoretical texts that inform Klimasmith's work, particularly those of geographers such as LeFebvre, Soja, Harvey, and Massey. In turn, I expect geographers and planners will be inspired as I was to read or re-read the novels she analyzes, and to share her insights with our students and colleagues. But while Klimasmith should and will influence future readings of the texts she analyzes, both fiction and nonfiction, readers most interested in the social history of urban architecture and planning may find certain key actors and urban housing forms missing in this narrative.

In each of the six chapters, Klimasmith analyzes one or more novels, exploring a particular theme as well as a housing type. In chapter 1, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* and Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* provide the opportu-

nity for a discussion of architectural determinism and new forms of urban housing—row houses and rooming houses, with communal dining rooms, hallways, and the proximity that allows a kind of passive voyeurism. These new private and public landscapes are shifting, permeable, and provide the possibility for transformation. In chapter 2, Klimasmith discusses *The Bostonians* and the social interaction that takes place in and transforms the new urban settings that Henry James describes, especially private living rooms and the public park. Here she also draws on the writing of Calvert Vaux on apartments as well as parks, but most interesting is her discussion of the way James represents the tensions and new sensibilities concerning privacy, and how the men and women in his novels use these new urban spaces.

The tenement is the focus of chapter 3, with novels by Abraham Cahan (*Yekl*) and Stephen Crane (*Maggie, a Girl of the Streets*) playing a less prominent role in Klimasmith's analysis by comparison with her discussion of Jacob Riis. This reading of Riis is detailed and compelling, as it presents the ambivalence in the writing of urban reformers, yet without a discussion of other voices of reform, it seems to suggest that architectural determinism is the only ideology that informs urban reformers, leaving out the perspectives of settlement housers like those at Hull House in Chicago, or Vida Scudder, whose own novel describes not just the shifting urban landscape of Boston but the new form of the settlement house itself.[2] In her address at the first national planning conference in 1909 (and thus more than a decade later than the publication of *Yekl*, and almost twenty years after *How the Other Half Lives*), Mary Simkhovich spoke not of "contagion" or even "congestion," but rather "overcrowding" caused by social and economic forces. And she made a compelling argument for urban living: "The reason the poor like to live in New York is because it is interesting, convenient, and meets their social needs. They live there for the reason that I do; I like it." [3] As others have argued, this suggests a

third way of understanding urban life in this period, a perspective that promotes the agency of urban dwellers and celebrates the city they shape.

Apartments and hotels are the focus of chapters 4 and 5. *Sister Carrie* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian novels as well as nonfiction provide rich sources for analysis of apartment living, especially the class dimensions and the possibilities for reinventing and transforming self as well as living space; Carrie Meeker and others move from apartment to apartment, as they shape and shift their new urban identities. But while Klimasmith's reading of Dreiser and Gilman is persuasive, urban historians may wonder that whole categories of rooms inhabited by unattached young women are left unmentioned. No doubt, as the quote from *House Beautiful* in 1916 suggests (p. 143), single women just wanted "a home of our very own," but how many could afford their own apartment? Most would find themselves in rooming houses or group homes, at least for a transitory period.[4] Where, for example, do Carrie's co-workers at the shoe factory live? To be fair, Klimasmith never claims to be writing about the experiences of working women, and certainly that is not the case in her consideration of luxury hotels as they appear in Edith Wharton's *Custom of the Country* in chapter 6. Her description of hotel lobbies and other semi-public rooms support her argument for these environments as the nexus for social climbing interactions and alliances.

In the last chapter, Klimasmith compares and contrasts Robert Park with Nella Larson's 1928 novel, *Quicksand*. Park's social theory seems an easy mark in this comparison; he is a straw man compared with the complexity of lived experience represented in Larson's novel. This is not to say that Klimasmith's argument concerning stasis versus mobility is simple, and readers will want to look at Park again, particularly "Human Migration and the Marginal Man," written in 1928. But again, other experiences, other voices, seem to be missing. Including the practice-based sociology of

those in the settlement house movement, those who would have witnessed, albeit through gender-, class- and race-based perspectives, the many different stories of transformation, would have produced a more satisfying, more nuanced analysis. Klimasmith's reading of Park is interesting and provocative, yet through this "easier" comparison she goes against what I take as her goal to promote the power of more complex stories of everyday life in urban centers. For example, Helga Crane's "spatial borrowing" of others' homes is a key aspect of her character's development, but so is the fact that when she arrives in Chicago with little cash after a hurried departure from her teaching job at Naxos, she stays at the YWCA, and also finds a job through the Y employment agency. Her mobility, her independence, her ability to return to the city of Chicago is made possible in part by urban institutions that women built, the same women who created the redemptive spaces that Daphne Spain has described. Helga is critical of "race women" like her employer, Mrs. Hayes-Rore, and her friend Anne Grey, and this creates an opportunity for an equally critical discussion of voluntary associations such as the National Association of Colored Women and the YWCA, and the race, class and gender issues that play out in municipal housekeeping.[5]

If the power of the novel is to permit the theoretical question "what if?" (p. 221), then are we bound only by what was then represented? By just those spaces, just those subjects fully described? Klimasmith does such a good job of encouraging and inspiring our reading of these novels that it is impossible to avoid wondering about the glance of the worker from the shoe factory as Carrie Meeker walks by in her new clothes, or the maid at Anne Grey's apartment in Harlem, or the circumstances of other residents at the YWCA. Storytelling is not only powerful, but perhaps "contagious" in a way that can only benefit students, scholars and practitioners seeking to understand the linkages between place and identity.

Notes

[1]. For example, Barbara Eckstein and James A. Throgmorton, eds., *Story and Sustainability: Planning, Practice, and Possibility for American Cities* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

[2]. There is very little discussion of Jane Addams, surprisingly, and I couldn't help wondering if this was influenced by the dismissive tone in Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). On Vida Scudder, see for example Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[3]. Susan Marie Wirka, "The City Social Movement: Progressive Women Reformers and Early Social Planning," in Mary Corbin Sies and Christopher Silver, eds., *Planning the Twentieth-Century American City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 72.

[4]. Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[5]. Daphne Spain, *How Women Saved the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Nina Mjagkij and Margaret Spratt, eds., *Men and Women Adrift: The YWCA and the YWCA in the City* (New York: NYU Press, 1997).

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