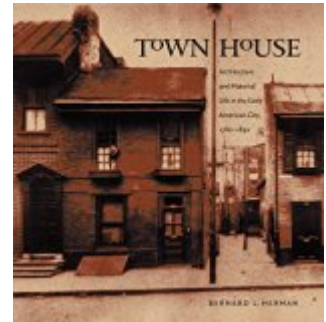


Bernard L. Herman. *Town House: Architecture and Material Life in the Early American City, 1780-1830.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xviii + 295 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2991-2.



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Published on H-Urban (August, 2006)

Having finally failed to elude creditors, in 1797 New York merchant John Pintard was bound for jail. He set about decorating his room in the debtors' apartment with comforts afforded by his wealth. He had the room painted and papered, and then furnished it. Renovations eased the sting of imprisonment, and enabled Pintard--despite having exchanged the company of merchants for the company of debtors and criminal inmates--to assert his social status. The objects in Pintard's cell underscored his claim to gentility and cosmopolitan culture that even incarceration could not erase. For his own preservation, for frequent visitors who called on business, and for fellow prisoners who caught a glimpse of the merchant's quarters, the embellishment of space and the accumulation of material objects sustained Pintard's membership in Atlantic mercantile circles.[1]

Though his circumstances were extreme, Pintard's adjustment to his new situation readily captures the social significance of living spaces and furnishings that Bernard Herman explores in *Town House: Architecture and Material Life in the Early American City, 1780-1830*. Urban houses on

the North American Atlantic seaboard that were built, bought, rented, lived in, remodeled, or decorated by Americans between 1780 and 1830 take center stage, but the author ranges widely, comparing American examples with architecture and material objects in cities across the Atlantic. Herman finds that men and women of various statuses in society--merchants and their wives, the families of master craftsmen, widows, petty bourgeois merchant-artisan households, servants, slaves, and travelers--used houses and furnishings as "symbolic representations of self and community" (p. 2). These spaces and objects meant that they shared a genteel existence and cosmopolitan *savoir faire* with refined urbanites throughout the Atlantic world.

Many studies of urban America move quickly through the early republic era, or treat one or perhaps two cities. The versatility of *Town House*, therefore, is a welcome contribution. It is not without shortcomings for urban historians, however, who will be interested in the emergence of the middle class, but will not find the mindset of the bourgeoisie discussed here distinguishable

from that of other urban groups. Readers will be reminded of Stuart Blumin's treatment of the values of the urban middle class and its growing distinction, through dwellings, furnishings, domestic ideology, employment, and leisure, from the better and lower sorts. In *Town House*, the search for refinement through possessing and displaying material objects is a ubiquitous and uniform phenomenon, showing little regard for class (slaves and live-in servants perhaps excepted) or for the different meanings gentility might have held for men and women, young and old. The quest for gentility also appears to be a timeless phenomenon for Herman, as intense in 1780 as it was in 1830, though the methods to achieve it (separating servant space from family space, for example) developed over time. Richard Bushman, in contrast, charts the emergence of the belief in a refined life over the eighteenth and early nineteenth century and finds that the middle class committed fully to a "vernacular gentility" only in the middle of the nineteenth century.[2]

Town House is a visually seductive work. Readers will be lured in by the wealth of photographs and line drawings of house plans produced by Herman's extensive fieldwork or gathered from archival collections. Comparisons of exterior forms, interior embellishments, and arrangements of space across towns and countries are throughout supported by abundant black-and-white images. These images are not merely illustrations; they represent the material artifacts that the author uses imaginatively as evidence. Textual evidence is here as well. Key to describing the small square footage and rude finishes of some artisan dwellings, for example, is the Federal Direct Tax of 1798. (The attempt to levy a national property tax failed, but it produced a unique record--alas, mostly lost--of housing stock in the early nation.) Estate records and particularly inventories play a critical role in this study. Both the interpretations and the prose of some chapters, however, are overly reliant on these lists, and Herman pays little attention to their biases in his

use of them. Close reading and innovative use of a trial record, several contemporary diaries, correspondence related to housing construction and renovations, and even a recipe book also shape the analysis. Supplementing Herman's original fieldwork are the myriad graduate student papers and theses that he and his University of Delaware colleagues have shepherded through its program in material culture studies.

Much of the work of that program, and of Herman himself, has helped to redefine architectural history in the last three decades by bringing attention to the vernacular. Scholars have focused increasingly on middling folk and their modest accommodations, and no longer exclusively on elites and their imposing mansions. The faithful rendition or adaptation of high style is no longer the standard by which buildings and objects are evaluated. Material culture historians look beyond and below the fine decorative tea tables and sugar bowls produced for elites, and examine the artifacts around America's humble hearths and modest parlors. This scholarship has drawn notice to a consumer revolution, and pushed the dawning of the revolution deeper into the eighteenth century, and deeper and wider into the ranks of the urban lower sort and rural households. It has made us recognize that early Americans experienced the world sensually.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Herman finds, merchant families increasingly used their houses to connect themselves to the Atlantic commercial community. They drew on a European vocabulary to organize rooms and choose ornamentation. Merchant design aspirations could be constrained by local traditions, deference to community restraint, financial resources, and skills of building craftsmen. Nonetheless, Herman argues, town houses became aggressive statements of the merchant household's sense of self; a house became its own performance. Ambivalence about display was resolved by referencing local architecture on the exterior

of the house, while the interior space was exclusive and cosmopolitan. The mantelpiece ornamentation and the accoutrements of dining or taking tea signified the status and identity of the household, linking it with commercial families in ports near and far. The functions of the house and the social rituals performed within it, furthermore, distinguished merchant families throughout the Atlantic world from unrefined masses who did not have access to the artifacts, spaces, or social knowledge of gentility.

"Burghers"—those in the middling ranks of urban dwellers, including artisans and shopkeepers—embraced a similar shift toward Atlantic cosmopolitanism. Herman shows how Lancaster property owners Carl and Catherine Reisinger "eschewed local [Pennsylvania-German] practice in favor of a British-American urban image" (p. 77) in remodeling their house. Was it the Reisinger household's commercial interests that led to anglicization? Or was it social aspirations? Whatever the motivations, rejecting the local vernacular in favor of a British-American image was not without tensions. It also took more effort for the middling sorts to shape spaces and perform elaborate dining rituals than it took for merchants. Burgher households often faced the challenge of creating discrete spaces for commerce within their dwellings. They resolved these difficulties by the early nineteenth century, Herman suggests, by choosing among a variety of shopkeeper town house plans in Atlantic rim cities and towns, but preserving local distinctiveness through construction techniques and ornamental details.

Merchants emphatically and burghers with comparatively less to display aspired to connect themselves to a cosmopolitan Atlantic community. Herman links slaves across North Atlantic towns, however, by function. Using testimony from the 1822 Denmark Vesey plot in which slaves purportedly conspired to rebel against their white owners, Herman explores the movement of slaves through town houses and yards in Charleston,

South Carolina. Slaves lived in marginal spaces such as in unfinished rooms above kitchens or in rude outbuildings in the rear of urban lots. Though they came and went throughout the residence and service buildings, Herman argues, the master and mistress often failed to notice them. The transparency of slaves could prove beneficial. Pottery and other African-influenced artifacts found in urban slave quarters suggest that the "invisibility" of slaves enabled them to lay some claim to their own spaces.

Herman continues the Atlantic world theme not by discussing the global scope of slavery, or comparing slave quarters in urban South Carolina to those in other slave societies such as Jamaica or Virginia; instead, he compares bonded men and women to French and English servants. By the 1830s, Herman asserts, town houses of the well-to-do throughout the North Atlantic were larger and had increasingly specialized spaces. Wanting servant lodgings and service space to remain within the town house, but still relegating servants to lodgings in unfinished attics and damp cellars, employers struggled to balance their desire for control with their genteel notions of segregation and privacy. Comparing slaves in slave societies to Parisian chambermaids, however, reduces the force of the "architecture of dominance" that Herman postulates; the gaze of the master or mistress in slave societies was capricious and potentially deadly for slaves, while paid domestic help, as employers from Bristol to Philadelphia complained, could pack up and leave without a moment's warning. Describing Billy Robinson (the protagonist of the Vesey episode) and his Charleston peers as "household servants," "chattel servants," "enslaved domestic workers," but rarely "slaves," does not make slaves and servants equal. The search for segregation and privacy, moreover, better explains the architectural shifts in the town houses of London elites who employed Irish servants, than it does the rearrangement of space in American southern households where the Vesey

conspiracy sharpened fears of widespread race rebellion.

Herman turns to another Atlantic seaport, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to examine how widows claimed their spaces and maintained gentility after their husband's deaths left them in reduced circumstances. Dower rights entitled the widow to a third of the husband's estate (after creditors were paid, and before heirs received their legacies.) The sea made an unusually high proportion of women in Portsmouth widows, and dower arrangements there left a particularly rich legal record. Herman examines how the court allocated an "architectural competency" to Portsmouth widows, dividing the family home into spaces that accommodated the work, domesticity, or social interaction that provided the "financial and material resources" for the "economic maintenance of the individual" (p. 158). But he finds no clear pattern in these divisions. The dower commissioners allotted widow Mary Hill, the widow of a well-to-do man, the service spaces in their grand house. Hill traded or lost the parlor and dining room--the sites of genteel sociability--in favor of the "workaday world" of the kitchen and a piece of the garden. Hannah Rand's family, in contrast, was barely solvent upon the death of Samuel Rand. Nevertheless, the widow wrangled the best parlor and surrendered the kitchen (though she did get half the garden, a productive space Herman disregards). Rand's allocation suggests that her "architectural competency ... meshed with particular forms of social life associated with images of gentility and sociability" (p. 167). One cannot but wonder, however, how convincing--or even how important--to herself or to her visitors Hill's performance of gentility was, if she set up her feather bed and mahogany card table by the kitchen, or Rand's, if she slept in the parlor and cooked her meals at the hearth under its "neatly worked mantel" (p. 160).

Dower divisions rarely resulted in physical remodeling. Thus for separate households living

under one roof, Herman postulates that "comportment ... erected visible partitions" (p. 190). The formulation of social conventions to ensure privacy, gentility, and space for exclusive rituals is tantalizing. Yet how often did a dower division actually result in two or more households living under one roof? Evidence for Portsmouth is spotty. In the case of the Rand family, for instance, the minor children owned the remaining two-thirds of the house not allocated to Hannah Rand. Herman claims that Hannah and her six children were "compressed ... into two heated rooms," but that could not have occurred unless the court had ordered the heirs' portion of the house sold or rented out. The functions of the rooms, in fact, likely did not change at all for the Rands. A dower division was a precautionary grant the judicial apparatus could invoke if the rights of minor heirs were endangered, and in Hannah Rand's case, they were not. Rand and her children lived in the house only a short period after her husband died. Herman discloses this information only in the last paragraph of the chapter, having lured readers into imagining that Rand "craft[ed] a new domesticity suitable to her situation, her resources, and her ambitions" in the very house where she and her husband had resided (p. 160).[3] A reader is hard pressed, consequently, to know what to conclude about the ideals of gentility Rand and the dower committeemen realized through dower divisions.

Hatters in Philadelphia, shipwrights in Baltimore, and cabinetmakers in Charleston, Herman contends, also displayed teapots in their parlors as marks of their refinement and membership in a transatlantic world. For artisans in the maritime trades, a mahogany desk "enshrined a particular category of social capital" as it connected to the literacy used as a "means to conduct business within the house in a proper fashion" (p. 213); for cabinetmakers, it symbolized the cosmopolitanism and refinement of the craftsman. Artisans presumably had qualms or dilemmas about acquiring symbols of gentility since they conflicted

with their republican sentiments. But dine on breakfast tables they did. When they could not afford one, a tea caddy sufficed to project sociability and link artisan households with polite society. Herman's artisans are awfully tame, domesticated, and polite--no violent, rebellious craftsmen espousing a cooperative vision of American economic growth. These are not raucous members of the Workingmen's Party, uncontrollable volunteer firemen, or riotous and brawling racists. Perhaps the conservatism (or good behavior) of Herman's artisans is an artifact of his heavy reliance on probate inventories. Brawling mechanics did not always amass enough property to show up in probate court, or by the time they did, perhaps they were old and staid. The widely acknowledged biases of probate records are ignored. We rarely learn whether the man (the inventories, after all, are predominantly attached to male decedents) had a growing family deferring the purchase of consumables in favor of more pressing expenses, or one full of young women eyeing spouses and requiring a show of sociability for the pursuit. Was the patriarch at an advanced age, having long since divided household furnishings among family members?

If objects were contained within a household, do these issues matter? They do, because a yearning for gentility might not be ubiquitous after all. Women and men at different life stages and at different points on the wealth spectrum might have had varied understandings of gentility. Suzanne Lebsock suggests that women were more likely than men to bequeath items to female kin for sentimental reasons.[4] Are some household possessions foremost symbols of deceased aunts, and only secondarily, if that, objects that convey the new possessor's refinement? I know of a nineteenth-century London woman who kept old letters in a tea caddy. Is it significant that once she might have kept tea in that caddy? Or that strangers might view the container as an object connoting polite sociability? Maybe sometimes a

tea caddy is just a container to store assorted items.

Herman suggests that objects carry multiple and simultaneous meanings, their constructions dependent "on the perceptions of audience and actors in shared contexts" (p. 262). But there is little ambiguity in his interpretation, which throughout emphasizes the connections of material culture to an Atlantic gentility. Despite these limitations, Herman has given us food--and china, tables, and teacups--for thought.

Notes

[1]. On Pintard, see Bruce H. Mann, *Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 100-102.

[2]. Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

[3]. Herman makes some slips of the pen relating to dower, property, and probate, perhaps consequences of simplifying complicated real estate transactions. Elizabeth Cambridge, a Charleston widow whose husband bequeathed her a life estate in their residence, could not have sold the property (i.e., the house and lot), as Herman states. What she must have sold was her life estate. Thus her repurchase of the house and lot in fee simple enabled her to clear debts against her husband's estate, and later bequeath the real property to her daughters (p. 183). Portsmouth widow Mary Hill's "dower tenure ended ... as a likely casualty of the economic dislocations of the second and third decades of the nineteenth century and a rising culture of litigiousness (p. 170)." This is a rather unsatisfying explanation, and one for which no records of any litigation are advanced to explain how Hill's one-third interest in the house could have been sold out from under her. Elizabeth Petrie's property was either her

dower or an inheritance from her husband that exceeded her requisite third, but it was not both and synonymous (pp. 182-183).

[4]. Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984).

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Citation: Donna Rilling. Review of Herman, Bernard L. *Town House: Architecture and Material Life in the Early American City, 1780-1830*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. August, 2006.

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